

A romantic scene set in a forest. A woman with her hair in a bun is laughing joyfully, looking up at a man. The man has a beard and is smiling back at her. They are both shirtless. In the lower right background, a brown bear is visible, looking towards the camera. The overall lighting is soft and natural, suggesting a bright day in a wooded area.

LUCK
OF THE

Paw



NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MILLY TAIDEN

LUCK OF THE PAW

PARANORMAL DATING AGENCY
BOOK 77

MILLY TAIDEN



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Shaara Patrick dreams of a quaint boutique inn, laughter of kids in the yard, and a loving husband. But her meager clerk's wage keeps those dreams distant. Then, Gerri Wilder enters her life, bringing with her hope and romance. **The shifter she's set up with is handsome and sweet, so there's obviously something wrong with him. Right?**

Lincoln Travis, the alpha of his bear clan, seems to have it all—wealth, looks, and women dying for his attention. Yet, an emptiness lingers; he craves his fated mate. When Gerri reappears in his life, Lincoln's spirits soar. **And when he meets Shaara, he knows that this strong, beautiful and hard-working woman is the one for him.**

Gerri's matchmaking magic intertwines Shaara and Lincoln's paths. But Shaara's heart isn't easily won. Their first meeting is a disaster, yet Lincoln refuses to give up. Can he make her fall for him despite his own failings and the fact that his brutal bearish nature may scare her? **And can romance win the day when danger lurks around every corner?**



LUCK OF THE PAW

PARANORMAL DATING AGENCY

NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MILLY TAIDEN

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are fictitious or have been used fictitiously, and are not to be construed as real in any way. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

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—For my readers,

Thank you for still loving the Gerri's matchmaking.

ONE



SHAARA

“You know who we are, don’t you?” the snobby blonde sneered as she flipped her hair. Her posse looked straight down their noses at Shaara with disgust.

“I don’t. I’m sorry.”

The group looked appalled.

Even if she had known whoever the hell these people were, she still would have said the same thing.

I’m so sick of these entitled bastards. Assuming everyone on God’s green Earth knows them for... let me guess, making a TikTok?

“We go by the handle ‘Speak out or don’t,’” one piped up, expecting that to explain everything.

Shaara looked at them blankly.

“You know, on TikTok? Haven’t you seen our videos? They’re, like, viral and shit.”

Shaara tried to stifle back a laugh. *Nailed it.*

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t really do much social media, specifically TikTok. Anyway, I’m sorry, but we don’t have the suite available you are requesting. Maybe next time it would benefit you to book ahead.” She said it without a smile, but inside she was laughing.

It was the small things that helped her survive day after day at the resort.

She loved working with customers and even had gone to college for hospitality, but working at a high-end resort that catered to those with a high level of privilege was wearing on her. The entitled rich snobs were getting worse every year.

“If you’d like, I could put you in one of our rooms that we have

available.”

“I don’t want another room.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. That’s all I can offer you until our current guest checks out.”

“I need to see your manager,” the blonde queen bee demanded.

“Absolutely.”

This happened more than Shaara cared to admit, but this time the rich kids wouldn’t win. Cher was the current guest, who certainly trumped some TikTok starlet. Besides, Shaara’s manager was her biggest fan.

She called her manager from his office and smiled politely at the waiting group as they folded their arms and snorted at her.

“You’ll be lucky if you have a job after this,” the blonde promised as she and her gang pouted near the lounge.

Shaara continued smiling as her manager scuttled over to assess the situation.

Thankful that she wouldn’t have to deal with them any longer, Shaara welcomed the next guest.

“Hello, welcome to Red Canyon Resort. How may I help you?” She looked up after her computer loaded to the home screen.

The customer was an older woman with short white hair, but she looked so young and vibrant. A vitality radiated through her crystal blue eyes.

She was definitely one of the guests who would stand out and make it easy for Shaara to remember her. The woman smiled a warm genuine smile.

Holy shit, this person is in a good mood.

“Yes. Shaara, is it?” the woman asked, looking at Shaara’s name tag.

She nodded and returned the smile. “Will you be checking in with us today?”

“No, actually.” The woman set her bag on the counter and rested her arms as if she were planning to stay awhile.

“I’m just here for a meeting. My name’s Gerri Wilder.” She stuck out her hand to shake Shaara’s.

She took it and was surprised at how firm and strong the grip was.

Not only that but how pleasant and enjoyable the woman was.

“What conference room is your meeting being held in? I could assist you in getting there if you’d like.”

Ms. Wilder stared at her for a moment with the same smile as if trying to examine Shaara. She blinked suddenly and answered. “No, that’s quite all

right. I know where I'm going. I'm early, anyway. I'm sure I'm being overzealous, but it doesn't hurt to ask."

"I'm sorry, ask what? If you don't mind me asking."

"Not at all! I'm trying to propose that the resort host a charity event. I've got a few selling points I doubt they'll want to miss out on."

Shaara was intrigued. Also, it was nice to indulge in a pleasant conversation instead of the usual.

"What's it for?"

The woman's eyes sparkled as a grin pulled at her mouth. "Public broadcasting and local-access radio."

Shaara let out a laugh. "Really? I didn't know people did that for the radio."

The blue eyes flashed quickly as if trying to contain excitement. Shaara couldn't help leaning in and becoming immersed with what the woman had to say.

"Oh, it's more important than ever." Her eyes widened with seriousness. "People need to listen to their local news. Know what's going on around them or what new places have popped up and need their support. So many big companies are buying up all the little stations and only telling the people what they want them to know. I have nothing against big companies, but it's the small-owned businesses I'm trying to help with this event."

After that, Shaara was ready to be locked into a deep conversation with Gerri. However, a few moments later, someone else was waiting to be helped.

"I'm so sorry. I hate to cut this short, but I need to help the fellow behind you," Shaara said with a slight frown.

"Oh, don't apologize for doing your job." Gerri turned to the newcomer with a remorseful smile.

"It was nice to meet you." Shaara meant it.

"You as well." Gerri grabbed her bag off of the counter. "I'm out of my meeting around lunchtime. If you get a break, I'd like to buy you lunch. It would be nice to continue having an intellectual conversation for once."

Shaara chuckled at the woman's brass. "I would like that as well." Which wasn't a lie. Shaara was intrigued. "But you don't need to buy me lunch. I get it for free three days a week."

"What a perk," Gerri smirked. Shaara couldn't tell if it was sarcastic or not.

“I’ll see you then. Thank you, Shaara.” The white-haired woman gave an award-winning smile once more before heading toward the conference room.

Shaara quickly turned her attention to the waiting customer, a welcoming smile on her face and her mood now lifted. It was amazing what a stimulating, pleasant conversation could do.

“Hello. Sorry about the wait. What can I help you with?”

Shaara was glad that Gerri had asked her to lunch. Something about the lady fascinated and mystified Shaara.

Noon hit, and Shaara had her fill for the day.

She grabbed her purse and headed to the dining room, eager to let the few... unpleasant, for lack of a better word, guests who arrived after Ms. Wilder roll off of her back.

Gerri spotted Shaara as she entered and waved her down. “Over here! I hope you don’t mind, but I ordered us an appetizer.”

Shaara slid into the seat across from the jubilant woman. “Not at all.”

The waiter came, and the two women ordered a drink and meal.

Once everything was decided, Gerri leaned on the table. “So, tell me about yourself. Are you from around here?” Her eyes were dancing as if everything about Shaara thrilled her.

“Well, uh, no. I’m not from here. I just work here.”

Gerri tilted her head. “So, why the resort? What drew you here?”

“The job, initially. I went to school for hospitality and saw this job opening here. I figured that an exclusive resort was a great opportunity for experience.”

“So this isn’t what you want to do for the rest of your life?”

Shaara let out a harsh laugh. “No! No, I have higher hopes. I just need to raise the money to do it. So now I’m here until I meet that goal.”

“Which is?”

A smile spread across Shaara’s face as she thought about her dream. “To open a boutique inn someday.”

Gerri’s eyes lit up again, almost showing a flash of gold. “That sounds lovely! I love a good small shop. They’re so unique.”

Shaara’s body relaxed. She always got slightly nervous when sharing her dream with people. She wasn’t sure how much more rejection she could take.

“How close are you to reaching that goal?” Gerri looked like she genuinely cared about the answer.

Shaara’s smile faltered slightly. “Not very, actually. I don’t make a

substantial amount of money here, but I'm building it slowly. I do a little day trading on the side. Nothing too risky but enough to push things along. I'm still a ways off, but I know if I keep going, I'll make it happen."

"You're probably one of the most positive people I know," Gerri remarked, leaning back into her seat as the waiter served their orders.

"Well, thank you."

After their first bite, Gerri had another more personal question for Shaara. "How's your love life?"

Shaara coughed a little as she chewed. "My love life?"

Gerri nodded, her blue eyes sparkling as if they knew the answer to a game that Shaara didn't even know she was playing.

Why lie? The woman was lovely and she hadn't had an honest conversation with someone non-judgmental in forever. "Non-existent."

"If you had it your way, what would be in your life right now? Besides the boutique."

Shaara set her fork down. She thought she would have to take longer to answer than she did. But deep down, she pictured the same thing over and over along with the boutique inn.

"A husband. Good-looking, of course," she joked. "A couple of kiddos running around the inn. A family." She sighed. "God, I really want a family."

"Sounds like a wonderful life. What if you could make the majority of that a reality?"

Shaara shot to attention and noticed that the woman's face had grown serious, her blue eyes seeming to turn a shade darker.

"Tell me, Shaara. Would you be opposed to dating?"

"Uh..." She was too busy to date, but she had a feeling saying that was wrong.

Gerri smiled. "It's okay to want success in life. But the way you sighed when you said a family makes me feel you should at least make time to date and see if you can do both at the same time."

She nodded. "Good point."

"So...would you be open to dating a shifter?"

All she could do was stare. She didn't know what to say. She looked at Gerri to see if she was kidding, but she looked eager to hear an answer.

"I, uh..." Shaara had heard of shifters, but they usually kept to themselves. She didn't know much, just enough that she definitely knew to be intimidated by them and that they stuck to their own. "I don't know

enough to say either way. I mean, I don't see anything wrong with it; I just never really thought about it before."

Gerri's intense face transformed into a mischievous smile. "There's not much to know. They are fairly similar to humans besides a few things here and there. But that's something you learn as you get to know one. Each pack or clan is different."

"I'm starting to think you may have had an ulterior motive to our lunch," Shaara joked with a nervous laugh. She wasn't mad, just curious about Gerri's hidden agenda.

Gerri's eyes glinted gold once again, only for a moment. "I may have. I did come here for a meeting about the charity but bumping into you was a bonus. A delightful bonus."

"And why is that?"

"Because I'm in the business of setting people up. Shifters mainly, but they sometimes pair better with a human than with their own kind."

Shaara became confused. "Wait, how would you know if I make a good match for whoever you think I may fit with?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's a little complicated to go into depth. I just get a feeling and go off that. I have a rather solid record to prove I'm good at it too." She winked at Shaara and sipped her drink.

Shaara's mind raced. *I've never been with a shifter before. Hell, I haven't even talked to one before that I know of.* She looked again at Gerri. There was something about her that told Shaara to trust her.

It couldn't hurt to say yes. Anything's better than standing still. Can't really bitch about not having a man when I don't put myself out there. Plus, I have no time while trying to save up every dollar I make.

As Shaara pondered, she realized she couldn't come up with a reason not to go for it other than being scared, and that wasn't good enough.

She shrugged and gave a shaky laugh. "I don't see why not. Sure."

Gerri flashed a face-covering smile, causing Shaara to mimic it.

This woman made her feel good. Like the almost-stranger understood her. It was odd, but she just went with it.

Gerri clapped her hands together, startling Shaara. "Perfect!" The older woman slid out of her seat and grabbed her purse off the chair. "You enjoy the rest of lunch. The bill has already been taken care of. I need to get on my way."

Shaara was confused. Weren't they just talking about setting her up and

now she was going to be left high and dry?

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, quite. I need to be heading out. I have another stop to make, but we’ll be seeing each other very soon. For the charity event.” She patted Shaara on the shoulder. “It was a pleasure meeting you. We’ll be in touch. And I’m so glad that you’re open to new things.” She winked again and headed out of the dining area.

Shaara sat in a state of shock. The woman who had just left was real, but their conversation had changed course so abruptly. In a matter of moments, it felt as if Shaara was about to get a shot at an exciting experience, even if that shot was presented with vague answers and the wistful promise that Gerri would be in touch.

She sighed. She felt like she could trust the woman, but she knew to be wary when something seemed too good to be true.

TWO



LINCOLN

Lincoln paced around his office as he tried to end the phone call with a new investor.

“I’ll have my assistant draw up the paperwork,” he promised.

“Splendid! Thank you so much.”

Lincoln’s smooth voice recited his favorite response. “You’re welcome. And thank you for doing business and trusting us to take care of your investments.” He clicked off the phone and sat in his chair, pleased with himself for gaining another client.

For a twenty-eight-year-old, Lincoln was doing pretty well in the business area. Hell, who was he kidding? He had it made. Alpha of his bear sleuth, a successful stockbroker, and the ladies... Well, there was no issue.

The problem was in finding the right one.

He was sick of lacking a real connection with any girl he slept with. Sure, the chase was fun, but it had gotten so easy lately. His predator senses were not being fulfilled, and neither was the hole in his soul from the lack of true companionship.

The sex was good, most of the time. But Lincoln was yearning for more. If anything, his inner bear was growing more restless with things being just short of satisfactory every time.

He wanted his mate.

Suck it up. We’ve got shit to do. Besides, do you really want to lose your sense of independence?

He adjusted his tie and ran his hand through the long part of his blondish-red hair.

Suddenly, Lincoln’s assistant, Samuel, knocked.

“Mr. Travis?”

Lincoln sat up. “Yes?”

“There’s a Ms. Gerri Wilder here to see you.”

Lincoln’s heart skipped a beat. “Gerri’s here?” he asked in shock.

“That’s what she says. Short white haircut, older...”

“Well, go get her. Bring her in,” Lincoln urged him.

Samuel gave him a curious look but did as he was told.

Lincoln let out a celebratory yet quiet shout. “Yes!”

Could she be here for what I think?

He had met Gerri Wilder years ago at a gathering. He had hoped she would be able to help find his mate after he realized he wanted something more.

He had expected someone who looked much older, given how long she had been around. A vibrant possible fifty year-old was not what he had expected. It was the white hair that made her look older, but her features were not that of an elderly woman. Neither was her personality. The straightforwardness and lewd remarks, on the other hand, were right on the money from what he had heard about her.

She was famous among multiple generations of shifters. She had a hundred percent success rate, but the trick was that it had to happen when she came *to you*. She had a long waiting list, but the wait was worth it.

She had urged him to be patient. The time would eventually come. But he had thought she had forgotten about him by now.

Maybe this is it.

The door swung open, and Gerri stuck her head in. She looked exactly as he had remembered, as if she hadn’t aged a day.

Lincoln rose from his seat to greet her.

“Lincoln! How good to see you.” She bounced in and embraced him in a two-armed hug.

“You as well. How are you?” He flashed his smile and gestured to a chair as he resumed his seat.

He had to control himself. All he wanted was to ambush her with questions like if she was here to finally reveal his fated mate. Lincoln forced the urge down and attempted to be gentlemanly.

“I’m great, dear. I actually came to talk with you about a fundraising event I’m helping put on.”

Lincoln’s heart fell as the enthusiastic older woman talked about some

charity event in Utah for public broadcasting.

“The point of it all was that I was hoping you would want to attend the event as one of the sponsors.”

Lincoln sat quietly for a moment. He tried to look as if he were thinking about what she had just proposed, but his disappointment about the lack of talk about a fated mate was crushing.

He finally pulled himself back into the conversation. “Listen, I have nothing against broadcasting, I really don’t. I just have no interest in it and haven’t ever donated.”

Her smile remained. “Now wouldn’t be a bad time to start though, don’t you think?”

The smile widened. Maybe she was trying to hint at something...

“Wait, is my fated mate in public broadcasting?” *That has to be the only reason she’s pushing this subject so hard.*

“Eh, no.”

Lincoln’s heart fell at the simple word. He sat back in his chair, not being able to help looking defeated. Back to the drawing board.

Gerri leaned forward on the table, clasping her hands together. “However...”

Lincoln’s eyes shot up to meet the matchmaker’s. There was a glint behind her bright blue eyes. Lincoln felt like he was just a pawn in a bigger game of hers.

It made him nervous. He didn’t get nervous.

“Your fated mate *will* be working at the venue where the charity event will be held.” She leaned back in her seat, looking pleased with herself.

His heart jumped. All he could do was just stare at her, letting her words sink in.

So she is here for that!

“Are you interested in sponsoring now?”

He didn’t hide his grin as he admired her gameplay.

“Well played. And yes, I think I will be a sponsor. When and where?” He pulled out his company checkbook and started filling in the blanks for the charity.

“I’ll send you the information over email once everything is confirmed,” Gerri assured him as she politely took the completed check.

She made no secret of looking at the amount that he had filled in. She grinned and shoved the check neatly into her bag. “Thank you for this. You

just bought a table.”

He stashed his pen away and chuckled, his mood now incredibly light. “No. I thank you. This couldn’t have come at a better time. I appreciate it greatly.” He stood and shuffled around his desk to shake her hand.

She took his hand as she rose. “Don’t thank me yet,” she warned.

“Why’s that? I know your success rate.”

Gerri smiled in thanks. “I appreciate that, but it really is different for everyone, and it will be harder in your case than most others.”

Lincoln grew serious. “What do you mean?” He didn’t understand why he was going to be so different.

Gerri raised her eyebrow. “Your mate is a human.”

“A human?”

The woman shrugged. “It happens. And it’s not a bad thing from what I have seen, but you’ll have to work for it.”

“Oh, that won’t—”

“No, really listen to me,” she interrupted. “You’ll have to actually work for this woman. She will need to be romanced and wooed. She’s smart, independent, and determined. Don’t let her good looks and kindness lead you into thinking this will be a cinch.”

Lincoln looked abashed. “What would make you think that is how I would approach her?”

Gerri just held his gaze and gave him a look that blatantly called bullshit on him.

He deflated. “Okay, I got it.”

“Plus, since she’s not a shifter, she won’t have the sense you do that she’s meant to be with you. The pull may be there, but she won’t feel it as you do. It’s going to be a challenge. Are you up for it?”

Lincoln almost laughed in her face.

Was he up for it? Of course, he was. This was his fated mate they were talking about, after all. Plus, he was an alpha. Him? Not be up to a challenge, especially this one? He wouldn’t dare call himself a man if he wasn’t.

“I think I can handle it,” he assured her.

Her smirk made Lincoln grow less confident, but only for a moment.

“I don’t back down from the challenge,” he stated, not only to reassure her but himself as well.

Gerri nodded and headed to the door. She turned before leaving, “I’ll be in touch. Keep an eye out for the information. It should be this week, but I’ll

send over specific details. I'll see you there." She winked and headed out, closing the door behind her.

He'd almost returned to his chair when his door squeaked open and Gerri popped her head in.

"One more thing, I almost forgot. She knows about shifters, and she knows that you're a shifter, so you won't have to hide anything or find a way to break it to her."

"How much does she know?"

She flashed her famous grin. "Enough. You'll be able to fill in whatever questions she may have. Tootles." And she was gone.

Lincoln stared after her for a moment.

He hadn't been expecting a meeting with Gerri. And even if he had, that was not how he had envisioned it going. In truth, it had been a blur, full of information he was still trying to process.

Gerri had wanted to see how interested he still was in finding his true mate. And she had succeeded. He was surprised that his mate was human, but that wasn't the part that stuck with him. Gerri had mentioned he would have to work for that. Woo her.

Lincoln sat in his leather swivel chair and tapped his chin thoughtfully.

He had faith he was going to be able to win over this human woman. Hell, he had to if he stood a chance at having a family and being able to pass down his inheritance of the sleuth leadership.

But that wasn't his main reason.

He wanted to be happy. To share his life with the one person he was meant to be with. So what if she was human?

The problem was that he had to romance her into falling for him.

Maybe it wouldn't be hard, but he realized after Gerri had left that he had never actually pursued a woman before. Being alpha, as well as not too shabby of a looker, he had never had to really work at taking a woman home or convincing her to at least have dinner with him. Human or shifter.

He had never had a hard time dating or finding a bedmate. He hated to feel full of himself, but women just sort of fell at his feet.

He wasn't trying to be arrogant. It was just the truth. He had been lucky that way. Why wouldn't this woman be the same as the rest?

Gerri may have warned him, but did she really know how easy it was for him to get a girl?

Possibly. She seemed to already know more than I ever shared with her,

he thought, recalling her sly look and knowing grin.

He shook his head.

This would more than likely be easy, but if it wasn't, he had to be ready to make the effort. In fact, if she proved to be a challenge, that may be even more of an indicator she was meant for Lincoln.

The more he considered it, the more he realized that he didn't want some simpleton bimbo by his side helping run the sleuth. He needed a competent and driven woman who wasn't half bad to look at. And according to Gerri's warnings, that was exactly what he was in for.

This challenge was becoming more appealing by the second.

Lincoln's inner bear paced excitedly at the thought of what he was about to face. He had to court his mate, like stalking his prey but with a different ending.

A grin stretched over his face at this pleasing metaphor.

While he was plotting all of the different moves he would be able to get away with on his hopeful mate, his computer dinged with a new email.

Lincoln clicked on the unopened envelope icon to view the message.

It was from Gerri. She had already gotten back to him with the date and time for the event.

"Three days at the Red Canyon Resort." He knew of that resort and how high-end it was. It only promised good things from Lincoln's point of view.

He buzzed his assistant, Samuel, and told him to book arrangements for him for the next few days and hold his meetings.

There was nothing pressing at the moment, so Lincoln couldn't care less about taking off for a while in order to mentally prepare for the charity event and meet the person he'd spent years getting ready for.

Once his assistant had confirmation and cleared the calendar for him, Lincoln grabbed his things to go home. He paused and looked at his desk for a moment before opening the top drawer and pulling out a little black book.

It was old, battered, and filled to the brim with numbers from his past conquests.

Lincoln rolled a finger over the familiar binding in his hand, let out a breath, and tossed the full book into his trash bin.

He was confident enough that he wouldn't be needing it ever again after this weekend.

Or at least he hoped.

THREE



LINCOLN

Taking a couple of days off and scoping out the Red Canyon Resort seemed much more enticing than working.

As he drew close to his destination, Lincoln admired the red rocks and buttes of Utah. “I wouldn’t have gotten any work done, anyway,” he reassured himself. “This was the right choice.”

This mini-vacation was not just an excuse to slack off. He was too eager to lay eyes on his mate.

He had grown more and more confident that this would be simpler than Gerri had implied. She didn’t know Lincoln’s track record when it came to women. It almost matched her own.

A tall sandstone adobe building emerged from the desert.

It resembled a mansion set on an island as if it should have been surrounded by palm trees and an oasis. Still, it looked stunning in the barren yet beautiful desert, its soft pink exterior glowing against the red and browns of its scenic background.

He was impressed.

As he pulled his car through the black iron gates, he caught a glimpse of the massive gardens surrounding a hidden pool that lay just behind the resort. Around that, the red sand and rocks created paths to the sand dunes where people cranked up their dune buggies and let their wild side out.

It also promised the perfect picture venue to watch the sunsets and sunrises from the room balconies. Or for the romantics, poolside worked just as well.

He smirked to himself, thinking about the idealistic endeavors he had conjured to win over his mate.

He hadn't put too much thought into wooing her. Mainly he thought about what they could do while getting to know each other better. He may have been cautioned that work would need to be done to win his mate, but he didn't want to overthink it. This type of shit was natural to him.

Lincoln got out of his car, grabbed his bags, and handed his keys to the valet. Once the keys had passed hands, the valet handed a stub with a number to Lincoln and went to park the car.

The alpha hefted his bags and took in the deep fresh air, causing his bear senses to tingle with energy. Even though it was a high-end resort, it still had the freshness of open spaces, which made it unique.

Before heading in, Lincoln looked around at the parking lot wanting to see what he could ascertain about the other guests. There was an endless supply of high-priced, top-of-the-line sport and luxury cars, his being one of them.

He walked inside, and before he could admire anything about the simple yet stunning structure, he was immediately pulled in one direction. Not just in a direction, but to a person. It was an intuitive, unexplained reaction, urging him to look to his right.

A petite woman stood behind the reception desk checking in a couple.

Everything blurred the moment Lincoln laid eyes on her. Everything, that is, but her. She was vividly bright.

She was also absolutely beautiful. Her long dark chocolate hair framed her kind, dark eyes. A bright smile lit up her face as she spoke with the guests.

He knew her without knowing anything about her. This captivating creature was his true mate. He could even feel his inner bear's agreement.

Lincoln was on fire. He was walking toward her before even realizing it. He caught himself and stopped, stepping into the line to give himself a moment to think about his next move.

He had always known he would find her. He just thought he would have a little more time. Plus, the intensity of the attraction was something he had definitely not been ready for.

Lincoln had heard of the mating pull, but he didn't know he would feel it so literally. He always thought of it more as a metaphor. But his gut already knew he had to approach her. There was no denying it. His body wouldn't have let him walk away if he had tried.

The bear in him wanted to just go for it and claim her right here. He

controlled that part and satisfied it momentarily by deciding that he was just going to ask her out.

It's worked for me every time before, so why not now?

He ran a hand through his hair and adjusted his jacket. Puffing his chest out just a bit, Lincoln straightened his posture and readied himself to be called forward.

Her voice floated to him as she obliged the requests of the couple ahead of him. It was angelic and sincere.

Maybe it was the lure of the mating, maybe not. He would never know. But to Lincoln, the woman had it all. It took a lot to control the inner rumblings of his bear.

Finally, it was his turn.

Lincoln stepped forward with a smile. He glanced at her nametag. "Good afternoon, Shaara."

He was wearing his best cologne, the one that had always proven effective. He leaned forward smoothly on the desk, convinced a whiff wouldn't hurt anything.

She smiled her stunning smile at him, her dark eyes full of light. "Good afternoon to you, too, sir. What can I help you with?"

Lincoln felt as if he were in a slight daze right now. Her presence was overwhelming to his senses. It was as if his body was still trying to adjust to all of the extra energy she gave off. It caused him to be almost jittery.

He shook his head and answered her question the only way he knew how. "How about accompanying me to dinner?" He flashed his best smile.

Shaara's face never lost its beam, but Lincoln could see the hesitation in her eyes as she took a moment to respond. "Are you a guest here?"

His smile widened. "Why, yes, I am. Checking in today."

Shaara's eyes looked satisfied and calm now, her smile taking on a mischievous expression as she replied. "I'm sorry, sir. Though it is flattering, staff are not permitted to fraternize with guests. It would give the guests the wrong impression."

Lincoln froze as he slowly registered her answer.

No.

He had to recover. "I'm sure there's always an exception. It wouldn't have to be a date. Just dinner between strangers wanting to get to know each other better."

Her eyebrows raised, but just barely. "I'm sorry, but I don't believe the

resort will see it that way. I'll have to respectfully decline. I wouldn't want to cause a problem for myself, or, of course, for you, sir. But what I *can* help you with is getting you checked into your room."

Her voice still sounded so inviting and completely unfazed by his request. In fact, everything she said was done with that same smile and mirth.

Lincoln was having a hard time dealing with the fact that he was being rejected. It didn't help that it looked like she was enjoying herself a little.

Her eyes had already gone back to the computer screen, getting it ready to check Lincoln in. He felt she was using the monitor as an excuse to not make any more eye contact with him.

Had he offended her somehow?

