



Wildest

Demon Hunter Romance #2

Carrie Thorne

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For my daughter. Too young to read it herself, but a diehard werewolf fan and a budding little author herself.

Chapter 1

Astrid Edmonds hated werewolves. Repulsive creatures. With a distinctive odor of sweaty socks, sporting patchy fur like bedraggled gorillas, and attired in disintegrating scraps of grimy fabric, hand-to-hand combat with the creatures could be downright nauseating.

How had she been suckered into leading the recon? No doubt her team's idea of a hilarious joke at her expense. And not only was her contact officially late, but now she had work to do.

She endeavored to banish the stench from her nares with short, sharp exhales, but when her lungs burned from the fruitless effort, she gave up. Stalking down the alley, she ducked behind the dumpster that smelled nearly as rotten as the monsters atop the building.

If the godawful stench weren't enough to convince her, eerie howls from above crushed any hope that the lead had been a case of mistaken identity. It could have been some other hairy monster ravaging Montana. Humans loved werewolf tales, and she and her team had been sent on enough wild goose chases. Werewolves were generally uncommon, solitary bullies, which was why she had hoped this was another hoax.

Keeping to the shadows in the heart of downtown Kalispell, Astrid took one last look to ensure she was alone. Matched short-swords strapped to her thighs, she jumped atop the dumpster and leaped to the second-floor windowsill. Pulling herself higher, she ensured the room was empty, then climbed onto the concrete ledge. Fingertips wedged into the bricks above, she scaled the weathered building.

Another howl. And another. Damn full moons. Werewolves didn't seem to care if it was day or night, cloudy or clear to wreak havoc, but on the full moon, they were particularly excitable.

According to their contact, the one that was now seven minutes late, there was a pack encamped in the mountains that comprised of thirty werewolves, maybe more. Their bloody trail stained the earth from Calgary to Salt Lake City. Tales of peculiar howls in the night were multiplying. In all of her research, she had found no evidence of werewolves behaving this way.

Bound to her inherited role of demon hunter, she fought vampires; regularly, in fact. Sirens. Sphynxes. Creatures that had no names. Hell, a few weeks ago, she and her team had taken out the sister of the demon king. That had been intense.

Yet werewolves freaked her out. They were like a human had mated with a wolf and got high on meth and steroids, but there was no coming down from the belligerent trip. Unlike the myth, werewolves didn't shift between human and monster; they were never more than the gnarly, humanoid brutes. Of all the legends that time and generations of oral tradition had muddled, werewolf history didn't make any sense.

Fingernails frayed from the chipped mortar, Astrid drew closer to the roof. Three points of contact at all times, grip steady. Peeking over the ledge, she discovered a trio of the monsters in question chewing on the mangled remains of a human.

Shirts in shreds over their torsos, pants stretched tight over their burly legs, shoes absent – presumably lost in the change from human form. Somewhere between wolf and man and beast,

down to the elongated furry face, clawed fingers, and humanoid shape, they emanated restless aggression.

Holding back the bile that rose in her esophagus at the grotesque sight of the human remains, Astrid accepted that she would be no help to the poor soul they feasted on. But she could prevent these creeps from dining on anyone else tonight.

With a growl, she hurled herself over the side and drew her swords. Perfectly well balanced, the matched pair cut smoothly through the air.

Dinner interrupted, blood dripping from their jaws, the trio drew back their lips and rose to their feet, their feral snarls rattling the night. The nearest two hurtled toward her while the other waited, watching.

A patient werewolf? That was odd.

Patiently waiting herself, she held back. Just out of reach, she dove into a slide tackle between the snarling duo. Swords swinging as extensions of her long arms, she sliced into the hamstrings of the nearest two.

As soon as her swords were occupied and her position seemingly compromised, the third pounced toward her. Ratcheting her body from the ground, she swerved and spun from his reach as he neared.

Fuming at her wily dodge, he started back for her. Raising an eyebrow at him, she taunted him to try again.

