**BEAR SHAPESHIFTER**

**ALPHA MALE**

**BBW ROMANCE**

**SYNOPSIS**

*“If I told you what you needed to know, I couldn’t let you leave this house,” he smirks with playful, malicious intent.*

*After having a meltdown at her job, and her boyfriend of 6 years dumping her, Olivia Roth has been pushed into going on a vacation to Key Largo, Florida to get away. The isolated bed and breakfast where she plans on staying for the month turns out to be anything but what she expected.*

*A near death experience, and a new romantic prospect, Ethan, who works at the B&B, will help her evaluate her life, after he saves her from drowning in the ocean.*

*Ethan helps her rediscover what it means to be alive and in love, while he learns what it really means to trust and care for another person. See, in his isolation, he has forgotten how to.*

*The real problems arise when Ethan’s sister, Ava, gets involved in their relationship. She isn’t shy about showing her wants quell their love.*

*Why? Olivia needs to know. And in trying to solve the mystery, she discovers more about Ethan, Ava, and even herself than she ever thought possible.*

*This tale is about love, trust, hatred, but, considering what Olivia finds out about the two, she discovers that the most important lesson in life is accepting one another.*

***A standalone BBW paranormal alpha bear shapeshifter romance.***

***Around 10,000 words. No cliffhangers!***

***KEYWORDS:***

*bear shapeshifter romance, short stories, bbw shifter romance, quickie romance, alpha male, werebear romance, new adult, bad boy romance.*

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# Chapter 1

She is half-awake in bed when her phone rings. Olivia Roth looks at the ID. It’s Abigail. She contemplates picking up, staring as the phone rings on the nightstand in mute urgency.

After a long series of rings, she answers.

“Hey, is everything okay?”

“I’m fine Abigail. How are you this morning?”

"So you didn't back out, did you? You’re really leaving today?”

Olivia sighs audibly, “I’m really going Abigail. I really appreciate everything you’ve done.”

Abigail says nothing for a moment. Then, “you know we’re only asking you to take a vacation because we’re worried about you.”

“I know Abigail, I know.”

“You’re being sarcastic.”

“Let’s just drop it, I have to go, I’m almost at the airport,” Olivia lies. “I’m going to have a good time on your behalf, I promise.”

“...Don’t you think it’s good to get out of that apartment, clear your mind from work, and break away from this cycle you’re trapped in? It’s okay to take time off to get over Henry, there’s no shame in it, Scar.”

Olivia is pushed to the brink of anger. After all, she needs her work. She liked working before, but right now, she *needs* it. She needs a distraction to get over two of the most challenging events in her life, which seemed to occur in conjunction: having a meltdown at her workplace, and her boyfriend of six-years dumping her and moving out.

But she doesn’t explain this to the woman that went up and convinced her boss that Olivia needs to use her vacation days, that it’s obvious that she’s suffering after a meltdown like *that*. Instead, Olivia recites the *I-was-going-to-be-perfectly-fine* speech.

“I’m just trying to help, Scar, but you’re acting delusional. I had to walk you out to your car and drive you home to keep from having you mental breakdown, and you’re saying that you’re fine?”

Olivia hangs up. She’s glad that her cell phone cuts off when she leaves the state.

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When she leaves her room, her bags are waiting by the door. Olivia is reluctant about vacationing in south Florida--reluctant to do anything really, but she knows that if she stays home she’ll just wallow in her bed, feeling shame and regret. *And could it really be called a vacation if it’s against my own will?* She wonders. All of these things swirl in her mind as she crosses the living room to the bathroom.

Olivia brushes her teeth. She plucks a freshly surfaced hair that grew from a beauty mark on her neck, and then she runs a finger along the rim of her light brown eyes. Black rings have formed around them. She considers them a sign of virtue; after all, she’s *working* through the heartbreak, instead of being helpless to it.

Indeed it is after she gets home from work, around midnight, when the busyness of the day simmers down, and all of her thoughts about work abandon her, that Olivia is haunted by the memories she’s made with Henry in that apartment.

She looks into the mirror for a minute, her eyes searching for something--then she suddenly pulls at the mirror, taking an Advil from a bottle hidden in the medicine cabinet behind, and pops it dry. Then she runs the cold water in the sink, splashes her face, dries off, and then leaves the bathroom.

“Those pills are going to go straight to your liver,” he would say. *Not in a “oh I’m right, you’re wrong” demeaning kind of way*, she reflects. *But as though he really cared*. Subtle flashes of regret have shocked these last few months, and, often not a day goes by where she envisions what life would be like if she’d done things differently.

She leaves the bathroom, looks around her apartment once more. She concludes that nothing important has been left behind. She has everything she’ll need. She’s set.

Moving to the door: she holds a finger flourished over the light switch, dramatically, as though this little flick will determine so much more.

The apartment *was ours.* Now it’s just hers...though his, like the smell of stale cigarettes on the drapes, from when Henry would smoke window side. That scent belongs to him--now *mine*. All of it. Then with a flick of a muscle: *OFF*.

She exhausts a heavy sigh, and then leaves. She has a flight to catch.

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Despite the fact that she is sitting in an airplane seat, it still doesn’t feel like she’s going anywhere.

The stranger beside her was already in his seat and half asleep against the window when Olivia sat down. The stranger squirms for a minute, trying to settle in such a way that’s comfortable enough to fall asleep. But he just keeps squirming and squirming beside her. *But he’s stuck in that seat,* she regards his struggle, *he’s stuck in that seat and there’s not a damn thing he can do. God*, then presses two fingers to her temples to suppress a coming headache.

It strikes her that she’s really not going anywhere. Olivia is stuck on these last few weeks, which, in her memory, is likened to a nightmare: bearing a strong semblance to urgency, fear, confusion.

The day that she knew she would have to leave began just like any other morning of the last few months. Scarlet woke up in a frenzy, feeling all over her bed over for Henry, but she found no one. Struck with worry, she reached to turn on the nightstand lamp--but didn’t, for she suddenly remembered that he’d gone. Been gone for two months by then. Waking up alone hadn’t quite settled in yet.

