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C.D. GORRI



Unbearable



Barvale Holiday Tales

UNBEARABLE

BARVALE HOLIDAY TALES 6

C.D. GORRI



UNBEARABLE

A Barvale Holiday Tale 6

By C.D. Gorri

Edited by BookNookNuts

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DEDICATION

To everyone who is still young at heart, yearning for romance and longing for love doesn't stop when we reach a certain age. Knowing this, I just had to pen Clary and Iggy's story for everyone who knows and understands that some things simply don't have an expiration date. Keep on loving, people!

Del mare alla stella,

C.D. Gorri

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UNBEARABLE

Can an ex-Alpha and his housekeeper find common ground when the kids are all grown?

The Barvale Clan Den has been a place of refuge for all members of the Bear Shifter Clan in good standing since Iggy Devlin's great-grandfather built the place. But with his cubs all grown, and his retirement kicking in, the old Black Bear just can't seem to settle. It doesn't help that wherever he goes, *she's* there! Always underfoot, *er*, claw.

Clary Aylin has been the Devlin family housekeeper since her mate died when she was barely out of her twenties. With no cubs of her own, watching those boys grow and having a hand in raising them was one of the greatest pleasures of her life.

She's kept her feelings for their father under wraps for decades, but what's she going to do now that the kids are all gone and all that's left is the sexy, growly curmudgeon of a Bear himself?

Iggy Devlin has never looked at her as anything other than a maid. Is he capable of change or are some things too ingrained? Clary has a decision to make. Tell him the truth or quit her job.

But will leaving prove unbearable for this smitten Sow?

A MESSAGE FROM ONE OF THE DEVLIN BROTHERS...

Hello Clan!

Thanksgiving is fast approaching, and I think we can all agree our Clan has much to be grateful for these past few years. Too many thanks to be giving here, for sure, but you will have an opportunity to write a Thanksgiving message on our banner of thanks mural that will be up for the entirety of Thanksgiving week.

Also, I've heard some rumors that our annual Thanksgiving weekend games have been canceled, but that is totally false! We are starting this year's games with Wednesday night's Turkey Bowl.

These friendly football games will be divided by age groups, starting with a pee wee game featuring our 5-year-olds, all the way up to our newly renamed silver games, for those of us lucky enough to retire—*this just in*—Iggy Devlin will re-take the reins as one of our returning quarterbacks in this year's silver games! Looks like our very own butcher, Pat McKenney, is going to have some competition this year for MVP.

Don't forget to sign up to cheer our silver athletes on! All games will take place starting at 2:00pm on our brand new turf field behind the community center. Remember to keep it fun, folks!

The following morning, Cub Care is planning a Turkey Day morning retreat at the Cub's Den. There will be face painting, food trucks, and all manner of fun up at Lake Ursa

for the cubs while the grown-ups tend to dinner. This event will be run by our very own Clary Aylin.

Be aware, there are *no normals allowed* during these games unless they are mated to Clan members and have gone through the proper training and security. Please fill out the RSVP form. And before I forget, I just want to congratulate Wade and Charity on the arrival of their twin boys.

Looks like the Barvale Clan is now home to two brand new Fox cubs. Just another reason to be thankful we get to live in this great place!

Happy Thanksgiving Clan!

Sincerely,

Daniel Devlin, Head Enforcer of the Barvale Clan

PROLOGUE

Leaves crunched beneath his heavy claws, but Iggy Devlin ambled onward without stopping. His Black Bear insisted on coming this way, even though his human half avoided that side of the Den like the plague.

Who could blame him? She was always there! Underfoot, voicing her unsolicited opinions, and baking those sinfully delicious goodies, but refusing to give him the recipe so he could impart that to his sons, who now not only ran the Clan but the Bear Claw Bakery as well.

Was that fair? Was that right?

Iggy Devlin gave Clary Aylin a job after her mate had passed far too early in their relationship. Poor young widow needed a reason to go on, so he gave her one. It was his duty as Alpha. She came to work in the Den, helping him wrangle his three sons and keep house for them.

Of course, the Den was not just the house of the ruling family. It was a safe haven for all Clan members in good standing, and visitors from other Clans or pack were welcomed as well. Of course, now, the Den was being replaced.

Feelings of sadness and angst had his Bear chuffing. Marcus, his firstborn and present Alpha of the Barvale Clan, had recently announced he and his mate Leya were moving the Alpha family to the much more modern and larger Den he'd been building on the north shore of Lake Ursa over the past year.

Oh, Iggy had known it was coming, but still. The idea of the Den not being the Den anymore rankled. And with all his boys living in their own homes, what the heck was he going to do in this big old house by himself?

Well, not by himself. But with her. The bane of his existence.

His Bear chuffed again, but this time the beastly sound was accompanied by other lewder suggestions at what Iggy's human half could do with the sweet smelling Sow. What? No way. Iggy took the reins from his beast, fighting the hard-headed Boar on this as he had several times over the years.

Clary Aylin was not for him.

True, Shifters had a higher sex drive than normals, but Iggy was too damn old for this nonsense. Besides, he had a mate once. Hell, he'd also met the woman he believed was his fated mate and had a child unbeknownst to him until recently with her.

Iggy's love life had been complicated, full of twists and turns, and heartache. But he had his four sons living in Barvale, even if not under the roof their ancestors had built. And truthfully, he approved of Marcus' plan to keep the Den as a haven for their Clan, and Iggy even agreed to continue living there. Technically, it was the Alpha's house.

But Iggy was not the Alpha anymore. And he had no use for the overly romantic notions his Bear had about their housekeeper. Dumb animal suggested he bring her flowers, honey, anything to soften her view of him. But that woman was a battle-ax, not some sweet tempered thing needing attention.

No. He was really not doing any of that. His Bear snarled that time, but Iggy pulled on those reins and made his beast turn before he got to the side door where Clary's room was located. The universe would surely understand if he was not willing to risk it all again. Especially not for Clary, of all people. The thought was preposterous. Hell, it was worse than that.

It was unbearable.

CHAPTER
ONE

Clary waited in line for her weekly order at *Meat on Main*. The butcher, Pat McKenney, was also a Black Bear Shifter and member of the Barvale Clan. She'd lived in town her whole life, so it was no wonder Clary was friendly with just about everyone.

"Good morning there, Miss Clary," Pat greeted her with a wide grin.

"Hello Pat. Just here to pick up my order," she returned politely.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that, you know. I told you last week, Miss Clary, I would be more than happy to drive it out to you at the Den."

"It's no trouble. I had to come into town, anyway," she said, still holding her polite smile in place.

"I see, well, it's nice to think you made time to drop on by," he returned with a wink. "Let me get that order for you."

Clary didn't have a chance to respond to the flirtatious old Boar, but she was a stickler for good manners. Surely, Pat was just being nice. Good looking and widowed these past ten years, Pat had been a little more attentive to her just recently.

It was hard on Shifters to be alone, especially after they'd been married. Her own pairing had ended a lot earlier than she'd planned, and childless and penniless, Clary had no other recourse than to turn to her Alpha for help. Lucky for her, Iggy Devlin was a good man.

He'd hired her, and without even knowing, that old Black Bear had given her a family. Watching Marcus, Taylor, and Daniel grow up was the joy of her life. She was their housekeeper, but sometimes, it felt like she was a mother, too. Clary lived for those times.

She'd seen them through thick and thin. The troubles of high school and navigating that rocky terrain between child and adulthood. She'd been there through it all, cheering on those Devlin boys and loving them in her way. And years later, when Nate arrived on their doorstep, she'd offered her silent support. Nate was Iggy's son by a Sow who was not his mate, and the half-Grizzly male had been a surprise for everyone. Turned out to be a very good one at that.

Now that all four boys were mated and having cubs, making Clary an honorary grandmother. Not that *he* considered her such. Iggy was polite and courteous, but that was it. He'd approved of her starting a sort of daycare/preschool for the Clan's booming cub population. Hell, the old fool even helped out at the summer camp over the summer.

She'd always loved children, and it was the one regret she had in her life, never bearing any of her own. But the Devlin boys made up for it in ways she never expected. All save one.

Clary had only herself to blame for her recent upset. She was wildly unhappy, depressed, some might call it. But who could blame her? Her Sow chuffed mournfully in that metaphysical plane where she rested until called forth. The beast wishing for a male she had no rights to, no claim on.

"There, I think this is everything. Want me to walk you to your car, Miss Clary?" Pat interrupted, and she nodded without really paying attention.

"Excellent," he said, puffing out his chest, and Clary soon realized her blunder.

"Oh, Pat, I'm sorry. The store is packed, you don't have to ___"

“Nonsense. It’s my pleasure,” he growled, waiting for her to open the door while he hefted the large box full of a week’s worth of meat.

Hmm, time to cut the order, she mused, thinking how empty the Den was now that Marcus and his family had left.

True, they were just down the path, but Clary understood Leya’s need to make her new house a home without the older Sow’s interference. She would stay in the periphery if needed, but it wasn’t her place to feed them anymore. She would miss it, but truthfully, it would open up her schedule and let her make plans for the brand new *Cub’s Den Childcare Center*.

Marcus already approved of the renovations she’d asked for to the small cabin she’d transformed over the summer, intending to make the Cub’s Den open year round. He’d even complimented her, telling her she was born to work with cubs. How her heart had swelled at the Alpha’s praise, which was funny considering she used to wipe his nose! Marcus was a wonderful Alpha and Leya was the perfect mate for him. But he’d had an excellent example.

“Well, there you are now, Miss Clary,” Pat said, snapping her out of her reverie.

She smiled at him, waiting for him to move so she could close the trunk to the small SUV she drove. But he didn’t. Instead, he rubbed the back of his neck and his cheeks turned pink, which was not a good look on the former red now white-haired Shifter.

“Miss Clary, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” he fumbled for the words, and anxiety filled her.

She knew what he was going to ask, but Clary didn’t have the heart to date a man when she had feelings for someone else. It was no one’s fault, and Pat was a good male. But she’d done something exceedingly stupid.

Clary had gone and fallen in love with her boss.

CHAPTER
TWO

*W*hat the devil was going on over there?

Clary was practically blushing like a schoolgirl while she chatted with some male across the street. The bastard was momentarily blocked from view by a delivery truck. His Black Bear rose inside of him, hellbent on getting a closer look at whatever was conspiring between his housekeeper and whoever she was talking to.

The truck left, and Iggy growled deep in his throat before loping across the street to confront the two of them. They looked guilty as teenagers when they spied him barreling towards them. Served them right. He might not be Alpha anymore, but he was still dominant as hell, and for whatever reason, his Bear was mighty roused at the pair of them canoodling together.

Canoodling? What the hell was going on with him? Iggy never used phrases like that! His four sons might have made him a grandfather a couple times over and counting, but that didn't mean he needed to think like one.

Grrrr.

“Well now, Pat, Clary, what's going on here, you two?”

Iggy Devlin narrowed his eyes at the other male. Clary frowned, her Sow glowing in her gaze, but he didn't bother reacting. He already knew she was too damn independent for her own good. There was just no reasoning with that female!

Regardless, Iggy would not sit quietly and watch that old fool, Pat McKenney, trying to put the moves on his

housekeeper! Clary deserved better than that randy old widow. As if she would ever fall for that Irish blockhead!

Still, better not take the chance. A plan his Bear was surprisingly on board with. Clary was theirs, er, well, she was family—not a blood relation or anything, but she was good as any family he ever called his own. Confused and out of sorts, Iggy was crossing the street and calling out to them before he could stop himself.

“Morning there, Iggy,” Pat returned, smile broad across his face. “You ready to lose the Clan Turkey Bowl again this year?”

“Ha! As if,” he retorted with a snarl.

How had Iggy never noticed how completely annoying, not to mention downright ugly, Pat was? Shifters as a whole were generally good looking, what with their supernaturally enhanced genetics, it was only logical they would be. Take Clary, for instance.

The woman was mature, there was no denying that, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t beautiful. With her silver hair cut just above her shoulders, thick and glossy with a slight curl at the end, and those twinkling blue eyes of hers, that ready smile, and her enormous heart, Clary Aylin was really quite lovely.

Pat, on the other hand, looked like a giant pig when he wasn’t in his fur. He had an upturned nose and pale skin that turned a blotchy pink whenever he exerted himself, which was often despite being a Shifter.

“I think you’re losing your marbles, Pat. We tied last year, 14-14.”

“Tie is still a loss in my books, Alpha.”

“I’m not the Alpha anymore,” he corrected the man, refusing to rise to the bait.

“That’s right, you’re not. You stepped down early to give your son a chance, didn’t you? Good idea for you, early retirement. Boy is a natural. I guess some of us don’t have the

endurance we used to,” the butcher added, and Iggy’s Bear roared at the insinuation.

“Nothing wrong with my endurance, I assure you,” Iggy growled, stepping closer to the slightly shorter Boar.

“Best leave challenges to your boy, Iggy. You’re getting too old to be throwing down anymore.”

“That boy is a man now, Pat, and your Alpha. And I sincerely doubt Marcus would appreciate you starting a brawl with his father in broad daylight in the middle of town,” Clary stepped in, voice sharp.

Iggy grinned, baiting that prick. His stare never wavered, letting Pat know Iggy was ready for a real challenge anytime, anyplace. His Bear chuffed, and he understood the beast’s sudden satisfaction. Pat might have thought he was getting somewhere with Iggy’s housekeeper, but the second anyone disrespected the boys, well, they were as good as dead in her world. In fact, Iggy had been counting on Pat to muck things up himself.

