

MOON
BURROW
BEARS

CRASH

F E L F E R N

CRASH

MOON BURROW BEARS 7

FEL FERN

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BLURB

In a race against time, Jared's life hangs by a thread... unless he finds his biker bear.

Death is unavoidable but Jared Church refuses to accept his fate. Haunted by his brother's murder, Jared is determined to rewrite destiny. A glimmer of hope emerges as his brother's final gift leads him on a desperate quest—to find the man who has consumed his dreams since childhood.

Harry ‘Crash’ Brady has everything. He’s satisfied with his role in the Grizzly Reapers MC and he has loyal friends to watch his back. Crash doesn’t need or want anything else, but everything changes the night he saves a psychic from two werewolves. Jared is wonderfully selfless, and he wears his heart on his sleeve. He also believes Crash is innately good, even though Crash has done his fair share of deeds he isn’t particularly proud of.

Just as Jared's hopes flicker to life, his brother's killer resurfaces. With danger closing in, staying by Crash's side might mean certain doom for the both of them. But Crash refuses to back down—even if their adversary is a bloodthirsty demon.

Prepare for an exhilarating ride in Crash, the seventh book in the Moon Burrow Bears series. Brace yourself for an intense m/m mpreg shifter romance, where a chivalrous biker bear and a sweet, sensitive psychic defy all odds.

JARED

The intense headache hit me in the middle of my afternoon shift. One moment, I'd been flipping burgers at the fast-food joint where I'd been working for six months.

The next moment, my stomach heaved, and it felt like someone had stuck needles in both my eyes.

I dropped the metal spatula, took a few steps away from the grill, and rested my head in my hands.

Massaging my temples didn't work. The sharp pain in the back of my head persisted, and instinct told me this wasn't normal.

It had something to do with waking up in bed this morning, my entire body covered in sweat.

My throat felt raw from too much screaming the night before. Something bad was going to happen. I knew it in my bones.

My twin brother, Jace, and I came from a long line of seers. Jace and I felt an immediate sense of wrongness on the day our dad Reid took his own life.

Ten years ago, Jace had barged into my bedroom one foggy morning, ashen-faced and unable to speak.

Words weren't needed. Deep down, Jace and I knew the inevitable had come to pass.

The same dread coiled in my insides in the present.

Both our dads were gone. Ken died of lung cancer. Unable to cope with his death, Reid took his own life.

Jace was all I had, but Jace was living thousands of miles away from Fair Creek, our hometown.

I had chosen to stay and live in the house where we grew up. The moment Jace turned 20, he left Fair Creek, our haunted home, and never looked back.

I resented him a little for leaving me behind. No, that wasn't true at all. I didn't want to leave back then and now.

The familiar comforted me. Sudden change unnerved me, but I had a feeling change was about to visit me no matter what I wanted.

"Jared, you alright?" Ronda, my manager, asked.

Ronda looked at me with concern. I realized I'd wrapped my arms around my skinny frame.

I stared at the burning meat on the grill. Ronda followed my line of sight and calmly took over.

Finally, I remembered how to use my words.

"I'm not feeling so good, Ronda. Must be the flu that's been going around," I said, lying effortlessly.

Lying had been part of Jace's and my skill set ever since we were kids.

There were places in the world where paranormals and humans openly coexisted, but not in Fair Creek.

We had our share of supernatural residents, but they mostly kept to themselves.

The human denizens treated them with open fear and suspicion. They did not spare my family.

My family were outliers and didn't belong on the side of the humans or the supernaturals.

Jace and I spent our miserable high school years being treated like pariahs. While we never openly declared what we were, rumors traveled fast in small towns.

Visitors frequented our house during my childhood, seeking Ken to read their fortunes.

In the present, some of the older locals still appeared on my doorstep, begging for my aid.

Jace would have refused immediately, but I never had the heart to turn them away.

"Take the rest of the day off, Jared," Ronda suggested.

I blinked at her, momentarily confused. For a moment there, I'd allowed myself to meander down memory lane.

"Thanks, Ronda," I told her.

"Take all the time you need. You have my number. Get some medicine for that flu," she called over my shoulder.

I made my way to the employee break room and grabbed the rest of my belongings.

Not bothering to change out of my uniform, I left the store. The moment my feet touched the pavement, I breathed in some fresh air.

The pounding in my head subsided a little, but the uneasy feeling in my gut lingered.

I tried calling Jace right after I slid behind the wheel of my battered blue Honda. No response.

The last time I heard from Jace was two weeks ago. He seemed happy, working an office job for a hot boss. Those were Jace's exact words.

Jace drifted from one job to the next, before finally settling on this one a year ago.

He'd sent me pictures of his desk, of his fancy new apartment. Jace seemed happy. So what went wrong?

After texting him to call me back, I drove back home. Spotting the latest graffiti artwork sprayed on my porch steps, I sighed.

Cleaning that mess up would take hours and I wasn't in the mood, so I left it for now.

I entered my quiet little home. Buster, my playful 5-year-old gray Ragdoll, immediately ran up to me to greet me.

Buster twirled around my legs, and I knew he wouldn't stop until I picked him up. He was such an adorable baby that way.

I hefted him in my arms and let out a dramatic groan.

"Did you gain some extra weight again?" I asked him.

Buster meowed in my arms. I carried him upstairs to my bedroom. Once again, I ignored the two empty bedrooms across the hall.

A co-worker once asked me if I ever got lonely, living in such a big house on my own. I told him I was fine because I had Buster with me.

That was another lie. There were nights when I came home, feeling completely wiped out from work, wishing I had someone to come home to.

Someone who would greet me with a warm smile and a teasing kiss. He'd make me dinner and ask me how my day was.

Maybe the mystery man I'd been dreaming of ever since I was a kid.

Jace always teased me every single time I brought him up. My Prince Charming had dark gold hair and vivid blue eyes that sometimes turned amber in certain situations.

He wasn't traditionally handsome but had a rough, rakish look to him. When he smiled, my heart completely melted.

When Jace told me to grow up and find a real man, I stopped mentioning my imaginary prince to him completely.

I never told my brother this, but some childish part of me still believed he was real.

My prince was out there, looking for me. Someday, our paths would cross, but until then, I'd continue dreaming of him.

Wanting to get the smell of greasy burgers off me, I took a quick shower.

After making myself a quick dinner, I checked my phone, but there was still no reply from Jace.

I hugged Buster close to my chest. He stilled, allowing me to use him as a fluffy pillow. It was as if Buster knew I needed the extra comfort.

"Jace, what happened to you?" I whispered to the empty kitchen.

I woke up crying. Buster licked my cheek, and I realized I'd fallen asleep on my lumpy living room sofa again.

The more I tried to recall the dream, the more it slipped away from my grasp.

I had dreamed of him again, my golden prince with the eyes that never remained the same. My prince with the hungry smile.

In that dream, I saw him clear as day, leaning against a black monstrous machine—a Harley.

Once he spotted me, he'd crooked a finger at me. I could still remember the words I said to him in the dream.

"You're my past, present, and future, Crash," I had said.

Crash. Was that his name? I'd always thought of my prince as nameless. Where did that even come from? What kind of name was Crash?

My phone buzzed, and it took me a few precious seconds to find it tucked under one pillow.

Jace's name flashed across the screen, and I answered his call immediately.

"Jace, thank God you called me back. I was worried about you all day," I blurted.

A quick look at the clock on my kitchen wall told me it was midnight. I arrived home at 3 pm.

Plenty of time had passed. Buster jumped on my lap, and I stroked him to calm my nerves.

“Jace, are you there?” I asked anxiously.

“There’s no time,” Jace said, sounding a little out of breath.

I pressed my phone closer to my ear and could hear shouting in the background, followed by a distinctive sound I’d only heard in movies or shows.

A gunshot? Was someone shooting at my brother? My heart thumped painfully, and I gripped the phone tightly in my hand.

“Jace, talk to me. What do you mean, there’s no time?” I demanded.

“I made a terrible mistake,” Jace said. Each word sounded strained. He panted heavily.

Jace continued, “I have so many things I wanted to tell you, Jared.” “Stop running and let’s talk this out like adults, Jace.” I heard someone saying.

Unlike my brother, who seemed to have trouble drawing air into his lungs, this speaker had a calm, velvety voice that made the hairs on my arms stand.

“Who are you calling?” asked that same voice.

“Run,” Jace whispered to me. “Get out of town. Do it right now or you’ll die in three days.”

Three days? Was Jace for real?

“Out of Fair Creek? Why? Jace, you’re not making any sense. Where would I even go?” I demanded.

“To your Motorcycle Prince. He’s real. I’m sorry I made fun of you all those years ago. Go to him. He’ll keep you safe,” Jace said. “I love you, Jared. I really wish we had more time.” Jace abruptly cut the call, and I stared at my phone for the next few seconds, stunned.

What just happened?

Jace told me to leave town, and I knew he wouldn't just give me that advice without a reason.

Jace's gift of foresight had always been stronger than mine. Did he see my death? I was about to call him again when my hands started to shake.

The cellphone slipped from my fingers. Invisible pressure constricted my chest, making it hard to breathe.

My heart felt like it would burst from my chest. I knew in that instant that Jared was about to die, and there was nothing I could do to save him.

Terrible agony gripped my head. I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing I was receiving a vision. A late vision, but something was better than nothing.

My head spun, and the world seemed upside down. Cold swept over my clothes, my trembling body.

I heard the crash of waves, and the smell of brine permeated my nose. I was on some sort of dock or marina.

Large and pale fingers circled my fragile neck, and a terrible face loomed above me, beautiful yet unnatural.

A croak slipped from my throat, but I wouldn't beg for forgiveness or mercy. That wasn't my style. It took me a moment to realize I was looking out of Jace's eyes and hearing his thoughts.

These were his last moments on this earth.

Despair filled me as the creature in front of me continued strangling me. My body, or rather Jace's body, started to grow limp.

"Tell me, Jace. Who did you call?" asked my brother's killer in that same eerie and calm voice.

Jace managed to blurt out two words. An impolite curse. His killer wore a disgusted look on his face.

Cold red eyes bore into mine. Jace's murderer wasn't the least bit human. Why wasn't I surprised?

“If you hadn’t snoopied around, then things would have still been peachy between us. I really enjoyed you in my life, in my bed, Jace. Here I was, thinking we were partners.”

I detected a hint of sadness in the monster’s voice, but it was gone the next moment. “Too bad I need to replace you.”

The monster squeezed one more time until the fragile bones in my brother’s neck broke.

My mind pulled me back to reality. I gasped, clawing at the fabric of my sofa. Sweat beaded my brow, and my heart galloped.

What was the point of having this gift, when I could only see my brother during his dying moments?

“This isn’t a gift. It’s a bloody curse,” I whispered to myself.

I burrowed my face into my hands. Hot tears filled my eyes. With Jace gone, I was the only member of the Church family left alive.

JARED

I glanced at Ken's battered wristwatch for what felt like the thousandth time. The grimy clock face stared back at me, along with the massive crack in the middle.

The watch was broken, no longer able to tell time, but wearing it comforted me. At the same time, it also distracted me from what was going to happen in the next five minutes.

"Want a refill, hon?" asked a waitress.

I silently read her name tag. Miranda. I studied her face. Inquisitive brown eyes peeked out from an angular face.

She had gathered her long brown curls into a tight, single braid. A jolt of recognition hit me.

Miranda was the woman I dreamed about the night before. This woman would die soon if I didn't intervene.

In my mind's eye, I saw Miranda bleeding on the dirty yellow vinyl floor, a bullet between her eyes.

I shuddered. Two days had passed since I packed my bags and left Fair Creek. That meant I only had one more day to live.

I still hadn't gotten over my brother's death, but it would be remiss of me to ignore his last warning.

Leaving had been easier than I thought, especially after coming to the realization that I wouldn't be missed.

With my entire family gone, I wouldn't miss Fair Creek one bit either.

My visions had also increased in frequency since Jace's death. Sometimes I saw strangers minutes before their doom.

My dreams of Crash had also ramped up in intensity. When Jace told me to find him, his suggestion felt absurd, but lately, I saw myself driving past vast cornfields.

Then I'd enter a narrow road lined with ash and oak trees that were centuries old. Almost there, I had thought that morning.

It wouldn't be long now before I could pinpoint Crash's location, but first, I had another soul to save.

"Yes, please," I said, remembering where I was.

Miranda flashed me a warm smile before refilling my cup. Over her shoulder, I spotted a nondescript man in his mid-thirties, pretending to read a newspaper.

I knew he was pretending because he hadn't turned the page since he occupied that booth fifteen minutes ago. Gut instinct told me to flee.

The stranger stuck out like an odd duck in the roadside diner. Truck drivers and the occasional traveler were the diner's usual customers.

This man looked like he belonged in an office. Judging by how well the dark violet suit fit him, I could tell his clothing was tailored and expensive.

Our gazes met for a brief second, and his cold, emotionless black eyes made me look away first.

There was something strange about his aura as well. Being psychic allowed me to read a person's aura. Most folks in the diner had muted, unremarkable auras, but his aura felt tainted and overwhelming.

He might look human, but I was betting he had supernatural abilities at his disposal.

He's here for me, I thought. My fingers shook as I picked up the steaming cup of coffee.

I took a sip to calm my nerves, but the caffeine only made me hyper. You're being paranoid, Jared, I reminded myself.

The man in the suit wasn't after me. That was just ridiculous. Except lately, I had the distinct feeling of being watched. Stalked.

I needed to get out of here, find a motel for the night, and hopefully, my dreams would finally tell me where Crash was.

It all sounded ridiculous. Here I was, running from whatever Jace got tangled up in and drawn to an invisible force I couldn't quite explain.

Even if I did manage to track down Crash, what was I going to say to him?

I've been dreaming about you ever since I was a teenager? Those words would certainly freak him out.

A bell chimed, and a young man wearing an oversized black hoodie sauntered in.

The sight of the cartoon shark printed on the front of his top made me freeze. The moment had come.

My intervention could mean saving a woman's life. I quickly took out several bills from my wallet, paid my tab, then slowly slid out of my booth.

Miranda had approached the man wearing the hoodie. He kept his hands firmly in the front pockets of his hoodie, where I knew he hid a gun.

Heart racing, I edged towards the pair. I was a few feet from them when the man suddenly whipped a revolver out.

Miranda's back was facing me, but I remembered the naked look of terror on her face in my vision.

Without thinking, I lunged at the young man, tackling him to the ground in the process.

I used all my weight against him because all I had was my gift of foresight. I didn't possess quick reflexes, extra strength, or speed like some

supernaturals.

I was just regular old me.

My quick save caught the man off-guard. His gun clattered to the ground, and one of the nearby truck drivers kicked it to one side before the man could reach for it again.

He glared at me, and I didn't see his punch until pain exploded from my left cheek. I rolled off him, knowing that the element of surprise was all I had at my disposal.

It turned out I didn't need to worry because the same truck driver who kicked the shooter's gun away also apprehended him.

"Here, let me help you up, hon," Miranda said.

She offered her hand to me, and I accepted it. Tears of gratitude brimmed in her eyes.

"Thank you," she told me.

"Don't mention it," I mumbled.

The appearance of the gun had stirred up the entire diner. I slipped away during the resulting chaos, not wishing to let my identity be known.

I was reckless. Things could have spun out of control. What if the shooter managed to hurt or kill me?

In my vision, he shot Miranda after she refused to take him to the cash register.

He ended up shooting three more folks, two customers, and the manager, before running away with the money.

I shook my head. There was no use debating what could have happened. My work here was done.

It was time to resume my search for Crash. Jace told me finding him was of utmost importance. He seemed supremely confident Crash would help me.

Then again, even Jace could make mistakes. He'd been seconds away from

dying, after all.

I almost bolted to my Honda, but I stopped when I saw the man wearing the violet suit leaning against my car.

I didn't see this coming at all. That was the problem with being able to see the future. My visions were always random.

"Hey there, little hero," the man greeted.

He flashed me an unnerving smile, showing his teeth, which he had filed into fangs. He wasn't a vampire because the afternoon sun didn't seem to affect him.

Not a shifter either, because shifters had a distinct wildness to their auras. Aside from having the gift of premonition, my family could also see auras.

This stranger's aura looked oily and black. The smell of burned matches wafted off him. That couldn't be a good sign.

I took a hesitant step back, then stopped and considered my situation. We were standing in an open parking lot.

There was a constant flux of truck drivers coming and going. We weren't alone.

I could call out for help, but this man hadn't done anything to me yet. He watched me, a curious look on his face.

What would Jace say in a situation like this? I'd always been the shy and meek twin, but right now, I needed to borrow some of my brother's courage.

"I need to get to my car. Get out of my way," I said firmly.

He raised one eyebrow. "Now that's eerie. For a second there, I thought I was talking to Jace."

"You know my brother?" I demanded.

"Sure, I do. Come with me, and I'll tell you all about it," he said. He jerked his head to a black BMW parked in the next lane. "Let's go for a ride."

"I'm not going to take a ride with a complete stranger," I said with a scoff.

“I’m Floyd Pittman,” Floyd introduced.

I tensed when he unbuttoned his suit, but he only took out a small white business card and handed it over to me.

He still blocked the door to the driver’s seat. I had no other option but to snatch the card.

“Pittman Industries,” I read the company name out loud.

Jace never mentioned the company he worked for, but I was betting it was Pittman Industries.

“My boss and cousin, Bernard Pittman, is very eager to meet you in person, Jared,” Floyd said.

“Why?” I asked, giving him a suspicious squint.

“On paper, Jace was Bernard’s secretary, but in reality, he assisted us using his talent.

The same talent that allowed you to take care of that gunman before he killed anyone in that diner,” Floyd said.

His frankness made me wary. How much did he know about Jace and my abilities? About me?

How much research did he do? Was he the one stalking me? Maybe he was tired of the cat-and-mouse game and decided to approach me now.

“Not interested,” I said.

“You haven’t even heard our proposal. Jace was generously compensated for his time,” Floyd said.

“And now my brother’s dead,” I said flatly. There was no change in Floyd’s expression.

“An unfortunate accident,” Floyd said. “He had a heart attack at work.”

“That’s the explanation you folks came up with to cover up my brother’s death?” I asked, my voice becoming heated.

My entire face felt hot. I needed to be careful with my words, but my emotions kept getting in the way.

Being on the road and finding Crash distracted me from my overwhelming grief, but now anger and pain surfaced. I couldn't hold them back.

"Is there a problem here?" The same nice blond-haired truck driver who intervened in the diner asked the question. He shot me a questioning look.

"Is there a problem, Floyd?" I asked, grateful for the truck driver's help.

It finally dawned on me that Floyd wasn't going to answer any of my questions, not unless I agreed to come with him. There was no way that was going to happen.

"Not at all," Floyd answered, smiling.

He stepped to one side, finally allowing me to enter my car. I gave the trucker a grateful nod. He nodded back before returning to his truck.

"Give me a call, Jared. We'll discuss this further," Floyd added.

"Unlikely," I muttered under my breath as I got in my car.

After starting the ignition, I drove away as fast I could, my heart thumping.

I kept looking over my shoulder, expecting to see Floyd in his fancy car following me.

Thankfully, I didn't see him or anyone else tailing me. Still, I didn't let my guard down.

For the next few hours, I drove in silence, my entire body still tense and wired from that interaction.

Floyd approached me in what many would consider a civilized manner, but I knew he and his cousin were capable of despicable deeds.

Was Bernard the red-eyed man in Jace's death vision? If so, I could have a name for my brother's murderer.

I could still remember the words Bernard had uttered. Jace wasn't just his employee. They were intimate as well.

Jace had a tendency to fall for the bad guys. He'd always been reckless when it came to giving his heart away.

“What kind of trouble did you get yourself into, Jace?” I asked.

Buster, who I left in my car because he'd been napping, was now finally awake. He purred in the backseat and jumped to the seat next to mine.

With one hand on the steering wheel, I used the other to caress his head. He licked my fingers.

Then another vision hit me out of nowhere. I skidded to a halt, killing the engine as another massive headache hit me.

Groaning, I unbuckled my seat belt. My chest tightened, and I forced myself to remember the exercises Ken taught Jace and me.

I breathed in and out slowly, repeating the process until I calmed down. Then I squeezed my eyes shut. I saw myself in this exact same car, Buster napping next to me.

We passed cornfields, the same narrow road surrounded by thick trees, and finally, I could see it in the distance.

A sign indicating where Crash lived.

“Welcome to Moon Burrow,” I read the sign out loud.

Then the pressure in my head subsided. Moon Burrow. I had never heard of that town.

Snatching my charging phone, I quickly opened my location application and saw it was only a two-hour journey from where I was.

“Moon Burrow, here we go,” I told Buster.

3

CRASH

I wiped the blood off my mouth using the back of my hand. My opponent, my best friend Lenny, stood at the opposite end of the challenge circle, panting.

He looked as terrible as I did, a mess of cuts, bruises, and a couple of broken bones.

No major injuries, nothing our resident raven healer could heal. Taking deep breaths, I silently took in where we were—a forest clearing near the MC headquarters.

This area was unofficially designated as our training grounds, a place where we could fight to our heart's content and improve our combat skills.

This lazy afternoon, however, Lenny and I had the place to ourselves.

I crooked a finger at him. That gesture only seemed to enrage Lenny's mad inner grizzly.

His eyes bled to yellow. Clothing tore as muscles exploded and fur covered Lenny's chest and shoulders. That was my cue to shift.

I took off my jeans, the only piece of clothing I wore to our duel. Then I reached for my own grizzly.

The change flowed through me, agonizing yet welcoming at the same time. Bones broke, organs moved.

I fell on all fours just as Lenny, in his half-grizzly and half-man form, charged at me. He didn't even bother waiting to complete his transformation.

That alarmed me a little.

Ever since I'd known him, Lenny always had trouble wrestling his inner animal to submit.

That lack of control often led him to trouble. It was a miracle Venom hadn't kicked Lenny out of the Grizzly Reapers MC. Greed—my second best friend—didn't want Lenny gone either, so we took turns fighting him.

This week, it fell to me to satiate Lenny's craving for violence.

Lenny and I tore at each other with claws and fangs. He was relentless today, slashing and biting me like a rabid animal.

There were even a few hairy moments where I thought Lenny would finally close in and rip my throat out. That wouldn't bode well for either of us.

For one, I enjoyed living. I spent half my life being tossed from one foster home to the next, feeling restless, angry, and different.

It was only until I met Venom and the other grizzly shifters that I realized I had a place where I belonged, a place I could call home.

If Lenny killed me, even by accident, it would be a death sentence for him. There were few rules in the MC and one of them was not killing a fellow MC brother.

Venom would execute anyone who broke that particular rule.

I gave Lenny a violent shove, forcing the other grizzly alpha to back away.

Lenny snarled at me, flashing me his sharp and blood-covered fangs. This fight managed to rile up my own grizzly, which was normally calm as a cucumber.

At the edges of my vision, I spotted another predator lurking in our midst.

Venom leaned against a nearby tree, arms crossed. He lifted his hand and gave me a half wave.

Venom didn't speak, didn't interrupt my brawl with Lenny.

I returned my gaze to my best friend. Foam covered Lenny's muzzle, and his yellow eyes looked crazed and bloodshot. Lenny wasn't getting any better.

I knew it deep down in my bones, and the realization stung plenty.

Had Greed also come to the same conclusion? Did Venom? With that last thought, I shot my lead alpha another look.

Taking my eyes off my opponent had been a terrible mistake. Lenny's snarl was the only warning I got.

The next thing I knew, Lenny came at me. Caught off-guard, I didn't defend myself in time.

Fire and blood coursed down the enormous gashes Lenny created across my belly.

"Enough," growled out a voice.

When Lenny kept going, I sensed Venom through the clan bonds. Venom's terrifying, monstrous aura flared, overwhelming both of us.

Lenny froze above me. I took that opportunity to shove him aside and place some distance between us.

Lenny turned his furious gaze to Venom, but he didn't go after our lead alpha right away.

He was assessing if he could take Venom on in a fight, I realized with a sinking feeling.

Knowing the outcome of that fight, I willed myself to turn back to human. Changing forms in a hurry hurt twice as much, but I gritted my teeth and endured the pain.

Lenny still hadn't made his move even as I fell to my knees, breathing harshly.

I gripped a handful of Lenny's fur, diverting his attention. Lenny growled into my face and instead of pulling away, I tugged at his fur even tighter.

“Remember yourself, John Leonard Hunt,” I said, voice harsh. “You are among friends and allies. We’re not your enemies.”

For a moment, I didn’t think my gambit would work, but Lenny froze and I knew I had gotten to him this time.

Fur receded. A series of pops sounded as bones moved and I was looking at my best friend in human form again.

Lenny looked down at me, and the desperation and pain in his eyes worried me.

Lenny was the only member of the Grizzly Reapers I knew who had never taken an MC name.

When I asked him a long time ago why, Lenny simply said in a strongly calm and collected voice that there wasn’t a need. Lenny didn’t expect to live that long.

I risked a look over Lenny’s shoulder and saw Venom shaking his head and walking away.

Panic rose inside me, then I pushed it back down. For now, my friend was safe. It didn’t look like Venom was going to expel him from the MC yet.

“At the rate you’re going, you’re going to hurt someone again,” I told Lenny honestly.

He still refused to meet my gaze. When Lenny offered me his arm, I allowed him to help me up.

“I know,” Lenny whispered, sounding a little resigned.

“Hey, not all hope is lost,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

“I nearly killed you, Crash,” Lenny pointed out, finally looking at me. “Why aren’t you angry at me?”

“You’re one of my best friends, Len. Greed and I would end up murdering each other if you’re no longer around,” I pointed out.

“That’s true,” Lenny said, flashing me a tight smile.

“Come on, cheer up. Let’s head to Micah’s place to get patched up, then let’s go for a drink. We can rope in Greed in the process,” I suggested.

“Alright,” Lenny said, and I grinned at him.

“So, I take it the fight didn’t go too well for you?” Greed finally asked.

Even though he uttered those words softly, I could hear him just fine despite the atrocious noise.

After paying a visit to our healer, the three of us got on our Harleys and headed to Steve’s Roadhouse, our favorite bar.

“He’s getting worse, Greed,” I said.

“We say that all the time, but Lenny somehow manages to keep his beast contained,” Greed pointed out.

“I don’t think we can hide our training sessions any longer,” I said.

Greed frowned, and I told him about Venom dropping by and how it was only thanks to his intervention that Lenny hadn’t killed me.

“That serious?” Greed asked, looking troubled.

“Lenny will be fine, as long as we watch his back,” I reminded him.

I didn’t believe in those words myself. Greed and I couldn’t monitor our friend 24/7.

No one wanted Lenny on their teams after Lenny nearly ended up killing another MC member.

From that point onwards, Greed, Lenny, and I almost always worked exclusively as a team. So far, the tactic had worked, but both Greed and I knew Lenny was steadily falling apart.

Greed knocked back his beer. I followed his gaze and spotted Lenny in the far corner of the room, talking to the cute server with the dimpled grin.

Greed was the only member of our group who managed to secure a mate. Micah might be loud-mouthed and opinionated, but Lenny and I could see Micah was madly in love with Greed.

Lenny and I had terrible luck when it came to love.

Random hook-ups and one-night stands used to be enough for me until I saw Greed and Micah. Saw what a genuine relationship looked like.

It also didn't help that the other grizzly alphas in the MC had started pairing up. Even Venom, volatile and nuts as he was, found his fated mate.

Destiny didn't smile kindly on either Lenny or me. For now, we had to contend ourselves with distractions until the real deal came along.

"He'll be fine tonight," Greed remarked.

I agreed. Lenny's grizzly had gone to the ground after our duel. Beer and sex would mellow Lenny out tonight and, hopefully, the next couple of days.

"Hey there, Crash. You look awful tonight, but come dance with me."

The offer came from Curtis, another regular in the roadhouse. The human practically purred as he inched closer to me.

He rested a hand on my injured shoulder, jumped when I let out an irritated snarl.

Micah's healing abilities were impressive, but he had his limits. The injuries Lenny inflicted on me earlier weren't completely gone.

They simply looked weeks old as opposed to hours old. Normally, I'd welcome the extra company, but tonight, I just wanted to be alone.

To chill with my best friends and forget about my problems.

"Not in the mood tonight, Curtis. Maybe some other time," I told the flirty human.

Curtis scowled at me. "If only you were that lucky."

Then Curtis stomped away dramatically, making sure I got an eyeful of his ass in those tight leather pants he liked to wear. Greed let out a whistle.

“Micah would punch you in the face if he saw you right now,” I reminded him.

“Micah’s my one and only, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate good booty,” Greed said, then laughed.

He was kidding, of course. Greed was the official joker of our little group.

The moment Micah entered his radar, Greed had ceased looking at any other man. That was how potent the mating call was.

I finished my beer. The roadhouse suddenly felt overbearingly hot and crowded.

The country music pouring out of the speakers normally put me in a good mood, but tonight, the soothing music sounded like noise to my ears.

“I’m stepping out for a bit. I need some air,” I told Greed. “Go ahead. I’ll keep an eye out on our boy,” Greed said, waving me off. He paused, then regarded me. “You alright, Crash?”

“Yeah, just feeling a little off,” I told him. “Understandable, especially after that intense fight with Len,” Greed said.

I left our table and elbowed my way through the crowd. Finally, I reached the entrance. I stepped out into the chilly night, breathing in the fresh air.

I recognized a few faces in the parking lot. A group of MC brothers waved at me from one corner.

I gave them a nod before finding my own private corner. I settled on a more empty area.

There were a few vehicles parked here and, thankfully, no sign of people.

I took out a cigarette, lit it, and shut my eyes. I inhaled, then slowly exhaled. Some measure of calm returned to me.

Today’s fight had been terrible. Venom finally knew Lenny was unraveling, or had known all along?

Maybe our esteemed and terrifying leader was hoping Greed and I would be able to cure Lenny somehow. If so, Greed and I were failing terribly.

A shout cut my next train of thoughts off. Angry voices followed it. Curiosity made me follow the source.

It was probably just a couple arguing, I told myself, but some force propelled me to explore, to investigate the commotion.

My feet seemed to move out of their own volition, or maybe I was just bored and needed a distraction.

Sex was off the table. Maybe there was a fight I could join. A little violence wouldn't hurt. In fact, it might be the temporary cure I was looking for.

4

CRASH

"George and I are just being friendly, seeing as you're a newcomer to our little town and all," drawled a cocky voice.

"I haven't changed my mind, so you two be best be on your way," said a firm voice, but I didn't miss the hint of fear there.

"Aw, don't be like that, cutie. Let's head back to my place. Then the three of us could have some real fun," said the first talker.

"The answer is no. Why don't you two meatheads leave me alone?"

I walked right into some sort of argument. Two musclebound werewolves had managed to corner one defenseless human. I cracked my knuckles in anticipation of a fight.

I never claimed to be anyone's hero, but if there was some kind of injustice unfolding before my eyes, I wouldn't just sit around, twiddling my thumbs.

Time for some hasty intervention. The two blond-haired and jacked-up werewolves didn't notice my arrival, much less catch my scent. They were too focused on their prey.

The human looked up from his messy brown bangs and stared right at me with startling gray eyes. They were a gray so clear they reminded me of rain clouds before a storm.

The intensity in those anthracite eyes took me slightly aback. Then the human flashed me a brilliant smile that left me off-kilter for a few seconds.

That was an odd reaction. Regular folks usually gave me and my MC brothers a wide berth.

What was wrong with this intriguing human?

Wait. Did I just call this stranger intriguing? Maybe it was those eyes. They sure were something.

"Crash," the human whispered my name as if we were old friends, although I was pretty certain we had never met before tonight.

The human seemed a little familiar, but I was sure I'd never forget someone with eyes like that.

One werewolf turned his head and finally caught sight of me. He nudged his friend? Brother?

The two certainly shared some physical characteristics, leading me to conclude they were somehow related.

I had only known of one wolf pack living near Moon Burrow. These two weren't members of that pack, and the MC constantly scanned potential threats to our town.

Funny how these two wolves had acted like they were long-term residents of Moon Burrow.

"Haven't seen you two around these parts before. New arrivals?" I asked, keeping it casual.

"Sod off, bear," growled the taller of the pair. "Leave me and George to our prey. He's ours. We saw him first."

The second, and smarter wolf, gave his pal a sharp nudge in the ribs.

"Careful, Louie. He's one of the grizzly monsters. Look at the cut he's wearing," George whispered.

Greed or Lenny would have reacted badly if someone called them a monster. The insult grated my nerves, but I told myself to shrug it off.

