

MOON  
BURROW  
BEARS

BASH

F E L F E R N

# BASH

MOON BURROW BEARS

BOOK FOUR

FEL FERN

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# BLURB

**Deliverance is far from Colin's reach...until Bash crashes into his life.**

Colin Sears' life is a walking nightmare. Finally freed from the crutches of a controlling monster, Colin only wants to hide from the rest of the world. Trouble comes knocking on his door in the form of a ferocious yet unexpectedly kind biker bear. Taking one day at a time without completely falling apart is already a tall order for Colin. While Bash proves to be a wonderful distraction, Colin doubts Bash would want a damaged dragon like him for a mate.

Betrayal is not a word Bash Saunders takes lightly. Double-crossed by his former clan, Bash forges a new life with the Moon Burrow Bears. He's put down roots, loves his job but there's still something missing. Bash had his eye on Colin from the first moment the broken omega dragon arrived in town. Colin is his destiny, Bash knows it in his bones. When a new evil threatens their future, Bash must journey to his old hometown and finally put old ghosts to rest.

*Bash is an m/m shifter romance and the fourth book in the Moon Burrow Bears series. It contains mpreg, plenty of action, a reserved dragon and an obnoxious biker bear who wears his heart on his sleeve.*

## CHAPTER I

# COLIN

The incessant ticking from my wall clock was slowly going to drive me mad. I turned on my left side, but it didn't help. I returned to lying on my back and settled for staring at the cedar beams of my cabin.

No matter what I did, sleep refused to come. I touched the fading mate mark on the left side of my neck. Old pain and hatred made me grit my teeth.

A month ago, the Grizzly Reapers MC rescued me from my tormentor and captor, Dario. Dario, who I had been forced to call my mate.

We were in the midst of a war—Dario and his rogue wolves versus the bears. Instead of killing me, the bears showed me mercy.

I still couldn't figure out why Venom, the lead alpha of the Grizzly Reapers, would allow a monster like me to live, someone who was beyond redemption.

My adopted father, Pierre, the lead alpha of a small werewolf pack, sold me to Dario to pay off pack debts.

The betrayal still stung. Forgiveness seemed like a foreign concept to me.

As an omega dragon shifter, I was considered an oddity in a world where humans lived alongside shifters, vampires and the fae.

According to what I could find on the internet, dragon shifters had almost completely died out.



Several supernatural groups had banded together in the past to eliminate the dragon clans, leaving only a staggering few left.

I never knew my actual parents. According to Pierre, he simply found me on his doorstep one morning. The man I used to call my father was now dead to me.

Pierre had drugged me and I woke up wearing Dario's repulsive mate mark on my neck. Before Dario, I had never taken a life.

Dario turned me into his weapon and twisted me until I barely recognized myself.

In my dreams, the terrible screams and abhorrent smell of burning flesh constantly haunted me. The nightmares continued to play on repeat.

When they began affecting me during my waking hours, I started dreading going to bed each night.

After what felt like an eternity, my phone alarm beeped. Looking to my left, I looked out the midnight blue curtains.

The seemingly endless dark night had finally made way for sunset.

Flinging the sheets aside from my sweaty body, I got out of bed, did my morning stretches. The muscles in my back and shoulders still felt tense.

I walked to the window, fingered the purple curtains I made from an old tablecloth the bears no longer wanted.

Pride and a sense of accomplishment filled me.

It was such a simple thing, but I finally created something. Destruction was easy and addictive. Creating something out of nothing, that was pure magic.

I spent way too many nights restlessly tossing and turning in bed and thinking about the past I could not change.

I focused instead on my blessings like these curtains I made, the cabin and the small patch of land it came with.

The cabin reminded me of an abandoned shack when I first spotted it. It had rotting floorboards and a hole in the roof.

Back then, I didn't care about the details. I was just happy the bears didn't throw me into the streets, expecting me to survive somehow.

Being reared by werewolves, I was used to living alongside a shifter group. While I felt like an outsider most of the time, the other wolves comforted me.

I had never been truly on my own until now.

I would have settled for the shack, for a place to call my own. Hiding from the rest of the world sounded like a luxury, but an infuriating biker bear insisted on fixing the cabin up.

Bash roped in his brother, Bane, and four other biker bears. They renovated the cabin in seven days, just in time for the incoming storm season.

They worked non-stop until the cabin resembled a home with water and electricity. Bash even replaced all the floors and fixed the roof.

Most of the time, my temperature ran cold. There was an old saying dragons were cold-blooded creatures, and it was accurate enough.

Thinking of Bash warmed my insides and made my heart beat a little faster, although I didn't understand why.

After the disaster that was Dario, tangling with another alpha wasn't on my itinerary.

I pictured the big, muscled, dark-haired and bearded biker bear. His chocolate brown eyes would instantly warm up when he saw me.

Bash's huge smile felt genuine, sexy enough to melt my bones.

Bash looked at me like I was pure sunlight, not the miserable and broken creature I really was.

I huffed, embarrassed by the fact Bash occupied most of my thoughts nearly every day.

One would have thought I would have learned my lesson after being used by one alpha—except Bash and Dario were like night and day.

If I only met Bash sooner—thoughts like that often crossed my mind.

Coffee was what I needed, I decided. I took a quick shower, then put on a comfy shirt and jogging pants before heading to the kitchen.

My kitchen was small but serviceable. Adam, a new friend of mine, recently got me a second-hand oven, which I appreciated.

Baking had been a pleasure Dario had denied me when we were together.

While I waited for my coffee to brew, my sensitive ears picked up the sound of breaking branches outside. A curse followed it.

I forced my tense shoulders to relax. I peered out the kitchen windows and right on cue, Bash appeared, carrying a small woven basket.

I wondered what baked goodies he got me today. Bash walked to my front door, looking left and right, as if he was worried someone would catch sight of him.

Venom left explicit instructions to his bears that I wasn't to be disturbed. I only welcomed a small group of people into my domain.

That list included Adam and his alpha mate, Arrow, and Venom himself.

Bash was a recent addition to that list.

I left the kitchen and stopped right in front of the front door. Unsure why I suddenly felt so nervous, I peered out the peephole.

Bash stood there, chewing on an apple muffin. A sign he was anxious as I was.

Sweat coated the back of my shirt. I waited, hoping this time Bash would finally have the courage to knock on my door.

Then that would be my cue to invite him in for some coffee. Maybe we could eat some muffins he baked, perhaps indulge

in some idle chatter.

I could hear his heavy breathing from where I stood and wished I knew what he was thinking about.

Bash probably had doubts about me, about us. That would explain why he couldn't take the next step, why he would eventually turn around and leave after dropping off his gifts.

Then again, I could simply just open the door and tell him to come inside. Simple enough, except an unknown force kept me glued to where I was.

Whenever Bash was close by, I could sense my inner dragon opening one curious eye at him.

It was strange, because I could hardly feel my dragon these days.

Dario used our unnatural mate bond to force the dragon to surface, to make me do several unsavory tasks I didn't want to.

As a result, my dragon had withdrawn deep inside me. I still could call on the beast whenever I needed him, but we were no longer allies.

I suspected my dragon felt betrayed by me. It was angry at me for not putting up more of a fight against Dario.

Nothing I could do about that now, or the rakishly handsome bear alpha standing outside my door.

Still looking through the peephole, I watched Bash clenched his fists by his sides. Bash raised his hand to the door, then hesitated.

This was it. The moment everything would change.

Then he turned around and started walking away. Disappointment weighed heavily on me.

Bash sometimes reminded of me an enormous teddy bear I wanted to cuddle, but I had seen him in action before.

After all, Bash once unloaded an entire clip of silver bullets at me. Of course, back then, Bash was just trying to save Adam, who Dario ordered me to kidnap.

The bears in the Grizzly Reapers MC were no strangers to violence or bloodshed. Initially, it had been amusing to see Bash acting all shy and reluctant.

The amusement had quickly worn off. Something was wrong with him, with both of us.

Maybe that was the reason we would never be more than... what? Awkward friends? Acquaintances?

Sighing, I leaned my forehead against the cool wood of the door. If only I was braver, but daring had never been part of my personality.

Most of the bears, I knew, saw me as standoffish. Pierre's wolves and Dario's pack mates felt the same way about me.

I always had trouble expressing myself. That was why crowds never suited me.

A knock on the door made me jump. I looked out the peephole, heart thumping. Seeing Venom standing there instead of Bash, I let out another sigh.

While it was tempting to ignore Venom, it wasn't a wise decision, seeing as I owed him plenty.

I was still waiting for the day Venom would kick my scaly ass out of the Moon Burrow Woods.

Opening the door, I stared at Venom. He picked up Bash's basket and started munching on an apple muffin.

Did the arrogant bear know apple muffins were my favorite?

"Those are mine," I said unthinkingly. "Bash baked those muffins for me."

Venom didn't protest when I snatched the basket from his grubby paws. Venom raised one scarred eyebrow.

As arrogant as Dario was, even he was smart enough to fear the king of monsters, and Venom was exactly that.

Even my dragon could sense something was off about Bash's lead alpha. There were different flavors of crazy, and I suspected those who crossed Venom regretted their actions immediately.

“Why don’t you ever open the door when Bash comes over?”  
Venom asked.

I looked over Venom’s shoulder, hoping to spy Casper,  
Venom’s omega mate. No such luck there.

I seldom left my cabin, but I knew Casper could calm his  
psychotic mate down whenever Venom lost his temper.

A furry head poked out of Venom’s inner jacket, and I stared at  
a lion shifter cub. I blinked.

I heard Adam mention Chase, Venom and Casper’s daughter,  
but had never seen her before until now.

Chase finished Venom’s remaining muffin in a few bites.  
Venom did not seem to mind.

Chase jumped off out of her hiding place and leaped at me.  
Unthinkingly, I caught the cub. Cats landed on their feet, I  
suddenly remembered.

Feeling foolish, I stared at the cub, unsure of what to do. I had  
never been good with children.

Most of the time, the werewolf cubs in Pierre’s pack were  
terrified of me. Chase licked my cheek, and I relaxed, if only a  
little.

Remembering Venom asked me a question, I answered, “I  
keep waiting for him to knock.”

Venom stared at me with his strange yellow eyes. He was the  
only shifter I had met whose eyes were permanently stuck like  
that, which meant his grizzly was always looking out.

“Anyway, what are you doing here? Are you spying on us?” I  
asked, suddenly feeling defensive.

Venom barked a laugh. I flinched and Venom plucked Chase  
from my arms, much to my relief.

The cub seemed to be way too interested in playing with my  
hair.

“The opening of Adam’s bookstore is tonight,” Venom said.

“I know. Adam handed me an invitation a week ago,” I said.

Adam had printed the beautiful invitation on thick cream paper. The invitation remained on my desk, accumulating dust.

I had no intention of going, of course, despite telling Adam I would think about it. Being around that many shifters made me nervous.

“Bash will be there,” Venom said.

“Of course he would. Bash is good friends with Adam,” I mumbled, feeling foolish.

“I can’t believe I’m playing matchmaker,” Venom muttered.

He rubbed at his scarred face while his daughter watched him curiously. Finally, Venom looked at me.

“Colin, you’ve been stuck in your cabin a long time. It would do you some good to come to the opening. Get some fresh air,” he said.

“The air up here is great,” I said.

My cabin sat on a small hill, and nothing beat the view. Still, I knew what Venom meant.

Venom growled, and I jumped on instinct.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” Venom said. Despite saying those words, he seemed pissed off. “Bash would love it if you’re there. There’s also someone I want to introduce you to.”

I thought of the kindness Adam and his mate had shown me, of the bears who helped built my cabin.

Acting on Dario’s orders, I had hurt some of them. Coming to Adam’s party might not make up for my mistakes, but it was a start.

“Okay,” I whispered. “I’ll go.”

## CHAPTER 2



# BASH

“Are you sure Colin will be here?” I asked Venom for what seemed like the third time.

Needing something to munch on, I snatched a red velvet cupcake from the buffet table and munched on it.

I finished the dessert in a couple of bites. Still feeling hungry, I ate another.

Judging by the impatient snarl Venom let out, I was now pretty certain I asked him that question more than once.

Dang it, I was nervous. I suddenly remembered my unsuccessful trip to Colin’s cabin earlier this morning.

Once again, I couldn’t bring myself to knock on that damn door.

I could hear Colin’s breathing from the other side, waiting for me to make my next move. Suffice to say, I ended up disappointing both of us again.

Relationships never suited me. After one omega broke my heart, heck, shattered it to pieces, I didn’t want to try dating again.

Hook-ups sustained me until now. Then again, a part of me always knew Colin was different. Special. I was terrified of screwing this up.

Not taking action didn’t seem like a good idea, either.

At the present, Colin didn’t appear to be interested in starting a relationship so soon, but that could easily change.

“He’ll be here,” Venom assured me. “Besides, there’s an old friend of mine that wants to meet him.”

“You have friends outside of the MC?” I asked, squinting at my lead alpha.

Venom gave me such an unfriendly stare, my inner grizzly snarled at me to be careful. Right. Pissing Venom off was never a good idea, especially when Venom was trying to be helpful.

I was about to ask Venom who this special friend was, but he beat me to the punch.

“Colin’s here,” Venom pointed out unhelpfully.

I spotted Colin entering the store. The dragon shifter was hard to miss with his white-gold hair, icy blue eyes and slender frame.

Colin was the rare sort of person who shone in a roomful of people, which didn’t work out well for him. I knew Colin didn’t like the extra attention.

Colin gave his surroundings and the crowd a reluctant look. After Axel and Julian greeted him, Colin relaxed a little. Another group of bears gave him a suspicious and hostile glances.

I wanted to wring their thick necks. Colin was already having a hard time as it was. Half of the bears in the MC didn’t mind Colin living in our territory, the other half wanted him gone.

No one, however, questioned Venom’s orders.

I had a sneaking suspicion Venom allowed Colin to stay, not because Venom was kind or generous. Venom probably saw Colin as a future asset the MC could use.

The thought angered me, because the last few months had been nightmarish for Colin.

Colin had been used for someone else’s twisted means in the past, but the selfish part of me didn’t want Colin to go anywhere, either.

If Colin continued to live on our lands, I could keep a close eye on him.

I would keep him safe from other predators, although Colin could probably protect himself just fine.

There was no use standing around. Snatching a few more cupcakes, I made my way towards Colin. He could use the extra company.

“Hey Bash, no leaving the party until you’ve bought a minimum of two books!” Arrow yelled from across the room.

The insensitive jerk didn’t need to announce my presence to everyone at the party. Colin and I locked gazes.

He looked me up and down and for a few precious seconds, it appeared Colin liked what he saw.

Slits appeared in Colin’s normally blue human eyes and I didn’t miss the underlying hunger there, a hunger that echoed my own monstrous desires.

Then Colin dropped my gaze, and the moment disappeared. I finally stood a few feet from him, but I tripped on a dropped book. My cupcakes ending up flying and—mysteriously disappearing.

I thought I spied Venom plucking one cupcake. A few other bears snatched the rest. I couldn’t blame them. Those cupcakes were delicious.

My face tasted the hardwood floors. I heard a crack, then pain exploded from my broken nose.

Someone—that suspiciously sounded like my brother Bane—laughed inappropriately in the background.

I grunted, terribly embarrassed.

“Here, let me help you up,” Colin said.

He grabbed one arm and helped me to my feet.

“You should look where you’re going,” Colin said. “Your nose is bleeding. Here.”

Colin pulled out what looked like an old-fashioned white handkerchief from the front pocket of his jeans. I noticed it had an embroidered C on it.

“I’m fine. There’s no need to fuss over me,” I muttered.

Colin began tucking away his handkerchief, but I seized the small fabric and wiped my nose.

The bone was already starting to re-knit thanks to my accelerated shifter healing.

The handkerchief carried Colin’s scent with it—a hint of ash and brimstone, mixed in with mint and coffee.

I sniffed at it. I wanted to imprint Colin’s scent on my memory forever.

“I’m glad you could make it to the party,” I told Colin.

“Initially, I didn’t plan on coming, but Venom had been... persuasive,” Colin said.

“Venom?” I asked, frowning. “He should mind his own business.”

Colin let out an unexpected, carefree laugh. I stared at him a little rudely.

I never thought I’d ever hear such a sound come out from his sweet and tempting lips. Lips I’d been dreaming of kissing.

I always wondered what Colin would taste and how was he like, as a lover.

Would he be shy or willing? Either way, I would never find the answer until I pursued this further.

“Venom was right. I needed some fresh air. Besides, I wanted to congratulate Adam and Arrow. They worked hard in getting the store ready,” Colin said. “I know you probably think I’ve permanently become a hermit or something, but I go out occasionally.”

This must be the longest conversation Colin and I ever had. Hope unfurled inside me.

I wanted to know Colin better, to find out his likes and dislikes. How he was truly like when he didn't put up so many walls between us.

"I don't think you're a hermit," I said. "And I'm glad you came out here to celebrate with us."

"Hold still. You missed a spot of blood on your nose," Colin said.

He licked his fingers, then wiped a spot on my left nose. Colin stood so close, only inches away, and he smelled so good, so heavenly.

It was such an insignificant touch, but I wanted more.

Instinct made me grip his fingers. Colin's heartbeat quickened, and he stared at me. Waiting for my next move, perhaps?

Colin struck me as an old-fashioned and polite sort of guy. I kissed each digit, not completely sure what I was doing, but it seemed to do the trick, because Colin let out a little moan of pleasure.

Would he make the same sound in the bedroom?

Courage took hold of me. Now was the right moment to take action. I couldn't let this opportunity slip away.

Worst-case scenario? Colin could refuse, tell me he wasn't interested.

That would devastate me, but if Colin said he only wanted to be friends, then so be it. I could be patient.

I opened my mouth, about to ask finally ask him out on a date, but someone else interrupted us.

"Colin, this is the individual I wanted you to meet," Venom interrupted our conversation.

I growled softly in protest, annoyed Venom had awful timing. Colin pulled back his hand, and we both looked at Venom's visitor at the same time.

Venom's old friend turned out to be a tall, lean man in his early forties. He looked out of place in a crowded room full of rowdy bears and chatty raven shifters.

For one, he wore a dark gray suit that looked tailored and expensive as hell. I didn't like the serpentine smile he flashed Colin—or Colin's look of pure, unmasked shock.

I didn't know who this jerk was. Smashing my fist into his handsome face wasn't wise.

He might appear human, but like the rest of the bears here, a predator lurked underneath his human skin.

I had a bad feeling that whatever monster he was, I would have a hard time fighting him.

The truth was a hard pill to swallow, because Bane and I were used to winning battles.

“Who are you?” Colin whispered.

His full attention was now centered on Mr. Sleek and Handsome.

“Zane Lessard. I'm been waiting for a long time to meet you, Colin,” Zane said, his voice velvet smooth.

Irritation and jealousy roared inside me. I thought Venom convinced Colin to come to the opening because he was playing matchmaker.

It turned out Venom wasn't trying to fix Colin and me together.

He had someone else in mind for my dragon, and Colin was mine. My grizzly knew it from the first moment I met Colin.

Rage covered me from head to toe, like a blanket. I didn't care if I ruined Adam and Arrow's party.

If Zane thought he could snatch Colin away from me, then he should understand I wouldn't be a pushover.

“Bash, I hate to interrupt, but we have a problem,” Bane whispered in my ear.

My focus remained on Colin, who seemed to have forgotten about everything and everyone else save Zane.

“What problem?” I asked, not really paying attention.

“Some old friends of ours are in town,” Bane said.

His worried tone finally made me look at him. Bane's aggressive aura hit mine, further amping up my grizzly.

I wasn't worried about either of us losing control of our beasts.

Maybe it would have been a problem ages ago, before we joined the MC, but I knew Venom was powerful enough to reel us both back to reality.

Finally, I paid attention to my brother and his careful choice of words.

Old friends. Five years ago, Bane and I left our blood-soaked past and never looked back.

We knew that eventually, old ghosts would eventually come knocking on our doors.

"Fine, where are they?" I asked, thankful for the distraction.

"Out back, in the alleyway," Bane said.

"Fine. Colin, let's continue our conversation later," I said.

Colin blinked and looked at me. He seemed a little lost and confused. Hesitation swamped me.

All I wanted to do was pull Colin close for an embrace, but Bane tugged at my arm, a reminder we had a more urgent problem to deal with.

I didn't miss the assessing look Zane gave me. Did he finally realized he had serious competition?

"Bash," Bane said tiredly.

I nodded, following my brother into the back of the store, where Adam kept his spare stock.

The front half of the store might look neat and organized, but the back end was a mess of boxes, trash and discarded pieces of furniture.

"They should clean this place up. Someone's bound to trip on something," I complained, kicking at a piece of wood.

"You fell on your face earlier. That was funny as hell," Bane pointed out unhelpfully.

“And you laughed. Who does that?” I grumbled. “You’re my brother. You’re supposed to always take my side.”

We were both joking around to lighten the mood. Neither of us wanted to face whoever waited for us in that alleyway. At least I didn’t.

Bane had always been the more pragmatic one, the problem solver. My brother never allowed his emotions to get in the way.

We were exact opposites, but somehow our contradicting personalities allowed us to work well together.

Bane was my step-brother, although the only one in the MC who knew that little fact was Venom.

Despite having different omega fathers, Bane and I always had each other’s backs.

Even if our former bear clan turned against us, we would be fine, because we were family. That was what we used to believe.

I opened the back door leading to the alleyway. Unlike the bright lights in the store, it was completely dark out here.

There were no streetlights to illuminate our unwanted visitors, but I could see in the darkness just fine.

A thin growl emerged from my throat as I spotted the two bear shifters waiting for us—one alpha and one omega.

Memories I had long ago buried threatened to surface and break my composure.

“Dino and Travis. What the hell are you both doing here?” I demanded.



## CHAPTER 3

# COLIN/ BASH

## C OLIN

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?” I finally asked Venom.

Zane’s presence filled me with discomfort and unexplainable dread. It didn’t help that Bash had left my side.

Bash steadied me, anchored me to reality. I wished he’d stay a little longer. It seemed like Bash had something important he wanted to say to me.

Venom called Zane an old friend, I reminded myself. Venom would have never invited such a dangerous supernatural to Adam’s party unless he trusted Zane to some extent.

“When Venom told me he found an omega dragon shifter, I didn’t believe him at first,” Zane said. “You probably know this, but there are so few of us left in this world. Colin, you are probably the last omega dragon shifter in this country.”

The words ‘our kind’ and ‘the last omega dragon’ reverberated in my head. I had so many questions, but I couldn’t myself to ask Zane.

Suddenly, I felt thirsty and a little nauseous. I snatched the plastic cup Venom had been drinking from.

Venom raised his eyebrows when I drank it all down, then spat it all out. I thought he’d been drinking water, not vodka.

I reached for my handkerchief, then remembered I gave it to Bash earlier.

“Here,” Venom said, handing me a paper napkin, which I used to wipe my mouth.

“Why did you bring him here?” I asked Venom, avoiding Zane’s inquisitive gaze.

“I can answer that question. Colin, I insisted Venom introduce you to me, because you’re my kin,” Zane explained.

“My what?” I asked, suddenly craving a stronger drink.

“Saul, your alpha father, was my brother. That makes me your uncle,” Zane told me in a gentle tone.

If Zane claimed he was blood, then where was he when my parents left me at Pierre’s doorstep? I didn’t even know my dads’ names.

Where was Zane when Dario—I refused to follow that train of thought. It wouldn’t lead to anywhere good.

Placing blame on this stranger seemed like an easy to do, and I was better than that.

“I can’t process all this new information right now,” I blurted.

“Take it easy, Colin,” Venom said.

To my surprise, Venom placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder, and that made me relax a little.

Despite his flaws, Venom and his bears had been good to me.

Venom probably arranged this meeting with Zane, thinking I would want to know more about my roots.

In a way, Venom was right. I was curious about where I came from, but I had been unprepared for tonight.

Bash, especially, held a special place in my heart. That reminded me I wanted, no needed to see and talk to Bash.

“You are not his lead alpha, Venom,” Zane said, looking displeased. “You shouldn’t be giving him orders.”

“He’s not. Venom and his bears are friends. You, I don’t know at all,” I said.

“One of the greatest regrets of my life,” Zane said, voice a little sorrowful. “But I’d like to change that. I’d like to invite you to my home and meet the rest of the family, Colin.”

More dragon shifters like him? The invitation sounded both daunting and wonderful.

I already had a hard time deciding if I should go to Adam’s party or not.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Venom added. “No pressure.”

“Let me think about it,” I told Zane.

We exchanged phone numbers. Venom told him to stay and enjoy the party, but Zane said he had other errands to run.

Zane left the store with little fanfare, much to my relief.

“You’re angry with me,” Venom observed out loud.

“I understand why you introduced Zane to me. I just wasn’t ready,” I said.

“Casper told me to warn you beforehand, but I figured it would be a nice surprise,” Venom replied with a shrug. “My mistake.”

“How do you know Zane, anyway?” I asked him.

“We met a while back. We owed each other favors,” Venom answered enigmatically.

“Colin, I’m so happy you could come,” Adam said, making his way towards us with his mate Arrow.

Venom excused himself. A fight had broken out between two bears, and Venom looked like he had a headache. I certainly didn’t envy his job.

“Scared off Bash so soon?” Arrow asked, his tone teasing. Adam nudged him in the ribs.

“I did no such a thing. Bane and Bash mentioned they were meeting old friends,” I said with a scoff.

Bash’s sudden departure made me feel a little out of place at this party. Lonely. It was a childish admission, but true.

“That’s the exact choice of words Bash used?” Arrow asked.

I noted the concern on his face and frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“Maybe you ought to go check on Bash. Invite him in for some more food,” Arrow suggested.

Adam gave him a curious look, but Arrow didn’t explain any further.

“Bash is in trouble, isn’t he?” I asked. Arrow scratched his head.

“I’m not sure yet.” Arrow’s response troubled me even more.

“I’ll look for him.” I nodded.

Armed with a purpose, I pushed aside my social anxiety and shyness and made a tour of the room.

“Bash and Bane? I saw them heading to the back a couple of minutes ago,” Axel told me when I asked if he saw the brothers.

“We’re glad you came to the bookstore opening, Colin,” Julian said with a warm smile.

Axel’s mate had also been a victim of one of Dario’s wolves, I remembered. I didn’t know Julian that well, but Adam told me how the unlikely pair fell in love.

Julian had been a broken mess, just like I was. Somehow, Axel and Julian two made things work.

Could the same work for me and Bash? It was certainly something to think about.

I made my way to the storeroom, wincing at all the mess and junk shoved back here.

Hearing heated voices, I knew I was close. I hesitated when I heard a growl that sure sounded like Bash.

Was I intruding? Arrow implied Bash needed my help, but maybe that wasn’t true at all. After all, Bash could handle himself perfectly just fine.

“Don’t back out now, Colin,” I muttered to myself.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the back door to see what I was dealing with.



## **BASH**

“SUCH A COLD GREETING to an old clan mate,” Travis murmured. “Is this how you treat old friends, Bash?”

He twirled one dark brown curl into his finger and pouted. Dino, who stood next to him, gave him a back rub.

Travis smirked at me but furrowed his brows when he didn't get the reaction he wanted.

If Travis believed I was the same possessive and jealous fool I'd been in the past, then he was mistaken.

True, even after Bane and I joined the MC, I had pined and lusted for the omega I lost.

It took me years to get over Travis' infidelity and betrayal.

“You two are not our friends,” I said, unable to keep the growl out of my voice.

“Let's not be too hasty,” Dino said quickly.

Dino might be the alpha of the mated pair, but from personal experience, I knew Travis was probably the one pulling all the strings.

“Why don't we go someplace warm and have some coffee?” Dino suggested when no one else spoke.

Travis usually loved hearing himself talk, but I had a feeling he was assessing me.

“There's no need for that,” Bane finally said. “State your business here, then leave. This is Grizzly Reapers MC territory and we don't take well to outsiders.”

Travis clung closer to Dino and looked hurt by Bane's words. It took me a very long time to figure out Travis was a talented

actor.

I had a feeling Dino still hadn't gotten that memo.

"You two won't kill us for intruding. The Irontooth Clan might have called you two savages, but I know there's some good left in you both, especially you, Bash. Won't you hear us both out?" Travis asked, batting his eyelashes at me.

It was an effective move Travis often used on me in the past. He thought I would cave to his demands, just like his before, didn't he?

It pissed me off. Travis underestimated me, thought so little of me, just like before.

Dino must have sensed my angry grizzly rising to bloodlust, because he edged closer to his deceitful mate.

Dino had always been more of a lover than a fighter. Looking at Travis right now, I decided he was a pale and flickering flame compared to the bright sun that was Colin.

These two really belonged together, and it finally struck me I didn't want either of them to be here.

Moon Burrow wasn't just home to me and my brother. It was also home to other misfits and exiles like us, who had no other place to go.

Bane was right. They had no right entering our territory unannounced and making demands.

"Travis called us savages, brother," Bane told me. "And he expects us to help him?"

"I know, pretty presumptuous of him," I said with a nod. "They're lucky we haven't tossed their furry asses out of Moon Burrow."

"Any other bear in the MC would do so," Bane pointed out.

"You two arrogant—" Travis began, but Dino interrupted him.

"The Irontooth Clan is in trouble," Dino muttered, cutting right to the chase. He gave me a pleading look. "A very dangerous polar bear alpha challenged me for the position of lead alpha."

“Not our problem,” Bane replied automatically.

“You’re the leader,” I stated, venom in my voice. “It’s your job to protect every member of your clan. Aren’t you embarrassed to ask help from outsiders, exiles?”

I spat the last word out like a curse. Seeing these two ignited the old fury I’d learned to bury over the years.

It only seemed like yesterday our former clan mates had attacked Bane and me like rabid dogs before tossing our injured bodies on the street like garbage.

The alphas had to band together because they knew they couldn’t take on either Bane and me in a one-on-one duel.

“I can’t hold the clan together. The current alphas are too weak. So am I,” Dino whispered.

The haunted look in Dino’s eyes gave me pause. There was a possibility Dino genuinely cared about those he swore to protect.

“Then you and your mate should have never conspired to kill the old lead alpha,” Bane pointed out.

“Bash took Ignacio’s head, not Dino,” Travis accused.

“Don’t forget you pushed him,” Bane said with a snarl. “You conniving little rat.”

After all these years, I thought I would no longer feel anything about what I had done, but I still did.

Regret coiled in my belly, along with rising anger. Not the best combination.

I was a powder keg waiting to explode. Bane and Dino knew it.

I lost control of my beast just once in my life, but one moment was enough to cause a chain reaction that left Bane and me homeless and without hope.

If this went on, Bane would need to leave my side to get Venom. By then, I might have lost control of my grizzly and it would be too late.



“What’s going on here?” a new voice demanded.

Colin appeared by the doorway, and somehow, the sight of him soothed my miffed beast.

“Leave, this isn’t any of your business, human,” Travis said with a sneer.

Travis eyed Colin up and down before curling his upper lip. Travis got jealous easily, especially if he saw someone he deemed as competition.

I didn’t understand Travis’ reaction, because we haven’t spoken in five years.

“Whatever he is, he isn’t human,” Dino murmured.

“Colin, just in time,” Bane said. “Meet our old pals Dino and Travis.”

I offered my hand to Colin. Taking it as an invitation, Colin stood by my side.

He didn’t blink when I reached out and tugged him close to me for a hug.

I expected Colin to push me aside, but he didn’t. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me, returning the hug. Every tense muscle in my body relaxed.

My bloodlust ebbed. No one was going to die tonight, at the very least. Colin finally looked at Dino and Travis intently.

“What brought you out here?” I asked him.

“Arrow mentioned you two were here. Judging from what little I heard, it doesn’t sound like a friendly conversation,” Colin said.

“Dino and Travis were just leaving. Isn’t that right?” Bane asked.

