



DENALI  
HEAT  
SERIES

LISSA MATTHEWS  
ARCTIC  
SHIFT

SANDHILL PRODUCTIONS

She believes in myths...can she believe in destiny?

*Denali Heat, Book 1*

Unlike her adventurous sister, Ruby is perfectly content to let her mind be the wanderlust while her body stays safely in Chicago. Melanie wouldn't be out of touch this long without a damned good reason, though. Which means it's time for a giant step outside her comfort zone.

While Denali National Park is like another planet, the myths and legends that saturate this wild land are right up her alley. The wilderness guide waiting for her—naked in her bed—looks about as safe as a polar bear.

Carson's people are kin to the great beast, right down to the white hair. Before Ruby ever set foot in Alaska, his inner bear knew that Melanie's little sister was his mate. He's doing his level best not to let his primal needs scare her, but everything about her sends his urge to possess her into overdrive.

To his surprise, revealing he's a shifter only stimulates her innate curiosity. Warming her with the perfect fire of their lovemaking, easy. Convincing her that real love isn't a myth—and making her want to stay in his home, his bed, his heart—now, that's a problem...

Warning: cozy flannel PJs, a naked shifter, incredible food and some fireside sex hot enough to melt the polar ice caps...

**eBooks are *not* transferable.  
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

Arctic Shift  
Copyright © 2010 by Lissa Matthews  
ISBN: 978-1-60928-159-5  
Edited by Bethany Morgan  
Cover by Kanaxa

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: August 2010  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

# Arctic Shift

*Lissa Matthews*

# Chapter One

Ruby shivered. She might be riding in a truck and the heater might be cranked up to high, but the cold permeated the windows and it was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering. “I can’t believe Mel would still be up here. There’s nothing except snow and woods and not a whale to be found. Her work is down by the water. It was only supposed to be a weekend trip.” The last was muttered into her hands as she exhaled warm air into her glove-covered palms trying to warm them.

It was only October, and winter hadn’t set in yet, but snow was beginning to accumulate on the ground and temperatures were a balmy thirty-something. Even though she lived in Chicago where it got bone-chilling cold thanks to the lake, this cold was different.

She couldn’t quite explain why or what it was that made it different, she just knew she’d never been this cold in her life. Their, Ruby and Mel’s, parents hadn’t had much luck getting direct answers from Mel’s boss about her exact whereabouts the last time he’d heard from her, but Ruby hadn’t been content to take his half-ass answers. She had dogged his every step, called him day and night until he finally gave her what little information he had. In the end, he hadn’t been very helpful at all. Even Ruby had known Mel was supposed to be in and around the Kenai Peninsula. It was what happened after she left the Kenai and Cook Inlet area that Ruby wasn’t sure about. Things had gone silent. The last communication Ruby’d had from her sister was that she was taking a few days to go up to Mount McKinley in Denali National Park with a local man she had the hots for. But even Mel knew if she didn’t check in or get back to work, someone would notice and contact their parents and their parents would contact Ruby.

Mel had booked an air tour and had gotten on the ground in a little town inside the forest area, not too far from the main park entrance, but well enough off the beaten path that only the locals could get anyone there. And that little town was where Ruby was headed.

“You said your sister was up here doing research?”

“Back along the coast, yes. Here in the middle part of the state where there are no whales? No. Which is why I don’t understand her not being back from her trek to the mountain.” The last was said more to herself than to Joe, the local she’d hired to drive her.

“Maybe she got caught up with one of the locals, and she’s holed up in his cabin.”

*As if. Though if either of us were likely to do such a thing, it would be Mel.* “No. She loves that job too much to jeopardize it and disappearing off the face of the earth would seriously jeopardize it.” Ruby looked

around at the snow-dotted trees. “And what locals? Aside from you and me, there’s no sign of human life anywhere.” She’d seen a fair amount of moose, caribou, some small white foxes, but no humans.

Joe laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound either and made her feel a bit uneasy.

“Oh, there’s life out here all right, little lady. Don’t you go forgettin’ it either. And there are...human types. They just blend in with the scenery so’s you can’t spot ’em. They don’t like to draw attention to themselves.”

Blend in with the scenery? Human types? Her interest was piqued. She didn’t want to admit it because Joe seemed a little kooky and creepy now, but she was a glutton for a good tale. “How do they do that? Everything is white for miles and miles, and it’s kind of hard to blend in with a tree unless you’re in brown from head to toe.”

“Well, they change form when they don’t want to be seen.”

“They change form?” She was having a hard time containing her curious enthusiasm. She was from the city where people were people and there was very little blending into the surroundings. There was no such thing as humans that could change shape around where she lived. But in the myths and legends she’d studied in her life, in her career...they were full of shape-shifting beings. Humans to animals. They were just stories though. They didn’t really exist, never had.

“Yeah, they shift, you know? Change.” He took a last puff from his cigarette and tossed it from the truck and into the snow. “You mean you never heard of shifters?”

“I’m afraid not. Not real ones, anyway.”

“Huh. Well, no one has been able to prove they exist, but they do. You mark my word. They’re here.”

“How do you know? I mean, if it’s never been proven?” All she wanted was to find Melanie and make sure she was okay, not to go myth diving. She couldn’t let herself get carried away with the intrigue and curiosity, couldn’t act like she cared. But dammit, he was tempting her bad habit of inquisitiveness. And since myths were right up her alley...

She loved delving into old tales. It was how she’d become a mythologist. Hardly anyone knew what that was, but the libraries and museums loved her. She was always asking questions, always looking for new answers, new avenues of thought.

The whys and what ifs defined more of her life than reality and right now. She had a natural curiosity and simple one-word answers never worked for her. It was probably why she liked reading so much, too, getting her hands on everything she could about whatever she was studying and trying to figure out.

He shifted behind the wheel as if her question made him uncomfortable. “I just know.”

“What kind of animals?” She shouldn’t have asked any more. She should have let the subject drop, but he had her hooked and she wanted to know more. Were they wolves? Bears? Moose? Caribou? Or were they smaller like some of the fox she’d seen along the side of the road?

“Bears, mostly.”

“Like Kodiak bears?”

“Polar bears. Ice bears.”

He had to be pulling her leg, but the serious, low tone of his voice told her he wasn't. Still, though...  
“This is too far south and too far inland for polar bears.”

Joe shot her a pointed stare and she shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. “You mark my word, they's more polar bears than any other kind. Wolves too. But not so much down here in these woods. The wolves are farther north and deeper in.”

He shifted again, and his jaw tightened. Soon after, he lit another cigarette. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was trying to frighten her, but she chalked that feeling up to just being tired and irritable. They'd been on the road for what seemed like forever, and she'd had enough. Enough of Joe, of the cold, of nature, of being so far out of her comfort zone and what she knew. She wanted warmth, one of her books that made her feel at home and comforted, and to sleep for a week. “How much longer before we reach the lodge?”

“Just 'round that bend up there. You'll be able to hire someone to take you farther into the wilderness. You make sure to be careful and watch out for them shifters. ”

She'd already been in contact with someone at the lodge about needing a guide. “Yeah, I'll do that.”

“Here's your key, Ms. Adams. The room number is on the inside of the envelope. Please let us know if there's anything else we can do for you.”

“Actually, when I made the reservation I told the girl I needed a guide to take me... I mean, I'm... I'm searching for my sister, and I have no idea where to even begin looking.”

“Of course. I'll put in a call to Carson and let him know you're here. He'll take care of you.

“Who is he?”

“Oh, he's the outdoorsman. His family pretty much owns this little town and brings in all the business. He runs the wilderness store and rents outdoor equipment to the tourists.” Her voice dropped into a conspiratorial whisper, and Ruby had to lean a little closer to hear her. “We don't get many normal people here because we're so far off the beaten path. We get a lot of rich and famous ones though. Sometimes actors and actresses and sometimes just high-powered businessmen wanting a real wilderness experience. Carson knows this area like the back of his hand, grew up in the woods and can find his way around with his eyes closed. He's the perfect man for what you need.”

Mountain man. She'd never met a real one. And why did the clerk seem to insinuate that a guide into the forest wasn't the only thing Ruby needed or was there for? “Great, thanks.”

“Sure. Is there anything else?”

Ruby shook her head. “No. I think just a hot shower and sleep will be enough.” She turned around and headed in the direction of the elevators. She honestly didn’t know which she wanted first, the snoozing or the shower. Too bad she couldn’t do both at the same time.

Her room, three-ten, was at the end of the hall. Decorated in browns and greens with rich dark wood furnishings, the room was warm in both feel and look. She loved it immediately. It was different than the sparse urban décor in her apartment back in Chicago and made her feel comfortable in a way she couldn’t remember ever feeling.

She dropped her bags on the floor outside the bathroom then stripped out of her boots and jacket. Her jeans and sweater and long underwear followed and the shiver that shook her body had her running for the shower. She turned on the water and steam soon filled the room. The shower enclosure was no different than many other hotel showers—fiberglass and stainless fixtures. The glass door instead of a curtain was a nice touch, though as was the stone countertop she’d briefly glanced at when she walked in.

A blissful sigh escaped her lips as she stepped under the hot spray. She fiddled with the showerhead and turned it to a pulse setting then turned around, letting the hard stream of water work on the tightness in her shoulders. She couldn’t stop the moan of pleasure as her muscles melted and the tension eased. As good as the hot water felt on her chilly skin though, her mind drifted to her flannel pajamas and how good it would feel to crawl between the covers of the large king-sized bed.

After quickly washing her hair and body, Ruby turned off the water and got out. She dried off and knelt on the soft carpet to rummage through her bag for her PJs. She flung sweaters and sweatshirts and jeans out. She found everything she wasn’t looking for and couldn’t find the one thing she was. “I know I packed them. I wore them last night. Dammit.”

She crawled over to her other bag and dug through it as well, still not finding the pajamas. “They were the only pink anything I brought with me,” she muttered. She sat back on her heels. “Well, it’s either sleep in the long underwear or sleep naked.” One more pass through both bags and the dumping out of her toiletry bag and—“Aha!”

She quickly pulled the soft material on and combed her strawberry-blonde hair out. The bathroom had a built-in hairdryer for which she was thankful. She hadn’t brought hers and hated going to bed with wet hair, especially when it took so long for her to warm up after she’d been as cold as she had been before.

It took all of forever to dry her hair. It was long and somewhat thick and was a pain in the ass, but she didn’t want to cut it more than necessary. A few times over the years, she’d even grown it out long enough so she could donate it to be made into wigs for cancer patients. She needed to do that again and if all she did for the next few months was get just the minimum trimmed, she’d have enough to donate by spring.

When her hair was sufficiently dry, she put the hairdryer back into its wall receptacle and brushed her teeth. She couldn’t even remember the last time she had eaten she was so bone tired. She grabbed her cell phone from her purse and climbed into the bed. The mattress was cozy, and Ruby snuggled deep beneath



the heavy bedding, sighing loud in the empty room. She sent a quick text to her parents to let them know she'd arrived safe and sound and put the phone on the nightstand. She wasn't sure what time it was back in Indiana where her parents had their farm and she really didn't care. She was exhausted. Her last thought before sleep took her was of Joe's story that shifters existed in the wilds of Alaska. Wolves and bears shifting form and shape into humans. Or was it humans shifting into bears and wolves? She couldn't imagine it, couldn't wrap her head around the idea and though she tried to dismiss it as ludicrous, something drew her into dreams of werebears. It would really be no different than...

*It was watching her. From the edge of the trees she saw eyes and a huge shape down on all fours. She could hear its breathing and yet, for now, she wasn't frightened. She was curious but not enough to go closer...*

*...his large hand in her hair tugged sharply as he wrapped it around her ponytail and held on tight, pulling her head back. His growl slid through her like claws, ripping away all her resistance, not that there was any. Her need was just as strong. They were like animals here against the wall...*

*...he mounted her from behind, his cock stretching and piercing her in one long, sure thrust. She let out a growl of her own, panting and pushing back against him, wanting him deeper, harder...*

*"Down."*

*He grumbled just as his teeth bit into the skin of her shoulder and she bent forward, dropping her upper body to an angle that left her vulnerable and even more at his mercy. She'd never been so helpless against a man, and she wasn't even sure he was a man... He was too beautiful, too much a creature of nature, too raw and honed to perfection...*

*...the tips of his long hair caressed her back, and she shivered at the soft touch. She'd only had a moment to take him in before he'd roared the word "Mine" and charged her. Fear cornered her against the wall of the building until he shifted from animal to man, until he touched her with a mix of tender patience and rough urgency...*

*...lips soothed the bite marks before traveling across her back from one shoulder to the other, his tongue leaving behind a scorching mark she was sure would be burned into her skin. He was one of them, she was sure of it, one of those shifters, one of those that legends were made of... She no longer feared him. Only ached for him in a way that would bind her to him for always.*

*...he swelled within her, rode her without mercy until his voice thundered in the quiet night air. Her knees buckled, and he held her up with his arm around her belly and then she was in his arms, both of them wrapped tight around her as he carried her against his chest. "Mine," he said again, this time calm and full of promise...*

*And she was...*

“Hey Charlie, let me in this room.”

“Why do you need in there?”

Carson Jenings sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. He was tired. Tired of dreams, tired of wandering the woods at night, restless, tired of waiting on the woman to show, and now that she was finally damn here, he couldn't get her to wake her ass up and answer the door. “I need the person inside, and she's not answering.”

“Well maybe she's not there.”

His patience was wearing thin, and he hadn't slept in days. Dreams of her kept him up, kept him hard and aching and hungry. All he could do to try and ease the frustration in his body was run and hopefully wear himself out. Knowing she was coming though just kept his nerves on edge. She wasn't here for him, but she was his. Melanie said Ruby would come, and she'd been right. Now all Carson needed to do was get to her without scaring the shit out of her by breaking the door down. Not to mention, his brother Patrick wouldn't be happy with him if he did it either. “Charlie, it's seven in the morning. She flew cross-country so she's got jetlag more than likely, and she's not used to our little world up here. Trust me, she's in there and chances are, she's still getting her beauty sleep.”

“Okay, well don't tell anyone. I'll get in trouble for it if Patrick finds out.”

“Won't breathe a word.” Carson made a motion of locking his lips and throwing away the key. Charlie seemed to believe him and slid the master into the lock, and it popped open. Carson mouthed a thank you and slipped in silently. Sure enough, she was still asleep. The curtains were drawn over the windows, and what little light there was came from the small lamp on the chest of drawers on the opposite side of the room. The only sound was his breathing and the small nasal snore from the woman in the bed.

*His woman.*

Melanie had been concerned with how her sister was going to take that bit of news, but it didn't really matter much to him. He'd convince her, coax her, seduce her, whatever it took. He needed her, probably in ways he didn't even know of yet, but the immediate need was her; her body, her sex.

He pulled the padded chair over from the sitting area and sat, propping his feet up on the end of the bed, careful not to jar it too much. For the first time in days, he started to relax and the tiredness began to take over. He could use some sleep. Hell, he could use a whole month of sleep. Crawling into bed next to her seemed like a damn good idea. He knew why she was here, but her sister wasn't lost somewhere in the wilderness. He knew exactly where Melanie was, and it wouldn't take long for him to get Ruby to her. The sooner he got her in front of Melanie and proved that the other woman was alive, safe and sound, in love with James, the fool-headed romantic brother of his, the sooner he could get Ruby into his home and into his bed.

She rolled over, and he caught sight of her face in person for the first time in the low lamplight. She was pretty with soft, welcoming features. He knew from the pictures Mel had shown him, Ruby was soft

and round from head to toe. She wasn't willowy and thin which was a damn good thing as far as he was concerned. He was a good-sized man, and he didn't want to worry about breaking the woman he was fucking, especially when he planned on doing a whole lot of it.

And that thought of her naked, him naked, of them naked together sealed the debate going on in his head of either dozing in the chair or crawling into the warm bed with her. He wanted to feel her against him. He'd been dreaming of her, imagining her, thinking about this one woman that the spirits had chosen for him and now that she was here, within reach, within his grasp, he wanted to lie with her, feel her against him, even if it were just in sleep for now.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he got up out of the chair and stripped off his clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor, and slid beneath the blankets. She purred and moved closer to him, snuggling. It wasn't what he'd been expecting, but hell, he'd take it. She wore flannel pajamas and while it was kind of cute, she wouldn't be wearing them anymore. She wouldn't need them. He was very warm natured, bordering on furnace hot, and she wouldn't need anything on in bed...except him.

She pillowed her head on his shoulder, and he gently slid an arm around her, pulling her even closer. His cock was screaming hard, and he had half a mind to pull her the rest of the way on top of his body and at least burrow his dick between her flannel-covered legs, but he figured that might be going a little too far without first introducing himself.

Her soft hair tickled his skin, and her breath was cool against his neck. Mel had talked nonstop about Ruby from the moment his brother had brought her home. Ruby was supposed to be some sort of librarian that studied fairy tales or some such thing but she had yet to find her own Prince Charming or White Knight. Carson hadn't paid much attention beyond being polite to his brother's mate until Mel brought out some pictures of Ruby. Something he hadn't believed existed had suddenly cracked open inside his gut, tugging at everything inside his soul.

Others in his family had said it was just the beginning and seeing their mate for the first time caused that very same reaction, almost like a shell breaking. It was the human part of their make-up taking over, allowing them to truly bond with others, to feel emotion on a human level, to feel human arousal as it was connected to love, empathy, pain and sorrow.

His kind were loners, sticking close to one another, but not mingling much with normals. That's what full humans were. Normal. At least in the eyes of society. He and his family were different, strange, and took care of their own. They controlled their own destiny, their own paths, making their own way of living so no one would ever know just how different they really were.

His bear half simply needed to eat, sleep, survive. He cared for his family, but it wasn't in this kind of way, this all-encompassing need and desire to live. When he'd seen the picture of Melanie and Ruby together, laughing, his human half began kicking in. At first he didn't like it, wanted to fight it, but the

more pictures he'd looked at, the more he heard her voice on the voicemails she left for Mel, the more the hunger had grown to know her, see her, touch her, have her.

He didn't have the luxury of spending a whole lot of time wooing her. Mating was something he needed to do and do quickly. His human half was still getting used to his animalistic needs and vice versa. It was sometimes so overwhelming that he couldn't stop masturbating, couldn't stop or slow down his need for orgasms. His brother, Mel's mate, said eventually there would be a more controllable balance, but it likely wouldn't take effect until he'd been with Ruby a few times. His bear half had a mating season, but his human half didn't. There were no female shifters so the science of the true ice bear mating didn't figure into his family genetics. Until he met his mate, a male shifter was allowed to have sex with anyone he wished, but once his mate was introduced into his psyche, other women were off limits.

His bear side and his human side had to learn to live together, which meant Ruby had to learn as well. He hoped it was as easy for her to accept and adapt as it had been for Mel.

She shifted in her sleep and turned over, presenting her back to him. He turned as well and held her from behind, scooting close and wrapping his other arm around her middle. His cock nestled itself against her ass and twitched, throbbing painfully. God above, he wanted inside her. And when she wiggled that ass...

He flattened his hand against her lower belly hoping to still her. That was a mistake. The tip of his pinky edged the top of her flannel-covered mound. He couldn't feel the outline of any panties nor the springy curls that would normally... Shit. The woman, his woman was wearing no panties and was smooth.

When she nestled in and settled down, her body relaxed and she sank into him. She fit like she'd always been meant to be there. He couldn't wrap his head around how that kind of thing was possible, but his body seemed to recognize the truth of it and he was too tired to fight it.

Her feet pressed into his shins, and her head was still at shoulder level on him. Her cunt and ass were at the perfect position and angle for his cock.

And he'd never known a peace so deep and strong. He'd never known the kind of protection and obsession that filled him now either. Hunger and lust peaked and flowed through him. He couldn't wait to meet her eyes and see her smile first hand, hear her voice, taste her lips, feel her under him, open and hot.

He kissed the top of her head, and she moaned. He closed his eyes and tightened his arms, smiling for the first time in weeks, and let much-needed sleep take him.