“Oh, of course, Miss Clary. I meant no disrespect. Marcus is a fine man and Alpha,” the butcher murmured. “But why wouldn’t he be when you all but raised him?” Pat added, and Iggy frowned.

Charming bastard! He’d turned the tables on poor old Iggy. Clary was just eating up that jerk’s smarmy smiles and pitiful excuses for compliments.

“Oh, Pat! Thank you! You are so sweet. Now, if you two would excuse me. I have to get to the vegetable market. Bye now, Pat, Iggy,” she said, leaving the two males standing there, just staring after her.

He frowned at the pair of them. Clary was wearing a pair of jeans that clung to her womanly curves, outlining her scrumptiously rounded hips. The sweater she wore with it ended right there with a scalloped trim that drew the eye. Pat seemed to notice the turn of his stare, and the other male growled low enough that only Iggy picked up the sound.

The Alpha in him reared up. His beast of a Black Bear was feeling mighty possessive of his little housekeeper. What did he expect, though? Iggy returned the growl, pissed off at himself, Pat, and Clary for putting him in this ridiculous situation.

It wasn't Iggy's fault Pat was trying to molest her in front of his shop. The old Bear had no business checking her out, but really, Clary should know better for encouraging the male. A Sow her age had no business just standing there, flirting with the old codger in front of the whole dang town.

Grrr.

"I don't know what you're up to, Pat," Iggy started, facing the male after Clary had driven away. "But it won't work. Clary is no fool."

"Just what are you insinuating there, Iggy?"

"I remember you before you mated Danielle. You were a real rounder, Pat. There is no way I am going to stand by and watch you make a move on my housekeeper—"

"I have no intention of making moves on Miss Clary, Iggy," Pat told him.

Relief field Iggy's chest cavity. But only for a moment, because the next thing that came out of Pat's mouth was a complete and total fucking shock.

"I intend to marry her."

CHAPTER
THREE

“Nana Clary! Nana Clary!”

Mia toddled over to where Clary was stirring a pot of her famous beef stew on the stove. She'd spent most of the morning chopping vegetables and prepping six chuck roasts to go in. Once the boys left the Den, living in their own house, with their own families, Clary worried she would have to learn to cook in smaller batches.

Lucky for her, their mates were only too happy to let her take care of dinners for them a few days out of the week. They'd settled on a simple schedule. Tuesdays and Thursdays, Clary made dinners for all the families, and every Sunday and all the holidays they all came to the Den as a family for dinner together.

Now, it was true, Clary had never felt like just the housekeeper. She'd felt like family to the Devlin boys. But nothing lasted forever, and the fact of the matter was everything had changed. Her time working at the Den was coming to an end, as much as it broke her heart to admit it.

“Oh my gosh, Clary! That smells amazing!”

Lacey came waddling in with the newest addition to her brood on her hip, while she rubbed the swell of her stomach where she was busy growing Daniel's third cub. The former model was as stunning as ever, and of all her surrogate daughters-in-law, she had a special place in Clary's heart.

Poor thing had been attacked by a crazed admirer when Daniel had brought her home, and she'd desperately needed

some tenderness and attention. Clary had been thrilled to have someone to talk with and prepare meals with. She'd even passed some of her kitchen secrets to the sweetheart of a woman.

To think she used to worry Daniel would wind up alone, and here he was a Daddy three times over, and mated to a woman who thought the sun rose and set on her man.

As it should be, she mused with a grin.

“Yes, Miss Mia, what can I do for you?” Clary asked the beautiful child.

“Wanna cook, too! Uppy, Nana, uppy!”

“Mia, it's not polite to interrupt Nana when she is busy cooking,” Lacey gently chided.

“It's no bother, Lacey. You know I have a soft spot for my Miss Mia. Come on, baby.” Clary grinned and bent down, lifting the little girl with ease.

She handed her a tiny wooden spoon, showing her how to stir the pot carefully without getting any of the hot, savory gravy on her soft little fingers.

“You know, you really do too much, Clary, but I sure am grateful,” Lacey sighed, placing Junior in one of the highchairs Clary kept on hand for any of the grandkids who happened to be visiting.

“It's my pleasure, Lacey, you know that,” she replied easily and honestly.

“Well, I am still thankful, and for the way you packed all of Daniel's childhood toys. I know he's been wanting to set some of them up in Junior's room for him.”

“He's such a sweet one, that boy. As an Enforcer, you wouldn't think he'd be so sentimental,” Clary said with a grin.

“My Daniel? He's the sweetest man alive, I swear. He practically dotes on the children, and he just spoils me rotten. Don't tell him I said this, but I love it,” Lacey confided as she placed a bowl of cereal in front of her cub.

The look on Lacey's face left Clary with no doubt she really did love it. She continued to hold Mia, allowing the sweet cub to stir the giant pot of stew and smiled the whole time, ignoring the pang she felt in her chest. It was petty of her to feel even a modicum of jealousy of what Lacey had.

"Down, down Nana Clary!" Mia said in that booming voice reserved for toddlers, and with a gentle plop, Clary set her down.

"What do you say, baby girl?" her mother scolded, and a grinning mischievous Mia turned back to Clary.

"Thank you, Nana!" she shouted and ran to her for a sloppy kiss on her cheek.

"Any time, my little princess," she said before Mia went running to the living room where a toy chest full of her favorite playthings sat waiting for her.

"Clary, is everything alright?" Lacey asked, and she turned to greet the younger woman with a bright, if a little, forced smile.

"It's fine. I'm fine."

"Clary, I might not have a supernaturally enhanced sense of smell, but I can still smell a lie," Lacey said, rubbing her belly in wide circles.

"Well, truth be told, I was just thinking about leaving the Den," she began.

"Leaving the Den?"

"With all of you gone, there's no one left to take care of. I mean, it's only a matter of time before you are too busy to be bothered picking up Tuesday and Thursday dinners. You girls are going to want to have some control of your own holidays, too, I imagine."

"Clary, I promise none of us want to replace you—" Lacey started, and the anxiety in her face was palpable.

"Oh, honey, I don't want to upset you in your condition. And I will always be around for you. Barvale is my home, I have no intention of leaving it. It's just, I don't think there's

any need for me to stay on here with just Mr. Devlin living here. In fact, I am not sure it's all that proper," Clary blurted, tucking her hair behind her ears as her cheeks flamed with embarrassment.

"What? Oh, you mean cause he's a single man and you are—oh! Ohhh," Lacey said as realization dawned.

Just then, Leya came traipsing inside with her adorable minions in tow. Jordan wiggled for his mama to let him down, while she pushed a double stroller with her twin girls, Leanna and Maribeth, cozy inside. With her supernatural hearing, Clary waited a beat before Krissy and Luisa came in and joined the rest of them, adding four more cubs to the mix.

"Hi Clary," Krissy said, greeting her with a kiss before the others could follow suit.

"Playpens are all set up inside, ladies."

"Thank you. You are such a lifesaver," Leya said, winking as she went to place the baby girls inside one of them with a few toys between them.

Hugs and kisses, and sticky baby greetings had already been exchanged while the mamas in the room took winter layers off their young. As they went to set them up with toys and make sure they were all happy, Clary turned on the monitors so they could watch the cubs from the kitchen.

This was her favorite time of the week when the Den was full of noise and happiness. She sighed quietly, wondering how much she would miss it, but knowing she couldn't go on this way. Pining for a man who didn't even know she was alive outside the kitchen. These women were lucky, glowing with love from the inside out, and Clary was so damn proud of them. Each one had had her own story, her own difficulty getting to this place of contentment and joy, and each one deserved their happy ever after endings.

That sort of thing was just never in the cards for Clary. She knew that now. Hell, she felt it now more than ever. Yes, her time at the Den was over. It was better to rip the Band-Aid off and tell them all when they were together like this. She waited

for them to return to the kitchen and already had the counter set up with take away bowls and covers so they could take what they wanted from the fresh rolls, beef stew, and green bean casserole she'd made for dinner.

"I have an announcement to make," she said, and felt Lacey's gaze on her.

"This wasn't an easy decision, but I think after thirty-three years working as the Devlins housekeeper, it's time I move on," she started, but not before the sound of someone slamming the side door shattered the stillness that had settled over the room.

"The hell are you talking about?" Iggy Devlin, the man himself, burst into the kitchen.

Eyes ablaze and a moue of anger twisting his lips, the former Alpha barreled down on Clary until he stood toe to toe with her. She swallowed down her gulp, narrowed her eyes, and did not back down an inch. Why should she?

"Iggy! Back off of her now, please. Now, Clary? Is everything okay?" Leya asked.

"Oh hell, I just wanna know what she's talking about, Leya ___"

"We all do, but don't you think we should let her speak?"

Clary released the breath she was holding. She'd had zero intention of telling Iggy about all this until after she was packed. But oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound. It was long past time for Clary to cut the apron strings.

"Take your time, Clary," Leya said, rubbing her arm affectionately before pulling Iggy to take a seat beside her.

For a normal, Leya Devlin was the best damned Alpha fem Clary had ever seen. Sensitive when she needed to be, with a solid steel backbone and a no nonsense attitude when it came to her people. If that little female could speak her mind without fear, so could a silver-haired Sow like Clary.

"I didn't want to upset any of you, and I am not moving away from Barvale, after all, this is my home. I just think

without the boys here now, there is no need for me to stay at the Den any longer, so I'll be moving out at the end of the month."

Her eyes flashed towards Iggy, but the old Bear just sat there looking down. His jaw was set angrily, and she had no doubt he was about to unleash hell with that temper he was so famous for in his youth.

But this time, Clary was ready.

CHAPTER
FOUR

The entire house seemed to go silent after Clary's announcement, or maybe that was just because Iggy couldn't hear a thing over the roar inside his head. His chest felt tight, but maybe that was his shirt. The room was closing in on him. Iggy could not breathe.

She's leaving me. Fuck. No. Not me.

She's leaving us, his Bear inserted with an angry growl.

No, not us! She isn't ours. But she is leaving the Den.

"Iggy, Clary just said something really big, isn't there anything you want to say?" Leya, his daughter-in-law, looked at him expectantly.

When he looked around the room, he found three other pairs of eyes with the same sort of hopefulness swimming in them. But what could he do? What could he say? He didn't want Clary to leave, but Iggy had no claim on the stubborn woman. Besides, if she wanted to go, he sure as hell would not stand in her way!

"No need to wait till the end of the month. If you want to leave, leave. Tell Marcus to have some of the boys come by whenever you're ready to give you a hand with your things," Iggy growled, stood up, and raced away before he made a total fool of himself.

Clary Aylin had been an established part of the Den, of his home, his family for over thirty years. But now she was just going, leaving him like Gloria had wanted to all those years

ago. That wasn't fair, his marriage was complicated at best, and hell at its worst.

His mating with Marcus, Daniel, and Taylor's mother had been arranged. It was not a love match. In fact, it was far from it. He and Gloria gave it their best shot, sure, but his Bear had been restless in his youth. Iggy had wanted more than she could give. After discovering her infidelities, Marcus waited a beat for his Bear to show any sign of possessiveness or anger, but the animal was indifferent.

That just said it all. No mated Bear who loved his mate would be so blasé about her sleeping with another guy. Iggy had confronted her, and she'd told him the truth about her extramarital activities, something he'd worked hard to keep from his boys. Clary knew. She'd tried to cover for Gloria once, claiming she didn't know where the woman had gone, when she'd been off indulging an affair with one of their Clan.

She'd missed family dinners, the boys' games, and school meetings, but it never mattered. Not even when Iggy couldn't be there, because Clary was always there. She'd filled in for their mother and father over the years, and after Gloria passed away, she had taken on an even bigger role in their lives. All their lives.

Yes, Iggy was just as guilty, he supposed. He'd stepped out on his wife, but only after confronting her about her own affairs. They agreed on an open marriage, and for years he traveled, fulfilling his role as Alpha the best way he could, and taking cold comfort where he could get it. Nate's mother had been special, but it was too late for them.

Iggy had returned from that Texas trip, determined to make things right with Gloria. But when he got home, he knew that ship had sailed a long time ago. Shame and guilt gnawed at him until he passed on the mantle of Alpha to his son, and afterwards he spent a year just kickin' around the country, trying to fill the void inside himself.

A big, dominant Bear like him could have held on to his title longer, but Marcus was more than ready for the challenges he faced as leader of the Clan. He believed in his

son. In all of them, actually, and Iggy returned intending to help in any way he could. He'd been surprised and humbled, counting himself lucky as he watched all four of his boys find mates and grow their families.

Fuck. This was messed up. He was messed up. Just the other day he was annoyed at the way Clary seemed always underfoot, *er*, claw. But now she wanted to leave.

No, retirement didn't bother Iggy half as much as the fact the only woman he could ever depend on wanted out of his life. Clary. Stalwart, trustworthy, and constant. Or so he'd thought. Betrayal sliced across his soul like a cleaver—a butcher's cleaver.

Grrrrr.

His Boar snarled angrily at that. Maybe that piggy-nosed fucker, Pat, had something to do with this? That was it. He was canceling his standard order and getting his meat shipped in from Eat Well Live Proud. The Lion owned company offered direct to your door service nowadays, and Clary had been wanting to try some of their goods.

Shit. Clary.

His Bear growled mournfully, and Iggy kicked a rock out of his path as he went to his favorite spot to change behind a copse of pines a few hundred feet from the Den. Looked like he was wrong about her. She was just like every other woman out there, wanting things he could not deliver. He supposed he wasn't good enough for her to stick around.