“It’s clear we have overextended our welcome, but Bash, please think about our request. For old times’ sake,” Dino said.

He turned away and started for his car, but Travis had to get one last word in.

“Jules was hoping you two would say yes,” Travis said.

Bane gritted his teeth, and I silently cursed Travis. He always knew where to strike, where it would hurt the most.

## CHAPTER 4

# COLIN

**A**fter that tense conversation in the alleyway, the three of us returned to the party.

None of us were feeling chatty. Bane wandered off to talk to another bear shifter.

Bash and I stayed together. I persuaded him to take a few more bites and a drink or two, but it was clear neither of us was in the mood to party.

We both reached our quota for unexpected surprises. Calling it a day would be the wise choice. I had plenty to think about after meeting Zane.

“I think I’ll head home now,” I told Bash after watching Venom pry two bears apart.

This must be the third fight Venom had broken up tonight, I thought.

“I’ll give you a ride back to the MC compound,” Bash offered.

“I’d like that. Thank you,” I said.

This party didn’t go the way I expected, and I never found out what Bash wanted to ask me. At the very least, I could spend more time with Bash before the night ended.

Bash and I purchased a couple of books before exiting the store. I picked several thrillers to keep me entertained during the long nights.

Bash selected two historical romances, which surprised me.

Neither of us spoke as we walked to his Harley. Bash mentioned he parked his motorcycle one street away from where we were.

A cool breeze caressed my face, and I decided it was a pleasant night for a short walk.

We passed shops that had closed for the night. Most establishments in Moon Burrow, save the theater and a couple of restaurants, closed at eight, I remembered.

In no time at all, we arrived at our destination. Bash, it turned out, kept a spare helmet in the back compartment of his bike. He handed it to me and I put it on.

After tucking away our purchases, Bash mounted his ride. He looked good, I had to admit, astride his beast of a machine.

I told Bash so, and he awarded me with one of his handsome grins.

“This is my first time riding a motorcycle,” I admitted. “Tell me what to do?”

I didn’t want to embarrass myself. I expected Bash to laugh at my inexperience, but he didn’t.

Bash patiently explained how I should sit and where to place my feet.

I gingerly got behind him, then wrapped my arms around his solid body. Bash let out a rumble of approval.

He started the engine once he was certain I was secure. I let out a whoop once we got going.

Riding a motorcycle certainly felt a lot different from being in a car. It almost felt like flying.

No wonder Bash and his biker bear friends loved these machines.

I knew it was only a fifteen minute drive back to the MC compound but Bash took the scenic route, which I appreciated.

The roads were quiet and empty at this time of the evening. We must have only passed three cars along the way.

I wanted tonight to last a little longer, but Bash was already entering the gated MC compound.

Bash found a parking spot. I dismounted, reluctantly handing Bash his spare helmet.

“I’ll walk you back to your cabin,” Bash said after stashing the helmets and retrieving my bag of books.

“I could manage on my own.” I immediately regretted the words the moment they slipped out of my mouth.

Bash reached for my hand. I stared down at this huge and inked fingers and clasped them tight. So warm, I thought.

“I insist,” Bash said.

“Okay,” I whispered.

How could I say no to that? I liked how forward Bash had suddenly become. I realized I never held hands with anyone before.

I dated little, so my experience when it came to relationships was limited. Pierre had always been protective of me.

Back then, I thought Pierre had only been looking out for my best interests. In the end, Pierre was only saving me, so he could sell me off to the highest bidder.

I dismissed thoughts about the past from the head and told myself to enjoy this rare and private moment with Bash.

Bash and I walked across the MC compound parking lot and entered the Moon Burrow Woods.

The Grizzly Reapers MC called the vast forest and the mountains surrounding it their home.

The bears used to be the sole occupants of the Moon Burrow Woods until Venom invited a group of homeless raven shifters to move in.

Then I came along and we all became a motley collection of shifters. While it wasn’t unheard of for multiple shifter groups to co-exist, it was incredibly rare.

Apex predators like bears and wolves were usually territorial in nature and would kill anything or anyone they deemed as a threat.

I appreciated the unique arrangement we had.

“Who’s Jules?” I asked, recalling Bash and Bane’s conversation with the two bear shifters in the alleyway. “Or is it a sensitive topic to talk about?”

“It isn’t. Bane and I used to be enforcers for the Irontooth Clan. During one of our patrols, we came across two outsiders—an injured omega bear shifter and his cub,” Bash began.

He had a faraway look in his eyes I didn’t like, so I gave his hand a squeeze. Bash blinked, then flashed me a tight smile.

“What happened next?” I asked, although I had a feeling I knew the answer.

“The omega didn’t make it, but the cub did. Jules was severely injured, but Bane insisted we take him to the clan healer. I’d never seen my brother so worried over another living soul.” Bash scratched his beard thoughtfully. “I called Jules a cub, but he must be an adult now. Hard to believe so much time has passed.”

“So Jules is special to Bane?” I asked. “Is there anything going on between them?”

“Jules looks up to Bane like a big brother. After we were expelled from the clan, I could tell Bane had a hard time leaving Jules behind,” Bash explained.

“Why were the two of you expelled?” I asked.

“Colin...” Bash trailed off and let out a sigh.

I felt like I just stepped on a landmine. Bash wasn’t ready to open up to me.

I could understand why. It wasn’t like we were close friends or lovers, but I wanted to take a step closer to understanding him better.

“My brother and I aren’t good men,” Bash finally said.

I snorted. “It’s not like I’m completely without sin, either. Heck, I can’t even sleep at night, because I keep hearing the screams,” I said unthinkingly.

Bash halted in his footsteps. Color rose to my cheeks and neck. I had never told anyone about my insomnia before, not even Adam, who I considered my best friend.

“The screams of those you’ve hurt?” Bash asked, his expression hard to read.

“I can still smell it. That terrible smell. The sickly smell of cooked meat.” I suddenly felt ill, like I wanted to throw up.

I silently cursed myself for revealing that information. The last thing I wanted was for Bash to see me for what I really was—a twisted creature beyond redemption.

I recalled all the times Bash looked at me, like I was his bright ray of sunshine.

My heart crumbled to pieces, because I knew I just shattered that illusion, that false image Bash held of me.

It’s better this way, I thought bitterly.

Better for Bash to see me for who I really was. Better for Bash to stay away and find someone else.

I thought of the omega bear shifter in that alleyway, the one who gave me a venomous look when Bash pulled me into an embrace.

There was a history between Bash and Travis. History I was curious about, but wasn’t privy to.

I dropped my gaze and darted forward.

Hope deflated in my chest. Did I truly believe I had some kind of future with this wonderful and strong bear alpha? That I was actually worthy of his love and affections?

“Colin, stop. We’re not done talking.”

Ignoring Bash, I kept walking. Trees, bushes and rocks blurred. I realized I was crying, and I didn’t want to Bash to see me like this.



Bash caught up to me with a few big strides.

“I told you to wait,” Bash said, his words a command.

Fear took hold of me, so did a second and unexpected emotion—excitement. I pictured Bash giving me orders in the bedroom and shivered.

After my nightmarish experience with Dario, I never thought I could stomach obeying the orders of another alpha. It turned out I was wrong.

Bash would be an exception, because Bash was—special. I couldn’t bring myself to call Bash my mate, not yet.

Why would Bash want damaged goods like me?

Bash gripped my hand, then abruptly dropped it. Whatever expression I wore made him wary.

He took a step back, giving me some space, something I appreciated.

“I’m not Dario, Colin. I’ll never hurt you and I’ll kill myself first before that happens,” Bash said.

The growl in his voice never left. His eyes glowed bright gold, and I knew Bash’s savage half had surfaced.

This was the first time I truly glimpsed the beast that shared Bash’s skin.

My dragon uncoiled from his hiding place and looked upon Bash’s grizzly with unnatural interest.

“I know that,” I whispered. “But you don’t want me. Not really.”

“Who the hell told you that nonsense?” Bash demanded.

He reached out for me again, or tried to, but he lowered his hand at the last second, as if Bash thought I was fragile as glass.

I wanted to yell at Bash, to tell him I didn’t break easily. I was forged out of stronger stuff.

After all, I survived Dario and our broken mating bond.

“No one,” I told him. “I can guess.”

“You guessed wrong then, because Colin, the moment I saw you in your dragon form, it felt like being hit in the chest with a sledgehammer,” Bash said.

“That doesn’t sound romantic at all,” I said with a broken laugh.

“I’m not good with words. Never been.” Bash scrubbed at his face. “I didn’t know you had trouble sleeping. I had the same problem in the past. Bane bought some sleeping pills for me. It works on shifters. I can get some for you.”

“You’ll do that for me?” I asked, surprised. He nodded.

“It will knock you out like a light. You won’t dream at all,” Bash said. “But pills, they can only do so much. They lose their effectiveness soon enough.”

“But you’ll still get me some?” I asked, hating myself for sounding so desperate.

A dreamless sleep sounded like a luxury at this point.

“I will,” Bash said with a nod. We resumed walking.

“Why couldn’t you sleep? You said you had insomnia in the past,” I pointed out.

“Mostly because of guilt and regret,” Bash admitted.

He didn’t say more, and I didn’t press. We started up the small hill that would lead to my cabin. Bash walked me right to my door.

“Thank you for accompanying me home,” I said.

“I just wanted to spend more time with you.” Bash paused, then asked, “how do you feel about Zane?”

“Zane?” I asked, confused. “I just met him tonight.”

“He’s like you, isn’t he? A dragon,” Bash said, looking thoughtful. “I didn’t expect competition this soon in the game.”

“Bash, Zane’s my uncle. I have zero romantic interest in him,” I said.

“Your uncle?” Bash let out a sudden bark of laughter that was so infectious, he made me smile.

“Yeah, he asked me if I wanted to meet the rest of the family,” I said.

“What did you tell him?”

“That I’ll think about it. I’m not ready, Bash. For most of my life, I had so many questions. Where do I come from? Why are there no others like me? Then Zane suddenly introduces himself and tells me I’m not alone?” I shook my head. “It’s too much too fast.”

## CHAPTER 5

# BASH

“If I were in your shoes, I would be overwhelmed as well,” I admitted.

Colin seemed relieved by my answer. I thought of his reaction during our walk, how withdrawn Colin suddenly became when he admitted he was suffering from insomnia.

At first, I didn’t understand his extreme reaction. Then it hit me. Guilt and regret must still be eating away at him, although Dario used the mate bond to force Colin to do his bidding.

Colin would never believe himself blameless for his past actions. He owned up to his mistakes and that was admirable.

“You don’t have to decide now,” I told him gently.

“That’s exactly what Venom said, but Zane seemed to expect an answer right away,” Colin said. “This is might be my only chance to meet others like me.”

“Hey, if you need someone to tag along and provide you some emotional support, I’m right here,” I told him.

It was a bold offer. Colin and I weren’t even lovers at this point, but I planned on changing that tonight.

As I walked Colin to his door, I felt the urge to hold his hand again.

He didn’t pull away when I entwined my fingers with his. Colin turned to face me. Colin widened his blue eyes and his breathing sped up.

I tipped his chin using two fingers. Colin's heartbeats quickened as I leaned in close and brushed my lips over his.

I only intended to give him a quick goodnight kiss, a hint of a promise that was to come.

To my surprise, Colin kissed me fiercely back, stealing my breath for a few seconds. He tasted sweeter than I imagine.

I instantly became hooked. Moving my hand to the back of his neck, I sucked on his bottom lip.

When Colin opened up for me, I deepened the kiss. I loved the way he sucked down on my tongue.

In those few tender and special moments, I forgot about the rest of the world, along with the shock of seeing Travis and Dino again. All that mattered was us.

Colin placed a hand on my chest, and I pulled away. I wanted Colin to see I could be patient, that I was mate material.

I knew full well Dario had left scars both inside and out on Colin.

Rushing had never been my intention. Tonight's kiss had been enough to sate my hungry beast.

"I've been waiting for you to do that for what seemed like forever," Colin whispered, staring up at me.

My grizzly liked the fact Colin could look me deep in the eyes. Other omegas, heck, weaker shifters, were downright terrified of me and, for a good reason.

I'd been born with a monster my entire life. Colin didn't shy away from the dangerous grizzly one bit.

"Did I disappoint?" I had to ask.

Colin laughed and petted my chest. I let out a rumble of approval. I liked the little touches Colin gave me.

"What do you think?" Colin asked.

Colin took out the key to his front door and opened it. He hesitated. I didn't know why I didn't automatically walk away, either.

Colin had probably reached his limit tonight when it came to romantic interactions.

Still, I lingered, hoping—I didn't know what I was waiting for. It seemed both of us didn't want the night to end.

“Would you like to come in for some coffee, maybe a drink?” Colin asked.

I beamed at him, glad my gamble paid off. “I'd like that. Thank you,” I said.

It was the first time I stepped into his cabin since my crew and I finished renovating the space.

Immediately, I knew Colin had transformed the house into a home.

Hints of his personality were obvious in bits and pieces of furniture, like the green rug by the fireplace, a kooky mushroom-shaped lamp by the sofa and the refurbished purple curtains on his windows.

“I loved what you did with the place,” I said, following Colin into his tiny kitchen.

I had a feeling this was where he ate most of his meals.

“Have a seat,” Colin said. He gestured to the small mahogany table and two matching wooden chairs. “How do you like your coffee?”

“With milk and plenty of sugar,” I said, sitting my ass down.

While it was chilly outside, the cabin was a little warm, so I took off my leather jacket.

“Here you go,” Colin said a few moments later.

He slid a steaming mug in front of me before joining me at the table. I noticed Colin picked a floral-smelling tea instead of coffee.

“What are you drinking?” I asked, curious.

“Camomile tea. It calms me,” Colin said.

He took a sip, then grimaced. Maybe he found it too hot?

“You nervous?” I asked. “About me being in your kitchen?”

“Only Adam has seen the inside of my house,” Colin admitted. “I mean, Venom and Arrow have stopped by, but I’ve never invited them inside.”

“No one else?” I asked. Colin nodded. “Don’t worry, I won’t bite unless you tell me I can.”

Colin stared at me for a few seconds.

“Are... you flirting with me?” Colin asked.

“Can’t you tell?” I asked.

“Before Dario, I only went out on a few days. Nothing serious,” Colin admitted.

“Tell me more about yourself. Were you a shy kid growing up?” I asked.

After constantly badgering Venom, I found out a few details about Colin.

I knew he had been raised in a wolf pack and his adoptive father Pierre, had been the one responsible for selling him to Dario.

Colin had endured wave after wave of betrayal. It was a wonder he survived from his hellish experiences intact.

It angered me that his father, the person who was supposed to protect him, would give him away to a complete stranger.

I still didn’t know the full story, but all I needed was a name and Colin’s say-so.

Then I would happily hunt down this bastard for Colin and make him pay.

Dario was dead, but Colin’s adoptive father was still alive somewhere.

“I was. Even when I was a kid, I understood I was different from everyone else. You know I grew up in a wolf pack?” He asked. I nodded. Colin went on, “my real parents left me on the doorstep of my adoptive father, Pierre. He was the lead alpha of the Green Boulder Pack.”

“Did they mistreat you?” I asked with a growl.



“The younger wolves aimed a few unkind words at me occasionally, but they never hurt me. Pierre was always looking out for me. At least, I assumed he was. It turned out he was only waiting for the right buyer to sell me off. The pack had debts, you see.”

Colin looked out the kitchen windows, his gaze blank. He spoke in a monotone, as if he was talking about the weather.

“Hey,” I said, reaching for his hand unthinkingly. “Don’t drift off to a place where I can’t reach you. Pierre can’t touch you anymore, Colin. Hell, I can bring you his head if you want.”

Colin looked at me for a few moments, then let out a nervous laugh.

“You really mean that, don’t you? You’ll really find Pierre and end him, for my sake?” Colin asked.

“If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s tracking and killing prey,” I said. “A coward like Pierre deserves to die, anyway.”

“Most bears from the MC would say those words with pride. You, you just said it manner-of-fact,” Colin said.

“I might be good at my job, but I don’t enjoy senseless killing,” I admitted. “I’ll go all out if you, Bane, or if any of my MC brothers were in trouble, but I’m not a psychopath like Dario.”

“I get what you mean,” Colin said. “I’ve only been living here for a short time, but I know the Moon Burrow Bears and Ravens would do anything to protect their homes and each other.”

“The pack you grew up with. They aren’t united?” I asked.

Colin laughed. “No, the wolves fight all the time. Loyalty doesn’t mean much to them.”

“The Irontooth Clan, the bear clan Bane and I came from, had been the same,” I said.

“Will you tell me the reason you and your brother left?” Colin asked.

I rose from my seat and leaned down to give Colin a kiss on the cheek.

“It’s getting late. I’ll tell you another time,” I said.

“When?” Colin asked.

“During our road trip maybe or our next date,” I answered.

I took his empty cup and washed them at the sink. Colin stood next to me.

“What road trip? I don’t recall you asking me out on a date either,” Colin pointed out.

“Our first official date,” I said, wiggling my eyebrows suggestively at him. “Tomorrow or whenever you’re free.”

“I have nothing planned for tomorrow night,” Colin replied. “And this road trip?”

“Whenever you’re ready, we’ll pay Zane and his family a visit,” I told him.

“Oh right. You really mean it?” Colin asked.

“I do. We’ll have fun. Promise,” I said. “Anyway, I ought to head back. It’s getting late and you might have other plans for the evening.”

“Just staying awake the entire night,” Colin grumbled.

Detecting the unhappiness in his voice, I turned and looked at him. I took a risk.

“I could stay a little while longer, at least until you fall asleep. Don’t worry, I’ll keep my grubby paws to myself.”

Colin bit his lower lip, as if he was thinking about my suggestion seriously.

“Let’s try that,” Colin began, then paused. “I feel safe with you.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said, pleased with his words.

We watched a little TV in his living room. After an action movie ended, we entered Colin’s bedroom.

I didn't even know what the movie was about, because I spent all that time thinking about how close Colin was.

How it felt nice, simply sitting on the couch next to him and hanging out.

"We should do this more often," I told Colin after he came out from the bathroom.

Colin had just taken a quick shower and changed into his sleep wear—a matching silk pajama set with tiny dragons woven into it.

"What?" Colin asked, drying his hair with a towel.

I wanted to edge closer to him, to take a whiff of him and maybe run my fingers through the fine strands of his fairytale gold hair.

"Just chilling together. When I mentioned going on a date earlier, we don't have to go out to a restaurant in town or watch a movie at the theater," I said.

I knew Colin wasn't comfortable with crowds. Truth was, we were a little similar.

I enjoyed being around my MC brothers and the ravens but other people? Not so much.

Heads always turned when a six-foot-five inked and muscled bear shifter entered any establishment in town. In a small town like Moon Burrow, gossip was inevitable.

Colin appeared to think about my suggestion while he combed his hair.

"Tomorrow evening, come by the cabin at eight. I'll make dinner. We can watch a movie, maybe even two?" Colin suggested.

"That sounds perfect," I said, beaming at him.

Colin slid under his sheets and looked at me, still standing by the doorway.

"Are you going to stand there all night?" Colin asked.

"I'm thinking," I answered.

Colin didn't look the least bit comfortable in his own bed. It was probably because of my presence.

I took off my shirt, noting with interest that Colin didn't look away.

“Are you giving me a strip show? Because I'm enjoying it very much,” Colin said. “But unfortunately, it's making me more excited than sleepy.”

I chuckled. Colin might have given me shy vibes in the beginning, but he was a bold one.

“I figured changing to my grizzly form will put you more at ease,” I told him.

I dropped my pants, then my boxers. Colin cleared his throat and picked up the book by his bedside table.

I didn't want to point out that the book was upside down. Not wanting to embarrass him further, I changed.

Fur covered my chest and shoulders. Bones broke and organs moved. It occurred to me I always shifted to prepare for a battle.

This time, it was to soothe the nerves of my potential mate. I didn't mind it one bit.

Colin made space for me in the queen sized bed. I took it as an obvious invitation to join him.

He tensed when I climbed onto the bed. Colin only relaxed when I curled up into a ball. Colin turned, so he faced me.

Then he raked his fingers through my fur. I let out a happy rumble as Colin buried his face into my fur. In minutes, Colin fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 6

# COLIN

*D*ario loomed above me, flashing me a wolfish and predatory smile. He eyed the spot between my shoulder and neck. Without warning, he sunk his fangs deep, breaking skin.

*Unable to do anything but open my mouth, I let out a scream of terror and frustration.*

*Fighting proved futile. Dario seemed to be made of shadows and smoke. When he let out a high-pitched and grating laugh, it raised the goosebumps on both my arms.*

*A sense of unexplainable dread filled me. The painful mark on my neck burned. Dario made me his prisoner.*

*There was no escaping him or our bond. Only death could separate us now.*

I KNEW DEEP DOWN I was dreaming. Dario was dead, killed by Arrow and Adam, yet he felt so real.

I could almost smell his putrid breath—a foul combination of fresh blood and rotting meat.

In the real world, someone shook me awake. I forced my eyes open and immediately touched the fading bite mark on the side of my neck.

I relaxed, then wondered why my hand felt wet.

Then I realized I had partially shifted my left hand to claws while I was dreaming.

The scent of copper, of blood instantly hit my nose. I noticed a second comforting scent. I wasn't alone.

My gaze found Bash. He touched his bleeding left shoulder with his right hand.

He sported a long rake mark on shoulder to elbow and I knew I caused him harm.

"Hey, you finally woke up. I get why you don't want to fall asleep," Bash joked.

Another alpha would've been pissed off, but here was Bash, joking around.

"I did that," I whispered, guiltily eying his wound.

I wanted this alpha to be mine so much, and yet during my most vulnerable moment, I had hurt him.

Bash had been so terribly sweet last night.

He stayed when I begged him to. Bash even kept his paws to his himself like he promised, because he knew I was far from ready for sex.

Was this a sign that I didn't deserve Bash after all?

"Hey," Bash said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

He touched my cheek, leaving a smear of blood there. I didn't think it was intentional.

Bash continued, "Don't be too hard on yourself. I've been hurt much worse."

"I bet you say that to all the omegas you've dated," I said.

Bash laughed, and the weight on my chest lifted. I pressed his big, inked hand against my cheek, then shut my eyes.

I took in his scent and relaxed. My old nightmare faded away.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Bash asked.

I set his hand down, rested my head on his broad shoulder. Only then it occurred to me Bash didn't have any clothes on.

Of course he didn't. Bash slept in his grizzly form the night before.

It was hard not looking at his generous assets. Suddenly, the room felt warm, and I focused on his face instead.

“I dreamed of Dario and the moment he put his false mating mark on me,” I admitted. “Which never really happened, because after Pierre drugged me, I woke up, already baring Dario’s bite. It felt so real, though.”

“Come here,” Bash said.

I didn’t know what possessed me to climb on his lap. Wrapping my arms around his solid and warm body felt good.

Languidness filled my entire body, like I could melt into him.

We were a perfect fit, I realized. Our chests and groins touched, and I tried so hard not to think about how sexy he was and how Bash’s cock would feel like inside me.

Bash started stroking my back, and it felt good. I let out a moan, shifting on his lap, so I felt more comfortable.

Bash pressed a kiss on my neck, on the fading bite mark there.

“Dario can’t touch you anymore,” Bash murmured in my ear. “And I’ll always be here.”

We remained like that for a few quiet moments, not saying a single word to each other.

Closing my eyes, I pictured waking up to a thousand mornings with this tender and protective biker bear.

It was so easy to picture Bash in my bed and in my life. Did I really deserve a second start, a future with Bash?

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” Bash said.

I flushed, not realizing I must’ve uttered my thoughts out loud.

“Even me?” I asked, finally getting off his lap. “I don’t know about that.”

“Before Bane and I joined the Grizzly Reapers MC, we both felt so lost, without hope, as we wandered country roads and moved from town to town,” Bash told me. “Eventually, we found our way home.”



“I don’t know home is anymore,” I said. Should I tell Bash I had come to love this cabin and the Moon Burrow Woods but was afraid I’d overstay my welcome?

“We’ll find it together.” Bash said. He stood up, gave my hand a squeeze. “Are you hungry? I can make us some breakfast.”

“I have one request,” I told him, using my most serious tone.

“What’s that?” Bash asked.

“Can you put your pants and shirt on? You’re distracting when you’re fully naked,” I pointed out.

“Don’t you like my goods?” Bash asked, wriggling his eyebrows at me suggestively.

I couldn’t help but laugh. This bear, I thought, was both capable of making me laugh and cry. He truly was something special.

“I like them very much,” I said after I recovered from my sudden bout of laughter. “We should look at the wound on your arm first.”

“Bah. Look, it’s already healing,” Bash said, showing me his arm.

He was right. The rake mark had started to fade. The blood only made it look worse.

“Let me put some disinfectant and bandage it up for you, at the very least. I insist,” I said.

“Stubborn dragon. Fine, I’ll allow you to fuss over me,” he said in a dramatic voice.

Bash dressed and followed me to the bathroom. I found my first-aid kit under the sunk.

Bash stood still as I got to work cleaning the wound and putting a fresh bandage on him.

I had to use a lot of bandages, because the rake mark wasn’t exactly small.

“There’s no need for frowns,” Bash told me. “If people ask, I’ll just tell them it’s a love scratch.”

I blushed. “Don’t you dare.”

Bash chuckled. He reached for my hand after I finished keeping the supplies, then pressed a kiss on it.

“I’m really sorry,” I told him. “It won’t happen again.”

“Again? Another invitation to your bed so soon?”

Bash smirked, and I gave him a playful shove in the shoulder.

After keeping the first aid kit, I made my way to the kitchen. I checked the cabinets and my fridge and was disappointed to find I needed to restock my food supplies.

All I had left was some bread, milk, and butter. For a second, my mind blanked.

What else did I have? Expired cereal and a can of beans. I really didn’t want to disappoint Bash or have him leave just yet.

“Perfect,” Bash said.

He peered over my shoulder to see the contents of my fridge.

I jumped, wondering why I hadn’t heard him at all. My bear could be quiet if he wanted to.

Wait. I shouldn’t even be calling Bash my anything yet, but it sure felt right.

“Enough ingredients to make French toast,” Bash announced. “I would have preferred some bacon on the side, though. Do you have any?”

I shook my head. Bash pulled out his phone and called someone.

“Say, Bane, can you come by Colin’s cabin and bring some frozen bacon? Yeah, I’m at his cabin and no, I will not tell you anything. Okay, great.” Bash ended the call and grinned at me. “Problem solved.”

Bash knew I enjoyed cooking. We ended up switching roles, with Bash making the batter and me frying up the bread. Fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang.

“I’ll answer it. Don’t burn the next one,” I warned Bash.

He only waved me away. I found Bane standing on my doorstep, carrying a large plate of fried bacon.

Bane wasn't smiling, and I realized he was staring at the spot of blood on my cheek which had been left by Bash earlier.

"Uh, it's not my blood," I said.

Bane relaxed and held out the plate.

"They assigned me cook duty at the MC clubhouse and there was plenty of bacon left," Bane said.

"Have you eaten? Do you want to come in?" I asked out of politeness' sake.

While I loved Bash's personality and could read him like an open book, Bane, on the other hand, was a mystery.

I knew the two brothers would do anything for each other, and I supposed that was all that mattered.

"Don't mind if I do," Bane said. I took a step back so he could enter the cabin. "Is Bash cooking you breakfast?"

"We cooked together," I said.

"Uh-huh. I see." Bane gave me an assessing look. "Nice pajamas."

"Thanks? Adam gave them to me," I said. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, I could use some caffeine," Bane admitted.

"Colin, I smell bacon. About time," Bash announced. He furrowed when he spotted Bane. "What's he doing here?"

Bane looked at Bash's bandaged arm, then at the spot on my cheek. He appeared thoughtful.

"I see. Must be some wild night you two had," Bash said.

"It's nothing like that," I blurted.

"Oh, hell yeah, it was," Bash said unhelpfully. Maybe he enjoyed teasing people in general?

I poured us three some coffee and set out three sets of plates. All my mugs and plates were mismatched, which embarrassed me a little.

The brothers didn't seem to care either way. The three of us sat down and ate breakfast.

Bane complained about the other bear alphas in the clubhouse, gobbling up breakfast like maniacs.

"I really hate cook duty," Bane grumbled. "And you were supposed to be second cook."

"Colin needed me more," Bash said with a shrug.

"If I knew you were also in charge of breakfast, I wouldn't ask you to linger," I grumbled.

I munched on my French toast. It was good, I realized. Bash had used his own secret recipe.

We worked well in the kitchen together. I wondered if we'd also mesh well in other aspects of our lives, then quieted the thought.

Hope was good and all, but I couldn't rely on it completely. Dario's unwelcome entry into my life taught me fate could suddenly throw me a curve ball any second.

"Nah, don't worry about it, Colin. Venom helped, although he spent most of the time chasing his playful cub," Bane grumbled. He eyed the two of us. "So what? Are you officially an item now?"

"No," I blurted.

"Yes," Bash answered, then regarded me.

"Maybe," I amended.

I still hadn't gotten over the way I reacted that morning. Bash got away with a scratch, but it could have been worse.

What if I accidentally burned him? Bash told me everyone deserved another chance, but what if I was the exception?

"Well, about time. I made a bet with Adam when it will happen. Guess who just won a hundred bucks?" Bane beamed in satisfaction, then sipped his coffee.

Bane's expression turned serious as he looked at Bash. "We need to talk," Bane told his brother.

“If this is about Travis and Dino, then you can speak in front of my future mate,” Bash replied.

The flippant way Bash referred to me as his future mate nearly made me choke on my coffee.

I sputtered and Bane mutely snatched a tissue from the nearby box and handed it to me. I wiped my mouth and stared at Bash.

“What?” Bash asked me.

Challenge blazed in his gold-tinged eyes.

“You’re just so forward,” I mumbled.

“Bash has always been that way, even when we were kids. No surprise trouble followed us all the time,” Bane said.

Intrigued, I leaned forward and gripped my mug eagerly.

“I would love to hear more childhood stories of Bash,” I said.

“No,” Bash groaned. He glared at his brother. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“This situation is just too funny. You know what? I haven’t been entertained this much in a long time. Let’s not ruin a good morning with serious talk.” Bane stood up. “Thanks for breakfast and coffee, Colin. Treat my brother right. That’s all I’ll ask.”

I gave Bane a solemn nod, then shook his offered hand.

“I’ll do my best,” I told Bane.

## CHAPTER 7

# BASH

“So I’ll see you later tonight?” I asked Colin, as he walked me to the front door.

“Tonight,” Colin agreed with a nod.

Not wanting to leave without getting a taste of Colin’s lips, I leaned in and kissed him, quick and dirty.

Colin clutched my shirt and responded fiercely. I was reluctant to leave him.

Staying in all day with Colin seemed like a luxury, one neither of us could afford.

We both had errands to run. Besides, the last thing I wanted to do was smother him.

“Can’t wait,” Colin whispered after I pulled away.

I whistled during my entire walk back to the MC clubhouse. My relationship with Colin was progressing nicely.

Last night had been a complete gamechanger. It was almost easy to forget that Colin and I both received unexpected visitors at the bookstore opening.

That reminded me. My brother and I were on the same crew for a delivery job today.

Perhaps after the job was done, we could discuss Dino and Travis’ proposition.

Back at the clubhouse, I headed back to my room and took a shower.

While I dressed, I realized I left my leather cut back at Colin's kitchen the night before.

Deciding I would retrieve it tonight, I went downstairs, where Bane and the other two members of our crew waited.

I packed light for the ride, just my favorite sawed-off shotgun and hunting knife. We weren't expecting trouble doing a routine job.

"Where's your jacket?" Bane asked me.

We were at the parking. Bane and I mounted our Harleys.

"Left it at Colin's," I answered.

"Someone got lucky tonight," Greed commented.

Crash nudged him on the shoulder. I ignored those two. Crash and Greed were both new to the MC.