"That's right, mess with Crash and you're both goners," said the human in a flat voice.

I couldn't help but raise one eyebrow at the human. So feisty. I had never slept with a human before.

They always seemed so fragile to me, but I would make an exception for this one.

"He your boyfriend, then?" Louie asked, looking from me and back to the human again. Louie continued, "Funny, I don't see his mark on you or smell his scent."

The human straightened his spine.

"Crash is my destiny," the human said frankly.

I didn't know what to make of all this, of this human who seemed so confident of himself, of his words.

I considered the possibility that this human was crazy. Then again, I didn't mind crazy. It didn't hurt the human was hot.

It wasn't just his physical appearance that appealed to me. I also wanted to dig deep and find how his mind worked.

Well, either way, the two werewolves didn't seem interested in leaving. I was going to get into the fight I wished for.

I watched and waited. Who would make the first move?

Then something small and lethal flew from the human's legs. The cat—for I saw it was a cat—sunk its tiny fangs into the closest werewolf.

Louie tried shaking the little critter off, but the cat wouldn't let go.

"Buster, you'll get hurt. Stop it!" The human looked distressed for the first time that evening.

This little cat meant something to him. The human tried to grab his cat, but George sprung into action.

He shoved the human to the ground with ease and growled into his face. I couldn't have that. These wolves should've left the moment I'd arrived.

Now, there was no escape, only retribution. I didn't understand why I was

getting all hot and bothered.

Possession filled every bone in my body. Protecting this human at all costs just became my number one priority. I'd figure out the reason later on.

"This is all your fault," George told the human. "You should've just come with us."

He sneered and started shifting. Mottled gray fur covered his neck and arms. I could hear another series of pops.

A scream followed. Louie had successfully shaken off the cat and was also changing forms. Despite my body being battered to hell, I dove into the chaos.

I got between George and the human just in time.

George hadn't completed his shift, but he closed his sharp fangs over my left arm. The human cried out, but the pain didn't bother me one bit.

I'd taken worse hits. Heck, compared to Lenny, these wolves were lightweights.

I wanted to tell the gorgeous human not to worry, but there was no time to flirt. That could be reserved for later, assuming there was a later.

I punched the werewolf in the back of the skull. George let go, looking stunned.

"Crash, watch out!" the human yelled.

I spun just in time to see a large brown wolf coming at me from my left side. Louie would've tackled me to the ground if I hadn't moved a half step backward.

"Hey, what's your name?" I found myself asking the human.

Part of me knew I should be paying more attention to the brawl, but the fight seemed inconsequential. I'd deal with these wolves soon enough.

"It's—" the human began, then let out a scream.

I couldn't see what happened next. Louie used the same tactics as the cat and

sunk his fangs into my right calf.

I growled, and my annoyance gave way to pure and undiluted rage.

Among my MC brothers, I usually had a more even temperament. That evening, I experienced what it felt like, letting go of all of my control.

It felt both terrifying and gratifying at the same time.

I glowered, and my grizzly ripped out of me. Clothing tore and fell like flakes of ash from my changing body.

Dang it. Repairing my leather cut wouldn't come cheap, but it was worth it.

Fur flowed over my chest and arms. Sharp claws emerged. I caught Louie, who was still trying to mangle my leg. The wolf suddenly seemed tiny.

Not a proper match for my enormous and deadly grizzly.

I lifted the struggling Louie and snarled into his face. He stilled. I could see the whites in his eyes. He was finally scared.

Good. I'd make an example of him and that might persuade his friend to stop. Another howl of challenge made me look over to where the human and George were.

I froze, catching sight of the human on the dirty ground. He looked far too pale under the dirty street light.

Blood constantly tickled down from the brutal gashes on his chest. His cat, Buster, constantly licked his left hand, but the human remained motionless.

I was going to let these wolves off with a beating and a warning, but everything changed in that moment.

Mercy left my body. Louie didn't move away fast enough. I drove my claws into his throat and ripped it out.

George whined, and I turned to him next. He seemed to think escape was the better option, because he turned tail and ran.

He didn't get far. In a few strides, I caught hold of him. I gripped a handful of his fluffy tail with my claws.

I yanked him towards me. Once George was within striking distance, I crushed his skull with one of my powerful paws.

Breathing hard, I surveyed the bloody damage I'd caused. Then I studied my surroundings. It was quiet on this side of the parking lot.

In the distance, I could hear drunken voices. A couple engaged in sexy times a few cars down. So far, I'd lucked out.

I had no witnesses yet, but that could change at any moment.

I returned to human form, snatched the remains of my jeans and put them on. Then I made my way to the injured human, my heart thumping painfully.

I wasn't aware of falling to my knees. Gravel and pieces of cut glass dug into my legs, but I didn't mind the pain.

Buster hissed at me, then calmed down when he probably realized I wasn't a threat. Feeling numb, I reached for the human's hand.

I was at a loss for what to do for a few seconds. Fingers gripped my hand. Hope flared in my chest. I looked down and saw the human staring up at me.

A strange and peaceful expression filled his face.

"Hey there, little human," I whispered hoarsely.

"Jared," he corrected.

Then Jared started hacking and coughing out more blood. I tightened my grip on his fingers and he simply smiled at me.

"We finally meet, my prince," Jared said.

His breathing grew ragged. I could hear his heart slowing down. No. This couldn't be happening.

Looking into those clear gray eyes, my grizzly howled in torment deep inside me. I finally understood.

This special human was meant to be mine. He was the special soul I'd been searching for my entire life... and he was dying.

“Hey, don’t cry,” Jared said.

“I’m not crying,” I said, feeling defensive.

Jared touched my face with his left hand, although the gesture seemed to cost him.

“You’re my past and my present. I was hoping you’d be my future, but this morning I dreamed death was going to claim me,” Jared said, coughing some more.

“Jared, I don’t understand anything you’re saying,” I said, feeling miserable.

“I’m glad I met you, Crash.”

Then Jared closed his eyes. Not letting go of his hand, I fished for my cellphone in the back pocket of my jeans and phoned Greed.

Luckily, Lenny and Greed were still in the roadhouse.

I quickly explained the situation, not bothering with the details. Greed told me he’d call Micah right away.

Would the healer get here in time? I felt amazingly calm, even though my mate was dying right before my eyes.

“Greed, one more thing,” I said.

“What’s that?” Greed asked.

“Contact Venom or Zack. Find out which of them is the closer and bring them here. Tell them it’s an emergency,” I said.

A pause came from the other end.

“Crash, what are you thinking of doing?” Greed asked in a careful voice.

“My mate. He doesn’t have much time, but I can give him another shot at living,” I explained.

“Your mate? Hold on a sec. Lenny just managed to contact Venom. He’s nearby.”

Greed hadn’t ended the call. It seemed he had more to say to me.

Greed finally spoke up, “Crash, I hate to tell you this, but even if Venom arrives in time to Change this human, he might not survive the metamorphosis.”

“I don’t care.”

I ended the call right there and then. Jared hadn’t stirred from his spot.

I didn’t know how long I sat there, holding his hand, which was getting colder by the second.

“Don’t die on me,” I told Jared fiercely. “You can’t just blow into my life, acting like you know me, then die.”

I heard movement in the background. Lenny and Greed had arrived. They’d discovered the bodies.

Lenny said something to me, but I couldn’t process his words. Eventually, he gave up and touched my shoulder.

“Greed and I will take care of the bodies. Venom will be here in five minutes,” was all my friend told me.

That was enough. I’d stay with Jared until he breathed his last.

JARED/ CRASH

J ARED

My house loomed in the distance. It didn't look menacing or dilapidated.

There were no broken windows, held together by duct tape and whatever I could find. No leaking roof or repainting needed to be done.

This must be what the house looked like when my dads purchased it.

For a second, I wondered if this was all real. Then I stepped onto the familiar and rickety porch, saw the identical wicker rocking chairs my dads loved.

There were even two iced teas on the small table next to the chairs, along with an old paperback with its cover torn off.

Smiling to myself, I stepped on the welcome mat but didn't push open the front door yet. I wanted to take everything in first.

I could hear Jace's laughter in the house, followed by Ken and Reid's voices. They were alive. My entire family was alive, including Jace.

Bernard Pittman didn't kill Jace. It had all been a terrible mistake.

I touched the doorknob, but before I could turn it, someone tapped my back.

I froze, wondering if this was some kind of nightmare after all. Swallowing

my bile, I slowly turned.

Seeing Jace smiling at me, looking whole and healthy, I relaxed.

“It’s not your time yet, little brother,” Jace told me, his voice painfully gentle.

I scoffed. “You’re only 2 minutes older than me,” I reminded him.

Jace touched my shoulder. “He’s waiting for you. Can’t you sense his worry?” Jace asked.

“Who?” I furrowed my brows and tried to rack my brains for an answer.

Slowly, it came to me. Driving into that dingy parking lot, wondering if he would really be there.

Bumping into those two awful werewolves who wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Crash appearing like a dream. My rough-and-tumble motorcycle knight with his disarming smile and amber eyes.

“He’s real, Jace. Can you believe it?” I asked my brother.

“I’m sorry for doubting you all this time,” Jace said. “But enough dawdling around. It’s time to return to reality.”

“But everyone’s waiting for me inside,” I blurted, biting my lower lip. I dropped my gaze. “It’s been so hard, Jace, going at it alone. You’re all dead, and I’m left behind.”

Jace didn’t understand my situation one bit. He had always been so carefree, unburdened by the past and always looking towards the present.

I’d always envied him for that.

“I know.” Jace patted my shoulder. “We’re sorry, but you’re no longer alone.”

“What if Crash doesn’t like me?” I asked in a small voice.

There was nothing great about me. Crash was even more amazing in person, even though we barely traded a few words.

“Are you kidding? Why wouldn’t he like you? You’re fantastic,” Jace reassured me.

“No one likes us,” I whispered. “Everyone back in Fair Creek called us freaks when we were growing up.”

What if Crash thought I was a freak as well? I wouldn’t be able to handle that sort of rejection, not after everything I’d been through.

“I’ve always wondered why you chose to stay in Fair Creek,” Jace said, curiosity evident in his voice.

“I was too scared to leave. I’m not like you, Jace. Brave and reckless—that’s not me.”

“You’re stalling, little brother.” Jace gave me a little push. “It’s time. I believe in you. We all do.”

“He won’t make it. Humans are so weak,” a brash voice was saying.

“Don’t be like that, Greed,” countered another voice. “Crash can hear you!”

“Shut up, both of you,” said a third, authoritative voice.

I woke up gasping for air. It felt like someone had doused my entire chest with gasoline and lit it on fire.

I clawed at the nearest figure I could hold onto, but I didn’t need to. Crash covered his callused fingers over my cold ones, providing me with much-needed warmth.

“Jared, you’re back with us,” Crash said, sounding relieved.

My gaze lingered on him a little longer than necessary. Shucks. He really was stunning in person.

“You’re so hot,” I croaked out.

Did I just say those words out loud? Crash only looked amused.

“Jared, right?” A voice interrupted.

I looked up and nearly screamed when I spotted the muscular, dark-haired, yellow-eyed man kneeling next to Crash.

It wasn't just his overwhelming aura that terrified me. There was a savageness to him, absent in Crash and Crash's friends.

No. I had seen this grizzly shifter in my visions before. I searched for a fragmented memory and stilled my fear.

The agony in my chest grew to unbearable heights, but I knew this moment was important.

I had only one chance to make an impression on Crash's boss.

“Venom. That's a strange name,” I found myself saying.

“How did you know my name?” Venom asked, frowning.

I looked to Crash, who gave me a nod.

“Psychic,” I simply said, because it was becoming hard to remain conscious, let alone form proper sentences.

“Huh. Never Changed one of your kind before. Should be interesting,” Venom said.

“Venom, please take this seriously. I can't lose my mate,” Crash said with a growl.

“I'm your mate?” I asked, hope rising in my chest.

I didn't exactly know what that word meant, but it seemed important. Part of me wished I'd done more research on shifter culture.

“Perfect. Crash found someone as crazy as he is,” someone grumbled in the background.

It was the same voice that said I was weak and wouldn't make it.

“Lenny, take Greed to one side,” Venom said impatiently. He looked at me again. “Crash, tell him what's going to happen.”

“You’re dying, Jared. There’s no way out of it, but I asked Venom here to Change you.”

“Change? I’ll be an adorable bear, just like you?” I asked too eagerly.

That got a laugh out of Crash. Wow. That sound sure sounded nice. I wanted to hear it again, but Crash fell disturbingly quiet again.

“The chances of your survival aren’t high. You’re too injured for one, but let’s do it anyway,” Venom said.

“I like you. Not so much that other bear shifter that said I was weak,” I pointed out.

Crash reached over and ruffled my hair. A painfully tender gesture. Something soft curled by my side and meowed softly.

Buster. He was safe. I couldn’t be in better hands.

Venom leaned over me, and I froze as he opened his mouth, revealing wicked long fangs. Without warning, he struck the side of my neck.

The sheer torment from that one vicious bite knocked me out cold.

CRASH

The moment Jared closed his eyes, and his grip on my hand grew slack, I entered full-blown panic mode. Dang it all to hell. This wasn’t fair.

Fate couldn’t just dangle my mate before my eyes, only to take him away. My grizzly roared inside me in fury.

My mind blanked. All I wanted to do was vent out my frustration. Wreck something.

“Get it together. He’s not dead yet,” came Venom’s rational voice. “Deep breaths, Crash.”

Embarrassed that I nearly gave in to my emotions like an undisciplined bear cub, I did as Venom asked.

I breathed in, then out. Repeated the process until I could think clearly again.

“Jared’s just unconscious?” I asked, wanting to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating.

“Watch him closely,” Venom said.

I studied my human, who looked like a fresh corpse with his unnaturally pale skin and blood-soaked shirt. After touching his icy hand, doubts resurfaced.

There it was. The faint rise and fall of his chest.

“He’s a fighter,” I whispered.

“He is,” Venom said.

“How long does this usually take?” I couldn’t bear to look at the large bite mark gracing Jared’s neck.

“Hours. Sometimes the entire night,” Venom answered unhelpfully.

“I’m here,” interrupted a curt voice.

Micah soon arrived with Greed by his side. He had a medical bag slung over one shoulder.

Micah took stock of the situation, shoed Venom away, then kneeled next to me.

He rested his palms an inch over Jared’s ghastly injuries, then closed his eyes. Knowing better than to interrupt the healer during this process, I kept my mouth shut.

I sensed warm energy flowing from Micah’s hands. The gashes covering Jared’s chest slowly closed, but they didn’t disappear completely.

“Thank you, Micah,” I croaked out.

The healer glanced at me for a moment. Greed’s mate and I had our share of disagreements over the past few months, but we understood each other.

Micah gave me an awkward pat on the shoulder before rising to his feet.

“It’s up to Jared now,” Venom told me. “It’s up to him whether to accept the Change or fight it.”

“Boss, we can’t stay here,” Greed said.

“He’s right,” Venom said, his gaze on me. “Crash, can you move Jared? We’ll wait this out in the MC clubhouse.”

“How—” I began.

“You can use my truck,” Micah offered.

“Thanks,” I said, relieved we didn’t need to wait for additional transport.

I remained by Jared’s side until Micah returned with his truck. Venom stuck around as well.

He probably felt responsible in some way because he had Changed Jared.

The Change hasn’t taken yet, I patiently reminded myself.

“Let me help you carry him,” Venom suggested, but I blatantly shook my head.

“I have this,” I said, unsure where the vehement growl in my voice came from.

Venom didn’t push, and for that, I was grateful. As carefully as I could, I hefted Jared’s body in my arms. He weighed light as a feather.

Most folks in Jared’s shoes would have given up and died, but my human was still fighting the supernatural changes assaulting his body.

I took that as a positive sign.

After gently laying Jared in the backseat, I took the seat opposite the driver’s.

Venom had volunteered to drive, which was a relief. I didn’t think I could focus on both the road and Jared right now.

The drive back to the MC compound usually took half an hour, but this time, it felt like an eternity. I felt every bump and crack on the road.

Once, I even yelled at Venom to be more careful. Part of my mind knew it wasn't wise, aggravating my lead alpha.

Venom certainly deserved more respect, but he seemed to sense my distress and allowed the comment to pass.

Once we arrived home, I opened the back door, half expecting Jared to be dead.

To my relief, my human remained in the same critical condition. I carried him out.

Word must have gone out to my fellow MC brothers, because no one asked me silly questions or interrupted us.

I ferried my unconscious human to my room on the second floor with no distractions.

Of course, it helped that Venom remained by my side, glowering and scaring off any curious bears. I placed Jared on my bed.

What propelled me to take him to my personal den? I didn't know. It simply felt right to bring him here, to my one place of refuge in the MC.

I fussed over him. I stripped Jared of his bloody clothes, changed him into one of my shirts and sweatpants.

Then I gave him a sponge bath until he looked clean and pristine on my bed.

Venom observed all my actions but said nothing. Suddenly feeling exhausted, I collapsed on the armchair next to the bed when my human stirred.

"Crash," Venom said, and I was back on my feet.

The two of us leaned over the slender figure in my bed. My gaze inadvertently found the large reddish bite on Jared's neck.

I could hear Jared's heart beating weakly, fighting to stay alive. Then it abruptly halted. I held my breath, disbelieving.

"Wait," Venom said in a low voice.

What else could I do but wait? Seconds passed. Then, without warning, Jared

opened his eyes. Clear gray eyes shot with gold stared at me.

The hunger there jolted me awake. I reached for his hand, hope rising in my chest like a phoenix coming to life again.

Jared squeezed my hand back, before shutting his eyes and falling unconscious again.

“Did it work?” I asked Venom. Excitement kindled in my insides.

“It did. Jared’s one of us now,” Venom said, sounding pleased with himself.

6

JARED/ CRASH

J ARED

When my consciousness left the waking world, I usually dreamed of other people. People in trouble. Folks I could save.

This time was different. I found myself staring at the starless sky. No moon hung above my head either, but it didn't matter. I could see in the dark.

I raced past ancient towering oak and ash trees with ease. On four legs, not two, I realized.

As a kid, I hated the camping trips my family took to the nearby forest back in Fair Creek. Fairy tale stories of protagonists getting lost and gobbled up by some monster always lingered in my head.

Almost always, I couldn't wait for those dreadful trips to be over.

This time felt different. My body felt alien, big, and powerful. I didn't wear my scrawny and fragile skin, but the fur of a predator.

The cold didn't even bother me. Laughter bubbled inside me, but what came out of my mouth was a growl.

A bigger and more powerful beast loped beside me, easily keeping pace. I kept running. Fear lingered in the back of my mind. I risked a look.

My companion turned out to be a monstrous grizzly with light blond fur. Amusement lit his amber eyes. At that moment, I felt completely at ease.

He wasn't an enemy. In fact, he was the exact opposite.

The dream collapsed, and I woke up in the real world. My entire body ached. I tugged at the oversized shirt I wore, surprised by the fading scars on my chest.

Buster meowed, and I spotted him coiled on the small table next to the bed. He opened one eye at me, then closed it again, seemingly satisfied I was safe.

I recalled a scary werewolf clawing my chest to ribbons. How much time had passed since then?

Groaning, I tried turning on my side only to behold a gorgeous gold-haired and very rumped bear shifter who had fallen asleep on an armchair.

Crash. Warmth surged through my entire body as memories of recent events came back to me.

Venom looming terrifyingly above me, then biting me. Me waking in an unfamiliar room filled with a wonderful scent. The scent of my mate.

Crash groggily opened his eyes and looked right at me. Amber swallowed both his irises, making him look more savage than usual.

I fearlessly met his gaze and decided I liked all of him, both his human and his animal sides.

The new presence inside my body shifted and approved of my thought. My grizzly. I had an animal sharing my skin now, and it was an odd sensation.

I looked deep inside me and saw a grizzly with dark brown fur and wicked ebony claws staring back at me. Taking a deep breath, I tried reaching out for him.

The bear growled softly at me and I pulled back.

“You’re awake,” Crash said.

Hearing the relief in his voice, I returned my attention back to him.

“Hi,” I whispered.

Crash stood up, hesitated. He let out a breath when I made some space for him in bed.

That simple action made me gasp. Crash furrowed his brows.

“Where do you hurt?” Crash asked.

“Relax, I just feel bruised all over,” I answered.

Crash sat down on the bed. He didn’t seem to know what to do with his large callused hands because he kept fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.

It was his shirt I was wearing, I realized. I took pleasure in that. Feeling brave, I reached for one of his hands.

“I haven’t properly introduced myself. Jared Church, a psychic from Fair Creek. Although now that I’m a grizzly shifter, I don’t know if I still have access to my former abilities,” I said.

“Harry Brady, although I go by Crash,” he introduced. A faint smile appeared on his lips.

I wanted to sit up and kiss that tempting mouth, but decided that might be too brazen. It was too much. Everything was too much to take in all at once.

My head swam. My eyesight seemed to have sharpened, and I could see every minute detail of Crash’s room. Every dent and texture of his shelves, his desk, and his wardrobe.

I could hear laughter and voices from downstairs. The rumble of motorcycle engines from a mile away.

My eardrums hurt, and my nose. Gosh. I could smell apple pie from the first-floor kitchen, along with dirt and motorcycle oil.

It would take time to get used to my new heightened senses. I silently swore I would make this work. I was always a fast learner.

Another thing bothered me. I had dreamed of this man, this grizzly shifter, my entire life, and now he was right before my very eyes.

Calm down, I reminded myself. The last thing I wanted to do was freak Crash out.

“Why Crash?” I asked.

“Funny story, actually. On my first mission for the MC, I crashed my motorcycle into a tree,” Crash said. Then he laughed. “An embarrassing story, isn’t it?”

“I like it. Knowing you have a goofy side, it’s nice,” I said.

When Crash smiled, his entire face lit up. I wanted to trace the shape of his lips, to clamber on his lap so our skin could touch.

I wanted to breathe in his scent and commit it to memory. Mine, my grizzly growled inside me.

My bear was an omega, not a warrior like Crash’s beast, but he certainly knew what he wanted. What we both wanted.

“I must confess, Jared. I’ve never met a psychic like you before. Can I ask what your ability is, or is that an intrusive question?” Crash asked.

“Do me a favor first, then I’ll answer all your questions.”

At those words, Crash raised both his eyebrows.

I made more space for him and patted the space next to me on the pillow. Crash studied me for a few moments before slipping into the covers with me.

Then he turned on his side, so we were looking at each other face-to-face.

My heart beat erratically, like the wings of a hummingbird. In my previous life, I’d never been this bold, but it finally hit me.

I survived my brush with death and was reborn into a sturdier body. Crash was real, and he was within touching distance.

It felt like my life had taken a full 360-degree turn since my brother’s death.

Sure, Jace's murderer was still after me, but I put that particular problem in the back of my mind for now.

All that mattered was this moment. What I said and did next could make or break everything.

I breathed hard, suddenly overcome with a plethora of dizzying emotions.

Words left me all of a sudden. Crash reached out and tucked a stray strand of my hair behind one ear.

"You're safe now, Jared. Nothing and no one will hurt you. Not when I'm around," Crash said.

CRASH

Jared blinked at me, and I finally processed what I had just said. Dang it. Was I being too forward?

Why did Jared invite me to join him in bed? Didn't Jared realize what a temptation he was right now?

My gaze lingered on his luscious lips. I wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

I bet Jared would taste as sweet as cherry pie. Stop it, I silently scolded myself. I focused on his eyes instead.

That clear and beautiful gray that reminded me of storm clouds.

Jared curved his tempting lips upward into a grateful smile.

"Thank you, Crash. For everything. I'm alive thanks to you," Jared said.

"Don't go thanking me yet. It will take some time for you to come to terms with your new body. Also, it was Venom who did all the work," I said.

"Then I'll thank him later," Jared said.

“You knew Venom’s name, although he’s certain he’s never met you before,” I pointed out.

“I’ve seen him in one of my visions. The gift of foresight has been passed down to my family for generations,” Jared explained.

I stared at him in silent amazement. I had my share of strange and supernatural encounters, but this was the first time I’ve actually spoken to an actual psychic.

As far as I knew, they were incredibly rare.

“Becoming a bear shifter—that wasn’t part of my vision. Neither was dying, I suppose,” Jared was saying.

I frowned. “But you can see the future,” I pointed out.

“Unfortunately, my curse—I don’t see it as a gift anymore—doesn’t work that way. I see versions of the future, but other paths are blind to me,” Jared admitted.

He continued, “I have limitations. I had no clue those two werewolves would turn up that night. Speaking of that evening, how much time had passed since then?”

“Three days,” I answered. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took your car keys and drove it here. Also, I grabbed your cat.”

At those words, Jared’s cat let out a meow. Jared looked relieved.

“Thanks for grabbing Buster. My important belongings were in the trunk as well,” Jared said.

I finally asked Jared what was bugging me.

“Jared, when you saw me in the flesh, you knew exactly who I was. You said I was your past and present,” I pointed out.

Jared’s cheeks and neck flushed. Red, I decided, was a wonderful color on him.

“You remember that, huh?” Jared asked. He didn’t address my query, I noticed.

“How can I forget something like that?” I countered.

Jared reached out and took my right hand and lifted it to his lips.

He kissed my thumb and the simple gesture jolted my grizzly wide awake. This psychic. He really was something, and he was mine.

Ours, our grizzly argued, and I agreed.

“I’ll tell you next time. On our first official date,” Jared said.

Emotion stirred in my chest at those words. Hope mingled with excitement.

Whatever he wanted to say to me, it felt important. I wanted to try wrangling the answers from him again, but ultimately decided to wait.

“Are you asking me out, you cheeky psychic?” I couldn’t help but tease him.

“I am. I hope that’s okay?” Jared bit his lower lip uncertainly.

“More than okay,” I said.

I kissed the tip of his adorable nose to appease myself. At least it wasn’t a kiss on the mouth. That could wait.

I never had a proper relationship my entire life. Hook-ups with random guys didn’t count.

I wanted to do right by Jared because I knew this was my one chance. Screwing up wasn’t an option.

“What are your next plans?” I asked him.

It was nice, simply chatting and lying next to him in bed. I never felt this comfortable with anyone else my entire life.

Greed and Lenny were my best buds. They had my back, and we didn’t hide secrets from one another, but this was different. Special.

Jared thought about my question for a few moments.

“I can’t stay in your room forever, so once I’m better, I’ll start looking for an apartment. Maybe find a job in town,” Jared said.

You can stay here with me forever. I wanted to blurt out, but decided those words might frighten Jared.

After what Jared had been through, he probably needed his own space. To learn to stand on his own two legs.

Four, I reminded myself. Transitioning to a shifter wouldn't be easy.

"I can teach you all about being a shifter," I told him.

"Private lessons with you?" Jared asked rather hopefully.

A certain innocence clung to him, despite being in his late twenties. That made him even more appealing.

"Saying it like that makes it sound a little dirty," I said. "Private lessons."

"You're teasing me." Jared nudged me sharply in the ribs, which I hardly felt. "I didn't know you were playful."

"All bears have a hidden, playful side," I pointed out.

He widened his eyes. "Is that true? I can't imagine Venom being playful."

"Only with his mate," I answered. "That's enough excitement for the day."

Jared looked disappointed as I slipped out of bed. He reminded me of a cute puppy that wanted my attention.

Stay strong, I reminded myself. If I let Jared's pleading eyes get to me, I'd be stuck in bed all day, talking to him.

Not a bad idea at all, but I still had errands to run.

"Let me get Micah. He'll give you a check-up. Also food and water," I said. "I'll be back."

"I'll be here, waiting for you," Jared said softly.

7

JARED

"Thanks for helping me move in, guys," I told Micah and Lenny.

Lenny set my heaviest box on the ground and started looking around my tiny studio rental.

Buster, who had already made it known to everyone that he was the king of the place, gave Lenny a hiss.

Lenny walked up to my cat, who licked his paw on the sofa and watched him warily. When Lenny scratched his ears, Buster let out a satisfied purr.

A week had passed since I regained consciousness in Crash's room. Since then, I'd been busy job and apartment hunting.

I'd also had the opportunity to get to know Crash's circle of friends a little better. They were a tight-knit group.

Greed was... well, Greed. Obnoxious, loud, and unlikable. His mate balanced out his personality. Micah was a little hard to get to know, but Lenny said to give it time.

Micah would warm up to me eventually.

I suspected Crash had asked Micah and Lenny to help me with my move for a reason.

Micah was here to check my health, despite the fact I've reassured Crash plenty of times that I was right as rain.

The scars on my chest were hardly visible, and I had gotten used to my new body. Lenny, on the other hand, was here for extra security.

"All clear," Lenny announced, peering out one of my windows.

Crash had helped me pick a quiet neighborhood only two blocks away from the MC compound.

Since the area wasn't near the town center, the rent was cheap. As for finding a job, most of the places in Moon Burrow weren't hiring during this period.

I thought bad luck followed me everywhere, but it turned out Cool Beans—the local cafe run by the Grizzly Reapers' raven allies—was looking for a new barista.

I had worked as a barista at a local cafe back in Fair Creek for two years. Zack, the manager and the lead alpha of the Moon Burrow Ravens, thankfully took a liking to me and hired me on the spot.

The resident Raven King even dropped by the MC clubhouse to conduct the interview. Well, Zack mentioned his main goal was to see Venom, so he might as well do the interview on the same day.

Work would officially start next Wednesday. Initially, it had been scheduled for Monday, but Zack found out I was moving today and gave me more time to settle down.

It was Friday today. Later tonight, I had my first official date with Crash. Everything was falling into place.

"Jace, thank you for convincing me to return to the land of the living," I whispered to myself.

Buster purred at my feet and I picked him up, scratching him behind his ears. "Who's Jace?" Micah asked, sounding curious.

"My brother. He died recently," I said unthinkingly.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Micah said.

He genuinely sounded sorry. Most of the time, it was hard to make out what the healer was thinking or feeling. Micah always seemed closed off to me.

"Thanks for everything, guys. I'm sure you both had other important things to do today," I said. "I haven't stocked my fridge yet, but would you like some orange juice or coffee before you leave?"

"Coffee sounds good," Lenny said. "I take mine black. Micah?"

"Fine, I can stay a little while longer," Micah grumbled.

The three of us crowded around my small kitchen counter. "Sorry, I don't have a coffee machine yet. Is instant fine?" I asked.

"Sure," Lenny said, giving me an encouraging nod.

Buster leaped from my arms and started circling Lenny's legs. Crash told me Lenny might appear normal most of the time, but his grizzly was unstable.

So far, I hadn't seen Lenny lose his cool. I watched him pick up Buster.

"Hey there, cutie. Going to miss you," Lenny said.

While I bunked in with Crash over the past week, I had allowed Buster to roam free in the MC clubhouse.

The little furball loved being the center of attention. It turned out the bears loved having pets around.

"So your date with Crash is tonight?" Micah asked, sipping the coffee I made.

He grimaced, but said nothing negative about it.

"It is. I'm nervous," I admitted.

Chatting with friends—this was a completely new and novel experience for me. Would Micah consider me his friend?

Probably not, but I appreciated him asking about my personal life. I felt completely comfortable being around Crash, but there were certain things I couldn't talk to him about.

"You don't have to be nervous at all. Crash is crazy about you. I've never seen him like this," Lenny pointed out. "Plus, it's fun to see him tripping over his feet every time he sees you."

“Crash is my first, so I wanna make sure I don’t disappoint him.”

I didn’t realize I had uttered those words out loud until I noticed Lenny and Micah glancing at me.

I blushed, not used to having all the attention on me.

“Crash is your first... boyfriend?” Micah asked gently.

“I hoped he’d be my boyfriend,” I quickly said after realizing how I sounded.

I tried to explain myself, so I continued, “I don’t want to be presumptuous or anything. I mean, he hasn’t even kissed me on the lips yet.”

“Aw, Micah. He’s so cute,” Lenny said. I glared at him, but Lenny only chuckled.

Lenny explained, “Jared, let me assure you that you’re doing just fine. You’re not being presumptuous at all.”

“Crash is being a gentleman. He wants to make sure you’re ready before making any romantic moves,” Micah added.

“Oh, is that right?” I asked. Both Micah and Lenny nodded, and I appreciated their vote of confidence.

“Are all the men in your hometown that horrible?” Lenny joked, asking the question to lighten the mood.

“Back in Fair Creek, where I grew up, my family was ostracized because of our gift. My brother Jace and I didn’t exactly have plenty of dating opportunities,” I mumbled. Immediately, I regretted what I said. I hadn’t meant to bring down the good vibes.

“Humans are fools sometimes,” Micah said vehemently under his breath.

