



My Unbearable Mate

(Sawtooth Security #2)

Author: *Kristen Strassel*

Category: Fantasy

Description: When my grandmother's magical pendant goes missing, she demands I convince bear shifter Bellamy Laredo to help me find it.

He's perfect for the job and adores my grandmother. So why does he toss me out of the Sawtooth Security office on my ample behind?

I rejected his mate claim in front of our entire clan. That trad mate life wasn't for me. Seeing him still makes the blood sing in my veins, and I can't imagine what I was thinking all those years ago. Seriously, who knew a little gray in his beard could look so good?

I can't blame the bear for holding a grudge. It's fine. I'm totally capable of finding the locket without him. Even if the details around its disappearance are sketchy. I might not have my grandmother's magic, but I'm no stranger to hustling to make things happen.

Then a mysterious bear clan abducts me, and Bellamy and his team come to my rescue. I wish I could say it was case closed, and let my rejected mate go back to hating my guts. But those unfamiliar bears give me even more questions about the locket, everything I believed about my clan, Bellamy, and even my lack of magic.

Now Bellamy and I are heading on a road trip to find the answers we deserve. If we're successful, nothing will keep us apart, even if the truth destroys our clan.

Total Pages (Source): 36

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter One

When Trouble Walks In

Bellamy

“A little authority looks good on you, man.” Beau, one of the newest additions at Sawtooth Security, clapped me on the shoulder as he came into the office, coffee in hand, along with Brad, the bear tasked with showing him the ropes.

My bear was more than willing to let the compliment and the slight increase in responsibility go straight to his head. He was a cocky beast and his personality wasn't anything like how I presented as a human.

“It's only temporary while Barrett and Tegan are on their mate moon,” I reminded everyone. We'd all come from different clans, and it had been natural for Barrett to take charge of the security operation.

You could've been alpha too, my bear loved to remind me. If your mate didn't ? —

Nope. Didn't need to think about that right now. Or ever.

“I can be your second-in-command,” Beau offered, earning a mix of laughter and groans from the rest of the bears at the table, and turning my focus back to the meeting. “Until Barrett gets back.”

A chorus of ooohs rang out. I was about to lose control of these rowdy bear shifters

before my first official day at the helm even started.

Maybe that's not such a bad idea, my bear said. I'd been about to put Beau in his place, but my bear could be onto something. Bellamy and I had talked about if things would work out with Beau. He was young, eager, but he didn't know his place in the company. Came in with a head of steam and didn't want to be told what to do.

He was really good at getting the job done, even if he was unpolished. The kid had potential.

"If you want to be second-in-command, you can start with making sure you bring coffee for everyone. Especially if you're gonna show up late."

Beau's eyes widened, and the guys on either side of him nudged his considerable biceps. We needed muscle, which he had in spades, and it might have been the only reason we hadn't fired his ass yet.

"The Tegan Reynolds case changed our business. Put Sawtooth Security on the map," I said, starting the meeting's official business. She'd called us from the set of a dating reality show after her ex-boss had duped her into a real marriage to keep his dirty dealings under wraps. Barrett had history with the slimeball wolf and putting him out of commission meant Sawtooth Forest was a safer place for all the shifters who lived here.

And he scored a smokin' hot mate when he'd completely given up, my bear added. Maybe that means you've still got a chance.

"Nothing about that case was typical for us," I added, ignoring my bear. The last thing on my mind was a mate. Especially while I was in charge of the business and working on earning the loyalty of a bunch of rambunctious bears.

“Good.” Beau nodded. “Hollywood doesn’t belong in Sawtooth Forest.”

Brad gave him the side-eye the comment deserved. “Thought you said you wanted to be a contestant on The Real Werewives if they filmed another season here.”

“You have to admit it’s kinda weird, having the cameras everywhere, all those people wanting to know about your life.” Beau shuddered dramatically. “But I wouldn’t mind finding my mate. Or bringing her to the hot tub.”

“If that’s how you feel, you’ll be a good addition to the team. Our work should stay behind the scenes. No one should even know we’ve done it.” I wouldn’t admit to the crew that I was relieved when filming ended. Barrett had been the one in the spotlight, but I hadn’t been comfortable with being on camera.

The mission of Sawtooth Security was helping shifters when their own packs couldn’t or wouldn’t. My job specifically was to find answers.

“Things might feel a little slow right now, but don’t get used to it,” I continued. “Our inboxes are overflowing with requests for help. We’ll be reviewing the cases and determining who’s the best fit. You should’ve gotten a survey about?—”

The door burst open and every head in the room turned to see the woman I thought I’d never lay eyes on again.

Hot damn , my bear said, confirming what I saw was not a figment of my imagination.

Otherwise, I would’ve never believed the woman who’d rejected me in front of my entire clan was standing in the Sawtooth Security office.

Fuck, she looks gorgeous , my bear added.

Couldn't argue with him there as my gaze locked with the woman who should have been my mate. No, Clover Crowley did not still have a hold over me. Not after she'd torn my heart to pieces and laughed as she threw them up in the air. But somehow, over the last fifteen years, she'd become even more beautiful. Her fiery crimson hair fell almost to her waist, completely untamed. She'd always been curvy, but now she looked downright dangerous. Maybe because I knew the truth about this woman. Everything about her was a red flag, but still I couldn't force myself to look away.

Her blue eyes narrowed, like she knew exactly what I was thinking. And if she thought she was about to have me eating out of her hand after all these years, she was dead wrong.

A low growl rumbled in my throat. Someone had the audacity to snort.

"Seems like the two of you might have a history." Brad's voice broke the trance as he rose from the table. "Maybe we should give you some privacy."

"That won't be necessary." Not that I blamed any of them for ignoring me and hightailing it out of this room. I wished I could do the same.

Get it over with, I told myself, expecting my bear to argue for a quick tumble first, but even he agreed that the last thing I needed was this woman complicating my life. Especially this week.

"What—

"What do I want?" Clover's lips curled up into a smile, and damn. No. There was no way I could still feel anything for this woman after what she did to me.

She's your mate, my bear said.

“I was trying to be professional. Not sure why.” I rose from my chair. I hadn’t forgotten the way I towered over her, but after all this time it caught me by surprise.

She softened. “Because you’re Bellamy Laredo, and not one thing about you has changed. Except for the little bit of silver in your beard that has no right to look that good.” She shook her head and chuckled softly. “And I’m still the horrible, rotten bitch who broke your heart in front of the entire clan. I don’t expect you to be nice to me. In fact, I don’t want you to be.”

“Then why are you here?” That question got delivered with the growl she deserved. “If you’re looking to make yourself feel better?—”

“I need your help,” she said quickly.

I couldn’t have possibly heard her right.

“Believe me, you’re literally the last person on earth I want to ask for anything,” she said when I didn’t respond. “But unfortunately, you’re also the perfect person to ask, and I’ve exhausted all possibilities. I would’ve settled for capable, but...” She finished the sentence with a shrug.

“Are you in danger?” My protective instinct was coming out and I hated that I couldn’t stop it. Not even for her. Whatever she was trying to hook me into, I couldn’t fall for it.

I couldn’t fall for her .

“Not exactly.” She dragged the second word out. This had to be good. “Nana’s locket is missing.”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at the thought of her grandmother. Shirley

Crowley was one of my favorite bears in the clan. She wasn't our alpha, but she was the pack healer, a spot exalted to only those who were gifted with certain powers at birth, and the only woman powerful enough to keep a bunch of rowdy bears in check.

Except for her granddaughter, who wouldn't listen to anyone.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Feisty as ever. Still mad at me for what I did to you." Clover smiled sadly.

"That's unfortunate." And this conversation was over. I took my seat and opened my laptop, like she'd caught me in the middle of something important. She had—the meeting. Ugh. I wasn't looking forward to the barrage of questions from the guys that would surely follow this surprise encounter.

I had to get Clover out of here.

"You know it's not just a necklace," she said as I opened my email. My inbox was overflowing with shifters who needed us, with real problems. "Nothing with Nana is what it seems. And of course, because I didn't get her magic, she won't tell me what will happen if the locket's not safely returned to her. She'll only say it's gotta be found. Or else. You know how she is."

"I hope you find it." I chanced a glance up at Clover to drive my point home. Mistake.

"I'm here because I need you to find it." She let out an exasperated sigh.

Of course I knew that was what she wanted, but I'd hoped she'd get the fucking hint that I wanted nothing to do with her. No way could I face my old pack after I'd been rejected. I missed them terribly, but this woman had made an absolute fool out of me.

Not that I could take the case anyway. I was in charge of Sawtooth Security until Barrett came back. I couldn't go running off in search of a necklace. If Barrett caught wind of that, he'd be making Beau his second-in-command.

I'd already made my one questionable decision for the day, and I wasn't looking to follow it up with a worse one.

"You don't need me to find a locket." It was on the tip of my tongue to quote her some outrageously inflated rate, but that would open up negotiation. Make it sound like there was a chance in hell that I'd take this job.

I wouldn't.

But I knew Clover wouldn't stop until she got what she wanted.

"Nana thinks it might be for sale. And if it falls into the wrong hands...she won't tell me what will happen, but I can say there's been a lot of incense burning and chanting anytime the possibility's been brought up." Clover gave her head another shake, and her hair shimmered like a crown.

For a woman who thinks she's got no magic, she certainly knows how to cast a spell.

Not helpful, bear.

"You know your way around a computer," she continued.

You know your way around a few other things too...

"I'm a hacker," I said, ignoring my bear.

That earned a grin. "Right. If there's shady shit happening online, you're the man to

call.”

Couldn't argue with that. “Listen, I would love to help you?—”

“Don't try to let me down easy, Bellamy. Are you in or not? There's a reward for the safe return of the locket.”

“I don't do tricks for treats. I'm running a security company that's just handled a case with national exposure, and we have more jobs than we can possibly keep up with.”

“Right, you saved that lady from the awful Moonlight Beast. That's how I found you. I wouldn't be here if I wasn't desperate.” She lowered her gaze. “I might be forty years old, but Nana will have my ass if this thing isn't found.”

Wait. “Are you responsible for this?”

There was no way this woman would come in here and beg me to do anything if she wasn't in deep shit. This was way more than just a necklace.

Clover pursed her lips together. Yeah, she was completely responsible for whatever mess had been created.

“I would never do anything that would hurt Nana or the clan.”

It took everything I had not to laugh in her face. If that was true, she never would have rejected me.

“I hope you find your nana's necklace, Clover.” Saying her name out loud tore at those delicate pieces of scar tissue that had never quite gone back to the way they were before she broke my heart. “But there's no fucking way I can help you.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Two

The Actual Audacity

Clover

Ugh!

The only thing that would be more satisfying than getting Nana's locket back safe and sound would have been wringing that stubborn bear's neck when he said no.

Did I deserve that reaction? Absolutely. Did I expect anything less? Hell no.

Okay, maybe I thought he might have felt the zap of electricity when our gazes met too...but no. The bear was stone cold and all business. I'd thoroughly ruined Bellamy Laredo.

He probably has a family and a mate waiting for him at home, my bear reminded me, pouring salt into a wound that apparently would never heal. And he's too busy for your mayhem and foolishness.

Totally understandable, even if I didn't like it. The part where I told him I was absolutely desperate to get this thing back wasn't bullshit. It was time to stop being the pack fuck up. Ever since Nana had discovered the locket had disappeared, she'd been in full sorceress mode, consulting every grimoire in her arsenal for a spell powerful enough to bring that thing back. There had been salt circles, all the crystals, smoke, sound bowls, and so much chanting. How she managed to channel the

ancestors and cuss me out with those very same words was a magic unto itself.

My mind raced as I backed out of my parking spot. The Sawtooth Security office was on the outskirts of the tiny, adorable town of Granger Falls. I flipped off the building before putting my car into drive. Our clan lived deeper in the forest, and I had a decent drive ahead of me. Which meant I had plenty of time to figure out a new plan before I had to tell Nana Bellamy said no.

I told her she'd have better luck if she went herself, but she pressed a piece of rose quartz into my hand and said everything would work out the way it should.

Which it probably had.

Not that I wanted to spend the rest of the trip thinking about what our lives could've been like together had I only accepted his claim. He wasn't the only one who could barely look at me after I'd said no. A few members of the pack still acted like I was invisible after all these years.

And my bear had yet to forgive me, saying I told you so after every failed relationship.

Why did I reject him? It had made so much sense at the time. The magic had skipped my generation, and everyone had expected me to bear the next daughter who would carry on Nana's work. For that reason, I had to marry well. Many thought Bellamy would be pack alpha someday. He was the natural choice. The golden boy of the clan. Smart, strong, charming, entirely too fuckable, and could absolutely do no wrong. I was supposed to lead the pack into the next generation, whatever the hell that was supposed to mean. I'd been twenty-five years old, and willing to take the gamble and challenge every single one of our traditions.

Now, fifteen years later, the feral spinster of the pack, I might have some regrets. Not

that I'd ever admit that out loud. Or that I still dreamed about being with Bellamy.

I banged my hand against the steering wheel in frustration. How dare he say no. Sure, I had some audacity to think he'd come to my rescue. I should've just told him how scared and stupid I was back then. That I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to produce this magical heir, no matter how perfect my mate was. That no matter what, I'd fail the clan.

But he hadn't just said no to me. I could accept that. I was no damsel. He'd said no to Nana.

Something dark, fuzzy, and familiar appeared in the road ahead, and I slowed the car. For a long time, we'd been the only bear clan in the area, but recently a few more had decided to call the forest home after getting displaced. And, of course, there was the Sawtooth Security clan that was growing rapidly. It was strange not to know every bear I saw.

My car stopped in front of them. There were four bears in the road, staring me down. I waved, but they didn't so much as blink.

Right, they didn't know me either.

A few more appeared from either side of the road.

This didn't seem so much like a random crossing anymore.

I lowered my window.

"Hey." I ignored the icy stares and gave them the brightest smile I possibly could. "I'm part of the clan just north of here."

Silence. Stillness.

“I’m Clover Crowley.” The Crowleys were an important family, thanks to my grandmother’s lineage. I thought name checking would bring me a little good fortune, but still nothing but these creepy, empty stares.

“It’s her,” one of them finally said.

I held my hands up as they came in closer. It was broad daylight, but we were smack dab in the middle of nowhere, so it was as good as time of any for an ambush.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure which clan you belong to. There are so many new bears in the area. We need to plan a gathering so we can all get acquainted with each other.” I chuckled nervously, wishing that Nana had given me some protection stones instead of the ones that were supposed to make me more fuckable.

The biggest bear of the bunch came up to me, flanked by two others who were almost as huge. They were grizzlies, but they were bigger than the males in our clan. In my human form, they could take me down in two bites.

If I shifted, it would be an almost fair fight...one on one.

Nothing about this fight is fair, my bear warned. I would help you if I could.

Like I hadn’t already been filled with dread.

Also, why wasn’t I shifting?

“Where is it?” the alpha demanded.

I cautioned a look behind me, to see if anyone else was here. But it was just me and a

growing number of unfamiliar bears.

“I think you might have me confused with someone else,” I said.

“No, you cleared that up for us.” How could this bear manage to growl and grin at the same time? “You’re Clover Crowley of the Crowley Clan. Your grandmother Shirley is your pack’s healer. Her ancestral talisman has gone missing.”

Nana had never once called it by such a formal name. It was always her locket. A chill went down my spine when I realized these unfamiliar bears knew more about an important clan relic than I did.

“Do you know where it is?” I asked hopefully.

A few snickers erupted from the crowd, confirming my worst fears, and the bear stepped closer. “That’s what I just asked you.”

My eyes widened. “Wait...you think I have it?”

Bellamy did too...had he tipped these guys off? No, he was way too lawful good to send these thugs out to get me.

The giant bear scoffed. “Wouldn’t waste my time asking you if I didn’t.”

“No! I have no idea where it is.” I didn’t need to know these bears by name to know that they thought that was complete bullshit. “No way I’d cause my Nana so much grief. The whole clan is up in arms about this.”

You’re saying way too much , my bear warned. Only give them what they ask for.

The alpha nodded. “Okay, so you don’t have it. Let’s try this another way. Tell us

where it is.”

“Listen, I wish more than anything right now that I could do that. But I can’t.”

The alpha jerked his head, and the rest of the clan started closing in on me. Heat rose in my body, but my bear knew there was no way we could fight.

Ugh. Why did Bellamy have to reject me? It totally served me right, but he lived for this do-gooder, saving the damsel shit.

No, I was not a damsel...

“What are you doing?” I shrieked. If one of them touched me, I would shift. And make things so much worse.

But two of them shifted into their human form and came for me.

“You’re coming with us,” the alpha declared as the two naked giants lifted me from my feet.

“No!” I kicked and squirmed and punched, but I was nothing more than a toy to them. Something to play with, something to break. “Why are you doing this?”

Any time my bear wanted to show up would be great.

The alpha watched his thugs wrap rope around my arms and legs with satisfaction. “We think you might be even more valuable than that talisman, Clover Crowley. So we’re gonna keep you while we find out.”

Fuck. They thought I had my Nana’s magic.

What would they do to me when they found out I didn't?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Three

A Nana Walks into a Bar...

Bellamy

“You should come out for a drink with us,” Brad suggested a couple days later. “You’ve been glued to that desk ever since Barrett left for his mate moon.”

I scrubbed my hand over my beard. “We’ve never been this busy before.”

Most of the week had been spent getting the guys up to speed on their new cases. Barrett had trusted me to assign them. There were a few smaller things I’d taken care of, and now I was working on pre-screening for a new season of The Real Werewives .

“And it will probably stay this way, now that everyone knows we exist.” Brad was one of newer recruits who was showing the most promise. Even though he didn’t earn the honorary title of second-in-command, I’d given him the most complicated case to see what he could do with it.

Wasn’t quite sure what to do with Beau yet. Maybe giving him extra responsibility wasn’t the answer.

“You can’t work around the clock. You’ll start missing details. And you know they matter.”

“True.” I rose from the desk. The guys would assume I was trying to impress Barrett by overworking myself, but the real reason I’d thrown myself into these Werewife background checks that anyone on the crew could handle was to keep my mind off Clover Crowley.

Was it working? Hell no.

My bear had been fantasizing about those dangerous curves and what it would be like to have her in our bed again.

Maybe a hate fuck is just the thing to get her out of your system , he suggested.

And he was never, ever going to find out. There was a piece of me who wanted to show up on clan land, locket in hand, and be the one to fix everything. Almost everything. It wouldn’t fix that I didn’t have a mate.

“Is everyone headed to The Stepchild?” I asked.

Brad’s face brightened. “Fuck yeah we are. And the guys owe me a drink because they didn’t think I’d actually get you to say yes.”

That’s why you don’t have a mate , my bear said. All work and no play makes for a dull bear .

A couple of drinks should shut him up for the night.

The Stepchild was a rowdy bar on the edge of town run by the local wolf pack. Didn’t matter that it was a weeknight—music from the live band spilled out into the parking lot, along with clusters of humans and shifters.

I waved to a few wolves who’d worked with us on many cases on the way in and

looked for my guys. No surprise they were lined up along the bar, with shot glasses in front of them.

“Boss is here!” Beau announced. “Next round’s on him.”

“You’re not getting out of buying drinks for Brad that easily.” I flagged the bartender for a beer.

“No shots for the big guy?” Brad asked. “We saved one for you.”

“I know better than to tangle with that shit.” I laughed. I was forty-two years old, and the effects of hard alcohol tended to linger. “Plus, I have a feeling I’ll have to keep all of you in line tonight when things get wild.”

Beau raised his brows. “Is Bellamy gonna take someone to Red Heaven tonight?”

Don’t rule out the possibility , my bear practically begged. It doesn’t have to be forever. Fucking Clover out of your system ? —

“We’ll see.” Red Heaven was the private area behind the stage at The Stepchild where absolutely everything goes. A place for shifters to get truly wild.

“We gotta get him back there.” Beau high-fived Brad.

“I’m more concerned with getting me back there than anyone else.” Brad nodded toward the crowd. “C’mon, let’s go see who’s here tonight.”

“Good luck.”

“We’ll see you back there.” Beau wagged his brows before he disappeared into the crowd.

I leaned back on my bar stool and took a deep sip of my beer, taking in the night. I didn't come here so often anymore. The crowd kept getting younger. My priorities had changed.

You've given up on finding a mate , my bear said.

I hadn't, but I wasn't hedging my bets of finding her in a rowdy bar and taking her to the sex room.

Tonight, my only focus was enjoying this well-deserved beer, watching the show, and making sure the guys didn't get into trouble. Didn't need the business getting a bad rep while the boss was out of town.

Someone took the stool next to me. I turned and almost jumped out of my seat when I realized who it was.

“Bellamy, how did you get even more handsome?”

My mouth dropped as she gave me cheek kisses.

“Nana Shirley.” It was Clover's grandmother. She had to be pushing ninety, but she didn't look a day over sixty. Her hair was still as red as her granddaughter's, and she'd put on a sparkly jacket for the occasion. “What are you doing here?”

She'll probably make it to Red Heaven before you do.

Shut up, bear.

“Everyone said I'd find you here.” She cackled. “Good thing I didn't have to drag the two of you out of Red Heaven.”

Shirley waved her hand. “Don’t you act shocked. Of course I’ve been back there. It’s been years, but I could probably go for another round.” She let out a hoot, and then narrowed her eyes, looked behind me, and frowned. “Where’s Clover? Let me guess. She’s already back there, and you’ve forgotten what a firecracker my granddaughter can be.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” I’d do anything for that luxury. “And Clover’s not here.”

At least, I didn’t think she was...

Now it was Shirley’s turn to stare at me in open-mouthed disbelief. “Oh, sweet moon. I would’ve sworn by every stone I have in my collection that the two of you had finally come to your senses after all these years. I knew losing the Goddess Locket would hex us all. If she’s not with you, where is she?”

Great. Now I had to tell this spectacular, powerful woman that I’d stone-cold turned Clover down. This wasn’t gonna go well.

“No idea.” Then it sunk in. “She didn’t go home after she came here?”

“She didn’t.” Shirley frowned as a drink was put in front of her. Looked like a Long Island Iced Tea. “But she did come here?”

I nodded.

“So you’re in? You’ll help us find the locket?”

Damn it. There was no way I could say no to Shirley. She was too powerful, too important. And the worst part was, she knew it.

“Something tells me we need to find Clover first.” Because I had a feeling she was in

danger, and there was no way Shirley or my bear would let anything happen to her.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Four

The Worst Mixtape Ever

Clover

Remote wasn't exactly a unique concept in Sawtooth Forest, but these bears straight up brought me to the middle of nowhere. I'd lived in Idaho all my life, explored the land in my human and bear forms, and I had no idea where I was.

Not that I could see much from the inside of a tent. The naked dudes had brought me directly here, tied me to a chair, and left.

So they probably didn't plan to hurt me. I could thank the moon for that. But that was only because they thought I had magic.

All bets were off when they found out the truth.

The tent flap opened, and an older woman came in with a jug. Very little light came with her. It had to be nighttime. The second night I was here.

I hadn't slept, and it was already getting too easy to lose track of time.

She ripped the tape off my mouth. The sting of the raw skin made my eyes bulge, but I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of yelping at the sensation.

"You need to have some soup." Everything about the woman with the ladle was soft

and motherly, with her dress and hair pulled up in one of those effortless buns, and I wanted to believe her. My mouth tasted like the bottom of a birdcage, and the formerly polite rumbling in my tummy had become a full-on angry roar.

The soup smelled good. Better than good—delicious.

But she'd just ripped skin off my face.

I pressed my lips together as she brought the ladle to them and shook my head.

The soft woman frowned. "You need to keep your strength up, Clover."

I had so many questions for her, but that would mean opening my mouth. Just because these bears wanted me strong and hadn't hurt me—yet—didn't mean that shit wasn't laced with something that would have me talking to the big bear in the sky.

"You're important to us, and we're glad you're here. I promise this will all make sense soon." From the hushed tone of her voice, I had a feeling she was telling me more than she should. Which I appreciated, but it didn't stop her from putting that awful tape back on my face.

A little bit of the soup stung the raw skin before it dribbled down my chin, onto my chest, joining what was left over from the last time they tried to force feed me.

I had to get out of here.

But how? A string of regrets played in my head like the worst mixtape ever. Like how I should've grabbed my phone before I got out of my car—not that I could use it with my hands tied behind my back, but eventually, I'd break free of these ropes. I'd been working on them before my fingers had gone numb. Or how I should've joined

my sister Sage at the gym instead of hitting snooze repeatedly every morning. Her kickboxing moves would come in handy right now. But the track that played constantly on repeat was how I'd rejected my big, strong, stupidly gorgeous, perfect mate. Now I was spending entirely too much time fantasizing about Bellamy busting in here and coming to my rescue.

I was no damsel, and I didn't need to be saved.

Yes, you absolutely do, my bear said.

There was no way that would happen, I wouldn't admit how much I wanted it. Or him.

I pushed my bear's voice and any thoughts of big, beautiful, bearded giants out of my head as I once again tried to shift. Cell phones and roundhouse kicks had nothing on sheer bear power.

But my body didn't warm, my skin didn't split, and my bear didn't come.

Maybe that's what the lady with the broth meant about keeping my strength up. She was giving me code for how to get the fuck out of here.

She thinks you have magic, my bear said. Like Nana.

This couldn't just be over a locket, or magic. Every clan had a healer. It was not worth abducting someone over. I didn't plan on sticking around to find out. But my numb fingers would barely move at this point, let alone untie a complicated series of knots.

The tent flap opened again, and this time, a much older woman entered. Small and wrinkled, almost like she'd shriveled, but there was no denying her power. It was a

tangible thing. She flipped on a light.

Wait—this tent had electricity? Maybe this settlement wasn't as rogue and transient as I thought.

If I were able to tear my gaze away from my guest, I'd get a better take on my surroundings. Even in the low light. I'd noticed crystals, dark pots that looked like cauldrons, and volumes and volumes of books. But they had nothing on my guest. Those eyes. They were pure bear. Clear and sharp and didn't look like they belonged in that wizened body.

"If it isn't the prodigal, wayward daughter of the Crowley Clan," she said as she ripped the tape away from my face once again.

Up close and personal, the power was even more intense. I'd never felt anything like this before. Not even from my Nana.

"My name is Alba Lynwood." She paused, as if she expected me to recognize her name. I didn't. "As clan mystic, let me officially welcome you to our land."

"Some welcome."

"Ah, she's still feisty." She clicked her tongue, as if to scold me.

I was a grown-ass woman and I said what I said. She seemed to know much more about me than I did about her, which was dangerous. Normally I was proud of being the free spirit of my clan, the one who laughed in the face of tradition.

"Your spirited nature is nothing to be ashamed of," she continued, like she had read my mind. "It's one of the reasons you caught our attention. That, and of course, your ancestral talisman."

I huffed out a sigh. “If I had any idea where that damned thing was, I’d tell you on the condition you’d let me out of here.”

Like it was that simple—I was deep in the forest, and there was no telling if my car had been left in the middle of that lonely country road. Or if someone had stolen it and was enjoying a shopping spree with my credit cards.

They won’t get much before they max out.

Not the time, bear.

“We think, once you know the truth about your lineage, that you may choose to stay,” Alba said as she circled me, inspecting me like I was the prized beast in some wildlife auction. “If you bring us to the talisman, we can give you its magic. You’ll be more powerful than you ever dared to dream.”

I laughed, and the old woman shot me a look that almost made me choke. The power that swirled between us would be a tangible thing, if I was able to reach out and touch it.

They knew I didn’t have the magic. And they hadn’t searched me for the locket. Then why were they holding me hostage?

“You have no idea who you are, do you?” It was Alba’s turn to laugh. “Your ancestors never told you.”

“I know exactly who I am. I’m a forty-year-old feral spinster with a pot belly, a shopping problem, and a healthy suspicion of authority. My pack has never forgiven me for rejecting my mate, and the only reason they didn’t toss me out on my ass after that stunt was because I’m Shirley Crowley’s granddaughter. Our pack healer, and the one with actual magic. But back to me. I’m tired, I’m hangry, I can’t feel my

arms, and I can guarantee you, I won't learn one single thing from this experience."

"Sweet moon, you're perfect." Alba folded her hands together. Her entire being lit up like the electricity in the tent was coming from her.

"Perfect?" That was not an adjective that often got tossed in my direction. "Why don't you tell me who I am since you know so much about me?"

"I can tell you what you don't know." Great. The old woman planned to keep speaking in riddles. "Your clan lied to you about your power because they wanted to keep you small. Told you that you needed to submit to an alpha. Let someone claim that wild spirit of yours. Keep it under wraps before you became too powerful to tame."

My lips parted as I inhaled her allegation. She had to be working some sort of magic on me, telling me exactly what I'd longed to hear as a little girl.

But I'd never heard of this woman. There was no way she was so well-versed in the ways of my clan.

"That's a lovely story, but I can assure you, every crystal in this room has more power than I do."

She raised a thin brow. "Can you feel them?"

"Of course I can. But that's their magic, not mine."

"Oh, sweet child." She picked up an impressive looking knife and sliced the ropes away from my wrists. "You don't feel power that you don't have. Those rocks are bringing it to life."

I opened my mouth to tell her that wasn't true. That every object on the earth had some sort of power, vibration?—

Then why don't you? my bear asked.

Good question.

I sat in stunned silence. Free, but I didn't run.

“Come.” She held out her hand. “Let me show you who you really are.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Five

Some Things About a Woman Never Change

Bellamy

“So if we find these guys, we have full permission to kick their asses, right?” Beau asked as he shoved his shirt back into his jeans.

As someone who worked at a security firm that specialized in protecting at-risk clients, I was no stranger to working in unusual locations. But this was the first time I’d yanked my coworkers out of a sex club to start work on a case.

“We need to get Clover Crowley to safety. By any means necessary.” I scrubbed my hand over my face as we stood in the parking lot of The Stepchild, all of us trying to sober up.

“What’s the plan?” Brad asked.

That was the problem. I didn’t have a fully formed one yet. But my bear wasn’t letting anyone lay a paw on his...

Nope. This was nothing more than doing the right thing for my clan. And probably punishment for not helping Clover when she first asked.

“We check leads. I should be able to access her phone records. See when the last time she used it was, and if there is a signal. Shirley, I need all the information you can

give me about her car. It might give us some clues about her whereabouts.”

Beau cocked a skeptical brow. “Wait, your mate is missing and you’re gonna spend the first critical hours of the search stuck behind your laptop?”

He’s right. You need to be out there. Paws on the earth. Tracking her down. You know her better than she knows herself, my bear argued.

Not anymore. It had been years since we’d been together.

There are things about a woman, especially that woman, that will never change.

“She’s not my mate. And?—”

“Dude, if you could’ve seen the way the two of you were looking at each other, you wouldn’t be able to say that with a straight face.” Beau grinned. “The energy was electric.”

“It’s my duty to find her. Clover’s a part of my clan,” I said between gritted teeth. “Or she was.”

“Boss doesn’t want to admit he’s got a thing for her.” Brad nudged him.

A growl rumbled from the very center of my being. I didn’t want to tell my team that Clover Crowley rejected me. I’d lived through that humiliation once, thank you very much, and that was enough for this lifetime.

I swore I’d never let anyone do that to me again. I’d be damned if the same woman got a second shot.

“I hate to say, the handsome boy is right.” Shirley grinned at Beau and patted his arm.

The cocky bear ate it up. “You’re so good with computers, but your team would be better served by having you lead them in the field.”

“My team is highly trained and very skilled at their jobs.” I wouldn’t tell her they were trained to kill if needed, and I could snoop around in the most secure databases in the world without being detected. “And taking time to do research could save us hours. Days. It could be the difference between finding her and not.”

Or you don’t want to go out there and search. Because you might find her.

Shut up, bear.

“I suppose it’s more efficient than casting a spell.” Shirley sighed. “But I will if we need it.”

“You mean, if we can’t get the job done,” Beau clarified.

She grinned. My second-in-command had the old woman eating out of the palm of his hand, and that could come in handy if his prediction came true. “Let’s hope we don’t need it.”

I laughed. “Science first, magic later. My laptop is in my truck. Don’t even have to leave the parking lot. Clover’s stuff should come up quickly. It’s all public record.”

Shirley raised a brow. “Weren’t you here having fun? Don’t you ever take time off?”

“This isn’t a nine-to-five. Clover can’t wait.” Grabbing the device out of the console, I sat on the gate of the truck. The Wi-Fi here wasn’t as secure as the office, but I had enough scramblers on my system that no one would be able to track us tracking her.

Which was exactly how I liked it.

Shirley gave me Clover's number, which hadn't changed in twenty years, and the make and model of her expensive sports car.

Brad whistled low. "Sweet ride."

"If you're not interested in her, maybe she'd be willing to take me for a spin in that car." Beau's grin faded quickly when I glared at him. "Okay, got it. Off limits. Even though she's definitely not your mate."

"She hasn't made a call since she left our office." I frowned as I looked at the information. "Not picking up a signal. The battery must be dead."

"Or she could be in a spot that has no signal," Brad suggested. "Deep in the mountains."

"We have to prepare for all scenarios." I turned to Shirley. "Is there a possibility that Clover was headed anywhere other than clan land?"

After a moment, she shook her head. "She was pretty insistent that she could convince you to help us."

"No plan B? In case she remembered what happened the last time we saw each other?" I ignored the loaded looks and nudges from the guys.

"She didn't think she'd need one."

I didn't have time to pack for that guilt trip. "We'll operate under the assumption she was headed home. Be on the lookout for a red Challenger. We need to cover a lot of ground, quickly."

"Do we have anything with her scent on it?" Brad asked.

“I think she left a sweater in the back of my car. I can go grab it.” Shirley headed across the parking lot.

I closed my eyes for a long blink. I could never forget that scent, no matter how hard I tried.

“You okay, Bell?” Beau asked. “I know I keep giving you shit, but there’s no denying this woman is under your skin.”

“Never been better,” I lied.

Shirley returned with a leopard print sweater that was as soft as...

Soft as Clover’s skin, my bear finished my thought for me.

This was going to be a long night.

“A team should do a sweep of the other directions, but my instinct is telling me she headed north.”

“What else do we need to know about this woman?” Brad asked. “We’re looking for Clover, but something tells me when we find her, that’s just the beginning of this job.”

I had a bad feeling he was right. Her visit to our office and subsequent disappearance were no coincidence.

Shirley clutched the sweater to her middle. “My granddaughter is a free spirit, but she always responds to calls and texts. No one’s heard from her since she left this office. Not her best friends, not her sister, and not me. She’s wild, but she’s not stupid. I’m holding out hope that this is all a misunderstanding, and my apologies for tearing you

away from a fun night, but my intuition tells me that time is of the essence, and my intuition seldom fails me.”