He didn't get the chance.

From the darkness, a gray wolf dove into the fray. Teeth sinking into the monster, the wolf tore a gash in its side, expelling the flesh with a disgusted spit, before going in for another strike. Pure power in its haunches, the wolf was unstoppable.

Shaking off the surprise of seeing a wild animal join the fight, Astrid returned her attention to the two that were recovering from her blades. Beckoning one closer, she cricked her finger.

Foolish as she'd hoped, it pounced at her.

Spinning out of its range, she drove her swords into its abdomen.

The other disappeared in the fray.

Fuck. Did they...?

No, werewolves don't set traps. They don't strategize. What was going on?

Wrenching her swords from the first, she tried to spin before the other got behind her.

Too late.

Clawed fingers wrapped around her waist and pulled her close, its teeth aimed straight for her neck. Whipping her head back, she knocked into its wet nose. A histrionic whine echoed across the rooftops as it released her.

Snarling, a mucousy mix of drool and blood dripped from its canines. Slashing wildly, it swung at her with its grimy claws.

The gray wolf dove at it. Gnashing its gleaming white teeth, it tore into the creature's neck. Crumpling to the ground, the werewolf landed atop its dead friend in a gruesome heap.

The wolf sniffed the area, confirming the fight was over. As the life drained from the three werewolves, the full moon illuminated the gory scene.

Unable to pull her attention from the striking wolf, Astrid didn't attack, despite her raging instincts to go after it as well. Demon hunters were inherently violent, but with a shred of common sense, she had no difficulty suppressing the impulse.

Shiny and clean, its fur was a magnificent pattern of light and dark, silver blended with an earthy brown undercoat. Meticulously, the wolf licked the blood from its lips, then preened its paws.

Was it wearing a... backpack? Had someone trained a wolf to fight?

Its limbs were long and muscular, its movements almost graceful. Clearly deeming itself tidy, the wolf gazed up at the moon, inhaled deeply, then turned to face her. Eyes as intensely blue as the sunny Montana sky that she'd savored this afternoon, it gazed at her with an awareness she couldn't place. Standing proudly before her, the moon framing his silhouette behind him, the image could easily win National Geographic's photograph of the year.

Taken aback, Astrid felt a humanity in his eyes. The wolf seemed to smile at her with an unmistakable amusement. Her mouth opened to say something, somehow knowing the animal would understand.

Shaking her head, she knew it was a stupid thought. Just a wolf, right? Okay, fine. Astrid Edmonds was stumped. Not a common occurrence, and, quite frankly, she didn't care for it.

As she berated herself for becoming distracted by her own ego, the wolf winked at her and slipped out of his backpack.

Within a fraction of a second, the wolf shifted into a man.

Astrid's limbs froze, her feet pinned to the ground as she mentally sifted through every text in her library to explain what was happening. If it weren't for the unchanged eyes, she would have thought the transition a clever magic trick, the wolf disappearing and the man appearing in its place. Shifters were lost to ancient legends, and certainly no known record of human nor wolf having the ability.

Eyes scanning the man in front of her, a blush flooded her cheeks. Astrid lost her voice, and all thought, really, as she accepted this was a man. A very naked, ridiculously attractive man. From the strong angle of his jaw that was accented by a roguish hint of a beard, to the chiseled abs, to the... unapologetically... completely uncovered... penis.

Air refused to pass in and out of her lungs, and she struggled to find something, anything to say in light of the bizarre change in circumstances. To demand an explanation.

Instead, she blatantly checked him out.

Yet another lesson learned tonight, perhaps the most important of them all: don't go so long without seeing an attractive man naked.

Get a grip, Astrid... she struggled to avert her eyes from, well, his amazing body. *Wow, he was really...*



Grinning at the appreciative reception, Bodie rubbed his hand over the back of his neck as he decided whether to get dressed or claim he had nothing to wear, so he could enjoy her blushing ogle a bit longer. Grammy had made the arrangements, but said she'd spoken to a guy demon hunter, Vann, who'd promised to send one of his team. Werewolves held their secrets close, especially from demon hunters, but Grammy seemed to trust this team.