Once in his fur, Iggy went for a long walk through the woods surrounding the lake. He loved this place. This land had been owned by the Devlins for over a hundred years and it was ingrained in his very soul. Same thing stood for the Den.

But what would it be like now, empty except for him? He'd been supportive of the boys leaving, making their own lives and homes. But he never thought Clary would leave. She was a damn good woman. A good Sow, too. Her improvements to the Cub Care center and her ideas on how the

Clan could be more supportive of its younger members were inspired.

He'd even volunteered with her on a few of her endeavors, and she always seemed fine in his company. But maybe the idea of living alone with him in that big old place was unappealing. Maybe he was unappealing. The last thought grated on him. She had no problem passing the time with Pat. That fucker. Oh, he knew what the heavyset Bear saw in her, alright. Iggy might be getting on in years, but he still had eyes.

Clary was one of those true, and rare beauties. She was the kind of woman whose inner beauty was miraculously matched on the outside as well. She had sparkling blue eyes framed by thick, dark lashes. Her hair had transformed over the years to a mass of glossy silver that shone like it was kissed by starlight. Pink, kissable lips and a straight no nonsense nose. Her skin looked soft and creamy, and she had the cutest little laugh lines at the corners of her eyes and by her mouth.

She usually dressed in regular jeans or slacks and blouses so she could do her work, but the woman still filled them out. Like most Shifters, Clary aged well. Very well. Her body was a little thinner than it used to be, but he could still tell she held on to all the curves that mattered beneath her clothes. Her ass was delectable, those hips of hers put him in mind of some things he hadn't thought about in years.

Fuck—wait, this was Clary he was thinking about. The reliable housekeeper who'd worked for him for three decades. It wasn't right for him to be wandering through the woods, fantasizing about bending her over the kitchen table and having his wicked way with her. Shit. This was getting entirely out of hand. Clary was leaving, and he had no business thinking this way.

Yo, Dad. What are you doing here?

Iggy stopped mid-snarl when he recognized his half-Grizzly son, Nate, ambling over to where he'd stopped walking. He'd somehow ended up a couple of miles away from the Den on Nate's land. Sometimes Shifters could communicate telepathically when in their fur, but that only

happened if there was a bond between them. Iggy shared such a bond with his boys.

Hey, son. Just out for a walk.

I see. Well, you should know, all the females are out for your blood after you basically kicked Clary out without so much as a 'by your leave'.

What? I did no such thing. That confounded woman announced she was leaving, what did I have to do with it? You know what, hang on.

A few pops, cracks, and stretches later, and Iggy was back in his own skin. Changing on command was not as easy as it used to be, but he was still a force to be reckoned with, and he was too damn angry to have to think talk to Nate about this. He waited for his son to return to human form before he started with his rant, and by the time he was finished, that kid of his just stood there, arms crossed, grinning like a lunatic.

“What?”

“You like her!” Nate replied, wagging his finger.

“Are you out of your damned mind, boy? This is Clary we are talking about. Of course, I like her. She’s worked for me for over thirty years!”

“No, no. You *like her*, like her,” the idiot cub insisted.

“Why am I even bothering talking to you,” Iggy growled, stomping away from his son, bare-assed, with his dick just swinging in the chilly breeze.

“Wait a minute! Come on, Dad. Look, let me grab you some sweats and I’ll drive you home. We can talk about this,” Nate said, jogging after him.

“Fine. But not another word about me having some sort of messed up crush on Clary.”

“Fine, and I guess it’s good you don’t like her that way.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cause Luisa texted me a few minutes ago when the girls were mad at you, but she said something else too,” he hedged.

“Something about Clary?”

“Yup.”

“Well, what is it, boy?” Iggy snarled, ready to throttle his son.

“Nothing. You don’t care like that, so I wouldn’t worry about.”

Iggy inhaled slowly, willing himself to calm down else he beat his son within an inch of his life. What was the git thinking, teasing his already riled Bear like that? He frowned hard, breathing slowly to release some tension.

“Nate, I swear on all I hold holy if you don’t tell me what Luisa said, I am not going to be responsible for what I do to you,” he snarled, using his Alpha voice.

He still had it regardless of his position in the Clan. Iggy Devlin was one dominant as fuck Bear, and Nate was enjoying himself way too much at his father’s expense. It wasn’t healthy. At least, not for Nate, it wasn’t.

“You may want to switch to decaf there, Dad. Really, for a guy your age, it isn’t healthy to get so riled up.”

“NATE!” Iggy roared.

“Alright, alright. It’s nothing really, and I am sure you won’t care, but Clary is going out on a date,” pause, “with Pat McKenney,” another longer pause, “tonight.”

“Sonova—*roaaaarrrrrrr!*”

CHAPTER
FIVE

After dropping that little bomb on everyone, Clary was practically attacked in a mob of tears, hugs, and pledges of allegiance from all four of the Devlin boys' wives.

"Clary, I can't believe it. I mean, what will I do without you?" Lacey cried, her pregnancy hormones getting the best of her.

"Oh my goodness, Lacey, stop all that crying. It isn't good for you. Sheesh! I am not dying, for Pete's sake. I'm just going to find a small apartment somewhere in town, is all."

"No. You can have one of the cabins on the lake. I'll talk to D-Daniel," she blubbered.

"Something else is wrong," Leya said.

"Clary, are you m-mad at us cause of the Tuesday and Thursday dinners? You don't have to cook at all if you don't want to, just don't leeeeeeeave," wailed Lacey.

Krissy rolled her eyes and giggled, handing her sister-in-law a tissue while Luisa rubbed her back. But Leya's gaze never wavered from Clary. The normal had better instincts than most supes, far as Clary was concerned. Before she knew it, she had told them the awful truth about her most secret and entirely inappropriate feelings for her boss.

"Wow. You and Mr. Devlin," Luisa murmured, eyes wide.

"Has he done or said anything to you?" Krissy asked, concern written all over her face.

“Goodness, no. He doesn’t think of me like that. I could ignore it for a while, but not anymore. Not without the boys and you all here.”

“Ugh, why does he have to be such a male?” growled Krissy. “Clary, I am so sorry. I guess the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. You know how long it took for Taylor to recognize his feelings for me.”

“It’s not Iggy’s fault,” Clary said quickly. “You and Taylor are fated mates, Krissy. I have never been anyone’s fated mate. Not even my late husband.”

“I never heard you talk about him,” Leya said softly.

“Oh, he was a good man. Jeremy Aylin. A good Bear. Our mating was arranged by our parents, but he was killed in a fight against another Clan almost right after our marriage. I was shocked and didn’t know what to do, but the boys’ mother was an acquaintance and she offered me a job. Gloria Devlin wasn’t much for housekeeping or raising cubs, but she was wildly beautiful,” Clary said, stuck in the past for a moment.

“You’ve given a lot to this family, Clary, and I think it is only fair we support you in whatever you want to do,” Luisa said firmly, and all the women nodded.

“Maybe you can talk to Iggy?” Lacey said, her tear-filled eyes brimming over with hope.

“You can’t talk someone into loving you, sweet Lacey. No, I think moving is the right thing to do. In town, not on the lake. I don’t want to be too close for a while yet.”

“I understand,” Krissy said, eyes filling with tears just the same.

“I love you all, you know that, right? And I will always be here for you. I just need to have a life beyond the Den. And well, I can’t stay here knowing I will never be more than a maid to him. I am okay not getting what I truly want, but I am not okay with that,” she confided.

“Oh Clary,” Leya said, hugging her tight. “I understand.”

Clary's phone pinged, and before she could press *ignore*, Leya took the phone. Her grin was wide as she read the incoming text, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. Clary opened her hand for her phone, but Leya tossed it to Krissy, who plucked it from the air, her Shifter reflexes on point.

"Miss Clary, you have been holding out on us."

"I have not!"

"Then why is Patrick McKenney texting you about a date?" Leya teased.

"Is he? Oh my goodness, well, I mean, we chatted outside for a little while the other day," she began.

"Ooooh! There is something there. Okay, this is what we are going to do. We are going to go to town for a little bit of a girls' day. I am thinking hair, nails, makeup, and a new outfit," Leya said, making plans.

"Yes! Okay, I am texting the guys to come over for babysitting duty."

"Great. The nail salon has openings for us at three," Krissy chirped in.

"Great! I want a mani-pedi, please. Now Leya, you, Krissy, and Luisa are going with Clary now. I just texted Maya, Roxanne, and Nita, and Maya's stepmom, Jill. They are already in town on a shopping trip for Eva's baby shower, and they said to hurry and get to *Jessica's Boutique II* because they are having a grand opening sale. I can't wait. Anyway, I'll wait for the guys and meet you later," Lacey announced, clapping her hands.

"Hold on now. What are you girls talking about? I never said I wanted to go on a date with Pat McKenney!"

"Oops. Sorry, Clary, it's too late. I already replied to Mr. McKenney that you would meet him at Chez Jaqueline, that new French place on Route 36, at eight o'clock," Krissy said with no visible signs of being actually repentant.

"Eight o'clock? I go to bed at nine thirty," Clary mumbled.

"Well, not tonight, you don't. Let's go!"

Ninety minutes later, Clary was sitting in a salon chair, gulping down an iced caramel macchiato with an extra double shot of espresso, and wondering how she'd manage to spend more money in one afternoon than she had in the last year.

“Slow down, Clary, or you'll get brain freeze,” Jill Jacobs said, wincing when Clary dropped the cup onto the side table and pressed her palm to her forehead.

“Ouch! Where were you ten minutes ago?” Clary gasped, hating the pain slicing through her head. At least it would go away any second now with her Shifter healing abilities and all—*she hoped*.

“Sorry, I, um, stopped at a store and, well, I got held up,” Jill mumbled, and her cheeks turned bright pink.

“Jill? What is it?”

Clary had tons of foil sticking out all over her head and was waiting for the timer to go off when Jill joined her. Though she had originally objected to dyeing her silver hair, she'd finally been talked into going with some lowlights to round out her overall look. That and a trim, a manicure, and pedicure, and a bikini wax later, she'd desperately needed the coffee pick-me-up Maya had brought for her and the others.

After the success of her ice cream shop, *Honey Sweet Creamery*, the entrepreneurial she-Bear had opened Honey Sweet Coffee & Tea right across the street. Clary was very fond of their artisan coffees and teas, but Jill was right. She needed to slow down.

“Okay, what's the blush for?” Clary asked, convinced nothing could shock her after what Antoinette, the stylist, had done to her in the waxing room.

Ouchie!

Her Sow was still not talking to her. Her brain-freeze forgotten, Clary leaned forward, worried about her friend. Jill and Tim Jacobs had married a few years back after years of dancing around the subject of their mutual attraction. They had that kind of romantic story that made Clary's old heart swoon,

but being the wonderful people they were, Clary firmly believed they both deserved to be happy.

“This is for you,” Jill said, handing her a discreet looking black shopping bag.

“For me?” Clary frowned. Curiously, she looked inside the bag, realization dawning when she saw a couple of smallish boxes inside.

“Look, don’t say anything. I know this can be uncomfortable or weird, but you’ve been my friend since my first marriage, Clary and well, I want you to know something,” she said, scooching forward and whispering the rest. “Just because we get older, that doesn’t mean we are any less than younger women. We don’t feel any less. We don’t want any less. You’ve been widowed a very long time, and I am sorry, I don’t mean to sound insensitive. I am happy you are going out with Pat, and maybe I am reading it wrong, but I don’t know if he is the man for you. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be *happy*, if you get my meaning.”

Yes. Clary understood her meaning, and the very idea of taking that shopping bag home and using what was inside made her shiver and shake like she was a teenager again. Yes, she was going on a date, but she had no plans on winding up in Pat’s bed. Still, making herself *happy*. Now, there was an idea.

“Oh, well, Jill, I mean, Pat and I, well, it’s just a date,” Clary murmured.

“I figured as much, and good for you. But in case you did want to, um, go there with Pat, there is stuff inside that bag for the two of you. And in case you would rather go there alone, well, there is something inside for that, too.”

“I see,” Clary replied, eyebrows disappearing into her hairline.

“Us older ladies still have a sex drive, Clary, no use pretending we don’t. We have all the working parts, but some things require some tenderness, and special handling,” Jill whispered, and her blush got even darker.

Clary was stunned. Grateful, but stunned. She smiled widely, wrapping Jill in a quick, but strong hug.

“Have fun tonight, Clary. I hope you find happiness, lord knows you deserve it.”

The timer went off and Antoinette came back to remove Clary’s foils and move her to the rinsing area. Her pulse was racing, and she felt positively giddy. Clary did not need a man to achieve happiness. At fifty-seven years old, she knew that. It was nice to know she had the option, though.

No, she wasn’t planning on sleeping with Pat McKenney, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t if she wanted to. And wasn’t that an interesting notion? Clary had waited a long time to discover her sexuality. But it wasn’t too late for her and owning that was like opening a door to an entire world of possibilities. At her age, that was simply amazing.

“Thank you, Jill. Really, really, thank you,” she told her friend.

“Ready?” Antoinette asked, and Clary nodded.

She was ready. Well, she hoped she was ready for her new hairstyle, her first date in ages, and to move out of the only home she had known for the past three decades. Chills raced up her spine and her stomach squeezed uneasily while her Sow chuffed mournfully. Dammit. Clary really loved the Den. But no, it was not her home. She had no rights to it, no matter how much she loved it. Or its owner.

Gulp.

Clary was finally ready for a new *her*—well, maybe not so much new as different. That felt better, truer.

