**BEAR SHAPESHIFTER**

**ALPHA MALE**

**BBW ROMANCE**

**SYNOPSIS**

*“I’m a shifter. I can shift into a bear, and you are my mate.” He growled again and kissed her neck.*

*Nick is the sheriff and protector of his remote shifter community, but his title is at stake.*

*Jay, his young deputy, has challenged his position. To secure his title, Nick has to find a mate—fast. With few eligible shifter women in the community, Nick joins an online service that arranges marriages. This is his best—and fastest—chance to find a mate and keep his position as protector of the community.*

*Trish is smart, confident, and beautifully curvy. She has spent her life focused on her career and now that she’s achieved her professional dreams, she wonders if something might be missing. She joins the online matching site to find her perfect husband and when she is matched with Nick, she is immediately connected with him, but it is obvious he is keeping something from her.*

*When Nick saw Trish, his bear claimed her for his own. He knew instantly he had found his mate, but she was human.*

*How would his community handle him choosing a human for his mate? No other human had mated into the community, and choosing Trish would jeopardize his place as protector even more—but he can’t deny his bear, nor his desire.*

***A standalone BBW paranormal alpha bear mail order bride shapeshifter romance.***

***Around 15,400 words. No cliffhangers!***

***KEYWORDS:***

*bad boy romance, new adult, bear shapeshifter romance, bride romance, short stories, bbw shifter romance, quickie romance, mail order mate, new adult college romance.*

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# Chapter 1

Nick sighed and propped his black boots on his desk. The sun had long since gone down and his lonely office was illuminated only by the single lamp on his modest desk.

It had been a long day, but he couldn’t pack-up and go home quite yet. Bear River’s population was only about 2,000 and was a safe haven for the bear shifter community and their generations old secret, but being the sheriff and protector of the community had long hours. Nick eyed the stack of paperwork on the desk beside his boots and let his head fall back against the chair in an attempt to avoid thinking about it.

Like his father before him, he had stepped into the role of alpha and kept his community safe from outside hunters and poachers. In the confines of their town, they were able to shift into their bear form and wander the river beds and piney hills in peace. However, that didn’t stop them from feuding with each other—and the daunting stack of forms on his desk proved it.

With a groan, Nick lowered his feet and pulled the first sheet toward him. It was a file of complaint: the Strat family was filing against their neighbors for attempting to build a property on a portion of their land. Nick resisted the urge to scoff. There were no official property lines, but each family had declared their own space. He knew why their neighbors—the Richards—were expanding and was struggling with the best way to settle the dispute. Jay Richards, and his deputy, had just gotten married and was looking to build his new family a home. It was an understandable motivation, and Nick couldn’t deny it.

Nick steepled his fingers under his strong, square chin and stared at the document. Perhaps he should just wait for Jay to return from his honeymoon and have *him* deal with it. Nick leaned back in his chair and swiveled from side to side.

Jay was a couple years younger than his age of 36, but he had already accomplished a part of life that Nick had long ignored. As the alpha, it had always been more important to put the needs of the community before his own; the pursuit of a family fell to the side and was forgotten. It didn’t help that there were very few shifter women in the community to choose from, and by now most of them were married off.

In fact, Jay had managed to mate with the last truly eligible shifter woman in the community. Nick let out a sigh and rubbed his eyes. He was happy for them, he truly was.

He and Sasha had dated years ago, but he couldn’t commit to her the way a mate should. As it turned out, she belonged with Jay, not him. Nick felt his bear paw at him and he shrugged it off. She never stirred his bear the way he assumed a mate would, but it didn’t matter much anyway.

He had chosen this life as the protector and it seemed a mate was out of the question. His bear gave a haughty huff and Nick ignored it. He flipped through a couple more of the documents, completing what he could until his broad shoulders slumped with exhaustion. He would have to do the rest in the morning, and hopefully Jay would be back to add his assistance.

Nick filed the forms away and switched off the desk lamp. He locked up the sheriff’s station behind him and climbed up the steep, rocky hill toward his cabin. He took a deep breath of the cool night air and felt his bear stir, wanting to run up the slope. With a shrug, and a glance at the empty street behind him, Nick stripped himself of his uniform and changed into his bear. He gathered his uniform in his jaws and climbed the rest of the way home, his brown fur ruffling in the gentle mountain breeze.

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“I don’t know what Tony’s problem is. I swear, Luke, I talked to him before the wedding about building my cabin there and he was fine with it.” Jay said, shaking the complaint form in frustration. Nick shrugged and took a sip of his coffee.

“Well, he either forgot that or changed his mind. What do you want to do?” Nick replied, sifting through the incomplete forms from last night.

Jay ran a hand through his blond, curly hair and shook his head. He dropped the form on Nick’s desk and leaned against his own desk parallel to it.

“I’m not sure. I should probably try talking with him again, with you as the mediator of course, and settle this man to man.” Jay said. Nick nodded and filed the form he had completed.

“That sounds good. I’ll set up a meeting on neutral grounds to work this through.” Nick said. Jay nodded wordlessly.

After a few moments, Jay pushed himself off his desk and maneuvered to the growing stack of unfinished work, taking half the pile to finish off. He dropped the papers on his desk and paused, glancing uncertainly at Nick. Nick could sense that Jay had something more on his mind, but kept his brown eyes turned down and continued to work. Taking a deep breath, Jay found the courage to speak what was plaguing his mind.

“Aren’t you going to ask about the wedding?” He asked. Nick paused, setting his pen down on his desk. Honestly, it hadn’t occurred to him. A wedding was a wedding, weren’t they all the same? He gave a nod and leaned back in his chair.

“How was the wedding?” He asked, trying to make his tone sound like he cared. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about Jay or his happiness, but he just didn’t see the big deal with weddings. The mating ritual between shifters was a very private affair, and he saw no need to create a public event to celebrate that intimate connection. Jay eyed him coolly, detecting that the question was forced.

“It was wonderful. Both of our families were there and most of the community showed up. It was great to celebrate that significant moment with everyone.” Jay said, his tone flat and a little sad. Nick felt a pang of guilt and pursed his lips, unsure how to continue.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t make it. Gillian’s cubs had wandered off and she needed help finding them.” Nick said, hoping his excuse was acceptable. It was the truth, but the other truth was that if he had tried he probably still could have attended. Jay nodded, his green eyes downcast.

“I really am sorry, I’m just not very good with the whole wedding thing.” Nick added. Jay’s eyes shot to his and a slight flush rose to his cheeks.

“Don’t you think it’s important for the alpha to understand family?” Jay finally said. Nick was taken aback.

“Well of course! I do understand family, this whole community is my family and I do whatever I can to keep them safe.” Nick defended. Jay nodded curtly again, walking around his desk and taking his seat.

“Yes, but that’s not the same. Having your own family to protect makes you understand what you’re protecting. I just think the alpha should have that understanding.” Jay said, not breaking eye contact from Nick. Nick frowned, picking up on the unspoken implication in Jay’s words.

“Are you saying I am unfit to lead this community?” Nick asked. There was a long pause where neither of them spoke, both knowing that Jay’s response would either alter the conditions of their relationship drastically, or be brushed off as anger and disappointment.

“Perhaps, it would be better if someone who understood community and family more was the alpha instead.” Jay finally said after a long pause. Nick pursed his lips and stared at Jay, analyzing the younger man’s determined and defiant gaze.

“Alright,” Nick started, leaning forward, “I will find a mate, and all this ‘unfit’ talk is over. Agreed?” He said, accepting the challenge. It was gutsy for Jay to challenge the alpha for dominance, that hadn’t happened in the community since before his grandfather.

His family had the sword duty and obligation to this town, and Nick was damned if he would be the one to end the reign. Jay nodded and stood up, walking over to stand in front of Nick. Nick slowly stood up, stretching to his full height of 6’4” and met Jay at eye-level.

“And if you don’t find a mate by the end of the month?” Jay asked, negotiating the terms of the challenge.

“If I don’t find a mate by the end of the month, we will settle this challenge the traditional way.” Nick said, holding out his right hand. Jay grasped his hand and gave a firm shake, wordlessly agreeing to the terms. It was settled, Nick would have to find himself a mate— and fast— if he was to hold on to his title.

# Chapter 2

Trish reviewed her reflection in the floor-length mirror as she twisted and turned, spinning the skirt of her dress around her knees. Her pastel blue, knee-length dress contrasted beautifully with her black hair and made her blue eyes stand out.

It was her favorite dress, not only because of the way it made her eyes sparkle, but it hugged all of her curves and perfectly accentuated her ample bosom, wide hips, and defined her waistline. With a curt nod, she approved the final culmination of her curled hair, light make-up, and perfect dress.