They were patched members, and I knew Bane and I could rely on them in a pinch.

Sometimes, however, they acted like juvenile bears sometimes.

"Then let's get this job done so you can return home early," Bane said.

The job went without a hitch. We delivered a modest shipment of weapons to one of our long-time customers—a small fox shifter community living in the remote mountains.

Our crew had a late lunch at a roadside diner. Bear shifters could eat a lot. The four of us ordered a feast large enough to feed eight humans.

"Everyone's getting hitched," Crash complained. He looked glumly at his burger. "I bet you're up next, Bane."

Greed nodded solemnly next to him. My brother only snorted. It felt like a lifetime ago when the first bear alpha in the MC—Mayhem—found his mate Wyatt.

Venom soon followed, then Axel and Arrow. It must feel surreal to Greed and Crash, because the bear shifters who



joined the Grizzly Reapers MC weren't exactly the cream of the crop.

Venom took in hardened ex-criminals and exiles other bear clans rejected.

Most of my MC brothers had terrible reputations. None of them believed they were mate material.

I still felt the same way, but I wasn't about to let Colin slip through my fingers.

Just the thought of Colin choosing another alpha made me see red.

I wasn't confident about sharing my relationship status with Colin with the other bears yet, so I remained silent.

Colin and I had issues to work through. Right now, I sensed we were at a crucial point. I could still screw everything up between us.

"What's it like, Bash?" Greed asked me. "Knowing your mate is right in front of you?"

I took a sip of my chocolate milkshake before answering.

"Frightening as hell. Surviving a savage battle is so much easier," I said.

"Huh. Never expected a big guy like you to admit you're scared," Crash said. He gave me a considering look. "Relationships must take a lot of work, huh?"

"You have no idea," I mumbled.

After finishing their food, Crash and Greed went ahead. Bash and I lingered in the diner. After our dishes were cleared, we ordered coffee.

I scrubbed at my face. Tonight, I needed to bring my A game. For now, Bane and I had something important to discuss.

"What really happened this morning?" Bane asked, nodding to my bandaged arm.

"Colin has trouble sleeping. He went out like a light last night, but he has nightmares," I said.

Bane and I never hid secrets from each other. I considered my brother my best friend as well.

Whenever either of us had a problem, we would always talk things out.

“I can imagine,” Bane said.

“That reminds me, remember the sleeping pills you gave me when I had insomnia? I promised to get Colin some,” I told him.

“Sure, that won’t be a problem,” Bane said with a nod. “Give me a few days.”

“So, are we going to talk about Travis and Dino?” I asked.

“You were pretty hung up over Travis when we joined the MC,” Bash pointed out.

“That was five years ago. I’ve moved on.”

Bash scoffed. He probably knew I had only got over Travis since Colin entered my life. There was no use lying to him.

“I finally see Travis for what he is—an accomplished liar. You warned me all those years ago about him, but I never listened,” I said.

“That’s what love does to you. It twists you up, blinds you,” Bane said.

A server refilled our coffee cups. I took a large sip and regarded my brother. It was unlike Bane to say something so emotional.

“Are we still talking about me or you?” I asked. “What Travis said about Jules got to you, didn’t it?”

Bane drummed his fingers on the table.

“It’s been five years, Bash. Jules had probably moved on by now. Dino sounded desperate. He was hoping your old infatuation with Travis would convince us to say yes to their demands,” Bane said.

“And when that didn’t work, Travis brought up Jules’ name,” I agreed. “Those two are really perfect together. Screw them,

right? Let them handle their own problems. It has nothing to do with us.”

Bane fell silent for a few moments.

“I know the Irontooth Clan did us both a disservice, but can we think about this a little longer?” Bane asked.

“A disservice?” I spat the word out like it was toxic. “Did you forget what they did to us?”

Bane touched the scars, the old rake marks on his arm, and I knew my words took him back to memory lane.

He sighed, then drank half his coffee. I let out an impatient growl, turning several heads in the diner.

My grizzly got riled up, simply thinking about the past.

I had to remind myself that I was living in the present. Bane and I had slammed the door to the past a long time ago.

Drudging up painful memories would not help either of us. I forced myself to calm down.

“I talked to Venom this morning,” Bane said.

“You had a rather busy morning,” I said drily.

“I went to his office right after having breakfast with you and Colin. I wanted his opinion,” Bane said.

Not a bad idea, I decided. Despite his terrifying reputation and appearance, Venom genuinely cared about every single bear in his MC.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“That ultimately, the decision fell to both of us,” Bane replied.

“Some help he was,” I grumbled. “Let’s pay the bill and head back to Moon Burrow. I’m not liking the stares the locals are giving us.”

Bane agreed. After paying for our food, we promptly left the diner and got on our motorcycles.

Bane left out an important detail during our talk, I realized.

He said little about Jules, but I knew that was the reason he was stalling. Ever since we found Jules with his injured and dying omega father, Bane had been protective about Jules.

Bane never said it out loud, but I knew he regretted leaving Jules behind. But the open road wasn't the right place for a young man like Jules.

Jules still had a bright future, but would that future be snuffed out if Bane and I allowed this challenger to beat Dino for the position of lead alpha of the Irontooth Clan?

I was still mulling over our talk even as we rode past the 'Welcome to Moon Burrow' town sign.

By the time we parked our Harleys at the compound, I was itching for a shower.

I certainly didn't want to appear at Colin's doorstep, smelling like motor oil and sweat.

"Alright," I told my brother. "Let's think about it more."

We parted ways in the parking lot. Bane said he wanted to hit the bar early tonight.

"Good luck on your date. Don't mess it up," Bane said. "And be patient with Colin."

"You don't have to tell me that," I said with a snort. "And I'm being careful with him. He's been through a lot. Colin knows I'm fine with taking things slow."

"But not too slow," Bane reminded me. "Don't give him the impression you just want to be friends and nothing more."

"Thanks for making me feel even more nervous about tonight," I grumbled.

I returned to my bedroom, took a shower. I spent an embarrassingly long amount of time picking my outfit.

In the end, I chose a pair of black jeans that didn't have any holes in them and a denim buttoned-down shirt Bane had given me last Christmas. I wore a blazer over the shirt.

After combing out my hair, I headed to the kitchen to see if I could scavenge something for my date.

Venom and Mayhem were in there, bickering as usual. Those two always reminded me of a long-time married couple.

Their respective mates only looked amused when Mayhem called Venom his work-husband.

Chase, Venom's daughter, was in lion cub form. She stopped biting at Venom's ankles and ran up to me. Chase wagged her tail.

"Hey cub, how are you this evening?" I asked, picking her up.

She licked my face, and I peered inside the enormous fridge.

"What are you looking for?" Mayhem asked, breaking away from his conversation with Venom.

They were talking about the MC's food budget, which didn't interest me one bit.

"Something to bring over to Colin's place," I said. I closed the fridge and looked inside the cabinets. Picking up what looked like an expensive bottle of wine, I said, "This would do."

I knew nothing about wine and I was more of a beer person myself. Tonight, I wanted to be a little fancy for Colin.

"Take this one instead," Venom said, picking another bottle and handing it to me.

Trusting Venom, I accepted the bottle.

"Since when did you become a wine expert?" I asked Venom.

"I'm not, but Casper's been teaching me some stuff," Venom said proudly.

Chase, seeing her papa, jumped on his shoulder. Her landing was perfect, and she lazily curled her tail around his neck.

Venom gave her back an affectionate pat. She sneezed.

I suddenly pictured Colin and me in his cabin. In this vision, I had done a massive expansion to our cabin, so it would fit Colin, me, and our two kids.

I could imagine a tiny daughter in her dragon form, flying around like a drunk bumblebee and a ferocious little son in bear cub form, roaring at his sister.

My chest squeezed tight with longing.

“You have a weird look on your face. It’s creepy,” Venom remarked.

“Venom, don’t be rude. He’s probably thinking about Colin. Do you have a romantic evening planned, Bash?” Mayhem asked.

“Uh, I figured we’d have a relaxing evening. Some dinner, then we’ll cuddle up in the living room and watch a movie together,” I said.

Venom snorted. “Boring. You should spice things up.”

“Ignore Venom’s advice. That’s a great plan. Best of luck tonight, Bash,” Mayhem said, grinning at me.

Spice things up? I looked at the wine in my hand and wondered if I should have planned this evening a little better.

Too late to make any last-minute changes. I bid Venom, Mayhem and Chase goodbye, then headed to Colin’s cabin.

## CHAPTER 8

# COLIN

My cellphone rang while I was checking on the chicken roasting in the oven. After Bash left this morning, I roped Adam into helping me prepare for this evening's date.

I did a quick grocery run for tonight's dinner. Adam also persuaded me to get a haircut.

I wore my hair long for most of my life. I started hating it when Dario used to drag me by the hair.

Maybe it was too short? I touched my hair again before grabbing my phone from the kitchen counter.

It could be Bash calling me to tell me he was running late. What if he decided to cancel our plans this evening?

That would disappoint me. I didn't recognize the number on the screen.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Colin, it's your uncle."

It took me a few seconds to realize it was Zane. We traded numbers at Adam's party, I recalled.

I simply didn't expect Zane to reach out to me this soon.

"Oh, hey Zane," I said.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Kind of. I'm about to go on a date," I admitted.



“Then I’ll keep this conversation short. Next Friday is my son’s eighth birthday. My mate and I would love it if you came by,” Zane said.

I paused, unsure of what to say. Zane genuinely seemed like a nice person, but experience taught me not to trust anyone easily.

Then again, I couldn’t deny I was curious about where I came from. Zane knew Saul, my alpha father.

I remembered the promise Bash made me—that he’d go with me if I took Zane up on his offer. That gave me the confidence to give Zane an immediate response.

“Okay, sure. I can do that. Can I bring a plus one?” I asked.

“Let me guess. It’s the same bear shifter who was with you at the bookstore opening?” Zane asked. “Venom mentioned his name was Bash?”

“That’s right,” I said. I didn’t elaborate further.

“Very well. I’ll ask Otis to prepare two extra plates at the table. I’m looking forward to seeing you again, Colin,” Zane said.

He gave me the directions to his home, which I scribbled on a piece of paper. Then Zane ended the call.

I stared at the note where I’d written his address for a few moments. I was really doing this, I thought. My anxiety spiked.

Bash told me to take it easy, but there was also no time like the present to get to know my long-lost family.

Besides, I wasn’t going there alone. Bash would be by my side the entire time. That thought gave me reassurance.

The door bell jolted me back awake. I took the chicken out of the oven before seeing who it was.

My visitor knocked again, and I opened the door. Bash looked wonderful.

Seeing Bash in a black blazer, buttoned-down shirt and black jeans told me he made the extra effort to dress up.

Bash held a bottle of wine in one hand and purple flowers in the other.

I wanted to throw myself right at him, trusting he'd catch me. Then I would wrap my legs around his waist and inhale his familiar scent.

Instead, I reminded myself to calm down and act civilized.

"These are for you. Picked them in the woods during my walk," Bash said. I accepted the flowers and wine.

"Come on in," I said, stepping back so he could enter.

"You look good," Bash said.

The alpha looked me up and down, and I had a sneaking suspicion he liked what he saw.

"I like what you did with your hair," Bash added.

"Really? You don't think it's too short?" I asked.

Bash closed the distance between us and ran his fingers through my hair.

"Not at all," Bash said. I placed the bottle of wine and flowers on a nearby table.

Then I tugged at Bash's shirt and stole a quick kiss from him. Bash quickly took control.

He settled one hand on the back of my neck and kissed me deep and true. I moaned into his mouth when he pulled away.

"Something smells good in the kitchen," Bash said. "What's for dinner?"

"Roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, sauteed garlic asparagus and apple pie for dessert," I said.

The widening of his eyes told me Bash was excited about dinner, which made all the preparation and effort worth it.

I took his coat, hung it on the rack, and led him to the kitchen. Bash helped me set the table while I plated the food.

"You're spoiling me," Bash said once we finally sat down to eat. "Thank you for cooking. Everything looks and smells so good. I can't wait."

“How was your day?” I asked while we dug into the food.

Seeing Bash looked so excited rekindled my appetite. I had been nervous about our date the entire day, so I barely had a bite to eat.

Finally, talking to Bash made me relax.

“Pretty productive. Venom assigned my brother and me to the same crew. We made a delivery run to a town that’s three-hour ride away from Moon Burrow,” Bash said, mouthful of chicken.

I handed him a paper napkin, and he thanked me.

“Are you and Bane usually assigned to the same missions?” I asked.

“Not all the time,” Bash said. He had seconds, and I reheated the apple pie because it had gotten cold. “How was your day?”

I told him about my trip to town with Adam and my haircut. Bash listened to every single word I said intently. A sharp contrast to Dario, who enjoyed hearing his own voice.

“One slices or two?” I asked Bash, knowing he loved sweets.

“Three,” Bash corrected, grinning at me.

“So, Zane called right before you knocked on my door,” I said.

“Yeah? What did he want?” Bash asked, taking a couple of bites of pie.

“He invited me to his home. He and his husband are throwing a party for their son,” I said. “I told him I’d only go if I bring a plus one.”

“And that plus one is me?” Bash asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively at me.

“Is that okay?” I asked.

“Of course. Where does he live?” Bash asked.

“Sky Stead. The town’s pretty far, probably half a day’s ride from here,” I said.

“Never heard of that town before. We’ll make it a fun road trip,” Bash said, grinning.

“Thank you. I don’t think I could do this on my own,” I confessed.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Bash said.

\* \* \*

After dessert, Bash helped me wash the dishes by hand since I didn’t own a dishwasher.

Working quietly silently side-by-side gave me a strange sense of peace.

Being with Bash was easy and comfortable. I could imagine us living together and tackling house chores like a team. A perfect picture of domestic bliss, except our lives wouldn’t be peaceful all the time.

Bash was a member of the Grizzly Reapers MC. It was part of who he was, and I didn’t want him to change. I didn’t expect him to. Bash loved his job and his MC brothers.

Peace and chaos—could Bash and I find some sort of balance?

As for myself? I was still a complete mess. Every day, I struggled to keep my life from falling apart.

My mind remained chained to the past, but maybe, with Bash’s help, I could finally break free.

We left the dishes to dry on the dish rack. Bash and I settled into the living room couch.

Adam and I had gotten the three-seater leather couch second-hand at a garage sale. It was barely used, and I considered it a steal.

Bash sat and patted the space next to him. I turned the TV on but muted it before settling on Bash’s lap.

He didn’t make a comment. Bash only banded one muscled arm around my waist to keep me from falling.

“You’ve suddenly gone quiet. Something bothering you?” Bash asked.

“Just thinking,” I answered absentmindedly.

“You do that a lot,” Bash pointed out.

“I’m thinking about what the future might hold for the two of us,” I whispered.

Part of me wondered if I was being too presumptuous. After all, this was our first official date.

Things could still go south between us. There were also plenty of fish in the water.

“Oh, I like the sound of that,” Bash said.

Bash’s answer gave me hope and the confidence I needed to ask my next question.

“Bash, tell me something,” I began.

“What?”

I took a deep breath. “Why did you settle for me?”

“I didn’t settle,” Bash replied with a scoff. “Colin, you’re a treasure. I’m elated you felt the same way about me.”

“You could have picked anyone,” I argued. “I’m damaged goods and you know it.”

A more callous alpha wouldn’t want an omega who previously belonged to another. Even worse, Dario’s old mate mark remained on my neck like an ugly brand.

It would fade in time, but looking at every day still filled me with disgust and horror.

Bash growled, and the sound made my heart race and the muscles in my back tense up.

I wondered if I said something I shouldn’t, but I was only telling Bash the truth.

Then Bash lifted my fingers, and kissed each one. Bash wasn’t mad, not really.

“I never want to hear you say those words again. You hear?” Bash didn’t wait for an answer. He continued, “You and me? We’re a perfect fit. Don’t you feel it?”

His words resonated with me. My dragon woke from its slumber and I swear I could almost feel the beast’s accusatory

stare.

Don't screw this up for us, it seemed to say. We waited our entire lives for this moment.

I was raised by wolves. My former pack mates always made it clear I wasn't a true member of their community.

I watched many wolves find their mates, fall in love and have offspring.

Until Venom introduced me to Zane, I thought there was no one else like me. It made me wonder if fate ever would assign me a mate.

It hadn't been Dario. Bash was the alpha I had been waiting for my entire life.

Despite my faults and what happened to me in the past, Bash accepted me for who I was.

"I do, but I wasn't completely certain. You're absolutely sure you want this, want me?" I asked.

My voice cracked. I had my share of doubts. Going down this road would be dangerous.

Bash was addictive. If I wasn't careful, I truly would fall deep and fast for him.

I never felt this strongly about anyone before. It was like going on a rollercoaster ride with no seatbelt on.

If Bash and I ended up not being compatible, I didn't think I could ever recover from such a blow.

One alpha took everything from me. I had nothing left to give Bash, except scraps of my heart.

If that was good enough for him, then there was nothing holding me back anymore from allowing my bear to claim me.

I pressed a hand against Bash's unshaven cheek. He slanted his warm mouth against mine, thrusting heat down my throat.

He tightened his embrace, pushing me forward until our chests and groins touched.

My entire body felt feverish with want. My dick pulsed in my jeans, ready for release.

Bash moved his free hand to my denim-covered crotch. He unbuttoned, then unzipped me, pulling out my prick.

Bash still hadn't let go of my mouth. He kissed me like he was terrified of letting me go.

I wanted to tell Bash I wasn't going anywhere, but I lost the ability to form actual sentences when he wrapped his fingers over my cock.

He stopped kissing me. Bash watched me intently while he gave me the best handjob of my life. I panted, gripped his biceps as he went faster.

"That's it, baby. I want to see you come undone for me."

His words only made me hornier. My prick thickened, and I groaned.

It didn't take long before I came all over his fingers. Bash lifted his hand to my face, and I licked them clean.

His eyes turned completely gold with lust. The evening was just beginning and I couldn't wait to see what happened next.

## CHAPTER 9



# BASH

Watching Colin clean his own jizz off my fingers proved too much. I told myself we would take things slow tonight. However, at this very moment, I had poor control over my beast.

Colin slid off my lap, then kneeled between my legs. I growled in approval as Colin undid my pants and freed my erection.

He licked his lips at the sight of my erect cock. Colin closed his fingers over the base of my shaft and I speared my fingers into his hair.

I tugged him close until his lips could touch the crown of my prick.

Colin went to work. He explored every single inch of me, kissing my veined length from root to tip. I groaned when Colin took my balls into my mouth and sucked on them.

“Stop teasing,” I said. “I won’t be able to take it anymore.”

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Colin closed his lips over my dick. He finally took me down his throat.

Colin gagged on the first try but succeeded in the second. Once my cock hit the back of his throat, Colin pulled up for air.

He bobbed his head up and down. My cock became hard as steel. Knowing I would reach my limit soon, I gave his hair a tug.

Colin held his mouth open while I pushed in and out of him. In moments, I came.

Colin took everything down his throat, not spilling a single drop. I leaned back against the sofa, panting and happy. Colin remained where he was, kneeling.

He rested his hand on my knee and I couldn't help but notice how hard he was for me. Now it was my turn to make him feel good.

"The best part comes next," I said.

I got off the couch and offered Colin my hand. He took it and the smile never disappeared from his face.

We undressed each other with care. There was no point in rushing. Colin and I wanted this evening to last forever.

Finally, the rest of our clothes fluttered to the floor. I kicked them to one side and tugged Colin close to me.

He let out a delightful laugh before resting his palm against the skin of my heart.

"Colin, let me know if we're going too fast. We can slow down," I told him.

"I've been waiting for this moment for a long time, Bash," Colin replied.

That was good enough for me. I slid my fingers into his hair and tugged him close for a kiss hard enough to draw blood.

Colin moaned into my mouth. I pushed my hand between our bodies and reached for his cock. I gave it a tug, making Colin gasp.

"How do you want me?" Colin asked.

"On fours," I said.

I helped get him into position and took a few seconds admiring everything about him.

Part of me still couldn't believe Colin was my fated mate. Back then, I thought it had been Travis.

Then Travis cheated on me, and I thought I could never recover from that blow. Meeting Colin had been an unexpectedly wonderful surprise.

Colin groaned when I gave his ass a slap. Without me needing to say a single word, Colin parted his legs wider, exposing his hole.

I positioned myself behind him, slid two fingers into him. Omega shifters were self-lubricating, and Colin was already wet and ready for me.

Still, I wasn't exactly small. I wanted to make sure Colin was ready for me.

Adding in a third finger, I prepped Colin for my access. He moaned and wiggled his ass at me.

"Please, Bash," he uttered.

That plea nearly undid me. I pulled my fingers away and positioned my cock in his asshole. Gripping his ass, I pushed in, slow and steady.

Colin gasped. Once I pushed past the thick ring of muscle, it became a lot easier.

Finally, I sheathed myself fully inside Colin. He was tight and perfect for me.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Move, Bash," he said.

I started with a steady rhythm which suited us both, before building up speed. Colin dug his nails into the wooden floorboards.

Every groan and cry of pleasure he uttered sounded like music to my ears.

Sweat covered both our bodies as I picked up the pace. As I pumped in and out of him, it occurred to me that never had I felt this connected to another living being.

It felt like a piece of my soul drifted out of my body to touch his.

My grizzly roared in approval. About time, he seemed to say. I pulled out of Colin and change the angle of my thrusts.

Colin whimpered, then arched his back. I knew I found his sweet spot.

I aimed for his prostate repeatedly. My balls tightened and every muscle in my body tensed. I was close to bursting.

I couldn't wait to fill Colin with my seed, to get him pregnant with my child.

Then there would be no breaking the bonds between us. Colin was born to be his mate.

At my next push, Colin screamed out my name. He shattered. I drove into him a few more times before reaching climax.

With a growl, I emptied my balls, filling Colin with my warmth. Satisfaction settled over me like a blanket.

At that moment, I knew I would do anything in my power to keep him. I pulled out of Colin and made a quick trip to his bathroom.

After snatching a clean towel, I returned to him and cleaned us both up.

Afterwards, we snuggled on the soft rug in front of the fireplace. Colin curled against me.

I wrapped my arms around him protectively, glad he was mine. If anyone tried to steal Colin away from me, there would be hell to pay.

"You good?" I had to ask, worried we might have taken things too far tonight. "I mean, I promised you we could go slow."

Colin laughed. "Better than good. I feel fantastic. I didn't know sex could be like that. Maybe because you're special?"

"You're the special one," I reminded him. "I'm honored you picked me."

I placed a kiss on his cheek. Colin let out what sounded like a happy sigh. Then he closed his eyes and rested his head on my chest.

I wasn't sure which I liked more—the actual sex or the sweet moment after.

“Stop worrying. I like this pace just fine,” Colin murmured. “I’m not as fragile as you think, Bash.”

“I know you’re not. Heck, the first time we met, I knew you were made of steel. You’re strong, Colin. Stronger than me,” I said.

“That’s not true,” Colin whispered. “I’m not sure what I would do without you.”

“You survived one monster. Colin, you didn’t let Dario break you. You’re still figuring out your next step. I only hope I could be of some help to you,” I told him.

“You give me a reason to wake up each morning, Bash,” Colin said.

Then he kissed me tenderly on the mouth.

“Do you think you can sleep tonight?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” Colin said. “No nightmares—I hope.”

“I’ll ward them away,” I said confidently. “You’ll see.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of freshly made coffee and croissants. My stomach let out an embarrassing rumble.

Opening my eyes, I saw Colin wasn’t lying next to me anymore. Sitting up, I stretched and yawned.

I hadn’t imagined last night. We really ended up sleeping in front of Colin’s fireplace. I rose to my feet and searched for my pants.

“Colin?” I called out. “I can’t find my pants.”

“They’re in the dryer. I washed your clothes before I started cooking,” Colin yelled back.

Smiling to myself, I made my way to the source of the heavenly scents. Colin took out a tray of croissants from the oven.

He set it down on the kitchen counter and batted my hand away when I tried to snatch one.

“They need to cool,” Colin said.

His gaze moved from my face to my assets. A blush appeared on his cheeks and neck.

Shifters were usually comfortable with nudity, but Colin seemed shyer than most shifters I knew.

I made my way to the washing area, which was right next to the kitchen. After fishing out my jeans from the dryer, I put them on.

Colin set two steaming mugs of coffee on the counter, as well as two plates of croissants.

He also brought out cream cheese, butter, and strawberry jam.

“I hope you don’t think I’m just going to eat one,” I told him. I bit into the soft and crumbling pastry and groaned. “These are delicious.”

“Thanks. I’ve been change up the recipe a little. I need a taste taster,” Colin said.

“I’ll gladly volunteer for that job,” I offered.

Colin smiled, then sipped his coffee when I grabbed another croissant.

“You don’t have to rush. I’m only eating one. The rest you can bring back. Maybe your brother would like one?” Colin asked.

I scoffed. “I’m not sharing these. You clearly made them for me, your honey sweet bear.”

Colin nearly choked on his coffee. “Did you just give yourself a nickname?”

“Don’t you like it?” I asked.

Colin brushed away crumbs from my beard. Then he touched my cheek. His expression softened.

Last night, Colin allowed me to see his vulnerable side, like what he was doing now.

Most of the time, he seemed guarded, especially with people he didn't know or trust.

"Sweet is a good adjective to describe you," Colin said, lowering his hand. "Sweet and patient."

"Most people would call me a brute or an asshole. Only with you will I show my softer side," I reminded him.

"That's a given. I'm your mate," he murmured. He suddenly looked at me with panicked eyes. "Am I really?"

I let out a whoop, hopped off the stool. Colin slid off his stool, looking uncertain. I enveloped him in a hug, and he relaxed against me.

"You finally acknowledged me as your mate," I said, beaming down at him. "I mean, I know we're still at the stage where we're getting to know each other, but this is progress."

Colin said nothing for a few moments, but I knew my reaction simply overwhelmed him. Bane always said I could be too loud and obnoxious sometimes.

Colin had always struck me as reserved and private. Maybe that was why the two of us worked so well together—we were exact opposites.

Someone knocked on the kitchen back door, and Colin jumped.

"Who is it?" I asked, sounding a little grumpy.

I was a little annoyed this visitor had the gall to interrupt our breakthrough moment.

"Who else?" returned a familiar voice.

I opened the door and growled at my brother.

"You asked me for these yesterday." Bane placed a bottle of pills in my hand.

Right. The sleeping pills I requested, I remembered. Bane didn't get the memo to leave and remained where he was.

I studied my brother a little closer. He had dark circles under his eyes.

It looked like he didn't get any sleep at all last night. Was he thinking about Jules and the Irontooth Clan?

"Bane, would you like some coffee and breakfast?" Colin asked.

"Don't mind if I do," Bane said, rubbing at his eyes.

"These are the pills I've mentioned," I told Colin, setting them on the kitchen counter.

"Thank you both," Colin said in that wonderfully soft voice of his.

I silently fumed at my brother as Colin pulled another stool for him at the counter.

Deciding I should help Colin out, I took out an extra plate and cutleries for Bane.

"Are these freshly made?" Bane asked.

Now he looked awake as he examined the croissant on his plate.

"I can make you something else if you like," Colin said, stiffening.

He completely misread my brother. Bane finished the pastry in three bites. He was about to reach for another, but I growled at him.

"What's your problem?" Bane asked me.

"You," I pointed out. "You always have perfect timing."

"There's plenty for everyone," Colin said.

Colin shot me a warning glare, which told me he didn't want Bane and me fighting in his kitchen.

"I'll behave," I told Colin.

"You better," Colin said, pouring Bane a cup of coffee.

"Where can I get one of him?" Bane asked me. I glowered at him, and he chuckled. "Relax, brother. I was only teasing."

"You wish. Finish your food and coffee quickly, so I can have Colin to myself again," I pointed out.



## CHAPTER 10

# COLIN

“You look different today, Colin,” Adam remarked the moment I entered Happy Books II.

I picked up the latest mystery book written by one of my favorite authors.

“Do I really?” I asked, flipping the book over to read the book blurb at the back.

I returned the book back on the display. Adam knew I didn’t come here to shop, although I would probably return on a later day to purchase that book.

“Yeah, you’re practically glowing,” remarked Corey, one of Adam’s raven shifters employees.

Corey recently joined the Moon Burrow Ravens, along with his older brother Simon, I recalled.

The raven omega was shy and reserved, as opposed to Adam. Adam always said what was on his mind, and that often got him into trouble.

Luckily for Adam, his mate Arrow always looked out for him, the way Bash did for me.

Just thinking of Bash made me curve my lips to a smile. Last night’s date ended spectacularly with the two of us in bed. It hadn’t been planned.

Bash told me he was fine with going slow. It turned out I was hungry to connect with Bash on a more intimate level.

Adam tugged at my arm and pulled me behind a tall bookshelf. Corey ignored us and served another customer who had just entered the store.

Business seemed to be doing well. I was happy for my friend.

“Did something happen between Bash and you?” Adam asked.

My best friend looked me up and down.

“Our date went better than expected,” I said.

Adam let out a groan of frustration when I didn’t elaborate further.

“Colin, don’t leave me hanging here. I have an idea. Corey, Simon, I’ll be taking my break. Will the two of you be fine minding the store?” Adam asked.

“Sure, not a problem,” Simon shouted from the back. “I’ll have my lunch break first, then Corey would take his. Would you be back by then?”

“Yes, not to worry,” Adam answered.

“Okay then,” Simon said.

Adam and I left the store. We walked past the cafe next door, which was owned by the MC, but ran by the ravens. I heard they made a wicked chocolate souffle.

“We’re not having coffee at Cool Beans?” I asked.

Adam shook his head. “Too many ravens would eavesdrop on our conversation. I don’t think you’d want that. They’re terrible gossips.”

“Right,” I agreed.

Maybe I could invite Bash on a coffee date, and we could share a souffle.

I probably needed to get my own souffle, I thought, remembering how much he loved desserts.

Adam choose a cafe three blocks away from his store. It was a cool day for a walk and neither of us sweated much by the time we arrive at our destination.

A few weeks ago, the walk would have tired me out, but I was taking daily walks ever since I moved to my cabin.

We both ordered iced lattes and found a table with a view of the opposite street.

Adam asked if I wanted to share a cheesecake, but I declined, because all that extra sugar might make me too overexcited.

“So, spill,” Adam said. He sipped his drink and eyed me. “Did Bash enjoy the dinner you made? Did he like your new haircut?”

“He enjoyed dinner and said he liked my hair short. Bash even had seconds and everything. We agreed to take things slow, but things became a little heated after the meal.”

I blushed, unable to help myself. No one ever called me shy, but I wasn't forthright like Adam either.

Before becoming friends with Adam, I never had someone I could confide in without reserve.

Sure, I felt comfortable sharing my secrets with Bash, but that was different.

I told Adam everything that went down the night before, while sparing him the more intimate bits.

Adam beamed when I got to the part about me agreeing with Bash that we were mates—potential mates, at the very least.

I was still afraid to put a label on our relationship. Bash was the one good thing in my life I never wanted taken away from me.

Happiness never lasted long from my personal experience. I hoped my relationship with Bash was the exception.

“Finally, Bash knocked some sense into you,” Adam said.

“Excuse me?” I asked, pretending to act offended.

“I mean, it took longer than I expected for the two of you to realise you're fated mates,” Adam pointed out. “Arrow even suggested setting you up with a blind date or two. Some bears had asked Arrow about you.”

“Well, there are complications. Issues we both still need to resolve,” I admitted.

Wait. What did Adam say earlier?

Other bear shifters were interested in me? I dismissed the thought immediately, because Bash was the only one for me.

“What issues?” Adam asked, furrowing his brows.

Bash knew I was close with Adam, so I didn’t think he would mind. I told Adam about the current obstacles in our lives.

I only briefly mentioned Bash’s run-in with his former clan mates. Adam seemed more interested in Zane than in Bash’s personal problem, which relieved me.