Yes, Clary was definitely ready for different.

CHAPTER
SIX

I ggy checked the clock again. It was ten forty-five. Almost eleven at night, it just started snowing again, and Clary still was not back.

His inner Black Bear snarled. The ex-Alpha Boar was still a monster, and right then, he was tearing Iggy up from the inside out. Oh, the beast was furious with his human side. It was crazy. Impossible even. But ever since he talked to Nate, and then his other sons once they joined them at the Den where all Iggy's gorgeous grandcubs were waiting for their daddies to watch them while their moms wreaked havoc all over Barvale.

Even sweet Lacey had been in on it, studiously ignoring Iggy when Daniel arrived to drive her to meet the other females. Of all his daughter's in law, Lacey had been the sweetest. But now, he had to wonder about the pregnant female. How could she, of all people, support Clary going out with that randy old Bear? It was enough to make Iggy lose faith in humanity as a whole!

Grrrr.

He rubbed the aching spot that sat dead center on his chest and heaved a sigh. He wondered if she was coming back there at all? Maybe she'd already found a place to rent or buy. Maybe she was occupying the space next to that fathead fucker, Pat McKenney, while Iggy sat there waiting up for her like a good friend. They were that once. Friends.

When did it all go wrong?

After he'd returned from the Flint Clan, and his most tumultuous affair at the time with Nate's mother, Iggy had been a changed Bear. He'd tried to make Gloria happy, but there was a deep sadness there that went beyond his ability to fix. It had wounded him, his Bear, to be such an utter and complete failure at marriage. That kind of thing scarred a man. It sent him running, and Iggy ran, fast and far, traveling under the pretense of his Alpha duties, but really it was because he'd felt ashamed.

He was man enough to admit he'd been a lousy husband. A bad mate. Iggy Devlin was sixty-one years old, even if he had the physique of a man little more than half his age, despite the gray hair and beard. Shifters aged differently than normals, had increased lifespans, too. Which made the fact he'd be living out the rest of his years alone a fucking nightmare of epic proportions.

He'd never imagined Clary would leave. She'd simply always been there, taking care of the house, the boys, and a zillion other things behind the scenes. How many times had he worked on a problem and sought her out for her keen insight and thoughtful suggestions? Too many to count, that was for damn sure. She was more than a housekeeper. So much more.

Fucking hell. He didn't want to lose her! But was he Bear enough to admit the truth. The one, actual truth he'd been running away from for years. Ever since the day Gloria introduced Clary to him and suggested he hire the young widow. The image of a younger Clary played inside his brain.

Iggy walked into the cold kitchen, unsurprisingly so, since his wife never cooked or did anything to make the place more homey. They'd been having problems, but it was a lot more complicated than he was prepared to deal with what with all the issues they'd been having with other Clans challenging them for territory left and right.

The Shifter world was wrought with wars and fights, not to mention the importance of keeping their kind a secret from the outside world. He inhaled a breath, stilling at the scents filling the air. Someone was there, a female, and the perfume of misery shrouded her. But beneath that, he scented something

else. Sunflowers and wild honey. Sweet, subtle, and mouthwatering. Iggy turned his head and caught sight of her. Her dark hair was wet from the storm raging on outside. She shivered, and he immediately removed his jacket, dropping it on her shoulders as he took the seat in front of her.

“I’m Iggy.”

“I know who you are, Alpha Devlin. Y-your wife told me to wait for you.”

“She did, huh? May I ask why you’re here, Mrs. Aylin?”

Yes, he knew her now. She was recently widowed, and it was his fucking fault. If he were a better Alpha, Barvale Clan soldiers needn’t have died in their last battle with that damned group of Grizzly Shifters from the Flint Clan from Texas. Why they wanted land in New Jersey, he had no idea. But there was no way he would allow them to have it. Iggy sported a few scars of his own from their last skirmish.

“I’m here for the job, sir. Mrs. Devin said you were interviewing for housekeepers,” the pretty young Sow said, and her voice rang with honesty.

Fucking Gloria. This wasn’t the first time his wife had done this. Led some sweet little female to the Den as an offering to appease his lusty appetites so he’d leave his wife alone to her lovers. Gods, he hated this. Hated her. Why did she do this to him?

The baser part of himself was instantly attracted to this young, shivering woman. But he was the Alpha, and he had a moral code to follow. The sounds of footsteps running caught his attention, and his three sons came inside, shouting for dinner and wanting a parent to talk to and coddle them. Iggy was hardly prepared for that.

“Easy now, boys. Your father has had a day, settle down and tell me what it is you need,” the young woman said.

“We didn’t have any dinner and we’re hungry,” the youngest mumbled, little blond-haired devil. He would be a lady killer someday, Iggy just knew it.

“Are you all hungry?” she asked, and three little heads nodded.

That was all it took. She stood up, removing Iggy’s jacket from her shoulders and hanging it on a hook while she went about switching on the light and starting dinner for his brood. He stared at the jacket for some long minutes afterward, heart squeezing inside his chest. His Bear liked her in his clothes. Liked his scent on her. But no, that was wrong. He was mated, even if he wasn’t faithful. His open relationship with his wife aside, this woman was nothing like Gloria. She deserved more from a man than what he was in a position to give.

“Mrs. Aylin, you’re hired,” Iggy said, deciding on the spot this woman was going to be afforded his protection from anyone wanting to take advantage of her, including his perverse wife and himself.

“Thank you, Alpha. Oh, and you can call me Clary.”

“That sounds fine, Clary. Call me Iggy,” he said, and left her to it.

Iggy sat there with the memory fresh in his mind. Of course, he never told Clary why Gloria had suddenly had a notion to hire a sweet, newly single, young thing like herself, when most mated females would have looked for someone older and mated to tend to their homes. Not his wife. She had delivered Clary to him like an offering, unbeknownst to her, of course.

Poor, sweet innocent.

He hated what Gloria had done to their marriage. Cringing at his touch, seeking comfort with other males, it had poisoned whatever bond they could have had. Yes, she bore him three sons in quick succession—her duty, as she called it, only allowing him to touch her when her cycle was ripe for breeding. Gloria hated Iggy. That was the truth. She could not stand his hands on her. But he’d been fine with that until the day she’d stooped so low as to bring Clary to his home when she’d been young and vulnerable, not to mention defenseless against his wife’s wily mechanisms.

“Oh gods,” he growled, covering his face with his hands.

Bad as Gloria was for doing that, Iggy shared her guilt. No, he never acted on his impulses, but he'd had them all the same. For years, he'd denied it. Told himself he couldn't let Clary go because she was necessary for the boys. Making up excuses and more lies to convince himself to keep her on was easy after that.

Man or not. Bear or not. Alpha or not. Iggy had been telling himself lies for so long, he'd started to believe them. He actually convinced himself Clary was nothing more to him than an employee at worst and at best a friend. Nothing could be further from the truth, but asshole that he was, he'd waited too fucking long to do anything about it. Now she was out with another man.

Smiling at him with those pretty pink lips. Looking at him with her sparkling blue eyes. Gracing him with that dimple on the left corner of her mouth that only came out when she was really laughing at something. The damned butcher was probably pouring her another glass of wine, sharing some French dessert Iggy couldn't even pronounce. The fact he was showing Clary an evening out, like Iggy had fantasized about more times than he'd care to admit, was embarrassing. That he would trade places with Pat in a heartbeat right now was laughable.

Clary wouldn't have him on a bed of roses with a bag of chips on the side and a cherry on top. She was too good for him, and that was the gods' honest truth. His Black Bear stood on his hind legs inside his mind's eyes, the beast roaring his upset so loudly Iggy covered his eyes with the palms of his hands, pushing them in to try to quiet the sound. No wonder he didn't hear her come in. Didn't smell her either until she was standing in front of him, leaning over and touching his shoulder.

“Iggy? Iggy! Are you alright?” she asked, concern lacing every word.

His eyes opened, and Iggy was momentarily stunned. What the hell happened to his Clary? This foxy female

standing in front of him looked nothing like the woman he'd vowed to protect, and leave alone, all those years ago. What had she done to herself?

Instead of soft jeans and a blouse and sweater, her usual garb, Clary was wearing a long, loose skirt with a pretty abstract pattern on it in blues and silvers. She wore a soft-looking, cowl necked sweater on top in that same blue color as was in her skirt. The sweater was an off the shoulder number, revealing her creamy skin and emphasizing her womanly shape.

Her hair was different, like she'd messed with color somehow, adding more dark gray undertones that really brought out the natural streaks of silver. Her blue eyes were beautiful as ever, but they were even more stunning with all that coal liner and shimmery shadow. No lipstick, he noticed, and anger boiled his blood. Jealousy, too.

"Do you have any idea what time it is? And just what the devil are you wearing, woman?" he snarled, regretting the words the second they left his mouth.

Clary straightened to her full height, an impressive five foot ten inches. Her eyes glowed with her Sow as she tried to rein in her anger, and he had to admit, she was right to be mad.

"Shit, Clary, I'm sorry—"

"What I wear and when I come home from a date is none of your business, Iggy Devlin. It never was!"

"The hell it isn't, Clary, I've known you far too long to mess around about this. Now, I don't want you going out with that McKenney character anymore," he growled, but it was like he was watching himself from outside of his own body.

Who was that idiot fighting with Clary when he should be loving on her? But no matter how hard he tried and how loudly his Boar roared, he just couldn't stop the angry tirade of words and ridiculous demands leaving his mouth any more than he could stop the raging boner from pulsating in his pants. Her sunshine and wild honey scent was driving him

absolutely bonkers. All he could think about was whether or not she was wearing panties beneath her skirt.

“What did you say?”

“Clary, as your employer, I forbid it. Now, just go to bed and, for fuck’s sake, put on something decent!”

“Decent? Decent! Well, excuse me for wearing something pretty for my date. And for going out with a nice man who doesn’t just think of me as a maid—” she said, her fury reaching full boil.

“You are my maid, damn it!”

“Not anymore, I’m not,” she shouted. “I already quit. And don’t worry about waiting up for me either when I go out with Patrick again tomorrow!”

“Clary, I am warning you,” he growled.

“I only have three words left for you, Mr. Devlin,” she replied, her voice uncomfortably low. “Go. To. Hell.”

Then she spun on her heels and left Iggy standing there, jaw somewhere on the floor, along with his heart. That went way worse than he’d planned.

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Clary wiped her angry tears away as she slammed the door to her bedroom. Well, her old bedroom, she supposed, and fought against a new flood of tears. Damn that man! He made her so angry.

Her bedroom was part of a suite of rooms that were all hers, done up in soft pinks with ivory molding. She had a small sitting room and a luxuriously large bathroom complete with a jacuzzi tub. She would miss it, that was a certainty.

Clary looked at herself in the mirror, frowning harder at the makeup running down her face. She looked like a drowned rat. She'd felt pretty in her new clothes, with her new hair and makeup. Who the heck was Iggy Devlin to make her feel bad for finally pampering herself after all these years?

As for his calling her his *maid*, like that was all she had ever meant to him and his family, well, nothing had ever hurt her more. Clary knew Iggy didn't have any feelings for her. Even so, he didn't have to be so damn mean about it, did he?

All the years she wasted, she thought with bitter disappointment. All that time, holding out hope he might see her differently someday. But the cold, hard truth was Iggy Devlin never looked at Clary as more than the hired help. He never had, and he never would.

Her heart cracked a little at that, but she was too old to go hiding her head in the sand. It was time to face facts. She was almost sixty, and unless she wanted to die alone and unhappy,

it was time to start living. Even if it meant leaving the one place she'd always thought of as home.

Clary went to her bathroom and washed her face, patting it dry with a fluffy hand towel. Next, she took off her outfit and tossed it in the hamper with an angry huff. Standing in her panties and nothing else, Clary looked at the bags she'd brought back with her from her shopping day.

There it was, calling her like a beacon. The nondescript paper bag was matte black with no frills or logo on it. In a small town like Barvale, she could appreciate the business acumen that led to such a decision. After all, had she walked around with a bag for an adult toy store all day, people would have noticed.

Biting her lip, she walked to the bag and opened it, eyes wide as she took out the various boxes and tubes Jill had gotten her. Her body tensed, anticipation making her tremble. Or was that guilt? Hell! Why should she feel guilt or shame? Clary was a woman and women had needs, Just because she'd been negligent about filling her own needs didn't mean she couldn't start now, did it?

"Oh my goodness, Jill, what did you do?" she whispered, giggling a little as she read the label on a tube of lubricant. Strawberry flavored.

Next, she pulled out a long rabbit vibrator with a special thrusting feature. Another box held a vibrating clitoral stimulator that simulated sucking sensations, *and oh goodness gracious*, was that a mouthful! Last, but not least, Clary took a long vibrating wand out of the bag. The rounded head looked the least frightening of all the toys in there.

Well, why not? Clary deserved happiness and orgasms equaled happy. Sure, Pat had made some suggestions and passes over their three course meal, and while she had a pleasant time, she simply was not attracted to the man.

Silly Sow that she was her Bear and her body only lit up for one man. One man she'd managed to avoid for thirty-three years, feeding her poor heart on scraps of attention and stupid

fantasies. This was her last night sleeping in the Den, so why shouldn't she make it memorable?

Did she have the courage for this, though? That was the real question. She was certainly mature enough not to blush like a schoolgirl at the thought of masturbating. It was natural, right? Shifters were highly physical beings, and she knew many widows who'd taken lovers after their spouses had passed on. But not her. She simply couldn't separate sex from love.