This would be the second wedding she was attending this summer. She was happy for all of her friends, never having had much time for dating, herself. Marriage was something that eluded her, but she was happy to share these moments with her friends and experience it through their happiness. There was a knock at her front door and Trish hastily shoved her feet into her silver flats and grabbed her purse. Her best friend, Tanya, waited patiently in the hallway, her arms crossed and her back braced by the wall.

“Why do you look so glum?” Trish asked, locking her apartment and stuffing the keys in her purse. Tanya groaned and pushed herself off the wall, straightening her pink dress as they walked down the stairs toward her car.

“I’m just not looking forward to this very much. I mean, we aren’t the best of friends with Kerri.” Tanya said, sliding into the driver’s seat of her car. Trish nodded her head and tried to suppress her smile.

“Uh huh, not to mention she stole your color scheme that you picked for your wedding.” Trish said in a sing-song voice. Tanya frowned and gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

“Oh and she tried to play it all cool, ‘Oh Tanya, what are you doing for your wedding?’ Like she actually cared. She just didn’t want to try and come up with her own idea.” Tanya scoffed.

Trish gave a non-committal shrug and kept silent. It wasn’t the first time their journalist co-worker had stolen an idea from Tanya, and probably wouldn’t be the last.

Tanya muttered some profanities under her breath, but said nothing more on the matter. They rode in silence for several miles, content in their own thoughts before Trish spoke. She nervously tapped her finger against the window, biting her lip as she debated voicing her questions aloud.

“What is it?” Tanya asked, beating Trish to it. Trish sighed, she should have known that her best friend for the past ten years would know her nervous habits.

“Well, it’s just everyone I know is getting married and starting families. I mean, you are, Kerri is, Morgan got married last month…I just wonder, am I missing something?” Trish asked, bringing her insecurity to light.

Tanya smiled and reassuringly patted Trish’s leg. “It’s hard to say. You’ve worked so hard on starting your own photography business, and now you have steady freelance work with the magazine. That’s huge! But, I know that everything has been so much easier with Jared by my side to confide in, and find comfort with, while I pursue my dreams as a journalist.” Tanya admitted. Trish pursed her lips and contemplated her friend’s words.

“I’ll never say that I’ve regretted putting my career first. I am proud of what I’ve accomplished and I’m exactly where I wanted to be at 26, but you do have a point.” Trish confessed.

Tanya nodded and turned into the wedding venue parking lot. Trish let out a sigh and gazed at all the happy couples walking into the building. “It has been a little lonely.” They got out of the car and Tanya gave her a comforting hug.

“I will spend this entire wedding brainstorming a solution for finding your Mr. Right. At least then I will be helping you, and too distracted to notice all the other details Kerri’s probably stolen from my wedding plans as well.” Tanya said jokingly, looping her arm through Trish’s and guiding her into the ceremony. Trish laughed and nodded her agreement.

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“I think I figured it out.” Tanya said, handing Trish a second glass of wine from the bar. Trish raised her eyebrows in curiosity and accepted the drink. They wandered over to their assigned seats at one of the reception tables, ignoring the other couples around the table chatting with one another.

“Oh? That was fast.” Trish said, taking a sip. Tanya grinned proudly and excitedly pulled her phone out.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. I’d been seeing all the commercials for it on TV, and it just hit me that this would be perfect for you!” Tanya said, pulling up a website to show Trish. Trish frowned and took her friend’s phone, studying the webpage she had pulled up.

“I dunno, I’m not really into the whole online dating thing.” Trish said hesitantly. Tanya shook her head and pointed to the “About” page on the website.

“No, no. It’s not online dating. It’s a service that uses a psychological profile and advanced questionnaire to find you a husband based on your personality and what you are looking for in a life partner. They do all the work for you and once you are matched with someone, you have one week to meet with that person and decide to go through with the wedding or call it off.” Tanya explained. Trish was unconvinced but continued to read through the website, reading up on the statistics and their profiling techniques.

“Well, it does have a high success rate… and a lot of people have extremely positive reviews.” Trish admitted. Tanya looked over her shoulder and pointed at one of the featured success stories.

“Oh look at that one! They’ve been married for ten years!” Tanya said enthusiastically. Trish nodded and scrolled down the list. It did seem pretty legitimate, and there was no obligation to get married once matched.

“It would be nice to have someone else find my future husband for me, I don’t really have time to spend dating around. Plus, since this is a marriage service, it’ll narrow it down to only those men actually interested in getting married. None of those time-wasters preying on desperate women, like that jerk Paul.” Trish said, her tone growing more bitter. Tanya patted her back and nodded sympathetically.

“Yeah, that guy was an ass, you didn’t deserve to be used that way. But, you’re right, this service will weed out useless guys like that and find you your perfect match.” Tanya encouraged. Trish nodded and pushed on the registration tab. She took a large swig from her glass of wine and gave a shrug.

“Why not. What have I got to lose?” She said, and began filling out the questionnaire as the bride and groom were cutting the cake.

# Chapter 3

He was starting to panic. After his agreement to the challenge with Jay, word had spread throughout the community. Shifter women of all ages were throwing themselves at him—all of them desperate to become the mate to the alpha. It was all ridiculous to Nick. Not only were the women either too old or much too young, but it was strange to even briefly consider any of these shifters whom he had known most of, if not his entire, life.

Not to mention the only stirring they caused his bear was the deep, emotional urge to flee. That was why he signed up for Perfect Partners marriage service. It was the only chance he had to find an eligible mate by the deadline. Except, it had now been two weeks and he hadn’t heard anything from them. If he was going to make the agreed upon deadline, he needed a mate fast.

“Nick, how delightful to see you on this beautiful, spring afternoon. Are you going on a walk?” Heidi, a young shifter, asked.

She twirled her auburn hair around her finger suggestively. Nick controlled his features just enough to not wince in disgust. This was now the fourth time in the past two weeks that Heidi had sought him out on his private trail.

He enjoyed going for long walks *alone* through the pines and down to the river to clear his head. It also gave him peace from the constant work of being sheriff. Nick gave a forced smile and a curt nod, declining to say anything. Heidi giggled and fell in step beside him, swaying her narrow hips in what he figured was supposed to be a seductive manner. Nick refrained from rolling his eyes but sped up his pace all the same. He really didn’t want to deal with her right now.

“So, how’s the search for your mate going?” Heidi asked, trying to sound innocent in her questioning.

Nick clenched his teeth and let out a soft growl. He *really* didn’t want to deal with this. It was bad enough all the older ladies were scheming together to find him a mate they approved of, but with her constant prodding his patience was quickly wearing thin. He had to hand it to her, for a 20 year-old, she was very persistent.

“Oh, you must be so stressed! Why don’t you come over tonight and I’ll make you some dinner. I’m an excellent cook, you know, my mother taught me all her famous recipes.” Heidi taunted, her brown eyes sparkling with delight at the rumbling sound his stomach made.

Nick winced, trying to quiet his suddenly starving body. Her mother was the best cook in the town, and just the thought of her roast beef and fresh cherry pie made him consider Heidi’s invitation.

“That’s very kind of you, Heidi,” Nick started, not sure what to say.

His stomach growled again, making him want to accept but he knew exactly what would happen if he did: an extremely awkward situation that no amount of cherry pie could fix. Heidi’s face brightened with anticipation, her youth shining through her features. Nick sighed and shook his head.

“Would 6 o’clock be okay?” Heidi prompted, biting her lip excitedly.

Nick felt trapped: he didn’t want to hurt the poor girl’s feelings, but she definitely wasn’t his mate. This was why he preferred his walks alone, it was significantly less stressful that way. He would need to seriously consider changing his route, it was obvious that this one was no longer going to be an option for solitude. His phone rang, saving Nick a few more moments before he had to reject her invitation.

“Nick Tremont.” He answered, turning away from Heidi’s big, expecting eyes.

“Yes, Mr. Tremont. This is Francine over at Perfect Partners. We have good news for you! You were matched with someone this morning and based on both of your profiles, it is a 95% match.” The woman on the other line said. Nick let out a puff of relieved air and felt the tension in his broad shoulders sag.

“That’s wonderful news, Francine. When can I meet her?” Nick asked, distinctly aware of Heidi’s stiffening posture beside him. Well, at least this would make it easy for him to reject her. Even she wouldn’t be able to argue against a 95% scientifically proven match.

“You can meet as soon as it is convenient for the two of you. I will be calling her next and informing her of the match, may I pass along your contact information?” Francine asked. Nick smiled, already feeling significantly less stressed than he did two minutes ago.

“Please do, I would greatly appreciate it.” He replied. Perhaps this wouldn’t be as hard as he thought. Francine confirmed the details with him and then disconnected.

Nick hung up the phone and returned it to his pocket. He turned back to Heidi, unable to contain his relieved smile. Her pretty face was contorted in a frown and her arms were crossed angrily over her small chest. Nick shook his head and opened his arms in a helpless gesture.

