

Chapter Five

Destiny stood in front of the mirror, fully satisfied that she looked her hottest. A rumble outside sent her to the window where she could see Jaxon getting off his motorcycle. She pulled the door open and leaned against the doorframe as he approached.

“Hi there,” he said.

“Hello.”

“Ready to ride?”

She was taken a little aback by his abruptness. Where was the small talk? But she figured that once they got wherever they were going, there would be plenty of time for talking. “You betcha.”

Jaxon did not have a helmet on, nor did he offer one to Destiny. So, he really did live on the dangerous side. The excitement in her chest increased. He was exactly what she was looking for. She climbed on behind him and held on tight, appreciating the feeling of his hard abs under her hands.

His bike roared to life and they sped off, the wind disrupting her perfectly styled hair. They drove for a while and by the time he stopped the bike near a patch of green grass in a large park, she was sure she looked like a mess. She ran her fingers through her hair and tried to detangle it.

Jaxon smiled at her. “Your hair’s perfect.” He pulled out a small duffle bag from the pack on his bike, then took her hand. “I thought a picnic dinner would be nice.”

“Sounds very cozy.”

He winked and she followed him farther into the woods until they came to a clear, flat spot. He pulled a blanket from the bag and spread it out, then took out several other items.

“What is all this?” she asked.

He pointed as he explained. “Wine, cheese and crackers, sushi, and cake.”

She’d never had sushi, but she was ready to try anything. She sat and watched as he finished setting up. The last thing he pulled out was a rose, slightly battered from being shoved into the pack, but a sweet gesture all the same.

Destiny picked up a cracker with cheese and took a bite. “So, what made you get on the dating site?”

“Oh, well, I guess I don’t get out much. With the bike shop, it’s nothing but biker chicks, and they’re not usually my style. I spend most of my time there and when I’m not there, I hit the gym. Not too many lovely ladies there, either. Online seemed the way to go.”

“You work a lot?”

“Owning your own business takes a lot of time, but I try to make sure I have time for fun, too. Can’t be all work.”

“Oh, you actually own the bike shop?” She hadn’t realized this from his profile.

“Yup. Six years now.”

She smiled and took another bite. “So, a bad boy and a businessman.”

“I try to be well-rounded.” He chuckled. “What about you? I can’t believe it would be hard for you to find a date.”

“Well, sort of. I get asked out, but not by the men I want. I guess I have a thing for danger, so when I found a dating site just for bad boys, it seemed perfect.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.” He opened the container of sushi and put several pieces on her plate before stuffing a piece in his mouth.

“What do you mean?” She picked up the sushi. He’d eaten the whole thing in one bite, but she didn’t think she could fit it all in her mouth. She took a bite, not sure if she liked it or not.

“Well, not all shifters are bad boys. I guess most of us are, but there’s a lot more to us than that.” He scooped out a small blob of green paste. “Wasabi?”

She put down her sushi. She couldn’t have heard him right. “Shifters?”

He raised an eyebrow at her but said nothing.

“Umm, you’re a shifter?” Suddenly, she felt cold all over. He was more than just adventurous, he was dangerous in the worst sense of the word. He could attack her at any moment.

“Yes. That’s what the site is. A shifter dating site.”

“Oh.” She stared at the food on her plate, then reached for her wine and downed most of the glass.

“You didn’t know?”

“I guess I missed that part. I thought the wild was just, you know, adventurous. Adrenaline junkies, that sort of thing.”

“You’ve never dated a shifter before.”

She shook her head.

“And how do you feel about it?”

She pressed her lips together, then decided to go with the truth. “A little scared, I guess.”

“You said you wanted danger.” He chuckled and stuck another piece of sushi into his mouth.

“Not the kind of danger that gets me eaten for dinner.”

“Wow.” The expression on his face made him seem offended. Crap.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that you would. I’ve never been around a shifter. I just don’t know how it works.”

“Okay, well. Do you have questions? And let me just say, I’m not going to eat you for dinner. We don’t do that.”

“Good.” She laughed nervously and finished her wine. “Well, how do you shift? Is it controllable? Are you dangerous to be around when you do?”

“It’s all controllable. I decide when to shift into bear form and when to shift back. I’m only a danger to those who I would be a danger to as a human. Meaning, if I get into a bar fight and shift, I might hurt someone, but I might also hurt them in a knife fight. I’m not going to just attack anyone. I’m still fully me when I shift. I’m just a bear.”

“Oh. Really?” Somehow, it suddenly seemed a lot less dangerous.