Bodie hadn't expected the willowy bombshell. Who knew those terms could play together so nicely? Yeah, small tits and narrow hips, but something about those lush lips and honey-brown eyes sealed the deal.

“I, uh... who are you?” Sweet voice, too. Not like benevolent sweet, but a husky soprano, if that were possible.

“Sorry I’m late. Boden Connery. Everyone calls me Bodie,” he extended his hand. Late was a bit of a lie; he’d wanted to get a feel for the hunter before revealing himself. Demon hunters weren’t exactly a werewolf’s best friend.

Then, wouldn’t you know it, but a trio of baddies decided to ruin both of their nights. Nice timing though; he had been worried about how to convince the demon hunters that not only was he a werewolf, but also a good guy. Revealing himself was a risky move, but worth it, and not just for the flattering eye-fuck.

Grinning, he waited for her to respond. A fiery red blush heated her cheeks further. Damn, he liked it. Stubbornly polished, she averted her eyes from his package and silently declined stepping close enough to shake his hand. As she avoided looking at him now that she’d recovered, her gaze now roamed *anywhere else*.

Okay, he needed to leave the ranch more often. His libido was usually a bit easier to tame. But, damn, she was not at all what he had expected.

Keeping busy, she cleaned her swords and sheathed them. “Astrid Edmonds. I... you can’t be who Vann spoke with on the phone. I don’t understand.”

Figures. Demon hunters and their narrow minds. Thought they were the only decent demon-human hybrids out there. There were enough feral werewolves, like tonight’s odorous trio, to blow it for the rest of them. Hence the secrecy.

“I’m not. It was my grandmother.” Turning, he knelt down and pulled his clothes from the backpack. He’d wound up naked enough on vigilante ventures like this one. Grammy finally modified a backpack for him so he could wear it as the wolf.

Demon hunter chick was a curious thing, observing him like a scientist. Well, a horny scientist. It had been getting a bit cool in the June evening anyway, and shrinkage would quickly ruin her first impression of him. Once he felt a bit more presentable in his jeans, black tee, and dusty old hiking boots, he turned to her and shrugged. “Better?”

Nodding, she relaxed her stiff posture, her hands pushing into her pockets, and a genuine, fricking dynamic smile blossomed. Damn, that was worth waiting for. The subtle expression lit her up like a beacon on a foggy day. How would she look, lit up from laughing out loud with an unrepressed grin... or crying out in exhilarated orgasm?

Down boy, he threatened himself. *Don’t let the demon hunter chick catch you fantasizing about her*. Without her team, his pack was toast.

“Never seen a real werewolf before?” He smiled, but found his hand rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

“I have seen a lot of werewolves. The first demon I slayed was a werewolf. You’re not a werewolf.”

“Figures. Come on.”

“What?”

“I’ll walk you back to your hotel. We’ll leave in the morning. You staying at West Montana Inn?”

Pulling her hair out of its ponytail, she ran her fingers through the silky locks. Glossy as the woman, the hair was just as enticing. What would it take to bring her out of that stiff shell? “No, I’m at Glacier Resort.”

“Nice digs. Let’s go.” No cheap hotel for a demon hunter. Not that his pack wasn’t well off, but they didn’t flaunt it.

Nor did they ever leave their secluded ranch. Suffocating compound was more like it. Content to live their entire lives within a hundred-mile radius, the pack didn't exactly need the money. Their investments were primarily intended to fight off the tycoons that continually tried to buy them out. Bordering Glacier National Park, the place was stunning, albeit excessively isolated.

"In a moment. I need to call the coroner first," she pulled out her phone and started dialing.

"Coroner?"

"Yes. We can't just leave these bodies up here for humans to find."