She got up for work and got ready as usual. Abigail came to pick her up. They were carpooling to work. They didn’t speak too much. Abigail asked if Scar was doing okay. She said she was okay and returned the question.

“I’m okay, you just, you know you can always talk to me, okay? I know what it's like after a breakup. Remember me and Dave?”

“I remember you and Dave” she had said, and then rode silently to work. The rest of the afternoon was a blur, until it came the time to take her lunch break. Abigail strolled up to her cubicle and suggested that they go out to eat; it was “such a gorgeous day out.”

And when Abigail nudged her shoulder and said jokingly: “I swear you’re a hopeless workaholic.” Those words exactly, *a hopeless workaholic*. The night of the breakup flooded back to her as she sat under Abigail’s gaze: coming home to his packed bags, to him saying *I don’t want to fight about this. It’s just time,* and when she tried to explain why she had to cancel their plans again and again, he cut her off and said *you’ll always be a hopeless workaholic.*

That was the last straw. Her head was throbbing from lack of sleep and her hands and eyes ached from working 10 hour shifts in front of the computer, without break--and then, to be called a *workaholic*. Olivia became a saturated red, heaving dry sobs--dry because she’d been crying the night before--and when anyone tried to touch her to calm her, to console her, to help if they could: she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Looking back on it now, Olivia isn’t sure what got into her that day. It’s embarrassing to even think about, but she’s glad, she--

“Ya’all right there?” The man sitting next to her interrupts her thought. “I normally mind my own but…” Olivia looks at him, her eyes wet and beady.

“No, no thank you, I’m fine.”

“Well good, I could use some com’pny then. You know, they make it impossible to fall asleep in these chairs.”

She laughs a little and says she saw him trying. They talk a bit. Talking about where they’re coming from and where they’re going. He’s an older fellow, tan skin, long lanky arms and legs. He lights up when Olivia says she’s taking a vacation in Florida, on south beach. He informs her she has it all wrong, that that place is too touristy.

“Key Largo, that’s where you want to go. An’ I’ll tell you what, it’s about the most romantic place in all of Flor--, no, I’ll damn well says it’s the finest place in the entire south, and I travel regularly. I so happen to own a little bed n’ breakfast out there.”

“Oh you’re not just trying to hook a customer, are you?” she asks coyly.

“I’m an honest man,” he grins, “I’ll tell you what, I’ll even give you a discount.”

She pauses for a second, “I’ll think about it.”

“It’ll be good. Sure, you can stay in a high class hotel--and it’ll be like you’re anywhere. But in my place, you’ll *know* you’re in south Florida. You’ll wake up to the sound of the breeze and” then he looks at her directly, and says in an earnest voice, “you look like you need to get away.”

Then after a moment, “Well, I won’t pester you about it. Just come on down if you feel like it. I’ll be in Fort Lauderdale till Monday, but I got two workers there that’ll take care of ya.”

She nods, and gives him a slight smile so that he knows she’s really considering it. When the plane lands, they leave the white tunnel together.

When the cab driver pulls up and asks her where she wants to go, she is rushed into making a decision--*why* *not?* Like Abigail said, she needs a break from routine. With this thought, she says “Bonaventure B and B, in Key Largo please.”

Olivia rolls the window down, something she never does back in Richmond, and lets the cool wind trace its many fingers along her hair; lets the sun fall upon her pallid face. *I’m in Florida*. Suddenly, she doesn’t feel very tired and is excited to see how her day will pan out.

# Chapter 2

*Henry would have loved the veranda*, she thinks, when the cab comes to a stop in front of the two story “Bonaventure B&B” house; in smaller letters underneath “Come See the Sea!”

She brushes the thought away with a wave of her hand, like she’s trying shoo a fly. Then she reaches forward, “Thanks” and pays the cabbie the fare, grabs her two heavy bags from the trunk, and begins walking down the long green field to the house. There is no paved road leading to the entrance.

Looking around, the only thing signifying civilization are the great power line crucifixes across the way, which fade into the distance. It gives her the sense of remoteness, accompanied by eerie feeling of isolation. Like she’s in a place untouched and unreachable. Not only is it nothing like Richmond, but it’s nothing like the hotel on the catalog she saw of south beach. The only thing reminding her that she’s in south Florida is the thickness of the ocean air. Flooding in.

The Caribbean version of a city townhome, with just a tin roof for a garage at the side of the house, wooden outdoor-stairs that lead to a second story veranda, which seems to trail to the back of the house. Peaks of pinewood and cook’s pine rise high and clear behind the colonial structure. She knows that the forest opens up to the warm waters of the Gulf. She envisions it now. “Warmest in the all the world,” Floyd had said.

She then walks up the small set of steps to the door. She rings the bell. The cold metallic chime echoes in the house, but no one responds. *Empty?* Just when she thought things were getting better, another problem comes up, *empty?* *Maybe they can’t hear me or they’re outside or something*, so she puts her bags down by the front door, and walks around to the back. As she’s turning a corner, she hears what sounds like metal pipes being clanged against each other.

A massive mammal is on all fours.

Whispering *oh my god,* she slowly walks back around the corner. When it’s out of sight, she bolts for the dirt road, but is suddenly stopped when someone calls: “Hey, hey!” from behind her.

Olivia turns and faces the house. “Were you back ‘round there?” a woman calls from the doorway. Her voice is steady and strong, with not a quiver of doubt. She stands erect, at maybe 6 feet 2 inches tall, with formidable muscle mass. Olivia isn’t scared, but she’d rather not get into an argument with this absolute *amazon*.

When Olivia gets up to the door, “was ya back there?” the amazon woman asks in a dead tone. Scarlet replies with a mere *no*.

“Well let’s get you checked in then. I just spoke to Floyd quarter an hour ago. Tol’ me all about the discount and that you was coming, so ya room is ready.”

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Olivia wakes up with a throbbing headache. She has sunk into her bed.

After a few minutes just lying there, watching the fan overhead turn and turn, the pain diminishes to nothing. *Sleep, God*, she is so grateful to have gotten a full night’s sleep. If the time on wall is correct, reading 6:54, she slept for about 12 hours. She checked in, Ava showed her around a bit, then took her to her room, and that was the end of it.