“I don’t think I recalled you ever mentioning you have blood relatives,” Adam mused out loud. “Are you sure this Zane guy is legit?”

I drank my coffee. I talked so much that the ice had melted.

“I didn’t know I had any relatives either. Venom said he knew Zane from way back, so I trust Venom,” I admitted. “All my life, I thought I was the only one. I mean, I read online that a few of my kind still existed, but I always assumed it was make believe.”

“So, are you excited to meet Zane and his family this Friday? Today’s Monday, so you still have a few days to prepare for your trip,” he said.

“Or change my mind,” I muttered. “If Bash didn’t agree to come with me, I never would have said yes.”

“Aren’t you curious about your relatives?”

“Relatives I never heard of until now?” I asked warily. “But I want to know more about my parents and where I came from. Zane knows that.”

“You made an excellent point there.” Adam looked thoughtful. “Good thing you have a grizzly protector by your side. These Moon Burrow Bears—they won’t let anything happen to their mates.”

“Are you referring to Arrow or Bash?” I couldn’t help but tease.

“Both,” Adam answered in a solemn voice.

“Also, I’m sick of being stuck in my cabin,” I muttered. “I think I’m going to look for a job.”

Adam raised an eyebrow. “What brought this up?”

“I don’t know. Bash always seems busy with his work. I don’t like feeling useless,” I admitted.

“Colin, don’t be too hard on yourself. You’ve literally walked through hell,” Adam pointed out. “It’s okay to take some time off.”

“But having too much extra time is counterproductive as well,” I said.

I wasn’t exactly hurting for cash. Rent was free. Despite my attempts to convince Venom I wanted to pay, he dismissed it.

Where did my tidy savings come from? Dario made the mistake of opening a joint bank account with me while he had been alive.

When Dario passed away, all his remaining money went to me.

Part of me had been initially reluctant to use it. After all, it was blood money, but Adam and Bash convinced me to think of it as payment for all the pain and suffering Dario put me through.

“What did you do before Dario took you?” Adam asked me.

“I minded the general the pack owned. Nothing exciting,” I told Adam. “Instead of having a watch wolf, the pack had a watch dragon, so no one would be stupid enough to steal our merchandise. That used to be the pack’s running joke.”

“Have you ever thought about confronting your adoptive father?” Adam asked.

“I do. Plenty of times, but what good would that do?” I ventured.

I could hear the bitterness and old anger in my voice. Adam rose to his feet and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry for bringing that up. If you want something to do, maybe you can come work for me?” Adam suggested.

“At the bookstore?” I asked, suddenly interested. “Don’t you already have a full roaster?”

“Well, Simon asked if he could take some time off. Personal business. I didn’t push, but I’m looking for a part-time employee to fill his shoes. Interested?” Adam asked.

“I am. Should I head back to the store and fill up an application form?” I asked.

Adam chuckled and shook his head. “We can do the paperwork another day. Welcome on board, Colin. We’re happy to have you. Can you start tomorrow? Simon could train you before he leaves.”

“Tomorrow sounds good,” I answered.

Books had always been my escape growing up. Working at a bookstore alongside my best friend sounded fun.

While I couldn’t picture myself working at Adam’s store forever, it was a start.

I walked Adam back to the store so we could chat a little more. Adam told me more about his home life.

“Arrow looked so nervous when we dropped Harry Colin off at daycare this morning,” Adam was telling me. He chuckled. “The teacher looked so terrified when he growled at her.”

“Did he let Harry go?” I asked.

“After some persuasion from me, yeah,” Adam said.

His phone beeped, and he plucked it from his pocket. Adam frowned after reading the text message.

Gut instinct told me something wasn’t completely fine at the store.

“Adam? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Corey just texted me. Simon went out for lunch, so it’s just him at the store. He says two troublesome customers just entered,” Adam said worriedly. “Corey might not look it, but he’s pretty reliable. He won’t contact me unless he’s really worried.”

I digested that and asked, “What about the cameras in the store?”

“I can’t access the shop’s security feed right now. They’re down at the moment. A technician was supposed to come down tomorrow to fix it.” Adam let out a frustrated sigh.

We both picked up the pace and practically ran back to Happy Books II. I knew how much the bookstore meant to Adam.

Guilt hit me as I remembered setting fire to Adam’s first store under Dario’s painful orders.

Adam constantly reminded me he didn’t blame me for that incident, but I never forgave myself for the act.

Disobeying Dario had one painful consequence. I felt like I was being flayed alive.

The mate bond between an alpha and omega was supposed to be special, not tainted.

Dario didn’t just make me feel like a prisoner, but a puppet without a will of my own.

Maybe if I endured the pain a little longer... no. I told myself I would stop mulling over the sins I had committed in the past.

The least I could do was help Adam out in the present.

Arrow wasn’t here with us, but I could be Adam’s bodyguard if the need arose. I hadn’t needed to hurt anyone ever since Arrow and Adam killed Dario.

Protecting those I cared about was different from doing what I was told because I didn’t have a choice.

“I sent a quick text to Arrow, but he’s in a meeting right now,” Adam said.

“Let me text Bash as well, but I think he’s at that same meeting,” I said.



After firing Bash a text, Adam and I resumed our fast walk.  
We would just need to deal with this problem ourselves.

## CHAPTER II

# COLIN/ BASH

C OLIN

BY THE TIME we reached the store, we were both out of breath. I reached for the door handle first. Adam huffed at me as I elbowed him out of the way and entered first.

At first, the empty store stumped me. Then the smell of wet dog hit my nose. I narrowed my eyes as I spotted the two bear shifters.

They were chatting with a nervous-looking Corey, who stood behind the cash register.

I recognized one bear shifter. When I first met Travis, it was in the darkened alleyway behind Adam's store. Under the afternoon light, he looked as smug as I remembered.

Travis brought another bear alpha with him, but it wasn't Dino. Travis' companion reminded me of a bodybuilder.

He was in his late thirties, had thinning brown hair and unfriendly golden eyes. The alpha didn't bother hiding his aggressive aura, either.

No wonder Corey looked pale as a ghost. If Simon had been here, Corey wouldn't be in this spot of trouble, but somehow, Travis and his friend got lucky with their timing.

Another unpleasant thought entered my head. Maybe Travis and his friend timed their entrance perfectly.

They probably watched the store from outside and waited until Simon, who they perceived to be a threat, left for his break.

Doubts crept inside me. Was I overthinking everything? Adam took a step toward them, but I stopped him by grasping his arm.

“Adam, I got this,” I said.

Adam gave me a questioning look, but nodded. I approached Travis and his friend.

The alpha growled at me but looked a little stumped when I gave him a bored look. I had faced down more terrifying enemies before.

Placing my hands in the pockets of my jeans, I addressed Travis.

“What are you doing here, Travis? Bash and Bane made it explicitly clear you’re not welcomed here,” I stated.

Travis ignored my warning completely. Not surprised, I crossed my arms.

I wondered where Dino was, and why Travis brought another bear alpha with him instead.

Dino was the current lead alpha of the Irontooth Clan. He didn’t strike me as the cunning sort, simply a guy trying to keep his clan together.

Maybe Dino didn’t know about Travis’ plans?

“We were looking for you, human,” Travis said with disdain.

I disliked Bash’s ex-boyfriend more and more. What had Bash been thinking when he dated Travis?

We were all young once, I reminded myself.

“Your cute friend here has been keeping us company,” the unnamed alpha said.

He flashed Corey his yellowing, sharp teeth. He held out his left hand, which he’d shifted to sharp claws—an obvious threat.

Corey couldn't meet anyone's eyes. Adam bristled next to me. My heart raced.

It occurred to me I had never found myself in such a difficult position before.

Before I met Bash, Adam, and the other shifters in Moon Burrow, I was used to being on my own. Putting my new friends in danger wasn't an option.

"I'll keep this simple. Come with us peacefully, Colin. No one else will get hurt," Travis said.

"Where do you plan on taking him?" Adam demanded. "Colin's staying here with us."

"I wasn't speaking to you, omega," Travis said with a sneer. "You're not important, so just keep your mouth shut and everything will be right as rain."

"You're an omega, too. Why are you saying that word like it's something foul?" Adam demanded.

I silenced Adam with a look. Travis probably assumed he had the upper hand here, considering his friend was the only alpha in the store.

He and his friend didn't know what I was or what I was capable of. I didn't blame them.

Most paranormals, even shifters, had a hard time identifying a dragon shifter.

I wasn't scared of Travis or his guard dog, but I was worried about causing damage to Adam's beloved store.

Even worse, what if Adam and Corey got hurt in the process? This was Bash and my problem.

Adam and Corey should have never been involved in the first place. An idea struck me.

"Why don't we take this conversation outside?" I asked.

My dragon stirred inside me, but I wasn't ready to let it out, at least not yet. The beast paced inside me, eager to let loose.

I remembered my recent nightmares and the overpowering smell of burning flesh. Nausea hit me suddenly.

I reminded myself I was doing this to save my friends. No one controlled me anymore. Dario was dead, and I made my own decisions now.

Travis gave me a smile so big it was as if he won the lottery. He probably thought he rattled me.

“What a brilliant suggestion. Lead the way, Colin,” Travis said.

“Colin, are you sure about this?” Adam asked, voice wrought with worry. “You don’t need to go with these two. We can figure something out together.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can defend myself, remember?” I reminded my best friend.

Adam still looked reluctant, but he bit his lower lip and nodded.

“Aw, the human took some defense classes and probably thought that would help him,” Travis told his alpha friend in a mocking voice.

Keep calm, I reminded myself. The alpha snorted. These two thought very little of humans or omegas, I mused.

“Why does he keep calling Colin human?” I overheard Corey asking Adam.

“Hush you,” Adam warned. “Don’t let the cat out of the bag.”

“This way,” I said loudly enough to grab the attention of our unwanted visitors.

Both Travis and his friend had sharp ears. I assumed they had ignored Corey’s words. I led the way to the back of the store.

The spot between my shoulder blades itched with discomfort. No shifter enjoyed exposing their back to potential enemies, but I was confident I could take one alpha and one smug omega bear shifter.

Spotting a windowless black van bearing out-of-state license plates parked nearby made me uneasy.

I remembered feeling lost and confused when I woke up tied to Dario's bed. The feeling of complete helplessness never really went away.

That incident taught me that even dragon shifters weren't invincible.

I laughed and pretended I wasn't scared or nervous. While I believed I had the upper hand at this moment, these two could have a trick or two up their sleeves.

"Travis, you're so predictable. Isn't that the same spot where Dino and you parked your car the last time you came to visit?" I asked.

"Luigi, shut him up. The human annoys me," Travis said in a dramatic voice.

He pinched his forehead like he was having a headache. Luigi turned his unfriendly eyes towards me. He took a step towards me and halted.

I felt my eyes change. Luigi was probably wondering if my slitted eyes were a trick of the light.

"Where's Dino, by the way? Got bored with your company?" I asked Travis.

"Dino is doing a noble job holding the clan together. You can thank your selfish boyfriend for putting you in this mess," Travis said. "Luigi, enough playing around. Take him."

Without warning, Luigi rushed me with claws and fangs.



## **BASH**

AFTER SEEING Coin's distressed text, I got out of my seat. Then I remembered I was in the middle of a budget meeting. Something Bane and I took turns attending, because talking about money didn't interest either of us.

Too bad Venom expected certain senior members of the MC to attend such meetings.

I enjoyed hollering orders to newbies and seeing initially uncooperative bears become valuable MC members.

However, I never had the patience for administrative-related tasks.

“And where are you going? We’re not even halfway done,” Mayhem said.

I remembered bolting out of my chair but not running to the door.

“He’s going to say he needs to use the restroom again,” Arrow complained.

“My mate’s in trouble. I need to leave,” I said, holding out my phone screen.

Venom, who was closest to me, squinted at the screen. I wanted to ask if he needed reading glasses, then decided now wasn’t the right time to make jokes.

When I was nervous, I tried to be funny.

“Colin and you are officially mates?” Axel asked, scratching his head. He looked at Arrow. “When did that happen?”

“Not yet, but we’re working towards that direction. Anyway, I don’t have time to explain. That’s why I need to leave,” I said, looking Venom in the eyes.

“Does this involve the visitors Bane talked to me about before?” Venom asked.

“Maybe, maybe not. I only know Colin needs me right now,” I said.

Gut instinct told me Venom’s suspicions were right. Travis could never take a hint.

Would he be foolish enough to go after Colin in Moon Burrow?

Dino would have shown more restraint, unless Travis came here without telling his mate. The thought made my grizzly



restless.

“Go then,” Venom said. “Mayhem will give you a rundown of the meeting later.”

“What fun,” Mayhem grumbled under his voice.

I left the conference room and headed for the doors. Bane was in the parking lot, cleaning his motorcycle while chatting with Greed.

He noticed me and matched my pace.

“What’s going on? You’re in a hurry,” Bane said.

“Colin,” was all I could say. I mounted my Harley. Bane frowned.

“Need back-up?” Bane asked.

I shook my head. Bane was supposed to be leaving for another delivery job this afternoon, I remembered.

“I can handle this one on my own,” I said.

“Be careful,” Bane warned.

I revved my engine and sped toward the town center. I probably drove past the speed limit, but I didn’t care.

Thoughts of Colin being injured or hurt by someone only fueled my grizzly’s anger.

After finding a parking spot opposite Adam’s store, I rushed inside.

It occurred to me I forgot to wear my helmet. Colin always scolded me when I did that. I found Adam talking in hushed tones to Corey.

“What happened here?” I demanded. “Where’s Colin?”

If Colin and I were truly mated, I would have been able to sense him from a mile away and read his emotions.

Frustration mounted inside me. My grizzly hovered near the surface of my skin.

“He took the two bear shifters outside.” As soon as Adam got those words out, my grizzly ripped out of me.

I quickly undressed before I completely ruined my clothes.

Corey gasped. Ignoring him, I focused on the change. Fur covered my body. Bones broke. Shifting always hurt, but I hadn't shifted for the day, so I knew it wouldn't take long.

Despite being in mid-shift, I ran towards the back of the store. In my animal form, I was larger than even most bear shifters.

That made me both destructive and clumsy. I knocked down a display of keychains in my haste, and a couple of books.

I would need to apologize to Adam later on. Someone, probably Colin, left the back door open. Smart mate.

"Get in the van or Luigi will need to make things unpleasant," said a familiar voice.

It hit me then. Travis and whoever Luigi was, planned on kidnapping Colin. Travis probably figured he'd use Colin as bait.

"No, I'm not going anywhere." Colin didn't sound panicked or scared, but he was probably just putting up an act.

Anyone would be terrified of this situation.

I ran outside, letting out a roar of challenge. Travis stood right next to a black windowless van. The door was opened.

There were no seats inside, but I glimpsed chains bolted to the floor. Fury filled me.

I didn't know the alpha with Travis, and I didn't care. The alpha, Luigi, I assumed, backed away at the sight of me.

"You never told me he's a monster," Luigi told Travis, his tone slightly accusatory.

I wondered where Travis had picked this guy up. He might have had the frightening look down, but he didn't look like a fighter to me.

"That's why we need him," Travis said. "Only a monster can take down monsters."

"If you call my mate that word again, you and your friend won't leave this alleyway alive," Colin said in an icy voice I

had not heard in a long while.

Colin stepped next to me. Didn't Travis and Luigi sense the temperature in the air changing?

Travis tugged the front of his sweat-soaked shirt and glared at Colin. Luigi, meanwhile, looked at Colin, a little uncertain now.

"You dare threaten me, human?" Travis asked.

"I don't know what that thing is, but he isn't human," Luigi whispered.

Insulting me was one thing, but calling my mate a thing? That broke the straw. My restraint over my grizzly broke, and the beast took over.

"Bash, wait," Colin called out.

Ignoring him, I came at Luigi like a rampaging bull. Satisfaction filled me as my claws sunk into his leg. Luigi screamed and tried to kick at me.

The other alpha didn't even bother shifting. I eyed his throat and debated ending his life at that moment.

"Screw this," Travis said.

Like a craven, Travis yanked open the driver's door and got in.

"Bash, should I stop him?" Colin asked me, his voice eerily calm.

Travis started the engine. When I glanced back at Colin, I saw his gold eyes were glowing.

A forked tongue slid out of his mouth. Colin flashed me a wicked smile.

I growled, basically telling him to let Travis go. Guilt of his past actions haunted Colin every single night. I didn't want Travis' death to eat at his conscience as well.

"Don't kill Luigi. He might give you some answers," Colin said.

My mate approached me and placed a hand my furry shoulder. His touch brought me back to reality. I looked down at my

prey.

My initial bloodlust had disappeared completely. Luigi was no longer moving, but he was unconscious, not dead, I realized.

Colin was right. Luigi would be of more use to us alive.

## CHAPTER 12

# BASH

“Just leave Luigi to Bane and me. We’re very good at getting answers,” I told Colin.

Colin didn’t look the least bit reassured by my words. Colin sat on the edge of my bed and fingered my sheets.

After the failed kidnapping incident yesterday, Bane and I put Luigi in a holding cell under the MC clubhouse.

Colin also stayed over. Neither of us were in the mood for sex, so we simply watched some TV before falling asleep in each other’s arms. It was heavenly.

“That’s what I’m worried about. You two might overdo it,” Colin said.

I sat down and Colin leaned his head against my shoulder. Reaching for his hand, I clasped his fingers.

“Adam certainly had a lot to say about the incident,” I commented.

In fact, the other omega kept harping about it so much, Arrow had to steal him away with the promise of sex.

“Can you blame him? Travis and Luigi threatened one of his employees. Corey has been hurt by an alpha before,” Colin pointed out.

“I remember. You seem oddly calm. It was you they were targeting,” I reminded my mate.

“I was indifferent on the outside, but deep down?” Colin let out a shudder.

He had that same blank-eyed look on his face again, which told me his mind had taken him back to his past.

“Talk to me, Colin,” I urged. “It might make you feel better afterwards.”

“Seeing their windowless van reminded me this wasn’t the first time I’d been taken,” Colin murmured. “When I found myself restrained to Dario’s bed, I was angry, scared, and frustrated at the same time. I never want to experience that again.”

“Travis and Luigi failed,” I reminded him gently. “I’ll make sure nothing bad will ever happen to you.”

Anger slowly simmered inside me. I knew Travis didn’t possess a lick of sense but he crossed the line when he tried to take Colin from right under my nose.

“Just reminiscing about the past,” Colin reassured me. He gave my fingers a squeeze. “I’ll be fine.”

“What they tried to do was unacceptable,” I said. “They would pay for their actions dearly, Travis included.”

“Bash, can you tell me what happened between Travis and you?” Colin asked.

I took a deep breath. If Colin were to stand by my side as my mate, he needed to know everything about me, including the mistakes I had committed in the past.

No secrets should exist between mates.

“Bane and I were born and raised in the Irontooth Clan. We shared the same alpha father. Craig used to be an enforcer for the clan. He raised the two of us to be protectors, fighters,” I began.

“Is Craig still living with the clan?” Colin asked.

I shook my head. “He passed away during my senior year in highschool. Bane and I basically did what we did best—taking care of the clan’s dirty business. That included getting rid of traitors and outsiders,” I answered.

“All that killing must’ve placed a heavy burden on both your souls,” Colin said.

“It bothered me at first, but after a while, it no longer did,” I answered.

Colin touched my cheek. I looked deep into his eyes and knew I couldn’t lie to him.

My dragon saw me for who I really was—both my good traits and my bad.

“It leaves a mark,” Colin said.

I remembered Colin had trouble sleeping. The ghosts of all the lives he had taken still haunted him, so he understood what Bane and I had gone through before.

“It does,” I agreed. “But Bane and I considered it a small price to pay to keep our clan safe.”

“When did Travis enter the picture?” Colin asked.

“Travis transferred from a large bear clan in the city. All the alphas in the Irontooth Clan were awestruck when he arrived. Everyone wanted Travis to be their mate. Then he picked me. Bane warned me to be careful of Travis. I didn’t listen. I only found out later on why Travis took interest in me,” I said.

Thinking of how Travis fooled me into believing he truly cared for me only worsened the growing rage in my belly.

Colin kissed me softly on the mouth, and some of my anger evaporated. I could think clearly again.

The past was irreversible, but the present was wonderful, thanks to Colin’s presence.

After years of searching and painful longing, fate had finally led me to my thoughtful and sweet mate.

“What did Travis do?” Colin pressed.

“It turned out he was seeing another alpha—Dino, behind my back. Those two had been plotting to unseat the current lead alpha Ignacio. Ignacio was getting on in years, but he was wise.”



I shook my head. I still regretted what I did to this day.

After taking a deep breath, I continued, “Travis told me Ignacio had hurt him. I believed his lie and killed Ignacio in a fit of anger.”

“He used you.” Colin sounded pissed for my sake and my dragon seldom lost his temper.

“That’s right. Bane wanted to plead my case to the other high-ranking members of the clan, but Travis had planned everything beforehand. The alphas drove Bane and me out of clan lands, leaving us half dead on the road,” I said bitterly.

“Bash.” Colin wrapped his slender arms around my bulky body. “I’m sorry your former clan mates were jerks. They all deserve to die for all the physical and mental wounds they left on you and your brother.”

“Bane and I got lucky. We bumped into Venom during our nomad days. He invited us to stay in Moon Burrow for a few days. We never thought we’d end up staying here,” I said.

I relaxed in Colin’s comforting embrace. Most of my MC brothers only saw my aggressive and wild side.

I only allowed myself to let my guard down around my mate.

“I changed my mind. Do what you want with Luigi. Make him hurt. Make them all hurt.”

Colin’s eyes burned with obvious hatred.

I planted a kiss on his tempting and soft mouth.

“You’re cute like this, but dangerous, too. Bane and I will play nice. Aren’t you late for your first day of work?” I asked him.

Colin checked his wristwatch and blinked.

“You’re right. Adam opens the store in ten minutes. I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, let’s have lunch together,” I agreed. I gave Colin a goodbye kiss on the cheek. “Let me give you a ride to the bookstore.”

Colin shook his head. “I’m good. I’ll take the bus.”

I frowned, not sure about leaving Colin on his own after what happened.

Images of Colin chained and unconscious in the back of Travis' filthy van made my inner grizzly seethe.

"Colin, you don't know when Travis might strike," I pointed out.

"I don't think Travis will show his face in Moon Burrow so soon," Colin said, his tone reasonable.

On one hand, I agreed with Colin's assessment. I didn't want to let Colin out of my sight again, either.

I knew how tough he was. If I hadn't appeared in that alleyway, Travis and Luigi might have been treated to the glorious sight of an angry, flame-throwing dragon.

Still, Colin's admission of fear made me realise that despite being a dragon shifter, Colin wasn't invulnerable.

Someone Colin thought he could trust—his adoptive father, the man who raised him—sold him out to Dario.

Both Colin and I had experienced betrayal. We shared the same pain.

"Colin, have you ever thought of getting back at Pierre?" I asked.

"Funny. Adam asked me that question the other day," he said. "Fine, I'll accept your ride. Will that make you feel better?"

"Of course." We left my room.

Fifteen minutes later, I dropped Colin off at the bookstore. It looked like we got there in time, because Corey and Simon were standing outside the locked door.

Both raven shifters were sipping coffee. Adam was late? That was odd.

Seeing Colin's entire body tense up told me Colin was worried about Adam as well.

Someone parked a minivan right in front of my motorcycle and Adam got out, whistling under his breath.

“Remember, it’s your turn to pick up Harry from daycare today,” Adam told Arrow, who I guessed was driving.

Adam then spotted all of us, then hurried to the store to open up.

“He’s fine,” Colin said, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Arrow probably distracted him this morning,” I said loudly enough that Corey and Simon chuckled.

Adam gave me a withering stare before entering the bookstore. Colin let out a carefree laugh, and that made me look at him.

“What?” Colin asked me after.

“You never answered my question earlier,” I pointed out.

“I thought of confronting Pierre plenty of times, but I’m not ready right now,” Colin admitted.

“Alright. You let me know when you want to do that and I’ll come with you,” I said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Colin said, giving me a strained smile.

“Have a good day,” I told him.

By the time I returned to the MC clubhouse, Bane had already started work on Luigi.

The holding cells in the basement were created to hold multiple prisoners.

Most of the time, we used the cells to protect bear alphas who had control issues. That would prevent them from harming themselves or others.

The bars of every cell were lined with silver, which harmed and weakened shifters severely.

Bane and I put Luigi in the farthest cell. We had handcuffed Luigi to the wall.

I opened the door and joined Bane. Luigi didn’t sport any bruises or cuts yet, which told me my brother was being gentle with him.

“Did he give you anything useful?” I asked Bane.

Bane chuckled. “Oh, yeah. It seems Travis has struck again. Luigi tells me he only joined the Irontooth Clan a month ago.”

“Travis said he’d leave Dino for me if I helped him,” Luigi muttered.

The bear alpha couldn’t meet our gazes. He mostly stared at the floor. The hurt in his voice seemed genuine.

“You believed Travis? Travis wears Dino’s mate mark on his neck,” I pointed out.

“Travis said it didn’t matter. That our love would overcome mating marks. I sound like a fool, don’t I?” Luigi buried his face in his hands.

“If he’s acting, then he’s fantastic,” I told my brother.

“I don’t think he is. Luigi claims he was a simple car sales agent who minded his own business before Travis convinced him to join the Irontooth Clan,” Bane said.

“Travis said he saw something in me. Told me I was special and that I would be a welcomed addition to his clan. He was a better salesman than I ever was,” Luigi grumbled.

Luigi punched his fist into the wall before regretting it.

He groaned, rubbing his bruised fingers. Luigi started babbling about his one-sided love story. Bane and I didn’t even need to ask him questions.

I suddenly felt like a priest in a confessional or a close confidant. Hearing Luigi bare his heart out to complete strangers made me feel sorry for him.

If Luigi was telling us the truth, which I suspected he was, then he was just a victim.

I kneeled in front of Luigi, and he cringed. My grizzly wanted a good look at this poor alpha Travis had tricked into doing his bidding, so I knew my eyes had changed to gold.

“Tell me more,” I said. “Why did you think Travis recruited you?”

Luigi scoffed. “I closed my business and packed up my bags. I gave up everything to be with him. When I arrived at New

Dawn Valley, I wasn't the only new alpha there," he said. "After speaking to the new recruits, I found out Travis convinced them to join the clan as well."

I rose to my feet slowly, processing his words.

"So Travis has been doing some kind of mass recruitment? Why?" I questioned.

"He knew a challenger would arrive to unseat Dino," Bane answered for the both of us.

"Challenger? Do you mean the polar bears?" Luigi asked.

I narrowed my eyes, noting he used the word bears. Plural. "What polar bears?"

"The Irontooth Clan has been at war with a small clan of polar bears alphas for over a year," Luigi said with a snort. "They're all brothers. Five of them, all tough as nails. Monsters like you two."

"Thank you for being cooperative, Luigi," I said.

"Wait. What will happen to me? Are you going to kill me?" Luigi asked.

"No, but you'll need to stay here a little longer until we verify all the information you've told us," I said.

"Okay." Luigi didn't argue.

He simply slumped against the wall in defeat. That was me five years ago, I thought numbly, before exiting the cell with Bane.

## CHAPTER 13

# COLIN

“Colin, do you need help with those books?” Adam asked me.

I blinked, realizing I was only halfway done restocking the shelves with this month’s popular releases.

“Sorry, I got distracted,” I admitted. I quickly finished up my task and noticed Adam hadn’t left. “Is there something else you’d like me to do?”

“I’m worried about you. After what happened yesterday, you didn’t need to come to work today,” Adam said.

“Why? Corey did. Neither of us is fragile,” I pointed out reasonably.

“Damn right, my little brother’s tough as nails. So are you, Colin,” Simon muttered as he passed us.

Simon carried an armful of boxes containing more books. The raven alpha must have overheard Adam and me talking.

Adam rolled his eyes. We worked in silence for a little while.

“Then what are you worried about? I can see it in your eyes. Is it Bash?” Adam pressed.

“Bash and Bane are interviewing Luigi right now,” I said.

Interviewing seemed like a more polite word to use than interrogating.

“Is Luigi the bear alpha from yesterday’s attack? I’m surprised Bash hasn’t ripped out his throat yet. Isn’t Bash the think-before-he acts sort?”

“He is, but I convinced him that Luigi might give us answers.”

My phone beeped right at that second. The message was from Bash, informing me that Bane and he were done asking Luigi questions.

“They intend to let go Luigi go?” Adam asked, reading Bash’s message over my shoulder.

“I guess they didn’t consider Luigi that much of a threat? Luigi didn’t seem all that tough to me, and Travis always struck me as the real mastermind,” I said.

“That omega is a real piece of work,” Adam said with a shudder.

No longer worried about Bash and Bane, I could focus on my work tasks.

Before I knew it, lunchtime rolled around. Bash came by like he promised.

At the store, we took turns having lunch. Today, I would go first, then Adam, then lastly, Corey and Simon. The following day, I would go last.

The moment Bash walked through the doors wearing a big, familiar grin on his handsome face, I practically melted.

Then Bash swept me in his arms, not caring about my co-workers or the browsing customers. He planted a passionate kiss on my mouth.

“While you two are cute and all, take the kissing outside,” Adam yelled from behind the counter.

“Didn’t we catch Adam making out with Arrow in the storeroom the other day?” Simon asked Corey.

Stifling a laugh, I grabbed Bash’s inked arm and led him outside, where we both took our time, enjoying each other.

“Missed me much?” Bash asked after he released my mouth.

“Plenty,” I admitted.

Bash and I headed to the cafe next door. We both ordered BLT sandwiches, iced lattes, and a chocolate souffle to share.



Zack, the cafe manager and the lead alpha of the ravens, stopped by our table.

“Colin, I heard what you did for Corey yesterday. Thank you for protecting him,” Zack said.

“I didn’t really do anything,” I admitted. “Just led those two bear shifters outside.”

“You risked your neck so Corey and Adam wouldn’t come to harm,” Zack pointed out.

“That’s my mate,” Bash declared so loudly, several heads, including some bears and raven shifters, turned.

Blushing, I focused on eating my food instead. Zack chuckled before returning to managing the cafe.

“You don’t really have a filter, don’t you?” I asked Bash.

“Isn’t that what you like about me?” Bash teased.

I didn’t disagree with him. Bash then told me all the information Luigi gave them.

“And you’re certain he’s telling the truth?” I asked.

“His information is solid. Bane made a few calls and consulted with our resident hacker. Locals living in New Dawn Valley recounted seeing these polar bear shifters.”

“It sounds like your former clan has a real problem,” I said. “Have you and Bane decided on that to do?”

“Bane hasn’t given me a direct answer when I pressed him after the interrogation. Me? I’m staying right here,” Bash said. “Anyway, let’s change the topic. Still nervous about meeting Zane and his family this Friday?”

“A little,” I admitted. “But the nerves will pass.”

We finished our meal. Bash walked me back to the store. I gave him a goodbye kiss before heading inside.

Tonight, we planned on having dinner at my cabin. Bash volunteered to cook, so I was looking forward to our meal.

Things were relatively quiet at the store. Mondays were a little slow. I remembered Adam telling me that earlier.

Around 4 pm, Venom strolled in. Corey looked downright terrified of him, which I supposed was a typical reaction from most humans and paranormals.

Poor Venom, I thought. He was just like my Bash. Their looks might intimidate regular folk, but they had good hearts.

Venom ignored Corey, and the lone customer that quickly exited the store. He headed right for me.

“Venom, did you just scare of our only customer?” Demanded Adam from behind one shelf.

“Not my fault,” Venom grumbled. “Mrs. Grubber has always had a thing for me.”

Mrs. Grubber was an eighty-something widow who lived nearby. She ran a book club. When she heard Adam was opening a store in this area, she was elated. At least that was what the old woman told me while we chatted about books earlier.