"I was thinking dumpster..." he trailed off. *Coroner?*

She stared at him like he was daft. Well, he felt like it at the moment. Staring right back, he raised his eyebrows in confusion.

Rather than saying more, she did exactly as she'd said. With a few quick beeps, she connected with the local coroner's office and notified them of the human victim, and then asked for a special pick-up requiring their expertise with an "odorous species."

Satisfied, she pushed the end key and slid the phone back into her pocket.

"Uh," he said stupidly. "That's a handy one."

A light, almost smug smile grew on her lips.

Realizing she wasn't saying more, he slid over the side of the roof. They could have broken in and taken the stairs, but she'd gotten herself up here, surely she could get herself back down.

She didn't disappoint. All proper on the outside, but fearless slayer throughout. Lowering from ledge to ledge with a few leaps, she was incredibly agile. Those long limbs were made for climbing.

What else would she climb so well? *Stop it.*

They remained quiet the few minutes it took to climb down the three-story brick building and the half mile up the slope to her hotel. She didn't question as he followed her to one of the cabins on the far side of the property. She unlocked the door and headed straight through the unit and out the sliding glass door.

Nodding her head, she gestured for him to join her on the secluded patio. At home in the classy, yet unassuming cabin, she lit the propane fireplace and parked in one of the cushioned outdoor chairs. Waiting until he joined her, she stiffly leaned back.

Not taking her bait, Bodie hung in the doorway and scoped out the patio, then turned back into the cabin. Opening the fridge in the kitchenette, he found the six pack he'd been hoping she had. Not quite the priss she wanted him to think.

Looks like she'd been here a week or more from the state of the fridge. Good head on her shoulders. He figured she, or whoever Vann sent, would arrive early, get a feel for the area before meeting the mysterious "werewolf expert" with an at-risk ranch. An incautious demon hunter wouldn't have been reassuring.

Popping the tops off of a pair of bottles, he sauntered out to the patio. Casually, he set one of the beers on the ledge of the tiled fireplace in front of her and dropped into the chair next to her. Gazing up at the full moon, he soaked up the invigorating glow.

Stretching his legs, he sank into the chair and savored the silence.

After an impressively long bout of impatient waiting, Astrid scrunched up her brow and scowled at him. "You're not a werewolf." The words were certain, but her tone was lilted with uncertainty.

The corner of his mouth quirked up; his eyes didn't stray from the sky. Nights like this, he could almost smell the cool blue of the moon. He took an easy sip of his beer. "Sure about that?"

An exasperated sigh passed those delicious lips. “Those things on the roof were werewolves.”

“Yep.”

With a growl, she grabbed the beer and curled into the chair as the formality melted away. After a hell of a gulp, big enough to make Grammy nod in appreciation, Astrid scowled at him. “Speak.”

He bit his lip in amusement. “Not a weredog. Wolf. Less trainable.”

This time, a hint of humor flourished on her watermelon pink lips.

Sitting up a bit, he grinned and turned in the plush patio chair toward her. “Astrid?”

Her lips blossomed into an almost-full smile in response to his own.

“You don’t like being wrong, do you?”

Ah, there it was. Gorgeous fucking smile that blazed warm as the sun. “No, I confess, I hate being wrong. It doesn’t happen very often.” One eyebrow raised in adorable arrogance.

“Well, then, I apologize for being the one to lower your stats. I am a werewolf, born and raised. Don’t sweat it; we’re a secretive breed.”

“Born and raised? Is that possible? You’re different from the guys on the roof.”

“I *can* be the guys on the roof. I choose not to be.”

She paused, honey eyes searching his with a thirst for knowledge. First time in his life he didn’t mind being studied. Kinda liked it, actually, how she soaked up every word, watching his lips as he spoke. Werewolves generally avoided study; easy to end up some genius’s thesis. Better to stay under the radar, especially considering what they could turn into with enough provocation.

Not pushy, Astrid was open, keen to drink up his words.

