

URSA
SHIFTERS



BOOK 2



bears
WITH ME

SAM HALL

BEARS WITH ME

SAM HALL

Bears in Mind

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Stalk me!



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AUTHOR NOTE

This book is written in Australian English, which is a weird lovechild of British and American English. We tend to spell things the way the Brits do (expect a lot more u's), yet also use American slang and swear more than both combined.

While many people have gone over this book, trying to find all the typos and other mistakes, they just keep on popping up like bloody rabbits. If you spot one, don't report it to Amazon, drop me an email at the below address so I can fix the issue.

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TRIGGER WARNING

Trigger and Content Warning

This book deals primarily with the breakdown of a marriage (FMC and the antagonist of the book) and her subsequent much happier relationship with a harem of bear shifters. As a result you will read about:

- A marriage that was limping along for some time.
- The husband/antagonist engaging in emotional abuse and cheating (though the FMC does not see this, just finds evidence of it afterwards).
- The husband pretending to want an open or poly relationship and proceeding to completely misunderstand the realities of this relationship dynamic. **THIS BOOK IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE ANTI POLY OR OPEN MARRIAGE.**
- The husband's attempts to maintain control over the FMC and his behaviour escalating into physical and financial abuse
- Elder abuse happens off screen

PLEASE NOTE: The FMC does not engage in anything romantic or sexual with any of the bear shifters until AFTER the husband has said he wants an open relationship and the vast majority of it happens after she has separated from her husband. If this is cheating in your book and you don't like it, you might want to avoid this book.

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“**W**e need to work out what the hell to do about Paul,” I told Alaric as he crouched in front of me, holding my hands between his. I looked up at Lars and Thorn as my voice strengthened, despite the tears still clogging my throat. “Because we are *never* letting something like this happen again.”

My words hung in the air between us. The three men—no, make that the three bear shifters—pulled up chairs to sit in a semi-circle around me in the hospital waiting room. And as for Koda? I could *feel* him, my awareness of his body the same as my awareness of my own; something I could detect without any real effort. The three in front of me just nodded solemnly. Of course they would. I was their... my mind stumbled over the word, so I tried again. I was their mate and, the way they told it, my every wish was their command.

That made me wonder how they’d like what I was about to ask for.

“I’m done running from Paul,” I told them. “I’m done reacting to his bullshit. We need to take him down.”

“Good to hear we’re on the same page, love,” Lars growled and I found myself over-analysing the timbre of his voice, wondering whether it was the man or the beast who was talking. I shook my head. It didn’t matter. “We’ll eviscerate the little prick. Drag him out to the bush and let our animals do the work. All the cops will find is his bones left—”

“Not you,” I corrected. “*We.*” I circled my finger in front of me to point to each of us in turn. At that, Thorn’s smile finally reappeared for the first time since the shooting. It was just as bright as it had been before, though the pain of almost losing his twin still shadowed his eyes.

“My baby is a badass as well as beautiful?” He nodded slowly. “Whatever you want. You know that.”

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” Lars snapped. “That piece of shit is dying to get his hands on Nat. If we give him an inch —”

“That piece of shit is in being questioned by the police right now,” Alaric said in a quiet voice. “Likely to be charged with assault causing serious harm.”

“Not attempted murder?” I asked.

“A murder charge comes with some kind of pre-planned intent to kill. The fact that we were on his property, naked...” Alaric shook his head. “Does he have any prior criminal charges?” I shook my head. “Then he’s likely to be out on bail sooner or later.”

He reached across and took my hands again. For a moment I flinched, my stress rising as I imagined Paul free to assault me or any of them, and then it hit me. A wave of warmth washed over me, the same as I felt each time I touched one of them. It was like sinking down into a steaming bath and drinking a hot chocolate all at the same time, and something released in me as a result. I let out a long shuddering breath.

“Then we need a plan,” I said, trying for calm though not entirely succeeding. “A lawyer. An Apprehended Violence Order. Guns.”

When they saw the effect Alaric’s touch had on me, the others moved in. One hand went to my shoulder, and another settled on my side as an arm wrapped around me. At their combined touch, my eyes fell closed. Because something connected when they touched me like this, something hot and immediate that seemed to pour through me, filling me with their energy and making me feel whole for just a moment.

But I couldn't allow myself to enjoy that, not while Koda lay in that bed and Paul was likely to walk free until his court date.

"You want to give me what I want, right?" I said, sucking in a breath, then staring into the eyes of each man.

"We have to," Alaric replied earnestly. "We're men, but we're also bears, and our instincts are screaming at us to keep you safe, to make you feel better, to protect you—"

"I don't want to be protected." I tried for a smile but failed at the shocked looks on their faces. "I'm sorry, it's probably not what you want to hear." I frowned, and stopped myself. Why was I apologising? This is what I needed. I was done with making myself small, with sheepishly asking for what I wanted, if I asked at all. "I let Paul control... everything. I tried to build myself a life when I got out of high school but I failed and he rushed in and took over, directed the way we lived."

I shook my head slowly, seeing the much younger version of myself and found myself wanting to scream at her to make her understand what she was doing. If I'd stuck it out in Adelaide longer. If I'd just hung on, maybe... But it wasn't too late. I was only thirty. I could fix this, with their help.

"I can't let the four of you slide into the Paul-sized hole left inside me. I can't hand over the keys of my cage to you, just when I have got them back from Paul. I need to... find my own way."

"Do you think we could do that together?" Alaric's grip on my hands tightened for a moment as he stared into my eyes intently, before he forced himself to relax his grip. "We all have our strengths—and we see yours, Nat." Each man nodded, which shouldn't have made me feel as flustered as it did. "Let's use what we all have to keep the sleuth safe and make this fucker regret the moment he was born."

I nodded and smiled, and it felt like the first time I'd been able to since all this crap had landed on my head. I squeezed back, enjoying the way his hands felt in mine as I rubbed my thumbs across his callused palms.

After a few moments, though, I pulled my hands away and got to my feet. “But first, Koda,” I said.

“He’ll fucking love that you put him first,” Thorn said with a cheeky grin. “Don’t tell him, though. He’s such an attention whore.”

“Pretty sure that’s you, mate,” Lars said, smacking Thorn on the back of his head.

“Hey, don’t touch the merchandise!” Thorn stepped closer to me, clinging to my side like he was a small child not a massive man of 6’6”. “If anyone’s gonna smack me, it’ll be Nat.”

“That could be in your immediate future if you don’t let go. I want to see Koda,” I said, trying to wriggle free of his iron grip. “Your brother’s just had a bullet dug out of him, remember?”

“Which just means he’s no good to you.” Thorn let me go then spun to walk backwards, so that he was facing me, and shot me a wink. “But I am. I can pretend to be my brother.” His brows jerked down and he put on an exaggeratedly dour expression. “I’m very, very serious and I never smile.”

“He does too smile,” I shot back, irrationally feeling like I needed to protect Koda.

“For you, maybe.” Thorn’s silly grin faded then as he turned around and walked normally at my side. “He’d do anything for you.”

Like nearly get himself killed, I thought as we walked into Koda’s hospital room.

He was going to get better. I had to keep telling myself that. The doctor had been sure of it. And he had the added benefit of accelerated healing... but he looked so frighteningly still lying in the bed, his beautiful long hair spread across the stark white pillow.

I approached the bed almost tentatively, like it was that of a stranger. But I realised that it wouldn’t matter even if he was a stranger: the pull I felt in my heart whenever I was near him now, it tugged me closer to him almost without my conscious

effort. With one hand, I pulled the bedside chair closer to him. As I sat down, my other hand found its way into his. And when I did that? His fingers tightened slowly, just a little, as if to keep me there. The other three sat down as well. I knew they didn't need to keep vigil with me, but they did it anyway, and together, quietly, we sat listening to the regular beep of the monitor as we waited.

“HE’S ALRIGHT?”

A woman appeared in the doorway, her voice high, thready and desperate for reassurance. There were several men with her and when I saw them all together, I realised who she was. She had long dark hair wound up into a loose bun at her neck, and her bright earrings swung with momentum as she paused at the entrance. Her dark eyes bounced from Thorn to Koda. She didn't wait for an answer as she'd already moved to the foot of the bed. The men with her had Koda's lithe build, his high cheekbones and his quiet confidence as they entered the room more slowly.

“Mum—” Thorn started to say.

“Is he going to be alright?” She seemed to push each word out from between gritted teeth.

“The doctor says he's going to be fine.”

“There you go, Meryl,” one man said, drawing her away from the bed and into his arms. He was a big guy with wavy brown hair and eyes the colour of amber.

Just like his sons.

“He'll be fine, I reckon,” another man said, looking over at me and shooting me a very familiar-looking smirk. “He's bonded to his mate.”

“His mate? What?!” Meryl turned to question him and, as she did so, her eyes settled on me.

I'd stood up to give her space to be with her son, but now I shrank back, knowing exactly what my ex-mother-in-law, Delia, would have had to say if her baby, Paul, had been

injured in my presence. But Meryl's eyes lost their desperate edge the moment she saw me and realised the significance of me being there. Instead, they grew warm and a huge smile spread over her face as she moved around to my side of the bed and took me in her arms.

I lifted my own arms stiffly, not sure what to do with them or where to put them as Thorn and Koda's mother gave me a hug, their dads looking on with amusement. Finally I just decided to hug her back, regardless of how awkward I was making it.

"You're my sons' mate?" she asked me.

"More than that." Thorn got to his feet with a smile that had my internal alarm bells ringing. "Mum, Dads, this is Natalie and she saved Koda's life when he got shot."

Guilt—that I was also the reason he got shot in the first place—rose up in my throat like bile, ready to be vomited forth. Meryl squeezed me in an honest to goodness bear hug before I could get a word out.

“My girl... Welcome to the family! I knew my boys would find the perfect woman.”

“Ahh...” I winced at her statement, feeling even more uncomfortable about what I had to say. But if they were to be my in-laws, I had to start this relationship right. I pulled away from Meryl then smoothed my hands down my shirt, noticing the dry, stiff blood stains as I did so. “I’m also the reason why he was shot in the first place. Mrs Hensley—”

“Meryl,” she said with a wave of her hand. “And I’ll introduce you to this unruly lot in a minute. But you said...?”

“I’m so sorry. My ex-husband was the one that shot Koda, Mrs... Meryl,” I said, sucking in a deep breath, ready to accept her judgement. She would have to be pissed. The sight of Koda in the hospital bed had hit me like a gut punch but she’d be bound to feel it even more—he was her child. And this had all happened because of me.

“And my Koda rushed in where angels fear to tread, just to keep you safe, didn’t he, Natalie?”

There was such gentleness and understanding in her eyes that I had to clench my jaw and blink rapidly for a moment. This tall, slender woman wasn’t exactly the big, broad earth-mother type and yet something in me wanted to step forward

and ask her to wrap her arms around me and tell me it would all be alright.

But I wasn't going to do that to a woman who'd only just recovered from thinking her son was going to die.

"Umm... It's a little more complicated than that," I said.

Meryl looked at me for a moment, then she nodded decisively, and turned to the rest of the room. "Boys, your parents are waiting outside in the reception area. They need updates. And you haven't been answering your phones." Ric and Lars looked slightly abashed as they got up to leave. "And Thorn?"

The man himself had been smirking as the other two bear shifters were simultaneously reprimanded and dismissed from the room, but that expression dropped from his face the moment his mum had him in her sights.

"Grab some more chairs. Natalie has a story to tell and I have a feeling we're going to want to sit down for it."

I sighed, sinking back down into my chair, my hand finding Koda's, almost on reflex. She nodded approvingly, but I wondered how long it would take for her to stop thinking positively of me. I tried hard not to think too much about that and stared down at Koda's hand in mine as I rubbed my thumb across the thick whorls of his knuckles, over and over.

"Keep doing that," Meryl said as she sank down into a chair on the other side of the bed to me. Thorn and his three dads did the same, pulling their chairs closer to the bed. "You're his strength right now, and that will get more powerful when you're touching him."

"I'm feeling a little weak," Thorn said, putting the back of his hand to his forehead and affecting a dramatic pose.

"That's enough out of you, you little shit," one man said. His dark hair had almost gone to grey, and the salt and pepper in it, combined with his imposing build made him seem like a big daddy bear. "So, she knows?"

Thorn nodded much more solemnly at that.

“It was part of the whole... misunderstanding. Koda...” Thorn looked at me, took a deep breath and stopped himself. “I’ll let Natalie tell the story.”

And with that, all eyes were on me.

“I’m Grant, love,” the grey-haired guy said, putting a hand to his chest. “One of the twins’ dads. This is Owen.” He pointed to the brown haired guy who’d hugged Meryl. “And this is Tony.”

Tony had a quiet stillness about him that reminded me so much of Koda. He just seemed to have been observing as everything unfolded, but as he was introduced he treated me to a small smile.

“I know what you are,” I said, feeling all the world like Bella when she revealed this to Edward. “Bear shifters.” But then I looked at Meryl with a slight frown. “You as well?”

“Women don’t shift into bears,” she said with a sad smile, “so if you had any fantasies about taking fur and laying waste to your enemies, I’m sorry to disappoint you. But tell us about you.” Her smile softened then. “We’ve waited their whole lives to find out who the boys’ mate is. Tell us your story.”

I sucked in a breath, and it hurt, all the way down as my lungs inflated. Then I opened my mouth and out it came.

I MANAGED to get through the whole shitty story in fits and starts. Koda’s family stayed silent, just listening, until finally I finished what I had to say. I didn’t dare look up, instead, I stayed staring at the prone body of Koda, focusing on his wounded state. And as I did so, my feelings of shame and guilt shifted and became something else.

Bright, hot, anger.

“So, we have to take Paul down,” I said. “That’s probably not what you want to hear—”

“Oh no, it’s exactly what we want to hear,” Grant said in a low growl, shooting sidelong looks at the other dads, then his son. “We’ll take that fucker out to the bush and—”

“That can’t be the solution,” I said, stopping him in his tracks. “Langston is too small a town for Paul to just ‘disappear’. Questions will be asked, and the police will one hundred percent get involved. We need to neutralise him, keep him the hell away from all of us and...” My brows wrinkled as I thought about the last conversation I’d had with Paul. “And work out why he was so desperate to have me sign away my half of the house. He’s got a little love nest in there with Britney, but...” I shook my head. “He would’ve had that anyway, if he could’ve bought me out. His parents would’ve helped him out there...”

“Threatening to murder a woman’s ex-husband isn’t exactly a good introduction to the family,” Meryl said, with a sidelong look at her husbands before turning back to me. She was sitting across Koda’s bed from me, his other hand in hers. “Nor a suitable motivation to take the rest of the sleuth as her mates.” She shot me a long look and sighed. “You know that’s how this works? Did they get that much out? It must seem like the world’s been turned upside down, but...” She tried to smile but struggled to do it. “Each one of the sleuth would lay his life down for you. That’s why Koda, Thorn and the other two did what they did. They had to make sure you were safe. They always will, no matter what you decide.”

Whether or not to accept the other men as my mates, that was the rest of that unspoken thought. I looked up and, as my focus shifted, I saw Thorn staring at me with a wary expression on his face, unlike any I’d seen on him before.

“I get that,” I replied and forced myself to smile. “And I’m not trying to play with people’s feelings. It’s just... it’s hard to move on with this shit hanging over my head, y’know?”

Meryl smiled, then nodded, a determined look coming into her eyes.

“A quest to fulfil before the men get to claim your hand? That’s always the way of it. My men had to fight the mighty dragon that was my father.”

Grant groaned, rubbing his hand over his face.

“Dragon? I’m pretty sure the only thing that stopped your dad from getting his rifle out and shooting us on sight was the fact we live in the city,” Owen said with a shake of his head. “That and he thought all three of us were vying to marry Meryl separately. He still hasn’t gotten over the polycule thing.”

“Christmas are pretty awkward,” Meryl replied with a grin before looking back at me. “It’s all part of our lore, the way the bear gods always work. The sleuth has to work to earn the girl and the girl has to decide whether they’re worth the risk.”

She got up, gazing down at Koda before leaning over and pressing a soft kiss to his forehead then pulling away.

“Look after your brother,” she told Thorn. “We’ve hired out some cabins on the outskirts of town. Send us a message and then come by once you’re done here. I’ll have a meal prepared for you.”

“Thank the gods the cabins have kitchens,” Grant said with a sigh. “I’m not sure if all bears’ mates cook in a crisis, but all of the boys’ mothers do.” He winked at me. “Bring your appetite because each one of the ladies will want to mother you to death.”

And with that, each one of them filed out, leaving just me and Thorn...and Koda.

My focus narrowed back down to the unconscious man, my mind instinctively reaching for his, but trying not to, not while he was resting. I took his hand in both of mine, cupping it there, feeling the warmth and trying to be reassured by it before a hand landed on my shoulder. My eyes flicked closed for just a second as that wave of warmth passed through me and hopefully into Koda, healing him, making him whole before—

“You can open your fucking eyes now, dickhead,” Thorn said. I flicked mine open, to see Koda doing the same. He looked so tired, the lines on his face etched deep as he focussed on me.

“Koda?”

“He was playing possum while Mum was here, knowing how much of a fuss she’d make.”

“Fuss you’ll have to deal with,” Koda replied in a scratchy voice that devolved into a series of coughs.

I got to my feet instantly, going to pull away and grab him some water but his grip tightened, keeping me where I was, forcing Thorn to pass the glass of water over. I brought the straw to his lips and Koda watched me the whole time as he took a few long sips, eyes burning a brighter gold now.

“You shouldn’t have done it, Nat, tied yourself to me,” Koda told me. Stung by his words, I tried to pull back, but his grip strengthened. “But I’m fucking glad you did. Whether you want it or not, I’m yours forever now, Nat.”

“Yeah?” They could hear the shake in my voice, and Thorn’s hand moved up to rub reassuring circles on my shoulder. “Well, if you’re supposed to do things in order to earn the right to call me mate, then I want you better: healed and whole again. You hear me, Koda?”

He smiled at that just a little, then closed his eyes again, letting out a long sigh.

“Climb up on the bed, my mate, and press your body into my side. I think I’ll get better that much quicker if you do.”

Thorn helped me clamber up beside his brother as I smothered a laugh at being manoeuvred, metaphorically, by one twin, as well as literally by the other. Koda’s eyes opened a crack as I settled down beside him and then his good arm went around me, tugging me down on his chest.

“Just like that, Nat.” His voice grew softer, sleepier the moment I nestled against him. “Just like that.”

Koda slept on and off during our visit, right up until visiting time was over. When the nurse came into his room and saw me lying next to him, she wasn't happy and started making moves to kick us out. I tried to get off the bed but Koda held onto me tight. He couldn't care less about hospital rules and kept hold of my hand until I turned back to face him. Then I saw the need there plain on his face and was unable to stop myself from surrendering to it. I pressed my lips to his, feeling them soften, him soften, some more tension leeching away at my touch, until the point the nurse cleared her throat dramatically and he finally let go of my hand.

More of that, Nat, he said inside my mind as I walked toward Thorn. *Promise me you'll be back for more of that.*

Why? I asked, turning to stare at him when we got to the door. *Because it helps you heal?*

Because it makes me feel alive in ways I've never felt before, he replied with an intense stare. *I'd walk in front of a million guns firing at me for more of that.*

Don't, please. For me, I replied as Thorn tugged me out into the hallway. *Stay safe and in one piece.* But it was only when he swore that he would that I was able to walk away from him.

"You know, I've got some owies too," Thorn said, the moment we got to my car. He leaned against my door, then pulled his shirt up to reveal all those taut abs.

“Is this you trying to steal a kiss?” I asked. “Do you always compete with your brother? And why aren’t you more worried about his state? He’s in hospital!”

“But he won’t be, come tomorrow.” Thorn pushed away from the car, moving closer until he was towering over me. “He’ll make a sudden and miraculous recovery, then he’ll get discharged from hospital into your capable hands.” He grabbed my hands, rubbing his thumbs across the palms. “And then you’ll have the first of your mates at your beck and call, desperate to do anything he can to please you...”

There was something hypnotic about Thorn as he looked at me, his amber eyes glowing brighter and brighter as he leaned in closer. His hand went up and traced the line of my jaw, just with the fingertips, then he smiled when I shivered.

“He’s the wounded warrior right now. But tomorrow? He’ll just be a big old bear shifter wanting to get closer to you.” He tilted my chin up so my mouth was mere inches away from his. “And as for competition?” Thorn shook his head slowly, keeping his eyes trained on mine. “I don’t need to fight my brother for your attention, not when we do our best work together...”

His head dipped down, ready to claim my mouth with his. My lips parted to let him in when the sharp ring of his phone cut the mood to smithereens. Thorn let out a pained groan, fished the phone out of his back pocket and answered the call, all the while staring into my eyes.

“Yes, Mum, we’re coming. Yes, Nat is coming too. Koda’s fine and I reckon he’ll be out tomorrow. Yes, you can come and visit in the morning. Mum. Mum, you— Mum! Mum, just shut up for a minute.” Meryl’s raised volume in response to his words was clearly audible and he winced at her reply as he turned away. “I’m sorry. Look, we’ll be there shortly, OK? See you soon.”

His breath came out in a hiss as he ended the call, before he turned back to me, a rueful look in his eyes.

“My mum and Lars’ and Ric’s mums aren’t going to settle until they’ve fed you. It’s a... thing for bear mates. Food is

like love and acceptance and connection and community or whatever to them, even if I just wanted a chance to focus on the connection part right now.” He plucked my keys from my limp fingers, but didn’t turn to unlock the car, not yet. “The moment’s gone, isn’t it? You were smelling so damn sweet there for a second and then—”

I went up on my tiptoes to press my mouth to his, but I couldn’t quite reach, not without his help. He ducked down to make sure I could, and my hands went around his neck, gradually moving to bury themselves deeper and deeper into his hair. As the kiss went on, he turned me around and pressed me into the side of the car, stepping between my thighs and grinding down until I let out a breathy little moan.

“What did I do?” he asked between panted breaths, still moving his hips in very distracting circles. “Tell me so I can do it again.”

“I have to decide what I want, right?” I asked him in a seriously breathy voice, almost losing my ability to speak when he found just the right spot and then rocked his hard length against it. I pulled my hands down and tried to hold his hips still for a moment, even though I really didn’t want him to stop. “Maybe I’m just reaching out and giving that a go, getting a taste of what it would be like if I choose all of you.”

But it wasn’t that, not really. Thorn was hot and sweet, gorgeous and so fucking responsive, and some part of me just wanted a bright moment of pleasure in all the grim bullshit we’d been dealing with.

“Try before you buy, huh?” He smiled down at me, his eyes glittering dangerously. “Well, I support this... cautious approach. Just be prepared for the fact that I will try to provide some very persuasive arguments.”

I was just about to enthusiastically agree when he jerked his hips right away, leaving me high and dry. I blinked in stunned amazement, then scowled at him when he laughed at my reaction, as he unlocked the car and escorted me around to the passenger side.

“Uh uh.” He waved a finger at me when I went to go back for more. “You know you have to have your dinner first before you get dessert.” My frustration turned to fascination as I watched his mobile tongue run along his teeth, highlighting a pair of sharp canines I’d never seen before. “I know I’m looking forward to something sweet after the feast the mums will have put on.”

I didn’t get to ask what that might be because he pulled himself away to open the passenger door and usher me into the front seat. Then, laughing, he strolled around to get into the driver’s side of my car, and he was still smiling as he started it up.

“JUST HOW MANY people am I going to meet?” I asked as we pulled up out the front of one of the holiday cabins.

“Lars has five dads, which is why his mother always has that little line here between her eyebrows.” He forced his brows to crease to demonstrate the look. “Alaric’s mum has four mates. And Mum has just the three. Some ladies get a little competitive about it, thinking more mates is better than less.” He shot me a sidelong look. “But the word on the street is that four is perfect.”

“So...you’re perfect. Is that what you want me to take away from this?” I asked, smiling despite myself.

Thorn often sensed my reluctance to smile in response to his cajoling, and always congratulated himself with a grin when I lost the battle. And sometimes, I was content to just let him light me up, because it felt like he was the sun incarnate and being in his glow made me feel pretty damn good. But as he looked at me now, he stifled his mischievous grin and showed a much more serious side of himself.

“That’s right: perfect for *you*, that’s all you have to remember. That’s how the bear gods work, babe. No one really knows why we shifters join one sleuth or another.” His brow wrinkled then. “Just that... the guys that are supposed to come together for their mate, do. Koda will be the quiet, serious one you can cuddle up to. Alaric will be all responsible and make

sure we have a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs. Lars will be the bossy daddy type...”

He watched me closely then, as if to gauge my reaction. And as I looked back at him, I wondered whether, with those paranormal senses of his, he caught the moment my heartbeat started to quicken. Because, as he spoke, I remembered the moments with Lars down at the beach, with Alaric after the pub that night.

“And you’ll be the comic relief?” I said, trying to play along with this game.

“You’ll be laughing; right up until the point you start to make little gasps as I force you to come, over and over,” he said.

OK then.

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” I replied primly.

“Oh, it’s possible alright. I won’t quit until it happens. And that’s something you need to think about when you decide where you’re sleeping tonight.”

Before I could think of a reply, Thorn was out of the car and around at my door, opening it to pull me into his arms.

“Oh, shit, I’m still covered with blood: I can’t go in there!” I yelped as I realised the state of my clothes. I tried to wriggle free, pushing against him, but he was having none of that.

“Yeah, and it’s my brother’s blood,” he said, taking my hand and holding it. “You saw he was hurting and you gave part of yourself to him to keep him safe.” His thumb rubbed across my knuckles. “No one inside is going to think poorly of you for that. Everyone here is ready to love you at first sight and this will just seal the deal for them.”

And with that, he drew me into the crook of his arm, shut my door and walked me towards the buildings, aiming the keys back over his head to lock the car as he led me along a path beside the first cabin.

I couldn’t help but be reminded of all the times Paul had dragged me over to his parent’s place, and the hostile eyes

watching me as I walked in, and I straightened my spine and braced myself for something similar as we walked out to the back of the cabins. Instead, I found a fire pit flickering and a host of strangers sitting around in a circle, sharing food. A very tall, solid looking woman got to her feet the minute she saw us and stared at me with ice blue eyes, just like Lars.

“This is her?” she asked Thorn, in a voice with a slight accent. “This is your mate?” She looked back and forth between us. “This is your Natalie?”

“Ah... yeah?” I replied, somehow turning something I was certain of into a question.

“I’m Ingrid, Lars’ mother.” She hurried over and pulled me from Thorn’s grip to give me a big hug, much like Meryl had before. “How are you, darling girl? Your head must be spinning!”

“It will be if you don’t let her go,” another woman said. When I was quickly released from Ingrid’s grip, a shorter woman stepped forward with a small smile on her face. “Be welcome, Natalie. I’m Jane, Alaric’s mother and I think we might be distantly related. You see, I’m a Granger too. A very distant cousin of your father’s, I think.”

I blinked, trying to parse everything that had been said. Instead, all I managed to do was blurt out, “Wait, what?”

Jane laughed at my reply as she came closer and placed a hand on my arm.

“Alaric didn’t tell you? He knew you were a Granger from the start. It’s part of the reason why he came down here with his team rather than sending one of the other crews.”

“He... knew?” I frowned in confusion as I stared at each of the women in turn.

“Why, yes.” She turned around and called out to her son. “Al, didn’t you tell Natalie that we have a genetic connection?”

“Mother,” Alaric began as he walked over, hands shoved into his jeans pockets with a serious expression on his face. “We’ve only just informed Natalie of what we are.” His eyes slid to me. “And that didn’t go all that well.”

“Oh, honey,” Ingrid said, stepping closer. “It is always a hard time, but you must understand why they didn’t tell you right away. Bear shifters came to Australia for a reason—”

“But perhaps now is not the time to dump all of this on Natalie,” Alaric said. His focus shifted to me but I could see there was something careful, wary, about his gaze. “She hasn’t eaten all day and has been living on hospital coffee and water. Can you eat something now, love?”

The way he called me by my full name, the careful way he spoke, it was so formal that something inside me ached. But then I realised that I was experiencing this sensation of painful

longing with an audience: Ingrid and Jane watched me closely, as if waiting to see what my answer would be.

Which was fine, but I wanted my own answers right now.

“Sure,” I replied, “as long as you tell me how you knew I was a Granger.”

All three of them seemed to let out a breath in a big rush.

“Let’s leave them to it,” Jane told Ingrid, steering her away from the two of us.

“Over here,” Alaric said. He automatically moved to put a hand on my shoulder to steer me towards the table groaning with food, then stopped in his tracks, hand still in the air, as he tried to make sure he was providing space for me to make my own choices. I smiled, despite myself, and then did something that felt very brave. I reached out and took that hand in mine and squeezed it.

Because, while it was true that he might turn into a massive furry beast every now and then, and I kinda would’ve liked to know that before we started ‘fake dating’,... what would I have said if he’d told me that at the pub? I would’ve laughed so hard I would’ve pulled something. And if he’d shown me then, as well? I was already struggling under the weight of the bullshit with Paul back then, and that would’ve been just one more thing to have to deal with, to have to process. One more thing I hadn’t needed. Alaric stared down at our hands, then returned the pressure, moving so he could cradle it against his chest and then he nodded, tucking my hand into the crook of his arm before drawing me over to the table.

“Mum makes the best roast lamb in the state,” he said, gesturing to a big leg that had already been carved into.

“Better have some of that, then,” I replied with a smile. “And, oh my god, cheese!”

“Well, if you like cheese, try this.” He spiked a cube on the end of a plastic fork and then held it out for me to taste. I went to grab it off but he pulled the fork back, then held it closer to my mouth for me to bite off. Those strange golden eyes

watched me the entire time, a small smile of satisfaction spreading across his face when I allowed him to feed me.

“Garlic cheese?”

“It’s a special infused one. Shit, I should’ve asked if you liked garlic first,” he said, his gaze dropping to where he’d already started to add some slices of roast lamb to a plate, apparently for me.

“I love garlic,” I replied, grabbing a few more cubes of the cheese, because, damn that was good! Alaric smiled and started adding other options to the plate. “Mum used to ban me from the kitchen because I always put so much garlic in the food. I mean it is always nice to be asked first about what you want, but...” I stared at him until he stopped putting food on my plate and turned to face me. “But sometimes you don’t remember to and, then, other times, you never seem to be able to find the right moment to say it.”

“About what kind of cheese you’re getting?” he said, a small smile forming, but his brows creased slightly.

“About anything really,” I replied. “Sometimes it’s hard to know when is the best time to bring something up. Like me being a Granger?”

He sighed, added a few more roast veggies to my plate and then carried it, while escorting me over to a spare couple of seats by the fire.

“Our great-grandfathers came over after the war, we told you that,” he said. “But we didn’t say why. There are... people over in the States who like nothing better than to hunt big game. Cougars, bears, wolves, bison... But, for some people, there was nothing more challenging than a bear with the mind of a human. Our sleuths were being picked off, one by one. Weirdly, at the time, Australia was one of the safest places for them. They headed for the outback, where you wouldn’t see another person for days, if not weeks, apart from local Aboriginal clans and they weren’t too keen on the government. So, there was no one that was going to report back to the authorities that there were a few bears roaming around. And then there were our great-grandmothers.”

He sat forward, his elbows pressing into his knees.

“Our great-grandfathers didn’t expect to find mates here. They didn’t know, as we do now, that some women are genetically a perfect match for us nor that when shifters spread across the world, in the wake of European colonisation, so did women who were suitable mates. Our great-grandfathers were just US soldiers who were stationed here, who, when the war ended, decided to stay. And then they found their mates. One of them was my great-grandmother, Violet Granger.”

“So... what? We’re related?”

Fuck, I was South Australian, not Tasmanian. I didn’t want to play doctors and nurses with a potential cousin. My fragile appetite fled completely and I put the plastic fork down on the plate.

“Not really,” he said and then nodded at the fork. I picked it back up though not with any kind of enthusiasm. “She was like a seriously distant cousin several times removed of your great-grandfather’s, but... We used to think it was just fate that drew us to our mates but, with modern science, that attitude has evolved a little. We’ve been able to determine that there is a definite genetic factor at work. Makes it easier to find her—the one.” His voice sounded unbelievably fucking reverent as he said those words, and he shot me a sidelong look as if to check my reaction. “Because, while she might be the one woman for us emotionally, the thing is that physically...”

He was looking worried now, more than he had before, and that should’ve alerted me, but I was trying to work out what he was trying to tell me. I put the fork down again as Alaric’s eyes searched my face, virtually pleading for me to understand. He reached out toward my hand, then stopped himself before continuing.

“She’s the woman who’s genetically capable of bearing our children, if she chooses to have them.”

And that’s when the penny dropped.

I put the plate down, oh so carefully, because an intense, cold sensation had rushed through me and I could barely feel

my fingers as a result. Then, as soon as I set it on the ground, I was up and out of my seat, turning away. Alaric followed after me but I was just shaking my head.

“I can’t...”

My voice failed me, my throat closing up tight, barely letting any breath in, which was an issue because I needed to breathe so that I could keep striding away from the fire and the people and the food—all of that rich, vibrant family life—because it would never be mine. My arms went around my middle and I found myself hunching over, a phantom pain twinging deep inside. But the moment the tears slid down my cheeks, he was there.

“Nat...? Nat...!”

He pulled me close, fitting me against his body and we came together like two puzzle pieces. He stroked his hand down my hair, my arms, along my back. The feeling of comfort from outside of me battled with the pain inside me. But the pain had always won. It was older; it’d had longer to fester. Finding out I couldn’t have kids had been the final nail in the coffin for the relationship between me and Paul. I’d felt like I was already lying in a damn casket, but then, when we got the news, it was as if the lid was being lowered and the mortician was there with a hammer in his hand. And I’d thought I was going to build something new—with four men, not just one? It turned out that I’d had my own secrets and I probably should’ve shared with them.

“I... can’t have kids,” I croaked out, dashing away my tears, looking up at him and staring him down. I wanted to see it: the moment his gaze cooled and he started to pull away from me. “I’ve been to see doctors and—”

“You couldn’t have kids with Paul,” Alaric corrected. I frowned, tilting my head to one side.

“What?”

“You couldn’t have kids with Paul, with a *human* male. Bear mates can’t. But...” He stepped in closer, rubbing those big hands up and down my arms. “If you wanted to...”

I could with them, that was the implication. I blinked, unable to even form a response to what he was saying. The idea of having children was something I'd shoved away from me, forced myself to reject it in the same way that the fertility goddesses had rejected me.

"Like, we don't have to. If you don't want kids, we are all fine with that."

But, I was looking past him with eyes hazy with tears. Seeing the fire and the families that surrounded it, it wasn't hard to blink and resolve the scene into a different one. One where I had dark haired little boys running around my feet, each a mirror of the other. Or maybe there was a tall, solemn boy with ice blue eyes, perhaps with an older brother with the same build as his father, amber eyes taking everything in, just like Alaric did, making sure the tribe of them didn't get too out of control. Alaric had been offering me a future, a new one, since the moment I met him, but now? I could only shake my head in amazement. I was only just realising what that future could look like.

"Whatever you want, Nat." Alaric was treating me like a skittish horse or an abused dog, moving slowly, keeping his voice calm and even. "That's what we keep trying to tell you. If you want kids, we'd love to be the fathers of them. If you don't want to be a mother, then we'll just have more time and energy to spend on spoiling you. We just want *you*, in whichever way you feel comfortable with."

And those were the magic words. If I'd been younger, I would've wanted phrases that were flowery, more obviously romantic. But as an adult, at this point in my life, I had come to realise that there weren't very many times that another person was willing to put you first. I stared up at him, searching his face for some sort of evidence that his statement wasn't true. But the more I looked, the more I realised that I didn't need to doubt him. Somehow, I knew that. Perhaps in the same way that they knew I was the one for them?

"Whatever I want?"

My voice sounded thin and shaky.

“Whatever you want, love,” he replied, staring down at me. “Just tell us and we’ll tear apart the whole world to get it for you.”

I let myself absorb what he was saying: that this was real, that they were actually here for me, would be here for me for the rest of my life. The deep-seated relief and sense of comfort was so great that I leant into Alaric, wrapped my arms around him and simply clung to him. As he put his arms around me and pulled me closer, a low rumble rose from his chest and he rested his head on top of mine, enfolding me in comfort and reassurance. “I want Koda to be better,” I said. “I want Paul to stay in that jail cell and rot. I want the clock tower brought back to its former glory. I want everyone to be safe, happy.” Then my voice hitched, because what I was about to say next was far more personal. “*I want to be happy.*” His grip tightened on me then, crushing me against his chest. “I want to be appreciated, treated like I’m fucking special for once and not someone’s afterthought. I want to be—”

“Loved.” His voice was deep, rich and throbbing with emotion. “You want to be loved in the way you fucking deserve, Nat, and I promise you, we’ll spend our entire lives trying to do that.”

He pulled back to smooth his thumbs over my cheeks, brushing away the tears that had fallen there.

“Just give us the word and we’ll—”

I’d wanted to kiss Alaric that first night we met, back at the pub. He’d come across as a big, outgoing hot dude who was interested in what I had to say— which on its own had been a potent aphrodisiac—but now I was glad things had

stopped where they had. If I'd kissed him back when he'd driven me home from the pub, it would've been just me lashing out at Paul, seeking revenge, validation; not about Alaric and how I felt about him. But now, as his head dropped down to meet mine, as our breath fanned over each other's lips, as we just stared into each other's eyes, as if unable to believe we'd each found the other, I knew this was right. He waited for me to initiate things, but the moment my lips brushed his, he was there with me, kissing me hard, and then his mouth was moving frantically as if he needed to taste all of me right fucking now. His lips separated mine, and I groaned as his tongue flicked out, taking possession of my mouth, my lips, everything, until I felt the sharp sting of fangs nipping soft flesh.

“Ow!”

“Fuck, sorry...” His breaths were coming in fast and hard right now, and when he pulled back, I saw he had sharp fangs where before there had been human canines. “My bear is close to the surface. He wants to claim you even though I know—”

His words trailed away on an indrawn breath as I reached out and traced the sharp point of one fang. I'd seen him shift—seen him become a motherfucking bear for god's sake—but somehow this seemed more real. Before, it had been Alaric there one moment, the next a bear, but right now, as his eyes glowed bright gold and his fangs flashed in the moonlight, there was no way of mistaking him for human.

He was a bear shifter—and I realized that didn't worry me at all.

“I want everything you've just described, Alaric. All of it.” I smoothed my hand across his broad chest, almost shyly, because I couldn't believe that all of this was mine. He put his hand up and pressed my hand against his chest, holding it right in place as I spoke, and I could feel the steady beat of his heart as I did. “I want... all of you.”

The double meaning there, leaving it to him to determine whether I was referring only to him or the rest of the sleuth,

was deliberate and he nodded slowly in recognition of that, a boyish smile spreading across his face.

“Nothing in this whole fucking world could make me happier than that, love. Nothing. But first, you need something to eat.” I groaned at this. All of them were seemingly obsessed with a need to feed me and Alaric was just as bad as the other three. “You haven’t been eating enough. You’re tired and you’re neglecting yourself for us, and that’s not OK.”

He wrapped his arm around me and steered me back towards my chair and my plate.

“You’re focusing on Koda. He would want you focusing on yourself.”

I was set back down and my plate was restored to me, and Alaric watched with undue focus as I picked up the fork and started eating again. “Eat, love, and be strong, because, no matter how this plays out, you’re gonna need your strength.”

“Especially for the four person orgy I have planned for later.” My eyes widened at the comment, and I jerked my attention away from Alaric to where Thorn was standing with a big smirk, a drink in either hand. He passed me one then flopped down in the chair beside me, waggling his eyebrows. “I don’t want no ‘I can’t keep coming, Thorn. I’ve already had twenty orgasms’ nonsense.”

“Twenty?” I nearly choked on a mouthful of roast lamb.

“OK. I’ll settle for fifteen,” Thorn replied with a sly grin.

“You’re optimistic thinking you’ll be getting anything tonight,” Lars growled as he ambled closer, smacking Thorn on the back of the head. “Your brother is in hospital and your mate is pretty cut up about that.”

“So... how about tomorrow, then?” Thorn asked, fluttering his ridiculously long eyelashes at me. “Koda bear will be out of hospital, and then we can play doctors and nurses. You can ‘tend’ to my brother while I push your uniform up and—”

“Enough,” Alaric told him in a firm voice. “You’re putting our mate on the spot and she’s only just agreed to seeing where this goes with us.”

“She what?!” Thorn and Lars exclaimed in unison, both staring intently at me. I felt shy all of a sudden, so I focussed my gaze on my plate and my Alaric-mandated eating. Then, as I was chewing some really lovely potato salad and trying not to think about their reactions, Lars dropped down into a crouch before me. “Seriously?”

It felt weird to have a man that big and strong to be hanging on my every word, but it also made me feel that perhaps Lars’ reaction was showing me that I had the power to find my way out of this shit situation. What I had to do was stop seeing myself in the same negative way that Paul and his family always had and, instead, find the girl that seemed to have these bears so smitten. I forced myself to meet his eyes, only to see a stricken expression on his face, as if expecting me to contradict Alaric.

“Seriously,” I confirmed. “I mean, this is written in the stars, right?”

Before I’d even really finished speaking, my plate was pulled out of my hands, and then Lars swept in, pressing his mouth to mine. He didn’t seem to care that my lips were still slick with mayo from the salad, so neither did I. The groan he made in the back of his throat, as soon as our mouths connected, put paid to any ideas I might have had that he was reluctant. And I couldn’t help but be swept up in all of his passion, wanting, needing his taste just as much as he wanted mine. Then, right as it felt he might try to swallow me whole, Thorn piped up.

“Hey, stop hogging the babe. She’s my mate too and I need kisses, stat.”

Lars pulled away from me and turned towards the other man, growling at Thorn from deep in his chest, but the black bear shifter just shot us that crazy grin of his, totally unfazed.

“I kissed you before,” I reminded him.

“Hmmm. I obviously have a very short attention span and need more kisses to compensate for that.” Thorn pursed his lips, making smoochy sounds. “Come on: kissy kissy for Thorn.”

I didn't have a chance to respond. Lars stuck his hand in Thorn's face and pushed him backwards, before turning back to me to finish the job he'd started.

If I'd had any concerns before about being with four men, I couldn't remember them now. My lips had already been stinging from Alaric's forceful kiss, but now, under Lars' attention, it felt like they were swelling up. My whole body was feeling different to normal. It was as though it was changing, softening and readying itself for them. Lars pulled away finally, pressing his forehead to mine as we both tried to catch our breath.

"Fine, you can neglect me," Thorn huffed. "But you'll only keep the mums away for so long. They're fair salivating over the chance to talk to you." He reached in and extricated me from between the others, then tugged me after him. "We put them off for a bit, telling them how hard it's been for you today."

"And what about you?" I asked. I wanted to check in with him and find out what he was feeling, despite the fact he was pulling me behind him to cross the open area behind the cabins. We were headed towards the three women standing together on the veranda of the closest one, before I tried again. "You've had it hard, too. Your brother nearly died today."

Thorn almost tripped. That was the only warning I got before he stopped and turned around, and I could see that the ever-present grin was missing from his face.

"I'm gonna keep reliving that moment—when Koda was bleeding out—every day, until that fuck of an ex of yours is brought to justice. You're right, he is my brother; but, Nat, he's more than that." He stepped closer, deadly serious for once. "I keep telling you about how it's gonna be between the three of us, once he gets out of hospital. He and I, we're two halves of the same whole. And you?" He cupped my face in his hands, brushing his thumb across my cheek. "You saved him."

I went to protest but he silenced me with a kiss. A slow, sensual, heartfelt one rather than being all passion and fangs.

And then, when he pulled away, that shit-eating grin was back.

“And Mum wants to show her appreciation. So, c’mon.”

“HOW ARE YOU, LOVE?” Meryl said when I approached. “Are those boys looking after you?”

“They better,” Ingrid growled. “I taught Lars everything that’s expected of him.”

“Stop overwhelming the girl,” Jane said, putting a hand on my arm. “You forget what it was like, just finding out about being the mate of shifters’.” She turned then to me. “Though the fact you haven’t run is promising.”

“Well, I did that, before.” When I’d first met Paul’s mum, I’d fallen all over myself to make Delia Bailey like me, because I’d literally been a teenager at the time. But I wasn’t going to do the same now. These women would either like me for who I was or they wouldn’t, and I’d deal with it either way. “That’s how Koda got shot. I—”

“Meryl told us,” Jane said in a gentle voice. “I hope that’s OK, but we didn’t want to put you through the trauma of having to tell the story again. None of us blame you. I took off to my aunt’s place in another state when I found out, needing to get my head around the reality.”

“The first time I saw a bunch of polar bears in the Australian bush I nearly fainted,” Ingrid said. “It was only the boys’ mothers that helped me to stop hyperventilating.”

“I was like you,” Meryl said. “From a small town, expecting to marry some local boy. Then these... men rolled into town. I couldn’t look at anyone else, I was eating my heart out at being equally drawn to all three of them, until...” She sighed. “We broke up for a few weeks and I cried myself to sleep every night, until my mother had had enough and invited the three of them around to have things out.”

“Does she know?” I asked.

“She does. We only tell the people we trust the most, because it’s very important to keep it secret.” I winced,

thinking about the conversation I'd had with Holly, hoping that she hadn't decided to break the news to Nicky. Meryl nodded slowly. "There are those who hunt bear shifters. They always have. From putting them in bear pits or using them for bear baiting or simply for the thrill of hunting something rare. We have to keep that knowledge protected."

"But you're one of us now," Jane said, rubbing my shoulder. "And we'll do everything in our power to make this transition easy for you. Because, god knows, we've seen what can happen if it doesn't go that way. Come inside for a cuppa."

"White with one, Janey," Thorn said brightly, going to follow us in.

"This is strictly women's business, son," Meryl said firmly. "You'll have your girl back before the end of the night, but not before we've had a chat."

"About how awesome I am, right, Mum? Mum?" Thorn asked.

"You know that I think the sun rises and sets with you and your brother," she replied, giving her son a hug. The way he seemed to sink into her arms, made me wonder again just how well he was coping with what had happened. "But some things you can't be a part of."

"Mum, you know I—"

"Need to turn around and touch base with your fathers?" Meryl corrected him. "Yes. Go and get some tips and tricks from them on how to better serve your mate." Thorn's shoulders slumped but he turned around to do as he was directed, shooting me a rueful look as he did. "Good boy."

He seemed to perk up at that comment, loping off to join his dads by the fire, making me wonder if I wasn't the only one who enjoyed a good pat on the head.

"Now, have you had enough to eat?" Ingrid asked, then began to bustle around the kitchen. "No, of course you haven't. Those boys are all too preoccupied with your mouth and not enough on keeping you well fed. You'll have some lamb and potatoes, yes?"

“Ingrid’s a bit of a force to be reckoned with,” Jane told me with a wink. “Best to just say yes to her and keep her happy.”

“Yes,” I replied dutifully and then sat down at the dining table, wondering what wisdom these women were about to share with me.

“So, you seem to be coping with the news your mates take fur at certain times very well,” Meryl said, keeping a close eye on me.

“It’s all this *Twilight* stuff,” Ingrid assured her as she bustled over, laying yet another massive plate of food in front of me. If these people had their way, my arse would be ten feet wide within months. “It features those awful wolf shifters, but I do think it seems to make it easier for girls these days. When I was young there were only monster movies.” She made a funny little snarl, clawing at the air for emphasis. “I thought I was going to be polar bear dinner the first time I saw my boys shift. Possible in Norway.” She nodded as she popped an olive into her mouth. “Much harder in Australia.”

“Ah... yeah, I guess it did prepare me a bit,” I replied, grabbing a knife and fork and cutting into the meat. “Like, it wasn’t that I expected something like that to *actually* happen, but...” I paused for thought as I stuck a forkful of roast meat and vegies into my mouth.