“Did Venom just make a joke?” Corey whispered to Simon.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” I asked him.

“Heard you’re here.” Venom looked around the store. “Working here doesn’t suit you.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked. “I love books.”

“Yes, but you’ll get bored, eventually,” Venom said.

Venom browsed the section we were in and picked up two popular children’s books. I guessed he was getting them for his daughter.

I wasn’t exactly sure where this conversation was going. Venom terrified me on some level, I would have to admit, but I also had plenty of respect for him.

It couldn’t be easy, managing a large clan of restless and rowdy bear alphas.

This alpha had given Bash and Bane a place to put down roots, a place to call home, I reminded myself.

For that reason alone, I would forever be grateful to him.

“What exactly is your point?” I finally asked.

“Come with me. Adam, I’m borrowing Colin for a little while,” Venom said loudly.

Venom didn’t even wait for me to agree or disagree. Adam protested, but Venom simply started for the door.

I stared at Venom’s retreating back for a few seconds, unsure of what to do next.

Then I decided indulging Venom—my landlord and Bash’s lead alpha—occasionally, was fine.

“Hey, did he pay for those books?” Adam complained. “Ugh. I’ll place it on his tab. Colin, will you be ok?”

“Sure,” I told Adam. “Sorry, I’ll be back after I find out what he wants.”

“There’s no need to rush back. Business is a little slow right now, but text me if you need rescuing from that grumpy, old bear,” Adam said, giving me a wink.

I exited the store, frowning when I didn’t see Venom on the sidewalk right away. Remembering the MC also owned Cool Beans, I peered next door.

Venom and Zack were talking. Their conversation didn’t take long, because Venom left the cafe a few minutes later.

“You ready?” Venom asked me.

“Ready for what? You haven’t told me anything.”

“Carlo’s Pizzeria is just a block away,” Venom said.

“Uh, so what? You’re treating me to some pizza?” I asked.

“Sure, why not?” Venom flashed me a crooked grin.

I sighed, thinking it took plenty of guts to have Venom as a mate. Casper seemed to manage it just fine.

Venom had a hint of crazy in him. I knew it the first time I met him, but he wasn’t psychotic or evil, like Dario was.

Maybe misunderstood was the right adjective to describe him, just like my Bash and the other bear alpha in the Grizzly Reapers MC.

“So you and Bash—that’s going well?” Venom asked.

I could see the pizzeria across the street. Venom really hadn’t spoken during our short walk, only now.

“Yes, I mean, I hope so,” I answered.

“That’s good.” Venom held open the restaurant door for me.

I eyed him suspiciously before stepping inside. The first thing I noticed was that the place was deathly quiet.

“This way,” Venom said.

He walked ahead of me. I glanced at the empty tables and chairs we passed.

Carlo’s was always full during lunch and dinner. Their pizza was reputedly the best in Moon Burrow.

Bash and I tried to have dinner here twice, but the long queue always put us off.

A group of paranormals sat around a large round table. Apart from that group, there was no one else in the restaurant.

I recognized Mayhem, Axel and Greed. I started to relax, then tensed when I noticed the other three men at the table.

The first thing I noticed was their looks. All three men were tall, fair, and possessed a kind of inhuman and unnatural beauty.

Then I used my nose. I scented earth and a hint of wild magic. A member of the fae community visited Pierre’s pack once.

That visitor smelled exactly like these three.

“Venom, finished having your smoke?” Mayhem asked.

“I picked up a friend along the way,” Venom answered.

He pulled out two seats from the table. One, I assumed, was for me. Feeling awkward, I sat down.

“Hey, Colin. How are you doing?” Axel asked me.

“Fine?” I answered, still unsure what my part was in all of this.

“You’ve brought an omega to join us.” The pale and black-haired fae man sounded puzzled.

His golden-haired companion wrinkled his nose and gave me an unfriendly stare.

“He is not a bear shifter,” declared the golden-haired fae.

“No, but Colin is one of ours,” Venom said.

Venom snatched the nearest beer bottle on the table. Judging by Mayhem’s glare, it was his beer. Venom took a long pull and let out a contented sigh.

One of ours. Venom had tossed out those words so casually, not understanding how much they meant to me.

The golden-haired fae whispered to the black-haired one. Shifters possessed sensitive hearing, but I couldn’t make out the language they used.

“I see,” the black-haired fae said. He stood up, straightened his coat. All three wore modern clothing, but the clothes didn’t seem to fit them. “Please think on our proposal, Venom, and thank you for meeting us. I have not caught your name, dragon.”

“Colin,” I answered.

The black-haired fae gave me a nod, then extended a hand to Venom, which Venom didn’t shake.

The fae man shrugged. When they finally exited the pizza place, the other bear alpha started talking among themselves.

“Did you bring me here just to—to rattle them?” I asked Venom warily.

“Carlos, can you bring that pepperoni pizza here? I promised my friend here some,” Venom called loudly.

Two minutes later, Carlos, the owner, arrived with a large pizza.

Hesitantly, I took one slice and chewed on it while I awaited Venom’s response. Venom was calling me his friend now?

“Yes,” Venom simply told me. “The fae are one of the most-lived members of the paranormal community and, therefore, the most arrogant. I hate their kind.”

Hate was a strong word to use, I mused.

“They thought they could just move in here and we wouldn’t have any problems with it,” Mayhem scoffed. “Actually, what annoyed Venom the most, Colin, was that those jerks tried to use fae magic on him. Persuading Venom into doing something he doesn’t like usually backfires.”

“Fae magic? You’re immune to that?” I asked Venom, thoroughly impressed.

“I have certain protections in place,” Venom answered rather enigmatically.

“Anyway, how did you convince Bash to let Colin come to this meeting?” Axel asked Venom, then glanced at me when Venom didn’t answer right away.

“I didn’t know about this meeting at all until Venom plucked me from Happy Books II and took me here. Also, I don’t need Bash’s permission for anything. I make my own decisions,” I said in a firm voice.

The pizza was good, so I grabbed another.

“Axel didn’t mean any insult by that.” Mayhem scratched his beard.

He then elbowed Venom sharply in the ribs. Venom grunted.

“What?” Venom asked him in an annoyed voice.

“You insensitive jerk. You brought Colin here to intimidate those fae, despite knowing Dario used him to discipline his unruly wolves in the past,” Mayhem accused. “Bash doesn’t even know. He’ll be downright pissed you used his mate this way.”

“I wouldn’t put Colin in any danger. He just needed to be here,” Venom replied. Venom finally looked at me. “Are you angry at me, Colin?”

“I’m a little irritated you didn’t tell me what the plan was,” I answered after my third slice.

I chewed on Mayhem’s words a little longer and contemplated on what just happened.

When I finally understood why Venom took me here, I was confused and angry.

Then I remembered Venom did things for a reason. I suspected the fae had placed him and his bears in a truly precarious situation, so Venom had to resort to something drastic.

It was probably something Venom would never admit to Mayhem and the others. I would eventually forgive Venom for doing this.

After all, it seemed like fair payment for all the hurt I’ve done to his bears while I was Dario’s weapon.

“Just tell me beforehand next time. Plus, you owe me one,” I told Venom.

Venom only grunted, then ordered more beers for everyone. Word of what happened this afternoon would probably reach Bash.

I sighed, wondering how my short-tempered mate would react.

## CHAPTER 14



# BASH

“Bash, this isn’t necessary,” Colin said the moment I killed the engine of my Harley.

I waited for Colin to dismount before getting off. After learning about what Colin and Venom did this afternoon, I rode back to the MC compound.

Colin and I had planned to stay in tonight, eat dinner at his place, then spend the rest of the evening eating popcorn and watching old movies.

Right now, I wasn’t feeling romantic, just mad.

I planned on confronting Venom alone, but Colin insisted on tagging along.

Most of the time, I didn’t mind my mate’s soothing presence, but the last thing I wanted to be was calm right now.

“Bash, you’re being ridiculous,” Colin said.

Ignoring him, I started for the clubhouse. I knew Venom would be at his office today.

He always sorted out paperwork on Tuesdays. Venom would probably be in a foul mood because of that, but I didn’t care.

We needed to address what had happened today. Venom didn’t have any right, dragging my Colin to strange and dangerous meetings with the fae.

“Venom!” I roared.

I didn’t care that several bear alphas halted from their respective conversations. Some looked at me in awe, others

only shook their heads.

None of the bear alphas present would mistake the look in my eyes or my rising aura.

My anger fell over my shoulders like a comfortable and well-used coat.

My grizzly could erupt out of my skin any second and I would let him.

I called for Venom's name two more times.

"Venom, you cunning bastard. Come out right now!"

This time, I heard a door open on the second-floor. Seconds later, Venom trudged down the stairs. He looked cranky.

"What do you want, Bash?" Venom asked.

I had a sneaking suspicion my arrogant lead alpha knew I what I wanted to talk to him about. Right at that moment, I wanted to wring his scarred neck.

Seeking a fight with Venom wasn't the wisest idea in the world. I knew that. Still, I needed to defend Colin's honor.

Venom needed to know what he did today wasn't acceptable.

Colin appeared at my side, slightly out of breath. He tugged at my arm, but I didn't bulge.

"Bash, come on. Let's not ruin a perfectly good evening," Colin said.

"You should listen to Colin, Bash. That's sound advice," Venom drawled.

"You're not helping." Colin gave Venom a glare.

Venom's indifferent attitude only worsened my temper.

"We need to talk," I gritted out.

"My office is upstairs, unless you want to do this right here," Venom said in a mildly deceptive tone.

"Right here is fine with me," I said.

"What's going on here?" I heard Bane's familiar voice in the background.

“What right do you have, dragging my mate out of his workplace? Colin’s not your personal attack dog.” A growl accompanied my words.

I met Venom’s permanent gold eyes. Venom was the most dominant alpha here. There was no denying that.

I wouldn’t get out of our fight unscathed, but I had a hidden advantage.

Even if Colin didn’t wear my mate mark yet, Colin would back me up, no matter what.

You’re just using Colin as a shield, a weapon just like Venom did this afternoon—a voice inside me whispered.

Venom laughed. The insensitive jerk made me curl my fists by my sides.

I partially shifted my hands to claws. Colin tightened his grip on my arm.

“Look at your mate. Do you really think anyone could force Colin to do anything he doesn’t want to?” Venom asked.

I finally took a good look at Colin. Of course, Colin wasn’t some helpless victim.

If Colin truly didn’t want to cooperate, he would have singed Venom’s fur without a second thought.

Colin had every reason to be mad, but he only gave Venom a warning look before turning his attention to me.

My grizzly settled down. Both my beast and I were proud of Colin for standing up to Venom this instant.

“Bash, I was trying to explain earlier, before you got on your motorcycle—it’s fine. Venom and I already had this talk earlier,” Colin said.

“And? Did he apologize to you?” I demanded.

“I don’t think Venom does apologies,” Colin said dryly. “Actually, if I have to be honest, I kind of enjoyed it.”

“Enjoyed what?” I asked, confused.

“Sitting there and pretending to look intimidating,” Colin answered. “It was a little exciting seeing those arrogant fae men looking surprised and wary.”

Colin blushed, his cheeks and neck turning red.

“It was hilarious,” Venom agreed, chuckling.

Colin flashed him a small smile. Jealousy stirred inside me. Venom and Colin were sharing a moment, and I didn’t like that.

Sure, I knew Venom had Casper and Colin was my mate, but that didn’t matter. I wanted Colin all to myself.

“You still have nightmares,” I reminded him.

“Bash, I would have never let Colin come to any harm. He’s your mate and therefore, under my protection,” Venom said.

“Is that his way of apologizing?” Colin asked me.

“I guess it is,” I agreed. “But I’m still unhappy. Next time, warn Colin and me beforehand if you’re going to try something like this.”

“Venom, you said I’d get bored working at Adam’s store eventually,” Colin said.

Colin took a deep breath, and I wondered where he was going with this.

“I did,” Venom said.

“If you want me to play the role of your official bogeyman, you need to pay me.”

I whistled, because it took guts to make demands out of Venom. Colin’s proposal seemed fair to me.

I wasn’t too sure about involving Colin in MC business any further, but that was my protective instincts talking.

Constricting and limiting Colin would be like smothering him, and I didn’t want that.

Colin seemed confident. That told me Colin knew exactly what he wanted.

“We’ll work something out,” Venom said. He looked at me. “Is this settled, or do you want to take this outside? We can’t fight in here. Mayhem would yell at me, because we just renovated the area a month ago.”

“Damn right,” Mayhem muttered from somewhere in the room.

“We’re good. Watching the two of us rip each other to shreds would only make my Colin unhappy,” I said.

I willed my claws turned back to human fingers. I continued, “But if you do something like this again... I won’t be so forgiving.”

“You’re threatening me?” Venom sounded more amused than angry.

“I have a fire-breathing dragon at my back. You should be worried,” I pointed out.

Colin closed his hand over mine and gave it a tug. Colin leaned in close, his breath warm against my ear.

“That’s enough damage for the evening,” Colin said, then pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

“Yeah, okay. I’m starving,” I said, grinning at my mate.

\* \* \*

“You have everything you need?” I asked Colin on Friday morning.

Colin opened his small backpack and peered inside. Then he zipped it close and nodded.

We didn’t need to be mated. Colin’s emotions were clearly written on his face.

“I can still call Zane, or you could. Tell him I suddenly had a stomach flu,” Colin told me.

He held out his phone towards me, but I shook my head.

“Colin, that’s just your nerves talking,” I reminded him.

We exited my room at the MC clubhouse. Colin spent the evening in my room. We had been alternating between his place and mine.

Colin's personal effects now graced my room, and vice versa.

"You're probably right," Colin answered sullenly.

We headed downstairs to where breakfast was being served.

"Over here, Bash and Colin," Bane called loudly.

My brother had gotten a table near the front door. He had three plates piled with food and three cups of coffee.

"Aw, Bane is really thoughtful sometimes," Colin said.

"We should be on the road by now, especially if we want to make it to Sky Stead before the sun sets," I pointed out.

"Come on, Bane looks lonely," Colin said.

My brother? Lonely? I scoffed, followed Colin to Bane's table. We took our seats.

My stomach growled when I caught sight of the small mountain of bacon piled on top of two waffles.

"It's a long ride. Might as well load up first," Bane was telling Colin.

"Thanks for always being so thoughtful, Bane," Colin said. Bane grunted.

After taking a sip of his coffee and several bites of his food, Colin asked, "Did you have something you wanted to discuss with Bash? I could make myself scarce."

"That's unnecessary. You're now an important part of my brother's life. I guess it's safe to say you're a member of our family now," Bane said. "Please, stay."

Colin seemed pleased by those words. I studied Bane and the too-serious expression he wore. I had a feeling I knew what he wanted to talk about.

A day ago, we set Luigi free. Luigi claimed he didn't want to have anything to do with the Irontooth Clan any more.

Still, I knew how deep Travis had dug his claws into him. I wouldn't be surprised if Luigi told Travis everything that happened to him, including the particular questions Bane and I asked him.

"I spoke to Venom this morning. I told him we want nothing to do with the Irontooth Clan. Plus, I also gave the other bear alphas a physical description of Travis and Dino. If they show their faces here again, they would be politely escorted out of Moon Burrow," Bane said.

"What about Jules?" Colin mouthed to me.

I shook my head. Bane had come to this decision on his own and I would respect that.

"That's a wise move," I said with a nod.

"I keep telling you not to let the past tie you down, but when it comes down to it, I'm the one who's unable to let go," Bane said.

"Hey, don't be too hard on yourself." I gave my brother's shoulder a squeeze.

"Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. I don't want to keep you two any longer. Have fun on your road trip," Bane said.

The three of us chatted about mundane matters for a few minutes. Colin and I finished our meal and coffee, then bid Bane good bye.

In the parking lot, I helped Colin put his helmet on. Colin knew how to do it himself of course, but he seemed to know when to let me fuss over him.

"I'm worried about Bane," Colin said.

"Me too, but I'll text some MC brothers to keep a close eye on him for me," I said.

After putting on my helmet, I sent Mayhem, Axel and Greed texts. With that task done, I mounted my motorcycle.

"And Jules? Are we really not going to do something about him?" Colin asked me.

“Once we return from our trip, I’ll try to contact Jules. I’ll do my best to convince him to stay in Moon Burrow for a little while. How’s that?” I asked.

“You tenderhearted bear. Why didn’t you say that to your brother?” Colin asked me.

“I just thought about it now,” I admitted.

I didn’t tell Colin it might be hard to convince Jules to move to Moon Burrow. Last I remembered, Jules had an unshakable loyalty to the Irontooth Clan.

I didn’t blame him. The shifters in that clan were the only family he’d ever known.

“Anyway, Bane, Jules and the Irontooth Clan, none of that’s important now,” I said. “We’ll have fun, Colin. Promise.”

“What if my relatives don’t like me?” Colin asked in a small voice.

I tried to place myself in his shoes. Before Zane, Colin had never met another dragon shifter.

Making a good first impression was probably important to Colin.

“Of course they would. You’re so likeable,” I pointed out.

“Adam says sometimes I appear a little stand-offish to those who don’t know me,” Colin said, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist.

“Adam doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” I said with a scoff. “They’ll love you. You’ll see.”



## CHAPTER 15

# COLIN

Bash and I made good time. At 5 pm, we reached our destination. So far, the journey had been smooth sailing.

Bash and I made a couple of stops so we could eat and use the bathroom.

If I had to be honest, I was having loads of fun. Being on the open road with Bash, it was easy to forget all our problems.

My anxiety returned once we entered the small town of Sky Stead. The locals had painted the welcome sign in big red letters.

There were lovely mountains in the background. Next to the words was a grinning red dragon. Seeing the cartoon dragon made me feel uneasy, although I couldn't explain why.

Bash suggested we stopped by the nearest general store to grab some supplies.

"Beers are always a welcomed addition to any party," Bash told me as we got off his motorcycle.

"Okay," I agreed.

Nausea gripped me. I suddenly felt ill and wanted to throw up. Bash repeatedly told me to relax and stop overthinking during our ride, but he didn't understand.

This was my only chance to meet others like me. If I blew this opportunity, would the outcome really be so bad?

I pondered on that thought while Bash chatted with the owner of the general store, who turned out to be a member of the local werewolf pack.

“Oh, you two are guests of Old Zane?” The werewolf, Earle, asked. He gave Bash, then me, a curious look. “Just turn left at Beaver Avenue. You won’t miss the Holloway House. It’s right at the end of the street.”

I asked Earle, “Just out of curiosity, why did the town put a red cartoon dragon on the welcome sign?”

“You’re Zane’s kin. Can’t you guess?” Earle asked.

Bash let out a warning growl at those words. Earle raised both his hands in mock defeat.

“Hey, I’m just answering his question. The red dragon has been Sky Stead’s official mascot for nearly a century. It’s also a warning to other supernaturals that Zane and his family protect this town,” Earle said.

“I see, thank you,” I said.

We picked up the beers and returned to the road. Earle’s directions turned out to be spot on. The Holloway House was indeed hard to miss.

It was more of a mansion than a house. With its stained-glass windows, arches and spires, the house’s gothic architecture certainly made it stand out compared to the more modern houses on the road.

“It’s kind of tacky,” Bash commented after we both dismounted.

I nudged him sharply in the ribs. Bash grunted.

“Be nice, please?” I added the last word to remind Bash of how nervous I was.

Bash pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Fine. I promised you I’ll behave today.”

I looked around the estate’s massive driveway. Apart from a black Mercedes parked outside the garage, there were no other vehicles.

Wasn’t this supposed to be a party? Did the other guests park elsewhere?

Come to think of it, the house seemed deathly quiet, apart from the occasional gleeful shriek of a child.

“Bash,” I said, tugging at the hem of Bash’s shirt urgently. Bash looked like an alpha with a purpose as he strode to the door. “Do you think this is a private party? I don’t hear other guests and there aren’t any other vehicles.”

“Will it be a problem if it’s a private party?” Bash asked me.

We were here now, so retreat wasn’t an option. I bit on my lower lip. Bash rang the doorbell.

Moments later, a tall and slender man with black hair and warm green eyes opened the door.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties. My dragon told me he was some kind of feline shifter. A leopard.

“Hi, I’m Otis, Zane’s husband and mate. You two must be Bash and Colin.” Otis smile seemed genuine.

A girl around eight or nine peered from behind Otis’s back. She had inherited Otis’ looks and Zane’s dragon.

“And this little one?” Bash asked, since I seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

“This is Ariel, our daughter,” Otis said. “Our son Porter is playing in the yard. I’ll introduce him later. Zane is in the kitchen. When he’s cooking, no one is to disturb him.”

Otis let us another laugh and invited us in. I noticed the balloons and decorations in the house.

“Are we the first guests to arrive?” I asked, finally finding my voice.

Otis blinked, looking surprised. “Yes, but the other two are on their way.”

“Other two?” I asked.

“Didn’t Zane tell you? This is a family dinner. Porter had another party this afternoon for his friends at school,” Otis said.

I swallowed. “Family... dinner?”

Bash put his hands on my shoulders and started massaging the tense muscles there. A massage usually put me at ease, but not today.

“Can I get you something to drink, Colin?” Otis asked worriedly.

“So—who else is coming to this family dinner?” I asked after Otis got me a glass of water.

“Well, there’s Doyle, Zane’s uncle and Zane’s younger brother Ivan,” Otis said, looking thoughtful. “They’re all looking forward to meeting you, Colin. I can’t believe Zane didn’t tell you about Doyle and Ivan.”

Bash shot me a concerned look. I had trouble drawing air into my lungs. My first instinct was to bolt and return to Moon Burrow, where everything was familiar.

Before I could drag Bash out the door, Zane emerged from the kitchen, wearing an apron.

“Colin, I’m pleased to see you and your—special friend again,” Zane said.

I didn’t like the pause he had made when he referred to Bash as my special friend.

“Bash,” Bash said, holding out a hand. Zane shook it, but he didn’t smile.

“Zane, honey. Why didn’t you tell Colin that this was a family affair?” Otis asked, touching Zane’s shoulder.

“Did I forget? My apologies. Please don’t think I did it on purpose,” Zane said.

“Really?” Bash asked, his tone skeptical. Zane didn’t miss it.

The two alphas openly glared at each other, telling everyone else in the living room they didn’t particularly like each other.

I knew how Bash felt about Zane, but I wasn’t aware Zane shared the same sentiment. I placed a lid on my personal anxiety. Putting out fires might be my job tonight.

“If you’re accusing me of something, bear, then spit it out,” Zane said.

“Being around unfamiliar people discomforts Colin. You should have told him every detail regarding this event before we came here,” Bash pointed out.

“Fight?” whispered Ariel to Otis.

“Just alphas being alphas, baby. Nothing to worry about. Colin, would you like some wine?” Otis asked me.

“Wine would be good,” I answered. I had a feeling this was going to be a long evening.

\* \* \*

“So how did the two of you meet?” Otis asked, looking from Bash and back to me.

I took another sip of my wine before answering. The first time Bash and I met hadn’t been exactly romantic.

Meeting the other dragon shifters tonight hadn’t helped my nerves.

On the outside, they seemed friendly enough. Still, I didn’t know these people, not the way I knew Bash, Bane, and the other shifters living in Moon Burrow.

“That’s a funny story,” Bash said, beating me to the punch. “I shot Colin.”

“You what?” Zane asked, sounding outraged.

Doyle and Ivan looked at Bash, waiting for him to continue his story. Their stares unnerved me, reminded me of serpents waiting to strike their prey.

I poured myself another glass of red wine. Shifters didn’t get drunk easily. Our blood filtered the poison out of our system almost immediately.

Still, consuming a large amount would affect us, eventually. I was very keen on trying out the experiment today.

“We were both on different sides,” I said quickly, wanting to diffuse any misunderstandings before they arose. “Dario

ordered me to kidnap an omega wolf named Adam. Bash was assigned to protect Adam.”

Talking about Dario only gave me a headache. I set my glass down. I had hoped to avoid talking about Dario, although I had a feeling Zane had told his other family members about my unique circumstances.

“Hey,” Bash said.

He edged his chair close to mine, then slid a protective hand around my shoulders before giving me a comforting kiss.

I shut my eyes, enjoying his familiar warmth.

“Dario, that’s the name of the wolf alpha who forced a mating bond on you?” Ivan asked.

Zane’s brother reminded me of a younger version of him, except Ivan seemed less refined and more wild.

“Ivan,” Otis warned. “Colin’s a guest in this house. I don’t think he wants to talk about his former abuser.”

Otis had shown plenty of times tonight that he could hold his own against the other dragons. That made me admire him a little more.

“What happened to this wolf alpha, then?” Ivan demanded.

“Dead. We also killed all the wolves working for him,” Bash answered. He released me and I felt a ton better.

“Good,” Doyle said. “Let’s talk of more pleasant things tonight.”

“Yes,” Zane agreed. “Colin, I’m sure you came here because you have questions. Ask away and hopefully we can answer some of them.”

I relaxed at those words. At the beginning of dinner, it seemed all three dragon alphas had been curious about me.

I never enjoyed talking about myself. Now, it was my turn to get some answers.

Otis announced he would put Ariel and Porter to bed. Those three excused themselves and left the table.

Zane started clearing the dishes. I offered to help but Zane told me it was unnecessary, but I was a guest in his home.

Doyle and Ivan helped themselves to more wine and chocolate cake, so did Bash.

When Zane returned, I asked, “You told me before that you knew my parents?”

“Your alpha father, Saul, was our middle brother,” Ivan supplied. “I’m not sure if Zane has already told you this, but our family has claimed the town of Sky Stead and its surrounding mountains and forests as our territory for two centuries.”

“Saul fell in love with Ross, an omega wolf who ran away from his own pack. After Saul mated Ross, the two of them left Sky Stead. Saul wanted to help Ross with his pack problems. That created a rift in the family,” Zane said.

My head swum with all the sudden influx of new information. Pierre had always been evasive when I asked him about my actual parents.

He always promised he’d tell me about them one day, but he never did.

“Just because of that?” Bash asked.

Zane flicked him an annoyed look.

“We dragons keep to ourselves and we seldom leave our territory,” Doyle explained. “There’s not a lot of us left. We don’t interfere with the business of other supernaturals. That’s the rule, one Saul broke. He chose his mate over his family.”

“Why did my dads leave me at Pierre’s doorstep?” I asked, hating how my voice sounded shaky.

Unthinkingly, I reached for Bash’s hand across the table. He gave my fingers a squeeze.

“I suspect it was to protect you. Saul and Ross had gotten themselves into deep trouble,” Zane said with a weary sigh. “As for why they picked Pierre Sears to raise you, I’m uncertain. I remember Ross mentioning before that Pierre was a family friend.”



“I see,” I said. “Maybe Ross didn’t have a choice, so he picked Pierre.”

“Yes,” Doyle agreed. He continued, “Ross struck me as a good person. He just carried a lot of baggage with him.”

“Ivan and I felt the exact moment Saul died. I sent Ivan out to investigate,” Zane said.

“After some searching, I found their corpses. Saul took his life right after Ross died,” Ivan said, genuine sorrow in his voice. He met my eyes. “I’m so sorry, Colin. Both your dads have passed from this world.”

“That’s okay. Thank you for telling me about them. This means the world to me,” I said.

Now, I could finally stop wondering about who my actual parents were. Saul and Ross didn’t abandon me because they didn’t want me.

Knowing that made me feel better.

“Would you like to see pictures of them? I don’t have pictures of Ross, but I have plenty of Saul when we were kids,” Zane offered.

“That would be wonderful,” I answered. “And maybe you can tell me more about the family as well?”

Zane smiled. “Of course. That would be our pleasure.”

## CHAPTER 16

# COLIN/ BASH

C OLIN

“YOU OKAY?” Bash asked me.

I closed the bedroom door. After tucking Porter and Ariel in bed, Otis came back downstairs while Zane was still telling me childhood stories of Saul.

By then, Doyle and Ivan had gone back to their respective homes. Apparently, those two only lived a few blocks away.

Otis had suggested Bash and I should stay the night. I had been reluctant about the idea until it started pouring.

Rain was followed by booming thunder and lightning flashes. According to Zane, a storm was passing through Sky Stead tonight.

Bash and I eventually took up Otis’ offer, because riding in severe weather wouldn’t be logical. Otis then told Zane to prepare the guest bedroom for us.

The room was spacious, if a little minimalist. It also had a bathroom attached. Bash took off his shoes, then his jacket before trying out the bed.

“Bed seems solid,” he remarked.

Bash bounced on the mattress a few times and fluffed up the pillows.

“Why are you testing the bed?” I asked in a teasing voice.

“I’m weird when it comes to sleeping in other people’s homes,” Bash replied with a shrug. He patted the space next to him.

I stripped down to my shirt and boxers before sliding under the covers to join him.

“I know what you mean,” I told Bash.

I rested my head against his shoulder. Bash started stroking my hair, which felt nice.

I assumed I wouldn’t get any sleep tonight, because I would be in an unfamiliar bed.

With Bash beside me, maybe sleep was a possibility. Although Bash got me those magic sleeping pills that worked on shifters, I never had the chance to try them.

Ever since Bash and I started sharing a bed, I slept soundly like a babe. Bash turned out to be the most effective talisman against old ghosts.

“Did tonight go the way you expected?” Bash asked me.

“No,” I responded. “The evening started out a little tense, anxiety-inducing for me when they started asking me personal questions, but I’m happy. I finally know who my real parents were. I also got a history lesson from Zane.”

“You did? I must have fallen asleep on the couch by then. Zane has that boring professor voice, you know?” Bash continued. “What did he tell you about your family?”

“Sick of being hunted by the fae, Zane’s great grandfather moved from France to America together with his mate two centuries ago,” I told Bash. I continued, “They were the original founders of Sky Stead.”

I cuddled closer to him. Bash automatically wrapped his arms and legs around my body, which was nice, because it was a little cold in the room.

The heater was wonky, but I didn’t want to bother Otis or Zane, because it was already late.

“Interesting,” Bash said.

“I thought so, too.” I yawned. “But tonight drained me.”

“I can tell. Maybe you deserve a reward once we get home,” Bash said.

He sealed his mouth over mine, and heat flooded my body. I gripped his biceps, and Bash deepened the kiss.

“I’ll claim that reward now,” I said, feeling re-energized.

Bash raised an eyebrow as I parted from him.

Bash lay on his back, watching me with hungry gold eyes. I took off my shirt and boxers.

Bash, seeing where this was going, also peeled off his shirt. Fully naked, I climbed on top of him, straddling him.

He was letting me lead the dance tonight? I grinned at my generous alpha.

Bash let out a rumble of approval when I unbuttoned his pants, then unzipped him.

I pulled out his cock, which was thick and already at half-mast for me. I always liked how he easily got hard for me.

He patiently waited as I took his pants, then underwear off.

“I feel like a king,” Bash said.

“Mine,” I said, closing my fingers around his shaft.

I stroked him until he was fully erect. Then I slowly positioned my ass on his cock. Bash held my hips as I lowered myself on him.

I groaned when Bash’s dick was fully buried inside my ass. I started rocking myself side to side, back and forth.

Every growl that I wrangled from Bash only made my dick hard.

I lowered my mouth to his. Bash grasped my hair and kissed me deep and true. After the kiss, I pulled out and lowered myself again.

“I’ll take over,” Bash said the moment I pulled out.

We switched positions, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. Bash drove relentlessly inside me while I silently begged him for more.

Bash took me fast and hard, exactly the way I liked it. My muscles tensed and my balls drew tight against my body.

We both tried not to be so loud. It was a good thing Zane and Otis' bedrooms, along with their kids' bedrooms, were two floors above us.

Thankfully, they had a massive house, so they probably couldn't hear us all the way on the first floor.

The next time Bash entered me, the pressure building inside me shattered. I gasped as the room blurred. Bash kissed me to suppress my scream.

Bash pumped in and out of me several more times before filling me with his seed. Afterwards, he held me tenderly, like he always did.