She feels revived. Like she can finally breathe.

A rogue sense of enthusiasm warms her, *and you know what? I haven’t seen the sunrise in years;* she’s astonished to hear herself say. Not because Richmond’s skyline is a concrete megaplex, but because she hasn’t felt the urge to just lie down on the beach and watch the sunrise since maybe high school.

She remembers staying out late, and only having to stay up a little later to catch it. She laughs to herself, imaging her group of friends, and how effortless things were then. She wasn’t so anxious. She was young and alive. She met Henry that same year, and he was young and alive too...*how did that happen?* How did they become so absorbed with their work that they let the relationship falter...and with that her odd sense of enthusiasm wanes.

But not enough to keep her in her room.

She makes her way down the dark, dusty stairwell. Ava showed her how to get outback, and pointed to the different paths through the pineland forest that leads to the water. It’s still dark and the forest is still cool as she passes through. Then the view breaks, and it’s just the ocean and sky, still mostly black.

Lying on the vanilla-grain shore, she allows the weak surf to wash her feet. It rolls under her warmly. She has the urge to take a dip. She’s been spontaneous this whole trip, *so why stop now?* And let’s off a girlish laugh to the wind, while stripping down to her bra and panties.

It’s colder than she expected. The shores ran warm under her toes, but gets exponentially colder as she draws closer to the sunrise. Still, nothing will get her down--she continues swimming out to the ocean--struggling towards that dawn, that symbol of a brand new day.

The sky has shift to fire red and mammal-belly pink, when suddenly Olivia feels the water pulling her away from the shore. She treads against it, but it pulls her in anyway. The current is too strong.

*A rip tide*, she’s horrified to realize.

Her arms are on fire within minutes as she wades against the water, panics for the shore. Already she’s on the verge of collapsing when a wave crashes down on her from behind, pulling her under.

Sinking, sinking, until her feet hit the sand--kicks up, and is back above the surface--this time seeing someone on shore. With her last bit of strength she screams “Help!” Then submerges when her muscles give way, but with one last bit of strength, she swims up, resurfacing for the last time to cry for help--no one is there.

*This is how it happens* she thinks, *this is how it ends*. She’s about to nod out then feels the water rushing around her, as though the ocean was finally pulling her down, or something was pushing her up.

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Olivia is under thick sheets in her bed, staring at the twisting ceiling fan. Waking up again, warm and dry. It feels as though the accident at the beach was just a nightmare--but knows it wasn’t, for her throat is sore, and her arms body feels like jelly. Someone saved her life...but who? She wonders.

The answer to her question begins to crawl into her room, in the form of the smell of food burning. Ava is cooking down stairs.

Putting a jacket on and a pair of shorts, she realizes that her hero undressed her, left her in a robe, and is vaguely turned on at the thought.

Downstairs, walking down a corridor that leads to the kitchen, she hears the sound of oil crackling in a pan.

A goliath of a man, maybe 6’6, and of a strong muscular build--it doesn’t look like he knows what he’s doing. He turns around and smiles at her, “I thought I’d make you something to eat. I didn’t think you’d be out of bed so soon.

She looks to the pan, to his hand gripping the handle. She notices that his nails are charcoal black. “I appreciate it but...you know, that pan looks a little hot.”

“Is it? To be honest, I’ve never cooked a meal in my life,” and smiles at her. “I hope you’re fine with that.”

She is astonished, “You’re going to poison me! How have you never cooked?” Then she dashes around the island countertop, lifts the pan from the ceramic panel--spurts of oil springing to her jacket--and lowers the heat to a 4.

When the oil is settled, she finally takes a good look at him. He towers over, and as he gets a rag to clean up the mess, she can see his voracious muscles flexing under his shirt. But the strangest thing was his eyes. Big and brown, with splinters of gold in his iris. His sclera as black as his pupils. They held her for a moment after he wiped up the spattered oil.

“You okay?”

“Yeah I was just--”

“Really hungry?” He completes, and then puts his hands on his wrist. “Ava said you went to bed without dinner. It’s never a good idea to go swimming with an empty stomach.”

“It was…” she is induced into a flash of fantasy: it was he who peeled off her clothing so gently, and breathed life back into her cold body, “Thank you. I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t know how to repay you.” She blushes, embarrassed.

He looks at her briefly, his eyes searching hers, “C’mon, you can help me catch your breakfast. Ethan, by the way,” and outstretches his hand.

“Olivia.”

Then she runs upstairs to change. Puts on a yellow blouse and jean shorts and meets him outback. They take a different route through the pinewood forest, talking all the while, about the plane ride and meeting Floyd--but neither of them brings up *why* they’re at the Bonaventure bed and breakfast.

# Chapter 3

When they get there, he leads her to a pile-up of rocks by the water. A small wooden deck protrudes from the stones, so that one can fish. She comments on the fact that he only brought a bucket with him.

“Who needs a fishing rod when you have these?” Then flourishes his big, heavy hands--pulling them away when he notices that she’s looking at his fingernails. “C’mon,” he says, and gets closer to the edge of the deck and points to the water, “See? These Bluefins stay close to the deck. They feed on the algae on the rocks.”

Olivia nods in understanding, rapt, dart, feed, swim away and return.

He looks at her, breaking her attention from the fish, “You like tuna?” with a smirk, then in a split second, he reaches into the water and out comes a massive fish, flailing in the grip of one hand, which has a firm hold of the tuna’s bottom jaw. She is absolutely amazed that he only needs the strength of one arm to hoist the Bluefin out of the water.

He gently lets it into the bucket. “That was easy, wasn’t it?”

Still in awe, “Where did you learn to do that? And how did--that fish has to weigh at least 200 pounds?!”

He laughs, “These are babies. The ones actually way out in the Atlantic can be around 900.”

“There’s no way you fish the same way.”

“If I told you that I couldn’t let you leave this house,” he smirks with playful, malicious intent.

Thus the secrets begin. But she likes his mysteriousness, so Olivia doesn’t press with questions.

