

CUB LAKE SHIFTERS

Bearly
MATED



LOLA GLASS

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Cover by Aura

To short love stories you can read in the bathtub in an hour or two

one

CALLIE

I DRUMMED my fingers on the diner's table, forcing myself to breathe through the bundle of nerves in my abdomen.

The checkered flooring and cherry-red booths screamed of decades past, and everything about the building reminded me of my childhood.

Even the pink and red paper hearts, streamers, and other Valentine's Day décor were familiar.

I combed my long, dark blonde hair over my shoulders and straightened the faded t-shirt I'd paired with black leggings.

It was going to be fine. Everything was going to work out.

The bell over the door jingled, and my head jerked upward.

A relieved breath escaped me.

It wasn't Hudson.

Yet.

My phone buzzed on the countertop, and I looked down at the screen.

WREN

Is he there yet?

You can still back out. I can fill out the paperwork with the clan, and give you whatever you need to make the payments manageable

I bit my lip and texted back.

ME

I'm not making you do that, or taking your money

I'll be fine

My best friend worked as a waitress at the diner, but she'd gotten off an hour earlier. Though she'd offered to stay for moral support, I'd turned her down. I didn't want to make her life any harder than it already was.

And my problems were my own.

Well, they were my dad's—but they had become mine when I buried him two months earlier.

Hence the meeting with Hudson.

My childhood best friend who I'd been secretly in love with through our teenage years, and the only adult bear shifter I was still in contact with. We only talked two or three times a year, and hadn't been face-to-face since our high school graduation eight years earlier, but he would always be family to me.

Well, not *family*, family.

I didn't think I'd ever stop wanting to screw him.

But family, because he was so familiar.

Anyway, supernatural beings had been a part of human society for a long time. We had been at peace for more than a century.

Cub Lake was a small town with the highest percentage of bear shifters *anywhere*, which meant everyone in town knew them. The bears were usually born male, and there weren't a lot of them by any means.

I happened to know *why* there weren't a lot of them—because they refused to stay with their mates after *breeding* with them.

And I was going to use that fact to save my ass.

Wren had grown up in Cub Lake too, though we hadn't become close until we realized we were at the same university. Two semesters in, she realized she wanted to open a bookstore in our hometown, and moved back.

We'd talked every day since then, and when I moved back after getting the news about my dad, had started spending a ton of time together in-person instead of just texting. I helped her at the store or with her toddler when I could, and had a ton of fun doing it.

She didn't agree with my plan—she'd even called it insane—but it was the best option as far as I was concerned.

The bell over the door dinged again, and I looked up once more.

False alarm. Again.

The middle-aged man in the doorway was one I knew well, though. Small town problems. He saw me, and his eyes lit up as he crossed the room.

Conversation incoming.

Dread flooded me, but it couldn't make me feel any worse than I already did. And the fact that he was a bear shifter only increased my worry.

“Callie Jones,” he said, offering a hand as he approached my table. “It's been a while.”

I stood reluctantly, and took his hand. “Kevin Carter,” I said, forcing a smile. “It has been a while.”

The feelings that surfaced when I shook his hand were strong ones. He had been one of my dad's best friends, and felt more like family than anything.

But missing dad made those feelings bittersweet, and the bills I had hidden under my bag made me wonder whether or not

he'd known what my dad was up to and just didn't get involved.

Suspicion was a bitch.

Kevin chuckled, and pulled me in for a hug. I hugged him back, and he let go after a brief moment. "How are you doing? I heard you were only staying in town for a few days after the funeral."

"That was the plan," I said, laughing a little awkwardly. "Going through everything took longer than I expected."

And my shitty, full-time assistant job had been bad enough that I wasn't even disappointed about moving back from New York.

"It always does. Can I sit?" He gestured to the bench across from mine.

"I'm meeting Hudson, actually," I admitted. Everyone in town knew about our childhood friendship.

And as much as I would've preferred to keep the meeting a secret, it was bound to come out. People would see us and talk, like they always did.

Everyone would realize what I was signing up for pretty quickly. Since I'd have to stay in Cub Lake indefinitely, there was no point in trying to hide it.

Recognition crossed Kevin's face. "You're not..."

"I've got to go," I said, forcing another smile. "But it's good to see you."

He frowned. "If you need money, I—"

The bell over the door jingled again.

The hairs on the back of my neck raised, and a masculine smell had me taking in a small breath.

It was Hudson.

Definitely Hudson.

"Bye." I gave Kevin another smile, slightly more genuine.

A man stepped up next to him, and my eyes landed on the newcomer—then widened.

Hudson had *definitely* grown up. And though we'd video-chatted and talked on the phone, that was nowhere near enough to understand the full impact of a six-and-a-half foot bear shifter built like a tank.

He still had the same piercing green eyes, tan skin, and dark hair, but I was standing in front of the *man* version of my best childhood friend. Not the teenage punk I'd left behind when I moved away for college.

"Holy shit, Hud." The words slipped out before I could stop them.

He cracked a smile, his eyes moving down my figure before landing on my face. "Fuck, Cal."

I rolled my eyes, but stepped into his arms the moment they opened for me. It had been a long eight years, but he would always feel like home to me.

Kevin excused himself with a murmur, but I barely heard him leave.

Hudson inhaled deeply, a typical bear thing to do, and I smiled against his chest when he rumbled like he always had. "At least you still smell like you."

"You know I look exactly the same as I did when I left."

"Like hell you do. You were pretty when you left me—now you're sexy."

I snorted. "Shut up."

He chuckled, rumbling again before he released me. Though I would've rather stayed in his arms and avoided the coming conversation, I sat down on one side of the booth.

He took the other, somehow moving smoothly despite the massive brick wall he resembled.

"So," he said.

"So." I bit my lip.

The waiter picked that moment to come by and take Hudson's order. He recognized that we were just seeing each other for the first time in years and didn't bother trying to stay and chat, which I appreciated.

"Your text said you needed help," he said.

I hadn't talked to him since before the funeral, and he didn't live in Cub Lake, so I didn't think he knew what had happened. I'd assumed his family would let him know at the time, but he never called. And I knew him well enough to be sure he would've called if he'd heard.

Though I'd known I should send him a text or just pick up the phone and call him, the idea of a conversation about it had been overwhelming.

So I just... didn't.

"My dad passed away two months ago," I admitted. "He had been fighting cancer for a while without telling me. He didn't want me to leave my life in New York. The hospital called me a few days before I lost him." I tried to stick to the facts, so I wouldn't get emotional.

"What? Why the fuck didn't you call me?"

"I dealt with it," I said. "That's not why we're meeting." I grabbed my sheets of paper off the seat beside me. They had been tucked under my small crossbody bag, so no one would accidentally see them.

I slid them across the table, and Hudson glanced down at the pages.

His eyes narrowed when he saw the numbers on the bottom.

I didn't need to look.

One was from the hospital. The other was from the bank.

"He told me when he was dying that he'd started gambling again while I was gone. Remortgaged the house. Spent his retirement fund and maxed credit cards. He didn't have life insurance, so all of my savings went into the funeral and other expenses. The mortgage transferred to me. Then the hospital bills came in. Apparently in our state, adult children are

responsible for their parents' medical debt. Some weird law about it passed a few years ago."

"Is there a repayment plan?"

"The monthly payment is on the bottom right on both pages. I can sell the house, but I'll still owe too much money," I said. "It'll be hanging over my head for the next two decades. Maybe more. And that's even if I throw every extra penny at it."

"I'll cover it," Hudson said, without pause. "I can afford it."

"I'm not taking your money. That's not why we're here," I said firmly. "I'm going to fill out the paperwork to become a breeder. With the money that comes with growing a little bear shifter, I can pay everything off, and have enough left over to fix up my dad's house."

"No, Callie." He leaned over the table, his hands on the surface. The man was so big, most people would've felt threatened by the motion. Not me, though. "That's not the only answer."

"It's the *best* answer."

Hudson growled at me, and I didn't let myself look around the diner. We had everyone's attention, without a doubt, and it was far from the first time he'd growled at me. Wouldn't be the last, either. "I'll find you another way."

He stood, taking my papers with him as he stormed out.

He wasn't going to find anything. I'd paid a lawyer to look through it already. Couldn't afford not to, in my situation.

I could choose to spend the next two decades struggling with money and barely making ends meet, or I could agree to let a bear shifter breed me, and raise my baby without having to stress.

Considering I'd always wanted to start a family, the second option was clearly better. Sure, it wouldn't be a traditional family, but I would love my baby enough to make it work.

Hudson had always been protective, so his response was exactly what I expected. There was no way I could've gone

behind his back and filled out the paperwork without talking to him first, though.

With every eye on me, I grabbed my bag and slipped out of the diner.

An hour later, I was leaving Hudson's father's house with a signed contract and a card that listed my upcoming *appointment times*. There was a bear shifter tailing me, as there would be until the breeding was done.

And though my heart was beating insanely hard, I was still confident I'd made the right choice.

My life was going to change—but it would change for the better.

two

HUDSON

“YOU SHOULD’VE SAID *NO*,” I snarled at my father, raking a hand through my hair for the dozenth time. I’d been fighting the urge to shift and let my bear rampage since I left the diner.

I worked for the supernatural government’s security team, so I had access to a damn good demon lawyer. But by the time I got off the phone with him, Callie had already been on clan land and signed away her life.

“She had proof that the debt was inescapable.”

“I could’ve bailed her out,” I said through gritted teeth.

“We both know her well enough to be confident she would never have allowed that. *This* is how we bail her out. Now, tell me which of our males you’d prefer to breed her.” He spread pictures of our unmated clan members over his desk, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

I saw red. “Anyone who touches her loses their fucking head.”

“I could call in one of your friends from the security crew, if you’d prefer.”

I bit back a roar of outrage, clenching my fists as I fought the urge to shift.

My father leaned back in his chair, as if the conversation was *relaxing*. “Or you could admit that you’ve considered her yours since you were a kid.”

My fists clenched tighter. “You know I’ve never wanted to do that to her. Bear shifters don’t stay with their mates.”

“I know you’ve been in love with her and fighting the urge to claim her since you were fifteen. Now, you’ve got one day to decide whether you’ll mate her or let someone else have her.”

“This is bullshit,” I growled.

“It’s life, Hudson.”

I forced myself to leave before I could do something I might regret. As soon as I was free of the building, my fur tore through my skin, and I shifted. Barreling into the trees, I forced my mind to clear.

Bear shifters didn’t live with their mates, and there wasn’t a fucking chance I would let myself hurt Callie by leaving her.

So I couldn’t do it.

She wasn’t mine, despite the way I’d felt since I was a kid.

Even as I thought the words, my paws carried me down an overgrown path through the forest that I knew better than anything else in my hometown.

A path that led directly to her.

three

CALLIE

“YOU CAN’T GO through with this,” Wren said, her collarbone-length, dark brown hair a wreck as she ran her hand through the top of it again.

“It’s going to be good.” I leaned back in my porch swing, my socked feet braced on the railing. Though I would be enjoying Cub Lake for the entire foreseeable future, I couldn’t resist the urge to sit outside and take in the view. “I’ll have my baby. Our boys will be friends. I don’t need a partner.”

“You’re going to get to know him, though. It’s going to hurt.”

“I’m a tough cookie.”

“Do you remember that time you found an injured feral cat behind our dorm?” she asked.

“Not this again.”

“Do you, Callie? Because you fed that cat until it was healed, and when it left without coming back, you were crushed. You were sad about it for *months*. And that was a cat you barely knew.”