“What about the locket?” I asked. Clover had been cagey about the details surrounding its disappearance, which wasn’t a surprise. Shirley and the elders had guarded their magic closely from anyone who didn’t have it.

And Clover hadn’t shown any signs of carrying their gift. The clan had hoped her child would, but after she told me to take a hike, they may never find out.

Unless she found another mate.

No , my bear snarled.

“Seems like a trivial thing to have a security team look for,” Beau said, and several of the guys nodded. “We usually work on much bigger cases. Personal security. Cyber threats. Not missing jewelry.”

“The locket is very important to our clan,” Shirley said, telling us nothing. “We could lose everything if it’s not found.”

Still nothing.

“Tell us more about the magic,” I said. “This isn’t the time for secrets, Shirley. Is there a chance that Clover has anything to do with its disappearance?”

She swallowed hard. “Sharing the magic with ungifteds?—”

“Might save your granddaughter’s life,” I suggested. “She isn’t known for making decisions in the best interest of the pack.”

Shirley pushed her shoulders back and took a step closer to me. “You need to find Clover, and the locket.”

“I need to know if I’m putting my guys in unnecessary danger, Shirley. All your traditions won’t mean shit if there’s no pack to save. So you need to ask yourself, which one’s more important—the magic, or your granddaughter?”

“Clover, of course.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Fine. The locket contains the spirit of our great ancestor, Artemis. For those of us who have the gift, it gives us the power to heal. But that’s not all we do. The power helps those in our clan find the one they’re fated to be with, and ensures mating is successful.”

“Thank you.” I nodded and turned to my team. “Beau and Brad, you’re with me. Everyone else can work on the sweep in the other directions. Head back into the Stepchild and ask everyone about Clover Crowley.”

I jerked my head toward my truck.

“We’re staying human?” Brad asked.

“For now.” Part of me was expecting a phone call in fifteen minutes reporting that they’d found Clover in Red Heaven. My bear had definite thoughts about that, but I had a job to do. “Be prepared for all scenarios.”

“Are you gonna tell us who the fuck Clover Crowley really is and why she’s got you coming undone?” Beau asked.

“She’s my mate,” I growled, shocking no one more than myself with the answer. “And that explanation about the magic was a lie.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Six

A Ghost Bear Cult Clan

Clover

Weirdly, I didn't run. And even weirder, I knew I should have.

For the first time ever, a strange feeling of peace washed over me. At least, that's what I thought it was. Like I said, it was completely unfamiliar.

Now wasn't the time to get in touch with my feelings. I needed to pay attention to my surroundings, because as soon as this spell Alba had surely cast over me wore off, I was out of here.

At least, I was going to keep telling myself that.

The clan was lively and a lot bigger than I expected. This was no rogue, temporary camp. This clan lived, loved, and thrived here. I took a seat in front of a fire, where other clan members looked at me with curiosity. Some smiled and waved. Others looked straight through me like I wasn't even here. There was a table off to the side, topped with heaping plates of fish, game, and vegetables.

It was rustic and a little rowdy, but something about it felt right.

Nope! I couldn't fall even further under Alba's spell, even if she did seem to have alchemy flowing through her ancient veins.

Speaking of ancient...I blinked to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me. The women were all wearing long dresses, the men loose pants and shirts. Even the kids who were running around the adults in a lively game of tag were dressed like they'd stepped out of another era.

Great. This wasn't a clan, it was a cult.

I was going to find myself in even more hot water if I didn't leave the first chance I got.

Nothing's stopping you now , my bear pointed out.

She was right, but I had no idea where I was, I felt like I was lucid dreaming, and my stomach was rumbling at the plates of food being passed around.

A giant man who made Bellamy look small sat beside me. As I was trying to figure out if he was one of the behemoths who had hauled me away from my car, he offered me a heaping plate.

"I should've asked you what you liked, but I put a little bit of everything on the plate." A little bit of pink blossomed through his beard onto his cheeks. He was bashful. "It's just a little taste of what we have to offer. I hope you enjoy your stay with us."

I shouldn't have taken the plate from him. But I was starving, salmon was my favorite, and...was it possible to become even more bewitched? Alba had been right about one thing—I needed to keep my strength up.

"Thank you." I took a bite of salmon, and it melted in my mouth. "This is amazing."

"I caught it this morning in the stream." Now he was beaming. The giant bear was

adorable, even if it was possible he'd abducted me days before. "My sister is in charge of the community garden where the vegetables were grown."

"It seems like your family is prominent in the clan."

He furrowed his brow. "No one here has any more importance than anyone else. We all work together for the common good of the clan."

Definitely a cult. "Not even your alpha?" I asked.

"I am the alpha."

"A pleasure to meet you." I carefully balanced the plate on my lap and offered him my hand. "I'm Clover."

"Oh, I know who you are." He smiled. "We've been waiting for you."

Alba sat on the other side of me. "I see you've met Anders."

"He's taking good care of me." I should've regretted those words the moment they came out of my mouth, but it was true, even if this transaction wouldn't end the way he hoped. They thought I had what they wanted. I had to get out of here before they realized I didn't.

The two bears shared a knowing smile, like I wasn't there.

"Can we talk about the talisman?" Anders asked.

"You mean, my grandmother's necklace," I corrected, taking another bite of food as he nodded. "It's a gorgeous piece of jewelry. I swear every color is in that stone, and the metal is silver. Possibly platinum."

“We know what it looks like,” he said with a faint hint of a rumble. “We want to know where it is.”

“Don’t we all.” I laughed. “Can’t help you there. I’m on the hunt for it too.”

“That locket belongs to us.” All the adorable was gone, replaced with pure alpha.

I couldn’t stop my mouth from dropping. “No, it doesn’t. It’s been in our clan for generations.”

“That’s true,” Alba chimed in. “Your ancestors stole it from us.”

The way she said us was like she meant that the bears who came generations before me had taken it directly from the bears sitting on either side of me.

Great, not only was this a cult, it was a ghost bear cult.

And to think I’d felt at home here. I was such a fool. I set the plate down and rose on shaky legs, wiping dirt away from my jeans.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” That sounded much better in my head. “But like I said, I can’t help you.”

“You can,” Anders said. “Would you like to know the truth about your clan?”

“I’ve lived with them for forty years. It’s pretty impossible to keep secrets from me for that long.”

They shared another one of those looks. They weren’t looking through me this time, it was more like telepathy.

“Forty years is a blink of an eye in this story,” Anders said.

Run , my bear said. But my feet were pretty much rooted to this spot.

“You owe it to yourself to hear our story, and then you can decide what to do with the information,” he added.

I lowered myself back to the ground, equal parts pissed at myself for giving into this nonsense at every turn, and curious about what bombshell these bears could possibly drop. Maybe they could explain why I had no magic.

Now I was the adorable one, still believing this story had a happy ending. “Fine. Tell me everything.”

Anders cleared his throat. “Generations ago, there was only one bear clan in Idaho. We were strong and our magic was very, very powerful.”

“We didn’t consider it magic then,” Alba corrected. “It was simply being in tune with nature. Working with our surroundings. Listening to what the spirits have to tell us.”

“The Lynwood family had produced a long line of alphas,” Anders continued. He’d never clarified if he was also a Lynwood. “The Crowley family wanted to make a deal. They offered their daughter, one with strong intuition, as a bride to the next alpha, mostly as a business arrangement that they claimed would strengthen both families. It was an excellent deal. They were in control of one of the most prosperous farms in the clan. But our alpha was fated to another bear. And no force on earth is stronger than fate.”

It took everything I had to bite my tongue and say sheer, personal will could trump fate any day of the week, but things were different back then. That arrangement was probably the best my long-lost ancestor could’ve hoped for.

Hell, no. I needed to come to my senses. This pack was creepy AF and she probably dodged a major bullet by getting rejected.

You can't deny this story has some major parallels to your situation , my bear said.

I wasn't following her.

I could feel her rolling her eyes. Your family promised you to an alpha that would awaken your magic.

Okay, she did have a point, because they thought the key to their future depended on me producing a magical baby.

But until the locket went missing and I got abducted, everyone was doing just fine without it.

"We refused the offer," Alba said, in case I was expecting a happily ever after. "The elder Crowley was furious. He refused to accept that we would reject his daughter, and he wasn't taking no for an answer. Families started to take sides. Clan members stopped talking to each other. Tensions rose to an unbearable level. Then, the talisman went missing."

"The Crowleys thought they could destroy us," Anders rumbled. "It didn't work."

"When we realized your grandmother was in possession of the locket, we hoped she would do the right thing and give it back. That she would listen to her intuition. But there were other voices, stronger voices, telling her that she had the right to lay claim to something that didn't belong to her." Alba shook her head sadly. "She refused, even after we told her that in the wrong hands, the talisman would only manifest misfortune."

That last bit hit like falling out of a tree for so many reasons, but the biggest one was I felt like I was a walking, talking manifestation of that misfortune. The end of the magical road. There had to be a reason the power chose not to come to me. My eyes stung with all these unprocessed emotions, but there was no way I was going to let these bears know I was feeling some pretty intense feelings. If a tear managed to drop, I'd blame it on the smoke from the fire.

But they were also talking some serious shit about Nana and it just didn't line up with anything I'd been told about my clan's history.

There are a lot of secrets and mystery around the clan's magic ... I hated that my bear was right.

Even more, I hated that this was all making too much sense.

But there was another issue.

"You're talking like this happened so long ago—using words like ancestors—but you're also making it sound like you were actually there, and this jilted bride is my nana."

The two bears shared one of those looks that was just getting annoying.

Alba nodded to Anders.

"You need to trust your intuition, Clover."

I rolled my eyes. I was exhausted, sore, pissed off, and I'd given these bears too much of my patience. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I prepared myself for yet another cryptic reply when a scream pierced the camp. I

jumped and the food flew off my plate, and Anders tensed like he was ready to shift. The heat wasn't coming from the fire anymore, instead it rolled off the bear beside me.

The clan were still in their human forms, running toward us, screaming something I couldn't understand.

Then I heard the roar that was responsible for this chaos.

I knew that roar all too well.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Seven

It's Complicated

Bellamy

The light from the stars was our only guide as we headed away from the Stepchild and into the unknown.

“Okay, now that the witchy old lady isn’t with us, you can tell us the truth.” Beau was riding shotgun, staring me down. “Why the hell are we busting our asses at zero dark thirty to find a piece of jewelry?”

“And why do you think she’s lying about it?” Brad added from the back seat.

“She’s clan,” I started but Beau quickly cut me off with a scoff.

“Sorry, boss, you’ve never mentioned your clan before Clover Crowley crashed our meeting. One of the reasons I felt at home here so fast is because you always say you might not be able to choose your clan, but you can choose your team. What we’ve put together feels good because everyone’s here willingly. Shirley and Clover don’t feel like a choice. It’s like you have something to prove.”

I rumbled, but didn’t argue as I stared into the dark and lonely night again. Beau might have said too much, but he wasn’t wrong.

“This is the first I’ve heard of an ancestor named Artemis.” There had been so many

stories that the elders used to tell us at our gatherings. They were wild and fantastic and I loved them. They made me feel connected to the earth and my animal in a world that we didn't rule anymore. "Have either of you heard of her? We should all descend from one ancestor."

"I don't know a lot about my clan, so don't go by me, but no, nothing here," Beau said. He and his mom had been separated from their clan when he was just a cub, and he'd been concerned he wasn't bear enough for the job. It was one of the reasons I'd taken him under my wing.

"My clan has strong traditions, and no one's ever mentioned an Artemis," Brad said. "My sister wrote a children's book with all our clan's legends. I illustrated it. If she existed, I'd know about her."

"Are you gonna tell us what happened between you and Clover, boss?" Beau asked.

"Wasn't gonna, if I could help it." I chuckled sadly then sighed. The more I tried to deny what happened, the more power she had over me. And I couldn't afford to make bad decisions when it came to this woman. Not now, not ever. "She was my mate."

"Was?" Brad said.

"I offered my claim, and she rejected me." It never got easier to say, especially as the guys each let out a low whistle. "A woman like Clover can never be claimed. Not even by a bear that should've been alpha. But I was young and stupid and I thought love and tradition could be enough for her."

"What happened after she said no?" Beau asked.

"I left. In a hurry." I didn't often talk about this part. "I couldn't face anyone in my clan after they'd all watched the woman who was supposed to be fated to be mine

humiliate me. I left. Joined the Army, which was where I learned to do what I do, but I wasn't ready for someone else's rules after my own had failed me, so I only stayed for one tour. I met Barrett right after his clan got displaced, and we've been working together ever since."

Brad leaned forward. "We don't have to take this job, boss. We can tell Shirley the truth. That her clan needs to find another way to solve their problems."

"You want me to tell my clan healer I think she's a liar?"

"Maybe it's about time someone does." Beau shrugged.

Again, he wasn't wrong. "Problem is, the chosen ones were so secretive about the clan's magic, that she could be telling the truth and I'd be making a fool out of myself. Again."

"No. They should've fought for their alpha. You don't owe Clover Crowley shit." Beau studied me. "You're still not over her, are you?"

"I have a lot of complicated feelings about the woman."

"Can't blame you there." Brad chuckled. "She seems like a force of nature. Not someone you can easily walk away from."

"That's for sure." I sighed. The guys were right. I was so close to saying fuck it and turning the truck around. Going back to the office and tackling the growing list of cases that needed our attention. But I wasn't a "fuck it" type of bear. "I'm doing this for me. I want the truth."

Brad clapped his hand on my shoulder. "We've got your back, boss."

“Fuck yeah, we do.” Beau leaned forward and pointed. “Slow down. I see something on the side of the road.”

We pulled up behind a red sports car that fit the description of Clover’s car. From the angle, it looked like it had unexpectedly veered off the road. My heart pounded as we got out of the truck.

The car was abandoned.

“It’s unlocked.” Brad’s face lit up as he opened the passenger side door. “Purse is still here.”

Not a good sign. The driver’s side was open too.

Her scent hit me in the face the moment I moved inside. I let myself indulge in the aroma of sweet vanilla and fresh cut grass. But it was short-lived. She didn’t mean to leave her car here. She’d never leave her purse behind.

I slid the seat back and hit the ignition button. It started, which meant her keys had been left in her purse.

“Levels are good,” I said. “This wasn’t car trouble.”

“I smell bear.” Beau waved his hand in front of his nose. “Stinks like a lot of them.”

“Yeah, I do too.” I growled. My animal would come quick. “But I can scent her . Follow me.”

I barely made it out of the car before my bones began to snap and fur burst through my skin. I was on all fours, all bear, following Clover’s scent and pure instinct. Beau and Brad shifted and fell into line behind me.

For the first time in a far too long, I felt like the alpha I was supposed to be.

I was a bear possessed, under the influence of that delicious scent that was still my favorite, but I couldn't let my complicated feelings for Clover get in the way of getting this job done.

I was a bear. She was clan. It was my duty to protect. On paper, it was simple. But in reality, nothing with Clover was. And the locket made it even more complicated.

What was Shirley trying to hide?

"How are you doing, boss?" Brad's voice startled me back to reality. The guys flanked either side of me. "I've got to admit, I've lost the bear scent."

"Me too," Beau added. "But I never scented Clover."

It had been so strong...which only meant one thing. We were still connected in a way neither of us wanted to admit. "Yeah. I've still got her scent."

"This is the middle of nowhere. Didn't think anyone lived out here. Are there any shifters this deep in the forest?" Brad asked.

"Everyone passes through, but don't think anyone lives this deep." And it was my job to know where every shifter in the area called home. "But I don't think we're looking for a permanent settlement."

"What are we looking for?" Beau asked.

"Any sign that someone's been here recently." We were pretty far out, but any time we'd dealt with missing person cases in the past, the victim seldom stayed in the same place. I had to prepare myself that we would only find where Clover had been.

If you're lucky...

Nope. Failure was not an option.

Brad stopped and tipped his snout up. "Do you smell that? Smells like smoke. Like we're coming up on a campsite."

"Be careful," I warned. "They might not expect to encounter bears."

Beau chuckled. "You've seen the memes. We're not the scariest thing that could find them out here."

That would all change if they'd hurt Clover...

It was too quiet. Too still. Humans and animals alike had a vibration that I was much more sensitive to in my bear form.

The trees thinned, and tents came into view. There must've been about a dozen of them, and they looked like they'd been abandoned years ago.

"Don't see anyone, boss," Brad said quietly.

"But there was a burn here. Hope it's contained," Beau added. He volunteered for the local fire department, and if there was a fire, he'd know what to do.

The smell of smoke sang in my nostrils, but it was nothing compared to Clover's scent. It had intensified, threatening my sanity. I stalked forward, looking for any clue.

That vibration picked up. A soft thump. A heartbeat.

Her heartbeat.

“She’s here.”

“What’s our plan?” Brad asked.

“Get her to safety. No matter what it takes.”

Beau eyed me. “No rules?”

“If you need to be the scariest thing in the forest, you have my blessing.”

But I didn’t want that.

We came around the corner to find a woman with wild red hair sitting alone in front of what had been a fire.

A rumble emitted from my throat, and she turned around.

Her eyes widened as she gaped. “Bellamy. It’s not safe for you to be here.”

“Where are they?” I growled. “Did they hurt you?”

“Keep your voice down. They’re everywhere.” She narrowed her gaze and made a small gesture with her hand. “Can’t you see them?”

“See who?” Now that I was closer to her, her eyes were wild, like she’d been drugged. But otherwise, she looked unharmed. Dirty and disheveled, but we could fix that.

Her brow furrowed. “There are bears everywhere. And they’re talking some serious

shit about Nana.” She stepped closer and whispered, “Problem is, I think they might be right.”

“Come on.” I nudged her with my snout, not expecting her to jump. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“I can’t leave,” she whispered. “They say I have magic too. Actual magic! What if they’re right, and it didn’t skip me?”

I’d almost prepared myself for every terrible scenario that could happen when we found her, except for her being completely fucking delusional. It was best to play along because if I made her angry, I could lose her forever. “Do they know where the locket is?”

She shook her head. “They think I’ll tell them how to find it.”

Problem was, her unhinged story lined up with that feeling in my gut.

“We need to get you home.”

“No!” She pushed me away. “I feel safe here. I finally know what that feels like.”

Fuck. This wasn’t just Clover being her impossible self. There was way more to this.

I had to get her out of here even if I needed to drag her to a place where she was actually safe. I picked her up, ignoring her kicking and punching and screaming as I hoisted her body over my shoulder.

“Stop it. We’re the only ones out here. Don’t think you’re gonna get someone to save you. That’s why I’m here. Just like you asked me to be days ago.”

“You’re trying to take me away from them. I’m so close to finally knowing the truth. You can’t do this to me.”

“We’ll find out the truth. I promise. But you can’t stay here.”

“Everything we know about our clan is wrong,” she said as she wriggled in my arms.

“It’s not my clan anymore. You made sure of that when you rejected my claim,” I grunted.

“It will always be your clan.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “You’re the one who left.”

“Didn’t want to wake up every morning without you in my bed. So I found a different bed.”

She chuckled and got in another kick. “How’s that working out for you?”

“Since I’m still saving your ass, I guess it’s not working out that great for either of us.”

“I told you to leave me there. You didn’t listen.”

“I learned from the best.” Once she got some rest and whatever was making her delusional out of her system, we’d get to the bottom of what really happened.

“Still trying to woo me after all this time.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Hardly.”

She exhausted herself and her body grew heavy in my arms. Her heartbeat had finally

evened out. We got back to the road, and I put her down, trying to ignore the way her curves felt as they slid against my fur.

Like that was even possible.

She looked around, and then her face lit up when she recognized where she was. “Oh good, you found my car. I guess this is goodbye? Thanks for the unwanted rescue. I’m headed home. I’ll give the clan your regards, if you want.”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

“What are you talking about? That’s my car. As long as everything’s still in there. I should be good to go.”

“Your stuff is in there. And there’s no way you’re driving like this. You’re high as a kite.”

“I’m fine.” She tried to get around me and I stepped in front of her. She jabbed her finger into my chest. “My car is a lot faster than any bear.”

Heat skyrocketed in my body. I didn’t even have to will my shift. The guys weren’t far behind me.

Clover watched me with her arms crossed, a satisfied smirk on her face as she raked her gaze over my naked body. “Still got it, Bell. Thanks for the show. See you later.”

I grasped her by the shoulders and crashed my mouth over hers in a kiss.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Eight

A Soap Opera Damsel

Clover

Sweet moon, did Bellamy ever know how to kiss.

I'll forever claim I let him take me by surprise because I was under the influence of unexplained supernatural forces, but the moment he grasped my shoulders and his lips met mine, pure lava rocketed through my veins. I could blame it on the delicious heat rolling off his glorious naked body, but as he ran his tongue along the seam of his lips, imploring me to let him inside, I forgot all the reasons I shouldn't be kissing him.

I let myself get lost in him, grasping his strong arms and going along for the ride wherever he took me. Maybe it would be nice to have a protective bear, even if he was a little grumpy and bossy, take care of me for a little while.

He drew away from me, blinking like he just woke up from a dream.

"So I guess you changed your mind about helping me." I grinned, hating how much I was already craving the next kiss. And the one after that. What? The idea of commitment usually gave me hives.

"Your nana paid me a visit at the Stepchild, thinking she'd find you there. I had to pull these guys out of Red Heaven to come to your rescue." He jerked his thumb over

his shoulder at his two very human and very naked associates. I seemed to have a knack for attracting naked bear shifters lately.

There was a fuzzy memory of others....

“Sorry. I owe you big time.” Wait. For what? I looked around, realizing I had no idea where we were or how we got here. We were on the side of the road, my car looked like I’d driven it off the road, and from the misty light, I was pretty sure it was early morning.

Bellamy tipped his head. Damn this maddening bear for being able to read my mind, but he’d kissed me stupid.

I smiled sweetly at him. No use in hiding it. “I’m having a little trouble remembering what happened.”

“You remember the kiss, right?” His voice was husky, and he was still so naked. No wonder I was distracted.

“Everything that happened before that was a blur.” I looked around, trying to figure out how I got here and why I ditched my car. And those naked men...I rubbed my temples, hoping it would bring the memory into focus. Nope, nothing.

Bellamy cocked a brow. “Maybe I should kiss you again and see if you remember anything else.”

“Don’t think it works that way.” But my bear was begging me to find out. “Good try though. Guess I’ll head home and sleep it off. Thanks for...the kiss, I guess. And whatever else led up to it.”

He stepped in front of me. “Like hell I’m letting you drive in this condition. You’re

coming back to my cabin.”

“I didn’t forget the part where I asked you for help and you sent me packing. Now you think you can tell me what to do?” The kiss wasn’t that good.

Are you sure about that?

“Ah, so you do remember something.” He crossed his arms over his muscular, hairy chest and grinned. “Clan land is three hours from here. Maybe two, since I’m sure you still drive like you’re trying to qualify for a race. You have no recollection of where you spent the last two days. I’m not so much as letting you operate a coffee maker until you get some sleep and can tell me what the hell happened to you.”

“Ugh. Fine. I feel like some soap opera damsel with amnesia.” I let out an exasperated sigh. “What about my car?”

The younger of the two guys behind Bellamy raised his hand. “I’ll drive it.”

“Beau has a serious man crush on your car. I’m sure he’ll take the utmost care bringing it back to my place.” Bellamy turned and gave him a playful glare. It was brotherly, almost fatherly, and I would not spend a moment thinking about what a good dad he could’ve been. “Brad will go with him. You’ll be riding shotgun with me.”

Hell, I hadn’t laid eyes on this bear in over a decade. He could have a wife and a whole bunch of cubs...

That kiss said otherwise, my bear reminded me.

“Be careful. And maybe put some pants on before you get in? The seats are leather.”

Bellamy's eyes widened, like he just realized he was still naked.

"We've got sweats in the back of my truck. Let's get dressed and head out. Maybe we can grab some breakfast first. I'm always starving after a shift, and it might have been a while since you ate."

A memory flashed in my mind of a plate of food in my hands. It being plentiful and abundant all around me. Kids laughing. But I couldn't place it, and it didn't make sense. "Yeah, pancakes would be great."

I climbed into the passenger seat of Bellamy's truck while the guys got dressed. His scent was so strong in here, and I couldn't stop myself from deeply inhaling it.

His cabin would be a thousand times stronger. I couldn't decide if that was a bad thing or not.

What had happened to me? This wouldn't be the first time I second guessed my decision to reject Bellamy's claim, but the longing, the attraction—oh hell, who was I kidding—the desire to let the bear claim me had never been so strong before.

No, this was ridiculous. I forced myself to look away from his perfect, bare ass as he stepped into those gray sweatpants. This bear still hated my guts. The kiss was nothing but a desperate measure. I needed to snap out of whatever spell he cast over me.

A spell...

The driver's side door opened before I could fully form the thought, and Bellamy climbed in. He pulled his sunglasses out of a protective case, because he always took meticulous care of his belongings.

That could've been you ...my bear reminded me like she hadn't been a driving force behind the rejection.

He started the truck and turned to me. "Never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad you're here with me."

"I'm still the same Clover," I insisted as he pulled the truck onto the road and headed back toward Granger Falls. "Just a little forgetful at the moment."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of." He chuckled. "I told myself I wasn't gonna get mixed up in whatever trouble you're in."

"You almost pulled it off." I grinned. "But at least now you're taking this seriously."

He gave me some wicked side-eye. Bellamy took everything seriously. Too seriously.

"I have more questions than answers," he said. "And I think we owe it to everyone in the clan to find out the truth."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Nine

The Right Bear for the Job

Bellamy

I was more disappointed than surprised that Clover passed out before we made it back to Granger Falls. There was no telling what she'd been through at that strange, abandoned camp, but I had a feeling that time and that talisman were slipping away from us.

She needs the rest , my bear said. She'll have better information for you when she wakes up.

My bear was probably right. He could sense things on a vibrational level that I didn't have words for. We just called it our instinct.

Beau and Brad headed to breakfast, with an order to bring back to the house. And that meant for the first time in over a decade, I was alone with Clover Crowley.

Why the fuck was I nervous about it, like I was a teenage boy trying to work up the courage to ask her out? This was strictly business.

Do you kiss all your clients?

I groaned as I carried Clover into my bedroom. I took her shoes off and covered her with a blanket. A smile played on her lips as she snuggled into the pillow, my pillow,

but she didn't wake.

Sweet moon, did she ever look gorgeous with her hair splayed out on my pillow. There was a little makeup smudged around her eyes. Her pink lips parted as her breathing grew heavier.

It took every ounce of strength that I had not to crawl in beside her and hold her in my arms while she slept.

Ugh. How could she still have this hold over me?

She belongs to you. This time, she's gonna realize she made a big mistake.

My bear had high hopes, but Clover was one stubborn woman. That kiss said she might have had a change of heart, but she'd also been under the influence of...something. I wouldn't make myself feel guilty about taking advantage of her. It seemed to at least bring her to her senses.

Yeah right. I chuckled softly to myself. No kiss would ever be enough to tame this woman. And I liked it that way. I slipped into my office and grabbed a pen and a piece of paper.

Hope you're feeling better after some rest. Yes, you're in my bed.

Come downstairs when you're ready. I had the guys pick up breakfast for us.

It didn't feel like enough, but I wanted her to know where she was when she woke up in a strange place.

I stifled a yawn and headed downstairs. It wasn't so easy to pull an all-nighter anymore, but I was too wired to sleep.

So work it was. It was the one thing that never let me down, that always challenged and rewarded me. I loved doing research because it gave me clear answers. New questions. A logical path of how to solve a fucking problem.

All things that my personal life had never given me. I also worked a lot so I didn't have to think about it, but with Clover upstairs, sleeping in my bed like a tempting little Goldilocks, I couldn't think about anything else.

So I pretended to be very interested in the aerial scan of Sawtooth Forest because it would give me answers. I had a rough estimate of how far north we'd traveled from the GPS hookup on my truck. We often had to retrace our unexpected steps on cases and tracking came in handy.

But looking at the trees from above wasn't giving me the clues I needed. It didn't account for the way Clover's scent had sang in my nostrils, luring me closer, or the way the guys had picked up on some random bear scent that I couldn't.

Had they scented her or someone else? And who had brought her there only to abandon her? A growl resonated low in my throat as I thought of all the things that could've happened to her out there. Clover was a bear, more than capable of taking care of herself.

Why hadn't she shifted if she was in danger?

I rubbed my hand over my tired eyes and sighed. I'd scanned deep into the forest, much further than we could've traveled on foot, and there was no sign of a camp. My calculations could've been off. But this was bizarre. I'd get in touch with the local wolf pack to see what they knew about a clan camp in the area.

Next order of business was to check the dark web to see if that locket appeared on any resale sites, or if any bears were bragging about having something in its

possession. I had yet to be convinced of its power of significance, because this was the first I'd heard of it.

Maybe you need to be investigating your own clan first . My bear's suggestion made my blood run cold.

I typed the Crowley Clan in the search bar and braced myself for whatever came up when I was saved by a knock at the door. It had to be the guys with the food. My stomach rumbled at the thought of it.

But instead, I found Shirley.

"Did I wake you?" she asked. "I hoped I'd find you at the office, but the guys said you hadn't come in yet."

"No. You had me out on a wild bear chase last night, and I just got home."

Her face brightened. "Please tell me you found Clover."

"I did."

"Oh, I need to squeeze her and make sure she never scares me like that again." Shirley clasped her hands together and charged forward, frowning when I didn't move out of her way. "What's wrong, Bellamy? Is she hurt? I need to see my granddaughter."

"She's fine." I wasn't completely sure that was true, but she was in good enough shape that the declaration served my purposes. "She's sleeping. And needs the rest."

Shirley cocked a grandmotherly brow. "Are you sure she's okay?"

“Positive.”

“Well, then I can just wait here for her to wake up, and then I’ll bring her home.”

I shook my head. Forty-two years old and I still felt like a scolded little boy when this woman I’d considered an authority figure all my life gasped at my defiance.

And now, I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach that she could also be a charlatan.

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to her about what happened while she was gone yet,” I said carefully, hating that Shirley was powerful enough to make doubt every word. “I need her help finding that locket.”

“It’s my locket.” Shirley placed her hand over her heart. “No one knows more about it than me.”

Which was exactly the problem.

“If you want to help, here’s the best thing you can do.” I hoped I didn’t regret this.

Shirley’s face lit up. Whatever power that thing had over her made her desperate to get it back.

“Go back to clan land. If a thief struck once, they could strike again. Look for clues that someone got access to it. I need you to photograph where you kept it and the room it was in so I can look for any signs of foul play. Evidence of what happened.”

I didn’t need all that. What I needed was this woman out of my hair.

“But Clover?—”

“I’ll take good care of her,” I insisted, closing the door slightly so this woman knew there was no room for negotiation. “And I’ll have her home as soon as possible, with the locket in hand.”

“I knew you were the right bear for the job.” Shirley leaned in and attempted to give me a hug. “I’m counting on you.”

I didn’t move from the doorway until Shirley had backed out of my driveway and her car disappeared on the winding road.

My body was on point, my bear ready to pounce. Why had that visit felt like an attack?

Because it was.

Chapter Ten

I Keep Attracting Naked Bears...

Clover

Instead of the magic my clan had depended on me to inherit, I got the gift of lucid dreams. Calling them a gift wasn't always the best description. Sometimes they were lucid nightmares.

Alba and Anders had paid me a visit deep in dreamland. This time, they insisted they had evidence of Nana stealing the locket. We were in what looked like an old timey wild west town, which still existed in Idaho, so it could be present day, and headed into a theater. We sat on plush velvet seats, and the walls were ornate, but peeling. I didn't have time to figure out what refused to be hidden under the coverings because the movie was about to start.

The film had been crookedly fed into the projector, and it had that black-and-white movie crackle. Anders offered me popcorn but the smell of it made me sick.

As soon as Nana appeared on the screen, Bellamy came out of nowhere and pulled the film out of the projector.

The two bears who'd brought me to the theater protested, saying he ruined the only evidence that they had of the crime.

I wanted to be furious with him, but I wasn't. I took a deep breath, and he offered me

his hand.

He pulled me in like he was about to kiss me again.

And then I woke up.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath as I blinked back to consciousness. I was in a strange bedroom with no naked bear shifters in sight.

But Bellamy’s scent was everywhere.

I rolled over and found a glass of water with a note propped up in front of it.

Hope you’re feeling better after some rest. Yes, you’re in my bed.

Come downstairs when you’re ready. I had the guys pick up breakfast for us.

I pressed the note to my chest. It was awfully sweet, considering this bear owed me absolutely nothing. My head protested when I lifted it from the pillow, which made that glass of water even sweeter.

Before I headed downstairs, I took a moment to look around Bellamy’s bedroom. No, I wasn’t snooping. I just wanted to get a sense of who the man had become since I’d rejected him. Everything was neat and minimal. He had a plaid comforter on the bed and lots of pillows. There was a fireplace on the wall across from the bed with a big screen TV above it. I closed my eyes for a moment, no lucid dreaming necessary to picture myself in getting cozy with a movie and a fire. On the other wall, there was a big picture window with a stunning view of the Sawtooth Mountain Range, and a comfy-looking chair with an ottoman in front of it.

Maybe you had to let him become the man he was truly meant to be , my bear

suggested.

After a quick look in the mirror to make sure I wasn't a complete mess, I ventured out of the bedroom. My heart was beating double time. Why was I nervous? This was Bellamy. We grew up together. At one time, I had believed he was my mate.

Maybe I was worried I would fuck things up beyond all recognition all over again. And this time, I wouldn't be able to fix it.

Something smelled divine. I followed the scent into the kitchen and found Bellamy in front of the stove.

There was a takeout container full of fruit salad in the middle of the island. Two mugs, ready for coffee. A bottle of maple syrup. And plates that were about to be loaded with sausage, bacon, eggs, and...

"Are those blueberry pancakes?"

He startled at the sound of my voice. "They're still your favorite, I hope."

"Yes." My stomach rumbled in appreciation as I took a seat at the island. "Didn't take you for a chef."

"Can't take credit for anything but ordering. Just heating up the food the guys picked up for us from the diner." He grinned as he took the meat off the baking tray and brought it over to the island.

That was when I noticed the dark smudges under his eyes. "Did you sleep?"

"Someone was in my bed."

“You make me sound like Goldilocks.” I laughed as I started loading up my plate.

He raised a brow. “Was it just right?”

My breath caught in my throat. “I don’t know...I might have to give it a few more tries.”

Our gazes caught. Being alone with Bellamy made it easy to forget he hated me. That I took a sledgehammer to his heart.

After what seemed like the longest moment in history where we were stuck in this do-we-or-don’t-we limbo, he slid into the chair on the other side of me and put meat and pancakes on his plate.

“While you were sleeping, I did a little research on the area where we found you,” he said. “It’s possible my coordinates were off, but there was no camp on the map, which seems strange to me, because it looked like it was abandoned. So I’m hoping now that you’ve had some rest, you can fill in some blanks for me, Clover. Do you remember anything about how you got there? Who, if anyone, brought you there? Did they tell you their names?”