He ran through their dialogue as he grabbed his wallet from his pocket and pulled out his card and ID.

She gladly took it and entered his information.

Lincoln had to rebound. At least say something, so that her blowing him off wasn't the last exchange that they had.

She handed him his key.

"Thank you so much. I hope I didn't offend you earlier by asking –"

"Don't worry about it. It's just policy, and I like my job, so I just wanted to make it clear. You seem nice enough. So, thanks but no thanks." Her eyes darted apologetically to him quickly before moving just as hastily back to the screen as she clicked nervously.

Was she just pretending to do something until he left?

"Well, thank you. Have a good day." He knocked on the desk as he turned to leave.

"Mr. Travis?"

His heart picked up pace as relief flooded through him. He knew she would come to her senses.

Lincoln turned around with a satisfied smile. "Yes?" The facial expression faltered slightly as he saw what he was being beckoned for.

"You forgot your ID." Shaara held out his driver's license. Her professionally polite demeanor was still right on point.

He forced himself to hide the growing disappointment he felt building as he walked back and retrieved the card.

"Thank you again, Shaara." He spun back around and sulked to the elevators.

Is this what rejection feels like? He shuddered.

He understood that while it may be policy for her, he had the feeling she was thankful that was a rule to fall back on.

Lincoln stepped into the elevator and pressed his floor. He looked back at Shaara, now on to helping the next guest. The golden doors closed.

He stared at his reflection trying to figure out what went wrong in that whole exchange.

He had been confident in going in, but Shaara had just so blatantly turned him down. The ease of it all was what upset Lincoln the most.

It had to be let go of, though. He had time to win her over. He just needed a better approach. Maybe not while she was at work. But she already knew that he was a guest, so that shot any chance out of the water.

She could hardly look at me. The doors opened and his reflection separated. An idea formed in his mind.

He stepped out and roamed toward his room number. Once he got inside the small space, he tossed his bag onto the bed and looked in the bathroom mirror.

What if he tried again, but *not* as a guest?

He had been bothered by how little she had looked at him, but right now, it seemed like it would work to his advantage. Lincoln could reintroduce himself and make a new impression on her. Get a chance to redeem himself.

He had told Gerri that he never backed down from a challenge. It had been a while since he'd had a real one. That was the only reason he'd been shaken by the whole ordeal. And this seemed like the perfect opportunity to revive that competitive side of him. No matter what Shaara threw at him, he wasn't going to back down.

He had to get to know her a little better before he jumped in. He had to observe her in her normal surroundings so she wouldn't feel threatened by him.

He also didn't want to pester her more than he already had. Plus, he had to do it in a way that didn't come off as a stalker. The last thing he needed was to get thrown out by security. "Or even worse, what if you creep her out so much she never considers you?" he mused. "Even you won't be able to recover from something like that."

A small part of him didn't want to simply watch her; it wanted to go for it and tell her everything.

But that was laughable. She would definitely think he was crazy. No, he had to blend into the scenery so Shaara would at least give him the time of

day.

Lincoln looked at the room service menu and called in his dinner.

He didn't want to go out again and risk her paying more attention to him if his plan was going to work. He had to stay in so he could perfect how and what he was going to do and what he hoped to accomplish by watching her tomorrow. Then, the following day would be his *accidental* run-in with the beauty.

He lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling as he waited for his food. Watching her for a day wasn't going to be the hard part. Lincoln could easily stare at her beauty as the world went by.

It was the simple fact that he needed her to see him as others did. His initial approach had not worked, so it was time for a different strategy.

He was mulling over what he should pay attention to tomorrow when there was a knock at the door. Room service.

Once the food was inside, Lincoln stripped down and hopped in the shower before he ate. He wanted to relax and wash away their initial encounter. That way he could start fresh mentally as well.

After he dried off and felt that the shame of rejection had been scrubbed away, he threw on a loose pair of sweats that barely hung on his V-line.

Lincoln grabbed the lid off of the silver platter and flipped on the TV. He sat on his bed and let his mind wander as if he already had his mate lying there beside him. That feeling alone was motivation enough.

He would win over his fated mate, no matter the cost.

Lincoln had to have her and he could hear his bear refusing to go on much longer without his mate.

Whether she knew it or not, Shaara was his prey and Lincoln never lost a chase.

FOUR



SHAARA

The charity event was ramping up quickly, pushing Shaara to the end of her rope. She enjoyed the work to an extent, of course. She had, after all, gained a degree in this type of thing. But managing a hotel wasn't exactly her definition of paradise.

She moved in between checking in guests and resolving problems that popped up at the front desk, to helping with the event set up in the communal room. She hovered from space to space, working tirelessly.

When she was busy checking off tasks, she didn't have time to ruminate on what she felt her life was lacking. A fulfilling career path or a partner to go home to and lose herself in the solace of his arms. Thinking about all that merely depressed her.

It was good to stay focused, feel productive, and look forward to that quiet glass of wine in the tub.

As dusk spilled over the sand, Shaara went into the back room to gather her things to leave for the evening. All that was left was a quick walk around the hotel and check-in with the event coordinators, and she would be out of there.

She was fantasizing in her mind, lost in the reverie of that delicious glass of wine when she saw a man she didn't recognize. But that wasn't what brought her thoughts to a standstill.

Despite being one of the most popular and luxurious hotels in the Red Rock area, the back room wasn't exactly reflective of that. It was more of a giant janitor's closet with foldable chairs and tables set up haphazardly and small cupboards and lockers with rust crawling along their edges. The staff consistently struggled to fit their personal effects into such limited spaces.

There wasn't much room to move around, and during popular event dates and holidays, it was easy for this sad section of the building to descend into utter chaos.

So when Shaara spotted the stranger, they nearly rubbed shoulders. She was turning around after having gathered everything into her purse when he was standing there – a mountain among the canyon city.

“Hi,” the man said. “My name is Lincoln. I’m assisting in the organizational setup for the charity event. Someone said I could find the speaker podium in here, but I’m not seeing it. I think they’re just trying to get me out of the way.” The scent flowing around him invigorated her senses. She breathed deeply of the sultry aroma.

Shaara had never been struck by someone’s oozing charm in her entire lifetime. Men, as far as she was concerned, either did too much or too little when it came to obtaining a one-night stand or something remotely resembling a committed relationship.

She had been wooed by the ones with beaming smiles and slick platitudes, but mainly when her brain and body were lubricated by liquid courage. The spark, if one could even call it that, fizzled into a dull coal flatness the second she awoke from the orgasm-less night.

But the man before her made her skin feel electric, her tummy bursting with an excitable glow. Simply by looking at him, she felt the tingling of her clit come to life.

God, am I so fucking desperate?

“Hi,” she said with a grin regarding his comment, trying to not signal the flutter in her chest. “I’m Shaara Patrick. I work at the front desk. And no, the podium isn’t in here.”

The man was tall, insanely tall, to the point where she had to crane her neck backward an unreasonable amount as he approached with an open hand. His teeth glistened under the dull lighting, his dark reddish blonde hair was cut, close and pristine. His beard’s neatness matched in shade. And those eyes – dark as a midnight sea.

Shaara took his hand, having to clear her throat and force herself to stand up straight to keep from shriveling the way her body wanted to. He gripped it hard, but she knew by the looks of his taut muscles that he could turn her bones to dust if he wanted.

“I’ve been in and out a lot today. I’ve seen you at the check-in desk and running around constantly. Seems like a long day for you, a lot of demands.”

Shaara nodded, trying to ignore the strain of his brawn beneath his button-up shirt. She wasn't a woman who was usually drawn to a man's stereotypical masculine features, but something about this Lincoln fellow was getting her juices flowing. She gave him a tiny, polite smile, trying to stifle the heat that wanted to rise into her pale cheeks like pinpricks.

"It is, but I don't mind it," she said, fibbing to herself. "It's an important role that not many people get to be a part of."

Lincoln nodded, then gazed around the room in an animated fashion. He then lifted and stroked the back of his neck in an *aww shucks* gesture that had Shaara swooning.

"I'm not from around here. You seem like you know where you're going. Would you happen to know anywhere where we could get a hot meal and a drink?"

Shaara smirked, charmed and undeniably impressed.

"We?"

"Yeah," he said, flashing that debonair grin. "You've been working hard all day. I think radical rest is just as important as radical hard work, don't you?"

Shaara wanted to congratulate him on his smooth moves, but that would have been sarcastic and disingenuous. The man seemed like he actually wanted to take her out and help her relax without a veiled ulterior motive which was rare.

Shaara decided to give in on a whim. Maybe it was because she was so exhausted. Maybe it was because it had been a long time since anyone offered to take her out on a proper date. Maybe it was because she hadn't been fucked until her eyes rolled into the back of her head in what seemed like a millennium.

Whatever the reasoning, it really didn't matter. If she was going to be miserable the majority of the time about her lackluster life, she was going to allow herself to indulge in a few scattered pleasures every now and then.

Fuck it, the world's shortest prayer.

She spun around to take her phone out of her purse and googled the address of a place she often went to with her coworkers. It had good BBQ and bar food along with live music. It would be a good vibe for a casual hookup.

"There's this place called The Axe not far from here," she said, checking the location and turning the phone to face the stranger. "I've got to do a few

rounds before I lock up here. Think you can meet me there in about an hour?"

Lincoln nodded, that wide, award-winning smile never leaving his face, then took down the address in his phone. When Shaara left the backroom, she felt like she had been holding her breath.

Shaara went through the rounds, admittedly ridiculously distracted. She was excited for the first time in a long time. She enjoyed live music and the nightlife of Utah but hadn't really relished it for several months. It always made her too contemplative, to the point where she would end up brooding under the stars.

But she wasn't going to be that sad sack tonight. No, she wanted fun. She wanted to feel alive, down to the DNA in her bones. She wanted to have sex with that strange, devilishly hot man, carnality for carnality's sake because wasn't that what life was all about? Taking chances?

IT WAS NEARLY ten at night by the time she left the hotel, making a quick pit stop at her apartment to slip into something more alluring. She didn't have much that wasn't black or too uniform-like, so she wore tight-fitted jeans and a black V-neck shirt. The top plunged enough to get his attention, and she sprinkled water lily perfume onto her nape and cleavage.

Then she unfurled her dark hair from the bindings of the braid. She brushed a comb through it briefly, leaving it to look wavy and untidy, but in a sexy way.

With an extra pair of underwear stored in her purse, she took a cab to The Axe. Her heels dug into the pebbles of the driveway where she was dropped off, a layer of clouds shielding glimmers of moon and starlight.

He was there right on time and waiting for her at the entryway. He had changed, too, into jeans and a dark blue polo.

The place was bustling, neon signs buzzing in flamingo pink, and dazzling frog-green luminescence casting the smokers outside in a brutal luminance. When they passed the doors, the throttle of the guitars boomed, the smash of drums not exactly rhythmic but powerful in zeal. It was hot and sweaty, but Shaara found herself falling into the fever of the primal expression of emotions the setting was drawing out of her.

They found a booth away from the musicians, tucking in close as they

ordered drinks and food. His arm pressed against hers, their skin already starting to get sticky after only a few minutes inside. Shaara loved it.

“So you’ve never been here before?” Shaara bellowed into his ear, delighting in the musky scent of his exposed neck.

“Nope, never,” he replied, speaking firmly into her ear. “An opportunity to help came from out of the blue, and I figured, why not? A different setting, change it up.”

Shaara enjoyed the sensation of his breath tickling the shell of her ear. It made her skin bloom into goose bumps, and she was no longer hiding it.

“Was it the desert that attracted you?” Shaara asked, eagerly waiting for his reply.

“Something like that,” Lincoln said, turning to gaze into her eyes.

Her tongue slid out of her without realizing what she was doing. His eyes flicked down it, and she felt a pulsing beat in the depths of her core.

“What?” she asked, grinning slyly.

Before he had a chance to respond, the server arrived with their drinks and snack. They had ordered two rum and cokes as well as a generous plate of Mexican-style nachos. They separated briefly, taking large gulps of their beverages and beginning to pick at their food.

Shaara was surprised by how hungry she was. She had eaten, but the pressure of the event had put her meals on hold.

She scarfed down a few handfuls while they chatted, the man’s look of admiration never leaving her. His energy radiated over her body. She knew in an intuitive way that it wasn’t the food he was ravenous for.

It was fresh and invigorating.

“So you were going to tell me about how much you love the desert?” Lincoln said after they cleared the plate, glass tumblers in hand.

Shaara smiled, raising the glass up to her lips while she mulled her answer around in her head. The booze was certainly having a flirty effect on her. She felt spicy in her simple jeans and T-shirt getup. Though he was slick with his peeks at her cleavage, she managed to spot him a few times when she was looking away, which only enhanced the feeling of enticement.

“I wouldn’t say I *love* the *desert*. It’s the place I grew up. There’s certainly romance to it, but I have grown weary of it. A little indifferent, I suppose.”

Lincoln put his glass down, then leaned in close. His introspective look was still charming, one that hypnotized Shaara along with the mixture of

alcohol. He pressed his arm against hers, then tilted his mouth along to the shell of her ear.

His voice was dusky, that darkened essence of a bedroom tone. She was glad music blared to cover up the groan that emerged from the small opening of her lips.

“You seem like a sweet desert rose to me. One whose folds and petals I want to explore. You are fucking gorgeous, Shaara.”

Shaara could have sworn she felt her pupils dilate. She glided one hand down to his thigh, teasing the threshold where she knew without knowing there was a growing bulge.

She felt like a wild woman. And she wanted to take it all out on the seductive stranger.

She pinned her lips against his cheek, then slid them up to his ear. In a vigorous and gritty voice, she went in for the kill with a savage whisper.

“I’m taking you home, right now.”

They swam through the crowd after he slammed a handful of bills on the table. Everything felt surreal. The band’s rising, jolting chords, the heat of the venue, the collision of salty bodies. Shaara had never felt such an urgency for sex in her entire life. It made her feel alive.

But when they emerged into the night air, Lincoln suddenly stopped. Still holding hands, Shaara shot a primal look of need back at him.

His expression had changed entirely.

“Shaara, I can’t go home with you under false pretenses. I have to tell you something.”

FIVE



LINCOLN

Lincoln had meant every word that had come out of his mouth that night at The Axe, other than the blatant lies, of course. His bear inside him was purring with intrigue every time her perfume drifted in his direction, a smothering, enchanting fragrance.

He'd had to keep his hands under the table, his nails digging into his jeans, even tearing them a little, to keep from scooping Shaara into his arms and whisking her off into the desert night. He had never felt such a pull with any woman in his life, which was part of the excuse he said to himself when he decided to deceive her.

He never could have imagined how quickly and easily he'd be taken by Shaara. The rush of endorphins triggered by her fated-mate status soaked his brain in testosterone and dopamine. Being around Shaara was akin to feeling drunk with a blast of heroin through his veins as the cherry on top.

He hadn't considered how open she would be to taking him to bed, which in itself was thrilling to him and his crooning bear. But the moment she'd pulled him through the ruckus of the bar and into the night, his mind was swarmed with guilt.

"Wait a second," he said.

They were moving through to the parking lot where a cab could be called. She'd stopped abruptly, still gripping his hand as the Utah night sang sweetly.

"What?" she implored.

Lincoln took his hand from hers, then shifted his eyes onto the road beyond them. The Axe was a fair distance from any gas station or the hub of civilization that the Red Canyon Hotel represented. Surrounding it was bare,

dry, barren land. It was idyllic as a southern-cowboy love story, but Lincoln feared what he had done was going to soil that.

She stared at him, her expression of sensual intrigue having completely vanished. Her dark eyes splintered with a fiery light that he knew instinctively wasn't lively.

When Lincoln spoke, it was in a nearly embarrassed tone that he couldn't recognize.

"I can't go on with this under false pretenses, Shaara. I'm not who you think I am."

Shaara turned and folded her arms over her chest. Her eyebrows knitted together with that protective glare many women have been forced to adopt for a sense of self-preservation.

"Is this some kind of cheap trick to encourage women from going home with strangers?" she said in a snarky voice.

Lincoln shook his head. Patrons from the bar filtered past them, too drunk to be headed to their own vehicles. But Lincoln couldn't deal with any of that at the moment.

"Can we talk about this somewhere private?" he asked.

Shaara shook her head with a snort of laughter.

"You just told me that you aren't who you say you are and then you ask me to go somewhere alone with you?" she snapped at him. "Do you think I was born yesterday?"

Lincoln raised his hands in the air defensively.

"No, no, not like that. I swear. I know Gerri Wilder. She sent me here as a part of her matchmaking service."

Lincoln saw Shaara tighten her grip around her arms. It made him feel sick.

"Tell me here, right now, what is going on," she demanded.

God, he had fucked up royally.

Lincoln ran his hands over his face and let out a grunt. Her eyes went wide for a moment with fear.

He wasn't used to being out of control of any situation. He was a businessman, a stockbroker who wasn't to be trifled with. He had a firm and steady hand when making deals that would benefit him and his company.

So why was the woman standing before him, with her long black hair glossy as a raven's wing, having such an effect on him?

The concept of matehood was as baffling as it was exciting. He decided

he had no other choice than the truth.

“Shaara, I’m a shifter. I’m the person you were matched with. You are my fated mate.”

Shaara looked away from him as car headlights passed by, streaks of light like paint splashed onto a canvas. When they returned to silence, her demeanor remained closed off to him.

“I don’t know what any of that means, and I don’t care to,” she said, her tone stinging in the dead air between them. “Why did you decide to go about getting to know me like this? Why not just come up to me in truth, as yourself, Lincoln? If that’s even your name.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. He knew he wasn’t going anywhere with her at that moment. She was too furious. He could sense it like a person senses the first scent of rain after a heatwave.

But he had to lay it all out there. There really wasn’t any persuading this human.

“Lincoln is my name. I checked in earlier today, and you didn’t give me a second look,” he confessed. “You said you didn’t fraternize with guests. I knew you had an idea about me as some rich, righteous prick. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Shaara snorted out laughter, then rolled her eyes so only the whites were visible for a few seconds. She then pulled her phone out from her pocket and began to type something out.

“You had so many options other than subterfuge.”

Lincoln stood there, feeling like a right idiot as she began to call a cab. He wanted to explain to her the power of the fated mate pull, how it corrupted his mind into behavior he normally wouldn’t partake in, but she had already made her decision. She slid her phone back into her purse and began to walk along the roadside.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” she snarled back. “Getting a cab home. Thanks for nothing. Stop stalking me or I’ll call the police.”

Lincoln’s shifter nature wanted to follow her, force her to listen to him and take in the entire story. He wanted to rip the door of the cab off its hinges as it pulled up in front of her, to make her take a look at him and just *see* how deeply he already cared for her.

But Gerri had warned him. She wasn’t a shifter. That didn’t only mean she didn’t understand the idea of fated mates and how their connection was

providence. She also wouldn't be able to comprehend how overtaken with emotion alphas could be. He would likely terrify her, leaving an indelible mark as an untamed monster in her eyes.

So he did the one thing he felt he actually had control over. He stood there, watched her get into the cab, and let it drive off. It was swallowed into the bluish-purple haze of darkness.

He was alone, just outside the hum of life of The Axe, fists curled tightly into themselves. Lincoln – the alpha of his sleuth of bears back home, a force to be reckoned with, who took shit from absolutely no one – was abandoned just before the stroke of midnight.

The wind brushed up against him as the sound of drums and guitars crooned in the establishment. His anger was an emotion he knew well, but ever since laying eyes on Shaara, it had sprouted vines, growing more nuanced than he had ever experienced.

In the past, when Lincoln Travis's pride was dented, he lashed out in the form of temporary self-destruction. It was a crutch. But that never stopped him from participating in cruel acts or promiscuity for the sake of it.

It would suppress his wounds, going back into the bar and picking up some random chick, or picking a fight that he knew he would undoubtedly win. But that was the past Lincoln – the new one had emerged inside him, nurtured and satiated from the mere sight of one Shaara Patrick.

New Lincoln would never lay his hands on another woman. The new one wanted to sing somber songs to the moon, lamenting his lost darling.

"Fuck's sake," he growled aloud, hating himself for a second.

He could call a cab just like Shaara had, not driving his own luxurious car so his cover as a lowly member of society wouldn't be blown. But he felt too energetic and razzed from their exchange. He decided that since the desert was open and vacant, the cloak of night would protect him from being spotted by wandering eyes.

Lincoln slunk a bit farther into the black, tucking his phone and smaller pieces of his clothing into a tiny pack that would remain strapped to him as he ran. When he had them secured, he took one last look back at The Axe.

He had moved out to the sandy landscape nearly half a mile away where the canyons lay. It was just past midnight, and the party was merely getting started at the popular pub. Patrons siphoned in and out while the glow from the neon lamps vibrated. No one was paying him any mind. All they were concerned about was the next drink and the next set of lips they were going to

kiss.

Lincoln sighed. He had never felt lonely. He knew it then, standing in the shadows with the bar like a lone boat bobbing in the inky ocean, the plight of true isolation.

But he shook it off like a dog coming in from the rain, shifting quickly into his bear form. A wash of relief moved through him, fitting into his true skin to express himself most authentically. It was something that humans could never really understand, that being a shifter meant wearing an ill-fitted suit of human skin and appearance. Transforming into his animal was like slipping into a warm bath, all of his muscles stretched and massaged through mere existence.

Lincoln wasted no time in getting going, heading back toward the resort. He galloped on all fours, kicking up the sand as his speed increased, watching as the veil of the clouds drifted away to reveal the shine of a million billion tiny balls of gas. It made him go faster, harder, the beauty of the sky and its glassy sheen exterior inspiring him to push himself more than he had in ages. His muscles clenched and unclenched, blood pumping through them like maddening rivers, driven by the sheer rush of being alive.

There wasn't a second in his journey through the desert that Lincoln wasn't thinking of Shaara. He figured that would be the way it was from now on. She was his mate, plaguing his thoughts, enchanting his heart, whether she was committed to him or not. He felt forlorn when he got closer to the resort.

He stopped at a fair distance outside the resort's entryway where he noted a gathering of guests hanging out poolside. Bears weren't really acclimated to a desert ecosystem, so spotting one would be a big deal. He didn't need to deal with that on top of trying to woo Shaara.

So he parked himself briefly before shifting back into his human state. He craned his head upward, peering up at the bright, shimmering starlight. Then he snuck along the shadows to crawl into his car where he had an extra set of clothes to redress.

Lincoln was a man capable of engaging in self-reflection, but only when it was productive. His bold and independent personality allowed him to usually get whatever he wanted, so reflection was rarely useful. But as he sat under the midnight sky, he realized that maybe, just maybe, the circumstances would require him to become bolder, but in a far more solemn way.

He really wanted a mate. He had known about the idea of it, of course, all of his life but rarely voiced his desires for one. Most of his focus had been on his job and status. Then there were the women who fell at his feet like loyal subjects. He hadn't ever needed to work hard for any of them.

But those relationships and interactions were hollow and dull. A few good bouts of sex and semi-adventure and the fun would sour. He wanted something that would make his heart ache and would turn him into the yearning poet his soul always knew he was.

Deep down, he wanted someone to worship. Someone to love. Someone who would love him back with the same adoration and ruthless commitment.

He let out a sad cry, expressing himself through sound. It was risky, but his bear needed it.

The desert night howled its crestfallen tune along with him.

SIX



SHAARA

Shaara had gone home in disarray, completely floored by the information Lincoln had revealed. She had felt properly lubricated in both mind and body, ready to have a fun roll in the hay with the sexy stranger. She thought that it would be good for her, not only to release stress but as a pleasurable distraction.

Then, he had gone and told the truth. He was a shifter, and she was his fated mate.

“Fated mate? What the fuck in the supernatural romantic bullshit is that?” she asked her empty car.

She knew what it was vaguely, of course, as did every human since they found out about the existence of shifters. But she wasn’t a professor on the subject. Shifters were more like mythical creatures, ones that existed and sometimes spotted in bars.

Or at least, she assumed they were shifters based on their size and attractiveness. She had certainly fantasized on a few occasions when she allowed herself some indulgence, her fingers crawling toward her heated core, what it would feel like to have one pin her against a wall and make her entire body tremble.

But all that had been just a fantasy. Sex was one thing, but the entire fated mate business? That shit sounded serious.

Shaara slid under the covers of her bed, the moon emerging over the canyons, and barely slept. When her alarm shrieked bright and early, she felt as if she hadn’t gotten a single wink.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She dragged herself from bed, showered, and gave herself a double shot of vanilla hazelnut espresso when she got into the

staff kitchen. She was just as tired mentally as she was physically, but the casual observer wouldn't have a clue.

She fluttered between the front desk, which wasn't as active as the day before, and helped set up for the charity event. It was a curse to be so reliable and meticulous with detail. That meant everyone relied on her. For a moment, she wished she was useless, pushed to the janitor's room to find the podium that wasn't there just to get her out of the way.

On that particular day, all that felt incredibly tranquil to Shaara.

It was just after noon when she took her fifteen-minute break, the thought of Lincoln and the way his eyes burned into her never leaving her thoughts. He was hot without a doubt, and despite the fact that he had deceived her completely, she couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if she had thrown caution to the wind of the Utah night.

Maybe the sex would have been outstanding. Maybe his body pressing against hers could have massaged out all of the sorrow and disappointment that had been raging through her bones. Even though he had lied, he said he had lied for a reason. He wasn't entirely wrong either. If she had been pursued knowing he was a guest, she would have drawn a harsh line.

Shaara went outside with a stiff cup of coffee, sitting on the stoop of the door that led from the staff kitchen out the back of the hotel. The coffee was cheap and reeked of cigarette butts, but she didn't care. The view from Red Canyon was stunning, a filter of clouds rendering the heat tolerable. She breathed in the cool air as she stared up at the sky.

Her annoyance with Lincoln remained, but the tasty thoughts and images of the potential power and skill of his hands continued to creep in. Shaara took her phone out in a huff, seeking any kind of distraction that wasn't her job, for a moment at least.

She went to an app that looked over the status of the various stocks she had invested in. Her parents were very practical people. Her mother had said the dreamer gene had skipped a generation. Even the idea of running her own boutique was too far off the beaten path for them. But Shaara had absorbed their practicality without consent, learning about stocks and long-term investments for when anything in her life went south.

She was scanning the webpage, taking sips of her coffee, and observing the average influx that she was used to. The clinks and clanks of the kitchen din and the endless chattering of event planning had ceased for a brief sliver of time, allowing Shaara to breathe.

“I would sell the Antech if I were you.”

The voice coming from behind her made her jump, for more reasons than one. It was gruff but confident and silky all at once.

Lincoln sat down next to her on the tiny step, his broad shoulders pressing against her own with intrusive force. She pinned the phone against her chest, scowling and rising to her feet at the speed of light.

“What?” It was all she could manage to get out.

Lincoln had a deer-in-the-headlights look that she had seen plastered on many men’s faces. He was holding the same foam coffee cup she was, but in his big mitts, it looked like he was a giant holding a seed.

“Antech. I had shares in them too. They’re very inconsistent, but lately, they’ve been on the up and up. It’s not forecasted to last very long, so if I were you, I would sell it all while you can.”

Shaara slid her phone back into her pocket, giving Lincoln a stabbing glare. She crossed her arms over her chest, which she realized she had also done the night before. She was protecting herself from him despite the smallest of inclinations to leave herself exposed.

“And what makes you think that it would be appealing to me to have you invade my privacy, hmm?”

He held a hand in the air defensively just like the night before. Shaara tried to ignore the thick, snakelike veins slithering up and down his arms, along with the chills that ran along her spine like a serpent’s tongue.

“I didn’t mean it that way. I’m a stockbroker; it’s what I do for a living. It’s a hazard of the job, giving out free advice.”