They head back to the house. On the way, they pass a row of coconut trees on the beach-end of the forest. “You like coconut?” Still with the bucket in one hand, he takes hold the tree’s trunk and shakes a few coconuts from the crown.

At that moment, it becomes obvious to Olivia: he’s trying to impress her. And in some ways it’s working. But she’s never been one to fall for flirting.

They continue on to the house, off to the kitchen.

“Limes” he exclaims. “We need limes. I’ll be right back, okay? There’s a little bushel near-by.”

With no wherewithal for standing lonely and still in a room, she begins to roam about the bottom floor of the house.

Most of the windows are blind with black curtains, keeping the sunlight out. The living room looks abandoned, the couches caked with dust. It makes her think that they never have guests at this bed and breakfast. In fact, who would stay here? The entire house smells like wet animal--not suitable for guests. It is as though the bear she swears she saw in the backyard, she muses, *lives* in that home, sleeps on the couch.

Olivia approaches the cedar wood bookshelf posted up in the corner. There are only three books on the shelf, two classics,“Huckleberry Finn” and “The Memoirs of Vidocq”, but the third book is unrecognizable. Nothing is written in the binding or on the front cover. But it’s heavy, with more pages than the other two combined.

She takes the book from the shelf and is about to open it. She feels like she’s doing something wrong and quickly replaces it. At the same time, she hears Ethan opening the sliding glass door to the back.

Walking back into the kitchen, “I was just checking something in my room,” she tells him.

Ethan nods his head, and then holds his hands up like he’s holding a prize, “Limes. You can’t eat raw fish without limes.”

“Who said anything about eating raw fish?” she teases.

“Who said I was preparing your meal?” Ethan says, “Meal prep is your own responsibility. My services are limited,” and smiles, waiting for her to say something.

She says nothing. She gives him a coy nudge with her hip, and then goes over to the stove. She’s having fun playing around with Ethan. And there’s just something about him...

As he stands at the island countertop, peeling the fish’s skin back, she asks over her shoulder, “How have you gone your whole life without cooking? Has mom been cooking for you like your whole life?” and giggles.

No response. For a second she feels like maybe she struck a chord by mentioning his mother. Although she meant nothing by it, she can’t be sure. She decides right there that he probably doesn’t bring up the past much.

He sighs, says “Ava can’t cook either. The few times we’re prompted to is when we have guests, which is rare, but even when they are here, we just tell them to do whatever they want with the kitchen. *Go crazy*. I catch their fish, Ava takes care of the rooms.

Things work out okay.” Then he pauses for a long while, concentrating on the cutting board. “We probably seem like we’re a pair of loons.” She notices the sad tone in his voice every time he talks about being different. And *although he is*, she thinks, *he shouldn’t have to feel bad about it.* Still, he keeps on, “It doesn’t help that we live way out in the middle of nowhere.” Snickering at this.

Olivia laughs too, in hopes of shaking the tension, and asks, “Do you like working here?”

“Do I? It’s alright. It’s kind of secluded.”

“Hmm, well have you figured doing something else?”

“I don’t know. There isn’t much for me to do. Look at me, can you imagine me behind a desk or a drive through window?”

They kicked their heads back and laugh. “God no. Maybe posing on the cover of Calvin Klein” she hip-nudges him again.

“No but, I find ways to pass the time. Picking up little projects around the house. I found an old broken down boat in the garage. I’ve been working on rebuilding the engine right out back and soon I’m going to work on the actual vessel,” he says gaily.

Ethan serves his plate of cold fish while Olivia serves hers of cooked tuna with shells of coconut meat on the side. Then they sit across from each other at the rosewood dinner table.

“Ceviche?” she says, pointing her fork at his plate.

“Se-wha?”

“It’s a Peruvian dish. It’s usually just fish and limes. You look like you could be Hispanic or something, where you from?”

“Mars.”

She rolls her eyes blithely, “I’m trying to figure out why you can’t cook, mister.”

He nods, “To tell you the truth, before I moved out here I’d eat pretty much just go out to eat, everyday so I never learned how.”

He gets up when they’re done eating and puts the plates in the sink then sits back down.

He says nothing, just looks at Olivia with his big brown eyes.

They hold each other’s gaze for a while, “So, what are you doing tonight?”

“Oh just hanging out in my room. I had a pretty busy morning,” she smirks. “Thanks again.”

“Don’t mention it. Well, I’m going to be alone, I don’t know if Ava told you but she went into town for the day, won’t be back till tomorrow. So if you want company, I’m here.”

*If I want*...she knows what he means. But, oddly, she isn’t turned off by his playboy confidence as she normally would be, or his *if you want company, I’m here*. She welcomes it. For reasons she has yet to completely understand.

In fact there is something about Ethan that she cannot deny. It's not his muscles or his handsome, kind countenance, though he has that, so many other people do, and it’s never fooled her before. It’s like her attraction to him is beyond reasoning. The sentiment could only be reduced to instinct. *Instinct?* It’s impossible. But there it is. Her heart thumping like crazy as she sits there with him.   
 But it's too early to get close to Ethan. She wants to distance herself from the situation. She wants to rest, too. It really was a tiring morning. So she says, “Later tonight. We’ll do something, I’m still a little bit tired.”

“That’s understandable...let me ask you, what were you doing out there this morning?” he looks genuinely concerned Olivia notes. “I mean, it’s just dangerous going out there alone, the tide could rise out of nowhere, a rip tide could take your from the shore, it’s just not safe. You know? Next time you can just come ask me and I’ll go with you.”

She says a weak, “Thanks.”

“I know that people go out there to think. Sometimes it’s better to talk, hm?” Olivia smiles, kisses him on the cheek, and thanks him for the breakfast. Ethan tells her to rest well, with sincerity in his big brown eyes. She nods, feeling light as she makes her way down the corridor, up the stairway to her room.

Later that evening, it bothers her a little that she can't shake her thoughts of him. She is intrigued, but feels a little guilty for it. She'll sleep it off, she considers. But Olivia will not sleep. She *can’t* sleep. Whenever she closes her eyes, Ethan comes to her. She has no say in the matter.