No, Clary didn't want to think about the last time she'd had sex with an actual man. Her husband had died months after their mating, but Jeremy Aylin had been a good man. Their mating was arranged, and he'd been her first, but he'd been gentle and kind. Clary closed her eyes. She'd made her peace with Bill a long time ago. The guilt she'd felt for being attracted to another man after his death had passed with time. It was the guilt she felt about that man being mated that lasted the longest.

But Iggy Devlin never noticed her that way, and thirty years later, she was still the same. Mooning over the man shamelessly. At least he didn't know. That was the only good thing about all this. His maid. He'd called her his maid. Well, Clary was done with that. She was going to live the rest of her life doing things that made her happy instead of pining for someone she could never have.

Uncertainty gripped her for a moment, but she focused on the positive. It might be a little late in her life for a sexual awakening, but she had to start somewhere. Why not there?

Decision made, Clary grabbed the tiny jar of vaginal lubricant and the long vibrating wand. She'd never used one of these before, making do with her fingers when her needs grew to be too much to manage. But even then, it had been a while. She stood next to her bed, took off the top of the jar and dipped a finger in.

The lubricant was surprisingly light and not greasy at all. Jill had explained things had likely changed a little down there since the last time she'd had sex, not that Clary needed

explaining, but she appreciated the other woman very much. This jar was purportedly the most natural feeling and best for her body gel. Clary scooped some out and slipped her hand inside her panties, rubbing the cool salve between her legs.

She cleared her throat, cheeks warm as she touched herself and sighed into the empty room. Her body swelled, butterflies took flight inside her stomach. The temperature in her room was comfortable, but suddenly she felt warm. Very warm.

Clary looked at herself in the mirror, shocked at what she saw. Her face was devoid of makeup, but her skin was glowing. Her hair, still styled from the salon, looked good, better than it had in ages. But it was her body that truly caught her attention.

The years hadn't been too unkind, she thought as she looked at her breasts, belly, and hips. The silk robe she wore was open down the middle, revealing all of her save for the area still covered by the nude panties she wore.

Yes, her breasts hung a little lower, but they were full, and her nipples were dark and tight. Her belly was thicker, softer, but not unbecoming. And those hips, always a little too wide, were still there, but maybe they weren't as bad as she used to think.

Maybe it was time for Clary to start loving herself a little more and to stop caring what a certain dumb Bear thought a little less. Sounded good to her. She took the wand and held it up, licking her lips as she planned her next steps.

Only, that was as far as she got before Iggy came bursting into her room.

“Dammit, Clary, that wasn't what I meant to say—what are you doing?”

“What are you doing in my room? Get out right this second, Iggy Devlin!” she raged, dropping the vibrator on her bed and pulling her robe closed.

She was mortified. Completely humiliated as she spun around and covered her face with her hands. The sound of the door closing let some of her tension out, but the low, rumbling

growl told her she still wasn't alone. Clary turned back, eyes wide, as she met Iggy's glowing stare. He had dark eyes, but when his Boar was riled, they turned gold. Like now.

"Get on the bed, Clary," he commanded, his voice deep and gravelly.

"What? Why?"

"You were about to pleasure yourself, right? Get on the bed."

"No, Iggy. I just, I mean, it's not your business—"

His head cocked to the side, and she flushed under his rapt gaze. He was looking at her from head to toe as if he could see through the thin silk robe she wore. Maybe he could. She shivered at the thought of his eyes on her body. So many times had she imagined this very thing, but not like this. Not now.

"Is this your first time using that?" he growled, nodding at the wand she'd carelessly dropped on the bed in plain sight.

Her humiliation couldn't get any worse, she figured, so she nodded. Her face flamed with embarrassment, but there was something different about the way he was watching her. Something wild about the way his eyes glittered dangerously in the dimly lit room. Iggy might be ex-Alpha, but he was all man. Just being in his presence when he was like this sent shivers of awareness pulsing through her body.

"Do you trust me, Clary?" he asked.

She could have lied, but he would've smelled it. So she just nodded, fool that she was. Clary faced him and forced the words past her lips.

"Yes, Iggy. I trust you."

"Then get on the bed."

Gulp.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

There were a dozen reasons or more why Iggy should have left Clary's room the second he caught sight of the luscious, gorgeous female. Her body was aged to perfection in his eyes. No doubt, she thought herself old, but to him, she was ripe and perfect.

If proof was required, he could always show her the steel evidence of his arousal in his pants. His cock was so damn hard, it was about to burst through the thick denim he wore.

"Yes, Iggy. I trust you."

"Then get on the bed."

He couldn't believe this was happening. Thunder roared in his ears as he inhaled a deep breath, sucking in the sunflowers and wild honey scent of her. His muscles clenched and bunched at the sight of her lying there, vulnerable and soft, her blue eyes wide. He took in her prone form, his growl never ceasing. Clary sucked in a sharp breath and her robe parted slightly, revealing a tantalizing sliver of warm, soft flesh to his hungry gaze.

Mine, his Bear growled the word inside his mind's eye, but Iggy pushed back his beast.

He hung on to his control by a mere thread, and he did not need to encourage his Boar any further. Thoughts like that could make this already precarious situation truly volatile.

Keep it simple, Iggy.

That was his plan, for now, anyway. Simple and physical. Then maybe he could work on the rest. He had thirty years' worth of penance to do, and he was going to start right now. Shifting his gaze to the long blue sex toy she'd been holding, Iggy grinned wickedly.

"Part your robe, sweetheart. Let me see you," he growled.

Clary's lips parted, but she did what he said and was rewarded with a gruff 'good girl' from his tense lips. He didn't touch her. Not yet. It was all he could do to stop himself from jumping on her. Tension so thick he could slice it filled the room. Then he pushed the button on the wand and it amped up even higher.

"Part your legs. Yes, like that. Good girl," he said, repeating the term.

"Iggy?" The question mark at the end of his name seemed to hang in the air, but he wasn't about to let her wiggle her way out of this.

After all this time, Iggy finally had Clary where he wanted her. Flat on her back, almost naked, with her legs spread. The sheer nude panties she wore did nothing to shield her pretty sex from his eyes. Silver strands mixed with her otherwise dark curls, neatly trimmed and utterly mesmerizing. He wanted to tear those damn panties off with his teeth, but not yet. Especially not when he saw they were darker right where her nether lips sat.

He moved closer to her, feasting his eyes on her body before he raked one hand, palm down, from her neck to her sweet, hot pussy. Iggy cupped her over her panties, delighting in the groan he conjured from her lips. He took the wand and pressed the vibrating head over her mound lightly, teasing another response from the beautiful, powerful Sow.

Clary moaned, opening her legs wider as he rubbed the toy in tiny little circles, flirting with her clit, but not giving her too much at once. The scent of her arousal permeated the air, a sweet and hunger inducing aroma that had Iggy dying to take his cock in hand. But he held off, barely. This was not about him, it was about her and her pleasure.

“Do you know how fucking sexy you look, sweetheart? Your skin is glowing and those sweet soft sounds you’re making, they got me harder than steel,” he growled, moving his wrist in tighter faster circles, applying just a little more pressure.

“Iggy!” she moaned his name, and he knew she was close.

“Hell, sweetheart, I need to taste you. Can I? Can I put my mouth on you, Clary?” he asked, desperate for her assent before he did what his Bear was demanding he do.

Clary’s lust-filled gaze met his, and she nodded, the slight flare of her nostrils telling him without words that she wanted what he was offering. Good. because he didn’t think he could hold back anymore. Iggy crawled onto the bed, glad he’d already kicked off his shoes.

He settled himself between Clary’s delectable thighs, the toy still circling her nubbin. He moved it slightly, just enough to tug her panties to the side, then he thrust his tongue into her tight wet sheath and started fucking her slowly with it. His sweet, naughty Clary went wild beneath him. Her fingers dug into his hair, not pushing but pulling him closer, and Iggy loved it.

He put the wand back in place, teasing her with the vibrating head while he tongued her again and again until it was almost too much. He waited till she was close to the edge, then he replaced his tongue with his fingers, tossing the vibrator away, he closed his prehensile lips around her clit and then Iggy sucked. Clary came suddenly and spectacularly, creaming all over his face and hand. Fuck, he loved it. Sucked down every drop until he couldn’t hold off any longer.

He lifted his head, a question in his gaze, but Iggy didn’t have to wait long. Clary was already moving. She sat up, tearing at his shirt and pants, pulling him down, still half-dressed, and taking his cock in hand. Then she placed it at her entrance, crashing her mouth to his, silently begging him to fill her.

“Are you sure—”

“Yes. I’m sure. Please,” she whimpered, and he didn’t need more proof than that.

Iggy pushed himself inside her, gritting his teeth at how fucking good she felt. He grabbed her by the ass, pulling her up until her legs were wrapped around his waist. He might be over the hill for normals, but Iggy was a motherfucking Bear. He lifted her easily, fucking her on his cock, and loving every inch of her body as she welcomed him so readily.

It wasn’t long till she was coming again, and thank fuck, because Iggy was only seconds behind her. Releasing inside of Clary’s tight heat was like nothing he’d ever experienced. It was so fucking good, so much more than sex.

Once they could both breathe again, Iggy pulled out of her with a sigh, collapsing on the bed next to her. He kicked off what clothes remained on his person before pulling Clary into his arms. She’d gone quiet, and he could understand the notion. But he was not about to let that happen. There would be no more distance between them, he promised himself that from now on, Iggy was going to prove to Clary how he really felt about the woman.

“That was—”

“Shhh. Let’s just have tonight,” she whispered, climbing onto his body and pressing her mouth to his.

Iggy dove headfirst into that kiss. How could he resist? She was an excellent kisser. Her mouth seemed to fit his perfectly, and drinking from her lips was like partaking in ambrosia from the gods themselves. Who knew his sweet Clary was as earthy and sensual as she was practical and headstrong? So many facets to this incredible woman, and finally, he was experiencing the absolute perfection of having her in his arms.

“Fine. We don’t have to talk tonight,” he growled, kissing her and tugging on her lower lip. “But tomorrow we will have a conversation, understood?”

She nodded, grinning as her searching hands found his already hard again length. He growled, loving the feel of her

soft fingers wrapped around him as she started to stroke. Without prompting, Clary lifted herself, and placed him right where he wanted to be, at her slick entrance.

“Fuck,” he groaned as she slid over him, her slick sex gripping him tight.

Iggy held her by the back of the neck with one hand, kissing her nonstop as he used his other hand to hold on to her hips. He kept her tight on him, grinding her pussy all over his dick while he flexed his hips in measured thrusts.

Some folks thought sex stopped after forty. They were wrong. Dead wrong. In fact, this was the best damn sex of Iggy’s life, and that was saying something. A virgin, he was not. But he’d never had a woman like Clary, and he never would again.

Mine.

This time, when the Bear growled possessively in his mind’s eye, Iggy let the beast have it. He wouldn’t claim her. Not yet. Not until after they talked. But he would love on her all night long. Prove himself a hundred times over if he had to. Clary Aylin was his now. She might not know it yet. But that didn’t make it any less true.

Iggy stayed in her bed with her all night, making love to her while a snowstorm the likes of which Barvale hadn’t seen in years raged outside. Sliding into her was his new favorite addiction. Right next to licking her pretty pussy until she was wet and dripping for him.

“I never,” she moaned the tenth time they’d come together.

He chuckled deep in his chest, loving the way she looked, deliciously mussed and pink from exertion. The sun was already out, but neither of them had slept much, and Iggy was happily exhausted.

“Is it six already? I have to make coffee,” she said, trying to get out of bed.

“Easy, woman, you don’t have to do a damn thing yet,” he said, pulling her back to his side.

“Iggy,” she started carefully.

Clary tucked her hair behind her ears and sat up with the sheet covering her breasts. Iggy’s eyes narrowed.

“This doesn’t change anything. I mean, I’m still leaving.”

“How can you say that?” he demanded, sitting up and pulling the sheet down from her body.

He didn’t want her hiding herself from him. She belonged to him, dammit. Angry and out of sorts, Iggy stood up from the bed, pacing, naked as the day he was born. Sure, it helped that her eyes followed him, and he liked very much that Clary appreciated his physique. But what the fuck was she talking about?

“Iggy, I’ve been your housekeeper for thirty-three years and for the first time, I went on a date with someone yesterday. You were jealous, a little possessive perhaps. But you don’t really want me,” she said, and again, he was shocked to shit.

“Of course, I want you, woman! I had you a dozen times over the last seven hours alone!”

“That was just sex, Iggy. You don’t really want me and I can’t stay here knowing you’ll lose whatever interest you had in me to begin with,” she murmured, not meeting his eyes. “Look. Last night was wonderful, but it doesn’t change the fact you had thirty-three years to notice me and never did.”

Iggy laughed humorlessly then and faced her, hands on his hips. He was calculating the odds, and fuck, he understood how she might have come to that conclusion. She was wrong. Dead wrong. But what could he say that she would believe?

“Give me till Thanksgiving to change your mind, Clary. We just started this thing. Let’s see where it goes—”

“It will be too hard to leave if I stay,” she said.

Good. he wanted to shout. He didn’t want her to go, so what was the problem? Instead, he nodded, sitting next to her.

“Stay till Thanksgiving. I promise to give you as much or as little space as you want, okay? You are holding the reins, Clary. I will do anything you say.”

“So, you mean, if all I want is sex, you won’t have a problem with that? Because after so many years alone, I am not really interested in going back to a celibate lifestyle. But if you don’t think you can, I could always ask someone else—”

“The fuck you will,” he growled, rubbing a hand over his face. “Look, if you want to explore your sexual side, Clary, you can do that with me.”