“And how do you feel now that you know it does?” Jane asked, after giving me a few moments to chew contemplatively.

I turned to her and tried to explain.

“I... It kinda makes sense, I guess. Like, they were all so intense.”

“Ah... I remember that well,” Meryl said with a smile. “There is nothing like a bear in love.”

“Love?” My voice was little more than a squeak, and each woman smiled at me in response.

“It takes longer for *us*: to connect with them, to make that bond. You have to actually get to know them and, while my boys may want to kill me for saying this, not just in a physical sense.” The other women nodded in agreement. “Don’t let them think that it’s just a matter of falling into bed.”

“But bear shifters don’t need time to build a bond,” Jane added and my eyes grew wider. “The moment they saw you, they knew you were the one. Each moment they spend with you deepens that feeling of connection, of rightness, so they’re always way ahead of the poor woman they’re trying to woo. We’ve warned them they need to slow things down, especially after...”

After Paul, she wanted to say, because I wasn’t divorced yet, and had only just separated from my ex.

“That’s... not as big an impediment as it might be,” I said, then busied myself cutting more food. Now that I was eating, I was hungry as hell. “Even if I’d never met your sons, I...” I paused, the potato chunk on my fork hovering in the air as I thought about it, thought about him. “I think we hadn’t really been together for a long time, if we were both honest.” My focus shifted back to the ladies. “Maybe...” I sighed, thinking it through, “all the way back to when we first got married. I’d gone to Adelaide to study, was struggling while I was there and Paul seemed... inevitable. Not what I *wanted*, definitely not what I needed, just... there.” I frowned slightly, laying the fork down. “That’s not a great start to a marriage.”

“But you couldn’t have known that he wasn’t the one for you,” Jane said. “It’s a phrase that gets used regularly when relationships that don’t work out, I know, but in your case, it’s true. He was a placeholder, something that came before. And... something you’ve decided to leave behind?”

She asked that cautiously but my response was to let out a rude snort of laughter.

“I wouldn’t piss on him if he was on fire,” I said. And that had all three ladies sniggering.

“Well, if that doesn’t merit a drink, I don’t know what does,” Ingrid said, going to the freezer and pulling out a bottle of vodka before pouring everyone a shot.

I SHOULDN’T HAVE BEEN DRINKING on a mostly empty stomach, but Ingrid had pushed the shots my way with a steely eye. And who was I to say no to my future mother-in-law? Make that one of my future mothers-in-law. I had a buzz going on, and my body was feeling warm and loose for once. With no hint of nerves or embarrassment, I asked them the burning question.

“So, how does it work with multiple guys?”

“Do you mean maintaining a balance so no one’s feelings get hurt?” Jane asked me.

“No, she means sex!” Ingrid roared, then burst out laughing.

“Well, yeah. Like porn is not helpful—” I said, totally emboldened by the alcohol in my blood.

“Not helpful at all,” the women assured me, looking at each other as they did so.

“It *is* different with bear shifters,” Meryl began.

“Right, because there are multiple dudes,” I said, nodding along. All three of them just looked at me, and I was beginning to work out there was something more to it.

“Ah... no. There are *other* differences.”

“Other differences?” I sat up straighter. “Like ‘rawr’?” I imitated being a bear very poorly and very weakly, considering what the hell I was trying to say.

“In fur? Gods no,” Meryl said, then looked at the other women. “We have to tell her. But, honestly, talking about my sons’ penises is really awkward.”

“Say what now?” I peered at the three of them more closely, my head feeling too full and kind of spacey all at the same time. “What about their—?”

“Hey.” Thorn called out as he slid the door open and stepped inside. He paused just inside the door when he picked up the mood in the room, then shook his head when he saw the vodka. “Getting my mate drunk? Nice. I thought you ladies had our backs?”

“Sisterhood, young Thorn,” Ingrid said, holding the vodka bottle up by the neck, then taking a drink. “We women need to stick together, help each other out, explain the physical differences—”

“Yeah, nah.” Thorn scooped me up and into his arms, hauling me away from the table. “That discussion is much better had in a hands-on setting. Say goodbye, Natalie.”

“Goodbye, Natalie!” I said, throwing one arm wide in an expansive gesture.

The other ladies all shouted after me, promising to see me at the hospital or later the next day. But I didn’t get a chance to answer, because Thorn had me whisked out the door and was heading towards the car.

“Where are we going? Am I about to get the promised twin sandwich? Though... we can’t. Not while Koda’s hurt.” I heard a low chuckle in the back of my head that didn’t come from Thorn. “Are Alaric and Lars going to sub in? But... then it wouldn’t be a sandwich, unless it was a club sandwich—”

“God damn it,” Thorn groaned, setting me down beside the passenger side door. “The mothers got you drunk.”

“Maybe...” I held out my fingers with a small gap between them, but Thorn grabbed them and placed a kiss on the tips. “Just a little bit.”

“Well, you are going to be completely sober when me and my brother rock your damn world, because I want you to feel everything.” He drew out the pronunciation of the last word. “And will you be having sex with all four of us in the same room? Yes, yes, you will. But not tonight.” He leaned in closer, with a rakish smile. “Polar bears are massive motherfuckers and grizzlies are pretty badass, but black

bears?” He winked at me. “We’re sneaky as fuck. That’s why I’m going to whisk you away—”

“Thorn?” Lars’ voice called out from behind the cabin. “Where is that little fuck?”

“And have my way with you,” Thorn said with a broad grin, unlocking the car, hoisting me into the seat and buckling my seatbelt in one smooth manoeuvre, before swinging round to the driver’s side. When he started the car, we heard Lars bellowing.

“Thorn? You bloody bastard—”

Thorn hit the button for my window to roll down.

“You snooze, you lose, Iceman!” Thorn shouted, before throwing the car in gear and taking off, laughing.

Stay with him, a voice said inside my head. *He won’t tell you, but he needs you tonight.*

Koda? I asked, struggling to deal with the fact I was hearing voices.

Yes, it’s me—your mate, he confirmed, and it was as though I could feel the warmth in his voice. *Come and see me tomorrow, but stay with Thorn tonight. He tries to make out he’s the strong one, but he’s not. Stay with him until you can break me the hell out of here.*

Will do.

I settled back in my seat after that, thinking about what Koda had told me, and feeling the effect of the alcohol fade just a little. I watched familiar houses and streets pass by, and then we were at the B&B. Thorn parked the car and turned to face me.

“We don’t have to do anything tonight,” he said, much more seriously. “I’ve got no expectations, but...” That smile re-situated itself, even while he cast his eyes down, as though he wasn’t sure how to express himself. “I’m used to Koda bear snoring like a log, so having someone else in the room will—”

“Hey,” I said, reaching over and squeezing his hand. “It’s OK to ask for what you need. We’re all gonna have to get used

to doing that, right?”

His eyes flicked up to meet mine, staying there for several seconds before he nodded. And then that roguish grin reappeared.

“Of course if you needed me to give you a tongue bath, I wouldn’t complain at all—”

Before he could say more, his phone began to ring. He pulled it out, saw it was Lars and hit decline call and got out of the car. After he picked me up again, he swept me into the B&B and then into the room he was sharing with Koda, reminding me of the last time I’d been there with him. Flicking the lock conspicuously, he watched me take a seat on his brother’s bed then he approached me slowly.

“Your mums were going to tell me about your penis,” I said with a frown. “Why would they want to tell me about that?”

“Fuck...” Thorn hissed, scraping his mane of hair back from his face. “I was hoping you’d forgotten about that.”

Thorn

“Why would I forget about your penis?” Nat said with a frown. “Like, I remember that time when you—”

She was drunk. Not falling down drunk, but she was definitely drunk. I could see it in the way she wavered on the bed, her eyes struggling to focus.

“Yeah, enough about that,” I said, rubbing the aforementioned dick with the heel of my palm before jerking my hand away. I was hard anytime I was around her. And right at this minute? She was in our room. She’d claimed my brother. She was acknowledging us as her mates. And that all meant a hell of a lot. “So I’m guessing that the mothers only told you so much about bears.”

“Devoted, want to make you happy.” She flicked up a finger for each point. “Don’t need to fall in love because you’re all instalovey.”

“I’m not even sure I know what that is but...” I sank down on my knees before her and took her hands in mine, just wanting to touch her, feel her. “If it means I’ve been fucking smitten since the first moment I saw you, then yeah, that.”

She didn’t hesitate in pulling a hand free to reach out for me. The less confident part of me wanted to say that it was just because of the alcohol. But no amount of drink would have made her have the reaction she did: running her hand down my cheekbone, along my jaw, rubbing her fingers across the

stubble there, like I was hers to do with what she liked. And, in reality, that was exactly what was happening. . But first...

“We are different to men in that respect,” I told her, waiting until she lifted her eyes to look into mine before I continued. “Bear shifters don’t have commitment issues, not with their mates, but...” I let out a sigh, my whole body wound so fucking tight from battling against following the many, many instincts that became stronger every time I was around her.

I wanted to scoop her up, snuggle her down on the bed and sleep with my nose in her hair so I could breathe in the delicate floral scent of her all night. I wanted to kiss her over and over, feeling her lips part and her breathing get faster. I wanted to grind right down into the spot that would have her breath getting all ragged and then I wanted...

Nope, show and tell first, I told myself. *Kissing and cuddling afterwards... if she still wants that.* I sighed, pulling my shirt up and over my head. And didn’t I feel like the fucking man when those hands of hers smoothed over my chest? I flexed a little in response, because I couldn’t help trying to impress her.

“You’re so...” She sounded all breathy and excited, and that was exactly the Nat I wanted to come out and play tonight. If she could just stay in this frame of mind...

“Panty-meltingly massive and muscly?” I supplied hopefully, and her eyes flicked up to meet mine. The fucking heat I saw in those blue depths nearly had me groaning.

“Yeah, that.”

“Right, well, before things go too far, I have to show you something,” I said, trying for calm. Then her hands slid down my stomach, caressing the V of muscle near my hips before undoing the top button of my pants. I guessed we were on the same track, at least for now. Nat slid down my zipper and I swear to fuck my cock punched against my boxers, raring to get to her. But that’s where the issue lay, along with my caution with moving too far, too fast.

In human form, we didn't differ from other men at all. I mean we were bigger, hotter, could maintain a low body fat percentage without much effort and we had more stamina... But the changes happened when our mate accepted the bond. Something more primal rose up, and parts of ourselves were unlocked. And if Nat didn't fucking stop, she was about to come face to face with those differences.

“Baby...”

I hissed that out as she pulled my pants down over my hips, then those little hands went around my dick, stroking it through my underwear. For a good few moments, all I could do was just feel her, smell her and feel that incredible sense of rightness the moment I was with her, but that wouldn't last without a warning. My dick started to curse me inaudibly as I pulled her hands away and held them, forcing her to look up at me.

“Nat, I need to show you something.”

“Your dick, I know. I was just getting to that when you—”

“Yeah, but there's something a little different to mine.”

Her eyes went wide then dropped down to where she was holding me. “Is there a problem? Do you have a disease? Do you have a hard time getting it up or getting off?”

“No, no, and, fuck no, but... Fuck.” I shoved my boxers down, Mr Happy popping up and ready to play the moment he was freed. I took one of Nat's hands and very carefully used it to cup the underside. “Have a bit of a feel, and you should find something hard.”

“It's all hard.” She gave my dick an experimental squeeze. “Really hard. Did you want me to...?”

When Nat moved forward, mouth open, tongue flicking out, I nearly fucking blew my load right there and then. But I took a deep breath and mentally told myself that a facial and a biology lesson weren't conducive to future sexual bliss so I needed to just go with the latter.

“No, babe, this.”

I found the baculum, a long, thin bone all bears have in their dicks, and pressed her fingers to it until I heard her gasp. In our furry cousins it just helped them do the hokey pokey with more ease when trying to mate with a female the size of a large car. But with us?

“He didn’t come out to play beforehand because you hadn’t accepted the bond, but now...” I groaned as she stroked her hand up and down, feeling right where the bone was situated, but that wasn’t going to be the entirety of our discovery session tonight. “Just jack me off a bit and you’ll see.”

I didn’t want to do this. I wanted her, spread out on my bed, perfectly naked as I watched the way the moonlight painted shadows on her skin. I’d show the Big Bad Wolf how it was done and eat her all up. But not now. Instead I had to fucking warn her about what sex with us would be like.

Her grip grew tighter as she got me closer and closer, just the way I liked, with a hint of roughness and a whole lot of enthusiasm, the movements making my hips jerk in time. But right as I was starting to feel that tell-tale tickle in my balls, I felt that fucking bone shoot forward and Nat snatched her hands away.

“What the f—?”

“Don’t be scared,” I told her. “It’s OK. It won’t hurt you. I can never hurt you.”

“There’s a bone hook,” she said, pointing and staring, fear changing her scent to an acrid stink that made me want to pull away or make it better.

“We have a baculum, just like bears do, but ours has... added benefits. When we’re fucking you, buried so deep and you’re all wet and screaming below, it’ll shoot out right when you are ready to come, catching on your G-spot and locking us inside you. We don’t come in one quick series of spurts.”

I reached out and took her hand, just tracing my thumb across her palm.

“We come and keep on coming over a longer period and this helps you do the same.”

“It won’t hurt me?” She looked so trusting then, staring into my eyes.

“Have a feel of the hook, babe,” I told her, shivering when she did as she was told. It didn’t have nerve endings in it but, still, I could feel the movement all the way down my shaft. “It’s rounded off, blunt. More like a G-spot toy than a hook, per se, and if you keep doing that...” I took a deep breath in and blew it out slowly, trying to find equilibrium.

I wanted her so fucking much, it was a constant ache in my body. But right now? As she inspected me with a strange kind of curiosity, all I wanted to do was fuck away her fears until she knew exactly how well I was made for just her.

“So how do I give you head? Because that isn’t going to feel good going down my throat.”

I nearly laughed out loud at her oh-so-practical question. Not ‘get away from me you foul penis boned beast!’ But ‘how do I suck you off?’ I stroked my hand down her cheek, tipping her face up toward mine before I answered.

“Push down on the tip. No! The bone, not my dick.”

I hissed as I felt the resistance from the muscles that had pushed it out in the first place. They were all tight and ready to go, assuming we were on a one way trip to Pound Town, but that wasn’t how this was going to work. She looked up at me in concern but I covered my hand with hers, knowing theoretically that this worked because my dads had told me about it, though not entirely believing it until the bone snapped back into place. We both panted as we looked down at the results.

“I can’t thrust into your mouth, but you could... Faark!”

Before I could finish my sentence, she’d covered the end of my cock with her hot little mouth. And didn’t that make my balls boil? I wanted to move, thrust forward, push myself all the way down her throat, but I stayed still, feeling her tongue flicker around the shaft, then her lips suction on the head.

“No, baby...” I tried to protest, to insist on lady’s first but, fuck me, if her touch didn’t turn my blood to fire. “Nat... Nat, no, not like this.” Even as I protested, my hands went to her hair, bunching it up so I had a good handful of it, able to see every time my dick was buried in her mouth, then shone with saliva as she pulled back. But then she fucking looked up at me, looking like the perfect little slut in that moment. Not in the pejorative sense, but like she was fucking loving every minute of this.

But as much as she might be loving what she was doing, I was pretty sure that she had something that I was going to love more.

So, I pulled away with a pop, my dick jerking hopefully before I stuffed it back into my boxers. Then I turned to her.

“But Koda told me you need me tonight,” she complained. It was as though my heart skipped a beat. I started to smile as I responded

“When did he say that?” I asked. “I don’t remember Koda saying anything like that in the hospital.”

“In here.” She tapped her head and I was pretty sure I strained something internally from stopping myself from thrusting my fists into the air and whooping. “I can hear him talking to me sometimes.”

“Of course, you can,” I replied. And I was kinda right. We usually developed that ability over a short period of time, but if she was accepting that link so fast... Hope flared hot and hard in my chest. “And what did Koda have to say?”

“He said you’d put on a brave front, but that you needed me close until he got home.”

Fuck, he might be way too quiet, but my brother had my number, well and truly.

“I do.” I tried to push down all the fucking need that raged inside me, need that had gone into overdrive the minute Koda had been shot and she’d stepped up. She’d made sure her fuck of an ex couldn’t get to his rifle and then she... She’d bound herself to us for the rest of her life and maybe beyond, because

I couldn't imagine any kind of afterlife without her in it. "But do you know what I *really* need?" I pushed her back on the bed, covering her body with mine, and started to rain kisses down her neck. "You promised me dessert and it's time to deliver, Ms Granger."

Thorn

Fuck, the way she felt underneath me, her scent, the way she was squirming, it was driving me halfway out of my mind, although not all the way.

Look after our mate.

I could almost hear my brother's voice in my mind as I grabbed her wrists and pinned her to the bed right where I wanted her. I didn't want her touching me yet. Well, I actually fucking did. Mr Happy was punching me right in the kidneys, trying to *insist* she touched me, but I ignored him. I'd gotten real good at ignoring my dick when I was around Nat. Because if she was going to let me see her naked, I wanted this to be all about her.

"Nat..."

She tried to fight my grip and kiss me and I couldn't stop myself from giving into that. Her mouth was so soft and sweet and it was as though every time I kissed her I dropped down, down, down into her.

Right where I wanted to be.

"Nat, baby..." I pulled back, because otherwise I was never going to get my question out, and she'd been drinking enough that I was pretty sure I needed to. "Do you want this?" She stared up at me as I propped my weight up on my arms and I popped my pecs a little, just to give her something extra to appreciate.

“This?”

She ran a finger down the centre of my chest and I fucking shivered in response, but I stopped her before her hand got too low.

“More like this.” My fingers went to the hem of her bloodied t-shirt, edging it up a little. I pressed a kiss to the small sliver of skin revealed. “And this.” I pulled her track pants down just a bit then pressed another kiss to her hip bone. “And a whole lot of this.” I licked a stripe across her skin, like I was planning to do between her legs the moment I got these damn clothes off, then I sucked in slightly, letting my tongue dance.

“You want to go down on me?” she asked. Drunk Nat was a whole lot more blunt and I liked that she was being so up front with me. I looked up, staring right into her eyes.

“More than anything else in the world,” I told her, smiling slightly. She took in my fangs, everything that made me different to a human male and she didn’t look away. “Bears love honey, baby, and by your scent I think you’ve got a whole lot for me to lick up.” I shot her my patented puppy dog eyes look. “Please?”

In answer, she moved to shove her pants down and her t-shirt up, trying to get free of her clothes all at once. I laughed as I took over and I stripped her shirt and bra off. Then I couldn’t help but freeze in place when I saw her gorgeous fucking tits swaying before me, making my brain kinda hypnotised by their movement. I lost track of what I’d been doing, I was so caught up in cupping them with my hands and bestowing kisses on each taut nipple. Kisses led to sucking. Sucking led to my mate moaning above me and her sounds of pleasure resulted in me swapping from one nipple to the other, sucking them harder and harder until her nails raked across my scalp and the sounds of her pleasure filled the air.

And then her scent deepened.

She was all sweet and thick in the air, and every instinct in me was screaming to close the fucking deal and just fuck her, already. Then when I was hunched over, bone locked down

tight, my fangs would... I jerked my head back, panting, as I tried to get a hold of myself. But then Nat said those magic words.

“Please, Thorn...”

She didn't know yet—though she would soon—that saying those two words would have me doing any damn thing she wanted. But the fact she was saying them now? My hands moved of their own accord, pulling off her shoes, pants and underwear and then I stopped in my tracks.

She lay there, moving restively on the bed, her hands smoothing down across her stomach but all I could do was stare. She was so fucking beautiful. Her heels went up on the edge of the bed, splitting her open and I let out a groan. Our mate was so fucking wet for me, it was almost as if she was dripping. She might be. Bear mates produce slick, a thicker, sweeter kind of lubrication, and I was getting desperate for a fucking taste. I pressed a kiss to the inside of her knee, her legs falling even wider open as soon as I did. Another kiss and then another, and her hips started to flex, luring me closer. And at the first smear of slick on her inner thigh, I licked, following the trail of all that sweetness until I got to the source.

I'd hung out in enough pubs to know that some guys don't like going down on a girl, but more fool them, I'd always said. I fucking loved it. That first lick, catching her taste on my tongue. Her moan and then her hand slapping down on my skull, like she needed to keep me right where I was. *I'm not going nowhere*, I wanted to tell her, but instead I showed her. My tongue slid along her whole seam, getting deeper and deeper with each pass, her hips twitching each time I brushed across her weeping entrance, then again when I flicked over her clit. I could tell that she wanted me to push my tongue inside her, to suck on her clit, but I was going to string this shit out because, while I hoped we'd have a million more times like this, the first time only happened once. Her moans became cries, growing sharper and sharper with each pass until she sobbed, “Thorn...!”

That was it, what I'd needed to hear, so my tongue slid up and then started tracing figure eights around her swollen little

clit, the sounds she was making growing more and more breathy with each lick. *But there's so much more to come*, I wanted to tell her. Instead my lips fastened around her clit and I started sucking.

Her hips jerked up and off the bed, but she wasn't gonna be able to throw me off. Her fingers clawed at the sheets, her voice more of a growl right now. *That's it, baby*, I thought, furiously flicking my tongue against her clit. *Take your pleasure*. But she wanted more, and it was like I knew exactly what she needed, like I could feel it in a way that I never had with anyone else. Her clit was throbbing from all the attention but so was her cunt. It was fluttering, clenching, sending out frantic little SOS calls and I was the one who'd come to the rescue. My fingers slid through her slick folds and then I pushed them in.

“Yes...” she groaned. “Yes...”

I forced her to stretch, to take me, the rapid push of my fingers making my dick fucking weep for the opportunity to take that job over, but not yet, not tonight. And as I delved deeper, I felt for it, that swollen, spongy spot that...

There.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Nat yelled, making me wonder if anyone had ever done this for her and I wanted to grin at the prospect of giving her that, but I couldn't stop while I needed my mouth and tongue to be operating at optimum performance levels. My tongue moved faster, flicking her whole clit now, loving the sound of her, the taste of her, every fucking thing. And then it happened.

“Shit. Thorn...!”

Her cunt convulsed around my fingers, gripping me so fucking tight. I knew she'd do the same to my dick when we finally got to have sex, but that wasn't my focus. I had another goal in mind, and I was going to make sure I achieved it.

That's one down, I thought as I licked her through her orgasm until she tried to push me away.

“I’m one and done,” she told me between panted breaths but I didn’t move my fingers an inch as I rose up above her.

“No, you’re not.”

“Seriously, Thorn,” she told me. “I’m too sensitive. I can’t. But I’ll do you—”

I put my hand on her chest and pushed her back down, unable to stop myself from playing with those beautiful tits for just a minute until the tension released from her body. Surrender, I liked that very much.

“Then tell me if this gets too much,” I said, right before I went back for more.

The trick to girls who were sensitive after their first orgasm was to go softer, softer, softer, until they didn’t even realise you were there, so they were just dimly aware of gentle little washes of pleasure. I used only the tip of my tongue, kept it as soft as possible and just barely grazed it over her clit. The tip itself was too sensitive, but the shaft seemed to be able to take it, the small movements of her hood drawing a curious little sound from her. Like she was feeling good and doubting what her senses were telling her all at the same time. I kept going until she started to moan again, getting a tiny bit firmer when the sounds got louder, then moved my fingers experimentally, feeling her cunt grip me tight, as if to hold me right where I was. I took the cue and stopped thrusting, curling my fingers up and making a come hither gesture instead.

“Oh my god...”

The wonder in her voice was music to my fucking ears and made me sad all at the same time. She should’ve been feeling like this the whole time. We should’ve... But I remembered the advice Alaric had given the rest of us when we first found her.

“We can’t dwell on what went before. Her husband is a dickhead and we have to wait around until she’s ready to move on. If she’s ready,” he emphasised. “It’s always about the woman with bear shifters. There are always hurdles to

overcome and this is ours. It'll be when she's ready and not one moment sooner."

She was ready now, I could feel it. Her cries were totally different, part fear, part arousal, because her body was doing shit it'd never done before and her horizons were about to be broadened.

"Thorn! Thorn!"

The way she panted out my name was so desperate, needy, but I was ready for my mate, coaxing her body to new heights before pulling my mouth away, my unoccupied hand taking over working her clit as I stared down at her. Nat had never looked so beautiful, and the expression on her face—with her cheeks flushed, her eyes wide and her mouth open—told me exactly the effect I was having on her, right before she came again.

Fuck, I wanted her to keep on coming and never stop. Pleasure turned her whole body rosy as she writhed on the bed, gripping my fingers in low, slow waves of ecstasy until finally she fell still.

I pulled my fingers free and licked every drop off, still hungry for her taste. But I figured a nice cuddle might be what she really needed. She was tired and she'd had a really tough day so— Before I could finish my thought, my mate roused with a growl, shoving me down on the bed before climbing on top.

"Nat, we don't have to—"

"You showed me a dick with a built in G-spot attachment," Nat said, cocking her head to one side. "You really think I wouldn't be raring to give that a go?"

She pulled Mr Happy out of my boxers, which turned him into Mr Ecstatic, then rubbed her wet cunt over my length, pushing him right over into being Mr Delirious.

"Hey, we don't need to rush..."

Anything I had to say was wiped clean from my brain the moment she sank down on me. Hot, wet, tight. My breath came hard and fast as I tried really hard not to just blow. She

was my mate, the perfect woman for me and, unfortunately, that translated into a series of sensations that made my balls ache with the need to cum.

“Nat, I’m not gonna last long,” I ground out. “So you need to decide where you want this load because it’s all for you.”

The little sorceress moved her hips slowly, making me feel every fucking inch as my dick pulled free and then disappeared back inside her.

“Give me everything you’ve got,” she said.

I grinned, then flipped her over, so she was beneath me and I could stare down into her face as I moved.

“Your wish is my command.”

Oh, my fucking god. I wasn't sure what had been in that vodka, but there must have been something more than potatoes, because my body was on fire. A dim part of my brain was quietly horrified at me straddling Thorn when he'd said no, but any concerns he might have been going to raise seemed to have been well and truly revoked. And then he delivered the coup de grace that cancelled all my hesitation.

“Babe, I'm not gonna last long,” His eyes seemed to glow in the dim light, the strain apparent in his body. “So you need to decide where you want this load, because it's all for you.”

I should have pulled free of him. I should have stopped everything; but he felt *so* fucking good. Every time I moved, that thick shaft stretched me right to my limits, but not beyond them. I felt like for once I was getting every fucking thing I needed and the little fact that I wasn't on birth control didn't seem to matter. I just wanted more of this. A terrible selfishness rose in my chest, and I moved my hips faster, taking him deeper until he grabbed me and rolled me over on the bed, covering my body with his.

“In me,” I commanded.

Because I was done holding back, done waiting, done saying no to everything good and done putting up with all the bad, even the mediocre. I didn't know if what was happening between us was just for now or forever, the way the guys insisted, but I couldn't say no to this moment. Thorn's cock

jerked deeper, making my nails dig into his shoulders in response.

“God, yes, just like that.”

With Paul sex had always been just a vague feeling of friction that was over all too quickly. This was totally the opposite. I could never focus on anything else while Thorn was inside me.

“Whatever you want, baby,” he told me and his voice fairly vibrated with a sweet warmth that had my eyes flicking open. I stared up at him, watching him watch me fall apart. “Just stay here with me.”

Don't focus on the shopping list I needed to put together or whether or not the washing was up to date, like I'd tended to do when Paul and I'd had sex. Don't focus on my ex, or the incident today. Don't even focus on his family or the other guys. In fact, I needed to focus just on him: just Thorn. I reached up, stroking my hand across his cheek, and he pushed his face into it, pressing a kiss to my palm. But as much as I wanted to stay in this moment of tenderness, every move he made stirred something else up.

Earlier, those cunning fingers had found a spot I'd never been aware of before, one that ached for him now. Each drag of his dick back across it sent great expansive waves of dull pleasure through me, only to be repeated as he drove back in for more. But then his pace got faster. He couldn't seem to help it, because we were in a cycle where pleasure begat more pleasure and both of us found ourselves striving for the pinnacle with profound intensity.

He thrust deeper, harder, forcing me to feel every inch of him and my hands slapped down on his butt, not letting him pull back as far. It was almost as if an itch had started up inside me, one only he could scratch, and I needed him to stay right where he was to do so.

“Thorn...”

“It's coming, baby. If you don't want my hook, I'll pull out, but I'll need to do it right now.”

Instead of saying no, I said yes, over and over: as I pulled him in deep and held him there; as beads of sweat broke out across his brow as his mouth fell open, a look of pure shock across his face; and as his hips hunched forward, making smaller, desperate little thrusts, right before I felt the hook lock down.

“Fuck!”

My whole body bowed under him, in an action that might have seemed as if I was trying to buck him off, but in fact I wanted him to stay right there. The dull pleasure his fingers had created was transmuting into something sharper, harder, more pure. I was coming in frantic pulses, but the pleasure didn't wash away—every small stroke had the hook nudging into me harder, forcing the pleasure to go on and on. And then he roared, a sound that could never come from a human's throat. His fangs were bared, his eyes flashing as he lunged for me. The sight should have been terrifying, but my instinct was simply to hold him close.

“Not yet...” He whispered against my neck. “Not yet. Not yet.”

I didn't know what he meant, but I couldn't articulate an attempt at a query. Not only because I was completely overwhelmed by the experience, but then I felt the hot splash of his cum over and over, filling me up. At that, we both let out a shuddering breath.

“Thorn...”

“This isn't over.”

There was something almost shame-faced about his admission. But when he lifted his head and looked down at me, he was every inch the shifter male, not simply a man. His eyes were bright as headlights, his fangs feral in his face. He moved his hips experimentally, my hands slapping down to stop him. And then I felt it and understood why he'd said it. Fuck! Every move provoked more pleasure. I felt swollen, spoiled with it, and then he thrust forward and kept on thrusting, small movements that triggered more and more responses deep within me so that I clenched down around him.

And when I did so, another jet of cum splashed inside me and another, the process happening over and over until I was mindless with pleasure, writhing underneath him.

This went on and on and on, until I was utterly limp, unable to feel anything more. It was only then that Thorn dropped his head down and, closing his eyes, just let it hang there. His whole body showed his exhaustion as he lowered his head further to gently brush his lips across mine. I kissed him back hard, hungrily, feeling like I needed to grab everything to do with him with both hands no matter what the consequences were.

“I... I can pull free now.”

His voice was weak and shaky. I pulled my head back to look up at him and we both smiled, despite not really being able to process what we had just experienced. Then, as he finally pulled out, a low moan escaped me as cum gushed out of me. He quickly grabbed a shirt off the floor to mop up the mess, but before he could do so, it was as though something stopped him. He stared into my eyes as, instead, he scooped the cum up and forced it back into me. Despite my cunt feeling swollen and tender, I was still responsive.

“Mm...” My moan was weak and thready and he watched me carefully.

“I need all of me inside you, Nat. I knew this was a thing, but fuck, I didn’t know I would feel... My instincts tell me to rut you and keep on rutting you, fuck you over and over—”

I reached up and tugged him back to me again, needing to feel his weight on top of me, his smell all around me, and he pulled me into a death grip of a hug.

“You’re mine now. Everything inside me wants to bite you, claim you, make the blood exchange, but I won’t, not yet. Not until you’re ready.” He kissed the tender skin of my neck. “Right now, you need to rest.”

I thought we would sleep where we were, but he scooped me up and put me in the other bed.

“We’ll leave the wet spot for Koda,” he said with an impish grin. “It’ll drive him fucking nuts when he gets home tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow...” I said sleepily, nestling down against his chest, listening to his breathing evening out, to mine matching it. “Get Koda tomorrow.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

“Everything will be better tomorrow.”

L^{ars}

The next morning.

“I’m waking that prick up,” I told Alaric.

It was the morning after whatever you call that colossal fuck-up at Nat’s old house and I’d had fuck-all sleep. I’d had to listen to the two of them making noise all damn night, and the broken sleep and the deep ache in my balls did not make me a happy fucking camper.

“And you’d be OK with Thorn marching in on *your* first morning with our mate?” Alaric replied, in that mild fucking tone of his that begged me to see reason. Too bad. I couldn’t.

“Visiting hours are starting soon. Nat’ll want to see Koda,” I said.

“And she will, as soon as she—”

I didn’t ignore Alaric often, but I needed to be in there, to be near her, so I just turned on my heel and marched out of the room. I rapped on Thorn’s door just once before twisting the door hard, breaking the lock.

I’d replace the door handle later.

The two of them froze like teenagers who’d been caught making out. When Nat looked up at me, her eyes went wide with fear. I’m sure it was warranted, because I no doubt looked like a scary fucking prick barging into the room, right as she was... My mouth went dry and all of the frustration burning

inside me was thoroughly fucking doused at the sight of her, naked and sprawled across my sleuth-mate. As pissed-off Lars got kicked to the curb, something else rose up inside me, something hard and intent. I moved forward, my eyes raking up and down her body, then I came to stand before them.

“Did he look after you, love?” My body like a tightly wound steel wire as I took in the flush of her skin, the rosy tip of her nipple from where it was peeking out between their bodies and the pink gleam of a pussy well used. “He didn’t leave you high and dry, did he?”

She shook her head, some of the fear fading from her eyes, to be replaced by heat. I took that as a sign to come closer, to drop down beside the bed, though not to touch.

“Did Thorn give it to you good? I heard you through the walls.” That might not have been the right thing to say: her eyelids fluttered as she processed what I said and her barriers began to rise in response. “The sound made me so fucking hard.”

Her eyes flared and her pupils increased in size as those barriers slid right back down again. She searched my face for clues, trying to make sure I meant it.

“Did you come? Answer me, love.” My voice was gentle but I couldn’t keep the command from it. She nodded. “No, use words. Tell me.”

“Thorn made me come...” Her voice was low and husky and felt like a hand sliding down my pants to tug at my dick. She breathed out, “...more times than I can count,” and then her hips moved restlessly, making me think she’d still like more.

Greedy girl. I couldn’t help but smile at that and she let out a little gasp when I did, her pupils flaring again.

I’d fucked up coming in here like a bull at a gate, which was probably what Alaric had been trying to get across to me. I knew that there were many reasons why, but I couldn’t remember any of them.

“How about one more?” I asked.

Her eyes flicked from me to Thorn and he grinned up at her as he responded.

“I told you he doesn’t care. He’s just jealous he wasn’t a part of it all.”

“I am so fucking jealous,” I growled, and she stiffened again. I noted that I needed to be very careful. “Not of this dickhead, but... You don’t have to take the lot of us each time.” Her pupils blew wider still at that statement, which convinced me that was something she wanted, too. “But we’re a team that works well together.”

“He wants to touch you, get you off,” Thorn told Nat. “But he won’t, not unless you say yes.” He held her closer and she nestled into him. “You could come up here and ride my face, let the grumpy cunt push his fingers into you until you come.”

“Do you want that, sweetheart?” I asked, trying for soft now. “I do. I’d count my lucky stars for the opportunity to...”

My words dried up in my mouth as, with a little reticence, she moved. It was like she didn’t quite trust us to be men of our word, to please her, to be OK with sharing that duty. I knew we had a long way to go before we earned that, but it gave me hope we were heading in the right direction.

“But won’t I smother...?”

Her question ended in a gasp as Thorn reached up and pulled her onto his face. Hmmm, at least he did that right. She would learn that we were always going to be up for whatever she wanted and the small risk of suffocation was not going to get in the way of that. I heard a long, slow moan escape her as Thorn lashed her clit with his tongue, and I climbed on the bed beside her. She looked over her shoulder to see what I was doing, but her mouth was open, her whole body moving in time with his ministrations. Ideally, we would hammer this out beforehand, but I admit I was bending my own fucking rules right now as I reached for her.

“I’m going to get behind you,” I told her. “I’ll smooth one hand over your stomach and then move the other one behind

you, then I'll press my fingers into you. If you don't want that —”

“No...”

I froze where I was, not willing to move forward.

“I mean, *yes*.”

She grabbed my hand and slapped it down on her belly and her skin felt like hot satin right now. I found myself rubbing large circles all over her, this sense of possessiveness, a need to claim her, raging inside me. But I was taking my time, because my dad's had a serious word with me last night.

“Finding your mate is one thing. Getting her to accept what you are is another. But the biggest thing? Holding back until she's ready.”

“But how do I—?” I began to ask.

“You'll know. She'll tell you somehow, but you'll know.”

Although that advice was about as useful as Master Yoda's weird arse pronouncements in *Star Wars*, apparently it was all I was going to get. What I was going to focus on instead was that she'd agreed to my plan, so that's what I did.

“Is he eating you out real nice?” I asked her as I slid my other hand around and over her arse.

“Yes...” Her reply came out slowly, her focus now on whatever Thorn was doing.

“But you're aching inside for something, right?”

“Yes, Lars. I need...”

“I know,” I assured her, covering her arse with my palm and then moving lower. “Spread your legs wider.” She moved to follow my instruction without delay, and that made me smile. She didn't have to do what I told her, but I liked it a lot when she did. “Does that make the ache worse?”

“Yes, Lars, I—”

“Shh...” I breathed that into her ear as I settled behind her, rubbing my fingers through her slick folds before tracing the

entrance of her cunt. “Right here, this is where you need me.”

“Yes... *Yes...*”

As I plunged my fingers in, it wasn't hard to imagine a different scenario where I would be in this position, her cunt stretching around my cock, my hook locking down inside so every damn tug would get her closer and closer. Some bear mates couldn't get off without the feeling, so I raked my fingertips across the front wall of her channel and then crooked my fingers.

“Fuck. I'm coming!”

“Mm... yes, let go, love.”

I was nuzzling her neck, treating her like she was unquestionably mine even if I felt like I hadn't earned that right yet, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. My fangs snapped down instinctively, ready to mark her if she asked for it, even as my mind knew she wouldn't. Not yet. So I kept thrusting my fingers into her, even when her cunt started to flex and grip, knowing that waves of pleasure would be rolling through her and wanting to prolong each one. Then she fell to one side, gasping.

“I think my vagina's broken,” she groaned. “I can't... I've...” She gestured wildly at her groin and Thorn rolled up into a seated position, a self-congratulatory grin on his face.

“Were we too much for you?” he asked. “Don't worry, you'll get used to the multiple orgasms.”

“At least you did that job right,” I told him with a growl.

“I do every job well—the ones that matter, that is. Me and you just have different ideas about what matters and what doesn't.”

I gritted my teeth, holding back a biting reply, but a slow groan from our mate brought our attention back to what mattered most: Nat.

“I need to...” She reached clumsily for our cocks, but I scooped her up into my arms.

“It’s not a matter of quid pro quo, love. It was our pleasure. Now, let’s get you washed and ready to go. We’ll head to the hospital soon and break Koda free.”

Thorn followed me into the bathroom. He adjusted the water and then pulled her under before turning our mate towards me.

“Lars is looking a bit grubby, don’t you think?” he asked, winking at me. “He always smells of Old Spice and mothballs, but he’s particularly ripe right now.”

I was about to splutter that I’d had a shower this morning when I understood the bone he was throwing me. Showering with our mate? OK: cleanliness is next to godliness, right?

“Very dirty,” Nat replied, but I saw the wide-eyed stare she was giving me as she said it. Things were moving fast and now that she wasn’t simmering with unresolved lust, she was feeling a little unsure of herself. I slowly stepped closer to her.

“I can shower back in my room or...” Whatever other option I might have come up with was cut off when she yanked me in under the showerhead, clothes and all. “I’ll probably get cleaner without clothes on. Gotta wash off the stink of Old Spice.” I shot a glare over her shoulder at fucking Thorn, the little shit stirrer. I wasn’t even that much older than him.

“Let me.”

Nat had moved on from uncertainty to being brave, being bold. She peeled my wet shirt up and over my head, then spread her hands across my chest.

Did she love how small her hands seemed compared to my size? I fucking did. I took in a deep breath and pumped up my pecs: I felt big enough, strong enough to protect her, which after everything... I shook my head, dislodging water droplets and all the shit of yesterday, instead focusing on the now. I was very happy to be in the now, especially when Nat’s hands moved to undo my jeans.

“I’ll do this bit,” I told her, and peeled the soaked fabric down. It stuck to my legs and I had to pull the denim free, but

she didn't seem to notice that. Her gaze was transfixed on tracing the outline of my hard cock as it pushed against my boxers. I shoved my underwear off, and then there I was.

We'd gotten to know each other's bodies to some degree when I'd taken her down to the beach, but this was different. It was morning and the bright naked light bulb above us hid absolutely nothing. For a moment, Nat didn't say anything; she just stared and then stared some more.

"That's not going to fit," she said, pointing with a wavering hand.

"It will," I assured her, stepping closer. "Our bodies are made to fit together. Don't worry, we'll take our time getting you used to us. You can touch me, though..." Her hand landed on my hip and I smiled in response.

"You wondering if your eyes are bigger than your vagina?" Thorn asked, stroking his hand up and down Nat's side. "Don't worry. We'll fit wherever you want us." She looked back at him. "*Anywhere* you want."

For a moment it was as if she was caught up in our spell, as she looked from one to the other of us, like a kid in a candy store unable to decide what to get, then she shook her head as though coming out of a daze.

"I need to get washed. We need to go see Koda." Thorn and I stepped closer to help her, but she shook her head. "No way. You touch me and we won't be leaving here for hours."

Damn. Not for the first time did I wish my sleuth-mate wasn't in hospital. First off, because that shit shoulda never happened. We should've assumed Fuckface had a gun and was keen to use it. He knew he had no way to fight us on an even playing field, so we should have known he would take what advantages he could find. But secondly, if Koda was here, he'd be in this shower right along with the rest of us, making sure...

Nat passed me the soap after she'd briskly scrubbed herself down, but I just stood there like a fucking idiot as I watched her step back under the water, my eyes tracing every rivulet as it slid down her body.

“Now she’s washed, there’s something else we need to do.”

At Thorn’s muttered comment, my eyes jerked sideways to see that he had moved beside me watching her with the same intensity that I was.

“Mmm? And what’s that?” I asked, though I already knew. Bears were possessive, territorial—what we would do next would ease those instincts for a while, especially seeing as how we had to go out with her without having mate-marked her.

“You finished, babe?” Thorn asked. When Nat nodded and turned off the water, we closed in, one either side of her. Our hands went to our cocks and I was willing to bet Thorn’s balls ached just like mine did. Her eyelids fluttered as she took in the two of us, as her instinct to either run the fuck away or draw us closer warred in her eyes. “The need to mark you is riding us pretty hard, but we can do it for now in a way that won’t leave scars, that won’t be permanent. We’re gonna coat you with our cum and... unh!”

Before he could finish his sentence, she’d knocked our hands away, replacing them with hers moments later. My hand slapped down on the tiles above her head.

“Nat...” I hissed at the feel of her hand, so small and hot on my shaft, making my balls pull up tight. “You keep doing that, I’m gonna shoot all over you.”

“That’s what you want, right?” she said, looking at one then the other of us, her grip tightening. “To cover me with your seed?”

For the moment, sure. But it wasn’t what we needed. Her hands, her mouth, they were a stand-in for the moment when I’d get past her defences and she would be gasping underneath me, taking every damn inch. I closed my eyes for a second, seeing exactly that scenario play out. But I couldn’t look away from her for long. I stepped close and pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her harder and deeper as she tugged us both harder.

“Fuck...”

I hissed against her lips as my whole body went rigid. The effort it took to keep the baculum locked down inside me, the way my cum erupted all over her hand to splatter against her body had me gasping and panting until I was finished.

“Well, look at you,” Thorn purred as he moved in closer to our mate, rubbing his hand through the mess he’d made until every drop was soaked up by her skin. “Now you’re perfect.”

“THAT TOOK LONGER THAN EXPECTED,” Alaric said as we joined him by the car.

“Things got a little hands-on,” I replied with a smirk. Alaric raised an eyebrow.

“What the fuck is wrong with your face?” Thorn asked, peering at my face. He reached over to poke a finger at my cheek until I slapped him away. “I’ve never seen you look like that. Your mouth’s doing something weird. It’s all... funny.”

“And you fucking aren’t, Chuckles, so get in the car,” I said, giving him a shove.

“Has anyone heard from Koda?” Natalie asked as she got to the car. She frowned, staring at each of us in turn. “I got distracted. I should’ve called.”

“You can, anytime you like,” Thorn said, reaching over to tap her temple. “He’s in here now.”

I frowned slightly at that because I knew he might not be yet. Bonding was a bit of a strange process, sometimes developing much more slowly for some than for others. But as Natalie’s eyes went wide and unfocussed, Thorn nodded slowly, smirking at me as if to say, ‘See?’ and at the sharp intake of Natalie’s breath, I knew she was hearing our sleuth-mate in her head.

“He says to move our arses. He’s ready to be discharged and is waiting on us,” she said. “Also that the doctors are describing his recovery as miraculous and that’s making him jumpy.”

“Get in the car then,” Alaric told us all, “and let’s get going.”

I walked down the corridor to Koda's hospital room trying to act like I was a badass bitch after all the orgasms I'd had, when, really, what I was feeling was more than a little guilty. Koda had been shot because of me and now... I walked into his room to see him sitting on the edge of the bed looking none the worse for wear. I rushed over to him and his arms folded around me, pulling me close.

"You've been having fun."

There was no judgement in his voice, even though I searched for it. Instead, his voice was almost feline, coming out in a low purr. I drew back, staring into his eyes.

"You know?"

His smile was slow and lazy, those eyes of his looking like molten gold as he stroked my face.

"We're connected now." His smile faltered slightly, then it brightened again. "No matter what, I'll always feel what you feel."

And with that he held out a fist and I stared, open-mouthed, as Thorn sauntered over to bump it with his.

"Nice work," Koda congratulated him.

"Damn straight, and that was just a warm up." Thorn looked his brother over. "You're coming home today?"

"Yep. I'm all healed up. I pretended to be sore and all that shit this morning, but then when they went to change the

bandage, they saw I was all good,” Koda replied. “Just waiting on the doctor to sign my discharge papers.”

“Well, you know how it went last night.” Thorn looked down at me. “Imagine twice the—”

“*Bitch!*”

My head spun around to see Holly standing there with two disposable cups in her hands. She looked about ready to toss them at me.

“You didn’t wait for me.”

“Holls.”

“And, then, when you didn’t wait, did you let me know what had happened? *No!* I had to hear it from old Mrs Davies that Koda got shot by Paul!”

“Holly.”

Her voice was getting higher and higher with each sentence. And because she was using her hands to punctuate what she was saying, she was waving the coffee cups so violently that coffee was splattering on the floor.

“Then you didn’t come home last night and now I know why the hell Mum always used to go on and on about not knowing if I was lying in a ditch because I started wondering if you were in a ditch and then what the hell is a ditch anyway and why do they get people to dig them?”

I swept the coffees out of her hands before they were totally emptied by the force of her delivery. Once I’d set them on a nearby table I took her hands in mine.

“Holly, I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” She peered at me closely, eyes narrowed, then sniffed the air. “You look different somehow. And not just from post-‘gun battle with my ex’ euphoria. You’ve lost that pinched thing here.” She reached out and smoothed a finger across my brow until I slapped her hand away. Then she drew back and said triumphantly, “I know what it is. You got laid!”

I went to reply, to say something to avoid the response that I knew was coming, but her mouth had already fallen open. She let out a low guttural laugh, snatching her hands out of mine so she could point at me, then Thorn, Lars and Alaric, before cackling like a madwoman.

“Damn girl! You celebrated Paul being in jail with multiple dick? High five!”

“No. No high fives.”

She reached down, grabbed my hand and slapped it against hers anyway, then tugged me close with an arm around my shoulders.

“Which one was it, Nat?” she asked me, pressing her head to mine. “Was it all of them? Please, please tell me it was all of them.”

“It wasn’t *all* of them.” I pulled free of her and smoothed my clothes back into place, before looking away. “Just some of them.”