“Well, forget those jerks,” Lenny said. “You’re in Moon Burrow now.”

“Speaking of gifts. Have you received a vision since you woke up as a bear shifter?” Micah asked, expertly switching from being my friend to being a healer.

“No, maybe I’ll never have them again,” I answered.

“You sound relieved. Those visions, they were a heavy weight to carry, weren’t they?” Lenny asked.

“I’ve been called a freak and worse names all my life because of them. I’m happy being a normal bear shifter,” I firmly said.

I hadn’t mentioned to anyone about the circumstances of Jace’s death and the fact his murderer was interested in me.

If my gift of foresight returned, I promised myself I would reveal everything to Crash.

There was nothing to tell if I could no longer see the future. What interest would I hold for Bernard Pitt?

“Micah, I could use your opinion. Can I show you my outfit for tonight’s date? It’ll be quick. Promise,” I added.

Micah finished his drink and nodded. “I’m not very good with fashion, but hopefully I could be of use,” Micah said with a nod.

“Okay. Great.”

The walk from my small kitchen to my bedroom took less than five minutes.

While I was pulling out a buttoned-down white shirt, recently purchased from my closet door, a sudden stabbing pain hit me right between the eyes.

“No,” I whispered. I dropped the hanger and groaned as the pain spread to the back of my skull.

“Jared? What’s wrong?” Micah asked, suddenly by my side. He touched my hand and grimaced.

“Micah?” Lenny was asking.

“He’s entire body is burning up,” Micah said. “I wonder if it’s an aftereffect of the Change? Christian had a high fever a week after Zack Changed him.”

“Don’t worry about me. It’s just a vision,” I whispered, then the real world faded away.

A series of images appeared in my head. I saw my target, a man, exiting a

truck.

As usual, I was looking at the man from a distance. I was always a casual observer during these moments.

I could only see his lower body, but not his face. That omission of detail annoyed me for some reason.

Relax, see what else you can observe, I reminded myself. Ken had trained Jace and me for this.

The man was wearing a faded pair of black jeans and worn work boots with red laces.

He was about to walk into a store with a 'closed' sign, then stopped midway to check his phone.

It hurt my head, but I tried zooming in on his phone screen. His screensaver was a group photo, but the faces were hard to make out.

At the very least, I noted the date and time on his screen. Monday. 7 am.

Relieved, I then tried to see where he was. There was a bench nearby, along with a poster of some real estate agent on a nearby wall.

A woman with long black hair, blue eyes, and an extra-wide smile. Someone called out to the man from across the street.

The speaker's words were warbled. The man even had his keys out. Perhaps he was the owner of the store or an employee?

He backtracked to his truck. An old black Ford model. There was a small sticker near the windshield.

It was some kind of animal. Then he was crossing the road. Out of nowhere, a bright yellow semi hit him and sent his body flying like a doll.

My mind blacked out, and I gasped, returning to the real world. I found myself on my knees. Micah was right beside me, shaking me gently.

"He's come back to us," Lenny was saying on the phone.

"Jared? The vision?" Micah prodded.

“A man. I couldn’t make out his features, but he’s going to die this Monday, at exactly 7 am.”

It turned out Crash was my visitor. Joy suffused my entire body at the sight of him. Crash joined me and Micah.

"Micah. Right," I remembered, "he remained by my bedside."

I found Micah's unnerving stare fixed on me. Jace and I only had each other growing up.

When I was in fourth grade, I once tried to tell a school friend about my gift. That revelation ended our friendship, and that boy ended up bullying Jace and me throughout the rest of our school days.

What if Micah finally saw me for what I really was? A freak who didn’t belong anywhere?

When my visions didn’t appear after Venom Changed me, I thought it was a miracle. My chance to be normal. In the end, I was right where I started.

“Sorry, I zoned out, but you have an incredible gift, Jared,” Micah said. “All I can do is heal people, but you can actually save them before they get hurt.”

“Incredible?” I echoed, confused.

“That’s what I keep telling him,” Crash was saying.

“You don’t understand,” I said, my voice rising.

Frustration welled inside my chest. My inner bear stirred. My irritation had woken him from his slumber. I clenched my jaw and kept talking.

“It’s not wonderful. Just the exact opposite. Do you have any idea what it’s like, knowing that someone’s about to die but not knowing how to prevent his or her death?” I demanded.

8

CRASH

What Micah had said had clearly distressed Jared, though I couldn't figure out why. Micah stiffened, and it was clear he didn't understand what had just happened either.

Jared's eyes had turned bright yellow, but to my surprise, he tamed his grizzly down with ease.

Newly Changed shifters usually had trouble wrestling with their beasts at this early stage.

Initially, Venom had been reluctant to let Jared go off on his own. He wanted to observe Jared a little longer and stay nearby in case Jared got out of control.

In the end, I assured Venom that I would keep a close eye on my mate. That was that.

Jared curled up on his side, exposing his back to us. He was trying to make himself small, invisible.

I didn't like that one bit. Jared didn't need to hide when we were together.

"Guys, can you give us some space?" I asked Micah and Lenny.

"We need to return to the compound anyway," Lenny said.

Micah opened his mouth, about to say more, but Lenny quickly spun him by the shoulder and marched him to the door.

Once they were gone, I took off my boots before joining Jared in bed. I spooned him, relieved he didn't draw away. Instead, Jared huddled closer to me.

"Sorry for my earlier outburst," Jared said. "Your friends must hate me now."

"Of course they don't," I said, wrapping my arms around him.

"I didn't mean to shout at Micah. He's been so nice to me. Lenny too," Jared mumbled. "This is all so new to me. Becoming a shifter. Having real friends. A boyfriend."

"What did you just call me?" I asked.

Jared stilled, and I leaned over to kiss his cheek.

"Prospective boyfriend," Jared corrected.

"Hmm," I said, not commenting further.

Jared didn't know how important he was to me, but he would soon. For the next few moments, I simply held him until Jared was ready to talk.

It seemed he needed to get something off his chest.

"I really hoped I could be a normal bear shifter," Jared finally said in a small voice.

I let out a laugh. "Trust me, baby. All the bear shifters in the MC are abnormal. Have you met Greed and Lenny?"

Jared's shoulders started to shake, and I realized I had finally made him laugh. Jared twisted in my arms, and I loosened my hold so he could turn and face me.

"Tell me what it's like, being able to see the future? I want to understand you better," I suggested.

"It's horrible," Jared immediately said.

He told me about his miserable childhood, how the locals in his hometown treated him and his family with wary suspicion, despite some of them approaching his dad to read their fortunes.

Jared also told me the number of times his visions came too late and the people he failed to save. His vivid gray eyes suddenly looked ancient, haunted.

All I wanted to do was chase his nightmares away. I reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze.

"You don't have to carry your burdens alone any longer, because now you have me."

I didn't know what pushed me to say those words, but they felt right.

"Crash, you're sweet, but you hardly know me," Jared whispered. "What if we start dating and you realize I'm not the person you want to be with?"

"That'll never happen," I said, kissing the tip of his nose.

"I wish I had your confidence," Jared murmured.

My stomach rumbled, and Jared stared at me for a few seconds.

"I missed lunch, so I'm famished," I admitted. "Come on. I have an idea."

I got out of bed and offered my hand, which Jared took. He allowed me to pull him out of bed. I noticed his closet door was open.

A white button-down shirt hung on a hanger. It looked brand new, smelled brand new too, because it didn't yet have Jared's scent.

His outfit for our date tonight? I slipped my feet into my boots again.

"Put on your shoes. We're heading out," I told Jared.

"I need more time to prepare." Jared looked panicked.

I approached him and gripped his shoulders until he visibly calmed down.

"We're just going to get some food and head back here. I thought we could chill and hang out tonight. What do you say?" I asked.

"That sounds good," Jared admitted. "Rain check for our dinner and movie?"

"Definitely," I said.

Once Jared put on his coat, we left his apartment.

"You never answered my question earlier," Jared pointed out.

He was following my lead as I made my way to a popular pizza place a block from his building.

"Which one?" I asked.

Realizing Jared was trying to keep up with my fast strides, I slowed down. Jared might be a shifter now, but he still wasn't completely used to his new body, I reminded myself.

"Did your mission finish early, or did you just leave?" Jared asked.

"The latter," I said. "Greed knew how excited I was for tonight, so he volunteered to finish up."

"That's nice of him," Jared said.

I knew Jared hadn't quite taken to Greed the same way he did with Micah and Lenny. Greed had a certain effect on people, but I knew they'd get along eventually.

Greed knew how important Jared was to me.

We finally arrived at our destination. I groaned, seeing the long queue. Jared abruptly reached for my hand and gave me a shy smile.

That smile hit me right in the chest and groin. I closed my fingers over his, feeling a little giddy. My heart raced a little faster.

I was a surly teenager again, secretly crushing on the high school quarterback, despite knowing he'd never return my affections.

What I felt for Jared, though, felt a thousand times more potent. More real.

"I don't mind waiting. The pizza smells good," Jared said.

While we waited, Jared told me about his latest vision. When he told me about the little details he observed, like the real estate agent's sign, I was impressed.

When I had arrived at Jared's apartment earlier, it seemed like he was in pain. Having visions was no joke, but somehow, Jared made sure he memorized certain things.

"How did you notice all that?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"Your observation skills. They're amazing."

Jared blushed at my compliment. Well, he would get used to them soon, I thought.

"My dad Ken, he also had the gift. He trained Jace and me to look out for certain things. It's a matter of life and death, so pay attention, boys. He would always say."

I winced. "That sounds like a lot of pressure to put on two growing boys. How old were you and Jace back then?" I asked.

"Six or seven," Jared answered.

He had a distant look on his face, and I wondered what he was thinking about. I knew his brother had died recently, and I gathered they were close.

It pained my heart to hear Jared admit he considered Micah and the others his real friends. If the Church family had moved to Moon Burrow, they would've been so much better off.

Their talents would have been better appreciated here, and the supernatural community in Moon Burrow was generally supportive and welcoming of each other.

"Either way, we still have until Monday to save this mystery guy, right?" I asked.

"We?" Jared asked, blinking at me.

"We," I confirmed. "I have Monday off, so it's perfect. We can spend the weekend driving around town until we find the place in your vision."

"You'd do that for me?" Jared asked.

"Of course. I can't let you play hero on your own," I said.

"Thank you, Crash," he whispered, sounding grateful.

In the end, we ordered two large pizzas: one Hawaiian and one plain pepperoni pizza.

Jared and I went to the grocery store next and bought some snacks, beer, and ice cream. Armed with our supplies, we returned to his place.

"This is fun," Jared said once we were back inside his apartment.

We unloaded our haul on the small table in his living room. We devoured the pizza first. To my surprise, the pies were still warm. Jared turned the TV on and we settled on a spy movie.

He sat very close to me on the two-seater sofa, which I both appreciated and dreaded. Dreaded because he smelled so good and his skin was so warm.

I wanted to do all sorts of things to him right there and then, but I reminded myself to be patient. This was just our first date.

We had all the time in the world. There was no reason to rush. Earlier today, I had asked Greed for some dating advice.

We had gone on a simple two-man delivery job. The Grizzly Reapers MC owned a few businesses, but our primary income came from selling weapons to other supernatural groups.

Our client today was a small rabbit shifter community a few towns away. The group wanted some way to protect their warren.

They were new clients, but our resident hacker, Whizz, had done several checks on them, which they passed with flying colors.

Greed told me the first few weeks he started seeing Micah were critical. I had to make a good impression on Jared. He already believed I was a great guy, and I wanted to live up to his expectations.

"You suddenly went all quiet. What are you thinking about?" Jared asked.

He looked delicious enough to eat, even with an empty ice cream tub on his lap. I couldn't help myself. I wiped away the cream on his chin with my

thumb and licked my fingers clean.

Jared turned a little red in the ears. Then he set the ice cream tub and spoon down. Adorable. How could I not devour him?

I wanted to scent mark him. To tuck him in my arms, spirit him off to bed and—not yet. We hadn't reached that stage, I reminded myself.

In my group, I always prided myself on having the most control. Lenny was off the rails most of the time, and Greed had a short temper. They always relied on me to keep the peace.

When it came to Jared, my control felt frayed. Like it could snap at any moment.

"About the dating advice Greed gave me," I told him plainly.

"Sounds suspicious. I'm afraid to know," Jared said.

I laughed. "Greed isn't that bad. He can be too much sometimes, I know."

"More like all the time. I wonder how Micah puts up with him," Jared grumbled.

Shots and explosions erupted from the movie. I tried focusing on the show, but Jared had all my attention.

Our shoulders and bodies touched. When I glanced at Jared to see how he was faring, I saw he wasn't watching the movie either.

"Come here," I said.

I didn't know what it was about Jared at that moment, but he seemed so kissable and the mood felt right. Grasping his shirt, I tugged him close until our noses were touching.

"Crash," Jared whispered. "I need to tell you something."

"Can't it wait?" I asked.

"It's important." Jared slumped his shoulders. "You have no idea how many times I've dreamed of this special moment, but I can't keep secrets from you."

"Secrets?" I asked.

Think with your head and not your pants, I told myself. Jared fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable, like he wanted to be anywhere else but here.

"Have you ever wondered why I left my hometown? How I ended up here in Moon Burrow?" Jared asked.

"It wasn't to find me?" I teased.

Jared fiddled with his fingers, and I decided to quit joking and pay attention.

Finally, I said, "I'm listening, Jared. You can tell me everything."

"Promise me you won't get mad," he whispered.

Jared waited for my answer, pressing his lips so tightly together that they turned white.

"I promise," I said.

And so Jared told me everything: Jace's murder, his encounter with Floyd, and his journey to Moon Burrow. I sat back, processing everything he had told me.

Jared's tale sounded fantastical, but I knew every word that came out of his mouth was the truth.

In my line of work, it was easy to gauge when someone was lying to me. Jared had been nothing but honest.

"In a way, Jace sent you to me?" I asked.

9

JARED

It was hard to make out Crash's expression. He made his face painfully neutral. My insides twisted, and I wondered if I should have kept Jace's murder from him.

No, I eventually decided. If I wanted to pursue this relationship, I had to be honest with Crash. No secrets. Secrets got one killed.

Jace's death taught me that lesson. If only my brother had told me about Bernard Pittman earlier, then maybe we could have figured something out together.

Knowing Jace, he probably chose not to say anything to me in order to protect me.

"Yes, Jace told me to find you," I admitted. "But I already know of you."

"I'm your past and your present. I asked you what you meant by that before, but you said you weren't ready to tell me," Crash said, his tone patient. Gentle.

This sweet bear was too good for the likes of me, but Crash would have to settle for this crazy psychic.

Destiny had wrapped a pretty little bow around us, trying our fates forever. Mate. Crash called me that when I was on the verge of dying.

I had to show him I was worthy of being his mate. I had done a little more research since I woke up in my new body. Shifters were like lovebirds.

They mated for life. The discovery excited me and overwhelmed me at the same time.

“Are you ready to tell me now?” Crash asked.

“I’ve had visions of you ever since I was a teen,” I confessed.

It felt silly telling him those words, but I forced myself to continue, “I told Jace about you, my Motorcycle Prince. Jace laughed it off and said I had an impressive imagination.”

Crash fell silent for a few moments. It was coming. Crash’s rejection.

He was finally going to realise how strange I truly was and decide I wasn’t worth the effort.

I bit my lower lip and hung my head. Hot tears stung my eyes, and I wanted to be anywhere but there.

Maybe I could burrow into my blankets, curl into a ball and wait for Crash to leave?

Crash suddenly cupped my cheek, forcing me to look at him.

“Why are you crying?” Crash leaned in and kissed away my tears. “You’ve told me something really wonderful, Jared. There’s no reason to cry.”

Wonderful? Any other man in Crash’s shoes would feel overwhelmed, maybe put off by my confession.

“Don’t you think I’m weird?” I asked, hiccuping at the same time. Gosh, I was a mess. How could Crash even look at me right now?

“No, I’m wondering why the heck fate or destiny didn’t send me those visions so I could look for you earlier,” Crash said.

He ran a hand through his hair. Crash continued, “Here I was, envious of all my MC brothers, finding their fated mates. Part of me wondered if I was destined to grow old and alone. Well, I suppose Lenny and I could live together.”

That last remark made me laugh. The weight pressing down on me also disappeared completely.

I swiped away the lingering tears in my eyes and looked at him, really looked at him. Crash's smile boosted my confidence.

"Now that's out of the way, let's continue where we left off," Crash said.

"I like that very much," I answered, pretty pleased as Crash closed his hand on the back of my neck.

Then he sealed his mouth over mine. I closed my eyes, enjoying the press of his lips. The kiss started slowly at first, explorative.

When I fervently responded, Crash deepened the kiss, and I sucked down on his tongue. Heat washed down my throat. My heart thumped hard.

My pants felt unbelievably tight. The real thing was so much better than dreams, I thought, feverish with excitement.

It seemed to go on forever, and I didn't mind one bit. The apartment faded away from my line of sight.

Only Crash and I mattered. I could do this every day, I thought. Eventually, we had to part to draw air into our lungs.

Then harsh reality set in. I wasn't sure if Crash truly processed my words earlier, or understood the gravity of my situation.

Jace told me to find Crash, but now that I've gotten to know Crash a little better, the last thing I wanted was to put Crash in harm's way.

"Aren't you alarmed by what I just told you? Crash, my brother's former lover and murderer, is after me," I pointed out.

I had debated long and hard as to why Floyd's boss wanted to see me. In the end, I only came to one conclusion.

Bernard Pittman lost his pet seer, and he wanted a replacement.

In Jace's death vision, Pittman accused Jace of digging around where he shouldn't. My brother had always been curious by nature.

Jace always stuck his nose where it didn't belong. Even so, Jace didn't deserve to die.

Crash shrugged. "I've dealt with all sorts of monsters before. I'll deal with this jerk if he shows up here," Crash said, his tone a matter-of-fact.

"That easy?" I whispered. "Something is off about Bernard Pittman. He scares the living daylights out of me, and I've only seen him in a vision."

"Why would Jace involve himself with someone like that?" Crash asked.

"Jace always falls for bad boys." I fell silent for a few moments, then tried to picture myself in my brother's shoes.

I continued, "Jace and I might be different in some ways, but we're also similar. He was also lonely. He left Fair Creek to start a better life in the city. Jace only wanted a home of his own, to fall in love, to live."

My voice had grown hoarse with emotion. Crash slid one muscled arm around my shoulders, pulling me close.

I rested my head on his broad shoulder and realized how addictive Crash's touches were. His kisses weren't bad either. Scratch that. They were mind-blowing.

"I'm sad my brother is gone. I still mourn his loss every day, but I'm also grateful to Jace for bringing us together. If he didn't tell me to come find you, who knows where I would have ended up?" I asked Crash.

"Well, I'll find you either way," Crash reassured me.

He kissed me on the mouth again, a quick one. We watched the rest of the movie in peace.



"We've driven past this neighborhood three times," I said, sounding a little miffed to my own ears. "I don't know what we're missing."

To his credit, Crash simply continued driving. He wasn't giving up. We had driven around town all weekend, only to come up with zero results.

For one, benches with real estate signs were everywhere. I knew every landmark in Fair Creek like the back of the hand, but Moon Burrow was still

new to me.

Eventually, I'd come to memorize every nook and cranny in this town. For now, I had to rely on others.

Whining wouldn't get me anywhere. Poor Crash. He had to endure my awful attitude. Annoyance brought out the worst in me.

I began scratching at the skin near my left elbow. The spot had begun to itch an hour ago.

It felt like some great and unnamed force wanted to burst out of my body. I started tapping my right leg on the floorboard. Impatience swept over me.

Crash abruptly stopped the car. He also rolled down the windows.

"Take a deep breath," he instructed. "I can sense your inner grizzly. It wants out."

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

I didn't stop scratching my arm until Crash lifted my fingers and gave them a kiss.

"Let's get some air. Feeling the solid ground under your feet might do you some good," Crash said.

That sounded like a grand idea. I was beginning to feel claustrophobic in my car.

We took my Honda today because Crash sent his Harley for repairs. The moment we stepped on the sidewalk, I felt tons better.

The itch disappeared and I could breathe easy again. Emotions drove a shifter's inner beast. I had nearly forgotten about that.

Most of the time, my grizzly and I got along, but he probably sensed my rising frustration and didn't know how to help me.

"Sorry about just now," I mumbled.

"It happens to all of us," Crash answered good-naturedly. "Let's keep walking. Maybe you'd remember something."

Crash and I walked in silence for a little while. I was too tense to hold his hand.

Finally, I studied my surroundings and realized we'd covered a suitable distance. We were near City Hall and the park.

Instinct made me take a sharp left turn into a smaller street. There were several antique stores here, along with a cafe and a bookstore.

I halted a few feet from a green metal bench that looked like all the other benches in Moon Burrow.

It was the same poster I saw in my vision on a nearby wall, free of graffiti.

I took a seat on the unoccupied bench and closed my eyes. The cool early morning breeze felt wonderful on my face.

Crash sat next to me, not saying anything. He probably didn't want to interrupt my process.

I was tempted to rest my head on Crash's shoulder and take a short nap. Sleep had eluded me the night before. No surprise there.

Focus, I reminded myself. I had a job to do. I replayed the vision in my head, down to what the man was wearing.

For some unexplainable reason, I kept returning to the sticker on his truck. An animal and it had wings. Some kind of bird then. My heart beat spiked.

"Crash," I said, opening my eyes and grabbing his arm. "The raven shifters. Which one of them drives a black Ford truck?"

Crash looked thoughtful. "Spencer originally owned a truck like that, but everyone takes turns using it when they need to get supplies in town."

His answer didn't help one bit. I checked my watch. Sweat gathered on my brow as I noticed the time.

6.53 am. Then the truck appeared in my line of sight. I noticed it before Crash. I gave his arm a squeeze.

"There it is," I whispered.

The driver parked the truck a few paces from where Crash and I were seated. Then a dark-haired and lean man climbed out.

He wore the same clothing as the man in my vision, down to the worn work boots with the red laces.

Every muscle in my body froze. That profile looked familiar. I knew him. It was Zack, my new boss.

Even worse, I hadn't recognized the sign in the store nearby. Cool Beans.

Zack had interviewed me in the MC compound, so I'd never been to the physical store. My first day of work would officially start on Wednesday.

I planned on walking in and checking the place out, but saving the guy in my vision had become my number priority.

Crash and I had passed this street during the weekend at least twice. Why did nothing jog my memory then?

I knew the answer to that question. Sometimes, what I was desperately looking for was just right in front of me.

It never occurred to me that the man in my vision was my future boss. Fate had a strange humor sometimes.

Zack was now checking his phone. Someone called out to him from the street. A gray-haired man in his late seventies holding a broom.

"Hey Zack, top of the morning to you. I was wondering if you could help me with something?" The old man asked. "My security system's not working again."

Zack turned around, and that was when I made my move. Zack started to cross the street.

I ran after him, but Crash moved even faster. He quickly overtook me. Crash shoved me back to the sidewalk.

Ignoring my shout of protest, Crash dove for Zack. He tackled the Raven King to the street just as a yellow semi let out a loud honk before harmlessly driving past them.

I let out a breath I didn't realise I was holding. We did it. Zack was safe. Crash and I prevented his death.

CRASH

Zack reacted like any other alpha shifter. He immediately shot to his feet and entered a fighting stance.

Spotting me, he relaxed, then looked thoughtfully at the yellow semi leaving the street.

Did Zack finally piece two and two together? I dusted my jeans and shirt before rising to my feet.

Mr. Frank, the owner of the antique store across the street, was shouting at Zack, asking him if he was alright.

Zack said he was, and the old man returned to sweeping his storefront.

I had a feeling Zack would help Mr. Frank with his problems after he took care of us. Unlike Venom, Zack was approachable and friendly.

It didn't hurt that he was charming and good-looking. It was a no-brainer that Zack was the official spokesperson for the bears and ravens.

Jared finally caught up to us, looking slightly out of breath. My mate gave me a painful shove.

Jared actually looked mad, which confused me. Before I could ask him anything, Jared turned to Zack.

Without warning, Jared hugged him. Zack looked momentarily surprised but nonetheless patted Jared's back.

If I didn't know Zack had a mate, I would've been jealous.

"Zack, you're still alive," Jared said, finally letting go.

"You saw my death, didn't you?" Zack asked.

I wasn't surprised Zack knew about Jared's abilities. They had one conversation together, but Jared, being a psychic, probably didn't come up in that job interview.

Word must've quickly spread through the MC and raven compound that Venom had successfully Changed an injured human psychic who could see the future.

Both the ravens and my fellow MC brothers were terrible gossips.

"We didn't know it was you. The vision I had only showed the bottom half of your body," Jared explained.

"Yeah, we spent the weekend driving around town and trying to figure out where your death would take place," I said. "Jared here hadn't gotten any sleep since the vision."

Zack studied Jared. The three of us moved back to the sidewalk, so there was no chance another vehicle might run us over.

Zack gestured for us to follow. He opened the cafe and persuaded us to come inside.

He convinced Jared to take a seat at an empty table. I joined my mate.

"You do look tired, Jared. Let me get you something to drink. I can't offer you anything to eat yet. The baked goods we ordered from Thad's bakery would only arrive thirty minutes later," Zack said.

"Coffee sounds good," I told Zack.

Jared looked a little out of it. I planned on taking him back home so he could get some shuteye.

Zack returned to us with two steaming mugs of black coffee. Zack then joined us at the table.

"Jared, I owe you for saving my life," Zack said.

"Think nothing of it," Jared said quickly.

He looked embarrassed. Both his ears turned red, and he avoided looking at Zack and me. Jared focused on sipping his coffee instead.

"He's very humble," I told Zack.

Zack politely asked us about Jared's vision. Jared spoke at first, but exhaustion hit him fast, so I continued where he left off.

By the time we finished telling Zack our adventures during the weekend, Zack's delivery had arrived.

Zack gave us a bag of chocolate croissants before we left the store.

"I'll see you on Wednesday?" Zack asked Jared.

Jared focused on him and nodded. During our conversation, I had texted Venom and updated him about the situation.

Judging by his answers, he was pleased everything turned out okay. Losing Zack would be a tremendous blow to our forces, after all.

The lead alpha was the heart of any shifter group. Without Zack to lead the Moon Burrow Ravens, the flock would break up and scatter.

The Grizzly Reapers MC would lose their most valuable allies. The realization hit me hard as Jared and I walked back to his car.

If my mate hadn't been here, Zack would be dead right now. After bundling Jared in the seat opposite mine, I slid behind the wheel.

Jared didn't look like he was in any state to drive.

"Are you okay?" I asked, a little concerned.

I reached over to clasp his fingers. He didn't pull away, although he seemed annoyed with me earlier.

"Yeah. By the way, I'm still mad at you for pushing me away just now," Jared said. "What if that truck ran you over instead of Zack?"

I liked that Jared was direct. So that was what Jared was worried about? That I had gotten reckless?

I simply wanted to get Jared out of harm's way. Besides, I was quicker than Jared.

Bringing that point out might only worsen the situation, so I mulled over my next words carefully.

"It didn't. Zack and I are both alive," I said. "Let me assure me you I have no plans of dying soon."

Jared fell silent for a few moments. I almost thought he'd fallen asleep, but then he spoke again.

"Promise? If I lose someone else, I don't think I can get through it again."

I straightened in my seat. Pity stirred in my chest. Jared had experienced too much loss in his life.

"I promise," I told him solemnly.

"Also, I didn't expect Zack to be so..." Jared trailed off and seemed to search for a good word. "Fatherly? Brotherly? He knows how to handle people."

I chuckled at Jared's word choice. "Yeah, he's good at taking care of others, huh?"

"Is Venom also like that?" Jared asked.

I nearly choked after hearing his question, then considered it.

"Venom seldom shows his softer side, but his mate Casper claims it's there," I answered with a straight face.

I thought of Venom, watching Lenny and me brawl, his expression hard to read as usual.

Was he quietly assessing Lenny, wondering if my best friend had to be put down soon? A bead of sweat rolled down my back.

"Crash?" Jared prompted, and I realized I had lapsed into silence.

Jared had been square with me about everything. He knew about Lenny's problems, so I told him about my concerns.

"Lenny seems perfectly normal to me," Jared said. "Then again, that's only one side of him I've seen."

"You're wise beyond your years, mate," I said.

I could hear Jared's heart beating fast. That word tickled his fancy, didn't it? It was true anyway.

Sooner or later, Jared would get used to me referring to him as his mate. Because by hook or by crook, Jared was going to be mine.

"Wake up, sleepyhead. We're here," I said.

I gave Jared a gentle nudge on the shoulder. My mate stirred, looking groggy-eyed. Jared stared out the car windows.

He slouched and his shoulders sagged at the sight of his apartment building. I frowned, wondering what got him so down all of a sudden. Then the answer came to me.

I didn't need the mate bond to know Jared probably didn't want to be alone right now.

In my texts with Venom, I informed him I planned on spending the entire day with my mate.

Venom said he was fine with it. He would find a replacement for the mission they assigned me today.

"Want to come home with me instead?" I asked Jared.

He looked pleased by that suggestion. Jared nodded.

He shut his eyes and mumbled, "Wake me up again when we're there."

He looked so dang precious and handsome. I had to lean over and give him a kiss on the cheek.

Jared opened one eye, nodded, then promptly drifted off to sleep again. His soft snores filled the truck. I started the engine again and returned to the MC compound.

Half an hour later, the bear shifters guarding the front gate to the compound waved me through.

At this time of the day, most of the crews had gone out for their respective jobs, so it was easy finding a parking spot near the clubhouse entrance.

Jared mumbled incoherently when I woke him for the second time that day. He leaned against me after I'd convinced him to get out of the car.

"I can carry you upstairs. You hardly weigh a thing," I told him.

For some reason, that suggestion woke him up. Jared adamantly shook his head and led the way inside.

The prospect of me carrying him probably distressed him. I chuckled to myself and followed him past the nearly empty bar and eating area and up the stairs to the MC members' living quarters.

In a few minutes, we entered my room. Jared dove straight for my bed. He plonked down like he owned the place.

He spread his arms and legs like a starfish. Snores once again filled the room. Jared had no intention of sharing the bed. I took my phone out and took a picture of him.

I planned on showing it to him later. Maybe I could bargain a kiss from Jared in exchange for deleting the cute photo.

I gently shut the door behind him because Venom probably wanted a word with me. It was better to tell him what happened in person, anyway.

Besides, I also had an ulterior motive—I wanted to ask Venom about what he intended to do with Lenny.

It took me fifteen minutes to track Venom down. He wasn't in his office.

It turned out he was in the massive garage, chatting with Mayhem. The two men were fixing their Harleys.

Venom seemed to be in a good mood, judging by his monosyllabic replies.

"Crash." Mayhem, our Vice President, grinned when he spotted me. "Heard about the good news. We have a psychic now?"

"Jared isn't a member of the MC," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but he's your mate, isn't he? Plus, Venom also Changed him, so Venom feels partially responsible for Jared," Mayhem explained.

Venom was, as usual, a man of a few words, so he only grunted. Right after Jared's Change, Venom did offer to show him the ropes of being a new shifter.

I didn't think he was serious back then, but that was my mistake. I remembered Jared asking me if Venom was like Zack.

In a way, Venom did care for all his bears, but his methods were just different.

That reminder gave me confidence that Venom didn't intend to get rid of Lenny just yet.

After all, Lenny hadn't hurt anyone since the first time he lost control.

He'd also moved up the ranks from prospect to a regular member, even if it had taken him longer than most bear shifters.

"Venom, can I have a private word?" I asked.

Mayhem, sensing what I wanted, suddenly declared he wanted a sandwich. Once Mayhem was gone, Venom stopped tinkering with his bike.

He sat down on a nearby bench and gestured to the stool next to it. I sat and told him about what happened this morning.

I only gave him a brief report earlier, after all.

"Mayhem's right. Jared would be a valuable asset to us," Venom said.

I stiffened at that comment and glared at Venom, daring to meet his feral, golden stare.

"Jared's not anyone's tool. He makes his own decisions," I firmly said.

Venom said nothing to that. I sighed, remembering I didn't come here for a fight.

Venom had never been good at expressing himself, but I knew he had good intentions.

"Well, Zack is Zack. He doesn't seem bothered by the fact he almost died," I said. "I brought Jared back to my room to rest."

"Why bother helping him get his own place when he spends most of his time here, anyway?" Venom asked.

"A practical question," I acknowledged.

I rubbed my jaw and sighed before answering, "I figured he'd want a place to call his own. Venom, there are two things I want to discuss."

