



CC

PARANORMALS  
OF CRESCENT CREEK

CAPTIVATION  
OF A  
**BEAR**

SHAW CLAN BOOK 4

JENNIFER SNYDER

# CAPTIVATION OF A BEAR

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Shaw Clan Book 4

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## PREFACE

A rustling noise followed by a low growl at the edge of the woods sounded. My gaze shot in that direction, locking with a set of yellow eyes. It had to be an animal, which didn't surprise me, considering I was on a mountain in the middle of the woods. Wildlife was everywhere here. However, when the animal stepped forward and I could see what it was, fear prickled through me.

A panther.

Without hesitation, I bolted inside the cabin and slammed the door shut behind me. Immediately, I erased the text I'd been about to send Harrison and tapped out another one instead.

**Did you know you have panthers on this mountain?  
There's one outside my cabin right now.**

I moved to the window and glanced out, realizing immediately there was more than one standing outside the cabin now.

There were three.

My fear intensified, because the one in the center had locked on me with an eerie, unyielding fixation, filling me with an overwhelming sense of dread.

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## POPPY

**F**ollowing the GPS on my phone, I turned down Main Street, wondering if this turn would take me closer to Shaw Cabins. My cell reception was awful, and my phone kept either glitching or giving me the spinning wheel of frustration.

I was lost.

Normally, this wouldn't bother me. I often thought of being lost as going on an adventure, but not today. Today, I was buzzing with nerves.

What if Tara knew by looking at me that I wasn't here for a friendly visit or to meet Micah? What if she could tell I'd gotten myself into a pickle and needed help?

My older sister always could read me like a book.

I made it to the stop sign at the end of Main Street before realizing the Australian hottie who lived in my cell phone hadn't shouted out my next turn. My gaze snapped to my phone. Instead of the spinning wheel of frustration this time, I noticed the screen was black. I tapped around on it, but nothing happened.

It was dead, which was just my luck lately.

I needed my aura cleansed or my chakras cleared and charged because I'd had a string of bad luck lately, and I didn't have Mercury Retrograde to blame it on.

It was all me.

The car behind me honked, and I jumped. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I noticed a line forming behind me. Not knowing what else to do, I cut a left at the stop sign and circled back to the beginning of Main Street again. The road to Shaw Cabins had to be here somewhere. My hope was that when I saw it, I'd recognize it without the help of my stupid GPS. If not, then I'd park and ask for directions. Crescent Creek was small. Everyone knew everyone, which meant anyone should be able to point me in the direction of the cabins.

At least, I hoped.

While creeping down Main Street for a second time, I dug through my purse for my phone charger. My bracelet got stuck on the clasp of my purse, and I shifted my gaze from the road for a split second to unhook it. Grabbing my charger, I refocused on the road in time to see a man crossing in front of my car, oblivious to my approach. My heart lurched inside my chest as I slammed on my brakes.

*No! No! No!*

Squeezing my eyes shut, I braced for impact with him. When a thud sounded, my eyes sprung open. He stood directly in front of me, his large hands splayed out across the hood of the car. A smirk twisted his lips as my gaze locked with his through the windshield.

Did he think this was funny? I mean, seriously? What had he been thinking walking into traffic as though he owned the road? Now, he was smiling at me.

I narrowed my eyes at something in his mouth—was that a sucker?

It was morning. While recent life choices hadn't proven me to be the most responsible, at least I wasn't this guy—walking into traffic because I couldn't be bothered to look both ways and eating a sucker for breakfast.

The guy stood to his full height; his hands lifted into the air. The smirk on his face grew, causing anger to bubble up inside me. My grip on the steering wheel tightened.



Who did this guy think he was?

My mind raced with all the horrible possible outcomes of what could have happened because of his recklessness—hospital bills, damage to my rental car, legal trouble. I couldn't afford any of it. Not now. Not with every penny I owned having been stolen from me.

“Looks like I won that game of chicken,” he said with a wink.

Did he really just make a joke about this? “Oh my God! Didn't your mother ever teach you to look both ways before you cross the street?” I shouted, my voice tinged with frustration. “What an idiot,” I muttered under my breath, thinking he wouldn't hear.

The guy gave me a nasty look, as though he'd heard that last part. There was no way I'd said it loud enough for him to catch it, though.

“Maybe you should've been paying closer attention,” he countered, his tone biting. “Pedestrians walk across here all the time. It's called a crosswalk, and you're supposed to stop, Tammy!”

Tammy? Who the heck was Tammy?

This guy was insane.

“And you're supposed to make sure oncoming traffic is planning to stop before you walk out in front of them,” I tossed right back at him. His expression darkened, and a sliver of satisfaction slid through me at the sight. “Can you get out of the road? I have somewhere to be. Also, my name isn't Tammy.”

“Whatever. Pay attention to the road before you hurt someone, lady,” he snapped before strutting across the street.

Lady?

That was almost as bad as if he'd ma'amed me. We looked to be nearly the same age. Releasing the brake, I gave the car some gas. It lurched forward, going faster than I probably

should through here. Easing off the gas, I gripped the wheel tighter, my irritation at that jerk still getting the best of me.

As I continued down Main Street, I forced myself to calm down. Regardless of how much that guy had gotten under my skin, it had been a close call. Too close. I'd nearly hit him—and then, I'd chewed him out.

I hadn't even noticed the crosswalk.

Crap, I hadn't handled that situation the best. It would have been my fault, not his. I hadn't been paying attention. At all. My lips pursed together. Although, he could have been less arrogant about it all, too.

An image of the guy flashed through my head.

Even if I had nearly killed him, it was hard not to notice how handsome he was. Tall. Honey-brown eyes. Chiseled features. Perfect teeth. A sexy smirk. Muscular. I'd noticed right away the way his muscles had bulged against the sleeves of his green shirt as he'd leaned against the hood of the car. And those hands, they were massive.

*Nope. Nope. Nope. We are not thinking about him like that anymore.*

My character judgment meter was broken. What happened with Diego back in Costa Rica was all the proof needed. Plus, I wasn't here to find my next boyfriend. I was here because I needed a place to stay while I figured things out, and also because I knew I could rely on my older sister for help.

Before I knew it, I'd made it to the end of Main Street again without seeing a sign for Shaw Cabins. Cutting another left at the stop sign, I circled around once more, my frustration hitting an all-new high.

It was time to stop for directions.

Circling back around to Main Street again, I pulled into the first available parking spot I saw and spotted The Caffeinated Fox a few shops down. A chai tea sounded amazing right now, and I was certain someone inside would be able to give me directions to the cabins. I plugged in my cell to charge, but

realized quickly it wouldn't do me any good because the car would be off while I was inside.

"Someone will give amazing directions at the coffee shop," I muttered to myself. "It's going to be okay."

Slipping out of the car, I started down the sidewalk. Crescent Creek was cute. I could see why Tara enjoyed living here. While I made my way toward The Caffeinated Fox, I made a mental note to come back and check out a few of the shops while I was here. Sugar Sweets Bakery, Celestial Scoops, and Book Stack all sounded amazing.

As I swung the door to the coffee shop open, the decadent aroma of coffee hit my nose. While I wasn't a huge caffeine drinker, I loved the smell of it. Easing into line behind the last person, I scanned their menu for chai. Thankfully, I spotted one near the bottom. The line moved forward, and I shifted my attention to the shelves of merchandise. There were tumblers, mugs, and a variety of clever and witty T-shirts, too. Bags of their special blend coffees caught my eye next. I contemplated buying Tara and her new guy one as a gift. What had his name been?

*Micah.*

From the last few conversations and text messages we'd shared, Tara seemed smitten with him. I was happy for her, of course. If anyone deserved happiness, it was Tara. She'd been through a lot and it was nice to see her happy again. However, I wanted to meet the guy in-person and get a feel for him before placing him in the category of *perfect for her*.

Not that I was the best judge of character lately.

"Can I help you?" a soft voice called out.

The line had disappeared, and I was next to be served. Clearly, a pick-me-up was in order. I was not as alert as I should be. I blamed it on the night flight here and the long drive from the airport I'd completed right after.

"Hi, yes. I'd like a chai latte, please," I said, stepping to the counter.

"Hot or cold?" the woman with beautiful red hair asked.

“Hot, please.” I smiled.

“Absolutely.” She returned my smile before punching my order into the register. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Actually, can you give me some directions?”

“I can try, but I have to admit, I’m not the best when it comes to that sort of thing,” she said, her cheeks turning pink. “What are you trying to find?”

“Shaw Cabins.”

“Oh, perfect. Harrison, one of the owners, is actually right over there.” She pointed behind me. “You’re in luck.”

Relief powered through me, because it was the first stroke of good luck I’d experienced in a while. Maybe things were finally starting to look up for me.

I glanced in the direction she’d pointed and spotted a guy standing at the counter near the exit, stirring loads of sugar into his coffee. After paying for my tea, I started toward him, ready to ask for directions while the barista made my drink.

“Excuse me,” I said, hoping to get his attention. He was tall and wearing a tight-fitting green shirt that accentuated his muscles.

Wait a minute—tall, muscular, green shirt?

“Yeah?” the guy asked as he shifted to glance at me over his shoulder.

My lips pursed as I realized he was the same guy I’d nearly hit earlier.

Crap. Apparently, my luck hadn’t changed after all.

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## HARRISON

I stared at the woman with olive skin and the most soul-searching brown eyes I'd ever seen. Her dark hair was piled high on top of her head into one of those messy bun things, and she wore a pale yellow dress that fell just above her knees. A smirk twisted my lips because I recognized her immediately.

"Come to apologize for almost hitting me earlier?" I asked, holding her stare.

The look on her face said she hadn't been expecting to see me again, which made me smile wider. I liked that my mere presence threw her off, probably more than I should have.

The area between her brows puckered as she narrowed her eyes on me. "Hardly," she snapped. "You walked out in front of me, remember?"

"Yeah, at a crosswalk. I had the right-of-way," I countered while tearing open another pack of sugar and pouring it into my coffee.

My energy was zapped today.

Hunter, my oldest brother and the clan alpha, had been pushing heavy patrols around the mountain on us since our public enemy number one, Neo, still hadn't surfaced after our last tango with him.

Sugar was the only thing keeping me going—that and caffeine.

The woman standing in front of me rolled her eyes and scoffed at what I'd said. My bear made a noise, but I brushed him away. I was drained and my patience was running thin.

"Maybe so," she said, folding her arms over her chest while continuing to glare up at me. I had a good six inches on her. "You should have looked both ways before crossing the street. It's common sense, which is something you must be lacking."

She was feisty, I'd give her that.

"Two things," I said before taking a sip of my coffee, tasting the coffee-to-sugar ratio. It was perfect. I couldn't taste the coffee at all. "One, it's a one-way street. So, I only had to look one way. And two, did you come over here just to insult me?" I asked, sounding more like Hunter than myself.

I blamed it on my lack of sleep and the stress of searching for Neo and his tribe. They were a looming threat right now.

Horrible Driver Girl's face grew red. I'd pissed her off even more, and for whatever reason, it felt oddly satisfying. I enjoyed getting under her skin. My bear disagreed, but I ignored him.

"Okay, one—you clearly didn't look at all, because if you had, you would've seen me coming and waited to walk. And two, I didn't even know you were you until two seconds before you turned around. I came over here to ask for directions to Shaw Cabins. The barista said you're one of the owners." She hooked her thumb at Cassie, who gave me a little wave, her cheeks flushing pink. "If I'd known it was you, I wouldn't have bothered asking."

I made a face, only focusing on one thing she'd said. "Don't tell me you booked a stay with us."

If she had, this woman was going to get me into so much trouble because there was no way I'd be able to leave her alone. Oh, I was about to have some fun. A list of all the pranks I wanted to pull on her while she was staying with us flashed through my head.

“Something like that,” she snapped. “Just tell me how to get there, and then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Let me think about it,” I said, before taking another swig from my coffee.

I sensed the change in her demeanor, the way her breaths grew shorter, and her body tensed at my words. The steam from her ears might as well have been visible, and it sent a rush of excitement through me. I couldn’t quite explain why, but her fiery anger was irresistible, and even my bear seemed to react.

“You know what, never mind,” she huffed, tossing her hands up. She stalked back to Cassie as she muttered, “I’ll figure it out on my own. I don’t need your help. You’re dismissed,” thinking I couldn’t hear her.

I cocked my head to the side. “Did you just say I’m dismissed?”