## Chapter Two

Ruby stretched. Or rather she tried to stretch. She was tied down. No, her arms were free. She was held down. No, that wasn't right either. She was held, but not down. Against. She was held against a body, a very big, very aroused body from the feel of it. His arms were big and tight as bands of steel, and the heat coming from him was hotter than anything she'd ever felt. It seeped through her pajamas and into her skin, warming her from the outside in and vice versa. She hadn't ever been so warm and, odd as it seemed with a strange man in her hotel bed, she liked it. A lot.

She liked his smell too. Like the outdoors. Like crisp air and woods. The man in her dream smelled like that too. He'd felt solid like the one she was pressed against. She—

The strange man part finally kicked in, and she started fighting to get free. She couldn't believe it had taken so long for the languidness of the dream to leave her, allowing her conscious mind control. She pushed at his arms, his legs, and his chest at her back. He didn't budge. She couldn't even turn over to see him, to poke him in the eye, to knee him in the balls. Hmmm...could she bend her leg enough to reach his crotch with her foot?

"If you'll hold still, I'll let go."

Ruby froze. She didn't even breathe. His arms loosened as his voice reverberated through her. It was deep, as warm as his body, oddly familiar and for a second she panicked at the thought of losing that incredible heat.

"Just let me turn around, please." She hadn't meant to say that, but she found that she'd meant it. She just wanted to see him, to see the man that went with the voice, with the body, with some thoughts, some memory she couldn't quite recall. She wasn't scared, and she would definitely be giving herself a talk about that later. For the moment though, she just needed to see him.

"Not gonna unman me, are you?"

There was humor in that dark, coffee tone that she wanted to drink in and savor for the foreseeable future. "No." She probably should. There were probably women all over the world screaming in protest because she wasn't going to knee him the first chance she got. But she wasn't like most women, never had been. And she didn't fear this man. Her own womanly instincts told her she did have to.

She was still going to have that talk with herself though. Sometimes one needed to use common sense and scream at the top of her lungs instead of being in awe of the incredible male that held her as if she were the most precious of treasures.

“Okay.” His arms loosened a bit, just enough that she could roll over.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she started to turn away again. He was unlike any man she’d seen before, except... “Oh wow.” Incredible was spot on.

“What wow?”

“You. You’re beautiful and...naked. In my hotel room. In my bed, in my hotel room. Naked.” She tried pulling away from him, but he only tightened his arms around her again effectively pinning her against his body.

“Don’t fight me, Ruby. Please.”

She didn’t want to fight him and as soon as he asked her not to, she stilled. She wanted to sink into his body and stay there forever, but she managed to wedge her arms between them and push against his chest with her hands. It didn’t do much good. His touch, his presence was comforting in a way she couldn’t explain. Her fingers simply curled into the soft hair beneath them, and she marveled at the strength of the heart that beat there. Adding in the fact that he was gorgeous didn’t hurt. Men that looked like him didn’t look her way, much less climb into bed with her.

She must be jet lagged or something. She shouldn’t be able to justify him being there in any way, shape or form. Could be she was still a little dazed from the dream she’d had. It seemed awfully real, and she could swear she felt the ache in her body from his handling and taking of her, but she knew that was just a figment of her imagination. Still...

That was all beside the point for the moment though... “How do you know my name? And why shouldn’t I fight you? I don’t know you.”

“You are the woman needing someone to take you into the forest, correct? Looking for your sister?”

“Yes. So?”

“So I’m the someone. I’m going to take you. Marsha said she’d call Carson when you checked in, right?”

“Uh huh. Is this what you normally do? Sneak into hotel rooms of clients and get into bed with them?”

“No. You’re the first.”

He wasn’t at all apologetic or bothered by it either. “Why? Do you know me? Well, of course you know me, a little at least. You know my name, but you’re right. It could be just that the desk clerk told you my name. It’s just not making any sense. I mean, do we have some connection I’m unaware of? Why are you looking at me like that? I’m rambling, aren’t I? I do that when I’m not sure what I’m doing or what’s going on. I—”

“Shall I formally introduce myself? Hi Ruby. I’m Carson. A pleasure to meet you.”

And he kissed her.

Tightened his arms around her and nuzzled her face up with his in a strangely intimate gesture and planted a scorching kiss to her surprised yet welcoming mouth. His tongue met hers and when she didn't pull back or object, he pressed the advantage, taking the kiss deeper, rolling her onto her back, and insinuating himself between her legs. They parted without her permission and wrapped around his back as he continued the assault on her mouth, her lips.

When he slowly slid his tongue away from the grip her teeth had on it and looked down at her, she tried hard to focus on his features, but couldn't take her eyes off his mouth, wanting it back again.

"There's something wrong with me," she whispered, touching his face gently with the tips of her fingers, tracing the lips that had just ravished hers, staring at him in wonder. If she could have conjured the most perfect man out of thin air for herself, he would be this man. The way he touched, kissed, held, spoke to her... It was all better than any fairy tale prince, better than any fantasy hero.

"Why?"

His breath was more than warm against her skin and her fingers tingled. "I'm not this person."

"What person?"

Ruby pushed at him and set her feet back to the mattress. He let go of her and knelt up on his knees between her open legs. She then pushed herself up and hugged her knees to her chest, shielding herself from his gaze. Even though she couldn't make his features out clearly, she had the feeling he could see everything about her as though it were bright as day inside the room instead of so dimly lit.

"I'm not the person that just accepts a stranger being in bed with me when I clearly remember going to sleep alone."

"I understand that. Would it help if I told you you're my woman and in bed together is where we're supposed to be?"

He wasn't smiling as he said it, there was not a hint of laughter in his voice and Ruby had the sneaking suspicion that he wasn't joking. "Of course it wouldn't help, but thanks for making me smile." And she did, even as she rolled her eyes. "Could you please open the curtains or turn on another light? What time is it anyway?"

"Seven thirty," he said, getting off the bed, but not before leaning forward and kissing one of her knees. "Sun won't be up for another hour or so."

He didn't seem the romantic type, but he sure was acting like it. He didn't kiss like the romantic type either. Heck, he kissed like a starving man afraid he'd never eat again. He kissed like he'd been searching for that one kiss his whole life. And she'd never been kissed before like that by any man. He was different, this Carson, and she was going to be different before all was said and done too. She knew it.

Her eyes followed the shadowed line of his body as he walked to the window and flung the curtains wide then turned on the floor lamp at his side. The room brightened and oh God. She'd been right. He was gorgeous. Indescribably so, with long platinum hair that fell between his shoulders, the roots of which were

black. The rest was so light that platinum was the only word she could come up with and even that didn't seem to fit it. It was almost transparent and that's when she decided the light must be playing with her eyes or something because...

He came back to the bed again and knelt on the edge next to her. Perfectly still and perfectly naked. Up his body her gaze traveled until she met his eyes. Black. There was no distinction between the iris and the pupil and his brows and lashes were like his hair, black at the root, platinum at the ends.

Lightly tanned skin with no tan line anywhere in sight, the hair on his chest, down his belly and between his legs all mirrored the hair on his head. Well defined muscles and while he was lean, he was very large, and much taller than her own five feet five inches, even when he was kneeling.

And then, there was his penis. It was large too. Easily larger than any man she'd ever been with. It was long and thick and made her fingers itch to wrap around the shaft, made her mouth water to take a taste of it. The longer she stared at it, the harder it seemed to get.

"Like it?"

Her gaze snapped to his face. "Yes." She'd thought for a second about lying, but she'd been caught and there was no point in not being honest. They were going to be spending time together, alone, which was going to take trust. If he couldn't trust her to be honest about something as simple as whether she liked his cock or not...well that wasn't a very good way to start off their relationship. Business though it was.

He grinned at her admission, and she wanted that mouth again.

"Good," he fairly growled. He followed the growl with a hand wrapped in her hair and gave her the kiss she'd just told herself she wanted.

It was starved, hungry, needy and she couldn't say the way she gave back to him was any different. Her fingers tangled in his hair as his did hers and before she knew it, she was sprawled on top of his body.

"Oh. Wow," she gasped against his mouth.

"Again with the wow." She nodded. "Okay. Wow is good. Though wait 'til I get you out of that flannel."

Out of the flannel? They were going to do this again? She was going to let him get her naked and touch her and kiss her silly? One look down into his darker-than-sin eyes and the smile that could tempt Satan and yes, she was going to let him. And probably let him do it more than once.

She was far from home. She knew no one. Her concern for Melanie was overwhelming at best and though she did her best to keep her worries to herself, she was very concerned.

And Mountain Man Carson was a hot, sexy, erotic distraction she could use. So, hell yeah, she was going to let him.

But first things first. "How do these things work? I've never hired a guide to take me anywhere because I generally have a great sense of direction and honestly, I can't imagine Melanie being this far



north, which is what I told the guy yesterday that brought me up here. She studies migratory patterns of belugas, and there are none in Denali.”

Ruby started to roll off Carson’s body, but he didn’t let go, simply held her in place. She didn’t mind it really—it was just that he was distracting as all get out.

“I like holding you. I didn’t think I would, but I do, so please just let me. Stop trying to get away from me.”

Didn’t think he would? “What do you mean you didn’t think you would?”

He shrugged, and she shrugged too. It was kind of funny but that was how tight and close his hold was. When he moved, she moved with him. “Dreams. Been having dreams about you.”

That wasn’t as odd as it should have been. They were strangers but something was strong between them and... “Wait a second. A dream. I was having a dream when you got into bed with me or after or something. You...you were the man bear-thing in my dream.”

One of his brows raised, and he looked at her with a very serious but quizzical expression. “Man-bear thing?”

“Yeah.” She scrambled around and this time he let her go. She missed the warmth immediately and curled into his side. When she thought he’d wrap his arms around her, he just lay there, unmoving. Why that moment should be any different than any other since she’d woken up with him a little while ago, she didn’t know and didn’t let it be. She took one of his hands and pulled it, effectively pulling his arm too and wrapping it around her body. He chuckled and turned to her, closing the miniscule distance between them. “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” He nuzzled his face into her hair and she could swear she heard a very low growl. “Tell me about the man-bear thing.”

“It’s crazy.” *Ruby, you’re crazy. All curled up in the man’s arms as if you’ve been his lover for years.* “The guy yesterday said there were these myths about shifters in the woods. He said something about hoping Mel hadn’t been taken by one of them.”

“I take it you don’t believe such things exist?”

His tone was conversational with an underlying steel edge that she did her best to ignore. “It’s not that I don’t believe... Well, no. I don’t believe they really exist. In my studies, quite a few cultures believed that men could shift into certain animals to appease gods or for hunting and protection, but to actually think they exist in real life... I mean, how could they? How would a man shift into another creature? The DNA alone wouldn’t allow it.”

“Did the man mention bears as shifters or just shifters in general?”

“Bears. Polar bears. My dream must have been a combination of the reading I did about polar bears the other day on one of my flights and his odd little tale. That must be where I got the strange idea about a bear shifting into a man.”

“Must be,” he said, dismissively. “You said the man-bear thing looked like me?”

Ruby turned so she could see his face. “No. He didn’t just look like you. He *was* you. Your build, your face, your hair, your voice, your touch. He was you, the spitting image. When you said you’d dreamed of me, it triggered the memory. It clicked.”

“Nice. I like that. Was it a good dream?”

“But why would I be dreaming of you? I didn’t even know you. I still don’t know you. I... And why would you be dreaming of me? None of this makes any sense. It’s the altitude isn’t it? The cold? Something in the water maybe, except I haven’t had any water lately. Maybe that’s what it is. Maybe I’m dehydrated or hungry.”

The more she went off the deep end, the more Carson’s arm tightened around her waist and the closer he pulled her into him. What was wrong with her? One minute she was okay with him, even though that was odd, but the next minute she was running off at the mouth, rambling, with a slight hitch of alarm in her voice. She needed to pick a side of this situation to be on. And the side she wanted to be on was his.

“Was it a good dream, Ruby?”

“How do you know my name?” she asked again. He’d given the answer about the desk clerk having called him, but she didn’t really believe that. Something else was up with this, was kinda hokey and... “Did you go through my stuff before you got into bed with me? How do you know anything about me? I’m starting to feel uncomfortable about you being here. I don’t think I want you as my guide. I’ll find someone else.”

Carson laughed that deep, so very, very deep rumbling laugh. She loved the sound. Damn, she loved the feel of him. The look of him. If she believed in love at first sight she’d swear that’s what this was. What other explanation could there be for the fact that she didn’t feel panic or that he was a threat? All she felt was this need for him, this desire to be with him when she hadn’t ever felt anything like it with any other man.

She knew deep down that the sex would be phenomenal too. After all, that’s what they were doing in her dream.

*Oh God.*

He rubbed his chin against her cheek and goose bumps blossomed over her skin. He needed a shave, but to look at him, she hadn’t known there was any stubble.

“You’re blushing. Why? Thinking about that dream again?”

She shivered when he nuzzled behind her ear. “We were having sex,” she whispered.

“So it *was* one of those dreams.”

“I’ve never had a sex dream before. It was so realistic.” She could see it vividly in her mind. His dream touch was the same as his real touch. He smelled the same, looked the same, sounded the same. It could have been reality it was so clear to her.

“Did you have an orgasm?”

She couldn't believe he asked that. “What kind of question is that?”

“A curious one. Did you?”

“No, I don't think so.” And she couldn't believe she answered it.

He tugged her over onto her back. “Don't think so? Don't tell me you've never had sex before.”

“Of course I've had sex. Just...” His black gaze bore into her green one, and she fought the urge to squirm under his stare. She didn't want to admit the things she was admitting. She didn't want to give him the answers to the questions he was asking.

She didn't want to refuse him either because she'd never wanted a man more. She wanted to know if the real thing with him would be as good as the dream.

“Have you never had an orgasm?”

There was such...concern? He was concerned? Or was that fear? “Well, yes I've had an orgasm.”

“Okay. Then what is it?”

She couldn't believe she was going to tell him the truth. “I've never had one with a man before.”

There was shock, surprise that widened his eyes, but the softening around his mouth, the concern still clear in his gaze made her belly flutter. “Never? Not even once? Not even a small one?”

“No.”

“Well, that just won't do. You know that, right?”

“It's not important.” The hell it wasn't. Who was she trying to kid?

“Oh it's very important. And you won't be hiring anyone else. You're stuck with me, Ruby. No one knows this area like I do. No one can keep you as safe as I can. I can take you where you need to go and to the one you're searching for. No one can make you burn hot enough to melt the snow like I can either. It's me or no one.”

The burn hot and melt snow part got her right between her breasts and traveled the length of her body down between her legs. Just looking at him made her hot. What she didn't tell him was that just before she woke up, the reason she'd started getting restless was because she was about to orgasm. The dream Carson was making her come.

“How do you know me? Will you answer me that? Please? How do you know me and why aren't I scared of you?”

“Truth?”

She nodded. “Truth.”

“You belong to me and...”

“And?”

“I know where Melanie is.”

## Chapter Three

“You have no heat in here.”

Ruby sat on the far side of the truck cab, huddled beneath a couple of wool blankets. Under that she wore long johns, two shirts, boots, wool socks and jeans. Black gloves covered her hands and a hat covered her head. Sure it was cold up here, but damn he’d have thought she came from the far south as opposed to Chicago.

“Nope, don’t need it.”

“You have AC though.”

“I do need that sometimes, but I rarely use it. Usually just roll the windows down.”

“What about the women you take out?”

Carson’s brow scrunched as he looked over at her. “What about them?” Not that there were many of them and not that they’d ever been in his truck.

“Well, don’t they get cold? Or hot?”

He had a few different ways he could answer that. “No, they don’t get cold. Yes, they do get hot.”

Her head whipped around, and her eyes widened. He just winked and smiled. She wasn’t a bit shy, but she could be shocked every once in a while. Just like she’d been at a loss for words when he’d insisted on being in the office at his store while she changed into more appropriate clothes. What she’d brought with her, jeans, sneakers, a few cute tops and sweaters and a lame-ass pair of boots that she said were for hiking, did not appropriate attire for the Alaskan interior make.

After she’d gotten used to the idea or at least accepted the idea that he wasn’t leaving while she changed, she’d stripped all the way down to nothing but her birthday suit. It had taken every ounce of self-control he possessed not to set her up on the desk, pull her legs apart and slide in. She knew what she was doing to him too. That was the kicker. She was driving him insane on purpose. It was her way of paying him back for having been naked in the hotel room while she’d been in pajamas, but he didn’t think she’d actually strip totally when it was entirely possible someone could have walked in. Not to mention, it hadn’t been necessary for her to take off her bra and panties, but she’d done it. Made a whole show of it. Bent over this way, giving him a great view of her ass. Stretched and pulled that way, giving his cock a peek-a-boo tease of her pussy. And she’d been damn cold doing it. Her nipples had been so hard and when she thought she’d concealed it, he saw the shivers that wracked her body.

Oh yeah, she made sure he squirmed in his chair as he watched no matter how uncomfortable it might have made her.

Her breasts were full and soft with pert, happy nipples he couldn't wait to sink his teeth into. And he'd been right about her shaving below the panty line. Shaved so pretty and smooth, and it drove him mad with wanting to touch her. He wanted to bury his face, his hands, his dick against the silky lips he knew were already wet.

He couldn't get it out of his head that she'd never orgasmed with a partner. In all his dreams of her, she couldn't stop coming. But then, neither could he.

"Why are you smiling like that?"

"Like what?"

"Well, you keep looking over at me and smiling like I'm going to be your dinner."

"Maybe you are."

"Not even funny. I can't get that image of you as...well, that dream of you out of my mind. Don't joke about eating me for dinner."

He sobered at that. "How bad did that dream freak you out?"

"It's not like we were having sex while you were a bear, just that you... I don't know. You turned from a bear into a man, not the other way around. And then there was the sex and it was just so primal, so animalistic and possessive. I've never experienced anything like it."

"It doesn't happen like that," he said, his voice low and barely audible to his own ears. He was going to have to tell her the truth sometime.

She turned in the seat to face him. "What did you say?"

He kept his eyes trained on the snowy path in front of him. The heavy snows hadn't begun to fall so the drive through the woods was still possible with ease. In a few weeks though, driving the truck back and forth to the store would be impossible. "What do you think you heard?"

She scooted just a fraction of an inch closer to him. Interesting. "I thought I heard you say it doesn't happen like that."

"Okay." So she had good hearing.

"Okay? Okay as in that's what you said or okay it's not what you said but what you did say doesn't bear repeating?"

"You heard right." Might as well talk about it now. She had nowhere to run, no one to run to. He kind of liked being her only option.

"I don't understand, Carson. What do you mean it doesn't happen like that? Will you please stop being cryptic in your answers? How would you know how it happens? Wait..." She shook her head as if to clear it. "Listen to me... I'm talking like this is something real, and it's not, right?"

"I know exactly how it happens, and it doesn't happen the way it did in your dream." He reached for her, expecting her to back herself up to the door and out it if she could get her hand untangled from beneath the blanket and pop the handle. She didn't though. She scooted another fraction of an inch closer, close enough that his fingers could grab hold of the blankets and tug her the rest of the way to his side. "You're not running away," he observed.

"And where would I run to out here in the middle of the forest?"

"You're not acting all scared either."

"I haven't been scared of you since I woke up with you in bed with me. Why would I start now?"

"Then what are you, if not scared?"

"Curious, I guess. Confused. I don't know what else to be. Joe said there were shifters. You look like the one I dreamed about. You just said you know how it happens. And I'm in the middle of a fairy tale world up here." She looked around, out through the windows. "It's more beautiful that I could have ever imagined it being. It's so white, but there's green too. It's colder than hell, but around a human furnace like yourself and these yummy wool blankets... Maybe there is more than what I know or what I thought I knew. I almost wonder if maybe I'm still dreaming because the Ruby that left Chicago a couple days ago couldn't have changed this much."

"She could have if the Ruby in Chicago wasn't the real Ruby that lives inside you."

She looked as though she was thinking about what he'd just said. Her brows furrowed and were drawn down over her eyes. Her pretty lips were pursed with a little frown pulling at the corners. Her gaze skated away from him for a second, but then it was right back. "I guess."

"You said you're a mythologist, right? That you study myths and legends."

"Yes. Primarily Greek and Roman mythology, but every civilization has its own. I would love to do an intense study of Native American legends."