“As the wolf, I am a wolf, with a man flowing through my veins. As the man, I am a man, with the heart of a wolf. The space between is chaos, anger, as the man and wolf battle for a dominance that neither will win. Some crave the power of it, the endless adrenaline rush.”

“You don’t?”

“Hell no. That’s a power no one can control. Anyone who tries, can’t pull out of it and goes feral. That’s why you don’t see many, but when you do, they’re wild, ruthless, and tough to kill.”

“How do you avoid it?”

He took a long pull of his beer and looked at her, unsure.

“Being both, the man and wolf, I mean. That’s all I’ve ever seen. Is that because they were bitten when they were adults?”

His eyebrows scrunched together as he realized just how much the outside world was clueless about werewolves, even demon hunters. Maybe they should scale back on the secrecy a bit. “Lycanthropy isn’t contagious. We are all born from a demon-human hybrid and a human parent, just like you.”

“Wait a moment. You... I’m sorry. I’m just trying to comprehend what you’re telling me. No one bit you?”

“Not lately, but it’s been a while since I’ve gotten laid.” He flashed her a wink and bit his lip impishly.

“Ha ha,” she surprised him by smiling rather than shifting her posture uncomfortably like a stereotypical priss would. There was hope for her yet.

“Seriously though, I shouldn’t be surprised you don’t know much about werewolves. We’re incredibly secretive, or we’d end up at the end of your blade, hanging from a noose, whatever. I’ll spare you the history lesson; it’s not flattering to your kind.”

Her expression darkened, but she kept her eyes on him.

“The nasties on the roof? You call those werewolves because that’s what you know; they are werewolves, but we call them ferals, as they’re beyond saving. It takes a hell of a lot of untamable rage to reach that point. So, part of a werewolf’s rearing includes meditation, martial arts, and education to balance the mind and body to prevent them from letting their anger turn them into a monster.”

“Like Hulk?” Honey eyes glowing with amusement, she curled up into her chair and watched for his reaction.

Bursting from deep in his chest, surprised laughter vibrated through him. “Sort of. Less green. More fur and teeth. But equally violent and brainless.”

Chuckling with him, Astrid didn’t take her eyes off of him. Now he felt like the shy one, hiding behind his beer. Clearing his throat, he sat up in the cushy patio chair. “Anyway. You can find out all about normal werewolves once we get home.”

Raising that eyebrow at him again, she scoffed, “After a good night’s rest.”

“Thought you demon hunters don’t need much sleep.”

“Need and want are two very different things. Sleep is quite restorative.” She sat up in her chair and looked at him expectantly. “Where are you staying?”

“Here,” he shrugged.

“In the main building?”

“I can sleep on your patio as the wolf, but I might scare the landscaper in the morning. Or, I can crash on your couch,” he smiled hopefully. He slept outside a lot as the wolf and didn’t mind it, as he had the last few nights, but that was a comfy looking couch.

Clicking the switch for the fire, she drained her beer with a final swig. “I’m not letting a strange demon crash on my couch.” She moved to the doorway and blocked it with her body, assessing his every movement.

He took a final gulp of his own. “Strange, yeah, I’ll give you that. Demon, sure, I guess, but no more than you. Don’t trust me yet?”

“Why would I?”

“Astrid, if I wanted you dead, or even maimed, I would have joined my estranged brethren on the rooftop tonight.” As his father had warned him, demon hunters liked to pretend they weren’t half demon like the other hybrids. Sure, they’d been created to keep the world safe from demons, but they had the potential to be just as dangerous.

With a haughty flip of her hair, she sighed, “I was doing just fine against those three. I most certainly could have taken you, too.”

Stalking closer, he paused inches in front of her, so she had to look up to meet his gaze. In the light, he was surprised to see a delicate dappling of freckles over her nose and cheeks. She’d probably sock him if he commented on it. “Sure about that?” He bit the edge of his lower lip as he gauged her reaction.

“You don’t scare me,” her eyes searched his in confusion, but her words were firm.