He grinned in self-congratulation, taking a gulp of his coffee. He waited for her response, which sounded just as irksome as she felt.

“Free advice?” She glowered. “I didn’t ask you for any.”

Lincoln chuckled, his inflated ego taking over. It was one of the few traits in him that put Shaara off.

“Well, yeah, I normally charge a hefty amount for advice like that. Especially for people who don’t really know what they’re doing. Certain companies like Antech fluctuate constantly. They can’t be relied on. But there are a handful of times that you can trust them to either fail or skyrocket. This is a good time to sell.”

Shaara felt like snapping at him again, but a part of her was intrigued by his advice. She knew enough about stocks, having learned from her business-savvy parents, but she didn’t use much of her spare time educating herself on

the behaviors of certain companies. Maybe what he said could help her get some reliable cash and break the infinite loop of working lame jobs.

She let her arms relax a little but hid her intrigue from him. He was staring at her just like he had since they'd met. Like she was a steaming piece of steak on a barbecue. It made her feel enthralled, but also, a little frightened.

"What else did you see?" she asked solemnly.

"On your phone?"

Shaara nodded, letting one arm droop down to her side.

Lincoln smirked. She felt like her mind was a pristine glass window when he looked at her like that.

"A few other investments. You seem like you know what you're doing. That was the main one that stood out to me though. Because it's so fucking moody."

Shaara breathed deeply. She looked at her phone and saw that she had gone over her break time by five minutes. She gritted her teeth, letting out a grunt.

"Problem?" Lincoln said.

The glare returned. She tried to step past him, feeling the heat coming off him like concrete in the dead of summer. She wedged her foot against his thigh, and he felt like stone.

"Hmm?" he said.

"Can I give you some advice?" Shaara said, using her shoe to push some of the weight against him.

"Of course," he said, unwavering and undeterred by her clearly agitated tone.

"Don't hit on women by looking over their shoulder into their private business. It's a big turn-off. Now get out of my way."

The smirk disappeared like the slapping of a knight's visor, a dumbfounded look replacing it. She felt a quiver of guilt, wondering if she was picking up hurt in his face.

"Note taken," he said, then rose to his feet.

He towered over her by more than a foot, maybe a foot and a half. She flashed him one final menacing look.

"Sorry," he said like a child put in the corner for a timeout.

Shaara said nothing, stomping back inside and moving through the kitchen back to the event space.

She didn't feel good about what she had said or done for the rest of the day. But hell would have to freeze over before she would apologize. The guy was looking over her shoulder and diving into her private business!

Shaara spent the remainder of the day as she had at the start of it, rushing back and forth, putting out fires between staff members, and ensuring that the charity event was going to go as smoothly as humanly possible.

Throughout it, she secretly hoped she would run into Lincoln. His presence was enjoyable, as annoying as it was to have him looking at her phone. She mulled over the advice he had given her, which she knew from her own experience wasn't complete bullshit. He had complimented her after all, saying it looked like she knew what she was doing.

It wasn't entirely a mansplaining experience. He had pulled back and apologized twice.

Nevertheless, Shaara was stubborn. She stuck to her work and didn't see Lincoln once, even when she was secretly keeping an eye open for him. Even a glimpse would make her heart flutter like a bird stuck in a cage.

Day faded into night, and it was finally time for her to go home. She was exhausted as usual, getting her things from the back room and doing a final round. She walked through the parking lot, the sky black as coal with glistening diamonds of stars shrouding the canyon behind its bold emptiness. She sighed to herself, then pulled out her phone.

She glanced over her stocks again, particularly Antech, which Lincoln had been referring to. It certainly looked like it was on the ups, and she had known through her own observations that was rather inconsistent. But Lincoln likely had insider knowledge she wasn't privy to.

She stared at it, seriously considering selling, which was what Lincoln had suggested in the first place. Her stubborn self-hated that he was likely right. She twirled her finger around the goblin green button, the wind from the canyon rolling down to sweep over the sand beyond the hotel.

The building looked like a lonely lighthouse from where she was parked. The lights would remain lit all night, giving a haunted ambiance. Despite not being where she wanted in life, this job had given her experience and ideas for her own boutique that flourished in her mind.

She stared at the resort with her phone against the steering wheel. She flicked her glare between them, thinking about unknown paths and the way they diverged unexpectedly.

But then there were times when the pathway was clear. One or the other.

You must decide. Like a fairy tale, one laden with gold, the other, gothic and dripping in crows. You had to decide. It was, quite literally, now or never.

She slammed her finger on the sell button, too exhausted to think anymore. Worst case scenario, she would lose a bit of money, but at least she was starting down the right path. The path of risk and willingness to dare. She couldn't stay safe anymore. Safety was dull and boring.

Shaara started the engine, spinning onto the road and heading home. She thought she'd feel somewhat anxious about going out on a limb on a whim, but it was the opposite. She felt empowered. She was finally taking life by the throat, not taking no for an answer.

Then naturally, Lincoln swooned back into her mind. He was also a risk. Sleeping with anyone was a risk for a woman in the form of pregnancy, diseases, and emotional and physical pain. She was smart enough to measure those hazards. But they felt heavier with Lincoln, being a shifter and having already burdened her with the status of being his fated mate.

It was like a stranger coming up to you and proclaiming their undying love. It was intimidating.

She soared through the night, a small grin tickling her lips. Tomorrow was a new day. A new day of promises and possibilities.

SEVEN



LINCOLN

Lincoln was beginning to think he should have hired a matchmaking service that taught you how to win over a lady. Or at least one that offered a separate service for it. At this point, he would've forked over a lot of money for such a course.

The bear shifter found himself in one of the extravagant bars in the resort and ordered himself a drink. He quickly knocked the first one back and then ordered another.

Twice, he'd had the opportunity to impress his mate. Twice, he had royally screwed it up.

"Another one for you?"

Lincoln lifted his head at the voice. The bartender gave him a questioning look and gestured to the bar top. The shifter blinked down at the cup in his hand. The empty glass. He hadn't even realized he'd finished it already.

He jerked his head in a nod, and a moment later, another drink was in front of him. Lincoln hadn't necessarily planned on getting drunk, but the idea wasn't all that unappealing now. Not that this would be enough to get the job done. It would take a lot more than just this to really get him sloshed.

His thoughts drifted back to his failed attempts to win over his mate. Looking back on both of those chances, he could see now why they hadn't worked.

He'd been far too blunt and straightforward the first time. Shaara might be his mate, but she was human. She didn't know shifter stuff. She didn't feel the same irresistible pull he did, the invisible strings of fate that entangled him and her and drew them together.

All she'd seen, probably, was a swaggering rich patron who was hitting

on her while she was working. Of course, she had been quick to say no. Even if she might admire someone so bold, his question had come pretty abruptly.

Then there was the dressing up and pretending to be a member of the charity committee. He took a long swing of his drink, thinking back on that attempt.

That had been perhaps one of the more stupid ideas he'd had in a while. At the time, though, it had seemed brilliant.

He had envisioned it going so differently. Like the way it might play out in a movie.

She would meet him as just an ordinary guy, another member of society just like her. Shaara would get to see who he was without seeing the rich shifter patron. And then later when she had fallen for him, he'd reveal he was really a wealthy stockbroker and her fated mate.

If it were a movie, she would have swooned, been awed and impressed that the simple man she'd fallen for was even better than she imagined.

But this wasn't a movie.

He'd lied to her. It wasn't fair to assume she'd like him as a rich patron. In fact, that had been why she'd rejected him in the first place. That, and no one ever liked being lied to.

Still, those interactions he'd had with her when she'd thought he was just a normal person gave him hope. They could get along. More than get along. She'd been willing to invite him over.

Maybe they could get to that place again where she was comfortable to laugh and talk with him. She was his fated mate. Surely that meant this was supposed to be going more smoothly than it was. Surely all mates didn't go through this much back and forth.

Their last conversation not too long ago hadn't been very promising. He thought he was being smooth by trying to help her. But maybe she took it as him thinking little of her.

He groaned and buried his face in one of his hands. At the very least, Gerri should have supplied him with a pamphlet.

A low whistle sounded behind him, and Lincoln turned to see who was interrupting his pity party. He raised an eyebrow in surprise when he realized it was none other than Gerri herself.

She was grinning widely. "Well, I thought I sensed someone in a bad mood."

Without waiting for an invitation, she took the seat next to him and hailed

the bartender. "I'll have what he's having."

The bartender gave her a concerned look. "Are you sure?"

She winked. "Very. There isn't much I can't handle."

With a sigh, the bartender mixed the drink and handed it over to her. Then he watched in amazement as she took a swig and didn't so much as even flinch.

The matchmaker turned her attention back to Lincoln. "So, why are you pouting?"

"I'm not pouting."

"Fine, *brooding* then. You seem quite melancholy for someone whose mate is not far away."

Lincoln looked down. "Things might not be going as well as I would have liked. In fact, things are *really* not going well with Shaara and me."

Gerri raised an eyebrow. "Do tell."

And he did. Everything from his blunt introduction to him deceiving her and Shaara still being angry with him for it.

"So as you can see, I –"

"Fucked up." Not a question.

"Yes." He sighed. "Have I messed it completely up? Do you think we'll ever be able to get along again after this?"

The matchmaker barked out a laugh. "You act like you've betrayed her after a lifetime together. Sure, it was a stupid mistake, but that doesn't mean it's unsalvageable. It's human nature to mess up, even if you are a shifter. It's just a part of life. Keep trying. She's your mate, and you don't want to give up on that."

Lincoln shifted in his seat. "Yeah, but if we are mates, shouldn't it be easier than this? I know she's human and doesn't feel the same attraction as I do, but shouldn't I have some instinct on how to win her over? Or shouldn't she be able to fall in love with me more easily?"

Gerri snorted. "Let me tell you something, boy. All the stars in the universe can align for two people, and they still have their rough patches. I've made a lot of matches. Shifter and shifter, human and shifter, any number of combinations, and they still find a way to slip up."

She shook her head. "Someone always makes a mistake, says the wrong thing, or acts out of emotion. Believe me, you're hardly the sorriest case I've seen. The worst thing you could do is give up and leave it unresolved. The longer you let it lie, the more you'll regret it."

Lincoln shook his head. “How is it that you’re able to magically find someone’s perfect match but not how to win them over?”

She laughed, though this time it was much more kind. “Simple. Because everyone is different. We all tick in different ways. I could tell you a million stories of how different people won over their mates, but they could all be worth nothing to you. One person could love big romantic gestures and another could hate it. Someone could love sitting quietly together while another could find it stifling. There is no one easy answer. And while that can be frustrating, it means your relationship will be one of a kind and special.”

He hadn’t thought of it that way. It also helped make him feel a little bit better. Still, it didn’t really tell him any more about what he was supposed to do.

“Is there any advice at all you can give me?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Nothing specific other than the basics. Show respect, patience, and love, and listen to her. But otherwise, I’d simply say be yourself.”

Lincoln huffed. “Be myself? So far everything I’ve done hasn’t exactly worked out.”

“Oh? And were you trying to be yourself?” she asked. Though by the tone of her voice, she already knew the answer.

He hesitated. He had most certainly not been himself the second time he’d tried to get to know her.

Gerri smiled softly at him. “I have faith in you two. You’re mates for a reason. Being yourself with her is the best thing you can do. She’ll come around eventually. But you need to stop trying so hard to be perfect and suave every second. To try every moment to win her over. Just talk with her and let it happen on its own.”

Lincoln shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Great.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. They were mates. As far as he knew, Gerri had never been wrong about this sort of thing. It was the reason she was so in demand in the first place.

If she had faith in them working out, then she had to be right. Their true selves were what made them fated mates in the first place. It made sense that was also what would allow her to fall in love with him. So, no more crazy schemes like pretending to be a different person to get Shaara to talk to him.

After thinking about it for a moment, he believed he had fully wrapped his head around the idea. He probably was coming off as too much to Shaara.

He needed a simpler approach.

What they really needed was a chance to just be able to talk to each other like regular people. And this time without any of the lies.

But how? Where?

He was very, very certain she wouldn't like it if he came up to the front desk and bothered her. That was one of the reasons she'd gotten so upset the first time.

Hoping to just run into her randomly wasn't a very promising idea either. It could happen, sure. But the resort was big enough and she was busy enough that they could miss each other. And he wasn't going to wait her out until she was done with her shifts. That felt way too much like something a stalker would do. And he was not about to cross that line.

There was also the worry that when he did see her, she wouldn't want to talk to him. She'd been pretty uncomfortable the last time they spoke.

So where was the happy medium between a chance of fate of being able to see her and being creepy?

Suddenly, an idea popped into his mind. Something he could do where they would be in the same place and be able to talk, but he also wouldn't be bothering her. This time he wouldn't be lying when he told her the same thing. But he needed Gerri on board if he was going to do it.

"Gerri, do you still need some help at your charity event here?" Lincoln asked.

The matchmaker raised an eyebrow. "I suppose we could always use some help. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering if you wouldn't mind me tagging along with you. Shaara's doing a lot of work to set up for the event, and I thought it might be the perfect opportunity for us to talk."

Gerri smiled. "I'd be willing to let you tag along, but don't think I'll just let you sit around. We still have a lot to do, and I intend to put you to work. No searching closets for unneeded items. Think you can handle that?"

He nodded. "Of course, I had no intention of just doing nothing. I want to be truthful this time."

After all, he didn't want Shaara to think he was a sloth when it came to work or even stuck up. This way, they could work together to do something for the greater good. It was a chance to show her what kind of a person he really was.

Even if it wasn't for her, he doubted he'd be able to hold still. The bear

inside him disliked being useless and always felt better when he was working.

“All right then,” Gerri said. “You’re going to want to dress down from what you have on now then. I know it impresses the ladies, but you’ll regret it once you start physically working.”

He hesitated for a moment and then nodded again. Not because he was too good to wear plain cotton, he simply hadn’t brought anything to do manual labor in. He’d just have to make do.

Gerri grinned and patted his shoulder. “I’ll see you in half an hour then. You better down that and get to it.”

He blinked at her in surprise before doing as he was told and rushing off.

Putting on a plain white button-down made him feel as if he was still being deceptive. As he made his way to where Gerri was setting up, he paused by the front desk, an idea forming.

“May I borrow a Sharpie?” he asked the man at the counter. The attendant handed him one.

In big bold letters where a nametag would be, he wrote *REAL VOLUNTEER*.

He grinned and handed the Sharpie back to the attendant. That should do nicely.

EIGHT



SHAARA

After today, Shaara was pretty sure she could run an event herself. Sure, it would probably drive her half insane, but if she could handle this, she could handle anything.

The morning of the event had arrived, which, of course, meant everything was thrown into chaos. It was truly incredible how days of planning, setting up, organizing, and managing could all fall apart in mere hours. It was as if in all the hurry and bustle to set up, people had completely lost their brains.

Suddenly, there were items missing that she would've sworn they set up the night before. Someone remembered they didn't have something they needed. One of the speakers was starting to get a cold. They were low on fruit somehow.

Where everything had been organized chaos these past few days, this was just plain chaos. And Shaara was at the heart of it all.

“Shaara, can you help me move this to the other side of the room?”

“Hey, Shaara, have you seen Tom? He had the wire cutters last, and we really need them.”

“You work here, right? One of the microphones is dead. Go see if you guys have another one.”

“Do you have a copy of the itinerary? I lost mine.”

“You need to update that itinerary, we've switched events C3 and E9 around. And make a hundred copies, would you?”

Shaara felt like she was in a game of tug of war. Except she was the rope, not a player.

As she started to do one task, someone else would ask her to do something else that had nothing to do with what she was already doing. She

didn't know what it was about her that made everyone see her as an errand girl, but she needed to figure out whatever it was and change it.

Not that she didn't like being helpful. It would just be nice to be able to complete a task before starting a new one. Or be able to have a moment to breathe.

"Hey, you, do you know where we can get some cleaning supplies? Someone just spilled a big bowl of punch all over the place. And if you wouldn't mind cleaning it up too."

Shaara took in a deep lungful and willed herself not to snap at this person who was probably just as busy as she was.

Somehow, she managed a smile that didn't look murderous. "Of course. I'll get right on that."

First, she'd have to drop off the box of table décor someone had decided at the last minute they didn't like. But luckily, that was also in the supply closet where the cleaning stuff was.

What was not so lucky was that said supply closet was on the other side of the building from the room the event was being held in. And it was made even more unlucky by having to heft the big box of not-so-light décor all the way there in her arms.

By the time she wrangled the supply closet door open and put the box in its designated area, she felt winded. She took a moment to lean against the racks and enjoy the silence. No one was in here to ask her to climb a ladder, ask where they kept the tablecloths, or have her make copies of something.

She seriously considered hiding in here for a while. But she was needed out there, and it was a good experience for when she'd host her own events.

Not that her events would ever be anything like this. No way, not a chance, especially not after what she'd had to deal with today. No, hers would be something much smaller in scale.

As she made her way to the ballroom, cleaning supplies in hand, she pictured what her business's client parties might look like.

Maybe a small-scale fall festival or trunk-or-treat in the fall. Gingerbread house decorating contests in the winter. Maybe an event in spring where they planted flowers around a needy property. And then maybe she could rent some inflatable water slides in the summer.

It wouldn't just be seasonal events either. She could have days where she hosted local food truck vendors. Trivia nights, murder mystery parties, and performances by local musicians.

A smile made its way onto her face as she thought about the future. How everyone would interact and want to book a night at her little boutique inn because they'd heard how fun it was.

Her fantasy was cut short as she walked into the event center. Back into the chaos.

She sighed.

Hopefully, she'd be able to make more money off her day trading soon. Surprisingly, Lincoln's tips had actually paid off.

Lincoln. She tried to put the very frustrating man out of her mind.

It was hard, though. She couldn't deny that he was extremely attractive. And he'd been nice to talk to. But he'd also been lying to her.

She shook her head. There was no time to ponder the strange man now. She had a job to do, and she needed to do it before someone asked her to do something else completely unrelated.

It didn't take long for her to spot the place where someone had spilled the punch. Why had someone even been making punch this early? The tables weren't even set out yet.

As she made her way toward the mess, she did a double take at the person dragging tables from the storage room.

It couldn't be. He said he was lying about being a volunteer.

Unbelievable! This guy just didn't know when to quit. Well, she was going to make sure he understood her loud and clear this time.

With a growl, Shaara marched toward him. She gripped the mop in her hand like a weapon.

But as she got closer, something gave her pause. There was something on the pocket of his shirt. She squinted her eyes and mouthed the words written on it.

REAL VOLUNTEER.

She blinked. Once. Twice.

He actually had listened. In fact, he had gone out of his way to show that he had listened.

Shaara felt a laugh bubbling up within her.

So this time, he really was helping out. And he seemed to be doing a good job of it. She watched him for a moment as he hefted tables and didn't seem in the least bit perturbed or tired. He seemed like he genuinely wanted to be there.

Shaara suddenly felt a little bit embarrassed for jumping to conclusions

but also curious. She made her way to him.

“Excuse me,” she called out. He whipped around to face her.

She grinned. “Mr. Volunteer, is it? Or is that Mr. Real Volunteer?”

The surprise on his face was quickly replaced by a genuine grin. “Actually, my name is Real Volunteer Staff.”

She giggled, glad he didn’t mind her teasing. “But seriously, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be getting ready to attend this event, not work it?”

He shrugged. “Why not both? Don’t you like my evening wear?”

Shaara pretended to look it over with a critical eye. “Well, you’ve gone and wrinkled the thing, so that’ll need to be taken care of. The shoes match well enough. I wouldn’t worry too much about that. You’re lucky you’re good-looking enough to be able to pull the whole thing off.”

Immediately, heat rushed to her face. What was she thinking, saying that? Volunteer worker or not, he was still a guest. And one she still didn’t know all that well. *Even if he is unbearably attractive.*

Thankfully, Lincoln didn’t call her out for the comment. If anything, he seemed to puff up a little. “Why, thank you. And what about you? Are you all dressed up for the event?”

Shaara looked down at the clothes she was wearing. She would have loved to have been able to work in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. But no, even though they were running around like chickens with their heads cut off, they still had to look professional. So she was in leggings, flats, and a nice blouse.

A blouse that currently had a stain where someone had crashed into her with a cupcake platter. And there was a small rip in the leggings where they had snagged a nail. She was actually a little miffed about that one. These were her favorite leggings.

And then there was her hair that she’d pulled neatly into a bun earlier. She didn’t have to reach back to know it was no longer in a nice bun.

She let out a laugh. “Oh yeah, I’m all glammed up. Can’t you tell?”

Shaara did a little spin like she was in a flowy ball gown. She expected him to laugh or even roll his eyes, but instead, there was a fondness in his expression. Like he really did see her all sparkly up in an extravagant dress.

Heat rose back into her cheeks, and she tucked a stray hair back behind her ear. “Actually, this probably isn’t too far off from what I’ll be actually wearing tonight. I’ll most likely be working it, and you can’t do that in a dress.”

He gave her a considering look. “Perhaps.”

She furrowed her brow. What did that mean exactly?

Lincoln started to sway uncomfortably. “Listen, I’m sorry about what I did before, pretending to be who I wasn’t. At the time, I just thought it was the best way to talk to you. I’m not trying to make excuses. It was wrong of me to do so.”

Shaara regarded him with a serious look this time, her defenses suddenly back up. She couldn’t just easily forget what he had done. But he did seem genuinely sorry. And he had stopped the deception before it had gone too far.

She supposed she could give him a second chance at making a good impression. Not that she was going to be letting her guard down just yet though.

Shaara nodded. “I accept your apology.”

He looked a little surprised at first, and then he smiled. “Thank you.”

“Hey, Shaara!”

Shaara bit back a groan. Right, she still had that floor to clean up. And this person probably wanted her to dust the chandeliers or something crazy.

She put on her best welcoming smile and turned to the speaker. “Yes, ma’am, how can I help you?”

“Do you know where you keep more wine glasses? Charlotte just had the best idea to stack them like you see in those photos.”

Shaara hoped her wince wasn’t obvious. That sounded like a disaster waiting to happen. And wait for it...

“If you wouldn’t mind putting it together, too, that would be great.”

There it was.

She summoned every cheery thought in her brain before she spoke. “Actually, I still need to clean up the floor so maybe I could direct someone to the glasses for them to set up?” she asked hopefully.

The other woman looked at the spilled punch. “Oh yeah, I was wondering when someone was going to clean that up. Well, just hurry then.”

“Excuse me.” Shaara almost startled at Lincoln’s voice. She’d nearly forgotten he was there.

“This lady right here already has a job. Now I see a perfectly capable man standing over in the corner who doesn’t look busy at all. Why don’t you ask *him* to go get the wine glasses and stack them for you?”

The other woman opened her mouth to protest, closed it, and then opened it again. Finally, she just nodded and walked away.

Shaara let out a breath of relief and smiled gratefully at Lincoln. “Thank

you. I feel like a rag doll being tossed around.”

He dipped his head. “It’s the least I could do.”

There was one other thing she needed to thank him for. “Oh, and I followed your advice on day trading. I didn’t sell all my shares, but I still made out pretty good. Thank you.”

He beamed. “I’m glad it worked.”

She shifted from foot to foot. She wanted to ask him for more advice. He clearly knew his stuff, but she was still wary.

“If I may suggest something else,” Lincoln said as if he sensed her conflict. “I would invest the rest of your money on what the biggest news source is covering this week.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it means that the company at the very least has the money to buy big publicity from them.”

She pulled out her phone and got onto the app. She showed him what was on there, and after a while, they came to one they seemed to agree on. And now she was about to invest everything in it.

What if this was one of those situations where she flew too close to the sun and lost it all?

“Trust me,” Lincoln said. They locked eyes, and Shaara studied him. She felt like he meant it in more ways than one. Like he meant it in every possible way.

Not giving herself another chance to think about it, she did it. She invested everything.

NINE



LINCOLN

He'd been to many events in his life. Big extravagant parties and intimate get-togethers with business partners. But never before had he been to a gathering he put so much work into.

Not just planning, but actually setting it up. Moving tables and picking decorations. Having five different people argue over what to do and making him change it up every time. He could have sworn at one point he saw Gerri cackling at him.

He supposed it was well deserved.

And now it was finally here, and the fruits of his labor came together. Well, some of his labor. He had been a last-minute addition to the workforce, unlike Shaara, who had been working her ass off since the moment this event was probably thought up.

Shaara. He'd actually gotten to spend some quality time with her today. That was worth it all in itself.

And hopefully, they'd be able to spend more time together tonight at the event. Once he'd heard she was only going to be working tonight, he asked Gerri to intervene.

He still remembered the matchmaker's grin and sly tone when she answered. "Don't worry, dear boy. I will take care of everything. Your lady will be there, and neither of you will be disappointed."

Lincoln still wasn't sure what that meant.

He'd taken his seat at his assigned table and waited for the event to begin. The shifter took inventory of the other people at the table.

There was an older man with, presumably, his wife on the other side of him. Two eccentrically dressed women were on the opposite side of the table,

and they were laughing loudly. Then on one side of him was an older woman who seemed to have an air about her that she was too good to be here.

Then there was the place beside him that still hadn't been claimed. There was a card on the table that read, *Reserved for Personal Guest*.

Gerri's personal guest, he assumed. He mused at what that person could possibly be like. If they were a friend of Gerri's, then at the very least they should be entertaining.

Lincoln turned his attention back to the people around him. Without trying to be too obvious, he peered through the crowd and tried to spot Shaara. He wasn't sure if she was already here yet or not. Or where she would be at all.

Gerri hadn't exactly been forthcoming about her plan.

Then between the throngs of people, he saw a woman emerge from the double doors. His breath caught in his throat as he realized who it was.

Shaara.

She was here. And she was absolutely stunning.

Her hair had been done up beautifully, and her makeup was subtle, merely highlighting and accentuating her features.

And her dress. He swallowed hard as he looked her up and down. She wore a gorgeous plum-colored dress that hugged her curves and made her look utterly breathtaking.

His mate was beautiful on a normal day. Like earlier with her hair a mess and her stained clothes.

He hadn't thought she could be any more beautiful. And yet here she was. A vision before mere mortals.

His mate.

He didn't even realize he'd stood until she looked over in his direction. She gave him a little wave and walked toward him.

Lincoln felt utterly immobilized where he stood. His bear inside yowled. When she'd come closer, he could smell her intoxicating scent, and his fingers twitched at his side.

He had to resist the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her breathless. Everything about her had his body and primal instincts screaming to be with his mate.

To hold her. To love her. To devour her.

Roughly, he pushed the sensations away and tried to focus.

Shaara came to stand in front of him and smiled. "It seems I made the

guest list after all.”

He smiled back at her. “Looking like that, I don’t think anyone would have denied you entrance.”

She snorted, but he could see a bit of red tinging her cheeks and her ears. Shaara cleared her throat.

“Where are you sitting?” he asked her. Selfishly, he hoped it was near him.

“Actually, that’s why I came over here,” she told him. “I was wondering if you could help me find my table. These numbering and letter systems are a bit confusing.”

He dipped his head. “Of course. What does your invitation say?”

“Table AA, seat two,” she read off from her invite. “Do you have any idea where that is?”

Lincoln blinked in surprise. He knew exactly where that was. So this was what Gerri had meant when she said she’d take care of things.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” he said, a grin forming on his face. “You’ll be right here up at the front.”

And with that, he pulled out the chair next to him and gestured for her to sit. Gerri had placed them right next to each other. He’d have to remember to thank her.

Shaara raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? Because it says, ‘Reserved for Personal Guest.’ That can’t be me, right?”