A strange thing for a woman that's only been in two relationships in her entire life; the one with Henry being the only relationship where she *wanted* to havesex. There is not a frisky bone in her body. Now this. But why not? She says to herself. She knows she can't stay stuck on Henry forever.

After all, as illustrated by her near fatal swim, you only live once. She laid there, just going through her thoughts. It's been a long time since she's relaxed and done just that.

It must have been around 8pm when she heard a voice tap on her door. The gruff tone asked politely, "Are you awake?"

She is. Olivia knows full well who’s on the other side of that door, and starts to feel a little nervous. His voice is a summons to warmest blood. Maybe, *she considers*, that’s why she feels such a strong urge to be around him--but she shouldn’t she corrects herself. She doesn’t think she’s had the proper time to grieve over Henry. Finally, she answers the door.

"C'mon, we should catch dinner before it's too late."

# Chapter 4

As the waves shush at the shore, as the foamy surf becomes lines of silver beneath the bright half-moon, and in the distance, massive black barrels form, then wipeout: the two walk along the water, just out reach from the rolling shore.

They have not spoken, nor feel the need to fill this quiet with empty conversation.

But she does feel the need to be nearer, for he walks just a few feet ahead of her. She could see his muscles undulating under his plain gray t-shirt as they trudge through the sand, to the buildup of rocks, and the wooden dock that protrudes from it.

The night quickly grew somber. The last of daylight left, the charged blue abandoned the twilight, leaving behind a dark blue sky.

She hardly knows this man, but she’s following him silently through the night, to the rocks and onto the deck.

She can tell right away that when he’s being himself, he’s the quiet type. And how could he not be? He lives way out here, all alone, well except for his sister. She wants to know what he’s thinking about as they look off to the ocean, swelling and dipping here and there. She’s comfortable enough to ask. “What’s on your mind?” “Nothing’s on mine. You? You seem quiet,” Ethan says.

“I’m just looking at ocean, thinking, I like you--I...” But he does not smile, he only looks worried. “Is...there something wrong with that?” She really wants to know.

“I’ve just...I like you too Olivia. I do. But this isn’t good for us.” But he does not look to her, he continues to stare off to the swellings. “It’s difficult Scar, it’s hard to explain. Just, last time it ended badly--.” He speaks brokenly, with pauses and hesitant utterings as if trying to pick the words that wouldn’t say too much. “I couldn’t stay where I was living. I just--couldn’t. That’s why I had to move out here with Ava.”

She listens to his anxiety. It clicks. In a way she’s going through the exact same thing. Driven from her home by an ex-lover. The memories haunting her. It seems that he would have to nearly die, before he’s willing to give up whoever this woman was.

She understands. She doesn’t pester him. But what she *does* want now, more than anything, is to kiss him, to let him know that there is someone that cares, deeply. But she can’t yet. She only rests a hand on his forearm, just to let him know she’s there. “A rain is coming,” he says. Indeed, one is.

They feel the slightest trickle of rain. In the distance, vaporish pellets are falling through the air. But they hardly notice it. “Come on, we should get what we need then go.”

"I..." she feels panicked but cannot understand why. She just met him, he saved her life but he would have saved anyone's life. Still, she wants him, unreasonably wants him. "I don't understand. I...is it something about me?"

They find themselves unwavered in this strange conversation. There'd been some underlying sentiment between them that simply could not be denied. And even though it’d hardly been noticed, it’s coming; like the storm clouds on the horizon: unseen, coming still.

"It's something about me." Ethan says, tiredly. "I don't want to get into it." She removes her hand from his forearm and lays it on top of his knee.

"You're going to have to sometime. C'mon, what is it? I promise I'll be a good listener."

"How about later tonight?"

"You'll be with me later tonight?"

He smirks, "I didn't mean it like that. Come on, I don’t think we’re catching anything tonight unless I jump in."

“Why not?”

“Storm. The fish get scared and swim to the bottom.”

She looks at him. *The fish get scared and swim to the bottom.* He’s been hurt before. That’s why he’s so reluctant. “Wait” she says, before they get up. “I want to just…” she begins to lean in on him. “Close your--.”

“Let’s go Scar, the stor--”

“Close them,” she coos, “just for a second.” He does. As they sit, she begins to crawl on top of him; he complies, lays down to her weight, lets her rub her nose up against his. He doesn’t protest. Can’t. And Olivia doesn’t question herself. She knows that there’s something about Ethan.

Olivia then leans on top of him and holds her lips just over his, then plants one long kiss on his. He pulls her closer, holding her thighs down closer to himself.

A sound of thunder rips the sky.

He crunches and then gets up still holding Olivia. She wraps her legs around his abdomen, and he carries her off just as the rain begins to pour. She holds him as he runs.

It feels so natural, to have Ethan lay her on her bed, flicking the lights off.

Paradoxically, the air of mystery around Ethan seems to heighten, the more intimate they become.

The air is humid in her room, from the doors being long enclosed. The two are damp from the rain, and hot.

The moon light cuts in at the slightest angle, illuminating his face and torso with a pale glow. He looms over her, trying to read her expression before he goes any further. Olivia nods and whispers yes. He takes her by the waist, and they roll so that Olivia's on top, in control. He wants her to be in control. He needs to know just how badly Olivia wants him.

Straddled now, she bends over, her lips pursed against his lips but not kissing--she is rapt in her own hypnotic motion of grinding her warm flower up against him, feeling as he gets stiff and flustered. Listening as his breathing becomes broken, and he starts to thrust upward, still against her clothes.

He blinks, holding his eyes shut as though suppressing pain, maybe thinking, facing the possibilities on how all of this this can go downhill. When he opens his eyes he leans forward so that their foreheads touch. Both of them closed their eyes painfully and kiss once more. A long unbroken kiss, followed by a slew of smaller ones, placing them on every spot from the neck up.

Then they hold each other there, breathing exasperatingly into each other’s ear. She surprised herself by reaching down and undoing his jeans. He slides them off slowly, but without protest.

She takes pleasure in the thought that she is pinning him down, that Ethan is all hers, and that he has no say in the matter. *He can’t resist!* She muses; but neither could she. So she reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. At this, he took a long deep breath; she felt him getting stiff underneath her.