I swallowed a bite of pancake. “Everything still feels a little fuzzy. Like I’m not sure if it happened or I dreamed it.” And there were chunks of time I couldn’t account for, which for someone who enjoyed control, was scarier than I wanted to admit. “There were a lot of bears there. Like a whole clan. The two who I had the most contact with were an older woman named Alba. She was their healer. And Anders who was their alpha.”

“That’s more than I expected you to remember. Which is great.” He brightened, but there was no missing the worried furrow in his brow. “You definitely weren’t yourself when we found you.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say he didn't know me anymore. But he'd obviously saved my ass, ordered this bomb breakfast, and as much as I didn't want to admit it, I was enjoying his company.

“Did they tell you anything about their traditions? You said when I found you that they'd called your nana out. Do you remember if they said anything about magic, especially if it conflicted with what we learned growing up?”

This wasn't as clear. I remembered sitting in front of the fire with Alba and Anders, but then it was getting scrambled with the memory of the theater. Was that a dream, or did that happen too? “They told me a lot, but the details are really fuzzy. And then they were about to show me proof, but that's when you showed up.” I rubbed my forehead, hoping it helped the jumbled mess of details fall into order in my brain. “Wait, you believe them over Nana?”

A rumble emitted from his throat. “We need to consider all options until we're sure what happened.”

“But you were always so pro clan,” I said.

He was supposed to be alpha. Until...

“Getting rejected changes things.”

Ouch.

I put down my fork and met his gaze. He deserved that much after all these years.

“I'm sorry,” I said softly. “It all seemed so gross at the time. That I was supposed to conform and be a good little wifey bear to the clan alpha—like it would make me a legit member of the clan because if I was lucky, I'd pop out a magical spawn.

Someone who could do for the clan what I couldn't. Save it. Every time I looked at you, I felt my future, my choices slip away."

"Fuck," he said under his breath. It couldn't have been any easier to hear than it was to say.

"Now I know it wasn't you. But back then, you were one of them. You were so important to the clan, and I couldn't believe it when they just let you leave. I thought they'd boot my ass out instead. It didn't make any sense that I got to stay and you didn't."

"Is that what you wanted?" he asked.

"I only knew what I didn't want. So maybe it was the right decision—not for me, but for you. Looks like you're doing pretty damn good for yourself. Running your own security firm. I'm proud of you."

Did the bear blush? There was definitely a little pink in his cheeks. "I'm actually just the interim boss while Barrett's on his mate moon."

"Tell me about your life, Bellamy."

His gaze was absolutely fucking smoldering in a way that made the muscles between my legs pulse.

He leaned forward. "Do you want to be a part of it?"

Chapter Eleven

Who's the Lawful Good One Now?

Bellamy

I had no idea what I wanted Clover's answer to be. Finally getting some insight about what made her push me away all those years ago didn't exactly give me closure. Did I want to give her another chance? Forgive her for ruining my life?

She didn't ruin it, my bear pointed out. She said it herself. She saved it.

No matter what her answer was, it could all change when I shared my theory about Shirley.

Clover let out a long, shaky exhale. "I want to do the right thing for the clan."

I slapped my hand down on the table. "Bullshit. Since when?"

Same old fucking Clover talking out of both sides of her mouth. I should've known better than to think she'd changed.

"I thought I was nervous to come see you, but maybe I was just dreading it." She pushed away from the island. "Thanks for breakfast. And letting me crash in your bed. And that kiss. But I can't stay here with you and stay sane."

This woman had some nerve.

Don't you dare let her go , my bear growled.

I followed her to the door. It didn't make any logical sense. Before this woman walked into my office this week, I would've been happy to never see her again. But now I couldn't let her go.

She stopped and shook her head. "I don't even know where my car is."

It gave me the opportunity to put myself between her and the door. "You're not running off getting the last word like you always do," I said as calmly as I could manage. "There's too much on the line this time."

She rolled her eyes. "What do you care? You haven't set foot on clan land in almost fifteen years."

"Because, like you, I want to do right by them."

"Of course, Bellamy's lawful good as always."

I growled. "How about I show you how bad I can be?"

Her lips parted. "I don't think you're actually capable of being bad."

"You don't know anything about me anymore."

"Prove it."

I cocked a brow. My bear was on point inside me. "Is that a challenge?"

"See? Told you. Can't do it." She tried to sidestep me, but I caught her lips in a kiss.

Her body stiffened, like she was about to fight me, but just like on the side of the road, she softened, opening her mouth, letting me in. I had to figure out another method to get her to see things my way, eventually, but right now, I really liked kissing Clover.

Like the way her lips teased mine, moving like she was issuing another challenge to see how far I would go. Her hands were on my shoulders, grasping the fabric of my T-shirt, pulling me in closer to her.

My brain was short circuiting. My cock was rock hard between us.

Clover pulled away from the kiss. Her lips swollen and open, her eyes wide and wild. Chaotic, infuriating, delicious energy radiated from her. I had no idea if she'd slap me or come in for another kiss.

“Is that the best you’ve got, bear?”

I picked her up, and she shrieked as I tossed her over my shoulder. It felt so different from when I had done it just yesterday—taking her away from that mysterious camp. This time I wasn’t trying to save her.

Don’t overthink this, my bear instructed. There are things that need to be settled between the two of you that words will never touch.

Pushing aside the chair she’d just sat in and letting it crash onto the floor, I swept my arm across the island, moving the empty breakfast plate to the side before I set her down.

Our gazes locked, full of fire, fury, and emotions too strong to name, just like my bear had said. Clover scraped her teeth over her bottom lip, a move that made me rumble. Then she slid her gaze away from me, picking up the plates and moving them

closer to the sink.

“Who’s the lawful good one now?” I asked.

“You’re not the one who will wind up with maple syrup in their hair,” she said with a shrug.

“I plan on winding up with a lot more than that in my hair,” I said as I pulled my T-shirt up over my head.

Her fingers hooked into the waistband of my sweatpants. “These are awfully slutty, especially with that big bulge giving all your secrets away.”

I growled, pushing her hand away. But it was only seconds before I slid them down my thighs and stepped out of them. “What do I have to do to get you to stop talking?”

“You’re definitely on the right track.” Her gaze raked over my naked body with appreciation. “I think you secretly like it when I piss you off. But you know what I like?” She looped her arms around my neck and pulled me down on top of her. “I’d like you to fuck me like you hate my ever-loving guts, bear.”

I slid my hands under her sweater and guided it over her head. She went up on her elbows, giving me room to work. Her bra was red and sheer and her nipples strained against the delicate fabric.

Sweet moon, she was gorgeous. But...

“When you get them pierced?”

“After you left. Didn’t have to answer to anyone but myself anymore.” Her eyes were heavy-lidded. “Wait ‘til you see?—”

I didn't give her a chance to finish before I ripped her jeans open, sending the button skittering across the kitchen floor. Of course her panties matched her bra. Classic Clover. Never met a detail she didn't like.

Which made it strange that she couldn't remember what happened to her in the woods...

We'd figure it out later, I promised myself as I slid the skimpy fabric down her thick thighs. A little piece of metal glistened in the curls.

"Fuck yes," I growled, putting my finger on it and giving it a wiggle.

She jumped on contact.

"It's sensitive?" I wiggled it some more.

She closed her eyes and moaned.

I went down on my knees and pushed her thighs wide open. It was almost impossible to keep the upper hand with this woman, but I'd have a lot of fun trying.

I buried my face in those curls, taking that little silver ring between my lips and licked around it, pushing it back and forth, taking it deep into my mouth and sucking hard until Clover's body bucked.

She cried out and grasped my hair. I moaned against her clit and slid my fingers inside her. Her body was slick and ready for me, and her muscles throbbed as I thrust.

"Sweet moon, Bellamy." Her words were strained.

"How'd...you...get...so...good—you know what, don't tell me."

I couldn't even if I wanted to. I was devouring her pussy, drinking her in like she was the air I needed to breathe. Her hips jerked, and she babbled words I couldn't comprehend.

"I'm gonna—" The rest of it came out as cry as muscles pulsed in double time against my tongue and fingers. Her body trembled, and I looked up at her, because there was no way I could miss the moment I made this woman come undone. Her belly rolled with each breath like an ocean storm. What was left of her mascara smudged under her heavy-lidded eyes. Those lips were still swollen, parted as she caught her breath, but the way she looked at me was enough to make me come undone.

No. I couldn't fucking come on the floor like we were in high school, sneaking around in the back of my dad's pickup truck in a dark parking lot hoping we didn't get caught...

I'd been head over paws for this woman, and she didn't fucking want me. And I'd make sure that she'd walk away from this regretting that decision.

But would I be able to walk away from her?

Chapter Twelve

An Even Bigger Mystery

Clover

That orgasm had left me a trembling mess. I had no right to be jealous of the women who Bellamy had honed his craft on. I'd practically handed him to them gift wrapped with a giant bow on top.

And it wasn't like I could keep him. Or fuck him out of my system...

It took everything I had to prop myself up on my elbows since he'd turned my bones to jelly, but I was well rewarded for my effort. Those dark eyes were on fire, and his beard glistened with my release. A thick dusting of hair covered his muscular chest that rose and fell in time with my ragged breath.

Best of all, his hand was on his thick cock, giving it a rough pump. Bellamy had always been big, but last time we were together, he'd been a little clumsy. Things were different this time.

"What's the best angle?" he practically growled.

"I thought you knew what you were doing?"

"For the piercing," he clarified.

“This is good.” I could barely get the words out. I just wanted him inside me already.
“I want to watch you fuck me.”

“Oh yeah?” Another growl as he pushed my thigh open and positioned the head of his cock. “I get to watch you come again.”

“You think you can give me another orgasm?”

“Yeah.” He punctuated the statement by driving his shaft inside me.

My head fell back as he began to move his hips. Pure electricity flowed through my veins, sending me right back to the brink.

He moved hard and fast, nothing gentle and sweet about this. His hand was still on my thigh, grasping it as his body fell forward. His cock rubbed against my piercing with every movement.

But his face was right above mine. Our gazes locked.

He slid his hand over to my clit, grasping it as he thrust inside me.

That electricity turned to lava.

“Damn it,” I cried as he brought my body to the brink one more time.

He pulled his cock out, pumping it as he came. I closed my trembling hand over his, helping him coax out his release.

There was a thumping noise coming from...somewhere.

“Shit,” he growled as he pulled away from me.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s someone at the door,” he said as he pulled his sweatpants on.

The banging grew more intense, and Bellamy looked around the room, and then grabbed the blanket from the couch and tossed it at me.

“You’re not gonna invite them in, are you?”

“Of course not. Didn’t think you wanted the world knowing I gave you two orgasms.”

I rolled my eyes as I tucked the blanket over me, but the move was wasted because Bellamy was already on his way to the door. I would’ve ignored their asses, but the bear was too lawful good for that.

And I knew damn well whoever was there didn’t plan on going quietly.

I thought about getting off the island, but the chair had been knocked over, and there was no way to make this look like anything but what it was.

“What?” Bellamy barked as he opened the door only the slightest crack.

“Hey, man.” It was the young guy who Bellamy let drive my car to moon knew where. “Looks like this might be a bad time.”

“Why didn’t you call?”

“I did. Many times. Texted too. You didn’t answer, and that’s not like you,” he said. “Considering the circumstances, I thought I should swing by. Make sure everything was going smoothly with the investigation, but it looks like you might have been

enjoying a little side quest.”

Bellamy growled, and that was my cue to slip off the counter, pick up my clothes, and head to the bathroom.

My hands shook as I got dressed. My legs felt like jelly. And my head was pounding. Maybe it was the two amazing orgasms, or the fact there were still large pieces of the last few days missing. Problem was, Bellamy’s coworker seemed like the type to tough things out, not run to his boss with every little problem.

Which meant he could’ve just brought us a big problem.

I smoothed out my hair the best I could—fuck knots were a real thing, and I could not wait for this guy to leave so I could take a hot shower.

No, I was going home, to my clan and my bathtub. Bellamy and I were not a thing.

Are you sure about that? my bear asked.

I stayed around the corner, letting the boys talk shop without me. I had a feeling they might hold back in front of me.

“There was a break in at Choppers by Lowe last night,” the kid said. “A custom bike is missing, as well as some parts.”

“Someone had the balls to steal from Major Lowe?” He was a prominent wolf in town, and he had a hard won reputation that no one messed with. I didn’t live in Granger Falls and even I knew that. “That’s not gonna end well.”

“No way. And the bike is unique enough that anyone in fifty miles of Granger Falls will know it.”

“The wolves will deal with it. Unless you’re here to tell me that they want us looking for it?”

“No, not officially. It just came up when I got back to my cabin at the Channing Reserve with Clover’s sweet ride. Everyone wanted to know about the car, and they told me about the theft. I’ve got to tell you, boss, I think the robbery is connected to whatever those bears did to Clover. I mean, they just left her there, vanished without a trace. Maybe they needed a getaway vehicle.”

I rolled my eyes. Connecting Nana’s missing locket to a missing motorcycle was a stretch. This guy was trying real hard to impress Bellamy.

“I’m not convinced there were any bears,” Bellamy said. “She could be lying to cover up for her grandmother.”

Oh, no he didn’t. I pushed myself away from the wall and strode into the living room. “Excuse me?”

“You’re in trouble now,” the young guy said under his breath.

Bellamy sat in his leather recliner, expressionless, stoic, like he hadn’t just stabbed me in the fucking back. Just because we’d had amazing sex on his kitchen counter didn’t mean I could trust him.

Hell, it didn’t even mean I liked him.

But I needed him.

“You remember Beau,” Bellamy said as I stood in front of him, with my arms crossed.

“How’s my car?” The question should’ve been where’s my car.

“She is smooth like honey.” Beau closed his eyes for a long blink. “She’s ruined me for all other vehicles.”

“Well, you better get over it pretty quick because you’re about to hand me the keys so I can get out of here before I wring your boss’s neck.”

Bellamy rubbed his hand over his forehead. “I have a theory about your nana. I meant to tell you, but?—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” I turned to Beau. “Where’s my car?”

“Right out front.”

“No, you’re not leaving,” Bellamy growled.

“I keep trying to go, and you keep drawing me back.” I really was a soap opera damsel. A vision flashed of all of us on the side of the road. If my memories were coming back, I was keeping them to myself. I couldn’t trust this bear. “You can’t keep me here forever under false pretenses. I don’t even know whose side you’re on.”

“I’m on your side, Clover. I always have been, and I always will be.” Bellamy stood, towering over me. It wasn’t intimidating. More like, he couldn’t believe I had the actual audacity to think he’d be anything but lawful good. “You told me about those bears over breakfast, and I haven’t had a chance to do any research on them yet because we got distracted?—”

Beau snickered.

“Do you remember what you told us when we found you at that camp?”

“No, but I don’t see what it would have to do with me covering up for Nana.”

“You said they were talking shit about your nana, and you thought it might be true. And they told you that you had magic, and you didn’t want to go because you felt safe with those bears.”

Things were becoming clearer, like I could hear myself saying those words. We were in the middle of the woods, and Bellamy and Beau and the other guy were in their bear forms...and the whole clan was there watching them in the middle of their celebration, but at the same time, it was like they weren’t there at all. My clan would never let strange bears waltz into one of our celebrations and hassle the guest of honor...if that’s what they’d considered me.

“Shit.” I sank into the chair. “I think I remember everything.”

So I told them every detail I could remember, from the tent and the tape on my mouth to the feast and the old timey clothes and the horrible accusation they made about Nana. I told them about the crystal and the magic.

“But the weird thing was, I had this really strange sense of peace like I’d never felt before. I felt at home there, when I’ve always felt like the black sheep of our clan.”

“Because you didn’t have magic, and they think you do,” Bellamy said.

“I don’t know what made them think that.” I scoffed, but then it was like I could feel the power that had come from that crystal in the tent all over again.

It’s coming from you , Alba had said.

“Why would they think you had it if you didn’t?” Bellamy asked.

“More importantly, why would my own clan lie to me?” I asked. My head hurt too much to get mad about it—and I wasn’t even sure who I should be mad at. “If I actually had magic, wouldn’t I know it by now?”

“They could’ve suppressed it,” he suggested. “Your nana was here this morning. She was hot to get you back home. Wanted me to wake you out of a sound sleep. Seemed out of character for her.”

“She came to the office too,” Beau added. “Demanding to know where you were.”

“I hate to say this, because I’ve always respected Shirley, but it seemed off. Dangerously off.”

“Wow.” I couldn’t believe my own grandmother could not only have stolen a sacred talisman but might also be immortal. And more than that, my entire life could be one big, ugly lie.

Bellamy put his hand on my shoulder. His touch comforted me way more than it should have. “We still need to find that locket. But I think your magic just became the bigger mystery.”

Chapter Thirteen

Surveillance is Sexy

Bellamy

“Now that we know what we’re looking for, we need a plan.” I paced the living room. My bear could make an appearance at any time. There was no imminent danger that I knew of, but he was on point.

More like, his clan had betrayed him by lying to his mate and he was fucking pissed.

“We’re looking for the locket, the motorcycle, and Clover’s magic.” It was surreal—and exciting—to acknowledge it existed. “Where do we start?”

Clover sighed. Her hair was still wild even though she’d attempted to pull it up on top of her head. “I’m not going home any time soon, am I?”

I shook my head. “I’d like to see what happens when you’re away from the clan for an extended period of time. If your powers come back.”

“That would be a lot easier if we had any idea what they were.” She threw her hands up in frustration. “They’re not one size fits all. I could have completely different powers than Nana.”

“Is there anyone we can talk to, outside of your clan that might be able to help you develop them?” Beau suggested.

“Great idea.” I might not regret making him my temporary second-in-command after all. I turned to Clover. “You should go see Chandra Lowe. She’s one of the Sawtooth wolves, and a doctor that has a foothold in traditional and shifter medicine.”

Clover narrowed her eyes at the suggestion. “Those bears didn’t hurt me.”

“It took you a while to remember what happened to you. As a precaution, we should make sure you didn’t ingest anything that caused you to forget what happened. And she’s Xavier’s mate, one of the owners of Choppers by Lowe. If these cases have any tie to each other, she might see the link before we do.”

“Looking for my magic seems more surreal than finding these bears.” Clover shook her head.

“We need to look them up,” Beau said. “If they gave you the right names.”

“Let’s start there. We can do that now.” One thing we could get out of the way.

I motioned for Beau and Clover to follow me into my office.

“Whoa,” Clover said. “This is quite the setup.”

I had multiple screens, several tower builds, speakers, and special lighting in case I needed to see things that others didn’t want me to.

Beau let out a low whistle. “I thought you were just working off that laptop when you went remote.”

“When I’m doing surveillance, sometimes it means pulling the night shift,” I explained as I sat at the desk and powered everything on. “I won’t bore you with an explanation of what everything does, but it all comes in handy.”

“It’s kinda sexy,” Clover said.

My bear liked that. A lot.

I typed Lynwood Clan into the search bar. Beau leaned over my shoulder, and Clover took the seat next to me. Our gazes met as she settled. There was no hiding she was nervous. Hell, I was too. No matter what these results revealed, there was no way this case would be straightforward.

The family tree finished generating and appeared on the screen. “Shifter genealogy isn’t as accurate as humans, since we typically weren’t born in hospitals, and our ancestors weren’t always concerned with keeping meticulous records.” I prepped the team for what we might not find. “And like human genealogy sites, participation is voluntary. So this might give us some answers and even more questions.”

Clover leaned forward. Her scent was still heightened, so soon after her orgasm, and it was enough to make my bear rumble with satisfaction.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t bring my reading glasses.”

I nodded, because I couldn’t tell her what I was really feeling with Beau on the other side of me.

She pointed at the screen. “Does that say Alba?”

I enlarged the display so we could all see it more easily, and she wouldn’t have to be so close to it. “It does.”

“It also says she’s been dead for longer than any of us have been alive,” Beau said. “At least, I’m pretty sure you guys weren’t around then.”

“We weren’t.” This time I didn’t hesitate to growl. Alba had left this realm ninety years ago.

“Where’s Anders?” Clover said. “I had a feeling he was her mate.”

I scrolled over to the side, and there was another name there. Clover frowned at the screen.

“Huh, they had to be connected somehow.” She jumped in her chair as I scrolled down. “There he is! He was her son! That’s why they seemed so connected. Wait, why is that name crossed out?”

“Looks like maybe he got rejected too.”

My mouth dropped as I saw the name under the strike-through.

Shirley Crowley.

“No.” Clover clutched the arms of her chair, and I was shocked her bear didn’t rip through her skin. “That can’t be. The time doesn’t add up. My Nana?—”

“Has powerful enough magic to keep her alive much longer than she should be.” I drummed my fingers on the keyboard, knowing we had to dig deeper but having no idea what we would find. “Which means she’s powerful enough to suppress your magic too.”

Clover’s eyes were wide. Panicked. “We don’t know that yet.”

“Are you still doubting there’s magic inside you?”

“I’m forty years old, Bell. I haven’t felt magical a day in my life until I was brought

to that camp, which apparently doesn't even exist." She shook her head. "What if they made me magical?"

"We need to find someone who can answer these questions. This definitely is not my area of expertise. You could be right, but we also have clear proof that these bears that abducted you have a strong connection to your nana." But that wasn't the only thing I was curious about. "When was the last time you shifted?"

She wrinkled her nose, like the question annoyed her. "Not for a long time. Why?"

"It's strange that you didn't shift when you were, by your own account, taken from your car by two naked bear shifters and held hostage in a camp. You could have burst free from them if you were in your bear form. But for some reason, you stayed human."

"I wanted to shift, but I couldn't. It's been a while." Her body was still tense. The heat that rolled off her confirmed her bear was in there...but she wasn't coming. "When I asked Nana about it, she said that it could be I was becoming too human, forgetting who I was. I hated that explanation."

"You should." It pissed me off too. "Someone's holding your animal hostage, and we need to find out why."

Clover covered her face with her hands. "I feel like my whole life has been a lie. It's gross."

"Not all of it." I put my hand over hers and drew it away from her beautiful face. "The way I felt for you was real."

"And I threw you away," she said softly. "I'm so sorry, Bellamy. You deserved better than me."

“Uh, should I head back to the office?” Beau was already out of his chair. “Seems like things have taken a turn into personal territory.”

“Stay,” I instructed. Then I turned back to Clover. Fuck, she looked completely destroyed. “You deserved better than whatever lie you were told. Now you have a decision to make. We can find this locket, but we might uncover some things you might not want to know. You can walk out this door and forget about the damn thing. Go on with your life. Or you can find out the truth for your clan. It’s your choice.”

She let out a long exhale. “Will you still take the case no matter what I decide?”

“The clan let me down long ago. Not sure I should be the one digging around on my own.”

She wrapped her arms around her chest and lowered her gaze. “I’m in. It’s time I learn who I really am.”

Chapter Fourteen

We'll Get Your Bear Back to Her Full Glory

Clover

Realizing I had no idea who I was at age forty was fucking terrifying. It wasn't so much letting go of what I thought of myself, the smartass free spirit esthetician who wore the privilege of my last name like a faux fur coat. I'd always reveled in the fact that my future was wide open, but I could do that because I had a sturdy safety net.

I was still a smartass, and I could give a facial with the absolute best of them, but as I sat here in my backless cotton gown waiting to see Dr. Chandra Lowe, I'd never felt more naked.

After a soft knock on the door, a woman about my age walked in. Her hair was in a bun, and under her white jacket, she wore a pretty, soft floral shirt and a pair of jeans.

I'd been expecting a stuffy doctor, a much adultier adult than me, but she looked like my kind of people.

"It's really nice to meet you," she said. "I'm sorry to say I haven't met all the local bear clans yet. I've been with the pack for almost ten years now, but I still feel like the new kid."

"Oh, I thought you were a Sawtooth wolf," I said. There were a lot of new names being thrown around, and it was possible I'd remembered incorrectly.

Like it mattered if she was or not. I was a Crowley and apparently I knew nothing about my clan.

“I am, but this pack has a complicated history, and my parents tried to protect me from it.” She set down her tablet and reached for her stethoscope. “I’m just going to check your vitals, do a visual exam, and ask you some questions, if that’s okay with you.”

I nodded. “I shouldn’t be nervous, but I am.”

“White coat syndrome is real, and I take that into consideration, especially the first time someone sees me.” She pressed the cool metal head of the stethoscope against my bare back. “Can you tell me the last time you shifted?”

“No, I can’t.”

The raised eyebrow was totally expected. She probably got an advanced dossier on me, thanks to Bellamy, that I was known to be difficult. Uncooperative.

How did all those qualities that I loved about myself become so negative? This magic thing was totally in my head.

“It’s been a while, but I’m honestly not sure when the last time was. Guess I didn’t know it could possibly be the last time I ever shifted.”

“We’ll get your bear back to her full glory.” Chandra sat on the stool across from me. “What can you tell me about your time in the forest with those bears? From your intake form, it seems like you could’ve suffered a concussion.”

“I don’t remember getting hit over the head, but I still don’t think I remember everything. Details are coming back to me, but there are still some big blank spots.

They tied my arms and taped my mouth until their healer came for me. Now that I think back over everything, that part feels real, and after Alba came, everything is fuzzy like I'm looking at it through gauze."

"She probably spelled you." Chandra swiped her tablet. "Your vitals look good, but your temperature and blood pressure are both a bit low. In a healthy range, but it makes me think you could've been suppressed in some way."

"I think...I don't even know how to say this." I didn't know this woman, but she was a respected member of the Sawtooth pack who'd been considered an outsider just a few years ago. "That it's possible that I've been spelled my whole life."

She nodded. "My theory on magic is its science we have yet to explain. I could do more tests on you, but it's unlikely that we'll get a definitive answer. Did you feel different under this spell than you usually do?"

I groaned. "I'm having a lot of complicated feelings since I arrived in Granger Falls."

"Let me guess, those feelings are named Bellamy?" She grinned.

"We also have a complicated history."

"If you stick around, I'd love to hear the whole story over a beer. I can introduce you to the rest of the ladies in the pack. They'll love you."

"Not sure I'm sticking around." I twisted my hands in my lap. "It's a weird feeling, knowing I can't go home right now, because it doesn't exist in the way that I thought it did. But I'm not sure I can stay here, either."

I was pouring my heart out to this almost stranger. Not like me at all. I always played tough. Didn't show anyone my emotions.

“I get that. I was always told Sawtooth Forest was the most dangerous place on earth. So when I got a call to come here to save one of these wolves that I’d been taught to fear, I was terrified. But it was the best decision I’ve ever made.” She tipped her head and smiled at me. “And judging by the way Bellamy absolutely glows when he looks at you, I don’t think he’ll mind if you stay.”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.” I needed to be straight with her. “I rejected his mate claim.”

Her eyebrows rose and she nodded. “Maybe it’s time to let magic happen.”

Bellamy waited for me in front of Sawtooth Sweets. Damn that delectable bear for taking my breath away. I could blame my possible concussion diagnosis for the way I admired his biceps straining against his T-shirt. Or how his hair slightly blew in the breeze, and that his beard seemed a little longer than when I’d first crashed his security meeting. He had no right looking so sexy.

Maybe this was the first time I was thinking clearly in a long time.

Wait. Was a spell responsible for making me reject Bellamy in the first place? That was a theory that I might need to explore with the Sawtooth ladies over a beer.

A brow rose over his aviators when I approached. “How was your appointment?”

“Interesting. Almost clean bill of health.” I wouldn’t tell him that after the initial rest period, she’d prescribed a steady diet of bear dick to get my animal to make an appearance.

“Almost?” He sounded concerned, and it was sweet.

I nodded. “She said there was no chance I’d make a full recovery unless I have one of

these cupcakes.”

“There was a reason I suggested this as a meeting spot.” He laughed and motioned for me to follow him inside. I might have melted a little when he held the door open for me, but I couldn’t let him know I was falling for him.

Hopefully a mega dose of sugar would bring me back to my senses.

“How can I possibly choose one?” My mouth watered as I considered the case.

“Don’t,” he said. “Get as many as you want. We’ll bring them back to the cabin, and whatever we don’t eat I’ll bring into the office, which happens to be full of hungry bears.”

I was literally feeling like a kid in a cupcake store as I ordered two dozen cupcakes and a hibiscus lemonade.

Bellamy got a coffee, black.

The bakery was busy and a few people said hi to Bellamy, but they didn’t stick around long enough for him to introduce them to me. Once we sat at a corner table, they all disappeared.

Maybe this bear was the one spelling me now.

He opened the box closest to him and considered it carefully before choosing the Girl Scout cookie cupcake.

“I would’ve bet money that you wouldn’t have one,” I said as I carefully lifted the caramel apple pie cupcake from the spot it had been safely nested in.

“You would’ve lost.” He grinned before he took a bite. A little bit of green frosting lingered in his mustache, and it was too adorable to say anything right away. “Why would you think that?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say because a body like that didn’t see any sugar, but then I remembered I was playing this cool. This wasn’t a date. We were on a fact-finding mission to find out what the fuck my nana had been up to all these years. “Because you always seem so serious.”

“Guess you don’t know me anymore,” he said before his next bite.

“Maybe I never did.” My body definitely saw more than its fair share of sugar, and I’d drown my sorrows in my treat. “Sweet moon, this is amazing.”

“Listen, you don’t have to like me to work with me. But this is a lot more than a missing locket. The clan deserves to know the truth about their history. And their future.”

This bear was absolutely infuriating. He’d lure me closer and then slam down a wall. In theory, I understood. I couldn’t even keep up with the emotions I felt when I was near him. It was presumptuous of me to think he felt the same way. And if he did, he could handle it better than I could.

“They do. Nana is as beloved as ever. Maybe even more so, now that magic is a little more mainstream.”

“Has anyone ever questioned her practices?”

“Not that I know of. How could they? She’s been practicing since she was a little girl, her library has a spell for almost everything, and her apothecary can cure all.”

“So she’s sharing magic with the others, but not with you?”

“No, but more people are coming to her for cures,” I explained. “Humans who are interested in magic.”

“That would’ve been helpful information to know before now,” he rumbled. “Changes the focus.”

“One of them could’ve stolen the locket, but how would they know the significance? I don’t even know what it all means.”

He leaned in close and I almost wiped the cupcake boxes away from the table and grabbed his beard for a kiss.

“You know more than you’re giving yourself credit for,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Close your eyes,” he instructed, his voice way too husky for his own good. We were in public, bear. “And tell me what power you think the locket has.”

Give it a try, my bear insisted just as I was about to remind Bellamy I had no magic.

It felt a little silly to be sitting in the middle of a busy bakery with my eyes closed, but only for a moment. I was transported to Nana’s apothecary, with her grimoires and crystals, and wait...were we in a tent?

My heart started pounding because I wasn’t sure if I’d accidentally transported myself to Alba’s apothecary instead.

Trust the process , my bear said.

She had to feel so frustrated, claustrophobic, and yet she was still patient with me.

Why do you think I'm doing this ? she teased.

I saw the locket. I wanted to open my eyes and tell Bellamy, but for once in my life, I willed myself to be patient. It wasn't in my hand, but the hand that held it was young. Smooth. Not present day Nana's.

Then I saw Alba, laying on a cot. The woman I'd met was old, but this version of her looked like a shrunken apple doll, which made the apple pie cupcake in my stomach churn. That young, smooth hand placed the locket on Alba's chest, and I gasped as the years literally melted away and revealed the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

"Clover." Bellamy's voice jolted me from the vision.

I opened my eyes, and everything was foggy. Bellamy was still there, even more gorgeous than ever, but he wasn't alone.

Nana had joined us at the table.

Chapter Fifteen

She Wore Her Bad Decisions Like a Sleeve of Tattoos

Bellamy

I'd never seen a bear shifter resemble a Cheshire cat until I saw Shirley grin at her granddaughter like she'd just found her prey. Clover's sapphire eyes were wide, her plump pink lips parted. It wasn't often my...Clover was speechless, but right now she was frozen in place.

Fix this for her, my bear demanded.

I couldn't waste time arguing with him about how that was the worst possible thing I could do. Clover needed to win this battle on her own. I could help her find answers and pick up the pieces that were sure to fall, but if we were right...

No wonder Clover was stunned. Shirley was the matriarch of our clan. A mother figure to all of us. The one who fixed our shit when we didn't know how to do it on our own.

Not trusting her felt traitorous. Like it would have consequences.

"Nana," Clover finally managed. "What are you doing in Granger Falls?"

"Making sure that you're okay, dear." Shirley placed her hand over her heart in dramatic fashion. "When you didn't come back home, I was sure that you and

Bellamy had reconciled. But even if you had, it wasn't like you not to call me. My intuition told me that I needed to come to Granger Falls."

Clover was frozen.

"You knew I found her," I said carefully, not to allow the growl that was begging to come out to get its way.

"I needed to see her with my own eyes, Bellamy."

I lifted my chin. "You didn't trust me?"

Her gaze landed squarely on me. My bear saw it as a direct challenge. No, I couldn't shift in the middle of Sawtooth Sweets. We were still outnumbered by humans in town, and even though they knew many of their neighbors had a second identity, being confronted with that reality often caused chaos.

"Your alliances very well could have changed since you left the pack."

"He left because of me," Clover clarified. "Because I rejected him."

I groaned, all too aware of the eyes on us in the busy bakery, and I didn't need for everyone in town to come up close and personal with the intimate details of my past. If Clover stayed?—

Ugh. I couldn't let myself get sidetracked by the fantasy this woman came to say she made a mistake. She wore those bad decisions proudly like a sleeve of tattoos. And I couldn't let any of it soften the blow that her grandmother might have just become an enemy.

Was I using this case as a last ditch effort to prove myself to the clan? To throw my

middle fingers in the air and let them know they'd made a mistake by letting my leave so easily?

Like any of them could have made you stay , my bear reminded me.

“He’s agreed to help us find the locket,” Clover continued. “But Bellamy is a security specialist. You were glued to the TV during the whole Moonlight Mates drama. You’ve seen him in action. Now his services are in demand and he’s doing us a huge favor, offering to help.”

Shirley scoffed. “It’s no trouble to help your clan.”

“What did we do for him after he felt like he had to leave? Yes, I’m owning that it’s my fault, but we aren’t talking about me right now. We’re talking about you.” And like grandmother, like granddaughter, now it was Clover’s turn to wear the Cheshire cat grin. This time, it made my dick rock hard. “The locket, more specifically.”

Oh, that glare was practically enough to melt the glass that enclosed us in the bakery.

“We need more information about the locket.” Now that Clover had handed her grandmother her ass, I felt comfortable with the assist. This woman didn’t need anyone to save her. She’d gotten herself out of more hot shit than I cared to think about. “Clover wasn’t able to provide an accurate description, so that’s a good place to start. We need to know exactly what it can do, and a detailed list of anyone who might be interested in taking it from you.”