“Well, did Ms. Gerri Wilder give you the invitation.”

“Yes, actually, she did.”

“Then that would be you. Gerri’s personal guest.”

Shaara let out a surprised laugh. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever been anyone’s personal guest. Especially not somewhere as fancy as this.”

Finally, she took the seat, and Lincoln scooted her in before seating himself. She looked around, seeming to take in the scene.

“Wow, I can’t believe it actually came together so nicely,” she said. “With all the scrambling we had to do this morning, I wasn’t sure we’d get done in time.”

Lincoln smiled at her. “Well, you did a wonderful job.”

Shaara barked out a laugh. “Me and about two dozen other people. It was a team effort to get this done. And that includes you too. You were there to help.”

He shook his head. “Yes, but I seem to recall you doing most of the

running around and fixing people's messes. Face it, we wouldn't have this if it wasn't for you."

She ducked her head, but he saw a small bashful smile forming on her face.

From onstage, a woman said, "Attention, if you could all take your seats, we will be beginning shortly."

Everyone around them quickly made their way to their seats and a hush fell over the crowd. Then Gerri made her way to the front of the room, a warm smile lit her face.

The matchmaker pretended to look annoyed when she had to bring the mic down several notches. She let out an exaggerated huff that made the audience laugh.

Gerri took the microphone and smiled out at the audience. "Good evening and thank you so much for coming out here tonight. I won't make too long of a speech so never fear. You will get to eat soon enough."

That got another laugh from the audience before Gerri continued. "The power of the media is a wonder and privilege that we have today. Having the ability to access information from across the globe in an instant is an incredible thing. The information shared over public broadcasting is what shapes the minds and hearts of viewers. So not only is it vital that people have access to it, but that they have access to exceptional programs as well. And that's where you all come in today. Your generosity will broaden our ability to share quality media with more people."

The matchmaker looked right at their table. "I'm pleased to announce that we have so many new sponsors this year, and one that has helped prepare this beautiful event for us. Please give them all a big round of applause."

The crowd applauded, and Lincoln glanced at Shaara. She looked thoroughly embarrassed.

Lincoln winked at her. "I told you this couldn't have been possible without you."

"I just cleaned spills and changed out microphones," she mumbled.

Lincoln shrugged. "True. And you set out tablecloths, bought decorations, printed schedules, set out food, kept everyone in line, and –"

"All right, all right, I get it. Maybe I did do quite a bit," she said, a smile forming on her lips.

"You did amazing."

She scoffed. He fixed her with a mock-serious look. She furrowed her

brow. “What?”

“Say you did an amazing job.”

“Oh, please –”

“Come on, say it,” he insisted, a smile tugging at his lips.

“I’m not going to –”

“If you don’t, I’m going to stand up and say it for you.”

There was a beat of silence.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He grinned. “Try me.”

She rolled her eyes, but her cheeks were flushed. “I don’t have to stand up and say it, do I?”

He shook his head.

She straightened. “I did an amazing job.”

His grin brightened. “Hell, yeah, you did.”

She giggled.

The crowd started applauding, and Lincoln realized that Gerri had just finished her speech.

Hastily, he and Shaara joined in on the clapping. Gerri waved at the crowd as she walked off, but before she could disappear out of view, she winked at him.

He needed to trust her more.

A few more speakers came up, and Lincoln couldn’t help but steal glances at Shaara throughout it. To his surprise and delight, sometimes he would catch her glancing at him too.

Every once and a while, he’d lean over and whisper a witty comment to her during a speech. A smile would always tug at her lips, and she’d murmur something sly back to him.

He wasn’t sure at what point his commentary had turned flirty, but he did notice how she slowly seemed to be warming to him. How she began to relax and take the compliments. She was still a bit guarded, but not as much as before.

Was she actually beginning to like him? Bolstered by the thought, he kept it up.

When the last speech was over, dinner was brought out.

Lincoln hadn’t realized how hungry he was until he smelled the food. He did his best to keep the bear from showing too much of itself as he ate. Still, he ate more than everyone at the table.

Shaara grinned at him. “I don’t think we’re going to run out of food here. Trust me, I’ve seen the kitchens.”

He grinned back at her. “What can I say? It’s good food. And some of those other speakers weren’t as quick about their speeches as Gerri.”

Shaara laughed. “Tell me about it. I can’t believe that one guy thought he needed to tell us the entire history of public broadcasting.”

Lincoln groaned. “I’m pretty sure he thought he was at a lecture hall, not a party.”

Suddenly, there was a ding. Shaara dug out her phone from her purse. Lincoln cocked his head. “What is it?”

She smiled nervously. “That’s just the alert that lets me know the trading day is over.”

Lincoln perked up. “Well? How did you do?”

“I haven’t opened it yet.”

“Why not?” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized how silly they were. She’d put everything on the line by following his advice. Right now, it had either really paid off or backfired severely. It was enough to make anyone nervous.

He gave her a warm smile. “Shaara, I promise I know what I’m doing. We looked at options, and I know you made the right choice.”

She gave him a grateful smile and then inhaled deeply as if steeling herself.

Shaara pressed something on her phone. A moment later, her eyes went wide and her jaw dropped.

“So? How’d you do?” Lincoln asked, her lack of response starting to make him nervous.

She showed him the phone. “Tell me you see it too. Tell me I’m not hallucinating.”

He looked at her screen. That was a lot of zeros. He grinned at her. “It worked.”

“It worked!” she all but squealed. “I can quit my job! I can have my inn!”

She threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you! Thank you so much for helping me.”

Her scent nearly overwhelmed him for a moment, and he had to make himself only hug her back gently. “Of course. I’m excited for you.”

She pulled back, her face all aglow. He thought seeing her in that dress had been incredible, but with that look on her face, he nearly went to his

knees.

Throughout the rest of the meal, she was practically bouncing. Any animosity she'd had left in her seemed to vanish. When the dishes had been cleared away and the music started, she'd gotten up and pulled Lincoln to his feet.

"Come on, I feel like dancing, and I'm not going alone," she told him. He laughed as he let himself be dragged onto the dance floor.

They swayed and laughed together, and as he held his mate in his arms, Lincoln didn't think he'd ever been happier.

TEN



SHAARA

Shaara was ecstatic about hitting the jackpot with her investments. The cherry on top of it all was that she got to celebrate with Lincoln, the man who had sparked the embers in her mind and body like a wildfire.

She cast aside all of the doubts she'd had about him, at least for the time being. He had given her advice that would allow her to leave her dead-end job and finally be able to move along the trail of her most feverish dreams.

Dancing with Lincoln at the charity was, in itself, rather feverish for Shaara. His hands trailing down the curves of her body felt like the softest of feathers with the firmness of a sword sliding down the porcelain of her skin. She was completely charged, her eyes wide and focused, narrowing in and on target of her ambitions like an archer's bow.

She was also focused on getting into bed with Lincoln. He had been respectful and kept his distance until she pulled him into the hot darkness of her desires. From then on, he had been holding onto her like a cowboy holds on to his most precious desert rose. It was the strength, the confidence, and the boldness that turned her on more than anything. He swept her into his arms heroically, carrying her into the elevator while they laughed merrily.

"God, I've never done this before," Shaara said with her arms snaked around Lincoln's neck.

"Done what?" Lincoln muttered, holding her against him and nuzzling into Shaara's neck. "Gone to bed with one of the guests? Or a shifter?"

She felt her chest and neck rush with blood while Lincoln's warm lips peppered down her lip and followed the road of her collarbone. Stars tingled in her core as he arrived at her cleavage, teasing the milky folds with the emergence of his pointed pink tongue.

Shaara had utterly forgotten what she was going to say. The wet touch of his tongue on her breasts sent rivets of shock through her system, bouncing around inside her until they settled in that warm bloom in her pelvis. It coiled lower like a tiger nestling inside a snug cave.

It truly had been a long time since she'd been touched. All of the men she had gone to bed with had sufficiently let her down either with the activity itself in the bedroom setting, or soon thereafter. She had let go of the hope of anything remarkable ever happening when it came to her romantic and sexual life.

Until Lincoln.

"Mmm," she groaned against him, running her fingers aggressively through his hair. "Lincoln, I want you so badly."

The elevator dinged just as he pulled away from her collarbone, his abrupt detachment enough to make her bones go rigid with impatience. Lincoln must have sensed it – shifters could notice the smallest changes in demeanor and chemical alterations, so she had heard – because he stuck his tongue out at her, wagging it with an erotic tease.

"You will have me, Shaara. Every inch if you desire."

Shaara felt dizzy, her limbs going limp as he carried her down the hallway and into his suite. After struggling briefly to open the door with his keycard, they waltzed inside, Shaara with her arms still draped around the shifter's neck.

She realized that she had never been a guest at Red Canyon despite having worked there for a few years. The room was pristine, and Lincoln appeared to be a rather tidy man. It worked for her as she was described in the past by lovers as walking the line between neat and persnickety.

"God, this is amazing," she muttered.

"We have barely gotten started," Lincoln said, laying her on her back on the bed.

It was soft and inviting, the gentle light next to the bed painting their energetic bodies in an ethereal glow. The night out was dark and dry, but a faint whisper of wind chimed against the walls of the hotel, making the ambiance of the room even more charming and serene.

But Shaara wasn't feeling serene. She was feeling ravenous. Lincoln lay on top of her, and as she arched her back against the mattress, she pulled him close. She had felt devastatingly lonely without his lips against hers, though it had only been a few minutes. She felt exquisitely desolate without the velvet

softness crushing her own plump mouth.

They began to make out on the bed, with Shaara enfolding her legs around his waist to yank him closer, his pelvis grinding against her own with an exceptional bulge between them. She moaned in the depths of her throat, the coil in her lower regions unraveling with maddening ferocity, the thong beneath her dress beginning to soak through its linen.

Then she suddenly stopped, taking him by the shoulders as a thought raced across her burning mind.

“Wait,” she muttered breathlessly.

“Hmm?” he said, looking at her with grave concern, his lips running along her jawline. “What’s wrong? Are you okay, baby?”

The dusky rumble of his voice nearly made her forget completely about her concerns but not quite. She guided him off and then stood, needing to steady herself from the sudden fluctuation in temperature and bodily flow.

“Did I bring my phone?” she asked.

Lincoln cocked an eyebrow, suitably amused.

She grinned at him, lying there on the bed, mocking her.

“I’m serious! I don’t remember where I put it, after everything...”

Lincoln sat up and pulled her phone from his pocket. She took it from him gingerly and searched her email for her boss’s address, taking a seat in the armchair by the window.

“What are you doing?” Lincoln asked, sounding a little impatient.

“Quitting,” Shaara said, folding one leg over the other. “I have to do it now before I feel guilty about fraternizing with one of the guests.”

Lincoln said nothing as she typed out her letter of resignation. It may not have been the best idea to do it while a little tipsy on both booze and the rush of endorphins. But she had to get it done before anything happened. She would feel ghastly and unprofessional otherwise.

Lincoln had risen to his feet as she finished off the email, coming to the chair where he stood over her. When she finally sent it out, he spoke, his voice akin to the whisper of the wind just outside their window.

“You know that this isn’t just a little fraternizing right?” he asked. “You’re my fated mate. Do you understand what that means?”

Shaara picked up an inflection of offense in his voice, so she placed her phone on the table next to her, daring to stare up into those dark ocean eyes. They were glossed over slightly, and she wasn’t sure if that was because he was upset or because he was speaking from somewhere vulnerable.

Either way, it was magical.

“No, I mean, I’m sorry. Bad choice of words to suggest this is a fling. But what exactly *does* it mean, fated mates?”

“It means that you and I are destined for each other. Our spirits are perfectly matched, and they’re meant to unite. Not every couple comes together thanks to the pull of fate, but we did. There will never be anyone else for me, Shaara. Once a shifter meets his fated mate, he could never bear the thought of being apart from her.”

He slowly lowered to the floor, kneeling before her as she watched him closely. She realized up close and without the distraction of the lamp that he didn’t look upset. He was, more than anything, severely earnest. Like what he was about to say to her was a proclamation made by a royal figure.

In fact, the way he kneeled reminded her of the way one kneels before their king. Or in her case, a queen.

She listened to him keenly, every word like a rock skipping across a lake into her heart.

“Shaara, I don’t want to alarm you, but I have to be honest, it is rooted in my DNA to be so. What is going on between us is something special, something cosmically determined. It’s not just sex for me. Its entanglement of the highest degree.”

He spoke like a poet from another time, and that excited Shaara even more. She leaned forward on the chair, and he watched her like a cat watching its prey.

“I know, I don’t mean to downplay it,” she said, placing a hand on his cheek. “It’s a lot to hear, that’s all, for me as a human.”

Lincoln nodded solemnly, then took the hand that caressed him and placed it on his chest. She felt the shuddering punches of his heart, unable to look away from the eyes that held her to the earth like a gravitational pull.

Her own heart pulsed through her ribs like sonic vines.

“Feel this. Feel the truth. Don’t think about it. Feel your own.”

He moved her hand back to her own chest, cupping his hand over hers. His fingers curled over hers, touching the exposed patches of her left breast. He held her there, staring, an entire universe sparkling in those eyes.

“You don’t have to think about it too much. If you learn to let go, you will feel it. I promise you.”

Shaara was feeling dizzy again, but not only because she was aroused. The words that came out of his mouth stunned her. There was an art to it, but

it was genuine. He didn't just think they were destined to be together. He knew it with every ounce of his being.

"Lincoln..." she muttered.

He took both of her hands, peppering each finger with kisses. She decided to heed his advice to stop trying to untangle the definition of what he was talking about, and simply let her body feel.

She breathed deeply, absorbing the sensation of his mouth, which moved up the inside of her forearms and back up to the most divine spot on her neck. She purred against him, knotting her fingers in his hair as he moved back down over her collarbone.

Every touch was like lightning. She leaned back in the high-back chair, groaning his name like a song, closing her eyes to absorb every movement and commit it to memory. He kissed the mounds of her breasts, rimming the folds again and teasing her nipples by tucking his slick tongue under the fabric of the dress.

Her peach nubs were as hard as stone, responding to the pressure of his hand on the opposing breast as he massaged over the dress. She chuckled at his teasing, impressed by the power his education was having on her body.

"You're mean..." she breathed.

When he left her breasts, she let out a mewling sound of a complaint. He stared up at her with a devilishly sexy smile, his head lowering even farther down her body.

"I would never be mean to you, darling. I simply need to taste you first."

Shaara knew all at once what he was about to do.

He grabbed her knees and parted them forcefully. She offered no resistance, pulling back the hem of the dress and rolling the fabric upward to give him more space. She was frantic with desire. He was, too, but he managed to control it better than she could. The clothes on her body suddenly felt like chainmail, heavy and pointless.

Lincoln hooked his fingers into the waistband on her thong, then languidly pulled it down her thighs, then her ankles, helping her step out of them. He maintained eye contact the entire time while Shaara's breathing heaved up and down like an untamed hunger.

Her legs were wide open, and he finally moved his gaze between them. Her pussy was wet, the anticipation of his talented touch both painful and delicious.

"Shaara," he whispered, kissing along the length of both her thighs. "You

are so fucking gorgeous. I am going to eat your pussy until you see stars.”

He stuck his tongue out like a beast, then went in for the kill. The second the wetness touched her clit, Shaara threw her head back against the chair, his technique having clearly been perfected over time. She was uncoiling completely with Lincoln moving his tongue up and down her labia, circling the sensitive nerves of her clit, and finding the pattern that was going to make her howl.

To Shaara, it really didn't matter what he did. The climax had been building ever since she first set eyes on him. It was a promise of the future that her dreams were worth chasing, that her pleasure was paramount.

She squeezed her eyes closed and dug her nails into Lincoln's skull, thrusting against his face as he worked flawlessly over her pussy. Stars cascaded through her body in a magnificent explosion. One of the most powerful orgasms she had ever experienced roared through her, her muscles going rigid then limp as her convulsions lasted nearly a minute.

“Lincoln, my God,” she screamed.

She lived in the divine subspace of her climax for some time, feeling Lincoln's tender kisses and touches along her body like a pleasant fog. God only knew what the sex was going to be like.

“My fated mate,” he whispered against her neck.

ELEVEN



LINCOLN

Shaara's sweet, explosive release tasted even better on Lincoln's lips than her pussy had. They hadn't even had sex yet, and she was already better than he could have imagined.

His cock pulsed against his restrictive clothes as he continued to soak up all her flavors. It begged to be let out to join the party that his tongue was selfishly enjoying so much, but Lincoln waited.

He knew how to be patient, and with Shaara, he was going to make every second one she would remember. It would be incomparable to any other sex she'd had prior. Lincoln was going to make sure it was a night she was not soon to forget. If ever.

He lapped her up, making sure every inch of her was clean. Her body twitched in his hands as he continued to hold on. Her convulsions were making it hard, but the way her body reacted to his tongue made him want to continue.

Her hand shot down to his face, reaching for him. "Oh, my God, Lincoln. Stop, stop, stop," she moaned achingly.

He did not oblige.

Lincoln snaked his tongue even farther into her depths. He knew she was sensitive after her orgasm. It was time to make her ready to come again. He wasn't done with her.

He pulled his mouth away just enough that his breath still tickled her lips. He inserted two fingers inside her, feeling more wetness gather in her lush walls.

Her twitching ceased as her movements slowed. Her change in stamina told Lincoln she was ready to soar with the next orgasm.

“You know,” he breathed against her pussy. He looked up, willing Shaara to meet his eyes to see how hungry he was for her.

Shaara lifted her head and stared at him with her big, beautiful eyes. They were inquisitive while waiting for the rest of his sentence.

“I hear that the second orgasm is even more intense than the first, and so on.”

She smiled wickedly as if daring him to make that true. “Is that so? And where did you hear that?”

Lincoln thrust his tongue back inside her. She moaned roughly at being caught off guard. Her body rolled in a smooth wave against his tongue and through his hands.

After a moment, he pulled away again. “I didn’t hear it anywhere. I know it for a fact.”

She opened her eyes and met his with a raised eyebrow. “Firsthand?”

He smirked. “Firsthand.”

She bit her lip, unable to hide her growing smile.

Lincoln sensed the air around them was thick with electricity and heat. Hunger and need shot through the density of it all, causing the room to become shrouded in passionate desire.

“Are you challenging my statement?” he growled seductively as he put his hands against her pussy and rubbed her clit.

Shaara’s hips shot up quickly before she regained control. “Yes,” she murmured. Her word was laced with want, causing Lincoln’s cock to quickly accept.

It was already dripping with excitement at thinking about ravaging her pussy itself. His cock wanted nothing more than to break through Shaara’s barriers and fuck her senseless.

He had a taste of her by eating her out and bringing her to climax. But that wasn’t enough for his eager dick, who wanted nothing more than to fuck her to completion.

Lincoln wanted her so depleted that her body would be limp and satisfied in his cradling arms.

He sat back on his heels and pulled his shirt over his head. Shaara stared at him from her reclined position in the chair and watched him strip.

He liked having an audience. Especially a captivated one like Shaara.

She watched every movement he made while undressing. It made his erection even harder by stroking his ego.

Lincoln sat up straighter and unbuckled his pants. All the while, he kept his eyes on the prize. Shaara.

She licked her lips while he stripped down to nothing but his birthday suit, and his cock twitched at the sight.

He knew he looked good. He had always been proud of his physique and alpha traits that stood out enough to make the girls swoon.

But Shaara was no girl. She was a woman. His true mate, and she deserved to be fucked like the goddess she was.

Lincoln kept his eyes locked on Shaara's doe-eyed brown irises. He was daring her. He could tell she knew what he was doing, and she had submitted to his game.

She never broke eye contact as she undid her dress and tossed it off to the side. She sat in lace underwear that was more see-through than any lingerie Lincoln had seen.

As he wondered how it could possibly support anything she needed it to, Shaara arched her back up and unhooked her bra.

With her thong already being discarded, her thin bra was the last thing that covered her perfect body.

She flung it over to the side and sat there seductively only wearing a come-get-me smirk. She spread her long legs even wider.

Lincoln took in the sight. His cock dripped with pre-cum as he took in the view she permitted him.

Her body was ready for the taking. She wanted him to devour her, just as he wanted to consume every bit of her.

Shaara may not have had the gene that screamed bluntly that he was her mate, but he sensed she definitely felt the pull and need for him.

Of course, his inner bear encouraged him to pursue her. As his eyes glazed over her and took her all in, it was becoming harder to rein in his inner predator. All he wanted was to claim Shaara as he lost himself in the sweet promises of her body.

Her hands ran over her breasts, making him pay attention to her erect nipples.

He wanted his mouth on her. Over her breasts, making her squirm as his tongue played with her newly found sensitive spots.

Instead, he was captivated by watching her slender hands run over her body, teasing him to claim the prize he had worked so hard for.

Her long fingers rested on her plush pink mound. Lincoln looked at the

glistening folds shining with newly flowing juices. Shaara was ready for round two. She was begging for it.

This time, Lincoln did what he was told without being asked.

He stood, and call him cocky, but Lincoln wanted to see her face when she gazed upon his full manhood and physique.

He was well endowed. It served him well, being the whole package and all that. He embraced his traits instead of being modest.

Shaara's eyes widened, and a pleased smile formed on her perfectly shaped lips. She blatantly stared at his hardness with no shame. She finally looked up to his eyes and widened her legs even more.

Lincoln ran his hand over his stiff dick, rubbing his eager juices over himself. It was nowhere near as good as Shaara's pussy was going to be, but that was the point. He wanted her to grow desperate for him.

She was already ready for the next bout. Lincoln had his prey where he wanted her, so of course, now his inner predator wanted to toy with it a little.

While she watched Lincoln stroke himself, her hand continued dancing between a feverish and slow dance on her clit.

He could tell she wanted to come, but she slowed when she grew too close. She was waiting for his cock to be the thing to finish her off. He could tell she was closer to begging for it.

As they held each other's gaze, only to momentarily glance down at what the other had to offer every so often, Lincoln grew impatient. He was not sure he would last much longer. She had more sexual power over him than he realized.

Lincoln came close to caving into his needs, but before he decided, Shaara let out a husky moan of words. "I want you to fuck me."

Lincoln kept his hand around his member. It pulsed faster as her words resonated throughout his nerve endings, setting his endorphins on fire.

"How bad?" he teased.

She licked her lips and wriggled slowly on the bed. "So fucking bad. I need you inside me." Her voice was heavy with her breathing. She was fighting her own urges to release.

"Please," she begged.

There it was. He had played with his delicate prey long enough. It was time to devour her.

Lincoln leaned over her petite body beside the table. Her pale skin glowed, calling him forward. He took his time to mesmerize every inch of

her.

Shaara was radiant.

He kept his body hovering over her but stayed close enough that the heat seared between them.

Lincoln kissed her deeply. His passion was higher than it had ever been. There was no controlling it. All he could do was let it take over because he was getting the same feedback from Shaara.

His inner bear could sense how hot she was for him. The pull of his mate had attuned him to a whole other level of depth when it came to sensing things with Shaara. It was what drove him into a frenzy.

Even though she was a human, Lincoln believed that Shaara could feel how badly he wanted to be inside her. There was no reason to hide it. He couldn't if he had tried.

Lincoln kept his mouth pressed against hers, shoving his tongue inside her mouth and trying to gather all her up in one taste.

She sucked on his tongue. It made him want that same action around his cock.

Next time. He smiled as he pulled away to bury his face into her plump breasts. He pushed them around his face as he licked them tenderly.

He had lowered his body slowly onto Shaara's. Her curves pressed beautifully against his long, toned body.

Lincoln had expected there to be flames when their bodies collided. The heat between them was incomparable to anything he had ever known.

He was careful to keep his large cock just against her thigh but far enough away from her tempting opening. His mouth had to cover every inch of her before he could let his dick indulge in the great unknown.

"Stop teasing me," she gasped, her body arching off the seat toward him. "I need you inside me."

Lincoln playfully nipped at Shaara. He moved his lips toward her neck, letting his tongue glide over her skin along the way.

Her hips tried to wiggle closer to his own pelvis. Lincoln's lips locked on her throat as he thrust his powerful cock deep inside his mate. She called loudly for him.

Shaara's nails dug into his back as she moaned with gratification that his cock was now safely buried deep inside her luscious walls.

She was warm, wet, and tight. Lincoln was already losing himself to her sensations. He didn't want to come too quickly, but her tight pussy was

holding him hostage.

He shoved his cock even deeper and wrapped his arms around Shaara's back.

Her legs instinctively went around his waist as she hooked her ankles and dug her nails deeper into his back. "Fuck!"

Lincoln rocked back onto his feet, hoisting Shaara from the chair with his momentum.

Shaara moaned loudly at the pressure of her lowering even further onto his thickness. "Oh my God, Lincoln. Holy shit."

He carried her to his bed and laid her down carefully. She stayed wrapped around him, making sure his veiny appendage never left its new home.

Lincoln had thought that the short trip from the chair to the bed would be enough to calm him down. If anything, it brought him even closer.

He hadn't realized how deep he could go inside her and how well she could take it. It was tight and warm. He swore he could also feel her suctioning his dick even farther into her. She knew how to use her pelvic floor.

Shaara dropped her hands from his back and reached above her to grab the headboard. "Fuck me hard. I'm fucking close."

Lincoln liked having her take control and tell him exactly what she wanted. He slammed into her harder and faster, wanting her to feel every inch he had to offer.

The white of her knuckles grew as he pounded into her, trying to make himself wait until she at least came first. He was a gentleman.

"Yes, yes! Right there! Don't stop," she pleaded.

There was no stopping him.

Lincoln was well on his way and only too glad to feel Shaara's orgasm crash like a wave against his sensitive cock.

It triggered his own release, causing his world to go blurry until he saw only Shaara.

He'd done it.

Lincoln had won his mate.

TWELVE



SHAARA

She was still on a high when she woke. A crack of light seeped through the curtain. She rubbed her eyes and looked around.

She was in a hotel room and suddenly remembered she decided to spend the night. She'd also quit her job last night.

She yawned as she thought about last night and how much fun she had. She was giddy with the knowledge she was no longer going to deal with rich petty people who thought they were better than everyone else in the world.

She tried to sit up, but something held her down. She realized it was Lincoln's arms wrapped around her, holding her against him. Her face heated as more of last night came into her memory.

She remembered kissing him, and it curled her toes now just thinking about it. She squeezed her thighs together, remembering how his tongue worked on her clit and how she came harder than she'd ever before. He certainly knew how to get her hot and bothered.

Her entire body went rigid with mortification and amazement. She wasn't the type of person to sleep around with customers. God, she'd hardly had a date, let alone took her clothes off for anyone.

Yet Lincoln was different. He seemed to care about her, and all the advice he'd given her was amazing. He was the reason her dream was even becoming something. He was the one who changed her world.

Unless none of that actually happened. She had a bit too much to drink last night. Okay, more than a bit. What if none of it was true? What if she dreamed all of that?

She looked around for her phone, needing to make sure it was real. She remembered her email to her boss about quitting, and she would be

absolutely screwed if she quit her job only to find out she needed it.

She spotted her phone on the edge of the nightstand and reached for it. Lincoln's arms tightened around her, making it harder, but her fingers grazed the case, and it tumbled into her palm.

She pulled the phone back and sighed, swiping her screen open. She clicked on her bank account and logged in. While it loaded, her stomach churned with the unknowing.

Her app opened, and she exhaled, seeing all the money. She had earned it. She hadn't drunk too much and made it all up in her head. It was real.

She sank back into the sheets, a smile tugging at her lips. She really was going to have the dream she'd been wanting. She was quitting her job and finally starting her future, a future she wanted.