“You want to have a sexual relationship with me until Thanksgiving?” she asked, and he was just as shocked as she was when he nodded.

No. That was not all he wanted. For fuck’s sake, he was in love with her. He wanted to mate her. To marry her. But he had to start somewhere.

Grrrrr.

CHAPTER
NINE

Warning bells were going off like mad inside Clary's head, but it was too late. Iggy had already agreed to her ridiculous demand that he engage in a sexual relationship with her, at least until Thanksgiving. That was less than two weeks away. How was she supposed to deal with leaving after that?

Didn't he know she would never let another touch her? She couldn't stand the thought of some other male's hands on her, and the Sow in her certainly couldn't. The last time she shifted, just a few days ago actually, her she-Bear had gone berserk, searching for the male. It was all Clary could do to keep the animal inside her from mooning about like a lovesick cub.

Clary's heart was liable to beat right out of her chest with the way she felt. Last night had been amazing. At first, she thought she'd die from embarrassment, but Iggy was the epitome of the confident male. He was so dominant and bold. He'd taken that magic wand vibrator from her bed and used it on her like he knew exactly where to touch her body.

And he did. Over the course of the night, Iggy had tested every bottle of lube, every toy on her body. While they were fun, she had to admit nothing compared to his lips, fingers, and that godly cock of his. Like all male Shifters, he was physically superb, even at his age. She'd seen plenty of naked men, after all, she was a Bear. But no one compared to Iggy as far as she was concerned. No one even came close.

But could Clary do this and not lose her heart? She was fooling herself if she thought she would survive an affair with him unscathed. But she only had this one life, and good for her or not, her body and heart were hers to give. She sighed as the warm spray of water from her shower relaxed her muscles, and Clary grinned. She'd used parts of her body she hadn't used in years last night.

“Any hot water left?” Iggy's voice interrupted her, and she faced him, shocked as he climbed into the shower stall with her.

Oh, it was plenty big enough, but Clary had never bathed with a man. She yelped as his enormous hands gathered a pump of body wash and pressed them onto her shoulders. Iggy grinned and turned her around to face the tiled wall, then he started washing her body.

“I couldn't stand being away from you, sweetheart,” he growled into her ear.

Clary was too stunned to speak. She stood like a doll, just letting him wash her until those marvelous fingers of his started kneading her flesh. Then she moaned and went limp, leaning back against him and loving the feel of his hardened length pressed against her ass.

“Some would say we're too old for this, Iggy.”

“Screw them. You're only as old as you feel, sweetheart. And you feel plenty young to me,” he grunted, sliding his cock between her legs.

He slid back and forth between her thighs, not penetrating, simply gliding between her pussy lips. Clary moaned, her body swelling and growing slick with need as he rubbed his palms over her nipples, cupping her breasts and testing their weight. His mouth closed over her neck, that delicious tongue of his finding her pulse. He licked and suck, then switched angles, filling her in one long, slow stroke.

After getting dirty again, Iggy cleaned them both up, carrying her to bed since she was too worn out to move. He went to make coffee and, after a little while, Clary got dressed.

The snow was done falling, but it left a blanket of white surrounding the Den and she grinned at the picture it made.

“You always liked the snow,” he murmured, handing her a mug of steaming coffee. “Two sugars, one cream,” he said, surprising her again.

She took a sip, closing her eyes at the first warm slide of liquid down her throat. It was fantastic. Then again, everything seemed fantastic this morning. Sex did that, she supposed, trying to remember her limited experiences of it in the past. Whatever. She didn’t want to draw comparisons, Clary just wanted to be in the present.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, I will stay until Thanksgiving. You’re right, I want to explore the physical aspect of a relationship before I leave the Den for good. I’m older now, and I don’t want to be alone. I understand you must be feeling a lot of things about me leaving, since I’ve become sort of a permanent fixture around here. But I want more from life than to be just a housekeeper. You and the boys were very generous over the years, and, with my shares of the company, I have more money than I could ever spend. But if you really are willing to help me explore my sexual nature before I look for someone who might want to give an old lady like me a chance, well I would appreciate it, because honestly, I trust you to take care of me, Iggy. You proved you could last night, and at my age. I appreciate that.”

“First, there are at least half a dozen things in that statement I’d like to argue with you about, but I don’t want you running. So, yes, Clary, that’s the short answer. Yes, I want you here, at least until Thanksgiving. But I have some rules of my own,” he said, eyes narrowed.

“Like what?”

“First, during this time that we are together, you will not go on any dates with any other men—”

“Oh, but I am supposed to see Pat for lunch Wednesday—”

“Cancel it. I mean it, Clary, my Boar won’t allow me to share you. When you are with me, you are with me, alone.”

Clary frowned, wondering at his attitude. It was sort of a known secret between the two of them that Iggy and his wife had enjoyed an open relationship. Well, maybe enjoyed was too strong a word. The point was, neither Iggy nor Gloria Devlin took their vows very seriously. As if he could tell what she was thinking, he raised a hand.

“I am not talking about my marriage with you right now. I will, someday soon. But right now, we are going over the rules. You’re mine alone till Thanksgiving, now say it, Clary.”

She thought it over for a minute. What was the harm? It wasn’t like she was going to jump in someone else’s bed after three decades of being celibate, for Pete’s sake.

“Okay, fine. I am yours until Thanksgiving.”

“Good girl. Next, we sleep together, even if you don’t want to have sex, you sleep by my side, woman, got it?”

“Alright,” she murmured, nodding her head. Big deal. She could sleep by his side.

“We eat meals together, too.”

“We always do that, Iggy—”

“Not always. I want you to eat with me. Not make the table and run away.”

“Fine, but we can’t let the boys know about this arrangement,” she said, deciding it was time she made some demands of her own.

“Why?”

“Because! This stays between us or no deal,” she insisted.

“Fine,” he growled, and it was obvious he wasn’t thrilled with her demand. But too bad.

Clary was not about to ruin her reputation or Iggy’s fragile relationship with his sons, just for the sake of two weeks in his bed. No sirree. She’d watched Marcus, Daniel, and Taylor grow from childhood to adulthood, and even though Nate

came into her life much later, she still loved him as much as the other three. But all four of Iggy's sons had precarious relationships with their father. It wasn't anyone's fault, but Clary could not allow their relationship or whatever it was they were doing to come between him and his boys.

That settled, Iggy held out a chair for her and waited till she sat down before bringing two plates piled high with pancakes and sausage.

"You made breakfast?" she asked, surprised. "I thought I smelled food, but figured I was hallucinating."

"Very funny. You just eat that and see if I can't whip up some damn fine buttermilk pancakes," he said, fake growling, as he handed her a tiny pitcher of warmed maple syrup.

They ate in companionable silence, and Clary sent word to Lacey that she'd be staying on at the Den through till Thanksgiving, claiming she and Iggy had a truce going till then.

Sounds good. But be careful, Clary. We are all here for you if you need us.

Lacey texted back, and Clary held the phone to her chest. A tiny spark of hope warmed inside her chest, and she closed her eyes, not wanting to stomp it out just yet. It was foolish and dangerous for her to believe something could come of this besides heartache, but Clary had to try, didn't she?

Please don't break my heart, Iggy Devlin. I'm not sure I will survive it.

CHAPTER
TEN

The next few days, Iggy and Clary spent almost every waking and sleeping moment together since they'd been snowed in after the storm. The Nanouk brothers had just finished plowing all around Lake Ursa, and they'd even stopped by to dig the Den out from under the two and a half feet of white stuff.

Iggy feigned relief and thanked the boys for coming over to see about them, when nothing could have been farther from the truth. He'd been keeping them snowed in on purpose. Using the bad weather as an excuse to keep Clary naked and writhing beneath him at every opportunity.

Oh, it had been a glorious couple of days. Sex was better now than it had ever been, something he was totally fucking thrilled to discover. Sure, he was older, but he felt better than he had in his prime. Maybe it was all the cardio, or maybe it was just her.

He grinned to himself, turning when the sound of the front door caught his ear. Clary smiled at him shyly. She was wearing a long velveteen skirt in a dark red or maroon color, with boots on her feet, a thick ivory sweater, and a puffer vest on top. She looked pretty as a picture, and he smiled appreciatively, raking his gaze over her from head to foot.

"You look beautiful, sweetheart," he growled and frowned as she looked around nervously.

"Iggy, hush!"

"What?"

“The boys could be anywhere, you can’t just be calling me sweetheart whenever you want,” she muttered, and his Boar reared up, growling.

“Those boys are men, sweetheart, and they know what goes on between two people mutually attracted to one another.”

“Iggy Devlin, you promised,” she reminded him, and he nodded, gritting his teeth.

“Fine. But where are you going?”

“It’s Tuesday. I have to pick up my weekly orders,” she said, cocking her head to the side.

“I’ll get my truck,” he said, turning around.

“You’re coming with me?”

“Hell, yes, woman.”

Incredulity shone on her pretty face, and Iggy just nodded once. Of course, he was going with her. She was headed to the produce market where John would doubtlessly ogle her like he always did. And of course, she would be off to *Meat on Main* next. That damned butcher had called her twice over the past couple of days, and it was all he could do not to lose his shit.

Clary was true to her word though, breaking her date with him, and keeping their conversations short. That wouldn’t stop Pat, though. The man was a damned womanizer, always had been. Made Iggy look like a saint!

“Well, that was easy,” Clary said, after John had begrudgingly handed the box of produce she’d ordered over to Iggy.

He’d had the feeling the man enjoyed walking Clary to her car every week, chatting her up. She waved goodbye, oblivious to the longing in the other male’s eyes, but Iggy wasn’t. He growled threateningly and was satisfied when John yelped and backed away. He might not be the Alpha anymore, but he could wipe the floor with any of these old codgers.

Best they not forget it, too. Grrrrr.

“Um, maybe I should go in alone,” Clary started.

But Iggy was already putting the truck into park and jogging around to open her door before she could finish her objection. No way was he sitting outside when she went into the enemy’s lair without him to protect her. Oh hell, he was being ridiculous. He knew it, but what could he say? His Bear was overprotective and a little more than possessive about the female.

The butcher shop was clean and chock full of prime, succulent meat. But that didn’t stop Iggy from glaring as if it was overrun with vermin. Clary was smiling wide when Patrick himself emerged from the back room, untying the bloodstained apron.

“Hello there, Miss Clary. Don’t you look beautiful today!”

“Thank you, Patrick. Good morning,” she said to him, then turned to Iggy. “Stop it,” Clary hissed from beside him, tugging on his sleeve.

Shit. He was growling and the normals in the store were starting to notice. Iggy covered it up with a fake cough, and Clary patted him on the back, smiling at the younger woman who’d been the closest to them.

“Your order is all ready. How about I bring it outside?” Patrick said, but Iggy stepped up to the counter.

“No need, Pat. Don’t want you to strain anything before the big game,” he told the wider man.

“Oh, I see,” growled Pat, eyes darting between the two of them.

Clary’s smile started to look strained, but she refocused and maintained her ever present calm and elegance. Damn. She was such a good woman. Good Sow. Would make an ideal mate. But Iggy needed her to trust his interest stemmed from some place good and real. Not just because of their physical chemistry, and certainly not out of any misplaced belief she was only good as his maid, for fuck’s sake.

He’d been stepping it up with the housework. Doing dishes and laundry, even cooking her breakfast on those mornings

when he wore her out and let her sleep in a little later. Hell, he loved those mornings best. Loved bringing her breakfast in bed and kissing her awake, then feeding her.

Clary was not afraid to eat in front of him. The woman was a she-Bear, after all. Powerful, majestic, and so damn beautiful it hurt to look at her sometimes. Oh, she'd worked her way into his heart, all right. The woman was in his blood. Just the thought of her leaving was fucking unbearable.

He'd wasted enough time farting around the truth. Tonight he was going to tell her, he decided. Pat returned with a huge box of meat, and the ex-Alpha took it from him easily, ignoring the hard glint in his eye as he watched Iggy and Clary exit his shop.

But this wasn't about any old rivalry anymore. This was about the rest of Iggy's life and his future happiness. Hers too. Try as she might to deny it, that woman loved him. He knew it as surely as he knew he loved her back. Iggy wanted Clary in his life from now until the end of his days.

Mine.

Getting back to the Den took no time at all. He brought the groceries inside, insisting she take a load off her feet. Naturally, she didn't listen. When he walked inside with the first box, she was already fixing them a couple of sandwiches. And when he finished putting the meat away inside the second refrigerator—*they had that one specifically calibrated to keep meat at its freshest*—Clary was already heating one of the containers she always seemed to have on hand of her special homemade soup on the stove.

“Is that your chicken corn chowder?” he asked, sniffing the air.

“Yep,” she replied, a knowing smile on her face.

“You know that's my favorite, right?” he asked, sidling up to her and pulling her by the hips against his always hard in her presence dick.

“Mm hmm,” she replied, resting her weight against him.

Her chest vibrated with her animal, the she-Bear purring for him as he rocked his hips into her backside with slow, measured movements.

“I’m hungry, Clary,” he growled against that sensitive spot just below her left ear.

“Lunch is almost ready,” she said breathlessly.

“Don’t want lunch, sweetheart.”

“Iggy,” she moaned his name, and he started pulling her skirt up her long, sumptuous legs.

“Fuck, Clary, you aren’t wearing any panties,” he growled, his hands connecting with her bare flesh beneath the soft garment.