“Yep, sure did.” She spun around to face me again, her eyes blazing.

Oh, this woman. She would be getting a big, fat black snake dropped at her doorstep tonight for that one.

“Okay, yeah. You’re definitely on your own now,” I said, flashing her a wide smile before walking out of the coffee shop. “Have fun finding the place.”

I headed back to the hardware store to see if Brodie had my order prepared yet. Three five-gallon buckets of Snowbird White instead of whatever shade of white I picked up yesterday was what had brought me into town.

Who would have thought there were so many shades of white?

I hadn’t known until Naomi informed me that I’d bought the wrong one. Honestly, I thought she was joking when she mentioned it. I learned quickly she hadn’t been.

As I pulled open the door to the hardware store, the familiar scent of wood and chemicals enveloped me. Comfort leaked through my veins. Carpentry was my passion. It was

also a necessary skill set if you lived on a mountain and maintained a rental cabin business.

“Hey, Brodie. You got that paint mixed up for me yet?” I asked him, not caring if he was with another customer.

“Not yet. I’m a one-man show, and everyone seems to need something today. Can you give me a few more minutes?” he asked.

My cell chimed with a text before I could answer him. I pulled it from my back pocket and glanced at the screen. It was Hunter.

**Where are you? Did you get lost while picking up the paint?**

I frowned at his jab. My bear growled while I sat my coffee on the counter and replied. First, I tapped out something smartass but then erased it, deciding not to poke the bear.

**Hardly. This place is busy. I can’t help that.**

Hunter responded instantly.

**I’ll send Naomi to pick it up later. Come back. Micah needs your help setting up the cabinets in the kitchen of the new cabin.**

“Was that Hunter?” Brodie asked, panic ringing through his tone. Even though he was human, there was a good chance that, by being born and raised in Crescent Creek, he knew what my brothers and I were and was scared of us.

I pocketed my cell and picked up my coffee before meeting his stare. “Yep. He’s not happy about the paint taking so long. He’s sending Naomi to pick it up later, though.”

“Sure, no problem. Sorry about that. I’ll give a 10 percent discount for the wait,” Brodie offered as I made my way to the exit.

“Thanks,” I said with a nod of my head before stepping out onto the sidewalk and slamming into someone. My coffee spilled all over the person. “Ah, shit! I’m sorry,” I said, before realizing who it was.



Horrible Driver Girl.

A smirk twisted my lips. Clearly, this was her karma for nearly flattening me like a damn pancake earlier.

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## POPPY

**S**calding, syrupy coffee spilled down my side, and I immediately froze. This was the day that just kept on giving. I didn't know what I'd done to piss off my guardian angels lately, but this was getting out of hand. They needed to step it up and intervene soon, because I wasn't sure how much more I could take.

Glancing up to see who had slammed into me, I locked eyes with Harrison. A deep scowl formed on my face. This guy had been a thorn in my side all morning.

"Seriously? You find this funny?" I asked, my arms still stick-straight.

He shrugged, his gaze never wavering from mine. "You have to admit, it is kinda funny."

"How?" I gestured to myself. "I'm covered in your sugary sweet coffee."

"It's karmic, don't you think?" he asked, his grin growing. "You nearly flatten me with your fancy car like a pancake, and then I bump into you, spilling my coffee all over you."

"I don't see the humor in it," I muttered, while attempting to wring my dress out as best I could. "I was already having a crap day to begin with. No, make that a crap week. It all just keeps piling up. Oh, and that isn't even my car—it's a rental. One I can't even afford right now. All I want is to get to Shaw Cabins. That's it. That's all I want right now." My words came out in a flustered, pathetic rush, but I didn't care.

I was done.

This had been the last straw, and now I was on the verge of tears. Biting my bottom lip, I tried to hold them back. The last thing I wanted was this jerk to get the satisfaction of seeing me fully breakdown in front of him.

“We all have crap days. Crap weeks, too. You’re no different from anyone else,” he said, immediately causing harsh words to build on the tip of my tongue. “My truck is right over there. Follow me. I’ll take you to Shaw Cabins.” He nodded to a silver truck parked a few spaces away.

Relief spiraled through me.

“Are you serious?” I demanded, wondering why the heck he’d reconsidered. It didn’t matter. All that did was that he had, which was good because now that I was drenched in coffee, I couldn’t remember the directions the barista had given me and I didn’t want to go back in there now to ask again. Forcing a neutral expression onto my face, I cleared my throat. “Thank you. My car is over there.”

Harrison started toward his truck without a word, and I speed-walked to my car so I could follow him. However, before I could reach it, an elderly woman stepped into my path.

“Excuse me, sorry,” I said, making my way around her.

“Hold on,” she insisted, her chilly fingers gripping my wrist. “One second. I have something for you.” She rummaged through her odd tortoiseshell purse.

“Oh, no thank you,” I said, hoping Harrison waited.

The last thing I needed was for him to take off toward Shaw Cabins without me.

“Here it is,” the woman said, pulling a rubber nipple from her purse and holding it out to me. It was the kind you used with a baby bottle. “I’ve been waiting to give you this.”

What the heck was this woman talking about? She’d been waiting to give me a nipple.

Oh. My. God! This day was awful!

“No, thank you,” I insisted, trying to get around her again, but she wasn’t having it. The woman danced with me, blocking my path on the sidewalk. It was hard to tell if it was an intentional move made by her or a coincidence.

“It’s for you,” she pressed, shoving the rubber nipple at me. “You’ll need it soon.”

She was persistent. I’d give her that, although slightly delusional. There was no way I’d be needing a rubber nipple any time soon.

Regardless, I took it from her, anyway.

“Thanks,” I said, flashing her a smile.

The elderly woman’s eyes locked with mine, and a strange sense of knowing swirled through their depths. She reminded me of a wise crone, causing goose bumps to prickle across my skin.

“Chin up, things are about to get better.” She winked and then walked away from me as though she’d never stopped me at all, her hands gripping her odd tortoiseshell purse tightly as she hurried along the sidewalk.

I cocked my head to the side, staring after her. That had to be the strangest encounter I’d ever had with someone. My gaze dropped to the rubber nipple in my hand. I shoved it into my purse and hurried to my rental car three spots down. I glanced in Harrison’s truck’s direction as I unlocked the driver’s door and noticed it was gone.

He’d left.

My heart plummeted to my stomach. Crap! He must have left while I’d been chatting with that old woman. Part of me wondered if he’d even planned on allowing me to follow him, or if it had been a way to screw with me instead. I was gullible. What happened with Diego was proof. Maybe it was tattooed on my forehead.

Irritated with myself, I slid inside the car and tried not to break down. On instinct, I picked up my cell and tapped around on the screen again. It was still dead. Tossing it back into the cup holder, I cranked my rental car to life. Rolling

down the windows, I tried to remember what the barista had said for the first turn.

Was I supposed to take a right at the end of Main Street? A left?

I couldn't remember. If my phone wasn't dead, I would call Tara and ask her to meet me somewhere. That wasn't an option, though. So, it looked as though I'd have to wing it.

Shifting into reverse, I glanced over my shoulder at the same time someone honked behind me. A silver truck eased forward until their passenger window was visible to me. It rolled down, revealing Harrison in the driver's seat.

"Looking for me?" he said. "Did you think I left you?" He flashed me a crooked grin, one I shouldn't think was sexy, but did.

This irritated me even more.

He was a jerk, which wasn't sexy in the slightest. Well, at least it shouldn't be.

"Follow me." He launched his truck forward like a bat out of hell down Main Street.

I let my foot off the brake and eased out of my parking space, then gunned it to catch up to him. When I came to a rolling stop behind him at the stop sign, he turned right, burning rubber on the pavement as he gassed it again. I rolled my eyes. Was he trying to impress me or lose me, because he was failing miserably at both. This car could get up and go, and my driving skills, regardless of what Harrison might think, were amazing.

I caught up to him in no time and tailed him perfectly as he wove through the curvy back roads of Crescent Creek. Though racing around in a rental car on unfamiliar roads might not be the wisest choice, it was fun, and after the past few days, I deserved some fun.

As we glided around each corner, a rush of adrenaline flooded my veins, igniting a thrilling sensation that quickened my pulse. Even though Harrison was a jerk, my morning had

been awful, and Tara didn't know about me losing all my inheritance—this moment right here was bliss.

---

## HARRISON

**T**he woman kept up with me well. Even though I'd initially thought she wasn't the most attentive driver, given the fact she'd almost pancaked me earlier, there was no denying she had skills behind the wheel. Almost enough for me to chalk up that earlier incident to a complete accident and write it off completely.

Almost.

As we climbed Shaw Mountain, my head filled with questions about her. She'd said some stuff earlier that kept looping through my mind—like her driving a rental car she couldn't afford. If she was that broke, why had she booked a cabin with us?

When the office came into view, I slowed and eased to the side so she could pull beside me. When she did, I hung my head out my window.

"Here you are. This is the office," I said, motioning into the place. "Head inside. Jax will check you in and give you a key to the cabin you booked."

"I didn't book a cabin," she said. "I'm here to see my sister."

Sister?

The door to the office burst open, and Tara came barreling down the stairs with a wide smile on her face and her arms extended.

“Poppy! Oh my gosh! Look at you,” she gushed while pulling her into a hug. “Wait, why are you sticky and wet? You smell like coffee.”

Poppy? This was Tara’s younger sister? She’d mentioned she was coming for a visit, but I hadn’t expected this woman to be her.

“Ask him,” Poppy grumbled, giving me a look.

“It was karma as far as I’m concerned,” I insisted with a shrug. “See ya.” I saluted them both and shifted into reverse before speeding off to help Micah set up the kitchen cabinets.

My bear grumbled as I sped away. He didn’t like the way I’d zoomed away from them, but I didn’t know what else to do. My brain was all muddled. Not knowing that had been Tara’s sister had me feeling all sorts of things, my bear too.

I’d assumed she would be a hell of a lot nicer than she was, given that Tara was the nicest person I knew. Tara had soft edges and an artsy vibe to her. She overflowed with kindness and warmth. Poppy, on the other hand, tossed out razor blades with her eyes and tried to flatten people with rental cars. She was like a damn tornado, causing chaos everywhere she went.

*A beautiful tornado.*

Where had that thought come from?

My bear made a noise, but I ignored him as I continued down the mountain toward the new cabin. Micah’s Bronco was parked out front. He was outside, gathering some tools.

“Hey, did you get that paint?” he asked after I’d cut the engine on my truck and climbed out. His eyes narrowed on me. “What’s wrong? What did you do now?”

I gave him a look. “I didn’t do anything. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Are you sure? You have a look on your face like you’ve caused some trouble or are about to.”

“Nope, not me,” I said. “In fact, I was on my best behavior.”



Micah frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said?”

“What happened, Harrison?”

“Oh, nothing other than I nearly got flattened like a pancake while trying to cross Main Street by a girl who wasn’t paying attention. Long story short, we’re in a game of tit for tat. She clearly can’t stand me, and there’s something about her that gets under my skin, too.”

A crooked grin twisted Micah’s lips. “She gets under your skin, huh? Who is she?”

“Tara’s sister, Poppy.”

Micah didn’t say anything. Instead, he continued to stare at me in a bemused way.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I demanded.

“Tara’s sister gets under your skin. Does she get under your bear’s skin?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Not in the same way. He’s fixated on her in another way, though.”

Micah arched a brow, a slow grin spreading across his face. “Oh, really?”

“Not like that.” I waved his words away, knowing what he was implying. “She’s annoying. Rude. And her driving skills are questionable—mostly. She was able to keep up with me on the way to the mountain from town. I was surprised.”

“Oh, she got to you.”

“She didn’t get to me,” I said with a chuckle.

He was nuts. There was no way my bear was ready for a mate, and neither was I.

“Oh, I think she did. I think Poppy got to you and your bear,” Micah continued.

My bear perked up. He released a noise in response to Micah’s statement, one that rattled my brain and caused a tremble to vibrate through me.

“Your non-answer gives me all the answers I need,” Micah said before heading inside the cabin.

I shoved my bear to the side and frowned, following Micah.

A mate wasn't in my cards yet. It couldn't be.

“You don't know what you're talking about,” I muttered, entering the cabin.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Micah countered. A shit-eating grin spread across his face. “Only time will tell.”

The afternoon passed quickly. Micah and I were able to set the cabinets in place easily together. We were a good team. I wasn't sure if it was because we were the youngest out of the four of us Shaw boys, or if it was because of our personalities. Whatever it was, we'd always been close and able to work well with one another.