She giggled and remembered she should check her email and make sure her boss got back to her. The last thing she needed was to not show up to work and have them get pissed because they never received her email. She wasn't that type of person.

She opened her email, finding some junk mail like any other day and a response from her boss. She smiled, clicking the email open.

SHAARA,

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE NEWS. *I am so happy for you and all that your future holds. But as you have signed an agreement with our business, I am expecting that you complete the shifts that you've picked up. Meaning you have a shift starting at 8:30 this morning, and I expect that you will be here to fill it.*

Regarding the rest of your shifts, they can be negotiated if you find someone to fill them in. I need at least you to work for the rest of the week, and I can find someone for the rest of your week.

We can talk more when you come in. See you then.

SHE SCOWLED, hating that she couldn't just be done. She wanted to tell her boss to eat sand, pound paper, and lay in a ditch, but didn't. Mostly

because what he was asking for was understandable.

She'd worked for the business for a while, and there wasn't a single person that just walked out unless you were fired. They ran a close crew, and they expected you to give everyone the respect that you would want. Screwing over her coworkers would not be fair, and she liked her manager too much to leave him in a lurch.

If roles were reversed and this was anyone else, she would want them to work what they could.

She sighed, seeing she had about an hour before she needed to go. She needed to shower, do her hair, and get some food in her before she left, which meant she needed to get out of bed.

She looked at Lincoln, taking in the reddish hue in his hair. While he lay there, the top of his hair fell into his face. She reached out, brushing it softly out of his eyes.

His nose scrunched up, and his eyes lazily opened, looking at her. He blinked a couple of times before he smiled at her.

"Well, good morning," he said, pulling her tighter against his chest.

She yanked her hands up, placing them over his chest. Her stomach churned, having felt his body pressed against hers last night. She could still feel the way his hands grabbed her, how he slid into her, stretching her.

She quickly shook her head, reminding herself she had shit she had to get done and she had work to get to. She couldn't be late.

"Lincoln, I have to get up," she whispered to him, suppressing a giggle as his finger grazed her hips.

He shook his head. "No, you don't have to do anything."

"What if I have to pee?"

"Well, maybe to pee," he said. "But that's it."

She snorted at his disorientation. She really didn't want to have to get up, but she needed to.

"I have to get ready for work."

His face scrunched as he looked at her. He shook his head as he yawned. "I thought you quit last night. You have money now, you don't have to work. Weren't those your exact words?"

They were, but still. She tried to wiggle free again, and he pulled her close. He kissed the top of her head. "You don't want to leave. It's warm under these sheets."

She rolled her eyes, smirking. "It is, but I do have to work."

He nuzzled closer, resting his face on her hair. She could hear him inhaling her scent. “You don’t have to. You have money. You can tell your boss you aren’t coming in.”

She turned, looking at him. “Yeah, should I do that before or after I eat their food? And leave the building?”

His face fell. “Okay, fine. You have a point.”

He released her, and she pulled herself out of bed. She stretched and eyed up her clothes. She had other clothes in her locker downstairs, so she could change into them. She needed a shower first to scrub off yesterday.

“I’m going to shower,” she said, turning toward the bathroom.

“I can join you,” he chirped, and she back at him, giving him a look. She knew fully well that if he entered the shower with her, she would be late.

“No.”

She hurried into the bathroom and started the shower. She hooked a towel on the hook and stepped under the heat. The pounding of the water against her muscles felt great. She didn’t realize how tense she was until now.

She closed her eyes and thought about her boutique inn. How did she want to decorate the rooms? Where would she have it? She didn’t even know what buildings were for sale. She didn’t bother looking because she never thought her dream would come true anytime soon.

She giggled, thinking about it. She would get to paint and pick out furniture. She was way more excited about that than furnishing her own apartment.

She stepped out of the shower and blow-dried her hair. She pulled it up and twisted it into a neat bun. Once she was happy, she pulled on her clothes from last night. After she was finished, she opened the room’s door.

Lincoln sat on the bed. He stretched his arms up, and she watched the way his muscles moved. It stirred her insides. God, she was horny.

She had never felt this way for another man, but there was just something about Lincoln. He was addictive, and not just because the sex was fantastic. Sure, that didn’t hurt, but she felt like she *craved* his presence in a way that baffled her. Maybe that was the whole mate thing. Maybe that was her way of knowing they were destined for each other, even if she didn’t have the same instincts as a bear shifter.

She shook her head. “The bathroom is yours now.” She moved, allowing him to slip inside. While he showered, she packed up her stuff and sat on the chair.

She made a list of everything she was going to need on the hotel's note paper. She was about halfway done when the door opened, and Lincoln stepped out. He rubbed a towel over his hair as he walked toward her. "Whatcha doing?"

"I'm making a list of everything I'm going to need."

He leaned over, and she smelled his shampoo. It was intoxicating, and she wished she could do what she wanted. She'd rather stay with him.

"You don't have to work. You could get started on this list instead."

She laughed at the way he seemed to read her mind, shaking her head. "No, my coworkers are nice. I can manage through a couple of days."

He leaned back, grabbing a shirt and yanking it on. He tossed his towel aside and smiled at her. "You know, the more I talk to you, the more amazing you get. I want to continue to get to know you, Shaara."

She blushed, feeling the same about him. While their relationship started off rocky, she found he was a nice guy.

"So, where do we go from here?" he asked, grabbing one of his shoes and sliding it on.

"Well, over the next two weeks, I am going to get things settled and then start looking for a place to have my boutique inn."

He nodded. "Okay, any location in mind?"

She shook her head. "No, but that's okay. I can see if there is anything open in your town. I know that it's a booming place. Might be a little more expensive, but for the foot traffic, that's okay."

He smiled. "That sounds like a great place to start. But I'll go wherever you want to go, Shaara. If you find another place for your business, we'll work it out."

She blushed, realizing how much Lincoln liked her. He wanted to be around her as much as he could.

She glanced at her watch, seeing she had about twenty minutes left. She could grab a bagel from the breakfast area and change into the clothes in her locker. She was grateful she kept a spare outfit in case something ever happened.

She pulled her own shoes on and gave him a smile. "All right, then, I guess I'll see you around."

"I think I'm going to rent this room out for the next two weeks. That way, I can visit you when you have the time."

She frowned. As much as she loved the idea of seeing him more over the

next two weeks, her life was about to become chaotic. That and she knew if Lincoln was around, it was going to be hard for her to think straight. She needed a clear head to face everything that was about to be changing in her life.

“Lincoln, I’m not sure that’s a great idea. Not that I don’t want to spend time with you, but I don’t think I’ll have the time.”

He frowned. “Do you not want me around?”

She shook her head, waving her hands. “No, it isn’t that. I would love that, but you have work, and I don’t want to get in the way of that. And honestly, I need to do this part by myself. I need to focus right now. For the time being, I won’t have that much time, and I want to wrap everything up so we can move to the next stage of our lives together.”

She scooted up to him and placed her hands on his chest. “But we can talk every day.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “Well, as much as I may not love that idea, I get your point. So, I’ll take what I can get. But that doesn’t mean I won’t be coming here to visit you. Or sending you things.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

He gave her a kiss, and she pulled away, saying good-bye before she slipped out of the room into the hallway. She made her way downstairs to prepare herself for the day and her future.

THIRTEEN



SHAARA

She took one more look around her bare apartment, her heart beating quickly. So much had changed in the span of two weeks, and she couldn't believe she managed it all.

She found some beautiful potential properties for the inn. She had sent Lincoln to check some of them to see if they were as good in reality as they looked on paper. Though she wasn't sure which one would turn out to be the perfect fit, she was excited to see them in person and make her dream come true.

The more she thought about it, the more ideas bloomed in her head. She grew more excited every day, and now that she was finally moving, she couldn't contain her joy for what the future held.

She looked over her space, gazing around the ceiling-to-floor windows and the neutral-colored walls. She'd made it her home, and now she was leaving.

She left her key on the counter for her landlord and grabbed her purse. She'd already shipped everything ahead of time. Lincoln had told her he'd handled it all on his end while she got everything settled.

She missed him and spoke to him on the phone a few hours ago. She told him the time her plane was coming in. He told her he went to the property and did a final check for her. The paperwork was being prepared, and soon it would be hers.

She shut the door, turned, and headed down the hallway. As she stepped down the stairs, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out, rolling her eyes as she noticed it was Lincoln calling her again. She smirked as she answered it.

“You know, at this rate, I’m never going to get anything done with your constant messaging me.”

She heard his laugh on the other end. “I was just making sure you were leaving. I didn’t want you to suddenly regret everything while you were saying good-bye to your apartment.”

She smirked, pushing the door to get outside. A taxi was waiting for her as she did. She hopped in, buckling herself in.

“If I was, it was only because the guy that I’m seeing is a psycho and hovering.”

He laughed, and it warmed her. She couldn’t wait to see him. He’d visited her once while he was away, but he’d gotten busy with work and hadn’t been able to again.

“You don’t even know half of it yet,” he purred, and she heard him typing on his keyboard.

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you working?”

“Yes.”

She fake gasped. “You’re making personal calls during office hours? Man, who are you?” she teased.

He snorted. “Oh, hush. I just wanted to make sure you were still moving along. I’ll talk to you after you land, okay?”

“Yes, dear.”

She ended the line and sank into the seat. The taxi driver had already pulled out and was on the way to the airport. She took in Utah, realizing these were her last moments here. She was moving away and not coming back.

That made her a little sad. Not enough to shift her mood but enough that she fathomed how much of a change it was. She was going to miss it a little.

She took in the view as they drove along. She would miss her favorite cafe and the bookstore she shopped at. She was going to miss her neighbors and her coworkers. But there was a lot she wasn’t going to miss, as well, and she was ready for the next phase of her life.

As they arrived at the airport, she tipped the driver and slipped out. She made her way to the front, got her ticket, and moved ahead to wait for her flight. Her phone dinged once more.

She pulled it out, seeing a message from Lincoln. He had sent her another message. *I’ll be at the airport to pick you up. I’ll see you when you get here.*

She smiled happily. She’d seen her future so clearly over the past two weeks. Lincoln loved her so much. They had maintained a long-distance

relationship, and he'd been nothing but a gentleman.

She could see them getting married, settling down, and having kids. She could picture him being the type of dad to be a soccer coach. She could see him being the dad who held his kids while they cried when they were hurt. He could see him cooking dinner in a big kitchen, telling wild stories as he stirred a wok of veggies.

There were some unknowns. She still wasn't quite sure what it would be like to be married to a bear shifter. Or what it might mean for their future children. Would they be shifters too? In any case, it was a future she desperately wanted, and it was at the tips of her fingers. She smiled to herself, realizing how far she'd come.

She boarded her plane and set her phone on airplane mode before she slipped it into her purse. She purchased a movie to give her something to do during her flight, and she relaxed.

The flight was calm, and she fell asleep near the end. She woke as everyone was getting deplaning and tried to shake off her nap. She rubbed her eyes as she got off and meandered for the pick-up area.

She glanced at her phone, not seeing any messages from Lincoln. She for sure thought she'd get one by now. She shrugged it off and kept moving forward.

She stepped out of the airport, and her eyes widened when she spotted a man holding a sign that said her name. She blushed, rolling her eyes. That seemed like something Lincoln would do.

She walked to the man, unsure of who he was. Lincoln said he was going to be the one who picked her up, so who was the guy holding the sign? Was he a friend? A coworker?

The man was medium height with a decent build. He seemed like any other guy you'd come across. He wasn't wearing high-end clothing, so probably not a coworker.

The man spotted her and gave her a smile. "Shaara, I'm here to pick you up."

Errand boy, maybe. But still. She was a little disappointed as Lincoln said he was grabbing her.

"I thought Lincoln was going to be picking me up," she said, glancing down at her phone once more.

"Something came up, and he asked me to get you. He had a meeting he couldn't avoid."

The man turned and opened the door of a black car. She glanced once more at her phone and decided to send him a message. She moved, sliding into the passenger seat, and the guy shut the door. He rounded the car, and she sighed.

The guy got into the car, started it up, and pulled out. Suddenly, her stomach dipped. She looked down at her phone and then up at the guy.

She chewed on her lower lip. "So, how long is the drive? Are we going to Lincoln? Or are you dropping me off at the site?"

The man glanced at her, and it sent chills down her spine. Something didn't seem right. The way he looked at her wasn't right.

She looked at her phone to see if Lincoln had answered her message. That was when she realized she still had it on airplane mode, and the message was never sent. She quickly swiped it off and looked outside the window. She frowned, realizing that the scenery was moving along rather fast.

They pulled out of the airport lot, and she glanced over at the speed at which the driver was going. She felt her eyes widen, seeing he was going sixty.

"What's the speed limit here? You seem to be driving a little fast," she asked, but he ignored her.

Her stomach twisted even more, and she looked down at her phone. She felt her phone vibrate. It vibrated again and again.

She glanced down and saw several missed messages from Lincoln. One asked if she was comfortable on the plane. Another said he arrived at the airport. And the third one made her stomach plummet.

Where are you? I'm waiting for you, but I don't see you.

She peeked at the man, realizing he wasn't working for Lincoln. He glanced at her, and his face fell. Rage filled his expression, and he moved.

He grabbed her phone, and she felt her mouth drop. "Hey! What are you doing!"

He threw it out his open window and looked back at her. "Shut up!"

"Who the hell are you!" she asked, ready to punch him.

She turned to open her door, but it was locked. She unlocked it and pushed, but it still wouldn't open. Her mind panicked, realizing he had locked her in. She was trapped.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked again, glaring at the man.

"Shut up," he growled again. "Just shut up and sit nicely. Otherwise, you're going to be in a world of hurt."

He hit the gas again, and she fell back into her seat. She gripped the leather, her mind going a mile an hour.

Who the hell was this guy? Why was he kidnapping her? What did he want with her? Did he know Lincoln?

Lincoln! She never even got to message him. He didn't even know she wasn't at the airport. How long would he be there looking for her? She tried to tell herself that her big, strong bear shifter would surely be able to come to her rescue, but her stomach was in knots.

The guy's phone rang and he answered and mumbled so she couldn't hear him. Her heart raced as she wondered how many people were involved in this... well, kidnapping. But who wanted to kidnap her and why?

When he stared into the rearview mirror watching something, she glanced out the back window, praying her knight in shining armor was galloping up on a white horse. Instead, her eyes spotted a car swerving in and out of the lanes, coming on quickly. Relief flowed through her, thinking it was the police. They would take her back to the airport, and she could be with Lincoln.

But as the car got closer, she realized it didn't have flashing lights on the hood. It wasn't the police to save her.

The car was moving fast, too quickly to be just another driver in a hurry. The guy was almost going eighty miles an hour.

"The fuck," the man growled, looking in his rearview mirror.

She looked back and swore it was Lincoln, and he looked pissed. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel, and he had venom in his eyes. He pointed, telling her to get low.

She blinked, swearing her eyes were deceiving her. But she wasn't going to take the chance.

She sank lower in her seat. The guy tried to go faster, but the car behind them stayed right alongside them.

They went through town and then hit the country roads. Lincoln pulled up beside them and turned his car, smacking into theirs. She screamed as the sound of metal on metal erupted in the car. The car jerked, making her uneasy.

"Son of a bitch," the man growled. He turned his steering wheel, returning the gesture. Lincoln's car fell back.

"Stop it! Stop it!" She smacked the man, clawing at his face. He shoved her back, and another jolt hit the car. They veered, but the man jerked the

steering wheel, trying to stop them from sliding into the ditch.

She looked back, seeing Lincoln pulling up once more. She darted forward and smacked the guy on the head and quickly ducked onto the back seat. He tried to grab her but failed.

The sound of screeching metal filled the air, and she sank hard to the floor. She gripped the back of the front seat, and the car jolted. This time, it swerved, and her entire body tensed as they went airborne.

She screamed as the car flipped and her body was thrown around. Her head smacked against the inside, and she cried out.

Her stomach clogged her throat, unsure of what just happened. But she was about to find out.

She tried to sit up, and her world spun. The need to vomit overwhelmed her but she was able to suppress it.

“Son of a bitch,” the man growled in front. She reached for the door, but it wouldn’t budge. She was still stuck.

She sat up slightly, looking outside the window. Lincoln’s car came to a halt beside them. The door swung open, and he climbed out. She could feel the rage and looked at the man, knowing he was in for a world of pain from an angry bear shifter.

FOURTEEN



LINCOLN

“Fucking fucker!” Lincoln muttered, his eye carefully trained on the car that he knew contained Shaara. He slammed his foot on the gas, gripping the leather steering wheel like grim death, and soared along the road after it.

He had arrived at the airport, wanting to make a good impression on his new mate. Though she had warmed up to him by now, he wasn't about to stop making an effort. That was why he had arrived to greet her personally with a bouquet of nice roses.

Gerri had told him that humans are complex creatures. Women wouldn't fall at his feet just because he said they were his mate. He realized now how right Gerri had been, but he was also grateful for the reality check. It made him a better partner and mate as a result, even though his ego had suffered a bit at first.

He had been so busy trying to impress Shaara, however, that perhaps his bear shifter instincts had relaxed a little too much. It had slipped his mind entirely that he was a formidable alpha. Which meant possible threats were around him at all times.

Enemy alphas could be brazen, stupidly brazen even, when it came to toppling someone like Lincoln off his throne. He knew a handful who wouldn't think twice about using his newfound mate as bait.

As he waited and waited for Shaara at the airport, his shifter senses kicked in and his stomach twisted. He tried to send her a message, but she didn't answer. And then he caught a whiff of her scent.

He followed it and saw her from a distance. Beautiful Shaara with her glossy, silky hair tied back in a braid, adorned in comfortable slacks and a gray T-shirt. She was assisted into a car by a man he didn't recognize. More

like pushed in, actually.

Lincoln only had a flicker of a moment to decide what he was going to do. He was too far away to reach her in time. Instead, he dropped his bouquet hastily and raced for his own vehicle, wanting to follow before she got too far away.

But he wasn't exactly a patient man. The pull of his mate in danger made him crave flesh in a way that was savage and righteous. It was nearly impossible to deny.

The car holding his beloved soared out of the lot, and alongside it, came two more cars of the same brand. Lincoln flew after them, a few distant honks of disapproval quickly disregarded.

"Come on, come on!" he shouted when traffic got in his way, weaving in and out to stay as close as possible. He followed them without stealth, not wanting to give them a chance to hurt his darling.

The other vehicles noticed him only a few minutes after leaving the airport, zig-zagging in and out of the lanes, the two opposing cars trying to enfold him between them to block him from following too closely.

They didn't know who they were fucking with. They would learn, and quickly, why he was so respected in the shifter realm. Even if it meant getting himself injured in the process. For Shaara, he would cut himself in half.

He revved the engine, moving like a bumble bee hovering from flower to flower to pollinate, out from between the sandwich the two cars tried to crush him between. He navigated through the traffic, not wanting to take out innocent people while he was at it.

The engine roared as he sailed forward, bumping the car that Shaara resided in. It was a gentle tap, pushing the car forward minutely, forcing it off the highway and onto a smaller two-lane road. The driver panicked, and that was what Lincoln was counting on.

"Let's go, motherfucker," Lincoln said through gritted teeth.

They approached an old, abandoned barn set off the road. Lincoln smashed into the side of the car, thrusting it into the grassy lot making it skid over the flat ground, and to his horror, roll over.

Lincoln smashed on the brakes, a screeching sound so profound that it echoed through the open fields before he came to a stop on the blacktop. He jumped out of the car just before the perpetrators who had been following close behind arrived and smashed into his vehicle. The sonic boom reverberated through the ground and disappeared into the crisp dusk.

Lincoln went for the car holding Shaara until the driver rolled out waving a gun in his direction. The kidnapper was a bit dazed, but not enough for Lincoln to take a chance on the guy hurting Shaara.

Lincoln was glad he had chosen to wear jeans and a long-sleeve shirt, pieces he could easily shift out of with little restraint. His thoughts twirled as the weapon was waved around in the twilight, the metal reflective and spotless.

“Hold on there just a second, tiger,” the man said, who was still wearing glasses despite the sunken sun. “Or should I say, bear?”

Lincoln picked up a familiar scent coming off the man, as well as his four comrades that had emerged from the other two cars. It was stark, not quite bold, but sneaky in its subtle fragrance. He was good at picking up scents when he needed to.

“You don’t know who you’re fucking with,” Lincoln snarled. “Just let her go and we can be done with this. Before anyone gets hurt.”

The approaching men chuckled. They were young and probably hot-headed. That meant they could be stronger, but it also meant they were far more impulsive and stupid.

“That’s quite a threat, Lincoln,” the man with the gun said. “But I’m afraid we are going to have to defer to option number two...”

One of the men, a scraggly-haired, smelly bastard, took a swing at Lincoln’s head. It was just the egotistical act he had been counting on.

Lincoln ducked, having seen the attempt from a mile away. He weaved behind the man and landed a skull-shattering blow to the base of his neck.

Lincoln’s knuckles collided with the nubs of the man’s spine, sending him hurtling with the force of a slingshot. That was when a gunshot went off. It split the night air with its blaring fracture, skidding past Lincoln with a light scrape.

Everything descended into chaos. But that was what Lincoln wanted. He thrived in chaos: graceful, violent, and deadly.

He ripped through his clothing, shifting into bear form as quickly as lightning strikes. He went for the man with the gun as he was the most obvious threat. Lincoln catapulted himself, thick and massive, into the man. The bear form crushed the human form instantly, the fiery burn of the bullets bouncing off his fur like BBs from a pellet gun. The velocity of his launch severely dented the car, nearly tilting it onto its side.

Lincoln caught it with his paws, using his incredible strength to pull it

down onto its wheels. The man between his animal form and the thick metal was a pile of dust, a squishy puddle of blood and bone.

The epitome of the carnage Lincoln desired.

The other men had shifted, too, coming for him in sharp barks and roars. It was just as he had predicted. They were cubs wanting to make a name for themselves. They came for him in a swarm, biting his limbs and attempting to thrash him. Lincoln protruded his claws and slashed, catching one of them in the eye, blood spouting.

The bear shrieked in agony, stumbling back to lick his wounds. Lincoln then took on the remaining two coming at him with everything they had. Glistening fangs barred, pupils the size of black saucers, gums the shade of a ripe watermelon. One tried to take hold of the scruff of his neck, a cheap shot from behind, while the other nipped at his ankles.

The rage in Lincoln focused him, which was unfortunate for the two shifters who were convinced they had him detained. He stabbed the bear who was gaining at his throat and throttled him, the large body slamming on the grass and rumbling the ground. Lincoln then lashed out with both paws at the bear trying to take him down at the knees, catching the thin skin of the enemy's neck and leaving a peachy thin line.

The kidnapper's eyes widened, the fright in his expression enough for Lincoln to drink up. Lincoln had narrowly missed his jugular, which he would've watched spew like a broken pipe. The dumbass stumbled back, yanking at his friend who had gone limp from the body slam, until they both yipped and skittered away into the darkness.

Lincoln heaved air, beyond satisfied, and barely marked. He let out a deafening howl, long and thick with victory. When he was left with nothing but the sounds of his own breathing and the thump of his heartbeat, he shifted into human form.

The silence was painful. He realized Shaara had been in the backseat the entire time, a witness to the catastrophic violence his kind was capable of. Not exactly a warm welcome.

He raced toward the car door, ripping it open in his naked form. He found Shaara curled up in a fetal position, shaking like a leaf in a windstorm.

"Shaara? Shaara, are you hurt?" he asked, his tone mournful.

She shook her head, but her gaze was fixed on the seat ahead. She had gone as white as a ghost.

"I'm okay, I mean, physically. I was scared, Lincoln. Very scared..."

Her voice descended into a hush, so Lincoln pulled her into his arms and carried her to his SUV. It was mostly destroyed, but there were blankets in the back for occasions such as the one he had just endured. He threw one over her and swaddled her to the heated core of his skin.

“I’m going to call one of my men to come get us. Don’t worry, you’re safe with me now.”

Shaara remained still, silent as stone. The mute quality of her response made him, the alpha of the canyons, terrified.

FIFTEEN



SHAARA

Shaara believed she had experienced trauma before. In some capacity, she thought everyone experienced terrible events during their lifetime.

But then the kidnapping had happened, along with the subsequent violence. Her body had devolved into survival mode the second she realized what was happening. And once it was over, she feared she wasn't ever coming back.

Lincoln held her in his arms in the back seat, enveloping the two of them beneath two fluffy blankets. She felt like she was on pause, her mind unable to comprehend what she had seen. It was protecting her like it was supposed to.

Lincoln was ever-present. He took her home to his guest room and gently offered her dinner alone. She sat on the foot of the bed, her clothing feeling strange against her skin, her thoughts unable to line up with any practicality. She was a surging swirl of need.

"No," she muttered, her breathing shallow. "Stay with me. Eat with me. I need you here."

Lincoln promised he would and called down to his chef to bring their meals to the guest room.

She wanted to say she was sorry for all of the commotion she had caused. She could sense that her response worried him, but she possessed no extra energy to put toward comforting him. He was left with that duty.

The chef rolled in not long after with two steaming plates of steak, honied corn, and butter-laden potatoes. The initial scent of it brought Shaara back to reality for a moment, but then her stomach began to churn.

She winced, and Lincoln was back at her side.

“Are you all right?”

She shook her head. It was spectacular how honest she could be with him.

“Not quite. My stomach aches.”

“You need to eat something,” Lincoln said, standing, taking the steaming plates, and thanking the chef. “You’re in shock right now. Drink some water, take it slow.”

She nodded, her previous trust and reliance on him coming back. Lincoln and the chef set up a folding table with napkins and golden utensils to boot. The way they shimmered in the light of the room gave Shaara a sense of surrealism.

Then again, everything did with Lincoln.

“Thank you, Sasha,” Lincoln said to the chef. “That will be all for now. I will ring you if there’s any possibility of dessert.”

The chef nodded, then left the room with the serving cart. Shaara felt a pang of guilt again, except it was closer, moving back into the place it resided in her gut.

“This looks wonderful,” she said, gazing down at her meal.

Shaara meant every word. Her stomach was still queasy, but she figured Lincoln was probably right. Her body was craving nutrients now more than ever. So she sliced up the steak and scooped small grains of corn into her mouth cautiously.

She managed to ingest a reasonable amount. Despite how delicious and luxurious the food truly was, she couldn’t quite scarf it down the way she had hoped. She stopped at a certain point and laid her utensils down, her hand going to her stomach instinctively.

“I’m sorry. That’s all I can take right now. It’s lovely though, really. I don’t want to eat too much and have it come up later.”

Lincoln, on the other hand, had essentially inhaled his food. She wondered if he had been famished from the battle and spike in adrenaline because of his shifter nature. But she didn’t have time to wonder for long. Soon enough, he was smiling at her, that dashing, debonair smile.

She couldn’t help but return it with her own.

“What?” she asked.

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” he said, leaning back on the bed and placing his hand on her lower back. “You have been through a lot. That wasn’t exactly the greeting I was hoping for when you arrived.”

Her smile began to fade when the images of the fight returned. They were

graphic and vivid in her mind like a roll of film being played.

“Lincoln,” she said, starting to rub her temples. “I don’t know if it’s such a good idea for me to live here. That was so much for me to see.”

The smile on Lincoln’s face was slapped away, and he shot forward on the bed. Even after only knowing him for a few weeks, she felt she could read his expressions like a book.

The one he gave her was that of understanding and a little fear.

“My men have been researching the guys who attacked us. I’m pretty sure the kidnappers were people who worked for commercial broadcasting. They must have thought you were involved in the public broadcasting fundraiser.”

His voice lowered into a purr, and it was comforting, at least for the moment. Maybe she was too exhausted to question him, or maybe she just trusted him with her vulnerability.