“Of course, if I’m angry and do want to attack someone, I’m much more deadly than someone with a knife or gun. So, just don’t piss me off and you’ll be fine.” He winked.

She wasn't sure if it was a joke or warning.

"Destiny. I'm kidding."

She forced a chuckle. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to fear. But I can protect you better than any human, so there is that. I'm tougher and stronger, and I heal faster."

"Is this something I'd get to see sometime?"

"If you want to."

"Maybe not right now. But sometime, yeah. I think I would." She stuffed a full piece of sushi in her mouth and noticed that it was better all at once. She got the full flavor from each part of the bite.

By the end of the date, she was feeling much better about the shifter thing. She was also feeling much better about Jaxon in general. They struck up some interesting conversations about bikes and working out, she told him about her boring job, and he held her attention. More than she could say for most dates recently.

When he drove her home, she took her time finding her key. She turned to face him.

"I had a really great time," she said. "Thank you."

"I did, too. Can we do it again?"

"I'd love to."

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. He was a good kisser. Forceful, but not rough. Like he wanted her. And she liked that feeling.

She went inside in a dreamy daze and put her rose on the counter. When she noticed her laptop, she opened it and went to the Wild Hearts site. After just a minute of looking at it, she felt like an idiot. There were signs everywhere that it was a shifter site. The claw marks, the bear paw print. She'd really been blind when she signed up. Maybe that's why all the guys were so big and muscular then. It was apparently part of being a shifter.

She did some research over the next days, and by the time Friday came around and it was time for her date with Aiden, she was feeling better about the shifter thing. Unfortunately, by the end of the date, she wasn't feeling too good about Aiden.

He'd shown up to the restaurant late, with some excuse about traffic when the roads had been clear. Their conversation had been forced and she didn't find him all that interesting. Not compared to Jaxon. By the time he walked her to her car, she was sure she didn't want to see him again. He gave her a quick hug and thanked her for joining him. No kiss. No mention of another date. So, apparently, he'd been feeling the same.

She was a little bummed, but still had her date with Jaxon to recall happily, and she and Parker had finally planned to go out the next night. As she drove to the restaurant to meet Parker, she hoped that this night would go better than the previous night had.

Destiny got out of her car and found Parker waiting for her. So far so good. At least he wasn't late. He handed her a small box.

"Brought you a little something sweet," he said.

"Aww, and you also brought chocolate."

He smiled an electrifying grin and she wondered why he didn't have a photo like that online. He looked even hotter in person than his pictures.

As they were seated, she couldn't help gazing at him and thinking of her shifter research. Strong, tough, adventurous. That's what the human sites said shifters were. And best of all, when she'd found a forum of human women who only dated shifters, they all said their animalistic tendencies made them fabulous in bed. That thought alone had her warm all over. And Parker was easy to look at it. She couldn't decide if he or Jaxon was hotter, but she didn't have to. They were both so good looking, she wanted them both.

"So, tell me about being a shifter," she said as they ate their dinner. "I'm kind of new to this world."

He glanced around, then spoke in a softer tone. "I guess it's cool. I don't really know any differently. But having the ability to change into a bear has come in handy many times."

At the next table, she heard a man cough in a conspicuous way. When she glanced at him, he muttered "Freak" under his breath, and glared at Parker before looking away.

Was this something that happened often? She knew there was a lot of shifter hate in the world, but she had never really seen it in action before.

She looked at Parker and he lifted his shoulder. “Not everyone is a fan.”

When she looked around more closely, she noticed a few glares from people at tables nearby, or they’d look away quickly to avoid her stare. She guessed she had said rather loudly that he was a shifter, and maybe that was a mistake.

“Sorry,” she said in almost a whisper. “I didn’t realize. I guess I was a little loud.”

He gave her a half smile. “It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

“I’m not.” She put down her fork and glared back at the woman at the table beside them. The woman’s face turned pink.

The man who had muttered “Freak” gave her a snarl and said to his date, “We need to find a new restaurant.”

Destiny’s blood was instantly hot. And when she got mad, she didn’t hold back. “Oh? Why is that?” she asked him, loudly.

He looked surprised that she was talking to him.

She continued. “Is it because you’re such a prejudice ass that you can’t handle being around people who are different than you?”

Her emotional reaction wasn’t helped by her own experiences with racism and sexism. Seemed like some people still couldn’t handle interracial couples and apparently, they couldn’t handle shifters, either. She was glad to know that shifters were strong and fearless, and often protective defenders.

The man ignored her and started talking to his date about football. She glared for another instant, then brought her gaze back to Parker. He was sitting back, his arms crossed, a smirk on his face.

