

## Bear Spirit

When I got into the apartment, Stanton was pacing in my living room and stopped when he noticed me. He looked agitated, then relieved when he saw me. I crossed to him and took his hand.

"I smelled a man in your bed. The scent of him is all over your apartment." Stanton said angrily.

I sighed. "That's probably my friend Josh. He's been a frequent visitor over the last week or two. He was just here yesterday for lunch."

"He was in your bed, Clover." He growled.

"Yes. I was sleeping with him before I met you. When he came over yesterday, I told him that the physical part of our relationship was over because I found my soulmate. He was very happy for me and wants to take us to dinner on Sunday. We can discuss that later. You don't get to be mad about who I was before I was with you. I'm yours now, and I will never betray you." I promised.

He tucked an errant hair behind my ear and caressed my face gently. "I don't think I could handle it if you did. Grizzly bears are erratic and a little explosive. Tell me about the witch from the shop. The one who was hurting you."

I pulled him to the couch and curled up on his lap. I'd never been able to do that with boyfriends. Most of them had been my height or only a couple inches taller. It wasn't usually this comfortable.

Stanton was massive. I felt like one of those small girls around him. Dainty and fragile. I loved it. I would love possessing him too. There was nothing more thrilling than making someone so much bigger than you submit.

"Steven was my best friend growing up. We were born on the same day and were practically inseparable. I didn't know that my parents had engaged me to him until six months ago. I thought they were joking at rst. Our families were having dinner together when my parents broke it to me. I started laughing. Steven looked heartbroken. I felt terrible about it once I realized they were serious." I sighed.

"There was never any hint that they had planned that?" Stanton asked.

"In seventh grade, Steven started suggesting we go to all of the school dances together. I was a tall, lanky girl. Boys didn't want to date me. Steven was always there telling me I was beautiful and amazing. I thought about dating him, and almost kissed him after one of the school dances. It made me feel sick. I took it as a sign from the goddess that we were only meant to be friends. Steven just kept waiting. His parents told him about the arrangement when we were thirteen."

"What happened after you found out?"

"I refused. I got in a lot of ghts with my parents. I was shamed and made an outcast in my town. Steven tried to defend me. He told people I was just in shock and I would be ne when it wore off. He kept telling people that he would marry me, that I would come around. A couple months later, my great aunt offered me her place when she retired. I started planning for it. I was going to leave the coven and come here as a free witch." I told him.

It was at that point that I felt tears. That time in my life was dicult. All the pressure. It was constant. Their words started making cracks in what little armor I had. I was the coven leader's prodigy daughter. I was a princess. No one ever insulted or berated me before.

"Everyone was so mean to me. My parents were constantly yelling at me and telling me I had to marry Steven. Fire witches can be hotheads. Everything turned into a ght. Suddenly, it didn't feel like I was leaving to embrace my future life. It felt like I was being abandoned. No one loved me. No one even liked me. My choices were Steven, or banishment. I was sure my parents would never speak to me again after I left." I whispered.

"Bellamy told me that you tried to take your own life. She wanted me to understand how fragile you might still be. I can care for you if you need more. I can be here for you, so you always feel loved." Stanton murmured.

"When I was dying, I heard someone. They were telling me I had to ght harder. The voice told me I was stronger than I realized and to think of this as my rebirth. It said I needed to embrace who I was and throw my whole self into my new life. So I did. My coven tried to beat me down more. They thought I was close to breaking and accepting Steven, but I left. I got away." I said.

"You came to nd me." He replied and kissed my temple.

"I came to nd something. I'm happy I found you. If I hadn't done my soulmate search on Saturday, you might not have been there to save me." I said softly and cuddled against his chest.

"You did a soulmate search and the goddess brought us together when you needed me. I looked for you, too. I was actually here, on this couch back in February having my tealeaves read by your great aunt. She told me she saw luck and prosperity in my search for my mate." Stanton smiled, wrapping his arms around me and holding me tightly.

I started giggling. Stanton looked at me strangely.

"Did I say something funny?" He asked.

"Luck and prosperity. She was reading your tealeaves." I snickered.

"What?"

"She saw a clover. The goddess was literally telling her the name of your mate, and she only saw the meaning." I laughed.

"Does that mean you'll bring me luck and prosperity, little Clover?" Stanton murmured heatedly in my ear.

I hummed as the vibration of his voice seemed to echo throughout my body. I'd never felt giddy like this with a boyfriend before. It was like every touch, every whisper, every breath he took, shot straight through my heart.

"I'll certainly try." I whispered and turned my head.

He closed the distance between my lips and his. It felt like electricity was owing between us. I wrapped my arms around his neck and repositioned myself so I was straddling his lap as we kissed passionately.

Stanton pulled back. I ground myself against him and he groaned. Then his stomach growled.

"When was the last time you ate? Shifters need a lot of food, right? I should make you something. Oh, but, aren't grizzlies carnivores? I don't have any meat in my fridge!" I worried.

With a chuckle, he hugged me tight. "Don't worry. How about if I take you out to dinner? One of the families in our sleuth owns a restaurant here."

I smiled and nodded before pulling myself free of his grasp and heading to my room.

"Where are you going?" Stanton asked.

"To change."

"You look beautiful no matter what you're wearing." He answered.

"I appreciate that, but I've been reading about werewolves. I know they're different from werebears, but I know how much Alphas like showing off. It will only take me a moment." I promised and closed the door behind me.