Either way, his hand on her back felt like heaven, as did the one crawling up her shoulder.

“Okay. But what is going to happen now?”

“I’m going to have everything figured out. Don’t worry. I got this, babe.”

Shaara sighed. It had been a long day. All she wanted was to take a steaming hot bath, then curl up next to her man. She would let him summon out the tension of her body, even with his hands and mouth if he saw fit.

But those carnal romantic thoughts were thwarted by the memory of him in his bear form. It was startling, and her stomach roiled again at the thought of what the man lying next to her was capable of.

His hand rested on her shoulder, rising to cup her cheek. The other remained on her lower back, moving in pleasant circles where all the stress resided.

“I can hear the cogs turning,” he whispered.

Shaara smiled, feeling her cheeks flush as she gazed up at him. Those eyes were dark pools, but ones that she would love to swim in, like a midnight float under the moonlight.

“It’s seeing you like that. There was something.... I don’t know... unsettling about it.”

Shaara thought that he might respond with offense or anger, but he didn’t. He merely stood from the bed, took her hands in his, and guided her upward.

“Let me show you something. I promise you won’t be scared anymore. Please.”

Shaara was hesitant, but the glassy look in his eyes encouraged her to

move with him. They went into the hallway where the scones flickered with ambient light, then silently padded downstairs, through the kitchen, and out back onto a stone terrace.

The night was cool but not frigid, a blanket of stars having emerged onto the frosty span of the sky. The length of the property looked massive, judging by the fact that Shaara couldn't see where the next house's property began. She held on tightly to his hand as they walked through the dewy grass, a spotlight flicking on and bathing them in soft luminance.

Then he stopped after they passed a garden of alarmingly red carnations and an elegant-looking in-ground swimming pool. The carnations swayed in the brush of the wind, quiet and supportive.

He stood in front of her, still holding both hands tenderly. He circled hers with his thumbs as he spoke, a soothing husky whisper under an ocean of stars.

"I know it must have been shocking to see me like that. So I want to show you I am still me, the Lincoln that you know, when I'm in my bear form. I am in complete control. How do you feel about that?"

She felt hesitant again, maybe even a little unsettled. But it was difficult to say no. She was at a very daring point in her life where taking risks was of the utmost importance. Showing her his shifter side was not only a vulnerable act but a poignant one too. Her heart hammered in her chest, but it was crucial to be brave.

"Yes," she said, trying not to mumble. "Okay, Lincoln. I trust you."

He laid a palm on her chest just as he had the night that they had first made love. She felt exposed having him feel the gyrations of her heartbeat, but then it was freeing. Just the way he had said it would be.

"Don't think about it, just feel it," he murmured.

Lincoln let his hands slide down her arms, sending shivers throughout her entire body. He backed up several feet out of the spotlight of the terrace lamp. In the shadows, he removed his clothing, folded them neatly, and then placed them aside in the damp grass.

Shaara's fists clenched as she watched the change unfold before her very eyes. She had caught a glimpse of him when she was in the car. The reddish, burnt shade of his fur was identical to that of his hair and beard. But she hadn't seen the process as it happened. The beating drum of her heart glided into her throat, wondering if human brains were capable of taking in something so spectacular and letting it sit in their memory forever.

Like a rare antique, fragile, at the center of the gallery.

But as she watched, she knew what she was seeing was more of a gift than a curse or burden. Her focus went razor sharp, her sensations heightened to the point where she could feel every droplet of dew as her pores absorbed them. It was a superhuman feature that she was, by proxy, taking in from her beloved.

Lincoln fell to his knees first, not in agony, but in pride. His snout extended and his jaw crackled like sugar glass, fur sprouting from his skin. He increased in size, despite his previous lean and thick shape, muscles ballooning beneath the waves of fur that swept up in the wind like a red-hot desert storm. She watched as the bone of his fingers elongated into meaty paws, claws shooting outward from his nail beds like glistening knives.

He had kept his eyes closed the entire time, and when he was finished changing, he opened them.

Shaara watched with bated breath as the eyes she had come to know and trust floated in the inky black, shards of sapphires and emeralds dyed in a sheen oil spill. The colors seemed to change as they evolved.

But none of it was imaginary. Not anymore.

Lincoln lumbered forward, their eyes fixed on one another as he stepped into the light. Slowly, he was washed in the soft glow, the red of his fur sparkling like rubies, the thunderous force of his weight shaking the ground beneath Shaara's feet. When he stopped and sat in a submissive stance, she knew that he wanted her to come forward and touch him.

"You want me to get closer?" she asked, voice trembling.

He nodded in his bear form, which was slightly comical. She did, then realized that what was motivating her was no longer fear. But a sublime fascination.

Shaara stepped forward, her eyes never leaving him, then reached out with her palm. He sat up, bringing his snout to her fingers, and sniffed at them with his velvety, wet nose.

Shaara chuckled, beyond relieved. It was him still. She sensed it in the depths of her soul.

"It really is you, isn't it?" she whispered. "Amazing."

Lincoln pushed his cheek against her hand, and she scratched under his chin. She laughed more, all of the tension that had tightened her body earlier having evaporated. The sea of carnations that stood in the background of their interaction reminded her of hope. Hope for the beautiful future she had

always dreamed of.

After a few more minutes of playing, Lincoln shifted back into his human form. She clung to him naked in the dark and buried her face in his chest.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he said, stroking her hair. “I promise you.”

Shaara believed him with every beat of her raging, madly tender heart.

SIXTEEN



SHAARA

Being wrapped in Lincoln's embrace was a comfort Shaara had never experienced.

It was hard to imagine that only moments before, she had been scared of his massive bear form. But now that she saw, now that she understood, she never felt safer than in his arms.

He was right. She had trusted him before, and he hadn't led her astray. Tonight, he proved he wouldn't let anything happen to her. That was more than anyone had ever done for her.

"Thank you," she murmured against his flesh.

He responded by holding her tighter.

Being embraced, she sensed his feelings for her. It was overwhelming in the most welcoming way. She never wanted to leave her snuggled-up spot safe in his arms.

When they finally separated, she looked into his eyes. The same ones that she looked into when a bear stood before her.

It was the eyes of the man she was meant to be with. That she was growing to love. The eyes of someone she was hoping was growing to love her as well, apart from the fated mate thing he had talked to her about.

She wasn't falling in love with Lincoln because it had somehow been pre-ordained by a mysterious force she couldn't truly understand. She wasn't even falling in love with Lincoln because Gerri Wilder had suggested him as a suitable match.

Though she knew there was a lot she didn't know about the bear shifter, she was eager to learn. She loved him, all on her own, because of everything he was and everything she saw in him. She hoped he felt the same about her.

As she looked deeper into his eyes, she realized that that wasn't even a question.

He kissed her softly and then pulled back.

Shaara's tension from earlier was settled, and other parts of her started to take over her raw emotions.

Her inner thighs grew hot as she took a moment to admire her man.

Lincoln was so fine. His reddish-blond hair fell perfectly over his captivating eyes. Darker red hair framed his angled face and accentuated every feature.

Then, Shaara's eyes moved from his face to his body, unable to resist admiring it.

Lincoln's broad shoulders turned into the strong, muscular arms that were still holding her.

Shaara's pussy was getting slicker by the moment as her eyes roamed farther down his athletic body and rested bluntly on his groin. Her nipples started to harden as she caught Lincoln's smirk at her while she took him in.

Shaara suddenly felt the urge to take a bath return. Only it wasn't going to be for washing away the events from earlier.

She pressed herself against Lincoln's body, her lower hips pressing perfectly against his pelvis. Shaara grew hotter for him as she felt his emerging erection. It jabbed into her; she wiggled against him as she slid up onto her toes to lean into his ears.

"I think I'm going to go and take a bath. The soap over my skin while soaking in warm water sounds inviting..." She slid her hand between them and gently squeezed his bulge. "Don't you think?"

She didn't wait for a response. She simply smiled sweetly up at him, nuzzled his neck playfully, and walked toward the house. A large porcelain clawfoot stand-alone tub lay beyond the bedroom doors, and she didn't want to keep it waiting.

As she walked through the home, she didn't completely close the doors behind her, leaving them cracked open just enough for Lincoln to be able to see her backside as she strolled along.

In the bathroom, Shaara stood in front of the mirror, stripped off her shirt, and wiggled out of her pants, being sure to bend over with her ass in full view.

She stood in her underwear as she threw her hair in a high messy bun. The movement elongated her body while making her curves pop. That was

what she was going for. She knew how to work it, and she was pulling all the stops.

There seemed to be an animalistic need in her to satisfy him as a thank you for saving her. It was intense and new, and Shaara wanted to feed it. It made her feel confident and sexy which empowered her even more.

Hair pulled up, she sauntered to the tub and began to fill it with warm water. She grabbed some salts and scented bubbles Lincoln had bought for her as a welcome-to-his-home present.

After she mixed her perfect concoction, she returned to the mirror. She saw Lincoln's reflection approaching the door. Acting like she wasn't watching him, she continued with her show.

She unhooked her bra and was about to slide out of her panties when he reached the door and creaked it open.

"Would you like some company?" he asked as his eyes looked her up and down and over again. His pants were tight around his groin, and it looked uncomfortable.

Shaara smiled. She chose to only reply by dropping her underwear and kicking it to the pile she had created on the floor.

Lincoln's eyes followed her garment then went to her again.

She loved seeing how much he desired her. He didn't try to hide it, wearing it plainly for her to see what she did to him.

Shaara sauntered to the tub. The water line was almost to where she wanted it. She stepped in and slithered down so only from her collarbone up was exposed.

"Will you turn off the water please?" she asked politely as she batted her eyes at him.

He grinned as he turned it off. "Is that an invitation?"

She gave in and smiled back. "You should know that you're always invited." Shaara scooted her feet underneath her so her knees popped out. She dropped them apart, tempting Lincoln to come play.

He took the bait.

Shaara was impressed at how quickly he could undress with such little effort. But she was more impressed as she gazed upon his Viking-like body.

She pushed back against the tub. "Sit in front of me," she requested, smiling sweetly up at him.

Lincoln slid down the other side without question and slunk into the water.

Shaara watched his stiff cock slowly disappear under the suds.

Once he was settled under the bubbles, Shaara reached forward and grasped his drenched dick below the mound of fluffy white foam.

Lincoln jumped slightly but quickly settled back in.

The soapy water made his long, rigid cock smooth and slick. Her hand glided with ease over his length. The lubrication allowed her to grip him firmer than if there was nothing but skin on skin. She twisted her hand around his cock, slithering with no friction to cause discomfort.

Lincoln's eyelids closed with a flutter as she quickened her strokes.

While his eyes were shut, Shaara leaned forward, stuck her ass in the air, and held her breath before plunging underwater to give him head.

Her lips replaced her hands as she latched on to him and ran her mouth down his shaft.

She could hold her breath for a while but not forever. She had to make her time count, which she planned to.

Shaara vacuumed his dick securely inside of her mouth. Her tongue ran around his cock like it was a candy cane. It had a faint jasmine taste to it from the soap, but other than that, he tasted clean and smooth.

He was long. She did her best to push his tip to the back of her throat until it started to maneuver down. She gagged but not enough to quit. Plus, when she gagged, Lincoln tensed and she tasted his pre-cum eagerly dripping down her throat. The noise turned him on and that turned Shaara on.

She held him in her mouth as long as she could. Eventually, she had to come out from the water.

Shaara pulled off and broke the surface. Lincoln's lips met hers with ferocity before she could fully open her eyes.

His tongue thrust itself upon hers and somehow pulled her in.

Hunger pulsated off him. It almost took her breath away.

Shaara regained control and pushed herself back onto her knees. Her hand had pushed Lincoln back, allowing herself a moment before scooting forward to straddle Lincoln's engorged manhood.

Slightly lowering herself over him, she grazed his cock and teased it with her lower lips, breathing kisses all over him.

Lincoln's hands ran up her soapy back and slid back down to her hips. He smacked her ass hard. It jiggled against him. It created small waves in the tub. Shaara smiled.

Not much of her was curvy, but her ass was an exception.

“You like that?” she purred as she rotated her hips playfully over his tip.

“Fuck yes. I want that pussy.”

“I bet you do.” Shaara slid herself over his length and then pulled up again.

He groaned in heated frustration. “You’re killing me.”

“Not yet,” she teased.

Shaara pushed herself onto her knees, letting the water cascade off of her body as she shoved her breasts into Lincoln’s face. She was taking advantage of her slippery body and using it to stimulate Lincoln’s every sense.

Lincoln’s mouth found her nipples and treated them with the attention they needed.

She moaned and let her heavy wet hair tilt her head back as she indulged in the sensations his tongue created. Her hips ground on top of him, not yet letting him penetrate her.

Shaara was holding off not only to torture Lincoln but for herself as well. If she put off throwing herself onto his joystick, her climax would be that much faster but that much more powerful. Right now, that was what controlled her. That, and wanting to make his release just as intense.

“Get on,” he growled, his face still buried in her breasts.

“What? This isn’t enough for you?” she breathed as she teased his tip even more.

He grunted in retort and nipped at her ear.

Shaara couldn’t put it off anymore. She wanted his cock inside her as badly as he did.

She slipped herself over his tip, placed her opening perfectly, and slid his full length inside of her. “Fuuuuck. Holy fuck. You’re so deep. Holy shit,” she moaned as she pushed herself up and down slowly onto him.

“Yeah, baby, you like taking that dick?” Lincoln’s hands had moved to her hips and gripped her hard. His fingers dug into her sides, but she didn’t care. She embraced every feeling she experienced right now. Her main focus was his dick inside her wet walls.

Her nipples rubbed against his body as she slowly bounced up and down, making her even more sensitive to his touch.

She kissed his neck and lightly bit him. She wanted it rough but wanted to make it last.

Lincoln kissed her neck and jaw, moaning his pleasuring tones into her ear. It was more than she could take.

Fuck it.

Shaara started to pick up her pace and push harder against his dick so the friction would hit her clit.

Once he realized everything was quickening, Lincoln moved his hands to help lift her and keep the fast momentum that they both craved to achieve their ultimate climax.

“Don’t stop, I’m so close. You want that come?” Lincoln moaned heavily as he grew closer to his peak.

His breathiness lit another fire in Shaara’s core. “Fuck, yes, give it all to me.” She slammed herself forward, creating maximum stimulation against her clit. She quivered and cramped, but she wasn’t stopping.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” she screamed as her body was about to completely give up by giving in. It was as if she could feel his cock deep in her throat. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

She slammed down on him and felt her trigger pulled.

“Yes!” Her breath had left her and raspy screams were all she had left to offer.

Before her movements ceased, Lincoln took control of her hips and slammed her up and down three more times. “Ah, take it!” he cried and filled her.

She moaned at the movements against her highly sensitive pussy as her body vibrated with each pulsing release of her own climax.

Now, mixed with Lincoln’s, she was overstimulated and seeing stars.

Lincoln moved his hands and wrapped his arms around her, pressing her hard against his body. His cock was still deep inside her. He nuzzled her hair. “Mmm, I could take baths like this more often.”

She smiled. “Me too. But I feel more dirty than clean now.” She giggled.

“Well, we can fix that. The water is still warm. Let me give you a sponge bath.”

His dick twitched to life inside her at his own suggestion. She encouraged him with a slow rotation of her own hips.

“A sponge bath, huh? Is that all?” She softly bit his lower lip.

His low grumble sent a new heatwave throughout Shaara. “I guess we’ll just see where it takes us.”

Shaara wrapped her legs around his waist and locked in closer to him.

Making it up as they went sounded good to her. Like he’d said, the water was still warm.

SEVENTEEN



LINCOLN

The next morning, Lincoln took Shaara out to breakfast at a quaint café downtown. Something serene and not too crowded, which he hoped would ease her mind. And it seemed to be working. Though she'd glance around occasionally like she was afraid someone would appear out of nowhere, for the most part, she was her usual self.

Lincoln hoped she didn't notice the subtle ways he kept looking around and occasionally sniffing the air. If she was going to feel comfortable, then she needed to think he was just as relaxed. She shouldn't have to worry about all this. Especially since she just moved here.

After breakfast, he took her on a drive, showing her the city before they met with the real estate agent.

"And that right there is downtown. You should see it in the winter all decorated. It's a real tourist trap," he told her.

Shaara soaked it up with shining eyes. "That's incredible. You'll have to take me there."

A smile made its way onto his face, seeing her so happy. "Absolutely. There's a little pub that serves some of the best food I've ever had. And they have a lot of local artists come in and perform."

"Oh, we'll definitely have to go there then. I was thinking that I could have some local artists perform at my inn. I'm sure they'd appreciate the business." Shaara went on, describing all the events and details of what she wanted to happen at her venue.

His heart melted, and he listened with rapt attention. She was so passionate about everything she wanted, especially when it concerned her inn. It was clear she had poured so much love and thought into every little

detail of how she wanted her dream to come true.

And soon, her dream would become reality. With the money she'd made from day trading, she could bring to life all those wonderful things she'd been planning.

He adored her for it. And he would make sure she had everything she dreamed of. That she would be around to enjoy the future she'd worked so very hard for.

His gut twisted in guilt suddenly. For a moment, he thought about telling her the truth. Telling her who was actually behind her kidnapping.

But then he saw her blinding grin and bright eyes and couldn't bring himself to tell her. To ruin the mood. They were about to pick out the place where she would build her inn. This was supposed to be a special day for her.

No, he couldn't ruin that. Besides, he was handling it. She didn't need to know.

They drove around the city a bit longer until they arrived at the first potential property where they were meeting the real estate agent.

Beth Cross was someone he'd worked with before when searching for a new office building. Though she wasn't a shifter, she was a trusted friend. Lincoln hadn't taken any chances though and had his sleuth look into her. She'd come back clean.

"Hi! You must be Shaara, it's so nice to meet you," Beth greeted cheerfully. Shaara shook her hand and smiled.

"It's good to meet you too. Lincoln says you know how to find all the best properties."

"Oh, I have my sources. If a good property pops up, I'm the first one to know about it." The agent winked at Shaara. "And I know how to sweet talk the owners like nobody else."

Then the real estate agent gestured to the property. "Shall we start with location number one?"

Shaara was all but bouncing. "Yes. You have no idea how long I've waited for this."

They walked up to the entrance when Lincoln spotted a figure moving in the shadows. He tensed and sniffed the air and then instantly relaxed.

It was a member of his sleuth. He'd asked one of the women to trail them today, and should anything happen, she was to take Shaara to safety while he took on the attacker.

That sinking feeling of guilt twisted his stomach again.

He'd lied to Shaara.

He'd told her the attack wasn't personal. That it had to do with public broadcasting. He'd led her to believe nothing like that could ever happen again.

But he'd lied.

From the moment he'd smelled Shaara's kidnappers, he'd known exactly who had ordered it. He could tell what sleuth they came from and who had sent them after his mate.

It was Rayner Thorson. Another shifter with a sleuth of his own. A very dangerous sleuth.

Rayner was known for being power hungry. He had to prove he was the strongest, most cunning of any shifter. It wasn't uncommon for him to challenge the leaders of other sleuths.

There were also rumors of how he regularly sparred with members of his sleuth to remind them who was their leader. And never in a good way.

Rayner had been a problem for him before. He'd challenged him to fight in an attempt to try to take his sleuth. Except Lincoln had utterly humiliated him in the fight and Rayner had been disgraced.

He'd hoped that had been the end of it. That Rayner had learned his lesson and wouldn't bother him again. Oh, how wrong he had been.

Lincoln should have realized how badly he'd wounded the other male's pride. And that someone as egotistical as Rayner wasn't going to let that little incident slide.

But before now, Lincoln hadn't been worried about retaliation. He'd beaten Rayner before, surely he could do it again. And his sleuth was exceptionally skilled and could take on Rayner's.

But now, things had changed. He had a mate. He had Shaara. And somehow, Rayner found out about her.

And if there was one sure way to get back at Lincoln, it was through his mate. He also doubted that Rayner had just been sitting idly by this whole time. No, that wasn't like him.

More than likely, Rayner had been growing stronger, building himself and his sleuth to be able to take on Lincoln when the time came.

Lincoln felt the anger bubble up inside him. He should have killed Rayner when he had the chance. He shouldn't have just assumed he'd taught him a lesson. Now Shaara was in danger because of his mistake.

He was not going to make her pay for what he'd done. Or in this case,

failed to do.

She was his mate, and he intended to give her the world. He would not let Rayner spoil all the good things Shaara was finally getting.

He would end it. One way or the other. He just needed to draw the bastard out first.

Unfortunately, Lincoln was certain that would be easy enough to do.

Rayner wanted to challenge him, and the best way to get to Lincoln was by going after his mate. And here they were, out and about. He doubted Rayner would be so bold or foolish as to challenge them here and now. But it was possible he could be that desperate.

Hence he had some of his sleuth shadowing them throughout this little adventure. Some of the male shifters were on-call just in case there was trouble, while Hannah had been instructed to keep an eye on Shaara. He was certain she could protect his mate should any of Rayner's sleuths go after them while he held off Rayner.

But what made him feel almost as bad was that Shaara knew none of this. That he had outright lied to her about all of it.

Why? Why had he lied?

This was what had gotten them off on the wrong foot in the first place. If she found out – no, *when* she found out – she was going to be furious with him. He'd asked her to trust him, and he'd abused that privilege.

Her life was still very much in danger, and she didn't even know. But maybe that wasn't all a bad thing. He hated how scared she'd been after he'd rescued her.

Lincoln was still haunted by the fear-filled look in her eyes when he'd taken her to the house. How she'd been afraid of *him*. His bear mewled at the reminder. If he went the rest of his life without ever seeing that look again, he'd be a happy man. He'd do anything so she never had to feel like that again.

She deserved to laugh and gush about the details of her dream inn. Not be ridden with anxiety over another attack. Not afraid that she might be taken away from him again.

And selfishly, he was afraid that she would leave him. She'd been so unsure after the attack about whether she wanted to stay. He couldn't lose her after finally finding her.

But he realized that when she found out about all this, he might lose her anyway. And he couldn't blame her. He'd be furious, too, if someone who

claimed to love him lied about something very big to him.

But it was also too late to tell her now. If he did, she might go somewhere where it would be harder to protect her. And if she died because of that...

With a heavy heart, he realized he'd rather have her hate him. As long as she was alive, that was all that mattered. Though if she rejected him again, it might kill him.

It didn't matter though. Once this was over, he'd let her decide how mad she was with him. And if she wanted to go, he would let her. So long as she was alive and well, she could be angry with him.

"You're having some deep thoughts." Shaara's voice jolted him out of his spiraling contemplation.

Her smile was teasing, but there was an edge of concern in her eyes. She was getting better at reading him.

He gave her a playful grin. "I'm just trying to think how much paint it's going to take to repaint this place."

Shaara snorted. "A lot. But I really like the layout. Though we'd definitely have to put some big money down on redoing the kitchen because it is tragic right now."

"Don't worry if you don't like this one too much," Beth reassured them. "We've still got six more properties to go after this. This one's at the bottom of my list, anyway."

"Well, I think we've seen all we can of this one. I think we're ready to move on," Shaara said excitedly.

She turned her attention back to Lincoln. "Are you ready to go?"

His expression softened a bit. "Hey, don't wait up on my account. You're the one running the show. I know you'll know when you have the one."

He also didn't want to admit how he hadn't really been paying attention while looking through this one. Which wasn't fair to Shaara. He was supposed to be supporting her through this, and she'd brought him to get his opinion.

Lincoln pushed away all the thoughts of Rayner and his sleuth to the depths of his mind. He needed to be here with Shaara, enjoying this time he had with her.

This would hopefully be a memory they thought back on fondly for years to come. Searching for where the future boutique would be. He didn't want his memories of that time to be clouded with worrying about Rayner of all people.

Shaara straightened a bit and nodded. "On to the next one it is then."

Beth took them to properties all around town, and a few outside the city. And while Lincoln would prefer not to uproot his life, especially with someone trying to chase him out of town, he wouldn't say no if she preferred one of the ones farther out. After all, Shaara had been willing to move all the way here for him.

Every location they went to had something about it they adored. There was one with an old fountain in the main entrance that Shaara was certain they could get working again. Another had a beautiful balcony with an amazing view.

There was one that already had a luxury kitchen all set up. One of the properties had a cute spiral staircase, although it was in need of some repair.

"I think if the fourth one had the sixth one's kitchen, the first one's layout, and the third one's entry fountain, that would be perfect," Shaara said as they drove to the last location.

Lincoln laughed. "At this point, it sounds like we're going to have to build your place."

Shaara shrugged. "I've never really liked the idea of building something new. I want to take something that already has charm and spruce it up a bit."

"Well, hopefully this one has everything you could ever want. Or maybe just something to add to your list of mashed-up locations you've made."

Shaara laughed. "Or that. Honestly, it wouldn't be a big deal if we had to renovate one of these. I don't mind getting my hands dirty."

Suddenly her look became serious. "And with the money you helped me get, I can actually renovate it into the kind of place I want. Thank you for that."

He felt that pang of guilt again. He tried to shove it down and gave her the best smile he had.

EIGHTEEN



SHAARA

All throughout the day, Shaara felt like she was walking in a dream that was too good to be true. She was finally doing it. She was picking out her place and starting on her dream. Shaara had tried her best not to seem too overexcited, but she couldn't help it.

After years of working and struggling and being set back, she was finally getting to do the thing she'd always wanted. And she had Lincoln here with her. Never in a million years would she have pictured someone like him with her throughout this. Sure, she'd imagined romance, but it was so much better than anything she'd imagined.

She had to admit, she'd been very uncertain about the whole thing after, well, after she'd been kidnapped. A shiver raced down her spine as the memory flashed before her. She quickly tried to shake it away.

Lincoln had said they were just angry about the whole public broadcasting thing. It wasn't like public programming would ever have more money to spend than commercial sponsors. Wasn't that the whole point of capitalism? She was not going to let them spoil her good mood.

She went back to going through her dream vision of her inn. "And you know, now that I'm thinking about it, property number three would look even better with some columns. Oh, and if we could get some vines to go up them. Not real ones, of course, since those spread like weeds, but still..."

By now, she had memorized inspirational photos of hundreds of venues. Every time she had been working at the resort and had a terrible day, she'd pull up photos and dream. More often than not, she'd also end up adding to her vision board, everything from colors to furniture to landscaping.

She'd probably terrorized her coworkers on more than one occasion by

showing them her plans. They'd been polite about it, a few of them even taking interest, though never like she had in it.

She had shown pictures to Lincoln as well, of course. But being here to check out real properties for a real inn was so much different, and better, than just browsing the internet. The way he paid just as much attention to each property as she did made it even better.

It felt less like her shoving her interests onto someone and more like having a partner who was willing to help. And he had been more than helpful.

“So, where’s the next property we’re going to?” she asked.

He grinned. “It’s just on the outskirts of town.”

She raised an eyebrow at that grin. It was the one he wore when he knew something she didn’t.

“What’s with that face?”

“What face?”

“You make that face when you have something up your sleeve. So come on, out with it, what are you hiding.”

She was surprised when he actually flinched at her words. He quickly recovered with a sly grin. That certainly hadn’t been the reaction she’d been expecting. She tried to think of what would have made him flinch like that.

Maybe just the mere idea that he might intentionally be hiding something from her? No, that didn’t seem right. But whatever it was, he seemed to have gotten over it quickly enough.

“Let’s just say that Beth may have clued me in and showed me a few pictures beforehand. And I’d say we’ve saved the best property for last.” His smugness was obvious.

She wanted to be annoyed by it, but she was curious now. All the properties they’d seen had been super cute. Granted, most of them needed quite a bit of work to make them exactly what she wanted. But still, they all had great potential.