"Then why isn't it possible that something like a shapeshifter exists? You can't say for certain it does or doesn't just because you haven't heard of one. Couldn't some of the gods and goddesses turn into other beings?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you struggling with exactly? That there may be other types of creatures or beings than you thought or is it something more? Like, that you're attracted to one? Just because something is myth or legend, doesn't mean there isn't some basis in reality. It's just a different reality than what you're used to believing exists."

That last bit brought an O to her heart-shaped lips but confusion and uncertainty still swirled in her eyes. He needed her to come right out and ask the question, but at the same time, he wasn't sure what her reaction would be to the answer. "Ask it, Ruby. You know you want to."

Silence ensued until she licked her lips and took a deep breath. "Carson, are shifters real?"

Here we go. “Yes.”

“Are you one?”

“You can’t be uncertain about wanting the answer. Do you want the truth? Once heard, you can’t unhear it, and I can’t take it back. So, be sure you’re ready for the answer to what you’re asking.”

“I know. I want the truth. All of it.”

He pulled the truck to a stop and turned to face her. “Yes.”

Immediately, her eyes changed, brightened and he could almost see her brain at work. “Yes, you are. Okay. You’re a shifter. Half man, half animal. Okay. But wait. What does that even mean? Are you a man or a bear? I mean, are you a bear masquerading as a man or vice versa? How is it even possible?”

If she had wheels in her head, they’d be spinning so fast smoke would literally come out her ears. He could almost hear gears grinding she was thinking so hard, trying to put the puzzle together in her mind before he could even answer her questions. He touched her hair, her face, thankful she didn’t pull away in horror. His little academic was so deep in her own thoughts she couldn’t even begin to think about being scared of him.

“My DNA is spliced with that of the ice bears from the Arctic.”

“Why?”

Carson wasn’t sure if he should laugh or not. She was so serious in her question, so earnest in the asking of why. “It was an accidental thing at first, and then it became an experimental thing until it was so interwoven into our genetics that we are what we are...man and bear.”

“Someone experimented on your family?”

“Sort of. No one is any worse off for it though. One day we may be all that’s left of the ice bears.”

“Do you actually...shift into a bear? And what is an ice bear? Is it like a polar bear, like Joe said?”

Carson did laugh then. She was throwing questions out and hadn’t even processed the first answer to the first question. She wasn’t slowing down in her curiosity, her inquisitiveness, and something about that was sexy as shit to him. “Yes, it’s a polar bear. And no, we don’t actually shift into bear form, but we do need to run, to hunt, to be in the cold. We can swim in the arctic waters, and we are very warm-natured. Our hair is like the fur of the bear, and our eyes are as theirs. We eat a diet rich in fish protein, and we go into a sort of mating heat around this time of year.” He leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose, staring into her eyes. “But unlike our ice bear kin, when we shifters mate, we mate for life.”

“Oh.”

“Scared now, Ruby?”

“No. Should I be?”

“You didn’t believe in shifters a couple hours ago, and I’ve given you a lot to digest.”

“I’m not exactly closed-minded.”

“True. You’re like a curious kitten, but earlier you were rather a little unsettled by the notion.”

"I don't understand it. I don't understand how it happened that you came to be this way, to have pieces and parts of an animal's, a bear's DNA, but I don't think I should be scared of you. You haven't harmed me. You haven't acted like you wish to hurt me."

"What have I acted like?"

"Like you couldn't wait to get into my pants."

"And you'd be right."

"I don't understand that either. Why do you want me? You hardly know me. You just saw me, met me for the first time today, but before we left the hotel room you said I belong to you. What does that even mean?"

He had told her that. He'd also told her he knew where Melanie was, but aside from a moment of sheer joy that her sister was alive and unharmed and waiting to see her, Ruby had clung to the other statement he'd made. That she belonged to him. "More questions? Seriously?"

For a moment she looked chagrined, and he honestly didn't have the heart to make her feel bad for asking him anything. There was more truth to tell her and for her to find out. Now wasn't the time to admonish her for wanting some answers.

He turned back to the steering wheel and shifted the truck back into drive and started them moving again. He wanted to reach the halfway cabin before it got too late. He wanted her warmed and settled before it became too terribly cold. He also wanted her good and comfortable with him because the cabin had only one bed, and he damn sure wasn't sleeping on the floor.

"Remember? Back in the hotel room I said I'd been dreaming about you."

She slid the rest of the way to his side. "For how long?"

"A few weeks I guess, give or take."

"Were they, you know, *those* kinds of dreams?"

He slid her a sidelong glance. "You mean the kind where you orgasm all over the place?"

"Yes."

"Oh most definitely."

"And I liked it? And you liked it?"

"Loved it." She seemed to exhale a breath he didn't know she was holding. Could it be that Miss Ruby wanted in his pants as much as he wanted in hers?

"What about the other part of my question? You know, the part about my belonging to you?"

"Yes. You do. It's not something I can control, Ruby. It's not something that won't happen either. It's meant to be, you as mine, as my mate in this life."

"I don't think it works that way, Carson. Even for someone with different DNA running through his blood."



“Believe me, in this instance, and in every instance of every member of my family, living and dead, this is how it has worked. They know it inside, way deep down. It’s not always easy. The women don’t always, well hell, the women rarely ever understand at first that this is the way it is, but over time, they come to accept it.”

“Over time? How long?”

“Guess it’s different for everyone. It takes months or even years for some. For others, it can take as little as a few days.”

“You’d wait for me for years to be okay with it?”

“If I had to. I don’t think it’ll come to that though.”

“Why not?”

“Because you want me.” He slid an arm around her shoulders and, if he hadn’t been driving and hadn’t had a steering wheel in his lap, he’d have pulled her across his thighs and kissed every ounce of doubt from her. As it was, he could only hold her close to his side until they were safely tucked into the cabin.

“No sense in denying it or playing hard to get then, I guess.”

“Oh you can play hard to get. I’ll chase you for a while but pretty soon you’ll come to me all on your own.”

“How do you know?”

“Destiny, Ruby darlin’. Destiny.”

## Chapter Four

Ruby stretched and stretched...and stretched. There was no dashboard, no rumbling engine, no hot hunk of man-bear beside her. She bolted up. Where the hell was she?

“Carson?” she called out. Where the hell was he?

While she waited for an answer, she glanced around. Rustic and cozy. She was in a cabin or something. It was small, just the one room it looked like, though there appeared to be a bathroom through a door in the wall across from her. There was a small kitchen, a raggedy old couch, a two-person table, and the biggest, most divine fireplace giving off the most exquisite heat.

She flipped off the blankets and went to kneel in front of the fire. She stretched her arms out toward the warmth and sighed in blissful pleasure. The only thing that would have made it any better would be the addition of food. Okay well two things would have, could have made it better. The second being Carson all naked again as he’d been in her room earlier that morning.

Though that had surprised her, probably not as much as it should have alarmed her, what got to her was the shifter story. She had no doubt of its reality. Carson had been so sincere in his explanation, so open and forthcoming. He didn’t make it sound like a fairy tale, just that it was their life.

Mel would probably think they were nuts if she heard the story. She was the scientist, the one that dealt in fact and data. Ruby was the make-believe one, the one that dealt in the fairy tales and had since they were kids. Their parents had, at one time or another, tried to figure out how they could have produced two so very different girls. The schools had wondered the same thing. While neither got into trouble, their areas of interest were vastly different. Mel was the cheerleader and the brain. Ruby was the actress and the other brain.

“Don’t get too close to that, it might swallow you up.”

Carson. “You wouldn’t let it.” She looked over her shoulder at him standing in the doorway. Cold air and snow swirled around him, but he looked perfect. His eyes were startlingly black and his hair...she just couldn’t get over the stark contrast, the black-and-white coloring.

“True. You been awake long? I didn’t mean to be gone when you woke up. Hope you didn’t think I left you.”

“No, I didn’t, and I’ve only been up for a few minutes. Guess I fell asleep in the truck, huh?”

“Yeah.” He brought in a couple bundles of chopped wood and kicked the door shut. The room was again toasty warm. “Hungry?”

Was she ever. “How long was I asleep?”

“A few hours. It’s around seven at night. You’ll want to get a good night’s sleep tonight. We’ll have a longer drive tomorrow.”

“Where are we going?”

“My family has a compound deep in the forest. Tourists never get that far into Denali. You didn’t answer me,” he said, squatting beside her, holding his hands out toward the flame, “are you hungry?”

“Yes. Very actually.”

“Good. I make a mean wood-grilled salmon.”

Damn. She loved salmon. “You do?”

“Oh yeah. With a maple syrup and pepper glaze.”

She couldn’t stop licking her lips. She wanted the fish. She wanted the man that was talking about the fish. “I’m famished.” The words rushed past her lips, and he just grinned at her, making her think he knew it was more than the temptation of the salmon she was hungry for. No one else could read her quite the same way Carson could. It was a bit unsettling, but not enough that she was willing to put up walls to keep him out. Not when she wanted him really far in...deep.

“Well, let’s get you fed then.”

He stood, and she followed his every move. For such a big man, he moved with effortless grace. And there wasn’t a feminine thing about him to go with that grace. He was every inch a man and clothed or naked, he was hotter than hell.

“Anything I can do to help?”

He pulled a few things out of a cabinet. One looked like a bottle of maple syrup. She wasn’t sure about the other ingredients. He turned in a full circle and bent down. When he stood up again, he was holding two fish. “Not a thing. This kitchen isn’t big enough for me, so it definitely wouldn’t be big enough for the both of us.”

“Okay. Where did you get those?” she asked, pointing to the fish.

“There’s a trap door in the floor and it’s where we keep the frozen stuff. This far into the forest and on north, the ground is frozen during winter, and we can store meats.”

Ruby climbed back into the bed and wrapped a blanket around her. Much as she loved the fireplace, the floor wasn’t all that comfortable, and she wasn’t sure the couch would hold up if someone actually sat on it. “What is this place?”

“It’s a cabin my family has been using for years. We use it as a stop-off point when we’re making the trip from town to the compound.”

“I thought you owned the wilderness store?”

“I do own it. Part of it at least.” He talked while he prepped the fish. After cleaning them, he put them on a wood slab with a long handle. He peppered the flesh then spooned the maple syrup over the top. Her

mouth was watering just watching him in the small kitchen. A man had never cooked for her and though at the moment it was a necessary thing, it was kind of romantic.

"My family built this little town. We thought we could control how much of the forest people were interested in if we kept them occupied with other things. At least that was the plan way back when. Now, we run the businesses because it's how we make a living. The lodge is managed by my brother, Patrick. James, is in charge of supplies, getting the things to us that we need. I run the store, and I'm the one that put in the small coffee shop and café. It's not much, but it warms people when they're out here braving the wilds. We have one other brother, Doug, the youngest, who's a daredevil and challenges outsiders to figure out he's not quite human."

"That must drive your family crazy given that if it ever got out..."

"Yeah, it wouldn't be good if the world at large learned of the bear shifters in Alaska."

Tension showed in his jaw and in the tightening of his voice.

"So, will we be going back after I see Melanie?"

He concentrated hard on that fish. "Maybe." He brought the wooden tray over to the fireplace and with a small crank she hadn't even seen, used it to lower a metal grate that he could put the fish planks on.

She fiddled with the frayed edges of the blanket while she stared at him. He was full of surprises. "Maybe?"

It was his turn to stare at her and he did, pivoting on his feet in his squatting position. "Truth?"

"Geez, Carson, have you learned nothing about me? Of course, truth. What's going on with my sister and why is it a maybe that you'll take me back to town with you?"

"Your sister is fine. Last I saw, she was more than fine. She's with one of my brothers."

Ruby scrambled off the bed and stopped in front of him. She couldn't believe she'd been so hung up on him and his being a shifter and the cold and him that she hadn't even asked what was going on with Melanie and why she was still where she was rather than where she was supposed to be. Ruby couldn't help but wonder what kind of sister it made her. After all, Melanie was the reason she was up there in the wilderness in the first place. "What do you mean she's with one of your brothers? With voluntarily or with kidnapped?"

"Voluntarily. We don't kidnap anyone. Haven't you learned anything about me?" He threw her words back at her, then flipped the fish on the wood and stood to face her. Or rather, look down at her. "She met James down at the coast. He was getting a few supplies for us and putting in a new shipping order. When he saw her, well, it was kind of like when I first saw you. The only difference being that he saw her in person the first time and I had to stare at pictures of you until you got here."

She wasn't going to be intimidated by his size. He didn't scare her. She wasn't going to attack him either. Even though she wanted him so much she couldn't seem to see straight past his sex appeal and her

lust. There was also the promise he made to wait for her until she came to grips with his genetics. It might be just what his kind did, but to her kind, it was the very essence of romance.

“Why didn’t you tell me where she was?”

“I don’t know. I had my own agenda. I needed to see you, touch you, spend some time with you, let you get to know me a little. I didn’t want to throw out where she was because I wanted the time with you to be not just about her but about this, you and me. I should have told you long before I did. I’m sorry I didn’t. I didn’t want you to think exactly what you did about kidnapping either. I have always intended to take you to her as soon as I could get you there. I know how worried you are about her, but I have to admit how happy it makes me that you want me as much as you do, in spite of it.”

“I still think I’m supposed to be mad at you or feel betrayed or something. I didn’t come up here for you or to meet my mate. I came up here to find my all-of-a-sudden scatterbrained sister and then go home once I knew she was okay.”

“Ruby look, I’m sorry. I did what I thought was best for everyone, including Melanie and James.” He squatted again and pulled the fish from the fire. It smelled so heavenly that it was all she could do not to melt to the floor and dig in with her fingers. “I couldn’t have you go in and demand she leave with you. You had to understand some things about us first. She won’t leave him and if she did, he’d come after her.”

“Just as you would come after me?”

“Sort of. We haven’t mated yet, so, I would wait until you came back to me. Only after we mate will I come for you.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Until we mate, we are still two separate beings. Once we do, we become one. It’s simple. You won’t leave me, Ruby.”

She followed on his heels as he went back into the small kitchen area, her mouth watering. He plated the fish along with some greens she’d never seen before, even from the gourmet stores back in Chicago. “If you cook for me like this on a regular basis, no, I don’t think I’d leave you.”

His laugh warmed her. “You won’t leave me at all.”

“What about your dreams? Did you do that before or after you met Melanie?”

“After. She had pictures of you and showed them to us. She let us listen to your frantic voicemails too. James was a little concerned when your one message said when you found her you were going to kill her.”

Ruby dug into the delicious-smelling fish after Carson handed her a plate and a fork. “Oh God,” she moaned. It melted in her mouth, and the taste was unlike anything she’d ever had. It was... “This is so good.”

“There’s something to be said for local fare.”

“No kidding. Where did you learn to cook like this? I mean, there’s good, and then there’s melt-in-your-mouth good.”

“

“My mother. Her father was a chef in New York, and he taught her everything he knew and she passed it on to me. I loved being in the kitchen with her when I was a kid. She always said I had a cook’s palate, able to discern taste, different flavors, appreciate food as more than just fuel for the body.”

“She must have been right.” Ruby had been to dozens of great restaurants in Europe, New York, Chicago, L.A., but the food hadn’t ever tasted so good, so fresh, so delicate on her tongue. “How did she end up here?”

“She was taking a cruise, and my father was fishing off the coast. Waiting for them. He was taking a group of people inland to explore a little, to see some of the glaciers up close and personal. He fell in love with her on sight.”

“And what about her? Did she fall in love too?”

“Not to hear them tell it. She was stubborn. He gave her an address to write him, and he waited. He was the first of our kind to start having the dreams. Six months later, he got a letter from her and for a couple years, they wrote back and forth until he convinced her to let him visit.”

“Visit? He left Alaska?”

Carson nodded, and Ruby was fascinated. It was a real-life fairy tale. A real-life, long-distance love affair.

“He spent a month in New York. He wasn’t cultured and wasn’t from her world, but whatever happened during those few weeks, she fell in love too. She left with him when he came back home, and she never went back except for visits.”

“Has she ever regretted it? Leaving what she’d always known for the unknown?” Ruby wondered that about Melanie, too, though without knowing much about what was going on with Mel, it was hard to think that Mel was here for good. It raised a good question though and one that Ruby wasn’t positive she wanted to face. Carson intrigued her, made her curious. He was gorgeous, generous, open and sexy as all, but could she give up her life for him, for this connection between them? Even though she had an inkling she’d never find it with another person.

“No. Not that I’ve ever heard her say. She talks about her family with love, and they’ve even come to see her over the years. They don’t know what we are, what she married into, but they’ve loved and accepted my father and all of us unconditionally because he made her happy.”

“I imagine most people wouldn’t understand about your family.”

“No, they wouldn’t. Here,” he said, placing a glass of the crystal-clear liquid in front of her. “We only have water, but water is good for you in this climate.”

“Thanks.” She put her fork down and pushed her plate a few inches away. “You must think I’m a pig with the way I dug into that.”

“Not at all.” He wiped a bit of glaze from the corner of her mouth. “I just think you’re hungry.”

She took a sip of water. “True. Famished. I don’t miss many meals.”

She could feel her cheeks heat at the admission. She knew she wasn’t thin and trim and where it hadn’t bothered her earlier in the day with him, she experienced a bought of uncertainty around the delicious food.

His gaze bore into her, drilled her to the spot with heat and raked her with appreciation. A girl could get used to that kind of look. “I’m glad you don’t. You’re beautiful, Ruby. Don’t concern yourself about anything that your society might deem important. We are simple people, and I am a simple man. Your heart, mind, loyalty and your hunger for sex are what matter most.”

“Hunger for sex?”

“Uh huh. Have I failed to mention how much I want you? How much I love...sex? I’m no virgin or fumbling man. You won’t be left wanting for anything but more.”

“I figured as much from earlier. How did you get your experience then?”

The surprise on his face was priceless. “The way any red-blooded American man does. Practice. I’ve traveled. Albeit to northernmost areas, but those women in Greenland, Iceland, Sweden...”

He made a face she couldn’t quite describe as anything but lascivious. He wagged his eyebrows at her, puffed out his chest, thrust his hips forward in a lewd imitation of sex. He had a naughty mind and though she was no prude, she wasn’t sure she could handle a man like him.

And the smile that spread across his face was sin itself. Oh my. “So—” she cleared her throat and took another bite of her salmon, “—the pictures Mel showed you started the dreams?”

“Yes. Your voice helped too. All throaty and sexy. Dreams are a big part of our culture. It was something that was discovered a few generations into the splicing.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we meet or come face to face with our mate, we begin to dream. I first met you through pictures and your voice. Dreams cement the bond on our end, triggering a drive and a hunger for the person we are dreaming about.”

“Why was I dreaming about you though?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of it happening before, but it probably just means you were tired and your mind was curious about the mysterious shifters you heard about.”

“But that it was you specifically?”

“I honestly don’t know, Ruby. Does it really matter?”

She shook her head. “I don’t guess so.”

“Good.” He pointed at her plate. “You finished?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Go get comfortable. It won’t take me a minute to take care of these.”

Ruby curled up in the bed again. She wanted his heat and warmth against her. “Is Melanie okay? Is she happy?”

“She is. She and James are crazy about each other. You’ll get to see her tomorrow and ask her all your questions.”

“Like why she didn’t call home? If she could get voicemail, she could surely make a call.”

“I don’t think she knew how to explain what was going on in a way that you would understand without actually seeing it with your own eyes.” He joined her on the bed as she hoped he would. “After your second message, she said your third would be that you were on your way to find her.”

“She knew I’d come?”

“You sound surprised. She knew and look, here you are.”

She shouldn’t be surprised either. Both she and Melanie could get caught up in work and forget to check in and their parents did it all time. They could go months without hearing anything from each other, but there was always the knowledge that any of them could be reached at a moment’s notice. When Melanie couldn’t be found, Ruby had done the only thing she knew to do. She came looking for her and found that not only was she safe and sound, but as Joe the driver had surmised, had been taken by one of the shifters and was holed up in his cabin somewhere. “I’m supposed to be angry at you, I just know it. You didn’t tell me things right away, like that Melanie was okay. You got into my bed naked. And you’re not even entirely human.”

“You aren’t supposed to be angry, Ruby.”