As we packed up for the day, a text came through on Micah's phone.

“Tara wants me to remind you about dinner at our place tonight,” he said, trying hard not to smile.

It was hard to tell if his smile was because he wanted to razz me about Poppy again or if it was because he was talking to Tara. The woman made him light up like a dang Christmas tree whenever they talked. Honestly, I'd never seen him happier. It was nice.

“I won't forget.” I tossed my tool bag in the back of my truck.

“Good. She also says the emergency goat milk you needed from Cheryl is in my fridge. If you need it now, you can swing by and pick it up. If not, don't forget to grab it at dinner.” Micah made a disgusted face. “What's with the goat milk lately?”

“I read somewhere it's good for you and wanted to give it a try.” I shrugged.

“Well, you must really like it if you told Cheryl it was an emergency that you needed more.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll pick it up on my way home,” I said, feeling as though that was the best option. Then I wouldn’t have to explain to anyone else why I needed the goat milk.

Micah tossed his hands up. “Okay. Whatever. Something is going on with you, though. I’m not entirely sure what, but I’ll figure it out.” He started toward his truck and then paused. “I’ll see you at dinner, I’ve got to head to the office and plug in a few things to Jax’s spreadsheet for this place before I forget. Tara’s not home. She went to the store to pick up something she forgot for dinner, so just let yourself in.”

“Will do, and nothing is going on with me. It’s all in your head.” I tapped my temple and flashed him a wicked grin before climbing into my truck.

After cranking my truck to life, I headed down the mountain to Micah and Tara’s place for the goat milk. It wasn’t for me—I’d tried it once and thought it was sour—it was for the baby deer twins I was trying to keep alive in the woods behind my cabin.

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## POPPY

I pressed my cell to my ear and listened to the voicemail that had come through a few minutes ago. Now that Tara had left for a moment, I could listen to it. Although, I could hardly understand the woman on the other end. Every other word cut out as she spoke, no matter where I stood inside Tara's cabin. I stepped to a window, hoping for better reception, but there was none to be found. One would think being on top of a mountain, reception would be perfect here, but it was quite the opposite.

When I finally found a bar of service in the kitchen, I pulled up the number the woman called from and called her back, hoping she was from my bank.

It rang twice before the woman answered.

"Elena Dyad, how may I help you?" the woman answered.

"Hi, this is Poppy Anderson. I'm returning your phone call. I don't have the best cell service where I'm at, so I couldn't fully make out what you were saying." There was a tremor in my voice when I spoke. I was scared to hear whatever she was about to say.

"Oh, yes, Miss Anderson. I was calling to say we've filed your report. Everything has been taken care of to the best of our ability. Unfortunately, it looks as though without knowing this man's true name, we can't go after him for charges, though."

"That's not something that can be figured out? I gave you everything I knew about him. You have a picture of him from

the surveillance camera, too. You even have the name of the organization he claimed to be affiliated with.”

“I understand that. However, that still doesn’t bring us any closer to learning who he is. This situation is tricky. We have to investigate further.”

“Are you insinuating I’m lying about my money being stolen from my account?”

“I’m not insinuating anything. All I am doing is looking at all angles here. I’m digging deeper into the situation. That’s all.”

“And how long will that take?” I smoothed a hand over my face and released a long sigh, feeling the frustration of the situation leak into my bones. “Look, I can’t mooch off my sister and her new man forever. I need my money.”

“I understand that, Miss Anderson, but these things take time. Unfortunately, policy procedure states your money can’t be reimbursed until a resolution has been reached. Until then, my hands are tied.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “I know. I get it. I’m just feeling frustrated.”

“I understand, and I wish I had better news for you,” she said, sounding genuine. “I hope this goes smoothly and is resolved quickly for you. Have a great rest of your day.”

“Thank you,” I said before hanging up.

“Is that why you’re here? To mooch off your sister and my brother because you’re in some money trouble?” an all too familiar voice demanded from behind me.

I spun around and noticed Harrison leaning against the doorframe, glaring at me. His arms were folded over his solid chest and an irritated look glimmered in his eyes.

“What?” I asked, making a face. “Wait, no. First, what are you even doing here? Don’t you know how to knock?” What was with this guy? He didn’t know how to look both ways when he crossed the road. He didn’t know how to look and make sure no one was walking by before swinging a door open

with full force. And he didn't seem to know how to knock when coming over to someone's place.

"So, you're telling me that you're not here to mooch off them?" he asked again, and I swore his eyes flashed a lighter shade of brown than what they were, which didn't seem possible. "You're not completely broke like you told whoever was on the phone?"

"I am broke, yes, but it's not like that," I insisted. "I'm not here to mooch off anyone."

"Sounds like it to me. You just said you're broke."

I smoothed a hand along my forehead. He was like arguing with a toddler. "That's not how it is."

"Really? Well, I don't think Tara and Micah are aware of your situation. In fact, I know they're not because I know how excited Tara was when you called to say you were coming for a visit. She told us all about you," he said, making me feel like dog crap for keeping my screw up from Tara. "So, if you're here to mooch off her and my brother, you better pack up and leave now because it's not going to happen. I won't let it. Tara's already been through enough, but you know that. She's happy, and that makes my brother happy. I won't let you ruin that for them."

I wanted to be mad at him for how he was speaking to me, for the way he was accusing me of something so horrible, but I couldn't because he was partially right.

I was here because I needed help from Tara to get back on my feet. I need my big sister to help me figure out the mess I'd gotten myself into. I needed her grounding aura and her business smarts—I needed her. However, I was also here to get to know Micah. I wanted to know the man who had brought my sister back to life after her loss. The man who had made her happier than I'd seen her in a long time.

Harrison's sense of family loyalty ran deep, and I couldn't be mad at him for it.

"I'm not here to ruin anything for anyone." I hoped he believed me. His expression remained skeptical, though. Even

so, I wasn't about to pour out the whole story of how I'd been conned to him. One, it was embarrassing. Two, he'd been a jerk to me all day. He didn't deserve the full explanation. "I'm not. Believe me or not, I'll leave that up to you. Now, is there a reason why you barged into my sister's place the way that you did? Dinner isn't for another couple of hours." I glared at him.

He might be sexy, loyal to his family, and have my sister's best interest at heart, but the guy still got under my skin.

"Tara said I could come by and pick something up." He moved to the fridge, grabbed two jars of something out, and then left without a single glance my way.

I stared after him. What had been in his hands? Milk? In mason jars?

Mountain life was weird.

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## HARRISON

**D**inner was great. Poppy was a fan of Mediterranean food. While I didn't have any complaints about the night's menu, I still wasn't so sure about the company.

Poppy was being secretive and cagey about something.

Even though she'd admitted to being broke, I could tell she was still hiding something else. It was in her demeanor. She was guarded and giving too many forced smiles.

Was I seriously the only one who noticed?

Tension rippled off her in waves. The more I thought about everything—the more I thought about her—I realized what bothered me most about the situation was the thought of those I cared about being taken advantage of, especially when it came to their kindness. While she might have claimed she wasn't here to mooch, I found that hard to believe after overhearing her phone conversation earlier.

My bear made an exasperated noise. He was sick of me being so skeptical of her. He'd rather I gave her the benefit of the doubt, but I couldn't do that. Not after what I'd heard.

Poppy had flat-out told whoever she was on the phone with that she couldn't mooch off her sister and her new man forever, that she needed her money.

My eyes narrowed, and my lips pressed into a thin line.

“Why do you keep glaring at Poppy like that?” Micah asked as he walked over and nudged me with his shoulder. I tore my gaze away from her and took a swig from my beer.



“Are you struggling with your bear over what you feel for her?”

I nearly spit my beer out. “Are you nuts?” I gawked at him. “I’m trying to figure out why she’s here.”

Micah took a swig from his beer to hide the smirk spreading across his face. I still spotted it, though. “You know why she’s here. She’s here because she’s happy for Tara. They haven’t seen each other in a while, and now that the two of us are together, she wanted to meet me. You’re acting like she’s here for some nefarious reason. She’s not.”

“Are you sure?” I pressed, even though I knew I shouldn’t. I didn’t want things to go south and blow up in my face. Also, I didn’t want to do anything that might upset Tara. She didn’t deserve it.

“Positive. Now, stop being weird,” Micah demanded, the hint of a smile working at his lips again. “You should go chat with Poppy, seeing as how you haven’t been able to take your eyes off her all night. Maybe then, whatever suspicions you have about her will dissipate.”

“I haven’t been staring at her all night. That’s ridiculous.” I shifted on my feet. I tore my eyes away from her and stared at my boots. However, they didn’t stay off her for long.

The woman pulled them back to her like a damn magnet, causing my teeth to grind together.

“Is it?” Micah countered. “Because I’m not the only one who’s noticed.” He nodded toward Jax and Hunter, who both lifted their beers and smirked at me.

Great. Now, all of my brothers thought I had something going on with Poppy, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

“You’ve got this pegged wrong,” I said, before shaking my head and then taking another drink.

Micah’s brows pulled together. “Okay, then what’s going on?”

“I don’t know the full story yet, but when I do, you’ll be the first to know.” My gaze drifted to the clock on the wall,

checking the time. I needed to go. My baby deer weren't going to feed themselves. "I'm heading out. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"All right," Micah said, his expression suggesting that he didn't understand what my issue was.

A pang of guilt speared me.

I guess I was being hypocritical by keeping this from him and the others, but in my defense, the secret I was keeping wasn't one that would hurt anyone—Poppy's would.

Making my way through the living room, I said my goodbyes.

"What? Why are you leaving?" Tara demanded. "We haven't even had dessert yet. I picked up cupcakes from Sugar Sweets Bakery."

"Can I take one to-go?" I asked, hoping she said yes. Turning down dessert made by an Owens woman was a sin. Had to be, because those women knew how to make magic in the kitchen. Quite literally, too. They were witches.

"No." Tara bristled. "They're only for those who hang around a little longer."

"Then I guess I'll have to pay Sugar Sweets a visit sometime tomorrow because I need to head out. Sorry," I said with a shrug before I pulled her in for a hug.

I ignored Poppy and made my way to the door. It was a dick move, but I didn't care.

There was another reason for her presence on Shaw Mountain than what she'd said, and I planned to find out what.

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## POPPY

**A** reminder dinged on my cell. I glanced at the screen to see what it was for.

*Return rental car!*

A frown pulled at my lips as I checked the date. Sure enough, three days had passed. While I didn't know how so much time had gone by already, it had, and the worst part was, I hadn't come clean with Tara about what happened in Costa Rica.

I'd tried but could never begin the conversation.

Deep down, I was ashamed to admit I'd fallen for the con that I had. It was embarrassing. While I knew Tara would be understanding and virtually non-judgmental, admitting my life was in the shitter was a challenging thing to do.

It was the truth, though.

I had no job, no home, and I didn't know what to do about any of it. While I didn't expect Tara to fix anything for me, telling her what was going on needed to happen soon because I felt lost at sea without her by my side on this.

Pulling up her name, I typed out a quick message.

**Still okay to meet for lunch at that place you mentioned?**

I pressed send and waited for her reply. It came a few minutes later.

**Yeah, Mariam's Diner. It's on Main Street. I'll send you the address so you can GPS it.**

It wouldn't do me any good, because the second I stepped away from this window, my phone wouldn't get any cell reception. Thankfully, over the last few days I'd managed to get acquainted with the area. I could find my way to Main Street without issue.

**I'll see you there.**

As I grabbed my purse and keys, I remembered that I needed to return my rental car. I went to tap out another text to Tara, but I had no reception now. Frowning, I tossed my useless cell into my purse and headed out the door.

Driving down the mountain, I soaked in the scenery. It was beautiful here. Thick wood. Blue sky. Plenty of wildlife scurrying about. I could see why Tara loved living here. Over the last few days, I'd come to understand the unique bond between her and Micah. It wasn't hard to see why they were such a perfect match. Their similarities ran deep. Both possessed a sense of laid-back charm and reserved wisdom, and there was a sweetness to them I found endearing. It made me wonder if I would ever find a love like theirs or if I was doomed to fall for the wrong guy every time.

For whatever reason, Harrison popped into my head.