Quickly, I stripped my work clothes off and dug through my closet until I found a light pink, owy, dress. It came off the shoulder and would show off my mark. The information I read said that showing off a mark made your mate happy.

After slipping on some high heeled sandals, I returned to the living room. Stanton turned and looked at me appreciatively. I went to him and he took my hands in his. His eyes seemed to eat me up.

"You're showing your mark. I love seeing it." He purred.

"I read that. Shall we go?" I asked.

"Absolutely." Stanton replied.

We headed downstairs after I locked up. He led me to an SUV that was parked next to my truck. Stanton opened the door for me and closed it once I was in.

The drive to the restaurant didn't take very long. It was just on the edge of the new downtown area. During the drive, I noticed small changes in Stanton's demeanor and how he held himself.

He parked near the restaurant and wrapped my arm around his as we walked down the sidewalk. People moved aside as we got closer. There was an aura coming off him that made my animal magic quiver.

Stanton opened the door for me and I waited inside. He grasped my elbow and pulled me to the hostess stand. His back was straight and he held an aristocratic expression on his face.

I realized what this was. He was releasing his Alpha aura. I'd heard about this from Auntie Tonya. It was the aura exuded by Alphas to let people know who was in charge. They would use it to challenge other Alphas, because it held a lot of their power.

A young woman was at the stand. She looked up at him with an awestruck expression. I could feel a buzzing in my head, but no dizziness. She was a shapeshifter.

Unlike a werewolf, she wasn't muscular and tall. She was plump and shorter than me. I didn't like how she was looking at him at all.

Most re witches were hotheads, I was less so than the single anity witches who could use re. The chill vibes for my plant magic usually evened me out. It was my animal magic that had its hackles up.

I felt a surge of magic burst from me. The woman's attention was suddenly drawn to me. The doe-eyed look she had before was replaced with confusion, then understanding.

"Urso, we're happy to have you here. Who is your guest?" She asked.

"Amanda, this is Clover Harrison. Clover, this is Amanda Blackwell, her family owns this restaurant. They're black bears." Stanton said.

"That explains why she isn't taller. Female black bears range from about four feet in height to about six feet. Judging by the height difference between you and your bear, I would guess she stands about ve foot ten in bear form." I replied.

"That's correct, there is a ve-inch difference between our bear form and our human form. Very impressive." He nodded with a smile.

"I'll take you to your table." Amanda said quietly.

She led us through the restaurant to a nice table in the corner. Stanton pulled out my chair for me and scooted it in before taking his seat. Amanda handed us our menus.

"Can I get you anything to drink, Urso?" She asked, her attention entirely on Stanton and her back to me.

"I'll have a water for now. Clover?" Stanton looked up at me.

"I'll take a water as well." I replied.

Without acknowledging me, she went off to goddess knows where. I looked at Stanton to see if he noticed any of that, but he was just staring at me quietly. It felt like this was a test of some sort.

Was he trying to see if I'd assert myself in this situation? He didn't introduce me as his mate, even though I was wearing his mark plainly. I'd never read anything like this in the research I'd done, but most of that was in werewolves, they were different from bears.

I picked up my menu and held it up, so he couldn't see me. I closed my eyes and reached out to my animal side. I felt myself sink down and I called to bear spirits. I asked for help, and I waited.

Soon, I felt a spirit approach me. She was powerful, I could feel that.

"What are you here for, witch?" She asked.

"Are you a natural bear spirit or a shifter bear spirit? I need the expertise of a shifter spirit." I answered.

"I am the spirit of the warrior queen and goddess Artio. I am natural and supernatural. I am an expert and an innocent. I sensed your connection to a powerful bear warrior and came at your request. Do not anger me or I'll leave you with nothing." She responded.

"I'm sorry. I meant no insult. I am mated to a werebear. He's an Urso. I need guidance. He expects something and I have no idea what." I replied.

"I feel your power, witch. If you would like my favor, I ask a boon from you." Artio said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"That is to come later. You either agree or you ght this battle on your own. An Alpha bear does not explain what his mate should know naturally. You've already felt what needs to happen. You are too restrained. Now, either agree to my boon and get my favor, or do not and leave this place empty handed." She demanded.

"I... I agree. Please grant me your favor and I will perform a boon for you at your request." I said.

The essence of the bear seemed to wrap around me. It merged with me and I could feel the power of it. Artio was not a peaceful black bear, she was the rage of a brown bear, a grizzly bear. Ursus arctos horribilis. The great horrible bear.

I relled my body with a mixture of my spirit and the bear spirit. I could feel it. The anger. The rage.

The sound of a cup being set on the table snapped my attention and I closed the menu. One glass with iced water sat on the table in front of Stanton. Amanda stood near him. I could smell so many things that I had never smelled before.

A strong scent came from her. It was tangy and sweet. She was aroused by being so close to my mate.

Before I knew what I was doing, I stood, grabbed the glass off the table and ung its contents on to her. She didn't even have a chance to move before I was gripping her neck and she was gasping for air. Her hands dug at mine, but I was somehow stronger than her.

"That is my mate. You touch him, look at him, or breathe near him and I will tear your throat out." I growled as my magic pulsed around me.

I knew I had the attention of every shifter in the restaurant. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw several people coming toward me slowly. They smelled like they were related to the girl who I was choking. I could feel the tension building. They were going to attack.