Although I muttered that in the lowest possible volume I could manage, she still caught every word and, looking like some kind of manic praying mantis, she raised herself to her full height to look down at me with a piercing stare.

“Some. Some, huh? How many somes? And did that include the massive scowly one with the Big Daddy Energy?”

“Lars was there in the morning,” Thorn replied for me, with a smug smile, as I was doing my best to keep mum. “I was there all night. And it was freaking amazing, if I do say so myself.”

“All fucking night?” Holly punched me in the arm hard, making me pull away with a yelp. “I need details. So, what’re we talking here? DP? DVP? Multiple orgasms? She had to at least have had a couple, right?”

Thorn sucked in a breath to answer her before I shot him a dark look.

“Say anything and there won’t be anything with any of those abbreviations happening in your near future.”

“Don’t worry, love,” Lars told me with a slow nod. “I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

“So you and you...” While Holly was starting to piece things together, trying to quiz the guys for more details, Alaric caught my attention and directed it back to Koda.

As soon as I was close to my mate again, I felt the need to apologise. “This is probably hell for you,” I said. I felt oddly shy for a girl who had let two guys bukkake me in the morning, then massage in the sticky residue, but I managed to overcome my uncertainty to reach out and place my hands on his thighs, feeling the muscular strength there.

“Not when you’re near me.”

Koda pulled me closer to stand between his legs and kept me cradled against his body as insanity raged as Holly attempted to get the play-by-play rundown of my night. “When you’re close, I feel like I can finally take a real breath.”

If he could feel what I was feeling, I had to be careful, because when I closed my eyes and just stood there, it was really hard not to see him on the ground bleeding out, growing so very pale. My grip on him tightened and he did the same, creating our own little moment of peace in all the chaos. And it was at this point that the doctor walked in.

“Mr... Hensley.” The doctor looked around the room, trying to understand the weird dynamic and then abandoning all hope before approaching Koda. “The nurse let me know you feel you’re ready to be discharged?”

The doctor’s tone was patronisingly disbelieving, so I pulled away, letting him take a look for himself. Koda pulled his hospital gown to one side, revealing the white bandage. When it was lifted, the doctor looked stunned.

“What...?”

“We heal quickly in my family,” Koda said, staring intently at him.

“But... you had a gunshot wound to the chest!” the doctor said. “The diagnosis must’ve been incorrect.”

“Check the X-rays and the surgical notes,” Alaric said, handing the doctor Koda’s chart. “It’s all there, and it’ll be needed by the police. The man who shot my... employee will be facing charges. The company lawyers are coming down today to meet with them about this.”

“But if this is correct...?” The doctor flipped through the pages faster and faster, scanning the paper for what he needed to see, moving on when he didn’t find it.

“When presented with an unexpected set of circumstances you just have to go with the most plausible explanation, right, Doc?” Koda said. “I just heal really fast.”

“Well, that needs to be studied,” the man spluttered. “We might discover—”

“I’m walking out of here now, with or without discharge papers,” Koda said. “So you can either help me with that process or get out of the way.”

“Right.” The doctor seemed to collect himself suddenly. Looking us all over with a suspicious eye, he obviously decided not to pursue the point. He was a busy man in a rural hospital, and other people would be wanting Koda’s bed. “Well, come this way.”

FIFTEEN MINUTES later I was walking out the front door arm in arm with a freshly dressed Koda. Holly and the rest of the sleuth were in tow when she said something crucial.

“You have to get an AVO on Paul,” Holly said, coming to a stop. “Like, I know you don’t want to make waves, but you’ve got to.”

“No, I want to.” I went to pull free of Koda, but he kept me where I was and brushed his lips over the back of my neck as I stood in front of him. “I want to throw the fucking book at him, if that’s what it takes. He was always a nasty prick, mean, abusive. When we were pretending that we still had a marriage, I could put up with it.”

Koda's hand rubbed up and down my back as I spoke, soothing me through his touch.

“But that changed the moment he told me he wanted to open our marriage up to others. And now? The gloves are off. Whatever we need to do, however it needs to happen, we need to take Paul Bailey and his pathetic little entourage down. And I won't stop until that happens.”

“So this is what getting multiple orgasms does to a girl?” Holly asked, while she grabbed my hand and squeezed it in support. She flicked a sidelong look at the guys. “Keep that up, because she's gonna need it.” Her focus returned to me and I knew by the look on her face that I wasn't going to like what she had to say. “You know he's gonna fight this. And that inbred family of his. Everyone knows that the Baileys are a bad bunch.”

Thank God I wasn't one of them anymore.

“Lucky I've got an even badder bunch at my back then, isn't it?” I replied.

A *laric*

“You need to get Natalie to apply for an Apprehended Violence Order,” Mum said as she hurried over to me.

We were meeting all of our parents at the police station. We had managed to persuade Meryl and her men to wait for us to get Koda out. Nat was still skittish and Koda hated a fuss, so we wanted to save that for once he was out of hospital.

“And good morning to you too, Mum,” I replied with a sigh.

“Morning, darling.” She gave me a quick hug, but Jane Burns wasn’t put off anything for long. Once she had the scent in her nose, she followed it to ground. “I just want Natalie safe. She seems so lovely. But that ex of hers? He shot Koda! He could’ve killed him. And then where would we be? Perhaps Koda should look at an AVO too?”

“Janey...” One of my dads ambled forward, pulling her close in a way I’d seen many times. Mum was fiercely intelligent and self-sufficient, but she also got bloody anxious a lot of the time, and my dads knew just how to settle her.

“Son, I made sure the lawyer came down on the first flight.” One of my other dads, Brent, stepped forward, clapping his hand on my shoulder as he tilted his head in the direction of the suit by the door. “They sent Mark Riley. The man’s a fucking shark, but that’s just what we need right now.”

Not all boys born to a bear/mate pairing grew up to be shifters. And those that didn't? They stayed close, still part of our community. Mark and I had grown up together, assuming we'd both take fur at adulthood, but when I had and he didn't, he'd gone to law school instead, becoming a top notch criminal lawyer.

"We need to nail those fuckers to the wall." The growl came from one of my other fathers, Brian. He crossed his arms and scowled at the door of the police station before he turned that harsh glare on me. "Natalie's your mate. Koda is your sleuth-mate. You need to keep them safe, Ric."

I knew that. I fucking didn't need to be told, because every moment of every day that need to protect my sleuth, my mate, beat hard and fast in my blood. The moment I'd received Natalie's message about what she had planned, we'd rushed in and Koda...

"Always, Dad," I replied, nodding to him and the rest of my fathers. "I'll introduce Nat to Mark and get things started."

"Good lad."

I was past thirty but I was still a 'lad' to them. Sometimes it felt like they still thought of me as a boy who needed to be constantly schooled and reminded to be responsible; to be a good mate. I sucked in a breath and let it out with a hiss. But every step I took towards my mate lightened something inside me. She was standing cuddled into Koda's side, the two of them looking fucking perfect together. *Because she chose him*, a little voice inside my head told me. *Because they're mated*. Hopefully, she would choose all of us before this whole thing was done, but that would be once we'd dealt with this shit.

"Natalie..." When she heard her name, her head twisted in my direction, eyes wide, before she realised it was me. I'm not sure she was aware how often she was startled by people approaching her when she wasn't expecting it. *Gently*, I told myself, *gently*. "We brought a lawyer down from the city to look after this situation, and I'd like you to have him in with you when you give your statement."

"Do I need that?" she asked, her posture stiffening a little.

Yes, I wanted to snap. Do this. Be safe. But I couldn't, wouldn't say that, because that would hurt her more than anything.

“Legal council is always a good thing to have when dealing with the police. And Nat...” I switched my focus to meet Koda's even stare, knowing he wouldn't like this part very much, but that's why it was my job, not his. “We need you to leave out the part where we hit the house in fur.”

She laughed mirthlessly, a short sharp sound.

“You think I'm going to tell the police that bear shifters rode to my rescue?” As she shook her head, Koda held her tighter. “I don't know how I'm going to explain how you were all naked but—”

“Don't. You don't need to worry about that,” I said with a shake of my head. “Keep to the truth as much as possible: that you weren't expecting us to come and you don't know why we did that.” I smiled, but didn't feel any lift in my mood. “Leave that for us to deal with.”

But how the fuck were we going to explain that? I didn't let my concern show, just nodded to the two of them before walking over to greet Mark.

“RIC. LONG TIME, NO SEE,” Mark said, holding out his hand for me to shake. I took it and gave it a squeeze. “So, all four of you were naked, outside your mate's ex's place and Koda got shot for his troubles. I get that right?”

“Yeah, they're the most important points,” I said, crossing my arms and shoving my hands up under my armpits. “The little fuck knows what we are, too.”

“The little fuck being Paul Bailey?” Mark looked at his notes on his phone. “Leave that to me. It's why you pay us the big bucks, right?”

But I couldn't, that was the problem. I had this innate need to care, to plan, to protect, to ensure those closest to me were safe, happy, secure. Even if Mark managed to tie Paul up in

legal bullshit for the rest of his natural life, it wouldn't stop me worrying. Nothing ever fucking did.

Except her.

It had started that moment when we'd sat together in the bar drinking tequila. With her scent in my nose, her laughter in my ears, her body getting closer and closer to mine with each drink, I'd felt a strange kind of quiet, my mind shutting up for a moment and just... letting me be. I wanted, needed that so fucking badly but...

"Let's get this shitshow on the road then, shall we?" I said, with a nod.

"THANKS FOR COMING IN," the fresh-faced police officer said, as we sat down in the interview room. They'd started with Nat, then moved on to Koda, and now they were talking to me. Mark had sat in during each interview, something the cops hadn't liked.

"So, you're representing everyone?" the older officer said, fixing Mark with a steely glare, his arms crossed over his paunch.

"I provide legal counsel for Burns Restoration. Therefore, I am here to represent the crew, and we're extending that to Natalie Granger, as a courtesy," Mark replied smoothly.

"And why is that?" the older cop asked.

"Police Constable Vickers, I don't believe that has any relevance to the case," Mark replied smoothly. "What *is* important is the fact that Paul Bailey shot one of my clients. Let's focus on that, shall we?"

Vickers narrowed his gaze then shifted his focus to me.

"What were you doing at Paul's house?"

Not Mr Bailey or Paul Bailey, but 'Paul', like he was a mate at the pub—and maybe he was. Small towns like this were a nightmare for bear shifters, as everyone knew everyone else.

“We got a message from Natalie that she was going to confront her ex,” I replied.

“And what did that have to do with you?” There was a note of accusation in Vickers’ voice, one that had the younger officer shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“You don’t need to answer that,” Mark said, but I shook my head.

“No, it’s fine,” I replied, noting the way Mark’s jaw tightened and Vickers’ eyes narrowed. “Because we’re in love with her.”

“All... *four* of you?”

This dickhead made it sound implausible. Meanwhile, he’d been the one to sit around while that fucking weasel terrorised Nat. He would’ve had to have known what was happening. If everyone knew everyone else’s business, then they would have known what Paul was up to.

“Don’t answer—”

“Yes, all four of us. We’d seen Paul verbally attack Natalie, saw him come to her workplace and start abusing her. She got distressing phone calls from him and then, when all of that didn’t work, he stripped their accounts of every cent. And he vandalised the clock tower to try and get back at her. The reality is that his abuse was escalating and you did nothing to stop him. We came to the house to make sure he didn’t do anything stupid. And given that he already had that rifle out of the gun safe, I think we were right to do so.”

The younger police officer stared at me, eyes wide, but Vickers just huffed out a breath.

“We got the same story from your... colleagues,” Vickers said, in a flat voice. “I don’t think we need anything more here.”

We were dismissed. I got to my feet and went to the door. As I opened it, I looked back and stared the prick down.

“And Natalie’s AVO against Paul?”

“Not at liberty to discuss that with you,” Vickers replied, with a sneer. “You might say you love her, but there are plenty of blokes who try and control a girl, coerce her into weird situations, get her to say shit like that.”

“You wouldn’t be trying to imply something, would you, Constable?” Mark asked. But as I stepped out of the interview room, my attention was no longer on either of them.

THE INTERVIEW ROOM led onto the reception area, and the police station was such a tiny little place that it was impossible to miss *him*. My nostrils flared as I felt every muscle tense as my instincts went into overdrive. Paul motherfucking Bailey came rolling out of the lock up. As I stood there, he had his cuffs removed and his effects returned to him.

“What the fuck is that prick doing out?” I growled.

“You’re not the only one with a hotshot lawyer on speed dial,” Vickers replied with a smirk, his expression mirrored on Natalie’s ex’s face. “Managed to get a bail hearing this morning, and he’s out until his court date.”

“He tried to kill my... work mate,” I snapped. “That’s attempted murder.”

“There’s no evidence he planned anything when it comes to you lot. And, I gotta say, if four naked blokes turned up at my house after my missus? I might get my gun out too.” Vickers’ lips twisted into a sardonic smile. “Why were you running towards the house stark naked anyway?”

“I think this conversation is over,” Mark said, jerking his head at the front door, but I stayed right where I was, staring that fuck, Paul, down, even as he walked towards me.

Natalie had to’ve had a reason why she’d fallen in love with him, but I wasn’t seeing it. He was a puffed-up little prick. I fucking loved the fact he had to crane his neck to meet my eyes.

“So, your boy recovered from that accident?” Paul said to me. “Seems like that was a close thing.”

“Lucky for you he did,” I said, shifting my weight so that I could lean closer, watching him take an involuntary step backwards. “Because you wouldn’t be standing here if he didn’t.”

“Don’t say another word,” Mark said to me in a clipped voice.

“Yeah?” A challenge flashed in the little fuck’s eyes as he spoke and, damn me, if I didn’t want to wipe that insolent expression off his face. Then he tried to provoke me with his next statement. “You reckon you could take me out?”

I didn’t reply, knowing now he was just baiting me, so I just stared him down.

“Don’t get any bright ideas. I’m on my own right now, but I won’t be for long. The cops have taken my guns, but my mates...” Paul shot me that shit-eating grin of his. “They’ve got some real powerful rifles on them, good for taking out big game.”

If we’d been in the Northern Territory, his words might’ve made sense. Up there, there were water buffaloes and crocodiles, along with massive feral pigs that would put your average oinker to shame. But not where we were, not in South Australia. You might be able to bag some deer, rabbits, goats or foxes, but that was nothing to travel halfway across the world for.

But I knew exactly what he meant.

Paul fucking Bailey had had no compunction shooting one of my sleuth-mates and being taken into police custody wasn’t going to stop him from going back for more.

“So, in order to put this application through, I’m going to need you to give a statement about what Paul’s been doing.”

Johnno and I had gone to school together and, while it was weird seeing him in a police uniform rather than a school one, I trusted that he would do the job properly. I nodded slowly. Mark Riley, the guys’ lawyer, entered the room and nodded to Johnno, before sitting down beside me.

“I was just telling Nat we need a full account of the issue with Paul before we can put the application in,” Johnno told him.

“Give as much detail as you can,” Mark advised. “I know that must be hard but... It helps the judge work out whether an AVO is appropriate in this situation.”

I sucked in a breath, but my chest felt tight. I wrapped my arms around my ribs as I looked at him. It felt like every time I told this fucking story I was shoved right back into everything that had happened and I really wanted this to be the last time.

“It all started when Paul said he wanted an open marriage...”

I said the words, described what he’d done, how he’d reacted, from coming into Maisie’s to have a go at me, through to his evil plan that I’d recorded on my phone. I played the audio for Johnno, despite already having done the same with the others looking after the criminal case and we all listened as Paul told me he’d put a bullet into my brain. I’d sent them a

copy and everything, but... Listening to it provoked the same damn reaction every time. Hearing his snide voice took me right back there, to being in the kitchen as he pushed the papers my way. I'd been ready to sign, but...

"Do you know why Paul is so keen to have you sign over the house?" Johnno asked.

I shook my head. "He's shacking up there with Britney, so I assume he wants to take possession of it for them so they can stay there." I snorted. "He can't afford to pay me out, that's for sure."

"A judge won't take kindly to the money being stripped from the accounts," Mark said. "They don't like decisions about the division of assets being taken out of their hands."

"Well, I've got everything I need here," Johnno said. "I can't promise anything, but..."

But I could hope, couldn't I? That's what he was saying. I nodded and got to my feet, Mark following suit as we all walked out into the reception area.

"Keep us posted, yeah?" I asked.

"Of course, Nat, and..." Johnno didn't get to finish his sentence because his attention was caught by someone coming in from the street outside. When his eyes widened in surprise, I turned to see who'd walked in.

Britney looked a mess. Her mascara was smudged around her eyes, creating a racoon-like mask, and she had a woebegone expression on her face, as if she was some sort of grieving widow. As I stared at her, my anger spiked from out of nowhere. Where the hell did she get off trying to play the heart-sick partner like that? It wasn't *her* soul mate who'd been shot like an animal, then left to bleed out on the grass. (Grass that Paul still hadn't mown.) She'd been up in my room, using the sex toys I'd left in the bedside drawers on her, no doubt, foul-smelling pussy. But as soon as she laid eyes on me as I stood next to Johnno and Mark, the careful image she was trying to present fell apart. Her eyes hardened and her jaw locked tight, as she came storming up to me.

“You!”

Britney had always been spoiled when she was a little girl. She used to scream the house down when she wasn't allowed to come and hang out with Paul and her brother and me. She'd wail and thrash until her mother scooped her up and put her in her room for a time out. And it was that out-of-control personality who I saw right now. She might be taller, a helluva lot better put together, but there was still some of the little pampered princess in her glare as she came to stand before me.

“This is all your fucking fault! You were always in the way and now... You just need to lay down and die—”

“Are you getting this, Johnno?” I asked him, biting off each word. “That sounded like a threat to me.”

“You need to back off and get the hell out of here, Britney,” Johnno said, in a deliberately bored tone. “You've got Paul now, so there's no more need for this sort of carry on.”

“Carry on? Carry on?” she screeched.

“You've got what you want,” I said in a low, tense tone. “Paul's been let out. He's not in here, so the two of you can fuck right off and leave me and mine alone.”

“Leave you alone?” The hysterics stopped so quickly it was as if they had never happened and instead a hard and cold expression rose in Britney's eyes. “Oh, we'll leave you all alone, right after we've gotten everything we want. You'll sign the house over to us if you know what's good for you.”

“I don't often give out free legal advice,” Mark said in a terse voice, “but in this case I can't help it. Making threats in a police station is a very ill-advised strategy; as, by the way, is trying to influence a decision about the divorce settlement. Whatever bone you feel you have to pick with my client, I suggest you go outside, back to your friends, and cool off before speaking to her again, if ever.”

At that moment, as if summoned, the guys stumbled back into the reception, looking around for the threat.

Whether it was Mark's words, his tone or the four large men who had just arrived, something seemed to finally sink into Britney's thick skull. She took a step back from me and cast a wary eye over everyone in the room.

"You'll wish you'd accepted Paul's offer in the end," she promised in a dark voice. "You'll find he was being more than fair. But you've had your chance—"

"Just fuck off, will you?" I said, my lip curling with disdain. "You've got my sloppy seconds waiting for you outside. Oh, and you can keep the damn toys you helped yourself to, as well, because god knows you're going to need them to get any satisfaction from now on."

She wanted to say more, to contradict me, but we both knew. Paul was a dud in the sack, but there was only one of us who had moved onto something bigger and better. Britney turned on her heel, storming off. As she went I had to wonder, again. What exactly was so important about getting me to sign the house over to them? It didn't sit right. Her father was a real estate agent and could set them up somewhere much nicer. I could hardly imagine Britney vacuuming the carpets and pottering around my old place while Paul went out 'hunting'. But before I could pursue that train of thought my men came closer.

"Everything OK?" Alaric asked, his eyes flicking from me to Mark and back again. "The application went through?"

"It's with the police now," Mark replied. "It'll be put before a judge and then they'll make a decision about whether or not it's approved, though..." He eyed the people clustered outside. "If they called a judge into town to approve Bailey's bail approval, he or she may have time to look at this as a priority." He pulled his phone out of his suit pocket. "I've got some calls to make, but I'll let you know."

As he pulled away, the four of them surrounded me.

"What the fuck was up with Bitchney?" Holly asked, eyeing the retreating forms of Britney, Paul and the rest of their flying monkeys. "Was she cruising for a bruising? Because I've got crystals on my rings." She flashed her big

silver gemstone rings. “And I’ve got a mind to rearrange her chakras.”

“She’s just being a dumb bitch,” I replied, as we watched them go. “But the two of them are really, really intent on getting me to sign over that house.” I shook my head. “We need to find out why.”

“That’ll need to take a number and sit kicking its heels in the waiting room of all the shit we’re dealing with,” Thorn said, raking his hand through his hair. “Because we’ve got bigger problems. What happened to Koda? That could happen to all of us, if Paul isn’t talking out his arse. He just threatened to sic his little mates onto Alaric. Normally I wouldn’t worry, but the guy’s got form, now. All the legal protection in the world won’t help...” he raised one hand, forming a gun with his fingers, “if they just put a bullet right in your skull, no questions asked.”

“W hat?”

I said that in the police station, again in the car when I was bundled inside it, and several times more on the drive over to the cabins. When we pulled up and got out, the dads appeared en masse, a steady stream of massive, dour-looking men pouring out of the cabins. My Spidey senses were tingling so damn hard I felt as though I might start shaking. I found myself drifting closer to Koda, my hand going to the spot on his shirt which I knew covered the livid scar from the bullet wound.

“It’ll be OK, Nat,” he told me, in that low rumbly voice that normally comforted me.

No, it wouldn’t be OK. It couldn’t. I should have known I would never be allowed to have something this perfect—

“Let’s get everyone inside,” a big man with ice blue eyes and greying ash blond hair said. “We can talk there.”

Well, that wasn’t ominous at all and neither were the stricken faces that met us the minute we stepped inside.

“Is everyone alright?” Meryl asked, coming over to inspect Koda, and then me where I stood within the circle of his arm. “You didn’t come home with any medications to take, any injuries that need looking after, son?”

“Mum, I’m fine,” Koda said reaching out with his spare arm. I heard her give a little gasp as he held her against his

side. He let her go so he could pull up his shirt to show her the wound. “Look, all healed.”

But if that puckered pink skin was supposed to make either of us stop worrying, Koda didn't understand women well. His skin was smooth, bronzed, perfect, except for this... aberration right in the middle of it. I reached out slowly, even though I wanted to pull my hand away when I touched it, but he placed his hand over mine and held it there, forcing me to hear the slow regular beats of his heart.

“We could see a lot more like that if we don't move fast.”

We all turned to see a massively tall man with broad shoulders and a tumble of light brown hair standing before us. One of Alaric's dads I was willing to bet.

“I'm Brent,” he said, nodding to me and Holly. “And now that you've discovered our secret, you're gonna need a bit of our history. We're all Australians. Have been for several generations, but before that our families lived in the US and before that, in Europe. Our kind has been forced to move on, to pick up stumps and try again somewhere else, since the Industrial Revolution. Before then having bears traipsing around in a forest wasn't such a big thing, but as humans took up more and more land...”

He shook his head slowly.

“We moved to the Americas when colonisation began. The place had natural bear populations all across the northern part and it was just so fucking big. Our forebears couldn't imagine the population size that lives there today. They thought we could buy some land, grow our families, find peace. Then the hunters came.”

Holly and I watched everyone nod along to that, as if this was just a thing, but they had something on us that we didn't.

“What... hunters?” I asked.

“Exactly as it sounds,” Brent said, sparing me a grim smile. “Men like to hunt: for food, to thin the numbers of pest animals, to protect crops or just for the thrill of it. What better thrill than hunting something as smart as you? Before the

advent of the gun, humans had little chance against us when we were in fur, but once they had muskets, rifles... They could sneak up on us downwind, get the drop on us and then bam!”

Both Holly and I jolted as Brent slapped one hand into the other.

“A bullet in your brain before you even caught scent of them. But imagine their surprise when those hunters found not a bear, but a man lying dead in the grass.” Brent’s lips thinned down then. “Some reported their findings as witchcraft back in mediaeval times, but with the Enlightenment came something else.” His lips curled into a mirthless smile. “A hunger for the kind of hunt only we could provide.”

“Some of our kind were bred by Europeans for exactly this purpose.” Grant, one of Koda’s dads got to his feet. “Some of the nobility kept breeding pens and cages for us, like they would for their hounds or their prize horses. Those of our kind were raised to be released, then hunted down...”

“We came here to get away from all of this. No bear populations meant no bear hunters.” This man had ice blue eyes that were a familiar shade. He had to be one of Lars’ dads. “We’d kept a low profile inside the city; we were accepted into Australian society. We were citizens. We were safe.”

“Until the guys met me.” I said the words, forcing myself to do so, to face the reality. “You could all die because of me.”

“No, Natalie—” Meryl started to say.

“Yes.” I rose to my feet. “It’s my fault. If Paul hadn’t been stalking me; if he hadn’t seen...” I turned to Alaric, able to see what he’d looked like, in the forest near the quarry, overlaid on top of the man now: the moment he’d stripped his clothes off and taken fur... I shook my head sharply, then frowned. “Paul and his stupid mates always wanted to go over to the US and shoot cougars and bears...” I looked around me, my brows pulling down hard. “So what do we do about it?”

“No one goes to fur,” Grant said. “Not now, not until everyone is safe.”

“I’m pulling all our crews off other jobs,” Alaric said. “We need as many hands as we can get to complete this job and keep everyone safe.”

“We need to stage a celebration—” Meryl started to say.

“Mum...” Koda and Thorn spoke at the same time, then snorted when they looked at each other.

“A party is an excellent way to justify all of these strangers coming to town,” she continued. “I’ll speak to the nice girl at reception and book out some more cabins.”

“If we’re not going to go to fur, we’ll need weapons,” one of Alaric’s dads said. “As bears we’re stronger, faster and could easily put those arseholes on their butts. But if we can’t go to fur, we need something to even the odds a bit.” He turned to Jane. “You can circulate that information when you start making calls, Ric. A lot of people have got guns in storage. Time to make sure those licences are current and they’re in good working order.”

“So the cavalry is coming and they’re bringing guns,” I said, despite my every breath catching in my chest. “What do you want us to do?”

“Find your way with my son,” Ingrid replied, her eyes red-rimmed, though not one tear rolled free. “With all of our sons. When they are bound to their mate, their chances of survival are that much higher.” God, it felt like a hand reached into my chest and squeezed. “If the worst was to happen, then...”

If we were mated, if her son was shot, then Lars might heal just like Koda had. I’d expected them to ask me to snoop in the council office or tell them all the likely ambush spots in town, not this. Not a request for me to bind their sons to me, just as I had Koda. His arms went around me tighter but I resisted that warmth, not wanting comfort right now, just wanting this to be over.

But that’s the thing about domestic violence.

I might not have had the shit kicked out of me the minute I walked into my old kitchen, but Paul had been coercing me, controlling me, belittling me, stealing from me for years, and

now he was going to try and steal this, too; my one shot at happiness. My brows drew down hard as my mind raced, and I finally remembered something that had been bugging me the whole time.

“You’ll wish you accepted Paul’s offer in the end,” Britney had said. *“You’ll find he was being more than fair. But you’ve had your chance—”*

Why did she care so much? I remembered her coming to my work for a meeting with Simmons, her dad putting forward a proposal and now, I wanted to know exactly what had been in it.

“I think I might be able to get some intel,” I told the room. I heard rumbles of concern but dismissed them as I thought through what to do. “There’s something bigger at play here and I think I know how to find out what it is.”

I patted my pockets for my car keys, but remembered I hadn’t driven over. Thorn held them out for me, raising an eyebrow in query as I took them.

“I need to go into work and put in my leave application, but also... I think there’s a document on my boss’ desk that might help us and I need to take a look at it.”

“We’re coming with you,” Alaric said, staring at me meaningfully when I went to protest. “That’s non-negotiable.”

“So we’re going snooping, bestie?” Holly said, slinging her arm around my shoulders. “Count me the fuck in.”

It was early on Sunday morning as we waited for Holly outside the closed council building, so the streets were mostly empty. She walked over trying to wrestle something over her head. It looked like... a balaclava? She finally managed to yank it down, the too tight weave stretching around her face. “What the hell are you doing?” I asked her.

“This is a covert mission. I’m too pretty to go to jail.” Her voice was severely muffled by the headwear.

“I have an after-hours enabled swipe key,” I said, producing it with a flourish. “What the hell did you think we’d be doing?”

“Breaking in. I’ve got a crowbar in my car. I figured we could use it to lever open the glass door if we had to,” she said, clawing the balaclava off and then gasping theatrically. “Man, that was kind of suffocating.”

“Maybe you should stay outside,” I told her, with a frown. I turned to the men with me to include them in that statement. “All of you could—”

“Come with you and ensure you’re safe.” Alaric’s tone was firm, and the other three men looked at me, as though daring me to argue.

“Super protective growly bears,” Holly said, waving a finger at each of them as she said each word. “So, that’s fucking hot. Alright, Ms ‘I have a swipe card’, show us your

techno magic, but I reserve the right to use the crowbar to... Oh.”

The glass door had slid open as I waved the pass card. We all walked into the still, quiet office building before I manually closed and locked the doors.

“So, I’ll go upstairs—” I started to say in a low voice.

“We’ll go upstairs,” Lars corrected.

“Why are we whispering?” Holly asked, her voice a hoarse mutter. “Isn’t this place empty?”

But as she said those words, we all heard the muffled sound of someone talking, coming from the first floor. I frowned slightly, wondering what the hell I’d walked into. Everyone always scuttled out of here the minute the clock ticked over to 4.21pm on a Friday, so I couldn’t think who the hell would be here after hours. As I looked up the stairs, my eyes zeroed in on Simmons’ open door.

“So you see how this could be good for Langston...”

I recognised that voice. Rob fucking Prentiss was in that room with Simmons. Why the hell would he be dragging the mayor into a clandestine meeting on a Sunday and, more importantly, what had he offered to Simmons to get him to agree to meet? I realised I was moving without a word, creeping up the stairs on cat-like feet, with the rest of my posse at my back.

“What you’re talking about could potentially change the face of Langston, not necessarily for the better,” Simmons said, his tone a strange mixture of wariness and greed.

“It’d put it on the map,” Rob insisted. “The wine industry has transformed South Australia, but only those parts that have suitable micro-climates and soils. Those areas reap the benefit of tourists and wine tours flooding into their towns, but when the wineries pull out, they’re going to be screwed... Climate change is coming, no matter what people say, and that’s affecting the places that have had vineyards up till now. The big knobs in the industry are looking for the next place to set

up their vineyards. Word on the street is that Langston has the perfect conditions.”

I froze as I went to put my foot on the next step, frowning at what I’d just heard. South Australia had an amazing reputation for good food and wine, but the vast majority of the state was either semi-arid desert country or sleepy farming towns like Langston, not yet gentrified by the tourist trade. But what Rob was proposing...

“Shit!” Holly yelped, crashing into me because, although I’d stopped, she hadn’t, not until she face planted into my butt.

The conversation on the level above us cut off and Simmons appeared in the doorway with a frown, taking in the cause of this unexpected interruption.

“Natalie?” I felt like I was being told off by my parents as the mayor looked us over with a censorious eye, something that seemed at odds with his faded polo shirt and cargo shorts. “I thought I told you to take some leave?”

I walked up the stairs to stand in the hallway, facing him down and then doing the same to Rob as he appeared in the doorway behind Simmons.

“I came to put my leave application in,” I replied. “I figured that was best done outside of business hours?”

“Right, yes, well...” I watched him dither, looking at Rob before coming back to me. “Well, if you’re here, you may as well make yourself useful.”

One of the guys let out a low growl at that, something that was almost inaudible. Then Simmons said the magic words.

“Rob has come in here to expand on the proposal he brought in the other day.” I remembered that now. Simmons had asked me to email all of the councillors the documentation. I needed to go through my work emails and retrieve that proposal. “He asked to meet with me to expand upon his ideas and feel me out. You’re here so you can take minutes.”

Yes, I fucking could.

Rob's eyes narrowed with a degree of suspicion as he took in the whole group with me, but when Simmons turned back to him, not even bothering to see if I agreed, his expression smoothed back into one of polite interest.

"Go into my office," I directed the others, shoving my keys at them. "I'll be out soon."

"I'm not sure minutes are needed, are they, Bernie?" Rob said and that was a freaking mistake. No one called Simmons 'Bernie'.

"Bernard," he corrected stiffly. "And yes, they are. You want me to take this proposal to the council—"

"I brought the proposal to you, thinking I had the man in charge," Rob blustered, trying for some kind of misguided dig, and failing miserably.

Mayor Simmons might not have been able to organise himself out of a wet paper bag, but the man was a stickler for following correct local council protocol as outlined in the Local Government Act of 1999. No one, and I mean no one, could fault him when it came to legal procedures.

"If you're serious about this proposal, then minutes are essential," Bernard said. "Natalie will take notes and provide you with a copy to sign. It will then be an official document to submit before the councillors..."

"Do you mind if I use your laptop, Bernard?" I asked. "Mine's in my office."

"Yes, yes, of course," he said, waving a hand at the top of the line device that was mainly used as a paperweight. Simmons had no head for technology at all. So I booted his laptop up, entered his password (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8) and then opened up Word while also accessing his emails. I was able to see most of them on my own device anyway, because monitoring them was part of my job, but sometimes there were a few that snuck through, addressed to his personal email instead.

"So, if you would like to describe the proposal again?" Simmons said, sitting back in his chair, fingers steepled and I

caught Rob's barely suppressed sigh, before he gave me the details.

And it was then that I realised what was at play.

Gentrification: the process where real estate speculators buy up previously overlooked areas of a city, or whole towns, with a view to 'revitalising' the area, building newer 'nicer' houses and commercial properties, luring in cute cafes and boutiques with sweetheart rent rates, all the while driving out the locals as property prices began to soar. The developers effectively turned down-at-heel areas, often with high crime and unemployment rates, into highly desirable postcodes, in the process making a killing as property values rose.

And that was what Rob had planned for Langston.

The big wineries had been talking about pulling out of their heartlands in the Barossa and Clare valleys, as well as the Limestone Coast, and relocating their headquarters to the area around Langston. Land was cheap and so was housing, but it appeared Rob didn't have enough capital to cover the full breadth of what he had planned. He wanted to buy up farms, houses, whatever he could get his hands on, in anticipation of seeing the properties appreciating rapidly, so that he could gain the benefit of a windfall with no effort on his part. I was assuming the banks had knocked him back already, because he was trying to get the council involved in a kind of US-style eminent domain setup.

But that shit was hard to get done in Australia.

But if he could pull it off... When the wineries came knocking, they'd have to buy everything through him, cutting our local real estate agents out of the deals and reaping the financial rewards himself.

My fingers flew across the keys, recording in deliberately neutral terms everything that was being said. I knew I couldn't expand on what was being proposed, or Rob wouldn't sign off on the notes I'd taken, but I couldn't stop a furrow forming on my brow as I contemplated the potential impact on the town. And when he was finished, and Simmons mulled over the

proposal, Rob stared at me and his lips curled into a mocking smile.

He knew I'd seen through his proposal. He knew I could see what this would do to the town, even if my boss didn't. But I wasn't the mayor or an elected official, I was just a personal assistant. His eyes glittered with challenge, daring me to say something, do something, but I stayed very quiet as I emailed the notes to both Simmons and Rob, then quickly scoured through my boss' emails.

Anything that looked relevant I forwarded on to myself, then deleted the sent items and emptied his trash. With most people, that wouldn't withstand the slightest scrutiny, but due to Simmons' total lack of tech savvy, it totally covered my tracks.

"If there's nothing else?" I asked, getting to my feet.

"No. And, thank you, Natalie," Simmons said, with uncharacteristic gentleness. "I know you've been through a lot lately."

And you hung me out to dry as I was going through it, I thought angrily, trying my best to keep an impassive expression.

"I'm going to take at least a few weeks leave," I replied, "to try and recuperate." Rob's smile widened in response, no doubt gleeful at the prospect of getting me out of the picture.

"I'll make sure to approve that at full pay," Simmons replied with a nod.

I walked out, feeling the effect of Rob's slimy gaze on my skin, until I was able to get to my own office to find my four bear shifters and my friend were waiting for me. I shut the door behind me and then leaned against it.

"I know what's happening now," I said, forcing my voice to steady even as it felt like my whole body was shaking. "I know what Paul is in on, and why he pulled the plug on our relationship all of a sudden."

I had their attention and I straightened up as I spoke.

“Our marriage was dead years ago, perhaps from the very start, but he had me right where he wanted me. Until now.” I let out a long shuddering sigh. “He’s in on a deal that Rob Prentiss is trying to put together, for...” I sucked in a quick breath, shaking my head in disbelief, “property speculation of all fucking things. Rob and Britney want to buy up as much of Langston as they possibly can and, if his strong arm tactics with me are anything to go by, I’m betting Rob is going to use Paul to apply pressure to the more vulnerable people in the community.”

Vulnerable people like me, just as I was in the position of trying to divorce him, when I needed the money from the house to try to strike out independently.

It was obvious to me now that Paul and Britney had been plotting to have me sign over control of the house so that they could sell it for far more than it was worth, and they would be able to make a killing if Rob got his way. The scheme would send property prices soaring all through the district. For our house, the anticipated increase in price from what we’d paid for it, originally, would keep Paul flush for a good while. And if he could ‘convince’ others to sell to Rob early and cheaply? I winced as I thought about just what Paul might do to some of the older members of the community. They would end up selling *very* cheaply when faced with Paul’s bully-boy tactics. I was pretty sure Prentiss would pay Paul a nice sum for a job done well, just in time for Britney Prentiss to become Mrs Bailey in my place.

“And the problem is...” I looked intently at each one in the room. “I think we’re the only ones standing in the way of this.”

A *laric*

“So, let me get this straight,” Brian said to Nat. “Your ex is threatening to shoot us on sight because,” he frowned as he looked at a piece of paper in his hand, “of a property deal?” He had picked up one of the printouts strewn across Holly’s dining room table. He, along with the rest of the parents, had arrived in droves once they’d got wind of the news. And now we were all crowded around Holly’s table trying to make sense of what had been revealed at the council offices. And right when I didn’t want them sticking their noses in.

“They’ve talked themselves into thinking it’ll make them a lot of money,” Nat said with a sigh. “I’ve looked at the figures that have been put together, and they think they’re going to make millions. They obviously feel like they need to get in quick to make that deal, and they don’t care who they have to step over to get to it.”

“Well, there’s nothing to be done about it today,” Mum said, then shot me a meaningful look. “Natalie must be getting hungry.”

She hadn’t eaten much of anything all day, and had been drinking endless cups of coffee to try to stay focused, because Thorn had kept her up all night. She needed to eat, to stop, to take a damn breath, but I felt like if I tried to force her, I’d be no better than that fuck, Paul.

“It’s OK,” she said with a wave of her hand. “I’ll get something later.”

And how often did she say that, do that, put what she needed last and everything else first? I glared at Mum, but she and the dads just gazed back, shooting pointed looks at Natalie as she sorted through the printouts.

“Well,” I said, and when I paused for a moment, Natalie tilted her head to look up at me. “What about now?”

I’d spoken to the rest of the sleuth, and we’d agreed that Natalie still needed to go on a date with me. A real date, not that fake dating bullshit.

“What? But we...”

“We’ll go through the papers with a fine tooth comb,” Mum promised. “Working in restorations for as long as the family has, we’ve got an eye for a property deal. Don’t worry. You two go and get something to eat.”

Holly nudged Natalie in the ribs. “Damn, Alaric’s mum is a pimp.”

“We can go somewhere low-key,” I said, underplaying the whole thing, because deep down I was terrified that if I went all out, Natalie would say no. “Get a counter meal at the pub or something.”

I watched my girl’s gaze soften as she looked at me and her mind started to turn over the issue. You could almost hear the cogs whirring as she thought about her response. And as I waited, not knowing which way she’d jump, I kept thinking, *Say yes. Say yes to us.* Because, while we were in the shit and facing real threats, none of it mattered unless we chose each other.

“Yes.”

Just one word from my girl and it felt like my heart would fucking burst. I blinked, heard the families make little sounds of happiness as they conspicuously consulted the printouts. But the little smiles, the sidelong looks, had an element of glee. Dating Nat had become a spectator sport of epic proportions the minute our shifter families had arrived in

town, and I knew the sort of commentary that would start once we left the room.

“Get it, girl,” Holly hissed under her breath, then shot a wink at me. OK, before we left the room.

“Um... should I get changed?”

Nat was finally out of those damned blood-stained clothes. I wouldn't have cared whether she wore an old sheet or haute couture.

“Not if you don't want to.” I rubbed my hands on my jeans, my palms suddenly all sweaty. “Why don't we... just go?”

I held out a hand then, willing her to take it, and when she did, I felt a jolt of warmth all the way through my body. I found myself drawing her closer, into my side so I could wrap my arm around her and hold her the way my whole fucking body had ached to do since the moment we got up.

“OK then,” Nat said, gazing up at me. “Let's go.”

I GOT us outside and to the car, opening her door and putting her seatbelt on for her, something that had her smiling at me.

“Thanks for that,” she said. “Not sure I could've done that myself.”

“Sorry.” I put my hands on the top of the door and then shook my head. “Actually, I'm not sorry.”

“What?”

That little crease in her forehead was back. I wanted to smooth it away the minute I saw it but I stopped myself.

“Of course you can do your own seat belt up. You can do almost everything, right?” She continued to gaze up at me and it was as though I was sinking down into those blue eyes of hers, never to come out. “But you don't have to. Sometimes I'm going to want to do things for you, just so you don't have to. I'm gonna want to look after you and care for you and mop the floor so you don't have to—”

“Oh, be still my heart.”

She meant it as a joke, I’m sure, but that’s not how it came out. Her lips curved slightly into a smile, sure. But her eyes? I’m not sure she realised just how hungry her gaze was sometimes, when her walls were down, when she stopped forcing herself to focus on everyone else and just let herself be.

“I’m serious, Nat,” I told her, my voice getting deeper and rumblier as the bear shouldered forward. He didn’t understand all the bullshit we had to go through. He just wanted to yank Nat close and claim her. “If you accept me as your mate, I’m gonna want to look after you, and you’ll need to let me.”

There was an air of challenge in her eyes as she processed my words.

“Yeah? Well, show me what you’ve got, Bear Boy.”

“THE SHOPS?” she asked as we pulled up in front of a supermarket that I’d noticed in our time in Langston stayed open late and had quite a nice selection of gourmet foods available. “What are we...?”

“Just trust me.” I paused as soon as I said those words and looked over at her, realising how hard that was going to be for her. “Just for tonight. Just for a few hours. Can you do that, Nat?”

She straightened her spine, the way she seemed to whenever she was scared, as if forcing herself to stand tall would somehow help her get through what she found challenging. And I fucking hated that she’d been in shitty enough situations that she felt she had to do that. Then she looked me in the eye and nodded slowly.

“OK. I mean what’s the worst thing that can happen at Woolies?”

“What’s the best thing that could happen?” I countered, waiting for that to sink in. She sat there, frowning slightly as

she thought about what I might mean, then looked up at me with a smile on her face.

“BBQ CHICKEN.” I was pushing the shopping trolley and she skipped ahead of me, grabbing a bachelor’s handbag (a rotisserie chicken in a plastic carry bag) and putting it in the trolley. “Oh, god, and mud cake!”

Not for the first time did I relish the fact our families had emigrated to Australia. Because we were blessed in a way our American cousins would never be: they would never experience the delights of a Woolworths mud cake. The plastic container crackled as she picked it up and carefully placed it in the trolley.

“Cheese!”

She veered over to the cold case where all the gourmet cheeses were displayed and I shouldered forward.

“Any types you’re not keen on?” I asked her.

“Swiss, maybe Gouda,” she replied.

“OK, what about this?” I picked up a selection of Mersey Valley flavoured cheeses. They infused their blocks with bacon, sweet chilli or pickled onion. Each one was a cheddar but it was so rich in dairy fats it was soft and spreadable, still with the bite of a vintage cheese.

“I don’t think I’ve ever tried that one.” She peered at the blocks and then reached for the sweet chilli one. I put that in the trolley, along with another few choice selections I knew were good quality. Then we needed baguettes to put them on, as well as tomatoes, basil and a few other sandwich toppings. She watched me, eyes widening, as I added more and more selections to the trolley. Finally, we were ready to go through the checkout.

“Hey, Nat,” the older woman behind the till said, as we loaded the groceries onto the conveyor belt. “How’s...?” She looked past Nat to me, seeming to realise real quick I wasn’t Paul, which made sense. Fuckface would struggle to reach my

shoulder. “How’s your evening going?” the woman finished lamely.

“Looking pretty good right now,” Nat said, and then shot me a sidelong look.

The sounds, the harsh lights, the canned air of the supermarket all faded away when my eyes met Nat’s. When my mate was around, I couldn’t care about anything or anyone but her. I found myself smiling as I held her gaze. The checkout operator announced how much our haul cost and Nat went to grab her wallet, but I paid for it before she could even think about it. Grabbing the bag in one hand and her in the other, I escorted her out of the building.

“So, what now?” she asked as we got to the car.

“Now you tell me where we can find somewhere nice to sit outside where we can relax and you can bloody eat something.”

She grinned impishly at me then.

“I know just the place.”

A *laric*

I was a grown fucking man. I'd dealt with difficult customers, state authorities, even chatted to government ministers and the premier at different times. But none of that had made me as nervous as I was now—because there was a whole lot more at stake. As the sun set low in the sky, I pulled up at the local park that Nat had assured me was just the spot for a relaxed meal. Carrying the shopping bags with all the items for our impromptu al fresco dining experience, I followed Nat over to a concrete picnic table that was in a secluded spot, away from the main paths through the park. As I started unloading all the tasty things that I hoped would tempt her to eat a proper meal, I handed Nat a plastic plate. When her fingers grazed mine, my heart thumped and I froze. She looked up at me quizzically before pulling the plate from my grip and setting it down.

Get it together, I thought fiercely to myself. I managed to spread the food out across the table top without further incident, then retrieved the bottle of wine, and poured us out a drink each into plastic cups. While it might not have been fine dining, just being with Nat made it better than any fancy restaurant I'd ever been to.

“This reminds me of uni,” she said with a smile, taking a sip of the wine and humming appreciatively. “Drinking wine out of plastic cups.”

“What was it like, going to uni, after living in a small town your whole life?” I asked as I took out a knife and started cutting up the breadstick. “And what did you study?”

“Architecture,” she replied, then winced. “It was... hard. You know, I thought I was ready for the big smoke—I was full of big ideas and big dreams.” She set her cup down and stared at it for a moment before facing me. “I wasn’t. I didn’t expect to be lonely. I didn’t think it would be so hard to meet people and make friends. Here, everyone knows everyone but there no one knows anyone and they don’t necessarily want to. I got through the course work fine but...”

I smeared some cheese on a piece of bread and added chicken and tomato before putting it on her plate. All the while, she stared down at the table, lost in thought, or memories.

“When I came home on the holidays, everyone seemed to think that was just what the city was like. That people there *weren’t* going to be friendly or approachable, like they were in Langston. Mum was critical of the fact that I ‘seemed to want it easy’ and Dad asked me what I had expected.” She straightened up, squaring her shoulders and affecting a deeper tone. “You’re not there to socialise, but to study.”

I took her hand and cradled it in mine, wanting to have been there to protect young Nat, and needing to protect present-day Nat from having to deal with any sort of bullshit.

“Nat, it *is* harder in the city. For a big place, it sure likes to section itself off, creating all these different little niches. All of us bear shifters tend to stick together and the only people who tend to join our community are the new mates of sleuths.” I grabbed her hand and rubbed my fingers across her knuckles. “It’s hard at first, like being in any new place, but at some point, you find your people. The ones who see you, see how fucking amazing you are and just want to see you shine.”