“Of course I am. How do I know you’re even telling the truth about her? Just because you have the people in your little town wrapped around your sexy finger, doesn’t mean I am supposed to be so gullible. I should be wary, untrusting, pissed off.”

“Then why aren’t you?”

Damn good question. Why wasn’t she? Was she just fascinated by the legend aspect of the shapeshifter? Why did she have such trust and faith in his honesty and sincerity? She was not by nature a very open person and yet, with Carson, she gave her trust openly and wanted to give herself openly. “Must be the thin mountain air.”

“Yeah, right. You aren’t supposed to be filled with concern and doubt. You’re supposed to be so filled with lust that you want to jump me.”

There was that. “Well, yes, I am, and I want to, it’s just I’m so tired. Why am I so tired?” Carson wrapped her in his arms and laid them both down. She cuddled into his side, melting in his heat. It lulled her and aroused her at the same time. “You make it hard to be mad at you for all your little deceits when you’re so big and warm. I’ll only sleep for a little while.”



He kissed the top of her head. “Then what?”

“Then I’m going to ravish you.”

“Oh well, I’d better get my rest too. I want to make sure I have enough energy to be ravished.”

“Yes, you should.”

## Chapter Five

She snored softly. Again. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Carson held a sleeping Ruby in his arms. They were both fully clothed this time though, and his dick had been admonishing him for hours that it was time to get naked. His head and his heart couldn't agree more, but it appeared she needed the rest.

The wind howled outside. Wolves howled too. It was the most peace that he'd felt inside himself though in ages. On nights like this when he couldn't sleep, he'd be out running, trying to ease some of the restlessness, but not tonight. What eased the animal that resided within him was the woman he held against his body. Until he began dreaming about her, he hadn't realized how fitful and unsettled he was. The dreams about the woman though, they showed him she was the key to his happiness, his contentment.

When she stirred at his side, he pulled her over on top of him. He wanted to fuck her. He wanted to rut until they were both so spent they'd sleep for days, but they couldn't sleep for days here in this cabin. He wanted her in his own bed the first time he took her. He wanted her in the bed he'd made, in the bed no other woman had ever been in.

And no matter how bad he wanted that, the way she was rubbing herself against his cock right now...

He held her tighter, trying to get her to cease and desist, but it wasn't working. "You need to stop, Ruby."

"I can't," she mumbled. "Was dreaming again. So close..."

"Close?"

"Yeah."

It dawned on him then. "You were about to come?"

"Uh huh." She kept up the undulating movements of her hips, pressing her pussy along the length of his shaft. "Please... Please help me."

For a few seconds she stilled, and he thought maybe she'd gone back to sleep, but then she whimpered and thrust against his pelvis. "Carson, please..."

Ah fuck. "Here, sit up. There you go, that's good." Carson pulled at the snap and zipper of her jeans. "Lean forward a little, let me slide these down." His cock was protesting, throbbing, screaming at the unfairness of it, knowing all the while it wasn't going to get to play just yet. "Can you get them off your legs, Ruby?"

She wiggled and shimmied on top of him until she got her jeans off.

“Come up here. Crawl up me.” He guided her up his body until her pussy was over his face. “You know what I’m going to do?” She smelled of sweet, hot musk and when he moved the crotch of her panties to the side, the scent hit him even harder. Rutting like an animal seemed mild in comparison to what he really wanted to do to her.

“Help me.”

“Yes. I’m going to help you.” His hands on her hips brought her wetness in contact with his tongue.

“Oh,” she breathed.

He licked through her folds, drinking down the juices that coated every inch of her sex. Flicking at her clit with the tip of his tongue, he teased and tickled. As much as he tried to hold her steady, to let him do the work, she wouldn’t stop moving, wouldn’t stop riding. All told, that was fine with him. He loved when a woman let go on his face, when she would nearly smother him in her desperation to come.

He held her tight against his mouth, the edges of his teeth rubbing against her clit. Loosening his hands, caressing her ass cheeks with his fingers, gave her the control she needed. And she took it.

She rubbed. She pressed. She writhed on his mouth and tongue. She rode him with purpose, with drive.

She got wetter, more slippery and the rolling of her hips back and forth picked up speed. She whimpered, gasped, and screamed when it crashed over her. Her come coated his tongue, and there was a lot of it. The more she moved on him, the more she continued to come.

When she finally slumped and slid off his face, he could breathe air again. He wanted her back. He wanted her scent in his nose, and he knew he’d taste her for days. She had the smoothest, most perfect-tasting cunt. He licked his lips, swallowing her taste, making it part of him.

He turned his head. “Ruby? You okay?”

“Uh huh.”

She was breathing hard and then began to tremble. He wrapped her up in his arms again. “You sure?”

“I’ve never done that before.”

“I know.”

“I like it better than the vibrator. Your breath, hot inside me.”

“I’m glad.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Not a bit. You can climb on my mouth anytime you want.”

“What about...you know?”

“What about what? My cock?”

“Yes.”

"It's fine." Liar. His dick was calling him a liar. And he was. He wasn't fine. He wasn't okay. He wanted to fuck and fuck hard. He wanted inside her pussy, and he wanted to ride it as hard as she rode his mouth.

"Do you want me to...?"

*Oh fuck. Yes. Please God, yes.*

"Carson?"

"No. Get some sleep."

"But..."

He tightened his arms and kissed the top of her head. He tried not to think about anything. Tried to clear his mind. Tried to blot out everything. Even tried forgetting that it was her so his cock would stop hurting and his heart would stop thundering.

He wanted to run. He wanted to get the hell out of Dodge before he rolled her over and slammed so deep inside her that her heart felt it. He would have to wait until she was asleep before he could get up and leave, and he wouldn't be able to go too far. She still had to be kept safe though he didn't now and hadn't earlier sensed any kind of threat. Joe telling her about the shifters though...that bothered him. Carson and his family didn't need people buying into the stories and trekking deep into the forest hunting for them.

"You're restless."

Her whisper brushed across his chest. How had she known? He hadn't moved. "I'm okay. Sleep, Ruby."

"You're not sleeping. Is something wrong? Is it because you're part bear?"

She just wasn't going to give it up. Tenacious. "Something like that." He closed his eyes and willed himself to calm down so that she could sleep. She was tied to him, deeply, and he knew it was more than just the fact that his heart was ready to beat right out of his chest.

Nothing more was said, and he soon heard her soft even breathing. She even had that small snore going. It was actually quite calming for him to know she felt safe, felt comfortable enough with him that she could sleep. They hadn't known one another for twenty-four hours yet, but, she was more at ease with him than he could have ever hoped she would be. He had envisioned sleeping on the floor in front of the fireplace rather than in the bed with her. It was also likely that her interest in things not quite real helped her comfort level. She spent her days studying and working on legends and myths and here, in the Alaskan wilderness, she'd found a real live breathing one.

He eased his arms from around her, and she snuggled deeper into the bed, right into the place he vacated. As quietly as he could, he slipped out the door, stripped and took off at a slow pace. The crisp air filled his lungs, his eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, and the slight, transparent hairs on his skin prickled, thickened, warmed him. He was long used to running through the snow in his bare feet and not

feeling the cold or the sharp rocks and rough ground. The pads toughened as he ran, his nails turning into claws.

His body didn't shift to run on all fours like his polar bear kin, but the freedom his soul felt at being able to run unfettered was almost more than he could take sometimes. He loved what he was. He didn't hate himself as others in his family had hated themselves. He welcomed his difference, his hunger to survive, his passion for the beautiful, harsh landscape they lived in, and now her. Being who he was, being able to be free with the woman that was his destiny, was another kind of freedom he never thought to know.

She was going to be his greatest ally. She was going to protect him, his family, the family he would make with her. She was going to be the salvation of his soul.

The forest was his home and as he maneuvered in and around the trees, up slopes and into small valleys, his lungs expanded and though any normal man's cock would have shrunk to nothing in the cold, his was still hard, hot and full of lust for the warm woman he left sleeping back in the cabin. Lucky for him, he could run like that.

He turned and headed back. He wanted her, wanted to be near her and as much as he needed the run, he needed to bask in her innocent curiosity, in the deliciousness of her body. Things wouldn't be easy for her. She would have a lot to adjust to, and he wasn't sure what they would do about her work. Those were questions that had yet to be broached, and he didn't know if she fully understood what being his meant. He'd told her what it meant, but had she really believed him? He didn't know that either.

It would be dark still when they started on the last part of the journey to the compound and his home. He hoped she liked it. Hell, he'd tear it down and build her something else if she wanted. He didn't really care. He just wanted her welcomed and made to feel as though she belonged, the same as they had done for Melanie.

He stood on the small porch, willing his body back to its normal human state of being. Ruby might be curious about him as a shifter, but he wasn't sure she was ready to see some of the small changes he did go through. His claws alone could rip human flesh to shreds and only once in his life had he used them.

His heart rate back to normal, he shut his mind to the thoughts of what he'd done to that hunter and re-entered the cabin. Ruby lay sleeping where he left her, only now his pillow was tucked against her body with her wrapped around it. He wanted her naked and wrapped around him like that and he'd have it, sooner or later. And he'd much prefer sooner.

He'd let her sleep a little longer, but then get her up. She could sleep the rest of the way in the truck. He rather enjoyed the idea of her head in his lap.

For the second time since meeting her, he pulled a chair up to the side of the bed, content to sit and watch over her, letting her sleep. This time though, he wouldn't be getting into the bed with her. He didn't trust himself.

“Where are we?” Ruby shifted and sat up, rubbing her eyes.

“About twenty minutes from my family’s land. You’ve been asleep since we started moving hours ago.”

Yes. It seemed she had. The sun was out, sort of. But there were low-lying clouds too. And they were fluffy. She’d never seen so much sky, so much snow, so much wide-open space. She lived inside the city of Chicago, in a downtown high-rise apartment building. She had a small balcony, but all she could really see was other buildings and there was always traffic. Here, there was so much silence even her thoughts seemed loud.

“Melanie will be there?”

“Yes, she should be.”

“What about the rest of your family?” Apprehension had set in when he woke her this morning to get her moving. What if they didn’t like her? What would she do then? Carson said they were destined to be together, but maybe his family would say no way no how. At the same time, it sounded as though they’d accepted Melanie easily enough.

She couldn’t believe she was thinking that way.

“Yes, most of them should be there. A little nervous?”

“Nope. More like a lot nervous.”

“Don’t be. They will like you just fine and even if they don’t, you’re not here for them. You’re here for your sister and now, for me.”

“Somewhat reassuring, Carson.”

He smiled at her, winked at her, and she had the sudden urge to crawl into his lap. He was a living, breathing heater. That’s how he’d gotten to her so easily. He’d seduced her with his built-in furnace. “What are you thinking with your brows all scrunched down like that? You look like you either want to kill me or fuck me.”

Her mouth dropped open. The word fuck rolling off his tongue was so sexy. She rarely ever used the word herself, usually limiting her cursing to damn and hell, but him saying fuck was hot and erotic. He was wrong about her wanting to kill him and oh so right about her wanting to...fuck him. Even thinking the word was naughty to her, and she loved it.

“Now you look like you’ve just... I don’t know what. What is going on in that head of yours?”

“I never use that word.”

“What word?”

“The *F* word.” Heat flooded her cheeks, and her gaze slid away, only to be brought back to his when he touched her knee. He slid his hand up her thigh and squeezed. She was ready to spread her legs and lean

back. She wanted that deliciousness she'd had last night with him. Oh God. *Oh. God.* "You made me come."

"You just now remembering that?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Damn, must not have been very memorable or good if you just remembered."

"No, it was the most amazing thing. It's been... I can't even count how long it's been since someone has touched me with their mouth, but I never came with them. You know that already."

"Yes, I know that already."

"Why did I come with you?"

"No idea, baby. Probably has something to do with how magnificent I am."

"Ye—" She had to think about what he said for a second and then laughed. "Oh I'm sure that's it. No doubt."

"I don't know why, Ruby, but if I have my way, and I will have my way, I'm the only man that will make you come like that or in any other way."

"Possessive much?"

"You have no idea. Ice bears aren't territorial. I am." He squeezed her thigh again as if to emphasize his words, to punctuate their meaning to her. "We're here."

With reluctance at that very moment to do anything but give herself to him, she turned her head and took in the scene just on the other side of the truck windshield. There was a large, octagonal home. It looked like it might have two stories, but those windows at the top could just be decorative, made for the extra light. There was smoke coming from the top of two chimneys, each set at opposite ends of the structure. The porch seemed from her vantage point to wrap all the way around. It definitely had personality and it was exactly as it was meant to be...a family home.

There were several smaller homes on either side of the long, gravel drive and mountains all around. Snow dotted the ground and yet there was still some green on the trees. They were well hidden here and if for some reason anyone flew over, it would look like nothing more than a ranch.

Ruby loved it immediately in a way her apartment in Chicago and even her parents home had never inspired.

From the right and left and from in front of them, people came out to meet the truck. Carson squeezed her hand, this time for reassurance before helping her out. He stood just behind her with an arm wrapped securely around her waist, and she was glad for the support, but once she heard her name and saw the original reason for her trip to the middle of nowhere, she broke away from him and raced to meet her sister.

"Mel! You really are okay. I was so worried."

They hugged one another tightly, and Melanie pet Ruby's hair as she always had as a sign of comfort. "Yes, I'm really okay. I'm better than okay. This has been an amazing adventure."

“What about your job, though? You can’t just leave it, and mom and dad won’t understand. I’m not sure I understand it, but God, Mel, I was so worried about you.”

“It’s all right, sis. Slow down. I’ve been in contact with boss butthead, and we’ve worked things out, but you and I don’t need to get into that now. You just got here, and I’m sure you’d like a shower and a hot meal.”

“I’d love both and a warm bed and to sleep all day and night for a week. All I seem to want to do up here is sleep, but...”

“Then let’s get you taken care of and afterward we can talk. I know you have a million questions, and I have a few answers. I’ve got the guest room all ready for you.”

“She won’t need it.” Ruby turned to see Carson had come up behind her and the look on his face, while at once soft and kind was also hard, unyielding and determined. “She’ll be staying with me.”

“With you?”



## Chapter Six

Melanie looked from Ruby to Carson and back again. Her eyes slowly lit up and understanding filled them. “Oh. She knows? You told her already? About you and your brothers? About me and...?”

“She knows. I’ll let you fill in your own details later.”

Oh dear Lord. They were trying to speak in code and seemed to forget that she was an expert in this kind of code. It was part of her job to read between the lines and figure out the missing pieces. “And guess what? She’s standing right here.”

Two sets of eyes turned to her, and she waved to both people discussing her as though she were invisible. Melanie had the grace to blush.

“Sorry, Ru. I didn’t know how much, if anything, you knew about Carson and the men in his family, including James.”

“James. Yes, I can’t wait to meet him. I can’t even believe you’d leave the whales for a man and the middle of nowhere. You’ve been tracking them for... I don’t know how long. Mom and dad were worried sick. Mom even said she knew how we must feel sometimes when they go off on one of their trips. Not to mention, how concerned I was when you stopped returning my phone calls and emails.”

Ruby suddenly hugged her sister. She really had been worried and concerned and all at once she was so ashamed at having been so preoccupied with Carson and her fascination with him.

“Oh Ruby, I know. I’m sorry. It all happened so fast. When it wasn’t happening fast, it was just happening. These are truly the most wonderful people, so warm and loving.” Melanie leaned in and kissed Ruby’s cheek. “We’ll talk after you’re rested. You’re lucky too. Carson is an amazing cook.”

“She knows.” She could hear the smile and pride in his voice. “I made my famous wood-grilled salmon for her last night. Tell James we need more syrup.”

“Uh uh. You tell him.” She squeezed Ruby tight, and they parted once more. “Ruby, you go get taken care of and then we’ll talk.”

Ruby couldn’t believe how utterly grateful she was that Melanie was indeed all right. She was almost hesitant to walk away let go, but Carson took her gently by the arm and steered her back toward the truck. An older couple stood beside it. His parents. Oh God. They weren’t far enough in their relationship to be introducing one another to parents. She wasn’t ready for this. She hadn’t planned for this. Here was the panic she’d been waiting for. Fine time for it to show up.

She looked back over her shoulder to Melanie, pleading with her eyes for help, for rescue. Melanie just shook her head and made a sweeping forward motion with her hands to which Ruby promptly stuck her tongue out at her sister. Melanie laughed.

“Mom, Dad, this is Mel’s sister, Ruby.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you.” Ruby held her hand out, but was quickly engulfed in a bear hug. Literally as well as figuratively. She was encountering a full-on dream for someone that loved myths and lore. And all she could think about was not being ready for this, not ready to be welcomed into a family like Carson’s. “I’m Franklin, and this here is Dorothy.”

“It’s so lovely to meet you. Melanie is just a doll, and everyone adores her. I can see it’s going to be the same with you. My Carson is a lucky man.”

Ruby was momentarily speechless. What did one say to that? “I... Thank you. My parents would want me to thank you as well for taking Melanie in and making her a part of your family.”

“I’m sure they’ve been so worried about her.”

Sort of. Not worried enough that they flew across the country to find her. No, they simply knew that Ruby would do it herself. They’d taught Ruby and Melanie how to fend for themselves, and taught them to be incredibly independent from very early ages. “Yes. They have. I will call them as soon as I get back to Carson’s.”

“Well, now that you’re here, we can ease up a little.”

“Ease up?”

“I’ll explain it later,” Carson whispered to her. To his parents he said, “I’m gonna take her on up to my place and get her settled in. We’ll come down and have breakfast in the morning. I imagine she’d like to meet James and sit for a while and talk to her sister.”

“Of course, son. Ruby, it was damn nice meeting you.”

“Thank you.”

The couple walked away toward the large home, looking back and smiling every few steps. Carson helped her up into the truck cab again. “It’ll only be about five minutes. I figure you’d rather ride in the truck instead of on horseback.”

Horseback? “I’ve never ridden a horse.”

“Never?”

“No.”

“Baby, I need to teach you a lot, don’t I?”

Did he? There was a lot implied in that one statement he made. Was she possibly reading too much into it? She needed a shower, some clean clothes, a solid meal. Maybe then she could think straight. “In some areas, it looks like it. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

Funny how she just accepted so easily his being part bear but also, talking as though they were going to be together for good when in her head she was so damn confused. She should have panicked long hours ago, a little at least. But no, not until she was faced with his family and truly in the middle of nowhere did she find herself unsure what the hell to do. It wasn't every day someone told you there were bear shifters in the woods and then you actually meet one. Although it wasn't every day for her that she woke up with a naked man in her bed when she knew she'd gone to bed alone, either.

"What did your mom mean by ease up?"

"It's not often new people are brought here and we've had two, first Melanie and now you. It always makes the family a little nervous and extra vigilant until we're sure the newcomers are not here to harm or expose us."

She could understand that and expected they weren't very trusting right up front. To let outsiders in meant a risk. It would be a burden on anyone, knowing they had a secret they could never share. At the same time, what an amazing secret it was, a group of men that weren't completely men and women that accepted them.

"I can't live up here," she blurted. Oh hell, she hadn't meant to just throw it out there like that.

His lips thinned slightly and she was afraid she'd made him mad. "Can't? Or won't?"

Carson didn't look at her as he turned around and drove back down the long drive. Back out at the, wherever they were, he took a left and then a right onto another drive. In the woods and unable to be seen through the trees, Carson drove them up to a cabin that looked almost identical to the lodge back in town except on a much smaller scale. The same dark wood, the same peaked roof line. The windows were large and uncovered and you could see through the house, from front to back. The scenery was indescribable and so vivid, alive. A large wraparound porch on both levels was furnished with chairs and rockers and swings. Talk about letting the outdoors in.

She got out and turned in a circle, trying to take in everything all at once. Her mind was filled with...wonder. It might seem a cliché, but that's the only word she could use to describe it. Wonder. Everything was pristine and untouched, unhampered by the world as she knew it. "I've never seen anything like it." And all her doubts about living up there were slowly fading away. She felt as though she was part of something bigger than herself for the first time in her life. Odd for it to hit her while she was standing outside a bear shifter's home. Why couldn't it have hit her in the middle of some city like Athens or Cairo or even in her own backyard of the city of Chicago? Why did it have to smack her upside the head when she was a million miles away from the nearest library or museum?