Beth had picked some great places so far, so she wondered what the best one could possibly look like.

They arrived at the place, and Shaara couldn’t help but let out a little gasp. It was utterly gorgeous. While the garden was a little overgrown, she could see how easily it could be tamed into something perfect.

The property itself was tucked in between large trees and really gave the feel of being secluded. Like a little escape hidden away from the world and

exactly how she'd always imagined it.

"So, would you like to get out and actually see it?" At his teasing tone, Shaara looked at Lincoln. She hadn't even realized they'd parked the car.

Without giving him an answer, she grinned and was out of the car in a flash. She felt utterly mesmerized as she walked the stone pathway to the building.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Beth said as she came to stand beside her. "Trust me, you haven't even seen the best parts of it."

Shaara and Lincoln followed as Beth unlocked the door for them and led them inside. The entryway, while in need of a good cleaning, was still amazing. It was wide and had a grand staircase that curved upward.

Shaara's mind immediately filled in little details. She could stain the stairs and really make them pop. The check-in desk would go over there. And some indoor plants right there would make it feel cozy.

The backyard was just as amazing. Like the front, it was going to need some love and care so it wouldn't look quite so much like a jungle. But once it was put in order, oh, it was going to be magnificent.

It was going to be. Not *if*. Not *maybe*. *Going to be*.

She hadn't even realized she'd had that same mindset as she'd gone through the rest of the house until that moment. Somewhere in there, she'd decided this was hers. Maybe she'd known it from the moment she'd set eyes on it. But her mind was made up about it.

"This one," she murmured. "This is the one."

All the others, she could picture after a ton of work. And even then, she'd have wished it had a different feature, or came with a better layout, or that the ceilings were different.

Here, only little things needed fixing. More than anything, really, it just needed a touch-up. It was already beautiful and wonderful.

It was everything she'd ever dreamed of having.

Lincoln's grin was wide, and there was a bit of smugness on his face. She could tell that he'd known all along this was the property she'd end up with. Of course, he had. He had looked at her dream pictures long enough.

And that also didn't count the hours she'd gone on and on telling him about every detail she imagined. He'd probably relayed as much of that to Beth as he could, and together they'd found her ideal spot.

Her heart warmed realizing how well the bear shifter knew her. He understood her, not just as his mate or as the woman Gerri Wilder had fixed

him up with. He touched her soul, her inner workings. She had never felt so *connected* to someone as she did with Lincoln.

She couldn't be happier. She was glad she hadn't given in to her fears and left. More than ever, she knew where she was supposed to be and what she was supposed to do.

"Excellent!" Beth said. "I'll be sure to put an offer on the place right away. And don't worry, honey. I'll be sure you come out on top."

Shaara smiled gratefully at the real estate agent. "Thank you so much, Beth. I appreciate you showing us around today."

Beth waved a hand dismissively. "Of course. Always happy to help. Now you two go enjoy your evening, and I'll get started on the paperwork."

Evening? Shaara blinked up in surprise at the darkening sky. She remembered them pausing at one point to eat lunch, but she was still surprised by how late it was.

"Thank you, Beth," Lincoln added. "We will."

He turned to Shaara and offered her his arm. She giggled and took it. "You know, I suppose I should thank you for all this too. I'm sure it was difficult to translate my ramblings into actual ideas."

Lincoln shook his head. "Not at all. Actually, I was almost as excited as you were when I was telling Beth what you were looking for. I think you've infected me with your passion for this whole thing."

Shaara grinned. "Good because once I actually have a place, you're going to be hearing about it a lot more."

His smile softened. "I can't wait to hear more."

It was said so genuinely that it made her heart stutter. This man truly was her match. Every day, she felt herself falling for him a bit more.

Despite herself, heat rose to her cheeks. "So," she said in an attempt to not show how flustered she'd become. "Off to have dinner then, I suppose?"

Lincoln grinned, and it was that same knowing grin again. "Well, I think we've been out here long enough that they should have had enough time to set up."

Shaara furrowed her brow. "What do you mean? Who's setting up what where?"

He tugged her toward the building once more. "Why don't we go inside and find out?"

She only furrowed her brow more. "In there? In the empty building?"

"Well, you see, I had the sneaking suspicion this might be the place you

chose, and I thought you might like to have dinner in the new place.”

“Eating what exactly? Are we going to hunt for grasshoppers in the backyard and cook them over a fire?”

He laughed. “No, nothing like that. Since I had the sneaking suspicion you’d pick this place, I had some friends from my sleuth set up something for us while we walked out here.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

“Really.”

They walked in the door, and Lincoln led her to where the dining room would be. Shaara gasped as she saw a picnic blanket set up with food laid out for them. Someone had even taken the time to quickly sweep and mop the room.

Lincoln walked her to her seat and then went to sit down in his chair “So tell me, what do you think?”

She shook her head in amazement. “It’s wonderful.”

Shaara noticed the candles lined around the room to give them light. LED candles, thankfully. She wasn’t about to risk the place burning down.

From a basket at the edge of the blanket, Lincoln pulled out two glasses and a bottle of champagne. “I figured we needed to properly celebrate the occasion.”

He popped open the bottle and then poured her a glass and then himself. He raised his glass. “To the future best boutique inn and its lovely owner.”

Shaara laughed and clinked her glass with his. “Here, here.”

They sipped their champagne and ate their dinner in the empty building with the sound of nightlife outside. Shaara looked around the room and smiled.

“What are you thinking?” Lincoln asked.

She sighed. “Soon this place will be full of people. Everything is finally coming together, and I can’t really believe it’s real. It’s been a dream for so long that it doesn’t feel like it could actually come true.”

“Or maybe that means it’s long overdue to come true,” Lincoln suggested.

Shaara giggled. “I like that answer better.” She tilted her head and studied the man across from her. “And what about you?”

He looked a little caught off guard by the question. “Me?”

“You. What are you thinking?”

He seemed to consider the question for a moment, then hesitated. He

opened his mouth to say something and then stopped. Then he shrugged. “I suppose much the same as you are. That everything I ever wanted is finally coming true, and I can’t quite believe it.”

She narrowed her eyes a bit but didn’t argue. Clearly, there was more on his mind than that, but he’d share when he was ready.

“Well, I’m just glad that I have you here with me to experience all this,” she said.

His wide smile returned. “So am I. Never would I have imagined that I would be so fortunate to have such an incredible mate. Someone whose wit and charm were only matched by her utter radiance.”

Shaara felt herself blushing again. He’d said much more romantic things to her, and much dirtier things. Yet his words still managed to get to her.

This truly was all she wanted. All she’d ever dreamed of. She couldn’t picture a more perfect day with a more perfect man.

Of course, she should have remembered that when things were too good to be true, they usually were.

Suddenly, Lincoln sat up ramrod straight, and a chill went through Shaara.

NINETEEN



LINCOLN

Sitting at the table with the lighting from the candle flickering, Lincoln's nostrils began to flare. His ears perked up as well, sensing the sounds of oncoming footsteps well before Shaara heard the disturbance. She must have sensed a change in him, too, for her expression of soft appreciation altered strikingly into a look of utter worry.

It wasn't a look he enjoyed seeing. It was one of fear, and he wondered how often she was afraid before he came into her life. Likely not as often. It was a scary world he inhabited as a bear shifter, and that was why he had to do everything in his power to protect his mate.

He rose from the table, lifting his hand to her.

"Stay here, I'll be right back. Don't wait for me."

He flashed her a wink, but Shaara was no longer in a playful mood. The blush in her cheeks had faded to a bone-white chill, the alluring flush in her chest draining into hollow porcelain.

It made him exceptionally angry. Whoever the fuck was outside was going to pay for disrupting such an important night. Though he had an idea as to who it was, he wasn't quite ready to admit it just yet.

"Be careful," she whispered, biting her lip in a way that wasn't from physical desire.

The voice came from a place Lincoln hadn't yet recognized. He opened the door of the vacant building and closed it tightly behind him. As he glanced around for Hannah, he discerned that the voice Shaara had used was the one from when she was traumatized the first time she saw him in his bear form.

He hated reminding her of such an experience. He wished he could wash

it all out of her mind.

But he had to deal with whatever was going on outside first. Then he'd paint her days with wine and roses.

Lincoln whistled for Hannah, letting her know she was finally needed to keep an eye on Shaara. He had barely made it around the corner of the building when a particularly zesty aroma stopped him in his tracks. He stood still, the forest surrounding him hushed beyond the crooning of cicadas.

It was an earthy, smokey smell he knew rather well. But that didn't frighten the alpha. In fact, it emboldened him.

So he moved along the sides of the building and into the small driveway next to the woods and away from the road. He called out in a booming voice, one that stretched along the length of the forest and echoed against the evergreens.

"Rayner! I know you're here, you son of a bitch. Show yourself. Let's make this a fair fucking fight."

Lincoln waited, fully prepared to feel a cheap shot from one of the young fellows the bastard had managed to recruit. From what he had learned about Rayner and his crew, they were inexperienced men with criminal backgrounds and questionable sanity. Rayner, ever the con artist and narcissist piece of shit, took advantage of their fury, channeling it into whatever master plan he was hung up on that week.

The latest obsession had, of course, been Lincoln himself. The crazy bastard wanted to rip him off his throne and take over his territory, but he had been unsuccessful until the point he discovered the existence of Shaara. Ever the resourceful man, Rayner finally thought he had found a way inside Lincoln's mind, and thus, his dynasty as sleuth leader.

But the man was going to have to think again. Having a fated mate didn't make Lincoln stupid. It made him smarter. He had something that was important to him that he could lose, and the idiot should be terrified.

Lincoln waited, ever-present and observant, then called out again, louder and far angrier.

"I know you can only get the upper hand in cheap shots, Rayner, but come on. Give it a try just once. Just one time, play fair."

It was then that he heard a ghastly cackle. Lincoln swiveled his head around, prepared to take a blow, but instead was greeted with the unseemly sight of his foe.

Rayner slowly clapped, looking awfully thin for a bear shifter. His face

was gaunt, his grin looking more like a Halloween mask than a face. His skin was that bluish gray of the near-dead. His hair was lifeless and long, with patches of bald spots catching light under the moon.

Lincoln had heard that Rayner was rabid. Rabid shifters were somewhat of a fable in the community, one that thrived upon rumors rather than actual evidence. Lincoln had taken the rumors with a grain of salt. The idea of animals being rabid was one thing, but the consequences of a rabid shifter were quite another.

“Oh, what a wonderful show you put on, Lincoln!” Rayner called out in a gravelly voice, like he had barely spoken in months. “You really have got that slut in the bag if you think you’ll turn her on with this performance.”

He was trying to make Lincoln mad. It worked slightly, but only in making Lincoln more determined to end the asshole’s life. No point in keeping human garbage alive anymore.

“Shut up, and let’s get to it.”

Lincoln began to remove his shirt when Rayner cackled again. The sound, as well as the overall demeanor of the man, made him feel like he was some kind of circus announcer. The hint of madness, the uproarious laughter, the clown-like fading skin. It was a circus of nightmares, without any doubt.

“You think I want to win a fair fight with you?” Rayner said, wiping a tear from his eye. “Oh no, even I’m not that stupid. Ego doesn’t get in my way, sweet darling.”

Rayner snapped his fingers and emerging from the shed behind him as well as the parking lot came a horde of bears. Some were skinny like Rayner, while others looked more like him. The rabid argument had yet to be proven, but that didn’t matter at the moment.

Lincoln had his own trick up his sleeve. He just had to hope that Shaara would stay hidden during the commotion, no matter how brutal it would get.

“Nice try,” Lincoln said, removing his T-shirt and jeans. “If there’s one thing I can count on for your type, it’s that they can always be counted on to cheat. You’re not the only one with backup, Rayner.”

The malevolent look of glee on Rayner’s face faded while Lincoln’s own sleuth emerged from the trees of the forest like a collection of soldiers. They were all also in their bear form already brawny and ferocious.

“Fuck you!” Rayner screamed. “Prepare to die anyway!”

Lincoln did not recoil. Rayner’s sleuth took the first charge into the forest where his own men began attacking without needing to be ordered. They had

Lincoln's back from the moment he was crowned alpha.

They smashed into each other like warriors on a battlefield. Many of the weaker ones were out cold rather quickly from the blows to the head or slashes to the throat that sent blood spurting. They tackled and toppled one another, the forest their combat zone. Lincoln had the utmost faith in them, so he turned his attention back to Rayner.

Rayner was gone, of course. The coward had tried to flee from his own fight.

But Lincoln wasn't going to have any of that.

He burst out of his clothes and into his bear form, chasing after the smokey scent of pine that trailed behind what would be Shaara's new inn. Rayner had also shifted, using the change as a means of escape. He wanted his sleuth to do all the dirty work for him, and then come back to take the crown.

Lincoln caught up to him easily, taking his tuft of a tail into his mouth and tugging with brute force. Rayner cried out in a sound similar to a cub-like squeal. If the stakes hadn't been so high, Lincoln would have laughed.

Lincoln held onto him until Rayner stopped, the wild bear struggling to slash at Lincoln. He was stronger than Lincoln thought he would be, judging by the mere size of him. What he lacked in strength he made up for in tenacity, and that wasn't something to be underestimated.

Lincoln let him go, tossing him to the side of the building and blocking any means of escape. He shook his head, then charged with full force, teeth barred as ragged bits of bone that had surely seen better days.

The alpha had planned on ducking and sending his enemy flailing toward a nearby bush, to toy with him before sending him to meet his maker. But Rayner was faster and far more skilled than he could have anticipated. The bear dodged the tactic, sinking his teeth into the taunt flesh of Lincoln's abdomen.

Lincoln roared out in surprise more than pain. Pain would come later. He had very little fat on his body to begin with, so it was a miracle that Rayner had found the tiniest slab to grab hold of. He thrashed his head back and forth as Lincoln used his sturdy paws to smack at his head, missing his eyeballs narrowly each time.

That was when the pain began. First, as a hot blush just above his stomach, then in a stifling frenzy of lava hurdling up his chest. He could feel the heat of the blood soaking his fur as he tried to grab hold of Rayner, to

swat him off his body, anything. He gritted his teeth in agony and finally stabbed Rayner in the sides of his face.

His claws made two clean puncture holes in Rayner's cheeks. That made him finally let go of Lincoln's abs, giving him the brief relief of the tight sensation and allowing him to retreat to regroup.

But it would only be for a moment. Blood poured out of Rayner's face like a waterfall, staining his gray fur. He was either numb to it, or the rabidness insanity had kicked in. Irrationality drove him, and that wasn't good for Lincoln.

"You are an abomination!" Rayner screamed in his mind across the back lawn, then charged Lincoln again. Lincoln wanted to jump up onto his hind legs, but the strain of his wounds wouldn't allow him to. He remained on all fours and used his head to buck into Rayner, knocking the wind out of him and sending him backward.

Lincoln then moved swiftly, the white-hot searing pain of his abdomen needing to wait. He turned to Rayner, who was on his back, and took his head between his paws. For a second, he saw the look in his eyes, empty as the sky on a warm summer's day.

Except it was far more gratifying. It was haunting.

I will kill your bitch and take your land.

Lincoln didn't have any other choice. Plus, his abdomen was bleeding out, and his vision was going blurry.

You wasted your chance, Rayner. Good-bye.

Before Rayner had a chance to say or do anything more, Lincoln jerked his paws with his enemy's skull between them like screwing off the cap of a water bottle. The sound was grotesque.

Lincoln fell onto his back, letting out a cry as his ab muscles spasmed. Rayner had really taken a chunk out of him. He pinned his paw to his stomach, still hearing the snarls and growls of battle but unable to summon the strength to call out to his sleuth.

He hoped it would be over soon. His vision was still fading, his body shutting down to preserve what little blood flow he had left. He stared up into the black sky, watching the clouds slide over the moon. It reminded him of the night Shaara had left him at The Axe and the gothic loneliness he had felt.

Except he wouldn't be lonely any longer. He had Shaara, and she owned every single piece of his demented, tired soul.

He closed his eyes, giving into the dark for a moment of rest and peace.

TWENTY



SHAARA

Shaara knew she'd heard something – mostly because she knew Lincoln had. There was certainly a connection being forged between them. She was starting to feel the things she supposed he was feeling. That happened in general with most partners who connect, she presumed. But with Lincoln, it felt different, enhanced somehow. Strange and supernatural.

She watched him walk out the door, and she rose from her seat. She paced back and forth. He had told her not to come outside, and she intended to obey, but the wait was excruciating.

“Hello?” a woman called, peeking her head inside. “I’m a friend of Lincoln’s.”

Shaara jumped at the sound and hurried to the front door. “Hello?” she echoed. The woman stepped inside, letting herself in.

“Lincoln asked me to hang out, just in case there was a problem tonight,” the first woman explained. “He thought maybe this would happen. So I’m here to keep you company. Make sure everything’s okay.”

Shaara gazed at the woman, taking her in. Nothing about her set off Shaara’s alarm bells, even in spite of her recent kidnapping. She believed this woman was exactly who she said she was.

The woman, she noticed, was just as tall as Lincoln, with burning red hair and two silver-blue eyes standing out like jewels in the snow. She smirked just the way Lincoln had, especially when they first met. The sleuth he ran definitely didn’t believe in any form of false modesty.

“What would happen?” Shaara said, trying not to snap.

The woman motioned with her eyebrows toward the door, then slowly slid her hand off Shaara’s. The female shifter crossed her arms on her chest,

which she had to do beneath a rather heaving bosom. The woman was insanely attractive, which made Shaara think that shifters were like vampires in that way. They could easily lure anyone, no matter their sexual preference, into doing their bidding.

It also made her feel a little jealous, which was petty.

“Look, Lincoln’s an alpha for a reason. This whole thing has been coming to a head for years. It was bound to have some kind of violent, dramatic end like this.”

Shaara felt her face flush, and her stomach drop. The woman picked it up instantly, her blue-steel eyes fluctuating for a split second of realization. She gently placed her hand on Shaara’s wrist and guided her away from the door.

A part of her felt irritated, the flush in her face spreading to her chest. Another part of her knew what was going to come out of the lady shifter’s mouth.

“My name is Hannah,” she said, holding her hand out to Shaara. “I’m Chester’s mate. He’s in our sleuth as well.”

Shaara stuck out her hand to shake Hannah’s, albeit tentatively. She tried to give a polite smile, but she was starting to feel sickly.

“I’m Shaara, I’m—”

“I know who you are, don’t worry,” Hannah said, breaking the shake and folding her arms under her breasts again. “What do you know about what’s going on out there?”

Shaara knew the woman wasn’t trying to intimidate her. She just had a way about her that other women may interpret as snobby. It was simply her way, which could have something to do with her shifter nature.

She rocked on her heels, her fingers flitting together as she pondered the answer.

“Lincoln told me that it all had to do with a public broadcasting fundraiser. A possible case of mistaken identity.”

She felt foolish as the words poured out of her mouth, but Hannah didn’t respond in jest. She listened intently, more so with a look of angry alarm than judgment.

“He didn’t tell you anything about a feud?” Hannah said, then immediately took the question back, waving her own hands in front of her face. “Never mind, it’s not important.”

It was Shaara’s turn to be bold and firm. Her own sense of anger exploded in her gut like a storm. It had overshadowed the shame for the time

being.

She took a step closer to Hannah, whose eyes pulsed like blue fire with surprise.

“No, I want you to tell me what’s going on. I deserve to know. Lincoln says I’m his mate.”

Hannah’s arms fell from beneath her breasts, running one hand through the thick locks of her hair and letting it settle at the bridge of her nose. She let out a grunting noise that sounded a lot like Lincoln’s.

Must be a bear thing.

“The person who is probably out there...” Hannah said, hesitantly, dragging her words through her monotone lilt. “His name is Rayner. There is an ancient feud that’s been going on between them. It’s not a very uncommon occurrence with shifters. A lot of men want to be alpha, think they have what it takes...”

Hannah trailed off, looking at Shaara for a response. All she could do was listen while fury brewed inside her.

“Go on,” she said.

“There’s not much else to it. They are likely going to battle it out.”

Then Shaara was struck with worry. It was a foreign sensation, to feel so angry and hurt by someone while also fearing for their life. She squeezed her fists together and looked toward a window on the opposite side of the room.

Hannah took Shaara by one shoulder. It was firmer than the handshake and wrist grab.

“Hey, listen to me. The one thing shifter men and human men have in common is this – they’re men. They often don’t think ahead and realize how their behavior will affect others. I wouldn’t take it to heart.”

But that was exactly where she felt it. In the very depths of her heart. Shaara opened her mouth to respond when a dull roar cut through the gathering.

Shaara’s heart rate kicked up the pace as another splitting howl washed through the building. It was muffled, but she knew somewhere down to her bones that it was her man – her fated mate.

She ran. Hannah came behind her as she headed toward the tall, open window. Shaara nearly slammed into it, she was moving so fast. She pressed her fingers against the glass and scanned the scene outside, finding nothing at first but a backyard with overgrown grass and weeds.

“Shaara, you might want to...”

Hannah was beside her, taking her by the wrist once more. Shaara slashed it away, then caught sight of what she had dreaded most.

Two bears. One with the rustic, muted flame shade of Lincoln's hair, and another that looked rather thin but completely agile and foul. Her stomach stirred again at the sight of the bear Lincoln was chasing. She didn't exactly believe in good and evil, but if she had to say anything about the unknown bear, it would have fallen under the latter category.

Something wicked and awful reeked off the bastard.

"That's him?" Shaara yelled, pressing her pointer finger against the glass in a tone that was more accusatory than a question.

Hannah nodded, inching closer and closer to Shaara. She spoke in a defeated manner.

"That's him. That's Rayner. He's the sworn enemy. He wants to take over Lincoln's territory."

Slashes of flesh, bellows of agony, and mournful cries crawled around the building like fog around a haunted house. Hannah seemed rather resigned to what was going on. Like it wasn't her first rodeo.

Shaara punched her fist against the glass, thankful it was double-paned. She figured if she tried to run outside, Hannah would stop her. And even if by some miracle Shaara managed to get close, she would likely be killed. And what would that do? Lincoln would fall to the gallows, either physically or spiritually.

So she watched out the window in horror as the bear named Rayner sunk his teeth into the mid-section of her lover. He held on tightly, causing Lincoln to shriek out in bewildered torment.

Magically, all of Shaara's anger was gone. All that mattered was the well-being of her lover, her man, her shifter, whatever he wanted to be called. All she knew was that his presence in her life was profound, and losing him to the jaws of some diseased beast broke her heart like a vase dropped from a rooftop.

"We can't just leave him..." Shaara muttered, her eyes swelling with tears. "We can't just fucking stand here!"

She tried to shake Hannah loose, but it was of no use. The woman was as strong as she was attractive, taking hold of Shaara by the forearms and pinning her against the window when she tried to skirt past her.

"Shaara, this is how it has to be. Our men are out there fighting. Lincoln called for all of his men to wait in the woods. He knew this was going to

happen.”

Shaara’s throat felt warm with venomous rage. She was going to watch him die right in front of her before they had the chance to start carving out their own path. It wasn’t fucking fair.

“Please,” Shaara said, the tears flowing down her cheeks. “We can’t let him die, we can’t...”

Hannah’s harsh expression seemed to break. Her eyes fluttered behind Shaara, where the fight was still taking place. The smirk grew back on her lips like a daisy in spring.

“What? What’s going on?” Shaara implored.

Hannah didn’t let go of her forearms, but she loosened her grip, allowing Shaara to turn back to the window. She thought she was going to see Lincoln sprawled out on the ground, throat slashed. What she saw was the complete opposite.

Her tears flowed with rapturous joy. Lincoln stood in his bear form on all fours, clutching his abdomen where the thin bear had nearly taken a chunk out of him. Shaara’s eyes glided down to see that the man they called Rayner was motionless, his tongue slumped out of his mouth like a cartoon character, his eyes fixed on the sky.

It was a death stare, and as harrowing as it was to look at it, it meant it was over. Lincoln was victorious, having defended his name and alpha status successfully.

Shaara didn’t care about any of that. She pushed past Hannah, which she knew was more so her going slack than anything else. She ran to the door, unbolted it, and sprinted out to the back where Lincoln had been standing.

It was a blur, moving through the carnage of violence, avoiding the sight of dead bears and men. She didn’t really have to try that hard, though. Her sole focus was Lincoln and his well-being.

“Lincoln!” she called out.

He had slumped to the ground by the time she reached him, staring up at the sky in his bear form. Her sides began to ache from running, but that didn’t stop her from pushing forward, dropping to her knees to the dirt next to the rusty-colored bear.

“Lincoln!” she yelled again. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

He was still breathing, which was a good sign. His paw covered his midsection, blood staining his fur like the color of grapes. He was grunting and heaving, which made Shaara think the situation was more serious.

“What can I do? Tell me what I can do, Lincoln!”

He shook his head, then laid it back with his eyes closed. She watched as the bear below her shrank away, fur swallowed by the tiny buds of pores, his jaw cracking and claws retracting into human-sized nail beds. He was finally back to the recognizable form Shaara knew and loved. He was the color of bone, breathing heavily still, his hand clutched against his bleeding abdomen.

But he was smiling.

“Hello, my beloved,” he said, licking his dry lips. “I’m okay, I promise you. We shifters can heal. Didn’t I tell you that?”

There was no time to tell him about all the things he had yet to tell her. She was too exhausted from the whiplash of adrenaline and relief.

For the time being, she leaned her head against his bare chest and began to weep.

TWENTY-ONE



LINCOLN

The pain in Lincoln's core was unlike any form of physical pain he had ever endured. He was an alpha of a renowned sleuth, so it was fair to say he had seen his share of battles and suffered his fair share of broken bones, bloody wounds, and punches to the face that would have made the average human's head spin.

Pain was a part of life for shifters. They had been raised with a Buddhist-like notion that pain was inevitable while suffering was optional. It was a conscious choice, a virtue passed down through generations. He knew it as well as his kin. Violence was how they defined their existence, and being slain in battle was one of the more honorable ways to die.

Though, he hadn't been thinking that way when Rayner sunk his teeth into his gut. He felt like his skin was made of bubble gum, being stretched thin as the bear tried with everything he had to tear him open. He had been thinking of Shaara and all their unfulfilled dreams waiting for him on the blackening horizon.

Agony radiated up through the canals of his chest and into his neck, the muscles tightening like thick cables. He stared up at the sky, knowing it wasn't the end, but really, really, disliking the depths of the torment.

Rayner was dead. That was all that mattered. Lincoln would heal in time. He just had to calm down and stare into the sky, black as coal, stars poking through like shimmers of hope. Then he heard the sweetest sound known to man.

"Lincoln!"

Shaara was coming for him. He laid his paw over the wound, the squelching sound echoing in his ears. He was smiling, but he was still in his

bear form.

She skidded across the grass, kneeling beside him as he heaved for breath. The sight of her dark eyes rimmed with golden light like the glistening of a crown made his heart feel like it was going to punch through his chest.

“Are you all right? What can I do?”

The pace of his breathing increased which he could tell concerned her. He calmed himself and shifted into human form. He lay there naked as the day he was born, smiling ear to ear like a Cheshire cat.

Shaara scowled down at him, more so in confusion than anything else. It was beautiful.

“We can heal,” he told her, his mouth tasting like pennies. “Didn’t I tell you that?”

Her head dropped like a rock onto his chest. And she wept uncontrollably. Guilt slapped him for appearing so lighthearted about wounds that would mark him for death if he were a mere human. He lifted his untainted hand and rubbed the back of her head.

“I’m okay, Shaara, I promise. I just need to see the shifter medic, and I’ll be fine. I promise you.”