We were the ones that would do that for her, I wanted to say. All of our families were here for her. She wasn’t alone anymore and if she wanted to stay in Langston, then we would. If she wanted to try again in the city, this time she

wouldn't be on her own when she did it. She could complete her degree or work for the business. I had so many ideas but I kept them all back for the moment, not wanting to swamp her with my enthusiasm in case it seemed like I was being like that fucker Paul in trying to tell her what to do, rather than trying to give her more choices.

But, somehow, she picked up on my intent and leaned into my side and resting her head against my chest.

My arm curled around her automatically, pulling her in close and holding her right where I needed her. I leaned over and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, closing my eyes for just a second and breathing her in before rubbing my hand up and down her back until the tension there flowed away.

“And right now, in order to be able to shine, you need to have something to eat.”

As I nudged her plate closer towards her, she groaned, then forced herself to sit up.

“What's the deal with you guys and food? Is this a bear thing? Like Winnie-the-Pooh being obsessed by honey.”

I sniggered at her example. “We look after each other, and food is a big part of that,” I explained. “Feeding our mate, taking her for dinner is often the first kind of care a woman will accept from her mates.”

“So you'll be like my self-care coach,” she said and smiled, before picking up the bread and taking a bite then making appreciative noises. I admit, I took a whole lot of satisfaction watching her eat, knowing that I'd provided for her needs. I had to mask how much that affected me by making more breadstick open sandwiches for both of us, making sure to slide more onto her plate. As she finished her mouthful, she asked, “So, what comes after feeding your mate into submission?”

The swirl of sensual images that her words created in my brain hit me with such force that I had to suck in a breath. My chest felt so fucking tight it was as though it was burning, as though it had been burning since I'd met her. I knew I needed

to tell her what I was thinking, how I was feeling, but the reality was that I found the whole communication thing hard. It would have been easier if I was like bloody Thorn, who just let his every sexual thought out, unfiltered. But she was here with *me*, not Thorn, and it was *my* body that ached for her. So, I managed to suck in enough of a breath to tell her honestly how her scent affected me—how *she* affected me.

“You said bears like honey...”

Her eyes jerked up to meet mine and suddenly everything was OK. Nat was mine, that reality beat hard and true in my chest. I just had to show her, make clear what my intentions were, how good it would be. So I smiled slightly, rubbing a thumb across her cheekbone.

“Well, there’s nothing bear shifters like more than licking up honey.”

“Is this one of those *9 1/2 Weeks* things?” she asked, raising an eyebrow as her nose wrinkled. “Because, dude, yeast infections. Look it up.”

She didn’t get it, yet. The kind of honey I was after was something else entirely. I picked her up, earning a little squeak from her as I deposited her on the edge of the table in front of me before I stood up. Her eyes followed my every move and that made me fucking preen.

“I don’t need to cover you in anything.” My mouth hovered over hers and I caught the moment when her breath started to come in little gasps. “I catch your scent all the time and it’s sweeter than honey. Makes my fucking mouth water and my dick hard at the worst possible moments, so...” I ran a hand up the inside of her jean covered thigh, watching her pupils blow wide and her breathing come in shorter and shorter pants before I cupped her mound, my whole hand covering her. “There will be no yeast infections here, only pleasure.”

“Now?”

It took me a moment to realise what she was saying, a fucking sloppy grin spreading right across my face as I worked

out what she was asking. I sat back down and dragged her down onto my lap before snagging her plate closer.

“Food first, eating later.”

“Eating? Oh...!” Her bemused look changed to one of intense interest. Then, as I held out a piece of bread stacked high with all the good stuff, she glared at me... “Pretty sure I’m a grown arse woman and I can decide when and where I want to eat, or be eaten.” I just held the food out until she started eating from my hand.

“You are.” My appetite for food was thoroughly gone so I nuzzled into the side of her neck, daring to press one kiss then another when she shivered. I mapped the whole expanse of her neck with my lips, drowning in her scent, in her, until finally she pulled away.

“I’ve eaten three whole pieces of bread, loaded up with heaps of protein and vegies,” she said, turning towards me. And, damn me, I didn’t care anymore. I had another priority to focus on.

“Good girl,” I said. The words rumbled up from deep in my chest and then my mouth found hers. I kissed her slowly, thoroughly, unable to forget the last time her lips had been on mine and needing her taste right now.

She pulled her lips away to look up at me. “You haven’t eaten a thing,” she said, reprovingly.

I smiled and rubbed my cheek against her hair. Fuck, all thoughts, worries, reasons dropped away when I drew close to her. Because the bear knew. He didn’t give a shit about the business, about restoring old places (though he liked living in them well enough). He just wanted her and that’s all he or I could focus on.

“I’ve got an appetite,” I growled, my voice taking on that deeper timbre that signalled the bear pushing me. “But it’s not for a Woolies’ chook or their mud cake.”

She gasped theatrically. “That’s positively un-Australian. They’ll deport you back to the US for that.” Then she tilted her head to the side to look consideringly at me, before slowly

raising an eyebrow as if in challenge. “So, what *are* you hungry for?”

I shifted her on my lap so she was straddling me, then jerked her hips down, grinding her right into the evidence of my need, and her responsive little moan was music to my ears.

“I was going to sit down and get to know you better,” I rasped out, distracted entirely by the effect of the way she was moving her hips against me in the smallest of increments, as though she was unconsciously seeking just the right pressure. “I wanted to find out how you’re doing with everything that’s happened—how you’re feeling about the shooting, the AVO...”

“Maybe I don’t want that right now,” she replied as her hands went to my face, her thumbs rubbing my stubble. “Maybe I want a break from all the shit that I’ll have to face when I get up tomorrow morning. Maybe I just want this.”

My heart felt like it slowed right down as she leant over, and then it was as though it stopped when she brushed her mouth over mine in a series of gentle butterfly kisses. My heart tried to pound out of my chest as I took over. I slid my hand up her neck and buried my fingers in her hair as I kissed her deep and hard, letting all my repressed hunger out.

She seemed to just give under me, lips parting, soft and pliable, under mine that were hard, thrusting, hungry. As soon as her mouth opened, my tongue flicked out, finding hers and sliding against it. Because I fucking needed the warm wet slip of that part of her body against part of mine, making my head spin with the sense of how it’d be when she finally took me. My baculum ached, reacting to the instinct to jut out inside her and lock her down for good, but no matter how much I wanted to bury myself inside her, I wasn’t going there yet. Not just yet.

“I’ve been wined.” Natalie broke away to grab her cup, and drained it dry in a single gulp. “I’ve been dined. So how about we get to the...?” Her bravado seemed to falter as she remembered the last bit of the saying.

“Sixty-nine?” I grinned at her expression. “How about a sixty-eight? I’ll go down on you and you’ll owe me one.”

“That sounds better than Woolies’ mud cake,” she replied, scrambling off my lap and hurriedly shoving everything back into the bags. “Let’s go.”

It was all so tempting.

Alaric was a picture of masculine perfection. He'd escorted me back to his car, picking me up and setting me sideways in my seat so he could step between my legs. Then he'd kissed me until I felt like I'd explode into flames. When he went to pull away, my lips followed, wanting more, more. He'd grinned boyishly, something rare in the man who was usually so serious, before he made sure my seat belt was on and he got in the car. But all through the drive back, I couldn't keep my hands to myself, because I'd missed this.

Sitting in a car with someone you were into, stroking your hand up their thigh and feeling their muscles tighten in response. Alaric let out a groan as my hand got higher and higher. Then, as I ran my hand over that swollen lump he slammed his foot on the brakes, gripping the steering wheel so tight I thought it would crack.

"Fuck, Nat..." He turned to shoot me a smouldering look. "You keep doing that and we aren't going to make it home."

"So?"

As I asked the question, I felt like I was someone else: someone more confident, someone more bold. I tried to squeeze my fingers around him without success. One, he was too damn thick and, two, his hand slapped down on mine, holding it there for a second before pushing it back to my side of the car.

“You before me, remember?” was all he said. And that made me realise something. They’d said they weren’t perfect, just perfect for *me*. And in this moment, I understood why.

In my relationship with Paul, I’d been in the position of eroticising the giving of pleasure rather than the taking of it. To do it, I’d performed some kind of mental gymnastics early in my marriage that made it A-OK for me to get Paul panting, even if he rolled over in bed and fell asleep right after he got what he wanted, not feeling like he needed to return the favour. No, love isn’t transactional; it isn’t tit-for-tat. But damn me if it doesn’t wither and die when only one person is doing all the giving. When we arrived back at the B&B, Alaric whisked me out of the car and into his arms, carrying me like I was precious. When he had to set me down by the door to unlock it, I smoothed my hands over his chest, and reached up for him, determined to not be the only one taking tonight.

“Fuck...”

And the moment our lips touched, neither of us could stop kissing each other. As soon as I tugged his head down for one, it led into another, then another, and his keys hung from the lax fingers of one hand as he held me to him with the other one and then fucking plundered my mouth. He claimed it utterly as his, kissing me into oblivion. Then he pulled away and chuckled as I just stood there wavering, like when I’d downed those shots of tequila the night I’d first met him. Though, tonight, all I tasted was him. Then he unlocked the door and led me inside.

Men’s rooms were usually strange spaces, imbued with their scent, and with all the minutiae of their lives scattered across every surface. But I wasn’t there to find out what might be revealed in the paraphernalia he had lying around; I was keen to get a read on the actual man. I walked up to him, my fingers going to his shirt buttons, easing them through even as he tried to push my hands away.

“Nat... Nat!” I stopped and looked up at him, catching the moment his eyes turned to liquid gold and he tilted his head to

one side, shooting me a gentle smile. “You before me, love, that’s how this works.”

“That’s funny,” I said, cocking a hip and turning on the sass. “I was going to say the same thing.”

“Nat—”

“I know what it’s like,” I told him, staring up into his eyes as I opened the next button then another, the soft flannel shirt parting slowly, revealing a mouth-watering section of bronzed skin. “To want to please someone. To feel a deep need to make sure the person you’re with is OK.” I slid my hand in through the gap, feeling the heat of his skin and then the tremor as his rigid abs jumped at my touch. “To get pleasure from pleasing them.” I traced the prickly line of hair that led from his belly button down until it disappeared under his waistband. “You want me to feel good.”

“Nat, I need it so fucking much that it feels hard to breathe sometimes.”

I nodded at the raspy intensity of his words.

“But... what if I need the same thing?” I stared at him, trying to make him see. His brows creased and his eyes searched mine, questioningly. “What if I need to taste you as much as you need to taste me?”

“Nat, I—”

“You want to be my mate.”

“Yes, fuck, yes, but—”

“Then that means taking orders, not just giving them.”

“I will, but—”

“So unless you have a major objection, I’m going to strip off this lumbersexual porn get-up that you insist on wearing to titillate me—”

“Lumbersexual...?”

“You know.” I waved a hand at his general attire. “Like you’re ready to stride off into the bush and cut down trees to build me a log cabin.”

“I could if you liked.” His grin widened. “My granddad showed me how.”

“Well, right now all I want to see is you, Alaric.”

I meant that more than simply in the physical sense, and I could see that he recognised that, his expression becoming more intense, even as the light shone brighter in his eyes. His hands took over unbuttoning the rest of the shirt and then he dropped it to the floor. He went to unbuckle his belt to complete the job, but I stopped him, putting my hands over his and holding him still, so that I could explore.

There was a strange kind of cognitive dissonance that came from touching a body that looked like so many thirst traps, but his physical beauty wasn't what I was seeing. It was him. Long, thin, silvery scars that were barely visible. I fitted my fingers and traced along the lines and realised they were claw marks. Massive heavy slabs of muscles that spoke of power, of strength, that allowed him to wield a hammer for hours or pick me up like I was made of air. Biceps that popped as I stroked my hands down them, big enough to hold me, protect me. My slow tactile inspection was intimate but it was more than physical. Alaric said he had wanted to spend a little time getting to know me and somehow we were doing that, but on an elemental level.

This was him...

His hands rose, smoothing over my shoulders, forcing a shiver out of me, even while I was still wearing clothes.

And this was me.

“I want to see you too, Nat.” His voice was deep and gentle, soothing me, keeping me in place before him. “I've dreamed my whole life of seeing the one woman in the world for me and I need you to—”

I grabbed my shirt and pulled it up and over my head in one quick move. My eyes flicked up, searching his face, looking for some sort of sign of revulsion or disappointment. Instead, the expression on his face struck me dumb.

Reverence as he grazed his knuckles across my décolletage. Reverence in the pass of his hand across the sensitive skin, my nipples tightening as it got closer and closer but never close enough. It was as though he saw me as I truly was, and that in his eyes I was beautiful. I wanted to do the same to him, make him feel the same, so I moved closer to press my mouth to his too hot skin, all the way down his chest. I felt his rumble of pleasure before I heard it, and it became deeper and more raspy as I traversed my way down his abs. When I reached his belt, he unbuckled it then undid the fly. As I eased his jeans down, I placed kisses over his hip bone, on the stretchy cotton of his underwear. And then he stopped me, again.

“Natalie...” He breathed my name like a caress. “Tonight was supposed to be about *you*.”

“So you said,” I replied, watching his pupils flare black as I got closer to his throbbing length. “Maybe I think it should be about *us*.”

“*I* don’t need anything, just you: your pleasure, your taste.”

I peeled down his underwear to reveal that, contrary to his last statement, his need was quite in evidence. I was also starting to admit to myself that perhaps I should reconsider my proposal, because what he was packing was on the exceptional side of large. Each one of my men seemed to have been overly blessed by the Penis Fairy. But, Alaric? I eyed his dick a little like I might an anaconda, impressed by its size while also being a little worried about what it might do. As I ran my eyes up and down the monster, I noticed a small bead of precum forming on the end and, transfixed, I bent forward to lick it away. His addictive, spicy taste had me moaning, making my mouth water for more. He said something, a whole lot of something, but I didn’t listen, couldn’t focus. I was intent on wrapping as much of my hand around his shaft as I could and, more importantly, pulling him into my mouth. As my tongue slid under his foreskin, he lost his much-vaunted control. Both hands dived into my hair, wrapping strands tight around his fists as he groaned.

“Nat... Nat...”

He said my name like a prayer to the gods of head jobs, begging for relief, and I delivered, wrapping my lips around the crown and then sucking, my tongue flicking across his shaft. His grip tightened, almost to the point of pain, and his pure amber eyes burned into mine.

“I’m gonna let you do that for a little bit,” he growled, and I could imagine that it was his bear staring down at me through his eyes. “Because you’re making me feel so fucking good.”

I bobbed my head slowly, making love to as much of his shaft as I could fit in my mouth before I felt it flex, and he pulled himself free of my mouth. For just a second we both panted and watched his cock bob, dry firing in response to all the stimulus, before he scooped me up and threw me down on his bed.

“You’ve had your fun,” he growled again, as he prowled his way over my body to pin me down. “Now it’s time for me to have mine.”

A *laric*

I wanted to stay like this for eternity: my mate squirming below me on the bed, one moment trying to get away from my wicked tongue and the next thrusting her cunt up into my face as I licked between her folds. She was just as sweet as I thought she would be and I couldn't help but keep going back for more. My fingers became claws, pricking at her skin, forcing her to go still as I licked and sucked at her. Each time the pleasure wound tighter inside her, she'd push and pull and I'd be forced to settle her again.

“Alaric...”

“Mmm...?” The sound rumbled from my chest as my mouth closed around her clit, sparking little cries of pleasure. The way her hands slapped down on my head seemed to be an indicator that the vibrations were going straight through her.

“Alaric. I need...ahhh!”

I knew what would set her off. It was as though I could sense exactly what to do to follow the pathway to her pleasure. I just wasn't in any hurry to get there fast. I licked her slowly, softly, until she started to squirm more violently, then I locked down on her clit, giving it a few long sucks, and her breath came in short pants to mark each one. Then, right as she was getting close, I pulled away, licking and circling her entrance, sucking up all the slick that was gushing forth, until her grip on my hair tightened.

“Alaric...” Her voice was changing, growing deeper, despite not having a bear to call forth. It was her need speaking. “Alaric, I—”

I speared two fingers inside her, feeling the way her body stretched around mine. My cock ached as it rubbed against the quilt, and I closed my eyes in anticipation, knowing at some point I’d feel her velvety warmth stretch around me. Just... not yet. I dragged my fingers along her front wall as I withdrew them, and her hands moving wildly from my hair to smack at my shoulders, trying to keep me inside her. I almost chuckled at her desperation, even as the bear rejoiced. We were driven to know that she needed us with the same level of intensity that we had for her. And when she was naked, like this, she couldn’t hide her need, especially when my fingers grazed against that swollen spot inside her.

Thorn must have locked down in her last night. It was more tumescent to the touch and spongier than before, something that would only increase until she went into heat. The gods were kind, gifting our mates with a terrible hunger that matched our own, once all the mating bonds were settled. For now, I teased at the spot, tracing its edges then curling my fingers hard to imitate the hook that ached in my cock, waiting to be released.

“Oh god...” she hissed, her hips snapping in time with my strokes. Fuck, what it would feel like when we mated her thoroughly? “Oh fuck...” At the torment in her voice, I stopped fucking around, and flicked the flat of my tongue across her whole clit, getting faster and faster as I felt her tighten around my fingers. “Alaric... Oh... Oh... Oh...”

I would be able to overcome anything if I only could keep hearing those little noises. My tongue flicked faster, then I turned to sucking her clit, pulling the little bundle of nerves away from her body in sharp pulses. I pushed my fingers in harder, mimicking the way it would feel when I was thrusting inside her, claiming her inside and out and making her mine.

“Oh my god...”

The words were barely whispered as her whole body went rigid, and I was rewarded by a splash of slick and her cunt snapping down, clamping around my fingers. As I worked her higher and higher, Nat clawed the fingers of one hand deep into my tricep. She bit down on the knuckles of her other hand as her whole body twisted and shuddered, the only sound coming from her mouth a high keening noise.

“Fucking hell.”

She growled that out the moment her body went slack. Without missing a beat, she rolled up and pulled free of me before slapping frantically at me to turn me onto my back, then diving down my body. Her mouth found my cock and it slid home seconds later, as she tried her best to wrap her hand around the base. Before I could protest, she'd placed her thighs on either side of my face so I reached up to meet her unspoken demand and pull her down on top of me. She didn't flinch, so I knew she wasn't too sensitive, and it was fucking heaven.

My cock felt ready to explode right down her throat, but Natalie didn't need that yet, so I held out. I flexed my hips as much as I dared, trying to avoid making her splutter, but her mouth was so hot, so wet, she just slid me down further, taking more. And her cunt? She was dripping with the white-out orgasm she'd just had, but she seemed ready for more, groaning around my cock as I licked the entirety of her seam, which in turn just drove me higher. Perhaps that was why I didn't hear Koda enter the room.

The door clicked open but it was hard to focus on mundane sounds when I was listening to my mate's muffled moans and I didn't give a shit who it was, not while she rode my face. I ground up into her, knowing my beard would be prickling against her skin, making her more sensitive, and then I started to flick her clit.

“Someone's having fun.” Koda's low growl was muted from where I lay with my head between Natalie's legs. I glanced up for a second, sucking on her clit harder as he crouched down to talk to her. “Is Alaric looking after you, love? He might need a hand.”

I watched him slide his hand across her arse, his fingers delving down. While I was trying to work out where he was heading, her hand went to my balls, cupping them so that they ached so fucking sweetly. Then her body jerked and I felt rather than saw Koda's fingers thrust inside her.

"Sensitive..." he asserted. He must've raked his fingers across her G-spot, because slick squirted out for me to lap up before I went right back to her clit. It felt like it was swelling and swelling under my ministrations, just like she was. But it was the way her hips tilted backwards that showed her need. Tilting her pelvis so he could spear his fingers into her harder, faster; so that her clit was ground against my mouth. My hands slapped onto her arse, digging into the softness there as she sped up, her head bobbing over and over along my aching length. Then I heard the jingle of a belt buckle and the sound of clothes and boots falling to the floor.

Need her.

That was all the warning I got as Koda stepped forward, to feed his cock into her, pushing forward, not stopping until he bottomed out inside her.

The groan she made resonated through my every nerve ending, and as her throat opened, my cock lodged inside it just for a second. Then she pushed back down again and the tight ring of muscle in her throat was gripping my cock again, making me want to thrust hard and fast, just as Koda was. We'd never really shared women before and I realised I was a lot more up close and personal than I would have liked, strictly speaking.

Keep your balls out of my face, I warned through our mental link, but he just laughed. His hands went to her waist, to the back of her head, forcing himself deeper inside her and pushing her down on my cock until I didn't give a fucking shit about how close his fucking ball bag was. All I cared about was her.

The way she felt; the increasingly sharp jerks of her hips; the way she swallowed me so damn good, making me want to unload right down her throat. Koda was slamming into her

now with a ferocity I understood well, even if I refused to give into it. He was taking her, claiming her, grabbing her and tearing her away from the teeth of the pain and anguish she'd experienced, to just focus on this moment: her scent, her moans, her pleasure and the way she felt, caught up on the spiking sensations of each of us as we all came, one after the other.

“Fuck... Fuck...”

Nat had jerked her mouth free of me, gasping oxygen into her lungs, and I felt her body tense then undulate in long slow waves.

“Jesus fucking Christ, you feel so fucking perfect,” Koda growled, slamming his cock deep into her so that she would ride every fresh wave of pleasure as he came, too.

My balls boiled, my cock jerked and the first jet of cum escaped me, spurting into the air, but she gripped my hips tight and covered me with her mouth again, sucking everything I had down greedily in long swallows that made me shake. Nat kept going until she had drained me utterly, and all three of us collapsed in a heap. Koda pulled free of her, pulling her to rest beside him while he snuggled into her back and I settled down on her other side.

“Is this the way it's going to be?” There was something small and vulnerable in her voice, almost fearful; like we'd shown her paradise and were about to snatch it away.

“Always,” I promised, hoping like hell it would be true, and feeling ready to fight the world if it wasn't. She snuggled into my chest then, her head tucked under my chin and I felt peace, real fucking peace as Koda scooted closer.

Couldn't fucking wait anymore, he told me down our bond. I heard her, felt her...

If she claimed me, I'd be the same, I said as my eyes fell closed, the lids feeling impossibly heavy. I don't know if I could ever leave her alone.

We won't need to.

Koda's reply was uncharacteristic of him, so sure and confident I had to open my eye a crack to make sure it wasn't Thorn playing silly buggers. But he just gazed back with that same deathly stillness he'd always possessed, before turning his attention to our mate.

“We'll never leave you alone.”

He gazed down at Natalie, stroking her hair back from her neck and she just made a non-committal snuffle as she fell into sleep.

“I need you to stay with the twins today,” Alaric told me, the next morning. He and Lars were dressed in their work gear, ready to restart the clock tower project. It seemed a ridiculous thing to focus on when we were dealing with everything else, but the project deadline still loomed and the company wouldn’t get paid if it wasn’t done on time. “They’ll look after you, keep you safe.”

“Damn straight we will.” Thorn ambled closer with an intent look. “You, me, Koda, an empty room and—”

“Morning!” We all looked down the hall to see Meryl and her sleuth moving towards us, the twins’ mother waving at us all. “I’m glad I caught you. I thought we might all go to breakfast.”

“I know what I want to eat and it’s not pancakes,” Thorn hissed.

“Right there with you, brother,” Koda said in a low tone, holding up a fist for Thorn to bump.

“Cock blocked by Mummy?” Lars said with a smirk. “Couldn’t happen to a nicer pair of blokes.” He turned to face down the incoming group. “Good morning, Meryl. You’re looking radiant.”

“Oh, bless you.” When she was close enough, she deposited a kiss on Lars’ cheek, leaving the scarlet impression of her lipstick behind. “And Natalie...” She enfolded me in a hug before I could even think to respond, holding me tight and

then pulling back, looking me over with a close eye. “You look much better this morning. Well rested?”

“Ah, yes,” I said, though that wasn’t entirely true. As Koda wrapped his arm around my shoulders, I was reminded of all the ways he’d broken up my sleep last night. “Thanks for asking.”

The twins’ dads were all smiling, Owen winking at his son, as if he knew exactly what we’d gotten up to.

“So, is there anywhere you’d recommend?” Meryl asked me. “The boys love a big breakfast.”

“Especially if there’s something sweet on the menu.” Grant pulled Meryl back into his arms and she let out a girlish giggle in surprise, then relaxed into his grip.

“Pancakes with maple syrup fit the bill?” Thorn asked. “There’s a place near Nat’s work...”

BUT WHEN WE arrived there half an hour later, Maisie’s was in no fit state to be serving breakfast.

“We’re not open.”

She sounded frustrated, no, devastated, as she stood in the middle of her cute little cafe, broom in hand. It was easy to see why, because there was broken glass everywhere. On the counter, on the floor, in the jars of exotic tea bags she kept on top of the cold display case and even in her coffee machine. Maisie was always a super chipper presence in the town, but she looked utterly defeated.

“No, I don’t suppose you are.” Thorn stepped inside, his work boots crunching on broken glass. “You look like you need a hand though.”

She shot him a sidelong look, the wariness there hurting my heart.

“I might... I mean, I need to contact the insurance mob, but they’ll be flat out. Windows have been smashed all up and down the main drag.” Her fingers wrapped tighter around the

broom handle she was holding. “They didn’t try and break into the till, but...”

“We’ll help you get this place safe enough at least to move around in,” I said, approaching her slowly. Sure enough, she flinched like I’d hit her when I put a hand on her shoulder. “There’s plenty of free hands here and...”

It was then I realised the mistake I’d made. I was just offering to help. Somehow I knew everyone here would be willing to pitch in to get the place in a better state, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, her eyes narrowed. It was as if she saw the guys, Meryl and her sleuth for the first time and to her the offer of help wasn’t positive. She didn’t see my mate, his brother, his family or the obvious concern on everyone’s faces. She saw strangers and out-of-towners were usually a bad thing in Langston. People didn’t come here to visit and to do the tourist thing. You were either born here and died here or nothing.

“I’ll be fine.”

The dismissal, the suspicion was obvious, and Meryl jerked back as if Maisie had strode over and slapped her across the face.

“So what’s happened here, Maisie?”

We turned around to see Police Constable Vickers standing there, that same smug look on his face. He looked us over and then schooled his expression into a more sympathetic one.

“The same as half the shops up and down Commercial Rd,” she said with a frown. “Windows smashed and for no reason I can see. Nothing was taken. There’s just broken glass everywhere. It’s gotta be those bloody kids you lot do nothing about.”

“Doesn’t look like the work of kids.” Vickers scanned the place with exaggerated care, while not doing any actual police work. “Especially if nothing was stolen or graffitied. Those boys wouldn’t be able to help themselves.” His focus shifted back to us. “Must be a new player in town, someone that’s handy with a hammer and likes to use it.”

The two of them took in Koda and Thorn's work boots, their worn jeans and flannel shirts, as if searching for the hammer in question.

"It wasn't—" I started to say.

"I'll take your statement and then have to move on, Maisie," Vickers said. "There's a lot of other people to see."

"Nothing to say," she replied. "I came in this morning to this mess. Nothing's been taken, no footprints. I haven't touched anything, just in case you can get fingerprints from a surface."

"Not much hope of that," Vickers said, pulling out a notebook and a pen. "Hopefully your insurance company can get someone to board up the windows and clean up the mess."

"Won't do much good if it happens again. What's being done about this, George?" Maisie said.

"Not much we can do without any real evidence. We've been asking Simmons for security cameras on the main street for years, to no avail. I shouldn't be saying this, but you might need to take matters into your own hands. Paul Bailey is talking about setting up a security company."

"Paul bloody Bailey?" Maisie said with a frown, and at the same time I felt an icy finger slide down my spine. "So that's his latest venture. Not bloody likely. Just like all those other businesses he tried to start."

"Suit yourself," Vickers replied. "Now, what time did you come into work...?"

I WALKED OUTSIDE, sucking in one breath then another in rapid succession. As I did so I saw broken glass littering the footpaths on either side of the road. I walked along the street, seeing the chemist standing in the doorway talking to Johnno about what had happened, looking terribly pale, then the florist, then the cute second hand clothes boutique, each one with smashed windows.

"Natalie."

I heard Thorn's voice, felt Koda's concern inside my mind, but I raced forward, seeing smashed window after smashed window, all the way up to Holly's shop.

"Fuck, Nat..."

Nicky was sitting on a milk crate, well away from the glass, having a cigarette, while Holly was pacing back and forth on the footpath. It was bad enough that everyone else had had their windows smashed. But why did they have to target Holly? As it turned out, that question didn't go unanswered for long.

"It was Paul and some of his drinking buddies," she told me in a low voice, glancing up and down the streets before meeting my gaze. "I caught them at it, raced out and shot some video." She pulled out her phone and showed me some blurry footage of men wearing balaclavas and brandishing hammers. They seemed to converge on one side of the street, smashing windows with wild abandon, then rushing onto the next shopfront. "Nothing that identifies them though."

"You should've called me." My heart began to thud frantically. While this had been going on, I would have been in bed... "We could've come."

"I did." Holly's gaze was soft, not accusing, but she didn't need to be. I felt a flush of guilt the moment I pulled my phone out and saw the missed calls. "Not that you could do anything. I called the police, who could've, but that prick, Vickers, said 'they were dealing with other matters' and to stay upstairs and make sure the flat was locked."

"What other matters could they have been dealing with?" I asked, moving towards the open door, then recoiling the moment I got close.

"Reeks like a trucker's bathroom in there," Nicky drawled. "Not that I'd know—"

"We know you can suck a golf ball down a garden house," Holly snarked, "so don't lie. But aside from your extracurricular activities, you and I have a mess to deal with."

“Um, ex-cuuuse me?” Nicky said. “I’m employed to sell books, not mop up puddles of piss.”

“We’ll help,” I said, hurriedly, looking at Koda, then Thorn, and the two of them nodded.

“We all will,” Meryl asserted, stepping forward.

“I’d love to say, ‘no, don’t trouble yourself’, but...”

Holly was such an OTT bitch most of the time that seeing her manic facade crack made me realise how badly she was affected. I saw the tears well in her eyes and rushed forward with a hug. Her arms went around me as she let out a little snuffle, trying to hold it all back.

“I’m going to say yes, please, help,” she said, her hand sliding down my back. “And grope your arse, because damn...”

“Fuck, Holly!” I pulled out of her reach when she gave my butt cheek a squeeze, then punched her on the arm as she burst out laughing. The tears were still there. But when I saw that grin? It helped alleviate some of my concern.

“I knew you had BDE,” Nicky said with narrowed eyes, as he pointed his finger at his boss.

“Big dick energy?” Holly shot back. “I think you’re mistaking me for some of those ‘friends’ you keep making in truck stop toilets.”

“Big dyke energy,” Nicky countered. “And I hope you’re as good at cleaning carpet as you are eating it, because this place...?”

Fucking reeked. We all crunched into the shop over the broken glass just inside the door, and the twins’ family moved in and started assessing what needed to be done.

“We can board up these windows until the insurance assessors arrive,” Grant said. “Use some enzyme wash on the carpets to neutralise the piss smell.” He smiled when I looked at him quizzically. “We’ve had to restore some places that have been largely abandoned or have been in pretty bad repair

and learned a trick or two. The crystals in urine remain after it's dried, and that's what keeps the smell around."

"We'll need some heavy duty gloves to pick up the glass," Meryl said, to the sound of her mates' grumbles. "And it'll need to be all hands on deck if we're to get this place cleaned up. But..." She looked out the now gaping window frames at the other properties with a frown. "It seems this attack was... more personal than the others."

"I've had some time to think about it," Holly replied, her eyes glittering with a hard light, "while I was waiting around for the police officers that didn't bother to come. Paul was terrorising Nat to try and get what he wants, right? And now? That deal that Rob Prentiss is pushing must have a time limit on it. It's something he needs to capitalise on before someone else gets wind of what's happening down here. Paul will keep trying to pull his abusive shit with Nat. But, now, the whole fucking town of Langston is in his sights and he's not going to stop. Unless something happens to change his mind."

Thorn

“We need to wring that little fucker’s neck,” I growled under my breath. My brother and my fathers nodded as we walked back from the hardware store. The bloke who owned it was doing a brisk trade out the back of his shop. The front had suffered the same kind of damage as everyone else, but without the liberal application of piss that Nat’s friend had suffered. That was a much more personal attack.

“He wants to take us out,” Grant said, with a nod. “Be easier to lure him out into the bush and sort him out before he can mobilise his mates. We could get rid of that prick, make Nat a widow and the beneficiary of his estate, and fuck off home, safe and sound, before the dust settled.”

“Lars and Alaric’s fathers are helping complete the job on the clock tower. That many hands, it should be done within days,” Owen said, before looking at the rest of our fathers. He hefted the sheets of ply he was carrying. “We could all head out then, if you can persuade Nat to leave.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Koda asserted, “not unless she wants to. The last time she lived in the city, it was really hard for her. We’re not forcing that on her again. She doesn’t leave until she’s ready.”

“So, we keep your mate and her town safe, until she is,” Tony said. We all looked up as we got close to the bookshop, where Holly and Nat were bickering about some bullshit on the door step. “But the minute she is...”

Nat turned to us as we arrived, pausing for a second even as Holly's gums kept flapping. Did she know that her eyes lit up every time she saw us? I was clinging to that every damn day, aware that it meant that, on some level, Nat had accepted us. Her brain just needed to catch up with her heart. For now we needed to show her how different we were to Fuckface. Where he'd actively damaged her friend's livelihood, we'd be staunch and help secure her shop, help her rebuild. So we set the wood and tools down, and got ready to start the job.

"UH UH," I said, swooping in when Nat tried to pick up broken glass.

"What are you...?" She shot a look at me when I pulled her hands away from the mess. "I need to help Holly. This is partly my fault."

"Why? Because you put hammers in the hands of Paul and his mouth-breathing friends?" I said, holding her hands to my chest.

"No, but—"

"No buts. Well..." I pulled her close, loving the feel of her pressed against my body, sliding my hands down to cup her perfect derriere. "Maybe this butt."

"Thorn!" She jabbed her elbow in my ribs, forcing me to let her go as the air was driven from my lungs, but I recovered fast.

I always did around her.

I rocked her against my body, letting her feel just how recovered I was, until she scrambled to get away.

"There's no time for... that," she hissed, looking around the bookshop.

"Oh, I dunno." I forced her closer, holding her in what I hoped was a masterful fashion. "We could re-enact some of the scenes from that Highlander book. I could be the roguish Thorn McScotsman and you could be the beautiful Lady—"

“I was re-enacting... scenes like that when Paul went on a bloody rampage last night,” she said, twisting herself away from me and, fuck, that made me ache. “I was having a very good time while people I’ve known all my life had their livelihoods trashed.”

She bent down to grab a dustpan and broom to scoop up all the glass but I stopped her again.

“These hands have a very important job to do later, so I just can’t allow them to be damaged in any way.” I kissed each knuckle, right as her gaze turned volcanic.

Sadly for me, not with lust.

“Allow?” Her eyebrow jerked up the same time she cocked a hip and crossed her arms for good measure.

“Now what did you say, dickhead?” My brother walked over and looked at the two of us. “Just remember, Nat, if Thorn says something dumb, that’s on him. I keep my mouth shut for a reason.”

Natalie seemed to soften into him almost automatically, something that had me smiling even as a sharp pain stabbed into my side.

“I promised our girl a twin sandwich,” I said, and I watched Koda’s eyes heat. We’d talked about it long into the night the minute we’d gotten to town, but the reality would be even better, I was sure of it. “And she needs to put her hands to much better use once we get back to the room.”

“Hang on? Your rationale for why I can’t help my friends is because I need to give you hand jobs?” she snapped, and I realised that what I had thought was a volcanic look before had merely been tepid. Koda smoothed a hand down her side and turned his body towards her, his instincts making him want to settle her.

“You need to help them,” he said, murmuring his words into her hair. “Don’t worry, we feel that.” I was getting a vague sense of it. But Koda? He’d be getting that loud and clear down their bond. “Can you pick up glass just like anyone else? Of course you can. But why not leave it to us?” His hand

stroked her slower, more surely, as she let out a breath. “We’re professionals, used to dealing with this crap. You could help Holly and Mum with the books, make them a nice cup of tea to settle their nerves. Would that be alright?”

All the heat seemed to leach out of Nat’s eyes, and she nodded slowly. Koda turned her to face him.

“Just because you *can* do something, doesn’t mean you *have* to. That’s the point of having mates. We need to help you just as much as you need to help your friends.”

She looked around the shop, and it was as though she was only just seeing the entirety of what was going on, rather than focusing on the destruction. For a few moments, she watched our dads at work, stripping out all the broken glass left in the window frames and then replacing them with pieces of ply that would keep the elements and thieves out.

“Holly does love her herbal tea,” she said finally, relaxing into Koda’s arms.

“I don’t mind a spot of tea myself,” I added. “Just no chamomile. Puts me to sleep and I want to be awake for everything that goes down tonight.”

“*If* anything goes down tonight,” she shot back, then frowned. “The prospect of my ex raging through town isn’t exactly going to put me in the mood.”

I moved then, pressing into her as Koda held her in his arms.

“If you let him affect you, then you let him win.” She stared up at me, obviously wondering if I was serious. I was. Deathly serious. “You can bet your bottom dollar that Fuckface goes home and fucks his side piece—for the 3.5 seconds he’s capable of, before blowing his load—then rolls over and goes to sleep without a care in the world. Don’t do his worrying for him. We’ll help as many people who are willing to accept it today, but then we go home and remember what’s important.” I stroked my hand across her cheek. “Us.”

She let out a long breath, releasing so much more than just air, then slowly nodded before stepping out of our embrace.

That's my girl, I thought, watching her duck behind the counter and go into the little kitchenette at the back of the shop.

“Natalie got both of you?” The bloke who worked for Holly, Nicky, was it? He looked the two of us up and down in a way we'd seen plenty of blokes do back home. I nodded slowly, my shit-eating grin a mirror of my brother's. “Fucking bitch...” And with that he turned on his heel, toting his mop and bucket.

“Oi, Blisters!” We both turned to see the dads grinning at us. It was the name you called anyone who got caught slacking on a worksite, because they didn't come out until after the work was done. “Get your arses over here and hold this sheet while we screw it in place.”

“Let's get this shit done,” I said with a shake of my head.

“For Nat,” Koda said, walking over.

“For Nat,” I agreed.

“I ’m going to stay with Holly tonight,” I announced as we arrived back at the cabins at the end of a very tiring and distressing day. Langston was a sleepy little place, not really having the issues with meth addiction and crime that some other small towns did, so I wasn’t used to having to deal with any of the consequences of vandalism or break-ins. Over the course of the day, we’d moved from shop to shop, helping people clean up glass and board their windows shut. All four of my men and Holly herself stared at me in disbelief as we walked around the back to where the firepit was going again and another big spread of food was set up on trestle tables. “I have to because—”

The guys all looked like they had something to say about my announcement, but Holly just fixed me with a scathing look. “The fuck you do.” I went to argue with her but she held up a hand. “I love you like I love double-stuffed Oreos, bitch. But, can I just say, if I ever had the opportunity to throw my knickers in the air and then dive into a veritable pool of hot man flesh, I would. Without a second thought. Soz not soz.”

“But Paul might come back—” I started to say.

“And your lovely harem and their dads secured the place for me. Your ex might be a raging fucking psycho, but even he would blanch at an arson attack.”

I wanted to agree with her, I really did, but...

“Stop worrying and start thinking about what you’re going to do with all this dick,” Holly said, rapping me on the head

until I shoved her hand away. She linked arms with me, dragging me closer to the food. “Like, how does that work? A dick in every hole and one in the hand? Inquiring minds want to know.”

“You wait until I tell you about the bones,” I said casually, picking up a plate and seeing, out of the corner of my eye, the moment Holls froze on the spot.

“You mean boner, right? Not actual bones.”

“Ah, no...”

“Like an honest to goodness bone? Like this kind of bone, bone?” She tried to pinch my arm and grind her fingers into my forearm but I slapped her hand away. “Like the pelvis bone is connected to the penis bone...” she sang, her eyes growing progressively wider. Of course, the moment she did that, some of the guys’ parents turned to stare at us.

“I’m not telling you anything else if you don’t shut the fuck up,” I hissed at her.

“Does it hurt? Is that why you’re so cranky? Does it like smash into your cervix— Shit! Is that what it’s for? To burrow through your cervix and impregnate you with boy bear babies?” Holly snatched my plate away, slopping food on both of ours at random then shoving mine back at me.

“Thanks,” I said dryly, looking down at the contents and seeing that I only liked half of what she’d so gracefully dished me up. “And, no, none of the above. It’s called...” I looked around, conscious that there were still a bunch of shifters, with very good hearing, watching us. “It’s called a baculum.”

“A what-u-lum?” Holly found two seats away from the main crowd and pushed me down into one of them.

“A baculum. Bears have them in their peens, and so do the guys. I don’t think it’s exactly the same because, hey, they have sex in human form, and bears don’t, but yeah...” Holly stabbed at her plate without looking at it. I was pretty sure she had not idea was she was eating as she stuck a forkful of pasta salad into her mouth and chewed slowly, while her whole

focus was entirely on me. “Imagine a dick with an inbuilt G-spot attachment.”

“Oh yeah, I’m imagining it,” she said, reverently.

“One that juts out when things get really heated and then locks down inside you.”

“Nooo...”

“And then it keeps him right where he is. He can’t really move much, but the small movements he does make push down hard against that spot and he just keeps cumming the whole time and so do you and, yeah, that’s basically—”

Holly grabbed my plate out of my hands and set it down on the ground next to hers, then threw her arms around me.

“What the fuck is this for?” I asked, my voice muffled by her patchouli-scented shoulder.

“You were gonna give up special peen tonight for me?”

“Um, well—”

“Peen that is guaranteed to give you multiple orgasms?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Oh my god, this is just like when you knocked Jimmy Curtis back because I said I liked him first. I know he turned out to be a complete dick, but...”

Jimmy had been a complete dick, reporting back to the whole school that he’d had a threesome with the two of us after I’d pushed him off me, and then Holly had done the same the moment he kissed her with way too much tongue and way too little technique.

“Sure.” I agreed with her, because sometimes that was easier. It kind of contained the crazy.

“So you’re gonna get bear dick tonight,” she said with a sly grin, nudging me in the ribs.

“Don’t say it like that,” I said, picking up my plate and moving the food around on it with my fork. “It sounds creepy.”

“Twin bear dick.”

“Fuck, you always make me regret telling you things.”

“So how would these speculums—?”

“Baculums,” I corrected. “It’s not like I’m getting a pap smear.”

“Whatever. How would these dick bones work in a DVP? Like, could one dig into the good spot and the other just be... not bony? Otherwise, it’d shred his brother’s dick to pieces. And that’d just be gross.”

“God, Holly! I’m not going to need to know right now,” I said, feeling my cheeks flush at the thought of it.

“But later, right? I mean, damn, girl. You have a freaking harem at your disposal. You have a responsibility to explore this shit—for science.”

“Science is what you’re using to cover up your puerile fascination with my sex life, is it?” I shot back.

“Who’s fascinated by our sex life?”

We both looked up to see that Koda had appeared almost from thin air. He shot me a smile and then held out his hand to me, pulling me to my feet before sinking down into the chair and drawing me back down to sit on top of him. I felt small, sheltered and utterly safe the minute he did so, and I nestled into him, my head resting on his chest.

“I was teaching Holly about bear shifter physiology,” I replied.

“And *that’s* my cue to leave,” Holls said. “I think I’m gonna go chat to your future mothers-in-law. They all look like they’d be up for a laugh, and anyone would have to be a big improvement on bloody Delia.”

Before I could protest, she was up and out of her chair and Thorn (who had appeared as suddenly as Koda had) had taken her place, and was looking over at the two of us with a smile.

“So what did you tell Holly about us?” Thorn asked, his eyes heavily lidded. “Did you tell her about that spot inside

you that's aching, waiting for us to lock down inside you again?" I began to shift restlessly, squeezing my thighs together, able to feel exactly what he was saying. "Eat your food, Natalie. Because once you're done?"

"We're going to take you back to our room and show you just how well we work together," Koda said, his voice buzzing in my ear.

K *oda*

Every now and then in life, there are things that just feel inevitable and, as the three of us walked back to our room, this was one of them. It was like every step I'd taken in my life had been moving me towards her. But while Thorn burred on about some bullshit, I walked a step behind them so that I could watch our mate. She was on edge, skittish, but when I breathed her scent in, I didn't get the acrid waft of fear from her. No, our mate smelled sweet with anticipation. I stepped closer to her, running my hands through the air around her, tracing the shape of her body as Thorn unlocked the sliding door and then we all stepped inside.

I wanted to get naked. On any given day, I wanted there to be nothing between her and me, but right now the fact we had clothes on was having the same effect as a persistent itch, creating a sense of discomfort that was hard to ignore. But I would, and I did, as I stepped in closer, because I wanted us to move at her pace. Nat was replying to Thorn, talking, until the point I leaned in, my warm breath tickling the hairs on the back of her neck.

Then she stopped talking, and sucked in a breath.

I watched as she became completely and utterly focussed on my proximity to her, her breathing rate increasing and her head falling forward slightly. My fangs snicked down at the sight of it, that surrender. I glanced over at my brother, knew that his eyes, burning molten gold, were mirrored by mine. I

reached out with my mind, found him linking with me automatically.

Ready?

I was born ready for this, came his reply as he moved in closer, taking Nat's hands in his.

No biting, no claiming, not unless she asks for it, I said.

I'm not rushing that shit. I want her to want my fangs in her throat, ache for it.

"You ready, baby?" he asked her, wrapping her arms around his neck and when she sank her fingers into his hair, I could almost feel her doing the same to me.

Because that was the nature of our bond. It was why he'd pushed Nat into blood bonding with me, because he'd felt that gunshot wound, just like I had. It was why he felt halfway bonded to her, though not quite. He couldn't feel her simmering excitement, the disbelief that always seemed to come with it, like this couldn't possibly be happening to her. I kissed her neck, making damn clear this was 100% real; that we would give her everything she needed.

She's going to want to look after us, I told my brother as I kissed a line down her spine, feeling each vertebrae. *It's always everyone else first with Nat.*

Then we don't let her, Thorn shot back. *Let's strip her naked and worship her, but keep our clothes on.*

A smile spread across my face, and I was glad she couldn't see me, because it was a savage expression. Black bears were sneaky fuckers and we were about to show her why. My hands slid around her, one around her waist, one around her jaw, so I could tip her head back, claiming her mouth, while I started undoing buttons. Thorn dropped down, pulling off her shoes and then undoing her belt and pulling down her jeans. She stiffened but I swallowed down any protests, sliding my hands across the span of skin I'd revealed, kissing her harder, deeper until I needed to turn her to face me to get to more of her.

"I—"

My Nat, my mate, the most precious woman in the world to me, started to pull away, moving her hands to my shirt to try to undo the buttons, to strip me down, but she hadn't caught on that that wasn't what was going to happen today. I grabbed her hands, stared into her eyes as I kissed the knuckles.

"Tonight's about you."

"But—"

"Nat, tonight is about you." I brought her hands up slowly, mimicking my brother's earlier move as I put her hands around my neck, while Thorn took over baring her to us. "Your pleasure. Your needs. And we need you to accept that."

"But what about—?" she started to ask, but the combination of my head shake and Thorn's kisses on her neck derailed that train of thought, and her eyes fluttered closed for a second.

"What if tonight was just about you?" I asked her, smoothing her shirt off over her shoulders once Thorn flicked open the last button, then easing her bra off as he undid the clasp, placing a kiss on her spine where it'd been. I didn't look down even though I fucking wanted to, wanted to take in every inch of her in of her gorgeous tits, the nip of her waist and the flare of her hips. Of her, my Nat. But I needed to establish this. "What if you'd taken me up on my offer the night of our first date?"

I knew she was hearing my words again in her head by the way her eyes widened, but I said them out loud, anyway.