"It is something, isn't it? Come on, I'll show you inside where it's warmer."

"You don't have anything covering your windows," she observed again, out loud this time. They walked into the house and heat enveloped her. It wasn't the same as when Carson's heat surrounded her, but it was close and all around, seeping through her clothes and into her skin.

"I don't need it. No one is out here to look in, and I prefer to look out. They're insulated and double paned."

"Couldn't do it in Chicago. Don't want people looking in at all and nothing much to look out at. Nothing inspiring really except at Christmas maybe when everything is decorated." And yet, she loved the city. Or had until she'd come here and was able to see the sky, feel life all around her in a way she never felt in the crowded urban area where she lived.

The room they'd walked into was cavernous. Two large sofas faced each other and looked to be made of dark brown suede rather than leather. There was a monstrous stone fireplace at one end of the room and a big-screen television set up at an angle, and she imagined the picture would be clear from any point one stood or sat.

The kitchen dominated the other end of the room. Stainless appliances and bronze accents made it appear inviting even if a bit daunting. She enjoyed cooking, but that wasn't the kind of kitchen for the hobbyist cook. It was for the diehard professional or diehard I-love-to-cook-and-ain't-afraid-to-show-it cook.

"It's my other passion, as you know."

"What's the first?"

"The outdoors. Love skiing, sledding, mushing. I think I'm going to have a new one that will be much more time consuming and involved. Probably just as strenuous too."

She couldn't stop staring at him when he talked. His mouth was quite sexy. "Really? What?"

"If you have to ask that question and judging by the look on your face, you seriously are asking, I'm gonna have to let you think about it."

She didn't understand. "I'm confused. I was being sincere in my..." And she stopped speaking, the realization dawning on her. He was talking about her being his new passion. God, he must think her an idiot. "Nevermind. Where's your shower?"

Damn man smirked at her and ruffled her hair as though she were a child. In retaliation, she stuck her tongue out at him and after a few seconds realized it was not the smartest thing to do. His smile dropped, and his already dark eyes darkened more. She read sex and lust immediately in the snarl of his lips.

It turned her on, this animalistic side of him.

"Don't stick it out if you're not prepared to use it."

"Right. After a shower maybe."

"Tease," he muttered. "This way."

He led her up an open, wooden staircase behind the fireplace. The second floor had four rooms, two on one side and two on the other. From what she could see through the open doors, one might be a bathroom, while the other three appeared to be bedrooms. The middle was open to the great room below

and picture windows flanked every open area of wall. There were no actual pictures around but there was no need. The outside world was art enough.

“I’m glad you like it.”

She turned her head toward Carson. He was just as beautiful as the rough and rugged wilderness landscape he lived in. “I love it. I’m in awe of it.”

“Good. It commands respect, demands it and is deserving of it. C’mon, this way.”

He led her through a bedroom, his probably judging by the lived-in feel, and into a bathroom. There were windows looking out over the back of the property. She could stand under the spray of the shower and stare at the mountains beyond. “I bet you never get tired of the view.”

“I don’t. If I did, I could put something up to cover it, but...it’s ever changing. I’ll put your bags on the bed and go down and make something to eat. Holler if you need anything.”

He seemed reluctant to go and his manner was a bit stiffer than before. A quick glance down his body showed his cock was hard, and she heard him huff before he turned and walked out. The view of his ass in jeans wasn’t too bad either.

His earlier comment about her being a tease floated through her head. She wasn’t trying to be a tease and honestly didn’t know the first thing about being one. That was Melanie’s area. She was the brains and the beauty, while Ruby was the fanciful plain Jane. Sticking her tongue out at Carson had been done in a teasing manner, but not one meant to tease him sexually.

Though, after what he did for her last night, using his mouth on her... She’d fallen asleep and slept better than she could remember sleeping in a long, long time. Her body relaxed, her mind eased and she’d slept like a baby, even if she hadn’t slept long enough.

She could still feel his mouth too. He kissed her sex the way he kissed her mouth, completely as if it were the only thing, the most important thing in the world. And he used everything...tongue, teeth, lips, breath. Not having a reference point for how awesome it felt to have a man make you come orally, she thought it was probably the best thing in the world, right up there with... Well, she didn’t know what to compare it to that would be just as good. Much as she loved her self-induced orgasms and her fun little sex toys, nothing made her feel quite like his mouth had.

Being on top was... She’d never done that either. No man had pulled her up over his face and then pulled her down while at the same time telling her to ride the tip of his tongue. No one had ever let her have that kind of power and that’s what it was, a form of power. He held her, but he let her control how it happened by lifting up, or grinding down to get to the edges of his teeth.

Talk about amazing. Sh—

“You ever gonna turn on the shower?”

She jumped, squeaked even. Had he just been standing outside the door? She never heard him move after he left, but if he'd gone to get her bags as he said, she didn't hear him come back either. In response, she quickly figured out his shower knob and turned it on.

And then she heard his laugh.

Stripping out of the clothes she'd worn since yesterday morning, she stepped into the shower and melted under the hot water. She could swear her bones sighed as the muscles around them loosened. She hadn't realized everything in her had become so tense and tight, though she hadn't really and truly relaxed since she'd gotten off the plane in Anchorage. Had that only been three days ago? Seemed like forever ago. Although, the orgasm had helped. A lot.

The water beat down on her shoulders and back and even though she didn't want to waste his water, she couldn't stop staring out at the mountain peak in the distance while the heat infused her body.

Just a few minutes more then she'd wash up and get out.

Just a few minutes more...

## Chapter Seven

“What in the hell are you cooking?”

Carson didn't bother turning his head. He'd heard James's footfalls outside before he ever set foot on the porch or opened the door. “Peppers and onions, why? Gonna throw in the sausage and shrimp soon.”

“Smells damn good.”

“Because it is damn good. What's up?”

“I heard Melanie's sister is here. Sorry I wasn't at the ranch to greet you.”

“No problem.” True to his word, sliced smoked sausage and large shrimp went into the pan. He'd put okra in last. Everyone always loved this dish which was his take on a very Southern dish, shrimp and grits, and by adding okra, it somewhat resembled a quick and easy gumbo. He didn't do grits, but served it over rice and his family always ate every bit. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Working on a supply issue. Tell me about her.”

“Supply issue? What kind?”

“Nothing to worry about. Just one of the places I usually buy from is giving me shipping cost shit. Told him I'd take my business elsewhere, but he didn't want that, and we came to a compromise. Tell me about her.”

“Not gonna have trouble getting me food supplies are you?”

“Have I ever? If it weren't for you and what you could do with food, we'd all starve. Mom has no patience for cooking for all of us anymore. Now, fucking tell me about Ruby? Stop ignoring it.”

“You've seen the pictures of her, heard her voice. She's just like that.” James scoffed behind him, and Carson turned around. “What?”

“That doesn't tell me anything at all about her. What is your deal? What's she like?”

“She's a city girl and said she can't move up here.” That was the fucking rub of it. She said she couldn't. Why? Why couldn't she? Was it her job? Did she have a boyfriend or lover? He hadn't thought to even ask that, just taking fate at her word that Ruby was his.

“And...?”

“And what? What the hell do you want to know?”

“You still think she's your mate?”

“She is.” She might not realize it and it might take her time to come around to accepting it, but she was going to belong to him, belong with him. She was also standing inside his bedroom door just out of

sight, eavesdropping. Two could play that game. “She’s sexy, beautiful. She wears flannel to bed, snores when she sleeps and she loves it up here, but she says she can’t move here.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

He turned back to the stove and stirred the shrimp and sausage mixture, then dumped in the bowl of okra. The rice would be done soon, and they could eat. “That’s exactly what I asked. We didn’t get any farther than that. “He leaned back against the counter, once again, facing his brother and the stairs. “James, you should see her naked though. Man oh man is she hot. She’s the small curvy sister. You got the tall, skinny one, but I know you like your women that way. Ruby’s hips though...” He made a body curving gesture with his hands and an appreciative sound with his throat, that was somewhere between a growl and a hum. “And the way her a—”

“Okay, you can stop with the anatomy lesson.”

Ruby came charging down the stairs and nearly tripped when she got to the bottom in her haste. A pretty pink blush stained her cheeks, and she’d forgotten to put on a bra. Nice bounce to those babies.

Carson grinned at her. “James, this is Ruby.”

She scowled back at him, then turned her attention to his brother. “You’re Mel’s James?”

“I am. Pleasure to meet you, sis.” James grabbed her up in big hug and swung her around. She held on for dear life. “You’re right, Car, she is soft and curvy.”

And he could well imagine those curves naked and pressed against him. “James? Wanna put her down?”

“Not really. She’s kinda cuddly.”

“Cuddly?”

“Yeah, like a stuffed animal or a fluffy pillow.”

James put her down and held her steady until she got her balance. He’d care for her as much as he cared for Melanie, just on a different level, but like they cared for one another’s spouses. The women in their family were special, chosen by destiny to be with them. He couldn’t explain it and though he’d known growing up that it would take a certain kind of woman to complete each of them, he hadn’t believed it would happen for him. He just wasn’t that fanciful, that idealistic, but he’d been shown time and time again that if something was meant to be, a way would be made for it.

“I’m hardly a stuffed animal and more like a life-sized pillow.”

“I think you’re just perfect for my big brother. Hey, that’s kinda ironic, yeah? My big brother and Mel’s little sister.”

“Big brother? Then how old are you?”

“Thirty-one.”



Carson joined in the conversation after stirring the rice one final time and tasting a spoonful of the shrimp and sausages. It was a little spicier than normal, though still damn good. He pulled sweet cornbread from the oven and set it on a cooling rack. “Why? How old is Melanie?”

“Thirty-seven.” Ruby sent him a pointed look. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-eight. You?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Well aren’t we all just cute. Carson, since you’re the oldest and likely to die first, don’t you worry about Ruby here. I’ll take her. Might get that sister fantasy thing I’ve always wanted.”

He grinned at James, feral and pleasant all at the same time. He knew it was a look that said he wasn’t to be challenged and though he knew James was only joking, Carson couldn’t help become jealous and go all cave man with even the mere idea of another man touching Ruby. “Not a chance in hell, little brother. Don’t you have a woman to go home to?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m goin’. Just wanted to meet the newest addition to the family.”

“Oh, I’m not the...”

She stopped mid-sentence and looked away from both men. Carson wasn’t sure what to think about her sudden notion that she couldn’t stay with him, but he didn’t like it. Before the orgasm, before seeing her sister and meeting his parents she’d been very different, more open. Now she just seemed to be closing off. That didn’t set well with him.

James tilted her head up with gentle hands cupping her face. “It’s hard to understand, I know. Melanie didn’t think she could either, but she’s working through it, and I’m with her every step of the way just as Carson will be with you. It’s a different life up here, but that doesn’t mean it can’t work. You just have to want him enough to try.” He kissed her on the forehead. To Carson, he said, “Save some of that for me. I’ll be coming for the leftovers.”

“What makes you think there will be any?”

“Because you always cook enough for an army. I’ve more maple comin’ in the next shipment of supplies. We’ll be well stocked for winter for the lodge, the cabin and home.”

“Thanks.”

James left with both Ruby and Carson watching behind him until the door was closed. “Food is ready. Hungry?”

“Starved and he’s right, it does smell heavenly.”

“Good. Have a seat here at the island and I’ll get you a bowl.”

“How do you afford everything? That kind of stockpiling has to be expensive and where do you store it all? My apartment has a tiny pantry that I can hardly find anything in, much less put anything in.”

He spooned rice into the bottom of a couple of bowls then ladled the sausage, shrimp and pepper mixture over top with a liberal helping of the gravy. He set them both on the island, one in front of her, and then returned with a plate piled high with corn muffins.

Carson's eyes were trained on her as she took the first bite. She didn't look up then nor did she look up when he sat. "Good?"

"Yes, very. Thank you."

She still hadn't looked up, just kept eating. "Ruby?"

"Hmm?"

She had pretty hair, and he liked touching it, liked the smell of it, the way different shades of light red and blonde glinted in the overhead light. What he didn't like, was looking at the top of her head. Not at that moment. "Look at me."

It was a few seconds before she did. Her eyes were sleepy and sad. He really didn't like that. "I'm confused, Carson."

"I know. I've thrown a lot at you in just a very short period of time."

"All I came up here to do was find my sister. I didn't expect to find you. I didn't expect..." She shook her head as if to clear it or maybe she was trying to find the right words, but whatever it was, she looked back down at her bowl and continued eating, silence once again falling around them.

"After you eat, you can go up and take a long nap. Sleep all night if you want. I'll stay in one of the other bedrooms."

"Why would you give me your bed? You should have it, I'll take one of the guest rooms."

"No." His answer was flat, final.

"Why?"

"You belong in mine. I know you don't buy it, or maybe you do. Hell, I don't know. I do know that you're mine and you belong in my home, in my bed. No other woman has slept there, has been here, but you. This is yours too." He ran his hands through his hair in frustration, furthering it by getting his fingers tangled in the long strands. He needed a shower as well and a good hard all-night fuck session. "I can't fucking explain it, Ruby, honestly I can't. I just know it. Deep down in my gut, I know you're the one. The dreams have told me. Looking at you, touching you, eating your sweet pussy last night... All of it told me that you're the one."

"But, Carson..."

"I'll wait until you're ready. Though if you prefer I can pursue you and be damn stubborn. Either way, you belong in my bed and that's where you'll sleep as long as you're here. With or without me."

He might have been mistaken and probably was, but he thought he saw the briefest of smiles twitch her lips before she looked back down at her food. Her eyes had widened as he'd confessed his feelings, his beliefs about her, about them. He hadn't meant to shock her, but then again, maybe he had. She'd taken to

him being a shifter really well, compared to how he thought she would. However, given her line of work, it didn't surprise him. She hadn't asked as many questions as he'd expected though and maybe those were coming somewhere down the road.

She pushed the bowl away, fiddled with her hands in her lap a little, then looked up at him. "Why did your dad leave New York?"

"It was too congested with people, not enough open space for him to run. We have only a small part of the bear DNA. Our human parts can help the bear adjust to pretty much anything, but the crowded, urban atmosphere was too much for him."

"There are parts of all states that aren't crowded, where there aren't any other people for miles and miles."

"Yes, you're right. He could have stayed in New York for a while, I suppose, but he loved Alaska."

"I don't think it's right that he asked your mom to leave and come back with him, to leave her life, her family, her job."

Carson was the shocked one. "Is that what you think? That he made her choose?" He shook his head. "No, Ruby. He didn't make her do anything. If she'd asked him to stay in New York, he would have found a way to make it work. She knew he missed home and made the choice on her own. He didn't force anything. That's what you think will happen here? That I'll make you, pressure you, to give up your life for me?"

"Isn't it?"

"You don't know me well enough to make such assumptions."

"No, I don't. I've known you for less than two days, but you're the one that says I belong here with you."

"Are you trying to understand or are you trying to figure out ways to argue it away?"

"I don't know. I think I'm just tired."

She stood and so did he. "I think you're right about that. Go on upstairs and crawl into bed. Sleep as long as you like."

She nodded, and he watched her walk to the stairs. He wanted to kiss her, pull her close and assure her that things would work out. Instead, he just let her go. She paused at the bottom of the steps and turned. "It's not about understanding, Carson. I don't have to understand you being a shapeshifter. I've researched and learned things, encountered things in my work that can't be explained. I don't understand what you feel, what possession is. I don't understand how it can just be that we are meant to...to..."

"It's okay, Ruby. We'll figure it out."

"What if we don't?"

"I don't want to think about that. Go on. Get some rest. I'll check on you in a while."

"Okay."

She took the steps quickly, and a few seconds later he heard the bedroom door close. It was going to be a damn long night.

## Chapter Eight

Ruby flopped onto her back. “This is ridiculous,” she said to the empty room. And it was. Ridiculous. And the room was empty. She’d slept, but she’d tossed and turned too. More of the latter than the former. Dreams kept her sleep restless and fitful. Dreams of Carson. Dreams of sex. Dreams of Carson and sex and her. Those were the most disturbing of all since he was doing the most naughty things to her and she was begging for more.

A glance at the clock made her sigh. Midnight. She was wide awake, but then that’s what she got for going to bed so damn early. It felt good to just lie there, sinking into the mattress, being warm all the way through. It wasn’t something she’d felt since arriving a few days ago. Hard to believe it had only been days ago rather than weeks. It certainly felt like weeks, like she’d been with him for longer than two days. She’d also done what she’d set out to do. She’d found Melanie.

Melanie. She really needed to talk to her sister. Mel was the level-headed, everything-had-a-logical-explanation sibling. So, why had she been able to accept living up here in the literal middle of nowhere? Ruby was quite sure it didn’t have anything to do with length of time, but everything to do with the men. After all, Carson’s mother had dropped everything she’d ever known to move with Franklin. What happened between the men and the women they chose that made the females want to be with them, no matter what the cost to their own lives and careers?

This was part of how she did her job. She asked questions, asked the what ifs, the whys, the what fors, but it was honestly the first time she’d ever had cause to use that method in her personal life. She did believe in fairy tales. She did believe in the stories passed down through the ages from generation to generation. She even believed Carson and the shape-shifter story and that he was one. If she believed all that though, why was she having such a hard time with believing in what she was feeling, in what seemed was going on through her mind, heart and body?

Love at first sight. Lust at first sight. Desire on a level she’d never been to with a guy at first sight. She was comfortable with him, craved his warmth and touch. His voice spiraled through her body and made her happy deep down inside. She remembered his mouth between her legs last night and... Was it just last night? Well, the night before. Damn she wasn’t even sure how long she’d been with him.

It was so warm in the bed, but she needed the bathroom and then she needed to go find Carson. The last two times she’d been in a bed, he’d ended up in the bed with her and she wanted him in this one, too. As long as she was in Alaska, she wanted him in bed with her. It might be disastrous in the long run, but

she didn't care. Whatever questions she still had about them, about fate and destiny and living legends, she could at least admit to wanting to be with him, to loving the time she spent with him.

She tensed and flipped back the covers expecting to be hit with cool air, but it was just as warm outside the bed without blankets as it was in the bed with them. Once in the bathroom, she took care of business, washed her hands, brushed her teeth and thought for a brief second about combing her hair, but didn't. He was going to have to get used to seeing her all a mess if they were going to...to...

Padding through the bedroom, she opened the door and looked out. The moon lit up the night outside, which lit up the interior of the house. She looked out one of the large windows and was amazed again at the beauty around her. She could see stars and they looked near enough to touch. In the not so far off distance were mountain peaks and with the light from the moon, she could see the snow glistening all around. Everything outside was still, silent, just as it was inside and with determined steps Ruby went in search of Carson.

Being a plus-sized girl, one would think her footsteps would sound in on the wooden floors, but it was like she wasn't even there. No boards creaked or groaned when she walked. She checked the bedroom next to the one she'd been sleeping in and didn't find him. She checked the other rooms upstairs as well with no luck. He said he'd be in one of the other beds, but he wasn't. So then, where was he?

"I'm downstairs, Ruby."

And how had he known what she was thinking? She looked over the railing and sure enough, she could make out the shadowed outline of his body and see the flames from the fireplace flickering over his skin.

"Why are you down there?"

"Why are you awake?"

"I asked first."

He was shirtless and barefoot. His amazing hair was pulled back off his shoulders, and he was the most beautiful man. His voice was tight, strained and she knew what that meant, had heard it before. Last night after he'd made her come on his tongue and earlier before he showed her where the shower was.

"Can I come down or should I just stay up here?"

He tilted his head back to look up in her direction. She had the distinct feeling he could see her clearly, could probably even hear her breathing. His all-knowing eyes took in everything about her and her flannels provided not a bit of protection from his probing gaze.

"Depends."

Damn cryptic answer. Fine. She'd just go on downstairs, one step at a time until she was standing at the couch facing him on the other end. "What can I do?"

She knew it was all about her, or rather all her fault that he was this brooding mess. And that's what he was doing. Brooding, staring moodily into the fire, not even looking at her when she was standing less than five feet away.