“I’m going to keep and raise my baby,” I protested. “You know I’ll love him more than anything. I—”

“I’m not talking about the baby. The baby will be loved and spoiled. I’m talking about *you*. Because the guy who breeds you isn’t going to stay. You’re going to have his baby, and he’s going to become a permanent fixture in your life. Permanently floating in and out. Mostly out. And nothing you can do will change that.” I could hear the pain in her voice.

Though she hadn't seen her mate since he knocked her up, she had been really damn in love with him. She didn't say she missed him, but I could tell she did every time the topic came up.

"I know, Wren. But this is the only option that makes sense. My baby will have a good childhood, and I'll get to watch him grow up. That has to be enough. You were strong enough to survive this—I will be too, because I have to be."

Wren didn't say anything for a moment, then finally said, "Shifter pregnancies are a bitch. You'll have all of the worst symptoms the humans have. You'll puke through the whole pregnancy, your heartburn will be so bad you feel like your chest and throat are on fire... not to mention the gestational diabetes. It's a cluster. You're lucky you'll have me there to hold your hand."

My lips curved upward. "I know. I'm a lucky bitch."

I heard the humor in her voice when she said, "You have to promise me that you're going to date through the pregnancy and afterward. You hate being alone. You can't spend your life alone."

I nodded, eyes stinging behind my eyelids. "Alright. Fine." She was right—I knew she was right. "You have to start dating too, though. I can't do it alone."

"Alright, deal. Now is when we act cheerful, isn't it?" she asked, lifting her voice a little.

A soft laugh escaped me. "Yep."

"You're going to fuck a bear shifter. Your whole world will be rocked, because nothing even comes close to comparing."

"I can't say I'm disappointed about that. It's been years since I was with anyone."

"Which is why you're going to have to be really, really careful not to catch feelings."

"That's fair." I leaned back in my chair. "Do I need to be worried about anything?"

“Not as far as the sex goes. It’s just otherworldly-good,” she said.

“Fingers crossed that my shifter is as good in bed as yours. I—”

A low, angry growl rolled in from the forest in front of me, and I cut myself off.

“Was that a bear?” Wren asked.

“It sounded like...” The bear stepped out from behind a few trees, and I recognized him immediately. “Yeah, it’s just Hudson. I’ll call you back.”

Hudson walked up to the porch, his steps heavy and his anger not fading. I ended the call, and he climbed right up the porch’s steps. They’d been replaced during my teenage years after he broke one in his bear form, but that was ten years earlier. The wood creaked and dipped beneath him, and I grimaced.

“Careful. I don’t have the money to replace those,” I warned.

He plodded up and came over to me without pause, ignoring the warning. Lowering himself to the porch, he rested his gigantic head on my lap like he had when we were kids.

I scratched his head lightly, the way I always had, and he made a noise of contentment. “Not yet, anyway,” I revised.

He growled at me again.

I gave him a small smile, though he didn’t see it. “Your dad probably told you I signed the contract, huh?”

He made an angry noise.

That was a yes.

“Not everyone has a clan to fall back on when money gets tight,” I said. “This isn’t what I planned, but I’m looking forward to becoming a mom. I know everything will work out. And I’m sure your clan will pick a good guy to be my mate.” I bit my lip, fighting my emotions again.

Hudson’s lips lifted in a snarl, his chest vibrating with the sound.

“It’s been a long time since we talked. I hope things are still going well for you and the other guys who joined the security team. Is Reed still your closest friend?”

Reed was the father of Wren’s toddler, not that he’d shown any interest in coming back to Cub Lake to raise the perfect little squirt. I’d never commented on Hudson’s shitty choice in friends, because I didn’t want to say something I’d regret.

And because Wren had never actually come out and told him he got her pregnant.

Which was morally questionable, but... well, I understood. He’d bitten her and screwed her without protection, and bear shifters almost always knocked their mates up the first time they were together without birth control. He should’ve assumed that she got pregnant, or at least texted her to ask.

But she hadn’t heard a peep from him since he ditched her while she was in the shower.

So I didn’t blame her for staying quiet about her son.

Hudson ignored my question about Reed, which reminded me of high school so much I had to smile. He had always ignored questions he didn’t want to answer when he was in his bear form. The animalistic instincts and behaviors grew stronger when he wore his fur. I was pretty sure the same thing was true for all bear shifters, but I wasn’t positive.

“I wanted to invite you to the funeral,” I said. “But I didn’t know what to say or how to tell you. You’re always so busy. And I thought your mom would let you know. It was nice, though. He kept his gambling addiction hidden, so no one talked about that. They spoke about how good he was at his job. How everyone loved to spend time with him. How he always ordered the same exact meal from the diner for breakfast every morning.”

I told him about the burial, the lunch that followed it, and the way I’d visited his and my mom’s graves every day for the rest of the week. She had passed on when I was a toddler. From cancer, too.

I told him how I’d gone through my dad’s things.

How I lost my shitty executive assistant job because my boss wouldn't give me a week off to say goodbye to my father and figure out everything else that needed to be done.

How I'd flown back to New York and packed all my things, then driven back to Cub Lake alone in a moving truck.

How I'd gotten the bills I'd shown him, and hoped they were a scam. How my heart had dropped into my stomach when the lawyers confirmed they were real.

By the time I stopped talking, the sun had set.

When I wished him goodnight and went inside to make beans and rice to appease my growling stomach, he stayed on the porch.

I peeked out the window after my dinner and a shower, and found him still sitting there in his fur. Though it looked like he was sleeping, I recognized the position well enough to know he was guarding me.

My teenage self would've wondered if that meant he had feelings for me.

It would've made me want him more.

But my adult self was smart enough to realize that he must've taken over for the bear shifter who had followed me home... because he wasn't there romantically.

He never was.

And that had to be okay.

four

CALLIE

THE PORCH WAS empty when I looked out the next morning. Part of me was disappointed that Hudson was gone, though I knew it was to be expected. He wouldn't want to be around me much when I was pregnant with some other guy's baby. Bears were possessive of the people they cared about, despite despising commitment.

He'd probably gone back to his security team already. He hadn't ever left me without saying goodbye in the past, but being a bear, goodbyes were pretty much unexpected.

I padded over to my fridge and opened it up, staring at the desolate shelves.

No breakfast for me until the breeding money came in. Just more beans and rice.

Lovely.

The money wouldn't come in until I had a positive pregnancy test at a doctor's office, but that was fine. From what I understood, the bear would most-likely knock me up after screwing me once, since I wasn't on birth control. I'd stopped taking the pills when the lawyer told me she didn't think she could get me out of my dad's debt.

When she confirmed it, I put them away in the back of the drawer.

I looked at the time—only an hour until the first of my multiple doctor's appointments—and headed back to my

bedroom to get dressed. I'd nearly reached it when someone knocked on my front door.

I frowned.

No one had knocked on my door in weeks. The casseroles and freezer meals had been great around and after the funeral, but they'd tapered off pretty quickly.

I padded to the door, surprised when I found a freshly-showered Hudson on the doorstep in a tight gray shirt and a pair of jeans that fit *too* well. He had a bag of takeout food in one hand, and two cups of coffee in the other.

Before I could ask what he was doing there and what the food was for, he'd stepped into the house and put one of the coffee cups in my hand.

"You still drink it with more milk and sugar than coffee, right?" he asked, on his way to the kitchen table.

"...Yes." I finally shut the door and trailed into the kitchen behind him.

"Still prefer bacon over sausage, and hashbrowns over roasted potatoes?" He opened one of two to-go trays.

I blinked.

He remembered all of that?

"And—"

I interrupted him. "What are you doing here, Hud? You should be back with your security team by now. You don't live here, and you rarely visit for holidays. You should be on a plane."

He handed me a fork.

I accepted it, even though I had no idea what was going on.

As he opened the second tray, he said calmly, "The clan chose me."

"Chose you for what?"

"To breed with you." He met my gaze steadily.

Way too steadily.

I went still.

He captured my wrist and gently pulled me toward the chair next to his, where he'd set up one of the trays. I didn't sit down, though he clearly wanted me to.

"You think of me as a sister," I finally said.

"I think of you as my best friend."

"You've never been attracted to me, Hud. Even in high school. I tried to kiss you at the beginning of sophomore year, remember? You completely shut me down." My face warmed with memories of the one time things had been weird between us. "I'll call your dad and ask him to find someone else."

"He won't," Hudson said. "Eat your food. We have a doctors' appointment soon."

"That's not..." I dropped the plastic fork he'd given me and stepped back. "You are *not* breeding me. You're not even attracted to me! We're not—"

He stood again.

Then he calmly stepped closer to me, and put his hands on my waist.

I sucked in a breath at the sudden touch.

He'd never held me that way before.

And I could feel his erection against my lower belly, already proving me wrong about attraction.

"I shut you down when we were sophomores because I'd been fighting the urge to claim you for more than a year, Cal. If I'd kissed you that day, I would've ended up biting you."

When a bear shifter bit a woman, he was hers for the rest of his life. He could never be with anyone else, physically or mentally.

That didn't make him stay, though. It just made him loyal no matter the distance between them.

"You've told me everything about bears, remember? I know exactly what it was like for your mom. I saw it. I'm not doing

that with *you*,” I said firmly.

“Why not?”

“Because it’ll break me, Hudson!” I tossed a hand toward his chest. “It’ll be hard enough dealing with a flaky bear I barely know. But you? I actually care about you. So, no. I’m not doing it.” I closed the lid on the takeout food he’d brought for me and put the container on top of his. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” His voice was still calm.

Calm enough to make me want to rip my hair out.

I pushed his hands off my hips and stormed back to my room, pulling my phone from my pocket and lifting it to my ear.

It rang four times before Hudson’s father answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mr. Claw. It’s Callie again.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, it’s just—” I let out a short breath. “Hudson is in my kitchen, claiming that *he’s* the one who’s going to breed with me.”

“That’s what the clan decided,” he agreed. “It’s standard to pair a woman with the male she’ll get along with best, for the sake of the child. Considering your history, he was the obvious choice.”

“Respectfully, I disagree. Because of our history, Hudson and I won’t be able to coparent peacefully. He spent most of the day, *every* day, with me for more than thirteen years. I’ll never see a reason he can’t give his child even more dedication.”

“That’s something to discuss with him. The assignment has been made and the contracts signed. Hudson is the only one who can cancel it now. Have a good day, Callie.” He hung up.

I groaned, shoving a hand through my hair.

Hudson knocked on my bedroom door. “We need to leave in twenty minutes, Cal. Come out here and eat.”

I crossed the room and yanked the door open, my face as hot as my temper. “Why are you doing this? This isn’t what you

want. This isn't what I want. I can get along with almost anyone, so there has to be someone else in the clan willing to breed with me."

He stepped up to me and wrapped his hands around my face, tilting my head back as he leaned his toward me. "I chose this, Callie. My dad asked me who to assign to you, and I couldn't let anyone else have you. This *is* what I want. You're mine. You've always been mine."

"That's *not* true. I—"

He kissed me.

It was just a brush of his lips to mine at first. A whisper of desire.

Then his tongue was in my mouth, and he was kissing me like it was the only chance he'd ever get. Like he was burning, and I could put out the fire.

Like he'd wanted me since we were teenagers, and had finally decided to do something about it.

And I couldn't help but kiss him back with just as much intensity.

I was gasping for air when he finally pulled away, my heart pounding like a freight train.

"You need to eat while you can," he said. "Growing a bear cub is extremely hard on a human body."

"You kiss me like that, and all you can think to say is '*eat your damn breakfast*'?"

His lips curved up in a grin. "It was either *eat* or *take your clothes off*. Considering I'm supposed to be making sure you don't fuck anyone before breeding, taking you to bed isn't exactly a good choice."