Bash buried his face against the side of my neck, his lips touching the spot between my shoulder and neck.

This wasn't the first time he did this. I touched his cheek and his blazing golden eyes met mine.

"I'm ready," I told him.

My heart raced and my breathing quickened, but I hoped Bash could hear the longing and certainty in my words.

"Colin, are you sure? The last thing I want to do is to rush you. Your first mating experience had been hellish," Bash said.

"Sweet bear," I murmured affectionately. "I know what I want and I won't regret this. In fact, I'll treasure this moment for the rest of my life. Make me yours, Bash."

Bash didn't need another invitation. He lengthened his fangs, then pierced my skin. He drove them deep until it hit bone.

I expected it to hurt, but the pain was mild. Bash was being extremely careful with me, and I appreciated that.



## **BASH**

I KNEW the exact moment my grizzly touched Colin's soul. Colin's dragon rose from its hiding place. The two beasts resonated.

The mating bond flared between us, bright and hot.

I knew all those lonely years of searching for my fated mate had finally ended. After pulling my fangs away, I gazed deep into Colin's eyes.

Certainty filled me. I knew without a doubt that I would do anything in my power to protect my dragon.

Colin didn't need further instructions. He knew how to finish this dance. Opening his mouth, Colin flashed me his deadly fangs.

He bit me on my right shoulder and left his mark there.

A growl of approval slipped from my lips. It was finally done. Colin and I were officially mates.

"Bash," he murmured.

I held him in my arms, not wanting to let him go.

"What is it?" I asked.

Contentment and dare I say it—happiness—settled deep in my bones.

"I could feel it. Your connection to Venom, to the other bears. When Venom said I'm part of the Grizzly Reapers MC, I didn't believe it. Not really," Colin admitted.

"But you do this instant?" I asked.

Colin nodded, then bit his lip. I thought he had doubts about what we did, but it turned out he was worried about something else.

“Zane’s family intrigues me, and while I’m glad we came to Sky Stead. However, they still feel like strangers to me,” Colin confessed.

“That’s fine. There’s plenty of time to get to know them better. You’ll have two families to lean on in the future—us and them,” I pointed out, nuzzling his neck.

Colin let out a moan, which only made me hard.

“That makes me seem greedy, doesn’t it? I started out with nothing. I nearly gave up after Dario took me. Some days, I debated suicide,” Colin began.

I growled at those words, despite knowing Colin no longer felt the urge to take his own life.

Seeing my mate unhappy or in distress didn’t sit well with me.

Colin continued, “Now I have everything. A protective and sweet mate. Two families to call my own.”

“What are you afraid of?” I asked, touching his cheek.

“That after everything I’ve done and had done to me—fate would one day decide to take away everything and everyone I love,” he whispered in a small voice.

The mating bond was new to me, to both of us, but I knew the basics of how it worked.

I tried opening my side of the bond, and flooded Colin with all the emotions I felt for him—affection, love, and pride.

I held nothing back, because I wanted my mate to understand how special he was and how he meant the world to me.

Colin could have chosen any other alpha in the world, but he settled on me. I was the lucky one.

Colin widened his eyes. I closed the bond before Colin became too overwhelmed.

“Why pride?” Colin asked.

“Because you’ve come so far. You could have given up, but you kept going,” I told him.

“You’re too good for me, Bash,” he murmured.



“Probably,” I joked.

Colin elbowed me in the ribs. I only tightened my arms around him. Colin eventually relaxed, his soft snores filling the room.

Certain that nightmares would not visit my mate’s sleep tonight, I too drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I carefully untangled myself from Colin. After putting on my pants, I snuck a look at the bed.

Colin still slept soundly. I headed to the kitchen. Someone was already up and I could smell waffles. Having breakfast in bed sounded divine.

I was hoping to find Otis, but Zane was the one cooking. Last night, he’d been in charge of making dinner, I recalled.

There was no love lost between us. Zane flipped a waffle on his frying pan.

He didn’t look at me while he spoke. “There’s fresh coffee in the pot. Mugs are in the cabinet to your left.”

Huh. He didn’t seem too antagonistic with me this morning. I grabbed two mugs and poured coffee. Sensing Zane’s stare, I glanced at him.

I didn’t want to expose my back to Zane too long. While I was certain nothing bad would happen to Colin and me while we were guests in Zane’s home, one should always be careful.

“I see Colin and you finally took the next step in your relationship,” Zane remarked, nodding to Colin’s mate mark on my shoulder. “If I had a say in the matter, I wouldn’t have chosen you to be Colin’s mate.”

“Because I’m a bear shifter and not a dragon?” I asked, deciding to play his game.

“I’ve known Venom a long time, so I know the type of alphas he takes in—usually the unstable and dangerous sort,” Zane said.

“I would never hurt Colin,” I said.

A growl accompanied my words. I kept my temper in check last night, because I didn’t want to ruin Porter’s birthday

dinner or upset my mate.

Colin was already nervous about coming to Sky Stead.

“Colin’s one-of-a-kind,” Zane said. “Probably the only dragon omega left in North America.”

“You don’t need to remind me how special Colin is. I’ve known that from the moment we met,” I said. “And you’re mated yourself. You know how it works. Fate decides, and her decision is always final.”

“I suppose I can’t do anything about it now,” Zane said. “Entrusting Colin to your care is hard, but I can see you would do anything for him.”

I expected another verbal argument. Zane seemed resigned. Then I realized he might be over acting the night before.

There had to be a reason for that.

“Why?” I had to ask. “You disapprove of me, but you don’t particularly hate me. So why the act?”

## CHAPTER 17

# COLIN/ BASH

## C OLIN

HEARING VOICES IN THE KITCHEN, I rubbed my eyes. I quickly picked out Bash's, then Zane's voice. Uh-oh. That couldn't be good. Groaning, I hauled my ass out of bed. Remembering that I was naked, I put my pants on.

Before wandering outside, I caught sight of my reflection in the full-length mirror in the bedroom.

I looked different, I thought, felt different as well, like someone had lifted an enormous weight off my shoulders.

Everything that happened last night returned to me. I touched Bash's mate mark on the side of my neck.

Dario's mark had looked angry and messy. According to Dario, despite being unconscious, I fought him like an animal.

My dragon probably had gone into self-defense mode while my human half was knocked out.

Bash's mark in comparison was neat. He took careful pains not to hurt me the night before.

Each time I spied Dario's fading mark, I despaired, but Bash's bite made me feel the exact opposite. It reminded me that Bash dearly loved and cherished me.

I practically bounced out of the guest bedroom, then remembered what I was supposed to do.

Straightening my shoulders, I headed to the kitchen. I heard noises from upstairs—the sound of Ariel’s and Porter’s giggles, followed by Otis’ laugh.

A smile formed on my lips as I thought of Bash and me having little ones in our cabin. Of course, he would need to move in with me.

His room at the MC clubhouse was good at all, but now that we were mated, we had to change our living arrangements. My cabin would be more logical.

Maybe I could persuade him to create some extra room. Bash had renovated the cabin, after all. Expanding the cabin would be easy for him.

Kids. Bash and I have never discussed that topic before. Unthinkingly, I touched my stomach.

Bash and I had been having sex frequently. Would his seed catch soon? I hoped it did.

When I was with Dario, he used me in bed sometimes, but I never got pregnant. I wondered if my dragon had something to do with that.

My beast had treated Dario as our enemy, so it protected me the best it could.

“Why the act?” Bash was saying as I entered the kitchen.

Waffles hit my nose. I eyed the enormous stack of waffles on the kitchen counter.

My stomach rumbled. Last night’s dinner told me Zane was an excellent cook. I was betting those waffles wouldn’t disappoint.

Bash spotted me, then flashed me a sexy grin. Elation suffused my entire body. He looked so raggedly handsome, even with bed hair.

Bash also wore nothing but jeans, which gave me an eyeful of his six-pack abs and muscular chest. Yummy. I licked my lips.

I wanted to throw myself at him and scream to the entire world he was mine. Any silly omega who so much as looked at Bash

wrong would get a fireball from me.

Zane cleared his throat, making me remember I was standing in Zane and Otis' kitchen. Right. Bash and I were guests.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

"Zane was just explaining to me why he was pretending to act antagonistic towards me last night," Bash said.

He slid a possessive arm around my shoulders, bringing me close to him. Unable to help himself, Bash planted a good morning kiss on my mouth.

I returned it, but parted from his kiss before things became too steamy between us.

I woke up feeling good and admittedly a little horny this morning. I wondered if that was an effect of the mate bond.

"Pretending?" I asked, looking at Zane.

My uncle looked downright embarrassed. Faint color appeared in his cheeks, which was a sight I never expected to see. That told me what Bash said was true.

"Zane secretly likes me," Bash whispered in my ear. "Don't tell Otis."

Zane glowered at Bash, his eyes turning reptilian gold.

"Don't push it, bear." Zane focused his attention on me. "I must apologize for my behavior yesterday, Colin. I sensed you were anxious, so I might have overplayed my role as your protective uncle."

"Oh," was all I could say.

No wonder Doyle and Ivan did nothing when Zane and Bash bickered.

I didn't understand Zane at all, but at the very least, Bash and Zane seemed to have reached some kind of compromise.

"I gave him a lecture about it last night," Otis said, entering the kitchen with his kids.

They looked freshly showered and dressed. Seeing the stack of waffles their dad had made, the kids dove in and ate.

Bash and I ate with Zane, Otis, Porter and Ariel. After breakfast, we decided to hit the road.

Zane had taken the kids to school by then. Otis walked us to the garage. Otis suggested Bash store his motorcycle there when it started raining last night.

Bash brightened, seeing his Harley. I turned to Otis, surprised he took my hands in his. I searched his smiling face.

“Thank you for coming to Sky Stead, Colin. You made my mate happy. You weren’t the only one who was nervous, you know?” Otis said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Zane called Ivan three times yesterday morning. He was worried you wouldn’t feel welcomed here,” Otis said. “I know we don’t know each other that well, but visit us anytime. Bash, that includes you as well.”

“Thanks, Otis. We’ll definitely come again. Don’t tell your smug husband this, but he’s actually an excellent cook,” Bash grumbled. “That chocolate cake last night, man. It was one of the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“And Bash is an expert in desserts,” I told Otis solemnly. That made Otis laugh.

“We better get going,” Bash told me. “Especially if we want to be back by sundown.”

“Have a safe journey,” Otis said.

Bash mounted his Harley, and I took my seat behind him.

“Time to head back home,” Bash said.

“To Moon Burrow,” I agreed, wrapping my arms around his solid body.



**BASH**

AS I PASSED the Moon Burrow town sign, I heard Colin let out a sigh of relief. Finally, after hours of hard riding, we arrived at Moon Burrow before sundown.

I had an irrational fear that Zane would tell Colin he could stay in Sky Stead for as long as he liked.

Colin might be against the idea at first, then he might slowly warm up to it.

If Colin moved to Sky Stead, he would have Zane, Doyle, and Ivan as his neighbors. My mate would be protected and safe from any supernatural who would seek to harm him.

I would move with Colin as well, because we were mates and I loved him with all my heart, but I would dearly miss Bane, the rest of the MC, and even Venom.

“Colin, if you were given the opportunity to move to Sky Stead, would you take it?” I asked.

Despite the wind and the sound of the passing vehicles, I knew Colin could hear me just fine.

“Why would I move to Sky Stead?” Colin sounded genuinely puzzled. “I consider Moon Burrow home. It’s where you, Bane, and the rest of the bears and raven shifters live. I would never consider living anywhere else.”

His answer reassured my worried grizzly tremendously.

After a pause, Colin kissed the nape of my neck. “You silly bear.”

I grunted, embarrassed that I would think for a second that Colin would decide to move to Sky Stead without hearing my input.

The two of us were a team now. Wanting to see his expression, I risked looking over my shoulder.

“Bash, watch the road!” Colin warned.

The urgency in Colin’s voice made me jerk my head. I returned my full attention to the road. I swerved just in time to avoid a collision with a battered Green Honda.

The driver didn’t use his horn, I realized. My anger spiked.



Riding a motorcycle while I was pissed and carrying another passenger seemed like a recipe for disaster.

I slowed down and stopped on the side of the road.

The MC clubhouse was only ten minutes away, but catching my breath wouldn't hurt.

Unlike the young and reckless bear alphas in the MC who craved danger and excitement, I was a veteran who possessed more common sense.

I took in my surroundings while I reeled in my annoyed grizzly. Pine and maple streets bordered both sides of the narrow road.

Few vehicles passed this way. Most of the time, the MC used this road to enter town.

I breathed in, then out. Colin gave me a hug, which I appreciated. I could never forgive myself if I got Colin and myself killed.

Our future together was just beginning as well.

Okay, I was being overdramatic. Colin and I were both shifters. Even if we were involved in an accident, we could probably get away with a few minor injuries.

A crash made me look behind me. The Green Honda had careened off the other side of the road and had smashed into a tree.

The engine emitted thick plumes of smoke. Colin and I waited for a few seconds, but no passenger came out.

Colin dismounted from the motorcycle before I could decide to drive away or assist them.

“Something's wrong. Bash, call for help,” Colin said, before running across the street.

“Colin, wait up!”

My stubborn mate refused to listen. I got off my Harley and quickly dialed 911. After telling responder the problem, and ran after my mate.

The first detail I noticed was the vehicle's license plates—Montana.

New Dawn Valley was in Montana. Quiet fury filled my belly. I had a sneaking suspicion I knew who was inside the Honda.

Was this another of Travis' schemes?

My first instinct was to grab my mate and leave Travis on the road to die. After all, Travis and the other alphas in my old clan had done the same to my brother and me.

Bane and I would have perished like roadkill, but a kind farmer had seen us and immediately took us to the nearest hospital.

Not the time to think of the past, I reminded myself. Travis couldn't possibly plan a car accident.

That was too ridiculous, even for him. Besides, the timing was suspect.

How could Travis know Colin and I had left town? It could also be someone else from my old clan in that car.

I hurried over to Colin's side. Colin grunted as he tried to driver's door open, but the mechanism seemed stuck.

My nose picked up the telltale scent of gasoline, motor oil, and smoke. The lid covering the engine had flown off. Flames covered the engine.

Trouble. My grizzly didn't need to tell me that. We didn't have time. We had to move fast and get all the passengers out before the car exploded.

"Let me," I told Colin.

He stepped back. I practically tore the door off the hinges. I dropped it on the ground with a grunt. Travis sat in the driver's seat, unconscious.

Immediately, the overpowering scent of blood hit my nose. There was a huge cut on the side of Travis' head, probably from the collision, but that one injury didn't account for that smell.

“Bash, there’s another passenger in the back. I can’t get the door open as well. Let me pull Travis out,” Colin said behind me.

I nodded, deciding to leave Travis under Colin’s care.

The two omegas might not like each other. Hell, I had no particular fondness for my ex-boyfriend either, but this was an emergency.

I knew Colin would lend a helping hand to anyone in need. My mate had a huge heart. With Travis taken care of, I focused on extracting the second passenger.

The back door was jammed, like Colin said. I pried it off again and another familiar scent hit my nose.

The second passenger let out a piteous moan. I gazed down at the slender, dark-haired omega slumped in the back seat. Unfocused, light blue eyes met mine.

The last time I had seen Jules, he had been an awkward teenager. The kid Bane and I had rescued all those years ago had turned into a handsome young man.

The coppery scent of blood drowned every other smell, including the smoke and spilled gasoline.

Underneath the oversized coat Jules wore, I could see rips in his shirt and several blood stains.

These weren’t from the car crash. I gritted my teeth. Travis probably carried the same injuries on his body. Bane would have my head if I allowed Jules to die.

“Bane?” Jules whispered. “Is that you?”

“It’s Bash. Let’s get you out of here,” I said.

I gathered Jules in my arms and pulled him out of the burning car.

## CHAPTER 18

# COLIN

I half-dragged and half-carried Travis far away from the burning vehicle. If had the strength of an alpha shifter, I would have carried him, but I didn't.

Travis groaned in pain. I grimaced. I wasn't a medic and didn't know basic first aid, although I should probably learn one of these days.

His eyes fluttered open, but only for a few seconds. Travis opened his mouth, but no words came out. Then he passed out again.

I was worried he'd gotten a concussion. Travis needed to be taken to the hospital immediately.

I overheard Bash calling for help earlier. Right now, I could only hope the paramedics were on the way.

I tore a huge chunk off my shirt and dabbed the cut on Travis' forehead. What the heck was I doing? Then I noticed the dark stains under the sweater he wore.

"Travis, I'm going to check you for injuries," I said. Travis didn't respond.

I lifted his shirt and sucked in a breath when I saw the rake marks across his chest. They looked fresh. Quiet panic filled me. I didn't know what to do next.

I looked for my mate, relieved to see Bash hurrying towards me, carrying a dark-haired omega bear shifter in his arms.

Bash set the omega next to Travis. I saw he was younger than Travis and me. He must only be in his early twenties.

The gentle way Bash carried him sparked a smidge of jealousy inside me, but I pushed that useless emotion away.

Bash probably knew the other omega from his past, but Bash had chosen me as his mate.

“Jules, hang on a little longer, okay?” Bash said. He turned to me. “How’s Travis?”

Hearing Jules’ name filled me with relief. So this was the omega that Bane was worried about all this time. I focused on my mate’s question.

“Not so good. Bash, someone cut Travis up good,” I said.

Bash narrowed his eyes when he spotted the exposed rake marks on Travis’ body.

“The paramedics?” I asked him.

“They might arrive too late. Why haven’t I thought of this earlier?” Bash fumbled for his cell phone.

Noticing his hands were shaking, I took his phone. Bash had already dialed Venom’s number.

“What?” Venom demanded. “Something happened?”

Ignoring Venom’s rude greeting, I said, “Venom, it’s Colin. Bash and I are ten minutes away from the MC clubhouse. There’s been an accident. We need assistance.”

I quickly explained the situation. Bash flashed me a grateful look. Venom promised to send help right away. I ended the call.

Bash was in the midst of examining Jules’ injuries just as the car exploded. Bash immediately used his big body to shield me, even though we were a suitable distance away from the explosion.

Shards of glass and metal flew, but none of the debris touched us.

Travis looked paler than I liked. Jules also bore fresh claw marks under his clothes, just like Travis.

A bad feeling settled in my gut. These two omegas were running from something or someone.

Bash mentioned his former clan was at war with a small group of vicious polar bear alphas. Were those alphas responsible for attacking Travis and Jules?

The rumble of a truck engine made me look up. A black pickup was headed our way.

“That’s Venom’s truck,” Bash said. I relaxed at his words.

Travis suddenly clutched my hand. I looked down at him. Pity stirred inside me.

Travis and I weren’t friends. I still hadn’t forgiven him for trying to stir up trouble for Bash and Bane.

Travis even thought he could kidnap and use me as bait to lure Bash back to New Dawn Valley.

At that moment, everything bad that happened between us didn’t matter.

Travis tried to speak, but only blood came out of his mouth. I took my shirt off and placed it under Travis’ head.

Travis squeezed my fingers even tighter. I swallowed and knew help wouldn’t arrive in time, not for Travis. Death’s shadow was upon him.

“Travis, do you have anything you want to tell me?” I asked.

No sound came out of Travis’ mouth, but his lips formed a single word. “Help.”

Then I was staring at a deadman’s eyes and holding a deadman’s icy fingers. I wasn’t aware of shedding tears, but they slid down my cheeks.

I heard hurrying footsteps and voices, but I didn’t bother paying attention to the words Venom and Bash traded.

Someone kneeled next to me. A lean man in his late twenties with shoulder-length dark brown hair and black eyes.

I didn’t remember his name, but I knew he was one of Zack’s new ravens.

A healer, I remembered. Shifter healers were incredibly rare and held a special position in any shifter group.

“This one’s gone,” the healer said. “I’m going to focus on the other one.”

“Thanks, Micah,” Venom said.

“Gone?” Bash whispered, sounding shocked.

I gently set Travis’ hand down and stood next to my mate. Bash was usually the one who offered me comfort.

This time, I took his hand in mine. Bash buried his head against my shoulder and let out a frustrated growl.

I finally noted who had come. There was Micah, the healer, Venom, and Zack. I was surprised Bane wasn’t present. Or maybe he was out of town?

There was also the possibility Venom had purposely left Bane at the clubhouse, knowing he had a history with Jules.

“How did you guys get here so fast?” I asked Venom, who had broken away from his conversation with Zack.

“Zack and Micah had just dropped by at the MC clubhouse when your call arrived,” Venom answered.

“Lucky us,” I murmured.

“How’s Jules?” Bash asked Micah. My mate had finally regained control of himself.

“I need to focus,” Micah said. “My magic isn’t effective as the magic used by the white mages you bear shifters are used to working with, but Jules will be just fine.”

“He’s grumpy,” Bash remarked to Zack.

Zack only laughed. “Micah’s always grumpy.”

“Well, I’m glad you guys came as soon as you could,” Bash told Zack in his most solemn voice.

Bash focused on Jules the entire time. My gaze slid to Travis. I didn’t know him well, but I would mourn for him.

Then I remembered Travis had a mate as well. I wondered how Dino was faring right this instant.



\* \* \*

“Where is he?” Bane asked the moment he spotted me in the eating hall.

I thought he was asking about Bash, then realized it was probably Jules he was worried about.

Bane smelled of dirt, open road and motor oil. He also wore his riding leathers. That told me he’d been out on a job for the MC.

“Jules is upstairs. Bash insisted they bring Jules to your room. He’s been in and out of consciousness,” I supplied.

“My room?” For a moment, Bane looked flabbergasted.

“Bash said Jules would be more comfortable in a space surrounded by your scent.”

Bane clenched his jaw. “How bad is it?”

“Bad enough they sent for a healer,” I said. I chose my next words with care. “What exactly did you hear, Bane?”

“That Jules was in a car crash, along with Travis. Is there something else I should know?” Bane asked.

Bash was usually the more expressive of the two brothers. Bane was the sort of guy who kept a tight lid on his emotions, but right this instant, I could read the worry on his face.

I rose from my seat and gave him a hug. Bane looked like he needed it.

“Colin, what’s wrong with Jules?” Bane asked, accepting my hug.

I pulled away from him and lowered my voice.

“I’ll walk with you,” I said. Bane nodded.

We walked side-by-side, passing a couple of bear alphas who gave us curious looks.

I continued once we reached the stairs, “After Bash and I pulled out Travis and Jules out of the car, we discovered they

had more serious injuries. Injuries not caused by the crash.”

“What sort of injuries?” Bane asked.

His face tightened as I told him about the rake marks. Bane usually had more control over his grizzly than Bash.

In fact, I had never sensed the monster living under Bane’s skin until that moment.

“Jules is special to you,” I said, touching Bane’s shoulder. “But take it easy if you plan on questioning him about what happened. He’s had it rough.”

“He’s always had it rough,” Bane mumbled.

Bash emerged from Bane’s room, along with an exhausted-looking Micah.

Venom and Zack had left the healer under Bash’s care once we entered the MC clubhouse.

“Jules?” Bane asked Bash.

“He’s sleeping right now,” Bash said. “Micah healed his critical wounds.”

Bane walked to Micah. The healer looked wary of him, but Bane only took his hands and murmured, “Thank you for saving Jules.”

“I was only doing my job,” Micah said.

The raven healer looked relieved when Bane released his hands.

“Micah, I’ll take you back to Zack. Colin, are Venom and Zack still at the eating hall?” Bash asked me.

“They are,” I answered.

“Wait,” Micah added. He looked at Bane. “You’re Jules’ mate, right? It would help if you could sit by his bedside. He would be happy to wake up to a familiar face.”

“I’m not his mate,” Bane answered tensely. His expression was hard to read again.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just assumed that because Jules carried your scent,” Micah said.

“Carried?” I asked.

“The shirt Jules was wearing belonged to Bane a long time ago,” Bash explained. “Colin, let’s have dinner here and head back to your cabin afterward.”

“Can Colin stay with me, even for a little while?” Bane asked, much to Bash’s and my surprise.

Bash narrowed his eyes. An unfriendly and possessive snarl slipped from his throat.

“Why?” Bash demanded.

“I could use a friend,” Bane admitted.

He looked terribly embarrassed. There was even a slight flush to his neck.

“Bash, he’s probably just worried about Jules,” I told my mate and gave him a warning look so he wouldn’t argue. “Sure, Bane. I’ll sit and keep watch with you.”

“Fine, but don’t hog Colin too long,” Bash muttered unhappily.

Bane opened the door to his room, and I entered first. It was my first time being in there.

I loved Bash most of the time, but he was a slob. My mate only cleaned up his room when he knew I was staying over.

Bane, in comparison, was a neat freak. There weren’t any unwashed clothes or dirty magazines on the floor.

“You can sit anywhere,” Bane said. “Sorry about this. I know you and my brother have had a long day.”

“Not a problem,” I answered.

“I’m going to take a shower. Will you keep an eye on Jules?” Bane asked.

So that’s what Bane was worried about, I thought. I nodded.

“Jules and I will still be here while you shower,” I said. “If he wakes up, I’ll explain the situation to him.”

“Thanks, Colin.”

I settled on the couch next to the bed. My phone beeped, and I pulled it out, not surprised to find several messages from Bash.

My mate was missing me already, although we'd only spoken to each other minutes ago.

Bash and I traded messages, like love-struck teenagers. I snuck occasional looks at Jules, but he remained fast asleep.

Bane took the shortest shower in the world. He emerged, freshly bathed and dressed, less than five minutes later.

"He's still the same," I informed Bane.

"He'll wake up, won't he?" Bane asked me.

"Of course he will. I might not know Jules, but from what Bash told me, he's a fighter. Isn't he?"

"That's right," Bane answered.

I didn't miss the pride in his voice. Bane joined me on the couch and gazed at the bed.

"Colin," Bane finally spoke after a few minutes. "I need to ask you a favor."

"Anything," I answered automatically.

Bane was family, and I would do anything for Bash and Bane.

"It's about my brother," Bane said, expression serious. He started talking, and all I could do was listen intently.

## CHAPTER 19

# BASH

I woke up expecting to see Colin's gorgeous body next to mine. I could already picture him curving his lips to a lazy smile when I kissed him good morning .

Seeing the empty space made me growl softly. Then I heard Colin humming from somewhere in the cabin, probably in the kitchen, and I relaxed.

Seeing Bane look all tangled up about Jules yesterday made me guilty about my own good fortune.

Despite our rough start, Colin and I had eventually gotten together.

If asked Bane if yesterday's incident would change his mind about Jules, but Bane had remained stubborn. He even insisted there was no way Jules could be his mate.

I understood where my brother was coming from. Bane and I did all kinds of foul deeds while working as enforcers for the Irontooth Clan.

Working for the MC didn't make us saints either, but at least we didn't feel like we were being used.

The Irontooth Clan only saw my brother and me as tools. Being in the Grizzly Reapers MC made us feel we finally belonged to an actual family. A family Bane and I would kill to defend.

However, after making Colin my mate, my priorities had changed. My mate and our future kids would come first before the MC.

Kids. Colin and I never discussed offspring, but we ought to sooner or later.

At the rate we were having sex, I was bound to get him pregnant.

Colin let out a giggle, and I frowned, wondering what made my mate laugh. My nose then picked up the smell of pancakes, and I smiled.

So, my mate woke earlier than me today to make breakfast, didn't he? That was sweet of him.

Maybe I should reward him for his efforts. I got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. After splashing some water on my face, I brushed my teeth.

I debated putting on the tight black underwear Colin loved seeing me in, then decided not to bother with clothes.

Colin would appreciate getting an eyeful of his sexy bear this morning.

I padded to the kitchen, careful not to make a sound.

"What should I do?" Colin was saying.

Odd. Was he talking to himself?

"Baby," I said with a purr. "Good morning."

I sauntered into the kitchen and froze, realizing Colin wasn't alone. Adam sat the kitchen counter, sipping a cup of coffee. Adam's jaw dropped when he saw me.

Colin reacted quickly and blocked Adam's view using his body. He waved both his arms like a starfish. What was my mate doing?

"Mine," Colin said, and the hiss in his voice only inflated my ego.

Adam coughed and looked elsewhere.

"Why would I be interested in that—when Arrow is tons hotter?" Adam pointed out.

"No way. My mate is definitely more hot," Colin said.

Laughing, I wrapped my arms around my mate and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“I didn’t know you invited Adam over,” I told Colin.

“I wanted to discuss something with him. Oh no. The pancakes are burning. Bash, you need to let me go,” Colin said.

“Not without a kiss,” I pointed out.

Colin pouted, but gave me a thorough kiss. I released him. Colin ran to the stove to tend to his pancakes.

“Are you just going to stand there, flaunting your assets?” Adam asked me.

I grunted. “Bane’s right. Arrow really should put a muzzle on you.”

“Bane said what?” Adam demanded.

Choosing not to answer him, I retreated to the bedroom. I put on a fresh pair of jeans, then checked my phone. No messages or calls from Bane.

Colin said Bane just needed someone to talk to last night. When I pressed Colin about what Bane and he discussed, he only said it was a secret.

Worried about my brother, I called him. An unfamiliar voice answered his phone.

“Bane’s phone,” said a grumpy voice.

“Jules, is that you?” I asked. “It’s Bash.”

“Oh, hi Bash. I heard what you did for me yesterday. Thank you,” Jules said. “Bane is asleep right now and I don’t want to wake him.”

“That’s fine. I’ll talk to him when I swing by the clubhouse later,” I said.

Honestly, I was relieved to hear Jules’ voice. If Jules hadn’t woken up, I’d be terribly worried about my brother’s mental health.



“If there’s nothing else, I’d like to go back to sleep as well,” Jules said.

Funny, he didn’t sound sleepy but a little nervous, like he was hiding some kind of secret. I reviewed what little I knew about Jules in my head.

Bane had watched over Jules from the shadows even after Jules’ rescue, although an elderly couple from the clan had taken Jules in.

I liked Jules back then. He was a little rebellious and certainly spirited. I knew very little about the adult Jules right now.

If I had to be honest with myself, I didn’t trust Jules being in the same room with my brother.

After all, Jules remained loyal to the Irontooth Clan all these years. He was an adult now. Jules could have left the clan anytime he wanted, but he stayed.

I’m sure Jules had his reasons but Bane and I left our past a long time ago.

Anger rippled inside me, but I kept it at bay. I recalled the events yesterday evening.

Colin and I found Jules with Travis, who wasn’t the most trustworthy person around. Sure, the wounds on their bodies were alarming. They probably drove to Moon Burrow out of sheer desperation.

Seeing Jules in that injured state probably put Bane in a volatile and dangerous mood. In that state, my brother was bound to do something reckless.

“Just don’t do anything weird to my brother while he’s sleeping,” I said.

Jules scoffed, then ended the call. His attitude pissed me off a little.

I returned to the kitchen, hoping Adam would be gone. No such luck. Adam was happily chatting with Colin about some event they would hold at the bookstore next month.

“Hey you,” Colin said, spotting me.

He handed me my mug. I took a sip and sighed in pleasure. Colin added the right amount of sugar to my drink.

“By the way, congratulations on being officially mated, you two,” Adam said. “Must’ve been a productive trip, huh?”

“Oh, you bet,” I said, feeling smug and full of myself.

Colin gave me a playful nudge on the shoulder. I decided to put the Jules problem on the back burner for now and enjoy the morning with my mate and his friend.



“So, did you manage to contact Bane?” Colin asked me once Adam had left.

I glanced at the brown paper bag Adam left on the counter and spied a few new books inside with interest. I tried to see the titles, but Colin slapped my fingers away.

Colin sometimes got a little shy about his steamy gay romances, I thought with some amusement.

I left the matter alone. Colin and Adam were probably discussing their favorite books before I entered the kitchen.

“I did. Jules answered,” I replied.

Still feeling hungry, I added two more pancakes onto my plate. Colin handed me the bottle of syrup.

Instead of joining me at the table, he leaned against the fridge and regarded me.