“What?” she asked.

“Impressive.”

She shrugged. “I can’t stand judgmental assholes.” She said it loud enough that the man would certainly hear her.

Parker chuckled. “I guess I need to make sure I always have my gun on me when I’m with you. Who knows what sort of trouble that mouth might get us into.”

She couldn’t tell if this bothered him or not. “Sorry,” she muttered.

He leaned closer and whispered, "I'm looking forward to seeing what else that mouth can do."

Her face flushed and she bit her lip.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked.

She nodded fervently.

Once he'd paid, he took her hand and they walked out. She stopped in the middle of the parking lot and turned to him.

She put her mouth to his ear. "I want to see you shift."

"Okay."

He took her on a narrow path into the woods. When they were out of sight of the restaurant and the public, he pulled his shirt over his head.

"I'd rather not shred my clothes if that's okay."

She gave him a flirtatious smile and turned her back to give him privacy. Though she wanted badly to see him unclothed.

"Ready?" he asked.

When she turned back, he was naked, holding his hands over his crotch to cover himself. But every one of his muscles was visible. She took her time appreciating him before she nodded.

Then she watched as he grew thick hair and bent forward, his back rising high and his limbs growing shorter and thicker. When the change was complete, he sat down, a huge black bear just relaxing in the woods.

She walked closer, hesitantly, and put her hand out to stroke his shoulder. She petted him like a dog, and he let out a rumbling sound like a cat purring. He nudged his cold nose against her hand.

A grin stretched across her face. "Thanks for showing me."

He moved back from her a few feet and then began shrinking, his hair receding back into skin as he changed back.

"Wow." She shook her head and smiled.

“Did that scare you?”

“No. But it did turn me on.”

Parker put his jeans on, but before he could get his shirt over his head, he pulled her close and kissed her hard.

By the end of the night, only one thing bothered her. How in the world would she choose between two amazing men? Jaxon and Parker were both smoking hot adventurous bad boys, and into the things she liked. They were both exactly what she wanted. After all these years of not finding a decent man, she now had two incredible men to choose from. But greedily, she wanted them both.

Chapter Six

“You are not going to believe what I’m about to tell you.” Destiny picked up a shirt and held it to her, then put it back on the rack.

Ava put her hand on her hip. “I’m still waiting to hear about these dates.”

“I know. That’s what I’m saying. You ready to be shocked?”

“You slept with them both.”

Destiny playfully shoved her shoulder. “Not yet.” She leaned in closer and dropped her voice. “They’re both shifters. The whole site is a shifter dating site.”

“What!”

“I know, can you believe it?”

“Why in the world would you get on a site like that?” Her tone sounded harsh and Destiny took a step back.

“I didn’t know it was, but I like it. They’re exactly what I want.”

“You want to date some wild animal that could suddenly maul you to death at any time?” she hissed.

“It’s not like that.” Her own tone was getting sharp.

Ava shook her head. “You better end it with them both or you’ll be in for a world of pain.”

“How can you be like that?”

“Like what?”

“So ignorant and judgmental.”

“Destiny. You are dating two guys who are highly dangerous. I’m just looking out for you. What happens if things do get hotter with them, but you don’t want to? You won’t be able to stop them.”

Destiny’s words were a hard whisper. “Being a shifter does not make them rapists! They have complete control over the change. It’s not what you think and you’re being a total bitch.”

“Oh.” Ava put her hands back on her hips and glared at her. “You’re really going to go there?”

Destiny crossed her arms and glared back. “I’d think, being an African American woman yourself, you’d have a lot less prejudice of others.”

“Not when they might eat my friend.”

“Okay, you know what?” Destiny set down the items she had been considering purchasing. “We’re done here.”

She turned from Ava and stormed out of the store.

Days went by and she hadn’t heard a thing from her best friend. In all the years they’d known each other, how had Destiny not realized how Ava felt about shifters? She felt stupid for even being her friend and she was not going to be the one to apologize. She hadn’t been the one to start the fight. Ava would just have to realize that she’d been wrong and come to say she was sorry.

The fight with Ava didn’t keep Destiny from seeing Jaxon and Parker again. She found herself getting on the site less and less. What was the point when she already had two men who were into her, who she found completely amazing? Throughout the day, she kept up conversations with both of them over text and in the last week, she’d seen each of them again.

Now she had third dates planned with them both, and she was ready to take the next step. But she’d never dated two men at the same time before. Was it wrong to sleep with them both? Wasn’t like they were exclusive or anything. Then the thought came to her, what if they were both seeing other women, too? She had no right to be upset about it if they were.