"If you're the one who's going to breed me, what would it matter?" I stepped out of his arms and strode back to the kitchen, my heart still beating hard.

"It's just the way things are done."

"Like leaving your mate?"

He grimaced. “Yeah.”

I sat down in front of the food. “I find it hard to believe that there aren’t *any* bear shifters living with their mates. If you guys are willing to pay a woman such an insane amount of money to have a kid for you so bear shifters don’t die out, wouldn’t it make more sense to settle down with her for the long run and have multiple kids?”

“Logically, yes. But most bears can’t stay in one place for that long. Living with your mate while knowing you’ll eventually leave her is crueler than not living with her at all. I don’t keep in contact with anyone in the clan, but there was always one guy who lived with his mate. He was the only one, and is very much an outsider for it.”

“Do you guys just not understand commitment, or what? Because commitment means knowing you *might* want to leave, but choosing to stay anyway and figuring out a way to enjoy it in the process. Because you made a promise. Or a vow.”

“We don’t make promises or vows.”

“Because you’re all too afraid to commit, and too much of assholes to stay.”

“Eat your breakfast, Cal. You still need to get dressed.”

I was wearing a pair of pajama shorts and a sleep shirt. “If we do this, we’re not going to be friends anymore, Hud. I won’t think positively of you. I won’t be able to stop myself from pointing out your shittyness to my son, so that one day he might grow up to be as good a man as the outsider in your pack who stays with his mate. Tell your dad to pick someone else, so we don’t have to hate each other.”

His jaw set. “I’m physically incapable of letting you mate with anyone else, Callie. There’s no other choice.”

“As long as you understand that it will change everything.”

He jerked his head. “I get it.”

“And I’m going alone to the doctor’s office. We’re not together. Since I’m going through the pregnancy and delivery

on my own, you're not going with me like we're a couple."

"I'm your guard right now." His voice was clipped. "I have to go with you."

"You can follow me, like the last guard did."

His chest rumbled with a growl, but he didn't argue any further. I think he realized I wasn't playing around. He'd kissed me, and it was even better than I would've imagined, but our situation was still the same.

He was a bear shifter, I was a human, and our different cultures when it came to relationships weren't compatible.

No matter how desperately I'd wanted him for much of my life.

We ate together in silence.

When we were done, he waited on the porch while I got ready. Afterward, he followed me to the clan's doctor's office in the truck he'd brought to my house that morning. I recognized it as the one he'd driven when we were teenagers, but didn't bring it up.

We *weren't* a couple.

five

CALLIE

EIGHT HOURS and an infinite number of exams, blood tests, and scans later, I finally drove back to my house with an all-clear from the clan's doctor.

Apparently, I was in peak fertility.

Yay.

My *breeding appointment* was scheduled for the next morning.

It made me sick to think about Hudson showing up at my door promptly at 8 AM to fuck me and leave afterward.

Also, turned on.

But mostly sick.

The nerves would've been worse if it was a stranger.

It was what I'd signed up for, though. And it was just a few minutes of sex—I'd survive it. I'd had sex with a whopping three men in my adult life, so I was basically a professional.

I snorted to myself at the thought.

I'd updated Wren on the Hudson development on my way to the doctor, and texted her that I'd gotten the all-clear as I left, so she called and asked me about it as I drove home.

I hung up when I arrived, and went right to work making beans and rice yet again.

The knock on my door while I was adding water to the rice shouldn't have surprised me, but it did.

“Our *appointment* isn’t until the morning,” I told Hudson, as I pulled the door open.

“We’re not fucking on a schedule, Cal.” He stepped into the house, his nostrils flaring. “You don’t have any food except rice and beans, do you?”

“Nope.” I let him shut the door, walking back to the kitchen.

“I’ll order something from the Grill.”

Jerry’s Grill was the only real restaurant in town. The diner closed at two, so dinner there was nonexistent.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I’m doing it anyway.” He caught up to me in the kitchen, putting his hands on my waist. “We need to catch up. Let’s spend tonight talking, like we used to.”

“Everything is different now.”

“Different can be good.”

“Not in this situation.”

He squeezed me lightly. “Just give me a chance, would you? You should know me well enough to know I won’t let your life look like my mom’s.”

“I haven’t known you for eight years, Hudson.”

“Like hell you haven’t. We talked, every few months. We—”

“We only talked when I called you,” I said.

He fell quiet.

“You didn’t text me first, or call me first. You didn’t start conversations, send pictures, or anything else. When my dad died, you weren’t here.”

“No one told me.”

“Because you didn’t ask, Hud. You didn’t care.”

“I cared,” he growled. “It was just better if I maintained the distance.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a bear. Because we’re shitty with commitment. Because—”

I turned around, though his hands remained on my hips. “You never had a problem with commitment as a kid. Or as a teenager.”

He blinked.

I’d known that was true through all of my teenage years. Everyone had warned me again and again that he would grow flaky. That he would resent scheduled activities and obligations. That he would start to withdraw.

I’d given him space to do so. I would’ve been understanding if he did.

But he didn’t.

“You answered every time I texted or called,” I said.

“You’re my best friend. Of course I answered you.”

“Your mom is your dad’s *mate*. Did he answer every time she texted or called?” I asked.

His forehead creased.

We both knew he hadn’t.

And she had avoided messaging or calling him as much as possible, their entire lives.

Being flaky was a choice.

Refusing to commit was a choice.

Bear shifters were full of shit.

Instead of answering my question, his hands tightened on my waist before he lifted me off my feet. I made a surprised noise, and he carried me all the way to the couch before he sat down and set me on his lap, with his chest only inches from mine.

“Hudson,” I began, but he cut me off.

“No more arguing, Callie. I’ve heard your feelings about the matter. I know you don’t like my people’s culture, and I’ve known that my whole life. But you signed up for this, so you’re going to listen to my feelings about it.”

I blinked.

It was hot when he took charge like that. He'd rarely done it when we were teenagers, but it had always been sexy.

"You remember Jimmy Opin asking you to the Spring Fling dance when we were fourteen?" he asked me.

I blinked again.

That seemed like a change of subject.

"I don't see what that—"

"Do you remember?" he repeated.

"Yes. I was thrilled."

"I didn't go over to your house immediately after school like I usually did. I wanted to follow him home and rip his fucking throat out. It was the first time I ever legitimately wanted to hurt someone. My dad had warned me to tell him when I got violent, so I asked my mom to drive me over to his place right after school. I had to explain why, and she was quiet afterward."

I frowned as I listened.

I didn't remember him not coming over right away, but it had happened occasionally.

"Dad explained to me that bear shifters are like most other kinds of shifters when it comes to their mates. Possessive. Violent. Dangerous. But we don't commit the way most do, so we only take mates we don't have any feelings for. Usually."

"Usually?"

He dipped his head. "Fated mates exist for us too. Most bears manage to avoid finding them. I didn't. Having such a strong possessive streak at such a young age was almost a guarantee that you were mine. So my dad called yours and explained the situation. Your dad called Jimmy's and told him you were too young for the dance, removing the potential threat to me."

"*Almost* a guarantee?"

“When you tried to kiss me, my canines shifted automatically. That was the confirmation. And the reason I basically ran away from you. I didn’t want my dad to move me away from you, so I never told him what I’d learned. He figured it out on his own at some point, but I didn’t tell him.”

I leaned back, all but reeling from the story. “So we...”

“We’re fated mates, Cal.”

“You haven’t called or texted me without my prodding in *eight years*.”

“You were happy in New York. I knew you wouldn’t have been happy with me. You hate bear culture. I couldn’t commit to be what you wanted. I thought about you every fucking day and looked through those pictures you sent me obsessively... but I couldn’t take your future from you. If you’d dated anyone, I probably wouldn’t have been able to stop myself from coming after you, but you didn’t. So—”

“I dated people.”

It was his turn to blink. “No you didn’t.”

“Not in High School. No one was attracted to me then.”

He grimaced. “Actually, I had buddies who knew how I felt about you and would tell me if someone was going to make a move. I’d have a conversation with anyone who showed interest and politely threaten to dismember them if they so much as looked at you too long.”

My eyes widened.

That was...

Okay, I wasn’t letting myself think about that yet.

Nope.

“Well, I did date in college. And have since I graduated. I wasn’t going to tell you who I was dating until I had a ring and a commitment, Hud. I had a crush on you for the better part of a decade, and you never even made me think you were attracted to me.”

“I was hard around you constantly,” he protested.

“I was so naïve that I didn’t even know what an erection was until I started college thanks to yours and my dad’s overprotectiveness, so I sure as hell didn’t notice that,” I retorted.

His eyes narrowed. “Who taught you?”

“My roommate—and that’s none of your business. Regardless of what you told yourself when you avoided me, I lost my best friend when I went to college. You don’t get to know those things.”

“For now,” he growled.

“*Ever*,” I shot back. “And I’m still not sure I believe that you’re attracted to me, so—”

He pulled me across his lap, until I was sitting on his cock.

His very *big*, very *hard* cock.

I couldn’t help the way my hips moved just a little, positioning him exactly where I wanted him.

“Do you want to know how many women I’ve dated, and been with?” he asked me, those gorgeous green eyes hot.

“No,” I said without question.

He leaned in and brushed a kiss to my throat. My traitorous head tipped to the side, my eyes closing as he sucked lightly.

I shifted slowly over his erection as he made his way up my neck until he nibbled on my ear, then teased my three lobe piercings with his tongue. “These are new. You didn’t tell me about them.”

“I didn’t tell you about a lot of things.”

“That’s going to change.” He bit down on my earlobe lightly.

“And Callie?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve never been with *anyone*.”

My lips parted, and he kissed them.

Kissed *me*.

Slower, this time. More intimately. There was no desperation behind it. Just desire.

And even though I knew I should push him away, I kissed him back.

My hands moved over his biceps as we kissed, and kissed, and kissed. I pulled away long enough to breathe, “These muscles are new.”

“Not new. Bigger. The gym was a good distraction when I wanted to track you down. And I always wanted to track you down” He dragged my lips back to his, and we got lost in the kiss for a few more minutes.

My hands moved down his pecs, pressing into the muscles when they flexed for me. I slid my fingers down the thick ridges of his abdomen, feeling every dip, swell, and crease. “Love these,” I panted, pulling away again.

He tugged his shirt over his head, exposing his gorgeous torso for me. “They’re yours, Cal.”

With that, he recaptured my mouth.

The way his grip tightened on my hips again and again told me he was fighting the need to touch more of me. And despite knowing that he was going to leave me, that the thing between us could never be what I wanted, I needed his hands on my skin.

“You can touch me,” I said against his mouth. “If you want to. I—”

His hands were beneath my shirt in a heartbeat, moving slowly over my bare abdomen and waist.

He throbbed hard beneath me, kissing me slower.

The way he touched me wasn’t needy, or desperate.

It was intimate.

Hot.

Almost *sacred*.

I felt his canines lengthen in his mouth, and ground against him a little harder.

“You going to bite me?” I asked.

“Eventually.” He dragged his front teeth lightly over my lip, and his hands moved slowly over my ribs. “You feel so damn good.”

“Your hands are still on my *stomach*, Hud.”

“It’s a sexy stomach.” He slid his palms back down before they dragged to my breasts, touching me lightly over the lace of my bra. “And these... fuck.” He squeezed again, still too lightly.

If he really hadn’t been with anyone, he didn’t know how to touch me.

And I liked the advantage that gave me.

For once in our relationship, I had the power.

“Take my shirt off,” I said.

He grabbed the hem of the fabric and slowly peeled it over my head.

His eyes moved over the swell of my breasts, his gaze hot and heavy as his hands found my chest again. His thumbs dragged against my nipples slowly, over my bra. “Fuck.”