"You can strip and crawl into my lap." He slowly lifted his gaze to rake her body, leaving a trail hotter than any fire ever could. "You can unzip my jeans and suck my cock into your mouth." Snap pulled, zipper down, echoing loud in the silence. "You can admit you want me just as fucking much as I want you, that you want my mouth between your thighs just like last night." Jeans off, naked man crossing the distance to where she stood immobile, speechless, completely hungry for every word, every vision his words painted. "You can bend over the arm of the couch and scream when I thrust forward. You can ease this pain I'm in, but..." He gripped the back of her head in such a tender, gentle grip which, given his words, should have not been possible. He should have been rough, harsh in his hold on her. "But if you aren't going to do any of those things, you can march yourself right up those stairs and back into the bedroom. You can lock the door and not come down until the sun is high in the sky. I can't *not* take you, Ruby. I can't fight it anymore. I can't be good natured and understanding and most of all patient, when I know you want me too."

So, he was giving her the option of retreat, of barricading herself behind walls to protect herself. "Why didn't you come to the bed?"

"I was trying to respect your confusion, give you the space you seem to have needed after seeing everyone, including my parents. Every mile closer we got to Melanie, the more closed up you became. I was trying to respect that, Ruby. But then when you blurted out that you couldn't move here, well, I wasn't sure what else to do beyond letting you have some time to think. Too much has happened in too short a time, and I couldn't force something else on you. I couldn't force *me* on you."

And he was glorious naked. As beautiful as he'd been in her hotel room, he was equally so here in his home, in the buff in front of the fireplace giving her all the reasons she needed to go back to bed alone. They were in the wilds of Alaska, far away from anything she knew to be true about her life. He was right about her wanting him. He was right about her being confused. He was right about everything he'd said and by the look on his face, sort of sad, sort of resigned, he thought she was going to make a run for it.

"I forced myself on you last night, remember? I begged you to help me."

"That wasn't force, Ruby. That was beautiful."

"Was it?"

"Yes."

"I'm going back upstairs."

His hands dropped from her hair as though she'd burned him and he stepped back, those same hands fisted at his sides. "Probably for the best."

Ruby reached out and took him by the wrist, tugged. "And you're coming with me."

“Ruby...”

There was warning in that tone as he said her name. She ignored it. “C’mon, Carson. I’m ready to use my tongue now.” His intake of breath at the reminder of their earlier conversation made her smile. Two could play the teasing game. Two could play the I-want-you game.

She let go of him and ran up the stairs as fast as her short, fleshy legs could take her. She could be full of sass. She knew she could. She just needed the right kind of man to use it on and right then, the right man was Carson. Not to mention, he was the only man around. But that wasn’t the point. All the other stuff aside, like the mate, fate and living in the middle of nowhere USA stuff, he was the only man she’d ever felt so entirely comfortable with that she *could* tease and speak her confusion and fear to.

It didn’t take long before he was up the stairs behind her. She was lifted off her feet and flung over his shoulder as though she weighed nothing. “Carson put me down. You’re not a cave man.”

He dumped her on the bed, and she bounced, her breasts jiggling, her flannel shirt riding up her belly. “No, but I’m part animal.”

The way he said it, all sexy and dark like, made her shiver. Oh yeah, he was part animal. She couldn’t forget that, wouldn’t forget that. If she were honest with herself, that knowledge played a large role in her curious fascination with him. There was also a part of her that wanted to protect him. He was wild, raw edged, and yet tender, caring, refined. She couldn’t see him get hurt, couldn’t take him away from the elements he thrived on and the Alaskan wilderness where he fit.

She could enjoy him though. Enjoy his body, his attention, his heat. She could figure out what to do about everything after...

“You’re overdressed, Ruby,” he stated gruffly, pulling at her pajama bottoms. They were free of her legs and tossed on the end of the bed. The buttons on her shirt were soon free of their loops and the material spread open over her chest. “Do you have any idea how hard it was for me last night not to take you? How hard it was not to roll you under me and fuck you?”

“No.” And she didn’t. She’d never encountered a man like him, someone so primal, so earthy. The men she dated, when she dated, they were polished, college educated, upscale. Carson was different, and the way he fit with her, or maybe it was the way she felt with him, made it easier. She wanted to give in and let go with him, wanted to let down the barriers that existed, that kept her from being able to orgasm with someone other than herself.

But then she *had* orgasmed with someone other than herself, hadn’t she? She’d orgasmed with him, with the shapeshifter, with the man with polar bear DNA.

“You’re thinking. What about?”

His fingers circled the dark of her areolas, coming ever closer to her nipples but never quite touching them, never quite making that ever-hungering touch. His black eyes glittered in the moonlit room, and she wondered just how much she could trust him beyond giving him her body.



“Nothing new. We’ll talk later.” She took his wrist again, this time guiding his palm over her entire breast and arched up at the contact. “I think too much, you know,” she whispered, reaching for his other hand. This one she guided between her legs. “Shut my mind up, Carson.”

He didn’t need to be told twice and snatched his hands away. She was flipped over and pulled up on her knees before another thought could enter her head. Fingers drove inside her making her gasp into the already tangled bedding.

“I’ve never known a female to be as primed and ready as you are when I touch you.”

She didn’t know what to say to that and soon all thought was gone. His fingers were replaced by something bigger, hotter, wider. “How long has it been, Ruby?”

“I...I don’t know. Months?” She shifted, her pussy asking for his cock when she’d never asked for it before, never cared much one way or the other with anyone else.

“Good.”

He thrust forward, taking her in one long drive, and she screamed into the sheets. He was bigger than he’d appeared or she was tighter than she imagined. She was stuffed full, then his hand was in her hair, pulling and tugging her head up.

For a moment, he stilled and his free hand rubbed her back, stroked her. “Are you okay?”

Was she? She didn’t know. Her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest and for the first time, she wondered what the hell she’d been thinking to bait a bear in his den. Literally.

He pulled away until just the head was teasing her. She shifted again, her pussy begging once more for his cock. He answered by sinking deep, slow and steady, pulling a gasp from her throat.

“Ruby...?”

“Yes. Do it.”

“Good girl.”

The hand on her back drifted down to her hip, flexed, gripped, short nails digging into her flesh. This time when he retreated, it was quick and she almost missed the nuance of it because he thrust back in so hard. Fast, unrelenting thrusts that pushed her forward across the bed. Thrusts that had him pulling her back to him, back against his body.

The fingers of both her hands pulled at the sheets and still he didn’t stop. She didn’t want him to. She wanted it to continue all night and into the next day.

“Ruby... God, Ruby...”

The pounding didn’t let up and the head of his cock rubbed against that place inside her, that magic place the toy she purchased just last week was for. He brushed it again and again, her nerve endings tingling, screaming for relief, release.

The toy was likely sitting at the desk in the lobby of her building, waiting for her to come home and claim it. And when the orgasm stroked over her senses, making her bite through the sheets on his bed to

stifle the cry from her, she realized she may not ever need the pink, curved plastic battery-operated wand again.

Her body shook, and her thighs trembled. He grunted in time with his driving thrusts until he went still, his semen filling what small spaces were empty inside her womb, his cock pulsing in counter point to the pulsing walls of her pussy.

Nails scraped and scratched against her skin, and she didn't care. All she wanted was more.

He kissed the blade of her shoulder and held tight to her as he lay on the bed, pulling her onto her side, spooning behind her, staying embedded in the slippery channel. "That's twice, baby."

She nodded. "I know."

"You're beautiful when you come."

"You haven't seen me."

"I've felt it against my tongue, against my cock, tasted it, inhaled it. You're beautiful when you come." His lips grazed her shoulder and then he buried his face in her hair. "Get some sleep. We'll fuck again later."

She giggled, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd giggled. She'd laughed, smiled, but giggling was something she hadn't done in so long. It was a light moment, completely unpretentious and as she closed her eyes, she knew he held a part of her much more vital to her well being and happiness than just her body.

"Carson," she whispered into the darkness.

"Yeah?"

"I'm kinda hungry."

He bit her shoulder, then licked the spot with the tip of his tongue. "For?"

"Food."

"A shame. C'mon, then. I know just the thing, but it'll wake you up a little and you know what that means, don't you?"

She followed him out of the bed. Oh yeah, she certainly hoped she knew what it meant.

## Chapter Nine

She sat curled in the corner of the couch, closest to the fire while Carson lay stretched out from the other end, one foot on the floor, one on the cushions with his knee bent. He was relaxed, once again just a gorgeous man, and not the predatory one that looked as though he wanted to devour her. For the moment, that part of him was sated. “There are no polar bears in the interior of Alaska,” she said, running her fingers along the soft suede arm of the couch. “There are some up around the Arctic, but not here where you and your family make your home.” She was trying to understand things about them, trying to connect the dots inside her head and sometimes the best way for her to do that was to talk to herself, hear it out loud. She knew Carson knew there were no polar bears in the vicinity and that they were farther north, near the water. It was simply her own need to figure some things out, reason them out.

“No, there aren’t.”

“Why do you live here then? Why don’t you live farther north or even around Hudson Bay in Manitoba, or in other parts of the world where they are?”

“My ancestors believed it would be too interesting for people to see us with our hair color and black eyes being around the bears. Over in Manitoba along the bay is where the research was being done, where the splicing happened. We have only been here for the last fifty or so years. My uncles and father built the town and started the supply line. I was born here, and it’s all my brothers and I have ever known. My family didn’t want other people getting suspicious, seeing any kind of curious resemblance to the bears themselves. They have a habit of...wanting to get close to us.”

“The bears? They sense you are kin?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. We are safe here. We have adapted to the slightly warmer climate, and there is a place up along the edge of the Arctic that the men in my family go once a year for a few weeks. It is sacred. There are a few bears, and we care for them. They aren’t tame but they are of no danger to us. Overall they are endangered and fighting to survive. We must do all we can to protect them.”

That was it. That was exactly how she felt about him. Protective. She must protect him. She couldn’t get it out of her head just how special he was, and that her being his mate was an open invitation to experience that specialness every day for the rest of her life. She’d be a fool not to accept.

“Does anyone ever talk about how you and your brothers look alike?”

“Sometimes. We nod and smile. We don’t confirm or deny. For most, we are just part of the tourism, part of the lore and otherworldliness of Alaska.”

“What can I do? What would I do?” She blurted it out without meaning to. She knew he didn’t have any answers for her, that she would have to come up with them all on her own. Whatever decision she made, had to come from her. He couldn’t make it for her, and she knew he wouldn’t.

“What do you mean?”

“Melanie can live and work in Alaska. She studies whales and is a frequent traveler here and to the Pacific Northwest. I, on the other hand, work in museums, libraries, universities. I travel to Greece, Egypt, Europe and all over the U.S. for my work. I write. I...” Her words trailed off at the last, her mind drifting to what ifs and probables. It was the world she lived in best. Always wondering, always trying to put the puzzles together for others. Her own life was very simple. She worked. She went about her routine. She didn’t deviate outside what was the norm for her. Carson, on the other hand, was way outside the norm for her quiet life and she couldn’t deny that she wanted to deviate with him. A lot.

His eyes zeroed in on her face and she was caught, snared, unable to look away. “What do you write?”

“Papers, articles, research. I freelance from time to time about myths and fairy tales, visit fantasy conventions, sit on panels, offer my expert opinion.” She could write more if she so chose. She could write from Alaska and travel to other places. She could even look into creating a small museum in their little town, myths and legends surrounding polar bears or something. There were incredible possibilities here in the vast reaches of North America.

There was no reason she couldn’t relocate and make this her home base. She was just looking for reasons not to. Change didn’t suit her well, and she didn’t adapt to it easily. Hell, until now she hadn’t been outside Chicago any length of time for at least six months, maybe more. Her introvert personality didn’t allow for it. The last trip she’d taken had been for a month to Greece. A dig had uncovered some new drawings and writings depicting the gods and goddesses. While she loved the work, the research, the history, she’d spent most of her time alone in her hotel room. She’d been holed up in her apartment writing and conducting online workshops ever since her return.

She always seemed to need a period of time to collect herself again.

“You couldn’t do that here? I can get you anything you need, give you anything you require for your work.”

He was so earnest in his offer, so willing. He firmly believed in the idea of fate, of them being meant to be. He even said he’d wait for her, that it was ingrained in his kind that once they met their mate, they would wait if need be. How was a girl supposed to say no to that?

“I was just thinking about that. I don’t know. It’s quiet here, and I’m used to the noise of the city. I’ve never lived with anyone, slept with anyone for any length of time. I’m a loner and get lost in my work, ignoring or avoiding others sometimes for days or weeks on end. The urban areas make me feel not so alone. I guess that doesn’t make much sense. I’m a loner, but I like the noise.” She shrugged and fiddled

with her fingers in her lap. She was suddenly nervous and unsure of herself and of all the possibilities life with him presented. Of all the things she didn't do well, putting herself out there, being vulnerable to hurt or pain were at the top of the list. "I don't know how to be someone's mate, girlfriend, lover."

"I don't either. Know how to be a girlfriend, I mean."

Shock widened her eyes, and her head snapped up. When she saw the serious look on his face, she laughed. He had a sense of humor. Dry, deadpan, but a sense of humor. She loved it. "Well, no, I don't imagine you've been a girlfriend, and I have to say I'm glad about that."

"Good." His grin was fleeting but bright in the firelight. "I've never lived with anyone, been a long-term lover. I've never been anything like I am meant to be with you."

"Because it is fate or destiny or brought on by dreams?"

He shrugged. "Yes, in part. One cannot fight it. But there is more, Ruby. You feel it, too. I know you do."

She did. She just wanted to hear him say it. She pulled her knees up and under her body then crawled across the couch to his lap. He welcomed her with open arms when she straddled his thighs. He was a beast—raw, primal, part animal, all hot and hunky man. "What more is there, Carson?"

His fingers slid under the shirt she wore. "You don't need me to tell you that."

"No. I want you to though."

"Well, there's this," he said, fingers gripped and pulled at her nipples, rubbing them, pinching them.

Yes, there was that. "And?" She tried not to squirm.

He bucked under her. "This." He did it again, and she moaned, grinding herself on the bulge in his pants.

Right again. "Anything else?" Her voice was raspy, her throat dry. Her tongue was even dry, and she couldn't lick her lips.

"Everything else, Ruby."

His mouth took hers, his tongue coaxed hers into his mouth, and it was the only contact other than his hands fondling her breasts and his cock throbbing between her legs. She wanted more, needed more and she started riding him. Her pussy was covered with panties and he was wearing a pair of pajama bottoms, but she could feel the ridges, the long hard rod, and she rode him.

Anytime he touched her, her body spiraled out of control. Her hands drifted into his long hair, the strands at once silky and coarse. Thick between her fingers. She feasted on his kiss, drank from his mouth and fucked her wet pussy on his flannel-covered penis. She couldn't get enough now that they'd had sex. She knew it could be like this, she just hadn't thought it could be like this for her and now that she did know...she was afraid she wouldn't be able to walk away from it, from him.

His fingers pinched her nipples, grabbed hold and tugged hard sending a fiery tendril directly to her clit. Oh hell, who was she kidding? There would be no walking away from him, from this feeling of lust, need, and a strange sense of belonging.

She sank into him, reaching for the orgasm. Without pulling away from his mouth, she dropped her hands from his hair down to his pajama bottoms, reaching in to grip his cock. She was fumbling, but she didn't care. She wanted him inside her. "Help me," she whispered into his mouth.

He let go of one of her nipples and slipped his hand to her panties pulling them to the side. She was sliding down on him in seconds, her tongue back in his mouth, her hips and thighs working, sending her higher again. He felt so good inside her, filling her, stretching her and though she was a little sore from earlier, it was a pleasant sore, one that made her crave the discomfort, the little twinge. She was more alive in his arms, with him inside her body, than she could ever remember being unless she was lost in her work, which she thought was the great passion of her life, the great love.

But, maybe there was room for two great passions.

"So tight and hot, my Ruby. God, baby, fuck me."

He punctuated his groan with a bite to her lower lip, with another stinging pinch to her nipples. Her hands went back to his hair and she pulled, used the long strands as reins, wrapping them around her fists.

"Oh yeah..."

His eyes glinted in the firelight, his lashes down low over his pupils, giving him a dark predatory look. She loved it, lusted for it, and was pulled deep into him by it. He was every inch the animal in that moment, and it triggered the wave. Their gazes were locked, and she didn't look away when she came. She didn't make a sound even though she wanted to scream through it. But more than that, she didn't want to break the spell, the tether binding them. So, she rode it out, her body jerking, convulsing and the more it did, the harder his fingers tormented her nipples.

She calmed slightly, sagged only to have him free her breasts from his hold and grab her hips, steadying her for the fucking he intended to give. He thrust her backward on the couch until he was crouched over her, pounding, slamming deep, growling low.

"Mine."

The word was barely audible, but she heard it, felt it crawling inside her skin and settling in her belly.

"Mine."

Louder now, the relentless pounding of his hips against hers pushing her closer to another cliff edge. She held on, her hands wrapped tight around his wrists holding her down.

He slammed deep one more time, held himself there and shook above her. He ground his pelvis into her, forcing her over that cliff little by little. It wasn't a hard orgasm as she'd had in the bedroom earlier or just now on the couch with him, but more like a series of waves rolling over her.

He smiled down at her, sweet and feral all at the same time, making her think she was the one meal he'd been waiting all his life to indulge in. "Mine," he whispered against her mouth before extracting himself from her body and pulling her up into his arms. She held on for dear life as he climbed the stairs with her. She might be a full-figured, plus-sized girl, but he carried her as though she weighed next to nothing.

"You need sleep, Ruby."

She agreed. She did need sleep. A lot of it. She didn't even know what time it was, but it had to be close to dawn. They'd come back downstairs earlier for a midnight snack of the most amazing chocolate brownies and milk. He said he had to hide them or his brothers would raid his house looking for them. She didn't doubt it. Now that she knew about them, she might be inclined to do the same thing.

She didn't know what it was about him as a cook, but it was so sexy, so hot. She never thought of food and sex in the same sentence as she did with him. But, then, everything with him was sexy and hot and he was offering it all to her. "Will you be staying with me this time?"

"Yes. All day and all night."

She nodded as he laid her on the mattress. She thought she remembered him crawling in next to her, but couldn't be sure. Her head met the pillow, and her eyes closed. Sleep and Carson. Nothing better in all the world.

"I thought we were going to have breakfast with your family?"

"It's well beyond breakfast time at their place." He winked at her, and she felt the heat creep up her neck.

"Right."

Bacon sizzled and pancakes bubbled on the griddle. Carson flipped a spatula in his hand waiting patiently to flip the pancakes. If she stayed up here with him, lived with him, she'd be putting on a lot more weight given the way he cooked. There was no Special K in his cupboards. There was no cold cereal or convenience food period. Everything had to be made and often from scratch. She was still marveling at him in the kitchen, long and lean, tall and well defined, but moved in a kitchen as if he'd been born to it.

"It's been ages since I had pancakes and bacon." Ruby sat on a stool at the kitchen island.

"What do you normally eat for breakfast?"

"You know, cereal, Pop Tarts, frozen waffles, instant oatmeal."

"Sounds exciting. I've never had a Pop Tart or instant oatmeal."

"Never?"

"Nope. No need to. I can make anything I want. And homemade is always better."

"I can't live without my Lucky Charms and my frosted cherry Pop Tarts." And she couldn't. She often took one or the other or both with her when she traveled. She hadn't this time though and while she might have missed them had she not met Carson, she certainly didn't miss them now that she had.

"Okay, well, I'm sure we can get some. If Fairbanks doesn't have them, we can send James looking for them next time he goes down to Anchorage. Otherwise, there's always Amazon."

Carson flipped the pancakes and drained the bacon on a paper-towel-lined plate. "You can get Amazon stuff delivered up here?"

"You make it sound like we're on another planet. Of course we can get deliveries. We sometimes have to drive to Fairbanks for packages, but for the most part, we do very well. We have satellite TV and Internet. We are our own entity up here, but we are also well connected and have access to anything we need or may want. You will not be deprived here, Ruby. I promise you."

Ruby shook her head. "I'm not worried about any of that. You told me last night you'd get me anything I needed and I believe you. I just... I guess living in the city, I don't think of such remote areas as being well supplied and often imagine... I don't know. It's just so different."