"Imagine we were your dream lovers. You could direct us to be absolutely anything you wanted. No more worries about what we want. Could you be that selfish for me?" Hope flared in her eyes, hot and hard, but it was squashed back down so quickly, it was as if she didn't consciously realise that part of her actually wanted to put herself first. "Could you just use us to get exactly what you want for once? Because I think it's been a long time since you've done that, if ever."

I ran my hand down her collar bone, letting my fingers dip into the shadows and wells there, before I dropped them lower.

Thorn kissed his way across the line of her shoulder and it was as though having both of us touch her like that brought her to life. Her eyes flashed, glowing brightest blue, her spine lengthened, so that she stood tall to face me down, and I smiled at the sight.

“Selfish?”

I could feel it down the bond I had with her, a fractious kind of energy, a little flame flaring to life, then growing, as at the same time she used her grip on my neck to draw me closer. I rubbed my lips over hers, teasing them open, then pulled away to listen to her speak. She didn't need to tell me verbally, not anymore, but she was still learning that.

“Just imagine it, how it would go,” I told her. “You don't even have to say the words, because I'll know.” I looked at my brother over her shoulder. “We'll know. Just show us how it would be.”

She couldn't stop her mind from going there and as soon as I saw what she had in mind, a grin spread across my face, the same expression appearing on my brother's face moments later, our groans similarly coming out one step behind the other.

“Baby...” Thorn wrapped his arms around her, pressing the soft worn cotton of his flannel shirt against the bare skin of her back as he rubbed his cheek against her hair. “That's fucking hot.”

“How do you...?”

“Perfect for you,” I replied with a wink, moving in and claiming her mouth before she could ask any more questions. They could come later, much much later, after she was exhausted, when her body was unable to come anymore. When I pulled away from her, Nat's lips followed mine until I pushed her towards Thorn. We held her close between us, kissing her one after the other until her head was spinning and all the bullshit she carried around every day was finally let go. Then, I looked over her shoulder and nodded to my brother. His eyes met mine, that perennial fucking shit-eating grin of his spreading across his face.

“Ready, love?” I asked her.

She wavered on her feet for a second, eyes half-closed, mouth half-open as her brows creased momentarily. Then her expression cleared and she nodded.

I turned and threw myself down on the bed, rolling over to face them as my brother guided her closer, his hands, my hands it felt, caressing the swells of her breasts. She arched her back in response, throwing her head back onto his shoulder, her feet dragging as Thorn brought her closer.

“Just a little bit further and you’ll feel so fucking good,” he promised and she followed his lead, bringing one knee, then another, onto the bed, moving forward until she was over my face.

My hands reached up without thought, stroking down her inner thighs, feeling her shiver as a result. Did other men stare at their partner’s sweetest place, gaze at what felt like the only place that was really home? I found my hands getting closer and closer, and her cunt opened slowly, dewy as a flower, ready for me to taste. I slid a finger through her folds, loving the softness, the slick there, unable to stop myself from bringing it my mouth and licking it clean before going back for more.

Thorn had his body pressed against her back, the harsh feel of his clothing against her bare skin reminding Nat of her nakedness, her vulnerability. She was ours to play with, ours to please and it was so damn hot to see her surrendering to that. As his fingers moved, teasing her nipples to hard points, I knew it was making something throb inside her, a feeling I chased on my end. I’d intended to be softer, slower, but when it came to her, the beast was always too close to the surface. I pulled her down onto my face, glorying in the way she covered me, her scent in my nose, her taste on my tongue.

She hadn’t had enough of this. I didn’t need to read her down our bond to know that, because the way her whole body stiffened, combined with the sounds she was making—a couple of sweet little panted breaths, followed by a low moan—told me that. Her stupid fucking ex hadn’t given her...

anything, really, but we'd resolve that tonight. I licked her greedily, flicking the flat of my tongue along her whole seam, sucking down her taste before circling the tip of my tongue around her clit. I traced figure eights around it, feeling her drip down on me, swelling, softening with every lick, and then I pushed my fingers into her.

Her hips jerked, then started to move in time with my caresses, her movements growing more spasmodic as I went. It was this spot, my fingers digging down, imitating the way my baculum would, that had her squirming. Because we'd wrought changes in her body from the moment she started to accept us. She needed us to lock down tight inside her as much as we needed it, something I silently promised her would happen tonight.

"Koda..." I loved the sound of my name on her lips. "Koda..." I dug my fingers in deeper, realising now why we'd always been told to keep our nails short. I wouldn't hurt her as I did it, massaging harder and harder into a spot that felt like it was blossoming, swelling under my caresses, right as her cunt started to tighten down around me. "Koda..." Her voice was getting higher, more desperate now and she leaned over, smothered me with her as she reached behind her and scrabbled at my belt buckle.

My mate was reaching for what she needed. And my brother? He was right there with me, as he slid down her body, ready to do something Nat had thought about, just a quick flash that had been there and gone again. I knew the moment when his tongue slid across her arse because her hands stopped moving and her whole body felt like it convulsed.

"Ohh..."

We buried our faces in her from either side, licking for all we were worth, trying to tie her up in pleasure before she thought too hard about how we were getting her there. She had so many rules, preconceptions, expectations of herself and they were like a wall around her, keeping her locked in as much as they kept us locked out. But right now, her walls were down. I felt her body lengthen as she ground down onto my face, doing exactly as I asked her to. Taking pleasure rather

than having it given to her, instinctively reaching for what she needed like it was her goddamn right and I gloried in that.

My hand slapped down on her thighs, not letting her move for a second as I felt her body wind tighter and tighter.

She's gonna come, Thorn said inside my head.

Yeah she fucking is.

Fuck, I'm aching. She's opening up. She can take the two of us at the same time, just like she was thinking.

Maybe. You'll have to go fucking slow; and can you hold your baculum back?

Anything for her. His voice was reverent for once. *Anything.*

I wrapped my lips around her swollen clit, sucking on it with long rolling passes of my tongue, feeling her shifting more and more restlessly with every pulse.

Come for us, I thought furiously. *Come just this once and we'll make sure you do, again and again.*

I wasn't sure if she heard my silent command, but the next moment she slapped her hands on the wall above the bed and did just that, like the good girl she was.

“Fuuuuck!”

Her cry filled the room, followed by a rapid series of gasps as her whole body clamped down. Thorn had buried his fingers in her arse, making her cunt feel even tighter around my fingers. She jerked under our ministrations, her cries getting louder, higher, sounding fucking glorious as she took her pleasure. We worked our fingers in and out of her, prolonging each wave until she was done, and collapsed to her side on the bed, an arm over her eyes.

Thorn and I shared a look before we started to undress.

“That was just the opening act,” I said. “I hope you're ready for more.”

K *oda*

“Oh. My. God,” Nat gasped.

She just lay there, looking utterly boneless as the two of us stripped out of our clothes. Dragging her arm off her face to look at us, her fingers twitched as if she wanted to take over, make us reveal ourselves faster, but didn't have any real strength to do so. We crawled onto the bed quickly enough, though. And when we did? Nat narrowed her eyes at us then flipped over onto her hands and knees, prowling closer with an animal-like grace. I let out a groan as she cupped my balls in one moment, then sucked down my cock in the next.

“Babe... Nat...”

I tried to protest, to push her away, though I didn't keep the effort up for long. A groan that was more like a growl vibrated through my whole body, growing deeper and more animalistic as she sank further down onto me, swallowing more and more of my cock. I pushed her hair to one side, balling it at her neck, needing to watch her every move. She stared back up at me, and I felt like I was sinking into her intense blue eyes. Then, she flicked her eyes to the side as she felt Thorn move, trying to work out where he was.

“Ready for more, love?”

And before she could ask what he meant, he'd dragged his cock through her folds. Her moan was muffled, humming around my cock, provoking an answering one from me and making me tighten my grip on her hair.

“When all four of us are in the room, we’re gonna fill you all up,” Thorn told her and I felt her throat flex around me at the thought.

He grabbed a bottle of lube from the bedside table, popping the lid just before he lined up and sank into her cunt. Thorn had to freeze where he was, his fangs snapping down, his face his beast’s for a second, as he forced himself to acclimate to her velvety depths.

She’d spent so long not feeling like she had any power, but she had so much more than she realised. We were her servants, her fucking slaves. Once he could breathe again, Thorn drizzled lube across her arse and pushed his fingers in, knowing that our mate possessed a terrible hunger for more, one that had been neglected for way too long.

But not anymore.

She shifted furtively, bobbing up and down on my dick, pushing back on Thorn’s cock, his fingers, but as the sensations washed through her, making every nerve ending stand up and take notice, her movements got stronger, bolder. Her mouth felt like hot, slick velvet, making my nuts ache even as I caressed her cheeks, brushing away the small tears that formed at the corners of her eyes, swearing to myself that they would be the only one that she’d ever shed for me. Then, as soon as I felt that tell-tale prickle in my balls, I forced myself to pull away. Nat followed me with her lips, seeking me out, wanting me inside her. I wanted the same, but more than that I needed to bury myself in her, locking down, the bone within aching with that instinct. My cock jerked in the air, her saliva drying on my shaft as I struggled to master myself, to resist pushing myself in between her lips again and just unloading.

“You want to take both of us.” I tipped her head up, forcing her eyes to meet mine. “I can feel it, that need and we want to give you that.”

“So fucking much...” Thorn groaned, every muscle locked down as he fought to keep his slow, steady pace.

“But have you...?” I didn’t want to ask what she’d done before with Fuckface because none of that mattered now. Nothing mattered but her. I wouldn’t hurt her though, and that beat hard and fiercely in my chest.

“Go. Slowly,” she ground out, even as Thorn pulled out. Her body felt horribly empty, that was clear, so I pulled her close as I lay back down on the bed, kissing her forehead, her eyelids and then her mouth. Then, she climbed on top of me and sank down.

“Fuck, nothing is better than this...” I barely hissed out the words, feeling her tighten around me, all that hot slickness. I jerked her down flat on top of my body, cradling her in my arms and simply holding her for a moment, breathing in her scent, hearing her breathing coming in fast and noisy. Her hands spread across my chest, almost tentatively, until she grabbed me hard in return, like she’d never let go.

And I hoped she wouldn’t.

“Hold your baculum back, brother,” I growled at Thorn as he loomed over her, slicking his cock with lots of lube then pushing more into her.

“I’m not locking down inside her,” he promised, rubbing his other hand up and down her spine, his eyes filling with a possessive heat. “I’d never hurt her like that. Now, baby...”

She turned as far as she could, though it wasn’t far. I didn’t want to let her go long enough to make it easy.

“If this hurts, or feels bad, you tell me. Tell me anyway. Tell me how we make you feel.”

I felt him shift behind her, then her body tense as he rubbed the head of his cock against her.

“Shh shh...” I said, rubbing my hand up and down her back. “Take a breath. Focus on the feeling of me buried inside you and then let that breath out as you push down.”

Her cunt flexed around my shaft, forcing me to close my eyes as my control feeling like it was fraying by the second.

“Keep talking to me, love,” Thorn said, his voice shaking with the effort of holding back. “How’re you feeling?”

“Full...” she ground out. “Big...”

“It’s a blessing and a curse,” he said. “We can stop, try again ano—”

“No!” Nat protested as she jerked her head up, searching my face as she continued, “This is what I want and you said you’d give it to me.”

Was she seeing me or Thorn right now? I didn’t know, but I nodded and responded.

“So, take what you want, love. Open up and let him in and we’ll give you every-fucking-thing you want.”

So she did just that, her whole body convulsing as she bore down and Thorn pushed in deeper. Her breaths came shorter and faster and I held her close as my brother continued to quiz her.

“Talk to me, Nat. I need to know—”

“Unh...” She was just making noises now, as though speech was no longer possible, but as she clung to me, there was something fluid, elemental, about her body. Finally, she managed, “Good.”

“Good? Good?! I need more than that.” Thorn was trying for his usual clowning bullshit, but failing utterly, and his gaze was fierce as he stared down at her as though she held his heart in her hands.

Probably because she did, and for me as well.

“So good...” She barely breathed that out, moving slightly now, her body clenching down around me, around him, provoking matching groans from us both. “So full, so much, so...”

He leant down and scooped her up, supporting her body on his forearms as he held her close, burying his face in her hair, himself in her, as we both began to move. Slowly at first, a series of quick gasps our reward. Everything for her. She was

helpless now, dragged along by our every stroke, her cunt fluttering all down my length until she really started to squirm.

“Close...” she gasped.

“To the next orgasm,” I growled. “You’ve got more in you, Nat. A lot more.”

But first she clung to me and Thorn, her face a terrible mask of desperate pleasure, as the two of us pushed her harder, faster, until I felt that deep ache inside me and my baculum shot out.

“Fuck, Nat! Fuck!”

She screamed when I locked down inside her, my strokes short, abortive now, but still enough to carry her on. I’d been shooting cum deep inside her before, but when she went tumbling off that edge, it felt like she was trying to wring every bit out of me.

But there was so much more to come.

We were getting close to a breeding frenzy, a state that bear shifters got in first when their mate accepted the bond, and then again later when she was ready to have a child. I didn’t soften for a second, not while blindingly hot pleasure washed through me and into her. I just kept moving, teasing her pleasure out with my own, as Thorn did the same.

“Oh god, I can’t...” She breathed the words out, collapsing down on top of me as I held her close. “I can’t anymore.”

“Yes, you can,” I told her, peering past her shoulder to my brother. He nodded, sliding deeper, harder inside her. “You haven’t had near enough pleasure. Just one more, love, for me.”

But it wouldn’t be just one more, Thorn and I swore silently to each other. We’d wring every drop of pleasure we could from our mate and only then would it be enough.

L *ars*

Feeling like a fucking creeper, I watched as Natalie walked over to the car with the twins in tow. I couldn't keep my eyes off her, my fork falling from my limp fingers to my plate, as my entire focus was on her. Well, on the three of them, really. The way Koda tucked her into his side, the way Thorn made her smile with whatever bullshit he was spouting. The way they escorted her over to Koda's car, ready to take her back to the B&B. Being a bear shifter was a weird fucking thing. Part of me wanted to shoulder forward and shove Thorn out of the way, to insert myself firmly in his place.

Like I had the other morning.

And the other half? It was fucking glad she was feeling comfortable enough with us that she could waltz off with the twins, let them touch her, please her...

"Son, you're drooling." Mum handed me a paper napkin with a pointed look and I took it with a frown, putting it on my plate. "Your appetite is off as well?" She tut tutted at that. "Goodness, you do have it bad."

"Ingrid..." one of my dads, Joe, said. Looking at him I got a glimpse into the future, seeing what I'd look like when I got older. His beard was flecked with grey now, his sandy hair kept short lest Mum started cracking it, but still. His eyes met mine and he nodded slowly. "The boy is struggling. It's always hard, son, to share her, right when it feels like she needs you the most, but she'll come around."

“She’ll be ready for group sex soon, I know it.”

We all spluttered as Mum patted me on the knee, her characteristic bluntness cutting through the bullshit again. We’d all thought maybe it was because she was from Norway, originally, but when we went to visit her side of the family, we worked out it was just her.

“It’s not sex...” I started to say in protest, even as I felt the heavy ache in my balls, my mind summoning the feel of her hands on me, her hot little mouth. My mouth filled with saliva as I remembered the taste of her on the beach. “I...”

I needed to do something, that was the issue. When I was at work, when my hands were busy, I didn’t have time to think about or worry about or long for Natalie. So I got up and dumped the perfectly good food in the bin.

I needed her as much as my next breath. I felt it in the ache inside my chest, the twitch of my fingers, but I couldn’t keep busting in on her, pushing myself forward. When I was a kid, I’d listened to the stories the mothers and grandmothers had told us about meeting their mates, taking in the tales of deeds done, obstacles overcome, like other kids did fairy tales. I’d do the same, I’d sworn at the time, when I found my girl.

Well, now I’d found her. So what was I going to do about it?

I saw her face when she’d arrived in the evening, the lines there despite the friendly smiles and greetings. She’d flopped down into her chair beside Holly and I’d longed to go and join her, but...

“Apparently Nat was heartbroken that her dead shit ex smashed all those windows,” I said to my family. Paul might have laid off directly harassing Nat, but he knew how to get to her by attacking her town, her home. “I’m going to go and walk the streets, make sure no one pulls that shit tonight.”

“Not alone you’re not.”

My dads got to their feet as one, five massive blokes with the same ice blue eyes as mine. I might have been an adult

man in my thirties, but I still got a buzz from seeing them do that, standing with me.

Unfortunately, that just wasn't a feeling shared by Mum.

She looked us over balefully. "And what will you do if you meet this man and his friends on the streets?"

This was what mates did, tried to be the voice of reason. Bears were slow to anger, but when we were... My dads clustered closer to me, a heavy hand landing on my shoulder. Because, in the end, each one of us could shift into a half tonne ball of fury if needed.

"Seems like meeting them on a darkened street could solve a lot of our problems," Vic, one of my other dads said with a wink.

Mum let out a noisy sound of disgust, but her complaints faded away when a six pack of beer was retrieved from a nearby esky and handed out right before we left.

"We'll come back to you in one piece, love." Jack was the cheekiest of my dads, and could be a bit of a prick sometimes, but when he swept in and placed a kiss on Mum's cheek, she flushed, all the same. That stirred the others to do the same, kissing her until she was smiling and shaking her head.

"See that you do," she said, before waving her finger at me. "If you want to do all those dirty things you've been fantasising about with your mate—"

"Mum." I put a hand over her mouth because that was pretty much the only way to get her to shut up. "I don't ever want to hear you talk about dirty things, ever."

"Some of those things resulted in you getting born, son," Jack said, cackling when I started to dry retch dramatically.

Which was how we got to standing in the main street of Langston at night.

I STARED up at the full moon, the cool brilliance of its light illuminating the main street better than the streetlights, before starting to pace up and down the footpath outside of Holly's

shop again. I could smell the faint acrid scent of human piss coming from beyond the boards and that had my fangs snapping down, my teeth grinding together.

“Son.” Joe stepped into my path, stopping me with a hand when I went to walk past him. He twisted the top off a stubby and handed it to me. Like he might have done when I was a baby, he encouraged me to take a long drink, but instead of sweet milk I got a much more welcome sour and hoppy beer. “This is hard for you. It always is.”

“He fucking pissed in Holly’s shop,” I said, gesturing to the boarded-up windows as if they’d personally offended me. “Right when Nat was starting to relax into the bond, starting to see us as...” I fought to find the words, drinking down another swallow of beer, as if that would help. “Every time she starts to see us as her mates, he fucking steps in.”

“This is a hard situation. Most bear mates are single, divorced, separated by the time they find their mates,” Joe said to me.

“Fuck, I wish...”

I didn’t want to change Nat, not one little bit. Even the ghosts of pain that seemed to haunt her eyes sometimes, they were all a part of her but... I sucked in a breath, the pain in my chest spiking harder.

“I don’t want to change her,” I said finally, my eyes trained on the concrete footpath. “I don’t want to change her history, make her somehow easier for me to win, but...” I set the beer down on the window ledge, my hand clawing at my chest. “I want to take the hurt away now. I need to.”

“Of course you do, son.” All of my dads stared at me, and Joe reached out to squeeze my shoulder. “You were the same when you were a kid, bringing home every bloody wounded bird you found.”

“What about that feral kitten with cat flu?” Vic said.

“God, and then we had to put it down. The crying—”

“Nat’s not a feral fucking kitten,” I snapped, scowling at them all.

“No, she’s the other half of your heart.” Jack was uncharacteristically solemn right now. “And when hers hurts, so does yours.”

That, *that* was what I’d been trying to say, trying to make clear. I just nodded, feeling my eyes start to ache, so I did what every other red-blooded Aussie guy would do and downed the rest of my beer in one long swallow.

“So we keep the town safe. More of the families will be coming down tomorrow and...”

Joe’s voice trailed away as we heard the low rumble of a car engine, and turned to see a big ute coming driving up the main drag. We all tensed when the passenger side window rolled down to reveal Fuckface was inside, and he wasn’t on his own.

“What’re you blokes doing here?” he said, with a sneer. “Bunch of strangers loitering on the street after dark? You look like you might be up to no good. People will start talking.”

But as much as I’d have liked to punch his teeth right down his throat, he wasn’t my focus. My dads all moved closer, trying to put me behind them, but I wasn’t having that.

The men with him were the pricks that had joined Fuckface in his midnight mayhem. I took a deep breath in, picking up the metallic scent of well-oiled guns. It seemed that these were the arseholes who thought they could bring this town to its knees. So, why did they look so fucking ordinary? They were a bunch of middle-aged blokes who were all going pudgy around the middle. One fucker had a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses on, and a cap pulled low on his head, despite the fact it was the middle of the night.

“And what do we have here?” Aviators pulled his glasses down so they perched on the end of his nose, as his eyes, small, brown and piggish, seemed to take the lot of us in. “This one’s a big fucker. Does that make him a grizzly bear?”

“Not quite,” I replied, the sound of my dads’ growls in my ears. “But big enough to put down a fuck like you.” I let my claws pop out the end of my fingers, digging them into the

side of the car, the other dickheads in the car shifting uncomfortably at the sound of metal tearing under my claws.

“That what you think, is it, mate?”

The ballsy prick had a handgun out and the muzzle pressed against my forehead in seconds, as his piggy little eyes lit up. His mates followed his lead, pulling out pistols from fuck knows where, the sounds of safeties being flicked off filling the air as they all scrambled to do the same thing.

“Yeah, g’day, mate.” Everyone turned around to see Joe talking to someone on his phone. “Name’s Joe Nelson and I was just walking up Commercial Road in Langston. Yup, Langston. Look, mate, there’s a white ute with a bunch of dickheads in it brandishing handguns around. Yeah, I’m not sure why.” My dad’s eyes narrowed down as he stared back at the car. “The rego number?”

Fuckface revved the engine as if to drive over my dad but Joe kept to the footpath, reading off letters and numbers off the rego plate to the apparent interest of the officer down the phone line.

“Paul Bailey’s car? Is he a little bloke that’s starting to go a bit thin on top? Red, flushed face? Yep, that’s him,” Joe smirked as he kept talking. “He’s broken the conditions of his bail and you’re sending a car out? Well, that doesn’t sound too good. See you when you get here.”

Joe shoved the phone back into his pocket and approached the window, shouldering me to one side as he slapped his hands down on the door frame.

“You’re probably all excited about the prospect of bringing down something big, bad and dangerous for once but, here’s the truth of the matter. If you manage to shoot one of us, in fur or in skin, you’ll end up with a dead body on your hands—a dead *human* body. Now, that’s something that’s hard to cover up, but doubly so in a sleepy little town like this.”

“And Fuckface here?” I added, nodding to the bloke in question, smiling when his face flushed brighter red. “He’s already on charges for shooting one of my sleuth mates, and it

appears that hanging out with people who wave guns around contravenes the conditions of his bail. The police will be taking him back into custody.” I stared back at the other blokes in the car. “You mob as well, if you’re not careful.”

The faint sound of a police siren had us stepping away from the car. Fuckface glanced in the rear vision mirror before planting his foot on the accelerator and taking off, burning rubber as he went.

I admit I smiled as I crossed my arms, because watching the little prick scuttle away with his tail between his legs was a pretty close second for the way I wanted to spend the night.

“FUCKFACE WAS out on Commercial Rd with his mates,” I told Alaric when I got back to the room. He rolled over to face me, blinking owlishly, obviously having been asleep. “We alerted the cops that he’d broken the conditions of his bail but I don’t have much hope of them taking him in.”

Alaric nodded, his expression growing more serious. He sat up in bed, grabbed his phone and starting to scroll through his messages.

“We’ll have more blokes down here tomorrow but, in the meantime?” He stared steadily at me. “We’ll work out a schedule for who’s working on the clock tower and who’s not, but everyone needs to stick together. No one is to wander off on their own at all.”

“We stick together,” I agreed. “Now, for that schedule: can you put me with Nat next?”

I woke to the feel of kisses being peppered along my skin. That and an incredible warmth. When my eyes blinked open, I saw a pair of golden eyes staring back at me, and somehow that seemed right. Just as warm, just as deep as the feeling of wellbeing filling me, right up until the door popped open and Lars and Alaric walked in.

That automatic instinct to cover myself rose, and my hands went to the blankets. Then, with a meaningful look, Thorn stopped me from dragging them up, so I left them where they were. Alaric and Lars stepped closer, their eyes raking over the three of us.

Well, they were pretty much focused on me, really.

“Paul was out with his mates last night and they were armed,” Alaric told the twins. “So no one is going anywhere on their own.”

“And you fuckers are going to work today,” Lars told the twins with a grin. “Your dads are on their way around to pick you up.”

“But Koda was shot only a day or so ago,” Thorn said, snuggling back down into me. “He can’t possibly go back to work.”

The man in question grunted at that, tossing a pillow at his brother, but before Thorn could get too comfortable, Lars reached down and tore the blankets off the bed, forcing us to deal with a rush of cold morning air.

“Do you see what I have to put up with?” Thorn asked me, with a wide-eyed, innocent expression. He got to his feet, all of his naked splendour on display. As Alaric eyed him with a slight frown, Lars made a show of shielding his eyes with a groan. “Always trying to see me naked, hitting me as an excuse to touch me—”

“You’re not the one I’m trying to see naked,” Lars shot back before flopping down onto the bed, into the space Thorn had left. But once he was there, a sheepish expression seemed to replace his usual gruff demeanour. He swallowed hard as he looked at me, seemingly unable to stop his eyes from roaming as he really took me in. “Ah... sorry, love. If you wanted the blanket...?”

“Have a good morning.”

My eyes fell closed as Koda tilted my head his way, his kiss like a brand to my lips, claiming them as his before he pulled away. I watched as he sauntered over to the adjoining ensuite to join his brother, who was now singing some top 40 song at the top of his lungs. And when I turned back? All the ire, all the frustration seemed to have leached out of Lars, and had been replaced instead by wonder.

“Stay with Lars today, love,” Alaric directed me. “Hang out with the mothers. Go and help Holly in the shop, or do whatever you want to do. But, please, promise me you’ll stay with him until we knock off for the day?”

I nodded slowly, and with that reassurance, Alaric walked out, leaving the two of us to be serenaded by Thorn’s musical stylings.

But it wasn’t him I was focused on, but Lars, his breath sounding ragged and noisy in my ears. Or was that my breathing, in reaction to him? He was dressed while I was naked, and I couldn’t help but feel the echoes of last night or, at least, what had happened then.

I felt it was as if Lars knew, as if he’d been in the room and seen me sandwiched between his sleuth-mates. I imagined him easing his zip down, fishing out that long, thick cock I’d

become so well acquainted with that evening at the beach, and stroking it as the twins drove me out of my fucking mind.

Like he could be doing right now.

We didn't have to go anywhere today, a little voice said in the back of my mind. We didn't have to go to work, to see Holls or the mothers. We could hunker down in this room, lying on sheets that reeked of everything I'd done last night and make an even bigger mess before—

“Kisses!”

Thorn launched his towel-clad body past Lars' body and then rolled onto mine, pinning me to the bed and kissing me all over my face with the enthusiasm and finesse of a golden retriever.

“Fucking Thorn!” Lars growled as he tried to prise the other man off me, but Thorn wasn't having any of that. He slid down behind me, twisting my body to face Lars and using me as a buffer between me and his sleuth mate. “Go and get ready before your dads—”

“Are you going to look after our mate today?” Thorn quizzed him. “It's a very serious job.” He hooked my top leg back and over his hips, making me gasp as he opened me wide for Lars to see. And then Thorn slid his fingers inside me. “She has this... spot.” They both knew when he'd hit it. I stopped any attempt at fighting him and went limp the moment his clever fingers stroked across that place that ached inside me. “That's the one. Since we started locking down inside her...”

He had more to say, I'm sure, but I was utterly distracted by the hard rub of his fingers, the feel of his mouth on my skin. I wasn't this girl, one who dissolved into a puddle of need the moment a man touched me, but my body apparently hadn't gotten that message.

“You locked down inside Nat?” Lars growled, his tone a combination of menace and need.

“Had to. You won't be able to stop yourself either, the minute you get inside her. She needs it, don't you, love?”

I opened my eyes to find Lars' eyes burning into mine, and Koda walking into the room, towelling his hair dry and watching me with a satisfied smile.

Tell him the truth, Koda urged inside my head. Lars will do anything for you, but it'll be better if he knows exactly what you need.

"I..." I couldn't get the words out, that terrible pressure building up inside me. It was as if between the two of them they'd bruised me, but instead of causing pain it was a bittersweet pleasure of gargantuan proportions that kept threatening to wash over me.

"What's he doing to you?" That command that had been in Lars' voice before, on the beach, was back, his growl almost feral with it. "It feels good, doesn't it?" I nodded sharply, my brows knotting. His big hand slid across my stomach, moving lower. "Tell me just how good it feels and I'll make it better, I promise."

"He..." That came out as a sigh rather than a word, Koda prowling closer, tossing aside his wet towel. "He..." I sought Lars' eyes, holding them.

"He what, love?" Lars' voice was deep, gentle and raspy. "What's he doing? His fingers are inside you?" I nodded again, much sharper. "And what's he massaging?"

My hands whipped out, clawing at Lars' t-shirt, trying to make him understand but, by his slow smile, I knew he already did. This was just a game, one where Thorn tried to make me fall apart and Lars made me try to describe that process.

"It aches." I grabbed Lars' hand and slid it down my body, pressing it against my clit and he took over, though his fingers moved way too slowly, too softly for any real satisfaction. "The spot where he..." Thorn pressed down harder, pleasure blooming as a result. "Where he locks down inside me. Each press, each tug..." I tried to drag Lars closer, his head moving slowly, way too slowly, a small smile spreading across his face as he did so. "I can't... It's like it aches really deep inside me and only gets worse when he touches it."

“So maybe Thorn should stop,” Lars said, the smile turning into a smirk at my outraged gasp. Then, the worst thing that *could* happen, did, as Thorn actually listened to Lars for once and withdrew his fingers.

“No...!”

“Don’t worry, love. I’ll look after you today.”

I stiffened at the feeling of Lars’ fingers replacing Thorn’s. His were thicker, the calluses more prominent, so I felt the stretch as he speared them in. But any fears I might have had, that he might not know where I needed them, were quickly allayed. It was easier from this angle for him to find that exact spot, his fingertips curling up and raking across that sensitive place until I was a squirming, panting mess.

“Just like this?”

His strokes were slower, harder, more thorough, as if making me aware of the exact shape, size and sensitivity of the place inside me.

“Yes...” I gasped out, my hand slapping down on his wrist to hold him right where he was, but he curled my fingers away and brought my knuckles to his lips, kissing them tenderly as he continued to work inside me.

Lars watched me with complete fascination, as if my pleasure was all that mattered. He caught the way my breath hitched, and his fingers pressed down harder, working faster, in response.

“You like it better when we lock down inside you, don’t you, Nat?” he asked me, right as I started to reach my peak. “If my baculum was digging into you right now, you’d be full of me, would be full of me for so long, coming over and over because I couldn’t go soft, not while I was inside you. I’d flood you with my cum and your cunt would swallow up every drop.”

I couldn’t answer him, so instead I pressed my mouth to his and kissed him. Then he took over and did the job more thoroughly. I could feel his jeans, his shirt pressed into my body as I broke, gasping against his lips as he pushed for

more, stringing things out for longer and longer until finally I dropped down onto the mattress. Alaric opened the door, announcing that the twins' dads had arrived.

"Looks like Daddy Lars understands the assignment," Thorn said, pressing a kiss to my forehead and evading my clumsy hands. "Not now, baby. I know you can't help but want to touch all of this." His hands slid down his body with sinuous grace. "But your man has got to go to work and fix that clock tower for you. Tonight though..." He winked at me right as Koda shook his head. But my mate had to say his goodbyes as well.

He tipped my head back as he crouched above me, staring into my eyes.

"Lars can protect you, if you let him. You'll let him, right?"

My eyes slid to the puckered pink skin of his scar and I reached out and touched it for a second, not liking the too slick, too smooth feel of it. I nodded then, not wanting anyone else to have to wear a mark like that.

"Good girl."

Lars was watching me closely, so he caught the way I flushed when Koda said those words.

"Did you want to go and get some breakfast?" he asked me once everyone else had gone. My stomach grumbled in answer and I smiled in response.

"Sure. I'd like that."

"Do you have any skirts or dresses you like to wear?" A devilish light burned inside Lars' eyes as he made the request, making me think he had more nefarious ideas in mind other than to see me wearing something more girly. I nodded. He smiled slowly. "And don't wear any underwear."

L^{*ars*} “OK, I get what you’re trying for here, but...” I watched Natalie stand there in just her bra, her bag of clothes scattered across the bed of one of the twins. “You have some hot *50 Shades of Grey* thing planned, right?”

I snorted as she waved her hand vaguely in the air both because I’d bloody hated that book when I’d read it, thinking to get some ideas for my future mate, and at her protests. She went to pluck a very nice pair of granny panties out and I strode across the room, plucking them from her grip and then tossing them back into her bag. She gasped, hands going to her hips, eyes flashing, as if she was about to tell me the fuck off.

And didn’t I just want to hear her do that?

I did have ideas for this morning, ones that were making my dick feel like it was single-handedly trying to burrow its way out through my jeans, but I’d toss them all to one side if she decided to really fight me. That wrestle to see who’d come out on top would be hot as fuck.

Of course, in the end, it would be me.

“I can’t do this,” she announced finally, throwing her hands in the air.

“Can’t do what, love?”

It felt like my bear was close to the surface right now, his heavy tread in my feet as I moved closer.

“I don’t wear dresses, like, ever.”

Except there was a very pretty sundress in a light crinkly material lying across the bed.

“And no knickers?” She stared up at me, her eyes pleading for me to understand, but I did all too well. “You want to go into a cafe or something, somewhere where I know people, where I’ve no doubt grown up around the owners and the other patrons. And, what?”

She eyed me suspiciously, her pupils huge, her breathing coming in faster and faster. Her rational mind was presenting some real challenges for me. But her body? It was on board with my plans, I just fucking knew it.

“And what do you think I’m going to do around the people you know so well?” I asked her in a low growl.

“Well, you know...”

She couldn’t bring herself to say it, and part of me loved that. There was something almost untouched about Nat. Fuckface’d had a bloody treasure in his bed every night, but he had never seen her value nor attempted to explore her depths. And right now I was grateful for that, because it meant I could. I shook my head slowly in response to her words.

“No, I don’t think I do know,” I said. “You tell me what I’m planning to do.”

“No underwear,” she said with a hiss, grabbing the dress and yanking it over her head, the generous draping folds of it hinting at her beautiful body, but also shrouding it. “Wear a dress.” She raked up the hem, baring her cunt to me and somehow she looked more naked doing that than when she was wearing just a bra. “I’m assuming you want to take me somewhere and...”

There, that reluctance again. I was painfully aware of it, pretty sure I could treat Nat to a range of new pleasures if I could get her to step past that reticence, but if she wasn’t comfortable with that... I shook my head, trying to dislodge the red haze that seemed to hang over my eyes as I stared at her, able to see a Nat that unabashedly took her pleasures, not

giving a shit about what close-minded people might have to say about it.

“I know what I’m thinking,” I told her, not getting any closer, not wanting to cloud her mind. “But I need to know what you are. Why do you think I don’t want you wearing underwear?”

“Because...” Her big blue eyes pleaded with me. “Because...” It would be so easy to finish her sentence for her, to tell her exactly how it would go and what I would do. “Because you want... access to me when we’re out.” Her eyes flicked wildly, as if she could see the scenario in her mind. “You’d slide your hand under the table at breakfast and up my thigh.”

Yes, I fucking would. I could almost feel the hot satin of her skin as she spoke.

“You’d force me to stay really still and quiet as you...”

I nodded in encouragement, having to ball my hands up into fists to stop myself from reaching for her.

“As your thumb rubs on my clit and your fingers push inside me.” Her words came out in a big rush, but once they started pouring out, they wouldn’t stop until it was done. “But I couldn’t stay quiet, not when you do that... thing. As soon as you guys push down on that spot, I’m a mess. I’m all sticky.” Her slick, she didn’t realise that’s what was coming in, not yet. Her cunt would weep near constantly, making it easier for her to take us over and over. “And staying quiet? How do I stay quiet during something like that?”

Her teeth locked down as she shot me a glare.

“It feels too fucking good and if you do it, I’ll be gasping like a little slut in a friend’s cafe for the whole town to see and then everyone will think what Paul spray painted on the side of the clock tower was right.”

And there it was, the fear that stopped her from doing what I wanted her to feel free to.

Men like Fuckface didn’t seem to realise something important. They wanted to dominate their wives and

girlfriends, but in a way that was utterly unhinged. They walked around their houses like petty despots, barking orders and creating resentment, thinking that the tiny dick swinging between their legs somehow gave them that right. A man could dominate his woman under set circumstances: if she was amenable, if she enjoyed it and if he was able to see that incredible gift of trust for what it was and step up and do what was needed to allow her to surrender for just that moment.

The latter was what I wanted to do right now.

“I don’t much like the word slut,” I told her. “Somehow the idea of a woman being free to pursue sex unapologetically is supposed to be a bad thing? And I don’t think that’s what’s holding you back. Part of you wants to do exactly as you said, to be forced to endure that pleasure in a place you’re not supposed to.” I nodded as I took in the way her eyes widened and her pulse began to jump in her throat. “But some real fears are stopping you. What are they?”

“What if people see me?”

She was pleading with me then, but not in the way she thought. It wasn’t people in general, but those she had grown up around. This wasn’t an experience she wanted to have in the safe little cocoon of Langston.

“So we won’t go anywhere local where people know you,” I replied. “What else?”

“What...?” She searched my face, looking for an answer before she took the step of trusting me enough to ask me the question. “What will this make me if I let you do this?”

If slut was off the table, then what? That’s what she wanted to know and that’s when I smiled, because the hard shell that had been keeping her contained was starting to crack.

“Mine,” I replied simply, loving that fucking word and loving even more her response to it, as something in her body softened in response, her scent growing thicker, sweeter. “Mine to please whenever and wherever I want. Mine to tend to, mine to make come and keep on coming.” She jumped

when I placed a hand on her bare stomach, her fingers clutching the fabric of her dress harder as I slid my fingers down. “Mine to make delirious with pleasure until you stop thinking about everyone else and only focus on this.’

She gasped as my middle finger slid just far enough to graze her clit. I teased the hood of it just slightly, but her lips fell open in response. I wanted to kiss her, stroke her, throw her down on the fucking bed and gorge on her, but this was an exercise in restraint for both of us. I moved closer, brushing my lips across hers and then asked the question.

“So what do you think? Yes? Will you say yes, Natalie?”

“Yes...”

I pulled my hand away, making a show of licking my finger clean and then tugged her dress down. I found a cute pair of flat soled sandals and slipping them on her feet before grabbing a clean towel from the bathroom and leading her out of the room then out into the carpark to my car.

“What’s that for?” she asked as I opened the passenger side and laid the towel down on the front seat, before hoisting her up to sit down on it.

“The fun starts as soon as I turn the car on,” I told her, leaning down to kiss her. She grabbed my head, deepening the kiss, letting the hunger that throbbed inside her burn hotter as she claimed my mouth as hers.

I would never get used to this, Nat touching me, grabbing at me like she was scared I’d pull away, but she needed to trust that I never would, not from her. I met her hunger with my own, sucking on her full bottom lip, thrusting my tongue inside her mouth, just like I wanted to do to her later when she was spread naked across my bed. But finally I pulled away, looking into her eyes.

“I don’t give a shit if you soak my upholstery, but I figured you might be uncomfortable with that, hence the towel.”

“Soak?”

She looked at me in alarm as I went around to the driver’s side and got in, watching her put her seatbelt on as I started the

car.

“Soak,” I confirmed with a nod and smile. “You might not have been able to squirt before, but you might be surprised at what you can do now.”

I ignored the fact that her mouth hung open as she stared at me, as I put the car into drive and then rolled out. “Now, if we’re not going to make you uncomfortable being around people you know, how about we head over to Argyle?”

Argyle was a bigger town a few hours away, nowhere near anyone my mate was likely to know. She just nodded slowly, watching me intently, particularly when my hand slid over towards her. I placed it on her thigh over the top of her dress as I got us out on the main road, then clawed the fabric up once it was smooth sailing and we were out of town.

“Lars...?”

“Hike your dress up,” I told her, keeping my eyes on the road. “A bit more. That’s it, love.” I felt the smooth heat of her bare thigh, then groaned as my fingers slipped through the slick that was already coating them. “Now, cover my hand with your dress so no one passing by can see.”

They would if they were curious enough. They’d be able to catch the way she gasped, see her lips fall open to let out helpless little pants as her back stiffened when I touched her. Because under all that fear and anxiety was a supremely sensual woman whose scalding hot desire was soaking my fingers, making it easier for me to grind the heel of my palm down on her clit and then bury them in her, curling up to stroke that throbbing spot inside her.

“Fuck!” Her hands slammed down on the centre console, on the door, her hips tilting to let me in deeper.

This was the sweetest fucking torture. I might be forcing my mate to come over and over on the drive over to the next town, but my cock was rigid, leaking pools of precum in my jeans, aching for her. I was tormenting myself just as much as I was her, which was exactly how it was supposed to be.

“Tell me what you want to order for breakfast,” Lars said.

“Wh-aaat?”

I was half fucking delirious, having come more times than I could count on the drive over. By the time we rolled down Argyle’s main street, with unfamiliar shops, unknown people passing by, I could barely focus. Every time Lars pushed me over the edge, every time I thought the fierce tide in my blood had gone out for good, he’d start stirring me again. Gently at first, tiny little caresses that felt like nothing until I would find myself squirming on the seat, needing more. And I’d get more. A whole lot more than I’d ever had before. My entire body felt like it was throbbing in time with my heartbeat, as if there was a red haze hanging over me. I felt like a cat in heat, needing him, wanting him. As Lars pulled his fingers free, they glistened before he licked them clean, then slapped his hand down on the gear shifter to pulling over into a parking spot on the side of the street.

“Tell me what you want for breakfast and I’ll order it for you when we go inside,” he said, nodding to a trendy looking cafe down from where we’d parked. “You won’t be able to do it without giving yourself away.”

He sounded so calm, so reasonable, which to my mind just made my own messy state seem worse. He was big, strong, invulnerable. And I was...? I grabbed his arm, half to drag it right back where I ached, half to try and change his mind.

“I’m not hungry,” I insisted.

“Nat, you need to eat.”

“Later, I promise.” My voice was all breathy and I was panting out each word. “Change of plans. Let’s get a hotel room. I’ll pay. We can order in room service... What?”

His grin was wicked, revealing those too-sharp canines snapping down as I watched the amusement spread across his face.

“We had a deal, love.” He glanced over at the cafe, his ice blue eyes now seeming to glitter with a hard light. “We’ll have a nice breakfast away from everyone you know and I’ll tease your little cunt until it’s ready to take me.”

“It’s ready.” I almost barked that out, my whole body feeling like it thrummed with desperation. “Really, really ready. You’ll fuck me, lock your penis bone down hard inside me and keep coming for ages. I want that.” His smile just grew wider. “I need it. Please, Lars.” I let out a hopeless little noise right now, feeling too hot, too sweaty, too sticky and too messy to be allowed inside a public place. “I’m not afraid to beg.”

He pulled his hand away, tilting my head up so my eyes met him, the smell of me on his fingers.

“You never need to beg with me. I’ll always give you everything you need. Always. You can trust me with that, Natalie.”

Fuck, at the sound of his deep voice I felt like I could trust him with anything. And why did that have my heart beating even faster?

“And right now, I think it’s this. What do you think?”

I wanted to argue, to insist that he just take me to some anonymous hotel room and do exactly as I’d asked, but part of the thing that had me so riled up was Lars taking control and delivering on every promise he’d made. I stared into his eyes, watched him watch me, waiting for my response. So despite myself, my body screaming obscenities, I nodded, agreeing to what he had planned.

He was out of the car, my heart rate thudding wildly as he came around to my door, opening it and unclicking my seat belt, turning me around to face him. My thighs parted, my dress now shoved much more modestly down as he kissed me. Paul had never kissed me like this, not with this kind of tenderness, intensity or passion and I found my fingers sank into his soft hair, smoothing it back from his face as I kissed him and kissed him. People stopped to stare as they passed us by and maybe they had a thing to say about us but I didn't hear it. Just him. That low growl in his throat as he forced himself to pull away, like it took real effort to do so, before holding out his hand for me to take.

It would've been easy for any guy to turn my head, I realised now. All he would have had to do was show a fucking interest in me. But Lars did much more than that, as he locked up the car, then tucked my arm in his. He showed me that he wanted me, needed me with every breath and that was fucking heady.

And something I bloody well deserved.

I leaned into his side, feeling the solid weight of his body, his arm as it went around me and pulled me in close, right as he escorted me inside the cafe and up the back, where a bunch of booths were set up.

I didn't often see evidence of his bear-like nature like I did right now. He ushered me into the booth, so that I was sitting with the side of my body towards the front door, while he slotted in beside me, blocking anyone's view of me. His hand went under the table, ostensibly to place it on my knee, but I knew better, sucking in a slow breath as he raked up the soft folds of my dress to get to me.

“What can I get you?”

I jolted at the sound of the chirpy waitress who'd appeared at the table, right as Lars' fingers found their target.

“Ahh...” That came out almost as a groan, his fingers sliding over my clit, rolling it lightly between his finger tips before pinching the hood for a second, forcing me to squirm.

“A couple of white coffees, thanks,” he told her, like it was no big thing. “One sugar and...” He made a show of consulting the menu, flicking a sly look at me before turning back to the waitress. “How about a couple of serves of pancakes? I’m in the mood for something sweet. Sound good to you, love?”

“Yes...”

My response was choked, forced out of my throat, and the waitress’ eyes widened slightly before she noted down our order.

“No problems,” she said. “I’ll be back with some water.”

My hands slapped down onto the tabletop, my nails raking across the laminate as his fingers delved deeper, setting up a now familiar rhythm and reaction. His palm ground down on my clit, forcing dull blooms of pleasure out of me. And his fingers? They pushed into my now aching entrance, my body not sure if he was causing the discomfort or easing it. Easing it, I decided as soon as his fingers pushed in, stroking, stroking, until I started to unconsciously rock my hips, only to have to force myself to stop.

The waitress returned with a carafe of water and glasses, shooting me a worried look. I wondered if she thought I was in a domestic violence situation or a victim of coercive control. I thought it ironic that I’d already escaped exactly that type of relationship and that this was what freedom looked like for me. Lars poured out water for both of us, pushing mine over in front of me as she turned to go and make our coffees. But all the foreplay had done something to me, and my body was now Lars’ bitch, coming at his call all too easily.

I wrapped both hands around the glass, bringing it to my lips as I felt the pleasure spike the minute he pressed down on that spot inside me, sucking down water as it began to crest. If I’d felt a horror about letting myself be fingered inside a public place, of getting off in front of other people, I couldn’t remember it. I glanced at the rest of the cafe briefly, glad most of the tables were empty, that everyone else was lost in their own little worlds, right as mine exploded. He seemed to know,

somehow able to feel the way I tightened around him, my body winding tight right before it came in low, slow ripples, washing through my body, just like the swallows of water, dropping down into my stomach, reducing my focus down to just me, just him.

“Good girl...” he rasped in little more than a whisper, reaching over and pressing a kiss to my forehead as the last waves tapered off, right before he started again.

I COULDN'T EAT, couldn't focus on the music being played in the background or the waitress' chatter as she set down our plates before us. My coffee sat there undrunk, because my whole body burned. But Lars had pulled his fingers free, wiping them discreetly on his paper napkin before he picked up his knife and fork to cut into the fluffy pancakes. And I just watched him.

“Eat, Nat,” he ordered, offering me a bite of his food and I opened my mouth, did as I was told, this simmering state of submission messing with my fucking head. He could have asked me to get to my knees and suck him off under the table and I would have. I would've done anything if only I could get more. He sliced all of his pancakes up into smaller pieces, so that he could eat one-handed and spike them on the end of his fork, freeing his other hand up again. And as he slid it up my thigh, I widened my knees, welcoming him back, ready for him to start again.