“Sorry, Heidi. It seems that I have a date to prepare for.” Heidi sneered and stomped off, angrily hitting branches out of her way as she stormed back down the trail.

That didn’t go quite as well as he would have liked, but Nick didn’t really care. She was young, inexperienced, and not even close to his type. Find bride: check. Now he just had to hope she was a shifter, or at least very open-minded.

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Trish hung up the phone and stared at the piece of paper in her hand. The digits she had jotted down seemed innocuous enough, but together they formed the phone number of her future husband. She felt her breath constrict in her chest and sat down on her couch, dipping her head between her knees to stay off a panic attack. Talk about pressure!

It wasn’t just some guy she met at a bar, or the number of a former co-worker. No, this was her 95% matched, perfect husband-to-be. She took a few deep breaths, taking the air fully into her lungs and blowing it out slowly through her nose.

She didn’t think this would happen so fast. She expected it to take months, maybe even a year before they found someone that met not only her qualifications, but matched her personality as well.

What were the odds such a man even existed, anyway? 95% apparently. Trish lifted her head and continued to take deep breaths. Her heart started to race in her chest with excitement. She wanted to be calm when she called him, poised, natural, charming. Not nervous, panicked, and stuttering. She took another deep breath and ran her fingers through her hair, lifting the waves off her shoulders. She punched the number in on her key pad and waited while the line rang.

“Nick Tremont.” A deep, sensual voice answered. Trish’s breath hitched in her throat at the sound and she struggled to reign in her nerves.

“Hi, Nick, this is Trish Lambert. Francine from Perfect Partners gave me your number when she informed me earlier today that you’re my match.” Trish said, rolling her eyes at how stupid she sounded.

There was probably a much smoother way to have eased into the whole ‘I’m your perfect match, marry me’ conversation. Nick smiled, leaning against his kitchen counter.

He hadn’t expected his match to call him so quickly, but he loved that she did. He always liked a woman that was confident enough to take action and not play silly, useless, time-wasting games. So far, Perfect Partners had delivered on their promise. Just the sound of her soft voice made his bear twitch with longing— among other things.

“Trish, it’s a pleasure to talk to you, I’m glad you called. I spoke with Francine earlier today as well and I’d love to meet you. Would you be free for dinner tomorrow night?” Nick asked, eager to get the week of courtship underway. Trish nodded, and then remembered that he couldn’t see her.

“Um, yes, yes I am. Dinner tomorrow would be great. Where should we meet?” She asked, choosing to stick with simple sentences so that the eagerness swelling in her breast didn’t make her stumble over her words like an idiot.

She heard him take a deep breath as he paused in thought and shivers tingled up and down her spine. Nick thought about a good meeting place. He had told the service that he lived in the city to protect the discretion of Bear River, so it would have to be someplace around there. It had been a while since he’d ventured into the city, but he did know of one place.

“There’s this little bistro over on the west side of town, would you be able to meet me there at 7 o’clock?” Nick suggested. Trish smiled, of course he would pick her favorite restaurant.

“Sounds perfect, I know exactly where that is. I will meet you there tomorrow.” She said, the excited energy building within her and making her knee bounce. Nick could hear the smile in her voice and the thought of how beautiful it must be made his skin flush.

“It’s a date.” He said. They hung up the phone and Nick stared down at it for a minute, disbelieving his own luck.

This could actually work, and based on his bear’s reaction this girl might be more than just convenient. Could he really be so lucky to avoid a battle between him and Jay and find his true mate at the same time? Nick took a deep breath and pushed himself off the counter.

He walked to the back door that led from his kitchen out onto his deck that overlooked where the pines met the river. The sun was setting and everything was bathed in the dim glow. He took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air—it would be his last for the next week—and stared out at the river. He could only hope he was that lucky.

Nick stood on the deck until the sun had completely set and then he returned to the warmth of his cabin. Regardless, he needed to pack and prepare the town for his absence. It was going to be a long night, but recollections of her voice made the hours pass quickly.

# Chapter 4

“So when are you meeting him again?” Tanya asked, stirring the cream into her cup of coffee.

Trish couldn’t suppress the smile that came to her lips. After she had hung up with Nick she immediately called and told Tanya. Tanya was so ecstatic for her and wanted to meet in the morning for coffee to get all the details. Trish yawned and held her hand to her mouth to cover it.

“Sorry, I didn’t get much sleep last night. We are meeting tonight for dinner. I was up half the night bouncing with joy and the other half thinking of every possible scenario.” Trish said, taking a sip of her coffee, thankful for the caffeine.

Tanya nodded her head. “Well both of those reactions are good signs!” Tanya said, her voice getting higher pitched in her enthusiasm.

“How so?” Trish asked, covering another yawn. Tanya laughed at her.

“Maybe I should get you a shot of espresso?” Tanya offered, handing Trish the sugar so that she could add it to her cup. Trish shook her head.

“No, I will take a nap after work so that I’m refreshed. So how are over-stimulating-joy and restless-scenario-creating good reactions?” Trish asked again. Tanya leaned back in her chair and regarded Trish.

“Because, one: it means you are excited about this man which is something you haven’t been over a date in a *very* long time. Two: it means that despite your anticipation, you are still being logical about it which will minimize the opportunities for you to get hurt. I think playing the scenario game is always helpful before any life-changing dinner date.” Tanya explained. Trish nodded, her eyes drooping a little in her exhaustion.

“That makes sense. Gosh, you’re right, I can’t think of the last time I was looking forward to meeting someone so much. I wasn’t even this excited when I met Paul for the first time.” Trish said, thinking back to all of her first dates. Really, the last time she was this enthused was just before her very first date back in high school.

“See! Okay, so let’s go over some worst-case scenarios.” Tanya suggested, resituating herself in her chair. Trish agreed and began thinking. “I’ll suggest a few and I want you to argue against it, and then form a just-in-case plan.” Tanya said, pressing on with a nod of acknowledgement from Trish. “Okay, scenario one: he turns out to be a giant creeper with super-stalker potential.”

Trish frowned and considered it for a moment. “Well, that is unlikely since the agency does background checks on everyone and he works in law enforcement. But, just in case, I will file a report with the agency and call you as soon as I leave.” Trish reasoned. Tanya nodded and gave her a thumbs up.

“Okay, your turn.” Tanya said, sipping her coffee. Trish pursed her lips and frowned.

“Scenario two: there was a mistake with the match and he’s completely un-attracted to me in every way— he was actually looking for a stay-at-home wife who is supermodel skinny.” Trish theorized. Tanya shook her head vehemently.

“No, no that would never happen. Their system is top of the line, you would never have been matched with him unless you were exactly what he was looking for, professionally, personally and physically.” Tanya defended.

Trish nodded her head and took a shuddering breath in. She loved who she was, but disappointment still happened.

“Okay, and just-in-case plan?” Trish asked. Tanya shook her head again.

“No, I’m not even going to justify that scenario as plausible by making a just-in-case. Moving on! I think it’s time for best-case scenarios. What if he’s everything you’ve hoped for and more, will you go home with him?” Tanya asked, raising her eyebrows up and down suggestively.

Trish laughed and smacked her shoulder. “No! Not on the first date, anyway. I don’t care how dreamy he is, I like to get to know someone first.” Trish said, the smile still lingering on her lips. Tanya smirked.

“Sure, you say that now, but just-in-case plan?” Tanya prompted. Trish rolled her eyes and set her coffee down.

“Just in case, I’ll shave my legs and wear cute panties. Are you happy now?” Trish asked sarcastically. Tanya nodded and stood up, grabbing her purse off the back of the chair.

“Hell yes, and you better send me pictures of all outfit options. I must approve before you leave the house.” She demanded. Trish laughed and followed her out of the coffee shop.

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Nick stepped out of the shower and began toweling off. He had been up all night packing and finishing up paper work, as well as leaving instructions for Jay. He trusted that his deputy would hold to their agreement honorably and not do anything to jeopardize his position while he was away.

He wrapped the fluffy towel around his narrow waist and padded back to the hotel bed. He had made it to the city around mid-morning, was able to check-in and unpack thereafter. He lay down on the bed as soon as he was done and closed his eyes. He had been so exhausted, not even the eagerness of his bear could keep him awake.

Now, refreshed after a nap and a shower he was preparing to meet this mate of his. He picked up the picture he printed out that the service had sent him. Just looking at the photo made him harden and all of his muscles tense, he could only imagine what kind of reaction he would have to meeting her in person. He pulled the towel off and began to get dressed. Regardless of her beauty, he had to make sure that if she was his mate, she would keep his secret and the community’s safe. When it came down to it, the community’s safety was above all else—even his title.

Dressed in a pair of jeans and white button-down shirt, Nick was ready for his date. He paused by the hallway mirror on his way out and ran his fingers quickly through his short, brown hair. Satisfied that he was presentable, he left the hotel and walked the few blocks up to the Bistro.