“The locket is a bit of an enigma. It can change colors depending on the energy that it comes in contact with. So an accurate description might be a bit difficult. It’s set in silver, and the pendant portion of it is oval. Probably about this big.” She curled her thumb and her forefinger. “And for who would take it from me, I have no enemies. Its disappearance is as shocking as it is heartbreaking.”

That was actually pretty helpful. Knowing it was silver meant I could rule out any of the local wolves. Not that I expected trouble with them, but it was still a relief to cross anyone off this nebulous list.

Clover tipped her head, studying her grandmother. “Are you sure you haven’t upset anyone who could be holding an old grudge, and maybe bided their time until they could get revenge?”

“What are you insinuating, child?”

“Let me try this another way.” Clover ran her teeth over her bottom lip. Sweet moon, these little moves were enough to make me grab her face and kiss her right here.

I had to stop thinking of her as mine. She was only here because she needed me to solve this problem. Beyond that, I lay no claim to this woman. Didn’t matter how good it felt to be inside her. What I felt when I looked at her. I couldn’t let this woman be my downfall. She didn’t belong to me.

Yet , my bear insisted.

“Who was in possession of the locket before you?” Clover asked. “Bellamy’s asked me so many questions about the locket, and I haven’t been able to answer them. I know the tradition is to keep the magic in the clan to those who have it, but that means I’m not sure how to find it. And what might happen when I do.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised she’d be able to weave a tale like that on the fly.

A faint flash of surprise flashed on Shirley’s face. Only for a moment before she regained control of the situation. “I’m not sure how that will help you.”

“Who gave it to you? I’m not sure I ever met my Great Nana, or any of your aunts.

As long as I've been alive, you've had the locket. And because I wasn't meant to have it, I guess it didn't occur to me that its history could've been important."

Oh, she was good. If those ghost bears were to be believed, the locket was stolen. Shirley would unknowingly confirm or negate our suspicions with her answer.

"Which is why that information seems irrelevant." Shirley reached across the table and put her hand over Clover's. She held onto it and met her gaze. "You have everything you need to find that locket."

And with that, she rose from the table, and every head in the bakery turned to watch her walk out the door.

There was a strange moment of silence, and then with a clang from the kitchen, the happy, sugar-fueled chatter started again.

"I don't want to get too excited, because everything about Shirley is a big fucking question mark right now, but her refusal to answer your question lines up with the accusation from the Lynwoods that she stole the locket."

Now, to find these bears.

Clover rubbed her temples and squeezed her eyes closed. "I think she spelled me."

I growled, not giving a damn if I offended any nearby human sensibilities. It was about time I reminded people that I was not a creature to be messed with, especially after that old witch had just spelled my mate in the middle of a busy bakery.

"What did she do, and how do you feel?"

"It was when she touched me. I wanted to pull my hand away, but I couldn't. And it

felt gross, like I was rejecting my Nana. But that's what's different, Bellamy. I'm sitting here looking at you when you've been nothing but amazing to me, and now it's pissing me off."

Fuck. I'd fallen for it again. This woman was absolutely maddening at every turn.

I raised a brow. "You're pissed I've been helping you? Because if that's the case, I don't have to."

"That's exactly it." She slammed her hand on the table and then looked down at it and frowned. "But I didn't feel like that until right now. Things have been weirdly good between us. I want your help. More than that, I need it. Which is more than I expected, or I deserve. The curse, wait, did I just call it a curse?"

"You did, and that might be entirely accurate."

She shook her head and sighed. "I'm aware of it. Like there's an angel on my shoulder and a devil. More accurately, two bears. One of them is telling me that you might be behind the locket's disappearance. And the other is telling me that everything I know about my life so far is a complete fucking lie." She swallowed hard and met my gaze. "Including rejecting you."

I nodded. Her panic was as tangible as the box of fancy cupcakes sitting in front of us. But that wasn't why I could sympathize with it. I was pretty sure we'd all been lied to.

She just said that she didn't mean to reject you, my bear said, like I'd missed the most important part.

I certainly had not, but there was no way I could claim her until we uncovered the truth about our clan.

I leaned forward and took her hands in mine. They were trembling. Not like Clover at all. “What are you gonna do about it?”

Chapter Sixteen

I'd Keep Telling Myself That Until I Believed It

Clover

Bellamy's smoldering gaze made my mouth water. I was almost ready to tell him anything he wanted to hear, but that would be as cruel as rejecting him. Whatever happened next would definitely be messy, but it had to be real.

"I want to find the truth." My voice barely had volume.

"Me too." He nodded and fastened the lid of the cupcake box. There was something final and declarative about it, and yet so damn sexy that this big beast of a man cared about my cupcakes. "Are you ready to head to Choppers by Lowe?"

"Yeah. Motorcycles and wolves might be just the thing to clear my head." My heart was still pounding. "What if we run into Nana again?"

"You handled yourself like a badass. I'm having a hard time with this too, so I can't imagine how you're feeling. Just remember why you're doing this." Bellamy stood and carefully placed the cupcake boxes into their paper shopping bag. "I'm proud of you, Clover."

"Thank you." I swallowed hard to make sure no emotion came to the surface. That too would be messy, and I had to keep my head on straight. Nana shouldn't feel like an enemy. She'd practically raised me. We'd worked together to call my magic.

What if she was working to suppress it? My bear asked a question that made a chill go down my spine.

Bellamy held the door open for me, and I followed him, shell-shocked as we headed down Main Street toward Choppers by Lowe. I'd expected him to reach for my hand, and I hated to admit I was disappointed he didn't. Clover Crowley certainly didn't need a man, but it would've been nice to have someone to hold on to.

As we walked past the cute shops and restaurants, I wondered what life would be like as Bellamy Laredo's mate. If he'd always pay this much attention to me if he knew I belonged to him.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked.

"About five years," he said. "It's a great place to live. The local wolf packs are making big strides, and there's a lot of fun things to do. Still, I considered leaving, because we only had a satellite office here. Wasn't much need for security teams in Sawtooth Forest. The shifters handled their own shit. But with the Werewives in town, and now all these cases coming in, looks like I'll be staying put."

"Are the cases local, or would you have to travel?" I asked. I cursed the stupid pang I felt at the thought of him going away. We weren't a couple, I reminded myself, and I liked it that way. I was a client. Nothing more, nothing less, no matter how hot those kisses or that sex on the kitchen island had been.

"It's a bigger scope than we've taken on before, but there would probably be some travel. Barrett and I would like to have all the new guys trained so we could trust any one of them to lead a case."

"Sounds like you have your work cut out for you." I chuckled. "Beau seems like a loose cannon."

“He’s young, has a healthy distaste for authority, and is pretty damn good at his job.” Bellamy grinned. “Or else we’d never put up with his shit.”

We were already in front of Choppers by Lowe, and a whole new round of butterflies began a routine in my belly. They were hopped up on sugar and I had no idea why I was nervous about this visit. There was no way a missing motorcycle could have anything to do with Nana’s locket.

Bellamy nodded toward their storefront, which had two sweet looking bikes in the window. “When was the last time you were on one of these babies?”

“It’s been way too long.”

“If you stick around, maybe we could go for a ride through the mountains,” he suggested.

“I’d like that.” Even though it sounded a lot like a date.

Sweet moon, had he been under my Nana’s spell when he was with the clan too? He narrowed his eyes as my mouth dropped from that realization.

“Although if I’m here for too long, I might want to get one to call my own,” I added, so he didn’t ask what had me shook.

“Not sure why you think that’s a problem.” He grinned as he opened the door.

Choppers by Lowe was a candy store for motorcycle enthusiasts. Shiny, gorgeous bikes sat on the floor next to computer screens full of specs and demos of similar models. There was a sales desk that divided the sales floor from the workroom. Heavy metal music blared on surround sound, and one of the wolves rose from his project.

He was in his human form, with long dark hair and a beard. He had on a plaid shirt with a thermal underneath it, ripped jeans, and combat boots. He offered me his hand, then Bellamy. The two of them did one of those complicated man handshakes that told me they'd met many times before.

"Hey, Bellamy. Good to see you. It's been way too long." Then he turned to me. "I'm Major Lowe. My brothers and I own this shop. Haven't seen you around town before. Are you one of the new employees?"

"She's a client," Bellamy said just before I had a chance to say it's complicated .

Was I disappointed that Major thought we were coworkers? I'd file that under complicated as well. It was better this way. I'd keep telling myself that until I believed it.

"Cool," he said, but he looked me up and down like he didn't believe it for a second. The wolf was pretty intuitive.

Was I feeling his energy? That was new. He didn't feel like a threat.

"Can you tell us about the missing bike?"

"Yeah, I'd be happy to." Major ran his hand through his long hair, and I could feel him trying to tamp down...frustration? No, it was embarrassment. "We came into work two days ago and it was like the damn thing had disappeared without a trace. We have a pretty elaborate surveillance system since we build high-end bikes here. The security cameras didn't pick anything up. No signs of forced entry."

"Is anything else missing?" Bellamy asked.

Major shook his head. "Nope. Not a bolt out of place. If you didn't know the bike had

been here, you'd never know it was gone."

"Does anyone besides you and your brothers have access to the security codes?"

"No. It's just us. There's no interruption in the surveillance. The cameras weren't tampered with," Major said with a shrug. "It's like a ghost took the damn thing."

Bellamy and I looked at each other. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck rose.

"Who were you building the bike for?" I asked.

He walked over to the desk and picked up a folder. "I figured you'd want the information. It was an online order, so I've never met the guy. This is everything—invoice, payment record, work order, and parts we've used on it so far."

"Have you been in contact with him since the bike has gone missing?" Bellamy asked.

"I was hoping we'd have it back before I had to tell him." Major sighed as he handed the folder to Bellamy. "We've got insurance. We can start over. It's a powerful bike, and in the wrong hands it could do some damage."

Bellamy's brows rose as he read the file. He motioned for me to come closer.

My blood ran cold when I saw the name on the invoice.

Anders Lynwood.

No fucking way, my bear exclaimed. He's real.

"You've had no contact with Mr. Lynwood at all?"

“Just the emails where we talked about the order.” Major furrowed his brow. “Do you know this guy? He lives up north.”

“He might be connected to another case we’re working on.” Bellamy was smooth. “Would you mind if we took a copy of this invoice with us?”

“Yeah, if it helps you find the bike, and whatever else you’re looking for, go for it.”

“Has anything unusual happened in the shop in the last few days?” I was probably overstepping my bounds asking questions when Bellamy was the private investigator, but he could deal with the muscle and the motorcycles. I would deal with the magic.

Major shook his head. “Business as usual, as much as it can be in a wolf pack.”

“If you remember anything, let us know. No matter how small it seems,” I said. “It might be helpful.”

“Will do.”

Bellamy and Major made loose plans involving some bar in town, and we headed out. The silence was thick between us as we walked away from the shop.

I looked around to make sure we were alone and grabbed Bellamy’s muscular arm. “Holy shit. The name on that invoice is the same as the bear that captured me who’s been dead for decades.” My skin blossomed with goosebumps as I said it.

“Yeah. Did not see that coming at all.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I could read Major’s energy, but after the run in with Nana—ugh! I hated thinking of it like that. It was better I didn’t say anything until I was sure. “What do we do now?”

A growl vibrated through Bellamy's body. I really hoped his answer would be to fuck me senseless in the back of his truck. This bear was maddingly far too sensible for that, but a girl could have a wild fantasy or two in the midst of a crisis.

“We go find him.”

Chapter Seventeen

My Bear Only Had One Plan

Bellamy

Working with Clover on this case was the most natural thing in the world, and my bear knew that feeling was downright dangerous. She could be setting me up for another fall. But she was different now, softer but still wild, wiser but not jaded.

Magical, my bear said. The thing that's different is the magic.

We hadn't talked about the possibility of her having magic at all since Shirley had crashed our cupcake...it wasn't technically a date, since it was right before we'd gone to talk to Major Lowe, which was all business. It had been a fun little diversion. I meant to bring it up on this drive to Coeur d'Alene, but we fell into an easy conversation about the clan.

"I was relieved everyone we grew up with seemed to be done having babies so I didn't have to be the awkward single lady at the baby showers quietly getting drunk in the corner anymore, but now I'm getting invited to showers for their grandkids." She laughed, but it was hesitant.

I glanced over at her, mostly paying attention to the road, but we were the only ones on this stretch. Soon, we'd be passing clan land and I'd been debating with myself the entire way if I should suggest stopping. My bear and I were both leaning toward hell no, because I needed to keep Clover away from anyone who could cast a spell on her.

You want to keep her for yourself , my bear said.

“I know, that could’ve been us,” Clover said when I didn’t respond.

“Do you wish it was?” I asked.

Her lips parted. If she didn’t answer, I’d tell her how it had been torture sleeping on the couch knowing her delectable body was in my bed. How I was getting addicted to the way my house smelled like her now. And the other reason I didn’t want to face my clan was my heart would never recover from another rejection.

“Sometimes,” she said softly. “I wonder what our family would’ve been like. How we would’ve spent holidays. And other times, I tell myself everything happens for a reason.”

“I think about it all the time.” I surprised myself by admitting it so easily. “Definitely what it would’ve been like to have a family with you. Watching you raise them to be just as fiery as you are. Growing old with you. Making a difference in the clan.”

She let out a long sigh. “You never found anyone else?”

I shook my head and clutched the steering wheel tighter. “Couldn’t even think about dating for a long time. Then when I finally let myself try, I kept trying to find you in them. And it turns out, you’re one of a kind. There’s no one like you, Clover Crowley.”

“Some people would say that’s a good thing.” She beamed at me. “I was terrified that I’d run into your wife and kids when I came to ask for your help, and I had no idea how I’d handle that.”

“How come?”

“Because there was no way you wouldn’t have told this fictional wife about me, and there was also no way she’d think I was anything but a heartless bitch. I expected it to feel like a slap in the face.”

“Is your reputation the only thing that was on the line in that scenario?”

“I don’t know, Bellamy.” Her lips curled up in a mischievous grin. “Why don’t you tell me how this ends?”

It shouldn’t have been a surprise that I needed a bulletproof vest for this conversation. “That’s a little complicated because we don’t know what we’ll find when we recover the locket. There’s a good chance your grandmother stole it. It could change everything for the clan. And if you have magic?—”

“I’m not talking about the clan, or my grandmother, or her stupid locket.” Clover rolled her eyes. “I’m talking about me and you.”

What I really wanted to do was pull the truck over and take her on the side of this lonely highway. But we couldn’t use sex to avoid every argument, as much as I would like to.

“I was too,” I finally said. “It’s bigger than us now. Maybe it always was.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re probably right.”

Clover turned toward the window, and I knew I’d said the wrong thing. I wasn’t afraid of anything, except for this woman shattering my heart all over again. Now that I was pretty sure her magic had been stolen and used against her...and me...fuck, it was complicated. If only there was a spell to put our past completely behind us and give us a clean start. I would empty my bank account for that potion.

And there would still be no guarantees , my bear reminded me. He had an answer for everything except for how to claim this woman.

Why did fate seem so easy when it happened to everyone else?

We were quiet for the rest of the drive. A part of me dreaded finding this stupid locket because it could mean saying goodbye to this woman, this time for good.

Fight for her , my bear said. She needs that more than she'll ever admit .

My GPS startled us both by announcing it was time to turn off the highway into Coeur d'Alene. It led us to an apartment building downtown, near the lakeside beach.

"This doesn't make any sense." Clover wrinkled her nose as she looked up at the converted industrial building. "It's a nice place, but it's not I-special-ordered-a-custom-antique-motorcycle-that-probably-costs-a-fortune nice."

"I agree, but maybe it's an office."

"Or a front for something else," she suggested. "If Anders Lynwood has access to a computer and a credit score, he can't be a figment of my imagination. And Major Lowe doesn't seem like someone who's easy to scam."

"No, he's not." But Anders Lynwood was supposed to be dead. These were all excellent points, but things were making even less sense now. The databases I had access to were as good as they got. If he was alive, we should've already had a lead on him. "Let's go see what we can find out."

Clover confidently walked up to the door and tugged on it, letting loose with a low growl when she discovered it was locked. The noise that came out of her made me want to back her against the doorway and forget all about Anders Lynwood.

“Guess we’ll have to wait for someone to come out.” She considered the list of names on the buttons. “I could play the auntie card, once I know who we’re here to visit. Or we could press all the buttons and see which one of Anders’s neighbors has trust issues.”

“No need for either.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and swiped.

“I understand you’re strong enough to huff and puff and blow the house down, but I thought we were trying not to draw attention to ourselves. Wait, what are you doing?”

Her eyes widened as I positioned my phone at the lock mechanism, and I winked at her just after we heard the satisfying click of it disengaging.

“What sorcery was that?” she asked as I held the door open.

“You’re not the only one with magic.” It felt way too natural to put my hand on her back and guide her up the stairs. Whoever was using this address didn’t live on the ground floor. The door that corresponded with the number on the invoice was on the third floor. There was a floral wreath outside. It didn’t feel right.

“What’s our plan?” Clover whispered.

“We knock on the door and see who answers,” I whispered back.

“What if no one does? Do we just loiter until they come back?”

I shook my head. “You’ll see.”

She grunted softly and I raised an eyebrow.

“Those little noises are going to get you in trouble.”

“Good to know.” She gave me a wicked grin.

I blew out a breath and knocked on the door before I got totally distracted.

A young woman answered the door, drawing back when she saw us. From what I could tell, she was human. She didn’t have shifter energy, but she was definitely picking up on ours.

Let me take the lead . Whoa. Clover didn’t say that out loud, but I heard her as clearly as if she had.

She stepped forward and gave the young woman a warm smile. “Hi, I was wondering if you could help us. We’re looking for Anders Lynwood. Is he home?”

That was good.

“I-I don’t know an Anders Lynwood.” The young woman clutched the door and narrowed her eyes at Clover. “I think you’ve given me a facial before.”

“It’s possible.” Clover beamed. “I’ve worked at a few spas in the area. So do you know Anders? Maybe I knocked on the wrong door?”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“Is there anyone in the building, big and burly, interested in motorcycles?” Clover asked.

“You just described half of the panhandle.” The young woman laughed nervously. “I’m sorry, I wish I could help you, but I can’t. I hope you find who you’re looking for.”

She closed the door before Clover had a chance to ask any more questions.

“Well, shit,” Clover said under her breath. “What do we do now?”

“We wait.”

“Here?”

I shook my head and motioned toward the stairs. “We’ll have to do some more research on the area. There’s a reason why Anders, or whoever placed that order, picked this address.”

We were outside again, in the blazing sunshine. Clover shielded her eyes with her hand. “When will we be done?”

“When we have everything we need.” I shrugged. “Do you have other plans?”

“Eventually I should get back to work, but everything’s on hold until we find the locket.” She sighed. “I was just wondering where we should stay. Clan land isn’t too far from here?—”

“No,” I said so abruptly she widened her eyes. “Conflict of interest. We need to be on neutral territory.”

She pulled her phone out of her bag. “There are a couple of cute hotels nearby. Some of them cater to long-term stays.”

“I can handle that,” I said.

“You can, but you’re busy looking for clues. This is my territory. Just because I asked for your help didn’t mean I expected you to do everything yourself.” She walked

away from me to a shadier spot. I definitely didn't mind the view of her round ass.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her not to book two rooms. But she was my client, not my mate. And if I had any chance of updating my status, I had to let her handle this.

A door won't be enough to keep you away , my bear rumbled.

I wasn't so sure. Clover seemed willing to play, until she didn't. I might have been fooling myself to think I ever had a chance with this woman, but I didn't want to jeopardize the case.

She turned to me. "The resort has availability. Want to go check in? It will give us a chance to come up with plan B."

"Let's do it." But my bear only had one plan, and it was the same plan he'd always had—to claim her.

Chapter Eighteen

It's Not What It Looks Like. Is it?

Clover

“You two are adorable together.” The woman behind the desk at the hotel beamed at us. She had some serious Nana energy to the point that I wouldn't be surprised she'd somehow managed to take over this woman's body. “How did you meet?”

“I'm his client,” I instantly regretted saying that, because in this setting, it had a much different meaning than it did when we'd given Major Lowe the same explanation. Although, the scandalized look on the woman's face as she thought about what kind of client a man like Bellamy would bring to the Tall Timbers Resort was totally worth a moment of mortification.

“If we need to change our checkout date, that can be arranged?” Bellamy's voice was gruff, and I didn't miss the hint of pink that was showing through his beard. Even the bear was scandalized by the client comment. Good to know. We could laugh about it later over?—

Over what? My bear asked. Wine in your hotel room? The woman had said the hotel was very busy this week, but they were able to squeeze us in. I had pretty much braced myself for the worst room in this cute resort that I'd wanted to check out for years.

“We hope you'll find your stay pleasant, and if you need anything at all, don't

hesitate to call the front desk and ask! We like to make magic happen, especially for guests like you.” She beamed at Bellamy as she handed him the envelope with the key cards inside. “But we understand that even the best plans aren’t set in stone, and if you need to make changes, we’ll work with you to accommodate that.”

Somehow, this felt more like a tarot card reading than a hotel stay. This woman was definitely picking up on something between us.

The desk clerk looked around us. “Do you have luggage?”

I stifled a laugh. She’d really think we were here on business now.

“Just our bags. I can carry them,” Bellamy said with a nod, and then we headed to the elevator.

“Oh, a penthouse suite.” I pushed the button for the top floor and then stepped closer to Bellamy. It was absolutely impossible to ignore the heat rolling off his body or the slight rumble that was probably coming from his bear. My bear wanted to hit stop on the elevator and do unspeakable things to this man.

There are mirrors everywhere , she said. You could watch yourself get him off from every angle...

I squeezed my legs together to calm the pulsing muscles between them. Even though we’d had that conversation on the way here about how we’d both dreamed about what our lives could’ve been like if I hadn’t fucked up everything and rejected him, he’d quickly gone back to trying to pretend he was only doing this job for the good of the clan.

Did I believe that for a second? Hell no.

But I was torn. Ever since we'd had breakfast sex, he'd been respectful. Not distant, but he stayed on the couch every night like a perfect gentleman, while I lay in his bed, aching for him to make the next move. Maybe he didn't think I wanted him too. Why did everything with this bear have to be so damn complicated?

You could have done something , my bear suggested.

Ugh. I wasn't used to thinking long haul. More like, I wasn't used to being afraid of losing someone. And whether it was magic or unfortunate circumstances that put me back in Bellamy's stratosphere.

The elevator opened, saving me from going down the rabbit hole of my thoughts. Bellamy was quiet as we headed toward the end of the hallway. He opened the door and I followed him inside.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me." He groaned.

It took me a second to realize where we were. I squinted at the red things on the floor, wondering why they'd given us a dirty room until I realized they were all over the bed—in a heart pattern. A tray sat in the middle of it, with more roses, an ice bucket with champagne, two flutes, and chocolate-covered strawberries on a plate.

And that was definitely a hot tub in front of the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the lake.

"Did she give us the mate moon suite?" I kept blinking, thinking the next time I opened my eyes all these ludicrous and hilarious accessories would disappear and we'd be in a standard room with two double beds.

My magic wasn't that strong.

“Should we go back down and tell her she’s made a mistake?” I added. My heart pounded as reality set in. This was no longer a business trip. It was a romantic getaway with the bear who tried to claim me. “When I said I was your client, I thought she was gonna make us leave?—”

“Nope. It’s perfect,” Bellamy said, his lips turning up in a defiant grin as he plucked one of the strawberries off the plate and dropped it into my surprised lips. “I say we milk this for all we can get.”

I could barely swallow my strawberry without choking. “You mean, make them think we’re on our mate moon?”

“Why not?” His dark eyes were dancing with desire. “Everyone roots for the newlyweds. They’ll tell us everything they know. We’ll have an all-access pass to this town. If Anders Lynwood is here, he can ride his fancy motorcycle wherever he wants, but he can’t hide from us.”

“Great plan.” My disappointment was a lousy chaser for the chocolate-covered treat. “We’ll be out of here in no time.”

“Hey.” Bellamy tipped my chin up so there was nothing I could do but look into those gorgeous eyes. “If this makes you uncomfortable, we can find another place to stay.”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” I jerked away from him. “It’s just that...” I shook my head.

“It’s just that what?”

I turned to find him sitting on the edge of the bed. The sight of him... The slate blue T-shirt clinging to his bulging biceps. His hair was slightly too long, and a little lighter at the tips. Those full lips. “You’re giving me whiplash. One moment, you’re

talking like you want to give things another try. The next, you're all business."

"What do you want, Clover?"

"I want you to make me regret every bad decision I've ever made."

He rose from the bed in a move that was more animal than human. Everything inside me pulsed at double-time as he came over to me and brushed my hair away from my shoulder. His lips were against my ear. "I think you know how long I've been dreaming about doing that."

His hands were on my waist, and he pulled me against him. His cock was hard against my stomach. "And you owe me a mate moon."

I didn't know what would happen when this was all done, but right now, I'd convince myself the best thing I could do was let both of us get lost in this fantasy. This alternate universe where I let him claim me. And maybe, just maybe, we could make it real.

But I wouldn't worry about any of that tonight. "Show me what you've got, bear."

His lips were on mine, hot and hungry. I let him inside, finally surrendering to him after all this time. Now I understood I wasn't giving up a piece of myself to let him into my life. It might be too much to hope that this was more than just this night, just this case, but maybe he could accept me for the hot mess that I would probably always be.

He drew away from me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. For a moment, he looked so much like he had the last time I'd seen him. When he'd been so brave to come forward in front of the entire clan and ask me to be his mate. Damn it, I didn't want to feel regret right now.

Do you understand how lucky you are to get a second chance? My bear sighed. Don't screw this up.

Oh, I did. Not in a million years did I ever think I'd ever have a chance to fix this mistake. My heart ached, realizing I'd taken so much time from him. I was convinced he'd moved on without another thought of me. Left me in the dust. This opportunity felt like pure magic.

Maybe Alba Lynwood had cast a spell that fixed my life.

The way Bellamy moved around the cozy suite was pure bear. He was totally in his element, in a place I never expected.

It's not where he is, it's who he's with.

I chuckled softly to myself as he carefully moved the tray with the champagne and the strawberries over to the wet bar behind the hot tub. Even in the throes of passion, he was still lawful good. I resented him for it when I was younger. I needed him to be wild back then. But now I could find comfort in it. Not that I needed anyone to take care of me. As a Crowley, I felt invincible because my name was my armor. Maybe I needed this professional bodyguard to protect me as I reemerged to the clan—and the world—as my own woman.

Bellamy picked up a little bottle and his face lit up. He turned to me and grinned.

"What did you find?" I asked.

"You'll find out soon enough," he rumbled playfully as he approached. His gaze raked over me. "This is gonna be perfect."

I groaned. "I'd agree with you if I knew what you were talking about."

He put his hands on my hips, and his breath was hot against my ear. “Let me show you what you’ve been missing all these years.”

It was like the bear could read my freaking mind. I scraped my teeth against my bottom lip. “Maybe I’d like to do the same.”

He shook his head, grinning. “It’s my turn.”

He slid his hands up, just enough to grab the bottom of my sweater and pull it over my head. He let it fall to the floor, and his gaze warmed my almost bare skin. His fingers were rough against my bra strap, then tracing the outline of the lace before he pulled one cup, then the other. My nipples pebbled as he moved closer, carefully circling the piercings through the lace. They were sensitive, and I closed my eyes as sensation rocketed through me.

“Do you like that?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Tell me.”

“Oh, you’re a bossy bear.”

He stilled his finger. “I can stop.”

My traitorous body throbbed, needing more.

“I like it a lot.”

“I like the way your body responds to my touch,” he said, his voice husky. “Last time we were together, I didn’t have a chance to appreciate it.”

“Because we were hate fucking.”

A brow shot up. “Do you prefer that, or would you like to see what I have in mind?”

“A hard, fast fuck is always fun.” I grinned as he groaned. “But there’s something delicious about going slow like this.”

“Mmmm. Turn around now and let me take this bra off you.”

I turned slowly and raised my hair so he could get at the clasp. The bra fell to the floor and I turned to face him.

“So beautiful,” he said, cupping my breast. He ran his thumb over the nipple and then took it into his mouth. Now it was my turn to moan, which made him suck harder, scraping his teeth against the piercing. He moved to the other side, giving it the same attention.

His next move was my leggings. He slid them down my legs. “Get on the bed. On your stomach.”

The rose petals were still there. I put my knee on the bed and looked over my shoulder at Bellamy. “Are you gonna keep your clothes on all night?”

“For now,” he said. “I have a plan, and don’t want to get distracted.”

“Always the practical bear.” I chuckled as I got comfy.

His knee shifted the mattress, and he settled beside me. He pulled that little bottle out of the pocket of his jeans and squirted it into his hands.

“They had massage oil?”

He nodded.

My mouth opened in an O. “That little old lady seemed so sweet, and she set us up in a sex palace.”

“We’ll have to leave her a glowing review.” Bellamy ran his hands from my shoulders down to the small of my back, bumping up against the lace of my thong. He made another long stroke, settled on my shoulders for a moment, before working his thumbs down my spine.

“You got a knot,” he said softly.

“It’s always there.” I closed my eyes, relishing the pain as he worked on it. “You’d think I’d get massages all the time, working in a spa, but the opposite is true.”

“That woman today recognized you,” he said. “Do you remember her?”

“No.” I didn’t feel like talking shop right now, but some things never changed. Bellamy was all business. “Usually, I cover my client’s faces with masks and creams. And her eyes would’ve been closed, so it’s a little strange she remembered me.”

“She must have been a regular. Did you ever open your spa?”

I shook my head.

“Why not?”

“Because it was never the right time. The clan always needed something. And it was easier to work for someone else.”

“But you wanted it.”

“I’m surprised you remembered.”

“I never forgot anything about you, Clover,” he said, running his hands down my back as the knot melted away. “Maybe you can open a spa in Granger Falls, if you decide to stay. I don’t expect you to give me an answer tonight. I just want you to know it’s a possibility.”

“That might be nice.”

He moaned in agreement. “You know what else is nice?” A smack against my butt cheek made my eyes shoot open. “This ass is fucking fantastic.”

“It’s a lot bigger than it used to be.” I chuckled nervously. Having Bellamy give me the once over before he told me to lay on the bed was terrifying. I’d gained a lot of weight since he’d last seen me, and I liked to think I was good at camouflaging it with clothes, but I had nowhere to hide. The rolls, the cellulite, the stretch marks. Gravity having the last laugh. It would’ve been sweet justice if he’d rejected me because of it.

His grip tightened on my cheek. “Are you suggesting that’s a bad thing?”

I looked over my shoulder at him. “Not everyone appreciates a woman with ample curves.”

He scoffed and shook his head in disbelief. “Anyone who thinks you’re less than a goddess is a fool. Guess I should use that to my advantage.”

Another slap, this time on the other cheek. Electricity flowed through my veins, and Bellamy rubbing away the warmth of his strike made me squirm under his touch.

“Someone’s getting impatient,” he said as he slid his hand under the lace and between

my legs. I was soaking wet for him. He stroked again, maddeningly deeper. “Very, very impatient.”

Then he drew his hand away, and I moaned, which earned another spank. And another. “You’ve needed these for a while.”

“You’ll never get me to behave.”

“That’s the last thing I want.” His hand was still on my ass. There was no way he wouldn’t be able to feel my pussy pulsing, daring him to come play. He leaned forward, heat rolling off his frustratingly still clothed body. “Are you ready to turn over?”

“I’m gonna get oil all over the sheets.” There always was the hot tub...

“They aren’t the only thing that will need to be changed when I’m done with you,” he rumbled.

I rolled over, meeting his hungry gaze as he poured more oil into his palms. He kissed me, his lips trailing down to my neck, stopping over the spot that pulsed wildly in anticipation of whatever he did next.

Drawing back, he rubbed his hands together and started at my shoulders. They were a little sore from the work he’d done moments before, that delicious pain of letting go. Healing. Is that what this was?

I didn’t have time to think about it because he’d moved to my boobs, making slow circles, squeezing them, running his hands up to my neck and grasping, meeting my gaze...

“Fuck.” The word was barely more than a breath.

He let go of my neck, giving my breast another circle before heading down to my stomach, pushing down my panties and rubbing either side of my slit. Next time, he pulled the panties to the side, fingering the bar above my clit. My back arched, and he grabbed a fistful of lace and tore the underwear off me.

The growl that came out of him as he pulled his shirt over his head was absolutely delicious. I would've helped him with his jeans, if he hadn't turned my bones into jelly. But watching him free himself from his jeans...his cock hard and ready...was all the motivation I needed.

I rolled up and Bellamy caught me. He liked kissing, a lot, like it was his way to say things that words couldn't possibly explain. He effortlessly lifted me onto his lap, never breaking the kiss. I grasped his shaft, running my hand up and down its length, loving the way he moaned against me.

His hand overtook mine, showing me what he liked. With his other arm, he lifted me, and helped me position him so he could come inside.

That was hot.

He slid inside, with fast strokes, holding me by the waist like I was a doll. My muscles pulsed around him.

"I love how it feels being inside you," he said. "This fucking gorgeous body is gonna make me lose control."

"Let me help you with that."

"If you do anything else, I'll lose my mind."

"I haven't done anything yet, bear." I slid my hand down my stomach, taking my clit

between my fingers. My head fell back on contact. Between Bellamy's thrusts and my touch, I was about to go right over the edge.

I cried out as my body went into overdrive. Bellamy groaned, his shaft swelled inside me, and my body wanted to trap him there. To do what our clan had said we were destined to do all along and have him come inside me. But he managed to lift me just before he erupted.

I lay on the bed, watching him coax the rest of his release out of his body. Sweet moon, was he ever beautiful, even more so that I'd brought him to this place. That he'd accepted me exactly as I was, nowhere near perfect, and made me feel like a queen.

It had been a while since anyone had made me feel that way.

I can tell you exactly when it was.

Shut up, bear.

It was right before you sent him away...

He lay beside me, pulling me against his dewy body. I'd be forever thankful he couldn't hear my thoughts. "Are you ready for the hot tub?"

"Depends on what you have planned there."

"I need to clean every inch of this beautiful body." He tipped my chin up. "I mean it, Clover. You're beautiful."

"You are too."

He grinned. “Not a compliment I get often, but I’ll take it.”

He pushed himself off the mattress, turned on the faucet, and unwrapped the bath bomb that had been left for us.

“Something borrowed, something blue,” he teased as he dropped it in.

I rolled over so I could get a better view of his ass as he got the tub ready. The man was pure muscle. “We definitely can’t claim that they put us in the wrong suite now. The whole hotel probably heard us.”

“Good.” He looked at me, his expression sobering. “I’d love another chance to make you mine.”