I ate a small amount and very carefully. I was slowly chewing a forkful of pancake when he made me come again, and it almost blocked my throat when I sucked in a breath. But I found myself adjusting quickly, timing my mouthfuls with his caresses, only able to accept one or the other at any given time. Once our plates were empty, I thought I'd finally get some relief, that he'd whisk me out of here, take me somewhere private and drive himself—

“Was there anything else?” the waitress asked, taking away our plates.

“No, thanks,” he said, like this was just another day, the two of us going out for breakfast like we’d been together for ages or something. “Just the bill.”

“No problem,” she said, setting the order out on the table. Lars sipped the rest of his coffee and I stared at him as she turned to go, realising I needed to up the ante for him as well if I was going to get what I really needed. My fingers felt numb as they slid across his jean covered thigh, his throat convulsing around a mouthful of coffee as I squeezed his rigid cock, his eyes meeting mine.

“You have something I need,” I told him. “This...” My eyes dropped down for a second, then back to him. “This isn’t enough anymore. I need—”

“What do you need?” His voice was pitched so only I could hear him, and he turned his body to face mine, blocking out the sight of the rest of the cafe. “Tell me and I’ll give it to you. Any fucking thing you need.”

“You, locking down inside me.” My cunt clamped around his fingers, as if it was hopeful it could fashion a baculum from them. “I need that, Lars, right now.”

He pulled his wallet out, throwing a hundred dollars down on the table before getting to his feet. That waitress was about to get the best damn tip ever. He pulled me up from the booth, and then we were out of the cafe and back in the car.

“We’re not going to make it back to Langston, are we?”

His voice contained a note of self-congratulation, and his smile widened as I shook my head.

“You need to be balls deep in me fifteen minutes from now,” I warned, “or I’ll—”

“No need for threats,” he told me, flicking on the indicator then pulling out onto the road at speed the moment there was a gap. “Been waiting my whole fucking life to hear my mate say that.”

L *ars*

I was shoving my way into the hotel room the moment the lock clicked open on the door, and Nat was right there with me, her hands raking over my chest, my back. This—*this*—was the version of my mate I wanted to see come out and play more often, because right now she was a woman on a mission, a mission to see me naked as soon as possible. A cruel part of me didn't help her at first, and I watched as her hands shook as first she shoved my shirt up and then went to my belt, a hiss of frustration escaping her lips as she fumbled at it.

It was then I relented because I was in as much need as she was. I dragged my shirt up and over my head, before pulling her dress off in one movement. I flicked open her bra, then pulled my belt free with a snap, and her eyes were everywhere over me as I backed her up towards the bed, watched her scramble back as I slid down my zip with undue care, toed off my boots and jeans then came to her bare.

She was mine, I knew that as soon as my knee hit the mattress and she babbled something along the same lines as I got closer. But when her hands went to my butt, pulling me down on top of her, I let out the growl I'd been holding back all morning. She went still, and stared up at me in question.

“The bear's a bit close to the surface,” I explained, moving to kiss her. She met me halfway, her hands sliding around my neck. “He's been going nuts since the moment I met you, but

today...” My eyes slid down, saw the way her nipples were pulled tight and swollen. “He’s done waiting.”

I raised my eyes back up to her face, watching her expression closely. She had to want this. I had thought she did, but until she said it—

“And what does the big bad bear want?”

Did she realise how fucking beautiful she was when she looked at me like that, a mocking smile on her face, a woman completely in her element. A woman seeking pleasure like it was her right. It was then all the games I’d been playing fell apart.

“You.” I couldn’t say much more than that, my throat closing up, making it hard to swallow. “Always you, Nat. Just you.”

Her arms wrapped around my neck, her legs around my waist and she pulled me down on top of her, my body grinding on her until I reached down and notched the head of my cock against her soft, swollen, wetness. I let out a little hiss and so did she, her eyes widening in tandem with mine the moment I sank into her.

“That’s my good girl...” I barely whispered that to her, my eyes falling half closed as I felt that fucking heavenly tight warmth of her sucking me deeper in. “Taking me so fucking well.” But as I tried to pull back, I felt a familiar ache inside me, one that had me gazing down at her. “Nat, I’m not going to last long. I need...”

My teeth clamped down as I felt her flex and grip me, and my hips jerked forward, burying myself as far as I could go before drawing back to do it again. Over and over. I wanted, needed, to thrust into her, to give her everything I had, and my eyes snapped wide open, staring into hers in question.

“You need me.” She said that with such wonder. “You were teasing yourself along with me.”

“Damn fucking right.” I was moving spasmodically now, on the edge of losing control, unable to hold back. And it was at that point that she took my head in her hands.

Had any woman looked at me like Nat did, to really see me? I was pretty sure they never had. She was the only one that seemed to look past the scary façade. She drew her hands along my cheekbones then scratched her fingers through my beard, and ran her thumb across my lips.

“You need to give me everything you’ve got.”

The baculum bucked inside me, ready to jut out and lock down, only a supreme act of will keeping it where it was.

“Yes.” I kissed her then, loving the way she softened underneath me, the way she opened up and let my tongue in, as her thighs widened, letting me sink deeper into her. “Yes, love. Yes.”

She said the same damn thing with every kiss, every thrust until the two of us weren’t making sense anymore, just chanting that affirmation over and over as things got faster, harder. She took every damn inch of me, swallowing me up, her eyes staring into mine as it happened.

I groaned as I felt the bone jut out and catch against her, instinctively slowing my strokes now I had her right where I wanted her.

“Oh fuck...” she rasped out, throwing her head back as she was caught up in the feeling. “I’ll never get used to that.”

Me neither, I wanted to say, because this had never happened with another woman. The tugging sensation was driving me fucking nuts, and my balls felt like they were boiling with each stroke.

“Lars... Lars...”

Her fingers burrowed into my arms, holding me tight and that’s when I worked out the great plan the bear gods had. By gifting us this moment, the moment we locked inside our mates, we clawed our way back from the edge of rut and instead faced our reality. And my reality was simple.

I loved her.

It maybe was a stupid thing to be surprised by when having sex with your fated mate, but it smashed into my heart

right then, leaving my rib cage feeling like it had been yanked apart, and despite that, the fragile organ had kept on pumping regardless.

For her.

I'd wanted her all fucking day, needing to get my hands on her, to tease her, push her, drive her bloody mad, but now? Those kinds of games seemed small and pointless when faced with this. My whole chest ached, my body shaking with the effort of holding things back, and her eyes were widening by the second.

“Lars...”

She was feeling it too, that was my only salvation, so she didn't flinch when my fangs snapped down, when a roar built and built in my chest, as the first twitch of her cunt spurred my cum to come jetting out, as the most perfect pleasure washed over the two of us, transporting us into ecstasy.

“Natalie...” I moved slowly, surely, feeling the way each movement pushed her harder, forcing her to feel more pleasure, more, but beyond that. The physical was a poor substitute to the feeling that throbbed strong and true inside me, right as she bared her neck to me.

I KNEW WHAT THIS WAS. Legends were told of the moment our mates surrendered to us, realising on some level we were the men for her and that she didn't ever want to let the world part us from her. I was cumming, cumming, and so was she. Her whole body felt like it was convulsing around me, squeezing out everything I had but my focus was entirely on her and the way her head was thrown to one side.

“Nat,” I barked, needing to see it, to feel it before I gave into my instincts. “Nat, I need—”

But anything I might have to say was cut off as she jerked my head down, my fangs finding the curve of her neck and clamping down, digging into her flesh. The taste of her blood, the way her body went rigid underneath me. She would wear my mark until she died, forever mine. The bear inside me

roared so fucking loud I tore my mouth off and let some of it escape me, filling the room with an animalistic sound. But as our bodies quietened, I dropped my head back down, licking the small spots of blood away until my mate started to squirm.

“Did we...? Was that...?”

“You’re mine now, Natalie.” My voice was more bear than man right now and she stared into my eyes as I spoke. “You’ll never get free of me now.”

“Who says I want to?” she said, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me back down for more.

My hips moved slowly, carefully, my baculum and her body both super sensitive right now, but we could work around that.

“Better not,” I growled. “You wanted me to lock down inside you and you know what that does.” My hand slid down between us, teasing at her clit as soon as I found it. “You haven’t squirted for me yet and I think I need that, my mate.”

Her expression was so easy to read right now, as pleasure, anticipation, desire and need all warred with each other.

Oh yeah? she said inside my head, the bond feeling like it locked down tight right now. *Make me.*

A *nd where did you get to today?*

I heard Koda's voice inside my head as Lars and I walked into a small shop to grab some drinks for the drive home. He asked the question gently, but I could hear everything he was holding back in that careful tone.

Lars took me over to Argyle. He... looked after me. I felt rather than heard his snort down the bond. So well, in fact, that we had to get a hotel room for a few hours.

Did he now? There was always something feline about both twins, but while Thorn was a cat rolling around playing with catnip, Koda was the one waiting quietly, ready to pounce. *I hope he treated you like a princess.*

I laughed out loud at that thought. Lars shot me a quizzical look as we walked into the shop. A quick montage of all Lars and I had done together played through my mind, something I hoped Koda could see. But if the royal family spent their down time doing what Lars and I had? Well, I was a lot more inclined to support Australia staying a part of the British Commonwealth.

A queen then, Koda amended and my memory of riding Lars' face, grinding my pussy into his beard as he licked and sucked frantically, playing in my mind again, the details coming rushing back. *Come home. Lars might have had his fill for the day, but we're just getting started.*

You mean Thorn, right? I said, walking over to the cold drinks fridge and pulling out a bottle of water, offering it to

Lars. I could just imagine how Koda's brother was behaving, coming home and finding us not there.

Don't make the mistake of thinking he's the only one who aches when you're not around. I heard Koda's hiss of breath like he was standing right near me. *Need you, love.*

That short, desperate little admission felt like it cracked my heart in two, my smile fading. Lars cocked an eyebrow, obviously not privy to the conversation, something I needed to ask him about on the drive home, so I explained.

"Koda's trying to get us to hurry up and get back,"

"I bet he is." Lars put a hand on the glass door behind my head and leaned into my space. "Maybe we should take the scenic route home, stop somewhere for dinner..."

He said more in a low, dark, filthy tone, but of course I couldn't just get to enjoy the experience of my mates playing tug of war for my attention, could I? I didn't go to Argyle often, the drive being too long to bother and there wasn't much here that I couldn't find at home.

But Paul had made us trek out here at least a couple of times a year.

Because Shaun lived out in Argyle, as did Britney and their mum and dad. They came over to the Baileys' for a Sunday BBQ every now and then.

And sometimes we drove over to theirs.

So it really shouldn't have been surprising to see Britney with Delia, Paul's mum, walk into the shop. This was probably their local corner store. But as I froze to the spot, I felt it. It was as if my past and my future were colliding and I could almost feel the impact of it. I looked at the way Delia laughed and leaned in closer to Britney as they chattered, both of them gesturing to each other with a kind of carefree abandon neither had showed me. I found it odd to see the pleasure in my ex mother-in-law's face as she spoke to Britney, the younger woman's face glowing. They were wrapped up in each other in the way only family could be.

I wasn't going to stand there, looking like a stunned mullet as they grabbed what they needed, so I plucked the water bottles from Lars' grip then squared my shoulders and walked up to the till, not even sparing the two of them a sidelong look. Part of me hoped they wouldn't see me. But the other part? She plonked the bottles on the counter and smiled at the girl behind the cash register, ready to make her purchase, not willing to quietly scuttle out the door and away from those two bitches.

“Evening,” the girl said, scanning the waters. “That’ll be ___”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

I rolled my eyes at the familiarly strident tone, let out a sigh and shot the cashier an apologetic look, reaching into my wallet and slapping down a big enough bill to cover the drinks and then some. When I turned around it was obvious that Bitch 1 and Bitch 2 had spotted me and obviously couldn't persuade each other to behave like a normal human being for once.

“Getting water,” I said, holding up the bottles and then taking my change from the girl. “I thought that was obvious. Hydration is important—”

“What the hell are you doing in Argyle?” Britney clarified, marching up to me, her flying monkey, Delia, in tow. “Are you that pathetic—?”

“Now, Britney,” Delia said in a pacifying tone. “You need to stay calm. Just ignore the silly girl. You can't let things get to you in your state.”

For a moment, it felt like the whole world had stopped and someone had raced over and doused me in ice cold water, because I remembered Delia's tone and manner. Early on in my marriage to Paul, she'd been the same around me, so sure a girl that was young and healthy like me would give her son a child quickly. She'd 'playfully' snatched away glasses of wine or cans of beer I'd been drinking, jokingly remonstrating me for 'endangering the baby'. I'd thought it patronising and

vaguely annoying at the time. And now? I blinked slowly, feeling like I saw the two of them for the first time.

There were lines, deep lines, in Delia's face I hadn't seen before and, while she'd always been warm with Britney, now there was an avaricious gleam in her eyes. She didn't see the daughter of a family friend anymore, but a womb, one her hands went out to touch as she patted the other woman's belly. And Britney? She was puffed up like a cat, ready to defend her turf. Part of me wanted to bitch slap this girl so damn hard, because she was committing what I felt was a cardinal sin.

She was furious that Paul had a past, a wife before her and my existence was a reminder of that past, somehow shaking her to the core. I watched her fists ball, her muscles tense and then she strode over, ready to launch herself at me, despite Delia's pleas, because one good punch to her belly could put an end to both of their dreams.

Just like they'd happily done mine.

But I didn't. Of course, I didn't. And it wasn't even the fact Britney might be pregnant that stopped me, it was something else altogether. Because, as I saw Delia squawk like a chicken on crack cocaine, as Britney raged and the girl behind the counter shouted in alarm, I realised what I felt.

Free.

They were all caught up in this fucking bullshit and I... I didn't have to be anymore. As Britney pulled her fist back it felt like she moved as slow as molasses, and my body jerked out and away from her before she could take another breath, her misplaced strike now on target to hit the girl who'd served us.

"What the fucking hell?" The girl stopped Britney with one hand, wrapping it around Britney's wrist and then grinding into the flesh there until all that anger turned into yelps of pain. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Don't hurt my daughter-in-law!" Delia shrieked, right as the girl tossed Britney's hand away.

“I’m not,” she replied flatly before pulling out her phone. “But you two better get your arses out of my shop by the time I count to ten, because I’m calling the cops.”

Britney had something to say, you just couldn’t discern what it was, from all of the shrill screaming, so I didn’t bother. I didn’t engage, I didn’t say anything back, I just grabbed my water, nodded to the girl who’d gone back behind the counter, and then walked out of the shop. A hand landed on my shoulder, making me jump initially, but when I turned around, Lars was there.

“You OK?”

Aussie men had this wonderfully abbreviated way of communicating, all superfluous words stripped away, but as I gazed up at him, I got the subtext, all of the subtext. Was I spiralling out of control after running into the side piece and the ex MIL? How was the revelation that Britney was pregnant hitting me? Was everything we’d built today, this fragile cocoon of pleasure utterly ruined? But when I looked up at him, I found none of it mattered except for him.

I rushed forward to wrap my arms as far around him as I could, and decided being a bear’s mate was a damn good thing. Because who else could hug you like they’d protect you from the whole world? I let out a sigh, dimly aware that those bitches were striding towards us, squabbling between themselves about how they were going to sort things, but I didn’t care about them when I looked up at Lars.

“Take me home,” I said, closing my eyes as he stroked his hand down my face.

“**W**e’ve got to make a quick pit stop,” Lars told me as we rolled into Langston a few hours later.

“What?”

Would I ever stop tensing up every time there were last minute changes of plan? Would I ever get to the point where I could just trust that things would be OK? Lars took his hand off the gear shifter and gave my hand a squeeze, no doubt feeling the spike of fear inside me, right before we rolled up out the front of Holly’s shop.

I scanned the scene quickly, looking for further evidence of wrongdoing by Paul and thankfully not finding it. Johnno, the police officer I’d gone to school with, was there though, along with Alaric and a bunch of his guys. Most of them were sitting on their tool boxes and having a beer out the front of the shop while Alaric showed Johnno and Holly something on a tablet.

“Everything OK?” I asked, racing over to them.

“Better than OK,” Holls said, turning the tablet around and showing me what looked like the feeds from multiple security cameras on the screen. “Like I knew your boyfriends were an improvement on Fuckface—”

“You call him that too?” Lars asked, coming to stand by my shoulder.

“What else could you call him?” Holls replied with a twist of her lips. “I mean Maggot Infested Cat Shit That Was Eaten

By A Dog Then Vomited Up Again is just too wordy, plus Fuckface works so well. He has a head like a bucket full of busted arseholes and every time I see him my mind goes 'Fuck! Not this arsehole again'. But with this handy dandy security system your boy just installed, we're going to catch Fuckface in the act if he tries this shit again, and gather some hard evidence to put him away so that the only company he has is a big guy called Bubba who'll put the 'fuck' into Paul's face every night."

"You installed a security system?" I asked Alaric.

He flushed, as if he'd done something really embarrassing rather than something so bloody sweet my heart felt like it clenched in my chest.

"I couldn't just let this shit keep happening," he replied. "Fuckf—" He glanced at Johnno for a second. "We need evidence, hard evidence in order for Paul to start answering for his crimes."

"And something Vickers can't just brush under the rug," Johnno said with a slow shake of his head. "Evidence that can't go 'missing'." He nodded at the tablet. "Paul's bail has been revoked but no one can find him to bring him in so your... boyfriend here has volunteered to put security systems all the way up and down Commercial Rd."

"Alaric..."

I wanted, needed, to say something. Thank you would be a good start, right? But the words seemed too small, too inadequate, for what I was feeling.

"We have a crew that puts security systems in the fancy places we restore back in the city," he told me like it was no big thing, even though it felt like something else altogether. "I got some of the boys down on the first flight." He nodded to some of the men sitting on their toolboxes. "We can do it quickly, cheaply and well, so that this shit stops."

"And you did that...?" I knew how I wanted to finish that sentence, but I felt like a knob as soon as I thought the words.

“For you?” Naked emotion rose in Alaric’s eyes, a twin to my own feeling. “Of course, Nat, you gotta know—”

But I didn’t. I wasn’t used to this. People didn’t rush in and fix things like this for me, not apart from Holls. I stepped forward, holding my arms out to Alaric and as soon as I got close, he scooped me up and held me.

“Anything for you,” he whispered into my hair.

Every relationship has its obstacles, and in ours, the biggest obstacle was trust. For me to actually trust them: believing them, believing they were as good as they seemed, believing they’d come through for me. I found that my fingers were clutching at Alaric’s broad back, my lungs were sucking in the scent of him, my breath was coming in rapid and noisy as my eyes pricked with tears. This was the point where I started believing that they were real, started realising that maybe I deserved everything they had to give.

“If you share the security footage passwords with me when the other cameras are set up, I’ll keep an eye on them, make sure that any relevant sections of video are brought to the chief inspector’s attention,” Johnno said. He shook his head. “He won’t be able to ignore that.” Johnno frowned. “At least I don’t—”

Before he could finish the sentence, a crackle down his police radio had us all jumping.

“Johnno, mate, you still in Langston?”

“Yep, on Commercial Rd,” he replied, lifting the radio closer to his mouth.

“Get your arse down the southern end. The CFS will meet you there, but there’s been reports of a fire, suspected arson.”

Everyone’s eyes jerked up and sure enough, there in the night sky was the greyish plume of smoke, followed by a faint acrid stink.

“What the fuck has that prick done now?” Johnno muttered before turning to the rest of us. “Stay here.”

But of course we didn't. We watched him get into his police car, flicking on the flashing lights and siren before he took off at speed down the street.

"You don't have a fire department down here, do you?" Alaric asked me urgently and I shook my head. My body felt cold, too cold, and I wrapped my arms around me until Lars stepped in to try and warm me.

"No, the Country Fire Service is... volunteers," I said, staring down the road, as if I could see exactly where the fire had been lit. Because I knew the structure of the CFS intimately.

"Then we better pitch in," Alaric said, then turned to his guys. "C'mon. Get the tool boxes in the utes and get a move on!"

"Don't engage," I warned them. "Don't go rushing in or trying to be heroes."

I'd heard those words said over and over, so it was weird to be the one saying them, but as I jumped back into Lars' ute and we took off down the road, we were quickly joined by others. We pulled over to one side as soon as we heard the wail of the CFS fire truck sirens, letting them pass by. But as they did, I craned my neck, looking through the wind screen for a familiar face.

You might wonder where the hell my parents were in all of this. Why weren't they supporting me when Paul, no Fuckface, was going on his rampages? Where the hell they were as my life was turned upside down? Perhaps this will explain that absence.

As we pulled up out the front of an old derelict house on the outskirts of town, the place a haven for teenage kids, I saw him jump out of the fire truck.

Dad.

He jerked on the hard white helmet, and I could see he'd dressed hastily in his yellow high vis uniform. He barked orders with all the same authority he'd used when working for the council, waving his arms around and pointing to the house.

The volunteers moved like a well-oiled machine, having practised this sort of thing over and over.

When I was a little girl, I'd gone with Mum to watch the practice sessions and information days where the CFS demonstrated their prowess, reassuring the public while also making sure members were well trained and prepared for anything. But not this. Fire was death anywhere, but it was particularly concerning in rural, too dry South Australia. We'd had bushfires that were commemorated for decades afterwards, had names that had earned themselves capitalisation because of the amount of destruction they'd caused. So the fact that Paul... It had to be Paul, because who else would do this kind of thing? The fact he'd deliberately set fire to a building? I marched closer, each footfall feeling like it reverberated all the way up my spine as I got closer.

"Natalie?" Dad saw me, his eyes flashing with a curious combination of excitement and fury. "Don't just stand there! Get everyone out of the house next door."

I nodded to Holly and the rest of my sleuth, running up the very nice footpath of Mrs Henson's house, going and knocking on the door with a quick rap.

"Mrs Henson?" I listened hard for sounds of her inside but it was hard to make out anything over the roar and crackle of the fire, the hiss of the water hoses as they tried to put it out. "Dottie?"

"She's in there," Alaric said, coming to stand beside me. His nostrils flared and then he met my eyes. "She's scared."

"Dottie? It's Natalie..." I nearly said Bailey. I realised why she was probably scared. An old woman living on her own, she'd never liked living right next to a derelict house, taking great care with her own garden. She often complained about the kids that hung out there and the stink of marijuana smoke that hung over the block, the bottles being smashed against the broken walls. But this had been her house and her now-dead husband's since the moment they'd married all those years ago. "It's Natalie Granger," I called out. "Dad's asked me to come over and get you out."

I jerked back when the door opened, wanting to take another step back when I saw her. She was tiny, seeming to shrink each year as she got older, but the pale skin of her cheek was bright red and starting to bruise, her trembling lip cut and still bleeding.

“Oh Dottie...” I hissed, going towards her, but she held me off with a hand.

“Are you here to finish the job?” she demanded, flinching back when I stepped closer. “No, you stay out there. That husband of yours...” Her lips quivered more violently until she thinned them down in an act of will, her eyes flashing with anger. “You tell him I won’t sell. He’ll have to set fire to my place next and with me in it to get this land!”

“I don’t want you to sell your house,” I told her, moving slowly, pitching my voice in a deliberately low and even tone. “I don’t want you to go anywhere, but we have to get outside and away from the house until Dad and the crew have gotten the fire under control. He’ll look after your house, keep it safe, you know that.”

“Arthur Granger?” she said, daring to peer out of the door and taking in the way Dad’s team were beating back the fire, reducing it slowly to a dull smoulder. “He was always a good man.”

“And you need to tell Johnno... Officer Hillyer what just happened,” I told her.

“That Paul said the police wouldn’t help me,” she said, shooting me a wary look.

“Johnno will,” I assured her, offering her my arm, holding it out until she finally took it and allowed me to escort her down her front path and out onto the road.

“PAUL DID THIS,” I told Johnno in a harsh whisper as I brought Dottie over to talk to him.

“Course he did. Vickers has made him think he can do what the fuck he likes,” Johnno shot back before schooling his

face into a carefully neutral expression and looking down at the older woman. “Now, Dottie—?”

“That’s Mrs Henson to you, young man,” she said, straightening up, the steel returning to her spine. “I knew you when you weren’t even knee high to a grasshopper.”

“That you did,” he replied mildly. “Now, can you tell me what happened?”

“That Paul Bailey...” She shook her head sharply. “They’re a bad bunch, those Baileys. Always were. That Delia —”

“And what did Paul do tonight, Mrs Henson?” Johnno leaned in slowly, his eyes widening as he caught sight of the marks on Dottie’s face. His voice broke as he tried to say the words. “What did... What did he do to you?”

“Natalie!”

Although my ears were ringing, and my heart was beating way too fast as I fought to process everything that was happening, when I heard that shout, my body moved automatically. Summoned by my father’s autocratic tone, I walked away from Dottie, Johnno and everyone else, across neatly mowed grass and then onto the scorched, dead stuff until I found him leaning against one of the trucks, the last of the fire being doused by a few of the volunteers.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked me in the same way he’d demanded answers for less than satisfactory grades, for toys left scattered across the floor or if I dared answer back to Mum. It felt like I was ten year old Natalie again, or fourteen or even eighteen, not a grown woman of thirty. “Why am I hearing down the grapevine that you’ve left Paul and now he’s terrorising the town?”

There was no question of not answering as his brows jerked down at me, his body looming over mine as he stared into my eyes, but as I opened my mouth, I knew my answer wasn’t going to build any bridges between us.

“And how the hell does what my ex-husband is doing become *my* fault?”

“**W**hat?”

Dad’s head jerked back as if slapped, some of the fellas beside him blinking and shifting restlessly at the sound of someone reading Arthur Granger the riot act.

“Am I to be held accountable for his bullshit my entire life?” I demanded, standing toe to toe with my father as I stared up at him. “I remember vowing to love, honour and obey, but I’m pretty sure that agreement is null and void when he told me he wanted to sleep with other people, especially when he did sleep with Britney Prentiss, and in fact has been doing so for long enough to get her pregnant.”

Dad started at that, then shot the guys on either side of him a quick look before putting a hand out to steer me away from them.

But I refused to go where he wanted me. I stepped back and as I did, I felt them, my sleuth, at my back. Hands went to my shoulders, my waist and Dad’s eyes narrowed, putting him right back where he wanted to be.

Judging me.

“And so you what? Decided to take up with a stranger?” His eyes became slits. “A *bunch* of strangers in... what? Retaliation? We raised you better than this.”

“You raised Natalie to accept less than she deserves.” Alaric came forward to stand beside me. “You made a woman

as beautiful, caring and talented as her think that some fucking idiot was worth sharing her life with.”

It was weird seeing Dad having to look up at someone, but as he did, his expression grew more mulish by the second.

“We never wanted her to marry that idiot—”

“Then we’re in agreement that Natalie deserves better.” Alaric thrust his hand out. Dad took a step backwards, as though he thought my mate was going to hit him. But then he saw the outstretched hand, and his frown deepened. “I’m Alaric Burns and I’m one of the men that will make sure your daughter is treated like a queen.”

“One of...” Dad shook his head slowly, but he took Alaric’s hand. He couldn’t stop himself from taking it: not shaking a man’s hand was a level of rudeness even Dad wasn’t capable of. “Now see here—”

But before he could say much more, the sound of gunshots, seeming like it was coming from several streets over, stopped the conversation dead. Langston was a quiet little town. The only gunshots we usually heard were when people went to thin the numbers of feral rabbits or foxes. Not this rapid spray of gunfire, accompanied by the sound of smashing glass.

“Fuck!” Johnno snapped and then grabbed his radio. “We’ve got gunshots down the southern end of Langston. I need some back up down here, now!”

I stepped away from my father, not really caring what he had to say. I pulled my phone out and then navigated over to my contacts, bringing up Paul’s name before unblocking him with a shaking thumb. Then I put the call through, tapping on the icon to ensure the audio came through the speaker.

“So you’re ready to talk, are you?” I could hear the manic malice in Paul’s voice. “Took you long enough, you dumb bitch.” I glanced up at the sound of my guys’ growls, but ignored them, staring into Dad’s eyes as Paul continued to spew out his bile. “I guess you want to discuss the terms of our divorce?”

“I don’t give a fuck about the divorce, Paul,” I snapped back, as people clustered closer to hear what was being said. Dad frowned at me, opening his mouth to tell me off for swearing, but I just shook my head at him. “I want to talk about what the hell you’re doing to the town. You set that house on fire. And you beat up Dottie?”

That last bit came out as a question rather than a statement, because I still couldn’t believe what I was saying, despite the evidence I’d plainly seen with my own eyes.

“Saw that, did you?” Paul let out a wild laugh, one that was reinforced by a series of muffled sniggers from others in his car, letting me know he had his merry band of mouth-breathers in tow. “Stupid bitch shouldn’t have knocked back my very reasonable offer. I just gave her a bit of a scare—”

“You fucking assaulted an old lady,” I corrected.

“Yeah, well, this town needs to get a fucking clue. Been a shit-hole for way too long, but things are changing. And me? I’m gonna be the one who changes them. Might want to tell your little friends that they need to get the fuck out of my way or they’re next.”

He ended the call. Thorn stepped forward, holding up his phone and replaying a voice memo in which Paul’s confession could be heard clearly.

“I’m sending this to Mark,” he told the others.

“And Johnno,” I said, my jaw locking tight.

“And to Annie who does the local news,” Holly said, nodding slowly. “You need to forward everything to her. This has gone beyond Paul having a go at you, Nat. If Vickers won’t stop him, then we need to.”

“Police Constable Vickers? Annie?” Dad stared at each one of us as the rest of the volunteers clustered closer. “Does anyone want to let me know what the hell is going on?”

I sucked in a breath, glancing at my sleuth, then my friend for a moment before let it out in a long hiss.

“Paul and the Prentisses, they’ve put a property deal to Bernard Simmons. They think Langston will be the next big thing in South Australia.” Everyone spluttered and laughed at that, everyone but the people on my side of the crowd. “Rob thinks the wineries are coming here and with them will come the tourists. He wants to snap up as much land as he can, as cheaply as he can, so he has a monopoly and can make a killing.”

“He wants my land?” Dottie’s voice was much firmer and stronger now, and she had her arms folded across her chest. “That bastard won’t get an inch from me.”

“It’s why he and his goons are running around trashing things,” Holly said. “He smashed all my windows, then pissed all over the carpet. He’s trying to scare people, make sure they’ll—”

“Move on,” Dad finished for her. He shook his head slowly. “He wants to gentrify the town, but he can’t do it until it’s gone into decline, so he’s scaring people off.” He looked over at the burnt-out husk of the house behind us, seeing more than just the remains of a derelict building. It could have been Dottie’s house, any of the houses of friends and neighbours that he was seeing.

“Hello, love.” I turned to see Mum bustling up, a basket full of thermoses and food hanging off her arm. “You put the fire out alright?” Mum was always a sensitive one, able to pick up a shift in mood at a thousand paces, and she detected this one alright. “What’s wrong? Did someone get hurt?” She scanned our faces, then blanched when she saw Dottie’s. “Oh my goodness, is everyone alright?”

“No one got hurt, love,” Dad said, pulling her close and giving her a hug, letting her burden slip gently to the ground. “Well, not while putting out the fire.”

“Play that audio clip again,” one of the guys said to Thorn, his expression dark, his broad shoulders creeping upwards. “I want to hear what that little fuck has planned.”

Thorn hit play and as he did, Mum’s eyes widened, but unlike everyone else here, her anger didn’t flare bright and hot

at Paul, but rather at me. She pulled away from Dad, grabbed my arm with a surprisingly firm grip and hauled me aside.

“What the hell have you got yourself mixed up in?” she asked, casting a sidelong look back at the crowd, worried somehow that she had their attention. But people were preoccupied with Paul’s words, discontent fomenting by the second. “And why are you creating such a fuss?”

I stared at her, willing my mouth to move but the words just wouldn’t come out. She didn’t even really know what was going on, but she’d sniffed out the fact that there was drama, quick smart, and was ready to stamp it down as quickly as it arose. It didn’t matter who was right or wrong, just that a facade of calm and decorum was being adhered to.

“Mum, Paul burned a house down. He assaulted old Dottie —”

“Mrs Henson,” she corrected, her mouth thinning. “Yes, well, what do you expect a man to do, Natalie?” She flicked a glance toward my sleuth, but couldn’t look at them for long, and her cheeks flushed from second hand embarrassment. “You’re swanning around town with these... strangers.”

“And what? That excuses arson and violence?”

But before Mum could formulate an answer, I heard my name being called as Meryl hurried over to me.

“Natalie?” She swept in, putting her hands on my shoulders, my face, inspecting me closely. “You’re alright? Nothing’s happened to you? We just got the news and came straight over.”

“And who’s this?” Mum said with a frustrated wave of her hand, the closest to being rude I’d ever seen from her before.

Meryl and I turned to face her and, I admit, I leaned into the arm wrapped around my shoulders, needing that support. “This is Meryl Hensley and she’s my future mother-in-law.”

Thorn

“Mum.” I ran over to her car as soon as I saw her and my dads arrive. “I need you to do something for me.”

“What? What is it? Did someone get hurt in the fire?” Mum scanned me rapidly, then looked for Koda. “It’s not your brother...?” Her hand went to her lips as she got out.

“Koda’s fine. It’s Natalie,” I said.

“Oh gods, not your mate...! What’s happened, Thorn? What did that man do?”

“Take a breath, love,” Grant said, coming around and giving her a hug, but she shrugged him off, not able to relax until all her ‘babies’ were safe.

“I will not take a breath until—”

“Mum. I need you to listen.” I grabbed her hands and gave them a squeeze. “You told me to never disrespect my elders.”

“Yes, of course,” Mum replied with an irritated frown.

“And not to hit women.”

“You must never—” she started to lecture.

“Well, I’m about 2.5 seconds away from decking Nat’s mum, so can you go over there? If you lay her out, it won’t look anywhere near as bad as if I do it.”

Mum’s eyes found my mate and her bloody awful mother, her gaze hardening as she drew herself up, then took off a

rapid click.

“Now you’ve bloody done it,” Owen said, settling against the car with a sigh. “Hope you weren’t hoping to get an invite to Christmas at the Granger house, because your mother...”

My mother was a ball buster of the highest order if it was required and we all knew it. I’d unleashed an Intercontinental Ballistic Mother on Nat’s mum and I didn’t care, so I followed along behind her at a more sedate pace, just in time to catch the blow back.

“This man has been terrorising your daughter and you’ve just stood by and let it happen?” Mum asked, every word uttered precisely and with just the right level of venom. “And now you’re taking her to task for trying to fight back against his tyranny? The man split the lip of an old woman and burned down a house, let alone what he was doing to your own daughter.”

“I don’t know who the hell you are, but keep your bloody voice down!” Nat’s mum hissed.

“You do know who I am,” Mum said, stepping up to the other woman. “And I know who you are, or at least *what* you are.” Mum’s eyes narrowed then. “I’m from a country town too, so I know exactly what this is. You’re the sort whose worst fear is that ‘people might talk.’ As if that’s the world’s greatest sin, when you have clear evidence right here it’s not. Well, let me tell you something I learned when I found my m... partners. Everyone talks: all of the time, about every damn thing, because it relieves the god-awful boredom of living out in the sticks. You can’t ever stop that but you could actually have stepped up and supported your own daughter when things were going to hell for her.”

Just one little sigh from Nat, that’s what had me moving a step closer, but Mum wrapped her arm tighter around my mate and shook her head slightly at me, so that she could get in her parting shot.

“But if you won’t do that, we will.”

And, with that, Mum marched away from Nat's mother, with Nat in tow. Holly came bounding over, eyes gleaming making it clear she'd heard everything that had been said.

"What the fuck was that?" she asked excitedly. "Was that a mum-on-mum smack down? Mumageddon? A mumapocalypse? Damn, Meryl, that deserves the highest of fives because Nat's mum is such a biii—"

Mum stopped Holly mid-word with a long look.

"C'mon Mezza, don't leave me hanging like this." Holly wiggled the fingers of the hand she was holding up before a high five.

"You remind me a lot of my son," Mum said with a sigh, then grinned as she reached over and slapped her palm against Holly's. "I like that."

"And I need to take over here," I said, grabbing my mate from my mother, having been feeling like I couldn't take a full breath until I held her against my chest.

"You OK, love?" I asked her, quietly.

"I'm fine." Nat's voice was muffled against my shirt, then she pulled back and looked up at me. "This was..." She let out a big huff of breath, then threw her hands in the air. "A total shit show, but it wasn't my shit show." She stared back at the ruins. "I didn't set that fire."

"Nothing a four man orgy couldn't solve, right?" I said with a waggle of my eyebrows which earned me a hard dig in the ribs. That was OK, love is pain and I was a slut for anything my mate would give me. "We'll help you forget all about Fuckface by sitting on my f—"

"But I can be a part of the solution," Nat said, pushing herself away from me, but I just dragged her back.

"I'm guessing 'solution' isn't code for me, Koda and the boys making you airtight, right?"

"What does 'airtight' mean?" Meryl asked Holly, who just stared at us in alarm.

“No,” Nat told me and then she did this really cute thing, growling at me while wagging a finger in my face. Naturally, I tried to snap at her hand. “Bad Thorn.”

“But baby, I can be good. Very, very good and you can make those little kitten noises as I—”

She slapped her hand over my mouth and then turned to stare at everyone else.

“I think we need to regroup at the cabins and put together a battle plan,” Nat said. “Meryl is right. Everyone in a small town talks and we can use that to our advantage.” She looked back at her parents, real pain rising in her eyes as she did so. I wanted to kiss away her sadness, but when I went to do just that, she held me off, shaking her head. “I was always told to avoid being grist for the gossip mill and that’s skewed my head, made me think we need to tackle this all on our own, but...” She let out a sigh. “Paul’s not content to just make trouble for me. He feels like he’s been given permission to do whatever he wants to whoever he wants and that needs to stop now.”

“Fuck, you’re hot when you’re all decisive and shit,” I said, grabbing her hand and kissing her knuckles.

“I’m glad you like it,” she said, “because that might be all you’re getting tonight.”

She might have mistaken what it meant when my grin faded. It wasn’t disappointment I was feeling and, when we were mated, she’d know. How fucking proud I was of her, that I’d been waiting to see that flash of certainty, of fire in her eyes.

“It’s all I’m getting right now,” I said and shot her a wink before scooping her up into my arms and carrying her off to my ute, despite her squirming all the way.

“So we need to get as much of this information out to as many people as possible,” I said, looking at the collection of printouts I’d made from the emails I’d taken from Bernard’s laptop. “Let people know what’s going on, what Paul and the Prentisses are trying. Paul and Vickers might be content to ignore me.”

“I’d really prefer if you call him Fuckface,” Thorn said. “We do.”

“Thorn...” Lars growled.

“What? You call him Fuckface the most. I think you came up with it first.”

“And I was just gonna say I completely agree,” Lars replied with a grin, winking at me.

“I’ve just texted Annie,” Holly said, looking at her phone. “She’s keen to take whatever we’ve got and disseminate it. She’s been getting calls and emails all night about the bullshit that went down.”

“This is your local newspaper?” Jane said. “Why not cast your net wider and alert the regional news stations, even the state ones?”

“NIMBY has stopped a lot of developments in the city,” one of Alaric’s dads said with a nod.

“NIMBY?” I asked, thinking it was an environmental organisation from the city.

“Not In My Back Yard,” he replied with a smile. “People who get all worked up about a development will all of a sudden become very passionate about some local frog or bird species, as long as it means they don’t have low-cost housing or a new shopping centre built close to them, lowering their property values.”

“There’s also the wineries themselves,” Grant said, rubbing his chin. “We’ve been to a few parties the big knobs have put on and I suspect what’s got this Prentiss fella all excited was just a possible venture, not anything serious. They wouldn’t be letting that slip out in a conversation with a leech like him anyway.”

“They won’t like the negative publicity that comes from this,” Ingrid said with a sharp shake of her head. “Big wineries terrorising a sleepy town to drive down property values? Doesn’t sit well with the snooty air they like to maintain. It is just fermented grape juice after all. I much prefer vodka.”

And with that she poured herself a shot and one for me too, and I downed it without a thought. I felt like I needed that harsh burn, and then the soft buzz that came after because I was feeling raw, on edge and exposed.

I was going to try and mobilise the whole of Langston.

The thing about Australians is that we’re a laid back bunch, so much so that we frequently tip over into apathy. To try and fight against that seemed like it might be a big call, trying to push people so that they’d give enough of a shit enough to... what? What did I want them to do? Without a call to action all we’d do was breed fear, gossip, inaction or, worse, knee-jerk responses.

“You need to get people to understand what’s happening first,” Alaric said, his eyes burning into mine across the table. “Because that counters what’s been a key part of Prentiss’ plan. Keep people ignorant, stir stuff up and scare them, because I’m willing to bet he’s distancing himself from P—” He looked around the table. “Fuckface, as we speak. Prentiss isn’t an idiot. I’m betting what he wanted was some low level

coercion, some subtle stand-over tactics.” He smiled grimly. “He just picked the wrong guy for the job.”

“So we distance him from his power base and his potential rewards,” Koda said with a nod. “Leave him to be hung out to dry.” Those amber eyes met mine for a second. “We’ll need to stick close to Nat. That sort of pressure will make him desperate.”

“No need,” Alaric said. “I’m forwarding everything to Mark. There’s enough evidence from tonight alone to have Fuckface’s bail revoked. Vickers won’t be able to sit on this any longer.”

“Well, to be on the safe side, there’s no need for any of the five of you to even go to the work site,” Joe said. “The clock mechanism has arrived and the rest of us are here so we’ll be able to finish the job.”

“Locked in a room together.” Ingrid clapped her hands together in glee. “They don’t leave until those mating bonds are formed.”

“Love...” Joe said with a sigh.

“What? She’s accepted Lars.” She beamed at me, her eyes sliding to the pink bite mark on my neck. “The first mate she chose without being under duress, I might add.”

“Of course, you’d bring that up,” Meryl said with a sigh. “It isn’t a competition—”

“You say that because it took a fatal injury for Natalie to accept Koda...”

The bickering felt like it just faded away as I sank down, both into my chair and then once I was there, within myself. I dropped down, down, down into something else. Something quiet, dark and watchful.

They do this because they care. Koda’s voice felt like it rubbed softly over my skin, making all the hairs on the back of my neck lie down flat. *They’ll calm down as soon as the bonds are solidified.*

Yeah, right. The sarcasm was clear in Lars' voice. *Then they'll start in on the talk of babies.*

We won't let them hassle you about that, Koda assured me. *It will always be your choice.*

Too right. I wouldn't mind banning Mum from our place for a bit. Put her in time out for once, Lars replied.

But it wasn't that which I focussed on. I stared at the table, not really seeing it, aware that people were talking, but not really hearing it. I felt like I'd contracted back to some small, essential part of myself, and as I sucked in a breath, I realised I knew what had to happen.

"We know what we have to do," I said and the table fell quiet. "Finish the clock tower." I nodded to the dads then. "Let Annie know what's going on and forward all of the info we have to her with the understanding she can share it as far and wide as she likes. I'll contact Rob Prentiss once the information is out there—"

"Natalie..." Alaric growled.

"On the phone only. I'm not stupid enough to get in a room with him. I think you're right. He thought he had a tool in Paul... Fuckface," I corrected. "But he didn't realise just how bloody stupid, how venal, how bloody minded my ex-husband is. Prentiss assumed Paul would know when to pull his head in and keep a low profile, but that's not in him. Once Prentiss knows what's going to happen, it'll make clear that any deals he might've made with Vickers are null and void and free him up to throw Paul under the bus." I nodded slowly. "The cops will lock Paul up and charge him with assault, arson and whatever other crimes he committed tonight."

"I'll set up a meeting with Mark tomorrow morning," Alaric said.

"I'll do that, son." His dad clapped him on the shoulder and then nodded to me. "You'll have your hands full."

"Well, if all the jobs have been allocated then you men need to go outside and make yourselves useful," Ingrid announced. The look she shot me made me distinctly nervous.

“We have words of wisdom to impart, advice to give and suggestions for sexual positions to share.”

All of the men groaned in unison at the last bit, getting up and exiting the cabin, but Holly bounced closer, coming to sit in the chair next to me.

“I’m sticking around because, if you’re going to have the *Twilight* life we both fantasised about in school, I’m gonna live vicariously through you. Maybe I can use this knowledge to write a best-selling paranormal romance series that will make me megabucks and allow me to boot Nicky out on his arse.”

“You’re an idiot, you know that, right?” I told her.

“But I’m your idiot.” She leaned in close and snuggled into my side. “C’mon ladies, make with the fucky fucky details.” She pulled out her phone and then opened a note-taking application. “Literary greatness awaits.”

“You’re ready.” Jane was the quietest of all of the guys’ mothers, but no less certain for it. She just stared into my eyes before nodding slowly. “You chose Koda under duress and then accepted Lars by choice, but... I could see, before, that you had unfinished business to attend to, but not now.”

“Not anymore,” I agreed.

It felt like after tonight, I was done with everything that had stood in our way. Paul had obliterated my past with every act of cruelty and that had me more than ready to step forward and accept my new future.

“So you obviously know what happens when you accept the mate bond,” Meryl said with almost a shy smile. “It’s a trading of blood, usually through a bite.” She nodded to my neck. “Though not always. It comes at a moment of great connection.”

“I thought there’d be a whole lot more DP in this conversation,” Holly muttered until I jabbed her in the ribs with my elbow.

“Because once you accept all of them, that’s when the magic happens,” Ingrid said.

“And by magic you mean DVP and DAP,” Holly said to herself, tapping out some notes.

“Some women feel the same way when marrying their husbands,” Jane said. “Some at the birth of their children, but I will say this. It’s a moment when every barrier, every boundary is lowered and you let them in, just like they’re letting you in.”

I waited for some snarky comment from Holls, but her hands went limp, her phone coming to rest on the table as Jane continued. Ric’s mum looked radiant as she spoke, as her mumsy exterior stripped away and the young woman she must’ve been seemed to rise.

“It goes beyond love, beyond all expectations of other relationships. It never stops and it never dies, not even when we do.” When Jane’s eyes met mine they were shining with tears, happy tears. “You’ll never know a feeling that can compare with it.”

“Shit, Nat...” I turned to see that Holly had dropped all the usual bullshit. She reached over and grabbed my hand, holding it tight. “They’re gonna imprint on you harder than Jacob did with that weird baby thing in the movie.”

I let out a little laugh that half sounded like a sob. Blinking rapidly to clear my eyes, I looked at the mad bitch that was my friend and hooked an arm around her neck, giving her a hug.

“You’ll still come and see me sometimes, right? I mean I get you have a sea of dick to dive into, but—”

“You know I will,” I said. “How could I handle life without your crazy?”

“Come, enough sentiment.” I looked up to see Ingrid was pouring out measures of vodka into shot glasses and passing them around. “Your mating will be beautiful and lusty and produce many babies.” She shot me a meaningful look. “Many, many babies.”

“Maybe babies,” I said, holding up my glass, not prepared to just capitulate to my new mothers-in-law, as I had Delia.

“Whatever you want, we support,” Ingrid said with a slow nod.

“Before you go,” Jane said to me. “There’s something I need to tell you about Alaric.”

I WALKED out of the cabin and into the cool night air to find the dads and my sleuth all standing around the fire, nursing beers. As I approached, my guys all set their beers down on the ground. I felt like the sun and they were the planets orbiting me, coming closer and closer until finally I stepped into their collective embrace.

“Take me home,” I said, the words feeling like they had a ceremonial weight to them. “Then, just take me.”