Nick got a table and positioned himself so that he could watch the door. Several minutes ticked by and groups of people came in and left the restaurant. He started to feel tense, worried that she wasn’t going to show and that he was back at square one when he caught sight of her.

His heart stopped and his breath came out in an airy puff. She was even more stunning than her picture. She spoke to the waitress who pointed her in his direction and he stood up to greet her. He raked his eyes over her luscious curves emphasized by the blue dress she was wearing and tried to control himself.

She had her black hair swept back away from her face with a few tendrils cascading across her forehead. Her blue eyes were bright and clear, and he was mesmerized by them. What struck him the most, though, was her brilliant smile. Nick felt his bear beg to be released, to claim her, and he knew before she even opened her mouth that this was absolutely his mate.

Trish felt her chest tighten at the sight of him. He was incredibly tall, muscular, and lean. His jaw was strong and square, and his eyes were a warm brown that made her melt. And the way he was looking at her! No man had ever stared at her with such open desire before. Her smile widened, and she held out her hand.

“I’m Trish, you must be Nick.” She said, pleased with how calm and level her voice sounded. Nick suppressed a primal growl and shook her hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Trish. Please have a seat.” He said, stepping behind her to pull out her chair. She thanked him and took her seat across from him. As far as first dates go, this was off to a pretty good start, Trish thought. He took his seat across form her and they stared awkwardly down at their hands until the waiter came to take their drink order. Composing himself and quieting his bear, Nick looked at Trish and smiled.

“So, Trish. Have you always lived in the city?” Nick asked. It was the first question on his check list. Trish shook her head and took a sip of her water.

“No, I moved here after college to start my photography business. I grew up in a small town a couple hours away.” She answered. Nick nodded and began munching on a piece of bread. “What about you?” Trish asked in return. Nick suppressed a laugh and reminded himself that she thought he lived in the city.

“Oh no. I’ve always preferred small towns, this is just a layover of sorts while I try to find a place I like better, maybe an hour outside of the city along the river somewhere.” Nick said. Trish nodded and thought about it.

“Yeah, that does sound nice. The river is really gorgeous up in the mountains, but it’s been forever since I’ve had to time to make it up there.” Trish said.

The conversation flowed naturally and smoothly. They discussed all sorts of topics from favorites, to careers, to families. Nick was pretty sure he’d never had such a long conversation with someone his entire life, but with her it was second nature. Trish felt relaxed, and more comfortable with him in the past three hours than she ever felt with Paul during their six-month relationship.

They agreed on all the important issues, and even seemed to be moving in the same direction regarding what they wanted in their futures. It was uncanny how perfect he was, but he seemed to be holding something back.

“Do you have a big family?” Trish asked, taking a bite of her dessert. Nick stiffened a little, but kept his face relaxed and at ease so that she wouldn’t notice.

“Yeah, it’s pretty big. A lot of extended family.” Nick answered simply. Trish nodded, waiting for him to elaborate like he did with all the other topics but when he didn’t, she tried not to frown.

“Are you close with your family?” She asked, hoping to get a longer answer out of him. She didn’t see her parents and sister very often since she lived so far away, but they were all very close and that was important to her. Nick nodded and swallowed his bite.

“Yes, we are pretty close. We have disagreements from time to time, they’re actually driving me pretty crazy right now but that’s what family does.” He said with a forced laugh.

Trish chuckled along with him but made a mental note that family was a sensitive topic. Nick took a sip of water and tried to change the topic; talking about family was going to get too tricky for him to navigate at this point in time. He didn’t want to tell her that he was a shifter or about the community until the time was right and he knew how she would react.

She was definitely human, which made this harder. He wasn’t sure how she would handle learning about shifters, or how the community would handle her as his mate.

“Tell me about your family, are you close?” He asked, shifting the weight of the conversation back to her. Trish’s smiled softened as she thought of her family.

“Oh, absolutely. Family is very important, they’re who supports you through whatever life throws at you. Don’t you agree?” She said.

Nick nodded in agreement and listened quietly as she told him about her family while the waiter ran his card. She was so lively, talking about her sister who was a little older than her and her parents, who traveled most of the summer months taking pictures as they drove across the country.

Nick watched her lips wrap around the words with such passion that he had to force himself to listen instead of imagine all the things he wanted to do with those lips. When they reached her car, Trish fiddled with her keys, wishing that the night wasn’t over just yet.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” She asked, not caring whether or not it was too bold. Nick grinned, he loved how she said what was on her mind.

“I would like that. Perhaps we can take a day trip to the mountains.” Nick offered. Trish smiled and agreed. She stared into his warm, brown eyes and opened her mouth just slightly, as if she was going to speak but said nothing.

Nick’s eyes flicked down to her lips and he lowered his head, unable to resist her invitation. Her lips were sweet and she tasted like chocolate. He grabbed her hips and pulled her closer to him, dipping his tongue in her mouth. Trish moaned and wrapped her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in his short hair and standing on her toes to deepen the kiss.

She opened her mouth wider and stroked her tongue against his. Nick felt like he was on fire, and his bear tried to break free and claim her here and now but he held it back. Nick pulled himself away with all the restraint he possessed and rested his forehead against hers. Her legs were shaking and she wanted to ask him back to her place—first date rules be damned. She opened her eyes and stared into his, a shiver of anticipation shot through her at the intensity of desire in his eyes.

“I should go while I still can. I’ll see you tomorrow, I can pick you up around 9 o’clock?” Nick said, trying to refocus the blood from his cock back to his head. Trish nodded and took a step back, unlocking her car.

“That sounds great. I’ll see you then.” She said, fighting against every nerve in her body screaming at her to go back to his arms. Nick waved at her as she drove off and began walking back to his hotel to take another shower, but this time it would be a cold one.

# Chapter 5

Nick looked over at the beautiful woman sitting in the front seat of his car and smiled. It was a couple of hours drive from her apartment in the city to the hiking trail he had in mind.

When she had opened the door sensibly dressed in shorts and a t-shirt with hiking shoes on, he nearly pushed her back into the apartment to have his way with her. There was nothing he hated more than a woman who chose fashion over practicality. In his world, that just wouldn’t work. Besides, he glanced over at her long, bare legs and thick thighs and felt his skin flush with arousal—she was just so damn sexy.

He was pretty sure she could wear a pillowcase and he would still be turned on. The drive was peaceful. They had chatted for the first hour or so, and then fell into a comfortable silence. Trish stared out the window, a light smile playing at the corners of her mouth. It had been so long since she’d left the city for a day trip into the mountains and she’d missed it.

The trees were all leafed out and created a canopy over the road where the sunlight filtered in and out through the leaves. As soon as they had left the main highway behind and pulled on to this two-lane road, she just felt an overwhelming amount of peace. She was incredibly comfortable with Nick, as if she had known him her whole life.

“We’re almost there.” Nick said, taking a turn onto a side road. Trish checked her cell phone and noticed that the bars were slowly dropping off the farther they drove. She sent a quick text to Tanya letting her know the road they had turned on. Tanya had been so excited when Trish called her after the date.

“He sounds perfect, I can’t believe you didn’t invite him over!” Tanya had scolded her. Trish was a little disappointed herself that she didn’t have Nick in her bed at that moment, but she knew it was for the best and she loved how he respected her enough to stop himself and propose a second date instead.

“This will be better anyway,” Trish had told Tanya, “because I think he’s hiding something and I want to know what it is before I get myself in too deep.” She remembered how short he was when it came to his family. Maybe he had a disagreement with them? Or a falling out?

“Or maybe he’s an escaped felon hiding under a fake name and that’s why the background checks didn’t work!” Tanya theorized. Trish rolled her eyes, remembering her friend’s taste for the dramatic.

She highly doubted that was it, but just in case, Tanya made her promise to send her updates of every turn they made and their final destination. It was a little over-protective, but Trish appreciated the sentiment. Not to mention, if by some rare chance Tanya was right, she didn’t want the scavenger hunt for her to take too long.

“So where are we going?” Trish asked, coming back to the present and putting her phone away. Nick smiled and pulled off the road onto a little one-lane dirt road. The radio was off so she could hear the sound of the river long before she ever saw it. It was like white noise at first, just a static that as they got closer turned into a roar.

“This is my favorite trail. It goes right along the river and up into the forest there.” Nick said, pointing at a dirt path that wove in and out of the trees and rocks. Trish unbuckled and got out of the car, amazed by the serenity of the place.

“This is incredible. How on earth did you find it?” She asked, looking around at the remoteness of it. This trail certainly wasn’t on any maps that they could get from a park ranger. Nick shrugged and pulled his backpack out of the back seat. He figured it would be best if he brought water and snacks for her. He was fine living off the land—or more accurately, his bear was—but he doubted she would be so inclined.