Chapter Nineteen

I Could Work With That

Bellamy

It was my job to put myself in dangerous situations, but I'd never been as nervous about any of it as I was right now. Fuck, I wanted Clover, but I wouldn't grovel. She'd hate that.

For her to accept my claim after all these years would be to admit she was wrong in the first place. And that was something Clover Crowley did not do.

I might have just set myself up for major disappointment. But I had to try. I had to let her know I still wanted her now as much as I did back then.

She rose from the mattress, her copper hair wild. My bear appreciated the view as her heavy tits rose with her arms as she stretched. Her nipples were still pink and swollen from our time together. Those barbells glistened. I'd just rubbed oil over every inch of her body, but being able to appreciate her from this view... I'd never get sick of looking at her.

Her leg swung over the edge of the bed. Thick, shapely calves, and bright blue toenails. She gripped the mattress and her gaze smoldered.

"So I might like to be yours, on one condition." She raised a brow. "Promise me you're not doing this to get the final word against the clan."

She said yes! But she thinks you have an ulterior motive.

I could work with that.

“I don’t care what the clan thinks.” Did I want them back? Absolutely. But there was another, much larger piece of me that would never forgive them for not fighting. For letting me cut all ties. “I just want you.”

She came over to the tub and sat on the edge. “I like to think I’m the same old Clover, but I’m not sure that’s true. To be honest, I’m not sure who I am anymore.”

I joined her, and steam rose around us. “I like you wild and defiant. I’m not interested in taming you, Clover. I want you exactly as you are.”

She didn’t answer right away. “I always thought I was broken because I didn’t have magic,” she finally said softly.

There were no words that would convince her otherwise. I’d try like hell to show her, but for her to really believe it, she’d have to figure it out on her own. That was the key to this woman. She had to do things her way.

So I let her run her hands over my body as I tangled my own in her hair and pulled her head to the side. She moaned as I kissed her neck, but then she pulled away from me.

“What are we gonna do? Now that we’ve confirmed that we’re ‘working’ together, in the mate moon suite.” She grinned.

“You wanna talk about this now?” I groaned.

“You’re the one who’s all business.”

“Usually.” I chuckled and ran my hand up her side. “But now that this gorgeous body is no longer off limits, I’m tempted to say your nana can find her own damn locket.”

Clover’s eyes widened, and she laughed. “And here I thought I was gonna be a bad influence on you.”

“If we find this thing, we need to dig into its history and find out why someone wanted to steal it in the first place. This could change things.”

“The clan deserves to know the truth.” She scraped her teeth against her lip, a move I was quickly becoming addicted to. “I’m worried about Nana. What if she really did something scandalous and our whole clan was founded on a lie?”

“We need to find Anders Lynwood, whoever he is. There’s a possibility that he was one of the bears who brought you to the woods, but you might be misremembering. You were most likely spelled, and that name might be in your head for a reason.”

“You think someone’s setting him up?” Her mouth dropped. “Or setting me up?”

“I think there are bears who want you to know the truth, and some that are intent on keeping it from you.” I kissed her forehead. “And we need to figure out which bear is doing what.”

There was nothing sexier than Clover Crowley lying in bed wearing nothing but my T-shirt. She’d commandeered my laptop and was working on one of the breakfast sandwiches we’d ordered from room service.

She took a long sip of her iced mint latte. “The motorcycle is a distraction.”

“Probably, but it was ordered by someone using the same name as the bear you claim gave you scandalous information about your grandmother and it’s still missing.”

“If there were other bears this close to clan land, we’d know about it, wouldn’t we?”

“Unless they made sure no one around here knew they were bears.”

She raised a brow. “Give me one good reason a bear would hide themselves from other bears.”

“We haven’t been forthcoming that we occasionally go furry,” I reminded her. “If they were looking for information on your clan, or they wanted to sneak onto clan land unnoticed, maybe to take back something they thought belonged to them, they probably wouldn’t mention it.”

“Pretty good reason.” She grinned. “But you know how the clan is. If anyone unfamiliar set a paw on our land, the gossip network would immediately kick in.”

“Maybe they weren’t so unfamiliar.” I had to admit, it was kind of nice teaming up with her. She had a playful approach to finding information that I’d abandoned long ago. “If they could shapeshift—either to appear to you as long-dead ancestors, or these ancestors somehow have rematerialized and are ordering luxury motorcycles, they could probably convince the clan that they were friends and not foes.”

“Gives a new meaning to the concept of shapeshifter.” She took another sip of her coffee. “There’s a problem with that theory. My memories of the incident are still fuzzy, but I’m pretty sure they accused me of taking the locket.”

“Interesting, because Shirley did too.”

“So did you.” She laughed. “Maybe a better question is, why would everyone think I’d steal something from Nana, when I’m not even sure what the flipping thing can do?”

“I figured you’d made a mistake and you were trying to cover your tracks,” I said. “Or the clan had pissed you off.”

She shook her head. “Nana came to me in a panic when she realized it was gone. There’s no telling how long it took her to notice. After we ripped the house apart, she insisted I come see you, because she said that”—she lowered her voice to mimic Shirley— “If anyone can fix this, it’s Bellamy.”

“Are you sure she didn’t set you up?”

“I don’t know anything anymore.” She scooted closer to me and tapped the laptop. “Look at this. When you look up the Lynwood family tree online, it lists a completely different birthdate for Nana than when you look her up as a Crowley.”

“Let me see that.” I took the laptop from her and studied the Crowley screen. There were names above Shirley, but many of the ones with completed entries were still alive. Anyone who had passed either didn’t have a full name, or their dates were listed as unknown. I switched back to the Lynwood tab. “Huh. Some of these names line up, and the information is much more complete over here.”

“But it doesn’t tell us why Anders Lynwood came back from the dead to special order a stolen motorcycle,” she said.

“No, it doesn’t.” I kissed the side of her head. “I want nothing more than to spend our time here ravishing you in this bed, but if we’re gonna solve this mystery, we need to find this guy. I got a copy of the order from Major. It seems legit. There’s a paper trail that confirms that someone by that name lives in that apartment.”

“But that woman said she didn’t know him.”

“And that she did know you.” I sighed. “This case was weird from the start, but

something about this part of it doesn't add up."

"Like I said, it's a distraction. But from what?" Clover tapped her fingers on her thigh. "If you were Anders Lynwood, what would it take to get your attention?"

"A gorgeous redhead with a sassy mouth and incredible tits." I laughed as she smacked my arm. "Fine. The motorcycle."

"But we don't have it."

"And most likely, neither does he." I leaned in and kissed her, a dangerous move because my bear was easily distracted by this woman. "Maybe that's our angle."

Chapter Twenty

This Card Has Trouble Written All Over It

Clover

“I have a weird feeling in my gut,” I said as we approached the alleged home of Anders Lynwood. “Something I’ve never felt before.”

Bellamy raised a brow. “Tell me about it.”

This magic stuff was something I never wanted to admit. Fucking scary. Fear wasn’t an emotion I usually let myself get up close and personal with.

“It’s almost like a dead zone. I’m not sure I have words for it.”

Bellamy chuckled. “That’s a first.”

“Don’t laugh at me. It’s freaking me out.” I paused so I could try to make sense of it. “There’s no vibration here.”

He nodded. “Someone could be trying to spell you.”

“Do you feel it?” I asked. He’d had the same weird exposure to magic that I had growing up. All the secrets, the half-truths, and separation. Clan land had always felt special, and it was why I spent so much time there, even though I was always threatening to leave. Nothing else compared. But this was... “It almost feels

suffocating.”

“Everything seems normal to me,” he said as he activated the app on his phone that scrambled the signal at the front door. The lock clicked, and he grinned smugly before yanking it open. Sweet moon, he was so fucking hot. I followed him up the stairs and admired the view. His T-shirt strained against his shoulder blades. His triceps were tense, like he was expecting a fight. And that ass was pure perfection.

He knocked hard on the door. Before we came, we’d texted Major and coordinated that we’d deliver the bad news to Anders about his bike.

“It feels even weirder in here,” I whispered. “It’s so still.”

Bellamy knocked again, hard enough for one of the neighbors to open the door and glare at us.

She looked like someone who prided herself on knowing absolutely everything about other people’s business.

I gave her my biggest smile as I walked over to her. “I’m so glad you came out. We need your help.”

Bellamy groaned, but I ignored him. He had his way of solving crimes, and I had mine.

“This is a private building.”

“Of course. So we’ll be quick.” Now that I seemed to have magic, it would be really helpful if I knew how to use it. Because a spell would work wonders on this sourpuss. “We’re here to see Anders Lynwood. Has he been around lately?”

She furrowed her brow. Worry lines were deeply ingrained in her skin. “I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“That’s odd.” I feigned surprise. “Because he told us he lived here.”

“I’ve been here for thirty-two years. I can assure you he’s never lived here.” She peered past me, considering Bellamy. “The girl who lives there has a boyfriend, though.”

“We know her.” It was sort of true. “She comes to my spa. Is her boyfriend a little older?”

The woman scowled. “If she’s got someone living there?—”

“We don’t want to cause any trouble.” Bellamy came up behind me and handed the woman a business card.

“Are you sure? Because this card’s got trouble written all over it.”

“Positive. We’ll head out now, but if you see anything unusual happening in the building, don’t hesitate to give me a call.” He gave her a nod and put his hand on my back.

I was about to protest that we were leaving empty-handed once again, but I was happy to get out of here. The woman was either going to be a nightmare or our biggest asset—no in between.

“Now what?” I asked once we got outside, fully aware the sourpuss was watching us out her window. “That was our entire plan.”

“Let’s comb the area and see what we find.” Bellamy’s hand was still on my back.

“You feel it too,” I said.

“Something’s off here, and I’m not sure what.” He turned to me. “Was that woman familiar to you at all?”

“I don’t think so.” My mouth dropped. “Do you think she was one of the Lynwoods?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Bellamy rumbled. “He could’ve given the wrong apartment number on purpose.”

I didn’t have the luxury of closing my eyes since we were on the move. I did my best to recall Alba’s image, but the neighbor was too fresh in my mind.

“It’s possible. But I hate that it adds more questions instead of answering them.”

“Welcome to private investigation. Nothing makes sense until it does.” He chuckled. “Let’s take a walk around downtown. Get something to eat. Maybe you can convince me to buy you something from one of those cute little stores.”

“I’m perfectly capable of buying myself whatever I want, but I won’t stop you from buying me gifts.” I sauntered ahead of him. “Maybe we’ll find a lingerie store.”

A low hum resonated in his throat. “Maybe you could try a few things on.”

“A gift is supposed to be a surprise,” I reminded him. “You’ll get to see it if you’re a good bear.”

“I think you’d rather me be a bad bear.”

I stopped, because something was glimmering on the sidewalk. Kneeling down to get

a closer look, I felt the same vibration that had come from the stones in the tent. Warmth tangled with electricity.

“What did you find?” Bellamy asked.

“The force field around it is so strong, it’s like it doesn’t want to me to pick it up.” But I’d brave the pinpricks that felt like hundreds of tiny shocks against my arm to see what this was.

Got it.

For a small, powerful stone, it was heavy. The weight changed, and the electricity subsided as I stood up. Bellamy watched me with a quizzical look on his face. The whole thing was so weird I wasn’t even sure what to tell him.

I gasped as the magic fell away and fully revealed the object. “What a gorgeous ring.”

“That’s moonstone, right?” Bellamy asked.

“Very good. I wouldn’t expect a rough and tumble bear like you to know your gemstones.”

“I paid attention when the elders spoke,” he said, coming closer to get a better look. “Looks antique.”

“It does.” I took a closer look. The silver filigree pattern with smaller stones woven in, the perfect circular shape of the moonstone...this wasn’t the first time I’d seen it. “This is Nana’s ring.”

Bellamy cocked a brow. “Are you sure?”

“To be honest, I feel like I’ve gone completely crazy ever since I walked into your office, but this ring is so familiar. I remember tracing over the silver and loving the way the light shone off the main stone. Nana said it came straight from the moon, and I believed her.” I chuckled sadly. There was a time I would’ve believed anything she said, and a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach made me think every word out of her mouth might have been a lie. “But what would it be doing here? Did she follow us?”

“Wouldn’t put it past her.” Bellamy’s voice had a hint of a protective growl, and it vibrated deep in my core.

Was it the ring making him have even more of an effect on me? Sweet moon, I was in trouble. I hadn’t even put it on yet. I almost tossed the damn thing, but didn’t, because a girl could have a little fun while we were in the middle of a wild ghost bear goose chase.

“Didn’t expect her to make an appearance at the bakery,” he added when I was too bedazzled by magic and his existence to form a coherent sentence. “We went straight to Choppers by Lowe from there. She could’ve overheard the conversation.”

“It’s possible.” I went through the scenarios in my head. “But that’s extra, even for Nana. If this is her ring, she loves it. She wouldn’t leave it out here as bait.”

“Or would she?”

“I don’t know anything anymore.” I sighed. “Has she always been this overbearing?”

“Kinda.” Bellamy lowered his gaze, like it pained him to come to this awful realization too. “Honestly, I didn’t want to be alpha because I knew I’d never be in full control of the clan. I would have always been answering to her.”

“Maybe you weren’t powerful enough back then to stand up to her. But now, I think the clan would be ready to follow you.” I went up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “What would you change about the clan if you were alpha?”

His eyes glittered almost as much as the stone. “I’m sure a lot has changed since I’ve been there?—”

“Not really,” I scoffed.

“Well, then we’d have a lot of work to do.” His lips spread in a dreamy grin. “I’d have a talk with everyone about what they wanted. No one likes it when someone comes in and tries to change everything. But one thing I’d definitely do is build stronger connections to the local packs.”

“And you said you didn’t want to be alpha.” I nudged him.

“I said I didn’t want to compete with your grandmother for control of the pack.” He took the ring from me and considered it. “Maybe we should see how this fits.”

He positioned the ring, and I held out my hand. Butterflies went absolutely berserk in my belly as he easily slipped it onto my ring finger. Like he knew exactly what he’d do if he were alpha, I’d dreamed of this moment too. The two of us together, surrounded by our loved ones, with lots of flowers and string lights illuminating the twilight.

And maybe this was the closest I’d ever get to that moment, standing on a sidewalk in downtown Coeur d’Alene.

He lifted my hand so we could both admire how pretty it looked, and I staggered, like something slammed into me. All I saw was an explosion of colors like the ones that had illuminated from the stone. But they were coming from me, the sight of the

impact. I wanted to scream for Bellamy, because all the sudden he felt like he was a million miles away, but the sound was trapped my throat.

The colors faded, and I was no longer on that sidewalk, about to kiss that gorgeous bear. I was in a tent, and there was a newborn baby crying. All the clan elders were around her, fussing—no, arguing. The baby felt so familiar, like I'd known her for a lifetime.

Was she...our daughter?

My heart was about to burst at the thought. Somehow, I was still aware that I was under the influence of the most powerful magic I'd ever knowingly encountered. Which made this weird, because it was like watching a movie I was starring in at the same time. I wanted to hold the baby, get her away from this chaos, but I couldn't, because my mother had snatched her away from Nana.

Mom had been gone since I was a little girl. She looked the same as I always remembered her. Young, healthy, and free. I came by my wild streak honestly. Oh, how I wished this was real so I could talk to her. I talked to her all the time, when I was by myself, but to have her answer me...

Wait, was I looking up at her, like I was the one in that swaddling?

"No!" My mother cried. "You can't do this."

"It's not by choice." Nana's voice sounded different. Smoother. She didn't look that much different, but I could tell her hair was still naturally red, and not the knockoff shade that came from a box. "The spirits want her."

Mom hugged me tightly against her cheek, and if it weren't for her arms around me, I would've freefallen at the realization that I was witnessing this scene through my

newborn eyes.

“Don’t take my baby from me.” I could barely hear the words over her frantic heartbeat. “You can’t raise her on lies.”

“This was the plan.” Nana tried her damndest to pry Mom’s arms free. “You knew this when you chose your mate?—”

The words faded and my tiny body was absorbed back into my mother’s...and now she was standing in front of the entire clan. She was nervous and pissed off. She wanted to run but she didn’t have any place to go.

She didn’t want to mate with this bear. But he was powerful, and he worked closely with Nana.

It all seemed so normal, yet I knew from my mother’s panic flowing through my veins something was very, very wrong.

“Yes, that’s right,” my mother said, and we were in our house. My sister was playing with her dolls on the living room floor, but I was sitting with my mom, with stones in front of me. Candles in the middle of the table. “You can never tell anyone about this. Promise?”

I nodded, and power began flowing between us, I could see it. It was almost like strings of taffy. I desperately wanted a taste, but it was no longer mine.

“No!” I cried.

“You promised,” my mother reminded me.

I wanted to get Sage’s attention, but I couldn’t. That taffy was taking my voice, my

power. How did my sister not notice? My mother was taking my magic!

Had she done the same to Sage? She'd always been a good little bear, and she'd married a dreadfully boring son of a powerful bear who worked closely with Nana...

In that moment, I realized I might not have been the one who'd gotten set up. Instead it was Bellamy, who had the pack stolen from him, and I'd played right into everyone's hands.

Chapter Twenty-One

Welcome Back

Bellamy

Clover's eyes blinked open cautiously, like she had no idea where she was. My plan after I'd put the ring on her finger was to kiss her, but she'd fallen unconscious, slumping against my chest.

"Hey," I said, as calmly as I could. I was mostly sure she'd been under the influence of magic, but there was no way to tell what that magic was doing to her. "Welcome back."

Her eyes were still blank, and I held her tighter, liking the little sigh that had come out of her too much for my comfort. I might be a protector, but I had a long way to go before I could claim I'd saved this woman.

My claiming skills needed a lot of work.

"I feel like I'm still dreaming." She looked around, her body tensing in my arms. "When did we get to your truck?"

"I carried you here when you passed out." We'd been on the sidewalk, and a bear shifter carrying the limp body of his mate didn't go unnoticed on a busy downtown street. Their horrified expressions mirrored what I felt on the inside. "Wanted to get you someplace safe in case I needed to get you help."

“I think I’m okay.” But her words were heavily laced with hesitation as she looked down on the ring on her finger. Her fingers spread out as she stared at it, like she was daring it to try her again.

“I tried to get it off, but your hands were locked into fists like you’d turned to stone.”

“It had a message for me.” She touched the moonstone and shuddered. “I don’t know how credible it is.”

“The magic is real.” I had no way to back up that claim, but it felt different from anything Shirley had ever offered. “You went from your lively, vibrant self to dead weight in my arms the minute you put on that ring. Did you feel anything from it before you put it on?”

“Yeah.” Clover narrowed her eyes at me. “You mean, you didn’t?”

I shook my head.

“When those bears captured me, they kept me in one of those tents. I think it might have been where Alba did her healing work, because it was full of crystals. I could feel them, so I remarked how powerful the stones were. And Alba said I couldn’t feel power that I didn’t have.”

Interesting. But why would Clover gain power, now?

She’s always had it , my bear said.

“What did you see when you passed out?” I asked, handing her a bottle of water.

She took a deep sip. “A baby. At first I thought it was our baby.”

My bear liked that idea a lot. I'd already beaten myself up thinking that putting the ring on her finger had been moving too fast, but Clover Crowley only moved at warp speed. All I could do was buckle up and enjoy the ride.

"But as the scene unfolded, I realized I was looking through that newborn's eyes. It was me," she continued. "The elders had gathered around me and my mom, trying to coax her to give me to them. She refused. Then the vision skipped forward a few years, and I swear I saw her take my magic from my body, like it was a physical thing."

"Seems like maybe she didn't do such a good job, since it's come back in a big way." But it made sense.

"She wanted me to keep it a secret. Like Nana wouldn't notice it was gone. And everyone accepted that I'd been born as this magical creature and then boom, it was gone, but they made me feel like it was my fault for not having it."

"None of this is your fault," I growled. "You should never apologize for being a powerful woman. It was always inside you, waiting to come out."

"You might be right. I've spent a lot of time wondering why I didn't get magic, who I'd pissed off in some other realm." She chuckled, but her expression quickly sobered. "It wasn't just babies and magic. I don't think I'm the target of this attack."

"Then who was?" My bear was on point. "We need to alert them. I can put a team on it, if need be. My guys aren't well-versed in magic, but we'll get them there. They're smart and they learn quick."

This could be the perfect assignment for Beau. He'd be working closely with me but still have his own case. Barrett would be back soon, and I needed to show that I'd made some headway on something, instead of getting totally sidetracked by the

woman who'd rejected me.

You found your mate, my bear argued. That's something he can certainly understand.

"I'm not sure you'll need a team." Clover did one of my favorite things and bit her lip. "I think they were trying to sabotage you."

"What?" She couldn't have seen it right.

She shook her head. "I didn't see the reasons as clearly as I saw Mom take my magic. As soon as I realized they didn't want you to be alpha, that's when I woke up."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I groaned, because this so wasn't the time for an interruption, but I couldn't ignore the business.

"Hey, it's Major Lowe. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, of course not." It wasn't exactly a lie. Major could make sense of some of the things that had happened since we'd gone ghost bear hunting. "What's going on?"

"You're never gonna believe this, but the bike is back."

"Oh, that's great news, Major." I nodded at Clover as her face brightened. "Is there a lot of damage? Did the reward you posted help get it back?"

"No, it's perfect, and to be honest, I'm not even sure how it got here. I went out front to help a customer. My brother X just came in with lunch. When we headed to the backroom to eat, it was just there, like it never had moved. It sounds crazy, I know, but it's here."

"Not the craziest thing I've heard today." Having the bike back was a relief, but now

we had even more questions. “Have the police come by and see if there are any prints on it. Let me know what they say, and if you find anything else interesting. But I’m glad to hear it’s back,” I said. “Did you ever get in touch with Anders Lynwood?”

I hadn’t told Major we were headed to Coeur d’Alene.

“Not yet. I planned to do it tomorrow if we still had no leads, because the parts we would need to build again are hard to come by. Some of them might even be one of a kind. Glad I don’t have to deal with that.” He chuckled. “Let me know what I owe you.”

“A beer the next time I see you at the Stepchild will more than cover it. Talk to you soon.”

I ended the call and met Clover’s eager gaze. “The bike just magically appeared back at Choppers by Lowe.”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t a distraction after all. It did its job by bringing us to the ring, and now it’s back where it belongs.”

“You think the whole thing was magic?” I asked.

“I wish it had brought us to the locket, but something tells me we wouldn’t have found the locket if I didn’t find this.” She held up her hand. “Or we wouldn’t be ready for what the locket has to tell us.”

“You’re probably right, but it doesn’t give us any solid leads on the locket, or who would’ve placed an order as Anders Lynwood. If he isn’t a living person, then whoever placed the order has the locket.”

“You’re very good at your job.” Clover gave me a kiss and batted her lashes. “It’s not

the only thing you're good at."

"I'd love to suggest another trip to the hot tub so I could show you what else I'm good at, but we should probably head back to Granger Falls." I checked the time on my phone, hoping it was late enough in the day to justify another night here, alone with this woman, away from the responsibilities of the business.

Once Barrett got back, maybe I could take a few days off and we could get away.

On your mate moon, my bear said.

It was still early enough that we'd make checkout. Damn it.

"Your cabin needs a hot tub." Clover waggled her brows as she rose. "I have a suggestion, and I'm not sure how you'll feel about it."

"I'm all ears."

"We should visit the clan on the way back."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Unfamiliar Damsel Role

Clover

“If you grip that steering wheel any tighter, fur is gonna burst out of your knuckles,” I joked, but Bellamy was so tense it was stealing the oxygen from the cabin of his truck.

“Not sure we’re ready for this,” he grumbled, looking straight ahead.

“I know this won’t be easy for you.” I felt for the bear. The last time he’d been on clan land, I’d rejected him in front of everyone who was important to him.

“This isn’t about me.” He looked at me only for a second, but it was long enough to send a chill through my bones. He definitely wasn’t ready for this visit. “We’re mid-assignment. The leads we have on the locket are barely tangible, at best. And we have no idea what’s happened to the clan while that magic is in someone else’s hands.”

“All good points.” I gulped. Maybe I was the one who wasn’t ready for this visit because I’d been so focused on how the clan would react to the two of us strolling in together like nothing had ever gone wrong. “An element of surprise might go further than we think. If my mom actually took my magic from me, that spell should’ve broken when she passed, right?”

“Makes sense to me.”

“I should know the answer, and I’m pissed that I don’t.” I turned toward the side window. Bellamy was firmly on my team, but I hated admitting that I needed him so much right now. Wanting him was perfectly within my personal rule book, but this situation kept putting me back in the unfamiliar damsel role. I didn’t want someone to feel like they had to save me, damn it. I wanted to be pursued for nothing more than lust and desire. “If the spell was broken, then the elders have been working overtime to keep my magic from me.”

“Paying them a visit should give us some answers on that front.”

I blew out a shaky breath. “What if it changes me?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think any magic is that powerful, Clover.”

“I didn’t have my magic before. When I rejected you,” I clarified, hating that it felt so cruel. “And with the magic, I want you back in my life. What if the elders try to take that from me? Or they’re using me as a weapon against you? That’s what scares me. I hurt you once, and I don’t want to do it again.”

I could only see his profile, but his face brightened, and those knuckles, so tense before, loosened their death grip on the steering wheel.

“Now that I know this wasn’t your choice, I won’t let anything keep me from you. Ever.”

The growl in his voice warmed my body, and the heat pooling in my core was about to cross over into the danger zone. It would be so easy to tell him to pull over to the side of the road...

Focus , my bear said. Get this over with and then the bear can be your sweet reward.

I hated to agree with her when I was this turned on. “We’re getting close. We should probably have a plan going into this.”

“This is a temperature check,” he said, all business like he hadn’t just turned my insides to liquid lava. “We’re not there to tell them what we know. More importantly, what we don’t know. We’re there to see how they react to an unplanned visit, and for the information they give us you might not have known to look for before you left.”

“I hate treating my own clan like they could be my enemy.” I hugged myself, but it didn’t make me feel safe. “I’m not sure how I’ll react to seeing them, now that I know that my whole life has basically been a lie.”

Bellamy glanced at me before he turned onto the gravel road that led to clan land. “This is your chance to take back control.”

He was right. And I only had moments to figure out what that looked like for me. I always thought I was in control, but in reality, I’d been played like a marionette doll.

“I don’t understand why Nana would have me look for the locket if it meant I’d find out the truth,” I said. “Or why she would’ve sent me to you.”

“She may have overestimated her own magic,” Bellamy suggested. “The power’s gone to her head, and having you go fetch the thing that gives her control over you...and me...is a pretty big flex. Or she’s trying to finish off the Lynwood clan, once and for all, and she knew this would be the way to provoke them.”

My heartbeat intensified as our village came into view. “Or provoke me. But still, why? Had she never sent me looking for the locket, everything would’ve been business as usual.”

Bellamy pulled to the side of the road, and a cloud of dust rose around us as he

parked the truck. “Maybe it’s better than whatever would have happened if you didn’t find out this way.”

He came around to my side of the truck and opened the door. I’d been too shell-shocked to move. My legs had turned to jelly, and the gravel crunching under our feet was the only thing that broke the tense silence.

We didn’t have a plan. Bellamy might have had one, but my thoughts and emotions had tied themselves together into a knot I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to loosen. The emotion I was least familiar with was fear. I’d been privileged enough to think I always had a safety net, but now that I realized it was made of spider’s silk, I had no idea what would happen once I fell through it.

That’s not new, my bear reminded me. That feeling is the exact reason you rejected this gorgeous bear in the first place.

If I’d accepted his claim, would I have found my power that much sooner?

Heads turned and our friends and families stared at us as we walked down the road that led to the heart of our little village. Bellamy reached for my hand and squeezed it. The bear was on a mission, and I knew exactly where we were headed.

I blew out a breath as we stepped onto Nana’s front porch. It was the house I’d grown up in, and where I’d learned about clan history and our magical lessons.

Lies.

It felt weird to knock on the door. Normally, I’d walk right in. But nothing was normal right now.

“Clover,” my sister Sage exclaimed as she opened the door. “What are you doing

here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” I asked. “Where’s Nana?”

“She’s with the elders. Weekly ritual.” She might as well have punctuated it with a duh .

“Good.” I stepped closer, expecting her to move aside and let me in, but she didn’t. “We need to talk.”

“Yeah, we do.” Her gaze was focused squarely on the bear beside me. “Good to see you, Bellamy.”

“Good to see you too.” But I could feel he was on edge. “What time will that meeting be over?”

She shrugged. “It starts at noon and ends when they’re finished.”

I took advantage of her distraction to hook my arm into hers and get into the house. Bellamy followed, closing the door and standing in front of it like a barrier.

Sage’s brows raised. “Why are you two acting like this is some sort of ambush? And since when do you even like each other?”

“We can talk about that later.” I eyed Bellamy, who’d crossed his arms and rumbled. His body looked massive in my Nana’s tiny and cluttered cottage. “Are we the only ones here?”

“Yeah. The kids are at school. What in the world is going on?”

There was no way she was this oblivious, and she usually didn’t hang out at Nana’s

house in the middle of the day by herself. “That’s what I want you to tell me.”

“Everyone was worried sick about you when you didn’t come home. The rumors were pretty wild, which is a stretch, considering you were the subject. Like how do you still manage to top yourself? It’s a talent. Some people thought this guy was holding you hostage.” She motioned toward Bellamy. “That he was working with a rival clan that was trying to destroy us. Some bears thought he stole the locket.”

“What did they say about that rival clan?” Bellamy asked calmly, like my sister hadn’t just accused him of theft and treason. I had to hand it to him, because her allegation had my blood boiling.

Her eyes widened. “Why don’t you tell me? You’re the one who disappeared without a trace.”

This wasn’t like my sister. Sage was the golden bear, the clan darling, the one who made good decisions on a regular basis. She had the mate, the two kids, the gorgeous cottage on the lake, and the perfect body. I’d called the she-shed in my Nana’s backyard home while I’d saved up to open that spa that was perpetually out of reach. She didn’t usually call me out for being a card-carrying member of the hot mess express. My big sister usually was the one to bail me out of my bullshit.

“I want to know about that clan too,” I answered before Bellamy had a chance to say anything. “What did they say?”

She shook her head. “Most of the focus was on Bellamy. The story got more dire every time it was repeated.”

I stepped closer to her and lowered my voice. “Has Nana done anything unusual? Like new rituals or spells?”

“I have to be honest, it goes in one ear and out the other when she talks about it. I wish I understood the magic, but you know how it is when you don’t have it.”

Okay, something was definitely off. Sage would never say that.

“You do have magic.” I held my hand up before she had a chance to protest. “It was stolen from you, just like it was from me. And I need you to cooperate with me, because I’m gonna try to show you how to get it back.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Are You Sure About That, Nana?

Bellamy

No surprise Clover had veered wildly from my original plan. The unexpected was part of the job in this business, and it went double for this woman. We hadn't decided what criteria we'd use to deem this visit a success, and what we'd do with the information we'd gathered here was still up for debate, but seeing the way Sage reacted to her sister's return was all the confirmation I needed to know that this was the right decision.

"What are you doing with Nana's ring?" Sage's eyes were round and unblinking as Clover pulled the cursed piece of jewelry off her finger.

The elder sister backed away like she'd been offered a scorpion.

There was no way she could deny feeling its power, and it scared the shit out of her.

It should.

Clover's face lit up. "You remember it?"

"Of course I do. I just don't understand why you have it." Sage took a step back.

"I found it," Clover said, like it hadn't completely knocked her on her ass only two

hours before. “Wanna see if it fits?”

I prepared myself to catch Sage before she fell to the ground...

Sage waved her hand. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was trying to break a spell. “No way.”

“Why are you acting weird about it? It's just Nana's ring.” Clover moved the ring up and down her finger.

While I watched the exchange with great curiosity, my focus wasn't only on the sisters. My bear's senses were on overdrive, being on clan land after so long away. The sights and smells were still as familiar as if I'd been here yesterday, and they were fucking overwhelming. I couldn't let them lull me into a false sense of security, or worse, submission. Especially since the vibration was totally unfamiliar. Almost chaotic. This exchange was nothing more than a distraction, but I wanted to see where Clover went with it.

And what Sage was trying to hide.

But for now, she still hadn't taken her eyes off the stone. “It's powerful.”

“Have you ever heard the saying, you can't feel power you don't have?” Clover asked, winking at me. My mate was coyer than I had given her credit for.

“Nope, that's definitely a first.” Sage let out a perturbed sigh.

Clover slipped the ring back on her finger. “You have magic, Sage. Just like I do.”

“Get rid of it. It's dangerous.” Sage shuddered.

“You just said it belonged to our grandmother,” I reminded her. “But you’re afraid of the ring.”

“I’m not afraid of it, but something’s not right.”

The door in the kitchen creaked open, and my bear wanted to burst through my human skin.

“No, something isn’t right at all,” Shirley stood in the doorway, her arms crossed, her presence much larger than her human frame.

Clover gasped and covered the ring with her other hand. The movement was futile, because Shirley would pick up on the ring’s power.

“Hey, Nana.” Clover gave an award-worthy performance as she beamed at her grandmother and kissed her cheek. “How was your meeting?”

“Very eventful.” Shirley’s gaze landed squarely on me. “There’s a lot of buzz about Bellamy Laredo being back on clan land for the first time in fifteen years.”

“Nobody’s more surprised about this visit than I am.” I grinned at the old woman, but I knew better than to let my guard down. “What are they saying?”

It would be good to see everyone before we left.

“They’re preparing for a fight,” she said. “Rumor has it you’re here to challenge the alpha.”

“Can’t imagine where that rumor would’ve started.” It was my turn to step closer to Shirley, doing my best to mask the conflicting feelings of disappointment and pure fucking rage.

“Why would anyone want to fight Bellamy?” Clover groaned as she brought her ringed hand to her forehead. “He wasn’t on bad terms with anybody when he left.”

“He was supposed to be clan alpha. They think he’s here for a challenge.” Shirley narrowed her eyes. “Is that my ring?”

“Don’t go near it, Nana,” Sage said quickly. “They did something to it.”

“What could they possibly do to it?” Shirley shook her head and held out her hand. “It’s been ages since I wore that ring. Have you had it this whole time?”

She has no idea what’s been taken , my bear warned. Why is she only looking for this locket when this ring obviously holds tremendous power?

Good question.

“It might not be yours.” Clover pulled her hand closer to her body, not willing to give the ring up. “We found it on the sidewalk in Coeur d’Alene.”

Shirley frowned. “This doesn’t make any sense. What were you doing there?”

“We were looking for someone we thought might help us find your locket.” Clover came over to me and hooked her arm in mine. “Have you ever heard of someone named Anders Lynwood?”

Shirley shook her head and frowned. “No, I haven’t.”

“Are you sure about that?” Clover crossed her arms, and the shine coming off that ring was blinding. “Because I heard a really juicy rumor that he was meant to claim you.”