I tried to force thoughts of him away, but it was impossible. It had to be his eyes. They were a shade of honey-brown I adored, and they constantly sparked with mischief. A tingling sensation coursed through my lower stomach as images of him flickered through my head. The man was sexy as sin; there was no doubt. But he was still acting as though I was some con artist here to swindle our siblings, which couldn't be further from the truth.

As I pulled into a parking space close to Mariam's Diner on Main Street, I tried to mentally prepare myself for telling Tara everything. It wasn't working. My palms were sweaty and my heart was beating triple time. I didn't want her to be disappointed in me; that worried me the most.

I spotted her at a table near the door as soon as I stepped inside. She was tapping away on her phone, smiling. Immediately, I knew she was chatting with Micah. She glowed whenever they talked or were around each other. It was sweet.

“Hey,” I said, sitting at the table across from her. She looked up from her phone and flashed me a smile. “Did you already order?” I asked, noticing her water.

“Only this. I’ve been dying of thirst all day.” She took a sip of water, her eyes locked on me. “Are you all right?”

I averted my eyes to the menu on the table. Was it hot in here? Because I was suddenly sweating. Pulling in a deep breath, I couldn’t ignore the weight of what needed to be said any longer. I decided to go for it.

“I’m fine, but I need to talk to you about something,” I said, shifting in my seat uncomfortably. “A couple of things, actually.”

“What’s going on?” she asked, an edge to her tone but concern in her eyes.

I exhaled a slow, shaky breath. “I’ve been trying to tell you something since I got here, but I couldn’t find the words. I’m nervous because I don’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

“Why would I ever be disappointed in you?”

I licked my lips. The words were right there—*because I lost the money Grandma Judy gave me when she passed*—but I couldn’t say them. “I don’t know. You’re so happy now. I don’t want to cause any trouble for you.”

Tara sat up straighter. “How would you cause me any trouble?”

My stomach twisted into knots the size of my fist. “I’ll get to that, but first let me preface this by saying I’ve loved seeing you so happy with Micah. You deserve that kind of happiness again, Tara.” I hoped she believed me.

“Thanks. That means a lot. I’m glad you came for a visit. It’s been forever since we’ve seen each other in person,” she said, her expression softening. “Actually, I’d love it if you

stayed for a while. I talked with Micah last night about it, and he talked to his brothers this morning and got the okay for you to stay in one of the rental cabins for a while. I mean, if that's something you want. We wouldn't charge you anything."

I wanted to cry.

This was the best thing to happen to me in weeks. I'd known visiting Tara would put me back on the right track; something in my gut had told me so.

Looked like my intuition was right.

"I know you enjoy traveling, and that Crescent Creek and Shaw Mountain aren't as exciting as some of the places you visit," she continued when I didn't respond. "So, it's up to you. I wanted to put it out there, though. You're always welcome here."

"Thank you," I said, before remembering a certain someone who wasn't my biggest fan. "Harrison agreed to it?"

Tara made a face. "Not exactly."

"I didn't think so." My teeth sank into my bottom lip.

"What's going on between the two of you?"

Thankfully, I didn't have to answer her question—even though it would have been a great segue into what I needed to tell her—because a sweet woman named Mariam came to take our order. We both ordered a Greek salad with grilled chicken—extra olives on mine—and then Mariam headed to the kitchen to turn our orders in.

Tara's eyes locked with mine, and a smile twisted her lips. "So, you'll stay for a while?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Great!" she shouted, causing some people at the table next to us to turn our way. "Naomi is cleaning cabin nine for you right now. It's at the top of the mountain, so you'll have plenty of privacy and can immerse yourself in nature as much as you like."

“That sounds amazing.” A weight lifted off me at the thought, but it was only temporary.

There was still something to be said.

“What did you want to tell me?” Tara asked, as though she could read my mind. She took another sip of her water, her eyes fixed on me. “I didn’t mean to sidetrack you.”

My heart hammered inside my chest, and I couldn’t bring myself to tell her. “Oh. It’s nothing. I wanted to know if you could follow me to the rental car place after we eat. I need to return my car,” I said. “I can go to work with you after, or if you have the time, you could give me a ride back to the mountain.”

“I wish I could take you back to the mountain, but I can’t. Sorry. Jessica is picking up some paintings from a gallery in the next town over and Mrs. Collins is out sick today. I’m running the store alone all afternoon and I have a meeting with another local artist after lunch who’s putting her stuff on commission with us.” A wicked smile twisted her lips. “But Harrison can. Micah just sent him to the hardware store, so I know he’s in town.”

I made a face. “I’d rather walk than catch a ride with him.”

Tara gave me a look that reminded me so much of our mom, it was spooky. “Seriously. What is with you two? You can’t stop staring at each other when you’re in the same room, but the second the other notices, death glares get tossed.”

“We don’t get along.” I shrugged.

“Is that really it? Or is the chemistry between you two burning so hot you don’t know how to act?”

My jaw dropped. “Absolutely not. Besides, I don’t think Harrison Shaw would touch me with a ten-foot pole, anyway.”

“But you wish he would?” she asked, her eyes never wavering from me for a second.

“We got off on the wrong foot,” I said, because I didn’t know the answer to her question. Yes, Harrison was hot, but

he'd been nothing but an ass since we met. Although, I hadn't been the nicest either.

Tara cracked a grin. "You mean when you nearly flattened him like a pancake?"

Mariam, brought us our food then, breaking up the moment. I wondered if she was the owner since she shared the same name as the diner. Once she left, I corrected Tara about the whole Harrison incident.

"Harrison is exaggerating," I insisted with an eye roll. "Yes, I almost hit him, but I wasn't going fast. I was barely moving."

"Like that matters." She chuckled, picking up her cell and tapping something out. "I asked him to pick you up from the gallery and give you a ride to cabin nine. Naomi should have everything ready by then, so you can get settled in."

Thankfully, there wasn't much to settle. Everything I owned fit in my suitcase.

"He's going to say no," I said. "I'll call the lady who has the taxi service in town. Wasn't her name Tammy? I saw some business cards for her somewhere."

"Do you want to die?" Tara asked, sounding dramatic.

I blinked. "What?"

"You're not getting into a car with Crazy Tammy behind the wheel. I don't even know how that poor woman has a driver's license. Honestly, I've never seen such a horrible driver before." Her cell chimed. Suddenly, I remembered Harrison calling me Tammy once. Apparently, it had been because of my driving, not because he'd mistaken me for someone else like I'd thought. "Besides, Harrison said he'll pick you up at the gallery. He has to come by anyway for some more jars of goat milk Cheryl dropped off for him earlier."

"What's with him and his love of goat milk? It's odd."

Tara popped a piece of grilled chicken into her mouth. "I'm not sure. All I know is that Cheryl has been happy to pass her overstock off to him."



As we ate, I listened to Tara talk about work and a few of the new pieces she wanted to show me at the gallery. I asked her when she planned to line the walls with her own paintings again, but she didn't give me an answer. Instead, she changed the subject. I thought about bringing up how my inheritance from Grandma Judy had been stolen once or twice, but the flow of conversation was so smooth and upbeat that I didn't have the heart to bring it down.

After we finished eating lunch, Tara followed me to the car rental place to drop off my car and then I rode with her to the gallery. She'd been on a call with Jessica, the woman she worked with, the entire time, so there hadn't been a moment to say anything about the money.

While she finished up her conversation with Jessica, I walked around the gallery, observing the art. There were so many cool paintings hung around the space and loads of art supplies lining the shelves. This place definitely had Tara's name written all over it. A smile formed on my face that I couldn't dim.

"What?" Tara asked, finally hanging up with Jessica. "Not artsy enough for you?"

"Actually, it's perfect. I love the variety of paintings and supplies. Everything is laid out well, too." My smile widened. "I bet this is your happy place. I mean, I know that's anywhere Micah is, but this surely is a close second." It was the perfect job for her. Art had always been her passion.

"Thanks. It is my happy place," she said, her gaze drifting around. "Where's your happy place?" she asked suddenly.

The question jarred me. I thought for a moment but couldn't come up with an answer. "I don't think I've found it yet."

"You will," she said, a knowing smile twisting her lips. "One day."

The door to the gallery opened, and I could feel Harrison's presence before I turned to look at him. He had an electrical

energy about him that sparked in the air whenever he was near. It brushed against my skin, causing goose bumps to form.

The man had a serious presence.

“Hey,” he said to Tara, his gaze never once drifting to me. I pursed my lips together and then tore my eyes away from him. “Thanks for letting me know Cheryl dropped off more goat milk for me.”

“No problem. There are four jars in that bag. I would’ve brought them to you, but I knew you were in town already. Thanks, by the way, for giving Poppy a ride to the mountain. Naomi should already have cabin nine cleaned.”

“It was her idea,” I blurted, sounding like a child, before he could say anything in response. “I didn’t ask for you to give me a ride. I planned on calling Tammy or walking, but Tara wouldn’t let me.”

“Okay,” he said before picking up the bag Tara mentioned and starting to the door. “See you later, Tara.”

“Later,” she called after him, then shifted to flash me a wide smile. It was proof she was loving having tossed us together way too much. I rolled my eyes and then followed after him.

“Have fun,” Tara called.

Fun wasn’t something I imagined ever having with Harrison Shaw.

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## HARRISON

While I didn't want to give Poppy a ride back to the mountain, the last thing I wanted was for someone else, particularly crazy Tammy, to do it. Despite Poppy's knack for getting on my nerves, mainly because of her obvious secrecy, there was an inexplicable connection between her and my bear that I couldn't ignore.

He wanted her, and frankly, so did I.

Over the past few days, I'd noticed the way my bear found a sense of ease when she was around. Her presence calmed him, unlike anything I had ever witnessed. During the night, while I patrolled with my brothers, searching for Neo and his tribe, there was a deeper shift in him. Each patrol wasn't solely about safeguarding the clan anymore; it had become about protecting her, too.

This woman had gained the captivation of a bear—my bear.

I felt that irresistible attraction toward her, and despite my attempts to resist it, it stayed within me as a constant presence. However, I was still in the dark about whatever she was hiding and the real reason she was here. I had to find out. Had to. I needed assurance that my bear and I weren't being drawn to someone deceitful. I had to understand her motives.

In order to do that, I needed to know her. Hence, why I'd agreed to this.

“Listen, I know you didn't volunteer to give me a ride back to the mountain. Tara can be persuasive sometimes. I

understand that, but you don't have to act so puffed up about it," Poppy insisted, tossing me a sideways glance. "She said once that you reminded her of me. Did you know that? She said you were so young-at-heart, carefree, and fun. Honestly, I've been wondering if she confused you with someone else because I have yet to see a trace of any of those characteristics in you. All I've seen is a broody, skeptical jerk who's constantly watching me like I'm some con artist waiting to steal everyone's identity."

I started to say something in response, but she pressed forward, continuing her rant, before I could get a word out. I couldn't deny a part of me found her cute when she got all worked up.

"That's not who I am. In fact, I was the one conned. Okay? I fell for a guy's line of crap and lost every penny I had. He scammed me dry. I foolishly thought he was into me and that he cared about rescuing dogs. Turns out all he cared about was stealing my money and running off into the sunset. He didn't care about helping dogs at all." She exhaled a puff of air and then tucked a few stray strands of loose hair behind her ear. "I'm here to see Tara, and to get to know Micah, but I'm also down on my luck. I came to my sister because she's always been my rock. I just haven't said anything to her yet because I don't want to ruin her happiness or sour this trip. I also don't want to see her disappointed in me."

This was what I'd wanted to know—the real reason she was here. It didn't make me feel any better, though. Instead, anger simmered to the surface. I wanted to find the guy who'd conned her and give him more than a black eye. My bear mirrored what I felt, getting as worked up as me the more she revealed.

"I still feel like crap I wasn't there for her the way I should have been when Eric passed. I didn't know how to handle it or what to say. All I knew was that I couldn't make anything better, so it seemed best to leave her be and let her heal in her own time. Now look at me."

She waved her hands like a lunatic in my passenger seat, oblivious to the anger coursing through me from hearing how

she'd been wronged.

"I'm here because I need her, but I don't feel like I have a right to lean on her, not after I abandoned her when she needed me most. What does that say about me as a person? You know what, never mind. You can think what you want of me, but there it is. There's everything. Now you know the truth, Harrison."

"I'm sorry," I said. She'd been going through a tough patch, and I'd added to it.

"What did you say?" she balked. "Did you just apologize?"

A grin quirked at the corner of my mouth. "Don't sound so shocked."

"It's just—are you actually being nice to me right now?"