“You said that already.” I reached behind my back, unbuckling the red lace fabric. When the straps fell loose, he eased them down my arms, freeing my tits entirely.

“Tell me I can taste them.”

“You can taste any part of me you want.”

The growl that followed my words was low and savage. My back hit the couch cushions a moment later, and his massive body was positioned over me, his tongue on one of my nipples and his hand on the other.

He tasted.

Sucked.

Nibbled.

Worshipped.

I was panting when he finally licked his way down my abdomen and to the waistband of my leggings. He peeled them to my thighs, meeting my gaze for a second before he pulled them the rest of the way off.

His chest rumbled as I opened my legs, letting him take in the sight of my core, barely hidden by the gray lace panties I had on. Though I did *own* matching sets of underwear, I never bothered to actually match them.

“Fuck, Cal.” His words were low, almost feral, as he dragged his fingers over the front of my panties.

“You already said that,” I repeated again.

“You’re going to hear it a lot.” He grabbed the top hem of my panties and tugged them downward. I arched my back, and he tore them away completely.

His eyes moved over me slowly.

Hungrily.

He couldn’t have faked the lust in his eyes if he tried.

Lowering his face to my center, he slowly opened my folds with his fingers. His thumb moved lightly over my clit, and his voice strained. “You’re so wet, I could come from the scent of you alone.”

A heartbeat later, his tongue was on my clit.

I arched so hard, I nearly fell off the couch.

He tasted me slowly, at first. I could tell he was trying to figure out what I liked—but the ferocity of his movements told me he was having the time of his life.

My fingers buried in his hair, my sounds growing louder as he dragged me to the edge with his mouth.

“I need you inside me,” I panted, desperation taking hold of me.

His thick finger filled me without a beat of hesitation, and I lost it. My hips jerked, and I cried out as I lost control. My

body squeezed around him, and he snarled against me, fucking me with his tongue harder and faster.

As I came down from my climax with his mouth still on me, slowly teasing my clit and entrance, I had one clear thought:

I needed more.

“I want you,” I said, struggling for breath.

Those gorgeous green eyes met mine over my core. His lips moved against my clit. “Callie...”

“I want you,” I repeated, some part of me seeing that face I knew so well and expecting him to say no.

To turn me down.

To walk away.

But he just sucked my clit lightly, making my hips jerk.

After another moment, he dragged his face over my inner thigh, wiping my pleasure on my leg, and stood. His hands went to the button on his jeans, but I sat up and pushed them away.

His cock strained against the front so thickly, I didn't know how I'd possibly missed it when we were teenagers.

I popped his button free and unzipped his jeans before pulling his erection out and wrapping my hand around his massive, silky length. Slowly, I dragged my fist over him.

A torturous groan escaped him. When I looked up, his eyes were closed.

“You're not going to last long if you don't let me take the edge off first,” I said, leaning in. With my free hand, I caught his wrist and lifted his fingers to my hair. They dug in without hesitation.

“Don't fucking tell me someone taught you how to give a blowjob,” he said, his voice strained.

“I won't.” I wrapped my lips around the head of his cock, and sucked lightly.

He swore viciously, his grip tightening. “Cal...”

“Let me make you come.”

His cock throbbed violently in my grasp, and I took him in my mouth again, this time taking him deeper.

He swore again as I tasted and teased him until he snarled his pleasure, flooding my throat with his release.

I swallowed it and opened my eyes without taking my mouth off him. He pulled out fast enough that my lips made a sound as they popped free of his cock, and had me on my back on the couch again a heartbeat later.

“You’re mine, Cal,” Hudson growled. “I’m not waiting any longer to have you.” He opened my legs wider and thrust his hips, filling me hard and fast.

The size of him alone was enough to make me gasp.

The way his eyes burned into mine made the emotions of the moment so much more intense.

I wasn’t screwing a stranger, or some guy I’d been dating for a few weeks. I was having sex with Hudson, my childhood best friend, the man I’d been secretly in love with for most of my life.

“You’re so fucking tight for me. Does it hurt?” He lowered his lips to my throat, nuzzling my neck as he kissed and sucked on the sensitive skin. Though his cock was throbbing inside me, he didn’t move, giving me time to adjust to him.

“No,” I breathed. “You’re just big. Really, really big.”

“Bigger than anyone else you’ve ever been with?”

“So much.” The words nearly came out a moan.

I moved my hips a little, and he stayed where he was, kissing and tasting my throat. “I’m going to bite you here when you come,” he said, dragging his sharp canines over the place my shoulder met my neck. “It’ll make you feel good. Really fucking good.”

“Don’t think I can feel any better than this.”

“We’re barely getting started, Cal. By the time we’re done, you’ll forget any other man ever existed.”

With the way he felt inside me, I believed him.

I really did.

“You ready to feel me move?” His hand dragged over one of my breasts, teasing my nipple roughly. I was starting to think he didn’t do gentle—and I loved that, intensely.

I moved my hips in response, making him growl as he grabbed my waist and thrust deeper inside me.

The motions were smooth but hard, as he pulled out and drove into me again and again, finding a slow, rough rhythm that made me cry out with every single thrust of his hips.

“Tell me who you belong to, Cal,” he commanded, as my breathing picked up and my eyes dilated. I was so close to the edge of my pleasure, I could barely speak.

“You, Hud. I belong to you.”

He made a sound of satisfaction as he lifted my hips a little and drove into me harder.

His cock hit that sensitive place inside me just right—and I cried out desperately as my climax slammed into me harder than ever.

His teeth sank into my throat as he throbbed and hardened with his release, and my cries became screams as my pleasure hit a height I’d never even imagined before.

My hips rocked fast, and he pounded into me harder and harder, setting off another climax.

And another.

And another.

Until he finally released my throat and dragged his tongue over it as he slowed his motions.

I could feel our combined release all over my core, thighs, and ass.

I didn’t even know how many times we’d gotten off, or how long it had lasted, and I was too dazed to care.

His gaze was molten when it finally met mine, his breathing hard as we recovered together. “You okay, Cal?”

“Amazing,” I whispered. “I never imagined sex could be like this.”

“Agreed. I’m not letting you off my cock all night.”

“Is that a promise?” I teased, a little of our old playfulness setting back in. Whatever tension had existed between us was completely gone.

“A vow, actually.”

Before my mind could go back to our tense conversation about promises and vows, he was rolling me off the couch and carrying me toward my bedroom.

“We need a shower,” I said, as he walked.

“No point in taking one now. You’re going to be covered in my release by the time the sun comes up.”

If I wasn’t already flushed, I would’ve reddened with his words.

But I was.

And it was blissful.

He laid me down on my bed and made sweet, slow love to me until the sun started to rise. Even though I knew it wasn’t possible, I silently hoped that we could live in those moments forever.

six

HUDSON

I STARED at the woman sleeping on my chest, wondering how any bear shifters had ever walked away from their mates.

It was supposed to be natural—the fear of commitment. The itch to leave.

I'd been taught that freedom was a need for bears. Mating was unnatural, but was a requirement considering the way our population continued to shrink.

Part of me had expected the need to be close to her to fade after the anticipation was gone.

After Callie was truly mine.

After... something.

But she was sleeping. My cock had long-since softened. I'd bred her, though that hadn't even been a factor in my mind when I made love to her until seven in the morning.

Yet, I wanted to *stay*.

My arms tightened at the thought of walking away while she was sleeping, and leaving her to wake up alone.

Fuck everything I'd been taught about bears.

What we had together was right. It was everything.

Callie was finally mine—and I wasn't leaving.

Not even if my life depended on it.

seven

CALLIE

I SMELLED bacon cooking when I woke up at 10 AM. The scent made my stomach rumble, and I forced my eyes open.

The blankets were rumped, and the bed was warm.

Hudson had stayed all night.

I didn't want to get hopeful about that, but with his scent on my sheets and the stickiness of his release dried all over my thighs and core, it was hard not to.

He'd said I was his.

I slipped quietly out of bed and into the bathroom across the hall, staring at myself in the mirror.

My long, honey-colored hair was a tangled wreck.

My face was red.

My eyes were a bit dazed.

And there was a mark on my shoulder. A permanent one. Two jagged crescents that could only have been left by his teeth.

My lower belly warmed.

I was his mate.

But I couldn't let myself obsess over that, because it didn't really mean much to a bear shifter. They left their mates, lived apart from them. Hudson was probably only staying to make sure I had enough food to get pregnant or something.

I scrubbed myself clean in the shower. Halfway through, I heard him step inside, and met his gaze when he pulled the

curtain to the side. His eyes moved down my figure, warm and appreciative.

“Good morning,” he finally said. “Any room for me in there too?”

“I smelled bacon,” I said, not wanting to have morning sex if he was just going to leave right after. “I’m almost done in here, and I’m pretty hungry.”

He nodded. “You need to eat. We skipped dinner.”

“Yep.”

There was a moment of awkwardness.

The first of many, I figured.

“Food’s almost ready. I’ll be in the kitchen.” He released the shower curtain and padded out of the room.

Though I felt bad for turning him down, I didn’t want to get used to having him as a part of my life when I knew that wouldn’t always be the case.

He wasn’t mine.

The mate bond was just a formality, to enable me to grow his cub. It was part of the contract, and it wouldn’t make him stay any more than the baby would.

I WAS DRESSED and in the kitchen ten minutes later. Hudson’s dad had definitely never made breakfast for him or his mother, but I obviously hadn’t been around when he was conceived. So maybe the food was a tradition or something.

“Where did you get the stuff to make this?” I asked him, as I cut into the food. Our plates were overflowing with pancakes, bacon, eggs, and sausage too. I wanted to just inhale the homemade breakfast food I hadn’t had since I was a kid, but forced myself to eat slowly so I could enjoy it longer.

“Ordered groceries. Someone dropped them off this morning.”

“Everyone in town will be talking about that by lunch time,” I said. “You can’t order groceries to my house.”

“I want them talking. They’ll spread word that you’re mine.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help the responding warm fuzzies in my chest. "I'm only yours for the moment, Hud. We both know some breeders go on to date or marry humans."

His eyes narrowed at me, his fork pausing. "You want to marry a human?"

"I want to avoid spending my life alone if at all possible, which will require attempting that. So, yeah."

A growl vibrated his chest. "No."

"It's not up for debate."

He opened his mouth to keep arguing with me, but the timer over the microwave beeped, and he reluctantly crossed the kitchen. When he returned, it was with toast covered in butter and honey.

The man was a bear, through and through.

"Let's not talk about this," I said. "How long are you going to stay in town?"

The question caught him off guard. "Indefinitely."

I lifted an eyebrow. "You love your job. Why wouldn't you go back?"

"I'm not leaving you alone here while you're growing my cub. And I'm sure as fuck not leaving my cub. There are jobs in town."

"Jobs you don't want."

"I don't need money. I've got a paid-off house on the edge of town and have barely used a dime of what I've made in the last eight years, on top of the clan's inheritance money. If I do need to work, I'll join the construction crew."

I blinked.

The bear clan had founded the town more than a century ago and invested wisely, so they had more money than all of them could spend in their lifetimes. Most of them still worked construction to stay busy, and though we lived in a small town, it was growing so they were always needed.

“That will be good for the cub,” I said, focusing on my food.

“Good for *us*, Cal.”

There wasn’t an *us*.

He knew that.

But I wasn’t going to start a fight over it, so I just ate my breakfast.

After we were done, he headed home to shower and change. Though he emphasized that he would be back in a few hours, I didn’t let myself get my hopes up. His dad had rarely kept the promises he made to his mom, or to Hudson.