Catching her scent with a subtle sniff, he could tell she meant it. The corner of his mouth quirking up, he shook his head with curiosity, “Then you won’t mind me sleeping on your couch. May as well. Tomorrow, I’ll be taking you miles away from civilization, and you’ll be crashing at my place. Just you and me in the middle of nowhere.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Chest rising slowly up and down, she nodded her head in acceptance.

He quickly added, “And Grammy. And my parents and little sister live next door. So does the rest of my pack.”

“You are relentless,” she smiled softly, her nose turned up in bewildered amusement. Backing up, she waved him in.

Chapter 2

As the moon disappeared on one side of the horizon, rays of the summer sun glimpsed over the opposite. Not a peep from the main room. Astrid wasn't afraid of Bodie. Still, she didn't trust him.

No, that wasn't true. She didn't trust how much she *wanted* to trust him. Charming: yes. Rough around the edges: absolutely. Trouble: no doubt about it. Sexy: hell yes. She had no need for any of the above in her life.

Outside of her demon hunting team, there were few she trusted, and certainly fewer, well, none actually, that she socialized with. Her parents were disinterested at best. With three older siblings, she had more immediate family than most demon hunters. Most of her team had no siblings at all. Hers were... somewhere.

Across the globe. Living their own lives. Left the nest on their eighteenth birthdays when they accepted the demon hunter gift of strength, long life, and healing, in exchange for dedicating their lives to protecting humanity from the monsters that literature is fond of embellishing.

To have a stranger in such close proximity while she slept was downright odd. Not that she'd slept much. Through the thin wall, she hadn't been able to drown out the subtle sound of him stripping out of his clothes and sliding into the sheets of the sofa bed. Far too easy to visualize – in detail – after the show he'd given her on the roof. Tossing and turning on the spring-loaded sofa bed all night, he sounded to have slept as poorly as she had.

By four that morning, his groan echoed through the wall, mirroring the insomniac misery she was drowning in. Little was worse than a sleepless night. He was right; they may as well have left last night.

Smiling to herself, she imagined him lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling like she was. Giving up on any hope of sleeping in, she rose from the bed and pulled on the hotel bathrobe to cover her satin nightgown. Wouldn't that be a pleasant good-morning to her sofa-crasher? She'd seen all of him last night after his change; bet he would appreciate the returned favor.

While she laid out her clothes for the day, she heard the shower switch on. Closing her eyes, she savored the image, a surprising warmth brewing deep in her belly. He seemed to have enjoyed her reaction to him last night. The view had been pretty spectacular; she hadn't been tempted like that in a long time.

Which was part of the problem. Astrid's life plan was very simple.

1. Leave home. Check. Freedom tasted so much better than she'd even hoped.
2. College. Check. Maybe she'd do more of that in the next few years.
3. Find team. Check. They were a pretty great team at that, better than she had expected.
4. Invest in a home she loved. Check. It had taken years of searching, but she'd just bought a house in Seattle. Amazing view, modern yet cozy, and easy distance to her teammates.
5. Fall in love.

Shit, when had she made it all the way through the first four steps? There were supposed to be years between steps four and five. Not a matter of weeks. She wasn't ready.

Dammit, look at what happened to Quinn. Her teammate and one of her best friends, although jealousy-inducing-deliriously-happy-in-love, was pregnant and married well before she had intended. At thirty-three, Astrid had a few hundred years of demon hunting ahead of her. She still had so much to learn about herself. And about demon hunting, apparently, as one of her most common enemies was, evidently, not so evil at all.

Not to mention, and well, probably top-tiered honorable mention, she sucked at dating.

Dumbass, she chided herself. A few steamy looks shared with a sexy-as-sin werewolf that was the paranormal equivalent of a rough-edged cowboy did *not* equate to love. He was absolutely *not* her type. She was getting the L-words mixed up. Hence, she needed some time to build up those dating skills with people that didn't set her hair on fire and make her toes curl in... among other physical manifestations she refused to acknowledge just yet.