“My family and I come here all the time. It’s near the town where I grew up, so we would explore this area often.” Nick explained, being careful not to mention the exact location of Bear River, or how close they actually were to it. Luckily, this trail was on his property, so he doubted they would run into anyone. Trish perked up at the mention of his family and fell into step beside him as he began to lead the way up the path.

“Oh, did you camp around here?” She asked, trying to get him to tell her more. Nick paused and helped her over a particularly large boulder. He had prepared himself last night for these questions because he knew that she had picked-up on the fact he was not telling her everything. That’s why he decided to bring her here instead of a public trail, so that he could ease her into the shifter world and maybe, reveal his bear.

“Yeah, my parents and I would spend weeks here over the summer. I learned a lot about connecting with nature and living with it, not just on it.” Nick explained. Trish nodded and reached for his hand, entwining her fingers with his as they hiked. She was glad that he seemed more comfortable to open up out here, perhaps it had just been the public nature of the restaurant that held him back last night.

“Do you have any siblings?” She asked, trying not to push for too many details too fast. Nick squeezed her hand comfortingly, as if he could sense her trepidation.

“Yes. I have two brothers but they moved away a few years ago. There wasn’t much for them in our town, so they moved to different parts of the country to find a home and a mate.” Nick said. Trish frowned in confusion at his word choice, but chose not to comment on it. Mate? What a strange term for ‘spouse’.

“Are they older or younger than you?” She asked instead. Nick navigated their way through the trees, leading her to a clearing by the river that he knew was just up ahead. It would be the perfect place to reveal his bear. He had debated most of the night whether or not it was too soon, but he knew without a doubt that she was his mate and challenge or no, he wanted her to be his.

“Both are younger. I’m the oldest, which is why I inherited my father’s position after he retired.” Nick explained. Trish’s frown deepened along with her confusion.

“I thought you said you were in law enforcement?” She asked, suddenly feeling uncertain about him. She was drawn to him, unlike any man she had been with before, and that was a fact. But, despite how comfortable she was with him, despite how much she felt like she’d known him forever, she had to remind herself that she didn’t.

Nick nodded, this was about to get confusing. They reached the clearing and Nick ushered Trish to a rock for her to sit on. He took off the backpack and offered her some water. Trish took the bottle cautiously, apprehension on her features.

Nick nervously ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. He had never revealed himself to a human before, and was uncertain on the best way to do it. He let the breath out and decided the best course of action would be to just lay it all out. Trish watched him struggle with his words and her uneasiness grew. She didn’t think it was that hard of a question, but evidently it was.

“I am a sheriff for a small town here in the mountains. We are very close knit and don’t like to be noticed, and because of our small size we aren’t listed on many maps. Mostly, people just drive through if they even find the road that passes through the town.” Nick started.

Trish nodded, her grip on the unopened water bottle tightening. Well, that explained some of his hesitation when discussing his family. He had lied about where he was from.

“Why did you say you were from the city?” Trish asked, twisting the bottle cap and taking a swig of water to ease her suddenly parched throat. Nick began to pace, the nervous energy building up and forcing him to move to dispel it.

“I lied because I wanted to make sure that the woman I was matched with was my mate. I didn’t want to risk bringing unwanted attention to the community in case she wasn’t, but you are so I want to be open with you about everything.” He explained. Trish nodded slowly, following his declaration carefully. Once he finished she shook her head, trying to make sense of it all.

“Wait, what do you mean by ‘mate’?” She asked, picking up on his strange word choice again. Nick stopped pacing and scuffed the toe of his boot in the dirt. This was it. He took a deep breath and pressed on.

“I am different from you.” He started. Trish nodded, agreeing fully with that statement based on his recent behavior. “I am part of a discrete culture that has lived in this town for…well generations.” He continued.

Trish pursed her lips and braced herself. If the next words out of his mouth were in anyway related to ‘secret society’ or ‘cult’ she was out of here. Nick could sense the tension in her body and the adrenaline that started to pump through her veins.

Crap, he was scaring her. “I’m sorry, I know how weird this must sound. Please, I don’t want you to be afraid of me. I’ve never told anyone this before so, it’s probably not coming out quite right.” Nick said, running his hands through his hair again.

Oh he was messing this up and he was going to lose her. He couldn’t lose her. Trish took a deep breath and stood up. This was clearly very hard for him and very personal. She walked over to him and put her hand on his muscular chest for encouragement.

“It’s okay. I won’t lie, you are freaking me out right now. Maybe you should just say it and we can work backwards from there.” Trish suggested. Her hand on his chest instantly calmed him.

He stared down into her blue eyes and was reassured by the openness he saw there. Of course, she was his mate. What did he have to be afraid of? His mate would understand him above all others. He nodded.

“Okay, you’re right. So here it is: I am a shifter. I am the sheriff of a community of bear shifters and it is my duty to protect them and keep them safe.” Nick said, the tight muscles of his abdomen unclenching from the stress that was released by finally letting her know.

Trish’s hand gripped his shirt for a moment as the words processed through her mind. She relaxed her hand, and at the desperate pleading in his eyes kept herself from taking a step back.

“A what?” She asked finally, her voice coming out higher than she intended with her anxiety to understand. Nick smiled at her and covered her hand with his own, his strong, steady presence calming the panic that was starting to well within her.

“I’m a shifter. I can shift into a bear, and you are my mate. Shifters only have one mate and we mate for life, and my bear claimed you the first moment you walked through that door to the restaurant.” Nick said.

Trish’s heart palpitated and her breath caught. Her brain fought to regain logic, but she knew in her soul that he was right. She felt it too, and now all these things she’d been feeling with him made sense. She was his mate. He was her mate. Trish took a step toward him, her breasts brushing against his chest with their hands locked between them.

Nick’s breathing became shorter, his cock hardening at her closeness and acceptance. She chewed on her bottom lip, tossing her question back and forth in her mind before giving a mischievous smile and tilting her head.

“Can I see?” She asked innocently. Nick groaned and unable to resist, lowered his head and kissed her deeply. He wrapped his free arm around her waist and crushed her against him. She opened her mouth hungrily and kissed him back with equal ferocity. She flicked her tongue against his and pulled away, biting his lip gently between her teeth as she did.

Nick groaned again, his bear growling at him to take her there in the clearing and make her his mate officially. He regretfully detached himself from her, she needed to see all of him first and *then* he could claim her.

Trish took a cautionary step back. “Will, will you know it’s me?” She asked. Nick chuckled and pulled his t-shirt over his head. Trish’s eyes went wide as they took in his lean figure and muscular torso.

“Yes. I have my same consciousness, I just won’t be able to communicate with you.” Nick explained, unzipping his pants and pulling them off.

It was difficult to control himself with the way she was staring at him. He smiled at her reassuringly, and allowed his bear to surface. The shift was relatively quick, dropping him to all fours. Trish gasped, her eyes not quite believing what she saw. It was true. Before her, he shifted into a bear. She walked cautiously toward him, marveling at his size and beauty. His brown hair was thick, and looked incredibly soft. She looked into his eyes and recognized them as Nick’s, which gave her more confidence.

“May I touch you?” She asked, holding her hand out. Nick gave a nod and stepped toward her outstretched hand, relishing in the feel of her fingers brushing through his fur.

Trish smiled, he was so soft. “You’re incredible.” She said, stroking his back. Nick let out a growl and changed back, unable to take it anymore.

“I want you.” He said, his voice husky with arousal. Heat pooled between her thighs at his demand. She couldn’t bring herself to speak, the ferocity of his desire rendering her speechless as her own want became uncontrollable.

She pulled him in for a kiss, the heat within her sparking at the touch of his lips. Nick slid his hands beneath her shirt, brushing his calloused fingers across her smooth skin. Trish moaned into his lips as his large hands found her supple breasts and gently squeezed. She reached up behind her back and unclasped her bra, letting it fall to the ground so that he could touch her. Nick pulled back and lifted her shirt over her head, revealing her large breasts and ample curves to him.

He growled again and kissed her neck, showering feather-light kisses down the slope to the upper curve of each breast. His thumbs brushed over her nipples making them harden. Trish let out an airy moan as his lips clasped around the peak. She dug her nails into his back, the pleasure from his tongue circling around her nipple making her body cry out for more.

“Nick, I want you.” She gasped, stroking the contours his chest and running her fingers down his torso to his thighs. She massaged his thighs and moved her hands inward, closing around his throbbing cock. Nick moaned as she took him in both of her hands. He moved his head to her other breast and began licking her, while his hand unzipped her shorts and pulled them, along with her panties, down her shapely legs.

“Wait.” Nick said, reaching down to pause her strokes. Trish was dazed as he walked away from her.