“That’s good news, isn’t it?” Colin asked. “That Jules is finally awake?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I admitted.

“What do you mean by that?” Colin positioned himself behind my chair and gave me a hug.

I inhaled his comforting scent and relaxed. The allure of alternating between my room at the MC clubhouse and Colin’s cabin was wearing off.

As I spent more time in here, I was beginning to see the cabin as home. I already had a massive expansion plan in my head.

Adding more rooms was essential, perhaps an additional wing for a private office or guest room. I definitely wanted to make the living room and kitchen a little larger.

If I slowly moved my personal belongings in here, would Colin notice?

“I’m worried Jules would have Bane wrapped around his little finger by now,” I admitted. “If Bane has one weakness, it’s that omega.”

“Am I your weakness as well, Bash?” Colin rested his cheek on my shoulder.

Unthinkingly, I reached out and stroked his hair. Colin let out a pleased moan, and that immediately woke my cock up.

I debated carrying Colin to the bedroom and enjoying a second breakfast.

Then I remembered my primary mission was to check on Bane and perhaps shake some sense into him. Colin and I could enjoy each other later this evening.

“No,” I finally answered his question. “You’re my mate and you look out for my best interests. I do the same, but Jules? He’ll use everything in his arsenal to persuade Bane to fight a battle that isn’t his.”

“Ultimately, that’s Bane’s choice, isn’t it?” Colin lifted his head from my shoulder.

What Colin said made complete sense, but when Jules was present, Bane’s judgement was always impaired.

I didn’t answer Colin right away. A childish part of me hoped Colin would take my side. I was his mate, after all.

I realized Colin and I had never had a disagreement before. Wait. Was this our first fight?

It certainly smelled like the beginnings of one, and I wanted to avoid that if possible.

“Bane’s an adult and he’s more sensible than most alphas,” Colin was saying. “When we spoke last night, I could tell Bane genuinely cares about Jules. Bane repeatedly pointed out that he felt some obligation to Jules because Jules is like his kid brother, but Bane’s lying to himself, isn’t he?”

“I’m heading over to the MC clubhouse,” I said, abruptly rising to my feet.

Colin stepped back, his expression thoughtful. I thought Colin would try to convince me to give Bane and Jules some space, but he didn’t. That was odd.

“Alright then, knock some sense into Bane, if that’s what you want to do,” Colin murmured.

He brushed his fingers against my hand. Unable to help myself, I tugged Colin close for a kiss.

Now this, I thought, savoring his sweet taste, was the best way to start the morning.

“Want to come with me? We can team up,” I suggested after the kiss. “Bane’s resistance would crumble away like dust.”

It was cool Colin and Bane seemed to getting along, but a part of me was also a little envious of their friendship. Bane didn’t make friends easily.

Heck, apart from Venom, it took years for Bane to trust the other bear alphas in the MC.

I knew I could be a little overprotective of my brother, and Bane could handle himself just fine, but we were always a team.

“Tempting, but I need to get ready for work,” Colin said. “And instinct tells me to leave this talk to the two of you.”

Smart dragon, I thought. We didn’t end up arguing after all. I wondered if Colin had something else on his mind. He appeared a little distracted now.

“By work, you mean Adam’s store, or does Venom have a side job for you?” I asked with a raise of my eyebrows.

Venom would inform me if he had a job for Colin. That was our agreement. I still wasn't happy about Venom wanting to make Colin the MC's bogeyman, but my mate seemed to enjoy his unique position in the MC.

"No side gigs today. I promise," Colin said, planting a kiss on my cheek.

That gesture soothed my worried grizzly.

"I'll take about what you said about Bane being an adult into consideration," I promised him.

"Please do," Colin said. My mate walked me to the front door.

"Is there something else bothering you?" I had to ask.

He shook his head. I studied my mate intently and my gut instinct told me Colin wasn't being completely truthful with me.

Calm down, I reminded myself. Colin was just probably tired. After all, yesterday had been a long day for both of us.

My mate would tell me what was bothering him when he was ready.

## CHAPTER 20

# COLIN/ BASH

C OLIN

“WELL, WHAT DOES IT SAY?” Adam asked. Adam had to speak a little louder, because he was standing outside the bookstore’s employees’ only bathroom.

I could hear Adam tapping his feet restlessly outside. He seemed more nervous than I was.

“Don’t rush me,” I grumbled.

I picked up the pregnancy test and waited for the results with apprehension. Were these things even accurate?

When I threw up in the bathroom twice that morning, I was worried all the retching would wake Bash up.

Good thing Bash continued to snore and mumble my name in his sleep. Sometimes, I envied Bash for being such a deep sleeper.

Awake, Bash wasn’t completely oblivious. My mate definitely knew something was up.

Earlier this morning, Bash seemed surprised when I didn’t stop him from confronting Bane.

I had been feeling guilty ever since, because I knew my mind wasn’t entirely present that morning.

Since I clocked in at work, I kept thinking of how our conversation could've gone in a different direction.

Should I have accompanied Bash to the MC clubhouse and we would confront Bane together?

That would be counterproductive, because I could imagine Bane lashing out and acting defensive. I recalled my exact conversation with Bane the night before.

“DON'T TELL Bash about my plans,” Bane warned me.

“Wait, why are you telling me all this?” I asked.

Bane gave me a pained look. “Because if anything happens to me, I trust you'll be there to comfort him.”

“STUPID BROTHERS,” I grumbled to myself.

Secrets were sacred, and I didn't want to break Bane's trust, but now I was wishing he didn't confide in me so much.

Add this pregnancy in the mix and no wonder my stress-levels were sky high.

I glanced at the test kit again and sucked in a breath when two lines appeared. Yup, there was no denying it now. I was definitely pregnant.

I knew I should be more enthusiastic about the news, but could this happen at a more convenient time?

“Adam? Is everything alright?” came Corey's voice.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear Corey enter the break room. Just perfect.

At this rate, everyone would know about my pregnancy before Bash. That would only make matters worse between us.

“A little help here,” Simon yelled from somewhere in the store.

I sighed in relief at Simon's timely intervention.



“Everything’s peachy,” Adam told Corey. “Why don’t you help Simon out?”

“Alright,” Corey agreed.

Once I heard Corey’s fading footsteps, I opened the bathroom door. Adam only took one look at my expression before shrieking with joy.

He enveloped me into a hug, then started jumping up and down.

“Wait a moment, why am I more excited about this news more than you?” Adam asked after finally calming down.

“I’m happy I’m carrying Bash’s child, but I wished this came at a less stressful period,” I admitted. I touched my still-flat stomach.

“Why? Did something happen? Does it have something to do with the grizzly omega that Bash and you brought in yesterday?” Adam asked.

Adam and Arrow weren’t even at the MC clubhouse last night, I mused.

“News travels fast,” I remarked.

Adam tugged my hand and persuaded me to sit down. I sat and Adam made me a steaming mug of camomile tea.

Thankful to my friend, I took a few sips. The tea calmed me down, even a little.

“Gossip usually travels like wildfire in the MC. Those bears and ravens love to gossip,” Adam said. “You ought to know by now.”

I nodded and gathered my thoughts before speaking again.

“His name is Jules and I suspect, although Bane denies it vehemently, that Jules is Bane’s mate.”

Adam widened his eyes. “Oh my, is that true?”

I nodded and told Adam about the brothers’ history with Jules.

“Please keep this to yourself? Bash really got all twisted up this morning when he found out Jules is conscious,” I added.

“I usually share everything with Arrow, but as your best friend, I promise not to tell anyone else. Cross my heart and hope to die.” Adam delivered those words in such a serious tone, he made me laugh.

“There’s something else,” I said, biting on my lower lip. “I might have just lied to Bash for the first time.”

I was really regretting how I handled our talk this morning. Bash and I promised never to hide anything from each other.

“What do you mean by that?” Adam asked.

I told him about Bane, and Adam’s expression grew serious.

“Well, you didn’t exactly lie. You’re just keeping a secret you shared with Bane from your mate,” Adam pointed out.

“That doesn’t make it any better,” I told him. I sighed. “Adam, Bash told me once that Bane doesn’t trust people easily. If I break my promise to him now, he’ll never trust me again.”

“Colin, Bane’s life is at stake if what you’re telling me is true,” Adam said.

“He won’t really charge in there alone, will he?” I asked Adam.

I checked my phone, but there were no calls or messages from either my mate or Bane.

My worry spiked. I had hoped Bash would have gotten to his brother in time, but what if he hadn’t?

“I don’t know, Colin. If what you told me is true about Jules and Bane—” Adam trailed off. Adam looked at me. “What would Bash do if you were in trouble or someone hurt you?”

“He’ll hunt my attacker down to the very ends of the earth,” I whispered. “Oh, Adam. I think I’ve made a terrible mistake.”

“Calm down, Colin. This isn’t your fault. Bane put you in a horrible position and there’s your pregnancy to worry about. Breathe in and out with me, that’s it.”

Adam’s reassuring voice pulled my panic levels back to an acceptable level.

“During times like these, there’s only one solution,” Adam finally said.

“What’s that?” I asked, eager to hear his advice.

“We call the big boss for help,” Adam said.

He pulled out his phone and dialed Venom’s number.



## **BASH**

AS I WALKED out of the Moon Burrow Woods and entered the compound parking lot, I looked out for Bane’s Harley.

Disturbed I couldn’t find it right away, I tried his cellphone but my call went to voice mail.

“Come on, brother. Pick up,” I muttered.

Settling for texting Bane instead, I entered the MC clubhouse. This early in the morning, there were only a few alphas awake.

I walked past the eating hall and headed up the stairs. Once outside Bane’s bedroom, I knocked.

“Bane, Jules, you guys in there?” I asked.

Noticing Bane left the door unlocked, I turned the knob and let myself inside an empty room. My brother usually kept everything neat and tidy.

I noted the scattered clothes on the floor, the dirty bandages next to the trash bin. Bane and Jules’ s scent lingered in the room.

That told me I just missed them. After taking a deep breath, I searched Bane’s room for clues.

Getting angry or worried wouldn’t help anyone, least of all Bane. I had to calm down.

I opened the large storage chest at the foot of the bed, where Bane kept his favorite guns. After flipping the lid open, I

deduced he armed himself before leaving.

“At least he didn’t set out on his trip empty-handed.”

Empty-handed? What was I saying? Bane usually had more sense than this. This was my fault. I insisted we carry Jules up to Bane’s room, thinking that would make him feel safe.

Jules had regained consciousness for a few minutes after I pulled him from the car wreck. He panicked but relaxed when I placed him in Bane’s bed.

Now, I regretted my actions. I should’ve known Jules would try to get under Bane’s skin and work his unique brand of magic on him.

By magic, I meant Jules’ personal charm and wiles. My poor brother could never say no to him.

“Stupid Bane,” I grumbled, kicking at the chest.

That action only hurt my foot. I yelped and gritted my teeth. Colin’s words earlier came back to me.

Sure, Bane might be an adult who was responsible for his own actions. That didn’t mean I could punch some sense into him.

I was mated to a wonderful and caring man. For the first time in years, I was genuinely happy.

Losing my brother to a persuasive omega with his own agenda and to a group of violent polar bear shifters wasn’t on my agenda.

With my mind made up, I snatched a shotgun from Bane’s chest of weapons, along with two revolvers and a few extra bullets.

Then I headed out. New Dawn Valley was a few hours’ ride from Moon Burrow. I was hoping I could catch Bane and Jules midway.

If I couldn’t convince them to stop this reckless venture, then I would have no choice but to back my brother up.

Bane and I had gotten out of terrible scrapes before. Jules, however, might be a burden.

In the parking lot, I bumped into Arrow.

Arrow eyed me and asked, “Why are you packing so much heat? Off to kill someone?”

“I’m off to kill my brother once I find him,” I answered.

Arrow looked at me with some concern. “Does this have something to do with that omega Bane rode out of the compound with? That one smells like trouble.”

I had been in a hurry to leave and was about to excuse myself from the conversation. What Arrow just said gave me pause.

“Trouble sums Jules up. You saw both of them?” I asked.

“I was eating breakfast in the hall when I saw the two of them leaving in a hurry,” Arrow said thoughtfully. “That omega should be in bed, resting. That’s what I told Bane. Bane was packing plenty of firepower as well.”

“When was this?” I asked Arrow.

“About half an hour ago,” he answered.

“That’s not too bad,” I mused out loud. “I can probably still catch up to them if I ride fast.”

My cellphone vibrated. I took it out from the left front pocket of my jeans, hoping it was Bane. No such luck.

Guilt filled me when I saw Colin had sent me a text message. I couldn’t bring myself to look at it yet, because my resolve would waver if I did.

Colin had been through so much. I had no intentions of dragging my mate into Bane’s mess. Ideally, Bane and I could resolve this matter quickly.

By dinnertime, Jules would be back where he belonged. Bane would be safely home with Colin and me.

The three of us could even have a meal together, because Bane probably didn’t want to be alone.

Colin wouldn’t mind, because he apparently had a soft spot for my brother.

“Do you need back-up?” Arrow was asking.

I considered Arrow's proposal for a moment. The other bear alpha would be useful in a fight.

Then I remembered his prickly mate. Adam would have a field day if Arrow returned with injuries. I decided not to risk it. Besides, I didn't want to overcomplicate this simple matter.

"No. This isn't an MC problem, just some personal business Bane and I have to take care of," I answered confidently.

"Have you told Colin where you're heading off to?" Arrow asked.

"He doesn't need to know and you won't tell me, right?" I pressed.

Arrow furrowed his brows. "It's not wise, hiding secrets from your mate. Believe me," he said.

I ran a hand through my hair, then let out a growl.

"Colin doesn't need to know. Bane and I would be fine on our own," I said. "While I appreciate the helpful information you've given me, I really need to leave."

"Come back safely, Bash. You and Bane both," Arrow said. The concern in his voice surprised me.

"I will," I answered, incredibly touched that he cared. "I have a mate to come home to."

## CHAPTER 21

# BASH

I always prided myself on being a decent tracker. This time, I failed at playing catch-up.

Bane was certainly in a hurry. Or perhaps, he thought he could outrun me.

Did my brother really believe I would allow him to deal with these vicious polar bear alphas on his own after everything we went through?

I arrived at Red Dawn Valley just a few minutes after noon. The town itself hadn't changed one bit.

I rode past shabby buildings and indifferent townsfolk who went about their everyday business.

My brother and I found very little joy living in Red Dawn Valley. The humans and the paranormals living here barely tolerated each other.

Back then, we remained with the Irontooth Clan, because our alpha father swore his loyalty to the clan.

Bane and I had known no other home until they left us on the roadside to die.

Bitter memories of the past resurfaced as I rode past the town. I shoved those memories down.

Right now, I needed to be in prime fighting shape and have a more focused mindset. The proper road gave way to a dirt trail.



I entered the wild forest that would lead to the Irontooth Clan compound.

I nearly passed Bane's Harley at first, but I caught the scent of freshly spilled blood. Killing my motorcycle engine, I dismounted.

Before investigating any further, I pulled out my favorite revolver, which I had tucked into my belt.

I approached Bane's bike, hidden carefully between two tall bushes. Seeing the crimson splatters on the motorcycle seat, I took a deep breath.

Calm down, I reminded myself, Bane's not dead yet. I would feel it through the clan bonds if my brother passed away.

They were attacked here, I thought. Drops of blood led me deeper into the forest.

I noted the paw prints and footprints left on the ground, along with broken branches and crushed leaves.

Multiple enemies had confronted Bane and Jules. The knowledge didn't comfort me.

Bane could be brutal in a one-on-one fight against another alpha. However, if Bane was outnumbered, it was a different story.

"Why didn't you bring me along with you, jerk?" I grumbled under my breath.

Logically, I knew I shouldn't be making any unnecessary noise. For one, I was in enemy territory and they had my brother and Jules.

Well, Jules, I didn't care for so much. Rescuing Bane would be my number one priority.

If Jules died, Bane would never be the same. Inwardly, I understood that. Whether or not I liked it, I couldn't deny Colin's suspicions. Jules might be Bane's fated mate.

Thinking of my own mate put me in a grim mood. Colin deserved an explanation from my own lips. Not just a call from Arrow.

If Colin knew what I intended to do, he would've come running towards me.

I couldn't have that. Colin was the most precious thing in the world to me. The last thing I wanted to do was put him in harm's way.

What if Bane and I never came back home? Dying here on Irontooth Clan lands seemed like just a terrible way to go.

I pictured myself at ninety, with Colin next to me in bed. Hell yeah. I wanted to live, to spend an entire lifetime with my mate.

Cherishing and spoiling Colin rotten—that was my job.

"I will not die here," I gritted those words out loud while still following the blood trail.

Noticing a torn fabric caught on a branch, I plucked it and sniffed. This shirt carried Bane's old scent, but Jules probably wore it. I was close.

Those who'd taken my brother and Jules wouldn't be far now, but I had to be careful. I didn't know how many enemies I would be up against.

It turned out I didn't need to go far. I could hear voices in the clearing north of where I was.

I strained my ears and tried to catch bits and pieces of their conversation.

"Look what Nestor and I found, Reggie," the first voice said.

Someone let out a whistle. "You found the missing omega? But who's that monster with him? Never seen him before. Is he an outsider?"

"Who cares? Let's just kill him and bring this wayward omega back to Noah," said another.

I counted three of them. There could be more, but I didn't have any time to waste.

I stripped out of my clothes and reached for my grizzly.

Fur covered my fur and shoulders. Bones broke and organs moved. Once I completed the shift, I inched towards the enemy.

I was quiet as a mouse. The last thing I wanted to do was alert them to my presence.

I hid behind a cluster of bushes to see what I was up against. Bane lay on the ground, bleeding in his grizzly form.

Rage coiled in my insides at the sight of my injured brother.

Bane was bleeding from multiple punctured wounds, and he wasn't moving, either.

Jules kneeled next to him, weeping. Bane wasn't dead yet, but Jules seemed to think he was.

Three pale-haired alphas surrounded Bane and Jules, each one covered in scars and old rake marks. These three had seen their fair share of fights. They were bad news.

I knew I had to be strategic in taking them out or they might overwhelm me.

That was probably what happened in Bane's case. My brother couldn't fight freely as well, because he was also protecting Jules.

Bane's ears twitched, and I wondered if he realized I was here.

One of the polar bear alphas kicked him in the ribs, and Bane let out a soft snarl.

"Stop that. He's already down," Jules whispered.

Jules looked at the polar bear alpha defiantly, which earned him a back-handed slap.

"Let's just get on with this. Nestor, kill him," said the biggest alpha there.

Nestor walked up to Jules and Bane. I carefully positioned myself behind the other two alphas. Neither seemed to have noticed another predator had entered the fray.

"No, you can't have him. You'll need to go through me first," Jules said.

He flung himself over my brother's body. At that moment, I admired Jules' courage. Jules was foolish for thinking that he could stop Nestor, but at the very least, he cared for Bane in his own way.

"Get out of the way, fool. I don't have any qualms about gutting you, too," Nestor said with a sneer.

"Nestor, leave the omega alive. Noah wants all the omegas in the clan alive."

"But Reggie, he's pissing me off," grumbled Nestor.

"Do I have to do everything myself?" Reggie complained.

He shoved Nestor aside and pried Jules from Bane. The third alpha remained quiet all this time, and I understood why.

He studied his surroundings and probably had a sneaking suspicion someone was watching them.

I made my move before he could alert the other two polar bear alphas.

I emerged from my hiding place, not making a single sound because I wanted to lean into the element of surprise a little longer.

The third alpha didn't know what hit him. I aimed at his legs, making him topple. In seconds, I was on him.

He struggled, kicking and punching me, forgetting to use his most dangerous weapon.

I tore his throat out with my fangs before he remembered he could shift.

All the noise drew Nestor's and Reggie's attention back to me. Nestor swore.

Reggie reacted faster. His face twisted in rage as he spied the dead body I was still standing on top of.

Reggie came at me, shifting as he ran. He completed the change mid-way as the two of us clashed.

He changed forms faster than I expected, which informed me this fight wouldn't be easy.

My brother and Jules' life was at stake. I didn't hold back. I roared into Reggie's face. He clawed at my face, ripping chunks of fur.

I pushed him away, then slashed at him. Triumph filled me as my claws found purchase.

Reggie lunged at me again. We collided on the forest floor, biting and slashing each other.

I nearly had forgotten the other alpha until I heard his retreating footsteps. A scream followed.

I turned my head for a look and found both Nestor and Jules were gone. Coward, I thought.

Reggie took that opportunity to pound me into the dirt. He roared into my face.

I raised my left paw to prevent his fangs from reaching my neck. Bright hot pain surged from my bleeding arm.

Using my hind legs, I shoved the crazy alpha off me. Reggie stumbled backwards.

Before Reggie could get another attack in, I pounced on him like an overeager puppy.

Tearing out his throat filled me with satisfaction. My victory proved short-lived when I realized it was only me and Reggie's corpse left at the clearing.

Somehow, Bane had recovered enough strength to go after Jules. Had Bane heard Jules' scream for help earlier?

Letting out an annoyed grunt, I started after Bane. It wasn't hard to do.

Once again, I followed Bane's trail of blood and wondered how Bane could still move at all.

Right now, adrenaline was probably the only thing keeping him moving, that and the thought of saving Jules.

My injured arm hurt, so did the large scratch Reggie left on my face, but I kept moving. Part of me wished I had accepted Arrow's offer of help.

Back-up would be perfect right now. I was so intent on reaching my brother in time that I hadn't realized where Bane was going.

The trees disappeared from my line of sight. More scents assailed my nose—the stink of fear and panic from a dozen shifters.

Bane stumbled right into the old challenge circle of the Irontooth Clan Compound.

I met the gazes of several desperate and frightened bear shifters. Some of them had hope in their eyes.

Screw this. Did they think Bane and I were here to save them from their current predicament?

My sole priority was getting Bane and myself out of this mess alive.

The Irontooth bear shifters huddled together in a tight group, like sheep gathered for a slaughter.

I recognized half the faces, the remaining half were strangers to me. There were two dead bodies on the ground and one of them was Dino.

I knew these bear shifters once upon a time. I cared little for them. They weren't my responsibility.

Nestor was there. He dragged an unconscious Jules with him like some ragged doll.

Nestor approached a muscular, bald, one-eyed alpha, who I presumed was Noah.

Noah tilted his head to one side as Nestor whispered something in his ear. Five polar bear alphas made up this group. I remembered Luigi telling me that.

It was easy to guess that Noah was the lead alpha.

Since hiding was no longer an option, I stopped next to Bane. Bane gave me a grateful look.

Nostalgia hit me right in the chest. The last time we were here, we squared off against eight alphas who were eager to get rid of us.

Now, we only had to kill two, but I was betting this fight would not be easy.

“I understand you killed two of my brothers,” Noah said, looking right at me.

He spoke calmly, but the tense lines on his scarred face betrayed his anger.

Noah gave Bane, then me, an assessing look. Then he spoke again, “We are all monsters here. Why don’t the two of you join us?”

“Noah, what the hell?” Nestor complained.

Bane growled, his gaze focused on Jules.

“I guess not. Two against two seems fair, doesn’t it?” Noah asked. “Nestor, leave that omega. He’s not going anywhere. Let’s teach these two intruders a lesson in humility.”

“My pleasure, brother,” Nestor said, dropping Jules and cracking his knuckles in anticipation.

I recognized crazy when I saw it. Nestor and Noah would not be easy to kill. It was a good thing I was looking forward to this no-holds-barred dance to the death.

## CHAPTER 22



# BASH/ COLIN

## C OLIN

“VENOM, can’t this thing go any faster?” I complained.

“This is the fastest I can go,” Venom grumbled.

I held onto Venom tightly, wondering if Casper would mind the fact I was sitting so close to Venom. It wasn’t like I was romantically interested in another alpha, especially not Venom.

I was only madly in love with Bash. That was why I was in this situation in the first place—hitching a ride with Bash’s lead alpha. I supposed Venom was now my lead alpha as well.

Right after Adam and I phoned Venom for help, Arrow called. Arrow informed us that Bash had just left, intending to go after Bane and Jules.

I then met Venom at the compound. Venom offered to take his truck, but his motorcycle would get us to Red Dawn Valley a lot faster.

Although Arrow was free, I picked Venom to come with me. Having the king of monsters watch my back seemed like a good idea.

We had to stop at a traffic light. My frustration mounted.

Why did Bash and Bane have to ride right into the jaws of danger without telling anyone else? I silently fumed.

Arrow told me Bash didn't want to drag me into danger, but Bash and I were mates. Wherever Bash went, I went as well.

I could also defend himself just fine, if Bash was worried about me getting in the way. Heck, even Venom considered me an asset, a secret weapon for the MC.

Oh, I understood where Bash was coming from. Bash probably thought he and his brother could settle this problem on their own without asking for anyone's help.

Those two had grown so used to being independent, it was sometimes vexing.

"Bash should have really known better," I mumbled.

"If you were in such a hurry, why didn't you just shift and fly over there?" Venom asked. "Is it because of the baby?"

I sucked in a breath. That was a good question and wait. Venom knew I was pregnant? Did Adam tell Arrow, and Arrow relayed the news to Venom?

"It's not because I'm pregnant," I finally answered.

"Then what?"

"When I was with Dario, he used our mating bond to force me to shift. It was usually to intimidate or hurt someone," I answered. "My dragon didn't like being used that way. After Dario died, I found I had trouble shifting. I only shifted twice outside my cabin, but it's never been a smooth transition."

"Does Bash know this?" Venom asked.

"No, but I've gotten better. My dragon and I are in a happier place right now," I admitted.

Venom sighed. "If you told Bash or me this earlier, maybe we could've helped you."

"It's my personal problem," I said.

Venom growled. "Do you know who you sound like right now? Bash and you are really alike," Venom pointed out. "Perfect for each other."

I let out a laugh. It felt a little awkward going on a trip with Venom because I was only used to riding with Bash. This was the first time I finally relaxed.

“Don’t worry. My dragon won’t fail me this time. Bash’s life is on the line,” I reassured Venom.

“Alright, but you don’t need to push yourself,” Venom said.

“Aw. You might be scary like my Bash on the outside, but inside you’re—”

“Don’t you dare say it. Only Casper gets to call me irritating pet names,” Venom warned.

Before I could come up with a retort, a sharp pain spiked through my mating bond. I groaned, gripping Venom tightly for support.

It felt like someone had shoved knives through my insides. I gasped, trying to think past the pain. Physically, I was unharmed. I knew that, yet it was hard to ignore the sudden burst of agony.

My mate had been severely injured. Panic seized me. I couldn’t think, let alone breathe.

“Venom, stop the motorcycle. Please.”

Venom must’ve heard the urgency in my voice, because he stopped his Harley by the side of the road. I didn’t have time to explain. I started to strip.

“Is that a wise idea? You just told me your dragon is unstable,” Venom said, voice calm.

“Bash is dying.”

Horrid images of Bash bleeding on the ground or being torn to pieces rose in my head. I let out a miserable sob, then took deep breaths. Crying wouldn’t help.

Venom was right. My dragon and I had been at odds with each other since our mating bond to Dario had been severed.

I searched deep within myself and needn’t worry. My beast and I agreed saving Bash would be our number one goal.

Of course, it would be nice if we could help Bane and Jules as well, but Bash would always come first.

“Understood.” Venom swiped my clothes and belongings and took them with him. He continued, “I’ll ride ahead. You’ll probably get there first. Be careful, Colin.”

“I will. Thanks for taking me this far, Venom,” I said.

Venom started for the road again. Scales covered my chest and arms. Shifting always hurt.

I hated it when Dario used our bond to force me to change. It always left me feeling sick and used afterwards.

We’re here to save our mate, I reminded my dragon. No one pulled my strings any longer. I made my own decisions now.

Unfurling my wings, I let out a loud bellow. A passing car nearly skidded to one side as I took flight.

One passenger, a young child of eight or nine, pressed her face against the glass and stared at me in wonder.

Beating my wings slowly, I ascended. Higher and higher I flew until my wingtips touched the clouds.

My scales were white. I would just blend in with the clouds unseen until I was ready to reveal myself.

I soared past a small town, then rows and rows of trees. A forest. Bash mentioned that the Irontooth Clan compound was in the woods.

I flew further north and spotted a small settlement in the distance. That must be it.

Small figures standing on what looked like a field caught my interest. Not just any normal field, I realized, noting the rough circular shape.

This was the clan challenge circle, where fights were issued to establish dominance. Every shifter group had one, save the Grizzly Reapers MC.

Bash told me Venom welcomed any challengers, but the fights usually happened in the parking lot.

Excruciating, blinding, white hot pain hit me in the chest and I almost lost control of my wings. I squeezed my eyes shut for a few seconds and gathered myself.

Hang in there, Bash, I thought, sending a wave of encouragement through our mate bond.

I'm coming.



## **BASH**

I PANTED, looking at my monstrous opponent through one good eye. Noah had given me more of a challenge than I expected.

I wasn't rusty. In fact, I was in excellent fighting shape, because violence was part and parcel of my job.

No wonder Travis and Dino had been desperate to ask for Bane and my help with these polar bear alphas.

Speaking of Bane, I risked a look at my brother. He lay in a bloody heap on the ground. Jules sat next to him, bawling his eyes out.

Nestor's dead body lay a few feet from the two of them. Bane had done his part. Now I had to do mine.

Noah rose on his hind legs and growled. Blood matted his white fur. His body—covered in bites and ragged claw marks—was a mirror image of mine.

I knew I had reached my limits about five minutes ago. Through our mate bond, Colin probably felt the moment Noah drove his claws right into my underbelly.

Stay where you are. I'll take care of this. I'll be home soon. That was the silent message I kept trying to send to Colin. Although, being mated didn't allow us to send thoughts, only emotions.

Noah fell back on all fours. He dashed at me. His speed had obviously dropped. Noah seemed so much slower compared to before.

So was I. Both of us were worn out. Move, I yelled at myself. For a second, I thought my battered body would finally give out, but I was suddenly running.

Noah and I ripped into each other. One lucky swipe of my right paw sent him flying across the edge of the challenge circle. To where Jules and Bane were.

I silently swore as Noah looked from me and to Jules and my brother.

Desperate alphas backed into a corner always reacted in unpredictable ways. Noah dragged himself up.

This time, he didn't try going for my throat. His new target was Jules. Even as injured as he was, Noah would have no trouble taking Jules down. Then he'd move to Bane.

Childhood memories materialized in my head. I recalled the hot summer day my father had introduced me to the shy boy who, like me, carried a monster inside him. I still remembered my father's words.

"You both might have different omega fathers, but you two are brothers from this day onwards. The two of you are family. Protect each other to the very end."

Newfound fury and energy filled my entire body. I charged at Noah one last time. For a fraction of a second, he glanced at me.

Fear filled his pale eyes for the first time. Then Noah shook it off. He sprinted for Jules, claws extended.

Jules didn't lift his head from Bane's body. He was too out of it to notice Noah's attack.

Too slow, I thought. I wouldn't be able to bridge the distance between me and my brother's future mate in time.

Despair filled me. I lost momentum, but a dark shadow suddenly blocked the sun. An eclipse? Strange.

I looked up. Some of the watching and useless bear shifters gasped at the sudden presence of a glorious white dragon, its large membranous wings outstretched.

Colin, still hovering mid-air, emitted a sudden lance of fire. Noah stared, stunned, unable to move as Colin's flames hit him head on. Noah screeched in torment as he burned.

Someone else screamed. There was going to be mayhem, I thought. The bear shifters in the Irontooth Clan had allowed themselves to become weak. They acted like sheep, forgetting they were predators.

A roar cut through the panic.

"Calm down. That dragon shifter is Bash's mate," said a familiar voice.

I spotted Venom, his Harley, not far behind. He strode to where we were, ignoring the bears gaping at him.