He set the plate of pancakes on the island along with the bacon. It all smelled good, and she was glad she could only feel her stomach growling and not hear it. Talk about embarrassing. "Dig in."

He filled his plate, slathered his pancakes with butter, and drowned them in syrup. After a few rather large bites, he looked over at her. She was still buttering her own small stack of two pancakes. "You okay this morning?"

She glanced in his direction, confused. "Yes, why?"

"I was kind of rough with you last night and wasn't much better the second or third time around either. Just want to make sure you're all right."

He took another big bite, and she ducked her head, more heat filling her cheeks at the memories, especially earlier in the shower. He'd soaped her up, washed her down, then knelt on the floor of the shower stall and pulled her toward his mouth. He ate at her pussy and wasn't satisfied until he'd made her scream. He'd gotten her out then and bent her over against the window and taken her from behind while she looked out at the Alaskan morning.

Someone would have to clean the glass where her hand, mouth and cheek prints were surely marring it. Now that they'd had sex, it just didn't seem to be enough, for either of them. They both went at each other equally fierce and hungry.

"Oh. Yeah, I'm good. A little sore, but good." She couldn't believe he'd brought it up over breakfast.

"Excellent."

Tension simmered between them as they finished eating, and she couldn't help wondering how his cock would taste with syrup drizzled on it. Of the things they'd done, that was one thing they hadn't. She didn't have a lot of experience with it, but she had some and would love to improve her skills. His cock was



beautiful—not too thick and not too long. It fit inside her as if it had been made to and if one took fate and destiny into account, it had been.

“You keep looking at me like that, Ruby, and we’ll be going at it again right here.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She looked down at her plate, for some reason surprised to find it empty.

“Don’t be.” He winked. “I’m not.” He kissed the top of her head and began clearing the dishes when the doorbell rang. Carson looked over his shoulder and grinned at her. “Saved by the bell, huh?”

## Chapter Ten

“Are you really okay with this, Mel? Living up here, working from here? Being married to a shifter? I mean... What did you tell your friends? What are you going to tell Mom and Dad?” Ruby and Melanie sat on the couch in Carson’s living room, the same couch she and he had... The heat crept up again. Damn. She was turning into a regular old slut. Inwardly she smiled. If it meant sex with him wherever and whenever, being a slut was okay with her.

Luckily, Melanie hadn’t been looking at Ruby or there’d have been some explaining for Ruby to do about the color in her cheeks.

“Yes, I am really okay with this. Ruby, it was love at first sight for me when I met James. I can’t explain it and I never fought it. Not like I had with other men. Whereas I always wanted my independence with most of my boyfriends and lovers, one look at James and I wanted him all the time, every moment I was awake. I have to say though, I’m very surprised that you are fighting it with Carson.”

Ruby nodded. “So am I. I’m the believer in the family, and you’re the scientist. Of the two of us, you should be the one having issues, not me.” So then, why did she have issues? They weren’t as prevalent right now as they had been before last night. Something shifted, gave way, opened up during sex with Carson and where before she was concerned with logistics and how it would work, now it didn’t seem as important. Yet, she was clinging to it for all she was worth.

“What exactly is it you have a problem with?”

“Being isolated.”

Melanie nodded. “I understand why that would bother you. I’m used to being off in remote regions sometimes, out in the middle of the ocean others, but you’re used to being surrounded by people, the city, culture. This would seem a little daunting.”

Yes, daunting. Looking out the large floor to ceiling windows of Carson’s living room, the mountains in the distance, the trees surrounding the cabin, the vast sky stretching as far as the eye could see, daunting was a very good word for it.

She was often lost in her own mind, a private person, an introvert, however she was quite at home in a crowded apartment building with people living just on the other side of the walls.

“Is quiet your only issue?”

Melanie’s words brought Ruby’s attention back to their conversation. Was it? Each time she thought about it, she came up with nothing else. Surely there *was* some other thing keeping her on the fence,

something much more substantial than the fact that it was quieter in Alaska than it was in Chicago. “Well, I don’t know Carson all that well. I mean, I’ve known him for what, four days? Or is it five? See I can’t even tell you what day it is. I’m so turned around up here.”

Melanie laughed and hugged her. Ruby clasped her sister tightly, glad to have her solid and strong and familiar there with her. Mel pulled back but held on to Ruby’s hands. “I know. It’s fast. It hits you right between the eyes and doesn’t let go. These men are like magnets and once one of them sets his sights on the woman he is meant to be with, there’s nothing to be done about it. In his mind, the die has been cast and there’s no out. You feel the same pull I did with James, Ruby. You feel the same pull Carson does.”

“His is different than mine.”

“No, Ruby, it’s not. Not really. He feels it in his blood, coursing through him. You feel it in your gut, in your heart. It’s a part of both of you.”

“His is... I don’t know.” Ruby shook her head, failing at finding the right words she was searching her brain for.

“Okay, let me ask it this way. When you first met him, what did you think? What did you feel?”

*Hot. Hard. Sexy.* “Well, he was naked in my hotel bed.” Melanie laughed and so did Ruby. “I felt safe, no panic, no fear. I thought he was gorgeous, the most beautiful and striking man I’d ever seen.”

“And you trusted him, yes?”

Ruby nodded. She had. Immediately and without question. Thinking back on it now, it seemed rather stupid. He was a perfect stranger, the emphasis on the perfect part because he’d never really felt like a stranger. She should have been scared, full of panic, but it wasn’t until sometime later that the absence of those feelings actually dawned on her.

“He’s your own hero, Ruby. Your own Prince Charming. This is your fairy tale, and he’s his own legend, just like the rest of the men in his family. They are living legends.”

“And no one can ever know about them.”

“No,” Melanie shook her head. “No one can ever know about them, at least not what makes them so very special.”

“You still didn’t answer me about mom and dad. What are you gonna tell them? Hell, *I* don’t even know what to tell them. ‘Hey, Mom, Dad, Mel and I have shacked up with a couple of ice bear shifters’.”

Melanie laughed. “Yeah, I’m not sure the parental units are going to understand, but you know them, they live their own lives in their own little world. The farm has always been everything to them.”

“True.”

“Look, Ruby, I have a confession to make. I didn’t call or answer your calls because...because I needed you to come find me. I needed you to see them for yourself. I needed you to meet Carson.”

“Why?”

"I saw the way he looked at the pictures of you I had. It was the same way James looked at me the day I met him. It was an all-knowing look, and I knew that you were the one. The way he would go completely still when he heard your voice on my voicemail saying that you were coming to find me. He got this intense look in his eyes. James said it was the animal kicking in, the need for his mate."

"But bears don't really have mates. Not for life anyway. The males don't even stick around."

"These hybrid bears do. Fiercely loyal and possessive, protective. They were humans first, but the need and animalistic urge to mate... Once it kicks in, it's there for good. Besides, Carson's a catch."

Ruby couldn't argue with that, but she wanted to know why Melanie thought so. "Why?"

"Oh don't pretend you don't know why. Honey, the man can cook."

At the same time, Ruby was ensconced in his house with her sister, Carson was sitting with his brothers and his parents.

"Who was it that drove her up to the lodge?"

"Joe."

"Well, I'm sure most people just think he's gone nuts living up here or that it's just a ploy to stir up more tourism. I doubt many people take him seriously."

"He knows where the cabin is though, Pop."

"I know he does, but he's never led anyone there, he's never put us in any kind of danger."

"And the one that did make it to the cabin? Taking pictures, snooping around? What if there are more?"

"Look, boys. I've lived here for so many years. We're safe. We're protected. The women that come into this family love us and protect us. Their families do too. Only one man has ever been killed by one of us, and it was because he pointed a gun at Patrick."

Carson flinched at the memory of that night. He'd need to tell Ruby about it. She deserved to know that he'd killed a man. It was in defense of his brother, and he'd do it for any other member of his family and he'd do it for Ruby. He'd do anything for her, and she deserved to know what he'd done. It wasn't something he was proud of, but with Patrick facing down the business end of a rifle, he hadn't hesitated.

"And Joe told that man about us. Just like he tells everyone about us."

"Douglas, what would you have us do? Pick up and move? Close down the home and the town we built from the ground up? We live and work here. Anywhere else we might go would raise suspicions about you boys. That man wasn't a rogue tourist. He was looking for us, looking for something. It was taken care of. Not in the manner any of us would have liked, but it was dealt with."

"Pop is right, Doug. We can't just up and leave."

"I'll have a word with Joe next time I sees him at the lodge."

Carson watched Doug wrestle with it all. He was the youngest of them, eleven years Carson's junior at the age of twenty-seven, and the one most likely to go off half-cocked. He was restless, feeling caged and Carson could well understand that. The older they got, the more they needed to mate, the more they needed their own particular mate.

Before Ruby, Carson had been feeling that restless, reckless, caged-up feeling for years. The running, the snowboarding, the hiking served to try and help. Doug did all of it and more. He was even somewhat of an Alaskan celebrity, participating, against every one's advice, in the Winter X Games. He always wore sunglasses and kept his hair cropped so short that no human ever suspected anything. Doug was good, too, often winning the competitions he entered.

"There's nothing we can do really but keep an eye on Joe and on any strange goings on around the cabin."

Doug didn't like that answer and slumped down in his chair, huffing and crossing his arms over his chest. He might be twenty-seven, but he could act ten years younger than that when he wanted.

"So, tell us about the girl, Carson."

His father was usually quiet in these large family discussions. He processed what was being said and then made whatever decision needed to be made. His asking about Ruby though, well, Carson wasn't sure what to say. He was still trying to deal with his own emotions and reactions to the woman he'd known for less than a week but that fate decided was his to have, hold, and protect. "What about her?"

"Anything."

James laughed. "He's quite mum about her. I tried asking the other day but he kept all details to himself."

"You all stop picking on him. He's never been one to open up about his private life and personal relationships."

"Yeah, Mom, but it's fun to pick on him, to get him all riled up."

Carson smiled and winked at his mom. Bless the woman for trying to keep some semblance of peace between them and for trying to keep everyone out of everyone else's business. It never worked. His brothers were the nosiest SOBs he'd ever met.

"Melanie said she works with museums and libraries. Doing what?"

James was just going to keep pushing until Carson gave up something, anything about her. "She puts research and collections of myths and legends together. She's a mythologist. She travels all over the world too."

"Never heard of one of them. Sounds a little fishy to me."

"No, Pop, it's not. I'd never heard of one either, but she's genuine. She's as real as a woman can get."

"You trust her, son?"

Carson nodded. "Without a doubt."

“And she’s the one?”

He tried not to grin, but damn he couldn’t help it. “Yeah, Mom, she is.”

“How’s she taking that bit of news?”

Not as well as he’d hoped. “She’s a little skittish about it, but all in all she’s handling it about as well as could be expected. She came up here to find her sister, not find a man that won’t let her go.”

James grinned at him. “Yeah, Melanie said Ruby seemed to be having a bit of trouble wrapping her head around this. Wouldn’t think that though, given her profession.”

“No, you wouldn’t, but there it is. I think she’ll come around. It’s just different and she’s not big on change.” She had to come around. However long it might take, she had to come around. He wanted her, needed her.

“Will *she* keep our secret?”

Carson turned his head toward Doug who was still sulking in the chair. “Yes.” That was all he was going to say on the matter. Doug was spoiling for a fight, and Carson wasn’t going to be the one to give it to him. His only concern was Ruby.

“Well, I think I should plan a really nice dinner for her to welcome her into the family.”

“Mom, we’re not there yet. That might not happen for a long while yet.” He hoped that wasn’t the case though. He liked waking up next to her, fixing breakfast for her. He could hear her laughter in his head, feel her body pressed up against him. She was warm and tender, and she was learning to play with him, tease him on purpose now instead of inadvertently, and hotter than hell in bed. Now that she’d been able to let go and come with him, she wanted it more and more, not that he was complaining.

“Oh. Well, no reason I can’t go ahead and plan for it anyway. It’s not as though she has a choice in the matter. I never did. Melanie didn’t either. It’s just going to depend on when she accepts it. You’ll be patient with her and so will we.”

She wanted to say something more. Carson watched her bite down on the tip of her tongue to keep herself from it. It was something his mother had been doing since he was a little boy. Whenever she disapproved of something or wasn’t sure how far she should push for answers, she’d bite down gently on her tongue and close her eyes. She once said she counted to ten very slowly until the urge to press the conversation or topic passed.

He had a feeling Ruby wasn’t going to be like that. She was going to question and reason and argue until she either got her way or he shut her up some other way. His cock jumped inside his jeans at the thought, volunteering for the job.

It was time to go home. He had a few things to tell her and if she’d still have him, he had a few things he wanted to do to her, with her.

Carson stood and hugged his mother. “I don’t know how long she’s gonna stay right now, but she’ll come around. We’ll have that dinner when she does, okay?”

She clung to him. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I am, and I will be. She’s the one. She just has to take it in.”

He headed for the door, then turned back. “James? Ever seen Pop Tarts on any of your trips to the stores?”

“Never looked.”

His mother laughed. “Pop Tarts? Lord, I haven’t thought about those in ages. She likes them? My father forbid us to have them in the house. If it couldn’t be made from scratch, we weren’t allowed to have it at home. My best friend and I used to eat them up in her room. I loved those naughty little things.”

“Apparently, so does Ruby. Frosted cherry Pop Tarts.”

“She has a world-class cook in you and she wants Pop Tarts?” James shook his head. “Women.”

## Chapter Eleven

Carson opened the front door to his house to find Ruby pacing in front of the windows. The sun was shining, the sky was clear and the light played off her hair, highlighting the strands in different shades and variations of red and gold. It was beautiful. She was beautiful. Her short stature, her full and very delicious curves, her incredible smile when she turned it on him... The woman had his insides all knotted up and was capturing him more and more every minute.

She hadn't heard him open or close the door. She just kept walking back and forth. Her mouth was moving, but no sound was coming out. He smiled. She was talking to herself.

Her brow was scrunched down, her fingers and hands making gestures. Her hair fell in soft waves around her very intense-for-the-moment face, and she was wearing glasses. He hadn't seen her in glasses before, and he suddenly was no longer content to just watch her without her knowing he was there. He now wanted her to look at him, so he said her name softly. "Ruby."

She stopped dead in her tracks and looked up toward him. If he thought she was beautiful without glasses, she was gorgeous with them. They transformed her face completely and the deep green of the frames set off her eyes. Even from across the room, he could see it, how they brought out the varying shades of greens and golds and browns in them.

Damn he wanted to throw her down on the floor and...

"I need to talk t—"

"I want to st—"

They spoke at the same time. Evidently she had something equally as important to say as he did. She smiled, and he met her in the middle of the room. "You first," he said, brushing his hand over the bangs covering her forehead. They were soft against the pads of his fingers.

"No, you."

Carson looked closely at her and took a deep breath. Telling her was much harder than telling his parents what he'd done. He stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"We don't actually shift into full bears. The black of our pupils fills in the whites of the eyes, claws lengthen from our fingers, our palms and the bottom of our feet become covered in a rough, kind of all-terrain skin. We don't run on all fours."

She nodded at the information, her eyes bright and encouraging.



“We have very fine translucent fur that covers our arms and legs. Our sense of smell, sight and taste are heightened and more keen and acute than that of a human. We are very primal and animalistic in our sexual needs, and we are incredibly protective of our family.”

“Okay. I’m with you so far, but I sort of knew this. Though some of the changes that happen to your body, I didn’t know. That’s fascinating. Do you feel the changes take place? Does it hurt?”

Ever the inquisitive one, this mate of his. “Yes, I feel them and no, it doesn’t hurt.”

“Good. Is there more?”

*Unfortunately.* “Yes.”

“You look more serious now,” she observed. She reached up and ran her fingers over the frown marring his brow. Funny, that was the same thing he’d wanted to do to the frown she’d had earlier.

“A few years ago, Patrick and I were at the little hunting cabin, unloading some fish and other items. There was a flash in the window and when we both turned around, there was another one. A guy with a camera stood outside. You haven’t met Patrick yet, but we look almost identical. Were it not for the four year age difference we could be twins.”

Ruby’s eyes widened, and she touched his sleeve, gripping it in her hand. “What did he want?”

“Us. He’d heard Joe talking down in Fairbanks about the shifters living in the forests of Denali and thought he’d check it out. Most people think Joe is off his rocker when it comes to stories like that, but this guy decided to see for himself. Patrick went outside to see what the guy was about and met the guy’s rifle. He wanted a souvenir I guess. I don’t know. I simply reacted.”

“What do you mean? A souvenir? Simply reacted?”

“I went out the back of the cabin and when I came around the front, I saw the rifle trained on Patrick’s chest. I reacted. The bear in me reacted. Ruby, I killed that man. With my claws, I killed him.”

“Oh, Carson. Oh my God.”

When he expected her to step back from him, to let go of his shirt like it was a snake going to bite her, she did the exact opposite. She stepped closer, pressed herself against him and wrapped her arms tight around his back. She snuggled her head under his chin and just held him.

“Keep talking. If there’s more, keep talking,” she whispered. She lowered her arms and took each of his, wrapping them around her body, then returned hers around his back. His fingers flexed in her sweater.

Damn.

“I’m not going to go into the details. No one knew the man before and as far as I know, no one has ever come looking for him. He was spouting off about shapeshifters and how he knew they existed, and he was going to kill us and take back proof. He also said there were aliens, and he was going to hunt them down next. His finger was steady on the trigger, his body rigid. He was going to shoot my brother, and I couldn’t let him. My claws extended and...”

Carson buried his face in Ruby's soft hair and inhaled deeply. She was the purest and best thing he'd ever touched. And while he didn't consider himself unclean in any way, even given what he'd just told her, he knew she was more innocent and fresh and true than anyone he'd met to date.

"Patrick is okay?"

Her concern nearly did him in. "Yes. I had to protect him."

"I know you did. What about Joe? He's still telling people there are shifters. What if there's someone else like that guy?"

"I don't know. Joe doesn't know what happened, but we're gonna have to contain his little stories somehow."

"I'm so sorry you... It must have been horrible for you to see a gun pointed at Patrick, for your whole way of life to be threatened just because some guy wanted a trophy."

She was trying to comfort him. He wasn't sure what to make of that. His mother had as well, but this was different. His mother would have killed the man, too, for threatening one of her kids, but Ruby... Ruby didn't have a stake in it, at least not... "I won't apologize for having done it. I'm not proud of it, but I won't apologize for it. I just reacted. You had a right to know though."

"You'd protect me, too, just as fiercely."

Statement, not question. She trusted him. "Yes."

She backed out of the circle of his arms. He felt the loss instantly, but the warmth and openness of her eyes when she looked up at him sort of made up for it. She wasn't wary or nervous with him and relief flowed through his body, relaxing the tension he'd felt since realizing he needed to tell her.

"I want to tell you something, too. Umm..." Her eyes shifted from side to side, to the floor, the ceiling, over his shoulder, down at her fingers, then finally back to his face.

Her voice might have been a little hesitant, but her eyes weren't when she focused on his once again.

"I want... I want you to come back to Chicago with me. Can you do that? I mean, with the store and all. Can you? I have some projects coming up that I need to do, and I don't have my computer or any of my research with me."

She turned and sat on the table sitting between the two couches. It put her mouth at just the right height. "Go on."

"I don't know how to do this. I told you that before. I'm not even sure where the logic in it is to do this. I'm not impulsive. I think, I study, I look at all angles, and then I start all over again. I just met you, but I can't deny the immediate connection, the lack of panic when I woke up with you, the sense of rightness when I'm with you. I've never felt it with anyone else, and I think I know you on some elemental level that has never been reached before with other men."

"Fate, Ruby."

“So you keep telling me. I believe in fate. I believe in the far-fetched, in destiny, in fairy tales, and shapeshifters. I believe in happily ever after for everyone. I just never believed in it for me. I’m too different, too deep in my own head.”

He stepped close, and she tilted her head up. Her lips were parted just a bit but enough that he could slip the head of his cock between them and they’d only have to stretch a fraction of a centimeter to accommodate it. Damn. The woman was trying to have a serious conversation with him, and he couldn’t get the image of her mouth on him out of his mind.