Neither of us had ever said it aloud, but his dad was a shitty father. He was inconsistent, unreliable, and unavailable most of the time. He had been there when Hudson needed him *sometimes*, but most of the time, he didn’t show up when he said he would or didn’t answer phone calls.

I did the dishes after Hudson was gone. As I was putting them away, I found a stack of cash on the countertop, next to my car keys.

My eyes widened when I picked it up, silently counting out a few hundred dollars. All of them were crinkled, like Hudson had pulled them out of his pockets or something.

Either way, he’d known my bank account was running on empty, and he’d done something about it.

That was...

Well, I didn’t want to think about what it was.

Shit, I needed to get out of the house.

I put on some mascara and left, headed to Wren’s bookstore. There would be adorable little kids to play with and spicy books to read. And my best friend to talk to, of course.

I parked on the side of the building, surprised by the number of cars in the lot. I counted them as I headed inside—eleven.

It was almost as busy as the diner, which was basically the town’s hot spot.

The bell over the door dinged as I stepped inside, loving the feel of the building as much as always.

Fairy lights lined the ceilings, making the dark green walls feel cozier. The bookshelves were made of light gray wood, and the tile flooring was made to look like dark wood, with rugs and furniture softening it.

Altogether, it felt like some sort of cozy magical forest pulled right out of a fairytale.

The smells of coffee and paper rounded out the whole place.

Most of the chairs and couches were full of people curled up with books. As usual, many of them had coffee cups in front of them. Some had pastries, too.

The checkout desk was off to the side, tucked away enough that it didn't catch your attention immediately. I knew that was by design.

When the person in front of the counter stepped away with a paper bag and a coffee cup, my gaze met Wren's, and her lips curved upward.

She had light skin and straight, dark hair cut just above her shoulders. Her eyes were bright, and she had one of those personalities that put everyone at ease.

She stepped out from behind the counter as I reached it, and she pulled me in for a hug. I hugged her back tightly, my emotions burning in my eyes.

"Let's sit," she said, towing me by my arm to an empty couch nearby.

I sat, blinking fast as I wrestled those damn emotions.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice soft. We had to be quiet in the shop. The town would gossip no matter what, but I didn't want them gossiping with accurate, intimate details.

"He says he's staying, Wren. What am I supposed to think about that? He's never left me before, but he never even called or texted me, and now he's saying he was always in love with me, and—"

“Take a breath, Callie.”

I sucked in air, leaning back against the couch and closing my eyes. “I’m still in love with him. I’ve always been in love with him. What am I going to do when he leaves? You were right—it’s the feral cat all over again. I’m screwed. I’m so screwed.”

“You are *not* screwed.” She smacked my arm lightly. “Maybe most bears don’t stay, but Hudson did. Right? You guys were together every day for more than a decade. He didn’t get tired of you. He didn’t leave you. He didn’t run when things got hard, or when they got intimate.”

“But what if he leaves me after the baby? Or before? Or ten years down the road? Or what if—”

“There will always be what-ifs. If you marry a human, he could divorce you. He could cheat on you. He could fall out of love with you, for fuck’s sake.” Her words were blunt, her eyes sharp.

“You’re right. Humans can be just as bad in relationships as bears.” I pushed a few strands of hair out of my eyes.

“But maybe bears can be just as good at relationships as some humans, if they decide to.” She gave me a small smile.

We both knew what she wasn’t saying.

Her mate wasn’t included in that possibility.

He’d been amazing to her while they lasted, but ghosting her sure as hell didn’t fit that definition.

“I’m terrified, Wren,” I said quietly.

“So am I. We just have to ignore the terror and enjoy our lives in spite of it.”

A door opened at the back of the shop, and a toddler with Wren’s dark hair came rushing toward us. She’d built a short-term childcare in the back of her bookstore, like some gyms had, so there were a handful of kids playing in the room.

Wren’s mother followed Parker to my best friend’s side. Even if I hadn’t known who his dad was, the shape of his face and those gorgeous golden eyes would’ve told me immediately.

The Pawsons were the only shifters in town with gold irises, and they only had one son. Reed.

Instead of the adorable little smile the toddler usually wore, his eyes were watery. He lunged for his mom immediately, babbling something I couldn't translate.

Wren scooped him up and snuggled him right to her chest. Something within me ached at the sight.

Having my own little kid...

I wanted that.

"What happened?" she murmured, looking to her mom for an answer.

"I think he's sick," Wren's mom admitted. "I can't get him to eat anything. Sylvie's on her way, she offered to run the shop so you can take him home."

Sylvie was Reed's mom, so one of Parker's grandmas. Between Wren, her mother, and Sylvie, they made sure Parker always had plenty of love and attention. Wren was lucky to have so much support, and she knew it.

I wouldn't be in the same boat.

Hudson's mom would help me from time to time, but we had never been very close. And my pride wouldn't let me lean on her.

Luckily, I'd have the clan's money as a cushion for the first little while. I'd need to find a job to afford to eat after the first year or two, but I'd make it work.

Anyway, Sylvie.

She obviously knew that her son was the father of Wren's child, but she had agreed to keep it a secret unless Reed specifically asked. Her mate had been the worst of the bear shifters, and I'd heard some of the shit he'd done from Hudson when we were kids.

Even though Reed wasn't anything like his dad, he'd still left his mate after sealing their bond. Every bear shifter knew that knocking a woman up inevitably followed claiming her, unless

she was on birth control. They'd been using condoms when they were together, but no condoms during the claiming—

So basically, he had to know he'd knocked her up.

Parker started crying, turning his head away from his mom's neck so he was facing me.

His cute little lips parted as he sobbed—and the sob quickly turned into a gag, which turned into vomit.

I was so shocked when it hit me, I didn't even jump.

Wren hurried him to the bathroom, apologizing over her shoulder as she rushed away. I called after her not to worry about it, following her there.

Her mom and I sent her home with Parker as soon as she was done washing his face and making sure he wasn't going to puke again immediately.

Her mother took my shirt from me and scrubbed it in the sink while I hauled the shop's portable upholstery cleaner to the couch in my bra and leggings. I took care of the rest of the mess, pausing to help someone check out halfway through. Considering the size of our town, everyone understood the situation and was understanding about it.

When she congratulated me on my new mating, I knew everyone in the shop had heard the drama I'd whispered to Wren about.

All of Cub Lake was going to be gossiping about me and Hudson even more by the time I left.

Yay.

An hour later, I finally made it back to my car. I smelled strongly of hand soap, and any bear shifter worth their weight would definitely be able to scent the vomit beneath the fragrance. But that didn't matter.

I just kept thinking about Hudson and I having a baby.

About the possibility of him *staying*.

Of us being together.

Had he even told his mom that he mated me?

He probably hadn't.

But she deserved to know.

I reached the intersection I'd taken so many times. The one that would lead me to his mom's place.

And, without missing a beat, I turned there. She needed to know as soon as possible—even if I smelled like soap and puke.

eight

CALLIE

I TURNED onto the street Hudson's mother lived on, then hit the brakes and parked in front of a house a few doors down.

My wide eyes were glued to the front of her house.

She was wrapped in a lacy robe, her hair up in a bun on top of her head. Her eyes were bright, and she was chatting with a man as he walked out to his car. He didn't have a bag, and he was in clean clothes, freshly showered.

It didn't take a genius to recognize the guy.

He was Hudson's father.

And he was talking to her just as easily as she spoke to him.

They had *never* talked that way.

Both of them looked comfortable.

Neither of them was in a hurry to leave.

Their conversation continued for a few more minutes before she walked off the porch and up to him, settling against his chest. I waited for them to kiss passionately, as if they'd just hooked up and were doing some kind of walk of shame, but she just fixed the collar of his shirt.

And continued talking.

He held her against him comfortably.

They laughed together.

I took a picture of them, just because I was so shocked I wasn't sure I would believe my own memories after driving

away.

Fifteen minutes had gone by when he finally drove away after kissing her lips lightly, the way an old, married couple would. She didn't wait on the driveway like it was a new relationship, or touch her lips like she was surprised.

Instead, she just walked back to her front door.

When she reached it, she glanced over her shoulder, and her eyes immediately caught on me.

Her lips curved upward, and she waved me toward her.

Shit.

No avoiding the conversation now. It wasn't like I could quickly drive away from my potential baby's grandma.

I should never have signed that contract.

Or had hot, hot sex with my childhood best friend.

Letting out a slow breath, I reluctantly drove up to her house and parked in the driveway like I knew she would want. She was still on the doorstep in her robe when I got out and walked up.

"Hey, Linda," I said, forcing a smile.

"Hi, Callie." She pulled me into her arms and hugged me tightly. I hugged her back, uncertain what she knew or didn't know. "You have questions for me?"

"Lots," I murmured.

She laughed, her eyes brighter and her body more relaxed than I had ever seen before. "Come on in."

I followed her inside, though my reluctance and uncertainty hadn't gone anywhere. The last time I'd seen her was at my dad's funeral. The time before that, was my high school graduation.

We sat down, me on a decorative chair and her on the couch across from it.

"So you and Arthur are..." I trailed off, not sure how to even ask the question.

She smiled and lifted her hand to show me a huge diamond ring. “Engaged. We’ve been trying to come up with a way to tell Hudson.”

I blinked.

And blinked again.

Her smile widened. “I know it’s a shock. When he came to me a few years ago and told me he wanted to try being a real mate to me, I slammed the door in his face. But you know how bears are. Stubborn to their bones. The man stayed on my porch for days. Would’ve starved to death there if I’d let him. Thank heavens there was snow on the ground so the dehydration didn’t take him.”

Wow.

“When I finally let him in, he explained that he and a few of his friends had gotten drunk together a few weeks earlier. The conversation shifted to mates. One of them admitted he missed his female, that he was lonely, and had been his whole life. They realized they were all in the same situation—lonely and miserable men after being trained to believe they couldn’t commit.” She brushed an escaped strand of hair off her forehead.

“He couldn’t stop thinking about it. The guys all got together a little while later, and he asked if any of them had *wanted* to leave their mate after knocking her up. No one said a word. They had all been taught that they wouldn’t be able to commit, that they needed their freedom, but all of them had simply acted based on what they’d been told. They left us, and forced themselves to stay busy so they wouldn’t want to return, instead of doing what they wanted and staying. All five of them are back with their mates, now, though some of us took far more convincing than others. Most of the other middle-aged men have done the same, excluding the ones whose mates got married while they were apart.”

Overwhelmed, I leaned back against the couch. “Hudson doesn’t know any of that.”

“No. The men were uncertain how to tell their sons that they were terrible fathers because of their screwed-up culture, and fear. A few of them have already found out through their fathers. The rest will likely find out over time.”

“Why didn’t they just tell them? It’s cruel to let them keep believing that bears can’t commit,” I protested.

She gave a small smile. “Ideally, we want them to decide for themselves to do better. Look at Hudson. The boy’s been in love with you since before he knew what love was, Callie. Do you really think he can walk away from you while you’re pregnant with his child?”

No.

I didn’t.

And that made me hopeful. Really hopeful.

“I haven’t seen him in eight years,” I said, rather than answering her. “Why didn’t you tell him about my dad?”

Her smile faded. “I tried to. I asked him if he’d talked to you recently multiple times, but he always changed the subject. I’m sure he puts on a brave face for you, but he’s struggled to stay away from you since you left. I thought it was only a matter of time until he went after you. I never imagined he’d make it this long. He doesn’t come home for holidays often, and when he does, he only stays for the day. I think it reminds him of you too much.”

My throat swelled. “You didn’t want to push him.”

“I wanted to, but he’s a grown man. I have to let him make his own decisions now.”