I haven't told Venom about the details surrounding Jace's murder and about Bernard Pittman.

Venom's expression didn't change. Like me, he didn't seem worried about Jace's killer.

My lead alpha trusted me to handle this problem, and I would do exactly that. Bernard Pittman still hadn't shown his hand, but he struck me as someone who wouldn't give up easily, especially if the prize was my mate.

I had already seen firsthand how invaluable Jared's gift was today, and the urge to protect and keep him safe intensified.

"What about Lenny?" I finally asked.

Venom sighed, and he suddenly looked years older.

"I know Greed and you believe Lenny's getting better, but he's not," Venom said.

He held out a hand before I could argue. I fell silent, knowing Venom wasn't done explaining himself.

Venom continued, "I could sense Lenny's grizzly constantly fighting against

the clan bonds. If this continues, my hold on him would break."

"You've managed to bring out-of-control bear alphas to heel before," I reminded him.

"If I do that to Lenny, the situation would only get worse. He'll break if I force my will upon him," Venom told me plainly.

I slowly got to my feet and started to pace. Venom said nothing more, allowing me to process his words.

"Are you saying Lenny would choose to die rather than submit to you?" I asked.

Venom's grim look was answer enough.

JARED

"You'll be fine; there's no reason to worry," Crash reassured me.

It was easy for Crash to say that. He could fit in anywhere. I remained where I was, on the back of Crash's Harley, needing something to distract myself.

I fingered the hem of Crash's leather jacket for a few minutes. Crash said nothing, he simply waited until I managed to soothe my nerves.

He was sweet and patient that way. I could have taken the bus, but Crash insisted on giving me a ride.

Part of me wished he didn't bother, so he wouldn't need to see me all indecisive and scared I wouldn't fit in.

The last place I worked at—a fast-food joint in Creek—I only got along with one person, my manager, Ronda.

She didn't grow up in Fair Creek, so she dismissed the rumors about me and my family.

Everyone who worked in Cool Beans were shifters, I reminded myself.

Crash was right, there was no reason to overthink things. Besides, I needed a job to pay the bills.

After giving myself one more silent pep talk, I dismounted.

"Are you forgetting something?" Crash asked.

He flashed me a disarming smirk, and for a second, I wondered what it was I forgot.

Then it struck me. My cocky bear wanted a kiss as payment for the ride. Smiling, I leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth.

"Have a good day," I told him.

"Call me if you need rescuing. Those ravens can be terrible gossips," Crash said.

He wore such a serious expression on his face it made me laugh. I finally loosened up. I remained on the sidewalk and watched Crash drive away.

No use delaying this. I didn't know why I was so worked up. I've already met two raven shifters—Micah and Zack. Meeting a few more wouldn't hurt.

I took a deep breath and walked inside Cool Beans. Judging by the closed sign hanging on the door, the cafe wasn't open yet, but the door was unlocked.

I found Zack and three raven shifters inside. I stole a glance at my new co-workers.

One was a muscular red-haired guy in his early thirties—an alpha. He flashed me a grin, which I didn't return.

I was too nervous to say anything.

I gave everyone an awkward wave, which I immediately regretted. Standing next to the red-haired alpha was a woman with brown curls and a bespectacled, golden-haired guy, both in their twenties like me.

The woman returned my friendly wave, but the guy with glasses kept looking at the floor. Zack flashed me a warm smile, which immediately made me feel welcome.

"Jared, you're just in time for our morning meeting. Come meet everyone," Zack said.

That was my cue to come forward. These people don't care that you're a psychic, I kept telling myself. We were all freaks here.

Well, I highly doubted these shifters saw themselves that way. To them, being a shifter was probably as natural as breathing.

"The redhead over there is Tucker. Deb's next to him. Deb's the assistant manager. You can approach her whenever I'm not around, which is rather often," Zack said, rather apologetically.

That revelation did not surprise me. As the lead alpha of his own group, Zack must have his share of responsibilities to tackle.

"And that's Rico," Zack finished, nodding to the shy guy with the glasses. "Rico just moved to Moon Burrow, like you. He'll be showing you the ropes."

"You're a barista as well?" I asked, intrigued.

Rico finally met my gaze, then nodded. After the introductions, Zack gave us a summary of everyone's shifts that week.

Apparently, there was also a town festival next week, and the cafe was setting up a stall. That sounded pretty fun.

Once the team meeting was over, they gave me a uniform. Our uniforms turned out to be aprons with the cafe name and logo on it.

Underneath, we could wear whatever we wanted. Usually, a pair of jeans and a comfortable top would suffice, Rico said. I noticed Zack had already left.

Rico then gave me a quick tour. He also showed me where everything was and what type of machines the cafe used.

Rico seemed relieved when I told him I had some experience working as a barista.

I picked up a plastic menu and studied all the drinks. Realizing the cafe served the standard coffees and teas, nothing too specialized or hard to make, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Good," Rico said, sounding relieved. "When I started, I didn't know a thing. Zack had to teach me from scratch."

Rico initially struck me as shy, but once I got him talking, he seemed

comfortable enough to carry on a conversation.

Deb butted in once, only to tell me to approach her if I encountered any problems. Everything was going smoothly so far and everyone was so nice.

Of course, we hadn't opened for the day yet, but at least no one pointed fingers at me or gossiped about me in secret.

That was my old life, I reminded myself.

"Say, Jared, are the rumors true?" Tucker leaned against the counter.

I found his stare discomfoting, so I pretended to read the menu again.

"Rumors?" I asked, because he seemed to be expecting a response. "That you could see the future."

I halted and stared at him, trying to figure out what his angle was. Deb must've overheard, because she came over and gave Tucker a nudge on the shoulder.

Tucker didn't pay her any attention, earning a glare from our assistant manager. I had a feeling he'd be in trouble.

Deb might be small in stature, but I had a feeling she was more than she appeared. Her aura hit Tucker a second later.

Another alpha. My hunch about her was right.

"Everything regarding you is so hush-hush. Micah kept his mouth shut when I asked him about you. That grumpy healer told me to stop snooping around, because even the big boss is looking out for you," Tucker said.

"The big boss?" I asked, confused.

"Venom," Rico said his name in a terrified whisper. Tucker continued, "Everyone knows you saved Zack's life. How did it happen?"

"Back to work, you nosy big lug. We're about to open," Deb said pointedly. "Feel free to ignore Tucker's questions, Jared. Everyone knows Tucker doesn't have any manners."

"It's true," Rico piped out.

"No, it's okay. I'd like to get this out of the way." I took a deep breath. "Yes, it's true."

"What is?" Tucker asked, brows raised. "I can see the future sometimes," I said with a shrug. "But it's nothing special. Visions come to me randomly. There's no pattern to them sometimes."

Tucker widened his eyes.

"Wow. That's amazing. Say, what are your plans after work today?" His question was met with a possessive growl.

I frowned, recognizing that sound. Our first customer of the day had just walked in, and it was Crash.

Didn't he tell me he was heading back to the MC clubhouse? Did he have other errands to run in town?

Crash walked right up to us and snarled right into Tucker's face. The redhead raised both his hands in mock defeat, then took a few steps backward.

At least a fight didn't break out. Alphas could be extremely temperamental sometimes, Micah once told me.

Maybe Tucker didn't want to lose his job, or he knew this was one fight he couldn't win.

I'd seen Crash and Greed spar before. Both men were brutal fighters.

"Jared's mine. Scram before I break your arm," Crash warned.

"Crash, what are you doing here?" I asked. I wasn't sure what to think.

Should it annoy me Crash didn't think I could handle my first day on my own or be pleased he was worried about me?

In hindsight, I didn't think Tucker had any bad intentions. Raven shifters were simply inquisitive by nature.

Well, maybe Micah was the exception.

"I'm uh," Crash paused, then he squinted at the menu on the counter, his anger at Tucker already forgotten.

Then he grumbled, "What to order?"

"You're lucky it's Crash and not the other one," I overheard Deb hiss in Tucker's ear.

She pushed him to one side. "Back to work or you'll be cleaning the restrooms for the entire month," Deb warned.

That finally got Tucker moving. He resumed wiping the tables. When he saw me glancing at him, Tucker winked at me.

I ignored him and returned my attention to my mate, who followed my stare.

"I'll rip his throat out," Crash said under his breath.

"Did you want to order anything?" I asked him. Crash sighed, then ran his hand through his hair.

"Three ice lattes," Crash finally said, setting the menu down.

While I made his drinks, I debated what to tell him.

Once I set them down on the counter, I said, "Crash, it's cute you're concerned about me but—"

"I know," Crash said, interrupting me. "I should've known better. Micah keeps reminding me you're not a baby bird that needs to be watched all the time."

"Micah compared me to a baby bird?" I asked, aghast. Rico, standing nearby, giggled at the comment.

"Yeah, I'm not saying anything else. Thanks for the drinks," Crash said, slipping a few bills on the counter. "See you at lunch?"

"After work," I corrected. "Don't you have a job this afternoon?"

"Sure, but I can delegate it to someone else..." Crash trailed off when he must've noticed my irritated expression. "Tonight then," Crash said.

Crash was about to lean over the counter and kiss me, but Deb cleared her throat. Crash stepped back.

The customer in the suit behind Crash tapped his foot impatiently. Crash settled for blowing me a kiss.

Then he exited the store, whistling a cheerful tune under his breath.

"Can I take your order, sir?" I asked the next customer.

The next few hours proved busy. It surprised me to find most of the cafe's food items gone by the time the morning rush hour was over.

Rico and I made drinks nonstop while Deb handled the cash register and served the food. Finally, we had no customers.

"Is it like this all the time?" I asked. "The last cafe I worked at wasn't this busy."

"Well, the cafe actually has fewer customers now that Zack doesn't come in all the time," Rico was saying. "A lot of locals have a crush on our Raven King. Of course, most just come in for the nice drinks and the food. We get all our baked goods from Crimson Delights, after all."

"I noticed we have a nice selection of coffees," I said. "Crimson Delights. That's the bakery run by Zack's vampire mate? The one that went viral a few months ago?"

"That's chocolate croissants are to die for," Tucker pointed out. "Speaking of croissants—"

"Will you stop flirting with the new barista?" Deb interrupted Tucker. "Jared's clearly taken."

"All the good ones are taken," Tucker complained.

I didn't miss Rico turning slightly red in the face at that comment. Did Rico have a crush on Tucker? Well, I was new here, and I wasn't about to point out the obvious.

"You know, this morning I felt really anxious about coming here," I began.

"How come?" Deb asked, raising her brows at me. "We ravens don't bite, you know."

"It's not that. It's just, back in my hometown, the people I've worked with

always kept some distance from me. I always needed to change jobs because of what I am," I admitted.

"What you are? Like a psychic?" Deb frowned.

She seemed completely confounded by the idea I would be treated differently because of my abilities.

"I know how that feels. A bunch of anti-supernaturals run the town where I grew up," Rico said, staring at his feet.

I wondered what his story was and decided I'd ask once we got to know each other a little better.

"Don't worry, Jared. You'll fit in here just fine. We're all weirdos here," Tucker told me with plenty of confidence.

It was as if he was proud of being a weirdo.

"You're the only weird one here," Deb said with a roll of her eyes.

"So you and Crash, is that a sure thing or—" Tucker began.

"We're a sure thing," I said.

Tucker sighed and finally gave up asking me out for the day.

JARED

"Watch your step. The ground's uneven in this part of the woods," Crash cautioned.

I sneaked a glance at him from under my bangs, not noticing the upraised tree root right in front of me.

Letting out a yelp, I nearly fell over, but luckily, Crash caught my arm just in time. He steadied me, and I flushed, feeling a little foolish.

A week had passed since Crash and I prevented Zack's death. I was getting along pretty well with my fellow co-workers at Cool Beans.

Never once did Zack's ravens make me feel unwelcome. Deb had even joked that I was now an honorary raven, and that made me feel really special.

Today was my day off, and Crash was free as well. He invited me for a walk in the woods to give me some basic lessons in shifting.

To say I was downright terrified would be an understatement. Changing forms hurt, and Lenny, Micah, and some of my co-workers confirmed that fact.

"Feeling nervous?" Crash asked as we continued our trek into the heart of the Moon Burrow Woods.

This area was lush, with towering ash and oak trees forming a leafy canopy above our heads, making the humid weather somewhat bearable.

Wildflowers in various shades of blue and purple bloomed all around us, scattered amidst tall grass.

Signs of life were evident everywhere. A pair of swallows took off from a nearby branch, and I glimpsed a family of squirrels making their way from branch to branch.

I thought I spotted a raven flying above us. The raven shifter gave Crash a croak of greeting before resuming its flight.

With my new and enhanced senses, there were too many sights to take in all at once, and I halted in my tracks, though Crash didn't seem to mind.

"Here's a good place, as any," Crash said.

He set his basket down and began taking out a checkered picnic mat.

I started to relax, because I knew Crash wouldn't rush me. I could tell he would be a good and patient teacher.

Venom had once told me I could approach him if I needed any help. I politely thanked him and told him I'd be fine, because I had Crash.

I helped Crash lay out the food we had pilfered from the MC kitchen. We made sandwiches, cold salads, and even scored some fresh apples and a couple of pears.

My stomach growled once we had everything laid out on the beautiful mat.

"You picked a great spot," I said.

Crash, leaning against the trunk of a tree, looked relaxed. I sat down next to him and picked up a ham and cheese sandwich.

I bit into it and let out a moan. After a few bites, I spoke again.

"It's so beautiful out here," I murmured.

We had both spent the morning preparing for our trip, and Crash and I were famished.

We devoured everything in sight, leaving no crumb behind. Crash opened a beer can and chugged it down in a single gulp.

He let out a sigh of satisfaction afterward. I curved my lips upward into a smile, and Crash raised a questioning eyebrow at me.

"Nothing, you just look so relaxed," I pointed out.

"I'm always relaxed when I'm with you," Crash said. "Finish your apple, hydrate, and then we can begin."

"Ouch. I didn't know you were such a harsh teacher. Maybe I should've asked Venom for help instead?" I teased, and Crash chuckled.

"Good luck with that. Venom's a harsh taskmaster. Even the toughest grizzly alphas end up crying after one of his training sessions," Crash said.

"That bad, huh?" I asked.

After cleaning up our mess, we decided to leave the mat on the ground in case we wanted to return to our spot after our lesson.

Crash and I made our way to the nearest clearing, which was just a stone's throw away from our chosen picnic spot.

"What's next, teacher?" I asked. "Do I take off all my clothes?"

A hungry gleam entered Crash's eyes at those words, and my pulse raced as he turned his intense gaze on me.

His gold-streaked blue eyes triggered my own lust. We'd been dancing around each other for days now.

Crash had always been a gentleman during our dates, settling for kisses and touches, always leaving me wanting more.

My grizzly woke and eyed Crash with interest.

My human half might have doubts, doubts about Crash and me, and whether I was worthy to be his mate. But human emotions didn't weigh down my grizzly; he knew that Crash was indubitably ours, now and forever.

"Close your eyes. Look deep within yourself," Crash instructed. "Can you sense him, your bear?"

"I can. He's wide awake, ready for anything," I answered, shutting my eyes.

Should I tell Crash that I was painfully aware of his presence? Crash's familiar scent wrapped around me like a comforting blanket.

He smelled of home, of being mine.

"Let him out, a little at a time. He knows what to do. Trust his instincts," Crash said.

At first, nothing happened. Then I forced myself to relax, to not try so hard. I opened my eyes, peeking at Crash.

He was watching me intently. Maybe an encouraging kiss would help; I wanted to tell him. But the words never left my mouth.

I watched in stunned silence as brown fur began covering my arms. That was my cue to strip.

After removing everything, I noticed my mate had done the same. I took a few luxurious seconds to admire Crash's muscled and naked form.

My mouth went dry, and I tried to come up with something witty and flirty to say, but pain swept over my entire body.

A scream tore out of my throat as my bones broke.

No one warned me how agonizing this process truly was. When they said it hurt, I thought it would feel like getting a bruise or falling down.

I felt like I was being turned inside out. A series of pops sounded as more bones broke and my organs moved.

Was it too late to turn back? As if Crash knew what I was thinking, he was suddenly right by my side.

He reached for my hand, or rather, my paw.

"Don't fight it, Jared. The first time is always the worst," Crash said. "It'll get better, easier."

"It sucks," I managed to growl out between gritted teeth.

Crash tightened his hold on my paw. His steadfast presence gave me a measure of peace and the courage to push through the torment.

It felt like a miserable eternity, but in reality, only a few minutes had passed. I fell on all fours.

I pawed at the pile of dead leaves on the ground before raising my left front paw in silent wonder.

Something large and furry nudged my shoulder. So caught up in my own transformation, I hadn't realized Crash had finished shifting.

He gave me a playful lick on the nose, and I pawed at him. He let out an amused huff. Before I could swipe at him again, Crash broke into a run, leaving me in the dust.

Two could play at this game, and I raced after him.

At first, I took halting steps, but soon enough, I got used to running on fours instead of two.

"Trust my bear," Crash had said.

I did exactly that. My inner animal seemed to know how the controls worked in this body.

I entered another clearing, coming to a halt when I realized I had lost sight of Crash.

It wasn't fair; Crash was on a whole new level compared to me. A raven croaked nearby, and I looked up, searching for him.

The raven shifter preened its feathers from a nearby tree, then extended one wing and pointed south.

Was it showing me where Crash had gone? After letting out a roar of thanks—hopefully, he understood that—I resumed my search for my mate.

South led me to a craggy area near the river. I could hear the rushing water from where I was.

A small cave peered back at me. Could Crash have gone in there? Would he even fit?

Hearing rustling bushes behind me, I turned, only to find Crash grabbing me from behind.

He kept his claws sheathed to avoid hurting me for real. Did bear shifters enjoy this kind of play?

We wrestled on the ground until we were both covered in dirt and leaves. I let out a growl, saying "uncle" first.

Crash understood and got off me. I took that opportunity to take him down.

Crash had let me win, probably to boost my confidence. The fur receded, and Crash shrank in size.

Not wanting to crush him under my grizzly weight, I did the same. Shifting back proved excruciating as well. I didn't know why I expected it to be easier.

In moments, I found myself on top of Crash, panting from the effort of the change.

Crash reached out, touching my cheek, his expression soft and open.

"Good job, mate," he said. "You deserve a kiss."

He leaned upwards, capturing my lips. I closed my eyes. Crash reversed our positions, so I was the one lying on a bed of leaves.

I didn't mind one bit. He rested his hands on either side of my head, keeping his weight off me.

I kissed him back passionately. Crash slipped his tongue down my throat and sucked on it.

He left burning kisses down my neck, my collarbones. Crash closed his mouth over one flat nipple and sucked, making me as hard as a rock.

Crash curled his fingers around my dick and started stroking me. I panted, needy for him.

"Yes," I whispered, staring into his face.

Crash's intense gaze never left mine.

"Tell me if I'm going too fast," Crash said.

“You’re not. I’ve wanted this for a long time,” I told him. “I’ve dreamed of this, remember?”

At those words, Crash sealed his mouth to mine again. He didn’t stop working on my prick. In moments, the pressure building inside me crested over.

I came, painting Crash’s six-pack abs with my release.

“I want you in me,” I whispered.

“On all fours,” Crash said.

Seeing his golden eyes, my heart raced in excitement. I nodded, wanting to feel Crash buried deep in me, to finally claim me as his.

Crash got off me and helped me onto my hands and knees. I shivered in anticipation.

Initially, I had questions about my new omega body because I had heard that we were built differently from humans or alpha shifters.

I couldn’t ask Crash, as that would be too embarrassing. So, I approached Micah instead.

He was red in the face, but he gave me all the answers I needed. Thanks to him, I knew what to expect next.

When Crash positioned himself behind me, he didn’t plunge into me right away. Crash slid one finger inside my ass.

I was already wet and ready for him. Crash added another digit. I moaned as he started preparing me for access.

It didn’t take long, but by then, I was squirming and begging him to take me.

I had thought alpha shifters would be impatient bed partners, but Crash proved me wrong. But it didn't matter; I was enjoying the foreplay.

Crash put his fingers away and angled his cock into my ass. He slowly pushed his way in, making me feel every impressive inch of him.

I groaned and, needing to hold onto something, I clawed at the ground. Gosh,

he felt thick and good inside me.

After getting past the thick ring of muscle, Crash finally buried himself deep inside me. I could finally breathe easy.

“You okay?” Crash asked, concern in his eyes.

“I am. Ride me,” I ordered.

Crash complied. Soon enough, I forgot about the initial pain. Crash started with slow and easy strokes before picking up speed.

Ecstasy filled my entire body, and soon, the woods blurred from my line of sight. This felt like heaven.

I tried telling Crash that, but only animal noises filled the air. It was okay; Crash understood, I thought.

Why hadn't anyone told me that sex could be this amazing and earth-shattering?

I knew it felt that way only because I was with the right man. My mate.

CRASH

Jared repeatedly moaning my name was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard in my entire life.

I pulled out of him and adjusted the angle of my thrusts. Jared arched his back and gasped. I knew I hit his sweet spot.

Not relenting, I aimed for his prostate with every push. My balls tightened against my body.

Each time our bodies joined, something, a fragment of my soul, my ferocious grizzly, floated away to brush against Jared's.

For the first time, I understood that we were two different pieces of a puzzle meant to come together.

That revelation filled me with purpose. Fated mates. I had never believed I would ever find my special someone until I met Jared.

I was close, but Jared finished first. He climaxed, screaming out my name.

Several thrusts later, I came. Letting out a growl, my mind flew, and I emptied my seed inside him.

Although we never discussed the prospect of children, Jared knew he was capable of giving birth.

Micah told me he gave Jared all the information he had on omega shifters.

For some reason, Micah wouldn't look me in the eye when I questioned him

further.

I guessed what went on between Micah and Jared was private. A friendship thing.

As I pulled out of Jared and lay next to him on the ground, I thought of little bear cubs that looked a little like him and me combined.

I never pictured having offspring before, given my dangerous lifestyle.

With Jared tucked close to me, I started to wonder, to dream. I had never envisioned moving out of the MC clubhouse because my private den, my room, felt sufficient.

Now, I thought of building us a rustic cabin in the woods. A few of my MC brothers had done exactly that.

They had rented out a piece of land for their own homes. Bash and Colin, Bane and Julian, came to mind. A private den for Jared, me, and maybe a cub or two.

My heart swelled with unnamed emotions. Tenderness mixed with apprehension. Start a family? Me?

Was I capable of being a father, as well as a good mate to Jared? Tough questions. Certainly mind-boggling ones.

The foster system had chewed me up and spat me back out. None of my foster parents cared about me.

I looked out for my own interests and practically raised myself. Jared rested his head on my chest, and I reached out and absentmindedly stroked his sweat-soaked hair.

At first, I was worried I was moving too fast, but I relaxed when I realized Jared and I were on the same page.

“If all our shifting lessons would end like this, sign me up,” Jared murmured, making me laugh.

He certainly always knew what to say at the right time. Love and fondness filled me.

I couldn't imagine my life without him. Jared was my bright ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.

Growing up, I couldn't rely on anyone but myself, but things would be different for our future kids.

They would have Jared and me to look after them, I decided. Either way, it was too early to worry about things like that.

Right now, Jared and I were still trying to find our respective footing when it came to our relationship.

"Something could be arranged," I said, giving him a wink.

Jared batted at my shoulder playfully. Then we linked hands, and the sounds of the forest faded away.

Only the rhythmic beat of our hearts filled my ears. I felt content. Happy. I couldn't remember the last time I felt this way.

Maybe never. I knew without a doubt that I would do anything and everything for my gorgeous mate.

I hummed under my breath as I helped Lenny and Greed move the MC's special merchandise from the truck to the storage facility.

We had a few of these warehouses scattered in various locations. Today, the three of us had drawn the short straw, stuck unloading the MC's latest shipment of weapons—a job no one else wanted to do, simply because it was pure grunt work.

The three of us wouldn't see any action today.

I glanced at the two trucks filled to the brim with boxes and sighed. It would take us all afternoon to finish everything.

Thankfully, this particular facility was located close to home, deep in the Moon Burrow Woods. We stored some of our excess products here—items not yet ready for distribution.

Primarily, this weapons cache was reserved for our own use in case of an emergency.

We had another stockroom deep underground in the MC clubhouse, but we mostly stored magical artifacts there.

The MC had scores of enemies, and we couldn't seem to stop pissing people off.

Violence was our way of life, and I never tired of it. Neither did Greed nor Lenny.

That was the reason we had joined the MC in the first place, but I also enjoyed moments of peace.

I couldn't wait to get this job over and done with because Jared and I had plans to meet after his afternoon shift.

We had reservations at my favorite Mexican restaurant. Afterward, we were planning to catch a movie.

I was looking forward to cuddling and making out with Jared in the dark movie theater. Maybe afterward, I could convince Jared to come home with me.

"Where's Greed?" I asked Lenny after setting a heavy box down in the warehouse.

Lenny looked up from his tablet, where he was keeping track of all the shipments. I distinctly remembered Greed being in charge of stock checking earlier.

"He said he'll take a five-minute break," Lenny said. He scoffed. "That was ten minutes ago."

Why wasn't I surprised? Greed was the type of guy who liked delaying tasks he didn't like doing. This wasn't the first time he'd taken a long break.

"I'll look for him and drag him back. At this rate, we won't finish until evening," I grumbled.

It didn't take me long to find Greed. I located him in the nearby woods,

comfortably perched against an old apple tree, phone in one hand, and an apple in the other.

Greed chuckled quietly to himself, and I wondered what had him so entertained.

My best friend was so fixated on his phone screen that he didn't even notice me sneaking up behind him.

The lazy bastard, as it turned out, was sexting his mate. Now I wished I hadn't seen any of the words on his screen.

It was hard to picture the overly serious Micah actually typing out those dirty suggestions. That was a side of Micah I didn't want to know.

"If you're done, let's get back to work," I said drily.

Greed jumped to his feet and growled in annoyance when he saw me.

"I'm on break," he grumbled.

"Yeah, I heard, but break time's over. Chop-chop," I said. "Don't you have a date with Micah later? I have one with Jared as well. If we don't finish up in time, our romantic evenings won't happen."

"I hate to admit it, but you're right," Greed said with a long-suffering sigh. "Give me five minutes."

I thumped my foot impatiently as Greed finished typing out his last message to Micah. He also finished his apple.

We walked back to the warehouse in companionable silence. My earlier annoyances with Greed vanished.

This was a fine opportunity to have a heart-to-heart talk. I couldn't talk to Lenny about Jared because Lenny was already a little sore about Greed and me finding our respective mates.

I didn't bother rushing back. Lenny wouldn't mind, and Greed seemed to understand that I wanted to get something off my chest.

I'd known Greed and Lenny for five years, yet it felt like we'd been friends forever—brothers.

“I take it things are going well with Jared?” Greed asked.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said.

“He’s not wearing your mate mark yet,” Greed said.

I rolled my eyes because Greed didn’t need to point out the obvious. It wasn’t like Micah was wearing Greed’s mate mark after a week of dating him, either.

“We agreed to take our time. I don’t want to rush anything,” I said.

“Well, don’t take too long or Jared might change his mind about you,” Greed said.

I shot him a glare, and he raised both his hands in mock defeat. Greed was joking.

I knew that, but his comment irritated me. Of course, part of me was still worried a more experienced bear alpha was going to sweep Jared off his feet someday.

“This whole dating thing, it’s scary,” I finally admitted.

It was an embarrassing thing to say, but Greed was my best friend, and he’d been in my shoes before.

“You’re admitting you’re scared about something?” Greed asked, raising one eyebrow. “That’s rare. Wait until Lenny hears about this.”

“This is the first relationship I’ve ever had,” I reminded him. “Before Jared, I was content with hook-ups, but after he entered my life, only he mattered.”

“I know. I’ve been where you are. It ain’t easy,” Greed acknowledged. “Micah and I had a rocky start.”

“I remember,” I said with a chuckle. “With sheer persistence, you won him over. Jared’s not Micah. He wears his heart on his sleeve.”

“No, he isn’t. Micah and Jared are exact opposites,” Greed agreed. “I have to admit, I had my doubts about Jared at first. I mean, a psychic suddenly appears out of nowhere and claims he’s your mate? It sounded so fantastical.”

“Hard to believe someone would like me for me?” I joked.

“Nah. It’s just, I was worried he was conning you or something, but then I got to know him better. Micah likes him as well. Jared’s okay by me,” Greed said.

“He still doesn’t like you, by the way,” I said. Greed grunted.

“My charm doesn’t work on everyone. Jared’s loss,” Greed said with a shrug.

“Greed, whenever I’m with Jared, I always feel like I’m a little off-balance. Like I don’t know what might happen next,” I said. “Did it feel that way when you were dating Micah?”

“All the time,” Greed automatically answered.

His answer gave me a measure of relief.

“I’ve begun thinking about the future seriously,” I began, then faltered.

“The future? Wow, things are really heating up between you two,” Greed pointed out.

“Yeah. Once Jared and I move to the next stage in our relationship, I’m thinking of moving in together,” I said.

Greed frowned. “What do you mean? You’re planning on moving into town, renting a place there or something?”

“Why do you look so worried? Miss me much?” That comment earned me a painful punch to the shoulder.

I sobered up and explained myself.

I continued, “Nah, nothing like that. I’ve been thinking of maybe building us a home, a cabin in the woods just for us, like what Bane and Bash did for their mates.”

“Huh, that’s fine then. You already told Venom about your plans?” Greed asked.

“Not yet. I’m still fleshing it out. If things pan out, will you and Len give me a hand in building the cabin?” I asked.

Greed clasped my shoulder and grinned. “Sure thing, brother.”

He stopped a couple of paces from the warehouse.

“Lenny’s doing well lately, huh?” Greed asked, changing the topic.

“For now,” I agreed. “Let’s hope he remains that way.”

“What Len needs is some kind of healthy distraction. Hey, that cute omega raven shifter Jared works with is single, isn’t he? What was his name, Rico?” Greed asked.

“I don’t think Len will appreciate it if we arrange blind dates for him,” I pointed out.

Besides, I privately didn’t think Rico and Len suited each other. Lenny frightened plenty of the raven shifters, although I would never point that out to him.

My cellphone vibrated in the back pocket of my jeans. Seeing it was a text from Jared, I smiled to myself.

Things were really looking up for us right now. Greed was wrong. There really was no need to hurry matters between us. I would simply let nature take its course.

JARED

I furiously scrubbed at the table, annoyed that the chocolate stain wouldn't come off.

"Here, let me try something," Rico said.

I stepped to one side as Rico sprayed the messy spot, then used a washcloth to rub it off.

The table now looked pristine. I whistled in approval.

"Why didn't I think of that?" I asked.

"This spray comes from my own cleaning supplies. I like to keep everything neat." Rico suddenly looked embarrassed by that explanation.

He flushed and quickly stowed away his spray and washcloth under the counter.

"Rico, Jared, Tucker, and I can handle everything. Go for your lunch break," Deb suggested.

"Rico, do you mind if we eat at the park today?" I asked the other omega. "I'd like to get some fresh air."

Rico seemed surprised by my question, because we usually ate in the break room. Rico only nodded.

"Why the park?" Rico asked.

We exited the cafe with our BLT sandwiches and coffees.

We could usually pick out anything from the cafe, and one shift included one free drink and meal, which was good because it saved me money.

“I don’t know how else to describe it, but I have a feeling,” I admitted. Rico halted in his steps.

“A good or bad feeling? Should I get Zack?”

“Nothing like that yet,” I blurted.

I’d developed a special kind of sixth sense lately. I called them mini-hunches because a massive headache didn’t accompany them like my usual visions.

Thanks to these hunches, my coworkers and I have saved a couple of customers from unlucky accidents.

We prevented falls and spills, nothing as drastic as Zack almost dying. Earlier that morning, I had one of them.

It was a short ten-minute walk to the local park. Rico and I found an empty park bench near the playground.

I unwrapped my sandwich and took a few quick bites. Rico watched the kids anxiously before returning his attention to me.

He barely touched his food.

“Rico, relax and eat your lunch. I’ll warn you if something happens. It might be nothing at all,” I told my new friend.

“Okay,” Rico said.

After finishing his sandwich, Rico and I talked about mundane things. Rico started to relax when I asked him about his dating life.

“I’m not interested in anyone right now,” Rico said. “Not even a certain redhead?” I teased. Rico groaned.

“Tucker is a menace. Sure, some of the paranormals in town find him cute, but he’s not the one for me,” Rico blurted.