He brushed his fingers against her cheek then traced the shape of her mouth. “Sometimes the things we believe in most are hardest to imagine for ourselves. We know our own flaws, our own weaknesses and it’s hard to see that we should have the same wonderful things in our lives that we want for others.”

“I guess. But, I want to try. I don’t know how you’ll like me long term. I’m afraid I’ll be rather difficult to live with. I’m used to my own space, spreading out when I’m working. I talk to myself.”

“I’ll suffer through it.”

“It’s quiet here and makes me think more than normal, which is usually a bad thing. Quiet makes me nervous.”

The pulse in her neck was picking up speed. His fingers were still tracing her lips. “I have a television and Bose surround sound. You can turn it up as loud as you want to cancel out the silence.”

She shifted to the edge of the table. “I’m a city girl, not a nature lover.”

“I’ll help you balance the two. You’ll grow to love the outdoors.” His hand shifted to the fly of his jeans.

“It’s too cold up here. I don’t like the cold.”

And she burned hotter than fire in his bed. “I’ll keep you warm.”

“I’m going to grow fat eating the delicious food you cook.”

He pushed his jeans down his hips just enough so his cock sprang free. “So? If it starts to bother you, we’ll find fun ways to work it off.” And his mind was already calculating the different positions they could try.

“I’ll still travel, and I’ll still want Pop Tarts.”

Her breath was warm on the head of his dick. God, he was so fucking hard. She wanted him, wanted this between them, was willing to give it a chance. “I can live with that. Maybe I can travel with you and try those Pop Tart things.”

She licked at the very tip of his cock with the very tip of her tongue, and he shuddered. “I’m going to want more orgasms. I like the way they feel with you.”

“Any time.” He was having a difficult time thinking and an even more difficult time talking. His own tongue seemed heavy and thick in his mouth.

“I’m afraid I’ll never be the same again, Carson. I’m afraid I’ll always want you, that when I fall, I’ll love you forever.”

“The feeling is mutual, Ruby.” He slid a hand into the soft tangle of her hair and fisted his fingers in it. “I can handle it. I can...” She was kissing the length of his cock. “I can handle anything you throw at me.”

“This is real?”

The first bit of doubt he’d seen in her eyes since he met her filtered through them. Melanie’s words came back to him from the night before he left to go pick Ruby up at the lodge. *She needs love. Unconditional, uncompromising, forever-after love. She won’t survive in a relationship without it.* “Yes. This is real.”

“Okay,” she whispered, the sweet heat and smile returning to her gaze. He’d go to Chicago with her. He’d spend time in her world before she became immersed in his. He’d give and take and compromise and work with her to get them where they needed to be in order to live forever as lovers, as friends, as mates.

Her mouth slid over his cock, and his mind emptied of every thought as he gave himself up to the pull of her. *Ruby.*

## About the Author

To learn more about Lissa Matthews, please visit [www.lissamatthews.com](http://www.lissamatthews.com). Send an e-mail to Lissa Matthews at [lissa@lissamatthews.com](mailto:lissa@lissamatthews.com).

Look for these titles by Lissa Matthews

*Now Available:*

Pink Buttercream Frosting  
Sweet Caroline

*Coming Soon:*

Cracklin' Rosie

*The second time around is even sweeter...with cherries on top.*

## Sweet Caroline

© 2010 Lissa Matthews

### *Blue Jeans and Hard Hats, Book 1*

Buck doesn't do personal projects. Until he runs into a woman wandering the aisles of the local home-improvement store, looking lost and confused. Just the way this fantasy looks at him nearly buckles his knees. In a hot second, the successful owner of a contracting company becomes a simple handyman, ready and willing to get as personal as the lady will allow.

Since her less-than-golden marriage to the local golden boy ended, Caroline's declaration of independence includes her own business, road trips...and nipple piercings. Now it's time to cut the last tie to her old life, but the house needs some work before she can unload it and move to her dream cabin in the mountains. Hard as it is to admit, she needs a little help.

Over the next few months, he shows her his toys, like hammers and drills, and she shows him hers—like floggers and paddles. And their attraction is the tinder that could send Caroline's plans for an independent life up in flames...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Sweet Caroline:*

A five year age difference wasn't much, but to a woman of forty, it was enough of one to make an impact. Buck hadn't come on to her, flirted with her or touched her unless it was necessary. The only thing he'd ever done to make her think he saw her as a woman rather than a client, was that look of heat every so often when she licked her lips or curled her hair back behind her ears to keep it out of her face. She didn't know if he'd seen the strands of gray at her temples or if he realized she had to use extra creams to keep the lines and wrinkles down to a minimum. But he wouldn't deny there'd been something about her he liked, that brought out that bit of lust in him and it was *that* look he'd give that had her wanting to feel sexy and younger, even if she didn't look it.

"Not a lot of work. I have a couple of baskets to put together, but they don't need to go out until the end of next week."

"That's good. I know I like being busy and seems like you do too."

"Yes. I'd rather be busy than twiddling my thumbs all day wondering what to do. I used to do that far too often when I was married."

Buck leaned his hip against the axe handle, and she had a hard time keeping her eyes trained on his face. She wanted to look down or lean against him. She wanted to drop to her knees, press her face to his crotch and rub her cheek against his cock.

When he licked *his* lips after taking another swallow of coffee, she looked away, somewhere over his shoulder. His tongue licking the drop of coffee seemed to have the same effect on her that it had on him when she did it. And things were even hotter between them after yesterday and last night. She'd not had so much sex in one night in a long while and though she should be sore, all she could think about was getting naked with him again.

She liked feeling free and sexy and pretty and wanted. She liked being the woman inside and letting her out to see the light, to be seen by a man like Buck. Even though he likely didn't know it, he'd helped her to see that side of herself, and she was enjoying the discovery.

She hadn't felt that way about herself during her marriage. At least not the second half of her marriage. When Derek focused on her, on them, she'd felt like the sexiest, most beautiful woman alive, but when he'd started looking away more, wanting and having other women, she lost that feeling. She'd retreated into a shell, and she was damn glad to be out of it.

"That's right. You didn't work before."

She looked at his face again, briefly raising her gaze to his. "No. I started my gift baskets after the divorce. Since it's an online business, I can move it anywhere there's Internet and shipping. I like it and it's..." She shrugged.

"Yes. A personal touch is lacking these days. I've seen some of what you do. It's good. I'm sure your clients are very happy."

Caroline smiled. She liked him being proud of her. "Thanks. Well, I guess I should let you get back to work." She didn't want to though. Staying, talking, looking at him was what she wanted to do instead. The taste of his come was still on her tongue from breakfast when he'd told her to strip down and suck him, and she was eager for him to tell her to do it again.

"Welcome." He picked up the axe, wrapping his hands around the wood shaft and lifted it to rest on his shoulder. The move pulled his tee shirt tight across his chest, and she knew his gaze followed hers as she looked him up and down, smiling into his face and bright blues. "Neither of us wants to work right now, do we?"

Caroline shook her head. "No."

"What do you want, sweet Caroline?"

"More of you."

"Huh. Interesting." She followed Buck into the shed. "I think that can be arranged. I had a thought yesterday about you and this sawhorse here." He patted the piece of wood. "But it might be a little chilly this morning."

"Coffee warmed me up. Didn't do that to you?"

"Oh I'm warmed up, but it wasn't me I was concerned about."



“Sweet of you.” Caroline pulled her sweater off over her head. “I’m okay though.” And from the way his eyes widened... “Like it?”

He reached out and flicked the ring in one of her nipples. “Love it. You need to wear that kind of bra all the time. Leave those beauties free and exposed.”

She grinned. “Yes. Exactly what I was thinking. I have two others, but, there are a host of colors I haven’t ordered yet.”

“Well, we should definitely get that done. God, Caroline, they’re beautiful.” He wrapped his large hands around the globes of her breasts and squeezed, tugged, massaged the creamy flesh. She moaned in need, and he grinned at her. “Matching thongs?”

“Lacey boyshorts.”

Buck groaned and she purred. “Driving me crazy, woman.”

“That’s the whole idea,” she whispered into his hair when he lowered his head and licked at the valley of her chest. Her fingers unsnapped and unzipped her jeans, and she shimmied out of them.

Buck stepped back a couple inches and looked down. “You deserve a spanking for being such a tease.”

“Mmmm.” She kicked the jeans off to the side near the door. “And how am I a tease?”

“You came out here under the pretense of bringing me coffee.”

She watched him unbuckle his belt and pull it through the loops, one at a time. The hissing sound it made caused her to shiver. “But I did bring you coffee.”

“You did.”

“Am I to be punished?”

“Spanking isn’t for punishment. It’s strictly for pleasure. Mine...and yours.”

She liked that. A lot. “Then what?”

“You will bend over the top of the sawhorse, spread your lovely legs and have your pussy plundered.”

*A Shifter, A Vampire and A Demon walk into a bar...*

## My Shifter Showmance

© 2010 R.G. Alexander

### *Shifting Reality, Book 1*

Thomas Lyons is your average cat shifter. Cool, seductive...and bored out of his mind. With the new popularity of all things paranormal, he doesn't see why he should hide anymore. When his half-demon technophile roommate hooks him up with a computer, Thomas starts a blog announcing to the world who and what he is. Oddly enough, the more he shares, the less he's believed. In fact, people begin thinking it's a new online series with fantastic effects.

Margo Sheffield doesn't dance on tables anymore, not since her reckless naïveté cost her so much. These days, her only guilty pleasures are dark chocolate, shoes—and a certain website with a man whose purring voice sends shivers down her spine. When the show, *Shifting Reality*, offers a week in a haunted Scottish castle with the stars, it seems a far-off dream. But when that dream becomes reality, her boss's insistence that she mix business with pleasure—or else—is more like a nightmare.

Thomas's focus on the show is blown by the luscious, camera-shy handful. And Margo can barely think about contracts when she's surrounded by newlywed ghost hunters, a matchmaking demon and a man whose addictive touch makes her head spin. A showmance is the last thing she needs, but with a sexy cat like Thomas on the prowl...she just can't resist.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for My Shifter Showmance:*

“None of that, now, Margo. Not between you and I.”

That was all the warning she got before she was spun around and lifted in the air to settle, breathless, straddling his lap. “Mr. Lyons, I think we should talk about—”

“Hush.” Thomas curled his fingers into her hair, pulling her down to meet his searching lips before she could get another word out. Margo's last thought was, *Oh hell*, before the kiss scrambled her brain.

He growled, the pressure of his lips opening hers as he sought entrance. God, his taste. And the way he was kissing her, exactly the way she'd always imagined he would. Greedily, hungrily...perfectly.

Her sex pressed against his thickening erection, and through their clothes she could feel the heat of him. He was blazing. She slid her tongue across his fangs. His body jerked in reaction, and she did it again, loving the fact that she could make him respond to her. Make him as crazy as he was making her from one simple kiss. Who was she trying to fool? She'd been crazy for him since the moment she'd seen the first video. Her fingers dug into the muscles of his arms, wishing she could touch his bare skin, desperate for more contact. *Closer. Harder. More.*

“Margo, baby...” He’d pulled away. Why had he pulled away? She looked at the agonized need tightening his expression, her brows lowering in confusion when he shook his head. “I never in all my years imagined saying this, but we should stop. We shouldn’t do this here. And if you keep grinding against me, I won’t be able to stop myself from tossing you on this table and taking you right now, in full view of our online audience.”

Audience. The cameras. Hell. Chi and Liam were gone, but Margo knew each room had its own grouping of stationary cameras. She’d been *grinding*? Mortification stung her cheeks. She imagined the people online watching her behavior, maybe even her coworkers, and she tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let her.

He stood, holding her struggling body easily in his arms and strode swiftly to the kitchen, nodding at the Goth servants before heading into the large pantry room and closing the door.

The lock turned with a click of finality, and Margo bit her lip. Would Darcy fire her for her inappropriate behavior? She huffed out a dark laugh. Her boss would no doubt wholeheartedly approve. As long as it got her those *Shifting Reality* rights.

He swept his hand out, drawing her gaze to the deep pantry filled with dry goods and empty jars. It was nearly the size of her bedroom in the insanely expensive cubbyhole she called an apartment. And the ceiling was so high, stocked to the rafters, that they actually had a sliding ladder leaning against one of the shelves.

Thomas caressed her jaw with his thumb, bringing her attention back to him. “There’s no sound equipment, no cameras here. Just you and I. Talk to me, Margo, please.” He ran his fingers through his hair, looking frustrated. “If I were Saint or Mac, I’d have a way to know what you’re thinking. Know why you look like you regret what just happened.”

“If you were Saint or Mac, I wouldn’t be in this pantry.” She spoke without thinking, flinched as she saw his pleased expression. Shit. Why didn’t she just tell him she only regretted he’d stopped? That she’d wanted to smother herself in chocolate and whipped cream and be his dessert? She sighed. “What I mean is— Hell, I don’t know what I mean. I think we should go to bed. Separately. To separate beds. Alone. We can talk about the reason we both know I’m here in the morning.”

*Work, keep saying it, this is for work. Contract not coitus. Contract not coitus.*

“I smell you.”

She crossed her arms defensively and looked at him askance. “I’m sorry?”

Thomas shook his head, his eyes going dark as he took a deep, lung filling breath. “Just, now that there’s no distraction, I can really *smell* you. It’s rich. Spicy and sweet. Like pumpkin mousse or, well, I’ve never smelled anyone quite like you.”

*Pumpkin?* “You smell nice too. I’m assuming we both shower. What’s your point?” She was being belligerent, but she couldn’t seem to help it. She was having a hard time accepting how easily she’d lost

control. The old Margo would no doubt have thrown caution to the wind, damned the cameras and danced for him on the table, perhaps torn off his buttons with her teeth. Which was one of the reasons she'd been buried beneath mountains of to do lists and restrained hairdos for the better part of a decade. The old Margo was nothing but trouble.

So was Thomas Lyons. His pupils had dilated, his strong features had sharpened and his cheeks looked flushed. He looked...feral. Wild. Like he was ready to pick up where they'd just left off, whether she liked it or not. Her slender thread of control began to fray once more. She should leave now. The pantry. The castle. The country.

Thomas blocked her way to the door. Did his fangs look longer? More intimidating? He towered over her, backing her up until her shoulders hit the ladder. He took her wrists in his hands and lifted her arms over her head. She gripped the rungs of the ladder, clinging instinctively, fascinated by the predatory look in his eyes.

"My point," his voice was rough, needy, "is that you aren't going anywhere, kitten. Regardless of what your mind is telling you to regret or run from, your body is speaking loud and clear. And it wants what I want."

"What?"

Thomas leaned into her, his lips lightly caressing her neck as he whispered, "More."

*What will happen when the hunter becomes the hunted...*

## **Tempt Not the Cat**

© 2009 J.C. Wilder

A woman whose chances for love were destroyed...

After surviving a brutal kidnapping, Erihn Spencer has spent the past eighteen years living in the shadows. Scarred both physically and mentally, she spends her days writing romance novels dealing with the type of relationship she's avoided. The night before heading into the mountains to start her new novel, a stranger approaches and shakes her world with one perfect kiss.

A man who could be her savior...

From the moment Fayne kisses her, the desire to possess this shy beauty is irresistible. Thrown together in a secluded house in the mountains, he's torn between his need for her and the secrets that are destined to force them apart. As Erihn struggles to break free from years of self-imposed isolation, he finds he is the one who is now trapped by his desires, his dark self.

Their worlds collide and old secrets lead a bitter enemy to their door.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Tempt Not the Cat:*

She moved like a cat, dainty, her feet barely touching the floor.

Fayne leaned against the bar, his pint of Scottish ale forgotten. Through the wide arch leading into the coffeehouse, his gaze followed her as she wove her way through the tables filled with chatting patrons.

Her hair was long and loose, ending just below her backside. To most people, it would appear to be brown but his preternatural eyesight detected glints of red and gold in the long strands. Unbound, it obscured her profile reminding him of Cousin It from *The Munsters*. Okay, not exactly flattering but the resemblance was undeniable.

Dressed in a long skirt the color of dirt and an enveloping cream-colored shirt, she was as diametrically opposed to the other women in their barely-there summer dresses as chalk was to cheese. Covered from head to toe with her modest, slightly oversized clothes and long, shaggy hair, she looked as if she were trying to hide from something.

Maybe everything?

His chest tightened. He loved puzzles. Curiosity had certainly almost killed this cat a time or two, but that didn't stop him from his favored pastime. Puzzles drove him mad and women were his favorite riddle. He reveled in their femininity, their scent and their innate sensuality. Basked in the hidden mysteries of their shapely limbs and secretive eyes. Overdosed on their voices and wrapped himself in their beauty while rejoicing in their strength.

In short, he loved women.

His eyes narrowed when the stranger stepped onto the stage. Reaching up to adjust the microphone, her slender fingers curled around the base as she raised it to the correct height. With one slim hand she pushed back her hair, allowing him a glimpse of her profile. Dark brows, a lovely cheekbone and a slightly snubbed nose, her skin was creamy pale and her mouth was lush.

He licked his lips.

The woman glanced to her left and smiled at her friends as they jostled for better viewing positions on the low-slung couch and chairs. A shy smile curved her mouth and a gentle blush swept her skin. She ducked her head as if embarrassed.

Even from here he could sense her nervousness. For some of the preternaturals, emotions could be detected by either taste or scent. With the room crowded with people, for most it would be difficult to pick up on any one person. But not him. Her scent was unique and it had already imprinted itself in his brain, becoming part of him.

Lemon.

Paper.

Flowers. Blue Lady roses to be exact.

And a healthy dose of warm feminine flesh.

Something dark stirred in him, gently nudging the leash of his willpower. The moon was waxing, and the urge to mate was growing stronger. It'd been over ten months since he'd last taken a woman, and the demands of the approaching full moon were taking a toll on his restraint.

After the debacle with the vampire Mikhail during winter solstice last year, Fayne's pleasure-seeking life had been derailed by the unexpected inclusion of a six-year-old mortal child. He smiled at the thought of the boy he called son, Max. Few things were more important to a were-cat than physical gratification and their own creature comforts, but his son was his top priority. Max came first with him.

Period.

End of story.

Even though he loved Max and would sacrifice anything for his welfare, for the next few weeks Fayne was free to do as he pleased. Max was off with his friend Bliss in South America on an archeological dig and having the time of his life.

Certain that his son was well taken care of, Fayne had other pressing matters to attend to. With only a few more days until the full moon, time was growing short and he had to act fast. He glanced at the women sitting with Shai and Jennifer.

To Shai's right sat a stunning brunette with dark red claws. She was lovely, but there was something brittle about her. Across from her sat Melanie Reynolds, the movie actress. She wore a barely-there pink leather dress, and her breasts were in danger of escaping. Too overblown and very married—two things he avoided.

There was something to be said about subtlety. As he'd prowled through the years, Fayne realized that he appreciated the subtle woman. The one who lightly dabbed perfume on the back of her knees rather than bathing in it. She wore high-collared shirts and demure lace bras rather than crotchless panties and garter belts. A confident woman didn't need to proclaim her femininity to everyone around her, it simply was what it was. The women most men would overlook intrigued him the most. The shy ones who didn't command center stage and constantly play the 'me me' game. Women who glanced away rather than returning his gaze boldly. Of course they always looked back again, just in case they were mistaken and he hadn't been looking at them. The subtle shyness, the faint blush of color on their cheeks when they realized it was them who held his attention. They all had their stories to tell—their darkness and their light.

He lived to ferret out their secrets.

Turning, his gaze landed on the woman standing on the stage. This beautiful little wren wasn't so much understating her sexuality as being completely unaware of it. She'd buried her feminine curves beneath layers of ill-fitting clothing and long, heavy hair so that most men would overlook her.

But not him.

What did she look like with no clothing on? Did she prefer serviceable white cotton lingerie or was she the kind of woman who dressed like a schoolteacher on the outside while wearing miniscule thong panties?

His groin tightened.

Either worked for him as lingerie had a tendency to get torn off women's bodies when he was around. Be it cotton or silk, the only thing he wanted to see it on was the floor.

Glancing over at Shai's friends, he smiled. No, he'd found his mate. He smiled as he turned his attentions back to the woman on the stage. She'd do perfectly.

It was time for the cat to prowl.

# Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

*It's all about the story...*

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)