I made a noise. "Oh, please. Whatever. I'm a nice guy."

"I haven't seen it."

"I know. Again, I'm sorry. I've been a real jerk to you." I cast a glance at her before shifting my attention back to the road. The sight of her smile made my heart stall inside my chest.

This woman was gorgeous.

"I'm sorry you were taken advantage of like that," I continued. "Don't feel bad about not handling the situation with Eric's death the way you wanted. Death does funny things to people. It makes them behave in ways they normally wouldn't."

"You say that like you have experience with it," she said, her gaze never wavering from me.

My bear liked her full, undivided attention. He thrived there.

"Because I do," I admitted. "My parents passed away a few years ago, and I'm not proud of how I handled it. I went on a rampage. It wasn't my finest moment." I smoothed a hand along the back of my neck as the memories flooded my mind.

Hunter still had scars across his back because of how badly I'd handled it.

"I didn't realize you lost your parents. I'm sorry to hear that."

I nodded and then redirected my attention to the road, scared dwelling on it might cause my bear to vie for control. When he made a noise and then settled on his own, I recognized it was thanks to her.

She calmed him.

As we crept up the mountain, I cut toward my cabin instead of Micah and Tara's so Poppy could grab her things before I dropped her at cabin nine. She didn't seem to notice until my cabin came into view.

"Why are we stopping at your place?" she asked as I killed the engine of my truck. I grabbed the bag of goat milk between us. "Oh, right. You should probably put that in the fridge."

"I want to show you something," I told her, swinging the driver's side door open and stepping out. "Come on."

"What do you want to show me?" she asked, skepticism pooling in her eyes.

"How fun I am." I winked.

Her cheeks tinted a shade of pink. It was beautiful.

"Wait, is that a pick-up line? Are you coming on to me, Harrison Shaw?" Her eyes narrowed as she tried to feign irritation, but I could sense her excitement. "I'm not going inside your cabin to sleep with you."

I chuckled. "Not what I was talking about, but I like where your head went." I flashed her a crooked grin before starting up my porch steps. "You can stay here, if you want. I'll be back in a minute."

I headed inside. Before I made it to the kitchen, I heard the passenger door of my truck slam shut. Poppy had gotten out. I set the bag of goat milk in the fridge and reached for the nearly empty jar inside the door, along with the last full jar I had before Cheryl had given me more. The front door of my cabin

creaked open, and my bear grew animated, loving the idea of Poppy inside our space.

It brought a smile to my face.

“This is cute, and it doesn’t stink like I thought it would,” she said, pausing inside the front door. Her hand clutched her purse strap tight as she gazed around my place.

I made a face at her backhanded compliment while gathering a couple of baby bottles and tossing them in a grocery bag along with the milk before she could see. I didn’t want to spoil the surprise. “Thank you—I think?”

“Well, I mean, you’re a young guy. I figured this place would be riddled with potato chips and soda cans, it would smell like feet, and there would be a gaming system hooked up to your TV.”

“My mom raised boys to know how to clean, and the gaming system is hooked up to the TV in my bedroom,” I said, nearly brushing against her as I exited the cabin. “I can show it to you, if you want,” I called over my shoulder, unable to help myself.

She closed the door behind her harder than was necessary. “Nope, I’m good.”

Instead of heading to the truck, I made my way to the woods behind my cabin.

“What’s in the bag?” she asked, hesitant to follow me.

“Goat milk and stuff.”

“We’re walking into the woods behind your place with a bag of goat milk and stuff,” she reiterated. “Okay, this isn’t weird at all. Not. At. All.”

I glanced over my shoulder at her. “Trust me, this is going to be fun. You’ll like it.”

“The milk? I doubt it.”

I chuckled and then took her hand in mine. As I interlaced our fingers, sparks of electricity buzzed across my palm. My bear went wild, and my breath hitched inside my chest. I

swore I heard hers do the same, but to my surprise, she didn't pull away or ask if I felt anything strange. Instead, Poppy left her hand in mine as we walked through the woods, and I imagined it was because she enjoyed the way it felt when we touched, same as I did.

When the metal bars of the deer cage I'd set up came into view, hesitation rippled through her.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's okay. Just wait."

A few steps later, the baby deer became visible.

"Oh my gosh!" She beamed, her face lighting up. "They're so cute! What are they doing back here?"

I dropped my gaze to the little guys and then crouched down to get their bottles ready. Niblet made his way over to me, excited at the sight of food. "They lost their mama." I reached out to scratch Niblet behind the ears. "I hope I'm doing okay with them. All I want is to help them survive."

Guilt gnawed at me.

"Aw. What happened to their mom?" Poppy asked, bending down beside me to pet Niblet.

"She died after giving birth to them." My chest tightened. "It was my fault. I was heading into town early one morning a few weeks ago. There was a lot of fog, and I wasn't paying attention. I clipped her with my truck."

"Oh, no."

I frowned, and then continued, "I followed after her into the woods to see if she was okay, but it was clear she wouldn't make it. Before she passed, she gave birth to these two. I know it might sound dumb, but I promised her I'd take care of them, that they would live."

"It doesn't sound dumb at all. It's sweet. Honestly, it's something I would've done." She shifted to pet Fawndle as she approached her. "Did you see if there are any local animal sanctuaries or rescues nearby that might be able to take them?"



“I called a few, but they were full. One lady told me to either care for them myself or let nature run its course.” I shook my head as I prepared a bottle. “I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t leave them to fend for themselves, so I scoured the Internet for how to take care of them.”

“Goat milk,” Poppy said, nodding to the bottle.

“Apparently, it’s the closest to their mother’s milk but you have to water it down some. I worked out a deal with Cheryl. I’ve been getting watered down goat milk from her for them for the last couple of weeks.”

“They seem to be doing good,” she said.

Pride surged through me. “You think?”

It was the first time in my life I’d ever taken care of something so fragile and needy. Honestly, I wasn’t sure I could do it. Hearing her say that meant a lot.

“Yeah. You’ve got a nice set up for them,” she insisted.

“Thanks. I tried. I even named them. The girl is Fawndle and the guy is Niblet.”

She arched a brow. “Fawndle?” I shrugged. “Anyway... you’ve been bottle feeding them both all by yourself? Why didn’t you tell the others?”

“I know I probably should have mentioned them to the others, but I didn’t want to hear everyone tell me I couldn’t take care of them. I didn’t want to hear their doubts.” I passed the freshly made bottle off to Poppy while I prepared the other. “You heard how your sister described me. I’m not the Shaw brother most known for being responsible.”

“I can understand that,” she said, nodding. “Tara never has thought of me as super responsible, either. Hence, why I haven’t had the guts to tell her about the scam.”

“Sometimes it sucks being the youngest, doesn’t it?” As I secured the nipple onto the freshly filled bottle, it unexpectedly ripped, causing the nipple to pop out of the ring. “Ah, shit. I knew this one wasn’t going to last. I should have

grabbed another one.” I took the torn nipple out of the ring and tossed it into the grocery bag.

“It tore,” Poppy said under her breath. “You need another one.”

I glanced at her, wondering why she sounded so strange. “Yeah, but it’s okay. We can just feed them one at a time. It’ll take longer, but they’ll still both get fed,” I assured her.

“No—the nipple,” she said, sounding even stranger as she dug through her purse. “I have a nipple.”

“I’m willing to bet you have two, but I don’t think you’re going to find them in there,” I teased, unable to help myself.

“Ha ha, funny,” she grumbled, giving me a look. “No, this old woman stopped me the other day when I was supposed to follow you to the cabins. She gave me a rubber bottle nipple, claiming I would need it. Honestly, I thought she was crazy, but I took it anyway to be polite. I mean, it’s not every day an old lady comes up and gives you a nipple.” She pulled it out in a ta-da fashion and waved it in my face.

I cracked up, even though the significance of her story wasn’t lost on me—Ms. Lynette had struck again. “Thanks for showing me your nipple,” I said, grinning wider.

She rolled her eyes and took the bottle ring from me. “You’re hilarious,” she deadpanned.

“Isn’t this the version of me you’ve been waiting to see?” I countered.

She pursed her lips together, but I could tell she was trying to hide a smile that was forming. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

Once she had the new nipple on right, she handed the bottle back to me, and we focused our attention on feeding them.

“This is a first for me,” Poppy whispered. “I’ve helped with a lot of animals, but never baby deer. Thanks for letting me see them.” Her gaze locked with mine, and I could see her compassion toward animals and the joy this moment brought her swirling through her eyes.

“Thanks for trusting me to come into the woods and see them. I’m glad we’re on the right foot now,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “I can be protective of those I care about.”

“That’s an excellent quality to have. I’m protective of Tara too, especially after everything she’s been through. So, I get it.” She shifted to sit with her legs crossed. “I know how things looked after you overheard part of my phone conversation. I should have explained it to you then.”

“It’s okay. I could have asked questions instead of jumping to assumptions. I could tell you were hiding something, though.”

Her eyes widened. “You could? I guess I’m more transparent than I thought. Do you think Tara knows? What about Micah?”

I shook my head. “Knowing my brother, he would’ve calmly pulled you off to the side and said something to you by now, especially if he thought there was a chance you might upset Tara.”

A grin twisted her plump lips. “So, your protective streak is a family trait?”

“Absolutely,” I said with a chuckle.

“Good to know.”

After Fawndle and Niblet finished eating, we hung around a few minutes longer to watch them play. Poppy laughed more than once while watching them, and each time I felt my bear sigh with contentment.

His feelings for her ran deeper than I’d ever dared to admit, and I was beginning to think so did mine.

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## POPPY

**F**our days passed, and during that time, I became fixated on Harrison Shaw. He was all I could think about, all I could focus on. I couldn't explain it, not even to myself. There were the obvious reasons to be drawn to him—his incredible good looks, his sense of humor, his spirit—but something else drew me to him.

Even so, a part of me held back.

Maybe it was the fact that he was practically my brother-in-law, which made it feel more complicated, or maybe it had to do with all the crap I was still dealing with thanks to Diego.

A knock at the cabin door pulled me from my thoughts. I rushed to answer it, knowing it would be Tara here for our sisters' night. It was something we used to host regularly when we were little. We used to eat popcorn and candy while chatting the night away. As we grew older, the conversations shifted from talk of dolls and cartoons to boys and drama at school.

We hadn't had a sisters' night in forever, and I was excited to gush about everything life had tossed our way lately, including Harrison. I needed to know where Tara stood on me being attracted to him, and if she thought it was a good idea. It felt as though it was, but I hadn't been the best judge of character lately.

Also, I needed to tell her about my situation.

Knots the size of my fist formed in my stomach, but it was time to tell her everything. Tara needed to know I'd messed up

and might potentially have to stay here a while because of it. Heck, this might become a permanent thing.

“Your candles smell so good,” Tara beamed, inhaling deeply as she stepped into the cabin. “Apple cinnamon?”

“Apple pie, but close enough.” I smiled.

She headed to the kitchen, and I noticed a bag with the Sugar Sweets Bakery logo printed on it in her hand, along with a bottle of wine. My mind dipped back to the cinnamon roll I’d had from there yesterday. It had been heaven. Those ladies really knew how to bake.

“You always were a candle lover,” Tara said, the hint of a smile twisting her lips. “I’m glad to see some things don’t change.” She pulled two mugs from a cabinet near the sink and poured us each some wine.

“Yeah, and that’s not the only thing that hasn’t changed about me,” I said, moving to sit at the bar. “Apparently, I’m still as gullible as ever and fall for men really fast and easily.”

Tara’s eyes widened. “I knew it! I knew there was something going on between you and Harrison,” she gushed. “I swear, I could feel it through the—” Her words died off, and she looked as though she’d swallowed a bug.

“The what?” I pressed, curious.

“Nothing. Never mind.” She took a gulp from her wine and her eyes darted away from me. An unreadable flicker of emotion became visible, but it was clear from her demeanor that whatever she’d been about to say, she wasn’t ready to share yet. “Back to Harrison. So, do you have a thing for him?”

“I find him attractive,” I admitted.

“He feels the same. I can tell. I’ve noticed the way you two have been joined at the hip lately. Don’t think I didn’t see y’all sneaking into the woods behind his cabin the other night, because I did.” She flashed me a wicked grin.

“Oh, that’s—no, it’s not like that.”

She lifted her mug to her lips again and took another sip. “No judgment here. You have my blessing.”