Letting him look at her, she places her hands on her hips. He looks to her eyes again then back to her breasts, crunching up to kiss her puffy pink nipples. She pulls his head closer. And they slowly drift back down to the bed.

He shifts uncomfortably under Olivia, so he pats her thigh, signaling to let him get on top. He knows what he’s doing now. Ethan has decided what he wants. Like a warm, thunderous cloud moving over frigid waters, Ethan strikes her chest with a forceful kiss, then her belly, making his way down, catastrophically.

She squirms; he helps her peel off her panties. Looking down at Ethan, he’s lost between her legs, breathing and licking like a ravenous dog, until what was pink is a lurid red.

He gets going, running and flicking his tongue over her clit, and rather than squirm, Olivia begins to shake. “Keep going,” she whispers, exasperated. He takes both of her hands in his, licks and licks, until a final warm scream erupts from her lips.

Ethan is simply too big for Olivia, so when he finally penetrates her, she screams, but she pulls him for more. Their love is as passionate as it is painful.

He pumps until he howls a slow drawl, then he rolls over and lies just to the side of her. Olivia inches towards him, then crawls into his arms.

A long silence.

She lay in his arms, rustling the bristles of hair. She lets off a sleepy whisper, “I want to know everything about you.” She says it like a confession.

“He smiles,” I think you got to know a lot of me tonight. How about tomorrow?”

“What if I told you that I wouldn’t sleep with you again if you didn’t tell me something about yourself.”

“Hmm. I’d say my favorite color is purple, umm, I’ve never been married, and I’ve lived in three different states.”

“You have no shame!” they shake with laughter. “C’mon, something big. Something real Ethan.”

“Well, I was born in Norfolk, Nebraska. And I met Ava just a couple years ago. We were separated at birth.”

She nods, “Okay, keep going,” she plays, but she really wants him to.

He explains that he wanted to move from where he was living because of a bad break-up. Caroline was her name. But he’s glad it happened. Or else he would’ve never found Olivia, he tells her.

“How do you like Ava?”

“Oh she...she’s very protective of her ‘territory,’ that’s all. She’s usually pretty nice though. Okay, well here’s a question for you, what made you want to come out here from where you’re from, of all places?”

“Richmond, New Jersey. And I just needed a vacation. I went through a bad break up too, and just something happened at work--”

They continued on like that for hours, until both of them drifted to sleep.

Olivia wakes up in the middle of the night, still consumed in his big burly arms. After such a night, she needs a drink.

Olivia goes into the kitchen and pours herself a cup of water from a glass pitcher in the refrigerator. Slices of lime swim inside. The jar emits a glacial mist, giving it the air of being ancient or enchanted. Maybe it's just the drowsiness of the ink black night, but she feels a strong sense of being in another world. She wanted to leave Richmond, but now she feels like she left Florida. The half-moon through the window is making the pitcher glow...suddenly she thinks of the book.

She walks through the corridor and peaks up the stairs to make sure he hasn't woken up. *He hasn’t*. Then she sneaks off to the living room.

It’s too dark to see. When she flicks the light switch--nothing. Strange. This presents a major problem. Sure she can look at the book now, but how will she read it? She'd have to sneak off to one of the bedrooms where there's a lamp. But that's too risky tonight.

She decides that she'll take it with her. Stash it and read it in the morning when Ethan is out fishing or something.

Back in her room, Ethan still fast asleep on the bed, she takes the book and stashes it in her luggage, and then tomorrow she'll put it back and it'll be like it was never gone.

Feeling a little guilty, she justifies that she isn’t being deceiving, and, if the book were so private, why would they leave it out like that?

# Chapter 5

Ethan is gone in the morning. Panicked, she runs to the closet and checks her bag. The book is still in there. Where could...

But that familiar smell of cooked tuna crawls under the door. She rushes downstairs, to the kitchen.

Ava stands at the ceramic stove. Cooking a hunk of fish. "Sit," Ava says with a plain voice. "Your food is almost ready."

She sits. After a few minutes, Ava walks over and serves the plates, then takes the seat right next to Olivia's.

She could feel the tension. She wants to break the ice, figures the best way to do it is with a relevant story.

"Did Ethan tell you what happened yesterday?"

"Naw, but I noticed he wasn't in his bed this morning, does it have something to do with that? That's an intriguing story in itself."

Olivia could feel it, her face is absolutely red. She’s never been so embarrassed. She gathers herself with a giggle and says, "No it hast nothing to do with that." Seeing that Ava is annoyed, she's about to drop the conversation, but can't, Ava presses on, telling her to say the story.

She tells her about getting caught in the rip ride and Ethan swimming out to save her. "It was crazy, I was a good two hundred yards out in the water and he got to me like that." With a snap.

She'd been nodding her head, interested in the story up until that last part. At this, she gets up and goes outside through the backdoor, leaving her plate on the table.

Olivia notices that Ava doesn't prepare it like Ethan. She doesn't cut it up, nor even makes sure that the fish isn’t moving. Ava likes it at its most fresh.

Ethan walks in through the sliding door. Without a word, he walks over to Olivia and stoops down to kiss her. Then scoops her up in his arms from her seat, "C'mon let's get you out of the house. I want you to help me with a special project of mine."

She kisses his cheek and whispers yes, and then they are off to the beach. The day couldn’t be nicer. Wind treads upon Olivia’s skin, and the sand is warm beneath her feet as they walk to the dock.

He points to the water. It’s moored by a single rope. The wood is a heavy dark brown, but still appears light and buoyant, despite its two small leaks--trickles of water seeping into the heart of the small boat.

“Let’s get her out,” he says, but does all of the work. “I was just seeing if she could float. I guess there’s still a couple leaks.”

"What's her name?"

"I can't tell you that. It's very sentimental. Besides, you'd laugh."

"Awwh Josh, I wouldn't laugh at you. I just...is it that bad?"

They laugh, "Okay, definitely not."

"Oh come on, please, I was only kidding."

"Her name is 'The Enchantress' because one day, when she's good and ready, she's going to take me to a whole new life, you know?