I nodded. “When are you going to tell him about your engagement?”

She smiled. “As soon as he comes by to tell me about your baby. He won’t know I’ve spoken to his father.”

“I’m not pregnant yet,” I said quickly.

“I know. I’m excited for you, though. As difficult as it was, I would sign those breeding papers and raise that boy by myself

all over again if I could. The times were hard, but they were the best days of my life. Nothing could ever mean as much to me as those sticky little kisses and toothy grins.”

Nodding, I bit my lip to hold back the messy emotions I was feeling. “He keeps saying he’s not going to leave me.”

“He never has before. I don’t see why he’d start now.”

She was right.

Her and Wren both.

When we parted after high school, it hadn’t been Hudson’s doing. I was the one who left him. He hadn’t had a plan—he’d only started running security because a few of the other bears had. He’d even told me that Cub Lake was too lonely without me.

“Let me feed you before you head home,” she said. “I can answer the rest of your questions, too.”

nine

HUDSON

I PACED the length of Callie's porch, itching for something to punch. The gym had gotten me through my years without her—but there was no gym nearby at the moment.

And being at her house while not knowing where she was might just kill me.

Most of the time, I could keep my cool.

But most of the time, my *mate* didn't talk about marrying some other bastard before making it clear she wanted me to leave her alone.

I dialed her number again, holding the phone to my ear. I'd managed to stop myself from calling more than twice, but I'd been pacing for an hour. I kept picturing her meeting some guy at the grocery store and screwing him in his car. It was—

"Hey," she said, answering right before it went to voicemail. "Sorry, I left my phone in my car."

"Where are you, Cal?" My voice strained.

I didn't want to be a possessive asshole. But fuck, I couldn't lose her.

"Your mom's house."

I blinked.

My fear and anger subsided rapidly. "Why?"

"I had questions. She had answers."

I heard her pull onto the road.

“Where are *you*?” she asked.

“Your place. Scared the shit out of me not to find you here.”

“Why?”

I let out a long breath and sat down on her dad’s old porch swing. Bears were territorial. I didn’t much like the idea of living in his house, but if I couldn’t convince her to move with me, I’d adjust. “You said you’re looking for some other bastard to marry. I was picturing you hooking up with a random person you met at the grocery store.”

She laughed. “I’ve never had sex with someone I met while buying groceries, Hud.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“Not that.” I heard her change the music station. She’d always been picky about what she listened to. “And I didn’t say I was *looking* for someone to marry. I said I would eventually find someone, after you left me.”

“I’m not going to leave you,” I growled back.

“Then I won’t have to marry anyone,” she said easily.

Except me.

I didn’t say the words aloud.

I wasn’t supposed to be able to stay. *Bears* weren’t supposed to be able to stay.

But how the fuck would I ever leave her? I’d been dedicated to her for too many years to even consider it a possibility. Having her with me and making her mine would only make me want to stay even more.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. What do you want to do for the rest of the day?” she asked.

“You.”

She laughed again, and whatever tension had lingered in my shoulders eased.

“I want to show you my house,” I said, not giving myself a chance to change my mind. “I think you’d be more

comfortable there. I would, too.”

“Are you insinuating that we’re going to live together?”

“Yes. We *are* going to live together. You’re mine, remember?”

“Does that mean you’re mine?”

“I’ve been yours since I was fourteen, Cal.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t sound like she was going to argue, for the first time in ages.

“What else did you do today, other than visit my mom?” I asked, not wanting another argument to ensue.

“I went to hang out with Wren at the bookstore, actually.”

“The bookstore?”

“You haven’t seen it before. Wren just opened it last year. And I didn’t have sex with anyone I met there, so don’t worry,” she teased.

Though she was joking, my shoulders relaxed anyway. “Thank fuck for that. Wren Davis?”

My roommate was hopelessly in love with Wren Davis. He’d been a grumpy bastard since he stopped hooking up with her two years or so earlier.

“Yep. She replaced you as my best friend during my freshman year of college. I currently stink of her toddler’s puke, so it’s a permanent kind of bond,” Callie teased.

“She has a toddler?” My forehead creased. “With who?”

Reed was going to lose his fucking mind when he found out she’d had a baby with someone.

“Oh, shit,” Callie whispered.

Suspicion hit me hard.

Callie was a terrible liar. It was one of her many adorable qualities.

But why had she reacted that way to my question?

“Who’s her toddler’s dad?” I prodded.

“Just one of the guys in town,” she said quickly.

“I’m going to need a name, Cal.”

“Paul Gordon,” she blurted.

“Why are you lying about the father of Wren’s child?”

“I’m not!”

My eyes narrowed.

The only reason Callie would possibly have to lie about the father to me was if she didn’t want me to know. And the only reason she might not want me to know who the father was, was if it was someone I knew.

Someone I was close with.

I had a handful of good friends on my security team, but Reed was the only one from Cub Lake.

And given his obsession with Wren...

“Reed would know if the woman he was in love with had his baby,” I argued.

Callie groaned. “How do you still do that?”

“I know you better than I know myself, Cal. But Reed would be here if he thought there was even a possibility that he had a baby—especially if he had a baby with Wren. They’re not even mated. I—”

“They *are* mated. I’ve seen the bite mark,” she shot back. “And every bear shifter knows that screwing his mate will lead to a baby without protection involved. They didn’t use a condom—he knew she was probably pregnant when he abandoned her. I’ve seen Parker shift, and he looks exactly like Reed. I’m not wondering, Hud. Your new best friend is one of the worst kinds of bastards.”

“No. I live with him, and I know him. If he had a cub, he’d be in town. Did she send him a message after finding out she was pregnant?”

“No, but she didn’t need to. He was the one who left without looking back. I can’t believe you’re defending him. I—”

“If he abandoned his pregnant mate and baby, I will fucking *kill* him. But I’m telling you, he didn’t know. And he needs to know. Are you almost back?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there in two. Don’t call him or anything, she doesn’t want him to know unless he actually comes looking for—”

“I love you, Cal. See you soon.” I hung up without realizing what I’d just said, and was already dialing Reed’s number when it hit me.

Warmth bloomed in my chest, though it was quickly overtaken by the fury burning through my veins.

He answered on the second ring.

“What was Callie’s emergency?” Reed asked, not bothering with a greeting. “I heard you’re not coming back.”

“Long story. Since when is Wren your *mate*?”

There was a pause.

A long pause.

“It was... unintentional,” he finally said. “There was another guy dancing with her. The bear in me was out of control. I—”

“Reed,” I growled.

“It happened about two years ago,” he admitted. “How do you know? And why are you calling me about it?”

“I just found out Callie is her best friend. And Wren wasn’t on birth control when you mated her. If she was, it failed.”

There was a moment of silence.

A long, heavy moment.

“No.” His voice was low. “There wasn’t a cub. We talked about it. She had—”

Callie parked in the driveway and came running up to me, her eyes and hair wild.

“Callie said he looks just like you, down to the eyes.”

“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fu—”

She ripped the phone away from me with one hand, grabbing a fistful of my shirt with the other. “False alarm, Reed,” she said, her voice rising. “Hudson didn’t hear anything. I didn’t say anything. Nope. You’re good. I—”

“You’re still a shitty liar, Callie,” Reed said. “I’ll be on the next flight home. Tell Hudson I’ll see him soon.”

He hung up, and Callie’s big, sexy blue eyes met mine. “What the hell, Hudson?” she demanded. “You can’t tell your friend my best friend’s secret! Don’t you remember high school? If I tell you something, you’re supposed to be a steel trap. We cannot be friends if you go sharing things I’ve told you. I—”

I took her face in my hands, cutting her off. “The entire town knows he has a baby. That’s not a secret, Cal.”

“He could try to take custody from her,” she shot back. “And he was the asshole who chose to leave her. It’s not—”

“Reed would never take a toddler away from his mother,” I said. “He’ll want what’s best for that baby. He’s a good guy. He deserves to know.”

“If he deserved to know, he would’ve come back for her.”

“He should have,” I agreed. “And if he’s missed the last two years with his pregnant mate and child, his conscience will make him suffer enough for leaving.”

She let out a huff. “I have to tell her. She’s going to hate me.”

“I’ll tell her. You know me, Cal. You know I would’ve done the exact same thing back when we were in high school. She probably remembers me enough to know that too. Do you have her number?”

Her anger slowly faded. She never had the energy to stay mad at anyone for long.

She reluctantly nodded, then released my shirt so she could grab her phone from her pocket, since she was still holding my phone. I typed in her code—it was still the date of her birthday—and hit the button to call Wren a moment later.

“Hey, Callie,” she said, answering on the third ring.

“Hi, Wren. This is Hudson Claw.”

She let out a long breath. “What happened?”

“Callie tried to lie to me about you not being mated to Reed and having his son. She’s a terrible liar.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Wren shot back. “You know she’s always honest.”

“I know, and I love that about her. But Reed’s one of my roommates, and he had no idea about the baby. He’s brought you up so damn many times, I’m confident he didn’t know. I told him, and he’s on his way back right now. If that bastard does anything except apologize profusely, I’ll bash his fucking head in. He won’t take your son, but they deserve to know each other. Growing up as a bear shifter without that support would be hell.”

She was silent for a moment before she finally said, “Thanks for the warning.”

“No problem. Sorry to spring it on you.”

“Can I talk to Callie?”

“Yep.” I handed the phone over, and Callie lifted it to her ear.

“I’m so sorry,” she said immediately. “I accidentally told him that your son puked on me, and he asked so many questions that my lies were useless.”

I heard Wren laugh softly on the other end of the phone. “It’s not your fault. I knew something like this would happen eventually, and I don’t blame you for it. Don’t feel guilty, okay?”

“Okay.” She sighed. “But call me when you see him. Or text me. I *will* kick him in the balls at your command. Hudson won’t let him kill me for it.”

“Thanks, Callie. I love you. Have fun reconnecting with him, okay? You know I’ll keep you updated.”

“Alright, I love you too. Good luck.”

They hung up, and Callie tucked her phone back into her pocket.

She glared at me. “You’ve always been the morality police. You were the only one willing to tell Jenna Kaper when Gordon Unders was cheating on her during junior year.”

“Some secrets need to come out. Cheating is always one of them.” I put my hands on her hips, pulling her closer. “Bears might be bastards, but we’re loyal bastards.”

Callie’s eyes remained narrowed. “If this causes me permanent problems with my best friend, I will never move on.”

“If it does, I’ll bring her flowers and chocolates for your sake until she agrees to forgive you.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She pushed away from my chest, and I let her go.

“Are you ready to see my house?”

“I guess. Did you let the clan know that we... you know... so they could set up the next doctor’s appointment?”

“I told them I made you mine, yes.” I took her hand, parting her fingers with mine. She was hesitant at first, but finally squeezed mine lightly as I led her to my truck. “They reminded me to ask if we can schedule a few more *appointments* over the next few days, just to make sure it sticks.”

Her face reddened as I opened my truck’s door for her.

I chuckled. “Eventually, you won’t be so embarrassed by the fact that we’re screwing.”

“We were only together last night. I’d hardly say that counts as *screwing*.”

“Is that a challenge?” I lifted an eyebrow at her. “Because I’m not the one who turned down morning sex. I’ve been dying to get my mouth on you again since I woke up.”

She flushed redder. “I thought you were going to leave me.”

“I couldn’t leave if I wanted to, Cal. And I don’t want to.”

“I’m starting to believe that.”

Her words eased my worry.

I kissed the back of her hand before releasing it so I could close the door and walk around to the driver's side.

ten

CALLIE

HUDSON'S HOUSE was absolutely gorgeous.

Big windows.

Cozy furniture, paint, and flooring.