The old woman's lips parted, but only for a second before she schooled her features. "The only bear who I ever had eyes for was your grandfather."

"That doesn't mean another bear didn't have his eyes on you."

"Men respect powerful women." Now Shirley's gaze was squarely on me. "They can't stay away from them."

"We think this Anders Lynwood might know where that locket is," I said. The key to playing with Shirley was to remember that she made the rules to this game. "But this guy is like a ghost. He has a habit of coming and going without a trace."

"I thought you were the best in the business," she said quietly. I almost believed she didn't have any connection to Anders.

"Sawtooth Security has a great track record because we ask questions instead of letting leads become dead ends." I wouldn't let her rattle me. "Did you tell your alpha you asked for my help?"

"Didn't see any reason to."

I nodded. "This misunderstanding could be easily fixed if you'd tell him why I was here. I could do the same, but things could get a little complicated."

Sage chuckled grimly. "Do you even know who our alpha is?"

I shook my head. "Only person who'd been in line after me was my child."

Clover sighed. "I should've told you this before, but we've been a little preoccupied. Edgar is our alpha."

“You’re shitting me.” He’d been my best friend since we were both cubs.

“And my mate,” Sage added, delivering another shocker. Edgar has been courting another bear when I left.

“What he’s done for our clan has been very impressive,” Shirley added with a smug grin. I had no illusions about who was really in charge. “Like he’d been born for the role.”

“Didn’t think this clan cared much about birthright,” I rumbled.

“Bellamy, no one asked you to leave this clan,” Shirley said. “A smart bear like you had to realize there would be consequences to his actions.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what a smart bear would think. Where is he?”

Clover gasped. “Bellamy! No.”

“Out by the central green.” Shirley ignored her granddaughter.

“He’s expecting you,” Sage boasted.

It was almost a relief to leave Shirley’s cabin. My skin burned, and my bear was begging me to let him out.

“Bellamy!” Clover called as the gravel crunched frantically beneath her feet as she caught up to me. “Don’t do this.”

“I’m just going to talk. Fill in some of the blanks for him.”

She managed to get in front of me. “Edgar’s changed since you saw him last.”

“Power does that to a bear.” I stepped around her and kept going.

It didn’t take us long to get to the central green, and even though it had been upgraded from the primitive firepit it had been when Clover had rejected me, all those feelings from that night came rushing back.

Edgar sat in one of the chairs, legs spread out, his attention on his phone. Bears I hadn’t seen in fifteen years stood around him, all in their human form, some with gray in their beards, some of them young men.

The most surprising were the ones I didn’t know.

I glanced at Clover, and she threw her hands up. “I tried to warn you.”

One of the bears behind Edgar grunted.

He looked up from his phone, and a genuine smile spread across his face as he rose from his seat.

“Bellamy.” He held out his hand to me as he approached. “This is a surprise.”

“Congratulations,” I said as I took his hand. “It’s good to see you in charge.”

“It is,” Edgar said. “You’ve been gone a long time. Things have changed.”

I drew my hand away from his. “Tell me about it.”

Edgar scrubbed his hand over his forehead. Heat poured from his body. It was only a matter of time before his bear burst through his skin. He could play it cool, but his animal was betraying him. He considered me a threat.

“This is uncharted territory. We’ve never had an heir alpha abandon their clan. The bears who remember you feel you betrayed them. There was chaos after your departure. An uncertain future. A clan without an alpha is weak.”

“How well do you know the history of this clan?” I asked.

Edgar scoffed. “My only concerns are the present and the future.”

Foolish bear. The past was about to come back and bite him in the ass.

“I’m not interested in being alpha anymore,” I growled. “But I won’t be run from this land when your healer called me here.”

His lips parted, giving confirmation that Shirley hadn’t told anyone but Clover about her missing jewelry. “I have to consider that a challenge, Bellamy.”

“If you want to fight me, make it fair,” I said. “Show me what kind of alpha you are.”

“No!” Clover appeared between us and spread her arms. The air thickened as she formed a force field between me and the bear I’d once trusted with my life.

She gasped, and the sound was muffled. The wind had come to a standstill like the earth had stopped moving.

“What the fuck is that?” one of the bears said. “It’s like she cast a spell.”

“None of the healers have ever done anything like that,” another said.

Inside the bubble, Clover’s mouth was open, her eyes wide. The magic was growing, pushing Edgar and those bears back. Some of them ran.

But not Edgar. Shirley and Sage appeared behind him, looking sinister in the magical glow.

I wasn't a bear who backed down from a challenge, but I had to get my mate to safety.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

Chapter Twenty-Four

You're Not the Boss of Me

Clover

This was so cool, even if I had no fucking idea how to control it. I'd only meant to stop Bellamy and Edgar from coming to blows, but my body temperature shot up the moment I put out my hands. I thought I was gonna shift...should've known better than that. Not even magic could bring my bear back.

Heat rose inside me, feeling like it solidified as it left my body.

And time stopped.

Bellamy and Edgar stared at me, their mouths open in shock.

Good. I'd rather that than them ripping claws into each other.

There was shouting in the background, but I couldn't understand it. Chaos erupted.

"Clover!" Bellamy's voice was as thick as molasses, but somehow, he managed to break through the barrier I'd formed and pull me into his arms.

The power shattered, and I was cold, somewhat safe in the massive, muscular arms of this bear, and surrounded by a confused pack.

Nana and Sage stood behind Edgar. I hated that it felt like they'd chosen a side, and even more that it wasn't mine.

Before I'd been sent on this crazy mission to find the locket, that realization would have utterly devastated me. But with this bear's arms wrapped around me and the force field that enveloped us both, I let myself feel my true power for the first time.

Bellamy wanted to take me away from here. To protect me. It was what he thought was safe.

But we had to face this.

"No more running," I said, for him as much as me. He might have been the one who'd left, but I'd rejected him out of fear. Deep in my soul, I'd always known something was off with our clan, but I'd had no reason to believe the people I cared about the most had lied to me. They'd stolen more than my magic from me. They'd kept me away from my mate. I wouldn't let them do that again.

Now, it was time to let them know who the fuck they'd been messing with.

"Don't know if we're gonna get the answers we were looking for," Bellamy said quietly.

"Probably not, but we'll get the ones we need," I said. "Only if we stay."

The growl that rumbled through his body intensified the magic. "I don't want to fight."

"You won't have to." It was a promise I wasn't sure I could keep.

"Unhand her. Now," Edgar demanded.

“Are you kidding?” I laughed. I had to be high off magic again, because no one talked like that. “If you had any idea where this bear’s hands have been?—”

“Clover,” Nana said with disgust.

“Let me take care of this,” Bellamy said in a low voice. My reality had definitely been bent and twisted, because there was no possible way for the two of us to have a private conversation, surrounded by our entire clan. “The faster we can move past this nonsense, the quicker we can solve this case.”

I nodded as he slipped his hands away from my waist. He was far too sexy for his good as he stalked over to Edgar, but my heart hurt for him. These two had been more than best friends. They’d been inseparable. Brothers. Edgar had mourned when Bellamy had left, and it had taken him years to even be able to look at me without snarling like he wanted to rip my limbs apart. That only got more awkward when he and my sister became the clan’s most prominent couple.

Absence had not made the heart grow fonder. These two bears staring each other down broke my heart, and I wished I knew the spell to make things like they were before.

But then you’d never know the truth, my bear reminded me.

There had to be a better way than watching these two tear each other to shreds.

“Congratulations,” Bellamy rumbled, but somehow still managed to make it sound sincere. “There’s no one I’d rather see leading the clan.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Edgar said. “I wasn’t the one who rejected you, Bellamy. This pack had been counting on you. You abandoned all of us.”

“I’m here now,” he said with a grim chuckle. “Who made you alpha?”

Edgar stiffened. “In the absence of the alpha heir, the healers are to appoint an alpha.”

“Did you recite that straight from the alpha handbook?” I asked, and all eyes turned to me. I might have had my magic back, but I was still the pack fuckup.

But it was becoming more apparent that Bellamy had been the target of this attack just as much, if not more, than I had.

What power did he have that the healers were so afraid of?

“I don’t want trouble,” Edgar said, his attention was still fully on Bellamy. “But you have to know how bad this looks.”

“No, I don’t.” Bellamy cocked a brow. “Do you have any idea why I’m here?”

Edgar shook his head.

“Shirley asked for my help finding an ancient talisman that she claims is very important to the pack’s future.” Bellamy paused, studying Edgar’s surprised expression. “I find it strange that she wouldn’t alert her chosen alpha of the problem. Or that her granddaughter had gone missing.”

Edgar took a step forward. The muscles on Bellamy’s back tensed, and I was shocked he wasn’t full bear already. “Are you responsible for that?”

Bellamy shrugged. “I could bring her back to the remote location in the woods where I found her, completely spelled by another clan, if you prefer.”

“Wait,” a voice called out from the back of the crowd. “Does that mean the two of

you are together?”

Bellamy turned and looked at me.

“Yeah,” I said, beaming at my mate. “We are.”

“There’s no way I can allow you to claim her,” Edgar said. “You betrayed this pack.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Super-Charged Cotton Candy

Bellamy

Edgar's declaration made Clover's magic disappear.

At full throttle, it had been an ethereal cloud of iridescent, super-charged, swirling cotton candy around her. But his statement brought it to a dramatic halt, which was saying something since this was Clover, and dramatic was part of the package. But it retracted as if she swallowed it.

And took all the air in my lungs.

Fuck. Had she played me like a violin? Made me think things would be different this time, got me to lower my defenses, just to bring me back to the scene of the crime and reject me all over again?

Would you change anything about the last week you spent together? my bear asked.

Hell no. I might have considered Edgar a brother in the past, but he was about to find out there was no way I was leaving this land without my mate. I hoped it wasn't a lesson I'd have to teach him the hard way.

Clover turned to him, the last traces of magic turning to pure growl as she put her hand on her hip and cocked a brow at her alpha.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

I should’ve been the bigger bear and held in my laugh. But I wasn’t. The glares of my former clan felt even better.

Edgar let out a quick growl, intended to make me shut up. I really wanted to get out of here without having to fight him. We needed to stay, talk to people, figure out exactly what we were dealing with when it came to this clan, but that would never happen.

No matter what happened next, the truth would reveal itself. It was guaranteed to be stark and ugly, and I wasn’t sure Clover or I were prepared for the fallout.

Edgar turned his attention back to Clover. “The last thing I’m doing is kidding. That bear abandoned his clan in a time of chaos. You must have known when you rejected him that he could never lead this pack into the future. For you to take him back, for us to forget the wounds he inflicted on his own kin, would make this clan weak.”

My bear bristled at his assessment of my actions, but I would’ve looked even weaker if I’d stayed. There was no way I’d be made alpha when my mate claim had been rejected.

Clover rolled her eyes. “We’re already weak. You had no idea I got captured by another clan. Because if you did, you would’ve saved me. But Bellamy was the one who found me.”

Edgar’s eyes darkened. “No, I didn’t know.”

She raked her gaze over him, sizing him up. He had a good foot and a half on her, like I did. But right now, my mate was a force to be reckoned with. Her magic hadn’t disappeared. It had just taken a very different form.

“So that means you probably have no idea that Nana begged me to ask for Bellamy’s help with this.” She grinned as he snarled in confirmation. “Believe me when I tell you it was the absolute last thing I wanted to do.”

She turned to me. “Sorry, Bell, a girl can admit when she’s wrong. I told Nana I thought we needed to tell Edgar, because he’s our alpha. Do you want to know what she said about that?”

“Clover,” Shirley warned.

“She said Bellamy’s the only one with the resources to help you.”

Now Shirley joined Edgar in indignation.

That cotton candy sparkle was back. “And don’t worry, Nana, you’re not the only one who thinks Edgar’s a weak alpha.”

“You’re treading into very dangerous territory.” Edgar’s voice was pure growl. “There will be repercussions.”

“Probably, but none of this will matter because in a few minutes, Bellamy and I will be back on the road. I won’t go as far to say we’ll be talking some serious shit about this encounter, but he’s got to be wondering as much as I am why Nana didn’t want your help when an important clan relic has gone missing.”

Edgar pursed his lips together. “You’re not leaving.”

She scoffed. “Watch me.”

Heat rolled off his body. “You’ll have to get through me first.”

The only reason my mate let him have the final word was because he roared, dropping to his knees as his bear burst through his human form. He'd always been an impressive animal, and an even better fighter.

He barely had time to strip his clothes away before his body expanded, and fur rippled into place where skin had been moments before. His face transformed, and those massive jaws opened, revealing sharp, ragged teeth before letting out a roar that shook the foundation of every house in the village.

Shift complete, his black eyes glittered, gaze squarely on Clover. Her mouth dropped.

She can't shift, my bear reminded me. He's either going to make a fool or a meal out of her.

I didn't have time to think about why the fuck she couldn't access her bear because my own animal was about to make an appearance. I had only seconds to get my clothes off before Edgar lunged at my mate.

She jerked back, her eyes wide with terror, and her hand over her heart. She was all I could see as my vision tunneled, and everything I knew about being a human melted into pure animal form.

Now Edgar's attention was squarely on me.

"Just like old times," he had the balls to say.

"Hardly ." My heart ached for those long-gone days as I stalked toward him. Fuck, I didn't want to do this. If I won this fight, the clan would belong to me. At one point in my life, I would've done anything to have the alpha title. But now that was the last thing I wanted. "This is about respect ."

“ You should’ve thought of that before you left, Bellamy.” He took his first swipe at me, narrowly missing my head. Back in the day when we fought for the same side, Edgar was smaller than me, but much faster. I was the big guy who either no one wanted to fight, or some hotshot wanted to take out as a trophy.

Edgar and I had made a great team, complimenting each other’s strengths. I swerved to avoid contact, and he bared his teeth at me as he rose to his hind legs.

Fuck. There was no avoiding this. I’d hoped to get away with a few shoves and some growly threats.

It’s his pack to lose , I reminded myself.

I had only seconds to make eye contact with Clover. The magic that swirled around her was even more tangible now, like a pastel force field. Her lips were parted in horror, but she managed a nod. I hoped that meant she knew what I wanted her to do, because I had six hundred pounds of pissed-off grizzly coming at me.

He grunted as I absorbed the impact. Our arms were locked, and there were people calling out to us, but I couldn’t hear them. Couldn’t afford to look away.

My diligence didn’t stop Edgar from sinking his teeth into my forearm. The pain that ignited through my veins confirmed that the sickening snap was a broken bone.

Blood blossomed at the spot, soaking my fur. I caught the fist that came for my head with that same arm, and Edgar pushed it back.

I was seeing stars. I hadn’t planned for a scenario where I lost this fight, and there was no telling how this victor would take his spoils.

I managed to get a clear shot at his ribs, knocking him back, away from my broken

arm. This was my best chance to gain control over him. Edgar was still faster than me, but he didn't take time to think things through. It had always made him vulnerable as a fighter. He had a bad reputation as someone who couldn't finish.

I ran into him, both of us grunting as I fell to the ground with him. My broken arm wasn't my dominant one, thank every star in the sky for that.

I had him pinned down, and I closed my paw on his neck, letting my claws break his skin. His eyes bulged, but he wasn't giving in. The bear thrashed beneath me, almost strong enough to throw me off him.

But almost wasn't good enough.

"What do you want?" I growled. "You have one chance to tell me before I puncture your windpipe."

"You won't do it." He wheezed. "This entire clan will turn against you."

"They already have, according to you," I reminded him. "And not one of them has stepped forward to fight for their alpha."

His body tensed at the realization, then went still. I didn't envy Edgar. Clover had suggested he was a weak alpha, and it looked like she was right.

How could he possibly be strong when all the promises made to him had been built on lies?

Unless he knew the truth. All of it. The secrets behind the locket, and why Clover had been sent to me.

"I want you to leave this land," Edgar said. "And never even think of Clover Crowley

again.”

“I can do one of those things.” I closed the grip tighter on his neck. “ But I won’t let anyone take anything from my mate again. Not her magic, and certainly not her free will. Anyone who tries to do that will answer to me. And next time, I won’t let them off with a warning.”

I pushed myself off his body. It was a risky move. Edgar was too busy gasping for air to spring to his feet.

The rest of the clan stood frozen in place. They might have thought I was a traitor, but none of them wanted to fight me.

But I wouldn’t give them the chance to change their minds. I lumbered out of there, each step hurting more than the last. A shift would probably fix the bone, but the break was clean, and it might carry over to my human form.

Clover was sitting in the driver’s seat of my truck with the engine running.

“Are you okay?” She jumped out of the cab. “There’s a trail of blood behind you.”

“ I will be .” I grimaced as I put my arms around her. Fuck, did it feel good to have this woman in my arms, even if one of them was broken. “ Need to shift, but I can’t do it here .”

“Get in the back of the truck. I’ll get us to safety.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nurse Clover At Your Service

Clover

My heart pounded as I floored the accelerator to get Bellamy's truck out of the parking spot. It wasn't easy to haul ass with a giant grizzly bear in the truck bed. I was absolutely heartbroken to be fleeing clan land—No. Pissed off was more like it. This was our home, our family, and it had felt like we'd just stepped into the Twilight Zone.

But I couldn't think about any of that until I knew Bellamy was okay.

He insisted he was fine, but it was nothing more than alpha bravado. His fur was stained with blood, and not only was he limping, he was holding his paw at a terrible angle, which could only mean one thing.

And those were just the injuries I could see. I'd kill Edgar myself if Bellamy was hurt worse than we thought.

I had to get him to a healer. Normally, that would be my Nana. Instead, I sped away from her as fast as I could.

Chandra Lowe was my best bet, but there was no way I could risk bringing him all the way to Granger Falls in this condition.

“Fuck!” I yelled to no one, since Bellamy probably couldn’t hear me, and slammed my hand against the steering wheel.

I pulled over to the side of the highway. No one had followed us, apparently the clan had what they wanted. But they still didn’t have the damn locket, and finding it felt further away than ever. Sheer adrenaline powered my climb into the truck bed.

“Bellamy!” I wrapped my arms around him and then jumped away. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“ You’ll always make me feel better by touching me .” He groaned as he repositioned himself. “ I’m glad you got out of there. When I didn’t see you... I didn’t know how far they’d go to keep us apart.”

“How badly are you hurt?”

“ My arm is fucked. Hopefully nothing a shift can’t fix .” There was no hiding the pain in his eyes.

“Don’t you dare try to act brave right now, Bellamy Laredo. No being a stubborn, proud bear. If you need help, tell me what you need me to do.”

The heat that rolled off his body was enough to liquefy me. I braced myself as he shifted to human.

“Once again, I find myself on the side of the road with a naked bear.” I managed a chuckle, but I was terrified. A shift would probably heal his injuries, but if those bears came after us...

I hated thinking of my clan as the enemy with every fiber of my being.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” His attention was on his left arm. He gingerly put his other hand on his forearm and grimaced. “I was afraid this might happen. That bastard got me good.”

“Shit.” It didn’t look good. The skin was purple and bruised. “Are you hurt anywhere else? I can call Chandra right now. She can be ready for us when we get there.”

He shook his head and groaned. “Just my arm, I think.”

“Liar,” I said softly, kissing his cheek. “Let me check you. You’re gonna try to be tough and say you’re okay, but we need to know what we’re dealing with.”

With his good hand, he grabbed my chin and kissed me like I was the medicine we needed to heal him.

“You were pretty spectacular back there,” he said.

At first, I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. He did all the hard work. All I did was mouth off. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Oh, the magic,” I chuckled softly. “I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

“Tell me how it felt.”

“Incredible. If only I had any idea how to summon that feeling on command, maybe we could use it to solve our problems.” There was a massive problem in the form of a broken Bellamy right in front of me. “We can figure that out later, once we know you’re okay.”

“Maybe you can use some of that power to make me feel better.” His eyes were heavy lidded with the suggestion.

“You want me to—Oh.” If the bear hadn’t made himself clear, his hard shaft was more than willing to spell things out for me. “Here? Are you crazy?”

“I thought you were the daring one.”

I could’ve argued, because he really did need to get his arm set, but he’d also just fought the clan alpha and his former best friend for the right to claim me. Injury aside, it was the hottest thing any man had ever done. He deserved a reward.

And my inner muscles were pulsing with need for that cock.

“I am.” I swallowed hard as a car sped by us. “I thought you were the careful one.”

“That was the case before a bear I considered a brother wanted to kill me, and I realized everything about those beliefs was a lie.” He winced as he moved his arm. “Now I need to feel something real.”

I could’ve argued with him. After all, I was the one who got him into this mess. But the truth was, I was so turned on there was no way we were going anywhere until I honored his request.

“I can do that.” I scraped my teeth over my bottom lip, loving the appreciative growl that slipped out of Bellamy every single time I did it.

No surprise our lips tangled in a kiss. Bellamy was hungry, like he was figuring out what it meant to let himself lose control.

I could be the perfect tour guide.

It took everything I had to pull myself away from that kiss. I raked my gaze over Bellamy’s naked body. He was glorious even when bruised and broken.

“Tell me where it hurts,” I whispered, then drew away from him.

My first move was to run my hand up his leg, all the way up to the top of his thigh. A moan slipped from his lips.

Our gazes locked.

“Feels incredible,” he said.

I ran my hand over his other leg, stopping close to his cock, but careful not to touch it. That wasn’t the kind of ache I was concerned with. At least, not yet, even though my lady parts wanted to speak to the manager about it.

Massaging his hip, I moved up to the hard plane of his stomach. His hair tickled my hand as I caressed his skin. But that wasn’t all that I felt.

Maybe it was aftershocks of my magic, but there was a spark there, something dangerous and untamed, ready to ignite...

And I was about to make it explode. I lowered my mouth to his stomach, running my tongue along the defined lines of his six-pack, loving the way his muscles tensed in anticipation of my touch. I made my way up to his nipples, which tightened on contact, and circled each one.

His heart thundered in his chest. Sweet moon, that was the sexiest sound on earth.

I trailed my lips along his neck, back to his lips, and he welcomed me. It felt like a homecoming. Being in this bear’s arms felt fucking magical.

I made quick work of slipping out of my jeans, conscious of the occasional passing car but not really giving a fuck if they knew what we were doing. Bellamy had

become the center of my universe, and a magical force field formed around us. Protecting us, shielding us.

He groaned as I dragged my panties over his stomach. The lace was soaked with my desire.

“You’re so ready for me.” His voice was pure rumble, like he was still in his bear form.

“We have a lot of time to make up for.”

I straddled him. His good hand was at the base of his cock as I positioned myself to ride him. He slipped inside me, his hips thrusting, as he moved those fingers to my clit.

Electricity and something far more powerful than that rocketed through my veins. Grasping his shoulders, I fell forward, and our lips met in a messy kiss, expressing things that words couldn’t possibly convey alone. There were so many missed yesterdays, so much time that we could’ve been together, if it hadn’t been for the lies. The limitations.

If only we’d really known who we were...

Bellamy pinched my clit, bringing that little pity party to an abrupt end as he sent the voltage inside me into overdrive. I threw my head back, letting out a howl as my orgasm crashed through me. Bellamy’s shaft swelled.

“Clover,” the word came out between gritted teeth.

“I want to feel you come inside me.”

And with those words, he came undone. He shot his hot release inside me, and I saw nothing but stars and this glorious man. This bear.

My soul mate.

When he was done, he slipped out of me. I collapsed against him, cradled in his good arm, with my head on his shoulder.

The sun was starting to go down, the sky painted with the same pastels that had shielded us in that magical bubble. But I knew better.

Together, we were invincible.

And there were a lot of angry bears who would try to stop us from reaching our full power.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

We Make Danger Look Good

Bellamy

“Why do I feel like I’ll be seeing a lot of you two?” Chandra Lowe chuckled as she set my broken arm. The shift had done some of the healing work, but the break had been clean, and the bone hadn’t completely come back together. “Seems like you have a way of attracting danger.”

“We make danger look good.” Clover put her hand on her hip. She looked irresistible this morning, in the fuzzy sweater and jeans that hugged her curves. Her hair was braided, and she’d pushed it over her shoulder.

“Are these the same bears responsible for your last visit?” she asked.

“Even worse. This was our clan,” Clover said. “Our alpha. Bellamy’s former best friend.”

Chandra gasped. “No! That’s terrible. I’m so sorry. It’s so stressful when there’s strife in the pack. When I came here, everything was a mess. I’d like to tell you it will get better, but you’re here, so...”

“It’s better already,” I said. Strangely, the visit, as fucked up as it was, made me feel better. I was familiar with the Sawtooth pack’s tumultuous history, and the era of prosperity that had followed. “We’re ready for a fresh start.”

“That’s the attitude, and Granger Falls is a great place to do it. The town is growing, and its shifter friendly.” She slipped a cast on my arm. “This soft wrap should give you the support you need. You should heal pretty quickly, as long as you stay out of trouble.”

“No guarantees.” The support from the wrap felt good. “I have some questions for you, if you have a minute.”

“Of course.” Chandra settled on the stool, her brow furrowed with concern.

“We’ve been looking for someone named Anders Lynwood. We’re pretty sure he’s the same person who commissioned the motorcycle that went missing.”

“And magically reappeared,” Clover added.

“Is that name familiar to you? Possibly someone named Alba too?” I asked.

“The missing motorcycle was a big deal, and it reappearing like it was never gone was really strange. X never mentioned who placed the order, only that it would be a pain in the ass to source some of those parts again, because it was a high end, custom, vintage job. That bike cost a fortune.”

“Are you familiar with the name Lynwood?” Clover asked.

Chandra shook her head. “I’ll ask around. Some of the pack had concerns when the Sawtooth Security bears came to the area, suggesting there might be conflict. But I try to keep out of drama.”

Clover and I shared a glance. This was the first I’d heard of this, and we needed to find out why there was a concern.

“Do any of your wolves have magic?” Clover asked. “You’re much more than a traditional healer, but is there a magic keeper that we could talk to?”

“Doesn’t get more magical than me in the Sawtooth pack.” Chandra laughed. “I take it this means you’re sticking around.”

“I’m down for girls’ night anytime.”

“I love this.” I kissed Clover’s cheek. “I want this to be your home.”

After the ladies exchanged information, we headed back out to the truck.

“I’m driving. You’re healing.” Clover pushed my good arm as I headed to the driver’s side. “And riding shotgun.”

“The new girl in town is already taking over.” I chuckled as I opened the door for her.

“Would you expect anything less?”

“Hell no.”

“As the new girl, I need directions,” she said after we got settled. “I could use GPS but I’d rather rely on bear instinct.”

“There’s only one main road. Head north like you’re going...” It was on the tip of my tongue to say home, but we couldn’t go back to clan land. It was time to create our own. “To my cabin.”

She nodded, but didn’t start driving.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’ve just been thinking.”

Fuck. “Have you changed your mind about me?”

“No. But I have a theory about why the clan wanted to keep us apart,” she said. “The magic came back once we were together. And I think that scares them. I just don’t know why.”

“You might be right, but if that was true, why would your nana ask us to find the locket?” I’d been wondering about it the entire time. “She had to know what would happen when we came together.”

“Maybe whoever took the locket is scarier than our magic,” she suggested with a shudder. “Or she didn’t think I could get my magic back.”

“Nothing about this case makes sense.” I scrubbed my face. “Anders has got to come and pick up the bike. Sounds like he spent a fortune on it. We can arrange to be there when it happens. Take the next left. Things should look familiar after that.”

“The first time I came here, I was scared shitless to face you. And I left in a red hot rage. So I didn’t remember details, because I never expected to come back.”

Same, Clover, same. I was a fool to think I’d never see her again once she’d stormed out of the office. And I’d never been so glad to be wrong in my life.

“You’ll see the sign out front.” I motioned to the left, and my mouth dropped. “My boss is here.”

She cocked a brow. “I thought you were the boss.”

“I was just filling in while he was on his mate moon.” I scrubbed my good hand over

my beard, trying to get myself back in the game. “Your magic has a way of making me lose track of time.”

“It only lasted for a few minutes,” she said.

“You cast a spell over me the day you were born, Clover Crowley. Nothing can ever change that.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“I hope I didn’t cause trouble with your boss.”

“Barrett knows when a case can’t wait.” He was a great boss, and we’d worked closely together for years.

This was the first time he’d put me in charge, and I wanted to make him proud. The company had grown bigger than the two of us could have ever imagined. But still, walking into the office felt like I was about to get busted for skipping class. Clover’s energy changed too, her nerves evident with her shaky breath.

Barrett was at his desk, his gaze fixed on his laptop screen.

“Sorry I’m late. Had a little incident I had to take care of.” I held up my arm with the arm cast.

Barrett’s eyes widened as he looked up. “So it is true.”

I laughed. “I’m not answering that until you elaborate.”

“I missed you, man.” He rose from his chair and clapped his hand on my shoulder. “First, tell me what you did to the other guy.”

“He kicked his ass, obviously.” Clover held her hand out. “Hi, you must be Barrett.

I've heard so much about you. How was your mate moon?"

"It was fantastic. Thanks for asking." Barrett grinned. "So you're the one with the hot car that Bellamy dropped everything to save from a ghost bear cult clan in the middle of the forest."

"I take it you talked to Beau." I groaned.

"To hear him tell it, you left him in charge of the whole operation while you went to woo your mate." Barrett sized up Clover. "So far, I'm not detecting the lie."

"That wasn't exactly how it happened," Clover said before I had a chance to speak. "First, I asked him to help me, and he sent me packing. Then I got abducted."

"This is Clover," I said, most likely in a futile attempt to regain control of this situation. "And that's a loose interpretation of the truth. From everyone. The case didn't seem like something we'd take, until Clover went missing, and things got more interesting from there."

"Can't wait to hear the details," Barrett said. "Since it looks like you're catching up with me, Brad's case came to a resolution last night, and to hear Beau tell it, you left him in charge of things."

"I did make him temporary second-in-command to give him a chance to step up. Everyone was great. They picked up the slack when this case took some unexpected twists."

"I might have another one. A woman came in looking for you. She said you'd know what this was about"—Barrett picked a Post-it note and squinted at it— "Does the name Alba Lynwood mean anything to you?"

Clover's expression had to mirror mine, with her eyes wide and mouth open.

"No fucking way," I said under my breath as I reached for the note.

Barrett narrowed his gaze. "Care to elaborate?"

"She's one of the ghost bears!" Clover exclaimed. "The one who I think might have spelled me in the middle of the woods. What happened? What did she say? Tell us everything, including what she looked like so we can confirm it's the same person."

"Older woman. Gray hair in a grandmotherly bun." Barrett shrugged. "She wore a long red dress that seemed kind of bohemian. I was pretty sure she was a shifter, but there was something strange about her energy."

Clover gasped. "She might have spelled you."

"Do you feel any different since she was here?" I asked.

"What the fuck are you two talking about?"

"The ghost bear cult clan. She's their healer," Clover said, and then let out an exasperated sigh when none of the what the fuck faded from Barrett's expression. "We're pretty sure Alba Lynwood is my Nana's rival. Which would make perfect sense, but as far as we know, Alba's been dead for decades."

I pulled my laptop out of my bag and set it up on Barrett's desk. The family tree research was still in my browser history, and I pulled it up quickly. "When I found Clover in the forest, she was alone, but she said that she was taken by bears, and they shared their names." I tapped the screen where the clan tree had been forever fractured. "You can see here that they have a clear link to her grandmother. This Anders, who should've claimed her grandmother, has also ordered a motorcycle from

Choppers by Lowe, that briefly went missing. But unless there's an extreme coincidence that another person with the same name is in Granger Falls, or we're dealing with ghosts."

Barrett whistled low. "Alba seemed pretty real to me."

"Right?" Clover said excitedly and then recounted what happened to her for my boss. I listened carefully, making sure the details of the story didn't change since she told them to me. Not that I didn't trust her, but if she'd been spelled, it could've messed with her memory. Every detail was the exact same. "The camp seemed like it was fully operational, but Bellamy said it was abandoned when he found me, no sign of other bears."

Barrett ran his hand over his beard like he often did when he was thinking a case through. "If they're long dead and they're connected to your grandmother..."

"Yeah, we questioned that too," I said. "Shirley's date of birth on this document makes her much older than she claims to be."

"Nana would never tell us how old she was." Clover shook her head. "All she would say was that women blossomed as they got older."

"She hasn't aged a day since we were kids."

"Is there any other significance to those names?" Barrett asked. "If the Lynwoods are dead, maybe someone is using their names to get your attention."

"Oh, he's good," Clover said. "We didn't think of that."

"It's possible," I said. "Did Alba leave any contact information?"

Barrett grinned. “She said you’d know where to find her.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Clock is Ticking

Clover

“She wants us to go back to the spot where you found me.”

Both bears looked at me. Barrett was a sleeker and more aerodynamic version of Bellamy. More polished. But still all bear. His energy commanded authority.

Feeling people’s energy like it was a tangible thing would take some getting used to, but I was excited by this new ability. I might not be able to fight like these guys, but this gave me a way to help.

Being a bear’s secret weapon felt totally badass.

Barrett raised a brow. “How do you see this shaking out? We got to make sure we’re prepared.”

He’d never met me without my magic, and it was wild to think that every new person I met would think of me as magical. A healer.

I closed my eyes, hoping the answer would come to me. Barrett and Bellamy were willing to offer back up—muscle and moon only knew what else. They needed the best possible information I could give them. It was my responsibility to keep them safe.

“Magic can only communicate with magic,” I said, chuckling to myself. “To think minutes ago I was so frustrated with Alba for giving us a riddle, just like Nana always does. That’s why she didn’t give you any information. This is a test.”

“You told me they considered you more valuable than the talisman that your nana wants us to find,” Bellamy added. “There’s no fucking way we’re sending you out to the middle of the forest alone.”

I grabbed his T-shirt and pulled him toward me. “You have magic too. And I’m not going anywhere without you.”

His lips parted. “You’re the one with the power.”

“But you activate it. I think that’s why they wanted to keep us apart. You were the missing ingredient. That the two of us together are greater than the sum of our parts. Once we figure out what to do with it?—”

“That’s what everyone’s afraid of,” Barrett finished my sentence.

Bellamy pulled my hands away from his shirt and kissed them both before pacing across the office. I could feel his bear much more than I could feel mine.

Was she ever coming back?

Patience , she said. I know it’s not your thing, but sometimes you have to trust everything happens for a reason.

Great. Now she was speaking in riddles too.

“Here’s the plan,” Bellamy said. “We head back to the forest, outfitted with surveillance. Cameras, microphones. Infrared that can pick up frequencies we can’t

detect.”

“You mean ghosts?”

“Could be, but I was thinking magical energy. They should each have their own vibration.”

“Should we be tested before we go, so we know how the magic registers on the machines?” I suggested.

Bellamy raised a brow. “Are you stalling?”

“No. If we could find a way to measure magic, it could be really powerful.”