Relief filled me. Bitter memories of being betrayed by my former clan still plagued me. If Colin and Venom hadn't arrived, I wouldn't put it past the surviving bear shifters to end Bane and me.

I really didn't trust any of them.

Colin landed next to me. My mate didn't change back to human right away. He narrowed his eyes when one bear alpha tried to approach me.

Colin curled one wing protectively over my injured body and let out a brassy growl of challenge. The alpha stared at Noah's burned corpse, swallowed, and wisely backed away.

All the adrenaline had left my body. All I could do was lay down and touch Colin's left claw with my good paw. I wanted to reassure him I was going to be just fine.

"Relax, Colin. None of these bears would try anything funny. Am I right?" Venom asked the huddled group.

Five alphas had fanned out to protect the weaker members of the clan. They appeared cautious of both Venom and Colin.

One alpha, who I didn't know, manned up and stepped forward, probably to discuss matters with Venom.

"Colin, can you carry Bash and Bane back to the MC compound?" Venom asked my mate.

Colin let out another brassy rumble. I was too tired to argue as Venom lifted my injured body without ceremony. Venom dumped me on Colin's back.

He touched Jules' shoulder and Jules squeaked, backing away from him. Venom ignored Jules and placed my brother's unconscious body next to mine.

Venom looked at me. "I'll handle matters here. Bane and you don't need to deal with these cowards any longer," Venom said.

He patted Colin's rump and I let out an irritated growl. Colin gave Venom a shove with his tail. Venom only chuckled. Since when did those two become friends?

Then Colin spread his wings and took to the skies. I reached for Bane's shoulder with one paw. I didn't want my brother to fall off by accident. Thankfully, Colin flew at a slow pace.

I had the distinct impression he was begin careful, because he carried two badly injured passengers. Certain my mate would bring my brother and me safely home, I let sleep take me.



## CHAPTER 23

# COLIN

“How are Bash and Bane doing?” Adam asked me. We were sitting in my kitchen, having breakfast, when a groan came from my living room.

“See for yourself,” I answered.

Hopping off the breakfast stool, I made my way to the living room where my mate and his brother were recovering.

The moment I landed on the Grizzly Reapers MC parking lot yesterday, Arrow was waiting with Micah.

The healer took care of most of Bash and Bane’s more serious injuries.

That didn’t mean Bash and Bane were back to their normal selves. Currently, the two brothers were in their grizzly forms. For us shifters, we healed faster in our animal forms.

Bash took up the living room sofa, while Bane settled on a comfy spot near the fireplace.

My mate was awake. The moment Bash saw me, he fell off the sofa with a loud crash.

Adam giggled next to me. I, on the other hand, wasn’t the least bit amused by Bash’s antics.

Approaching my mate, I gave his ear a tug. I then fixed him with a glare. My mate should know better.

His job was to rest up and get better. Unfortunately for me, Bash lacked patience and got angsty easily.

Bash rose on his hind legs and gave my face a lick. My heart melted. I took one large furry paw and led him back to the sofa. Bash gave me a pitiful look.

“You should be resting.” I pointed to the sofa. “Why can’t you be more like your brother? Bane doesn’t give me any trouble.”

Bane let out a soft snarl from the ground. Wait. Was Bane chuckling? I glowered at the other alpha. Bane faced the fireplace again and pretended to sleep.

I wondered if they woke up because they were hungry. According to Micah, injured alphas consumed more food because they needed energy to heal up.

I made a quick trip to the kitchen. After piling up two plates with eggs, plenty of bacon, and chocolate muffins, I returned to my patients.

The moment I placed the plates next to them, the brothers started devouring the food like hungry locusts.

“Do you guys want another round?” I asked.

Their growls of assent told me they did. Adam helped me prepare a second serving for both of them.

“Colin, you seem to have a good handle on things over here,” Adam observed.

After hearing what happened to us yesterday, Adam drove up to my cabin with coffee, breakfast, and plenty of baked goodies for my patients.

“I don’t know how I put up with these two,” I said with a scoff.

Bash growled softly under his breath. My mate looked adorable, with bits of scrambled egg on his nose and muzzle.

After wiping his face clean with the hem of my shirt, I leaned over him and kissed his nose. That seemed to satisfy him. He closed his eyes again.

“I’ll wake you again for lunch,” I said to my mate.

Adam nudged me in the shoulder as we walked back to the kitchen.

“You have a good heart, Colin.”

“Why do you say that? I’m just looking out for my mate and his brother,” I said.

“Well, sure, Bash is your responsibility, but you could’ve left Bane to the care of the other bear alphas in the MC compound,” Adam pointed out.

“I couldn’t do that. Bane’s family, after all,” I said. “Besides, he’s probably missing Jules.”

“Whatever happened to that omega?” Adam asked.

“I have no idea,” I said with a shake of my head. “Venom asked Jules if he wanted to come back to Moon Burrow with him, but Jules refused. Said he would stay and help the Irontooth Clan rebuild.”

“Well, that group has a lot of work to do,” Adam said.

“I’m just glad Bash and Bane no longer need to worry about the folks that betrayed them. Without a strong lead alpha to hold that clan, who knows what would happen?” I shrugged.

Adam looked shocked by my words. “Colin, you really don’t mean that, do you?”

“Adam, they put my mate and Bane through hell in the past. They brought trouble to our doors. Can’t I be mad?” I countered.

“Of course you do. I guess I’d feel the same way if I were in your shoes,” Adam said.

“Bash and Bane already did them a huge favor by getting rid of all those polar bear alphas. Next time a new challenger comes knocking at their door, they would need to deal with him or her on their own,” I said.

“You’re right. Well, I’m sorry to bring them up. Let’s talk about something else. Does Bash know about you-know-what?” Adam nodded to my flat stomach.

I tentatively touched it.

“Not yet. I figure I’ll tell him when he’s a little better. Venom knew right away.”

“He did?” Adam asked, surprised. “When was this?”

“When I hitched a ride with him to New Dawn Valley,” I answered. “When he asked me why I didn’t just fly over to where my mate was, Venom asked if it’s because of the baby.”

“Wow.” Adam looked thoughtful. “I heard you were badass, so your dragon didn’t give you any problems?”

“No, I was worried my dragon would suddenly abandon me during my time of need, but he didn’t. I think we’ve reached some kind of understanding,” I said.

“That’s good news,” Adam said.

A thump came from the living room.

“Are you sure you don’t need any help with those two?” Adam asked me.

I shook my head. “You have the bookstore to run, and a family of your own to take care of. I can handle two grumpy and injured bears.”

“Well, best of luck to you. Don’t hesitate to give me a call,” Adam said.

I walked Adam to the front door, since I didn’t think Bash needed my attention at this instant.

If Bash was in terrible pain or genuinely needed me right away, I could sense his emotions through our mate bond.

Returning to the living room, I was appalled to find Bash and Bane fighting over a chocolate muffin. Since they were both acting silly, I pulled them both apart.

I was an easy feat to do, considering they were both injured and thus a little slower than normal.

“Bane, you can have that muffin. Bash, I’ll get you another.”

That seemed to satisfy them both. I sighed, hoping the two of them would recover faster. I couldn’t wait for things to be normal again.

\* \* \*

## BASH

“THANK you for taking such good care of me,” Bane said.

I watched my brother leaning against the doorway with some amusement. I couldn't recall the last time I'd seen Bane look embarrassed.

Bane ran his fingers through his hair and looked Colin in the eyes.

“If there's anything I can do for you and Bash, let me know,” Bane finished.

“Can give Bash and me a heads up before you make another reckless life-and-death decision?” Colin asked.

Bane laughed and seeing the two of them talking so casually made me a little jealous.

I walked up to my mate and hugged him from behind. Colin gave me an annoyed look, but eventually relaxed in my arms.

“Will do,” Bane finally said.

“Any news from Jules?” Colin asked Bane, his tone hopeful.

My mate sure had guts, asking my brother that. If any other bear alpha in the MC brought up Jules, they would get a punch in the face.

“No. In the end, Jules only wanted my help to get rid of those monsters,” Bane said, his expression unreadable.

“Hey,” Colin said, touching his arm.

It was a friendly gesture, nothing more, I reminded myself.

Colin continued, “The only thing that matters is that Bash and you came out of that fight alive.”

“Thanks to you and Venom,” Bane muttered. He seemed angry with himself.

“Hey, I think we could have handled everything just fine on our own, brother,” I told Bane.

Bane gave me a nod. “I won’t take up your time any longer. It seems you two have some matters to discuss.”

I relaxed my hold on Colin so Colin could shut the front door. My mate turned to face me, his back pressed against the wood.

“It seems you’ve been keeping a secret from me,” I told my mate.

Oh, I wasn’t mad at Colin. Colin had been so focused on fussing over Bane and me, he probably forgot to tell me the news.

There was no denying Bane and I were a handful. Colin had been unbelievably patient and caring. Or maybe Colin was just waiting for the right opportunity to tell me.

“I wanted to tell you right after I found out, but then Bane ran off to Red Dawn Valley with Jules,” Colin began.

“Is it true?” I asked, searching my mate’s eyes. “We’re expecting?”

Colin took a deep breath.

“Yes, Bash. I’m pregnant. I know we haven’t discussed—”

I cut my mate off with a hug. Some of my wounds hadn’t healed completely. Noah had really done a number on me, but I could now walk on my own.

I let out a whoop, then kissed him silly. After the kiss, Colin gripped my shoulders.

“I take it you’re happy?” Colin asked me.

“Of course! Why wouldn’t I be? Can you picture me playing chase with a little baby dragon shifter? I bet he or she would be so cute,” I exclaimed.

“Or an adorable bear cub nestling in bed with us at night,” Colin said.

He had a dreamy expression on his face. After his ordeal with Dario, I never broached the subject of kids with Colin.

Giving him time to accept me into his life had been hard enough. Eventually, Colin let his walls down and allowed me

in.

We became mates. Partners. Now, we were having a kid together. I was going to be a father.

Oh, my god. I was going to be a dad. I set Colin down. My breathing turned rapid, and Colin glanced at me with concern.

“Bash, are you alright?” Colin asked.

“Just hyperventilating a little,” I admitted.

Colin opened the door again and held out his hand.

“Let’s head outside. Get some air.”

I agreed with his suggestion. We stepped out of his cabin. I inhaled the fresh forest air and looked over my shoulder at Colin’s small cabin.

When we first laid eyes on this property, it had been a dilapidated mess, certainly unfit to live in.

When I roped in a few of my MC brothers for my little construction project, all I wanted to do was give a broken dragon shifter a place to call home.

Now, this little plot of land and the cabin was going to be home to Colin and me, but also our little ones. Plural.

I wanted more than one kid and wondered if Colin felt the same?

“Bash?” Colin asked. “Tell me what’s going on in that brilliant mind of yours?”

“Did you just call me brilliant, mate?” I asked, grinning at him. “I’m thinking of my next construction project. We’d need a whole new wing for the cabin. No, wait.”

“Wait?” Colin asked.

He looked confused when I pulled out my phone. I opened the group chat that included all the bear alphas in the MC.

Colin peered over my shoulder and let out an adorable little gasp as I told everyone the good news.

**Bash: Colin is pregnant. We’re having a kid!**



As I received a slew of congratulation messages, Colin sighed and leaned his head against my shoulder.

“What?” I asked him. “I want everyone to know I’m now a proud papa.”

“Bash,” he murmured.

Colin rested the palm of his hand over the skin of my heart. I set my phone down and placed my fingers over his.

“Hmm?” I asked my gorgeous mate.

“You have such a generous heart. That’s one thing I really love about you.”

I was thirty-five-years old this year and yet my heart skipped a beat after hearing my mate’s words.

“You love me?” I asked in a teasing voice.

“Of course, silly bear.”

I tugged Colin towards me and gave him a deep and tender kiss.

“I love you so much, Colin. I’m excited to start this next chapter of my life with you,” I told him.

# EPILOGUE

### 3 MONTHS LATER

“Colin, just one more push. You can do it, baby,” I urged my mate.

Colin groaned and gripped my hand so hard I thought bones would break. I didn't protest, especially given the fact Colin was the one giving birth.

As Colin worked hard to bring our baby into this world, I thought of how these last three months had gone by so fast.

After Colin and I announced to everyone in the MC that we were expecting, I once again roped in Bane and four other bear alphas to start work on the cabin's new wing.

Bane needed a project to distract him from his recent heartbreak. Well, Bane would never admit he was suffering from heartbreak.

He kept insisting he was over Jules, but Colin and I knew better.

Bane even went on a couple of blind dates just to prove something. I told Colin that Bane was just making himself even more miserable.

My mate reminded me to leave Bane alone and let him figure things out on his own.

As for the Irontooth Clan, Lincoln—an alpha I didn't know—had taken over the clan's leadership.

Lincoln was young, ambitious, and wise enough to know that he had to make amends.

Last week, Lincoln asked Bane and me for a meeting. We reluctantly agreed. Lincoln made the trip to Moon Burrow.

It surprised Bane, and I he came alone and without guards. Lincoln apologized on the clan's behalf, thanked us for getting rid of Noah and his brothers.

Then Lincoln left town, without asking for anything but forgiveness. I liked him immediately, while Bane was skeptical he would last long.

Meanwhile, Zane and Otis had invited Colin and me over to their place several times for lunch or dinner. Sometimes, Ivan and Doyle were there.

Most of the time, it was just the four of us. Zane still didn't like me completely, but we tolerated each other for Colin's sake.

Colin seemed happy being able to stay in touch with his kin, and seeing him pleased was all that mattered to me.

A month ago, Colin stopped working at Adam's store because he had reached the critical part of his pregnancy.

Omega pregnancies lasted only three months after all, and my mate needed plenty of rest.

"That's it, one last push," Micah told Colin.

After finding out Micah had helped deliver several babies in his old flock, we convinced him to be our midwife.

Micah agreed after some exceptional persuasion on my part. Colin and I opted for a home birth.

Colin let out a groan. I etched the new few moments in my brain forever. Micah wrapped our baby boy in a blanket, then handed him to Colin.

Now it was my turn to grip Colin's hand.

I gazed down at the beautiful boy Colin and I both made. We both agreed to name him Denver, after my alpha dad.

Denver had inherited my dark brown hair, Colin's light blue eyes, my alpha genes and Colin's dragon.

Our son was going to change the world someday, I thought with pride.

I wished my dad was here to see my son, but I figured it was fine, because he was probably watching over Colin and me from the afterlife.

“Want to hold him?” Colin asked me.

“Can I?” I asked.

Colin must’ve heard the uncertainty in my voice, because he sat up slowly. Without waiting for me to tell him I was ready, he handed Denver to me.

Swallowing, I accepted my son. Part of my fears stemmed from the fact all I was good at was fighting and violence.

Being a dad? That was a tall order.

While it thrilled me to know Colin and I were having a baby, I soon realized I had zero experience when it came to caring for another living soul.

“Hey, there’s nothing to fear. You take good care of your mate. I know you’ll be the best dad in the world,” Colin whispered in my ear.

Denver stared at me and his small fingers gripped my big, inked ones. At that moment, I fell in love.

I knew I would move mountains for my mate and son.

“Look, he’s taken with you immediately,” Colin murmured.

“Yeah? He’s probably wowed by how awesome his alpha dad is,” I said.

That got a laugh out of Colin. Our sweet and tender family moment was broken when the door to the cabin opened.

Micah gathered up his medical bag, excused himself just as Bane and Venom entered the bedroom.

Judging by the amount of noise coming from outside our cabin, I knew the rest of the MC was eager to meet Denver.

I glanced at Colin, concerned he wanted some privacy. Yelling at the other bears would be easy, but I knew some of them

would be disappointed or hurt because they couldn't see Denver.

Most of my MC brothers might look tough on the outside, but they could also be unexpectedly sensitive.

"Look at that handsome boy. Colin, congratulations. Your son inherited all your good looks," Venom drawled.

"Oh yeah, you're right," Bane said, peering at little Denver.

Denver sneezed, and a tiny jet of flame came out of his mouth. Bane, Venom and I stared at my little boy.

Denver's eyes turned reptilian gold as he laughed, then returned to blue. I had a feeling Denver was going to be a handful. Then a stray thought occurred to me.

"Oh no," I told Colin.

"What now?" Colin asked.

"We forgot to fireproof the cabin," I said, worried. "Why didn't I think of this earlier?"

"Don't panic. That's easily doable," Bane said. "Right, Venom?"

"Right," Venom agreed. "We have your back."

Those words filled me with reassurance. Colin let out a snuffle, and Denver and I looked at him with some concern.

Even Bane and Venom didn't seem happy to see my mate shedding tears.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I asked him. "Why are you crying?"

"Nothing. These are tears of joy. When Venom said I could live here, I thought it was a temporary arrangement. Then you entered my life and everything changed," Colin murmured. "I didn't just find my fated mate, I also gained a family."

"Aw," Bane murmured. Venom began tugging him out the door. "Wait, I haven't held Denver yet."

"Let's give these two a moment," Venom said.

I shot my lead alpha a grateful look, then transferred Denver back to Colin. Colin hugged our little boy and let out a pure,

undiluted laugh of joy.

I leaned over and gave my mate a kiss on the mouth.

“Do you feel more composed now?” I asked a few moments later.

“I do,” Colin agreed. “Now let’s call those bears in here before they tear our cabin down.”

THE END

**Want more of Bash and Colin? Click [here](#) to get the bonus scene, *The Party*.**

**Want more Moon Burrow Bears? Turn the page to see a preview of *Bane, Bane and Jules’* story.**

# A PREVIEW OF BANE

## JULES

“Let me through please,” I said urgently. James and Don, the two bears alphas in my way, ignored me completely, but I persisted.

I bulldozed my way through several whispering clan mates until I could finally look upon on the dead body buried under several feet of snow.

Seeing Louie Bonner’s corpse frozen like a block of ice didn’t make my body break out in a cold sweat.

It was the two neat little holes on the left side of his neck. A vampire bite.

Dread lined my insides. He’s finally found me, I thought. I made a checklist when I returned to New Dawn Valley with my tail tucked between my legs.

The number one item on that list said, ‘Run the moment he finds you’. Linger here on the kill site meant wasting time, and time was a luxury I didn’t have.

I should gather my senses and run straight back home, to the house my adoptive parents left me after they died.

An emergency bag containing all my essential items waited for me under my bed.

Snatch the bag, get my car keys and get as far away from New Dawn Vally as fast as I could. That was my agenda. Still, my feet seemed encased in ice.



I couldn't tear my gaze from poor Louie's body. Louie was the clan drunk. No one wanted to be friends with him except me.

The alpha had once been a formidable enforcer for the clan until death ripped his mate away from him in a tragic car accident.

These days, we could always find Louie in the local pub, drinking his days away.

Alcohol didn't affect shifters the way it did humans, but drinking an entire barrel of poison might just do the trick.

"Go back to your homes," ordered Lincoln Weber.

Some bystanders drifted away, but most of the bear shifters continued talking amongst themselves.

Lincoln had only recently become the lead alpha of the Irontooth Clan.

No surprise Lincoln hadn't earned the respect of all the bear shifters yet. A threatening growl silenced everyone there.

Lincoln had to use the clan bonds to enhance the sound.

I hadn't formed much of an opinion of Lincoln yet. Lincoln joined the clan only a three months ago.

When our territory had been threatened by a small but frightening capable group of polar bear shifters, the Irontooth Clan recruited as many fighters as possible.

The previous lead Alpha, Dino, had been kind. Dino might have a selfish and manipulative omega mate, but he cared for the well-being of the bear shifters under his care.

In my experience, however, kindness wasn't a favorable trait for a leader. Kindness made one weak.

I wondered what kind of leader Lincoln aspired to be.

"Everyone can leave except you, Jules. Stay," Lincoln said. His tone booked no arguments. "Jordan, I'll speak with you later."

Jordan, Lincoln's newly chosen second, didn't seem to enjoy being dismissed. Like me, Jordan had been a long-time

member of the clan.

I had seen Jordan fight. He could hold his own, but he was a follower, always content to receive orders instead of giving them.

There weren't any true monsters left in the Irontooth Clan, I thought. All of them had left.

My thoughts immediately strayed to Bane and his brother Bash. Regret immediately filled my heart, along with a sudden spark of anger.

Bane and Bash were exiles of the clan. When the polar bear alphas finally invaded our territory and took our people hostage, another omega and I traveled to the territory of Moon Burrow to seek Bane and Bash's help.

Thanks to them, no one else had to die.

Complicated was the only word I could use to describe my relationship with Bane.

Ever since Bane and his brother rescued me and my biological omega father a decade ago, I always felt a special connection with Bane.

Too bad Bane only saw me as a younger brother, a ward he felt obligated to protect. Certainly not a potential partner.

In the end, that was a good thing, I mused.

If Bane knew how much trouble I had gotten myself in, he would end up running back to me and to the trap I'd gotten myself caught in.

"I can handle Jules, Jordan," Lincoln was saying.

"You can handle me?" I asked, unable to keep the venom out of my voice.

Jordan glanced at me, then shrugged. The alphas and betas in the clan outnumbered the omegas.

No surprise I had received a few interested glances over the years.

Jordan and I went on one disastrous date. One date was enough to convince him I didn't possess the qualities he was looking for in a mate.

"That's not what I meant and you know it, Jules," Lincoln said.

Jordan finally left us. One good look around the clearing showed me Lincoln and me were truly alone.

A chilly wind made me shiver in my oversized puffed jacket. My hands began to turn blue, so I stuffed them in the front pockets of the jacket.

Bane's old jacket. It was one of the few pieces of clothing Bane left behind in his old room.

The same night the clan made the horrible decision of driving Bane and Bash off our lands, I snuck into Bane's room.

I gathered all his belongings and claimed them for myself. Bane wouldn't mind, or so I assumed.

"Why did you want to ask me?" I asked Lincoln.

I began shifting my feet and realized Lincoln watched me too intently for my liking.

After forcing myself to stop looking so nervous, I took several deep breaths. Lincoln might be new at his job, but he'd always been a keen observer.

"You knew Louie better than anyone," Lincoln began.

It was a statement, not a question.

"I can't say we're close friends," I said, keeping my tone neutral.

Lincoln said nothing. I prevented myself from squirming under his inquisitive gaze.

I cleared my throat before speaking again.

"When it's closing time, I pick him up from the pub sometimes. The bartender has my number," I admitted. "No one else cares about him, which is sad. Louie was a good

enforcer for the clan once, but loyalty doesn't mean much these days.”

My voice came out bitter, but I didn't care. I remembered how shocked I had been five years ago, when I heard ten alphas in the clan had ganged up on Bane and Bash.

They left the two brothers, half dead, on the side of the road, conveniently forgetting that the clan owed them plenty of favors.

Bane and Bash had been the clan's best protectors. Some would call them killers, but no one could deny they had been effective at their jobs.

After they left, the clan had never been the same.

Yet you crawled back to New Dawn Valley when you ran into trouble, my inner bear whispered.

I sucked in a breath. These days, my bear and I often disagreed with each other.

I couldn't even remember the last time I had shifted to my animal form.

“I'm aware of that,” Lincoln finally said. “But now that I've taken over Dino's old position, I intend to make a few changes. I might have not here been here long, but I had seen for myself how lies and secrets have destroyed this clan.”

“And?” I pressed.

Lincoln let out an annoyed growl, but it did not impress me. In my twenty-one years of living, I had seen how real monsters operated and Lincoln didn't scare me.

He should and showing him a little more respect wouldn't hurt, but what was the point?

I knew what came next. Venom, Bane's scary new lead alpha, asked me if I wanted to stay in Moon Burrow for a little while, at least until I figure things out.

In the end, I refused that offer, because Bane made it clear all he could offer me was friendship.

Even that had been a lie. How could we even form a friendship when things were so awkward between us?

Besides, each time he looked at me, I reminded him of the past, of the most awful moment in his life.

What could I say to that?

Bane had already rescued the clan once. Everyone, at least the bear shifters who knew him, said that Bane only came back for me.

Maybe that was true. Still, I had already caused him enough pain and trouble.

“Jules, are you listening to me?” Lincoln suddenly grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

My bear shrunk into a tiny ball inside me at the sight of Lincoln’s sharp teeth.

Terror seized me, and I froze, remembering my time with another monster.

Lincoln must’ve felt my distress, because he released me abruptly.

Lincoln could be a good leader for this clan if time allowed it, I thought.

Too bad I wouldn’t be able to be part of the Irontooth Clan’s future. Not anymore, especially after Louie had been killed.

What had Lincoln asked me? My mind had drifted while he was speaking. Why did Bane preoccupy my thoughts every single day?

“Louie pissed off some regulars at the bar three nights ago,” I said, finally remembering what Lincoln wanted to know.

“So he has enemies? Maybe pissed off a vampire who was visiting town?” Lincoln asked.

He and both knew there were no vampire residents in New Dawn Valley. For the longest time, it had only been us, the Irontooth Bears and the humans.

We often clashed with the human locals in the past. Our relationship with them had improved somewhat over the years, but we wouldn't consider ourselves allies.

During the short time I spent with Bane recently, I remembered him telling me the relationship he and his MC had with the human population in Moon Burrow was friendly.

I hadn't believed him. I couldn't imagine shifters and humans working together, let alone co-existing in a mutually beneficial relationship.

"Let's stop dancing around the topic, Lincoln," I finally said. "Tell me what you really think."

Lincoln crossed his arms, the motion making his biceps bulge. It made me aware of how fragile I was compared to Lincoln.

Omeegas might be stronger than humans in general, but alphas were on an entirely different league altogether.

"Three months ago, when I arrived with the other newcomers in New Dawn Valley, we bumped into each in the eating hall. Do you remember?" Lincoln asked.

"I do. You stopped flirting with me mid-way," I replied. "Because you saw these, didn't you?"

I tugged the collar of my jacket and the shirt underneath to expose my collarbone and the three neat vampire bite marks there.

"I and everyone else in this clan know that those two powerful exiles only returned to New Dawn Valley for your sake," Lincoln said. "Because of them, we are all still alive, but I need you to be honest with me, Jules. The vampire who killed Louie. Is it the same one you were... involved with?"

I tugged the collar of my shirt back up, noting how polite Lincoln sounded.

A less patient alpha would have simply tossed me out of clan lands or punished me for putting the entire clan in danger.

Then again, these were special circumstances. Those polar bear shifters had decimated half our numbers.

Hell, they could've killed me as well. One of them had gone after me and the omega who had driven to Moon Burrow.

Thanks to the healer employed by Bane's clan, I survived. I got lucky. That other omega didn't.

"How much do you know?" I finally asked.

Lincoln had easily risen through the clan ranks in a short time.

After seeing how well Lincoln managed himself, Dino had promoted him to the rank of clan enforcer.

Dino trusted all his enforcers and shared clan matters with all of them.

"I asked Dino about you. He didn't seem surprised when I mentioned seeing those vampire bites," Lincoln said. "What's your story, Jules? What you say next will determine if I deem you a danger to everyone here."

"So you're debating if you should cut me loose or allow me to stay?" I asked.

"Normally, the lead alpha may exile someone who is a threat to the clan," Lincoln answered.

"But because of Bane and Bash, you can't just kick me out?"

I finally understood why Lincoln wanted to speak to me alone. If he booted me out of the clan without a valid reason, the other bear shifters might rebel.

Right now, Lincoln stood on shaky ground. It was odd to have so much power over an alpha.

For my entire life, I lived under the rules of my adoptive parents' house, but ultimately, even my adoptive parents answered to the leader of the clan. We all did.

It unnerved me, being in such a position. I could choose to be selfish and remain here in New Dawn Valley for my own personal protection.

Then I glanced at Louie's body again. Sorrow rippled over me. It was my fault Louie died.

True, Louie had given up on living after his mate died, but he could have found another partner to love.

Instead, his future had been ripped from him.

“You’re a good person, Jules,” Lincoln said. “I know that.”

He touched my shoulder, then pulled his hand back. Lincoln wasn’t Dino, who I knew I could depend on.

We were strangers to each other and Lincoln understood that.

“I made a mistake,” I finally told Lincoln. “I knew better, but here we are. It’s okay, Lincoln. I’ll pack my bags and leave tonight. Tell the others I hit the road because I was bored or something.”

Lincoln sucked in a breath. He and I both knew I wouldn’t last long on my own, especially with a predator hunting me.

If I didn’t leave, then more bear shifters would die. I couldn’t have that.

We had buried too many bears these past few months alone. Lincoln would bring welcome change to the Irontooth Clan. I could see that.

“I would wish you luck but,” Lincoln trailed off.

He knew he would send me off to die, but he didn’t have a choice.

“I wish I could stay for Louie’s funeral, but I don’t think lingering here is wise,” I said. “Promise me you’ll give Louie a decent burial?”

“We will. Louie will have a special place in the Irontooth Clan graveyard,” Lincoln said.

That was all I needed to know.

Shivering in Bane’s old coat, I buttoned it all the way to the top and made my way to my adoptive parents’ old house.

The walk took me half an hour, but only because snow started falling in thick clumps. My boots were drenched by the time I reached my porch.



I opened the door and entered. For the next few moments, I stood in the eerily quiet hallway, staring at the framed photographs on the wall.

My adoptive dads, Ryan and Kevin, smiled in all the photos. The sullen kid standing a little apart from them in all the photos was me.

They were in their fifties when they adopted me.

They never mistreated me, although this house never felt like home to me.

I certainly gave them plenty to worry about, because I spent half my childhood running away from home to hang out with Bane.

I shook my head. Now wasn't the time to ponder on the past. I hurried to my old bedroom and snatched the bulky bag underneath.

The posters of the rock bands I loved in high school still hung on the walls. Ryan and Kevin kept my room the way I left it.

They had passed away while I was partying and living recklessly in the city.

Ryan died in a hunting accident. Kevin took his own life the day after.

One of my greatest regrets was never thanking them properly for taking me in when I had no other place to go.

I shouldered my backpack, then touched the last photo taken of the three of us.

Ryan and Kevin stood behind me, smiling proudly at the camera. It was taken at my highschool graduation and I wore my graduation gown and cap.

"Sorry I'm such a disappointment," I said.

I plucked the frame photograph off the way and took it with me. With a heavy sigh, I left the house.

A tall, dark figure waited for me by my car. Thanks to the falling snow, I could barely make out who it was.

Fear gripped me by the throat. I expected to see a cold and terrible face peering back at me.

His red hungry eyes would meet mine and then his thin red-ruby lips would form a twisted smile.

Instead, I saw Jordan waving at me. I calmed my racing heart.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I heard from Lincoln,” Jordan said. “You don’t have to do this. Stay, Jules. The Irontooth Clan will protect you like it always has.”

Jordan and I weren’t particularly close. I was about to ask him why he cared so much.

Seeing the haunted look in his eyes, I bit back my words. He had experienced loss as well, I reminded myself.

“I’m thankful to Dino, to the clan, for offering me sanctuary when I needed it,” I told Jordan. “But Louie died because of me. I have to take responsibility for my own actions.”

“No one cared Louie died. He’s useless to the clan,” Jordan began. “We can make sure it doesn’t happen again. We’re stronger now.”

“Louie was my friend,” I said, unsure why my eyes starting tearing up. “Jordan, I need to do this. Lincoln, he’s a fair leader. He’s good for this clan. If don’t go, then more of us would die.”

“Lincoln said it would be hard to convince you,” Jordan said with a sigh.

Jordan pulled out something from the inside pocket of his jacket. He offered the revolver to me.

The gun looked old, but it was obviously well-maintained and cared for.

“Take this for your personal protection.,” Jordan said when I didn’t make a move.

He pushed the gun into my hand.

“It belonged to my alpha father. It’s loaded with silver bullets,” Jordan added.

“I’m not even sure silver has the same effect on vampires,” I whispered. “But thank you, Jordan. I will take good care of your dad’s gun.”

I closed my fingers over the cold metal, accepting Jordan’s gift, because I needed all the help I could get.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicia loves writing sizzling MM romances with hot Alphas and happily-ever-afters.

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