Admittedly, I had a hard time focusing on our conversation. I was waiting for my gut instinct to alert me to any signs of trouble, but all was quiet.

I'd been wrong plenty of times before. It looked like today would just be like any normal day. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Jared...I'm glad you started working at Cool Beans," Rico was saying.

"What brought this about?" I asked Rico out of curiosity.

"When I first moved here, I found it hard to connect with the other ravens, save Elliot. But you're easy to talk to," Rico admitted. "There were even a few times I debated leaving Moon Burrow, but I'm glad I stuck around."

"What prompted you to move here?" I asked.

"The guy I was with, he wasn't so nice. Neither was the flock I belonged to," Rico said.

He looked at his feet, a nervous reaction, I noticed. Then Rico met my gaze and flashed me a sad smile.

Suddenly, he looked far too old for his years.

Deb had once hinted to me that Rico's past hadn't exactly been smooth sailing, but she hadn't elaborated when I pressed further.

I respected her decision. It was Rico's story to tell. When he was ready, he'd open up to me.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. I meant every word.

"I'm in a good place right now," Rico said quickly. He flashed me a sheepish smile. Rico continued, "It's been hard learning to trust people again."

"Well, I'm glad I met you and everyone as well. Before meeting Crash, I didn't have any friends back in Fair Creek. People there treated me like a pariah. My brother, he'd always been the smart one. He left Fair Creek early and never looked back. I was a little slow on the uptake," I said.

Rico seemed surprised.

"You didn't have any friends?"

“Is that so hard to believe?” I asked. I was no longer embarrassed about that admission.

“A little. I mean, you’re nice to everyone, and you’re thoughtful as well. I get why Crash is madly in love with you,” Rico said.

A moment of awkward silence passed. I wanted to tell Rico he didn’t need to worry, that his fated mate must be out there somewhere and would eventually find him.

Finding Crash made me believe in magic.

Rico spoke again, “Anyway, we’re both in Moon Burrow now. That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah. Let’s finish up here and head back,” I said, glancing at my wristwatch.

Our lunch break was almost over. We gathered our trash, and I was about to throw mine in the nearest bin when a blinding pain hit me out of nowhere.

I cried out, dropping to my knees. The crumpled paper bag fell from my hand.

This wasn’t like any of my mini-hunches but one of my full-blown visions. Rico grasped my arm.

He was repeatedly calling my name, but his voice sounded distant. I shut my eyes, knowing what was coming.

A little boy’s laugh reached my ears. My stomach clenched. Please, not a kid, I thought to myself.

The stakes always seemed higher when a child was involved.

Then I saw him, bright-eyed and happy, holding his mother’s hand. He must be five or six, wearing orange sneakers, jeans, and a matching bright orange hoodie.

I couldn’t see the face of his mother, but she gripped his hand on her right and her purse on her left.

They walked past the playground. The kid wanted to run to the swings. His

mother shook her head.

The playground was almost empty. No one was in sight, save for a shadowy figure that appeared from behind a tree, a knife in his hand.

He looked unkempt, smelled like he hadn't showered in a week, and his breath stank of alcohol.

"Give me your purse," the man said.

I saw the knife descending again and again. Blood everywhere. Screams erupted.

The kid standing all alone on the footpath, covered in his mother's blood.

Gasping awake, my eyes flew open and found Rico's concerned ones. I turned my head to the playground, desperately searching for the mother and kid.

Lunchtime was nearly over. Parents and their kids were slowly leaving the premises. It would happen soon, I thought. There was no time to panic.

"Jared, talk to me. What are we looking for?" Rico asked.

I had nearly forgotten he was there. Rico had his cellphone out, and I assumed he probably contacted someone.

Hopefully, it was Zack or Deb. I wished Crash was with me because he would know what to do.

Then I immediately dismissed the thought. I couldn't rely on Crash for solutions every single time. Besides, I wasn't alone. I had Rico with me.

My new friend would assist me to the best of his abilities.

No one was at the playground now, I noted, but there were still a few people by the park benches.

We weren't alone. My anxiety amped up. Time was ticking.

"Mother and kid," I said, rubbing the back of my head.

I took out two white pills from my wallet and chewed them. My headache

subsided, and I could think again.

Details, I reminded myself. I described what the kid looked like to Rico.

“Jared, you just described that kid down to a tee,” Rico whispered.

He sounded downright frightened, and I couldn’t blame him. This was a lot of pressure to put on someone all of a sudden.

Rico pointed to our left, and I spotted a woman in her mid-thirties, leading a child by the hand.

“Go,” I shouted at Rico.

We dashed towards the woman and her son. She saw Rico and me sprinting towards her and immediately gathered her son close.

There wasn’t any time to explain. Over her shoulder, I spotted the man with the knife. The purse-snatcher.

The man tapped on her shoulder. She spun, almost forgetting we were there.

Her eyes widened in fear as she spotted the wicked-looking kitchen knife.

“Give me your purse!” He yelled, sounding frantic.

A couple of heads turned in their direction, but no one made a move. One man even had his phone out. Was he taking a video?

What was wrong with people these days? I reached them before Rico did.

The woman frantically shook her head. Her little boy started crying. The attacker raised his knife just as I came at him from his blind side.

I threw my entire weight at him, and we both crashed to the ground. Bloodshot eyes met mine. A drug user?

That would make things a lot harder. This man was both dangerous and unpredictable.

He raised his knife, and the blade sliced across my left arm. The sudden pain made me grit my teeth, but I reminded myself not to lose focus.

“Jared!” Rico cried out.

“Keep her and her kid safe,” I yelled back, tussling with the attacker.

In the end, the man was only human. Even though I didn’t know the first thing about fighting, I overpowered him with my supernatural strength.

I knocked his knife from his hand and silently congratulated myself. I didn’t see his fist crashing down on the side of my head.

A groan slipped from my lips. For a moment, I saw stars. Even if he managed to stab me, I wouldn’t die. I doubted that the dirty blade contained silver.

Jerking my knee upwards, I caught him in the groin. The man rolled off me, hissing between his teeth. Then Rico appeared behind him, clocking him.

He fell to one side, motionless.

“Good job,” I told Rico, a little breathless.

I opened my mouth, about to say more, but an electric pain gathered behind my eyes.

Another headache so soon? I groaned as a series of images flashed through my head before I blacked out.

“Clear the space. Give him some breathing room,” a familiar authoritative voice said.

“Rico, warn that man to stop taking photos.”

“Zack?” I asked, still feeling groggy.

My limbs felt like lead. Tiny stones dug into my skin, and my back felt a little stiff.

I opened my eyes and saw I was lying on the park footpath. Strong hands helped me up.

I looked up at Zack’s concerned face, then desperately looked around.

“The mother and her kid—” I began.

“Are safe, thanks to you. A police officer escorted them back home,” Zack finished.

I sagged against him in relief. Before I lost consciousness earlier, a series of blurry images appeared in my head.

They flashed by so fast, I couldn’t make sense of them. I had to talk things out with Crash. He could help me make sense of everything.

“Can you walk?” Zack asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

Most of the time, my body felt completely zapped out of energy after a vision. I had two in a row, I realized. That was new.

“Let’s get you out of here. Crash is on his way,” Zack told me.

My boss gently steered me away from the gawking passersby. I spotted Rico talking to a nondescript man in his thirties.

“Just delete the photo,” Rico was saying.

“Rico helped,” I told Zack. “If he didn’t knock that guy out, he might have stabbed me. Where’s the attacker?”

“The police have him. They wanted you to come down to the station to give a statement,” Zack said.

He didn’t need to say more. I had a feeling Zack intervened on my behalf. The woman and her kid, along with the attacker, were nowhere in sight.

The mother and son duo were fine. The suspect was behind bars. My mind still felt sluggish, so I was processing everything slowly.

“How long was I out?” I asked.

“An hour. I wanted to take you home, but Crash insisted he’ll do that himself,” Zack said.

“That sounds just like him.”

“What sounds like me?” asked a familiar voice.

Spotting Crash, I parted from Zack and stumbled right into Crash's waiting arms. He pulled me close to a tight embrace.

CRASH

Relief surged over me as Jared buried his head into my chest. I gave Zack a thankful nod, silently telling him to leave Jared to me.

I had everything under control. The Raven King got my message.

Zack patted Jared's shoulder and approached Rico. Jared lifted his head. He didn't look so good.

His pale complexion and tired eyes told me he might lose consciousness any second again.

Receiving visions wore him out completely and this particular one looked like it packed a punch.

"Let's get you to Micah," I said. "I want him to check on you."

Jared nodded, looking too tired to argue. That worried me a little, but now wasn't the time to ask him questions.

Jared managed to stay awake until we reached my parked Harley. Once he positioned himself behind me, Jared wrapped his arms around my waist. Then he promptly fell asleep.

Thankfully, my mate clung close to me during the entire ride back to the MC compound.

Zack must've phoned Micah ahead, because the healer was already waiting for us at the MC clubhouse entrance.

“Jared, we’re here,” I mumbled.

When he didn’t stir, I almost panicked, but Jared eventually loosened his grip on my body, then yawned.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” I said.

“Oh hey, Micah. How’s it going?” Jared asked, sounding a little drunk. Completely out of touch with reality.

Jared seemed to be stuck in some kind of dream-like state. This wasn’t the first time something like this happened.

Sometimes it took some time before Jared snapped out of a vision.

He nearly fell off my bike, but Micah gripped his shoulder and allowed Jared to lean on him for balance.

“It’s this bad, huh?” Micah remarked. Before I could answer, Micah came to a decision. “Crash, carry him to your room. I’ll examine him there.”

“Good choice,” I said.

My fellow MC brothers could be nosy sometimes. A group of bear alphas hanging near the entrance had already given us curious looks.

I gently pried Jared from Micah, and easily hefted him in my arms. Jared didn’t weigh a thing.

“Whoop,” Jared murmured.

He rested his arms on my shoulders and gazed at me, his eyes still unfocused. Jared suddenly giggled.

“Carry me to our honeymoon suite, my prince,” Jared said.

“Honeymoon suite?” I asked, amused.

“That vision must be potent,” Micah said.

We headed inside the clubhouse and made our way up the stairs to my private den without any further incident.

“Jared and Rico saved a mother and son today,” I told Micah.

We finally reached my room. Micah stepped aside and allowed us in first. I set Jared down on my bed.

Jared automatically curled to one side and hugged one of my pillows.

He sniffed at it, then wrapped his arms and legs around it. Jared let out a contented sigh.

“I wished it was me Jared was hugging,” I grumbled.

“You’re jealous of a pillow?” Micah asked with a raise of his eyebrow.

The healer didn’t bother with further chit-chat. Micah immediately went to work. He placed a hand over Jared’s forehead.

I could feel warmth emanating from Micah’s palms. Micah frowned, then checked the rest of my mate.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Micah.

“Physically, there’s nothing wrong with him,” Micah reported. “But?” I prompted. “I would suggest he take some days off from work to rest,” Micah finished.

“Crash,” Jared murmured, suddenly opening his eyes and looking at me.

All of a sudden, his expression looked intense. Wide-awake.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“I’ve been thinking of going back home,” Jared said.

“To your apartment? Babe, it would be better if you stayed here with me so I could keep a close eye on you. I’m worried about you, you know?”

“Not to my apartment. To my house in Fair Creek. I still have some stuff there I want to get,” Jared said.

He spoke in a halting voice, as if speaking wore him out.

“We could take a drive to Fair Creek over the weekend,” I said.

Perhaps a quick getaway could do Jared some good. To Micah, I said, “I’ve never seen him this bad.”

“It’s because I’ve never received two visions in a row,” Jared said.

He turned, so he was lying on his back. Jared stared at the ceiling, but he had a faraway look in his eyes.

I reached for his hand, immensely worried.

“Jared, don’t go to a place where I can’t reach you,” I whispered. “I’m right here next to you.”

“Yes.” Jared curved his lips upwards to a distracted smile.

“Jared, you mentioned seeing the future twice?” Micah prompted.

I shot the healer a glare, because Jared had been through enough today.

“The woman and kid were the first. That headache had been manageable but the next one, oh. It was a doozy,” Jared said.

“What did you see?” I had to ask, but it seemed important.

Jared tightened his grip on my hand and the fear in his eyes alarmed me a little you.

“At first, I couldn’t make sense of them, but it’s slowly coming back to me now,” Jared said.

“What is?” I asked gently.

“Your death, Crash.”

Jared released my hand and curled back on his side. He started sobbing into the pillow.

I sat on the edge of the bed and reached out to stroke his hair.

“Jared, whatever you saw, it hasn’t happened yet. We can still prevent it,” I told him in a coaxing voice.

“You weren’t the only one dead, Crash,” Jared finally said in a terrified whisper. “Next to your corpse were Greed and Lenny’s lifeless bodies.”

At the mention of his mate, Micah grew still.

“Jared, when is this going to happen?” Micah pressed.

“I don’t know!” Jared suddenly yelled. He screamed into his pillow.

“Micah, let him rest,” I said firmly, rising to my feet.

“But—” Micah began, but I ignored his protests and steered him towards the door.

“Jared would tell us once he’s well rested. I don’t think whatever he saw will happen right this instant or the next,” I told him. “Greed, Len and I, we’re tough bastards.”

Micah let out a breath. It was rare to see the healer lose composure. Nice to know Micah was human, too.

“You’re right. I’ll come by tomorrow morning to check on him again,” Micah said.

“Thanks, Micah,” I said.

Once Micah left, I closed the door and slipped next to Jared in bed.

“Hold me, Crash,” Jared said, a plea in his voice.

I did exactly that and simply held my mate close until Jared fell asleep.

The following day, Jared spent the entire time sleeping. The morning after that, color returned to Jared’s face, and he almost looked like his normal self.

Micah was giving him another check-up while Jared nibbled on a piece of toast. All of a sudden, Greed entered my room without knocking.

“Have you seen this?” Greed asked me before I could remind him to knock before barging in.

“What?” I asked, distracted by the sight of Jared, chatting amicably with Micah.

Micah wasn’t the easiest person to get to know, but those two seemed to have

gotten close in a short amount of time.

“This.” Greed shoved his cellphone in front of my face.

I squinted at the screen. It was a local news article. I read the title out loud. “Barista saves mother and son from vicious cutpurse.”

I paused, scrolling through the article. Then I saw a photo of Jared, looking dazed as Zack helped him up.

I cursed, because the last thing Jared and I needed was unnecessary publicity.

Pittman and his associates haven’t made a move towards Jared because we assumed they haven’t managed to zero in on his location yet.

This news article was bad news. I nearly crushed Greed’s phone in my hand, but he managed to wrestle the device from my fingers. Greed threw me a dirty look.

“It’s a good thing we’re leaving for Fair Creek tomorrow,” Jared piped in.

I walked up to him, bent down and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth.

“Micah, what’s the verdict?” I asked.

“He’s good to go, although Jared, you should really take it easy,” Micah said.

“Leave all the heavy lifting to Crash. That’s what he’s there for,” Greed added.

“I’ll do exactly that,” Jared said.

He rubbed his left arm with his right.

“Micah, I’ve avoided talking about it, about what I saw, because it spooked me so much,” Jared admitted.

“Hey, don’t be too hard on yourself,” I reminded my mate.

“You asked me when it would happen, but I don’t have a clear answer yet,” Jared said, looking at Micah.

“This vision seemed fuzzy compared to the others I’ve gotten before. It’s like watching a video online with a bad Wi-Fi connection.”

“But it won’t happen anytime soon?” Micah asked.

Jared shook his head.

“I don’t think so. Another massive headache would warn me if what I saw would come to pass,” Jared explained.

“If it happens, it happens. We’ll deal with it then,” Greed said, pragmatic as ever.

Nothing ever fazed my best friend. Death never scared me before.

As a member of the Grizzly Reapers MC, I frequently gambled with my life, but that was before Jared entered my life.

If death claimed me, then Jared wouldn’t be far behind. He’d die of a broken heart, because shifters mated for life.

I pushed the morbid thought aside and focused on the now.

“Greed, let’s give them some privacy,” Micah told his mate. He pushed Greed towards the door.

“Crash, I’ll find the jerk who posted this article and make him take it down,” Greed said.

“Thanks Greed,” I said.

While I appreciated the gesture, the damage was already done. The news of Jared’s heroic deeds was already out there.

When they were both gone, I looked at Jared, surprised he got out of bed. Jared did a few stretches.

“I’ve been stuck in bed for too long. I need some fresh air,” Jared said.

“Then put on your shoes and some pants. We’ll take a walk,” I suggested.

Fifteen minutes later, we were outside. Jared held my hand as we took a slow stroll in the nearby woods.

“That news article really worried you, didn’t it?” Jared asked.

“You should be worried, too. That nosy reporter had no right publishing that

article without talking to you first,” I pointed out.

“It’s just the local paper,” Jared reminded me. “No reason to panic just yet, besides Greed promised he’d convince them to take it down.”

“I’m glad you’re calm as a cucumber,” I said drily.

Jared kissed my cheek, then ran his fingers down my stubbled-covered jaw. That appeased me a little.

I privately conceded that I was being too paranoid.

“You need a shave,” Jared reminded me. His expression softened. “You’ve been worried about me, haven’t you?”

“Well, you slept all day yesterday,” I pointed out. “I was scared you were never going to wake.”

“My body just needed time to recharge,” Jared said. “But I’m at full battery now. By the way, Joseph Tate, that little boy I saved, he sent me a thank you email.”

I frowned, looking at Jared’s phone screen. I quickly scanned the kid’s heartfelt message.

The kid probably had help from his mother typing that out. Sweet of the kid, I thought.

“How did that kid get your email?” I asked.

“Rico gave it to him. Apparently, Joseph and his mom, Kim, stopped by Cool Beans yesterday. Rico and I were still wearing our cafe aprons when we went for lunch, so I guess it was easy to figure out where we worked,” Jared said.

“Hmm, I don’t know how I feel about Rico just giving out your private email,” I pointed out.

“Joseph isn’t just anyone,” Jared said. “Besides, I think Rico had good intentions, so don’t get mad at him.”

I only grunted in response and decided to leave the topic alone.

“So, are you looking forward to our trip this weekend?” I asked Jared.

“Yes, surprisingly,” Jared said with a smile. “You’ll be with me, so for once, I don’t dread going back to Fair Creek.”

BERNARD

Bernard Pittman curled his upper lip as he read the news article Floyd sent to his email.

The author had already deleted the original article, but Floyd managed to save it before it disappeared from the web.

Reliable old Cousin Floyd. Loyalty was hard to buy in their cutthroat world.

Floyd had been with him even during the early days, before Pittman's elevation to a higher plane of existence.

Floyd was also his cousin, his blood. That was the reason Bernard was willing to share some of his power, even though he could just hoard it all to himself.

After all, Floyd might have the magical potential, but he lacked ambition and talent. But why had it taken Floyd this long to track their errant psychic?

Bernard reminded himself of Floyd's role in the company. He would try not to be that cross with his second-in-command.

Sweat dribbled down his forehead. Bernard pulled out a silk handkerchief embroidered with his initials on it, then used it to dab his face.

The white fabric came away with pink spots. It was sweltering hot in the warehouse.

The supervisor hadn't fixed the broken air-conditioning yet, despite being

warned once.

“It’s practically humid in here,” Floyd said with a scowl.

He joined Bernard on the second floor. They both stood on the metal balcony overlooking the warehouse floor.

For a moment, they watched their workers milling about.

They appeared like busy little bees to Bernard, tirelessly moving boxes, while the supervisor walked around and shouted at them.

“The supervisor needs to go,” Bernard said.

Happy workers were essential to his organization. Discontent ones only slowed down the entire operation.

Speed was one of his company’s best-selling points.

“I’m already in search of a replacement,” Floyd said.

Floyd grimaced as two of the workers dropped one of the heavier boxes. Bernard stilled. His first instinct was to lash out, punish those responsible.

The magical artefact handled by those clumsy workers cost more than their life savings, but he silently counted to ten in his head.

Bernard tried to contain his smoldering rage. He always had anger issues, even when he was human.

Giving in to his emotions had already cost him dearly once this year.

The supervisor, these workers and even the products—they were commodities. Jace Church, on the other hand, was a rarity Bernard was finding difficult to replace.

The supervisor zoned in on the clumsy workers like an attack dog. The shifter probably knew the big boss was watching.

Floyd excused himself to deal with the problem himself. Bernard watched Floyd examine the merchandise.

Floyd must have determined there wasn’t any notable damage done to the

artefact.

He then took the supervisor to one side. The balding and overweight shifter turned sheet white as Floyd whispered a threat in his ear and gripped his meaty forearm with sharp and long ebony claws.

The supervisor walked like a shattered man after Floyd released him. Floyd promptly returned to Bernard's side, as was his place.

Bernard decided to return to the major topic at hand. He decided to confront Floyd directly about his incompetence.

"Why did it take you this long to find Jared Church?" Bernard asked.

He tried to keep his voice pleasant, conversational. Floyd stiffened and Bernard didn't miss the look of momentary panic that briefly appeared on his cousin's face.

"I'm not angry, Floyd," Bernard said patiently.

That was a lie, of course, but one Floyd needed at that moment. Floyd licked his lips. Bernard wished Floyd would say what was on his mind.

"I never anticipated Jared Church would go to Moon Burrow," Floyd admitted.

He was sweating now but unlike Bernard, he didn't carry a handkerchief with him, so he constantly sweated blood.

"Is he under the Grizzly Reapers MC's protection?" Bernard tried to keep his voice calm but deep down, he trembled with barely suppressed rage.

He'd given Floyd a simple job. Locate Jace Church's twin brother and recruit him to the organization.

Jace's absence had been sorely felt. Half of his business deals went sideways since Jace's death. Jace should have known his place.

The psychic shouldn't have gone snooping around his warehouses. Jace threatened to call the paranormal agency on Bernard for distributing dangerous artefacts.

If only Jace had followed instructions, he could have prevented his

unfortunate death.

“The associate I’ve sent to Moon Burrow is still confirming the details, but I assume Jared has an in with the Grizzly Reapers MC,” Floyd said.

A good answer. Bernard’s father always taught him to expect the worst, and tangling with those monsters was bad business.

Their two groups were alike in some ways. Both of their organizations were weapons dealers.

The MC sold guns and ammunition, Bernard dabbled in a more specialized market.

The Grizzly Reapers MC might be small compared to Bernard’s own group, but they had earned his respect.

The MC had successfully slaughtered every other opposing group that crossed them.

That only solidified their reputation in the supernatural world that they were a force to be reckoned with.

“Boss, I can’t help but ask, but is acquiring Jared Church—” Floyd didn’t finish his thought.

In moments, Bernard had closed his sharp claws around Floyd’s thick neck. Floyd knew better than to struggle.

Bernard might have shared a portion of his demonic power with his second, but Floyd was only a shadow of what Bernard was.

“When Jace was by my side, we were the top dogs in this wretched city. Jace had prevented one catastrophe after another,” Bernard hissed. “Now we’re fallen dangerously close to the bottom of the food chain.”

He knew his control was breaking apart. His human features melted away like wax.

The skin of his face turned leathery and his horns burst forth. All his anger swept over him like a raging inferno.

If Bernard wasn’t careful, he might break his most useful tool, so he loosened

his grip on Floyd's neck.

Bernard could move his organization to another city, somewhere with less competition, but that was close to admitting defeat. Failure wasn't part of his DNA.

"We used to have an edge, but now we don't," Bernard reminded his cousin.

He willed his human skin back as he adjusted the lapels of his suit jacket. Floyd watched him wearily, then lowered his head.

"I'll get the job done. In fact, I'll head to Moon Burrow myself," Floyd said. "And get yourself torn apart by those grizzly shifters?" Bernard asked in disgust.

"What will you have me do, boss?" Floyd asked.

"Play it safe. Catch Jared Church unawares and bring him to him. Where were the brothers originally from?" Bernard asked.

"Fair Creek. Small town in the mountains," Floyd asked.

Floyd had always been a slow learner, but he soon connected the dots.

"I'll order my associate to continue watching his movements. If Jared returns to Fair Creek, I'll be waiting for him there."

"Do that," Bernard said.

JARED

“Home sweet home,” I whispered as we passed the Fair Creek town welcome sign.

Crash, who was at the wheel, took his gaze off the road for a fraction of a second to flash me a reassuring smile.

I had initially debated taking Buster along, but eventually decided to leave him with Micah and Greed.

I knew they’d take good care of him. Since I planned on boxing up some of my stuff and moving it to my new apartment, we decided to take my Honda.

It was an eight-hour drive, so Crash and I had taken turns at the wheel.

“You nervous?” Crash asked. “About coming back here?”

“Not at all. It’s not like I have friends back here,” I muttered.

We entered the main town area. I gave Crash directions to the local supermarket, so we could stock up on some supplies before heading to the house.

Crash found an empty parking slot opposite the grocery store. I’d been nervous about coming back here, but I knew I had some unfinished business to attend.

Packing up my belongings was one thing, but during the drive here, I’d been thinking about selling the house as well.

After all, I couldn't imagine living here again. My future lay in Moon Burrow, with Crash and the new friends I have made.

We received stares the moment we entered the grocery store. I wondered if we should turn back, but we really needed some supplies, so I decided to just muscle through.

A woman in her sixties, who I didn't know, pulled her grandson close to her as we walked past her.

I sighed, unsurprised. Think positive thoughts, I reminded myself. I thought of Joseph Tate and his mom.

They dropped by Cool Beans again, so Joseph could drop off a homemade card. Rico said he'd give it to me once we returned.

I was looking forward to reading that card. I'd gotten used to being treated like a normal person in Moon Burrow, but nothing in Fair Creek had changed.

Why had I expected it to?

Two women by the fruit section eyed me, then started whispering furiously to each other.

I usually ignored the way the locals reacted to me, but today it bothered me for some reason.

I'd done literally nothing to these people. My entire family was dead, so why were they still afraid of me?

Did they think I was going to curse them or something?

"Don't worry, everyone's probably looking at me," Crash joked.

He was trying to lighten the mood for my sake, so I forced myself to relax.

To act normal, but I had a feeling Crash didn't buy my act one bit. Crash was also on his best behavior.

He hadn't even growled or glowered at anyone, but that didn't last long.

His patience quickly wore off as we proceeded to the check-out counter. Now

Crash wore a perpetual scowl on his face.

He growled at a bunch of guys I knew in high school who immediately went into gossip mode after spotting me.

One even pointed at me rudely, as if I was invisible and didn't know they were talking about me.

They immediately scattered at Crash's growl. I was relieved when we finally exited the store with our bags.

"No offence, Jared, but your town sucks," Crash complained.

We loaded our groceries into the truck.

"Jared! Hey, Jared, you're back," a familiar voice called.

Crash tensed, ready to fight off anything and anyone who came at me. Ronda ran up to me, smiling.

Crash shut the lid of the trunk. Spotting him, Ronda came to a halt. She eyed him warily, and I decided at that point to make introductions.

"Hey Ronda, I'm only back in town for a few days. This is Crash, my boyfriend. Crash, this is Ronda, my former manager," I said.

Crash didn't seem to mind I referred to him as my boyfriend. Ronda looked surprised when Crash held out his hand.

Ronda didn't hesitate. She shook it, and I could tell Crash liked her immediately.

Maybe I had been a little oversensitive in the grocery store. Crash might be right. People stared not only at me, but also at him.

It was hard to ignore the only six-foot-five ripped grizzly shifter in a store.

"I see. So he's the reason you left Fair Creek?" Ronda asked. She nodded in satisfaction. "I get it. Let's catch up and have coffee sometime when you're free."

"I'd like that," I said.

“Is your number still the same?” Ronda said it was.

After we parted ways, Crash and I returned to the car. This time, I took the keys and drove us to Fair Creek’s residential area.

“She seems nice,” Crash remarked.

“Yeah, Ronda’s okay. She’s the only reason I lasted that long in that fast-food joint. Before that, I kept switching jobs,” I said. “Jace once theorized that we give off this strange aura that’s off-putting to most normals.”

“Aura? I didn’t sense anything when we first met,” Crash said, sounding confused.

“I don’t think it affects supernaturals,” I said. “That’s why my family had no problems with the town’s paranormal residents.”

“Huh, interesting,” was all Crash said.

We finally entered my street. I half expected to find garbage in my driveway and more graffiti.

Thankfully, it looked like the kids in town left my place alone. I took my time getting out of the car.

Crash seemed to study the dilapidated house with interest, although what caught his attention, I didn’t know.

“It used to look different when I was growing up,” I mumbled. “More lively.”

“The house is great. All it needs is some repairs,” Crash said.

He grabbed all the grocery bags from the trunk while I walked to the front door and unlocked it.

“I’m thinking of selling this place,” I said. After locking the door, I led Crash to the kitchen.

“That’s a big decision to make,” Crash said.

He dumped all the bags on the counter and I started sorting everything out.

Crash didn’t seem to mind when I instructed him where to put certain items.

“Yeah, but I don’t see myself living here again,” I admitted.

“Well, if you do decide to sell, then it’s good riddance to this awful town,” Crash said.

“When you spoke about Fair Creek, there’s always a mix of sadness and anger in your voice. I finally understand why. I’d grow up angry if I were in your shoes as well.”

“I’m glad you came here with me,” I said.

With all our food supplies tucked away, I could finally focus on my boyfriend. He fistled my shirt, tugged me close.

I rested my hands on his broad shoulders, and this time I made the first move.

Standing on tiptoe, I daringly pressed my lips against his. Crash clasped the back of my neck and kissed me back fiercely until I forgot all about the overly superstitious townsfolk.

The sky was ablaze with hues of orange and red when we rolled inside the iron gates of Fair Creek Cemetery.

Since Crash and I arrived near closing time, the parking lot was empty.

After Crash parked the car, I remembered to snatch the bouquet of daisies from the dashboard before getting out.

Crash and I spent the majority of the weekend sorting through my stuff and boxing up what I wanted to take with me back to Moon Burrow.

Now it was late Sunday afternoon, and I remembered I had one last errand to run.

Well, I wouldn’t consider visiting Ken and Reid’s graves an errand, but it was certainly a task I dreaded.

“Where to?” Crash finally asked when I remained where I was, pressed against the car door.

It wasn't too late to slide back in, to tell Crash I changed my mind, but that was a cowardly move.

"I'm scared to face them, Crash," I finally confessed. "What will I even say to them? Sorry, I got Jace killed?"

"But you didn't have anything to do with Jace's murder. Bernard Pittman killed him in cold blood," Crash reminded me.

"I know, but before Reid took his own life, he made me and Jace promise to watch each other's backs," I whispered. "I'm a failure of a brother."

"Hey," Crash said.

He approached me and hugged me. I hugged him back, comforted by his scent, his presence. Whenever we were together, I felt like I could do anything.

"Let's just head back. I'll pay them a visit another time," I said.

My dads were dead. Their spirits probably had moved on to the afterlife.

There was no reason for my fear, and yet I couldn't even take two steps forward.

"You're being too hard on yourself again, babe," Crash said. He kissed the top of my head. "We'll go together. You don't have to face them alone."

"Why do you always know the right thing to say at exactly the right moment?" I asked him.

Crash chuckled, and the familiar sound of his laughter lessened the phantom weight pressing down on me. Crash was right.

I didn't kill Jace, Bernard Pittman did. Jace left Fair Creek of his own accord.

He chose to associate himself with a dangerous figure like Bernard.

"Okay, sorry. I feel better now," I told Crash.

He released me. Hand-in-hand, we walked to where my dads were buried.

Crash already knew how both of them died. He released my hand as we

reached their graves.

I placed the flowers on Ken's tombstone, then returned to Crash's side. A myriad of emotions crashed inside me—overwhelming grief mixed in with regret and relief.

“I hated Reid so much after he took his own life, because I couldn't understand why he would leave his sons alone,” I said.

I never told anyone about how I felt about Reid, not even Jace. After we buried Reid, all Jace wanted to do was escape, to leave Fair Creek and all his troubles behind.

“Do you feel differently about Reid now?” Crash asked.

I nodded. “Both my dads were human, but they were mates. If I lost you, I don't know what I'd do.”

“Same here. Actually, I do. I'll hunt down whoever took you from me to the very ends of the earth,” Crash said softly, and I could tell he meant every word.

I rested my head against his shoulder and thought of Jace and where Bernard Pittman had buried his body.

My heart ached thinking about what that monster had done to my brother's corpse. Jace should be buried next to our dads.

“What are you thinking about right now?” Crash asked after a moment of silence had passed.

As I told him, tears filled my eyes, and I hastily brushed them away. When we left the house earlier, I swore I wouldn't cry, but in the end I couldn't help myself.