Part of me was ecstatic when she’d said that, but the other part was focused on the huge elephant in the room that I still needed to address.

“Thank you for that, but we haven’t even kissed. Not that I don’t want to, it’s just—I’m holding back,” I said.

“Why? Harrison is a great guy.”

“I know that, but I’m getting out of something that left me a tad bitter.”

“Don’t hold that against Harrison. He’s not this other guy,” she said, sounding so wise I nearly cried.

I needed this side of her—my wise older sister.

“If sneaking into the woods with him at night wasn’t about something like that, then what were you two doing?” Skepticism entered her stare.

“It’s not my secret to share,” I said, remembering Harrison had said he hadn’t told any of them about the baby deer. “Speaking of secrets,” I started, but then stopped, noticing how tense Tara had suddenly become.

Did she know what I was about to say? Had she already picked up on the fact that I’d been keeping something from her since I arrived?

It didn’t matter, because I was ready to get it off my chest.

“There’s something I have to tell you,” I said, holding her stare.

And then everything that happened with Diego and my inheritance poured out of me.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me sooner,” Tara insisted, pulling me in for a hug. Concern and compassion radiated off her. It was comforting. “Like right after you found out it happened.”

“I was embarrassed,” I admitted. “I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me or to say *that’s what happens when you live*

*this way*, which is exactly what Mom would say. Speaking of, I haven't mentioned anything to her about it either."

"I'm not Mom."

"I know. I just—I didn't want you to think I was visiting because I wanted to mooch off you and Micah. I swear, all this happened two days before I was supposed to leave."

"I wouldn't have thought that," she reassured. "Did you file a police report? Did you contact your bank?"

I took a small sip from my wine, and then nodded. "I did everything I'm supposed to. There's an investigation happening, but I don't know if it will land any charges on the guy. The name he gave me was fake. No one at the rescue center knew who he really was either. Apparently, he'd only been volunteering there for a week. He wasn't affiliated with them like he'd claimed." I smoothed a hand over my forehead and sighed. "I still can't believe I fell for it. I feel so stupid."

"Don't feel stupid. You have a kind heart. It was in the right place. All you wanted to do was help those poor animals. He's the one who'll have to deal with the bad karma from the situation, not you."

Her eyes flashed brightly, but she shifted her attention to the mug in her hands before I could examine them. How had she done that? Was it even real, or had I had too much wine already? We were on our second mug each and I wasn't much of a drinker.

"This is going to sound insane, but did your eyes just brighten?" I asked.

She took another sip from her wine, her gaze never lifting to meet mine. "My eyes?"

I could tell she was nervous, but why? What did she have to be nervous about?

Before I could ask, my cell chimed with a text. I scooped it off the coffee table and tried not to smirk when I saw it was from Harrison.

**Want to feed the deer with me?**

“You’re fighting a smile,” Tara said, calling me out. “Is that Harrison?”

I nodded. “I think he forgot we were doing this sisters’ night tonight. I’ll tell him that I’ll catch up with him tomorrow.”

“No. Don’t do that. Go ahead and hang out with him,” Tara suggested. “There’s something I need to talk with Micah about, anyway.”

“Um, are you sure? We haven’t even made the popcorn yet.”

“Yeah. It’s okay. We can get together again tomorrow night. Maybe we can invite Naomi and Wren?”

“That sounds like fun.” I nodded. “I like those two.”

“They’re great,” Tara said, gathering her purse and making her way to the door.

I hurried to walk her out, wondering what was up with her strange behavior. Why was she suddenly so eager to bail on me? Had it been something I said?

Before she jogged down the steps of the little porch, she paused and turned to pull me in for a hug. “I’m glad you told me about that shitty scammer. I’m sure the bank will give your money back to you soon. Until then, you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you like. The guys don’t rent this cabin out much anymore.”

“Thanks,” I said, meaning it.

There was a huge sense of relief floating through me. I lingered on the porch while Tara turned her vehicle around and headed home. Once she’d left, I shifted my attention to my cell and tapped out a reply to Harrison. A rustling noise followed by a low growl at the edge of the woods sounded. My gaze shot in that direction, locking with a set of yellow eyes. It had to be an animal, which didn’t surprise me, considering I was on a mountain in the middle of the woods. Wildlife was everywhere here. However, when the animal stepped forward and I could see what it was, fear prickled through me.



A panther.

Without hesitation, I bolted inside the cabin and slammed the door shut behind me. Immediately, I erased the text I'd been about to send Harrison and tapped out another one instead.

**Did you know you have panthers on this mountain?  
There's one outside my cabin right now.**

I moved to the window and glanced out, realizing immediately there was more than one standing outside the cabin now.

There were three.

My fear intensified, because the one in the center had locked on me with an eerie, unyielding fixation, filling me with an overwhelming sense of dread.



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## HARRISON

**M**y heart stopped as I read Poppy's text. I rushed out the door and hopped on my four-wheeler, my bear thrashing inside me. He wanted me to set him free, but I couldn't. Not yet. I needed to get to Poppy in the fastest way possible, and right now, that was my four-wheeler.

Gravel and dirt slung around behind me while I throttled into high speed. As I rounded a corner, I met Tara's vehicle and eased into the grass to pass her. She came to a stop and lifted her hands into the air, but I didn't pause to tell her what was going on or apologize. Instead, I continued toward Poppy on a mission. Deep in my gut, I knew the panther prowling around cabin nine was Neo.

When the cabin finally came into view, I ground my teeth together because it wasn't a single panther—it was three.

Neo and his tribe were here.

My appearance gathered everyone's attention. I cut my four-wheeler off and shifted my gaze to the cabin, searching for any sign of Poppy. She stood in the front window. Our eyes locked, and I saw how freaked out she was.

This wasn't good.

As I eased off my four-wheeler, ready to get to her, she frantically shook her head. Her hands made a shooing gesture like she wanted me to leave, but that wasn't an option.

My bear wouldn't allow it.

The panther in the center of the trio made a noise, drawing my attention back to him. A predatory expression twisted his features, sending my bear wild, and I knew right then he was Neo's panther. When he took a step toward the cabin, his gaze reflecting a challenge, my thought was confirmed.

My bear thrashed, refusing to remain caged any longer. He wanted out—he wanted Neo—and honestly, I didn't want to stand in his way. There was only one thing stopping me from releasing him—Poppy.

I hesitated only for her, because I wasn't sure if revealing my secret was a smart move.

As I debated, the front door of the cabin swung open and she stuck her head out to glare at me.

“Harrison, get out of here!” she shouted. “Go back to your place and call a forest ranger or something!”

Neo's panther made a low growling noise that captured mine and my bear's attention. I watched as his head lowered and he shifted into a predatory stance.

He was about to lunge for her.

Without a shred of hesitation, I allowed my bear to rip out of me. His massive paws pounded against the ground as he roared ferociously into the air before charging Neo's panther. Poppy's scream tore through the night air. I didn't look at her. I couldn't, because I couldn't stomach the fear I knew would be reflected in her eyes. Instead, my bear's attention remained focused on the threat. When the sound of the cabin door slamming shut hit my ears, I knew Poppy was safe. She was inside and my bear was free to cut loose.

Without hesitation, he lunged at Neo's panther, jaws clamping down on his hind leg with a viciousness that spilled blood across my bear's tongue. The taste didn't sate him, though. Instead, it fueled his unrelenting thirst for more.

He craved both blood and the end of Neo, and if my bear had any say in it, Neo wouldn't see the light of the next day.

Neo's panther writhed free. His paw sliced through the air, barely missing my bear. But before my bear could strike again,

the two panthers with him—Daxton and Miranda from his tribe—came at us. Their swift movements kept my bear’s attention on them until a deafening roar reverberated through the air behind us.

My reinforcements had arrived.

Hunter’s beastly bear stormed onto the scene, his eyes burning with fury. My brother’s bears, all brimming with anger, closed in too. This was the moment we’d all been waiting for; this was the ultimate showdown.

Using their arrival as a distraction, my bear lunged for Neo’s panther again. Unfortunately, he anticipated the move and dashed away too quickly. He wasn’t fast enough to get past Hunter’s bear waiting in the wings, though. Satisfaction coiled through my bear and me when Hunter pinned him to the ground.

Shifter magic pulsed through the air in the next instant, and my bear spun to find Daxton standing a few feet away. His hands lifted into the air, a pleading look on his face, as he walked toward where Hunter’s bear had Neo’s panther pinned. Hunter’s bear snarled, his irritation palpable as it rippled through the clan bond, making it clear there would be no negotiations. However, before anyone could make a move, Miranda rushed forward and blew a purple powder into Neo’s panther’s face, causing him to go limp beneath Hunter’s bear instantly.

When had she even shifted?

More shifter magic burst through the air, this time coming from Hunter. A pissed off expression darkened his features. Miranda eased herself to Daxton’s side, and my brothers and I reverted to our human forms. We were uncertain about the next steps in this situation, but we would follow Hunter’s lead without question.

“What the hell was that?” Hunter demanded; his heated gaze locked on Miranda.

“A sleep spell,” she answered, straightening her back. “He won’t wake up anytime soon. It’s the most potent sleep spell I

could find.”

What a tricky little half-breed she was.

“We weren’t trying to attack any of you,” Daxton chimed in, shifting to look at me. “All we were trying to do was stop him from hurting anyone, and anyone from hurting him. He’s not well. We planned on using that sleep spell on him earlier, but he took off before Miranda could.”

“How convenient,” Jax growled.

“Please, just let me take my brother,” Daxton pleaded. “We won’t bother you again—he won’t.”

“How can you be so sure of that?” Micah demanded.

“You have a vampire in town. He works at Last Drop,” Miranda said.

Clearly, she didn’t realize Joe didn’t work at Last Drop, he owned the place.

“And?” I pressed.

“And we can ask him to compel Neo to forget about Naomi,” Miranda continued. “We can have him dissolve this vengeance he has against you and your brothers, too.”

“What makes you think we’re willing to show this piece of shit any mercy after everything he’s done?” Hunter ground out, still riled up.

“Because this doesn’t have to end in death. There’s another way,” Daxton insisted. “Another way for you to have the outcome you want—my brother to never bother you again. Isn’t that what you want? Isn’t that your end goal here?”

The sound of four-wheelers speeding toward us captured all of our attention. It was followed by a puff of something swirling through the air in front of my face that made me feel unsteady on my feet and clouded my vision for a moment. When everything cleared, Naomi, Wren, and Tara were dismounting four-wheelers, and Neo, Daxton, and Miranda were gone.

“Damn it,” Hunter growled. He whipped around, searching for them, but they were nowhere in sight.

I stepped forward, scanning the edge of the woods and hoping to spot them, but they’d vanished.

“That’s the same crap she used last time when we lost them in the woods,” Jax grumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“I’m not a fan of witches,” Micah said.

“Where did they go? What happened?” Naomi asked, rushing to Hunter. “Don’t tell me they got away again.”

“They got away again,” I deadpanned.

“Where’s Poppy?” Tara asked. “Do any of you smell smoke?”

I took a deep breath and detected the faint scent of smoke in the air. My attention snapped to the cabin, where orange flames danced inside the front window. I shoved past everyone and darted up the stairs of the porch.

The door was locked.

Taking a step back, I kicked my heel at the wooden door, snapping it off its hinges. Rushing inside, all I could see was smoke. It filled the cabin as bright orange flames consumed the curtains along the opposite wall.

Panic set in.

It intensified when I spotted Poppy sprawled out across the floor. Clearly, she’d seen me shift into a bear and passed out. Candles burned on the table behind her, but there was one that had fallen off and rolled across the floor, lighting the curtains on fire.

“Oh my God!” Tara gasped from behind me.

I scooped Poppy into my arms and slid past Tara through the door, heading back outside. I didn’t stop until I felt there was enough distance between her and the cabin.

Poppy stirred as I placed her on the soft grass. She released a few coughs as she sat up. Relief powered through me, because that had to be a good sign she was all right.

“What happened?” she asked, her voice hoarse. Her gaze drifted around. “And why are all the guys naked?”

No one said a word, but Poppy didn't seem to notice our discomfort. Instead, she pressed her hand against her forehead, and looked up at me through squinted eyes.

“I had a crazy dream you transformed into a big brown bear,” she said.

I rubbed at the back of my neck, my gaze dipping to the gravel. “That wasn't a dream.”

“You can't be serious,” she scoffed.