Fancy appliances.

Modern everything.

My dad's house had been in serious need of updating when I was a kid, and he'd never bothered, so the style of it was more than forty years out of date.

At Hudson's instruction, I sat on the counter while he made dinner for us.

"Do you think you'd be willing to move here?" he asked me, as he stirred the chili on the stove with his spare hand sitting on my thigh.

"Yep." I nodded. "But if you leave me, I'm keeping this place."

"I'll put it in the contract," he agreed, flashing me a grin. "Because I'm not leaving."

"Good."

"Now, I want to hear about the bastard who taught you how to give a blowjob. And all the other assholes you've dated."

I rolled my eyes. "We're not talking about my exes right now."

"Why not?"

“Because you’ve always been possessive, even before we were actually together. The last thing I need is to make that worse.”

“I’ll trade something in exchange.” He continued stirring.

“Like…”

“Orgasms.”

I blinked.

His hand left my thigh as he set his spoon down and washed his hands in the sink.

Suddenly, I was feeling warm.

Very warm.

“That’s not fair,” I said, as he walked back over.

“Never said it was.” He pulled me smoothly to the edge of the countertop, then peeled the waistband of my leggings downward. When he reached my ass, I lifted it for him.

Probably shouldn’t have, but I wanted him to touch me.

“What would the morality police say about forcing me to tell you about my exes in exchange for sexual favors?” I countered, settling back down on my ass, wearing nothing but my shirt and a pair of panties.

“That you could just refuse.”

He ran his knuckles over the front of my center, and I inhaled sharply.

His chest rumbled in satisfaction. “You’re already wet for me.”

“You’re going to touch me whether or not I tell you anything,” I breathed, as he teased my clit through the lace again.

“Probably.”

“*Definitely.*”

He pulled the crotch of my panties tighter, so they parted my folds, and gave me a low growl as he lowered to his knees in front of me. “Fuck, you’re perfect.”

“You’ve never been with anyone else, so you don’t kn—ohhh.” I moaned when he tore my panties away and dragged his tongue over my clit.

My fingers fisted in his hair, tightening as he licked me again, faster, and harder.

I clutched him desperately as he devoured me, nipping with his teeth when he wanted to make my hips jerk.

My climax built quickly, and my cries filled the air as I lost control on his tongue.

In no hurry to stop, he ate me out until I came again, my body jerking desperately when I did.

I was panting when he released my clit with one last swipe of his tongue. He stood, tugging his shirt over his head before doing the same with mine. Though the buckle on my bra made him pause a moment, he got that off too, and it joined the rest of my clothes on the floor.

I unbuttoned his jeans, pushing them down his hips. He helped me shove them down until we were bare together, my hand on his cock and his on my tits.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Cal,” he said, lifting one of his hands to my face so he could tip my head back as he kissed me.

“So are you.” I slid my hand over the ridges on his abdomen, making him flex for me.

My legs parted wider as he stepped into me, and in one smooth motion, filled me with his cock.

My lips rounded at the feel of him, so insanely thick.

“You okay?” he dragged a thumb over my nipple.

“Forgot how good that feels,” I breathed.

“How about this?” He opened me wider and took another step, taking me deeper.

I moaned. “Hud...”

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.” I pressed against him as he pulled out before filling me again, harder and faster. Every motion took me closer to the edge—closer to him—and closer to admitting how desperately, hopelessly in love with him I’d been for so long.

We climaxed as one, and he wrapped his arms around me, holding me to his chest as I sucked in air, trying to recover from my orgasm.

He rumbled in satisfaction against me, his cock still insanely thick and hard.

The timer on his phone went off, telling us the chili was done, and I groaned.

He chuckled, reaching over to turn off the stove before he lifted me off the counter.

“Where are we going?” I mumbled against his shoulder.

“To bed. So I can try to get stories out of you.”

I groaned again, for a reason that was absolutely not sexual.

He laughed. “It can’t be as bad when I’m buried inside you.”

“It absolutely can.”

His steps forced him into me even deeper, and my breathing grew shallow.

He settled on his back on the bed, leaving me on top of him and therefore in control. It was the first time I’d ridden him like that, and the sensation was incredible.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, moving slightly, and he throbbed inside me.

I forced myself to try to breathe deeper, to fight the desire, but it was intense. I wasn’t sure whether to blame it on the mate bond, our past, or just my existing level of horniness.

He didn’t ask again about my exes—but I knew he hadn’t dropped it. Hudson didn’t drop things like that.

And truthfully, we were going to talk about it eventually. If he’d saved himself for me, there was no way around that

conversation. So, we might as well get it over with while our bodies were connected, forcing us to feel pleasure.

“The first guy was a few weeks after I started college,” I admitted. “Wren introduced me to him. I was missing you horribly, so she dragged me to this game night that some people she sort of knew were hosting. We all got a little tipsy. The guy and I had been flirting all night, the flirting led to making out, and...”

Hudson’s chest was rumbling in a way that told me he didn’t like what he was hearing, but that was expected.

I let out a long breath. “I don’t regret getting it over with, but I’ve always wished it was with someone I knew and trusted. He didn’t care about me. Didn’t even try to get me off.”

Hudson’s hands slid over my thighs and around my ass, squeezing. “I should’ve been there.”

“It’s in the past, Hud. No point in dwelling. You’re here now. And you’re not leaving.”

“Not a fucking chance.”

I moved my hips a little.

“Who else?”

“I started dating a guy a few weeks after that. Still needed a distraction after being away from you. We were together for a month, and he did try to make the sex good for me.”

Hudson’s eyes darkened. “He’s the one who taught you to give a blowjob.”

“Yes.”

He dragged his thumb over my clit, and I gasped.

“Tell me you’re mine, Cal.”

“Definitely yours,” I panted.

“The last guy?”

I groaned. “Not this again.”

“Callie,” he warned, still teasing my clit.

“I was pickier after the second,” I moaned, as Hudson pushed me closer to the edge. “I realized I didn’t like meaningless sex. I dated, but made a rule not to sleep with anyone until the third time we went out. Nothing ever got serious enough until my senior year of college. We’d had a few classes together, and had been friends since sophomore year. When he asked me out, I was surprised, but we hit it off. We were together nine months. After graduation, we had to decide between marriage and breaking up, and I—” I cried out as Hudson stopped teasing my clit just before he got me off. “Damn you!”

“I don’t want you coming with anyone but me on your mind.”

“Possessive bastard.” I dug my fingers into his abdomen, sitting back on his erection so he bottomed out inside me again.

“Undeniably. Now finish your story.”

“I couldn’t commit. It was that simple. Some part of me was still in love with you, no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise. We broke up, and I moved to New York. Haven’t dated anyone seriously since then, and I kept my rule.”

“It’s been three years?”

“Four.”

He made a noise of satisfaction. “Thanks for telling me.”

“You were never going to put it to rest if I didn’t.”

He chuckled. “You know me too well.”

Hudson started working my clit again, and my thoughts went blank. My mind went quiet.

Every fiber of my being was focused on the way he felt inside me—until I shattered again.

EVENTUALLY, we slipped out of bed. After a stop in the bathroom to clean up, Hudson tugged one of his shirts over my head and pulled on a pair of shorts. He held my hand as we walked back to the kitchen.

Somehow, the place already felt like home.

He dished up bowls of chili (and cornbread with honey that he whipped up quickly, of course), then joined me at the table. He sat down beside me instead of across from me, settling one of his hands casually between my thighs as he ate with the other. His feet tangled with mine, and I couldn't bite back my smile.

"What did my mom say?" he asked, and my smile faded.

She might be able to keep his dad's secrets from him, but I couldn't. It had been hard enough to lie about dating when he asked over the phone a few times a year. Now that we were together again, I didn't think I could sell a lie even if I tried.

"Your dad was in her driveway when I got there," I said.

He frowned, his forehead creasing. "Why?"

I took a bite of chili to give myself a moment to figure out how to word the admission. "They're engaged."

His forehead creased further. "No they're not."

"I didn't believe it either, but I watched them interact like a real couple from my car. Your mom saw me after he left, and waved me over. When I got inside her house, she explained."

I gave him a very detailed rundown of everything she'd told me about his dad's conversation with his friends, and their realization.

Hudson didn't touch his food the entire time I was speaking.

He let out a slow breath when I wrapped up the explanation, his grip on my thigh deathly tight. "I need some air."

Releasing my leg, he stood, then stopped abruptly.

"This isn't me leaving you," he said. "I'm not. I'd never."

"You're a bear. I know you need time alone to process sometimes. That's not new." I captured his hand and squeezed it. "I get it."

He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "I love you, Cal."

With that, he strode out of the cabin, ditching his shorts on the porch.

I finished my food—and some of his—before digging through the kitchen for Tupperware. After I'd put the rest of the chili and cornbread away, I grabbed my phone. Then, I made my way out to the porch and sat down on the swing out there. It was positioned to face the forest just like the one at my dad's house.

Lifting my feet onto the railing, I sent a message.

ME

I'm sorry about Hudson, I tried to stop him

Any sign of he who shall not be named?

WREN

Nope

It's been six hours already, and the flight only takes four. I looked it up

And don't worry about Hudson. I thought Sylvie would tell him ages ago, remember? It was inevitable that someone would break the news

ME

Did you look at flight times to find out the earliest he can get here?

WREN

No

That would make it feel too real

I looked it up.

ME

The only plane he could get on today would land at 10 PM if it's on time. With the hour drive from the airport, 11 is the earliest you'd see him

WREN

Dammit

I was finally starting to feel better

ME

Liar

WREN

Shhh

ME

How's Parker?

WREN

He's seemed fine ever since he threw up. Maybe he ate something that disagreed with his stomach

ME

At least he's not still puking

WREN

No kidding

Sorry again about that

How are things between you guys?

ME

Really good, honestly

I don't think he's going to leave

WREN

I don't either

And that makes me really, really happy for you <3

I set my phone down on the bench beside me. Leaning back against the swing, I let myself picture what the future might look like.

Hudson, building a crib while lecturing me that I shouldn't be painting the baby's room while pregnant.

Holding my hand in the hospital.

Holding our baby with his arm around my shoulder.

Holding *me* when I cried because I was worried I'd be a shitty mom. Mine had died when I was so young that I wouldn't know the first thing about doing it well.

But I could see him playing catch with our toddler, running around the house with the little guy.

Carrying our son on his shoulders.

Playing sports with him as he grew up.

Hudson would be an amazing dad. Just like mine had been.

I wiped my eyes as a few more memories slipped in.

My dad putting a bright pink Band-Aid on my knee after I fell and scraped it while running with Hudson.

Laughing with me as we watched the silly TV shows I'd liked.

Making me Rice Krispy Treats with pink food coloring, because I wanted them to be cute.

Taking me to the store and teaching me about tampons while pointing out the different types after he researched them.

My father had his demons and his struggles, but he was a good dad. I wished I'd been in Cub Lake to help him when his addiction set in again. He'd overcome it when my mom was pregnant with me, and it hurt to know that he'd been struggling alone at the end.

But the past was in the past.

Like I'd told Hudson, there was no point in dwelling on it.

He had been an amazing father, and I would do everything I could to make sure I was as good to my baby as he had been to me.

eleven

HUDSON

IT WASN'T difficult for me to accept that bears didn't have to be commitment adverse like I'd been taught to believe.

Deep down, I'd known for more than a decade that I was never going to change my mind about Callie or leave her. I'd let her leave me, but walking away from her had always been unfathomable.

If anything, learning that what I'd been taught was bullshit made me feel like I wasn't a phony.

But hearing that my mom had given my dad another chance, after I'd watched her struggle to raise me because of his absence...