The scent of coffee emanating across the cabin tickled her nose, a welcome distraction. *Mmm*. Maybe Bodie wasn't as boorish as he seemed.

Opening the bedroom door, she peered down the hall. No sign of him. She tiptoed toward coffee.

The bathroom door opened just as she was passing. Jumping like a foolish ninny, she pasted a subtle smile on her face and stepped back politely.

Bodie stood lickably wet from head to toe, wearing nothing but a plush white towel slung low over his hips. Grinning, he bit his lower lip. "Mornin'." Rather than releasing her to her task like any normal person would, he leaned against the bathroom doorway, his penetrating blue eyes taking full measure of her.

"Good morning." She exaggerated the phony smile. Since when did she think of a man's skin as lickable? He must be rubbing off on her already... closing her eyes, she tried to shake the visual *that* stirred.

As he clearly missed the hint, she stepped back further and waved her hand to show him the way out of the bathroom.

Irritating man; Bodie didn't budge. "Didn't sleep so well, huh? Terrifying monster in your living room keep you up all night?"

"I slept fine," she lied through gritted teeth. Chin held high, she refused to let her gaze drift lower so she could savor the view of those amazing abs. Certainly, she was *not* hoping the towel would spontaneously slip off and reveal the rest of the delicious image that had kept her from getting a good night's rest.

Flashing her a devious wink, he stood tall. In all his not-quite-naked glory, he stepped closer, his body only inches from hers. How hot of a shower had he taken? Her body temperature rose a solid two degrees from the close proximity. "Try the rain setting on the showerhead; like standing naked in the field during a Montana summer storm."

And the damn blush flooded her cheeks again. Lips forming a hasty smile, she brushed past him and locked the bathroom door with an assertive click. Coffee could wait.

Closing her eyes as the torrential spray trailed down her skin, she absolutely did not picture his wet skin sliding over hers. She did *not* imagine his mouth on hers, his hands gripping her hips and pulling her tight against him.

Who was she kidding? He was *hot*. Besides, a creative imagination was a natural, healthy part of life.



“What’s wrong with my car?” Astrid placed her hands decisively on her hips and fired eye-daggers at him. Decked out in an expensive looking pink plaid shirt over a slim white tank, artfully distressed skinny jeans, and expensive hiking boots—very REI, she looked like a geologist posing for a sexy-nerd magazine cover.

So many things were wrong with the high-priced all-wheel drive, but Bodie didn’t think she’d enjoy hearing his criticism. “First, we have a long-ass drive ahead. We’ll probably be gone for weeks, and I don’t want you to get stuck with the bill for having the rental for so long.”

“I’m not worried about the-”

“Second, parts of the road washed out in the storm a few weeks ago and aren’t passable without some serious four-wheel drive with high ground clearance. And someone who knows which mud-holes to avoid; with all the recent rains, even my truck’s going to have trouble getting in.”

Her foot tapping in an impressively rapid rhythm, Astrid’s rebellious, jaw-clenched indecision was no laughing matter. No matter how much he enjoyed her ferocity. “Fine. But when I’m ready to go, you take me back immediately.”

Sneering, he crossed his arms over his chest. “What kind of guy do you think I am? Not exactly going to hold you hostage.”

“Fine.” She said again. “You haven’t exactly proven yourself to be a gentleman.” At least she muttered the last bit under her breath, but he heard it all the same. She was a real piece of work.

Stepping closer so she had to look up at him, he didn’t uncross his arms. “Maybe not a gentleman, but I’m not an asshole either.”

Honey-eyed scowl softening an inch, he didn’t wait for her to come up with another reason to not ride with him. Excuse after excuse. Bodie was beginning to think she was afraid of him after all.

“Come on. I’ll follow you back to return the rental.” Hiding the smile that teased at the corners of his lips as she held her ground, he relaxed and put his hands on his hips, but couldn’t seem to step away. He’d already learned her prissiness was a façade. How many more times would she try the tactic on him?