I lifted my gaze to meet hers and allowed my bear to come close enough to the surface to brighten my eyes, hoping it would be all the proof she needed.

“I'm a bear shifter,” I said.

A loud pop sounded; it was followed by the sound of glass breaking. Everyone's attention shot to the cabin. Flames now licked along the roof.

“Oh my God! The cabin is on fire!” Poppy jolted to her feet, the swift movement causing her to fall into another coughing fit and sway on her feet.

Tara rushed to her side. “Are you okay?” she asked her.

“I'm fine, but I could use some water,” Poppy said, glancing at her. Her attention swung back to the cabin. “Your cabin could use some water, too. Has anyone called the fire department?”

Everyone's attention remained focused on cabin nine as it burned to the ground, and all I could think about was something Hunter had said once before.

“Nah, this is just Hunter getting his wish,” I said.

“What wish?” Hunter demanded, swinging his gaze to me.

“Remember when you said that you wished this place would just burn down?” I gestured to the cabin. “Well, here you go. Wish granted.”



Hunter frowned. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I did say that,” he muttered. “Seems fitting since things with Neo are over.”

“You believe Daxton and Miranda will take him to Joe?” Jax asked.

Hunter nodded. “I do, because they know if they don’t, I’ll kill him. Neither of them wants that, which is why they did what they did. They’ll follow through.”

Daxton and Miranda might have initially shown up in Crescent Creek as backup for Neo, but once they realized how vengeful and crazed he was, all they wanted was to save him from himself. They wouldn’t become a threat.

Hunter was right. It was finally over.

Poppy coughed again and my attention fell to her once more. My bear nudged me, wanting me to help soothe her cough and take care of her.

“I’d like to take you back to my place, get you some water, and let you rest,” I said. “If we stand here any longer, my hankering for roasted marshmallows and the ingredients to make s’mores might become too big.” I tossed her a wink.

“Water and a place to sit down sounds good,” Poppy said with a nod. “S’mores do too, though.”

“Maybe later.”

I helped her to my four-wheeler, but before either of us climbed on, I grabbed a pair of shorts I kept in a bag strapped to the back and pulled them on.

“Well, that was convenient,” she teased, flashing me a crooked grin.

“Hey, never know when you might need a change of clothes,” I said, before climbing on my four-wheeler and revving the engine to life.

Poppy hopped on the back and wrapped her arms around me. I eased us away from the burning cabin, leaving my brothers to handle it, and headed toward my place.

Every cell in my being exhaled with relief. Poppy was safe. She knew my secret, and she wasn't running.

Everything was going to be all right.



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## POPPY

**H**arrison was a bear shifter. Did that mean Tara was, too? Was that why her eyes had brightened like Harrison's had earlier?

I had questions—lots of them.

However, I waited until we reached Harrison's cabin, and he'd gotten me a glass of water before I voiced any of them. I needed time to gather my thoughts first.

"I'm sorry you got pulled into that mess with Neo and his tribe," Harrison said, his gaze filled with tenderness. "I didn't mean for that to happen. None of us did."

"I'm sorry for burning down your cabin." I took another sip of water. "I think I passed out after seeing you transform." My fingers smoothed along the back of my head where there was a tender spot.

"We call it shift, and don't worry about the cabin. I wasn't kidding when I said Hunter wished it would burn down a while ago. A lot of bad things have happened there in the last year or so. It's for the best that it burns. Trust me." Concern filled his eyes. "How's your head? You winced when you touched the back."

"It's tender. I must have hit it when I fell."

"Should I take you to the hospital?" he asked.

"No, I'll be fine." I took another sip of water, unsure how to start the conversation about what he was. "So, you're a bear

shifter.” The words fell out, but I was glad because I needed answers.

This was all so crazy.

“Does that scare you?” Harrison asked in a whisper, his eyes locking with mine.

It should, but it didn’t. I couldn’t explain why. All I knew was I could never be scared of this man.

I shook my head. “While I might not understand the situation well—and I might have passed out back there—I’m not afraid of you. I trust you, Harrison. I trust that you won’t hurt me.”

“Thank you,” he said, his face relaxing into a soft smile. “That means a lot to me, and my bear.”

It was strange hearing him say *and my bear*, but it wasn’t scary. Harrison’s bear was an integral part of him woven into the fabric of who he was, and I accepted all parts of him.

I stared into his eyes, feeling a sudden heat rise within me. It wasn’t a new feeling, but instead one I’d been trying to ignore since I first met him.

Without a second thought, I gave into what I was feeling and leaned in to brush my lips against his.

The kiss was slow and tender, a quiet reassurance that I was okay with who he was—with *what* he was—and that I myself was okay, too. His lips worked beneath mine, fueling my desire for him. I melted against him, threading my fingers through his hair, losing myself to the electric sensation that pulsed across my skin where we touched.

How was it possible to feel so alive while touching someone else?

It had always been this way with Harrison, though. He’d had an electric presence that made him hard to ignore. I’d felt it the first day I met him, but it had amplified over time. The day he took my hand and led me into the woods behind his place to meet Fawndle and Niblet it had quadrupled. I hadn’t

believed the electric sensation could intensify any further, but at this moment, it did.

His hand lifted to gently cup my face. He pulled back, his eyes scanning my face before settling back on my lips as though breaking our kiss was the last thing he wanted.

“I need to tell you something,” he whispered. “I need to make sure you understand something before this goes any further between us.”

“Okay.” I licked my lips, feeling the tingles from his electric presence already dissipating and hating it. “What is it?”

“It’s about—” His voice quivered slightly as he spoke, making him sound as though he was nervous to say whatever came next. “Mates.”

I stared at him, feeling a flutter in my chest. “Mates?”

“Yes, mates,” he repeated, hesitation present in his eyes. “As a shifter—a bear shifter—finding a mate is important. It means a lot, and it’s not something we control. It just happens.”

I didn’t know exactly what he was trying to say—was I his mate or was someone else? “Okay.”

He smoothed a hand over his face. “I’m not explaining this well. I’m sorry.” He swallowed hard. “When we find our mate, we just know. It’s like this intense connection that can’t be ignored.”

Something clicked in my head then.

“Oh,” I said softly, the flutter in my chest growing stronger. I glanced away from him, trying to make sense of my feelings. “So, that’s why Tara and Micah got so close so fast.”

“Yeah,” Harrison said, a slight smile pulling at the corner of his lips. “They’re mates.”

“And what about you?” I asked, my heart fluttering faster inside my chest.

“I think you already know the answer to that, Poppy.”

He was right. I did.

I had just learned that shifters were real and now I was being told that I was someone's mate. This couldn't be real. Me, a human, mated to a bear shifter? It sounded impossible, like fiction, but I knew it wasn't. Honestly, it felt right. It felt as though I'd been waiting for this moment my entire life.

"Does that scare you?" Harrison asked, pulling me from my thoughts. "To know that my bear and I have chosen you?"

I met his stare. "No, it excites me."

His eyes brightened, and I knew now that was his bear coming to the surface to say hello. In the next instant, Harrison's lips brushed against mine. All thoughts fled from my mind and I gave in to the intense connection between us that had been there since day one.

A fire that burned hot and bright, consuming everything in its path.

His hands roamed my body, pulling me closer to him, flaming the palpable heat between us. As his tongue slipped into my mouth, exploring, my desire for him reached a near combustible level. He pulled me into his lap without breaking our kiss, and I could feel his hard length pressing against me.

He wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

I nibbled his bottom lip, causing a low growl to vibrate up his throat that was sexy as hell. Half a heartbeat later, he lifted me up, carrying me through his cabin. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and gripped his flexed muscles as he walked me to his bedroom, while I trailed kisses down the side of his neck. Our bodies were pressed so tightly together that I could feel his heartbeat pounding against my chest, matching the rhythm of my own.

As we tumbled onto the soft mattress of his bed, Harrison's hands were everywhere, exploring every inch of my body as his lips devoured mine. I arched my back, wanting to be as close to him as possible. He tugged at the hem of my shirt and in one swift motion, pulled it over my head. As his eyes roamed over me hungrily, all I felt was wanted and beautiful.

There was passion in his eyes, fire, but there was also tenderness, which I'd never witnessed in a man's eyes before when they looked at me.

It was enthralling.

I ran my fingers down his chest, feeling his muscles flex under my touch. A smug smile twisted my lips, and Harrison released a low growl at the sight of it. His lips skimmed the length of my neck, sending shivers down my spine as his hot breath caressed my skin.

"I want you, Poppy," he whispered, his lips still pressed against my neck.

The ache between my legs grew stronger as my need for him swelled. "I want you, too, Harrison."

Another low grumble rattled from somewhere deep inside his chest, and then his teeth nipped the skin between my shoulder and neck. Goose bumps prickled across my skin as a gasp escaped me. My fingers intertwined within his hair as his hands traveled down my back, fumbling with the clasp of my bra. Once he'd managed to undo it, he pulled away to admire what he'd revealed and that same blend of fire and tenderness entered his eyes again.

"You're beautiful," he murmured, before dipping his head and skimming his tongue along the swell of my breasts. I gasped, arching my back as I felt his tongue trace along my soft skin. His hands slid up my back, pulling me closer to him, and every inch of me came alive under his touch. My nipples hardened as he took one into his mouth, and a soft moan escaped me.

This man was addictive, and I knew he would always be my drug of choice.

I pulled at the elastic of my shorts and shimmied my hips, wanting every piece of clothing off of us both right this instant. As though he could read my mind, Harrison pulled my shorts off and then hooked his thumb into the elastic of my panties and painstakingly slid me free of them.

He already knew how to torture me in the best of ways.



I craved him, needed him, and as he flashed me a wicked grin that let me know how much he enjoyed teasing me, I pressed on his shoulders and flipped us over. Straddling him, it was my turn to play. His eyes glimmered with desire, and the bulge in his shorts grew. I trailed my fingertips down the length of his torso. His delicious abs twitched and flexed, and I nibbled my bottom lip, loving the reaction my touch drew from him.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he said, his voice a low rumble as his heated eyes locked with mine.

I paused my fingers, hovering near the waistband of his shorts. “Is that a bad thing?”

“From where I’m lying,” he muttered, his hands gripping my hips. “Not at all.”

I slipped my hand under the waistband of his shorts, and his eyes closed, his breath catching in his throat. Stroking him once, twice, three times, before I lifted off him and tugged at his shorts. He raised his hips, helping me to slip them off. I tossed them to the floor, and then sat back down on him, staring at him directly in the eyes.

Every inch of him was perfect.

He was everything I could have ever dreamed up for myself and more. He was the person I was meant to spend the rest of my life with. I knew it with unshakable certainty.

I lowered myself onto him while holding his stare, and I knew by the spark of his bear flickering through the color of his eyes he felt the same way I did—that this moment was perfect. With our bodies joined together, I found a rhythm that had us both panting in pleasure. I hadn’t known sex could feel this good. This was what people meant when they claimed to be making love. I understood that sentiment now.

My soul touching his was the best feeling I’d ever experienced in my life.

I continued to move my hips as ecstasy and pleasure built quickly within me. My nails trailed over Harrison’s chest and

his hands tightened their hold on my hips, guiding me to move faster.

As we rocked together, the passion between us grew until I could barely breathe, that combustible heat between us becoming ever more intense. We were both on the brink of crashing over into the abyss.

I leaned over him, and he hugged me close, rolling us over, so that I was on my back again. Harrison hovered above me, his hips picking up speed.

“Harrison!” I gasped, my back arching off the bed as I slipped over the edge.

Ecstasy crashed through me as he moaned my name, leaping over that edge with me. My body pulsed with pleasure as Harrison thrust one last time and then stilled. We both collapsed onto the mattress, tangled in each other’s arms, giddy with the excitement of the moment.

“I love you,” he whispered, and I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

I curled closer to him. “I love you, too.”

Time ticked away as we lay in one another’s arms, and when I was almost about to fall asleep, Harrison stirred beside me. He kissed me on the temple and then slapped my bare ass.

“You’re going to want to wake up and get dressed,” he insisted.

“Why?” I grumbled, feeling comfy.

“Because my brother is here.”

I bolted upright in bed, pulling the sheets close to my chest. “What?”

My gaze shifted around the room, searching for one of Harrison’s brothers, but found no one. However, I did hear something coming from outside the cabin.

“What is that?” I asked.

“A four-wheeler.” He slid out of bed and walked to his dresser. I watched him pull on a pair of boxer briefs and a

clean pair of athletic shorts. “It’s Micah.”