Confused, she watched him pull a wool blanket from the backpack and spread it out on the ground. He knelt on the blanket and held his hand out to her. Smiling, Trish took his hand and lowered herself down. Nick crawled on top of her, pushing her onto her back.

He kissed her, grazing his hands across her breasts and down the curve of her hips to spread her legs. He lowered his head and licked her entrance. Trish let out a soft cry and clenched her fingers in his hair as he plunged his tongue inside her. He licked and teased her, flicking his tongue over her clit and making her want to scream with pleasure. He inserted two fingers in her and stroked her, pressing his thumb against her clit as he nibbled her breasts.

Trish ground her hips against his hand and moaned her release. Nick lifted his head and stared into her wide, blue eyes as she struggled to regain her breath. Every nerve in her body was tingling from the orgasm and she could hear the blood pounding in her ears. She wanted him inside her. She nodded her consent and reached down, grabbing his cock and positioned him between her thighs.

Nick groaned and rubbed himself on her wet entrance. He stared into her eyes as he thrust inside her. Trish gasped, her fingers digging into his back. He pulled out and plunged back inside her. Trish lifted her hips and met his thrusts, taking him deeper. She felt her muscles tighten at the climbing pleasure and knew her release wasn’t far behind. Nick thrust inside her and felt her walls contract around him.

He pulled out and drove inside her again, taking her as deep as he could go and came. He braced himself on his elbows and managed to roll to the side so avoid crushing her before he collapsed.

She’d never experienced anything like their lovemaking before. Her body shivered with the spasms of her orgasm still rushing through her. The sunlight warmed her naked flesh and she smiled contentedly. So that’s what it was like with your mate. Trish turned her head and stared at Nick. His eyes were closed and his chest was heaving with heavy breaths. She pressed a chaste kiss to his lips and he opened his eyes. He stared at her with such deep contentment her heart ached. He brushed his fingers along her arm and sighed.

“After we’re married, I’ll mark you as my mate and then it will be official in both worlds.” Nick said, her smile spreading happiness throughout his satisfied body. Trish nodded and snuggled closer to his chest.

“I’d like that.” She said, tracing her finger along his collarbone. Nick wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. No matter what, she was already his mate and his bear was not ever going to let her go.

“Well, as much as I want to keep you to myself, I think it’s time I introduced you to the community. They’ll want to meet my mate.” Nick said, working himself up to disentangle from her.

Trish nodded and lifted her head, scouting for her clothes since she couldn’t recall where they had fallen. “I should warn you, my future mate has been quite the topic of conversation the past few weeks.” Nick said, pulling away and standing up. Trish sat up and watched him gather their clothes and bring them to her. She smiled her thanks and pulled her panties on.

“Why’s that? Are all the ladies after you?” Trish joked. She clasped her bra and pulled her shirt over her head. Nick chuckled and pulled his pants on. He shrugged and tilted his head.

“Kind of. I should tell you the circumstances surrounding my decision for finding my mate.” He said, crouching down in front of her. Trish paused in her dressing and stared at him.

“Is everything okay?” She asked, seeing the hesitation and anxiety in his face. Nick nodded and sat down beside her.

“Yes, it’s just, I told you I am the protector of the community, right?” He said. Trish nodded and remained silent for him to proceed. “Well, as the alpha it has been my familial duty to provide the protection of the community, that’s why I inherited the job from my father and him from his. My title was challenged by my deputy, he believes that he can serve the community better because he has a family of his own. We reached an agreement, I needed to find my mate before the end of the month in order to maintain my title as alpha and protector.” Nick explained. Trish took it all in, her brow furrowed with thought.

“So, you would have married me even if I wasn’t your mate just to protect your title?” She asked hesitantly. Nick shook his head and grabbed her hands.

“No. I wouldn’t have married anyone unless I knew it was safe for the community. I admit, I didn’t believe that the woman I found would be the mate my bear chose, but I knew whoever she was I would have to feel bound to her in some way. I couldn’t believe my luck when you were both the woman I wanted, and the mate my bear claimed.” Nick said, squeezing her hands. Trish felt his love wash over her and smiled, returning the squeeze.

“I never expected that the man they matched me with would be the love I’ve been searching my whole life for. I’ll admit, I didn’t realize how much I was missing out on until I met you.” Trish said, leaning forward and kissing him.

Nick’s heart swelled and he smiled against her lips. She pulled back and gazed into his eyes. “So, getting married will nullify the challenge?” She asked. Nick nodded.

“Yes, it should. There is one more potential complication,” He said, his bear flaring a sensation of protectiveness within him. “There might be some disapproval since you are human, but I don’t care. You’re my mate, and I will do anything to keep you and protect you.” He said. Trish could read the sincerity of his statement in his eyes and kissed his knuckles on their clasped hands.

“I trust you. I will stand by you, no matter what.” She said reassuringly. Nick released a sigh and pulled her into his arms. He held her close and inhaled her sweet scent that was musky from their lovemaking.

“Then let me take you to your new home: Bear River.” He said and pulled her to her feet. They walked back down the path to his car, holding hands and saying nothing more about the town or the challenge that awaited them. Trish felt her chest squeeze with apprehension and tried to calm her nerves. She had a bad feeling about what they were walking into, but Nick seemed so confident that she didn’t say anything. She just followed beside him and let him lead her to her future home, praying that they would accept her there.

# Chapter 6

Nick decided that it would be best to introduce her to his parents first. As important as the community was to him, his parents’ opinions mattered the most to him. He pulled into the dirt drive of their cabin, which was very similar to his own. He unbuckled his seatbelt and gave Trish an encouraging smile. He could tell that she was nervous the way that she kept idly tapping her finger on the window while they drove. He took her hand in his and kissed the back of it.

“Don’t worry, they’ll love you. Come on.” He said, giving her a quick kiss and then got out of the car. Trish took a deep breath and followed him, telling herself to relax. The screen door to the cabin swung open and a tall, curvy woman rushed down the porch steps to embrace Nick. She had the same brown hair as him, but it was streaked with gray and fell in long waves down her back. She scooped him into a tight hug and patted his back.

“Luke! I thought you weren’t coming back for another three days. What happened? Was she horrible? I told you not to trust the internet.” The woman rambled, oblivious to Trish standing beside the car. Trish held a hand to her lips to keep from laughing—and she thought Tanya was over-protective.

Nick shook his head and tried to interject but his mother barely took a breath long enough to allow him to. Trish was highly entertained by the mama bear fussing over her grown son when the screen door creaked open again and an auburn-haired young woman stepped out. Trish’s breath hitched involuntarily at the sight of the girl. She was beautiful, and the complete opposite of Trish. She looked to be about the same height, but that was it. She was thin and fit, dressed in shorts that were far too short in Trish’s opinion, and she smiled at Nick in a sickly-sweet way that made Trish want to wrap her arms around him to mark him as her own.

“Luke, you’re back! I’m so glad you gave up on that silly date. Come in! Your mom and I just made lunch and—who’s that?” The girl asked, her smile falling and becoming a sneer when she spotted Trish. Nick’s mom stopped her chattering and peered over Nick’s shoulder, finally noticing Trish’s presence as well.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there. Nick, don’t be rude, introduce us.” His mother chided. Nick shook his head with a smile and took a few steps back to wrap his arm around Trish’s shoulders.

“I have been trying to, mom. This is my mate, Trish.” He said proudly. Trish smiled at the two women politely and gave a small wave. Nick gestured to his mother with his other hand and gave a proper introduction now that the woman was wide-eyed and speechless. “Trish, this is my mother Claire.” He said. Trish reached out her hand and shook Claire’s.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Tremont.” She said, her confidence beginning to waver at the prolonged shock. Claire shook her head and jolted herself out of her dumbfounded daze. A large smile, very much like her son’s, swept over her face and she held out her arms to embrace Trish.

“Oh it’s a pleasure to meet you, dear! His mate? How wonderful! You must come in and tell me all about yourself.” Claire said, pulling Trish from Nick’s arms and leading her inside. Trish immediately relaxed, feeling accepted by his mother.

They paused when they got to the top of the porch steps, the girl blocking their way. Her beautiful face had twisted into a look of contempt and her arms were crossed angrily. Claire tilted her head and tried to wave the girl out of the way.

“Heidi dear, you’re blocking the door.” Claire said, her voice polite but there was an edge to it that dared the girl to defy her. Heidi glared at Trish and then looked at Nick who was standing just behind her.

“She’s human.” Heidi said, disdain dripping from her voice. Trish could feel Nick tense on the step just behind her, and he protectively climbed in front of her. Claire’s smile was officially gone as she regarded Heidi. Claire dropped Trish’s hand and stepped forward, addressing the girl.

“And she is a guest in my house and my son’s mate. You will show her respect, or you will leave.” Claire scolded.