The animal inside him roared, and his dick throbbed against his pants. He’d taken her out all afternoon on her errands without knowing his woman was bare-assed beneath her skirt. Fucking hell. Was that sexy! He dropped to his knees, moving her, so she was leaning on the counter as he licked her from her forbidden hole to her tight little pussy.

Iggy withdrew the tube of lubricant he’d picked up from the store in town, along with half a dozen others, while she’d been getting hair products from the salon next door. Oh, he liked the strawberry one just fine, but the unflavored variety was his favorite. Nothing could compare to Clary’s sunflower and wild honey scent. And he wanted it all over him. Right now.

She moaned as he traced her lips with his gelled up fingertips, creating a nice, slippery path for his cock as he worked her clit with his lips and tongue. Then he stood, lifting her onto the counter and slamming his mouth to hers while unleashing his cock and pushing into her with unerring accuracy.

Iggy swallowed her moan as he fucked her hard and fast on the counter, giving her everything he had until she exploded around him, her pussy squeezing him tight as he moved double time before spilling himself with a mighty roar.

Clary was panting with exertion as he lovingly cleaned the evidence of what they'd just done from her thighs. Kissing and petting as he went, coveting her with every inch of himself. Gods, he loved this woman.

He straightened her clothes, giving her ass a playful swat and shook his head, muttering something about her being naked outside all damned day. Clary giggled like a schoolgirl at that, her cheeks blushing prettily when he kissed her again.

“You have any idea how pretty you are, woman?”

“Oh stop, I know better than that, Iggy Devlin.”

“I'm serious, Clary,” he said, and suddenly he sounded as serious as he felt. “You're the prettiest damn woman I've ever seen. Thought so from the first time I found you sitting at that table shivering in the dark,” he whispered, cupping her face.

Clary's breath hitched, and she moved back, forcing him to release her. She was building walls again, and fuck, but that cut him like a knife right in his chest. He watched her go to the stove, ladling soup into bowls before bringing them to the table. Iggy followed behind with the platter of sandwiches and sat next to her, waiting for her to speak.

“I always wondered why Gloria asked me over here that day just to leave me standing outside in the rain. I waited for an hour, and when she finally came out, she was dressed to leave. She laughed at me, pointed out that I was soaked to the bone, and told me to go inside the kitchen to wait for you. I did, obeying her was easy.”

“Why Clary? Why didn't you tell her to go to hell?” he wondered aloud.

“She was my Alpha fem,” Clary replied, as if that said it all.

“Gloria was using you as bait for me,” he growled, angry at the memory and the manipulations of his not so dearly departed wife. “She thought if she left me something to play with, I wouldn't mind the fact she was fucking half the males in our Clan.”

Clary gasped at Iggy's blunt explanation, and she dropped her eyes to her bowl. A tear ran down her cheek and he wished Gloria was alive today to pay for putting that hurt on Clary's face, but she was long dead, and her sins buried with her. Or so he'd thought.

"I didn't know you knew," she murmured, and Iggy's heart stopped.

"What? What the hell are you talking about, Clary?"

"Gloria. She explained it all to me. I was to provide you with *entertainment* so that she could live her life. She said you had agreed to an open marriage, but your Bear was too old-fashioned to let your human side enjoy it. She thought I would be perfect for your Bear because I was innocent and practically untried. You see, my father was already trying to mate me to another male not of my choosing, and I was horrified by the prospect. But Gloria rescued me from that fate. All she said I had to do was let you have me."

"Let me have you? For fuck's sake. You were barely twenty and newly widowed, what the hell was she thinking?"

"It doesn't matter, don't you see? You didn't want me then. You really don't want me now, it's just proximity and the thought of me leaving, Iggy, I-I should go now while there's still a chance we both get out of this thing unscathed. Excuse me," she muttered, and ran to her bedroom.

Iggy couldn't move. He sat there dumbfounded and vibrating with fury. Clary had known the whole damn time she was supposed to be this sacrifice to his lusty needs, brought to him by his own wife. He did not know what was more fucked up, that Gloria did what she did, or that he'd been too bent on protecting Clary, he couldn't see she'd known the truth the whole time.

His skin itched, and his fingertips burned. His Bear was vibrating with the need to shift. Iggy left his plates where they were and raced outside, kicking his shoes off just in time for his Boar to burst out of his skin. He loosed a mighty roar, pawing the ground as he released his anger. His beast glanced

back once and saw Clary watching him from her window, hands covering her mouth as she sobbed her heartache.

Fuck!

By the time he got home, she was gone. He knew it the second he entered the Den. There was a note on the kitchen table and on it were two words. The last two words he deserved from her. Iggy tossed his head back and cried out at the pain lancing his chest.

I'm sorry.

Clary was sorry. Iggy was broken. And Thanksgiving was five days away.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

“**G**ood morning, Clary.”

Taylor smiled as he walked into the Cub’s Den the Tuesday before Thanksgiving with his cubs in tow. He and his brothers, along with their wives, have been trying to reach their former housekeeper and surrogate mother for days to no avail.

This was the only thing he could think of, and luckily, it worked. Clary would never shirk a promise, and this whole Cub’s Den was her brain baby. Offering childcare to Clan mates during busy times like the holidays was above and beyond, and as usual, it was exactly what the Clan needed.

“Morning. Hello there,” she cooed to the youngest still clutching her Daddy’s neck.

“Mornin’, Nana Clary!” the twins, Megan and Tammy, said, before running to their favorite art table to start coloring.

“Come on, Kayla, let Daddy go now,” Clary said, taking the toddler from her father.

“Thanks, Clary,” he said.

Taylor watched Clary set Kayla down in a playpen with another cub her age. The two almost toddlers started playing and giggling happily in no time. There were four other members of the Clan present, all volunteer staff, to help watch the young cubs as their parents ran errands before the big holiday. It was Clary’s idea, and as always, he thought it was a damn good one.

“Krissy will be here in a few hours for them. You are still coming to Thanksgiving dinner, right?” he asked.

“Oh um, well, I figured we would all see each other at the Turkey Bowl. But don’t worry, the girls have it covered this year,” she said with false brightness.

“Dad isn’t doing great, you know,” Taylor said, and by the flare of her eyes, he knew he’d hit the nail on the head.

“Oh,” she replied quietly. “Is he sick? Perhaps you should call Luisa to take a look—”

“I don’t think Luisa can fix what’s wrong with him, Clary. Why’d you leave?”

“It’s complicated, Taylor.”

He placed a hand on the small of her back, moving them over to the small kitchen nook inside the cabin where Clary had set up the Cub’s Den. Taylor turned on the coffee machine, and the faucet, hoping to drown out their conversation from prying ears. What he had to say was for Clary alone.

“I get complicated. Look at me and Dimples. But Clary, you’ve loved that old fool for years, and I know he cares about you. Head over heels, Clary. Now, what happened, hmm? Come on. You’ve been more like a mom to me than she ever was, you can confide in me. I just hate to see the two of you hurting,” he whispered.

“You knew I was in love with your father?” she whispered, eyes wide.

“Sure, I did. And he’s been in love with you for ages, or are you blind? The way he watches out for you and looks at you when he thinks no one can see. I am dead serious, Clary. He’s loved you for years.”

“Oh gods, Taylor. It’s complicated,” she said.

“You said that already. Look, we know about Mom,” he told her bluntly. “Me and the boys. We know what she did and what she tried to do. She was wrong. Using you and hurting Dad that way. It was wrong.”

“How do you know?” Clary asked, shock written all over her as she clutched the place right over her heart.

“I’m the Clan Keeper. It’s my job to know, but if you must know, I found records, bills, and Mom’s diary, not to mention entries from our former Keeper. I told my brothers as soon as I found out, and we agreed to give you and Dad space to work this out, but he’s miserable and trying his best to drown himself in whiskey, and you have been avoiding all of us.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause trouble. After the day we met, your Dad seemed to draw a line, and he placed me on one side of it and himself on the other. You boys needed looking after and I tried my best to fill that role. Even if I wasn’t what he wanted, I could do that for him. I could take care of you boys, and keep his house, and not worry about my parents arranging another mating for me that I didn’t want,” she whispered.

“So, you admit you loved him then?”

“Yes, I loved him then. The first time I saw him, I loved him.”

“Then why didn’t you say so,” another voice chimed in.

Taylor stepped aside, and in walked Iggy, larger than life, chest heaving with emotion. Clary narrowed her eyes at Taylor and he ducked his head like he was a kid again.

“Sorry, Clary. But I am too old to live through my parents breaking up. Now, you two get out of here. I am covering for you until the next shift comes in.”

“What? No, I have to—”

“No more running, Clary,” Iggy growled, and bent down, tossing her over his shoulder.

The sounds of applause erupted from everyone as he carried her outside and placed her in his truck. Not that she went meekly, Clary was yelling something awful about how he couldn’t just walk in there and take her home like some barbarian. But he could and he would. Starting the car, he drove her back to the Den, where, as far as he was concerned, she had no business ever leaving.

“Are you going to walk inside on your own steam, or do I need to carry you ass over teakettle again?” Iggy threatened, hoping he would get the chance to have her body on his one more time.

“I’ll walk, you, you ogre!”

Clary got out of the car, slammed the door, and went inside, sweet ass sashaying in the jeans she had on. Fuck, he loved her in blue jeans. There was nothing like a mature woman filling out a pair of well-worn jeans to make a man drool. He followed behind her, getting every second he could of that view.

Before he even had the door closed, she rounded on him. Her blue eyes sparked fire and her finger pointed at him. Clary let loose with a slew of curse words he’d never heard from her pretty pink lips. Shocked and delighted, Iggy grinned, stalking towards her until she bumped into the far wall.

“You overbearing, egotistical, blind old fool! Thirty-three years in this house and you never told me how you felt? Twenty since Gloria passed, and you still didn’t say anything. How could you leave me like that? All alone, pining for you, you fool! I’ve been so alone—” she cried out and he crashed his mouth to hers.

“You’re right about everything. I’ve been a blind old fool. But, gods help me, I love you, Clary. Do you hear me? I’ve always loved you. It’s always been you, mate.”

Then he kissed her again and again until they were both tearing clothes off each other, not even making it to the couch before they fell on the rug in a tangle of arms and legs and mutual need. This time, when they came together, Iggy didn’t hold back. He bit her in that place he’d been marking with his lips for days, under her left ear, nice and high so everyone could see this female was taken.

Clary was his. His fated mate. And he finally had her right where he wanted her.

Mine.

EPILOGUE

“It’s another interception from our favorite Grandpa and Quarterback, Iggy Devlin. That’s too bad!” Leya announced from her place at the officials’ table.

Clary glared at her new daughter-in-law, the ring on her finger glittered in the sunshine as she hollered and clapped for her husband’s team. Pat McKenney was grinning like a lunatic, having just thrown a touchdown that brought his team in the lead. After she’d told him about her and Iggy, he’d been mildly amused, and not at all angry like she expected. But she understood now the old Bear had been saving it up for game day.

“Give him hell, Iggy!” she screamed, and her mate caught her eye, a smile teasing his lips.

Uh oh. She knew what that meant. Her mate was about to throw down and get serious now. She only hoped he didn’t do himself any permanent injury, Clary had plans for later on and she didn’t mean Thanksgiving dinner, which was warming nicely back at the Den.

One of the bakers would be dropping off the six twenty-five pound turkeys she’d seasoned and sent to the Bear Claw Bakery to roast in their old-fashioned brick ovens, like most of the town did, in the next hour or so.

What could she say? Those boys ate a lot. Not to mention her daughters-in-law had already sent most of the side dishes and desserts, following her recipes under the strict rule they were not to share them with their mates. It was amazing she

and Iggy were able to get married that morning, but she supposed it helped when you were getting hitched to the former Alpha. With all his connections, he was able to rouse a judge and get the deed done before eight that morning. Neither of them wanted to wait another minute before they could officially live their lives together.

“TOUCHDOWN by Marcus Devlin, your Alpha, and my man! WOOT WOOT! Oh, and great throw by his dad, Iggy!” Leya announced, and the crowd went wild. After Nate sent the ol’ pigskin through the makeshift goal posts, winning the game for her boys, they came running off the field to the sounds of thunderous applause.

“Come here, mate,” Iggy growled, hugging Clary to him and spinning her around before kissing her right on the mouth in front of everyone.

“Iggy! Everyone will see,” she whispered, but her mate didn’t seem to mind one bit.

“So? Let them look, Clary. These young people could use a lesson or two on what it takes to make love work,” he said, kissing her again to another, even louder round of applause than his touchdown earned him.

“I love you, Clary Devlin.”

“I love you too, Iggy.”

“Nana Clary, Gwampa, uppy!” little Mia said, toddling up to her grandparents. Her face was covered in face paint and a chocolate turkey lollypop was clutched tight in her chubby little hands.

“Yes, my princess,” Iggy said, lifting the sweet baby. “Why you kissin’ my Nana, Gwampa?”

Iggy grinned, looking from Mia’s chocolate smeared face to Clary’s blushing one.

“Because, princess, not kissing her would be unbearable!” he growled, giving their granddaughter smacking kisses on her cheeks until she giggled and squirmed to get away.

He tugged on Clary once more, but she was laughing so hard she was crying and shaking her head.

“No way! You have chocolate and face paint in your beard, Iggy!”

“Come on and kiss me already, woman. Gods know I’ve waited long enough.”

They both had. And he was right. Waiting another minute would be unbearable.

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EXCERPT FROM PURRFECTLY MATED



How the fuck did I wind up here?