“How can you tell?” I asked, realizing too late it was probably one of his bear shifter abilities.

“My bear can sense him.” He turned to face me after pulling on a tight-fitting cotton shirt and held his hands out to me. “Come on. They have something fun planned. It’s tradition.”

I grabbed hold of his hands and allowed him to help me out of bed. “Tradition. Okay.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but as the sound of a four-wheeler revving its engine out front met with my ears, I pulled my clothes on. A wide smile plastered on Harrison’s face, and I couldn’t help thinking that he was adorable.

Once I was dressed, he interlaced our fingers and started toward the front door. Sure enough, Micah sat on a four-wheeler, waiting for us to make an appearance.

“Role reversal,” he said with a grin. “Get to the firepit.” He sped off without another word, but I could feel the excitement emanating off both Shaw brothers. It danced in the air, becoming palpable.

Harrison didn’t hesitate to hop on his four-wheeler. I slid on the back behind him, and we followed after Micah. I had no idea where we were going, but the excitement bouncing off Harrison was intoxicating. By the time we arrived at a clearing in the woods behind Hunter and Naomi’s cabin, I was as giddy for what was to come as he was. That excitement only intensified as I took in the scenery.

White lights had been strung through the tree branches, creating a warm, welcoming glow through the area. A fire crackled in the pit, and there were nice chairs spaced all around it.

“No more bag chairs?” Harrison asked, noticing them too.

“Nope, we upgraded,” Jax said with a wink.

“I see that,” Harrison gushed. “Look at these lights.” He nodded to the white lights in the trees.

“Those were my idea,” Tara said. “They’re actually from my shed, but I think they look better out here.”

“What is all this?” I asked, feeling as though I was missing something.

There was a weight to all this, a happy one, but a weight, nonetheless.

“This is your welcome to the clan party,” Hunter said, stepping to my side. He handed me a beer and then tossed one to Harrison. “We keep it simple—a fire, some beers, music, and good food—but that’s all you need to commemorate something truly worth celebrating.”

A smile I couldn’t keep at bay spread across my face. Harrison made his way to me and wrapped his arms around me from behind. He kissed the top of my head and squeezed me tight.

“Welcome to the Shaw Clan, Poppy,” he whispered.

The joy and love that filled the air was infectious, and it was impossible not to feel like part of something special while standing there with them all.

“To Poppy,” Naomi said, lifting her beer into the air. “Thanks for completing our clan.”

Everyone lifted their beers in a toast to me, and warmth swam through my chest. This moment was special. These people were. And I was grateful to be here with them.

“Is that stuff to make s’mores?” Harrison asked, releasing me before making his way to a cooler behind one of the chairs near the fire. All the ingredients for s’mores sat on top. “Y’all knew exactly what I was craving.”

“We heard what you said at cabin nine about them,” Wren said.

“What happened to that?” I asked. “Did you get the fire out?”

“Hunter called Dusty,” Micah said, as though I should know who that was. When I gave him a look, he elaborated. “He’s a firefighter in town—a dragon shifter firefighter.”

“Oh,” I said with a slight nod, as though it was the most logical thing in the world. “Dragon shifter firefighters, okay. Sure. Makes sense.”

Music turned on from somewhere and everyone fell into conversation. Tara stepped to my side, a nervous smile on her face.

“So, are you mad at me for keeping this gigantic secret from you?” she asked, her shoulders lifting to her ears.

I shook my head. “I get it. It wasn’t just your secret to tell.” I looped our arms together and pulled her close. “I understand.”

“I wanted to tell you so badly,” she said, leaning her head on my shoulder. “I just didn’t know if I could. I wasn’t sure how you would react. If you would even believe me.”

“Sounds familiar.” I chuckled, hinting at how I’d felt about telling her I’d lost my inheritance money to Diego. “I’m not mad, though. Honestly.”

“Good.” She leaned away from me so she could meet my stare. “And I’m super excited you’re Harrison’s mate. I could feel it. Well, my bear could. She knew before I did, I think.”

“Really?”

She nodded and then leaned her head on my shoulder again. “So, does this mean you’re staying here indefinitely now? No more traveling around like a nomad?”

“Oh, I’m definitely still going to travel some,” I insisted. “Only this time, I won’t be alone. I’ll have Harrison with me. He’s it, Tara.”

“Your guy? I know.”

I shook my head. “No, he’s my happy place. I finally found it,” I said, smiling.

Warmth swelled through me as I stood there, staring at Harrison while latching onto my sister. This was my family. This was my home. This was my happily ever after.

My luck had finally shifted for the better.

## EPILOGUE - POPPY

I added a few more grapes to the center of the fruit flower tray I'd created and took a step back to gaze at its beauty. The arrangement of colors between the various fruits was appealing to the eye. I was pleased. While I might not be the artist of the family, I sure could make food look pretty. In fact, opening a charcuterie business was something I was considering lately.

Harrison made his way into the kitchen. He snagged a grape from the tray as he passed me and popped it into his mouth.

"Hey, this is for when everyone gets here," I scolded him. We were having everyone over tonight to celebrate my scammer case closing and my inheritance money being returned to my bank account.

Thank goodness.

It had taken longer than I'd expected, but I was glad that nightmare was now over with. All I wanted to focus on now was my future, which included Harrison, Shaw Mountain, and the clan.

"No one will even notice," Harrison countered as he continued to the fridge. I watched him pour himself a glass of sweet tea and then chug it down.

"Hot out there?" I asked, even though I knew it was. The temperatures had been sweltering this week.

"Yup, which is why you all are going to love my surprise." He flashed me a wicked grin before slapping me on the ass as

he made his way back outside again.

I wasn't supposed to peek into the backyard today, not until everyone got here and Harrison revealed his surprise for us, but I had to admit, it was tempting. There was no telling what he had up his sleeve. All any of us knew was that we were supposed to wear our bathing suits, which had us all thinking he'd bought a pool.

Harrison was definitely a wildcard, but that was one of the things I loved about him. He kept me on my toes and made each day interesting. Living with him was one of the best adventures of my life.

A knock sounded at the front door, and excitement fluttered through me. Over the last few weeks, I'd grown close with everyone in the clan, and I loved it.

"Hey," Tara said as soon as I opened the door. "I brought dessert." She wiggled a plastic container of cookies.

"Sugar Sweets Bakery cookies?" I asked.

"Oh yeah. This is their summer tray. It has lemon meltaways, coconut lime cookies, pink lemonade, and even pineapple upside down sugar cookies," she said, making her way inside.

"I've been dying to try one of the pineapple upside down ones all day, but she won't let me," Micah chimed in as he followed her to the kitchen. "Where's Harrison?"

"In the backyard, finishing up whatever this surprise is he's been working on." I made some room on the counter for the cookie tray.

"Have you tried to peek and see what it is?" Micah asked.

I nodded. "Several times, but he blocked me each time I tried."

Harrison came walking in with Hunter, Naomi, Jax, and Wren. They were laughing at something he'd most likely said. Harrison was always the life of the party.

"Are you ready to reveal your surprise and put the salmon on the grill?" I asked him.



“Absolutely.” He winked. Once he grabbed the pan with the salmon filets on it, he motioned for us all to follow him outside. “Y’all are going to love this.”

“Would this surprise have anything to do with the baby deer you’ve been keeping as pets in the woods back there?” Hunter asked, putting Harrison on the spot.

Harrison looked shocked. “You knew about them?”

Hunter nodded and so did everyone else.

“How did you know about them?” Harrison demanded.

“We were patrolling for weeks all around the mountain,” Jax chimed in. “Did you really think none of us would see them?”

Harrison ran a hand through his hair. “I guess so.”

“You’ve done good, by the way,” Micah said, and I loved him for it. “They look healthy and well taken care of.”

“Thanks.” Harrison smiled and then continued outside.

As we rounded the cabin, every kid’s dream came into view. There were four inflatable kiddie pools and a slip-n-slide set up in the backyard with another pool at the end.

“What is this?” Hunter asked. “I thought you bought a pool.”

“I did.” Harrison motioned to the kiddie pools. “I bought five, actually.”

“Those are not pools. Those are tiny bathtubs,” Hunter countered.

Harrison shook his head. “I beg to differ.”

All I could do was laugh. Heck, all any of us could do was laugh. This was definitely a Harrison-style pool party.

“Pick a pool. Hop in. I put coolers of beer next to each.” Harrison carefully put the salmon on the grill.

I walked over and gave him a hug from behind. “This is great. I love your version of a pool party.”

“It’s great, isn’t it?” He nodded with a smile. “Wait till you see what I bought us all to camp in.”

“When and where are we going camping?” This was news to me.

“Next weekend, in the new tent area I cleared close to the pond.”

“You did what?” Hunter demanded. “You cleared an area for tent camping?”

I released Harrison and stepped to the side, trying hard not to laugh. Harrison was always doing things like that on his own, never thinking to ask his brothers first.

“I figured we could use a tent camping area around here. Some people really enjoy tent camping. It’s something else we could offer, another source of revenue,” Harrison said. “Plus, I got us some amazing tents for next weekend. We’re going to have a blast.”

He shifted his attention back to the salmon. Hunter’s eyes snapped to me.

“You’re supposed to keep an eye on him,” he said. “This is not keeping an eye on him.”

I shrugged, flashing him a grin. “Sorry.”

“Tent camping could be a great attraction,” Naomi chimed in, taking Hunter by the arm. He immediately settled at the feel of her touch, and she tossed me a wink.

Wren made her way to stand beside me. “Did you make the trays up inside?”

“Not the cookies. Tara bought that from Sugar Sweets Bakery,” I said. “The fruit trays, though.”

“Those look great. They’re like little pieces of art,” she insisted.

“Thanks. I’m considering opening a business where I make them,” I said, hoping the idea didn’t sound dumb. So far, I’d only mentioned it to Harrison. He thought it was a great idea,

but I'd come to realize quickly that he would be my biggest fan and hype person no matter what I wanted to do.

“People would love that around here,” Wren insisted.

“Did I just hear you say you're considering opening a business with your charcuterie boards?” Tara asked, eyes wide. “Poppy, that would be perfect for you!”

“You really think so?” I asked.

“Absolutely, you've always loved making pretty food platters and charcuterie boards,” Tara continued.

“Is there a market for it here, though?” I asked.

“I think there is,” Wren said. “I could talk to Amelia at the salon and see if we could set some business cards out for you there.”

“Business cards for what?” Naomi asked, making her way to us.

“Poppy is thinking of starting a charcuterie board business,” Tara said, sounding so proud of me it made me smile.

Naomi's eyes got wide. “Oh! That would be great! We could put menus in each of the cabins. That way when someone stays with us, they can have the option to order a board of their choice. We could even deliver them to their cabin or have it waiting for them when they arrive.”

“That's actually a great idea,” I said, warmth flowing through me from brainstorming with these ladies.

“Looks like you finally found your thing,” Tara said, flashing me a smile. “I know you've been antsy lately. Now, you've got the perfect idea for a business of your own. This is going to be awesome. I'm excited for you.”

I pulled her in for a hug, feeling excited for myself, too.

“Poppy, let's show them how it's done!” Harrison called out to me.

I glanced in his direction and spotted him standing at the top of slip-n-slide. He held out a hand toward me and

motioned for me to come to him. With a mischievous grin, I joined him at the top of the slip-n-slide. As I stood beside Harrison, I could feel everyone's eyes on us.

“Ready to make a splash?” Harrison asked, his eyes dancing with excitement.

I nodded, my pulse quickening. “Always.”

Harrison took a step back, positioning himself at the slide's entrance. I followed suit. The sun beat down on us as we began our countdown together.

“Three, two, one—go!” we shouted in unison.

Together we raced down the slip-n-slide, laughter spewing from us both. As we reached the end, we catapulted into the kiddie pool Harrison had set up at the end. Everyone clapped and shouted, celebrating our little plunge and we laughed even harder. Harrison took a bow, and all I could think about was how this was a memory I would treasure forever; a reminder of how incredible life could be when you shared it with the people you loved.

Drenched and grinning like a fool, Harrison pulled me close and kissed me. My heart swelled. I loved this man. Every day with him was filled with excitement, surprises, and overflowing with joy. Life with Harrison Shaw was an adventure in itself, one that included kiddie pools and plunging headfirst down a slip-n-slide. But I was absolutely certain that with him by my side, and our clan around us, we could craft a life together far beyond our wildest dreams.

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