That would take time.

More time than I had, if they were already engaged.

That was the shit I had to work through, as I barreled through the forest in my fur.

After a while, I missed Callie too much to stay in the forest alone. So, I headed back home.

Back to her.

Back where I belonged.

twelve

CALLIE

THE SUN HAD SET COMPLETELY, turning on the gorgeous lights strung across the porch, when Hudson returned.

He shifted as he reached the stairs, picking me up wordlessly and holding me to his chest with an iron grip as he carried me inside.

I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him as he headed for the shower.

He washed us both, kissing my neck as his hands moved over my bare body.

And kissing the mark on my shoulder as he made love to me with water falling over our skin.

It was the most beautiful night of my life.

When morning came around, he woke me with his face between my thighs. We didn't get out of bed until noon—and wandered back soon enough.

On the way to my dad's place to pick up my things, I grinned as I read messages from Wren about Reed showing up—and refusing to leave, much like Hudson had.

It would take time for her to forgive him, but I was pretty sure she would. She'd been in love with him for years.

We moved my stuff into Hudson's place, and asked one of the town's realtors to put my dad's house on the market.

Then, we spent the next two weeks getting to know each other again, both physically and mentally. The only time we left was to pick up groceries or visit Wren, Reed, and Parker at the bookstore for an hour or two.

The day we were supposed to go to the office for the pregnancy test, I woke up too nervous for sex. The appointment was early, so we just showered, then got in Hudson's truck.

Instead of taking the turn that would lead into town, he turned away.

"Where are we going?" I asked him.

He flashed me a grin. "I rescheduled the appointment."

"You *what*?"

He put his hand on my thigh. "We're not together for the sake of breeding, Callie. We've got things to settle before we find out whether or not the baby's coming."

"I'd like to know what's going on in my body, actually," I shot back.

"You will. After we do this."

"After we do *what*?"

"You'll see. Patience, Cal."

"Neither of us have any of that, as you damn well know." I leaned back in my seat, huffing. "I can't believe you rescheduled the appointment."

"Can't you?"

"Fine, I can. I'm just irritated."

"You won't be for long. Trust me."

I did trust him, and my initial anger calmed as he turned onto a dirt road I recognized. We'd gone hiking together a lot when we were teenagers, with him in his bear form. I'd even ridden on his back now and then.

He parked in a small, empty dirt clearing, and got out. When I opened the door, he lifted me out of the truck, setting me on

his feet.

“*Hiking* is what we have to settle?” I asked, the doubt in my voice clear.

“Yep. Let’s go.” He laced his fingers through mine, and we headed down the trail together. Though it was familiar, I couldn’t remember where this one led.

It still felt nice to be in the forest together, surrounded by nature, though.

“I hope you have a plan,” I said. “Because I’m going to be very irritated if we skipped the appointment and there’s no plan.”

He chuckled. “We’re practicing trust, remember?”

“Right.” I moved a little closer to him as we kept walking, pressing my arm against his.

“Tell me about your favorite class in college. You never mentioned that on the phone,” he said, as we kept walking.

I launched into a story to answer his question, and by the time it was over, we reached a familiar lookout point.

Makeout Point.

I was pretty sure every town had one.

My face flushed as I remembered leaning in and trying to kiss Hudson there during my sophomore year. Some embarrassments would never fade.

I turned to ask Hudson why he’d brought me back, and my mouth closed suddenly.

My eyes widened, too.

He was on one knee, holding a small, black box with a glittering ring inside it.

“Callie,” he said, those gorgeous eyes gleaming as they met mine. “I’ve wanted you for more than a decade. I’ve been yours for just as long. Our situation is abnormal to say the least, but I want this desperately. Say you’ll be mine, for the rest of our lives.”

My eyes stung. “Hud...”

“That’s not really an answer.”

I sputtered an emotional laugh. “Of course I’ll be yours, you big, ridiculous bastard.”

His chest rumbled with his laughter as I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him, hard.

He kissed me back, and I heard the ring box hit the ground, but was too lost in him to care.

“Remember when you tried to kiss me here?” he asked against my mouth, pulling away for a moment.

“Are you trying to kill the mood?” I teased.

He chuckled. “No. I’m reminding you why this is the perfect place for a new start.” Taking my lips again, he pulled me down over his lap, so I could feel his erection against my core.

“We’ve been together so many times the last two weeks, I don’t know how you can still be hard,” I whispered.

“Welcome to Shifter 101. Being near your mate equals wanting to fuck her. Always.”

I laughed. “No wonder most of you guys are afraid of commitment. That’s a lot of sex.”

“No kidding.” He kissed me again. “But I do have a proposition for you.”

“Oh, really?” My voice was playful.

“A new idea, actually. One we haven’t tried.”

“I’m listening.”

He leaned in, brushing his lips against my ear as he whispered, “You let me fuck you from behind.”

Heat rolled through my body. “We haven’t tried that yet?”

“No. I’ve been worried I’ll be too big for you.”

“When has that ever been a problem?”

“Never, actually. Which is why I’m proposing it.”

I smiled. "I'm not against it. When we get home, we can—"

"Oh, no. The offer only stands right here. Right now. Against that rock." He gestured to a misshapen boulder that looked fairly smooth.

"You're insane," I said, though my body was still warming.

"It's the mate thing. I'm blaming that." His hands slipped beneath my shirt, stroking up over my abdomen before finding my breasts.

When he teased my nipples over my bra, I sucked in a breath. They'd been sensitive the last few days, and he was taking advantage of that every chance he got.

"I can smell you getting wet for me," he murmured into my ear.

"We're at Makeout Point," I protested, as he slid his hands around my back and unbuckled my bra. "Anyone could come up here."

"It's the middle of a school day. The teenagers are busy. We'll be fine." He slipped his hands back to my front, pushing the bra aside so he could grab my bare breasts.

My hips rocked, and he pinched my nipples, making me swear.

"It's a long drive back," he said. "You want to wait until we were home?"

It was only twenty minutes, but I wasn't used to waiting. He never made me wait.

I groaned. "I can't believe I'm considering this."

"It could be the best sex of your life."

"It's *always* the best sex of my life."

He pinched my nipples again. "You're right. Let's get back in the truck. I'll screw you when we get home."

"You're trying to use reverse psychology on me. It's not going to work," I warned.

But I was already picturing myself bent over that boulder, while he drove into me from behind.

“I would never.” He kissed the side of my throat, releasing my breasts and grabbing the ring box on the ground. “Want to see it?”

“Of course.”

He opened it, and I sighed.

It was perfect.

Just like him.

“It’s gorgeous. Put it on me.”

He grinned, sliding it on my ring finger and tucking the box back in his pocket. “Now everyone who sees you will know you’re mine.”

Okay, that made me hot.

I undid the button on his jeans. “Alright, I want it, but just a quickie.”

“Here?”

“Against the boulder.”

“Deal.” He grabbed the hem of my shirt, but I stopped his hand.

“Clothes stay on as much as possible,” I said.

His eyes heated. “Fuck, woman.”

I flashed him a grin. “That’s kind of the point, Hud.”

He lifted me with him as he stood, carrying me to the rock. I didn’t bother telling him to let me walk. We both knew that wasn’t going to happen.

He set me down on my feet when we reached it.

I planted my hands on the curved edge of it as he shoved my leggings down to my knees and opened my thighs. The head of his cock was against my slit a heartbeat later, and my fingertips pressed against the rock as he filled me in one rough motion.

“Fuck, your ass feels good,” he growled, his hand slipping between my thighs as he worked himself in and out. I leaned

more of my weight against the boulder, the feel of his fingers against my clit overwhelming.

He knew exactly how to touch me.

Exactly what I wanted, and needed.

“You fit perfectly inside me,” I moaned.

“Of course I do. I’m your mate,” he said, smacking my ass lightly.

I nearly climaxed from the light tap alone.

“Harder,” I said, and he thrust into me harder.

My body clenched around him, my orgasm making my hips jerk and rock. He swore, fucking me roughly until he filled me with his pleasure.

It was supposed to be one-and-done... but I wanted more.

So, I met his final thrusts with my own, pushing myself backward and making him move again. He filled me harder and faster, still working my clit as he fucked me again and again.

Two climaxes later, I was panting and my knees were shaking from my pleasure.

“So much for a quickie,” he growled, smacking my ass lightly again.

“You’re my mate, and my fiancé now. We don’t need to be quick,” I said, catching my breath.

“Good. I’m nowhere near done with you.” He rocked his finger against my clit, and I smiled.

He would never be done with me, and I would never be done with him.

We were forever.

thirteen

CALLIE

WE MADE it home before anyone found us at Makeout Point, and spent another week in our den before we finally emerged.

You could only reschedule with the shifter doctors so many times before they called you angrily, and we'd reached that point.

So, we got in the truck, headed for the office.

If Hudson hadn't been there, I would've been nervous.

Because he was, I just held his free hand and leaned back against the passenger seat in his truck, watching the town we loved as we drove through it.

I'd been puking once or twice a day for nearly a week, so I was pretty sure I knew what the test would say, but I was trying not to get my hopes up. Hope could hurt like hell.

"Did you miss this place when you were gone?" I asked him, trying to avoid thinking too hard about the way our future was probably about to change.

"Every day." He squeezed my hand. "Did you?"

"All the time." My lips curved upward. "I should've come back years ago. You would've followed me."

He chuckled. "In a heartbeat."

The words made me ridiculously happy.

We pulled into the parking lot soon enough, and slipped inside the doctor's office together.

An hour later, we were back in the truck, wearing stupid grins. I was still clutching the blood test's results in my free hand, and my eyes were still stinging.

We were going to be parents.

Paying off my dad's debt didn't even register in my mind. That might have been what pushed me to meet Hudson in the diner, but it was the furthest thing from my thoughts.

Because we were going to have a baby.

And he was going to be so, so loved.

Or she.

But probably he, given shifter genetics.

"I love you," Hudson said, lifting me into the passenger seats and stepping between my thighs to kiss me. "So fucking much."

"I love you too."

He kissed me again, harder, until someone in the parking lot honked at us.

My face was red when he pulled away, and he grinned as he put a hand on my cheek. "Still embarrassed that we're screwing, Cal?" he teased me, his voice playful.

"Only a little."

Hudson laughed. "Let's go home."

Nothing had ever sounded better.

epilogue

HUDSON

CALLIE WALKED down the aisle in a dress that clung to the swell of her belly. The first half of her pregnancy had been rough, but she was feeling a little better since we'd reached the second half.

Despite the struggles, she glowed as she made her way toward me, holding my dad's arm.

My parents had gotten married a few months earlier, and though I'd always be a little suspicious of him, I did believe that he wouldn't walk away from her again. I'd never seen either of them so happy before.

Callie stepped up in front of me, and I brushed a loose wave out of her eyes.

She was perfect.

And she was finally mine, in every way there was.

Fuck, I would never let her go.

afterthoughts

Okay, this has to be the sweetest little book I've ever written.

I've never tried to write a novella that's not connected to a series with longer books in it before. And if you know me, when I realize there's something I've never done before, that I'm interested in doing?

It happens.

Everyyyy time.

So, here we are.

I love Cub Lake. I love short, sweet stories that leave me with a smile on my face. And I'm excited to see how Wren story goes! It'll be the last in this cute little duo.

As always, thanks for reading!

Until next time!

All the love,

Lola Glass <3

stay in touch

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about the author

Lola is a book lover with a **slight** romance obsession and a passion for love.
Especially love between sassy women and huge, growly magical men ;)

When she's not reading or writing up a storm, she's hanging out with her husband and two little boys, or baking something sugary that she **probably** shouldn't eat (but will).