For the first time ever we were all perfectly quiet as we drove over to the B&B, even Thorn. He shot me sidelong looks from where he sat next to me in the back seat, Koda on my other side. And when both of them took my hands in theirs I felt it, a thrum of energy, of excitement, of arousal, of... fear. What we were about to do would mean that things would change forever. Alaric kept flicking glances at the rear vision mirror to watch me, far too often for it to be safe, but we made it there in one piece.

The doors were opened and when I went to get out, Thorn took over, scooping me up in his arms like a bride on her wedding day, then setting me down on the ground for the others to cluster around. Lars' lips curved into the smallest of smiles, half hidden by his beard, as his fingers trailed over the bite mark he'd left on my neck, and his touch there made me shiver. Koda appeared beside his brother, watching me with those unfathomable golden eyes and then Alaric stepped forward.

“When we go in there—”

“Yes,” I said, knowing my answer now would be the same as my answer later.

“Nat, we—”

“Yes.”

Alaric shook his head. “I need you to be clear—”

“I am.”

As I stepped forward and pressed a hand over his chest, I could see it, the rapid flicker of everything he'd done, everything Alaric was. From the first time I'd met him: the man who'd sat by my side at the bar, coaxing me into drinking good tequila, then making me feel wanted, attractive for once, before making sure I got home in one piece. The man who worked tirelessly on the clock tower for me. The man who'd stripped down and made himself vulnerable, both in fur and in skin. The man who'd worked to make sure Holly's place was secure... My fingers teased at the top button on his shirt, flicking it open, and I held my fingertips against his warm skin, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

"I'm ready." I said to him, to Lars, to Koda and Thorn. I smiled, feeling a curious kind of lightness, despite everything I'd seen in the last 24 hours. I didn't want Britney yelling at me or Delia's foul looks. I would've taken away Dottie's injuries if I could've, stopped the fire from being lit, but I couldn't. The police, the judge that let Paul out on bail, Vickers, who seemed intent on aiding and abetting him, were the ones responsible for stopping that from happening, not me. And when I tossed aside all that unwarranted guilt and obligation I felt so bloody light it was like I was about to float away. "I'm ready."

There was joy in my words, and wonder. Need and desire and... love. I stared at each one feeling like I had to store every detail away, protect it from the world, but then I realised that I didn't need to. They were mine and I was...

"I'm yours," I said, remembering the white hot anxiety I'd felt as I walked up the aisle to Paul and knowing I had none of that now. "If you still want me."

"If we still want you...?" Koda growled, stepping forward and cradling my jaw so gently, brushing his thumb against my cheek. We were already mated, tied together deeply, and yet there was something shy about the way he leaned down to kiss me. It started with just a brushing of his lips against mine, but both our heart rates picked up as he did so and as he deepened the kiss, we both breathed a little faster. It was as though I sank into him, going deeper and deeper into a dark pool until I

was forced to pull away and catch my breath. He stared down at me, those amber eyes glowing like molten gold and a gentle smile spread across his face. “I’ll want you until the sun dies in the sky, until the world goes cold and beyond. Gods help me, I’ll never stop wanting...” He swallowed hard, staring at me meaningfully. “I’ll never stop loving you.”

I flung myself at him, wrapping my arms tight around his neck, clinging to him.

I love you too, I told him down the link, my throat too tight with emotion to squeeze the words out as tears streamed down my face.

“Fuck, brother, you made her cry already?” I turned my head towards Thorn in surprise because his voice had cracked with emotion, and while he was trying to sport his usual boyish bravado, the effect was somewhat ruined by the tears in his eyes. “I mean I am too, but—”

Before he could continue with the stream of bullshit that was about to appear, I stopped it with a kiss. Koda snorted and Lars laughed out loud at the effectiveness of my strategy. And then they sobered, because they could see and feel the raw emotion rising up in me for their sleuth-mate.

I had to show Thorn my feelings for him more overtly than I had with his brother, because I wasn’t able to rely on the mating bond to do the work. So I kissed him and kissed him like I was trying to learn every inch of his mouth, and then some. My hands raked through his hair, slid down the sharp edge of his jaw, and he was right there with me, kissing me harder, deeper, before he slowed the pace and rested his forehead against mine.

“Thorn—”

“I know.”

“But Thorn—” I started to say.

“I know.” He nodded slowly, staring down at me in all seriousness for a moment, his brows creasing like it hurt to do so. He took a deep breath as he stroked my hair. Without his usual bravado, he had an air of vulnerability about him as he

wrestled with what to say. “You love me... like I love you.” His brow cleared and a genuine smile spread across his face. I smiled back at him, confident that he really did understand how I felt about him. The next moment, he stepped back and a rakish smile flashed across his face, and he unbuttoned his shirt lightning fast before smoothing his hands down his muscular chest. “I mean, why wouldn’t you?”

“Fuck, Thorn—” Lars growled.

“Don’t hit me,” Thorn said to him, dodging out of reach before focusing back on me. “The only person touching me tonight is my baby.” He moved back to pull me in close, and my hands sliding up his torso and across his hot skin without any conscious thought on my part. “You want that, don’t you, Nat?”

“I want everything,” I whispered against his chest, like I was making a wish on my birthday, not a command. I pressed my face into him, breathing him in, listening to the rapid skitter of his heart. “I want everything you’ve got to give.”

He tilted my chin up so I couldn’t hide, and looked down at me with that intent expression back in his eyes.

“Well, that’s good then, because that’s exactly what you’re gonna get.”

He dipped his head down and tasted me again, his kisses becoming firmer and deeper until both our hearts were racing and an insistent mental nudge from Lars had me pulling away, panting for breath.

“Everything we’ve *all* got to give?” he asked me as he drew me from Thorn’s arms into his. He stroked my face, searching my eyes for answers. “You’ve had a lot happen today. There’s never any shame in saying ‘enough for now’.”

“Daddy Lars?” I said with a smile. “I know you’re bloody bossy, but sometimes you’re going to have to trust that a yes is a yes.” I reached up and pulled his head down to mine so I could place a kiss on his nose. “And it’s a yes from me. What about—” He swept in and claimed my lips before I could finish my question.

“I’ll never say no to you,” he told me in a low growl between kisses. “Never.”

After a few more moments, Lars lifted his head and turned me around in the safe harbour of his arms so that I was facing Alaric. The leader, the organiser, the planner, the one who always held himself in check. He was the one that looked on edge right now, the one whose mother had warned me...

“If it’s too soon—” I started to say.

“Too soon? Fuck...”

Alaric didn’t take me from Lars’ arms and my mate held me close as Alaric stepped up to me, caught my head in his hands and kissed me hard. There was so much pent-up passion and need in his touch that it was as though my body was set alight. He kissed my mouth until my lips were swollen, then trailed kisses down my neck, pulling at the collar of my dress to get to more skin until a button popped off and went flying.

“Shit...” Alaric jerked himself back, eyes blinking for a second as he came back to himself. “We need to take this inside before we have the police on our backs for public indecency.”

“So you plan on getting indecent with me, do you?” I said, meaning for it to be a joke. But the look Alaric gave me in response was one I hadn’t seen from him before. All of that careful, considered man seemed to have been wiped away. And in its place? There was something wild lurking in him that was coming to the fore.

He held out his hand for me to take, letting me choose, making sure I knew it was always my choice. I took it, because of course I would, stepping out of Lars’ embrace as Alaric drew me inside. Then there were warm, calloused, gentle hands all over me, working together to pull my dress down and my underwear off until I stood there, naked before them; the same way that Alaric had done for me, back in the forest on that day when I had learned about their true natures. They stared and stared at me and, for a moment, an old, atrophied part of me tried to rise; the part of me that wanted to cover myself back up, stop them, make excuses for my body.

But I didn't do any of that. I looked at each of them and saw the reverence, the love, the desire. I let them take their fill, because I knew I'd be doing the same as soon as they were stripped bare and I sent that thought to Lars and Koda. They both twitched, coming out of the reverie they'd been in, and their movement inspired a melee of large men kicking off boots, pulling off jeans and shirts, then socks and underwear. When they were all naked, they moved forward as a sleuth, ready to claim me.

And I reached out for them.

At the feel of so much hard, muscular flesh under my hands, I felt a momentary flash of shame, a hangover from my mum's bullshit parochialism, but it was easy to push it to one side. I had other mothers now who'd shown me the way, ones who'd told me this would be beautiful and lusty.

And I knew it would be.

"I want..." My voice cracked on the words. "I need to claim..." I stared deep into the eyes of each man in turn, taking in their intent expressions. "I need to claim this sleuth as mine," I said, slowly and clearly now.

"I've been waiting my whole fucking life to hear my mate say those words," Thorn said, grabbing me and dropping me down onto the nearest bed. "You're not leaving this room until every single one of us has marked you as his."

I answered him with a happy sigh.

A *laric*
Fuck.

In some ways, male bear shifters had it easy, when it came to mating. Our whole lives we'd been prepared for just this moment and, yet, here I was, standing on my own beside the bed as my three sleuth mates moved as one, kissing Nat all over. Somehow, now that the time had come, my brain wasn't letting me do more, despite my body aching, demanding I join them. Instead? I watched Lars move to sit behind Natalie and put her head in his lap, his hand smoothing down the column of her neck as he bent down to kiss her, while Koda and Thorn traced their lips across her collar bones and down. My tongue darted out to moisten my lips and my mouth filled with saliva as I watched the twins kiss their way over the gentle swells of her breasts, Lars sucking down her moans as they licked, nipped and sucked her nipples.

And I knew just what she would be feeling. Twin tugs of pleasure, not too hard, not too soft, and her thighs would be starting to rub together as the feeling translated to her clit, making it swell. And, sure enough, as I stepped closer, I caught the sweet glisten of her cunt, right before I fell to my knees between her splayed legs.

“Be careful, son,” Brent had told me at work earlier today. “You’re all getting close and you know what that means.” My other dads had clustered closer, tools left lying on the ground as they tried to make me see it.

But I already did.

“She’s ready.” When Brian said that I felt a rush of relief for just a second, right before the worry roared back twice as hot. “She’s ready to accept the lot of you and—”

“And if we all claim her, she’ll go into heat,” I said, wanting that with every breath, yet fearing it just the same. “She’ll be vulnerable. We’ll be vulnerable.”

It was why bear shifter colonies were so tightknit. Bears in the wild were much more solitary, the big apex predators needing so much food to support them that they couldn’t stay in very close contact with each other for long. But us? We’d evolved as humans as well as bears. We needed protection while we went through the most intense moment of our lives, and that’s what our families did for us.

The thing was, the four of us were already protective of Natalie. But once that bond snapped in place? Our instincts would be running the show, at least initially, and half a ton of furry fury would be directed at anyone or anything that would hurt her.

“If that prick of a husband of Natalie’s comes near her...”

My dads didn’t need to say it, because I already knew. If Paul tried anything with Nat once I’d marked her as mine, I’d fucking kill him. I wouldn’t be able to think logically, or be able to stop myself, because I’d be running on instinct. I’d just shift to fur and rip his ugly mug off his shoulders, and then my mate would be left to stand in a shower of his blood.

“Mark can sort a lot of shit out, but not that.”

I’d nodded to make clear I understood. But now? My hands shook as I slid them up my mate’s thighs, as I spread her wide for me. My fangs ached and I wanted to sink them into the tender skin of her inner thigh or high on her hip, marking her as ours—the bear’s and mine. Instead I ducked forward, collecting the sweetness of her nectar on my skin, trying to be satisfied with the surprised groan that vibrated through her.

And in this moment, that wasn’t hard.

I was, though, my cock was aching to be touched. But I focussed instead on her, teasing the shape of her sweet little cunt with the tip of my tongue, tilting her hips up with my hands so I could get to more of her. I felt like I was drowning in her, her slick coating my face, my tongue, and I kept going back for more, making love to her entire cunt. I pushed my tongue inside her, feeling my cock jerk as I imagined the moment when I'd replace it with something much fucking harder, but not now, not this time.

I couldn't allow that to happen, because my bear was too close to the surface. He didn't give a flying fuck about Paul, the law or the fact we'd likely end up in jail for murder. He just wanted his mate, no questions asked, and was prepared to bulldoze everything that might get in the way. So I had to hold him back, and that pain, that effort, forced my tongue to move faster, flicking at Natalie's clit, feeling it swell as I did and I pressed her hips hard against the bed as her body began to tighten.

"Alaric..." She'd pulled away from Lars to pant my name, knowing exactly who was doing what. "Alaric, please..."

I pressed a kiss to the inside of her thigh, my eyes falling closed for just a second. My hand slid upwards, my fingers pushing into her, a poor facsimile of what I really wanted to do: loom over her, claim her with my fangs as I thrust deep inside her, my baculum locking down hard as the sound of her pleasure filled my ears.

I only got one of those.

Her breaths grew hoarser, her cries louder as I felt her clamp down around my fingers, her body responding as if it was my cock inside her. I curled my fingers up, raking across her G-spot, tricking it into thinking it was getting exactly what it needed.

"Fuck..." Her voice was all high and breathy. "Alaric..."

"Ric," Koda snapped, pulling away from her and glaring down the line of her body at me. *You first*, he said inside my head. *She's ready*.

I can't! I shot back at him, thrusting my fingers deeper, harder, but her sounds of pleasure were mixed with a note of deeper need. *One of us has to hold back.* I left a silence there, letting him put two and two together. *We can't complete the bond, not until we're safe.*

This is not the way it goes, he growled back, staring at me as if that would make me understand. *She chooses, not us.*

And what about if Paul comes for Natalie?

She was getting close. She didn't know it but when she was ready to come, her skin glowed, her nipples turning a deep pink, and all of her body flushed with blood. I could almost see it surging through her veins, that need. I yanked my focus away from Koda and back to Natalie because, no matter what my dads said or I felt, there was something I knew deep in my bones.

She was my girl and she deserved every fucking thing I could give her and I would, every time, *as soon as it was safe.* I bent my head, flicking my tongue over her clit, working her harder and faster until she was ready for me to wrap my lips around her and suck her clit into my mouth.

“Alaric!”

Her hands slapped down on my head to hold me in exactly the right position, but she needn't have. I wasn't going anywhere. Not while she needed me, not while she needed this. Her hips bucked in time with the wild waves that washed through her, while her cunt felt like it was trying to wring the flesh from my bones with each surge. I licked her softer, slower as she began to come down, drawing my fingers from her slowly before nodding to Thorn.

He shook his head at that, eyes burning bright, but I knew he wouldn't be able to last long, not while our mate was needing. When I moved away from her, he took my place quickly enough, his hand slamming down on the bed beside her head as he eased himself in.

“Gonna take me now, Nat?” he asked her in a low husky voice and she nodded. “Yeah, you're gonna take all of me,

aren't you, love. Every damn inch. Take everything I've got to give."

His hips hitched forward, the need to bury himself inside her too powerful. Thorn's mouth fell open at the feel of her, so soft and slick I was willing to bet, the scent of her still clinging to my fingers. I rubbed them together, to prolong the feeling of my mate on my skin, right as Thorn began to move, thrusting in long, slow strokes as she began to rise again.

"Thorn... Thorn..."

As I began to pull away from my mate, Koda and Lars just looked at me, the accusation plain in their eyes, but that was nothing compared to the mental messages that came slamming into me as they watched me pull my clothes and pick up my keys.

Don't leave her, Koda commanded. *Don't fucking do this.*

She's ready and you need to fucking step up, Lars snarled inside my head.

I knew that, which was why I kept walking towards the door. I paused in the doorway to hear Thorn talking to her and I knew his fangs had snapped down and he was about to make her his own.

"You ready, love?" he asked. "Ready to be mine?"

His baculum would lock down inside her the moment his fangs buried themselves in her flesh, his cum would flood her as he sucked down a tiny mouthful of her blood. She'd be tied to the men I called brothers tighter than any ring or legal bond could ever achieve and they'd look after her all night and into the morning.

While I took care of the clock tower.

We'd come down to take this project with hope in our hearts, something that had just grown the moment I'd first sat down and talked to Natalie. I could still hear all of the passion and love she had for old buildings in her voice, and that was why I stole out of the building to my car instead of turning back to her and my sleuth-mates. I had teams working around the clock now, but someone always needed to oversee the

project, to make sure it was done right, and in this moment, that was me. When it was done, she'd finally be free, I just knew it, free to decide...

I shook my head as I stared at the steering wheel, coming back to the here and now and all the resulting exhaustion that came with it. I was just so fucking tired. I blinked and then sucked in a breath, starting the ignition before driving over to the restoration site.

“WE'RE all ready to put the clock mechanism in, boss,” my leading hand said when I walked up the steps. The walls were bright white, freshly painted, the roof was complete, the joists were all replaced. As I walked up the steps I could see that the job was indeed nearly completed, because all the tools had been put away. On my way up, I could see out through windows that had been reglazed, the glass now clean, complete and secure. Some of the boys were up the very top, standing in the little platform where the mechanism had been taken apart, cleaned, oiled and then put back together with a few minor repairs.

And then there were the clock faces.

Specially made by a small company of old fellas in the city, this would have to be one of their last jobs. The cracked and weathered originals would have been made a hundred years ago, and these guys had remade them using the same tools, the same materials. Each man was long past the point of retirement, but they'd done this one last job for us.

“We good to go?” my team asked, tools at the ready, because they knew, each one of them knew, what this meant to us, especially to me. Every sleuth had to show their mate how much she meant to them, to prove they were worthy of her—and this was my task, my burden. I moved in, picking up the right tools and a pair of gloves, and I nodded. And the exhaustion that had been weighing on me for days seemed to just fall away.

Yesterday, my dad's had gone across to Argyle and hired a crane and right now the first clock face was being manoeuvred

into position. It was a shame we had to do it in the middle of the night, because it was impressive to watch, but it was a deliberate move. While there were no onlookers to get in the way, there was no chance of anyone getting hurt. While Phil, the crane operator, moved it to the right height, we stood in the window where it would be set and I waved him closer. A little to the left, a little more, then forward, forward, and the massive panel with Roman numerals painted painstakingly on the front slotted into place.

I reached out into the space between the clock face and the building itself, carefully grabbing where the mechanism joined to the clock face and swung it into place. As soon as it was, my team worked quickly to secure it before we started on the other side. But every screw, every bracket, it felt like it shored up something inside me so that when I let go of the clock face, I wasn't surprised it stayed right where it was. I looked the work over with a nod, each man's eyes on me, waiting for some sort of correction, but there weren't any.

“Good work,” I said, “now let's do the other side.”

“Thorn...?”

There was something niggling in the back of mind, something I couldn't quite remember, but as my mate bent over me, rubbing the head of his cock against my sodden folds, I couldn't seem to spare the mental energy to work out what it was.

“Thorn—”

“I know, love,” he told me in a ragged croon, notching himself against me and then thrusting forward. “I've got just what you need.”

And he did, he so fucking did. My body was forced to stretch around him, the feeling driving me mad. My hands clawed at the sheets, at Lars, at Koda, before finding purchase in Thorn. My hands slapped down on his butt and jerked him closer.

“Need it hard, need it deep. I can feel your hunger,” Thorn growled as he stared down at me, all of the clown gone and replaced by this golden-eyed demon.

“So give her what she needs, dickhead, or I will!”

My head jerked sideways to see Lars moving over me, his body big, broad and ready to form a wall between me and anything that might cause me harm.

But Thorn wasn't hurting me in any way I didn't want.

“Lars... ” I pulled him down into a kiss, feeling like I wanted to devour him as Thorn began to move.

“Fuck, yes, just like that. Her cunt is gushing with slick and fuck... She’s strangling me. Gonna lock down in you... way too soon, if you keep doing that, babe.”

Natalie. Koda’s voice was like a stone dropped into the pond of my mind, the ripples drawing my attention away from Lars and back to him. “Is my brother making you feel good?”

His gentle voice drew my focus right back to Thorn, back to the place we were joined. I dropped my arm from Lars’ neck as Koda rolled me on my side. All the while, Thorn kept up slow thrusting into me as the two brothers repositioned me. Koda pressed his body against my back, his hand in my hair, stroking me as Thorn pressed himself harder against me.

“Is he hitting just the right spot?” Koda asked.

“Yes... yes...” I squirmed, trying to force the pace, but both men were holding me tight so I could only move my hips in short abortive little thrusts. “Need more. More, Thorn.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Lars growled. “Give her—”

“Exactly what she needs?” Thorn’s voice was ragged, every muscle tensed as he held himself back. “I fucking am. I hold nothing back from her, you know that, so stop trying to micromanage that shit and just listen.”

Lars’ eyes went wide as he stared down at us, as though he was only just now properly seeing what was in front of him. His big hand reached out, tracing a circle around one nipple, tightening his fingers to pull it as he heard the hiss of my breath.

“You feeling good, love?” he asked me, as if unsure of the answer. “Feeling full of everything Thorn’s giving you?” I nodded sharply, unable to get the words out. “Tell me how it feels. Tell me what he’s doing.”

My forehead creased. That felt impossible, incongruous. It was like I was on the edge of a cliff, about to fall, and Lars was asking me for a weather report while I was hanging there. But I tried. I’d always try for them.

“He’s... deep.” I tilted my hips upward slightly and it felt like he delved in further. “So deep.”

“Not hurting you? Don’t mash her cervix, dickhead.”

“No.” I slapped my upper hand onto Thorn’s hip to stop him from pulling back. Then both my hands slid upwards, along his taut form, across the muscles that shook with the effort of keeping things slow, and into the soft fall of his hair. “No pain, just good. So good.”

“How good? Tell me about it.”

“He’s tilting his hips so...” I groaned gutturally as I felt that spot being rubbed over slowly but surely, the pleasure rising, blossoming, as surely as bulbs in spring. “He’s getting it... every stroke.”

“And you’re sensitive from today,” Lars said, with a self-congratulatory smile, forcing me to nod.

“Lars work you over good, did he?” Koda asked, his hand sliding down between his brother and me. His fingers played with my clit, working the hood back and forth, even as Thorn’s body mashed down into it with each stroke. “So you must be feeling every inch of Thorn.”

I shook my head sharply, desperately, feeling something rise inside me, something bigger and harder and more encompassing.

“Good work,” Thorn ground out, shooting a quick look over my shoulder at his twin before looking back at me. “So you’re gonna feel this, hard.”

His hips bucked forward and for the first time I felt the moment his baculum slid free of him and into me. The bone spiked down, creating a dark explosion of pleasure that had me clawing at his shoulder with the hand that was between us and raking the nails of my other hand shamelessly over his back, and he hissed in response.

“Fu-uck...” Thorn’s beast looked down at me now, with eyes glowing fire bright, fangs fully extended. “Gotta make you mine now, love. Tell me you’re ready. Tell me you’re ready, now.”

His voice sounded destroyed, as if the extent of his emotions had corroded his vocal chords, but I wasn't much better. All I could manage was to pull him on to me as Koda moved further back on the bed.

Thorn smothered me, forced the air from my lungs so that when I took another breath it was of him, all of him. His hair fell in my face, his lips were on mine, until I felt my back begin to arch, the pleasure spiking that hard. Then his fangs found my neck and I leaned into his bite, needing it.

As he bit down, I exploded, my whole body filled with bright golden light the moment he swallowed my blood.

Nat...

It was weak at first, but as I felt something inside me reach out for him, there he was.

Nat! His mouth slammed down on mine, his body moving again to string the pleasure out and make it begin again.
Natalie. My Natalie...

Thorn...!

And I felt every him as our pleasure spiked harder, higher. My arms wrapped around Thorn to keep him just where he was. The way he fucking stared down at me, unable to stop himself from moving inside me, even if the strokes were small, almost gentle movements.

Here, love, I heard him say inside my mind. *Always here, now.*

God, and he was. I wasn't just full of him physically, but emotionally and mentally as well. I arched underneath him again, that small movement resulting in a furtive spurt of cum from him, his groan mingling with mine in response, as my body felt like it'd been remade. No aches or pains, no discomfort, only pleasure. One we would explore over and over.

It was easy to overlook Alaric's absence for a while, because we were so caught up in each other, touching, stroking, someone else thrusting deep when another pulled free, the sensual haze hanging heavily over me. Finally, we were sated and it all stopped. Then, as I settled into the bed, I noticed it. Like a sore tooth your tongue can't stop touching, Alaric's absence became apparent.

"My son cares very deeply for this sleuth and most of all for you," Jane had told me before we left for the B&B. "But he's quite different to Lars or the twins. Sleuths don't have alphas or leaders, not like wolf packs do, but..." She sighed. "The way we've raised him has meant responsibilities lay heavily on him." She reached out and rubbed a hand up and down my arm. "You're ready to accept him as your mate."

I'd nodded, unable to get out the words as they felt too insanely intimate.

"Alaric wants that with every breath, I know that for a fact, but..." She searched my face then, as if needing to see something there before she could continue, but I didn't know what. "He won't let it happen, not until everything is finished, everything's perfect and right. As boys, bear shifters are raised with stories of great deeds done to win their mates. And, Alaric, he feels like he needs to do great things to win you."

"I don't need him to do anything," I'd said, frowning slightly. "I just need him."

"Make him see that," she said. "Please, Natalie."

So when I lifted my head, a sinking feeling settled in my gut. I wasn't surprised to see that Alaric had slipped away at some point during the night. Beside me, Koda rose up on one elbow, meeting my eyes even as his brother started to snore lightly.

You ready to claim the last of your mates, Nat? he asked me, his voice a quiet, tense note inside my head. *Because it might not be as easy as it was with Thorn.*

Nothing worthwhile ever is, I replied, pulling free of Thorn's grip, even as he tried to draw me closer.

I PULLED on a jumper and some track pants, padding out of the room behind Koda, out into the cool mist of the very early morning.

"Where is he?" My voice sounded thin in the moonlight.

"Finishing things off, making everything better, all for you," Koda told me, then held out his hand.

I took it, letting him escort me over to the car and set me in my seat before we drove across town, past familiar streets, familiar houses cast in gold by the streetlights, we got to the council building. And that's when I saw it for the first time. I stumbled out of the car, staring up into the air, my feet tripping over non-existent obstacles as I walked closer, the vision I'd carried with me since childhood of an intact clock tower, mentally overlaid on top of what I saw above me. The windows shone, reflecting back the lights from the street beyond, the stone was pristine and clean. The roof tiles were a dark slaty grey. And the clock faces? I watched the big black hands tick by, marking each second that I stared.

"It's done," I said, letting out a breath of amazement that seemed to just whoosh free of me, carrying so much emotion with it. It was just an old building, a relic of the past that no one cared about, but I...

"It's done," Koda said, with a slow nod, grabbing my hand then pulling me close as he directed me over to the building. "It's done for you, love."

I could have chosen to feel that Alaric had neglected me tonight. After all, he'd slipped away like a thief in the night, pulling away from me rather than rushing towards me the moment I declared I was ready. But I fully understood now why Jane had taken me to one side. The four of them all communicated differently. Thorn said everything that was on his mind, where Lars mentioned everything that pissed him off. Koda measured his words carefully and used them when he needed to. But Alaric? He spoke with actions, not words, and so it was my job to decode what his actions were saying to me.

I stepped closer, but it was like I was in a dream, because I barely registered the sound of the concrete flagstones under my shoes. Then, when Koda used his swipe card to get us into the building, I heard the dull roar of masculine chatter, the sound of beer cans being cracked and rough cheers going up. But those sounds fell away as soon as we stepped inside. Instead, I could hear the gentle rhythm of the clock mechanism. The men who'd been standing celebrating the completion of the project moved aside, looking like a ragged honour guard of sorts, and my eyes were drawn up the steps, leading to the one who had organised all of this.

"Go to him," Koda urged, his hand on my shoulder, giving me a little push. Before I could move, the other men came rushing down, collecting tools and equipment as they went, leaving a near empty clock tower in their wake. After I climbed the first step, though, I found it hard to take another. Everything still felt dream-like, unreal. Then Alaric walked down the steps to me and held out a hand.

"Come and have a look, Nat."

There was something quiet and uncertain about his voice, but it stirred out of my reverie. I took his hand and he escorted me up, up, up to the top, pointing out everything that had been done and all of the improvements that had been made. I nodded wordlessly, unable to take it all in. When we got to the top and I looked back down, Koda was looking up at us. He smiled and shook his head before collecting some more tools and walking out, leaving the place to the two of us.

“I needed to get this done, Natalie,” Alaric told me. “I know that wasn’t the right thing to do, but I had—”

I cut him off with a kiss. His hands settled almost tentatively on my shoulders at first, before pulling me closer and then plastering me against his body.

“I needed...” he started to say, but I kissed him again and again. “Needed to do this for you.”

I pulled free of him then, and looked up at the man I loved, at his stupid stubborn face, at the stupid bloody clock that he’d installed, just for me. Tears filled my eyes and he frowned, looked devastated, then tried to brush them away. When the tears kept on coming, I threw myself at him again. When he started talking again, I realised just how much this man observed and planned.

“I want Paul to stay in that jail cell and rot.” They were my words he was repeating back to me. “I want the clock tower brought back to its former glory. I want everyone to be safe, happy.” His head tilted to one side, and I knew that he wanted me to understand why he had done what he had. “I want to be happy.” His grip tightened on me then, crushing me against his chest. “I want to be appreciated, treated like I’m fucking special for once and not someone’s afterthought. I want to be —”

“Loved,” I finished the sentence this time, feeling somehow that we’d come a full circle.

“I’m sorry I—”

“I love you,” I ground out, though every word hurt as it came out, because he didn’t know the full impact of what he’d done for me.

In my life, I hadn’t had that experience of being the person who other people put first. Of course, Holly did, that’s why we were best friends. But everyone else? I had made myself reliable, useful, practical and able to fit into almost any set of circumstances, but it was always *me* making concessions, not anyone else. I had become accustomed to bending myself into the shape that other people wanted me to be. And then I’d be

left to deal with the consequences of that, often without even any thanks for my trouble. But this? It was a motherfucking massive clock tower for one, but it was so much more than that. This was someone putting what *I* wanted, what *I* needed first. And creating a damn town monument while he did it. It wouldn't be my clock tower. It belonged to Langston, not me, but... A possessive part of me would remember this, remember what he'd done for me, every time I saw it.

“I love you too, Natalie.” He tipped my chin up so I met his eyes and then he stroked my face with shaking hands. “So fucking much it hurts and that's why I had to do this. You love this building. I never forgot how you talked about this place that first night in the pub, so I had to do it, fix it, get these old fellas up in Adelaide to hand paint those damn clock faces and —”

I pressed my fingers to his lips.

“I want to hear about it all, I promise.” I looked around me in wonder. “You can't rebuild a place like this and not tell me the story but...” I frowned slightly, emotions throbbing raw and harsh inside me. “But not tonight. You must be exhausted and I... I need you: not this place, not this town, just *you*.”

I hadn't been sure how to navigate this, hadn't really known what to say, but evidently I didn't do so badly.

“Fuck, you've got no idea how bad I needed to hear that.”

Alaric's voice throbbed with all of his exhaustion and all his need, right as his mouth dropped down to smash against mine, but right before his lips could touch mine, there was the dull sound of shouting from down in the street below, then the sharp crack of a gunshot cutting through the air. Our heads jerked up and there, in the brand new clock face, was a perfect round hole, with another forming on the other clock face as the bullet followed its trajectory.

“Natalie...” Alaric growled, shoving me behind him, but I wasn't having that. Wriggling free, I flew down the stairs, knowing exactly what I'd find once I got down to the street. And I was right: there he was, with that same shitty fucking ute and that same bastard smile on his face. This time, he had

one of his buddies' hunting rifles slung over his shoulder as he high-fived another one of them from inside the ute, proud of his shooting prowess, no doubt. I didn't care. My blood was up and my momentum carried me straight towards him across the concrete footpath.

“NATALIE!”

Alaric's voice was deeper, distorted, the bear rising, not the man, but I wasn't going to stop. I marched closer and closer, a grim approximation of the bridal march I'd made to become his wife, but this time I was out to negate every bit of our relationship, not consolidate it.

“Hello, Nat—” Paul sneered.

I pulled my hand back the moment I got close enough and slapped him across the face with all of my strength. My palm stung with the impact but the effect I had on him was worth it. He stumbled back against the ute, eyes wide with shock for once, staring at me as if he didn't recognise me or what I'd become.

“What the fuck—?”

“Shut up!” I snapped, my voice trembling with the intensity of my anger. “Just shut up!”

Then, just as I'd started to shout at my husband, the roar of a raging grizzly bear filled the air.

A *laric*

This—*this*—was why I couldn't let her claim me. We might have called him Fuckface, trying to minimise his impact, but for one stupid fuck of a man, Paul's influence was as pervasive as it was corrosive. Through sheer will, he managed to poison everything he came into contact with.

But no more.

My clothes strained at the seams as I strode out of the building, the change coming on faster, harder than it ever had before. Our mate was in danger and the bear was done waiting. We hadn't had the chance to change when the moon was full, worried what he and his buddies might do. And now? Now my control was fraying by the second.

“Ric!”

Our head swung around to see Koda step in front of us. We went to sweep him out of the way with a hand that had become a paw before we completed the action. My grizzly had surged forward, claws at the ready, and everyone stepped back.

“Ric, mate, now's not the time,” one of the men said, but I pushed past him.

“The cops have been alerted, they're on their way!” another said, but I didn't care. Paul was near my mate. He'd fallen back against the ute, was sporting a red mark on his cheek, but experience told me he wouldn't stay down. And, sure enough, we caught that flash of sheer fucking menace in

his eyes, right before he stood back up and lifted his arm to backhand Natalie. We charged then, with all of the momentum our massive body could muster as we stomped forward, our roar filling the night air right before we descended on our enemy.

He thought it was his right to slap our mate, but he was about to find out how wrong he was. Our paw sliced through the air, slamming into his side and then sending him flying through the air, his body landing in a limp pile like a discarded doll.

The bear didn't care.

It was her he wanted, needed. The fact we'd held out on the bond, had resisted joining the bonding process with our sleuth-mates, had eroded any control I might have had, forcing me to take a back seat in my own body as I reared up in front of my mate.

"Ric!" Koda's voice rang out, but I barely heard it, couldn't, not when I was staring at her. I chuffed deep in my chest at her wide eyes, the stink of fear coming off her; the bear knew that was wrong. Koda tried again, "The fucking cops are on their way, mate. Time to rein this shit in!"

He was right, I knew that, but I couldn't regain control. Not when her hand reached out towards me, shaking and tentative. Especially not when her fingers sank into my fur, pulling back at first, then digging deeper until they massaged my skin. I couldn't take this moment away from her because the bear wouldn't allow it. If I wasn't going to let her touch us in skin, he demanded she do so in fur. He dropped down to all fours, gently moving closer. His paws came to land on the other man's car, either side of her, and his claws raked across the metal as we pushed our face into the crook of her neck and snuffled.

We caught so much more from her scent in this form. The sweetness of her arousal, still clinging to her skin. The faint trace of blood and our sleuth mate's saliva left behind as he'd licked her clean. The combined seed of the others marking her as ours. The more recent stink of fear and anger and then...

Everything else was driven out of our head as she reached out and buried her face in our chest.

And that was the moment when it was all worth it. I would never sleep again, I would restore a thousand clock towers, if that was what it took. Anything for this. The world seemed to right itself, everything good and true rebuilding when I held my mate. But we seemed to be doomed to never experience that kind of thing for long, as the harsh sound of the police siren drew closer, screaming in our ears as the police car pulled up. The siren came to an abrupt stop and there was the sound of two doors opening then slamming shut.

“What the fucking fuck...?”

We moved forward, putting our body between our mate and the two uniformed men who were pointing firearms in our direction. Their mouths were open, their faces similar masks of surprise. We chuffed out a warning, then let out a low growl, making clear they shouldn't get any closer and that's when wariness replaced their initial surprise. Their grips tightened on their guns, right before—

“No!” Our mate threw herself in front of us, arms wide, trying to make herself as big a target as possible, even as we roared our disdain. “No! Don't shoot. Don't you touch him! Don't you fucking touch him!” Her voice was sharp, strident, throbbing with fear. “Alaric, change back! Please change back!”

Each member of the sleuth was all powerless to disobey our mate's order and so the beast retreated, leaving just the man instead, staring now at two very, very surprised Australian police officers.

“Well, fuck me...” Johnno said with a blink.

“What the...? What just...?” His partner seemed unable to form full sentences, as though his brain was glitching. Then he heard a groan from Paul. The prospect of dealing with an armed fugitive seemed to set him right. Giving me a last look out of the corner of his eye, as though wondering if there might suddenly be a bear in front of him if he looked away, he holstered his weapon and walked over to cuff

Fuckface,hauling him to the police car with a fair bit more than necessary force.

“Get out of town.” Johnno looked at me, then Nat, his voice uncharacteristically flat. “Go to the city, somewhere. Just get the fuck out of Langston until this shit dies down.”

“Should you be giving us that kind of advice?” Nat asked, her voice shaky.

“No. As a police officer, I need to tell you to make yourself available for further questioning. But as a friend?” He looked at the two of us, shaking his head. “Get the hell away from all this shit, Nat, just until things settle.”

My heart was in my chest, beating far faster than when I’d smashed Paul or when I’d held my mate, as I turned her around to face me.

“What do you think, love? Want to come and stay with us for a while in Adelaide?”

I braced myself for her answer to be negative, sure her ties to this place were too great for her to even consider it. But she grinned up at me, her eyes shining.

“Well, let’s see. The project is done. Paul’s locked up and is going to face charges.”

“Sooo many charges...” Johnno muttered. “Vickers, too, the prick.”

“I’m done,” she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. “Let’s go.”

We weren’t really. There was nothing to stop Rob Prentiss from trying to push through his dodgy property acquisitions via other means. The people of Langston might be receptive to the information she’d organised to send around about keeping Prentiss’ hands off their properties, or they might not. But I knew what was going on in her head, even without the bond. Natalie was done with it all. Her sense of responsibility, her ownership of the issue was done. The town could do what it liked with the restored clock tower, the information, but she was done.

I reached out for her hand as Koda sidled closer, and I rubbed my thumb over her knuckles.

“You have no idea how fucking much I’ve wanted to hear you say those words, love,” I told her.

Leaving Langston this time had a whole different feel to it. Before, I'd been young and naïve, thinking the world would fall at my feet, ready to welcome me into it. And now?

“Do you have enough clothes?” Meryl asked, looking at my small duffle bag as we lined up to get our boarding passes. “It doesn't matter if you don't; we'll take you shopping as soon as we get to the city.”

“Natalie won't need clothes.” Ingrid shot me a sly look, which just had Jane looking flustered. “Once she gets inside the door of the boys' house, we won't see them for days. We'll have some care packages prepared for you and left on the doorstep.”

“Did your mother-in-law just volunteer to do meal prep for your upcoming orgy?” Holly whispered as we waited in line. “Because, damn...”

“There won't be any orgies,” I hissed back at her. “We're just getting out of town until all this shit blows over.”

“You know you don't need to come back here.” Holly sounded serious. That in itself was weird enough for me to turn around to face her. She tried for a smile but failed. “I've been preparing myself for you leaving town since we were kids.” Her eyes were suspiciously shiny. “Langston is a cute little town, but...” She put her hand on my arm. “I've always felt like you needed more. I thought you were going to get it, going to uni and everything.” She blinked away a few tears

then that wicked gleam returned to her eyes. “Now you’re just going away to get dick in every hole instead. Much better than boring old architecture.”

“Holly—”

“...you’re the most amazing friend in the world and I can’t bear to think of life without you?” She finished my sentence for me in a melodramatic tone, putting the back of her hand to her forehead. Then she grew serious again. “Not telling you what to do, but... just think about it when you’re in the big smoke. Your future isn’t being dictated by the bloody Baileys anymore, so... what is it you really want to do with it?”

Usually, I just brushed off Holly’s bullshit. But this time? Her words stayed with me. After we’d hugged it out at the departure gate, I kept thinking about what she’d said. My mind was preoccupied with the idea for the whole one hour plane ride. I rolled it around in my head as we descended into Adelaide, the city of churches seeming a lot bigger than it had the last time I’d flown in. It spread out before us as I peered through the window, watching it get closer and closer. In my mind, the city was filled with possibilities as well as potential problems, and not knowing what was going to pop up first made me a little nervous.

AFTER WE GOT out of the airport, we said goodbye to the guy’s parents, piling into a hire car we’d use until their cars could be driven back to the city. Alaric had left a skeleton crew behind to take care of the finishing steps of the restoration and complete the handover to Simmons. They’d bring all the cars and the gear back within the week and then it would be as if the bear shifters had never been in Langston.

“Oh my god, this place is beautiful!”

As I peered through the front windscreen, I saw a huge stately Federation style home, complete with all of those beautiful details picked out in Brunswick green, cream and oxblood red. It was the kind of house you saw in glossy magazines, beautiful but remote as you knew just how much the bloody thing would be worth. I looked at Alaric then.

“Is this... your house?”

He looked proud as punch, though he tried to hide it, but there was no mistaking the flush in his cheeks.

“My great-grandfathers bought it just after the war. It was in a pretty bad state, because the family who’d owned it had been unable to manage the upkeep of it. It came into my family as the very first Burns Restorations project. They had some coverage in the local paper and a few magazines, which helped launch the business.” He sighed when he parked the car just in front of the immense house and gazed at it. “I inherited it when it got passed down because Mum and the dads had set up their own place down the road.”

“All of the sleuths live in this area,” Lars said, with a long-suffering look. “So when Mum says she’ll drop by with supplies, expect that to happen. A lot.”

“But not right now.” Thorn threw the door open and hauled me out of the car. “Why look at the pretty house when you’ve got all of this?”

As soon as my feet landed on the driveway, he shoved my hand up and under his shirt. His skin felt too smooth, too hot to touch. Koda came around and pushed his brother away, only to do the same, sliding my hand into the open collar of his shirt to rest it over his heart.

“Are you ready?” he asked me, in that same quietly intense tone he always used.

“Ready for what?” I asked, searching his face, then looking to the others for answers.

“This means something, coming into our home,” Alaric said, his cheeks still flushed a deep red. His eyes seemed to bore into mine, holding my attention. “To the bears, this is our den.”

“Thorn’s room looks like a literal cave,” Lars grumbled.

“Natalie, you’re not committing to anything by staying here,” Alaric continued, “but...”

“Let’s just show her before this gets built up into too much.” Koda held out his hand and I took it without thought, always ready to go where he’d take me. Alaric fished out his keys and then opened the front door into heaven.

Federation style architecture was probably the most beloved by Australia. Modern architectural design favoured homes that were clean, almost clinical. That wasn’t the case back then. From the green, red and cream mosaic floors to the elaborate ceiling roses and simple stained glass designs in the windows, it was both ornate and restrained, all at the same time. My footsteps were swallowed by a long Persian runner that led further into the house.

A massive living area, complete with a fireplace and overstuffed couches, greeted us. I could see the evidence of the guys everywhere, in the flat screen TV and game controllers tossed on a wooden coffee table as if they’d just finished a game. An open book on architectural history lay hanging over one of the arms of the chair. And over everything hung the spicy scent that was theirs, perfuming the air slightly, claiming the space as theirs.

“You can beat me at Super Smash Bros later,” Thorn said. “C’mon.”

He took the steps two at a time, racing upstairs while the rest of us followed at a more sedate pace, but when we got to the top, he was the one who started the guided tour.

“My room.” He gestured to a darkened space, with block-out curtains stopping any light from coming in. He flicked on the lights sheepishly, then his eyes went wide when he saw the chaos everywhere. I was sure it was a beautiful room, but it was just hard to see under all the mess. He swallowed audibly, then raced around, stuffing dirty clothes and rubbish into a laundry hamper that was acting as a bin, or maybe it was the other way around, without bothering to sort it.

“Told you,” Lars said, then wrapped an arm around my shoulder and steered me across the hallway. “This is mine.”

It was curiously Spartan, with little in the way of furniture apart from a bed and a chest of drawers beside it, with a desk

set up against the other wall. Everything was set just so, at perfect right angles to each other. Even his bed was neatly made—the quilt was smoothed flat and it sat perfectly proportionally over the bed. When I stepped into the room, natural light poured in through the window which looked down to the street below.

“So, your family lives somewhere out there?” I asked. To me this seemed to be a pretty damn fancy suburb, much grander than anything in Langston.

“My family lives over there.” He pointed to a sprawling house with a terracotta coloured roof over to the right. “Alaric’s lives there.” My focus was directed to the house just next door to ours.

“Our family’s house is over there,” Koda said, gesturing to a massive house down the road a bit. “Basically every house on the street is owned by bear shifters.” He watched me carefully, a small smile on his face. “This is our community, our turf.”

And one I could become a part of, his tone implied. I walked out of Lars’ room and Koda followed, showing me the room next to Thorn’s. His had a style that was somewhere in between his brother’s and his sleuth-mate’s. Not so sparsely furnished, not so neat, and yet there were no suspiciously stiff-looking socks on the floor either. He had a thick fake fur rug on the floor that made me want to sink my toes into it. The desk against the wall was piled high with books, and I wandered over and picking up the first one to flick through it. I shot him a surprised look when I saw it was a romance, but he just shrugged.

“I started reading them for homework, to get a better idea of how women’s minds work: what they want, what they need. But then...” The others chuckled at this, but Koda seemed impervious. “Who wouldn’t want to read books about beautiful women having hot sex with the men they love?”

“Got any ‘scenes’ we should try and re-enact, Koda bear?” Thorn asked, picking up a few books to look at their spines, then winking at me.

“Maybe.”

The collective gaze of the twins felt intense right now, as if the two of them were mentally communicating about just what they had planned. I left them to their plotting, and continued down the hall, to where Alaric stood. He gazed at me, not saying a word, and all the while his eyes roamed over what I was wearing. He didn't invite me into his room, either. Instead, it was as though he was waiting for something. I took a step forward slowly, warily, unsure if I should. And as soon as I was within range, he pulled me close. He held me against his chest, loosely enough that I could pull away if I wanted to and just buried his face in my hair, taking breaths of my scent. But if I didn't?

This is hard for Alaric, love, Lars told me. He's lived in this house, changed it in readiness for this day.

Everything was set up before we moved in, Koda said. We just had to bring our own gear but—

He's dreamed of this day, of bringing you here. He can't fucking say it because of the stick up his arse— Thorn said.

Not everyone says everything that's inside their head the moment they think it... Lars' rebuke faded away as I looked up and into Alaric's eyes.

“Show me,” I said, meaning his room, the house, but so much more. I was aware he kept a lot back from me, from everyone, but now I needed to see it, to see him. If we were to do this, to complete our bond, I needed to know all of it. Alaric nodded and then twisted the door handle, opening the door into his room.

And, despite being an eclectic mix of styles and colours, it was completely him. His bed looked like it might have been an antique that had come with the house, the bedding heaped high and in a haphazard pile. A beautiful old rug was spread across the floor, worn in some places, but the design was intricate, the colours jewel-like. His desk was heaped with paperwork, and there were pens and stamps and folders everywhere, along with a laptop that was still open, though not currently running. And books. What looked like a million books were stored in

bookshelves that ran along almost the entirety of one wall. I moved closer, seeing familiar titles amongst them. Some on Australian architectural history, on different forms of restoration. Source books that had photos upon photos of the way houses looked when they were first built. As I ran my fingers along the spines, the door closed and I turned around to find that Alaric had shut out the rest of his sleuth, leaving just the two of us.

“You can’t do that kind of thing anymore,” I said, not bothering to clarify what I was talking about, because he knew. “You can’t keep taking off and doing what you think we need.”

“No.”

My brows rose because I hadn’t been sure he’d agree, not straight away. But the look on his face made it clear that he was behind what I was saying, one hundred percent.

“It was a lovely thing and all very noble. But I don’t need noble.”

“No, I don’t suppose you do.”

He stepped in closer, looming over me, blocking out the light that came from the stained glass light shade in the middle of the ceiling, but he stopped short of touching me.

“When I said I wanted to be happy...” My throat seized up then, as if even vocalising it was hard to do. I sucked in a breath, then let it out and looked at him. “The clock tower wasn’t what I needed to be happy.” I blinked, realising, for the first time, even as I said the words, that they were true. “You are.”