Olivia lets out a hushed chortle. "No I'm kidding. I like it. But I mean...I know what you mean. You know, that's why I'm here, you could say. I just want to get away from it all."

"Somewhere to start fresh." He looks off to the ocean for a while, "you know, I honestly don't know why I came here. I lived in Nebraska before this.” He laughs to himself, “But...we can talk about that later, okay? Let's work while there's still daylight.”

Olivia nods her head, understanding what he means. She perks up to liven the mood and says, "Okay Captain, what's first?"

"Hmm...can you handle a blowtorch?"

Olivia puts both hands on her hips and squints her eyes, "what else can I do?"

He points to the tool box he brought with him, "Inside there's long sheets of carbon fiber, can you cut it up into four by four squares? It doesn't have to be exact," and smiles.

"That I can do."

They spend the afternoon working on the boat. Just before sundown, they catch another Bluefin tuna and call it a day.

"Look, smell this one, it's ripe, and this one still needs a few more days."

She is amazed by this uncanny ability. "A city boy? From Nebraska? Are you sure?" She puts the two tangerines up to her nose, "yeah just as I thought, I can't tell the difference."

"Looks like you're going to need me around then."

"Maybe," she smiles, "don't take advantage of me," then she steps in closer, putting herself against his chest. He wraps his arms around, tilts her head up with one finger, and kisses her loose lips--just once, and then he holds her there for a bit.

There is still light in the ocean blue atmosphere, but, slowly, ink pours from the east, darkening the sky in degrees. When enough light leaves, so that the pinewood around them grows silhouetted black, he slips off a strap of her shirt, and she begins kissing his neck lustily, breathing on him as she makes her way to his mouth. He lays her down in the slew of grass amid the brick-red mulch. It was so quiet they could hear the fish in the bucket, sloshing around in circles.

He stops suddenly, "did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Shh" he says, in a serious, gruff voice. "Come on, we should go." Takes her hand and swings Olivia onto his back. She doesn't protest, just hangs on. She's scared out of her wits.

When they’re back inside he tells her to go to her room. He looks like a completely different person.

Sitting in her bed, she can hear them. Ava and Ethan are arguing about something downstairs. She considers the possibilities but after a second, it becomes obvious: Ava was spying on them.

*Ugh.* The thought of Ava watching her and Ethan about to make love: Olivia feels disgusting.

It isn’t until after 12 o'clock that he comes to her door.

“I can’t really talk tonight. I love you, okay?”

“I...what happened downstairs? Why doesn’t Ava like me?”

“I just can’t tonight, okay?” then kisses her cheek.

She shuts the door and leans on it with all her weight...listening to him go. Then she lays in her bed, until it’s late enough to consider them asleep.

It is the middle of the night.

There is a sense of foreboding at the other end of the door. But she brushes it off as fear playing tricks on her and goes to her bag.

In proper light, the book is inkwell purple. The pages have yellowed and...she almost doesn't want to open it. She understands that once she knows something, she can't hide it from her face. But...it’s just a book, she says to herself. What's the worst it could contain?

Opening the leaves, she has to separate some from each other. The yellow pages are scrawled with symbols and letters that she's never seen before. Thousands of pages of indecipherable text and...she can't help but feel relieved. She tosses the book to the side.

What drove her to this? It's like she wanted to find out something bad about him, or, maybe just answer all of the questions on her mind. Not only on his appearance either, but on his past, of which even he hardly has a clue, apparently being an orphan. She sighs. Decides to put the book on the bookcase in the living room before going to sleep.

She turns to pick it up, but halts--the page shows a small drawing in the top left corner. It’s a diagram of a man, his arms twisted into painful contortions. She flips the page. The same man on the diagram, on all fours--he has thick black claws, tearing off sheets of his own skin, revealing hair. Then on the next page, a massive bear lay on the ground, an exhausted beast.

Her ears are red hot, and a pearl of a tear makes her world blurry: his big black nails, his amazing strength, his ability of smelling and hearing, the bear in the backyard when she first arrived...

Olivia shuts the book and quietly steps from the bed. She'll put the book back and in the morning she'll leave. Yes. It'll be as simple as that. She’ll play it smooth, tell Ava she had a nice stay and to call a cab for her, then get the hell out of there.

She slips from her room and heads for the stairs. A hand juts from the darkness, covering her mouth, slowly pushing her back into her room.

It’s Ethan. He quickly snatches the book from her hand. “Did you read it?” She only looks down at her feet. “Did you it read it?” slower, sadder.

Out of sheer fright she begins to cry, “What are you going to do to me?”

“Do to…no,” he takes both her hands in his, “no. I’m not going to do anything to you…I just, I never really told you *why* I had to move here. Shh, please, look, we can’t make too much noise.”

Maybe out of fear, or understanding, or love, she sits down beside him and listens quietly.

He tells her everything. About being a foster child. He finishes the story about his ex-lover and how she drove him away from his home because she found out who he really was. A monster. A beast. He grows frustrated with himself--trying to grasp again, but the broken up past splinters his hands. But Olivia does her best to calm him. She holds his hand, and kisses his shoulder. She tells him that she loves him.

She really does. He grows angry at that. Caroline loved him too. But…

“Look, I know you heard Ava and I today, I just...here give me that, and we’ll talk in the morning. Never bring this up to Ava, okay? Never. She’s very protective of her home.” He gets up from the bed.

“Okay...I love you, Ethan, you know that right?”

Stooping down to kiss her, she feels assurance press upon her cheek, then walks out the door, it’s footsteps thumping on the way downstairs.

She falls asleep relieved that night. Ethan is still perfect.

But she has yet to see his other side.

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The next two weeks are paradise. Every morning Ethan would go out and catch fish while Olivia slept in. She would wake up to the smell of breakfast, and none other than Ethan waiting downstairs. Then they would go out and work on the boat--which was coming together beautifully. The weather told of a pleasant vacation. They made love all over that beach.

Everything was lovely, save for the near constant interruptions that they face from Ava. She doesn’t approve of their relationship, and as the days go by, her aggression escalates. But it really blew off the lid the day the couple finished patching up The Enchantress.