“You’re right, and that’s something we can explore after we solve this case. Time seems like a critical factor.” Barrett picked up his phone and swiped. “I’ll get all available bears on deck. Right now, all we need to know is if there is magic. If this isn’t the place she intended for us to meet her, we’ll need to find her.”

“It is.” I could feel it in my bones.

I hoped my bones weren’t lying.

Time moved in strange waves as Bellamy’s coworkers arrived at the office. They were all massive bears. Strong. Smart.

The energy was overwhelming.

But it wasn’t just bear bravado. It was sadness. Having something to prove. I realized all these bears had lost their clan to circumstances beyond their control.

I hadn't, not yet. But after that last encounter, when my sister questioned me like a criminal and Edgar wanted to throw down with his bestie instead of welcoming him home? The memories turned my stomach. I used to consider myself an outsider, but now I really was.

There was no way I could go home again, after that fucked up visit. With Bellamy hurt, I'd barely had time to process what had happened. Nana had been acting sketchy ever since the locket went missing. Sage shocked me. We'd always been close, even though she was always doing the right thing, and I was the disaster sibling. We understood each other. And there was no excuse for the way Edgar treated Bellamy.

I wandered into Bellamy's office while the guys finalized their strategy. Excitement rolled off Beau, Brad, and some of the other guys who I'd been quickly introduced to, but I couldn't shake the feeling that whatever these ghost bears had to tell me would make it worse.

The person I always turned to when shit hit the fan like this? Nana. This time, I couldn't. And that hurt.

Is there any reason anyone would use those names to get your attention ...Barrett's question was doing somersaults in my head... There was only one way to find out who conjured those long-dead bears back to life.

I took a deep breath before I dug my phone out of my purse. It had managed to fall to the bottom, poetically settling under the tangle of receipts into the puddle of broken lip gloss and spare change at the bottom. After using an old parking ticket to clean the goop, I read my notifications and my eyes widened.

Maybe calling Nana wouldn't be so awkward after all, since I'd missed a half dozen calls from her and several texts. There was one from my sister, urging me to call her.

Someone knocked at the door just before I was about to hit send. Bellamy poked his gorgeous face in.

“Ready for the surveillance gear?” he asked. “It’s pretty badass, if I do say so myself. You’re gonna look hot in it.”

“Not yet.”

He frowned. “You’re not changing your mind about this, are you?”

I shook my head. “We can’t go out there blind.”

“We’re not. We have my whole team on this. You’re not alone anymore, Clover.”

His words knocked the breath out of me. I wanted to counter that I hadn’t been alone, but I’d always been the outcast. The troublemaker. The one who’d sent our alpha packing.

These bears had my back.

“I appreciate that. But we can’t rely on magic alone. We need answers.”

Bellamy nodded. “We’re ready when you are.”

Emotion stung my eyes as he closed the door. I hit send before I had a chance to talk myself out of it.

“Oh, thank the moon you called,” Nana said when she picked up the phone.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“You didn’t need to call me to know the answer.” She chuckled grimly. “I called to apologize. And more importantly, to come clean with you.”

“I have questions for you too.” I swallowed hard. We were in uncharted territory. Nana didn’t often apologize, or admit she was wrong. That was usually my job.

“Hear me out. Then I’ll answer anything I haven’t already cleared up for you.”

“I can do that.” Inside, I cursed myself. After my mate left our land bloody and broken, I had every right to demand answers from her. But taking control of the situation was simply what she did.

She’s scared , my bear said. Because you’re in control .

“As you know, we mislead you about your magic.” Nana let out a shaky sigh. “The truth is, your magic is more potent than any of us have ever seen. None of us knew how to nurture something that far surpassed our abilities. Some of the elders thought that unmanaged magic could put our clan at risk.”

“Why would they be threatened by a little girl?” I asked. “Seems to me, the power would’ve made our pack stronger. Unless we didn’t want to be noticed.”

“In retrospect, you’re correct. We thought that with time, we’d learn to manage your magic, and teach you how to use it. But then Bellamy showed that he had power too. Not as strong as yours, but we feared that had we let you go through with mating ceremony, we’d create a bear so powerful that we wouldn’t be able to contain them.”

“So Bellamy’s power was stolen too?”

“It wasn’t developed,” she clarified. “He’s not as powerful as you, and as alpha, it wouldn’t have seemed unusual for him to have power.”

Later, I'd be pissed about the double standard, but right now I'd revel in the fact that I was right.

"It was decided that it would be best for the pack if you were kept apart. It wasn't solely my decision, but I have to admit, I supported it, and I was the one who cast the spell that convinced you to reject him."

It took everything I had not to scream I knew it . The life I could've had if Nana hadn't spelled me flashed before my eyes.

"Nana, how could you do that?" Forget being pissed later. My heart broke for Bellamy. He'd lost everything because the elders were too intimidated by our power. "You made me humiliate him. Made me think I didn't want him."

"As soon as I did it, I knew I made a terrible mistake. I hoped that your power would be stronger than my spell and it would fail, but instead, it made your conviction stronger. I don't expect either of you to forgive me for this, because I've never forgiven myself for betraying both of you, and my clan."

"You took my mate from me. He was supposed to be alpha." There were no words for how deceived I felt. "My whole life has been a lie."

"I know. The elders assured me that a bear as magnetic as you would find another mate, and he'd be so head over heels for you that you'd forget about Bellamy. But you never did, and I decided to right this wrong. Once I saw Bellamy on TV, as part of the team that helped that reality show gal bring down that awful wolf, I knew it was my turn to play matchmaker."

"I guess I can thank Barrett for bringing me to my mate...or destroying my clan. Or maybe both." Wait a minute. "Is the locket even missing?"

It had to be, if the Lynwoods knew about it. They knew about me.

Nana sighed. "It wasn't. It was supposed to be a cute way to get the two of you talking to each other. But when I came back from Granger Falls after you didn't come home...I discovered it was gone. As you saw, all hell has broken loose in its absence."

"Maybe it's karma," I said. "Because I heard you stole the locket."

I swear I could feel her bristle through the phone. "I don't know where you heard that, but it's not true."

I wouldn't argue with her, because this might be my only chance to get the information I needed. "So let me get this straight. The missing locket is the reason Edgar attacked Bellamy?"

"It's possible, but it's more than that. My body is changing."

"I'm not sure I'm following."

"The locket's magic might have been keeping me alive," she said. "If we don't find it, I'm not sure how much longer I've got."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

An Inside Job

Clover

Leaving Bellamy's office, I felt like I was walking through taffy. My body was numb. If we didn't find this locket, the clan could descend even further into chaos. Nana could die. Edgar might call himself alpha, but Nana was the leader of the pack. Without her...

No, I couldn't even think about it. I wouldn't mourn her while she was still here. My nana might be a lot of things, and no matter what we found, badass would always be one of them. I took after her in that regard.

A massive wall of bear stepped in front of me. Bellamy rumbled softly as he put his hands on my shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Nana's gonna die if we don't find that locket."

Every bear in the room gasped.

I shook my head. I needed to think straight. "I didn't mean to be so dramatic. But she said with the locket missing, she's losing power. She's aging fast."

I repeated our conversation. "But there's stuff that makes even less sense now. How did the ghost bears know there was a problem, before there was an actual problem?"

Bellamy nodded. "It's a good question. And there's got to be a logical answer. You're in shock, Clover."

"Totally expected, considering the circumstances," Barrett added with a nod.

"Maybe the ghost bears have a way to read minds? A spell that they could forecast what your nana planned to do?" Bellamy suggested. "Or it could be a coincidence. Shirley could have already been sick. They could've picked up on that energy."

All eyes turned to me.

"Did you feel a change in your nana's energy?" Barrett asked.

"The magic is so new to me, unfamiliar." I shook my head as I replayed the last couple of weeks. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure."

"Think back to your last visit. The one where this guy got that." Barrett motioned to Bellamy's cast. "What did you feel?"

I shrugged. "It was a total shit show."

"Think about the emotions," Bellamy said. "Go back and feel those feelings again."

It was the last thing I wanted to do. I'd felt betrayed, disappointed...

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Anger. Jealousy. Competition."

A growl slipped from Bellamy's lips. "There's a chance this could've been an inside job."

"No. No one in the clan wants Nana dead." My gaze locked with his. "Unless I'm

wrong about absolutely everything.”

“It makes sense,” Barrett said softly. “Whoever did this knew enough to use those names?—”

“And to plant that ring in Coeur d’Alene,” Bellamy added. “It’s too much of a coincidence.”

They made valid points, but... “It doesn’t explain why those bears ambushed me on the way out of Granger Falls, and that village that they brought me to that supposedly doesn’t exist. Was that my magic, or theirs?”

“Good question,” Bellamy said. “Did your nana give you any information about the Lynwoods?”

“Sort of, but after she told me she was gonna die, I got a little sidetracked.” I hated the sinking feeling. Minutes ago, we thought she was the problem, and now I might have screwed up the only chance to save her life.

“We stick with the original plan.” Bellamy’s energy changed, and it didn’t matter if he was second-in-command, or that he’d never be alpha—he was totally in control, and it was hot as hell. “We use what we know to get answers from the Lynwoods.”

The bears outfitted me with surveillance equipment. There were microphones on my earrings, and a camera on my pendant. I had an earpiece so we could stay in communication with the rest of the security team.

Bellamy punched something into his GPS. “I dropped a pin last time we were there, looking for you, in case we didn’t find you on our first trip.”

“Smart.” I studied his profile as he drove. The bear was serious, clutching the steering

wheel while he scanned the road. Butterflies fluttered in my belly. “What did you feel when we were in clan land?”

He let out a breath and shook his head slightly. “It was surreal being back after all these years. I can’t lie, I’ve dreamed about it so many times, but they always welcomed me back.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was my delusion, not yours.” He chuckled grimly. “But to answer your question, I didn’t feel anything, at least not until your magic blossomed. Until that, I was numb.”

“Interesting.” That definitely wasn’t the answer I’d expected. “Maybe I needed your magic to pull that off.”

“Whatever you did, it was one hell of a showing,” he said just before the GPS told us we had reached our destination.

My heart pounded as the convoy of bears pulled over behind us. Everyone had been given their assignments. Bellamy took my hand in his as we headed down the forest trail.

“Does any of this look familiar to you?”

I shook my head. “No. All I remember is two naked bears picking me up”—I grinned as Bellamy growled— “And then being in that tent with tape on my mouth, and all those stones and crystals. They must have spelled me as soon as they captured me. What if they spell us again? All of us?”

“That would take some impressive power,” Bellamy said. “Especially now that your magic has been realized. Can you call on your power?”

“Technically, yes. But I don’t know how I did it when I tried to stop Edgar from challenging you.”

“You were pretty fucking magnificent.” Bellamy grinned at me. “Call it if you need it. The rest of us have your back. I see the tents ahead. If we’re in the right spot, we’ve arrived.”

My body contracted like someone had punched me in the gut as we walked into that village. Or I should say, where the village had been. The place I remembered being vibrant and lively looked long forgotten. Strips of faded, tattered tents rippled in the breeze. The setup seemed similar to what I remembered, with the only remnants of the firepit being some ancient wood in the middle of the clearing.

When I closed my eyes, I felt the energy like they were all here. But when I opened them, it was only Bellamy. He nodded, letting me take the lead.

I made a loop around the village, vaguely aware of the bears from Sawtooth Security watching us from the perimeters. But no sign of the Lynwood clan. One of the tents seemed familiar, even though they all looked the same. Was that the one I’d been kept in?

A peek inside offered no confirmation. It was empty.

“Did I imagine this whole thing?” Everything about the Lynwoods was incredibly frustrating. I settled in the middle of the clearing, where I’d sat between Alba and Anders and enjoyed a giant feast.

“There’s too much evidence that says you didn’t,” Bellamy said as he settled beside me. It was probably no coincidence that he chose Anders’s spot.

“Maybe it was a vision, and my subconscious did a shit job at conveying that it was

really you and Nana.” I knotted my fingers in my lap. “It could’ve been Nana’s power all along.”

“She’s admitting she took us on a wild goose chase.” I didn’t recognize the voice of the bear who was talking shit in my earpiece. “Maybe now we can get back to real work.”

Bellamy growled as he rose from the ground. I fully expected his bear to make an appearance. The heat that rolled off his body could’ve ignited the long forgotten wood in the middle of the firepit. “We’re staying until Clover says the job is done. If you think this job is beneath you, hand in your resignation. You’re no longer part of the Sawtooth Security team.”

The declaration was met with deafening silence.

“That’s what I fucking thought,” Bellamy growled. He put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry you had to hear that. I believe in you, Clover. And we’re gonna find this locket and save your nana.”

“Maybe we’re not in the right place,” I said. “Do you feel anything?”

He didn’t answer right away. We’d been so focused on this case we hadn’t explored his powers yet.

“I feel your heartbeat. Your energy,” he said, that protective rumble still resonating in his voice.

He needs your strength , my bear said. The magic can come later.

We sat in silence. I was listening, feeling, and trying to think about anything but how I’d put the entire security company in danger. How I’d fucked things up again. Okay,

I was absolutely thinking those things. I could feel the bears getting restless in their outposts, and Bellamy beside me, sure and steady. Massive and magnificent. This bear had every reason to doubt me, to walk away from this whole thing, and here he was, by my side.

Energy swirled inside me, and I thought I was going to get sick. I'd been too nervous to eat before we left. I opened my eyes and gasped.

“Holy shit.” That was definitely Beau’s voice coming through the earpiece. “I’m looking at a real fucking ghost.”

Chapter Thirty

Who Do You Think You Are?

Clover

The whole village blossomed before our very eyes from a dusty, deserted camp to a vibrant community. Old tents transformed into colorful yurts worthy of a social media glamping selfie, and wild forget-me-nots, lady slippers, and arrowleaf dotted gardens in the landscape between them. Bear shifters in their human forms milled about, getting ready for another gorgeous, abundant feast. Tables were heaped with fruit, vegetables, and baked goods.

I jumped as the fire in the pit roared to life.

“Are you seeing this?” I was pretty sure that was Barrett’s voice. “This deserted lot just roared to life.”

“Are they really ghosts?” another security team member asked. I didn’t remember his name.

None of the recent arrivals seemed to notice Bellamy or me. This time, they were dressed in more modern clothing. They looked like hippies, or bohemian, as Barrett had described Alba earlier.

The males were strong, healthy, and absolutely huge, making Bellamy look small. He looked around, eyes wide, absolutely dazzled by the scene unfolding around us.

Good, it wasn't just me experiencing this. Although, my mate looked more gorgeous than ever...

No, I couldn't get distracted. This already felt like a dream, because the images, even the smells, were so fucking vivid this time. There were jeeps and motorcycles and things that couldn't have possibly just appeared here.

It had to be real, right?

Alba appeared out of nowhere with Anders at her side. I'd definitely have to compare notes with Bellamy as soon as we were alone, if I didn't rip his clothes off first.

"This place looks amazing," I said, not sure if it was the right description. "It seems different than the last time we were here."

The old woman nodded. Her dress was long and red, waffled cotton with embroidered flowers. Real flowers had been twisted in her hair, looking like they'd grown there. She was elegant, effortless, and magical. I didn't expect to feel underdressed for the occasion, but I could add that to the list of surprises.

"This is what's possible when you believe in your own magic," she said as my jaw dropped. "You always had magic, even though you didn't know it. We gave you back what we could the first time we saw you. But you didn't believe, and you thought you were fighting us, but you were holding yourself back. We left you alone, to see what you'd do with that power. At first, I feared we had overwhelmed you. But it seems like you manifested an admirer." She beamed at Bellamy. "He was drawn to your power like a magnet. The two of you were always meant to be together."

Wow. "How did you know?"

I didn't want to give them too much information. Like visiting a psychic, leading

these bears or giving them something to confirm wouldn't help us solve this case, find the locket, or save Nana. We needed to hear what they'd volunteer on their own.

"We could feel Shirley's signal fading," Alba said. "We knew the clan would fall to chaos, so we needed to reach out to you before it was too late."

It was a nice, neat explanation that made no sense. "But you knew the locket was missing before it really was."

"The locket belongs to you," Anders said. His voice was deeper than I remembered, and he was the only one who was still dressed in a more dated way. Men's fashions didn't change as drastically as women's, but his colorless button-down shirt and gray pants didn't fit with what everyone else wore.

"It's my nana's locket," I said.

"We allowed Shirley to keep it until there was kin with real power." Alba gave Anders a knowing smile. "We may have influenced that."

"It was a risk we didn't think would pay off, but it looks like it just might," Anders's glittering gaze was squarely on me.

My body warmed in an unfamiliar way. I wasn't turned on, but I wasn't creeped out, either.

Bellamy growled. "Care to explain?"

"I would love to." Anders took a slight step forward, and Bellamy tensed beside me.

If we had another bear battle royale, we'd never get the information we needed to save my nana.

“Clover is my daughter,” Anders declared.

“What?” I couldn’t have heard him right. This bear was lucky I’d never met my father. The sperm donor had only been spoken about in hushed tones and profanities.

“That’s not possible.”

“We found records of the clan,” Bellamy said. “They showed that Anders’s mate should have been Shirley.”

Anders’s expression darkened and a rumble emitted from his lips.

“That is the way fate intended for things to happen,” Alba said, probably staving off World War Bear for now. Anders and Bellamy weren’t yet seeing eye-to-eye. “But Shirley left with the locket, convinced that she could choose her own fate. And she proved herself right. But if we were unable to continue our magic line, we would all perish. So when it was appropriate, Anders wooed your mother.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to rip this giant bear a new asshole. Even if this was true, how dare he prey on my poor mother, who’d worked her ass off to provide for my sister and me as a single mom? The clan helped, especially after she left, but in a place where fated couples were the norm, Mom was definitely othered. No wonder I had daddy issues.

Your mother wasn’t that sweet, my bear reminded me. She had enough power to take your magic away...

That was true, but for the moment I was willing to revise history to fit my rage...

“Seems like you can’t resist a devastatingly handsome bear either, Clover,” Alba said, smiling at Bellamy. “We had to make sure we preserved our magical lineage. We’d heard another powerful bear had been born into your clan.”

“Bellamy,” I said.

She nodded. “Without the locket, we’re all stuck in time, unable to age or to go onto our next energetic assignment. You’re our only hope, Clover.”

So without the locket, my nana might die, and these ghost bears would live forever. “And if I give you the locket, you’ll be able to age?” I couldn’t bring myself to say the other thing. Because if these bears were really my family, it seemed unfair that I could be responsible for their death.

This was a lot to swallow. This bear was claiming he was my father.

Wait, did they just admit to having the locket?

“As long as the locket is obtained by honest means, no harm will come to our clan,” Alba said.

Bellamy raised a brow. “And if someone came by the locket in a dishonest matter?”

“Magic is simply the way we activate the energy that we invite into our sphere,” Alba said. “No one answer would apply to every situation.”

“That’s a fancy way to say I don’t know.” I folded my arms across my chest. I wanted answers, not more questions. Although they’d just given me one hell of an answer. “Was Anders honest with my mom when he knocked her up and then left her to fend for herself?”

“A spell was cast, blocking me from having any part of your life.” Anders lowered his gaze. His hands were behind his back, and he pressed his lips together, like he had so much to say but needed a moment to make sure the right thing actually came out. I could sympathize, even if I wasn’t ready to accept he was who he claimed to be.

“We’d hoped that having a new generation with magic would bring the clans back together and be enough to break the curse. It backfired.”

“A shield prevented Anders from setting foot on your clan’s land, and your magic was taken from you,” Alba said with disgust. “Very crudely, I might add. Not done properly at all. Your clan is lucky that wayward magic didn’t come back to bite them in an uncomfortable place.”

“Maybe you needed to give it more time,” Bellamy suggested. “We’re here now.”

“Are you Sage’s father too?” I asked.

Anders shook his head. “You’re my only daughter.”

“Let’s make sense of a few things,” I said, rubbing my hand over my forehead to stave off a burgeoning headache. “You sensed Nana was getting weaker, and you captured me, thinking I had the locket. Why?”

“We hoped we could show you how to use your power to save both clans,” Alba said.

Okay, I could accept that. Their execution hadn’t been the greatest, but if these bears were actually ghosts, it was pretty impressive. Those naked bears who had picked me up and carried me here felt pretty damn solid. But that didn’t explain everything.

“We knew you needed more proof,” Alba continued. “We needed to make you believe in your own powers or everyone was doomed. After our first attempt to show you who you really were, we realized you’d have to figure it out on your own.”

Bellamy chuckled. “She’s always been stubborn.”

I nudged him.

“Did you actually order the motorcycle?” I asked.

“I did.” Anders’s face lit up. “It’s over there, if you’d like to see it.”

My mouth dropped and I met Bellamy’s gaze.

“I’d love to see it,” Bellamy said. “I thought that might have been one of the clues.”

“It wasn’t intended to be, but we hoped it would be a good way to gauge how interested Clover was in her magic,” Alba said. “Anders gave your grandmother that ring, which was why we chose it as a conduit of your magic.”

“But how did you manage to get your hands on it?” If they could get the ring, they could get the locket.

“We didn’t,” Anders said with a maddening smile. “The ring is an illusion. It would disappear if we chose to terminate the spell.”

“Can your magic tell you who has the locket?” Bellamy asked.

Alba smiled. “Whoever benefits from the truth staying a lie.”

“Really?” I sighed. “You’re going to leave us with a riddle?”

“Soon, it will become clear to you,” she said. “No matter what happens, we’ll always be here for you, your mate, and your heirs. All you have to do is believe in your own power, Clover, and anything is possible.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Enjoy It While It Lasts, Bear

Bellamy

Clover was shell-shocked. Not that I could blame her. We walked hand in hand back to the road. Sawtooth Security had our back.

Whatever the fuck just happened was totally mind blowing. I wasn't sure if I'd hallucinated everything, but from the heavy silence of our crew, I was pretty sure we'd all seen the same thing.

Once I got Clover into the truck, I went over to talk to Barrett.

"That was wild," he said. "I've never seen a community just appear like that."

"We'll have to compare notes." I was relieved he'd seen it too. "Not tonight. I need to get Clover home."

"Take care of your mate," he said. "I like her. She challenges you."

I laughed. "Does she ever."

"Listen, you know the team has your back in this case. But I have a feeling this will be settled between Clover, her grandmother, and whoever has that locket. We're here to do research and surveillance, but you two have already done the work. And the real

breakthrough will come when you both discover your magic.”

“I’ll be back to work as soon as I can.”

Barrett shook his head. “I’ve got plenty of bears who can handle the business. Take all the time you need. You’ll be off on your mate moon after this case is done.”

He clapped his hand on my shoulder before he turned away.

Mate moon. I hadn’t had a chance to think about making things official.

“Where are we going?” Clover asked when I got into the truck.

“Home.” I made a U-turn and headed toward Granger Falls. “No matter what happens with this locket, I want you in my life, Clover Crowley. I want to come home to you every night and wake up with you in my bed every morning. I’m gonna get you a real ring, and we can make our own magic.”

She stared at me with her mouth open. “Did you just propose to me?”

“I guess I did.” I couldn’t suppress my grin. “Are you gonna tell me to eat shit and die this time?”

“How did that work out for me?” She looked down and twisted that spelled ring on her finger. “I don’t often admit that I’m wrong, and I might not ever do it again. So enjoy it while it lasts, bear. Rejecting you was pretty much the worst thing I ever did. I’m sorry I was so terrible to you.”

“It’s a red banner day when Clover Crowley apologizes.” I hadn’t planned things this way, but they were perfect. “Even more so when she doesn’t shoot me down.”

“Maybe I’m entering a new era.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder.

“I think I’m gonna like this era. But you can’t beat yourself up for being wrong before?—”

“Hey! We’re not dwelling on it. You got me to admit I was wrong. Yes, I’m ready to make magic with you. Take the win graciously.”

“You didn’t know who you were.” I could barely concentrate on the road. She fucking said yes. I was the happiest bear alive. And I finally had a chance to talk about this. I’d held all the anger inside for so long. “If you had said yes all those years ago, we would’ve crashed and burned under your nana’s curse.”

“It would’ve been a total disaster.” She laughed. “But think of all the hate sex we missed out on.”

“The make-up sex, the morning sex, the quickies on our lunch hours. We need to stop talking about this or we’ll have side-of-the-road sex. Again.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.” She sighed. “Do you think what Anders and Alba said was true? Talk about bombshell city. I tried really hard not to give them any hints to lead them. But they knew everything. And this ring! It’s just like Nana’s. How can it not be hers?”

“They must have been planning this since the day Anders got blocked from your life. And they took action when the opportunity presented itself.” We’d both need time to process this turn of events, but none of this happened by accident—or magic. “They knew you’d need your dad’s magic, and now you have it.”

“I can’t believe he’s my father.” She shook her head. The initial anger seemed to have faded into disbelief. “We need to check the dates on that website. I’m pretty

sure that dude should've been dead before I was born."

"He shouldn't be alive now, and he's ordering motorcycles and sending you magic."

She looked at me as we crossed into Granger Falls. "What about your magic, Bellamy? We know you have it, but we don't know anything about it. Your parents were never involved with the healers. Did anyone else in your family have powers?"

"If they did, they didn't tell me." This case was the first time anyone suggested I had magical powers. I was strong, some would consider me smart, and I tried to be an upstanding bear, even though others would consider my job unethical. "I think you bring it out in me."

"I like that."

The sun was starting to set when we got back to my cabin. The air was misty, the sky streaked with pastels. Clover already had her door open when she saw me round the front of the truck to her side. She closed it, beaming at me as she let me open it for her.

She wasn't used to anyone taking care of her. Claiming her would be the greatest adventure of my life.

We walked hand in hand to the door. So much had changed today, but everything felt right.

Once we got inside, I pulled her against my body, loving the way her curves felt against me. Soft and warm. She tipped her face up, ready for a kiss, but I had something else in mind.

"No." I shook my head. "We're gonna do this right."

She gasped as I dropped to one knee.

“Clover Crowley, you are my fated mate. You are my heart, my soul, and the reason the blood sings in my veins. Please do the honor of letting me claim you. Body, mind, spirit. I don’t think for a minute that I’ll ever tame you, but give me the privilege of calling that gorgeous wild spirit mine.”

“Only if you promise to be wild with me.”

“Always.”

“Good. Keep surprising me, Bellamy. I like it. A lot. The answer is still yes.” She took my face in her hands, studying it for a moment before bringing her lips to mine.

Our bodies melted as the kiss intensified. We were on the floor together, in front of the fireplace.

“I need to get you a ring. Don’t have one yet. Didn’t think I was gonna do this. You’ve got me wild already.” I chuckled and then kissed the line of her neck down to her collarbone. “I’ll get you something big and gorgeous.”

“I already have something big and gorgeous.” She pushed my shoulder, then considered the ring on her hand. “Maybe this should be my ring. It symbolizes everything that brought us together.”

“We can do that, if you like.”

“I think so.” She beamed at me. “And you can take all the money you were gonna spend on that ring and put it toward our mate moon in Bali.”

“Oh, you think we’re going to a tropical island?”

“I’ll book one of those bungalows over the water.” She leaned in and tried to give me a quick kiss, but I caught her before she got away. She surprised me by shaking her head. “I promise I’ll fuck your brains out later. But first, I really want to explore your magic.”

“I like the first option better,” I groaned. My cock was already ready to burst...

“Hear me out. What if fully realizing your magic makes sex even better?” She wagged her brows. “Listen, I know it’s scary. Unfamiliar. But it’s ours, Bellamy. There aren’t many things we can truly say that about.”

“You’re right,” I said and her eyes lit up. “What do you want me to do?”

She didn’t answer right away, instead scraping her teeth against her bottom lip. This woman had to know what that did to me.

“Lie down,” she finally said. “And promise you’ll keep an open mind.”

“Should I keep my clothes on?”

“Don’t have a one-track mind, you naughty bear.” She pushed my shoulders and I leaned back. “I’ll take care of that cock later.”

“Promise?”

“Yes. Now lie down and close your eyes. Try not to think of anything. Just concentrate on your breathing,” she said in a low voice. I imagined it was the same one that she would use with her clients at the spa. “Let all your muscles relax. You’re safe, Bellamy. If any of this gets to be too much, we can stop.”

I nodded. My body already felt heavy. Relaxed. It was nice not to have to be on guard

for once. “You’re never too much for me.”

“That’s not something I hear often.” She laughed.

“This feels new for you. Zen.”

“You get to see a new side of Clover. Okay, take a deep breath in, hold it for three seconds, and then let it out in a sigh.” She waited for me to do as I was told. “Good. Do that two more times. Then I’m gonna run my hands over your body. I’m not gonna touch you. I’m just going to stop at the places that might draw the most energy.”

I peeled open an eyelid. “You can touch me all you want, and I have a few ideas of where that energy might be.”

“You dirty bear. Are you gonna take this seriously?” She let out an exasperated sigh that told me she was taking it very seriously. “If you have magic, think of how powerful you’ll be when you know what it is. I’m not sure how to make that grr side of you take this seriously, but maybe it will get you a promotion at work, or help you fight better, or help you please your mate.”

I grinned, but I didn’t open my eyes. “All those things appeal to my grr side.”

“Let me do this.” She paused, and I really wanted to open my eyes and see what she was doing. I felt the heat of her body close to my face. “I’m gonna start at your head and move down your body, stopping at each chakra.”

“Are you sure you haven’t done this before? You seem like you know what you’re doing.”

“I learned how to do reiki as service for my spa clients, but I’ve never performed it on

a magical beast,” she said. “Tell me if you feel anything.”

I fully expected to have to make something up not to disappoint her. “Is it supposed to tingle?”

“It can.” Her voice went up an octave, like she was surprised it worked too. “Where do you feel it?”

“Along my scalp. And there’s heat too. Like you’re drawing it out of me.”

“Good. That means we have a connection,” she said.

I wished I could watch her, but she’d asked me to keep my eyes closed. And I wasn’t sure if I could open them. My body felt heavy, but light at the same time, almost a dream-like state.

“I’m moving over your third eye, in the middle of your forehead,” she said softly. The tingling sensation followed her, like one of those old-fashioned toys with the magnetic hair.

I let myself relax and enjoy it. I could feel her energy too. She was in her element, making someone feel better. Clover got frustrated when people didn’t understand her, and words often made things worse. But what she could do with her hands was pure alchemy.

She didn’t have to tell me she’d moved to my throat. A low rumble erupted inside me as soon as she brought her energy to the spot.

“Well, that’s interesting,” she said with a chuckle.

The sound intensified to a full growl. I dug my fingers into the carpet as my body

temperature rose.

“Sweet moon, are you about to shift?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

“Let’s move down to your heart,” she said quickly, moving her hands and taking the energy with her. “I can see your body relax. That was intense, but good to know if we ever need it.”

“Wonder if we can use that to help you shift.” Shit, I probably shouldn’t have said that.

“We could try,” she said. “Not sure she’s ever gonna grace us with her presence again.”

“She will, when she’s ready.” My heartbeat slowed again as she held her hands over my chest, and my tummy warmed as she moved the energy there. Electricity flowed through my veins.

“I’ll move to your root chakra next.”

The energy warmed my body, and my eyes snapped open in response to the pure power Clover was drawing from me. She didn’t notice, she was totally engrossed in the ritual, like she’d cast her own spell. She looked like an angel, with heavy-lidded eyes, hair flowing down her back, and a sweet smile playing on her lips.

All that power was flowing straight to my cock. I writhed on the carpet, and the only sound I could manage was a growl.

Smooth.

Clover's eyes snapped open. "Do you need to shift? Oh. Let me help you with that."

Her hands were like fire when they made contact with the strip of skin above my jeans. Her fingers shook as she undid the button and fly and freed my cock. It was rock hard and ready for the burn of her touch.

She pumped my shaft frantically, like the energy had taken hold of us both. With her free hand, she pulled at her shirt.

"What are you doing?" I managed.

"I'm gonna ride your cock like a bucking bronco." She let out a sound that was between a laugh and a gasp.

"No," I said between gritted teeth.

"Let me get this straight. You don't want me to slide my pussy onto this hard, ready shaft?" she asked, grinning when I groaned. "I think I can make you come in..."

"I want—" I could barely get the words out. "To do this to you too."

"Bear, I can come for you all night long." She pulled her shirt over her head. My entire being ached for her touch as she slipped out of her jeans and panties. "That's what kind of magic you do for me."

She straddled me, and I positioned myself to enter her. Her body was so warm, I was surprised smoke didn't rise from my shaft as she slid down it. Sweet moon, this woman was absolute perfection as she took all of me. Her head fell back and those luscious tits bounced every time I moved her body up and down my cock.

The energy that flowed from her body to mine felt like liquid lava, and I wouldn't be

surprised if we set the entire world on fire.

“This is insane,” I gritted out. “It’s never been like this before.”

Clover fell forward. Her hands were on my shoulders and her crimson hair tickled my cheeks. Her tits swung forward, hitting my chest. Seeing my mate like this, coming totally undone, was enough to send me into overdrive. My balls hitched?—

“Bellamy,” she cried. “She’s coming.”

“Yes, you are, baby.”

“No.” She grasped my shoulders hard, her fingernails piercing my skin. “My bear. She’s coming.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ready for Takeoff

Clover

Bellamy lifted me off his body like I weighed nothing. He cradled me in his arms and made a beeline for the door. There were so many things I couldn't say because my body felt like a rocket ready for takeoff. My nana always said I shouldn't mess with things I didn't understand...

Not that I wanted to be thinking about my grandmother at a time like this, except to curse her for hiding my magic. For making me reject my mate. For letting me live so long having no idea who I was.

I screamed as my skin split and fur filled the broken places. It didn't hurt, but after not shifting in over almost two decades...

Since I'd rejected Bellamy.

I'd never made the correlation until now.

My bones were cracking, expanding, and I'd totally lost control of the situation.

But then, the heat faded, and sweet moon, I was a bear.

The world looked so different through these eyes. It was an entirely different spell,

being in my animal form.

“Welcome back,” Bellamy said, roughing the fur on the back of my head.

“How is it possible you’re even more gorgeous?” I bumped against him. I was awkward in this form. It would take me a minute to get used to this body.

“You’re spectacular.” Bellamy fell to his knees and took my face in his hand. He rested his head against mine, and that heat was back.

Would it be like this every time we touched?

He rolled back, giving me one last look at that glorious naked body before his bear arrived. His shift was fluid, graceful, powerful, all the things I didn’t feel at this moment.

“Let me show you the forest,” he said, nudging his snout against mine.

“I’ve lived in Idaho my entire life,” I said.

“But you’ve never seen it like this, as a bear, with magic. The moon is almost full, and there’s still snow on the mountain peaks. The lakes will be sparkling, and the grass will be dancing.”

“You should write poetry.” I sighed as we headed away from the cabin. “Or everything really is different as a bear. Or with magic. I feel like I’m starting everything from scratch.”