Crash offered me some tissues, which I accepted. After wiping my face and sneezing, I crumbled them into a ball and shoved them inside the pockets of my jacket.

“Bernard Pittman will pay for what he did to your brother,” Crash said, his words a vehement promise.

“I don’t want to go looking for him on purpose,” I said. “Vengeance sounds tempting, but it’s not wise, tempting fate.”

Crash considered my words, then nodded. “I respect your decision. Has anyone told you lately that you’re wise beyond your years, babe?”

“Just you,” I said, smiling. “I’d like a few minutes alone with my dads, if that’s okay.”

“Sure. I’ll wait in the car,” Crash said. “There are some text messages I need to respond to. I’ll see you soon.”

He gave me a kiss before leaving me to my own devices.

I sat on the nearby stone bench, then proceeded to tell my dads about my latest adventures, beginning with how I met Crash and how I ended up as a bear shifter.

“I wish you guys could have met him. Even Jace would be so surprised. I can imagine Jace asking me how I managed to bag someone as handsome and wonderful as Crash,” I said.

Of course, I expected no answer. I gazed at their tombstones for a few moments before deciding to get up.

I didn’t want to keep Crash waiting. Our plans for the evening included takeout and chilling in the living room all evening.

Maybe we’d watch a movie or two before moving upstairs to my bedroom for some late-night activities.

Smiling to myself, I touched the top of Reid’s gravestone, then Ken’s.

“You guys don’t need to worry about me. I’ll be alright,” I told them.

I was about to make my way back to Crash when I heard the rustle of branches behind me, followed by a soft thump.

Slowly, I turned. I had additional company, and it wasn’t Crash.

JARED/ CRASH

J ARED

The cloying smell of rotten eggs and burned matches hit my nose, making me sneeze.

After becoming a bear shifter, I did some extra research so I could identify various supernaturals.

I didn't want to enter my new world blind. I could now classify who this scent belonged to.

It was sulfur, and only one type of paranormal emitted this stench—demons. How did Jace end up with this dangerous group?

I stared into Floyd's grinning face, except it was no longer Floyd. At the very least, it wasn't Floyd in his human skin.

Floyd folded his black, bat-like wings behind him. His skin had taken on a reddish tint, and when he smiled, he revealed long, wicked fangs.

Every muscle in my body locked into place, just like what happened in that dingy parking lot, except it wasn't two werewolves I was up against.

Shifting wasn't an option. The process would take too long and besides, I didn't know anything about fighting.

I needed to change that. If I survived this encounter, I would have Crash teach me. I made that mental reminder to myself.

I could run back to Crash, but with those wings, Floyd could easily catch up to me.

The only option left to me was getting Floyd to talk, to buy myself enough time. Crash would wonder what was taking me so long and come back for me.

“Are you here to offer me a job? I haven’t changed my mind. I have no interest in working for your boss or your organization,” I said, keeping my voice firm.

I crossed my arms and pretended his physical appearance didn’t faze me one bit.

Floyd was probably counting on his devilish looks to terrify me and somehow make me comply with his demands.

Devilish looks. Did I just make a joke while my life was in peril?

My brother would be proud of me for not cowering or begging for my life immediately.

“The time for being polite is over, Jared,” Floyd said. “Do you have any idea what happens to those who spurn our magnanimous offer?”

“You act like you’re doing me a favor,” I said with a scoff.

This was going well so far. I could hold an actual conversation with this fiend. *Crash, where are you? I could really use your help right now.*

“Trust me, I am offering you a boon. Our special employees have it good—money, protection, life insurance, you name it,” Floyd said.

I couldn’t believe Floyd was still doing this pitch when he had every intention of taking me against my will.

Maybe he’d been Bernard Pittman’s sales agent for so long that recruitment had become second nature to him.

In all likelihood, Jace wasn’t the only special employee their company had on

their payroll.

I bet they recruited other specialized supernatural talents as well. The thought filled me with dread, because those employees were probably as clueless as my brother.

They didn't know they were disposable pawns until it was too late.

"What more can anyone ask for?" Floyd was saying.

He really believed the pointless drivel he was sprouting.

"Was your boss doing my brother a favor when he killed him?" I demanded.

"Jace should've been content with his place," Floyd said flatly. "I never liked your brother, but you seem more flexible, easier to control."

Easier to control? That didn't paint me in a flattering light at all. If someone placed Jace and me side-by-side, most folks would assume

Jace was the more dominant twin. Maybe Jace's personality was a little more forceful, but I was certainly no pushover.

"Do I now? I'm insulted by your observation. You don't even know me," I said with a scoff.

An irritated growl accompanied my words. My grizzly woke inside me, and knowing I was no longer alone proved me with the extra dose of courage I needed.

Floyd raised both his eyebrows, then he started sniffing the air, like a hunting dog or a shifter.

"You no longer smell human," Floyd said, frowning.

This revelation seemed to displease him. Would it be enough to put him off and simply leave? Who was I kidding?

Of course, Floyd wouldn't just walk away and leave me be. He'd probably been tracking me for a long time.

They must have seen that news article, I thought. Crash had been right to worry.

“What does that mean? Have you lost your abilities?” Floyd asked.

He examined me closely, like I was a specimen under a microscope. I didn't like the feeling at all.

“Yeah, I'm practically useless to your boss,” I said with as much confidence as I could muster.

Floyd didn't look like he believed me. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy to fool a demon.

Was he even a demon? Floyd ticked off all the boxes, but something told me he only seemed like a parody of the real deal.

Besides, demons possess powers of suggestion, didn't they? Floyd didn't seem to have that kind of ability, because he would've used them by now.

He intended to take me by sheer brute force.

“I'll simply have to conduct tests on you, then I'll be able to verify whether you're lying to me or not,” Floyd finally said.

He looked pissed about it, as if he wasn't looking forward to more work. Floyd was really just a grunt.

Better him than Bernard Pittman. I hadn't even met Floyd's boss, and if possible, I didn't want to see or talk to him at all.

“Why would I lie to someone who wants to kidnap me?” I asked sarcastically.

“You're trouble, just like your brother, but what Bernard wants, he gets. I have to make sure not to damage you too much when I hand you over to my cousin. It's a good thing you're a shifter now,” Floyd said.

Floyd let out a sigh. “Enough talking. I know you're purposely delaying this conversation, but no one's coming for you. We're alone here.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked.

Floyd didn't bother with words any longer. He came at me just as a massive blond grizzly charged into the scene.

CRASH

I tried calling Jared, but when he didn't answer or reply to any of my texts, I knew something was wrong.

My monstrous grizzly snarled inside me in agreement. My entire body felt feverish, like a raging furnace.

Gut instinct told me Jared was in trouble and that I needed some serious firepower.

I peeled off my clothes in a hurry and once they were out of the way, my bear exploded out of my skin.

The change was fast, agonizing, but I gritted through the transformation. Getting to my mate was my number one priority.

I sprinted back in Jared's direction, despite being in mid-shift.

For a few seconds, I had to orient myself with my awkward half-formed body, but then everything fell into place.

It was just like riding a bike. I ran on all fours, relieved I didn't have an audience.

The only other visitor—a woman in her seventies—had gotten in her car and left ten minutes ago.

My nose immediately picked up the smell of something putrid. Burned matches. Spoiled eggs.

It took me a second to place the smell because it had been a while since I encountered demons.

Well, in all likelihood, it would be hybrid demons we were facing. Hybrid demons could come into existence in two ways.

Either they were born from a union between a human and a true demon, or

they were originally humans who dabbled in dark magic. I was betting it was the latter.

Adrenaline wrapped around my entire body as I spotted Jared exactly where I left him.

A winged man with red skin lunged at him. The fact that his attacker wore a purple suit would've made me laugh another day, but right now, there was no time for humor.

Rage filled my entire body. This creature had no right being here and disturbing Ken and Reid's final resting place.

I needed to make this fight as short as possible.

The demon saw me a second too late. He was about to sink his claws into Jared's arm when he sensed movement behind him.

I didn't bother with stealth. I wanted this thing to know I was coming for him. He looked over his shoulder.

Momentary fear flickered in his black gaze. That fraction of a second of doubt cost him, allowed me to hit him right where it hurt.

I tackled him to the ground and immediately went for his wings. He cried out as my claws ripped through his left, then his right.

Relentless and filled with righteous fury, I managed to render both appendages useless.

He finally rolled away from me, but I wasn't going to let him go. I wanted answers from this scum.

"You'll pay for my destroyed wings, bear," the half-demon spat out.

Calling him a half-demon was generous. I'd fought off this breed of supernatural before, and they were abysmally difficult to kill.

While he was sprouting threats, I pounced on him again.

I was betting this creature had gotten so used to pushing and threatening those weaker than him, those who couldn't put up a fight, that he'd gotten lax.

So lax he didn't know how to deal with someone his size.

The quarter demon's survival instincts must have finally kicked in because he managed to get to his feet.

Then he lurched at me, claws and fangs out. Such dainty little weapons didn't bother me one bit.

He tried to take me down, but I didn't budge. He scratched and bit at me, but I hardly felt the pain.

This creature didn't even make a single dent on me. I shoved him away with one paw, holding him at arm's length.

He panted, staring at me in shock. His face was a bloodless mask.

"Crash, do you think we should take him in alive? Floyd is Bernard's cousin. I think he's pretty high up the hierarchy ladder," Jared argued. "He'll be able to give up some valuable information."

I didn't take my gaze off my prey, even for a single second. Floyd might not have given me much of a fight, but it was the truly desperate ones that one had to watch out for.

A trapped rat would do whatever it took to survive, even resorting to bold measures.

Floyd scoffed, then wiped the blood trailing down his mouth. Jared made a good point, but the more important question was how loyal Floyd was to Bernard?

"I have to hand it to you, Jared. You got smart. After our talk, you went right to the bears, didn't you? What did you offer them? Did they Change you in return for your visions?" Floyd spat out blood.

Floyd knew escape was an impossibility. His eyes darted around the cemetery. Was he still debating if he could make a break for it?

"You got it all wrong. I don't work for them," Jared said with a shake of his head. "They offered me something your boss never could. Surrender now, Floyd. It's all over. You're coming with us."

Floyd let out a cackle. “If you think I’d break and talk, then you don’t know me at all. I’d rather die by this grizzly’s fangs than return to Bernard. He doesn’t tolerate failure, you see.”

So be it, I thought. I approached Floyd. He didn’t even bother fighting back.

Floyd simply closed his eyes and stood still as I closed my fangs on his throat and tore it out in one jerk.

Blood splattered my fur. I released him and Floyd crumpled to the ground, his dead eyes staring at the grass.

Jared approached me, then clutched my fur. He was shaking all over. All I wanted to do was change back and hug him close, but I decided not to.

I fought best in this form and I wasn’t confident about letting my guard down just yet.

So far, I didn’t smell any other enemies, but it didn’t hurt to be careful. Floyd came here alone and without any back-up.

He was either overconfident, or he didn’t expect any resistance from Jared. That mistake had cost Floyd his life.

BERNARD/ JARED

BERNARD

Bernard felt the exact moment Floyd's life fizzled out. He'd been in his office, answering emails when it happened.

He froze, fingers poised on the keyboard. The power he had loaned to his cousin rushed back to him all at once. Surprised, he slumped back in his computer chair.

Bernard took a few seconds to catch his breath and process what had just happened.

Floyd couldn't be gone. Floyd was his second, and replacing him was unthinkable.

His loyal cousin wasn't just his primary enforcer; Floyd had also been in charge of recruitment.

Surely, Jared Church wasn't capable of besting Floyd—which left only one alternative.

Jared must be under the protection of the Grizzly Reapers MC.

Floyd had gone to Fair Creek after his associate had received reliable information that Jared had plans of going back home.

That associate failed to mention that Jared had additional company, probably a grizzly alpha as a bodyguard.

Bernard would make sure that careless associate paid for that oversight.

Bernard glanced at the framed photograph next to his computer. It was a shot of Floyd, him, and some of his company shareholders.

Sure, Floyd had his share of flaws, but he was blood—the only family Bernard had left.

He clenched his fists on his desk until black claws slid out. Heat emanated from his skin, and the burnt smell of wood soon filled his nose.

Anger filled every pore in his body until Bernard had a hard time breathing properly.

He was tempted to overturn his desk, his entire office. Reduce it to cinders, maybe, but that would only scare his secretary and the rest of his employees.

No, Bernard had to remain cool and collected.

Bernard remembered the day he decided Floyd was worthy of sharing his power.

Floyd had been over the moon, like a puppy that had finally received his owner's approval.

Floyd's loss would be sorely felt, but his cousin had also been a fool to underestimate his opponent. Bernard should have taken care of this sorry business himself in the first place.

He should have dealt with this important matter himself. He still wanted to acquire Jared Church.

That much hadn't changed, but his treatment of the psychic would be different.

Bernard had initially planned to lure Jared into the organization with the same comforts and gifts he used to lure Jace.

Jared forfeited those luxuries the moment he got Floyd killed.

Jace was amenable, but his twin brother had proven to be a challenge.

No, Jared would be better off as his willing prisoner. Bernard had given Jace too much freedom, and look at what a mess that had turned out to be.

He would not make the same mistake with Jared.

Bernard had not used any of his suggestive abilities on Jace even once.

With Jared, Bernard planned on stripping away his free will. He'd program Jared to be obedient—a loyal tool who would only answer to him.

The thought filled him with satisfaction.

Bernard's anger finally subsided. He opened the article Floyd had sent him and read it again.

He took note of the names of the woman and child Jared had saved and smiled.

Bernard always used whatever was at his disposal, and he didn't care how many people got hurt or died in the process. Jared would learn that soon enough.

JARED

“Jared, I'm glad you guys are back. I heard you and Crash were attacked,” Micah asked.

The four of us—Crash, Greed, Micah, and I—were having dinner in Micah and Greed's apartment.

The other couple lived in an apartment above Micah's clinic, so Micah had to head downstairs now and then to check on his patients.

Currently, Micah had two patients: Julian, another raven shifter, and Lenny.

Lenny was supposed to join us, but the bear alpha had gotten into a fight with

a fellow MC member.

Greed apparently broke up that fight, which was why his left hand was in a sling today.

While Micah showed me around his home earlier, I noticed Greed and Crash had retreated to one corner of the living room.

It was apparent they had a serious conversation about Lenny, but I was sure Crash would tell me all about it later on.

I decided to answer Micah's question.

"Yes, by a demon," I said.

Even that got Greed's attention. He placed his phone down.

"Not a true demon. Must be some hybrid, because Floyd wasn't that hard to kill," Crash piped in.

Greed wanted details. Micah didn't say as much, but I could tell he was also curious, so Crash and I regaled our friends with our recent adventure.

After the fight with Floyd, Crash had driven me back to my house. I didn't ask him what he did with Floyd's body, but I was certain it would never be found.

Crash was good at his job, after all. We still managed to accomplish the task we initially came for. Boxes of my stuff were now sitting in my apartment.

"You ended up killing him?" Micah asked Crash, sounding exasperated.

"Hey, if my mate was threatened, I wouldn't think twice about killing the demonic bastard either," Greed pointed out.

"Floyd made it crystal clear he wasn't willing to talk, even under torture," Crash said.

"I have to agree with Crash. Floyd seemed more terrified of Bernard than facing death by Crash's hands," I confirmed.

Silence met my words. Everyone was processing what Crash and I just shared.

“Means you both are up against a truly formidable foe,” Greed commented.

I didn’t need Greed to highlight the obvious. Crash killing Floyd—that probably had its consequences.

Bernard Pittman would no doubt retaliate. Men with power had pride in spades.

If word got out that a psychic and his grizzly shifter mate took out one of his people, Bernard Pittman’s reputation would be in tatters.

“It’s time to see Whizz,” Crash said.

I flashed him a curious look. Greed must’ve noticed my confusion, because he explained who Whizz was.

“Whizz is the MC’s resident hacker. He’ll be able to dig up everything you guys would need to know about Pittman,” Greed said.

“Alright,” I told Crash. “Let’s go see your hacker.”

Micah wouldn’t let us go until we had our fill of dinner. Once Crash and I were both full, we bid the couple goodbye.

We also stopped by Lenny’s bedside to see how he was doing.

“Are those restraints necessary?” Crash asked Micah, who wanted to see us out.

“Greed insisted on it,” came Micah’s defensive answer.

I was guessing Micah didn’t want to put those silver-lined cuffs on Lenny, either.

Lenny was fast asleep and he looked so still, I almost thought he was dead. The rise and fall of his chest assured me he was still alive.

Scratches and bite marks covered his arms and legs. His chest was bandaged up as well. I grimaced.

“You should see the other guy,” Micah told him.

“Where’s Piston?” Crash asked, referring to the bear shifter Lenny fought.

“He had to be taken to the hospital,” Micah said.

Crash let out a breath. I could see my mate fighting an inner battle inside him.

On one hand, he was worried about his friend’s mental state, but we had more pressing matters to worry about.

“Nothing we can do about this now. Let’s go see Whizz, Jared,” Crash suggested.

We left Greed and Micah’s home. The hike through the woods was relatively quiet, but I didn’t mind. I had plenty to think about as well.

If Crash hadn’t intervened, Floyd would have taken me to Bernard Pittman by now.

The time for pleasantries had passed, as Floyd had claimed. Pittman wouldn’t treat me like his pet seer, the way he did Jace.

I’d just be his captive, taken out only whenever he needed me to predict the future for him. The thought made me shudder.

My thoughts also strayed to Crash, who fought off Floyd for my sake.

Crash emerged from that brawl victorious, but it could have gone either way. What if Crash ended up six feet under, or if he’d gotten really hurt?

I thought of Lenny, heavily injured in Micah’s clinic, and my heart sunk.

I always imagined Crash and the other members of the Grizzly Reapers MC as invulnerable, but they could die just like everyone else.

My palms began to sweat as I remembered the vision I received right after Rico and I saved Kim and Joseph.

Crash lying face down on someone’s wooden floor, blood trickling down the right side of his head. Greed and Lenny were only a few feet from him, motionless as dolls.

My stomach lurched, and I suddenly felt sick. If Crash had never met me... no.

I didn’t want to head down that dangerous line of thought. I’d be in heaven

with my family if Crash hadn't entered my life, if he hadn't walked in that parking lot and taken care of those two werewolves.

"Crash," I began haltingly.

The trees thinned. The dirt path Crash and I had been walking on came to an end.

I could see the MC compound in the distance and hear rock music blaring from some biker's portable speakers.

Crash seemed to sense I wanted to talk, so he stopped and looked at me.

"Back in Fair Creek, I put you in danger," I said. "If it weren't for me—"

"Jared, I'm going to stop you right there," Crash interrupted.

He placed a finger to my lips. Feeling stubborn, I set his fingers down. Guilt weighed me down heavily.

"I'm your mate, Jared. Nothing and no one can keep me away from you," Crash reminded me. "Not even some crime lord who also happens to be a demonic hybrid."

"You might die. We both might die if we confront Pittman," I whispered.

I thought of Reid, hanging himself with Ken's old belt in the garage, and cringed.

After finding my mate, I began to have a better understanding of Reid.

It wasn't cowardice that pushed him to end his own life. He simply couldn't live in a world without Ken, in a world filled with hopelessness and despair.

"Nothing is set in stone yet. Have more confidence in me, in us," Crash said, flashing me his confident grin. "Take a deep breath. Everything must seem overwhelming right now, but it isn't. We have a plan."

"We do?" I asked.

Taking Crash's advice, I slowly breathed in, then out. My mate was right. I did feel a little better.

We didn't know each other long, but it seemed Crash knew me better than I knew myself.

He knew what made me tick. Crash even knew I had a tendency to overthink every situation.

"Yeah. I admit I didn't consider Bernard Pittman a genuine threat, not until he sent his minion after us. We'll rectify that immediately," he said.

"By getting more information on him?" I asked.

"Never enter a fight unprepared," Crash said.

"Wise advice," I murmured, still feeling a little uncertain.

Crash grabbed my hand, and we finally exited the woods. He took me to a section of the MC clubhouse I'd never been in before—the fourth floor.

"Whizz used to have two rooms for himself, one was his bedroom and the second one was for all his computer equipment," Crash told me conversationally. "Venom recently gave Whizz the entire unoccupied fourth floor. Lucky guy."

Unlike the other floors which housed the MC members' individual apartments, the fourth floor only had one door.

Crash knocked on it. I could hear heavy metal music from inside.

Sighing, Crash pounded on the door and he was rewarded with a grumpy, "Come in."

I glanced at Crash anxiously. Crash only shook his head, then turned the knob. We entered Whizz's den.

JARED/ CRASH

J ARED

Whizz wasn't what I expected. When Crash mentioned that Whizz was the MC's resident hacker, I pictured a thin, somewhat nerdy guy with glasses in a sweatshirt and jogging pants.

Well, Whizz was indeed wearing an old sweatshirt and a pair of loose jogging pants.

However, apart from his clothes, he looked like any other grizzly alpha in the MC. Whizz was ripped, just like my Crash.

He let out a long sigh after spotting us, as if he wasn't looking forward to receiving visitors.

"Venom said the two of you would come by," Whizz said, rising from his computer chair.

He had about ten computer screens in front of his desk.

Whizz pried a folder from under a pile of fast food wrappers and chips, then handed it to Crash.

"He did, huh?" Crash flipped the folder open.

I leaned over his shoulder, and my eyes widened seeing a compiled and comprehensive report on Bernard Pittman.

Whizz returned to his computer chair, and it creaked under his weight.

“I’ll give you a quick summary of the report if you want,” Whizz offered.

Huh, I thought. Whizz was a nice guy after all, or maybe he just wanted Crash and me out of his den immediately so he could focus on his work.

“That would be helpful,” Crash said, snapping the folder closed.

I snatched it from his hands, prompting Crash to raise his eyebrows at me.

“We appreciate all the hard work you’ve done, though,” I told Whizz quickly. “I’ll look through this later. We haven’t met, but I’m Jared. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Crash’s psychic,” Whizz said with a grunt. “Fascinating. Can you really predict the future?”

I was about to answer him, but Crash spoke again, “Whizz, you mentioned you’d give us a summary of what you’ve found?”

“Pittman is bad news,” Whizz said. I thought that would be the end of it, but Whizz continued, “Bernard’s the oldest son of a once-prominent family with old magical blood. He’s never hidden the fact he practices black magic.”

“Once prominent?” I prompted. Whizz must’ve chosen those words for a reason.

“His parents and two younger brothers mysteriously died in a house fire ten years ago,” Whizz said. “I’ve looked into that incident, and it turns out Bernard also invited a group of his dark mage buddies during the same period.”

My face blanched in horror as I put two and two together. Crash gave Whizz a grim look.

“Let me guess, Bernard and his pals used his family as some sort of human sacrifice?” Crash asked. “Black magic always demands a heavy price.”

“Not only his family but also his five friends in an elaborate blood ritual

which would enable him to Ascend,” Whizz said.

“Ascend to what?” I asked, despite knowing the answer.

“He successfully managed to transform himself into some kind of hybrid demon, didn’t he?” Crash asked.

“The authorities did not charge Pittman. The deaths of Pittman’s family and his friends were simply written off as a house fire. I guess it doesn’t hurt Pittman has friends in high places,” Whizz said. “If you want to know anything else about him, it’s in that file.”

“Thank you, Whizz. This helps us a lot,” Crash said.

“We appreciate it,” I told Whizz.

“Just be careful.” That was Whizz’s last advice.

He turned his back on us and returned to his computers. Crash and I took that as our cue to leave. We retreated to Crash’s room.

Crash volunteered to head to the kitchen to grab us some drinks and snacks while I looked through Whizz’s research.

“Anything useful?” Crash asked once he was back.

He made peanut butter and jam sandwiches and brought us two cold beers. I accepted one can and opened it.

The cool liquid tasted heavenly on my tongue. I reached for one sandwich.

Despite having a hearty dinner earlier, I was famished. I finished the sandwich in three bites.

“Just information on Pittman’s organization. He runs a few legal businesses, but his primary income comes from auctioning off dangerous magical artifacts,” I said.

Whizz was right on the mark. Pittman was indeed bad news. Did Jace know all this before throwing in his lot with Bernard Pittman?

No, I decided. My brother couldn’t have known. Floyd had mentioned twice that if Jace kept his head down, none of us would be in this mess.

My brother died, trying to do the right thing.

Jace probably wanted to report Pittman's illegal dealings to the authorities.

Too bad Bernard Pittman was one of the major players in Chester City. Even if Jace got to the police, nothing would get done.

The police were probably in Pittman's pocket.

Jace had been way over his head, but I was different. I had Crash and the support of my friends and the Grizzly Reapers MC.

I was fortunate, and I thanked destiny every day for meeting Crash.

Crash joined me on the bed. He munched on his sandwich as he read the file with me.

"In other words, he's a weapons dealer, just like the MC," Crash muttered darkly. "Confronting him directly won't be the wise move either. He has a lot of people under his employ."

"Yeah," I agreed. "So what's next? We wait for him to make the first move?"

"That's the best option. Ideally, we won't have to fight him on his turf. The chances are pretty low, anyway. Chester City is a hotbed of violence. That city's overrun by supernatural gangs," Crash informed me. "For now, all we can do is wait."

Crash growled in irritation and leaned back against the pillows. I could tell he was frustrated.

My Crash preferred a straightforward fight, and I supposed I did as well.

Deciding that re-reading the file wouldn't get us anywhere, I set it down and lay back next to Crash.

He smiled when I cuddled next to him. Crash kissed the top of my head.

Before dinner with Greed and Micah, I was looking forward to some sex before bedtime.

After receiving critical information about Pittman from Whizz, neither Crash nor I were in the mood for anything intimate.

“We’ll be just fine, you’ll see,” Crash told me confidently.

“I wish I had your confidence,” I whispered.

“Sure, I’ll lend you some of mine,” Crash said.

He gave me a brief and welcomed kiss on the mouth. I let out a happy moan when Crash ran his fingers through my hair.

Content as a kitten, I rested my head on his chest. Hearing his steady heartbeat relaxed me.

“Jared, Bernard Pittman is just one obstacle on the road. Once we get past him, there’s nothing stopping us from focusing on our future,” Crash reminded me.

“Yeah, but he’s one tough roadblock,” I pointed out.

Crash brushed his fingers over my neck, and I shivered. It wasn’t from the cold.

That particular spot was where an alpha shifter usually placed his mate mark.

There was no undoing a mating bond. Both of us held it off because we decided we weren’t ready, but tomorrow also held no guarantees.

If fate did decide it was my time to die, then I wanted to leave this world knowing my mate loved and treasured me.

“Make me yours tonight, Crash,” I told him.

I thought he’d reject the notion right away, but Crash said nothing. He kept stroking the side of my neck.

Finally, he seemed to have come to a decision, and his eyes bled gold.

Crash gathered me close, sliding his arm across my shoulders. He pressed a kiss on the sensitive place between my shoulder and neck.

I speared my fingers into his hair, urging him to do it.

That was all the encouragement Crash needed. He unsheathed his fangs and buried them deep into my skin.

The sudden prickling sensation made me cry out.

Natural instinct made me want to pull away from a predator. I forced myself to remain where I was.

The sting subsided as Crash held me close. I could sense the spirit of his dominant grizzly reaching out for mine. The two beasts roared, then merged into one.

There was no other way to describe it. Our life force became one as the mating bond ignited. Silvery threads formed between us.

The sight was so beautiful, and the moment so profound, words left me.

I clutched at Crash as he lifted his head, his lips coming away with blood. My turn came next. I bit Crash on his upper left arm, leaving my miniature bite mark there.

He smiled at me, and I could sense his pride through our bond. Our bond that was now unbreakable.

Only death could rip us apart, and hopefully that would be decades from now.

“Wow,” I whispered as we both tumbled back onto the bed.

My neck was still bleeding, but I knew it would eventually stop once my shifter healing kicked in.

“Jared,” Crash murmured, pulling me close to him.

He felt like a warm security blanket. My mate. I could safely call him that now.

I wanted to break the news to my new friends right away, but eventually decided that could wait until tomorrow.

“Love you,” I told him.

Crash widened his eyes. “Love you back,” he said without hesitation, and all was right with the world again.

CRASH

Dead certain Jared had fallen asleep, I quietly slipped out of the covers. I didn't leave for my midnight meeting with Greed right away.

I studied my mate, tucked neatly in my bed.

Jared lay on his right side and under the moonlight, I could see my mate's mark, stark against his slender neck.

A wave of possessive hunger hit me then. Mine, my grizzly and I thought with pride. Finally, my patience had paid off.

Now, I didn't need to worry about some other alpha butting in and sweeping Jared off his feet.

A ridiculous thought bordering on paranoia, but whatever.

I placed a tender kiss on Jared's mouth despite the risk that the kiss might wake him.

Jared stirred, and I stilled, but Jared only moaned my name in his sleep. He snored softly.

Smiling to myself, I let myself out of my room. I headed downstairs, unsurprised that the bar and eating hall were still half-crowded.

A few bears were already deep into their cups and lay slumped on the tables, sleeping. Venom was wide awake though, talking to Mayhem at the bar.

It must be important, I thought, for those two to be away from their mates and kids at this time of the evening.

Mayhem spotted me and I thought he'd wave me over, but he only nodded to me. I left the clubhouse and made my way back to the woods.

Greed and I had a secret meeting place—a little hill located between the MC compound and the ravens' compound.

The hill was hard to miss because bushes and overgrowth obscured the trail leading uphill.

Greed was already there, smoking a cigarette and gazing at the dark forest beneath. His bandaged arm reminded me that Lenny was on borrowed time.

“Does Micah know you’re smoking again?” I asked, standing right next to him.

“This is an emergency cigarette,” Greed said.

He finished his smoke, but didn’t throw it on the ground. He tucked the cigarette butt into the pocket of his jeans.

“How’s Lenny?” I asked.

“Still the same. Whizz gave you what you need?” Greed asked.

I nodded and told him about what Whizz managed to dig up on the bastard. Greed let out a whistle after I was done.

“Call Len and me up whenever you need backup. We’ll be there,” Greed said.

“I don’t think we should involve Len in this one,” I pointed out.

I also mentioned seeing Mayhem and Venom at the clubhouse. They didn’t call me over for one reason.

I suspected they heard about Pittman by now. Whizz always kept Venom up-to-date about everything.

Pittman came first. Lenny was still holding on. Somehow.

“Actually, some action might do him some good. His grizzly usually comes down after his need for violence is sated,” Greed explained.

I weighed his words for a moment, then nodded.

“But it’s a temporary solution,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but we’ll figure something out. We always do,” Greed said. “Let’s talk about that cabin you want to build for your mate.”

JARED

I picked up the card Rico had placed down on the break room table. Joseph Tate had drawn four stick figures in what looked like a park.

There was him, his mom, Rico, and me. The Rico and Jared stick figures wore bright red superhero capes, and that made me smile.

I opened the card and read what the kid wrote to me out loud.

“Dear Mr. Jared, thank you for saving me and my mom. We really appreciate it. Aw.”

“I know, right? When I read the card, my heart turned to goo as well,” Rico said.

My friend leaned over, then tapped the spot on my neck where Crash placed his mate mark.

“I noticed Crash and you moved to the next step. Congratulations,” Rico said.

“Thanks,” I said, suddenly embarrassed.

I’d received my share of grins from Crash’s fellow MC brothers when I left his room that morning.

“What’s it like?” Rico asked.

He had a dreamy look on his face. Rico just came out of a terrible relationship. He was dating again, but so far, all of them had been busts.

Deb and I were constantly coming up with plans to get Rico and Tucker to work together.

Hopefully, the two men would realize they were perfect for each other.

So far, all of our schemes had failed. Maybe those two weren't fated mates after all.

In the end, Deb and I concluded that it was best to let nature take its course.

"Wonderful," I told Rico. "When Crash drove me to work this morning, I kept thinking how inconvenient it was, alternating between staying at his place and mine."

Rico gasped, wide-eyed. "Are you guys moving in together? Isn't that too soon?"

"We haven't actually talked about it yet," I admitted. "Since Crash just gave me his mating mark, I thought it was too early to broach the topic. I'll bring it up once we deal with this Pittman situation."

"Oh yeah, I heard about that, too. It must be terrifying to have a demon after you," Rico said.

"You heard about that?" I asked.

Rico shrugged, not even embarrassed. "We raven shifters hear everything. Hey, you haven't taken a single bite of your egg sandwich, much less opened your bag of chips."

The mention of eggs and greasy chips made my stomach queasy.

"Excuse me a second," I said, rising from my seat.

My next stop? The restroom. I had already thrown up once two hours ago. I figured it was something I had eaten the night before.