Heidi sneered and met Claire’s challenging glare before eventually moving aside. Nick ushered Trish in the cabin, ignoring Heidi as he walked past her. Claire remained on the porch, blocking Heidi, until Trish was safely inside. Trish followed Nick to the kitchen and clung to him, her legs shaking from the encounter. It didn’t escape her that she could have been almost mauled by a jealous, young shifter.

“Who was that?” Trish asked. Nick guided Trish to a chair at the table and got her a glass of water.

“That was Heidi. She’s been one of the more aggressive suitors this past month. It’s been very unpleasant, thank god I found you. I’ll never have to deal with that again.” Nick said with a laugh, kissing her.

Trish retuned his laugh and sipped her water, the panic ebbing from her as she regained her composure. Claire entered the kitchen then, shaking her head in dismay.

“Where’s Heidi?” He asked, his brow frowning with concern. Claire patted Nick’s shoulder and continued on her path to the back door.

“She did the intelligent thing and left. I’m so sorry for her behavior, Trish. She’s just young.” Claire said, opening the back door and shouting for Nick’s dad to join them. She began clearing off counter space when a large, burly man entered in from the back door carrying a platter of grilled meats. He set the platter down on the counter and kissed Claire’s temple.

“All done! Oh this all looks so good, honey. You really out-did yourself on the sides.” He said, his voice deep and muffled by his beard. Claire smiled at his praise and hugged him.

“Well thank you, John. I can’t take all the credit, but—” she started before he interrupted her.

“Oh yeah, where’s Heidi at?” He looked over her head and gazed around the kitchen. His warm brown eyes stopped on Nick and Trish and brightened.

“Luke! You’re back! And who is this gorgeous lady with you?” John asked, releasing Claire and clapping his son on the back. Nick smiled and took Trish’s hand. Trish stood up and took her place beside Nick while he introduced her to his father.

“This is Trish, my mate. Trish, this is John— my father.” Nick said. Trish shook John’s hand and felt very welcomed by his family. Trish and Claire brought the food to the table while Nick and his father put out the place settings. They chatted easily, both of his parents having plenty of questions for Trish about her life and how she knew Nick was her mate.

“I guess because I just felt complete with him. He just made sense, like he’d always been there.” Trish explained, a blush rising to her cheeks.

Claire crooned and leaned into John. Nick kissed Trish’s temple and continued the conversation. After the meal was finished, and they all sat around the table slouching and sipping iced tea. Trish felt the growing tension, it had been underlying the entire lunch and now that they had fallen into a full and satisfied silence, it was more and more apparent.

“So what did happen to Heidi?” John asked, leaning back in his chair and unbuttoning the top button of his jeans. Claire rolled her eyes and hit him on the shoulder.

“Really, John. We have guests!” She scolded. John shrugged uncaringly and grinned.

“Nah, it’s just family. If you can’t be comfortable around family, who can ya?” John said, winking at Trish. Trish laughed and agreed with him. There was a tense moment of silence before Claire decided to fill him in on Heidi’s earlier actions.

“I’ll admit, I was shocked to see that Nick had brought his mate with him—and what a pleasant surprise you were dear—but Heidi was very rude. I told her that if she couldn’t be respectful then she needed to leave.” Claire explained. John nodded and sipped his glass of iced tea.

“I see. Well, I think you made the appropriate call, honey. I don’t take kindly to having guests mistreated at my home, especially when it’s my son’s mate.” John said, his voice deepening to a growl at the end. Nick smiled appreciatively at him, tapping his thumbs against the wooden table rhythmically, before finally caving in to the unspoken discussion hanging in the air.

“I’m assuming that Heidi has spread the word to the entire town by now about my mate being a human. How do you think it’ll go over?” He asked, his eyes downcast as he continued his drumming on the wood.

Claire gave Trish a sympathetic look and allowed John to respond. John took a deep, agonized breath in and blew it out. He gave his son and his mate an apologetic look.

“Unfortunately, with Heidi being the one to spread the news, it probably won’t be good. I love the girl, but she does not have tact. I know that she fancied you, and I also know that you were never going to pick her. Not only is she too young and inexperienced, but after meeting Trish there is no doubt in my mind that you two belong together. Heidi won’t take that rejection well.” John said. Nick slowly nodded his head, understanding his father’s logic.

“But there is still a chance they will accept her once *I* introduce her, right?” He asked. Claire leaned forward and patted his hand soothingly.

“Of course, dear. She’s wonderful, and once they have the chance to see that they will welcome her just as we have.” She said, beaming at Trish. Trish released a breath and leaned against Nick who instinctively wrapped his arm around her. He nodded and took another sip of his water.

“Well I guess there’s no time like the present. Shall we all take a trip into town?” Nick asked, standing from the table. John nodded and helped Claire out of her chair.

“Right behind you, son.” John said, following them out the door.

# Chapter 7

“My friend Tanya and I like to play this game where we come up with different kinds of scenarios,” Trish started, striding beside Nick as he led the way through the pines to the main street of the town. Nick nodded and pushed a branch out of the way for her and his mother to pass through.

“Alright, how does this game work?” He asked, eager to get out of his own head with all of the possibilities he had swimming around in it. Trish shrugged and started to explain.

“It’s pretty basic. Basically, we think of a couple worst-case scenarios and come up with some just-in-case solutions to them—that way we are prepared for anything.” She said, stepping over a rock in her path.

“Just worst-case? What about best-case scenarios?” Nick asked. They were still about ten minutes out from reaching the sheriff’s station on the edge of town. He had to admit, this game seemed like a good idea and it made him fall in love with her even more for wanting to be prepared for the worst.

“We think of those, too, but those come *after* the worst-case. That way you end on a happy note.” She said, her smile easing some of the stress Nick was feeling.

“I think it sounds like a great idea. Why don’t you go first?” He suggested. Trish nodded and scrunched up her face in thought. She pulled out her hair-tie and let the black waves cascade down her back while she contemplated. She ran her fingers through her hair, combing out some of the knots that had formed during their tryst in the clearing. A blush rose to her cheeks just thinking about it, but it gave her the first worst-case.

“Okay, what if you have to choose between me and your title?” She asked. Nick knew the answer immediately, and hoped that his father would understand it.

“You, of course. There’s no contest. As my mate, you are part of me. Losing you would be like losing half of myself, I don’t know how I would be able to perform my duty as half a man.” Nick answered. He glanced back at his father and saw him beaming with approval. John gave his son a proud clap on his back and nodded in agreement.

“That’s how it should be, Luke. Anyone who asks you to choose differently is missing out on what it means to be complete.” John said, patting Trish encouragingly on the back as well.

“So what’s the just-in-case plan?” Trish asked wearily. Nick shook his head and Claire laughed good-naturedly.

“There’s no need for a plan, dear. If someone asked him to choose that would simply be that.” Claire said. Nick frowned in thought and paused. They could hear the sounds of people going about their day up ahead. He turned to face his parents and took Trish’s hand in his own.

“Actually, there might be a way to have both.” Nick said. Trish frowned in confusion and looked to his parents for some clarity. Claire’s face looked somewhat saddened, and John’s was drawn in stoic reverie.

“Yes, that is a possible solution. I hope it doesn’t come to that, though.” John finally answered. Nick agreed and squeezed Trish’s hand. “I’m proud of you for considering it, so that you can continue to protect the town and community, as well as your mate.” John finished. Nick smiled at his father.

“Well, best case scenario: Jay will acknowledge the terms of the challenge and it won’t come to anything else.” Nick turned to Trish and cupped her face, staring into her bright blue eyes. “Then, we can get married before the week is out and I can mark you as mine, forever.” He leaned down and kissed her slowly, not caring that his parents were watching. When he broke away her cheeks were flushed and she felt incredibly at peace. She stroked his cheek, marveling at the feel of his jaw rough with stubble beneath her fingers.

“Regardless, best-case or worst-case, we are still going to be doing that.” She affirmed. Nick smiled and turned to kiss her palm that was on his cheek.

“Then let’s get this over with so we can go on our honeymoon.” He said. Trish laughed and followed him up the rest of the hill to the paved sidewalk.

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From first glance the town was quaint—like any other small town she’d been to in the mountains. The buildings lining the street were all locally owned businesses, and the street stretch on for a couple of miles.

There were some near-by residences that she could see from the road, but she assumed most of the town occupants lived in cabins like the Tremont’s, buried in the forest or along the river. Trish felt her heart swell with familiarity, and instantly knew she was home. Nick kept his arm wrapped around her waist, both for comfort and to demonstrate that she belonged with him.

Trish smiled when she saw a group of bear cubs wandering out of a store followed by a weary looking older woman who must have been their nanny. No wonder Nick wanted to keep this place hidden and discrete; it would be a hunter’s paradise.

John and Claire greeted people as they walked down the street, pretending that they didn’t notice the curious, confused, or hostile expressions some of the other shifters had when they noticed Trish.