“Kind of a cool place to be, if you ask me,” he said. “ You get to experience the wonder of everything for the first time. Don’t hold yourself back, Clover. Let yourself enjoy this. Don’t worry about living life how your grandmother or your

sister told you it should be. It's time to start making your own rules."

"I've never liked rules as much as you do. Maybe I won't make any." I stopped in the middle of the rolling field. We were at the base of one of the bigger mountains on the edge of Granger Falls. I could feel the energy vibrating from it. "How long do you think I can stay in my bear form?"

"Few hours. Few days, hard to tell." If Bellamy had been human, he would have shrugged.

"Can we sleep out here?" I asked. "As bears?"

He gave me another nuzzle. "I know just the place."

The lucid dreaming followed me into bear form. Bellamy and I had spent hours frolicking through the forest like we owned it. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun or felt so free.

I never wanted it to end.

Once we totally exhausted ourselves, we curled up under a cottonwood tree near the edge of the river, and fell asleep, nuzzling each other and listening to the gentle lap of the water against the shore.

Without warning, I was taken from the warm embrace of Bellamy's arms and I was back in our village. I was just as aware of my sense of purpose as I was that I was still asleep, but this wasn't like watching a movie. It was more like virtual reality. From my eyeline, I had a feeling I was human instead of bear. And the magic? Nowhere to be found. My heart hurt a little at that realization, but I couldn't dwell on it, because I was on a mission.

I walked into Nana's cottage with purpose. It was eerily quiet inside, which was unnerving. The village had been deserted too. That never happened. We were a lively clan, and everyone was always up in everyone else's business.

"Nana?" I called out. Bellamy tightened his grip on my midsection. I wasn't sure if I'd actually spoken out loud, or if he sensed my apprehension.

I wondered what he dreamed about.

She wasn't here. And the house almost felt brittle, like she hadn't been home for a while. Weird. Nana hardly ever left our village. As she was an elder, we made sure everything was provided for her.

Unless she was out looking for me...

A chill ran down my spine, and I moved more like a cat than a bear—quickly past windows, making sure no one saw me. I was in her bedroom, but that wasn't my final destination. Nana had an altar set up in one of her closets.

The power of its contents fought me, making opening the doors challenging. Inside, I found her impressive collection of crystals, candles, and grimoires. I used to beg her to teach me about the contents of this closet. Every time she shot me down. Knowing what these stones could do would be helpful, but not now. I knew what I was looking for.

The cover of the jewelry box creaked when I opened it, sending panic rippling down my spine. Even though I hadn't seen a soul since I'd entered the village, I knew there was no way that would last. Unless something was really wrong.

Sweet moon, had Nana already passed on to the next realm? My heart constricted, sad that I didn't have a chance to say goodbye.

No, she was alive, and this was the only way I could save her.

The locket had been pinned to the middle of the top of the case. Encrusted with stones, mysterious, dare I say nefarious, power swirled around it. Someday I'd understand the spell it had cast over Nana and our clan.

But now, I needed to take it as my own.

After making sure everything was as I'd found it—Nana was usually a stickler for detail, one of the things that made everything about this case so frustratingly off—I closed the door to her cabin softly behind me.

The sun was high in the sky, and the village was bustling, like always.

I opened my eyes, and my body bucked as it transitioned back into this reality. In this world, the birds sang their morning greeting as the sun rose, cutting through the mist that danced over the river.

There was a mix of satisfaction and pure dread flowing through my veins. I hadn't felt anything like that since I was a teenager. I liked to say I didn't have any regrets, but my biggest one was sleeping soundly beside me. Still, I didn't often dwell on the past, or worry about the future, and this strange sense of anxiety was setting in...but like the locket, it didn't belong to me.

That was when I realized what I'd really just witnessed.

"Bellamy," I said, pushing his fuzzy arm to wake him, which was when I discovered I was very human, and very naked. How the tables had turned. But I didn't have time to worry about that. "I know who took the locket."

Chapter Thirty-Three

I Won't Let You Destroy This Clan

Clover

“We’ve had some strange cases at Sawtooth Security, but this is a first,” Bellamy said. “We’ve never had the answer come in a dream before.”

“A magical bear dream.” I chuckled as I corrected him. But there was no hiding the fact I was nervous about what action that dream demanded we take. Even if I was right, I could still lose everything. “Are you sure we’re doing the right thing? If we’re wrong, the legacy of two clans is in jeopardy.”

“Based on what you told me, and what we know about the current clan dynamics, we should have enough to mark this case closed.”

Problem was, it was so much more than a case. “It’s just my entire life and the future of our clan hanging in the balance. Don’t mean to sound dramatic, but watching every video available on YouTube about lucid dreaming doesn’t feel like we’ve done enough.”

“If I didn’t think we had enough evidence to get in there, we wouldn’t be doing it.” Bellamy punctuated his statement with a growl. “You deserve answers, and the clan deserves a stable future. Whatever that is.”

“We won’t be able to go back to our lives like they were if we find the locket. This

changes everything.”

He raised a brow. “Is that what you want? Your life like it was before?”

“No. I want to start a new life with you. But it would be nice to be able to go home again.”

“You can’t protect the clan from other people’s mistakes,” he said. “It’s the hardest part of this job. All we can do is show them the truth, and hope that they make good choices.”

“Because we all know that’s my strong point.” I took a shaky breath as Bellamy turned off the highway onto the road that led to our village.

He brought the truck to a stop in the middle of the dirt road. “If you don’t want to do this, you gotta tell me right now. We can turn around, and we’ll never talk about this again.”

“I’m sick of living everyone else’s lie.”

He took my chin in his hand. “You’re also sick of being everyone else’s scapegoat. Trust your intuition. You’re a powerful woman, and you’re just coming into that power because the people you trusted the most lied to you. Exposing that lie? It’s not gonna be easy. But know this—I want to see what that power can do.”

“Thank you.” I wished that declaration was enough to dissolve the brick of doubt that had formed in my belly. “Are you sure a feast day is the right time to drop this bomb?”

As the clan’s designated party girl, it was one of my favorite days of the year. I loved getting everyone together, all the food, and sitting around the fire until the wee hours

of the morning. I was usually the one who planned the festivities, and this year, I'd been too wrapped up in Bellamy and the mystery of the locket to put the final touches on the day.

It would be my first chance to see what the clan would do without me. It was a grim thought, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to find.

"It's the perfect day to do it," Bellamy countered. "Everyone will hear and see the truth firsthand. They'll demand answers from the elders. They might even ask questions we didn't think of."

"You're right. I need to stop thinking that everyone will turn against me." I waited for him to open my door for me. I'd never considered myself a chivalry type of girl, probably because no one but this bear had ever shown me any. Bellamy had a quiet way of demonstrating he had every situation handled, and it was making me fall even harder for him.

But last time we were here, he'd been pushed to losing that control. Over me.

"Clover, it's not your fault the clan put you into this impossible situation. I'm proud of you for taking your life back." He kissed my forehead. "I love you."

Sweet moon, it was the first time he'd said those words to me. My heart fluttered as I let the emotion wash over me. "I love you too."

He took my hand in his and squeezed it. There was no missing how tense he was. "Let's do this."

Rocks crunched under our feet as we made our way to the green. Bellamy was determined, looking straight ahead, his body on point like his bear would burst out at any moment.

We passed a few clan members, and I smiled and waved. Every single one of them responded with an open-mouthed stare.

Not good. Although not unexpected. Bellamy hadn't exactly lost Edgar's challenge, but anyone who dared to make our alpha look weak wouldn't be welcomed back with open arms.

I felt like shaking everyone who looked at us with suspicion. Telling them that what they knew about the clan was a lie.

And I wanted to tell them all that this bear loved me.

They'll know , my bear said. Everyone can see it.

Bellamy slowed his pace, and his grip on my hand intensified.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. My heart was in my throat. My bear felt close, but I had no idea how to tell if she was coming...the other night might have been a fluke, a spell cast by Bellamy's body.

If I had to fight...no. I had to stop expecting the worst. But Bellamy had said to trust my intuition, and I had a bad feeling the worst was about to be served at this feast.

"I swear that's Alba and Anders up ahead," he said.

"How?" I asked as I squinted. "What do they want from us?"

"Looks like we're about to find out."

Bellamy held out his hand and Anders took it, giving it a hearty shake. Then the ghost bear offered his hand to me.

So many emotions rocketed through me. It felt like we were choosing a side, aligning with these bears. Possibly the wrong side. But I was also relieved they were here. Even if they had a funny way of showing it, these ghost bears had my back.

Anders clapped his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "I'm proud of you," he said.

Alba stepped forward and took both of my hands in hers. Energy tingled through my veins on contact. "We're so glad you're learning to trust your intuition. The Lynwood clan knows you'll do the right thing."

"Thank you." Tears welled in my eyes.

"There's something I need to tell you before you get there," she continued. "Your grandmother...she's considerably weaker."

"You mean she's dying." All the air went out of my lungs. I wasn't ready to lose my nana.

"The time to act is now." Alba stepped away from me with a reassuring nod and turned to follow Anders to the green. Music and laughter spilled from the party, waiting to greet us.

If she was right, how could the clan possibly be celebrating at a time like this?

Bellamy put his arm around me and followed them. My legs were heavy. Sweet moon, I didn't want to find out Alba was right.

"Am I dreaming again?" If so, I could wake up and fix this. I could help Nana.

"I think so," he whispered back.

The party was in full swing. Picnic tables had been set up around the green, circling the spot where we'd all gather for the fire later. Families perched at each one, enjoying heaping plates of food. Edgar was manning the giant grill. As alpha, he certainly wasn't expected to do the grilling, but he was totally in his element.

I scanned the crowd for Nana. She was nowhere to be found. My heart sank. I came by my love of parties honestly—Nana never missed one. If she wasn't here... I looked at Alba, and she simply nodded.

I'd never wanted her to be wrong more in my life.

Everything quickly skidded to a stop as the clan realized we were here. Everyone turned to stare at us. The only sound, other than my thundering heart, were murmurs about Bellamy, wondering if he came back to finish Edgar's challenge.

Not one of them seemed concerned that we'd brought friends. Could they even see them?

This is the first time any of them but Nana have seen a Lynwood, my bear reminded me.

Edgar set his spatula down and nodded to one of the other bears before striding over to us.

"I told you to never come back here, Bellamy." He didn't even acknowledge me.

"This might be the last time?—"

"It will definitely be the last time." Edgar stepped forward and growled at Bellamy

I wedged myself in between them. "Enough."

Edgar sneered. “Another magic trick won’t save him.”

“Tuck your ego back into your pants, bear. This has nothing to do with you.” I pushed Edgar, but it was hardly enough to make him budge. The crowd who had gathered around us gasped. “Where’s Nana?”

Confusion furrowed his brow, and relief washed over me. Maybe Nana had just run back into the house to grab a plate of cookies, or my favorite, her pasta salad.

“She’s in her cabin,” he said gruffly. “But I still need to ask you to leave. Your friends too.”

So he did see Alba and Anders. Interesting.

“We’re not going anywhere until I see Nana.” I met his gaze. “What are you so afraid of that you don’t want to see the two of us together?”

“There’s no need to overreact,” Sage said, wrapping her arm around me in an attempt to pull me away from her mate. But she couldn’t move me. Guess all that kickboxing was no match for real magic. “You’re causing a scene.”

“That’s what I do, right?” I turned to her. “Screw everything up and you’re the one who picks up the pieces. You’re the perfect one who never does anything wrong, but you got cursed with a hot mess of a sister.”

Sage pinched between her eyes. “This isn’t the time.”

“Why not?” I gave her a moment to answer, but no surprise she didn’t. She was the alpha’s mate. She wasn’t used to being questioned. “Is it because Nana is fading away and you’re throwing a party?”

Her mouth dropped. “What do you mean, fading away? And no, that’s not true.”

“Then where is she?”

“In her cabin.”

I pushed past Sage and made a beeline for Nana’s cabin. Heat confirmed Bellamy’s presence behind me.

“Clover, you have no idea what you’re doing.” Sage called after me, but with the wall of magical bear at my back, there was no way she could stop me.

Bellamy almost walked right into me when I stopped, turning to face my sister. Nana might be far from perfect, but she deserved better than this.

“You can save her, you know,” I said.

“Clover,” Alba said softly, nodding to me. “Trust your intuition.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ve changed.” Sage tipped her head, her brow furrowing with what looked a lot like concern. “Ever since you got back together with Bellamy.”

“He’s not responsible for this.” How could I possibly explain what had happened to someone who didn’t have magic? And why was I trying to dumb this down for her?

“I know who I really am now. And you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Explain it to me,” Sage said. Edgar had come to stand behind her, rumbling and ready to unleash some chaos.

“Where’s the locket?” I asked. The crowd around us gasped once again.

“Everyone thinks you stole it,” Sage said. “That you’re using it as some kind of ransom, and that’s why you’ve been missing in action. I think they might be right, since you showed up here with bears we’ve never met before. Are you in trouble, Clover? Again? Are you expecting us to get you out of it?”

“I didn’t steal anything. See, turns out, Nana was using the locket as a ploy to get Bellamy and I back together. Pretty good plan to pretend it was missing, since it worked. But then, the locket really went missing. And that’s when things started to change around here. When I felt like I no longer belonged in this pack. When your mate was all the sudden ready to fight anyone who looks at him sideways. This isn’t about Bellamy. This is about you trying to keep control of your own destiny.”

She shook her head and scoffed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You found out that Nana was sick, and you were scared to death that I’d find out that I had magic,” I said. “You were there when Mom took it away from me. I always thought she’d taken yours too, but it turns out, it came from my father. Not our mom. You didn’t really understand what was going on at the time, but you were sworn to secrecy. There was a reason for that, and you probably still don’t know the whole story. Until now. And because you’ve always done what everyone’s expected, that secret was safe. But if Bellamy was back in the picture, mated to a bear with magic, then Edgar would no longer be alpha.”

“This is ridiculous,” Edgar huffed.

“And it’s why Edgar made the last-ditch attempt to keep me away from Bellamy. But you both know how it is when you find your mate. Nothing will keep you apart, and you’ll do anything to protect them.” My heart was beating so hard I thought it would break a rib. “So you slipped into Nana’s house when she went down to Granger Falls looking for me.”

“That’s preposterous.” Sage scoffed.

I shook my head. “You might have gotten away with it, but the Lynwood clan?—”

“Who the fuck is the Lynwood clan?” Edgar growled.

“They’re a clan who lost their power when Nana took the locket from them. Her magic was stolen. She’s been fooling everyone all this time,” I said. “Meet Alba and Anders Lynwood.”

“We tried to reason with her,” Alba said. “But as you know, Shirley Crowley is a strong-willed bear. She created a beautiful thing here, but she’s not who she claims to be.”

Sage’s mouth fell open, mirroring the expressions of the bears around her. “And we’re supposed to take the word of complete strangers over our own family?”

“They’re my family,” I said. “Anders is my dad. Which makes Alba my other grandmother.”

The Lynwoods looked so proud, so certain, and honestly, it was the only thing keeping me going.

“This is ridiculous.” Sage shook her head.

“It’s not, and I wonder, is this the first time you’ve heard this? Because let’s go back to you sneaking into Nana’s house. You knew if I got my hands on that locket your mate would no longer be alpha. The only way you had a chance to keep your status is if the locket actually went missing. So you took it. Funny how you knew more details about it than I did, when I was supposed to be looking for it.” I gave her a moment to protest, but she didn’t. “I’d like to give it back to Nana. I’m not sure it will be enough

to save her, but I'd really love her blessing to bring the clans back together."

"I would love to help you with this, Clover. But not only is this story batshit crazy, I don't know where the locket is."

"I think I do." My lips curled into a grin. "Wanna help me find it?"

My sister cocked a brow. "Now? In the middle of our feast?"

"Can you think of a better time? Everyone's already here. We can celebrate." I didn't wait for her blessing. I prayed to any deity willing to listen that these visions were right. My magic was as untamed as I was, and trusting it was terrifying. But Bellamy, Alba, and Anders believed in me.

My body shook as I turned the knob on Sage's front door. We didn't bother locking things—stranger danger wasn't an issue with bear clans.

"Clover!" Sage was right behind me. "This is too much."

Her house was immaculate, a magic feat of its own with two littles. I marched through the living room and straight to the primary bedroom.

I lifted the mattress on Sage's side of the bed. "I'll be damned."

Sage gasped. "How did that get there?"

"You put it there, knowing no one would ever have the balls to accuse the alpha's mate of a crime." I scooped up the locket and let it dangle from my finger, unprepared for the power that jolted through me on contact. "Nana used this talisman to destroy one clan. I won't let you do it to another."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Cursed, But Alive and Kicking

Clover

My legs were pure jelly as I knocked on Nana's bedroom door. All my strength was coming from the locket and Bellamy's hand on my back. The talisman had power, but I would've chickened out if it wasn't for my mate.

"Come in." Nana's voice was scratchy but strong. I took it as a good sign.

"I brought the party to you." I plastered a smile on my face as I entered the room.

She rose onto her elbows. She was lying in bed, which was alarming, along with the fact that she looked like she'd lost a significant amount of weight since I'd seen her last a little more than a week ago. The lines in her face had grown deeper, and there were dark smudges under her eyes.

"Clover, Bellamy." She managed a smile, but then her eyes darkened. "What are these two doing with you? I thought you were dead."

"Cursed, but alive and kicking," Alba said. "And she knows. Everything."

"I know that Anders is my father," I clarified as I sat on the edge of the bed and dangled the locket from my finger. "They helped me find this."

Nana gasped. “Where did you find it? Don’t tell me they were there behind this.”

“Hardly,” Alba scoffed. “If it wasn’t for us, you’d be in the ground in a matter of days.”

“Ladies,” Bellamy said. “We brought you together for a reason.”

“It better be good,” Nana muttered.

Of course there was friction. Nana had stolen a locket and cursed her former clan. I wrapped my hand around the locket, absorbing its power.

“I need your help,” I said. I’d planned this speech carefully, but all the times I’d rehearsed it in front of the mirror were poor preparation for the real deal. The energy in this room was intense.

Nana closed her eyes for a long blink and rested her head on the pillow. It was too much for her. Were we too late?

“Nana.” I gasped as she opened her eyes. “You sent me to find the locket. But after Bellamy refused to help.” I grinned at him. “The Lynwood pack found me. They brought me to their village, and at first, I thought they’d kill me. But they said I was more important than the locket.”

“If you had so much as hurt a hair on her head.” Nana’s gaze was fixed on Alba.

“Ladies.” I held my hands up. “To be fair, we suspected the Lynwoods too. They were everywhere, but at the same time, they were nowhere. We referred to them as a ghost clan. But they led us to the most important clue of all. The thing you kept from me all my life. My magic. And that’s how we solved this case.”

“It was a mistake to take your power from you and keep you from Bellamy. I’ll take that regret to my grave.” Nana’s voice was getting weaker.

“It wasn’t what you took away from me that helped me figure it out. It was what you gave to someone else.” I looked at Bellamy, and he beamed at me. “Edgar was always a controversial choice for alpha. He didn’t have the lineage, but turns out, none of us do. And he was always hot-headed. We feared he’d make enemies in the forest.”

“I don’t understand what this has to do with you finding the locket.”

“I had another one of those dreams, and it showed me who took the locket. Well, sort of. In the dream, I saw the theft happen through the eyes of the culprit. And I knew she was doing it to protect her mate. Our alpha. Sage knew my magic was taken from me, and the locket could bring it back. But she didn’t know that its power was keeping you alive.”

“So will you challenge Edgar for his title, Bellamy?”

He shook his head. “Clover has a better idea.”

“The locket is mine, which means the magic belongs to me.” This wasn’t news to Nana. “It was part of the deal that you broke. You were losing power before it went missing, Nana. And I’ll do everything in my power to keep you with us as long as I can, but I don’t want you to have any regrets. I’d like to bring the clans back together. And I want all of you at our mating ceremony.”

“Can you put aside your differences to make the clan stronger?” Bellamy asked.

Alba stepped forward and offered Nana a knotted hand. “I think Clover and Bellamy will be wonderful stewards of our joined clans. I would love to give them a chance to

come into their power and teach us all a thing or two about magic.”

“If you can forgive me, I’d love to introduce my clan to yours.” Nana closed her hand over Alba’s. “I’ve always wanted to know what could’ve happened if our clan had true magic, and now we have a chance to find out. I know the two of you won’t let me down.”

Back to Where It All Began

Bellamy

“Kinda funny that we’re headed back to where it all began.” Beau grinned before he took a swig of his beer. “Never thought you’d be getting mated at a sex club.”

I could do him one better. I never thought I’d have a mating ceremony. “The Stepchild is the only place in Granger Falls that can handle a bunch of rowdy bears and wolves.”

The consolidation of the clans had just begun—our first order of business was bringing the Lynwood clan completely into this realm. They’d been stuck for decades.

“Go big or go home, Bell.” Brad clapped his hand on my shoulder. “Even though you were only the boss for a couple of weeks, I’ve gotta say, you were the best boss I’ve ever had. If you tell Barrett I said that, I’ll totally deny it.”

“Sounds like you’re writing a eulogy.” Barrett grinned as his employees’ mouths dropped. “This guy isn’t going anywhere. His role might be changing a little, but he’s the best in the business, and I’m not ready to let him go.”

“You’ll have your plate full as alpha of the new clan and working with us.” Beau whistled low. “Barrett might need a new second-in-command.”

“Good thing he’s got the perfect guy who can step in.” Clover startled all of us as she

wrapped her arms around my waist and kissed me.

“Whoa. Isn’t it supposed to be bad luck for me to see you before the ceremony? Aren’t you supposed to be with your glam squad getting ready?”

She put her hand on her hip. “Are you saying I don’t look gorgeous every day?”

Her hair had been loosely twisted away from her face, and there were little crystals dotting the design. Makeup accentuated her features. But she was still wearing a tank top and leggings.

“You get more beautiful every day. That’s the last thing I’m saying.” I leaned in to kiss her and she drew away. “Don’t tell me you have bad news.”

“Hell no. But if you mess up my makeup, everyone will know I snuck off to see you. And as you just said, that’s totally against the rules.”

I tipped my head toward Brad and Beau. “And you think these guys can keep a secret?”

“Not a chance.” She laughed. “But everyone expects them to spread wild rumors. Can you sneak away for a minute?”

“They can’t start the ceremony without us.” I chuckled. “But don’t want anyone to think we bailed on them.”

She shook her head. “I have a surprise for you.”

Before I had a chance to answer, she pulled me by the hand away from the crowd of bears and wolves and out into the yard. I thought she’d stop there, and I was about to protest that I had a gift for her too, but I’d planned to give it to her tonight, after the

ceremony, but she kept going and didn't stop until we were surrounded by trees and birdsong.

She looked up at me and batted her long eyelashes. "Happy mating day."

"Can I kiss you now?"

"Almost." She ran her teeth over her bottom, glossed lip. "It will make more sense when we're done. The ceremony later is for show. For everyone else. But I wanted something for just us. You deserve to have a special day. You're the bravest bear I've ever met, Bellamy Laredo, and I'm proud to be your mate. So every time you come through this forest, whether you're in your human or bear form, I want you to remember this is the place we started our life together."

I didn't notice the bag slung over her shoulder until she pulled it forward and unzipped it. A long ribbon emerged.

"Are you familiar with handfasting?" she asked.

"Is that a Lynnfield tradition?"

She shook her head. "I wanted to find something just the two of us could do in private, and this seemed perfect. Hold my hand, and we'll take turns wrapping it, and when we're done, then you can kiss me."

"Deal."

With the ribbon tied around her ring finger, she held out her hand to me. I was surprised to find mine was shaking. She wrapped the ribbon around our wrists.

She gazed up at me. I was more than happy to oblige her with this ceremony. But

there was something about feeling her hand in mine, the ribbon holding us together, that hit me. I didn't know it was possible to fall deeper in love with Clover Crowley, but I had a feeling this woman would surprise me every single day.

"Your turn," she said with a husky voice.

I circled the ribbon around her wrist, then opened my fingers a little so I could wind it there too.

"That's not how it's supposed to be" She laughed.

"Since when do you care about rules?" I leaned in closer. Sweet moon, did I ever want to kiss her. "You're lucky I don't tie you against that tree and tell everyone to start the party without us."

"Naughty bear."

"You said you wanted me to remember this spot." I wagged my brows and gave the ribbon another wind. "It would certainly be memorable."

"You're not wrong, but I have another idea." She took a deep, shaky breath, reached into her bag, and pulled out an envelope. "This is for you. I hope you like it."

It wasn't easy to open the envelope one-handed. There was a picture inside that looked like it had been printed from an actual camera. It was a little blurry at first, and I needed a moment...holy shit.

"Is this what I think it is?"

Clover nodded excitedly. "I'm pregnant. Only seven weeks—but I asked Chandra about it on our first girls' night, and she suggested that I opt for fizzy water instead of

beer when I said I was late. I didn't want to tell you until I was absolutely sure. Because this is a mature pregnancy, Chandra wants to monitor me closely and make sure everything's okay. That's why she did the ultrasound so early."

"But everything is...okay?"

"It's hard to tell, but we've passed all the tests she's given us with flying colors so far." Clover turned the picture so she could see it too and pointed at the little white dot in the middle. "And you've got to admit, she's gorgeous."

"She is." The only thing that could make me look away from the picture was the beautiful woman who was standing beside me. The mother of my child. All that scar tissue that had held my heart together since she'd rejected me melted away. "Do you know for certain we're having a girl?"

She shook her head. "No, but every time I picture her, she's a girl."

"Never thought I'd ever have a chance to be a dad."

"You'll be amazing." She ran her fingers over the ribbons. "I'm so happy we get to do this together. We get to teach our little one magic. The right way. No more secrets. No more lies."

"Can I kiss you now?"

"Abso-fuckin-lutely." She shrieked as I somehow managed to lift her off the ground while our hands were still tied together. I spun her around, letting the sun catch the light on the crystals in her hair. She looked like a goddess. A queen.

My mate.

Our lips tangled together as I lowered her feet to the ground, but we were still spinning, the world orbiting around us as we said all the things that words couldn't. The love between us poured hopes and dreams into the cracks of the pain and heartache from the last fifteen years. But it didn't make them go away. Those scars, those mistakes would make us stronger.

I drew away from her, a completely different bear than I was the morning she'd walked into my office. I was a broken man who'd stopped dreaming. Now I realized I couldn't have dared to dream big enough.

"Ready to go do this in front of the clan?" I asked her.

"So ready." Her eyes widened. "I have to get the dress on. So you'll still have a little surprise when I walk down the aisle."

"I have a better idea." Luck and superstition were the least of my concerns. My mate was pure magic. "I know you plan to have Anders walk you down the aisle and give you away, but let's do this our way. I say we enter together, and the next time we see our friends and clan, it will be as a family."

"I love it." She went up on her tiptoes and kissed me again. "You'll be an incredible alpha, and the most amazing mate I could ever ask for."

Thank you!

I hope you enjoyed reading Bellamy and Clover's story as I did writing it! It's been so much fun to return to Sawtooth Forest and see things from a different perspective.

Next bear on the case? Beau's been called up to protect a wolf shifter actress who's gotten mixed up in some bad business. Not just any actress, his celebrity crush. Can he keep things professional while he's spending every moment with Kayla?

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:43 am

He Was Ready To Deliver The Goods

Kayla

“That’s a wrap on Kayla!” the director announced. She smiled at me warmly as the sound guy approached to unclip my mic. “Great work. See tomorrow, bright and early.”

I groaned playfully, but the truth was, I was so thankful for my seven seasons on *The Wolf’s Moon*. Like hashtag blessed to be an actress with such a rare, steady gig. The cast and crew had become my family, but it didn’t mean I wasn’t excited about an early escape. Just because I’d only had one scene scheduled on the call sheet didn’t guarantee a short day. Shooting schedules changed constantly, and sometimes the simplest scenes took forever to film. But this one had been quick, and I was free.

As I headed to the hair and makeup trailer for a warm towel to clean my face while they took my extensions out, I made a reservation for hot yoga. Once I was out of my costume and back in comfy clothes, I headed out to the van waiting for me outside my trailer.

“Hey, Jimmy. Boy, am I glad to see you,” I called out as I arranged my bags in the backseat and buckled my seatbelt. “These short days always make me feel like I’m getting away with something.”

Jimmy simply grunted, and didn’t wait for me to settle before he drove off.

Odd.

He was usually a chatterbox. We'd spent a lot of time together over the years as he drove me to and from set, and I loved listening to his stories about his recently retired wife, his son who was training to earn a spot on a Continental Football Association team, and his granddaughter who'd recently been diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes. I'd only seen pictures of her on his phone, but he'd told me enough about her that I felt like her honorary auntie.

"Is everything okay?" My heartbeat sped up, worried something had happened to that sweet little girl. I lifted my sunglasses and took a good look at the driver. "I'm sorry, you're not Jimmy."

First rule of set: Make friends with all the teamsters. Some of the drivers were a little rough and tumble, but they could also be the world's biggest teddy bears. If they liked you, they had your back through thick and thin.

I'd never seen this guy before.

"Nope." It was more grunt than word. "Jimmy had something he had to take care of."

That didn't sound good. "Not Ella, I hope."

"Who's Ella?"

Okay, something was definitely wrong. Anyone driving Jimmy's van would know the name of his granddaughter. He had a picture of her taped to the dashboard. Her little smiling face was still there. This was definitely his van.

"Who are you?" It came out more hostile than I intended, but my hackles were standing on end inside me. My wolf's intuition was never wrong. Right now, she was telling me to hold off on my apology and get ready to fight, a sentiment that sent a shiver down my human spine.

“I’m Mike,” he said.

I gave him a moment to elaborate, but he seemed to think that was enough information to share.

“How long have you worked on The Wolf’s Moon ?” Even though something felt off, I’d give him the benefit of the doubt. We were a family on this show. Which meant we welcomed all kinds of personalities.

Something’s not right about this guy , my wolf cautioned. His energy is weird.

“Just started.” Those words were a little more eloquent.

He must have come highly recommended to already be trusted driving the cast to and from their homes. Not that I thought of myself as a big deal, but we had some huge names on this show—Logan Mathis and Amelia Barrett regularly drew fans from all over the country hoping to catch a glimpse of them in action.

The GPS urged Mike to get on the freeway.

“I hate to tell you how to do your job, but this isn’t the way to my house.” I chuckled nervously.

“It’s a shortcut,” he grunted.

“We’re headed north, but I live south of town.” Maybe he got the addresses mixed up. Some of the cast lived up here. He probably confused me with someone else.

I wanted to make this make sense.

His only response was to press down on the accelerator.

I told myself it was because he'd merged...oh what the hell was I doing? My wolf was practically screaming at me. Something was wrong, and I was worried about hurting the new guy's feelings as he got into the fast lane and sped past the first exit.

"Where are going?" I asked. My voice was firm.

"You ask a lot of questions." He picked up his phone. "Yeah. I've got her."

My heart slammed against my ribcage, and my temperature spiked.

A few more grunts and he hung up.

Oh shit. I willed my wolf to stay inside me for a few more moments. Our surroundings were a blur as we sped past them. My wolf was eager to fight, but if she caused a crash, they'd be scraping her off the side of the highway.

I was not in the mood to get maimed or killed because of this asshole.

The windows fogged around me, and my skin stretched.

No. Focus .

With shaking hands, I pulled my phone out of my purse. Who should I contact—production? The police?

A message from Vera, one of the show's producers, lit up my screen. Have you left yet?

I closed my eyes for an indulgently long blink as a wave of relief washed over me. But then my eyes snapped open as my wolf reminded me I was in fucking danger.

I have.

Okay, that's a problem, she wrote. Are you okay? We found Jimmy unconscious behind the trailers.

It took everything I had not to growl. That explains things. I'm with some weird guy named Mike and he's shady AF. We're on the freeway headed north. Wrong direction.

We've called the police. Can you get any more info about him?

I couldn't see much more than the back of his head. He wore the unofficial driver's uniform of a hat, sunglasses, and a hoodie.

He's Caucasian and has a dark, scruffy beard. Maybe around forty. Looks like a crew guy.

Great. Keep talking to me. We're tracking your location.

It should've comforted me, but it sent a chill down my spine.

No, this jackass didn't get to intimidate me. I threw my shoulders back and stared into the rearview mirror until he shifted his head, acknowledging my gaze.

"Who are you working for?"

"The show." Another grunt.

"I'd love to believe you, but 'I've got her' isn't normal crew communication. Not to mention, we're going the wrong way."

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel. The way his knuckles whitened made me think he might have been a shifter too.

“What are you?” Maybe that would be a better question. “And who are you bringing me to?”

“Shut up.”

“Absolutely not,” I growled. “If you’d talked to Jimmy before you stole his van, you’d know I like to chat on the way home. But you probably didn’t say anything to him before you knocked him out.”

“I said shut up!” The last two words were more of roar, but he didn’t strike me as a cat shifter.

“The police are coming,” I said as calmly as I could manage. “So you might as well tell me everything.”

He took in a deep breath as he changed lanes, slowing down the van, slightly. Didn’t feel like he was giving in. More like putting plan B into action.

“If you tell me, maybe I can help you,” I offered, even though each word tasted disgusting as I said them.

“Mark Peters,” he finally said. “That’s the name I was given. Don’t know anything else. Unlike you, I know better than to ask too many questions.”

With those two words, he told me everything that I needed to know. I’d met Mark on an online dating site. He’d totally catfished me, and looked nothing like his picture. To be fair, it might have been him, about twenty years before our first date. I’d been ready to storm out of the restaurant but somehow he convinced me to stay for a drink. I made sure it was a mocktail and didn’t let it out of my site. Mark was a big fan of the show and seemed to have a hard time understanding that I wasn’t actually Regina, my character.

I'd met many superfans before, but this was beyond. Mark thought Regina owed him something. Like my first born.

With a quick enaction of the Friend Emergency Bailout Text system, I excused myself and got the fuck out of there. Deleted my dating profile on the ride home.

Didn't stop him from texting me. Not that I ever gave him my phone number. Or sending gifts to set. A few days later he showed up at the pool of my apartment complex. Needless to say, I don't live there anymore.

Mike slowed the van as we approached the offramp.

We're getting off the freeway at exit 98, I texted Vera. And I'm gonna shift.

I barely had a chance to drop the phone before my skin split, and fur blossomed in its wake. Forget about getting out of these sweats. I'd forever be pissed because this set was so cute.

"What the fuck?" Mike swerved as my fully formed wolf leapt over the backseat.

He narrowly missed the cars stopped at the red light as the van veered into a ditch, rocking back and forth, threatening to roll over.

Mike came at me, still in his human form, not even waiting for the van to come to a full stop. He was determined to deliver the goods, dead or alive.

Like. Fucking. Hell I would let that happen.

I smashed through the passenger's side window and made a run for it.