Ava stands at the foot of the sliding glass door when they return. She doesn’t look at Olivia, only at Ethan, pointing with her eyes, “we have’ta talk. In the livin’ room.”

Olivia froze. The book? Did she know that she read the book? Ethan warned her: if Ava ever finds out, she won’t let Olivia leave. Under no circumstances does a human leave if they know-- and if she’s lucky that’s all it would come down to.

The argument between Ethan and David is livid. Olivia can hear them getting into it downstairs. Ethan doesn’t return to her room to say good night. She lays paralyzed in her bed until morning strikes.

No one is in the kitchen in the morning. Some leftover coconut meat is in the fridge. She grabs that, two tangerines from a fruit basket, and eats in the kitchen, excited about taking the boat out, like Ethan said they would. It’ll make for such a nice weekend, she envisions. Her days with Ethan have been near magical.

Sigh. She knows that she was up all night worrying for nothing. Ethan is probably out with Ava, testing out the boat, talking things out. Olivia is quite exhausted. Rather than go look for Ethan down at the dock, she elects to go back to bed, and actually get some sleep.

Her head just touches the window. She’s struck upright by the heavy thud of someone climbing up the stars. The door suddenly flies open. “Olivia, come on, we have to leave.”

"Where are we going?" She asks, already getting up to pack her bags.

“We can’t talk about it right now, just listen.”

Then a strike of thunder in the house, so it sounded.

“I had to tell her.” Explaining the sound. “I had to tell her that you know about us. She knew about the book, I had no way out of it.”

“Well, I mean, that’s alright. I love you and obviously I have no problem with who you are.”

“You love me now,” he replies, “or at least that’s how she sees it. If you ever wanted to leave me, she thinks you’d tell...Olivia...she doesn’t want you to leave this house.”

Her head flashes woozy and light. “You okay?” Ethan asks, propping her up when he sees her sway. But she’s struck awake when she hears Ava stomping up the stairs.

Ethan quickly takes her bag and tosses it out of the window. With one swift motion, he flings her onto his back and tosses himself out of the window too, so that they're on the side of the house.

His body crashes into the dirt, but he springs up and runs again to the backyard. "We'll never make it anywhere safe on foot. We just have to get to the docks."

Straddled to his back, "Why are you so afraid of her?"

"I know she doesn't look it, but she's stronger than I am. And If I fight her face to face it would make her want to hurt you. God, if she ever hurt you...And I can’t forget that she's my sister. Fighting as humans is one thing, but if we fight in form--one of us will get hit with something that can’t be recovered from. No, it’s better if we just go. No one gets hurt."

They run through the pinewood, to the beaches. The Enchantress is moored by the docks. Olivia gets in, and as Ethan untethers the boat, they hear her call, "ya know I can't let you just leave."

"Ava, please just drop it. We're not going to call authorities or anything, we're just going to forget everything, and go. Okay?"

She laughs, "I told ya not to trust her, Ethan. I told ya it would only bring us trouble. No, you didn’t wanta listen."

She begins stepping towards the water but Ethan holds his hands up, "wait, I'm coming out so we can talk, okay?" Olivia takes his hand. He kisses her, tells her that everything's going to be okay and to stay in the boat, then steps onto the rocks.

From the boat, Olivia can hardly hear what they’re saying. The sly blue waters are bobbing her up and down. He says something to Ava. She approaches, tries to push him but Ethan takes her arms. In the struggle, Ava falls to the ground, and Ethan bends over her, trying to pick her up but she pushes him off, falling to the ground once more in the process.

Then she begins, doing just as the picture showed, but with grace. Her bones sound like gunfire and her skin falls in thick leaves. Without the excruciating look on her face. Olivia realizes that Ava is used to transforming.

Ethan stands in front of the beast, unphased. He is silent and still as it begins to pace around him, considering a strike. Never looking away from Ava, he screams, “Untether the boat! Go!”

Her insides chill. *What?* Then she says it aloud. “You have to leave!” he screams. “Go.” Then he slowly lies down. She doesn’t want to look but she has to. As his body begins to twitch, pain, it seems, rushing through his veins--she can’t watch. She looks forward to the blue horizon, slowly drifting away. The keys are sitting in the ignition, but she refuses to leave him.

The sound of his limbs cracking rips the sky. She can’t turn around but she can’t just leave him…

She sits listening for what feels like eternity, two fingers resting on the key all the while. She cries to herself. Sobs dryly as they grunt and howl in the background. But she can’t turn around, she can’t...see him this way.

Would it be too much? Could she still love him? Could he still love *me*? She wonders in that boat. Who is the man on the shore, howling into the air in fatal pain, or victory? Or just flat out animal madness.

The sound of the storm passes. The sound of bones breaking has settled in the sky. There is only silence and a shush of the waves.

It’s safe to turn around, she figures.

One black bear lays wet on the vanilla sand beyond. She can’t tell if it’s Ethan or Ava, not from this far and not in this form. She’s worried.

Suddenly, a weight pulls on the side of the boat. The beast rolls in, and lays half-dead in the corner. It breathes heavily, like it’s on its last breathe. She looks into its eyes. See’s that it’s most definitely Ethan. She cries his name to herself. She didn’t want it to get to this.

Tears of blood drip from a paw that’s covering his hip. She could only imagine the gash, because he refuses to move his paw then she tries to pull it away. She lets it be. She looks into his big honey splintered eyes, then turns on the engine of the boat they built together, and takes off.

Just as the day is about completely consumed by night--they reach a harbor. The wooden posts bear blue reflectors, attracting them in. Safe ground. He still lies in the corner, breathing.

“We’re going to be okay,” she says.

It looks like a crowded harbor. Groups of people stand by their boats, illuminated yellow.

*The Enchantress*, she thinks, wondering how many of them had to leave home to gain the strength to build a boat, and if it’s anywhere near as sturdy as the one Ethan and she drift in now.

When she looks back to tell him that they’re almost *home*, the bear that once lay hurt had transformed back to Ethan. He was hurt, but nothing fatal. He looked up and smiled. Olivia smiled back, both knowing that this was the beginning of their new lives…together and in love.

**THE END**