After letting out a final stream of tears, Shaara lifted her head, sniffing. Her eyes looked sore and weary, her skin flushed rosy from crying. He was swarmed with remorse again.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he said, reaching for her face.

She hesitated, then let him cup her cheek. He picked up on a sense of anger mixed with the fear for his well-being.

Well, he would have to face up to that once his guts stopped spilling out.

One of his men wearing only his boxer, Chester, ran over to the two of them. He weaved through the dead bodies, which Lincoln was sure horrified Shaara.

“Lincoln! The battle has ended, are you all right?”

Shaara moved aside as Chester went to his knees. Lincoln watched her eyes darken with concern as Chester lifted his hand from the injury. Lincoln couldn’t see it and lacked the core strength to sit up, but judging by her expression, it wasn’t exactly a tiny scratch.

“Let’s get you up and looked at, pronto,” Chester said.

Lincoln hooked his arm around his man’s neck, who raised him onto his feet effortlessly. Before they started moving, he regarded Shaara standing

close behind them.

“Shield your eyes from all this, Shaara. It’s not meant for humans.”

“I can take it,” she responded briskly.

He gazed behind him, noticing her appearance was wan. He hated that he had everything to do with her irritability.

“She’s coming with me. Call the medic ahead and send someone here,” he instructed Chester.

“Yes, sir.”

Chester did as he asked, all with his alpha hanging off him like a fish on a hook. Once the calls were made, they threaded through the carcasses of bears and men. Shaara had wrapped her arms around herself, eyes glued to the ground despite taking little glances up for a moment before returning to the trail. Lincoln was quickly taken by the EMTs when he finally reached the makeshift triage station.

Lincoln lay on his back on a gurney. It was their own form of an ambulance of sorts. Normal human ambulances weren’t equipped with the necessities that aided shifters in recovery. The majority of the time, shifters didn’t need much help other than time.

But his wound was far worse than anything he’d undergone before. He’d rather be safe than sorry, not succumbing to a pesky infection just because his pride was overbearing.

Shaara rode next to him, holding his hand the entire way back to the house. Something weighed on her mind; he knew without needing to be telepathic. He wanted to deal with his injury and make sure his men were okay first.

When they arrived at his estate, the medic was already there waiting. They rushed him into his dining room where Shaara followed, waiting in the wings in silence the entire time. He was assessed with no need for an operation, merely a few stitches, and prescribed hydration and an IV for a day or two. Lincoln wasn’t exactly relieved because his physical pain had gone numb in his mind compared to the hurt he felt emanating between him and his fated mate.

“You are going to be fine, dear Lincoln,” the medic said, a shifter himself who had studied conditions specific to his kind. “Simply rest and keep the IV in. Afterward, you’ll feel as good as new.”

Lincoln thanked him and sent Chester to the battleground to report back with the casualties. When he left, it was just the two of them with Lincoln

sitting with a blanket over him, upright in his recliner. The doctor said not to strain his abdomen for at least two days, so he would be stuck in an awkward position until then.

The IV drip on wheels stood next to him, siphoning through a vein into his forearm. He was already starting to feel better, the cells of his lower abs duplicating to grow new layers of skin. For shifters, the process was sped up to the ninth degree.

But while his physical body healed, his heart and mind were in turmoil. Shaara stood by the window across the room with her arms folded across her chest. Just the way she was when they'd first met at Red Canyon Resort.

How did I manage to fuck up again?

"Do you want some water? Something to eat?" Lincoln asked.

She turned to him with daggers in her eyes. But then they softened, and she let out a long sigh.

"I don't want anything other than the truth. Why did you lie to me?"

She was a woman who got straight to the point. No sugar coating, no fluff, no dazzle. It was one of the many traits that made him fall head over heels for her.

He did his best to suppress his signature grin. He didn't want her to think he was mocking her when nothing could be further from the truth. Lincoln could swear he fell more and more in love with Shaara every minute he spent in her presence. Everything they had gone through today, however, had sped up that process and multiplied it by a factor of at least ten. His heart swelled as he wondered if he could possibly love her more.

He had hurt her by lying, though, and he knew that as clearly as he knew he loved her. She watched him closely, her face incredibly closed off to him. He didn't blame her in the slightest. He had lied to her, and it had all come back to kick him in the ass.

"I lied to protect you, Shaara. I thought we had it all under control and that it was something we would deal with swiftly. I didn't anticipate all of this."

He pointed at the IV bag, but her glare did not waiver. She moved toward him, her arms still crossed, her fetching face still stained with tears.

"And what made you think lying was such a good idea in the first place?" she implored.

Lincoln looked away for a moment, catching sight of the ascending crescent moon. It was a conversation he really didn't want to have. It made

him sad to think that the truth about his nature and community was enough to drive his fated mate away. But he feared he had done that anyway through misleading information and lying by omission.

He had to face the music. He didn't have any other choice.

He turned back to her, feeling crestfallen. The cadence in his voice remained even.

"I was afraid you wouldn't want this life with me. I'm so used to keeping my nature a secret. A secret within my career, a secret among the humans. It's an ingrained habit for me and I never intended to hurt you."

Shaara hovered closer which he thought was a good sign. She sat on the couch next to his recliner. He could see the cogs turning in her mind like her brain was a crystal-clear fishbowl.

"This is the second time you've lied to me, Lincoln. And you always seem to have an explanation for it. I don't take kindly to deception and deceit."

He nodded in agreement. He felt a desire to retreat inward, to pity himself, but that wasn't the alpha way. Nor was it the way she needed him to be. She needed him to step up as her man, not to fill the room with hot air and shoulda, coulda, woulda. That's not what a better man would do.

Lincoln went to bend forward, then felt a stab to his abdomen. He had already forgotten the doctor's instructions, trying to take Shaara by the hand to make a point. He grimaced, and Shaara flew to her feet in a fit of panic.

"Don't move," she instructed, setting him onto his back. "Stay still. I'll come to you."

Her voice was soft again, lifting the blanket to make sure the stitches weren't torn. Her eyes widened when she saw that it no longer looked red. The stitches were already starting to disappear.

"Marvelous, isn't it?" Lincoln groaned. "It hurts like a bitch, but it won't for long."

Shaara moved the blanket back to cover his private parts then rolled her eyes up to his. She remained quiet when she pushed his hair away from his forehead, then followed the trail back down his cheeks along his jawline. Her eyes were portals to paradise.

"What am I going to do with you..." she whispered, running her fingers along his bottom lip.

"I don't know," he responded in an equally dusky murmur. "All I know is that I am never going to lie to you again. I promise."

She raised an eyebrow for a moment, which was sexy even though it wasn't her intention.

"I know there's a lot I have to learn about shifters still. But I can't learn or trust you if you keep that information to yourself."

He nodded, then took the hand exploring his mouth. He kissed the back of her hand, then the inside of her palm. Her bouquet was that of rose water, healing droplets of sea salt and sage.

"I know I have made many promises to you. And I have broken them. And I have lied. But that isn't going to happen anymore. I will share with you everything that is going on with the sleuth. Because you matter to me, Shaara. More than anything in this wretched world."

For a long terrible moment, Lincoln thought she wasn't going to believe him. He wouldn't have blamed her. A few of his promises had been rather hollow, and he had explained them away as compassion. But no more.

She finally smiled, bringing her lips to his. They kissed gently, Lincoln's breath being stolen from him in the most wonderful way.

When they parted, she was still smiling. Lincoln ran his hands through her hair, and she moaned. It instantly sparked an erection in the injured alpha.

"Down, doggy," she whispered.

They kissed again and promised they wouldn't keep anything from each other again. They also agreed that lovemaking would be on the table only when Lincoln healed, much to his chagrin.

But he had the rest of his life to fill the hallways of his home with her sensual gasps.

TWENTY-TWO



SHAARA

Finally, the two days for Lincoln to be in the clear were here.

Shaara hated to admit it, but she had been impatiently waiting for her man to make a full recovery and be given the all-clear. Honestly, if it had not been for the IV, they probably would have already risked it.

Lincoln had made it clear how badly he had wanted Shaara while they waited for the go-ahead signal. He had even asked her to try to be less sexy. She laughed, knowing there was no way she could do that. She was already wearing sweats and a baggy shirt, and had her hair thrown up. She would playfully remind him that it wasn't her fault if he found her irresistible.

Still, she had kept cleaning and organizing the home. She was even able to check out the future site of her inn and get an idea of how she wanted to decorate and lay it out.

Making herself busy was easy, but being away from Lincoln was proving hard.

Shaara was wondering if it was because of the fated mate ordeal that affected her so strongly, when she caught the healer walking out of his room.

They nodded to each other as Shaara strolled in to see Lincoln sitting up. He wore loose-hanging sweats that showed off his V-line.

Shaara couldn't help but let her eyes wander to where the line led. Her body became covered in goose bumps as her mind pictured him without the sweats.

"Everything's good," Lincoln said, misinterpreting her silence for worry.

Shaara's eyes shot up to his sculpted abs, remembering he had a wound there. Her eyes traced it over in deep examination.

There was no bandage on it now. It looked like a faded scar. A big one,

but still sealed. The IV had been removed as well.

Lincoln reached out his hand for Shaara to take and come closer.

She offered her own hand and let him pull her in close.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

He kissed her lips softly. “I told you I would be.”

Shaara playfully hit him as he smirked devilishly at her. “You think you’re so funny.”

“And you don’t?”

“Just don’t make it a habit of seeing how close you can come to death, okay? I’d like to not have to worry that much about you.” Shaara was teasing, but her voice had a serious note to it.

Lincoln caught on. He smiled again and kissed her cheek. “I promise.”

Her mind wandered back to what she had been thinking before the healer had exited.

“Lincoln, what exactly does a fated mate feel when they’re a human?” She felt embarrassed to have to even ask, but she needed to know more. He wanted her to feel free to ask anything, so she wanted to start with the basics.

“What do you mean? Like, toward their mate?”

She nodded.

Lincoln was silent for a moment. “I don’t really know. I mean, I’ve heard from others that weren’t shifters, but I can’t say firsthand.”

“What did you hear?”

“Just that the pull was there for them. The heat, emotions, pathways. All of these emotions and connections became enhanced when they were around their mate. Even being apart was harder than usual, especially at first. But not like what the shifter experiences.”

Shaara’s eyebrows shot up. She hadn’t thought about how hard it would be to be apart from a shifter’s mate.

He looked at her and must have seen the curiosity behind her eyes. “For a shifter, to not be near their mate can drive their inner animal mad with longing. A human could reject us and not really feel much if they don’t care for us. It can be shut off. But not for a shifter.”

Shaara felt better knowing she wasn’t the only one hating being away from him and unable to touch him. Actually, her ego was slightly boosted knowing it had been worse for him.

“Well, that’s good to know. I was feeling a little pathetic there for a moment,” she said jokingly.

She looked back at Lincoln's face as she laughed. He had gone more serious, and he was staring past her.

Shaara looked behind her. Nothing. She looked back at Lincoln. "What is it?"

"Nothing." His eyes came back to her and smiled.

"Lincoln, we just had the talk about no more lying. If it's a shifter thing, I need to know. Remember?" she warned.

"I know. I'm not lying, I'm just trying to figure out how to word this all without it coming across as... creepy."

Shaara pushed herself back to arm's reach from him and stared him down. "I've seen you become a bear. I've seen bodies torn apart. I have seen lots of things lately that would *freak* a person out. I think we are past that. I want to be with you. And I need to learn your traditions and ways. That's how we work. So, just say it."

Lincoln took a breath. "The reason these last couple of days have almost been unbearable is because I haven't claimed you yet."

"Claimed me? I'm yours. What else is there besides marriage?"

"Shifters claim their mates with a mark during sex. It binds them together until death."

Shaara was trying to follow. "Like marriage, but more intense?"

Lincoln shrugged. "In a way. Once a mate is marked with a bite or a scratch, or whatever the shifter does, the two are connected. Shifters can sense when their mate is in danger, and it strengthens telepathy between them."

"Even for humans?"

His smile returned. "Every case is different, but yeah."

"So, wait. Why would you marking me make a difference in how we feel when we are apart?" Shaara didn't like it if marking her meant they would lose the need for each other.

"Everything between the two becomes in tune. So, the need to be with each other is still there. But the worry and anxiety are lessened because even when we're apart, we sense each other. It's sort of like when people talk about carrying someone in their heart."

Well, that didn't sound too bad. "And that's all it dulls?"

Lincoln's smile grew bigger, knowing what she was getting at. "Yes. Also, once you are marked, our scents are permanently on each other. It tells all shifters you are mine, and I am yours. And that you are not to be fucked

with.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her neck in a playful manner.

She giggled. “Well, isn’t that a good thing? Why were you so nervous to tell me?”

He nuzzled her neck. “To leave a mating mark means I scratch you during sex. A mark that will stay. I don’t want to do that without having your permission. Especially now that you know what it means to have it. It’s not just a kink.”

Shaara was taken aback at how chivalrous he was being.

Lincoln wanted to be with her forever. Yet he was still asking her permission so nothing would happen she wasn’t comfortable with. He was a real man, shifter or not, and that drove Shaara wild for him.

She kissed his neck in return and let her tongue linger over his salty skin as she made her way to his lips. She wanted to accept his proposal, but not with words. She would show him.

Shaara pushed herself deeper into his embrace, causing him to lean back onto the bed. She followed him down, their lips never parting. Her body was firmly against his. She could feel his cock rising as their kisses kept going.

“Are you sure?” he asked, pulling away only for the question.

Shaara found his lips again and slid her hand between them, rubbing his engorged cock. “The thought of you claiming me,” she whispered into his ear in a low husky voice. “It makes me want you even more. Take me.”

Lincoln’s sweats didn’t leave much to the imagination. Shaara felt him twitch at her request. He grabbed her behind the head and pulled her face to his, kissing her hard with intention.

Shaara arched her back, pushing her breasts into him. She moved her hand past his waistband, grabbing onto his strong, smooth cock. Her strokes glided over his cock, using his pre-cum as a lubricant.

“It’s been a long couple of days, wouldn’t you say?” Shaara purred.

“Mmm, I couldn’t agree more.”

Shaara pulled at his waistband with her hands to help him slip out of the sweats. The movement bent his erection down just enough that when it was free, it sprung up in eagerness.

She wriggled out of her own clothes with dramatic arching of her body to exaggerate her feminine features. She watched Lincoln stroke himself as he watched his private show.

She crawled over his body and held herself over his cock. It was aimed

and ready for riding. Her pussy slid over it with ease from her own personal lubrication. A moan from deep inside her made its way to the surface.

“God, you take that dick so well,” he growled as she ground slowly on the entirety of his member.

Shaara flexed her pussy as she changed direction and began going up and down. Her breasts bounced as her pace quickened. She enjoyed feeling him deep inside her.

She was so close. Her eyes closed as she took in every ridge of his long shaft as she drove it deeper and deeper. Her hands went to her breasts to stop them from bouncing so hard as she sped up faster and harder.

“Fuck yes! Your dick feels amazing,” she moaned before hushed screams made their way to her throat.

Lincoln grabbed her small hips and helped lifting her up and down, slamming her onto his cock and driving him in farther.

“Holy shit, Lincoln!” she screamed.

“Fuck yes, baby! Take that dick.”

It was all Shaara could do to keep herself from continuously screaming. This was the fucking she needed, and he was the only one to be able to give it to her. He was leading her to a breathtaking orgasm.

She called out his name, ready to explode when suddenly Lincoln dug his fingers into her hips and lifted her straight off him as if she were nothing.

He set her on her hands and knees on the bed. He climbed behind her and took hold of her hips again.

“God, you have a nice ass.” He smacked it lightly.

It sent a thrill through her, making her forgive him for stopping her climax. She lowered herself onto her elbows and stuck her ass high in the air, wiggling it in his face.

“Mmm,” he moaned as he slapped it a couple more times, each one harder than the last.

“You like that?” she asked in a breathy voice, already knowing the answer.

“Fuck, yes, I do. Come here.” Lincoln pulled her closer to him and slipped his fingers inside her wet pussy. “Are you ready for me?”

“Yes,” she whimpered, needing him to stop teasing her.

Lincoln moaned loudly as he shoved his dick into her.

Shaara’s knees buckled as she took him all in. In this position, it somehow felt even deeper than her being on top. Her fingers gripped the

bedding as she shoved her face into it to muffle her screams. Her release was close again, and this time, it was edging toward a blackout.

Lincoln slammed his dick against her most sensitive spot.

“Don’t stop! I’m so fucking close!” she begged as she pushed her ass against his cock as he thrust forward.

He grabbed her hair with one hand and held onto her ass cheek as he drilled her harder upon her request. His own breathing became heavier as he sounded closer to reaching his peak.

Shaara’s vision was going as her clit twitched. In seconds, her body crashed with a seismic orgasm that nearly made her legs go out. Her body lurched as it crashed upon her and she called out Lincoln’s name.

She kept slamming her ass against Lincoln’s dick as her body kept soaring with her climax. She felt Lincoln’s grip tighten on her hair as he drew closer to his own.

His come flowed fast and thick into her as she felt his cock spit it out. His moans were loud. She flinched slightly, feeling a little sting on her hip as he slammed into her repeatedly to empty his dick completely.

Unable to hold herself up any longer, Shaara flattened her body onto the bed, Lincoln still inside her.

He lowered himself with her, kissing her cheeks before rolling off to the side.

She turned her head to look at him as he kissed her.

Pushing her hair from her face, he murmured, “You’re amazing.”

She smiled. “I know.” She remembered the sting and looked at her hip. There was a red scratch that looked worse than it felt.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not at all.”

He leaned over and kissed the mark he had left. “You’re mine forever now, babe. And I’m yours.”

Shaara ran her hand through his hair and smiled.

There was no one else she would rather belong to.



EPILOGUE

SHAARA

Shaara looked around her inn and couldn't help but feel the warmth of her dream surrounding her.

It was exactly how she had imagined it, only the feeling was something she could never have conjured.

She took in every detail of her little boutique inn that had been taking off. People were filtering in and out as she was finishing the final touches of the event she would be holding upon the hour. How had it been a whole year already?

“Hey, what are you still doing down here?”

Shaara turned at the voice of her insistent manager. Lincoln had recommended her from the sleuth when things started taking off quicker than she had anticipated. So, Shaara was introduced to Millie.

She had grown to be one of her closest friends throughout the year and the only person that Shaara would listen to when it came to her inn.

Shaara smiled at her plump little brunette friend, who was capable of looking anxious and joyous at the same time. “I was just seeing how it was all coming together.”

Millie grabbed Shaara's hand and led her toward one of their bigger bedrooms. The mint-green bridesmaid's dress swished around Millie's legs, dramatizing her energy. “Everything is going to be just fine. Trust me! You need to get yourself ready.”

“I'm fine, I have plenty of time,” Shaara reassured her.

“Still, I would feel better if Lincoln didn't see you before the wedding. He's probably wandering around here too!” She unlocked the bedroom door and ushered Shaara inside.

She stepped in and saw her beautiful lace ivory dress hanging on the closet door.

Having her wedding at her very own inn was a surreal achievement. But having it as the first big event was a bonus. It acted as a showcase for what they could do with their rooms and decorations. Shaara wanted to expand, and this provided the perfect opportunity.

Lincoln had lectured her to relax on their wedding day, but this was therapeutic for her.

“Do you need any help?” Millie asked as she walked to the door.

“No. I’m good.” Shaara took her dress off the hanger and walked to the bed.

“Okay. I’ll be up to get you when we are about to start.” Millie waved and shut the door behind her.

Shaara stripped down. Before putting on her dress, she admired the newly purchased lingerie she had gotten for tonight.

It matched her dress in material and color. The mesh panties were boy-cut but did not hide a thing. Her bra pushed her breasts up just enough to make them mound with cleavage. The lace material showed off her pink nipples.

She turned to see her full body. She smiled as she reached for her dress. Lincoln was going to be more than pleased once she was alone and had him to herself.

She wiggled into her dress and grabbed her heels. Her earrings and necklace were on the dresser. Shaara walked past the floor-length mirror to retrieve them. She avoided the mirror until she was completely put together.

Her simple diamonds were the only sparkly thing on her. She had wanted to keep everything low-key for herself.

She grabbed a sparkly hair comb she was going to place in her messy updo. She took a breath and walked over to the mirror.

Shaara did her best to keep her eyes focused on her hair before looking at everything else.

Once it was placed, she took it all in.

The ivory lace clung to her petite body falling just short enough to see the toes of her high heels. Seeing her reflection filled her with the realness of what was happening.

She was marrying Lincoln today. They were already bonded, but now they would announce that love in front of their friends and family. The entire sleuth was to be there as well. The rest of her life started today in her own inn

with the man of her dreams.

Shaara's face was starting to hurt from smiling so much, which was not a problem at all. She bathed in her joy a moment longer before she reached for her bouquet of wildflowers.

Faint voices filtered in from outside. Shaara walked over to the window and looked into the gardens. People were gathering in the area behind the hedges where their ceremony would be held.

They had decorated an archway with the same flowers in Shaara's bouquet. The sun was out but the crispness of fall in the air kept away the bugs and heat.

She caught a glimpse of Lincoln heading toward the archway. He looked so handsome in his suit and tie. His jacket fit him so well that it made him look even more fit and towering than he already was. The sun glinted off of his hair, making it look even redder. His facial hair was trimmed and angled to perfection, per usual.

Shaara smiled at the sight, her heart swelling. She wondered how many more times she would wonder if it could get any better. She was confident she would be shown how it could, time and time again.

The door creaked open, and she turned to see the guest.

It was Millie again. Her eyes glistened as she looked at Shaara. "You're beautiful. Absolutely beautiful!"

Shaara handed Millie her own bouquet. "Thank you," she said, smiling sweetly at her.

"Are you ready?"

Taking a deep breath, Shaara smiled and nodded as she exhaled her nerves. She needed to be steady as she walked down the aisle.

They walked out together. The inn had become empty as most were outside waiting for the ceremony to begin.

Shaara walked through the party hall to the backdoor where she would exit to the ceremony. The whole setup was immaculate. The exterior illumination was dim, letting the twinkling lights stand out even more. The centerpieces and tables were set up around the dance floor, leaving Lincoln and Shaara's table front and center for all the guests to look upon.

She heard the music cue. Millie looked excitedly at her and then walked out slowly with Lincoln's beta. They were the only two in the wedding party. Shaara had wanted to keep it close to sleuth tradition, which meant she and Lincoln had one person to stand beside them.

Her pulse picked up as she watched the two approach the archway. She saw Lincoln's eyes focused on the glass she hid behind.

"This is it," she whispered. She straightened her posture, held her head high, and began her walk out to her future.

The guests stood as she approached. Among them, she spotted a white-haired shorter woman peeking between the tall shifters. Gerri Wilder had made it.

Shaara smiled and nodded at the jubilant matchmaker, forever grateful for her interjection into their lives.

Her eyes went up and caught Lincoln's reflection with the onset of tears.

He was beaming at her. She could feel how happy he was at this moment and how much love he had for her. It made her whole body hot with tidal waves of emotions.

She stepped up beside him, and he took her hands.

"You're absolutely breathtaking," he whispered loud enough for her to hear.

"You cleaned up pretty nice yourself." She smirked as they turned to face the officiant, a sleuth elder. When Lincoln had explained to her what they needed to do, he had told her it would be short and simple. Just a public binding of mates for the sleuth to witness more than anything.

The extras with the decorating and reception were more for Shaara's sake, though the sleuth couldn't resist a good party. Shifters also didn't exchange rings, considering the mating mark was what bound them, plus when shifting, the ring would cause problems with their thick paws.

As Lincoln had promised, the ceremony was quick and sweet.

"I now mark you mates for life," the officiant announced. The guests clapped as Lincoln grabbed Shaara and dipped her in a deep kiss.

Her breath escaped her as everything hit her at once. She wanted to cry, laugh, and jump but instead, she put all of her feelings into that kiss.

Lincoln stood her up and held her hand high at their accomplishment for all to see. People lined the aisle to shake their hands and congratulate them.

Shaara got into a groove of thank yous and almost passed over Gerri when she came to give her blessing.

"Gerri!" Shaara hugged her tightly when she realized who was in front of her.

"Gerri! I'm glad you were able to make it." Lincoln beamed at the spry older woman. He lowered himself to grip her in an embrace.

“Of course! I wouldn’t miss it. I had to see it for myself anyway. I always enjoy seeing the final product.” Her blue eyes glistened brighter than the sky as she looked at the couple. “Anyway, I won’t keep you. I have other matters to attend to, but I wanted to at least stop by. I wish nothing but the best for you two.”

Shaara and Lincoln hugged her again.

“Oh, and don’t forget to enjoy the wedding night. I’m sure you won’t need it, but my gift might help spice things up if ever the need occurs.” She winked at the speechless couple before she bounced away between the crowd.

Shaara started to giggle.

“Well, now I’m curious what she got us.” Lincoln chuckled, looking over at the gift table.

They finished with their guest line and moved inside to the food and drinks. The night flew by faster than the day had.

Shaara had visited with every guest. The females of the sleuth had taken care of keeping things in check, mainly due to Millie running them around so Shaara didn’t have to lift a finger.

As the night was coming to a close and guests departed, Shaara was receiving endless praise about her inn. Everyone wanted to know if it would start hosting things like this more often and asked how to reserve it. It made her heart soar, knowing that everything she had dreamed of and worked for was being appreciated.

She looked at Lincoln, who was laughing with some shifters. She couldn’t be more thankful to have him by her side to share all of this with.

As she watched him mingle, the champagne was helping warm her womanly needs for her new husband.

She wanted to feel his hands over her body, his lips trembling over her nipples as he slowly undressed her to officially claim her as his wife. She wanted him to take her as he had before. Rough, wild, and full of passion.

Looking around, Shaara felt that enough guests had left. It was time for her to take her man and sneak off to their room. She craved the intimacy of her mate.

Shaara sauntered over and hooked her arm through Lincoln’s. “What say you and I take this party to the other room?” she purred, licking his ear.

She heard a low growl come from his chest as he turned toward her, his back to his company.

“I think we could arrange that.” He squeezed her ass and kept his hand on her hip.

The two looked around at the few lingering sleuth members and slid off quietly to the room Shaara had dressed in.

Lincoln closed and locked the door once they were inside. “You know, you really look good in white. But I can’t wait to get you out of that dress.” He started undoing his tie and unbuttoning his clothes.

Shaara smiled coyly at him and unzipped the back of her dress. She shrugged off the straps and let her lace dress fall to the floor, leaving her standing in her underwear and heels. She pulled the comb from her hair and let it fall onto her shoulders.

Lincoln’s pants had been dropped, letting his briefs show his cock fully erect at the site he was seeing. “Damn, Shaara.”

She grinned at the reaction she received. It was exactly what she was aiming for.

“You like?”

“Fuck, yes, I do.” He stripped off the rest of his clothes, baring his fine-as-hell body, and sauntered to her. He grabbed her face and stuck a finger into her underwear, pulling at it. “I can’t wait to taste you.”

She moaned as he held her jaw and kissed her neck.

“Were these expensive?” he asked, hinting at her lingerie.

“Not enough to care about.”

In one motion, he ripped her panties off and then unhooked the bra with a quick flick.

They stood naked, bound, and married, yet still filling the air with the hunger of horny teenagers.

“I love you, Shaara. So fucking much.”

“I love you, too, Lincoln.”

He kissed her hard.

“I’m yours for the taking,” she breathed as his fingers ventured between her thighs.

“Forever,” he moaned as he pushed her to the bed.

And always, Shaara thought as she lost herself in marital bliss.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to all types of desserts.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

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