Then I crossed that idea off, because Micah was an excellent cook, and I knew he only used the best ingredients.

After throwing out the entire contents of my stomach, I washed my mouth at the sink.

Then I splashed some water on my face. I didn't feel better one bit.

Did I have some kind of stomach flu? I knew there was a lot of it going around town. A knock came on the door.

"Jared, are you okay?" Rico asked, sounding concerned.

I decided to unlock the door.

"Yeah, must be something I ate yesterday or earlier today," I said.

Rico noticed me touching my stomach, then asked, "Didn't you throw up earlier this morning as well?"

"You noticed that, huh?" I asked.

It was what a concerned friend would do, and having friends that cared about my well-being still felt completely new to me.

"Jared, there's another prospect," Rico ventured.

He suddenly couldn't meet my gaze.

"What prospect?" I asked, confused by his reaction.

"You might be pregnant," Rico finally said.

"What? That can't be true."

Even after saying those words, doubts suddenly assailed me. I knew as an omega shifter, there was a possibility Crash could knock me up.

Crash and I had sex frequently as well. Amazing and mind-blowing sex, I would like to add.

Since shifters couldn't catch anything, Crash and I decided not to bother with protection.

So it shouldn't be a surprise Crash and I would reach this stage.

I tentatively touched my flat stomach. Crash and I hadn't discussed kids before. I didn't even know if I wanted them. Did Crash?

Heck, before Crash entered my life, I figured I'd grow old with Jace in our

dilapidated little house and hateful town. Kids never even entered my radar.

Rico must've read the panicked look on my face because he pulled me close and gave me a comforting hug.

"Hey, don't worry. It's not confirmed that you're pregnant yet," Rico told me in his most reassuring voice.

"Dang, you're pregnant Jared? Congratulations!"

Both Rico and I grimaced. Tucker was the last person I wanted to overhear the news.

Before we could pull him aside and tell him to keep his mouth shut, the raven alpha left the break room.

I could hear him excitedly talking to Deb and Zack outside. I winced.

"Oh no," I whispered.

"That insensitive lug," Rico muttered darkly under his breath. "I'll give him a fierce talking to."

"I want Crash to know the news from my own lips, not from anyone else," I said desperately.

"Text him now," Rico urged. "We'll get to the bottom of this. After our shift, let's go straight to Micah."

I was glad Rico managed to remain level-headed because I didn't know what to do. His advice was sound, I decided. Taking out my cellphone, I messaged Crash.

He was out of town for the day, doing a delivery job with Greed and a few other alpha bears. Lenny was still out of commission.

After taking a deep breath, I typed a message to my mate and was surprised Crash immediately responded. He must also be on his lunch break.

Jared: What time are you coming back? I have something important to tell you.

Crash: We'll be back in Moon Burrow by 8pm. Something important?

Jared: I need to say it in person.

Crash: You're not breaking up with me, are you?"

Jared: I don't have time for jokes. This is serious. I'll talk to you later.

Crash: Okay.

I tucked my phone away when Crash didn't send me any more messages.

I glanced at Rico's expectant face and said, "Okay, done. I'm planning on telling him tonight. By then, Micah would be able to confirm if I'm pregnant or not. Thanks, Rico."

"For what?" Rico looked puzzled.

"A moment ago, I felt completely overwhelmed. You took charge and gave me sound advice. I really appreciate it."

Rico blushed and looked red as a tomato. "That's what friends are for, right?"

"Right," I agreed.

"Well? What's the verdict?" I asked Micah, unable to keep the apprehension out of my voice.

The rest of the day felt sluggish after my unexpected lunchtime revelation. I couldn't wait to finish my shift.

There were times I wanted to come up with a flimsy excuse to leave and bolt right to Micah's clinic.

In the end, with Rico's help, I managed to calm down and act like an adult and not a raving maniac.

Jace would've been proud of me. I wondered what my brother thought of me

now.

He was probably amused I was in this strange predicament in the first place.

“You’re pregnant,” Micah said.

Rico let out a breath next to me. The other omega gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

Trust Micah to be blunt. So it was final. I touched my stomach again, unsure how I felt about everything.

Then I spotted Lenny, lying on the cot next to mine.

He probably overheard everything, which was fine because by now every raven and bear shifter in the Moon Burrow probably knew about my unexpected surprise.

Everyone but Crash. Lenny lay on his side, looking pale and wrung out. At the very least, he no longer wore restraints.

Lenny seemed to be doing a lot better. I wasn’t sure what would happen to him. Crash mentioned Lenny’s actions had consequences.

We were all waiting for Venom to decide on his punishment. Of course, I didn’t want anything bad to happen to Lenny.

He was my friend, just like Micah and Rico.

“Congrats,” Lenny told me in a tired voice. “Crash would be over the moon.”

“Thanks, but I haven’t told him yet,” I said.

“You haven’t?” Micah asked, looking surprised.

I looked down at my lap and muttered, “I don’t even know if he wants kids.”

Lenny snorted, and Micah shot him a glare. Whatever it was Lenny wanted to say, he decided to keep it to himself.

“I’m planning on telling him tonight and in person,” I blurted. “I hope he takes the news well.”

“If he doesn’t, I’ll have Greed knock some sense into him,” Micah assured

me.

“I should head back. I promised Corey I’ll cook tonight,” Rico told me.

Corey was his roommate, I recalled. I gave him a nod and thanked him again for being a supportive friend. Rico blushed again.

“Good night,” Rico muttered under his breath.

Then he exited Micah’s clinic.

“I’m glad you’re getting along with Rico. For a moment there, Zack was worried Rico would request to leave the flock,” Micah said.

“Rico’s a great guy; he’s just a little shy,” I pointed out.

“So, when are you going to tell Crash the news?” Micah asked just as the clinic door opened.

“Speak of the devil,” Lenny mumbled.

Crash walked in, looking handsome in his battered leather jacket, black shirt, jeans, and worn boots.

He wore the exact same outfit yesterday and yet somehow he looked bigger than life to me.

Crash had a huge grin on his face, and in his left hand, he held a bouquet of white roses. My favorite flowers.

On his right, he carried a box of expensive-looking chocolates.

I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating. Crash got me flowers and chocolate?

I could hazard a guess that he heard the news from someone else. Dang it, Tucker. I wished he’d kept his big mouth shut.

Was my mate mad I didn’t tell him right away? If I were in Crash’s shoes, I would’ve preferred hearing the information from my mate’s own lips.

I bolted to my feet, and the sudden motion made me a little dizzy. Thankfully, Micah grasped my arm, steadying me before I could trip on my

clumsy feet.

“Hey, babe,” Crash said.

He took a few steps towards me, then planted a long and tender kiss on my mouth. I gripped the hem of his shirt, wanting it to go on forever.

Micah made a disgusted sound and made some flimsy excuse that he was going to check on Lenny.

“Get a room, you two,” Lenny croaked out.

Crash pulled away from my mouth, and the smile hadn't left his lips. Some of the worry that plagued me all day left my body.

“I heard,” was all Crash said.

Then he slid his big and rough hand under my shirt, then rested it there. He started rubbing my tummy.

Honestly, it was embarrassing, because two of our friends were there, but it was also sort of nice. Of course, I'd never admit that out loud to anyone.

“In a few weeks, you'll be able to feel the baby's heartbeat,” Micah pointed out.

“That's fantastic,” Crash said.

I looked at him, really studied him, and realized he wasn't being sarcastic at all. Crash was genuinely looking forward to that moment, and I realized, so did I.

It would feel amazing to be able to hear our baby's tiny heartbeats. It finally dawned on me that there was an actual human being inside of me.

Well, an adorable baby bear shifter, to be exact.

“I take it you're happy about the news?” I asked rather tentatively.

We hadn't planned for this pregnancy, and I was really worried Crash wouldn't react positively.

It turned out I had nothing to worry about. As usual, all my overthinking had

led to unnecessary worry and stress.

“Pretty pleased,” Crash confirmed. “Why don’t we head on back to my place and celebrate? I managed to convince the cook on duty to grill us some steaks.”

My stomach didn’t lurch or protest at those words.

“Steak sounds great,” I said, beaming at my mate.

I thanked Micah and wished Lenny a speedy recovery before leaving with Crash. On our walk back, I snatched the box of chocolates.

I didn’t just eat one; I happily ate all of them.

CRASH/ BERNARD

C RASH

"Do you want more pie? I could head downstairs again," I told my mate.

Jared flopped on my bed and hugged one of my pillows to his chest. He looked completely lethargic, and I was pretty sure he'd fall asleep any second now.

I had to admit, I felt completely stunned when Greed and I returned from our job and Whizz of all people slapped me on the back and congratulated me.

In the first place, it was rare to see Whizz out of his den, but he'd apparently come down to the bar and eating hall to discuss something important with Venom.

Venom also gave me a nod and for a few minutes, it confused me why everyone was congratulating me or giving me a thumbs-up sign.

In the end, I asked Whizz to explain. He looked irritated at first. When Whizz realized I was completely clueless about everything, he sighed and finally explained why everyone was acting so oddly.

At first, I wondered why Jared hadn't told me, then remembered our texts this afternoon. My mate had probably wanted to break the news to me in person.

Someone must've eavesdropped or heard the news and spread the gossip. This wasn't the first time something like this happened.

I ended up making a quick run to town to grab some flowers and chocolate before I met up with Jared. Micah had texted me where he was.

"Pie? Pie sounds good, but I'm too full now. Maybe later," Jared mumbled.

I set my plate down and walked up to him. Jared let out a yawn when I kissed him on the cheek.

Part of me still processing the fact that Jared and I had made a baby together.

Didn't I dream of this moment when we first got together? It seemed so surreal and yet felt so wonderful at the same time.

I pulled the blanket over Jared's body so he wouldn't get cold.

"Today was a surprise, wasn't it?" Jared asked, closing his eyes. "I'm glad you're not mad."

"Why would I be? We're going to have a kid together. Imagine that."

Jared wasn't listening. My mate had fallen sound asleep. Not wishing to disturb him, I switched the lights off and grabbed our used plates and cutlery.

I brought them downstairs to the kitchen. Whoever was on duty had already left. The dishwasher wasn't working either, but I didn't mind washing the dishes by hand. The task gave me some time to think.

Venom walked in at that exact moment.

He seemed to be on the phone with his mate, because he said, "I'll be home soon, Cas. Don't forget to turn the security system on."

Venom ended the call and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

"You were caught off-guard earlier," Venom remarked, taking a sip of his beer.

"Yeah, but in the end, everything worked out," I said.

I left the plates and cutlery to dry. Venom handed me a cold beer, which I

accepted.

He seemed to sense I needed to get something off my chest, because he didn't leave the kitchen right away.

It was spooky. Venom seemed to know when one of his bears needed to vent, and he would grumpily provide a listening ear.

He had different tactics for each of us, which told me Venom knew what made everyone tick. Maybe that was what made him such a reliable lead alpha.

Venom waited until I gathered my thoughts.

"I'm happy, and yet this pregnancy happened at a bad time. Bernard Pittman is still gunning for Jared, and now we've got more to lose," I admitted.

"It's natural to be worried about your pregnant mate," Venom pointed out.

"I've read the report Whizz compiled for me and I think I've underestimated him," I admitted. "I know I shouldn't have, but it's the first time I'd ever been this elated. The moment Jared entered my life, I couldn't focus on anything else."

"Demon hybrids are trouble," Venom conceded. "You need to be prepared for Bernard."

"I'll read up on their kind, do my research and find what's effective against them," I said.

"Check the stockroom for protection charms. Demons are good with mind magic, just like vampires," Venom said. "I also remembered stashing a special ceremonial knife in there, one that's capable of harming them. It was blessed by a shaman."

Venom's answer was reassuring. Tackling Floyd had been easy. Too easy, but he was just Bernard Pittman's minion. The real deal would be much harder to kill.

"Thanks for the useful tips. I'll pay a visit to the stockroom tomorrow," I said. Another thought crossed my mind. "Do you think Jared will take it badly if I ask him to move in with me temporarily?"

Venom considered my question for a few seconds. Venom shrugged, then finally spoke.

“Jared is pretty agreeable. Just present your argument to him in a logical manner. Have you told him about your plans for the future?” Venom asked.

“Not yet. I want the cabin to be a surprise. Actually, I already have the blueprints for it. Want to see?” I asked.

Venom only nodded as I pulled my phone out. Nearly most of the bears in the MC had some construction experience, Venom included. Like me, they moved from job to job before joining the MC.

Greed and Lenny already agreed to lend me a hand, but I debated asking the other bear alphas as well.

More hands would speed everything up and with a baby on the way, that seemed like a grand idea.

Venom made a few helpful suggestions, which I typed on my phone. We discussed my future cabin at some length. Venom also gave me more tips on how to deal with Bernard Pittman.

Sharing strategies boosted my confidence. When I first read Whizz’s report on Bernard, I’d lost some of my initial confidence.

I’ve handled one rogue hybrid demon before, but I had a full team at my back. This time, I couldn’t rely on the entire MC for help, because Pittman was my problem to clean up.

Then I asked, “have you decided a punishment for Lenny?”

“I’m thinking of sending him on a solo mission,” Venom said.

“Is that a good idea? I could come with him, watch him in case he loses control,” I offered.

“Crash, you have plenty on your plate,” Venom reminded me.

Venom was right. I couldn’t keep an eye on Lenny, not when Jared needed me more. Bernard Pittman hadn’t made any new moves since Floyd’s death, but I had a feeling he had something up his sleeve.

Men like Pittman didn't like staying idle for long.

I then realized what Venom was up to and sucked in a breath.

"This is a test, isn't it?" I asked.

"A final one to determine if Lenny can reel in his grizzly or not," Venom said.

"If he fails this mission, then you're going to—" I trailed off, unable to continue.

I pictured Lenny on the ground, his throat ripped out and the light in his eyes gone. Then I gathered myself, because my best friend's life was at stake.

I tried pleading with Venom. Maybe I could make Venom see reason. Deep down, I knew Lenny had already used all of his chances.

Heck, it was a miracle Piston survived Lenny's attack. Greed told me Piston had said a single offensive sentence to Lenny and that had been enough to trigger Lenny's fury.

"Venom, he's not a hopeless cause. You've got to give him another shot. He'll get better with Greed and my help."

To my chagrin, I realized I had used the same pitch before. If I had been speaking to Mayhem, the club VP would have given me a pitying look.

Mayhem was a softie. He'd then promise me he'd talk to Venom. Venom only gave me a grim look, which told me his decision was final.

He wasn't going to change his mind. Not this time.

"When Lenny joined the MC, I made Lenny the same promise I made to everyone," Venom said.

I knew exactly what that promise was. Most of the bear alphas who joined us were either ex-criminals or exiles nobody else wanted.

Half of my MC brothers had control issues. We trusted Venom to take us out in case we turned Feral. I knew all this and yet the truth was hard to process.

"Return to your mate, Crash. There's nothing else you can do but trust Lenny

to sort his own issues.”

That was Venom’s last advice, so I headed back upstairs.

BERNARD

Bernard Pittman arrived at Moon Burrow without any particular fanfare. He had purchased a second-hand white Toyota beforehand and wasn’t wearing any of his favorite suits.

Instead, Bernard wore a plain t-shirt and jeans - casual wear. The clothes felt odd on his skin, but he could play pretend for a few hours.

Blending in was the key to the success of this mission. Sure, Bernard could have hired someone else to retrieve Jared Church.

Money wasn’t an issue, but after Floyd’s failure, Bernard decided to step in and handle this mess himself.

Besides, Bernard had an ulterior motive - he wanted to confront and face this slippery psychic who had managed to elude him for so long.

Bernard familiarized himself with the town, but that didn’t take long. Moon Burrow wasn’t that large and didn’t have any landmarks that interested him.

Soon enough, Bernard entered the street where Kim and Joseph Tate lived. He parked his car across the street from their home.

It was a modest, single-floor red-bricked house with a tiny porch complete with a swing - a picturesque little place.

Bernard had done his research on the Tates. Alex Tate, Kim’s husband, died in a fishing accident a year ago, leaving Kim to take care of her son.

They had no relatives in Moon Burrow. Kim had acquaintances, but no real friends. That made them the ideal target for Bernard.

He got out of the car and surveyed the neighborhood. Given that it was midafternoon, there weren't many people around.

Bernard pretended to go for a walk and once the street cleared, he made his way to the back of the Tate's house.

Breaking in wasn't a problem. Even if the Tates had an advanced security system, which Bernard doubted, he had an arsenal of useful spells at his disposal.

He used a spell which bypassed any inconveniences caused by modern security devices.

It emitted a pulse, which basically took everything out, including the electricity. He heard a fizzle inside the house.

Using his supernatural strength, he broke the doorknob and let himself in. It was quiet inside the kitchen.

Bernard glanced at the apple pies cooling on the counter with interest. He'd hired a PI to take note of Kim's schedule.

At this time of day, Kim had gone out to fetch little Joseph from school. They would be back soon.

On Wednesday evenings, Kim cooked, and they ate dinner at home so Kim could catch the latest episode of her favorite singing competition on TV.

Bernard also didn't miss the newspaper clipping pinned by a pink donut-shaped magnet on the fridge.

He plucked the offending article - the same one praising Jared Church's heroics. He summoned a little flame and reduced the clipping to cinders.

Well, that felt satisfying.

Bernard then did a quick circuit of the house to pass the time. Bored, he returned to the living room.

Since he'd taken out the electricity, it felt like a brick oven in there. Bernard opened the windows.

Why not make himself at home? Kim and Joseph should feel honored that

someone like Bernard had paid them a visit, had decided they were the perfect bait to reel in Bernard's real prize.

Sure, Kim and Joseph were fodder like most of the human race, but they were useful fodder.

As soon as Bernard heard the click of the door, he let out a sigh of relief.

"Finally," he murmured to himself.

"Can you get the lights for me, Joe?" Kim asked her son.

She must've noticed they wouldn't come on because she spoke again.

"Must be a blackout. Let's put the groceries down so I can check the generator in the basement."

Bernard knew the only way to the kitchen was through the living room, where he was waiting.

Kim halted, arms full of grocery bags, when she spotted him sitting there.

To her credit, Kim didn't freeze up. Instead, she gathered her son close. A mother's protective instinct. How noble, Bernard thought.

"Who are you and what are you doing in my house?" Kim demanded.

"My name is Bernard Pittman, and I'll be a temporary guest in your lovely home. This must be your son, Joseph," Bernard said, eyeing the boy, who hid behind his mother after taking one frightful look at him.

Could the boy see the thick black aura surrounding Bernard? Interesting.

Only supernaturals could sense his demonic aura, but there were a few humans who could see them.

Jace Church knew what Bernard was right away. It took some convincing, but Jace had eventually bought his lie.

Jace thought he was so in love with Bernard. Jace truly believed that, yes, Bernard had done some bad stuff in his life, but he was now on a path of redemption.

Bernard did indeed miss Jace and not simply for Jace's handy ability.

He wouldn't go so far as to admit that he loved Jace. Bernard knew he was no longer capable of that emotion.

There had always been something missing in him since he was a child, something vital - his soul, perhaps.

But despite his flaws, Bernard felt something genuine for another being. Now that was gone.

"You're insane. Leave before I call the cops," Kim said in a shaky voice.

She dropped her groceries. Smart woman. Now Kim fumbled with her phone. Calling the cops? That wouldn't do.

Bernard rose to his feet and snatched the phone in a blink of an eye. Kim stared at him, stunned.

Then her face turned pale as Bernard willed his human fingers to transform into black claws.

He closed them over the device and reduced them to a hundred metal pieces.

Bernard then dropped the ruined device on the floor for dramatic effect.

Kim opened her mouth to scream, but Bernard had already moved behind her using his supernatural speed.

Did she really think anyone would come to her aid for help? He clamped a claw-covered hand over her mouth.

Joseph was a smart boy. He started for the door, but Bernard threw a freezing spell which hit the boy in the square of his back.

He also threw a silence spell for good measure, so the boy could neither move nor speak.

"If you want your boy to live, pay attention to my instructions carefully," Bernard told Kim in a calm voice.

"Nod if you understood." Kim nodded, although Bernard could see the terrified whites of her eyes.

“Good, your first job is to make an important phone call to your good pal, Jared Church,” Bernard told her.

As Kim phoned Jared, Bernard opened a magic circle in the Tates’ backyard and summoned his monstrous familiars.

JARED

“**W**hat are we looking for again?” Lenny asked.

I looked at the various assortment of knives arrayed on the wall in front of me, incredibly impressed.

Crash had gotten the key to the MC’s magical stockroom earlier this morning from Venom.

The four of us—Crash, Greed, Lenny, and me—were now rooting through the vast chamber for protective charms and a demon-killing knife.

“A knife,” Crash said from behind a shelf. “Protective charms.”

“What do they look like exactly? Do you have a picture?” Greed called from another section.

I should be helping out, but really, this wasn’t how I imagined spending my day off.

The last place I wanted to be was in a windowless room full of dangerous things that could kill us if we weren’t too careful.

I pictured Crash and me having a lovely picnic in the woods. After our nice little meal, we’d go for a walk.

Maybe Crash would teach me how to fish, like he promised a while back. Afterward, we’d return to our picnic spot, catch an afternoon nap.

Once we woke up—my fantasy broke as Lenny waved a hand in front of my

face.

“Jared, you feeling okay? Maybe you need to sit down,” Lenny said.

He looked good for someone who had just got out of Micah’s clinic. Crash had told Greed and me about his conversation with Venom the night before.

I could tell my mate was worried about Lenny’s fate, but I had full confidence Lenny could tackle his solo mission with ease.

“No, I’m good,” I answered, moving on to another corner.

“Have some of my water at least,” Lenny said, offering me an unopened bottle of water, which I accepted.

Since news of my pregnancy came out, everyone had been extra nice to me, even Greed. I took a sip of water and did feel tons better.

“I have no idea,” Crash was telling Greed. “Oh, wait. I think I found the knife.”

Lenny and I made our way to where Crash and Greed were arguing. Crash pulled out an unremarkable hunting knife from a small wooden box.

The blade seemed to be made of obsidian. It also had runes I couldn’t make sense of embedded in the ivory handle.

“How are you sure that’s the knife?” Lenny asked with the most obvious answer.

“The box,” Crash said.

Greed picked up the box and right there on the wooden cover were the words ‘For Demons’ written in black marker.

“Yup, that’s Venom’s messy handwriting,” Greed said.

Lenny had wandered off from the group and returned to us with four brightly colored woven bracelets.

Friendship bracelets, I thought. The kind kids in primary schools traded with each other.

Of course, seeing as I didn't have any friends growing up, I'd never received one from another kid.

"Saw these in a plastic baggie. Someone labeled them as protective charms," Lenny said.

"Those are ugly. Do you really expect me to wear one of those?" Greed asked Crash, who managed to find a leather sheath for the knife.

"If you want to tag along and live, sure," Crash answered nonchalantly while Greed gave him an annoyed look.

I was about to remind Crash to be nice to his friends when my phone vibrated.

After fishing it out from the back pocket of my jeans, I looked at the screen for a few moments, puzzled.

Kim Tate's name flashed across the screen. I got her number thanks to Rico.

Rico asked her for it when she and Joseph stopped by the cafe when I wasn't around.

I wanted to call her and thank her and Joseph for the card. In the end, I hadn't gotten around to calling her because things had gotten so busy.

I answered her call right away.

"Hi Kim, I was going to call you," I began.

"Jared?" Kim whispered.

I immediately detected the fear in her voice and decided to dispense with pleasantries.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Crash and Greed stopped arguing to listen in to my conversation.

"A strange man's at our house. He says you know him," Kim said.

She sounded like she was on the verge of crying. My chest tightened.

"A man? Can you describe him to me?" I asked.

My heart raced, and a part of me kept hoping my guess was wrong. That Kim and Joseph weren't in trouble because of me, but that was wistful thinking.

"He says his name is Bernard Pittman," Kim said.

Bernard must've taken her cellphone away from her, because it was Bernard who spoke next.

"Finally, we have an opportunity to speak, Jared," Bernard said. "As you can guess, I'm currently a guest in the Tates' family home. I've told Kim what a lovely house she has."

"Shut up," I said, full of fear and righteous anger.

How dare Bernard use Kim and Joseph against me?

They were innocent in all of this and Bernard had plenty of resources and power at his disposal, according to Whizz's report.

Why resort to something so low-brow?

"You didn't have to take Kim and Joseph captive to get to me," I said.

Crash stepped behind me and gave my shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

That gave me confidence to continue my conversation with Bernard. The bear alphas were uncommonly silent, and I finally understood why.

Any noise would alert Bernard to the fact I wasn't alone.

"How else can I lure you out of your hiding place?" Bernard asked, but I didn't answer.

I knew Bernard had plenty more to say, and he did.

"I have to admit, Jared, I underestimated you. Going to the Grizzly Reapers MC for protection? Genius idea. Your resourcefulness impressed me, amused me even, but the time for games is over."

Bernard's voice came out flat. Empty of emotion. That scared me.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Right to the point. I like that. It's simple, Jared. Even a kid like Joseph could

work it out. You in return for Kim and little Joe, but you have to come alone. The moment I spot you approaching the house with your new bear shifter allies, I cut out their throats.”

I let out a breath. Of course, I should’ve expected Bernard to name his conditions. He controlled the rules of this sick game, after all.

“Fine,” I automatically answered. “A fair exchange. I won’t tell anyone, including my grizzly allies, where I’m going.”

“That’s a good boy. We’re off to a good start, Jared. I’ll see you soon and don’t take your sweet time.”

Bernard paused, then continued, “I’m not a very patient man and Kim and Joseph smell so good. I might decide to take a sip of their blood.”

“Don’t touch them!”

“You have no right to make demands out of me, Jared,” Bernard answered frostily. “We’ll be waiting.”

Bernard ended the call. I gritted my teeth and glared at my cell phone for a few seconds.

I had the gift of foresight, but why couldn’t I predict this? Was it because I already saved Kim and Joseph twice?

I intervened and prevented Kim’s death, but they only became targets of a demon because of me.

The realization made me sick to the stomach. If it weren’t for Crash, holding me close to him, I would’ve broken into a full-scale panic attack.

“Jared, breathe,” Crash reminded me.

“They’re in danger because of me,” I told him. “I didn’t see this happening.”

“You’re not omniscient. No one is,” Crash told me gently. “We’ll get Kim and Joseph out. I promise.”

“Bernard specifically said I should go alone,” I pointed out.

Lenny snorted. “Like we would allow that to happen.”

“Going in without a plan might get Kim and Joseph killed,” Greed pointed.

“Who says we don’t have a plan?” Crash asked.

I craned my head to look at him, hopeful. Bernard’s phone call had messed with my head, and I had a hard time thinking straight.

Heck, I didn’t even know what I should do first.

“We do?” Lenny asked Greed.

“Jared walks in first, we come in later,” Crash said. “I don’t like putting my mate directly in the line of fire, but we don’t have any other choice.”

I turned and grasped his hand. Crash furrowed his brows and I could tell he was second-guessing his suggestion.

To be fair, it wasn’t much of a plan, but we didn’t have the luxury of time either. I gave his fingers a squeeze and Crash gave me a worried look.

“I’ll go in as bait, make Bernard think I followed the rules,” I told him. “I’ll demand to speak to Kim and Joseph alone. Once I manage to shepherd them into a room, you guys come in and deal with Pittman.”

“Sounds easy, but a hundred other complications can arise,” Lenny said.

“Then we’ll just have to deal with them,” Greed said firmly. “So we’re really doing this?”

“I don’t have a choice, but you guys do,” I said, unable to meet their gazes. “Crash would insist on coming with me because he’s my mate, but this is my mess.”

Greed scoffed. “Your psychic can be real silly sometimes, Crash.”

“Yeah, but Jared is just worried about endangering you two,” Crash told his friends.

“We always have Crash’s back and now yours,” Lenny told me. “That’s all that matters.”

“Alright,” I said after taking a deep breath. “Let’s make what preparations we can, then pay Bernard, Kim, and Joseph a visit.”

No one disagreed with me.

CRASH/ JARED

C RASH

We dropped Jared off a block away from Kim and Joseph's street. I didn't like this plan at all, even though I came up with it.

In fact, I wanted to haul my mate back in the truck and tell him I had changed my mind.

The look of determination on Jared's face eventually stopped me. Saving Kim and Joseph was important to him, and hence, it was important to me as well.

Despite how hard it was, I let Jared leave the car.

"I wouldn't have allowed Micah to do it," Greed unhelpfully told me.

Greed had offered to drive, and I was sitting in the back. I was tempted to smack him on the head but decided not to.

Greed and Lenny had gone out of their way to help us, after all.

"Jared will be alright. Your mate's pretty tough, Crash," Lenny told me.

With nothing better to do, I pulled out my phone. Dealing with a self-styled demon and whatever he threw at us didn't worry me one bit.

All I thought about was Jared entering that house on his own. I should be by his side, protecting him.

Trust in your mate, I reminded himself. Lenny was right. Jared was no weakling. My phone vibrated. A missed call from Jared.

That was our signal to move. Jared had arrived at the Tates' house.

"Let's get going," I told my friends.

We got out of the car, fully armed. Greed, Lenny, and I each carried our usual arsenal of guns and knives.

I had Venom's special knife tucked into a sheath at my belt. All of us wore protective charms, including Jared.

We had prepped ourselves the best we could. The three of us made our way to the Tates' backyard.

Whizz had gotten us a blueprint of the Tates' house earlier this morning, so all of us knew the basic layout.

"Crash, check out the gate," Greed whispered.

The white garden gate swung on its rusty hinges. Someone had left it unlocked, and I had a feeling Kim Tate wouldn't have been so careless.

A sense of urgency filled me as I entered the backyard. The old elm trees planted there provided us some shade.

There was a swing nearby, along with a sandbox and a lawn chair. I could imagine Kim and Joseph Tate spending a lot of time here.

Gut instinct told me something wasn't quite right. The trees seemed to cast long shadows on the ground, and my grizzly was wide-alert, practically snapping inside of me.

I paused, looking down at my feet to see singed grass. The burned area formed a distinct shape. Some kind of magic circle. That couldn't be good.

Old habits made me reach for the revolver. As an extra precaution, we loaded all our guns with silver bullets.

Silver pretty much hurt most supernatural nasties, with a few exceptions.

I was hoping whatever Bernard summoned in the Tates' yard wasn't immune to silver.

"Crash, get down!" Lenny yelled behind me.

I didn't question Lenny. I ducked just as a dark monstrous shape sailed over my head, its long claws creating rips across my back, drawing blood.

Hearing another low growl ahead of me, I realized I didn't have time to look over my shoulder.

Lenny and Greed would tackle whatever tried to get at me earlier. All I could do was focus on the opponent in front of me.

What I faced was a creature I'd never seen before. Black fur and darkness cloaked its entire body.

While it looked like an enormous dog at first glance, no one would mistake it for a domesticated pet.

For one, it had no fur, and it had muscles in all the wrong places.

I shot at it, but it darted away, only to run towards me. The monster hell dog opened its mouth, revealing two rows of black, triangular teeth, like that of a shark's.

I fired again and once again. The creature utilized its uncanny speed to dodge most of them. I was relatively an excellent shot, so some didn't miss.

What bullets managed to hit the beast only made it angrier. It hissed at me and came at me again. My gun made an empty click.

I'd run out of bullets, so I tucked the gun away and pulled out the special knife.

The hell dog went mad with rage, as if it knew this knife was dangerous. It narrowed its red eyes.

Snarling, it came at me with a newfound sense of purpose.

The beast toppled me over and sunk its long claws into my chest and

stomach. Blood pooled.

I growled because it felt like someone had doused me with fiery flames. The knife clattered from my hand.

Screw this. I didn't bother scrabbling for the knife. My grizzly ripped out of me.

Fur covered me from head to foot. I increased in mass. Claws emerged. When the hell dog tried to rip my face off, I blocked his muzzle with my left arm.

It made that odd hissing noise again. I shoved the thing off, and it retracted its claws.

Standing in my grizzly form, I practically towered over the demonic dog. It tore at my leg with its teeth, or tried to.

The hell dog didn't see Greed behind him, obsidian knife in his hand. I gathered my friends had already taken care of the hell dog's partner.

It was a risky move, but I stopped the creature mid-lunge with my paws. I held the monster in place just as Greed drove the knife into the back of the hell dog's skull.

The thing let out a pathetic whimper. I wrestled with it until the light left its eyes.

Finally, it flopped to the ground, limbs twitching. It didn't get up again.

"Well, that was fun," Greed said, grinning at me.