She felt like maybe she’d have to choose soon, though. How long could she keep seeing them both? Didn’t she want to move on from casual dating to something more serious? And how fast did that happen these days anyway? She could probably wait at least a few more weeks or months before it came down to really having to choose.

She had a date with Parker that afternoon. Maybe she could try to determine if he was the one. Or maybe she’d sleep with him and that would tell her. She prepared for it—shaving her legs and putting on lacy panties. By the time she drove over to his house, she was already hot with anticipation.

Parker opened the door when she knocked. He grinned and held out his hand. “Welcome to my home.”

The house was big and dark. It reminded her of what she thought a hunting lodge might look like. Dark hardwoods, animal skin rugs, heads of creatures mounted and hanging on the wall. She wondered if the big fish had been caught with a hook or a paw. Probably a paw. Or a set of teeth.

He led her into the dining room, where two men sat at the table, working. They looked up as they entered.

“This is the alpha of the Tate clan, Logan.” He pointed to one of the men, then the other. “That’s Chris.”

They exchanged hellos and waves. As they left the room to head to a living room where a TV was on, she wondered why Tate sounded so familiar. He must’ve mentioned that name to her before. In the next room, she met three more of the clan. Then, as he took her hand to lead her to his room where his paintings were, he stopped.

“Ahh, here’s the last member.” Parker turned and Destiny turned with him to face the man who’d just entered the room.

Her mouth popped open and her heart leaped. “Jaxon,” she said without thinking.

He kept his cool much better than she had. He nodded and held up his hand to wave. “Hey.”

Then he turned and went back the way he came.

Parker raised an eyebrow. “You know each other?”

She nodded. “Let’s go to your room.”

As they walked, her mind spun. They were clanmates? It wasn’t enough that she was seeing them both and felt a bit guilty about it, but now they were both here, living in the same house, practically brothers. As soon as they were alone in his room, she dropped his hand and turned to him.

“I have to tell you something.”

He waited, his jaw set.

“I’m... dating Jaxon. Too.”

He took in long breath and let it out slowly. “Okay. I guess I never asked if you were seeing other people. And it’s not like we’re exclusive.”

“Right...” She twisted her fingers together and a sudden realization hit her. Both of them had said their middle name was Tate. Jaxon Tate Gill and Parker Tate Hartman. She hadn’t thought a lot about it, but it would be quite a coincidence if they both had the same, rather unusual middle name. “So, for shifters, you use your clan name as a middle name?”

He nodded.

“I didn’t know that.” She dropped her gaze to the floor.

“You might have done some research before getting on a shifter dating site.”

“I didn’t know it was at first. I thought it was just for bad boys, but then Jaxon said...”

He stepped forward and took her hands, then kissed her. That kiss melted her anxiety. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe he wasn’t upset over it.

“This isn’t the ideal situation,” he said, “but it’s my fault for not asking you sooner. I’m not seeing anyone else, and I’d really like it if you weren’t either.”

“So... you...”

“I want you to be my girlfriend, Destiny. I want to be exclusive.”

She pulled her lower lip into her mouth. She wasn’t ready to make this decision. She didn’t want to pick Parker simply because he’d asked first. Her feelings for Jaxon were just as strong.

“I think—” She kissed him again and squeezed his hands. “I need a little time. I really like you, Parker. A lot. But I really like Jaxon, too.”

He chuckled. “You know what’s funny? I was just talking to Jaxon the other day about you. And he was telling me that he was dating this amazing woman, too. We said that we should go on a double date. We were both excited for each other, that we’d finally found someone that seemed compatible.”

“Parker, I—”

“No, it’s okay. It makes sense. We all love each other like brothers. Jaxon is a great guy and we have a lot in common. More than I even realized apparently. If I was going to lose you to anyone, I’d be glad it was him, and I know he feels the same.”

Destiny's throat grew thick. Maybe Parker really was the one for her if he was going to act like this. So understanding, so loving to his brother. His body was strong, but his character was stronger. And now she wanted him even more.

She pressed her body to him and kissed him with all the desire that was building in her chest. He kissed back for a while, his hands roaming along her back, but then he stepped back.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here and go see some art."

They continued the date, and while things went well and she had a great time, there was a hint of tension between them. By the time he drove them back to his house, she knew they wouldn't be sleeping together. Maybe he needed some time. Maybe he wanted to be exclusive first.

She drove home thinking there was a good chance that Parker was the one. She couldn't get past the way he was so considerate and understanding. But he'd also made it clear, every time he broke their kiss, that he wasn't the type to sleep around.