“Fine,” she hissed again, clicking open the back hatch of the fancy SUV and pulling out her well-stocked backpack.

He held his hand out to take the bag from her. She nearly shoved it at him, but he saw her swallow her pride and hand it over non-violently.

His hand brushed against hers as he took the handle.

Radiating through his arm like a thousand volts of pure energy, his skin meeting hers for the first time, power, life, longing, ignited at the connection. He blinked as he tried to recover his bearings, but he couldn’t pull away.

Staring at the light physical connection, Astrid’s breath quickened.

He shifted his gaze, desperate to see if she was as dazed as he was. Goopy honey, her eyes locked onto his. Neither looked away.

Flashes of something, *everything*, ricocheted through his brain. *Full grin, delighted laugh, like an apparition she strode toward him through a field of pink lupins. Cradling his jaw in her hands, she rose up on her toes, her glorious lips meeting his.*

Eyes fluttering closed, he tried to grasp hold of the vision before it slipped away. But, as with all good things, it floated away with the breeze.

What the fuck was that? She was attractive, but not at all his type. Not that he had a type. Either way, a snooty demon hunter was not his idea of a summer fling, and absolutely not a potential life partner.

Still, that touch was off-the-charts electric.

Clearing his throat, he nodded to the backpack. Her brow was still scrunched together in confusion, but she released the bag and backed away. Movements forced, or he'd stand there like an idiot all day, he tossed her gear onto the backseat of his truck.

"Astrid?" he whispered, afraid to speak for the confounding emotion that threatened to boil over.

Inhaling forcefully, she slammed the back hatch shut. "Meet you there."

Brain well and truly muddled, he turned and climbed in his Toyota Hilux. Snob that she was, she must realize that his truck was a hell of a lot more expensive than her rental; imported and maxed out in upgrades. Besides, he didn't want to be trapped at the ranch any more than she did. If she wanted to leave, he wouldn't hesitate.

He fired up the engine and slammed his forehead against the steering wheel. His Bluetooth connected and Imagine Dragons blasted from the speakers, reminding him to do *Whatever it Takes*. He shook off the shock of the last few moments and focused on his mission. Bodie turned down the music and shifted into reverse.

After a short drive to the airport, Bodie waited out front of the rental car office for Astrid. Within a few minutes, in all her lithe glory, she strode out with a secretive smile on her face. What made her smile to herself? Whatever it was, the subtle expression fired right into his chest and triggered a disarming flip-flopping sensation.

Typical; by the time she opened the passenger door and climbed into the truck, the smile was gone. In its place, her nose was turned up in that snooty expression she pasted on.

Shifting into gear, he headed toward home. She was quiet on the drive. As they passed through Whitefish and increasingly tiny towns, he pointed out interesting landmarks along the way. While nodding politely, she was in a different world.

By the time they turned off the main road, her brow was drawn in a tight scowl, and she wouldn't even look his direction. Wow, yeah, she was hot, but priss might be too kind of a word.



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- **Hiding Away**: *November 1, 2020*. Natalie is not what she seems. The reserved photographer is laying low in Seaview to hide from her criminal past. Keeping her secret from attorney Aiden McAllister may prove necessary to protect her heart.

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About Carrie Thorne



Carrie's living her own happily ever after (with the inevitable ups and downs that go with it!) with her kids, husband, and dogs in the Pacific Northwest, working full time in healthcare, and always wishing the laundry would fold itself. When she's not rocking the world of romantic fiction, she's exploring the outdoors, travelling (or wishing she was), hanging out with her amazing family, or, quite frankly, she's a total introvert and you can usually find her curled up in front of the fire or in the hammock with a romance novel.

Writing romance is Carrie's not-so-guilty pleasure. She believes in writing genuine and strong characters, promoting positive ideals, that love and happily ever afters are for everyone, kindness is humanity, and she cannot resist a zinging romance.

For more exciting news and juicy details, wander on over to <https://carriethorne.com>.