“Don’t fret, they’re just a little skittish around outsiders.” Claire whispered in Trish’s ear. Trish nodded and tried to shake it off. She’d never been the focus of such contempt before. She didn’t know where they were going, but she trusted Nick.

Nick tried to keep his anger in check and smiled politely to everyone they passed on the way to the diner where he knew he would find Jay. He had no idea what sort of lies Heidi had been spreading, but based on the looks some people were giving Trish, it wasn’t good. He took a deep breath and inhaled his mate’s delicious scent. It didn’t matter, once he proclaimed her as his mate and introduced they would accept her. He was sure of it. He held the door open at the diner for his parents and Trish to walk through before entering himself.

Sure enough, sitting at the counter flirting with his wife was Jay. Nick approached him, aware of all the looks the other occupants were casting in his direction. He didn’t want to make a scene, he just wanted to settle this and take his mate back to his cabin where he could make love to her for the rest of the day… and most of the night, too.

“Jay, how have things been in my absence?” Nick started, getting the younger man’s attention. Jay turned toward him, smiling.

“Nick! I didn’t expect you back so soon, I thought you said a week? You shouldn’t worry so much, I’ve got it covered.” Jay said with a friendly laugh. Nick gave an obligatory chuckle and pulled Trish to his side. Trish’s stomach twisted as she stared at the deputy in front of her. This was the man she had to win over so that this could all be smoothed over. Now this was some pressure.

“Well things went really well in the city. So well in fact, that I’d like you to meet my mate, Trish.” Nick said, pulling her in tight against his firm side. Jay’s smile faltered when he glanced over at her. Unlike the friendly smile he had before, it was now very forced and Trish couldn’t quite figure out what he was thinking. She held her breath and held her hand out to greet him.

“Nice to meet you, Jay. I’ve heard so much about you.” Trish said, making sure her voice didn’t quiver. Jay’s smile fell but he shook her hand anyway.

“All good things I hope.” Jay said, his voice falling flat. Trish nodded emphatically, trying her best to ease the tension and awkwardness of the situation.

“Oh yes.” She answered but Jay wasn’t looking at her anymore. He and Nick were locked in a staring contest—both challenging the other. She felt Claire wrap her hand around her wrist and pull her back, squeezing Trish between herself and John. Neither Jay nor Nick acknowledged the change, but she saw Nick’s shoulders relax a little knowing that she wasn’t in the line of fire.

“Trish and I will be married by the end of the week, and I intend to mark her as my mate at that time. I believe this completes the challenge, does it not?” Nick finally spoke. Jay’s eyes darkened and he stood up from the stool at the counter, his gaze never leaving Nick’s.

“Technically, yes. However, this presents another problem I think we need to discuss.” Jay said. The entire diner had gone silent, the pretense of not eavesdropping completely given up by the bystanders.

“And what problem would that be?” Nick asked tersely. Jay’s eyes flicked to Trish and then back to Nick. His lips curved into a smirk.

“I think you know full well what that problem is. Bringing a human here is putting the entire community at risk, and I can’t allow that.” Jay said, his skin flushing with anger. John took a protective stance in front of Trish, partially blocking her from view. Nick growled, clenching his fists at his sides.

“How is my mate a risk? She is no more dangerous to the community than your mate is.” Nick stated, keeping his voice low while he diplomatically tried to prevent an even bigger scene from taking place. Jay scowled at him and crossed his arms.

“She’s human! She’s automatically a threat to us. What if she runs off and tells everyone about us? Being hunted as a bear was bad enough, but can you imagine what kind of hunters we would get if they knew we were shifters?” Jay said, his voice steadily climbing in volume. Nick shook with anger. How dare he imply that his mate would do something like that.

“She’s my mate and by extension, part of me. Do you really think I would allow any harm to come to this community? You honestly believe their safety wouldn’t occur to me? Of course it did! It is still my sworn duty to protect them, challenge or no.” Nick said, shouting.

It was getting harder and harder to restrain himself, each word that Jay spoke against Trish made his bear want to lunge out and defend his mate. He couldn’t do that, not yet. He wanted to solve this amicably first, without injury to either party. Jay scoffed and shook his head.

“But you still chose her?” Jay asked disdainfully. Trish flinched, glad to have Claire and John there to comfort her. She felt horrible for the position that Nick was in. It was nothing she could control and she kept reminding herself that he told her he would always pick her, she just wished he didn’t have to make that choice. Nick straightened and squared his shoulders.

“Damn right I did. From the moment I saw her my bear identified her as my mate and I will always choose her. You told me that I couldn’t protect the community until I knew personally what it was like to protect a family, well she is my family and I will protect her from every single one of you that wants to take her from me.” Nick growled threateningly. Jay gave a curt nod and dropped his hands to his sides.

“Then there’s only one way to settle this: traditionally.” Jay said. John tensed and closed his eyes. Trish felt Claire’s grip on her tighten. Nick nodded and held his hand out.

“Accepted. Shall we take this outside, then?” Nick said. Jay shook his hand and the challenge was issued. The two men strode toward the door, heading to the center of the street. Claire, Trish, John and most of the diner followed them out taking up posts on the sidewalk. Trish leaned in toward Claire who was standing stoically.

“What does ‘traditionally’ mean?” Trish whispered. Claire took her eyes off the men for a moment and looked at Trish. She gave her a pitying smile, her face drawn with seriousness.

“Traditionally, when a challenge is issued to the alpha it is settled with a fight. Whoever is able to pin the other will win the title.” Claire explained, turning back to Jay and Nick. Trish furrowed her brow as she watched them undress.

“That’s not so bad, right?” She said, looking up at John. John glanced down at her and patted her back.

“It can be. They will shift and fight in their bear form. It can get pretty violent, and it has happened in the past that one or both of the challengers were killed.” John said his voice gruff. Trish’s eyes widened with horror and she turned back to the men as they started to shift.

“We should stop them! It isn’t fair that Nick has to do this.” Trish whimpered. John rubbed her back and shook his head.

“It’s not fair, but he agreed to the challenge. It’s dangerous, but I support him for wanting to defend not only his title, but his mate. He’s doing this for you, Trish, so that you can call Bear River your home.” John said.

Guilt ate at Trish but she understood. This was his world, and she would respect his decision. Nick and Jay circled each other, slapping the pavement with their paws challengingly.

Finally, Jay made the first lunge and plowed into Nick, taking a bite of the fur around his neck as he tried to push him to the ground. Nick let out a growl and twisted free, slamming his front paws on Jay’s shoulders and pushing him back. Jay snorted and they circled each other some more. Rearing up on his back legs, Nick charged at Jay, biting at his snout. Jay reared up and bit back, he dug his claws into Nick’s shoulders and Nick pushed him back. Jay managed to break away for a moment, before Nick pushed him onto all fours.

Nick dropped to all fours and used his weight to force Jay onto his back. He pinned him, holding him down on the ground. Jay snapped at his nose, and squirmed trying to leverage Nick off of him and flip him. Nick brought his paw down on Jay’s chest and held him down. Jay, not wanting to give up, tried again to regain leverage but it was futile.

Trish glanced at Claire for a clue as to whether or not it was over. Claire stared at her son, proudly smiling at him. Trish glanced around at all of the bystanders and noticed that they too, seemed to have deemed Nick the winner.

Hope swelled in Trish’s chest and she rocked back and forth on her heels, waiting for the official verdict. Jay stalled his squirming and lay still, knowing that he had been defeated. Nick lifted his paw off of Jay’s chest and backed up, shifting back to his human form. Trish gasped at the blood dripping down his back and the thick gouges on his shoulders.

His nose was also bleeding and his ribs were starting to bruise. Jay shifted back and his physical state resembled much of the same wounds that Nick sported. The two men were breathing heavily, exhaustion of their fight taking its toll. Nick held out his hand and helped Jay stand.

“Are we done?” Nick panted. Jay gave a small smirk and nodded.

“Any man that fights that way for his mate, I trust will fight that way for his community.” Jay said, clasping Nick’s hand with brotherly acceptance. Nick smiled and looked over at Trish. Her eyes were wide with relief and the color was returning to her face but she never looked more beautiful to him. She was *his*.

The men dressed and returned to the diner. Sasha got them each a large glass of water and handed a wet towel to Trish so that she could wipe the blood off Nick. Jay gulped the glass of water and winced when Sasha cleaned a particularly deep cut.

“So when’s the wedding?” Jay asked with a broad grin. Nick laughed and then sucked in air painfully through his teeth as Trish pressed the towel against a still bleeding cut.

“As soon as he’s no longer dripping blood all over the place. I don’t want any stains on my white dress.” Trish joked. Nick laughed and pulled her onto his lap.

“Tomorrow it is.” Nick said, kissing her deeply and squeezing her soft curves against him. Trish sighed and sunk into his embrace.

**THE END**