He looked like a maniac, covered in cuts and bites. Lenny didn't fare any better, and I supposed neither did I.

"Shall we?" Lenny asked, nodding to the house.

A scream sounded from within. I didn't hesitate. I ran right in.

JARED

My hands trembled after I gave Crash a missed call. I closed my eyes for a moment, summoning my grizzly for courage.

"I'm here," it said, and I opened my eyes again.

I knocked on the Tates' front door. When no answer came, I tried the knob, and it turned.

I showed myself in, anxious about what I'd find.

"Join us in the living room, Jared," came Bernard's voice from somewhere nearby.

I was about to take another step forward when my vision spun. Nausea hit me out of nowhere.

I gripped the wall for support as a killer headache hit me between the eyes. Sweat dribbled down my back.

The house suddenly felt unbearably hot, and my entire body was burning up. Squeezing my eyes shut only made me feel worse.

I saw that horrible vision again of Crash lying on the floor, his eyes wide open but with nothing in there any longer.

Greed and Lenny were just a few feet from them. Greed still in human form, covered in bloody cuts and bites.

Lenny in his grizzly form, with his throat torn out.

I desperately tried looking away from their broken bodies, and my gaze focused on the beautiful and vanished wooden floorboards.

They were the exact floorboards I was standing on. My mate and our two friends were going to die today.

That realization made me want to throw up, and somehow, I managed to gather my wits and hold myself together.

"No," I whispered. I kept repeating the word, as if saying it would prevent

what would happen next.

“Jared, we’re waiting,” snapped Bernard.

Still feeling lightheaded, I entered the living room. I felt like a zombie, allowing my feet to take me where they willed.

In the back of my mind, I remembered that rescuing Kim and Joseph was my number one priority.

I walked right into a seemingly normal scene. The golden-haired, pompous-looking bastard sitting cross-legged on the armchair must be Bernard Pittman.

His skin was pale, like that of a vampire’s, and he had a deceptively slender build.

At first glance, it seemed like Crash could easily rip this man into two. Then I remembered Bernard, wrapping those long white fingers around my brother’s neck.

Bernard didn’t let go until he strangled Jace to death.

Blood-red eyes met mine. A cruel smile formed on Bernard’s lips. I tore my gaze from him to see how Kim and Joseph were faring.

At the very least, they looked frightened but unharmed. Both mother and son sat on the sofa, uncommonly still and silent.

Then I noticed the faint scorch marks at their feet. A magic circle. Daddy Ken had been friends with a few magic users, so I recognized a circle when I saw one.

Bernard had trapped them in some kind of spell. I was betting he froze their movement and speech. I didn’t even think that was possible.

Magic users formed covens because it was easier to cast complicated magical spells as a group. Bernard didn’t seem to need anyone to back him up.

He simply had that much juice.

This particular circle didn’t glow with pure light. It felt tainted, just like Bernard’s oppressive aura.

The demon hit me with it, full blast and without warning, making me stagger. My chest tightened, and I found myself gasping for breath. I fell to my knees. My bear growled in protest.

We both tried to fight off Bernard, but it was no good. The hybrid-made demon was imposing his will on me, and something told me that resisting proved futile.

“You will come with me now,” Bernard told me in a firm voice.

He rose from his armchair and walked up to me. I cringed when he ran his fingers through my hair.

Bernard patted me like I was his favorite new pet, and that pissed me off. Did Pittman simply expect me to do as he says, like some mindless robot?

His initial burst of tainted aura overwhelmed me for a moment, but I found I could wiggle my toes and fingers.

I could move again, but he didn't know that. The rainbow-colored friendship bracelet on my left wrist gleamed under the dusky glow of the living room's warm fluorescent lights.

The protection charm. Bernard didn't know I had it.

Bernard had taken a phone call, as if this business here was done and over with. I snuck a look at Kim's frightened face on the sofa.

He seemed to have forgotten all about Kim and Joseph. Jace had been collateral damage, but he'd been a little useful to Pittman.

What did that mean for Kim and Joseph? Bernard never planned on letting them go, did he?

“That will be all,” Bernard said to whoever he was speaking to.

A gunshot from the backyard made him press his lips. Crash and the others must be here already.

Hope leaped into my chest. Bernard looked inconvenienced as opposed to alarmed or angry.

Did that mean he had another trick up his sleeve?

“I knew your grizzly allies would come,” Bernard told me with a sneer. “Did you think I wouldn’t erect secondary measures to deal with those troublesome pests?”

“What did you do?” I whispered.

“Why, I just summoned my guard dogs in the backyard to make sure we won’t be interrupted,” Bernard said. “Now get up. We have places to be. I have an upcoming business deal I need you to look into.”

I slowly rose to my feet and caught Kim’s desperate look. Bernard caught me looking, then shook his head.

“You broke your promise and brought the bears. So their lives are forfeited. There’s one important lesson you must learn, Jared. Disobey me, and there will be consequences.”

Bernard pointed a finger at Kim, and vicious cuts appeared across her arms and legs.

She let out a shrill scream. Joseph started sobbing. I grasped Bernard’s wrist, and he seemed surprised.

The contact interrupted the flow of magic. No new gashes appeared on Kim’s body.

“That shouldn’t be possible. How the hell did you do that?” Bernard asked me with narrowed eyes.

JARED

Bernard Pittman wrenched his hand back from mine, as if I were corrosive or poisonous.

I used his momentary confusion to run back to Kim and Joseph. Using my left foot, I rubbed away a part of the circle, thereby breaking the spell.

Kim and Joseph could move again, and the first thing Kim did was hold her son close to her.

“Run,” was all I managed to say before Bernard flew at me.

I turned only for Bernard to backhand me so hard that I crumpled on the ground.

“You’re nothing special,” Bernard said above me.

He eyed the friendship bracelet on my wrist and scoffed. He probably figured out what it was.

“I’m beginning to think you’re more trouble than you’re worth,” Bernard added.

“You killed Jace, but you won’t kill me,” I said, feeling half-foolish and half-brave.

He sneered, and I could see his human features contorting, melting away to reveal his true demonic form underneath.

His human skin gave way to a leathery hide. Two twisted horns spiraled from

his skull. Like Floyd, his other form also had bat-like wings.

Before he could use them, I heard a thud from the kitchen. Then Crash came barreling into the living room in his monstrous grizzly form.

My mate hit Bernard like a truck, but somehow, the demon managed to take Crash's tackle without bowling over.

Without hesitation, Crash went for Bernard's wings. His claws tore through the upper part of Bernard's left wing, but unlike Floyd, Bernard reacted faster.

Bernard darted away with a speed faster than most shifters.

I swallowed, nervous about my mate. I darted behind the sofa for refuge. Outside, I heard a car engine.

Kim and Joseph had gotten out of the house. Relief filled me at that realization. Bernard didn't seem to care his prey got away.

He was too distracted fending Crash off. Greed and Lenny soon arrived. Both of them were in human form.

I wanted to shout a warning at them to stay back. This was the moment, I realized with sinking horror.

The moment Bernard would somehow turn the tables on all of them. Crash would die, leaving me and our baby behind.

I swallowed just as Bernard's punch sent Crash flying. Crash's back hit the wall, and the sickening crunch of bone made me wince.

Lenny swung his shotgun, aiming the barrel at Bernard. He repeatedly fired at the demon.

A black magical circle appeared in front of Bernard. A protective shield, I realized.

It soon became clear that Bernard's shield couldn't block close-ranged physical attacks.

Greed dove into the fight, the obsidian knife clutched in his left hand. Bernard laughed, as if he didn't believe such a small weapon would wound

him.

The demon stopped laughing when Greed's blade scored a line of blood down Bernard's arm. Bernard's red eyes blazed with indignation and anger.

While Lenny and Greed kept him busy, I crawled my way to Crash, who remained slumped against the wall, immobile.

Once I reached him, I shook him, terrified he'd somehow been killed. Don't panic, I reminded myself.

The mate bond flared between us, and Crash opened his golden eyes. Seeing me, Crash relaxed slightly, but neither of us could let our guard down yet.

"Crash," I said, gripping one furry shoulder.

He growled, and when my hand came away with blood, I released him. The gash looked deep. How did Crash receive that injury?

Bernard said he sent his pets after Crash and the others, and my mate, Greed, and Lenny hadn't come out of that fight unscathed.

"Listen to me," I whispered, putting as much urgency in my voice as I could.

Crash stared at me, and I knew he was paying attention.

I continued, "That death vision I saw of you, Greed, and Lenny. It's going to happen now."

Crash widened his eyes. Greed let out a groan. Both Crash and I returned our attention to the fight.

It wasn't going well. Bernard had disarmed Greed, and the knife clattered to the floor.

Greed lay on his side on the ground, unmoving. I cried out because that was the exact position Greed had died in my vision.

Greed's hand twitched, and I breathed a sigh of relief. He was still alive.

I wouldn't know what to tell Micah if his mate perished in a fight that was meant to be mine.

“Len, the knife!” I yelled, seeing what Bernard was up to.

Bernard was about to press one clawed foot over the obsidian blade, but Lenny’s barrage of bullets made him take a step back. Bernard changed his targets.

He flew at Lenny, his fangs bared. I wondered why Bernard wasn’t using any magic, then it dawned on me that he might be out of juice.

After all, Bernard had already used a summoning spell, then a spell to contain Kim and Joseph.

Nice to know Pittman’s power wasn’t limitless. Lenny coughed out blood as Bernard viciously drove him against the wall.

Crash rose to all four paws, despite my weak protests. I knew he’d help his friends, no matter. Frustration welled inside me.

I was utterly useless. Shifting forms would take too long, and I wasn’t an experienced fighter, like Crash, Greed, and Lenny.

Bernard anticipated Crash’s charge. He choked Lenny into submission. Lenny let out a rattling breath before falling to the floor with a heavy thud.

Crash roared in fury. Bernard and Crash came at each other like violent animals.

I made my way to Greed first, then checked his pulse. It was alarmingly faint, but I knew he’d hang on.

Greed suddenly gripped my wrist. He coughed out blood, then whispered three words, “Jared, the knife.”

I nodded, setting his hand down. While Crash and Bernard belted out blows, I swiped the knife from the floor.

The handle was slippery with blood, so I wiped it with the hem of my shirt.

For a second, Crash took his gaze off his opponent, then met mine. He winked. What did he expect me to do?

Crash slammed Bernard against the wall. The demon’s tattered wings fluttered behind him.

Bernard dug his claws into Crash's injured shoulder, making my mate howl. Then Bernard reversed their positions, so it was Crash pinned against the wall.

Somehow, I knew in that millisecond that Crash had allowed Bernard to do that. With a scream, I ran right at Bernard, sinking the knife into the side of his neck.

At the same time, Crash impaled Bernard with his claws, ensuring the demon wouldn't get away.

Bernard struggled, and he fought for a long time, but eventually, Bernard's arms flopped to his sides.

I stepped back. The knife remained lodged in Bernard's neck. Crash released him, letting the corpse fall to the ground. I heard a groan and saw Greed slowly rising to his feet.

He clutched his bleeding stomach and grunted. I couldn't believe it. All of us were still alive. Well, I still had to check on Lenny, but I knew he wouldn't die on us.

The future I saw, where Crash, Greed, and Lenny had died—we prevented that.

"Finally," Greed grumbled. "That fight took longer than expected." "Are you okay?" I asked Crash. "I want to check on Lenny."

Crash growled softly, which I took as assent. I ran over to where Lenny was. I touched the side of his neck.

Lenny opened his eyes, and they were bright yellow. That wasn't what surprised me. Lenny's face twisted in rage, and I fell on my ass.

There was nothing of my friend in there. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Crap," Greed muttered.

Someone grabbed my arm, yanking me backward. I groaned at the pain but saw it was only Greed.

He looked grim. Lenny let out an inhuman snarl. Crash had come between us,

and the two bear alphas started grappling with each other.

Lenny changed forms, and he did it at an alarming speed.

“What’s happening?” I asked Greed, who had used himself as a shield.

He positioned himself in front of me so I couldn’t see the expression on his face.

“Len’s finally snapped,” Greed answered, his voice sounding hollow.

“But Bernard’s dead. His corpse is a few feet from them,” I argued.

“Doesn’t matter. When a shifter turns Feral, he’s no longer able to tell friend from foe,” Greed explained. “The Lenny we knew is gone.”

“No,” I whispered.

This couldn’t be happening. Bernard Pittman was dead. Crash, Greed, Lenny, and I had miraculously survived this battle.

Crash and Lenny tore each other to shreds. Fur, blood, and skin flew, and I couldn’t bring myself to look any longer.

I allowed myself to collapse on the nearby chair. Exhaustion hit me bone-deep. Then I buried my face in my hands.

My head ached, as if someone had hit me on the skull with a hammer. The awful future I saw. We didn’t manage to circumvent it at all.

Pittman didn’t kill Crash, Greed, and Lenny in that version of the future.

The grizzly alphas ended up dead because the three friends ended up killing each other.

“No,” I whispered repeatedly.

“Uh, Jared? Hate to be harsh, but you can’t be having a breakdown right now,” Greed said.

“The three of you going to die,” I whispered.

Greed was no longer listening. He waded into the fight, despite his injured state. Everything moved in slow motion.

Lenny easily shoved Greed away. Crash bared his fangs at Lenny. Jace, how do I stop this? Of course, my brother wouldn't answer.

He was no longer on this plane and—agony unfurled in the deepest recesses of my brain. I cried out and shut my eyes.

Another vision? What was the point? I expected to see mayhem, violence, and more death, except this particular vision had none of those elements.

My feet crunched on fading red and brown leaves. The wind swept my hair back, along with my scarf, making me laugh.

Whoever this person was, it wasn't me. I was simply looking out of his eyes. I passed through withered trees and trailed my fingers against the low-hanging branches.

There was an odd tattoo on my left wrist. A skull wreathed in burning flames. Well, that certainly looked ominous.

It was the end of fall, and winter was coming soon. I rubbed my cold bare hands together, then promptly forgot all about the cold as I spotted a familiar figure standing by the lake.

My heart raced as the tall and muscular figure turned. His warm smile punched me right in the gut, and I realized I knew who this man, this grizzly alpha, was.

He was hot chocolate on a cold wintery day, and he was, without a doubt, mine.

"Len, hey," I uttered.

"Hey, Jack," Lenny said, holding out a hand. "What took you so long?"

The vision ended, and I found myself back in Kim and Joseph's ruined living room.

The bear alphas had made a mess out of the furniture. Lenny stood over Crash, fangs bared, claws dripping with blood.

I ran right in front of Crash, heart thudding.

"Jared, no," Greed said with a wheeze.

I spread my arms out and looked into Lenny's empty golden eyes. It wasn't Lenny I was facing, not exactly, but his out-of-control grizzly.

I knew without a doubt that he would kill me without a second thought.

"Jack," I said.

Lenny raised one mangled paw, his claws outstretched. My heart thudded painfully.

"Jack," I repeated a little louder.

Crash pawed at my leg. My mate was too weak to do anything else, and my heart ached for him. I ignored Crash, because I had one important task to do.

"That's the name of your mate, Lenny. I saw him, and I saw you," I said, speaking a little faster. "It was the end of fall, and you guys agreed to meet at the lake. I felt his emotions. When Jack looked at you, you were his whole world."

Lenny lowered his paw, and his eyes were no longer blank or wild.

"Hear that, Len? He's out there," Greed croaked out. "He's real, so you gotta come back to us. If you leave, who's going to look after your mate?"

Greed's words seemed to do the trick, because Lenny's fur receded. He shrank in size, and pretty soon, Lenny was human again.

Unsure of what else to do, I opened my arms and folded them around Lenny's body.

He collapsed against me, then started sobbing.

CRASH

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Tell me about him again,” Lenny pressed.

I shot a glare at my best friend. I was really tempted to shove him away, but Jared’s warning look stopped me cold.

Thankfully, Micah intervened before I could hurt Lenny for real.

“Len, Jared’s about to give birth any second now. Wait upstairs with Greed,” Micah said in his no-nonsense voice.

Lenny slumped his shoulders. Jared, ever sweet and kind, only reached for Lenny’s fingers and gave them a squeeze.

“I only caught one glimpse of him, so anything I’ll say you’ve already heard,” Jared said.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Lenny said.

I’d never seen Lenny look this way before, like an eager puppy who wanted extra treats.

Greed and I knew the prospect of meeting his mate in a few months was the only thing keeping Lenny sane.

It took me weeks to forgive Lenny for almost attacking Jared in the Tates’ living room.

In the end, Jared and I offered to pay for the damages to Kim’s house. She wouldn’t hear of it.

Kim was simply grateful Jared rescued her and Joseph a second time.

I persuaded Jared to leave the matter be, because we were expecting a child and raising a kid cost money.

Heck, I couldn't believe it was really happening. Three months had gone by too quickly.

Shifter pregnancies only lasted twelve weeks. Jared couldn't finish retelling Lenny his vision because he screamed when a contraction hit him out of nowhere.

"Lenny, for the sake of our friendship, go upstairs," I gritted out.

Lenny took one look at me, then patted Jared's hand. After Jared told Lenny about Jack, Lenny seemed to have gotten extra affectionate with my mate.

I didn't quite approve, but Jared reminded me we were on the verge of losing Lenny, so I sighed and relented.

Jared grabbed my fingers and squeezed so hard, I was pretty sure I heard a crack.

The pain didn't bother me because I couldn't even begin to imagine how my mate felt.

I reached for the cup containing ice chips on the bedside table and lifted it to Jared.

He chewed on some, and that seemed to tide him over for a little while.

The next hours were anxiety-inducing, but come morning, Micah wrapped our baby boy in a blue blanket.

He handed Jared our boy. I leaned over, shocked by how perfect and small he was.

"Hey, there. Welcome to the world, little Hudson," I said.

"Welcome," Jared said, kissing the top of Hudson's head. "Want to hold him?"

I nodded, speechless, as Jared gently transferred Hudson to my arms. A well

of emotions unfurled inside me.

A wave of protectiveness filled me as I held my son and cooed to him. The profound and quiet moment was broken when Greed and Lenny joined us.

Greed slapped me on the back.

“Lucky you, bro. Your kid inherited Jared’s features and none of yours,” Greed joked.

Micah jabbed his mate in the ribs, but Greed kept on laughing. He was the only one amused by his own joke.

“Congrats,” Lenny told Jared.

“Thanks. Would you like to hold him?” Jared asked.

Both Lenny and I froze because I wasn’t that keen on handing my son to a bear alpha who had control issues.

Then I reminded myself that this was Lenny, one of my best friends. It was going to be fine.

Lenny warily looked at me, and I took a deep breath before handing Hudson over. Nothing dramatic happened.

Lenny awkwardly stared down at Hudson’s face. My little boy broke into a smile and giggled.

“He likes you,” I said, unable to hide my surprise.

“Don’t hog the baby. My turn,” Greed said. “Hudson needs to meet his favorite uncle.”

Lenny scoffed and said, “We’ll see about that.”

I thought Micah would reprimand him again, but Micah only stared at Hudson.

He also seemed eager to hold our son in his arms. I smiled, glad that Jared and I had such good friends by our side.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “Five minutes is the time limit for each person.”

Hudson didn't seem to mind being held by our friends. In fact, for a tiny person, he seemed to have plenty of energy stored.

After what felt like an eternity, Hudson was back in Jared's arms.

"That's enough excitement for one day," Micah said. "Greed, go on and tell the other bears outside that visiting times are over."

Greed blanched. "Even Venom?"

"They can come by tomorrow morning," Jared said, sounding guilty.

"Tomorrow morning," I agreed.

Micah nodded. Lenny left the clinic, while Greed and Micah retreated upstairs to their apartment. As for me? I slid next to Jared in bed.

He was the only patient in Micah's clinic today, fortunately for us. Neither Jared nor I spoke as we watched our baby boy.

Hudson let out an adorable yawn, then promptly fell asleep, sucking on his thumb.

"Do you think he'll inherit the Church family gift?" Jared asked.

I detected a note of worry in his voice. Knowing Jared saw his gift as a curse his entire life, I didn't blame him for worrying about our son.

"Hey, even if he can see the future, he'll have an excellent teacher to guide him," I said. "I'll teach him all about being a shifter, and you can guide him about being a psychic."

"Sounds fair," Jared said with a laugh. "Crash, it's been an eventful few months."

"Yeah, hard to believe that nearly a year ago, you crashed into my life," I said.

"I see what you did there," Jared said, eyes twinkling. "If you told me a year ago that I would find my mate, become a bear shifter, and have a baby with the love of my life, I wouldn't have believed you."

"Did you just refer to me as the love of your life?" I teased.

“I did. Am I not the same for you?” Jared asked.

By now, I knew him inside out. Jared was just pulling my leg, of course. I leaned over and kissed him on the mouth.

“Yes, you are. Without a doubt,” I told him. “Good, because for a second there I wondered if I needed to find a replacement,” Jared said, smiling.

JARED

ONE MONTH LATER

“**Y**ou ready?” Crash asked me.

He looked over his shoulder, and when he spotted Hudson asleep in my arms, his expression softened.

Crash didn't need to tell me how much he loved me and our son. It was right there on his face.

“I am,” I answered in my most solemn voice.

Of course, I knew what Crash, Greed, and Lenny were up to. I had secretly hired Rico to find out what the three bear alphas were up to.

Crash was building me a house. That revelation still shook me, because I couldn't imagine asking my wonderful mate for more.

I mean, sure, it was getting a little crowded in my apartment.

Crash had moved his things there right after Hudson was born, but we both knew it was a temporary solution.

“Watch your step,” Crash said.

He guided me past a grove of oaks, then led me and Hudson to a beautiful clearing.

The cozy cabin in the center looked picturesque and unreal. An old oak tree and tall blades of grass dotted with violet wildflowers surrounded it.

Crash had even attached a swing to a nearby tree. Hudson wouldn't be able to use that yet, but I could imagine sitting on that swing with my baby boy on my lap.

"Wow," I whispered.

Crash gave me a side-eyed look.

"You knew about this, didn't you? Who told you? Was it Greed? It can't be Micah. Micah's reliable, but Greed? That guy could never keep a secret."

"I won't tell you my source," I said, smiling. "The three of you did all this?"

"Well, a few of the others also helped out," Crash said.

He led me to the wide, wrap-around porch. The hardwood felt sturdy under my feet.

The porch swing made me smile. I could already picture Crash and me spending lazy afternoons there—Crash playing with Hudson while I read a book next to them.

Crash also placed my dad's favorite wicker rocking chairs next to the porch swing. My heart swelled with gratefulness.

The front door had a welcome sign on it, along with a matching mat.

Crash flipped the mat with his feet, revealing a tiny old-fashioned golden key. I handed Hudson over to him and picked up the key.

I opened the door to our magical castle. Well, the cabin to me was a castle because I felt like I'd been dropped into a fairy tale.

Sure, Crash and I had faced plenty of obstacles to get to where we were right now.

We tackled a demon, for crying out loud, but we didn't need to worry about anyone coming after us anymore.

After Bernard's death, his companies dissolved. The pieces left behind were fought over by his investors.

As for my house in Fair Creek, Ronda introduced me to Cassie, her real

estate friend. Cassie managed to get a good price for the house.

As I walked inside our new home, I noticed Crash had put some of my old furniture in.

Tears welled in my eyes as I wandered into the living room, which came with an enormous fireplace.

I ran my fingers over Ken's favorite rocking chair, over the framed photographs of Ken, Reid, Jace, and me.

Buster lay curled up on the rug in front of the fireplace. Spotting me, he ran up to me, circled around my legs, then returned to his rug.

"You really do get me," I whispered to Crash.

I turned to my mate. Since Crash was still holding Hudson, I hugged him from behind.

I took a few seconds to breathe in his wonderful and familiar scent.

"Thank you," I told him. "For everything. You make me happy, Crash."

"Babe, I should be the one thanking you. I would still be lonely and empty if you had never entered my life," Crash said.

"And the seer lived happily with his motorcycle prince and their beautiful son in a lovely cabin in the woods," I murmured.

"Come on," Crash said, his voice choked with emotion. "I'll show you the rest of the place."

"I'd like that," I told him.

THE END

Want more of Crash and Jared? Sign up for Fel's newsletter to get a FREE bonus scene [here](#).

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A SNEAK PREVIEW OF HIS WINTER FOX

NICK

I growled, hearing the damn alarm on my phone. I was all groggy and disoriented, trying to find that annoying thing.

Usually, I stashed it under my pillow, but this morning, it had gone rogue and ended up who-knows-where.

After some colorful cursing, I finally spotted it lurking under the bed.

I snatched the phone and fumbled to turn the alarm off, only to realize I had no reason to be up so early.

It was my day off and I didn't have to drag myself to the workshop. I sighed, wishing I'd turned the darn alarm off the night before.

With the irritation fading, I debated whether I should just fall back into bed and go back to sleep. Too bad I was now wide-awake.

I glanced out the window, my breath misting up the glass. When I'd made the move to Fox Haven, it had been a different world.

It was summer then, and the town had looked like something out of a postcard, all green and vibrant.

But now, it was winter, and a blanket of snow had transformed the landscape. Everything was quiet, white, and cold.

Apartment hunting had been a real nightmare when I first arrived here. Small town, limited options.

It was just my luck that I stumbled into Owen's territory.

Owen, the lead alpha of my new pack, had offered me one of the unused cabins the pack owned to rent.

It had been a lifesaver, and I couldn't be more grateful for his hospitality.

As I watched the snow-covered ground and the trees heavy with their frozen burden, it reminded me of why I hated this time of year the most.

This time last year, it was a different kind of cold that had pierced my heart.

I remembered the shock and pain of finding Gary, my fiancé, in bed with my ex-best friend, Ben.

Gary and I had been together for three amazing years, and it felt like the perfect time to finally tie the knot.

I was excited beyond words, and I wanted to make the proposal unforgettable.

So, I did the one thing that meant the world to me: I begged my alpha father for the ring he had used to propose to my omega dad.

I had hoped the ring would bring the same kind of happiness to Gary and me.

With the ring carefully tucked away, I decided to make the evening even more special.

I bought a bottle of the finest champagne I could find, planning to pop it when I asked the most important question of my life.

I couldn't wait to see the look on Gary's face, the joy in his eyes when I asked him to spend the rest of our lives together.

My heart was pounding as I made my way to his apartment.

But when I opened the door, the world came crashing down around me. There he was, the love of my life, in bed with my ex-best friend, Ben.

My entire universe crumbled in that moment and the betrayal still stung. I pushed those awful memories away.

Suddenly feeling trapped in the cabin, the walls closing in on me, I decided that a morning run in the woods as my fox form was the perfect escape.

The need for the freedom and solitude that the forest provided was irresistible.

I washed my face in the cabin's small bathroom, the cold water refreshing against my skin.

I couldn't wait any longer. I had to get out of there. I left the cabin, the door closing with a soft click behind me.

I undressed quickly, leaving my boxers and shirt in a neat pile by the porch, and took a deep breath.

Shifting was always a bit of a rush.

My body transformed. Fur covered my chest and shoulders. I shrank. Bones broke and organs moved.

The world around me changed. I set off into the woods.

At first, this place had felt like a maze, but now, after so many runs, I knew every twist and turn, every hidden nook and corner.

A part of me was still reluctant to call Fox Haven home.

I was more like the outsider, everyone else tolerated but barely knew and I was fine with that. I didn't come here to make friends.

My paws padded softly against the forest floor, and I went deeper into the woods, the sense of familiarity calming me.

Soon enough, I forgot about Gary and Ben.

As I approached a familiar loop in the trail, my animal senses caught a glimpse of another fox shifter in the distance.

I perked up ears up in surprise. In the pack, there were only two fox shifters with white fur.

One was Cal, a pack enforcer, and an alpha. The other one was Matt, an omega who had recently transferred from another pack, just like me.

I slowed down, my sharp eyes focused on the other white fox. Judging by his smaller size, it was definitely Matt.

I watched Matt as he curiously approached each fir tree in the clearing. What did I know about Matt? Very little.

Matt worked at the pack clinic. He was always friendly and cheerful to our pack mates.

Unlike me, he was sociable and made it a point to attend every town and pack gathering.

But I'd never been a people person, and after the whole mess with Gary and Ben, I'd become even more of a grump.

So, I kept my distance, content to observe from afar.

As Matt stopped by each tree, staring at them for a moment, I was tempted to ask him what he was doing.

It was a strange sight, and it piqued my interest, but something held me back. It's none of my business, I reminded myself.

Besides, there was something about Matt's cheerfulness that always seemed a little fabricated to me.

He was hiding something. Not that I didn't have my own share of secrets. Everyone had them.

I growled softly, realizing that I'd never be the social fox of the pack. It wasn't in my nature, and Gary's betrayal had made me even more withdrawn.

With a shake of my head, I decided to leave Matt to his tree inspection and made my way back to my cabin.

Sometimes, it was just better to stick to what I knew and leave others to their business.

Returning to my porch, I couldn't help but notice the open door to my cabin. Every fur in my body stood up.

My first instinct was worry that an intruder had broken in. Back in my old pack, we'd always been vigilant about locking our doors.

But this was Fox Haven, a different world, and fox shifters around the pack compound rarely bothered with such precautions.

Everyone trusted everyone. It was just that kind of town.

With a sigh, I reminded myself that this wasn't my old pack, and things were different here.

It was more likely that I had an unexpected visitor, perhaps another member of the pack.

Shifting back into my human form, I swiftly donned my shirt and boxers and decided to check who it was.

The delicious scent of freshly brewed coffee pulled me into the kitchen.

As I followed the aroma, it mixed with another familiar smell, and I couldn't help but ask, "Owen, what brings you here?"

I was not happy to see him. Owen, the lead alpha of the pack, was casually pouring coffee into two mugs.

He handed one over to me and I grudgingly accepted.

It wasn't the first time Owen had dropped by for a chat, and it wasn't like he was giving me special treatment.

He was just a more down-to-earth and hands-on kind of alpha compared to the leader I'd known in my old pack.

I found a seat at the kitchen table, wondering what he wanted.

I was always a bit on edge around Owen, but I had to admit that his friendly approach was a refreshing change from the standoffishness of my previous pack leader.

As I sipped my coffee, Owen asked, "Have you eaten breakfast, Nick?"

I replied with a curt, "No."

My mood wasn't exactly sunny this morning. I wondered if he checked the contents of my fridge and cabinets.

If he did, he'd find nothing. I made a mental note to head to town and buy some groceries.

Undeterred by my single-word answer, Owen asked, "We missed you at the last pack meeting. Everything okay?"

The truth was, I hadn't attended the meeting last week because I'd received some unwelcome news – an invitation to Gary and Ben's wedding in the mail.

Why they would send me that, I had no clue. I had made it clear to them both that I wanted no part of their lives.

Still, gripping the invitation card felt like a punch in the gut.

Eventually, I'd decided not to make an appearance at the pack meeting.

I would be in a foul mood and no good to anyone in that state.

Most of my pack mates had given up on me. Owen, though, was trying to get me to open up, to be more sociable.

I owed him a lot, and I inwardly, I knew couldn't keep shutting people out.

So, with a sigh, I admitted, "I was busy, but I won't miss any more meetings."

Owen gave me a reassuring nod. "Good. Finish your coffee, and then we can leave together," he said.

I frowned, trying to process Owen's unexpected invitation.

"Leave together? What? Where are we going?"

I was planning to spend my day off indoors, wrapped up in a cozy blanket, and lazing around.

Maybe if I had enough energy left, I'd run to the grocery store. I was in that kind of mood.

"For the Christmas party planning session, of course," Owen said, like it was obvious.

I couldn't help but groan. I did remember receiving a reminder in my email from the pack administrator a few days ago.

All pack members were encouraged to attend, and 'encouraged' had been rather heavily highlighted.

How was I going to tell Owen that I wasn't exactly a fan of the Christmas holidays?

I didn't even have the heart to admit that I wanted no part in the festivities.

With a deep sigh, I continued to stare at my half-empty coffee cup while Owen set his own mug down.

He looked expectantly at me, and I had a sinking feeling that he wasn't going anywhere until I complied.

Owen was the only person who knew why I had transferred from my old pack to the Fox Haven pack.

Never once did he bring up Gary and Ben but he could've had.

Grunting softly under my breath, I finally relented and finished my coffee. There was really no getting out of this torture.

Then, I finally grabbed my coat, my earlier plans of a lazy day off now forgotten.

"Oh," Owen added as I met him by the front door. He looked me up and down. "You should probably put on some pants as well. It's freezing outside."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicia loves writing sizzling MM romances with hot Alphas and happily-ever-afters.

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