“Natalie—”

“Just listen.” I reached up slowly and put my hand on his chest, and what I was saying, who I was saying it to, felt all the more real. “It was what I *thought* I wanted, to see the history of the town restored to its former glory, some image in my head made real but...” I stared up at him. “But it’s not what I really want.” I stroked my hand back and forth over his heart, before he covered it with his. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

“Only you know the answer to that,” he replied, shifting slightly closer, his head dropping down. “But if you want my input—”

“I want this.”

Reaching up and grabbing his head, bringing it down so his lips met mine, I felt a rush of much greater satisfaction than I’d ever felt about, well, anything really. It was just a butterfly kiss at first, a brush of my lips across his, but neither of us were satisfied with that for long. Our mouths parted, each one opening up to let the other in, the kiss deepening then getting harder, our breaths becoming gasps.

“I’m sorry...” He raised his head and rasped the words out, before going back to taste my lips again, but I stopped him. As I peered up at him, Alaric gazed deep into my eyes. “I know you were ready. I knew what you needed, but...” He let out a deep sigh, and as he acknowledged the truth, tension leached out of him. “But *I* needed you here, safe. Away from that town, all the fucking shit going on there and... him.” His hands slid around me and he slowly drew me closer. “Paul’s locked up and we... It feels like now there’s time for us.”

Alaric hadn’t wanted to share his worries, but I didn’t need to be bonded to him to know what he was feeling. He needed for us to be safe, to know that Fuckface couldn’t get to us, before he could let down his barriers and I realised that Alaric understood me better than any of the others.

Paul didn’t have a need to take care of people. He had done what he did for a reason, because coercing, manipulating and terrorising those around him gave him a kind of power, one that Vickers and Rob Prentiss had supported and encouraged while it suited them. Alaric had nothing to fear from my ex-husband, but he did have this. I saw him in all of his furry glory, a massive grizzly bear that was ready to unleash all of his considerable fury on the man who sought to threaten me. Alaric could’ve killed Paul, murdered him, turned him into a bloody smear on the road and part of him had wanted to. That was the wild part of him, the part that nipped at my lips when we kissed, stirring my blood. But Alaric had been schooled hard to keep the bear under control, to keep

everything under control. So, the fact he'd had to unleash his bear to keep me safe had been both a relief and another form of abuse, because he'd been forced into the shift rather than it being an act of free will.

“He can't touch us here,” I said, studying his face, wanting to capture his every reaction. “He can't touch anything of ours anymore. So where does that leave us, Alaric? What is this between us? What are we, now he's locked up and likely to stay behind bars for some time?”

He answered me with actions, not words, because that's what was how he communicated best, scooping me up into his arms and holding me there for a second, not a muscle straining to hold my weight.

“We build something,” he told me, his voice deep and growly. “We build something real.”

A *laric*

I'd been wanting this moment, dreaming of it, for so fucking long it was hard to know what to do now it had arrived. I laid her down on my bed, regretting for a moment not having fresh sheets for my mate, then I moved over her, caging her in with my body. She just grinned at me, reaching up and scratching her fingers through my beard and I closed my eyes in satisfaction and relief.

Walking away from her the other night had fucking killed me. It was only the sure knowledge that I had to give my mate everything she'd asked of me that had kept my feet moving. But now, it was like I'd been freed: freed of worries, freed from threats, freed from the constant thoughts of my own fucking head messing with me. And now it felt like I was base jumping, taking a leap of faith and falling. Falling into her.

The way her lips gave under mine, the taste of her lips, weren't enough, though. I had to get to her, get to my Nat, to reveal her satiny skin so I pushed at her t-shirt, nearly tearing it in my haste.

“Hey...”

I jerked back, staring down at my mate, and I realised my breaths was coming in sharp pants. She smiled, then bent forward so she could pull her t-shirt up and over her head. Reaching behind her, she flicked open her bra clasp and I circled my hands around to help her, easing the bra down her arms and onto the floor.

Did she realise how beautiful she was? The diffuse light coming in through the semi-sheer curtains bathed her in an extra dimension of radiance, turning her skin to alabaster, her nipples a perfect blush pink. She smiled a little nervously under my close inspection, then her hands went to my shirt to try and even the score.

I sat up so I could yank it free of my jeans. Buttons went ping across the room as I rushed to get it off and Nat let out a little laugh. I wrestled my shirt off and threw it down to join her bra, and then her hands went to my belt. I sat back on my heels to watch her feed the leather tongue through the clasp and then pull it free, her fingers working my zipper down seconds later before my hand covered hers.

I stepped free of the bed, although the bear fought me on that. We'd waged a battle when I'd walked away from Nat before and he thought I was trying to pull the same shit again. But there was no walking away now. She watched as I stripped away every barrier between me and my mate, both literally and figuratively, exposing my body and my vulnerability. She nodded decisively then shoved off her shoes and socks and wriggled her jeans down her hips until I took hold of them and pulled them all the way down. Then, when I crawled onto the bed, we touched, skin to skin.

I dropped my head down, seeking the softness of her lips before I said the words to her, and then I only drew back far enough to say them to her. "I love you, Nat. I'll always love you, always want to do the things that make you happy, make you feel safe. But, having you here—"

"This is where you feel safe." I looked into her eyes saw the understanding there as she looked up at me. What she said was true, but it was lot more than that.

Here, I could protect her. No one would get in the front door of my house, not without my permission. Here, I could take my time, kissing the slopes of her shoulders, the column of her neck, feeling the healed bite marks of my sleuth-mates. Here, she was mine, all fucking mine, and nothing would get between us. I didn't have to worry about the project, her damn fucking almost ex-husband, her parents or anything. My mind

was freed for her, only her, and she was all I could focus on. Her scent was in my nose, her taste was on my tongue, but bears are greedy pricks. We want more, more, stockpiling calories, experiences, away for a long, hard winter.

So when I traced the shape of one of her nipples with my tongue, I knew I'd be able to summon the feel of her, the way she sighed and gasped under my caress, whenever I wanted. Emboldened, I sought more and more, sucking the tip in and feeling the way it swelled, growing tight with need as her body began to move restlessly. Then I transferred my attention over to the other, forcing it to harden as well, while my fingers pinched down on her neglected nipple. But that wasn't enough. I kissed my way down her stomach, loving the feel of her skin, the way her body undulated under my caresses, and most of all loving her ripening scent as I kissed further down

Her thighs separated for me, letting me closer to her most intimate of flesh, the skin slick and shining with her need for me.

"You look swollen," I said in a low voice of self-congratulation, feeling how my knuckle slid through her folds with ease. "Slick and swollen."

"I always am, now," she said, her brows furrowing slightly. "You guys have done something to me, because I wasn't sporting lady wood 24/7 before this."

I grinned, unable to stop myself.

"Is that making you feel uncomfortable, needy?" I asked, her eyes flicking down to mine as she scowled at me. "Lucky you have four mates dying to see to you at a moment's notice." My smile faded. "Can I, Nat? Can I tend to you?"

She grabbed my head, pushing it down to where she wanted me, and I loved that she did that, taking control. She could have the four of us running in circles at the crook of her finger, she just had to accept that power. But despite her obvious cues, I simply placed a gentle kiss on her mound, then another, soft and barely there, until she groaned.

"Alaric..."

I shoved my hands under her hips, tilting them up like she was a cup for me to drink from. My tongue slid all the way up her seam, not wanting to miss any-fucking-thing, especially when her thighs spread wider and she arched up under my caress.

“Like that, my mate?”

“Like that...” she gasped.

Her hands slapped down on my head as I went to work, tracing the shape of where I would slam my cock deep, then working my tongue up inside her to slurp her slick from the source. I followed that with long, slow sucks of her clit, forcing the nerve endings up against my tongue and the roof of my mouth, making her feel every damn thing. It was as though was sucking down her moans, her responses, as much as her slick, like I was absorbing the way she responded to me and more. That feeling of connection was finally able to rise inside me, and it was a real and throbbing thing. It had my eyes pricking, my tongue working faster, my whole chest aching as I slid my fingers inside her.

“Yes, yes... Just like that, Alaric. Just like that!”

I raked my fingernails over the very swollen pad of her G-spot, feeling the way my sleuth-mates had awoken it inside her, and I built upon what they'd done. It only took a few strokes across it before she was squirming, thrashing beneath me, rising up half off the bed and then...

“Fuck, I'm coming!”

My fingers dragged pleasure out as long as I could, the ripples washing through her. I couldn't let her have a break. As she collapsed down onto my bed, limp as a doll, I surged up and over her.

“Need you, Nat.”

That's all I ground out before covering her body with mine, hooking her heels up and over my shoulders before I rubbed the head of my cock against her. And she just sighed.

“God, yes, Alaric...”

When I sank into her, it felt completely different than the first time we'd been together. Natalie was open to me in ways she hadn't been before. And that bond? It was as though I could reach out and grab it with both hands, something I was determined to do. I burrowed in deep, forcing her to stretch around me and loving the tight snap of her sheath as I did, her moans getting deeper, faster as I did so. A small worry that I might be hurting her had me slowing, but her heels dug in as her eyes flicked open.

"Now, Alaric," she told me. Her hands reached for my face but I had to lean down to make that happen, which just made me go deeper again. "God, yes, just like that."

She didn't need to beg, or plead or order me around. I was helpless to do anything else but delve deeper into her. I couldn't even keep my hips still as I kissed her; I had to keep pulling back slightly, then thrusting forward again.

"I need all of you." I paused at her words, needing to make sure I'd heard her right. Then her eyes flicked open and what I saw within them felt like it struck me right into my soul. She stared at me implacably and then said the words again. "I need all of you, Alaric."

And she had chosen exactly the right thing to say, because I needed to know that she was giving me permission to do this.

I cradled her head in my hands, my eyes not looking away from hers for a second as I started to move. Harder thrusts, deeper, pushing back and then diving back into her within seconds of pulling free. I needed to burrow myself inside her until there was no way for either of us to pull free. I was slamming into her now, and she arched up into every stroke, wanting, needing everything I had to give. And then her mouth fell open and her breath brushed against my face, right before she said this.

"Everything, Alaric."

A bear's mate always chooses. Mine tipped her head to one side to reveal the blank canvas of her neck, currently unmarked by any of my sleuth-mates. She was offering me

every damn thing I'd ever wanted and I wouldn't hold back ever again.

My baculum shot free, locking me down inside her and the bear roared his approval. "Mine!" I snarled, as my fangs snicked down and then my mouth clamped around her neck.

"Oh god..."

Just one little gasp and then I felt her orgasm roll through her, triggering my own, every spurt of cum feeling like it was being wrung out of me. Her cunt clasped me so fucking tight I felt a whole body shake overcome me. But I wasn't going to move, wasn't about to be thrown off, and I licked at the blood that had welled to the surface off her neck until it finally came to a stop.

"It's done?"

She looked up at me, wide-eyed, and I watched the moment she felt the connection settle, an experience that was like seeing the sun rise. A sense of joy and light filled me and then came the sense of her.

My mate.

I didn't want to cry, but tears formed anyway. All of the longing and need that had plagued my days washed away and was replaced by her. Nat. My mate. I pressed my forehead to hers, unable to do anything else but feel as it all rushed in. I knew then exactly how I'd made her feel, and how complete she now was. I knew the persistent ache in her chest was gone and instead she felt as light as a feather. And, on a more pragmatic point, that each time I moved, my baculum created a very distracting sensation inside her, one I decided needed much further exploration.

So we did.

"IT'S DONE?"

Hours later we stumbled downstairs to find the rest of the sleuth sitting around waiting for us. I was trying to hold Nat

up, but I felt just as wobbly as she did as we entered the lounge room.

“It’s done,” I confirmed, pulling my mate down on my lap as I flopped onto the couch. “And some food wouldn’t go astray. What are you feeling like, love?”

Nat’s hand slid down to her stomach, then a little lower. I covered her hand with mine as I felt a hunger waken inside her, though it wasn’t for food.

“I’m not... hungry.” Every single one of us stiffened at the sound of her voice, at the scent of her perfume filling the air. “I feel... hot.”

The three of them rose as one, coming closer to the woman that we loved.

“You might well be feeling that,” Thorn said, his mouth curving into a wicked grin. “Love, you’re going into heat.”

“Heat?”

The mothers hadn't talked in a lot of detail about that, but as I stared at each one of their mates I saw the same expression on their faces. The look Daddy Bear gave Goldilocks when he said he was going to eat her all up. And if I was Goldy here? I wasn't too upset by that idea. As I stood up, my legs felt like rubber and sweat prickled all across my skin. I pulled at the old t-shirt Alaric had given me, the voluminous folds somehow feeling constricting, then I frowned.

“What do you mean I'm going into heat? Like a dog?”

My voice sounded different, the question coming out kinda high and whiny and that just had them all stepping closer.

“Not like a dog,” Lars said. “Like a bear's mate.”

“Like you've accepted us and are receptive,” Koda added.

“Like your pleasure belongs to us.” Thorn grinned but there was something darker in it, as if all the golden retriever energy had been banished, leaving something much wilder in its stead. He ran his tongue along his fangs then winked at me. “Gotta admit, I've been waiting for this.”

I expected Alaric to step in, stop whatever this was, but instead he sat down again and pulled me back down on his lap, this time, hooking my legs over the outside of his, then pulling his legs apart in order to spread mine open. His hands rucked the t-shirt up, displaying me shamelessly to the rest of them. I

should've stopped him, pushed his hands off or pulled at the shirt to keep it down, but I didn't.

"Time to decide what you want to do, my mate." Alaric's voice was a low buzz in my ear. "You're not on birth control."

"No," I breathed.

"Then there's a possibility you could get pregnant if you let us near you for the next few days."

I felt a wash of white-hot sensation pass over me, and I couldn't tell whether it was from fear or anticipation. That was the thing about not being able to have children when I'd wanted them, the two feelings had become so tightly entwined it was hard to determine one from the other.

"You don't have to make a decision now. You've only just accepted us. You can run upstairs, claim the room right down the end and lock the door. We won't come in, not without your say so."

"Or?" It felt like my question hung in the air.

"Or you can see just what being the mate of a sleuth of bears means," he replied, rubbing his hand possessively over my stomach.

Everywhere his hand went, a burning sensation followed, making my skin grow slicker with sweat. And my body? I shifted restlessly on Alaric's lap, feeling like I was dripping all over him and all the while they watched my every move. I was prey and they were the predators. I pulled myself free of Alaric, low growls sounding around me the moment I moved, but my feet seemed to have their own idea, moving lightly over the floor as the men trailed behind me.

"Be clear on what you want," Alaric warned, getting to his feet, the tent in his pyjama pants notwithstanding. The gentleman, who'd made me his only hours before, seemed to have left the building. Each one of them was a bright eyed demon tracking my movements. "If you don't want this, then go up to that room and lock the door."

"And if I don't choose that door?"

It felt as though I was throwing down the gauntlet, for myself and for them. To toss all my worries to one side and to just go with whatever happened. Everything they'd brought into my life had made it better, so it wasn't hard to... My throat tightened. It wasn't hard to imagine us expanding our lives to include children. A little boy with ice blue eyes or twin little girls with long dark hair, or a tall, solemn boy with the golden eyes of his father and a rump of light brown hair. There was a challenge in my voice, but not just for them, for myself as well, to allow myself to be vulnerable in this way, to let myself consider the possibility of having children after having told myself it wasn't possible.

“Go upstairs and find out,” Lars commanded.

Part of me rebelled, taking any attempt to tell me what to do as an incitement to violence, or perhaps a bout of bad behaviour.

“Maybe we should leave this decision to fate,” I replied, taking a step towards the stairs, then another. They watched every movement closely. “If I get up there and behind the door before you, I lock it and keep you out.”

“And if you don't?” Koda asked, but he knew. They all knew. They could feel the tide in my blood pulling me along and it was sweeping them up too. I scaled the stairs as fast as I could, the sound of their thundering steps behind me making my heart race. I scrambled up to the top of the stairs, my feet skidding on the long rug leading up the hallway, when I saw the open door.

I bolted for it to the sounds of their curses, as four massive men came lumbering along behind me, but I was quick as a rabbit. I zipped past one door, then another, aiming for the light shining through the doorway at the end, beckoning me forward. My hand slapped down on the door knob and I shoved the door open and crossed the threshold, ready to slam it shut behind me when one foot, then a shoulder, then whole bodies stopped that from happening. I fell to the floor, scrambling to get my back against the wall, for all intents and purposes a poor weak little human being chased by the big bad bears.

“Looks like you lose, my mate,” Lars said, his eyes almost phosphorescent blue in the afternoon light.

“Oh no,” I said with a quirk of my lips. “What will I do with all the multiple orgasms?”

“Cheeky wench.”

He plucked me off the floor and tore my t-shirt clean off, my pulse picking up at the sound of ripping cotton as I was bared before them. Clothes were pulled off or torn away, until all four of them approached me, boxing me in.

“You need to be sure,” Alaric warned, his fangs bared, hands flexing with a need to grab me. “Last chance, my mate.”

“Pretty sure that moment passed the minute I let each one of you claim me.” They went very still. I could feel down our bond all that power contained inside them. Power that felt like it was pouring into me. Perhaps that’s why my head jerked up, my eyes stared into theirs. “If I’m your mate, what’s to stop you from taking me?”

“Nothing,” came their growled response to my challenge. My body was picked up and thrown down onto the bed, and they came with me. My eyes fell closed as I felt mouths, hands sliding over every inch of me.

“Lube,” one muttered and I let out a small noise of complaint as I felt someone pull away from me to retrieve something from the bedside table. Then they turned me around and put me on my hands and knees.

This is what it must be like when animals mate, I thought dimly, the fire in my blood seeming to burn out my brain, stopping me from thinking, from feeling anything but this. Fingers on my clit, tugging it insistently. Fingers pushing inside my cunt, first two, then three, then four, forcing my body to stretch hard around them. Something slick rubbed into my arse and then fingers pushed in there, right as Koda tipped my head up so I stared into his eyes.

This doesn’t happen often, he told me. But bears treasure it when it does. We give you pleasure in return for your surrender. Can you do that, Nat?

My hand slapped down on his hip, feeling the hard muscle there before I pulled him closer so that the head of his cock brushed my mouth, the tip, weeping pre-cum, painting my lips.

Our pleasure, I insisted, opening my mouth slowly and pulling him in, all of his quiet resolve fracturing further with each inch I swallowed. I stared up into his eyes, forcing him to meet my gaze, so he saw the moment mine fluttered as I felt someone easing inside me, replacing their fingers with their cock. Then someone flopped down on the bed and flicked my clit with their fingers as I took him, moving faster when I felt another one of them rubbing against the tight muscle of my arse. They were about to take everything I had and I gave it gladly.

I showed that in the way I opened my throat, their thrusts pushing me forward onto Koda's cock, forcing me to swallow him. And the sound of his hiss? That little moment of satisfaction made me flush all over. I spread my legs wide, feeling the others move. Lars and Thorn, I realised, working together for once without arguing. Because there was nothing to dispute right now, a strange kind of harmony setting in. Our bodies sang with our own pleasure and that which we felt down the bonds. Harder, faster, I needed it just like that, and they picked up speed accordingly, able to read my responses like no man ever had. Alaric grabbed at my swinging breasts, tormenting the nipples at each pass. All too soon I was forced to pull free of Koda, little gasped breaths escaping me. Then he tilted my head up, pushing back past my lips. Because as I got closer, so did he.

“Not gonna fucking last...” Lars groaned in disgust. “Too good.”

But I didn't care. Pleasure was infectious between us, making us move, clench, thrust, swell, fuck as one being, right up until it all came to a head.

I stared into Koda's eyes, my view of him blurry now from the sweat pouring down my forehead and into my eyes. His dick felt like it grew diamond-hard in my mouth, swelling as far as it could go, right before it jerked. My scream was muffled by his cock, his cum splashing over my tongue, right

as they erupted inside me. And my body went into overdrive, the burning sensation flaring harder and harder until I felt like I was about to go up in flames. Then, as I hit the summit, I felt something totally different.

A flood of love, commitment, a desperate, desperate need to care for me. The four of them worked to drive me right out of my mind as my whole body jerked in time with the waves of pleasure washing through me, and I swallowed, twitched, convulsed around them until finally I fell still. I was lifted up, held close and snuggled down between four bodies, our collective sweat gluing us to each other as we caught our breath.

“So that’s it?” I asked, only to be met by the dark chuckles of my mates. Someone lifted me so I rested against his chest and then a bottle of water was cracked and held to my lips. As I drank obediently, they let me know exactly what was going to happen.

“This is only the beginning.” I opened my eyes to see Thorn lounging in front of me, an devilish look in his eyes, despite his sweat-streaked hair. “We’ve got three days until you either get pregnant or the heat breaks.” His hand slid up my thighs, scooping up the mess they’d made there and pushing it back inside me. I wanted to shove him away, because I was feeling too sensitive, and yet it was not enough, all at the same time. “Three days where we do nothing but please our baby.”

He moved, prowling towards me before depositing a kiss on my lips. They stung from all of Alaric’s kisses and from being wrapped around Koda’s cock, but I didn’t pull away, instead I leaned forward, as far as I could go, so I could meet him and taste his lips on mine. He brushed his hand across my forehead, stroking the hair away from my face.

“Rest now and catch your breath.” But even with his soothing words, the feel of his fingers had me shifting restlessly, the curl of pleasure starting to wind tight again. “Because then it all starts again.”

K *oda*

“Sticky...” Natalie whined, shifting restlessly on the bed.

We’d been at this for a day and half, and only now were the flames of her heat burning down for a momentary reprieve. I understood what she was talking about. I parted her thighs with gentle hands, seeing the cum leaking out of her and feeling a primal rush of satisfaction. Natalie was mine. I could feel the heavy weight of the pleasure we’d forced her to accept over and over, like it was my own. But seeing this tangible mark of our bond? There was nothing better. Though right now, she wasn’t loving it so much, her sweaty, sticky skin grabbing at the sheets every time she moved. So I picked her up and carried her down the hall.

“Koda...” Her eyes cracked open a little and she stared up at me. “Koda, I can’t.”

“You can,” I assured her, feeling that heavy ache in my balls that only happened when she was feeling receptive. “But, right now, you’re having a bath.”

“A bath?”

I knew how deep she was in her heat as she stared at me quizzically, not understanding what I meant. I just shook my head with a smile, then kicked the bathroom door open and set her down to sit on the edge of the bath as I got the water running.

Mum had set up some different bath salt mixes in preparation for when we brought home our mate. I opened a few jars and sniffed them, choosing one that smelled of soothing herbs like calendula and arnica before pouring it in.

“God, yes...” Natalie lurched toward the water, ready to dive on in, but I held her upright for a moment, stepping into the water first before picking her up and settling her against my body as we both lay down in the warm depths. “Yesss...”

“Not so sticky anymore, right,” I said, just shifting the water back and forth with my hands so it lapped over her rather than scrubbing at her skin, getting her accustomed to the feeling when she was so sensitive.

“Not sticky...” she agreed, and that’s when it happened.

She went limp against me, trusting me to keep her face up and above the water’s surface, her head coming to rest in the crook of my shoulder. I sucked a deep breath in at the feel of her completely relaxing, because I wasn’t used to it. Nat had been a ball of fear, suppressed anger, anxiety and pain when we had first bonded, but that had been slowly unravelling. I felt like only now could I finally take my first full breaths in and out, and as I exhaled I pushed out everything I needed to get out of my system, as what came down the bond washed through me.

Bears committed hard and fast, which meant we had to get to know our mates once we were mated, but this was the first time I could really feel that possibility. We could spend hours in the bath, just like this, watching the light change through the window set high on the wall, sitting here until the water cooled and then heating it up some more. But now as I listened to her breaths get longer and slower, a feeling of peace settled in, making me happier than I’d ever felt before.

I loved her. I loved her so deeply and fiercely. My hands twitched and I had to move them, to find the soap and the washcloth. Even while she was resting, I needed to tend to her, to make her feel more comfortable, to wash away everything we’d left inside her, so we could start anew as soon as she roused again. I pressed my lips to her neck, wanting to unleash

my fangs and dig them into her skin, mark her more clearly as mine, but... We were tied together in ways the others weren't. I'd been dying, feeling the world go cold and dim around me and she'd... she'd saved me. I closed my eyes then, moving the washcloth by feel alone, using it to map the curves on her body, to learn the terrain of Nat. I pressed my nose to her neck, breathing in her scent with every lungful of air and that's when I caught the moment the notes of her perfume shifted, became more intense.

“Koda...?”

My hand moved upwards, dragging the washcloth over her stomach and up to her breasts. That feeling of electrical connection spiked as her arousal rose sharply.

“Koda...”

That was more a moan, a small pant, her lovely little arse grinding back on my cock, as if I needed more stimulation.

“Koda...!”

I nipped at her neck so she tilted her head sideways. I claimed her mouth as both my hands covered her now heavy breasts. Her nipples were pulled painfully tight, sensitive as I brushed my fingertips against them. The noises she made now, as she writhed against my cock, had become much more primal. I surged up out of the water, taking her with me, pushing her until she had her hands slapped down on the rim of the bath, her sweet cunt on display.

“Hold on,” I told her, meaning that both literally and figuratively. “I've got what you need, but I need you to hold on.”

Her thighs spread wider, her hips tilting back in a raw representation of the lust that surged through her. I tried to be gentle, just touching her with featherlight strokes, fearing she was starting to get sore after everything she'd had from us, but she pushed back against my caresses, obviously wanting more.

“Something you need, my mate?” I asked her, smiling to myself.

“Koda, I need—” Her demand was cut off as I speared a thumb inside her, the web of my fingers grinding into her seam as my forefinger grazed her clit. “Yes, more, please, Koda.”

I’d give her the world the moment she asked for it, she had to know that, so I pulled my thumb free, stroking her clit as my tongue swept in, working its way inside her to slurp on her slick.

“Oh... oh, fuck...”

She was a very good girl and gripped the edge of the bath, just like I asked her to, as I ate her out, my whole face burying itself in her, licking, sucking, searching for more. I pulled my mouth away, to the sound of her little whine, and then her knuckles went white as I shoved several fingers inside, raking them across the place that had started to ache again, feeling her start to squirm. But I couldn’t keep it up for long, the need to fuck her, cum inside her, mark her as mine burning hotter and hotter, until finally I pulled free of the water, my hands slapping down on her hips.

“Hold still and I’ll give you everything you need,” I told her in a low growl.

“Yes—”

Her reply was cut off as I found her core with unerring accuracy and then thrust deep inside her.

“Fuck...”

I wasn’t sure if I hissed that out or if she did, but that didn’t matter, not when I was deep within her. My baculum ached to lock down inside her, but I held it off. Instead, I thrust harder, deeper, her body opening up to me on every stroke, her hips pushing back to meet mine. We each reached for the other, sought each other out, the pleasure that sparked as easy as breathing between us. And still there was more.

“Koda...!”

She wasn’t crying out for me because I was taking her over the edge and beyond. She didn’t need me just as a hard cock, to see her through her breeding season. I felt her heart, her

soul reach out to me through the bond and that's when I knew just how perfect she was.

Mark me. Her voice inside my head was much more measured. *Mark me as yours.*

You are mine! I snarled back, my fingers digging deeper into her hips.

I am and you never got the chance to complete the bond like we should have. Mark me now, Koda. I want to feel your fangs in my throat the moment you lock down inside me. I need

She didn't have to tell me twice. I'd had to stop myself from biting her several times and somehow she'd known. I scooped her up, supporting her torso with my arms and I held her close the moment my baculum shot out. At the sounds of her gasps of ecstasy, right as her cunt started clamping down hard around me, my fangs popped out and I bit down into her neck.

It shouldn't have mattered. We were mated, inside each other's heads, hearts, but somehow it meant everything in the damn world. When I'd been bleeding out, she'd offered me a lifeline, bringing me back to the land of the living. But now that I was in it? I wanted to choose her, claim her, show her just how much I fucking loved her, and that's what I did.

"OH GOD, THAT WAS INTENSE..." she gasped as we came back to the room. I was still rigid inside her, ready to go off at a moment's notice. Nat seemed to sense that, wriggling a little and then laughing when more cum shot free of me, forcing my hands to clamp down harder to hold her still.

"And what has you giggling, my mate?" It felt like there was an extra weight to her title now, as if we fitted together that much better.

"God, it used to be that once a guy came, it was all over, red rover," she sighed, then I felt her very deliberately tighten around me, using the muscles of her cunt to milk my cock. "And now? It's only just begun."

“It’s all just begun.” I whispered it into her neck, knowing that was true of so many things about our life together, right as I began to move again.

“O h god...” I groaned, every muscle in my body aching, but it was that good ache that came from doing something awesome. We had been doing something awesome for three days straight and right now I was starting to feel like the red haze was breaking.

“You called?” Thorn appeared above me, his beautiful long hair all stringy now with sweat. He’d bound it back in a very manly bun and I reached out and tugged a strand that had pulled free. “How’re you feeling, baby?”

“Hungry.” I frowned as my stomach started growling very aggressively, because it had been ignored for some time. He just grinned.

“Ah. You’re starting to come out of it,” he said before standing up and hauling me up over his shoulder.

“Thorn!” I yelped.

“Shh...” He rubbed a hand over my arse as he carried me in a fireman’s hold out the door. “You’ll wake the babies.”

The ‘babies’ were Lars, Koda and Alaric and they still slept on, exhausted by everything we’d done. But Thorn seemed to still be full of beans, and he carried me downstairs and then sat me on the kitchen benchtop.

“Now, we need lots of carbs...” I watched his very fine arse as he opened the fridge door and bent over to see what he had to work with. “Salt, sugar.”

“God, yes...” I moaned, my hands slapping down on my stomach as it rumbled again, hunger hitting me so damn hard I ached with it. “Just gimme whatever. I don’t even care—”

He shoved a cube of cheese into my mouth, silencing me, and I chewed it up, the sharp taste bursting on my tongue, dragging another groan from me.

“Like that, huh?” He dove back into the fridge for more, plonking all sorts of foodstuffs on the bench and then holding them up for me to taste. “How about some garlic and chilli olives?”

Vinegar, the bite of chilli and the harsh blast of garlic along with the much saltier taste of the briny olive was amazing in ways food had never been before. I reached for more but he whisked the container away, picking up something else. A container of garlic hummus was pulled open and he stuck his finger straight into it, then gave it to me to lick. The much milder taste was lemony, nutty and freaking awesome, so I cleaned every drop off before he grinned at me.

“Everything tastes so good,” I said.

“Everything’s better when you find your mate.” He swooped in, kissing me, then pulled back, smearing the hummus across his mouth and offering it to me.

“Tell me you don’t have a food kink,” I said, laughing. I licked him clean anyway, and that soon devolved into more kisses. The haze threatened to rise again, to drag me under and Thorn with me.

“I have a you kink,” he assured me, but pulled away with a regretful look. “And you need to eat.” He cut a thick slice of sourdough, covering it with layer after layer of toppings until my eyes started to widen, then cut another slice and used the top half of the sandwich to squish everything down. He cut it in two, offering me half. “A Thorn special. Try it.”

I wasn’t even sure what was in it, but I decided I trusted him, so I took a big bite and was pleasantly surprised as my taste buds came to life. There was creamy, salty, tangy, crunchy, squishy, cheesy and meaty all in the same sandwich. I

took another bite and then another, which made him grin around his own mouthfuls until we were both finished and left staring at each other.

“You’re special,” I said softly, because expressing terms of endearment still felt weird to me. I’d thrown them at Paul, only for him to ignore them. But Thorn? He tilted his head down slightly so he could see me better, and his whole face lit up as he registered what I’d said.

“Yeah?” His voice was low and husky as he stepped in between my legs. He wrapped arm around my waist and tugged me closer, and I locked my ankles around his back. “How special?”

“Well, you make very good sandwiches,” I said and he grinned, edging closer. “And you’re very strong.” He almost purred as I slid my hand over his chest, muscles popping up everywhere I touched. “And you—”

A sharp rap on the front door had both of us freezing.

“Lars?” Ingrid’s muffled voice came through the door, pinning us to the spot.

“They’re probably still in bed, love,” one of the dads said.

“In bed? It’s been three days. Natalie’s heat will’ve broken and she’ll need food.”

Thorn’s eyes sparkled with mischief as he stared into mine.

“So leave it on the doorstep and stop being nosy,” another masculine voice said.

“But, what if—?” Ingrid protested.

Thorn edged closer, wedging his body against mine and, while I could hear a muffled conversation being held outside, I couldn’t decipher the words. Not when my attention was all on the man looming over me, his mouth descending to mine, ready to claim it.

His kiss was slower, softer, much more exploratory than it had been before, the fire inside us dying down to warm coals. But my feet dug into his butt as the kiss became long and drawn out.

“Can you be quiet?” Thorn whispered into my ear as his hands slid over my shoulder and then down my back. The reason for his question became immediately apparent as he gripped my arse, grinding me down on his cock that had risen again, ready to plunder me. I let out a little groan as his shaft rubbed against my clit, each movement sending sparks of pleasure through me, the kind that shouldn’t have been easy to rouse again. Yet maybe that’s the way it would always be. One of us reaching for the other, ready to connect, to tie ourselves to the other at a moment’s notice. “Shh...” he said, barely audible. “They’ll hear you.”

That threat hung over me as he pulled me right to the edge of the bench. My legs dangled free as he dropped down, eyes burning into mine as he pressed a kiss into one inner thigh then another, getting closer and closer to my core.

“Thorn...!” I rasped out.

“Shh... Quiet, baby, otherwise Ingrid is going to demand to come in and you know how that will go. It’ll be vodka and a play-by-play of everything we’ve done over the last few days, and no one wants that. You want *this*.”

His tongue moved slowly, surely, and it was like it mapped every inch of me. My teeth sank into my bottom lip as he flicked my clit with surgical precision. His tongue delved deeper and deeper, a small burst of pain accompanying the much bigger one of pleasure as he licked me into submission. But when he surged up, his hands slapping down on the bench, his hand over my mouth as he thrust up inside me, it felt like I couldn’t hold it in. I needed to shout it to the whole fucking neighbourhood, what I had, what I felt and that’s when I heard something beyond the front door.

“They’re still alive and still have stuff to sort out,” a dad said, “so let’s go. We’ll come back tomorrow.”

“Oh fuck...!” I whispered as Thorn removed his hand, his whole focus on me, us now.

“Fuck, you feel like heaven,” he growled. “Nothing’s ever been as good as this. I could die tomorrow a happy man after going through your heat—”

“Don’t say that,” I said, grabbing at his head and pulling him closer. “Please don’t ever say that.”

“You need me around still?” He was teasing me, I knew that, both of us not able to commit to this conversation as his thrusts grew deeper and harder.

“I just need you,” I told him, and that’s when he stilled. Just for a moment, staring into my eyes as the bond throbbed between us. “I just need you, Thorn.” I stroked his beautiful face, seeing the peace that seemed to settle over him every time we connected. “I love you.”

He surged forward, holding me as hard as he could, his mouth smashing down on mine, the taste of each other and the food he’d made combining.

“I’ll love you until the world grows cold and the sun burns out,” he said, not pulling away for a second. “You’re fucking everything to me. Now take my cock, Natalie. Take everything I’ve got to give you, and more if you need it.”

We barely moved, we were gripping each other so tight, so he rocked my world in small little movements until we both erupted.

“Mm...” He nuzzled into the bite mark he’d left on my neck, licking and sucking on it because he knew the sensation drove me crazy. “That’s it.” He breathed in my scent, burrowing his nose in my neck. “You’re finished now. Your heat has broken.”

He was right. I felt it almost as a loss, because once the haze lifted, we were once again two people who wanted each other, needed each other, but couldn’t rely on powerful instincts to bring them together anymore.

“Want to have a shower?” he asked, watching me carefully. “I dunno about you, but I smell like an actual bear right now and its fucking ripe.”

I burst out laughing.

“God, yes. I’ll wash your hair if you wash mine.”

A *month later.*

The flight back to Langston was a weird one. It felt like I was going back in time, back to a more painful place and in some ways both of those were right. My mates and I had been called to appear in court as witnesses in Paul's court case. We got off the plane and drove over to the courthouse, and I wasn't sure what I'd think or feel on being back. 'Nothing' hadn't been high on my list of expectations, but it didn't stay that way for long. Commercial Rd looked much better, all the damage Paul had wrought had been swept away and repaired and in some ways that's how I felt as I walked into the courtroom. As if I'd moved on from all of this and was wondering how I'd come to be standing back here again. But when Paul was led out in his prison uniform, his hands cuffed behind his back, then it all came back.

"How're you holding up?"

Holly slid into the seat next to me, my mates taking up all the other spots around me. My friend and my sleuth were like a wall between me and the court proceedings. So when Paul looked across the courtroom with a sneer on his face, I didn't feel... anything. Just faint curiosity, perhaps a little disgust, but mostly nothing.

"I just want this to be over," I said and that was my honest answer. She reached over and squeezed my hand and then the trial started.

I WAS CALLED to talk about so many things during the trial. His treatment of me before this all started and then there was the whole drama of his relationship with Britney. She was sitting in court, back ramrod straight with fucking Delia at her side, shooting me filthy looks through the whole thing, but as I spelled out the betrayal and her role in it, people started to mutter. The judge called for order, then prompted me to go on. I gave the lawyers all the details they asked for, spoke about the information as if it had happened to someone else, because that's what it felt like. That I was an actor in a play or I was watching the trial take place on TV, some other poor woman called forward to testify against her shitty ex. It wasn't until we got to other people's testimony that my calm exterior started to crack.

Dottie looked a million times better than the last time I'd seen her, and she was full of piss and vinegar as she told her story. More gasps went around the courtroom as it all came out. The shitty things Paul had thought he would either get away with, or be able to coerce or threaten people sufficiently for them to stay quiet. That's what this was in a way, a community therapy session where the truth and all of his sins were exposed.

His defence lawyer did his best, but this wasn't the fancy one he had before. Apparently Rob Prentiss had washed his hands of him, and Paul was represented by a legal aid lawyer who stammered through his questions, the prosecutor pulling him up with points of order throughout the trial. No one and nothing would stop the prosecutor from laying bare everything Paul had done. But after my testimony, my mates', Holly's, and other victims were delivered, then some of his 'friends' who rolled on him for a better deal for themselves, the jury went away to deliberate.

“PAUL'S BROKE APPARENTLY,” Holly told me as we sat in Maisie's newly restored cafe, nursing coffees. “Bitchney went to get some food from the shops and her card was declined. Went full Karen mode and was screaming at everyone who was watching her while every method of payment failed.

Someone would've stepped up and helped her out except she was being a total raging bitch. She tried to walk out with her shopping without paying and then security guards tackled her to the ground. Then she was screaming about the baby, the baby, and Delia had to be called. She was forced to pay for the goods while bailing out her new daughter-in-law."

She shot me a wry look.

"Britney managed to get herself rushed to the hospital for 'the baby's sake', and was threatening to sue Woolies, but no one cared. Just steer the fuck clear of her while you're down here. Those two..." She shook her head. "They're on the bloody warpath."

And I found out why soon enough.

THE JUDGE DELIVERED THE VERDICT. I missed the exact crimes Paul was charged with or the terms of his imprisonment, just that he was going away for a considerable amount of time. I let a long breath out, my chest losing a feeling of tightness I hadn't even realised was present until I released it, my whole body sagging into my chair. Hands went to my shoulders, my back, or linked with mine and squeezed, but I could hardly feel any of it. Paul shouted something, at me, at the town, at the judge, and the magistrate dealt with it swiftly, instructing the officers to remove him back to his cell.

His cell.

Paul would be locked up in a small concrete box for his crimes, only allowed to go out, exercise, eat and socialise when corrections officers said he could and I...

I was free.

My mind grabbed onto those words, turning them over and over, repeating them like a mantra, trying to get my soul to accept them the whole time as we walked all the way out of the court house and onto the street beyond. And, of course, that's when Britney and Delia appeared.

“YOU FUCKING BITCH...!”

That was the only warning I got before Britney appeared, wild-eyed and not looking anywhere nearly as well put together, the whites of her eyes showing as she launched herself at me.

Sometimes I questioned why I didn't want to go back to Langston. It was my home, wasn't it? Generations of Grangers had been born and raised there. But it was people like this and their insanity, I realised in this moment, that kept me away. The place was forever tarnished by this kind of unhinged bullshit.

“You did this!” she shrieked at me, spittle flying everywhere. “You took Paul from me! You couldn't just let things be! You had to take everything!”

I didn't focus on her words, because I was focused on dodging her wildly swinging blows. There were voices being raised in the street, people rushing forward, but not before *they* did. My mates' bodies formed a wall between me and the hysterical woman, Holly joining in the line to block her from getting to me. She tried again, only to be shoved back, something that had Delia spluttering.

“You'd hit a pregnant woman?”

“Would you?” Alaric's voice contained a kind of deadly certainty, something that had both women peering past my mates and my friend to look at me, frowning when they did so.

“Natalie can't get pregnant!” Delia snapped.

“Not with your useless, piece-of-shit son she couldn't,” Lars said and, man, did that get people's tongues wagging. They'd come for the drama of the court case and now they were getting a double serving of gossip on the street. I felt the need to disappear then, move, get the fuck away from this place and all these people, all the prying eyes. But Lars pulled me closer, cradling me in his arms in a way Paul would never do Britney, even if he was freed from prison. “He didn't give Natalie what she needed, but we do.”

Delia's brows furrowed as she watched Lars' hand slide over my stomach, the crease between her eyebrows growing deeper as he smoothed over the slight swell. I wasn't showing yet, obviously, but one morning I'd woken up and they'd known. I didn't talk about it, too fearful of putting the news out into the world lest it be snatched away, and right fucking now, Delia and fucking Britney were forcing it out against my will which made my anger flare harder.

"I don't want to know what your fucking problem is," I snapped, not bothering to clarify who because that didn't matter. "Once I knew Paul was fucking Britney I split up with him, left him to your tender mercies and moved the fuck on, like you need to."

My eyes slid down to her stomach, equally as flat as mine, but a child could be growing slowly there, just like mine was.

"You're going to have to raise a baby without its father." Britney flinched at that, as if I'd physically hit her. "He'll be in jail right up until... your kid is well into primary school. He won't be there to see his child born. He won't hold your hand as you give birth. You won't have him to pass the baby to when you're going out of your mind with all of the crying. He won't be there to teach your child about what it is to be an adult."

And that's when I realised what kind of karmic justice was being served. I looked at Delia, holding her gaze for some time.

"All you wanted was for your son to have a child. But this baby? His or her father will be a total stranger to them right up until they're about eight or nine."

I didn't take any pleasure from the moment when both women's eyes went red with tears, when their lips quivered and their faces seemed to collapse in on themselves. I'd described their fate and that was more than enough revenge. But as we turned to walk away, I remembered all the pain the two of them had inflicted and how little they'd cared, ready to tear my life in two to get what they wanted. I walked off and I

kept on walking, getting further and further away from them, from all of their drama, until we got to Holly's.

“HOLY FUCKING SMACKDOWN, NAT,” she said, eyes wide as she poured us both a cup of tea. “Karma is a bitch, and so are you, apparently.” She set a cup before me and I numbly added milk and sugar to it before taking a sip. “But a baby?”

I blinked then, feeling terribly drained. It was as if life had worked tirelessly to hollow me the fuck out, scraping away everything soft in me until all that was left was this husk, something that had me swaying slightly in my seat.

“The windows are looking good,” Alaric said, coming to sit beside me. “The glazier did a good job.”

“They did and thanks for the recommendation of that company,” Holly said. “Tea?”

“Thanks,” he said. The others took her up on her offer as they settled down beside me and that's when I realised. While it might have been the case that all of my former self had been torn away, things were different for the new me, my current self? This version of me leaned into Alaric's arm, feeling it go around her as soon as she did so. She listened to Lars and Thorn bicker and felt the curious touch of Koda's mind against hers, right as she sank into her mate's side.

“A baby...” I confirmed in little more than a whisper. “I'm having a baby.”

“Oh my god,” Holly yelled. “Is she having some kind of sex-induced aneurysm or something? Or is this just really early onset baby brain?”

“We weren't telling anyone yet,” Koda said, shooting Lars a dark look. “Just in case—”

“No need for any ‘just in cases’,” Thorn said, grabbing my hand. “Nothing bad will happen to my baby.”

He didn't bother to clarify who he meant, me or the child, and I knew right then that was deliberate. Thorn believed we'd both be OK and that's why I allowed myself to smile for the

first time since I'd got off the plane from Adelaide. The light in his eyes, that certainty, it seemed to fill me right up and I found myself smiling at each and every person in the bookshop. Then Holly reached out and grabbed my hands.

“I'm gonna be an aunty?” I nodded sharply, tears filling my eyes, closing off my throat and preventing me from speaking. “Oh my god, I can't wait to start teaching it to run with scissors.”

A *week later*

“So you don’t want to come for the grand opening of the clock tower restoration?” Simmons asked me down the phone line. “This project was your baby.”

There was an expectant air in my old boss’ voice and I knew why. He was offering me everything I’d thought I wanted. I’d thrown myself into the restoration of the clock tower thinking it would fill the hole inside me. It had given me purpose, something to get out of bed for each morning, because there’d been so little going on in my life. But now?

“Nope.” My reply was firm and definite. “Alaric will send a representative for the formal unveiling, but...” I looked across the lounge room to where the man himself was looking through my new textbooks, orientating himself on the topics I’d need to study. “We won’t be attending. Sorry.”

Not sorry, I said silently.

“I understand,” he said with a sigh. “After everything that happened... I apologise for the way I handled that—”

“Don’t worry.” I smiled then, knowing he really should, but I couldn’t find it in myself to push that home. I was done. It was over. None of this mattered anymore.

“It’s a little too late for me to tell you this now, but I was preparing you to take over my role when I retire,” he told me and I just blinked. “By forcing you to deal with all aspects of the mayor’s role, I felt like it was an apprenticeship of sorts,

one that paid off with the way you dealt with the Prentiss property proposal. From your interventions, three of the major wineries operating in South Australia have booked meetings with me.”

I saw then the way it could've been. Me still married to Paul, as he slept with anyone who would have had him, then I'd take over a role even my father hadn't been able to attain. It would all have been so easy.

But it just wasn't right for me. And that's what I'd realised in the short time I'd spent away from Langston. It was the place I was born in, the place I had history with, but as I looked around the room of Alaric's, no, our house, I realised it wasn't home anymore.

“Really?”

“I have to do them as... Zoom calls? You don't know how to do one of those, do you?”

It was tempting to let myself get sucked back in, to let his flattery lure me into getting involved again, but as I settled back into the couch, Thorn's arms tightening around me, it wasn't hard to say what I really needed to.

“No,” I replied honestly, then smiled. “But I'm sure someone will help you with it. Look, thanks for letting us know about the grand opening. I hope it all goes well for you.”

And with that, I ended the call.

For a moment I just stared at my phone, that feeling of unreality washing over me again, but I knew what it was now. I'd broken up with Paul much more easily than I had my town, because there was a lot more there for me to hold onto. But the friends I had, the people that really counted, they'd always stay in my heart. And everything else?

The sound of the fire crackling filtered through, of Lars and Alaric discussing the different subjects I'd need to take to complete my architectural degree, the feel of Thorn's arm around me, then Koda's as he came and snuggled into my other side. The longer I sat there, the more I allowed it to come rushing in.

Love.

“Everything OK?” Koda asked as I slowly closed my eyes. The concern in his voice made me smile.

“Everything’s going to be perfect,” I said, and as my hand came to rest on my stomach. “I just know it.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

So will there be any more bear shifter books? Yup, if sales are good! I have an idea for a teacher who is unwittingly teaching the orphaned nephews of a sleuth and she meets their hot uncles during a parent teacher meeting and sparks fly. I have some covers set up and any future books will be standalones only.

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Interested in booking her? Contact her via Facebook Messenger.

<https://www.facebook.com/steph.tashkoff>

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