It was all Elissa could do not to slam her face down on the table as she pondered that question for the umpteenth time since leaving her cozy Hoboken apartment to go on this so called date.

“So, babe,” the over-stuffed, heavily-cologned, and downright fugly man said.

Her date of the evening looked like something out of a bad sitcom as he tried to lean over the stained tablecloth of the rundown hotel buffet room, he’d driven two hours to get to. Wagging his caterpillar-like eyebrows, he gave her the once over and Elissa’s skin crawled.

Oh, hell no.

“I got a room upstairs, you know, for *after*,” he told her, nodding his head, and biting his lower lip in a manner she assumed he thought was provocative.

At best, it was nauseating.

FML.

How was this guy Elissa’s date for the evening? What had she done to deserve this?

Little Gianni. Yup, that was how he’d introduced himself. And here she was. On a blind date with a guy who had the word ‘little’ in front of his name.

Well, what did she expect? Roses and champagne? In this economy? She didn't know where Cinder-fucking-ella got her prince, but it sure as fuck wasn't in Jersey.

Elissa could only blame herself for agreeing to go on this blind date. Initially, the whole Little Gianni fiasco had been intended for her roommate.

Wait a second. Scratch that thought.

It was all Gretchen's fault. That ungrateful cow!

She tried to play it off like she was some sweet little homegrown maiden. Oh, just wait till Elissa got home. Gretchen was never going to hear the end of it.

She owed Elissa. Big time. Like a whole month of washing the dishes big time. The rat trap they shared in her hometown of Hoboken was all the two women could afford, and for the most part, they got along just fine.

In fact, they'd grown to be close friends over the three years they'd lived together. It was the only reason she'd ever agreed to this date from Hell.

Elissa sighed and looked over at Little Gianni. Maybe he wasn't all that bad?

“BEEEELLLLLLLLCHHH! ’Scuse me, doll. Better out, am I right?”

Gianni winked and Elissa wished for a black hole to open up and swallow her up right through the floor.

OMFG.

The man just burped out loud like he was in a frat boy belting contest, only those days passed him up about thirty years ago.

For fuck's sake. Gretchen, you so owe me.

Elissa cursed her roommate and tried not to groan. But Little Gianni wasn't quite done. The grown ass man lifted his leg and let one rip.

Right. Fucking. There.

Elissa was going to die before the end of the night.

Literally.

This is what you get when you do a friend a favor without asking for details! Idiota!

The voice of her Italian grandmother sounded in her brain. She tried to ignore it, willing herself not to wince at the man while he sucked air, and who knows what else, noisily through his coffee-stained teeth.

Ew. So gross.

That was the perfect word to describe it. The only word, in fact. The entire date was just so fucking gross. She still couldn't believe her sweet little roommate from Iowa, *Gretchen Kaepernick*, she of the wispy hair and baby blues, had set her up with this guy!

What the actual fuck was up with that?

Little Gianni was a slob. Actually, he looked just like her Uncle Nico, and that was not a good thing. Seriously, not good at all.

He wore his hair slicked back in a too tight ponytail that emphasized his rapidly receding hairline. As if that wasn't enough to put her off, he was sporting an enormous paunch. Now, being a curvy girl, Elissa appreciated food and was in no way against men showing the same appreciation.

She liked bigger men. Always had. But bigger did not mean you had to be sloppy. Little Gianni's stomach was literally hanging out from under a tight tan golf shirt that had definitely seen better days.

The man didn't even look like he had ever played a sport of any kind. With it, he wore brown polyester pants that were three inches above his ankles and unbuttoned at the waist.

He didn't look like he tried at all for this date. What kind of guy did that? His shirt collar was bent and wrinkled, and all three buttons were open to his chest, revealing a mat of oily, dark hair and pimples.

Somehow, he'd managed to tuck the back of the shirt in, but the front simply would not hold in that stomach. What worried her more were the tight brown pants.

As he sat back and stretched, she wondered if she should take cover. They looked like they were one bite from exploding off his body. Elissa shuddered at the image.

Please God, if You have an ounce of mercy, don't let that happen, she prayed.

"Hang on, doll, I gotta take this," he said, and turned to answer his cell phone.

It was ringing to the tune of '70s disco music she hadn't heard since the last family reunion. Her eyes kept going to the huge stain on the front of his shirt. It was a little game she liked to call *what the hell is that*.

Coffee, she guessed.

"Up your ass, Bruno. I gotta have it by Monday," he cursed into the receiver.

Elissa winced at the spectacle he was making of them both. There were only a handful of people there, but still.

Deep breaths.

Ew. Maybe not.

She coughed as the strong body spray, that he'd obviously used a ton of in lieu of a shower, bad move in her opinion, invaded her lungs.

Oh, this was so bad.

Elissa was, by no means, a snob. But this guy looked like he'd stepped out of a bad 1980s mafia spoof film. What's worse, he kept smacking his lips together as he hung up the phone and looked her over from head to chest.

Thank fuck for the table, she thought, wishing she could hide her bosoms from his view.

"Ssssss," he hissed, like it was sexy or something.

She just grimaced. Elissa might be able to forgive a lot of quirks, but she hated mouth noises. Really hated them. It was a super pet peeve of hers. Never mind his totally inappropriate and unwelcomed leer.

She started counting the minutes, willing the date to be over already. Plenty of people would tell her she shouldn't be so choosy, but really? She was not this desperate.

Not yet anyway.

So, she was curvy and a little mouthy too. But was it wrong to want a man with good table manners? Even if men were thin on the ground for someone like her.

As a chef, she'd worked in a lot of restaurants and even as a personal cook for professional couples. She'd seen her fair share of unhappy couples and downright uncomfortable marriages. But as far as she was concerned, all relationships went downhill when good table manners were dismissed.

Good manners were merely a sign that a person was thoughtful and respectful. At least, that was what Nonna had told her. Gianni here had clearly missed that lesson as a child. Elissa had to work not to groan in disgust as he slurped a raw clam down his gullet.

Shudder.

Was there no end to his feeding? That's what it reminded her of. Feeding time at the zoo.

OMG. That was rude, she scolded herself. But it wasn't like she said it out loud.

All she wanted to do was go home. At least she was comfortable. *She'd* worn her softest pair of black leggings for this disaster date, paired with one of her favorite tunics on top.

It was dark green with tiny black buttons down the front and showed just the right amount of cleavage. She'd gone for neat and tidy as opposed to downright sexy.

Good call, in her opinion. Elissa looked perfectly fine for a nice *getting to know you* dinner, which is what she thought she

was getting when her roommate asked her to step in for her on a blind date that one of her best client's had set up for her.

Elissa shuddered now, thinking how good old Gianni here would've reacted to the red dress and heels she'd contemplated before checking the weather report.

Gulp.

The lewd man was already salivating, and she was so not having it. Fending off his unwanted advances was not how she wanted to finish the night.

Ew again.

Elissa shivered, slightly chilled despite the fact they were indoors. It was a cold, gloomy evening, and the forecast called for even more rain later that night. Not at all unusual for this time of year in the Garden State.

November was always chilly in the evenings, rainy too. Elissa tended to run warm, but she was glad she'd brought a jacket with her. Especially since her date refused to turn the heat on in the car.

When she'd asked, he'd looked offended and told her it wasted gas.

Um. Okay.

She checked her phone. It was only seven o'clock, but the two hour drive was still ahead of them. Maybe they could make it home before ten if they left soon.

Ugh. Did he just blow his nose?

"Allergies, doll. Say, you gonna eat that?" he asked before scooping a fry from her dish and swallowing it down.

Elissa was gonna kill her roomie. Gretchen was a hair and nail stylist. A lot of her clients were elderly, and they just loved her. They were always offering to set her up on blind dates with their nephews and grandsons.

Mostly, the sweet old ladies were kind. They swore they could find her curvy roommate the right man, assuming she was single because she was new to town. Well, when Elissa

got home tonight, she was going to tell Gretchen she needed to fire the old lady who set this date up from being her client.

Like *ASAP*.

No one who liked Gretchen would've sent her out with this guy. Gianni reached over and touched her hand and Elissa pulled back, reaching for the napkin.

Gross.

"I sure hope you ain't a cold one, doll," he said, shaking his head.

"What?"

"Ain't gonna matter. I know just what you need, doll."

She was still wiping the greasy residue he'd transferred to her skin from the food he ate sans utensils. This was too much. Elissa was beyond uncomfortable with all the leering and bad attempts at innuendo.

Plus, she was starving. One look at the dump he'd taken her to, and she knew she could never eat there. The chef in her wouldn't allow it.

To think they drove two hours for this! She'd practically frozen to death in his maroon Cadillac, listening to a CD of the Rat Pack, while Gianni crooned loudly, and off key, to the music.

Normally, she was a fan of the famous group of legendary singers. Having grown up in Hoboken, she couldn't not be a Sinatra fan. Though, to be honest, Dean Martin had always been her favorite.

Still, Elissa was a firm believer that there were just some people you did not try to imitate. Especially not if you were Little Gianni. While he was belting his heart out, he'd been trying to get his right hand on her thigh. She'd asked him politely to stop.

Twice.

Then she'd been forced to try something a little more drastic. Like spilling her hot tea on the offending hand the

third time he'd tried it. Finally, he'd removed his hand from her leg. Not making a fourth attempt, which she was grateful for.

Elissa should've taken that behavior as a sign and gotten out of the car. But no. She'd wanted to do Gretchen a solid. So, against her better judgement, she gave the creep another chance.

Idiota, her grandmother's voice echoed in her brain again.

The old woman had loved her. Elissa knew that without a doubt. She'd raised her after her own parents had passed on in a tragic automobile accident when Elissa was just twelve.

Her grandmother was a no-nonsense kind of lady who dished out priceless wisdom with brutally honest insights. It was the same way she dished out huge bowls of pasta with her amazing meatballs and homemade sauce. Not to mention a side order of back-breaking hugs that Elissa still missed.

Nonna cooked like that all the time. She made a huge pot of sauce every weekend, and she was happy to serve it to Elissa and her teammates and friends, especially after games and tournaments.

Soccer had been her sport of choice, and cooking had soon become her favorite hobby. Her grandmother had encouraged her in both pursuits. Guiding her in one and cheering her on in the other. Elissa still missed her terribly.

"Hey babe, ain't you gonna eat nothin'?" You know they charge twenty dollars just to sit down," Little Gianni interrupted her train of thought.

Elissa was forced to turn her mind back to the present, which unfortunately included watching, *and hearing*, him as he sucked on his teeth and stuffed another breaded shrimp down his throat.

"I'm fine," she answered with a polite smile plastered on her face.

Just get home, Lissa. Just get him to take you home.

Elissa closed her eyes when he looked back down at his dish. Thank God for small favors, she mused. At least he was more interested in eating at the moment.

He'd taken her to the rattiest looking hotel and casino she'd ever seen in her life. And the buffet room?

Ew.

Seriously, the place had to be violating at least a dozen health codes. When Gianni had said Atlantic City, she'd thought at least the atmosphere would be exciting. But they were so far from the real glitz and entertainment, they might as well be anywhere else.

She sighed, looking at the plate she'd made for herself. Elissa couldn't even fake an interest in the food. As a chef, it was hard enough to dine out.

She was always judging the food, the service, the ingredients. How could she not? It was her business. And that was when the food was good!

This was not good. Not at all.

She'd been to hospitals that served better food. Old yellow lights buzzed and blinked around the buffet, giving it an abandoned kind of feel. The menu was made up of mostly frozen then fried or baked cuisine.

Reheated actually. It was like a giant TV dinner buffet where every item was previously frozen when already cooked and warmed up in an oven.

It was the kind of food sold cheap at restaurant supply stores in bulk. Yeah, this was much worse than hospital food, in her opinion.

There was a worn carpet on the floor, a handful of scattered tables in the dining room, elevator music on in the background, and the entire place smelled like canned soup.

Not to mention not one of the five people there besides them was under sixty years old.

"Gianni," she said, leaning forward so as not to hurt his feelings.

“I thought you mentioned something about seeing a show tonight. Is it here?”

Please don't be here.

If he was taking her somewhere else, she could beg off and hire a cab to take her home. There was no way she was sitting through anything else with this man. Not now. Not ever.

“Ah, I see, babe, you want some entertainment first, I get it,” he snickered loudly, and she blanched.

Whatever he thought was going to happen wasn't. She needed to disabuse him of the notion, and fast.

“Alright, alright. Lemme finish this, babe. Then we'll go up to the room I got for us,” he said.

Before she could make sense of the ludicrous statement, he slurped another fried shrimp, don't ask how. Then he grabbed her arm and yanked her from the seat before she could even react.

Elissa tugged on his hold, but the man was immovable. Tossing a five-dollar bill on the table, Little Gianni snatched a toothpick from the hostess stand before dragging her outside.

Great, he was a cheap tipper, too.

All she wanted was to go home. Figuring the best way to do that would probably be to get him to the car, she let him lead the way.

Once inside, she would ask him to drive back to Hoboken so she could wring Gretchen's neck. Fuming, she pulled her arm out of his hand and walked behind him.

The rain was really pouring, and the cheap bastard had refused valet. Elissa ducked her head so she wouldn't get so wet. Of course, the jacket she'd brought was light and had no hood.

Gianni had an umbrella, but he didn't offer to hold it for her, and honestly, she did not relish the idea of getting any closer to him than necessary.

Seriously, not happening.

Now all she had to do was break the news. She had no intention of watching a show or returning to the hotel with him.

What could go wrong?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Thank you and happy reading!

del mare alla stella,

C.D. Gorri

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