

KEIERA PEARSON  
NEUTRAL GROUND



A  
WOLF'S  
MATE  
WALKS INTO A  
BAR

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# Author's Note

No AI was used in the creation of this novel. The words are my own, the characters are my own, the plot is my own, etc etc. It's kind of a weird world out there right now. You don't have to believe me, but it's true.

With that said... this is my first novel. I'm not the best writer in the world, obviously, but I am quite proud of the world I've created. I never thought I would make it this far, but here we are, me with a complete novel and you reading it.

I really hope you enjoy it. If not, well, that's okay, too.

# Dedication

To my husband, thanks for supporting me through this crazy journey, even though I'll probably never let you read this book.

To my friend Jessie, you're the best. For real. I probably wouldn't have gotten this far if I hadn't gotten tipsy one night and sent you my books, lol.

And to my sister, sorry you've had to put up with my incessant book chatter for like the last two years, but I did listen to your WoW lore dumps for years there. Consider us even. Love you.

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# Prologue

Fifteen Years Ago



# Tony

“Tony?” Dad gave my shoulder a hard shake. “Come on, please wake up.”

I flinched away from his touch with a groan. Everything hurt but the pain wasn't unfamiliar anymore. Memories of that very morning rushed back in a cacophony of horror.

My heart rate jumped. A tightness pulled at my chest as I bolted upright. I scrabbled backwards. My shoulders slammed into the kitchen cabinets. I tried to remember how to breathe.

“Dad?” My voice came out a high-pitched squeak. “W- what happened? What did I...?”

It couldn't have happened as I remembered it. It wasn't possible.

The tattered remains of my pajama pants told a different story. So did the scent of fear and fur and blood blanketing the kitchen.

Dad sat on his knees in front of the open half-bath right off the kitchen, the one he barricaded himself in to get away from the wolf, to get away from me. Fear-filled eyes stayed pinned on me. His short brown hair stuck out in every direction, probably from having slept on the couch waiting for me to drag my formerly clueless ass back home. A blood-spotted hand towel wrapped around his arm while a bloodier one lay discarded on the floor behind him.

He lifted his hands, made a sort of 'calm down' motion with them. “Easy, just... just take it easy. Breathe or something.” His jaw clenched. He hesitated, but found his feet and stumbled across the kitchen on shaky legs.

Abject horror coursed through my veins. I didn't know what his intentions were. He hadn't been the type to show much emotion outside of numb indifference ever since Mom walked out on us both years ago. Every once in a blue moon, I'd see some lingering fragment of the man he used to be. Most often, it was his anger, like that morning when he burst into my room demanding to know where I'd been all night.

He accused me of being out screwing around, but it hadn't been like that. The night had gone the same as it had the other two times. I spent the whole day as a jittery mess, overly full of restless energy I didn't know how to burn off. By the time the late summer sun had set, all I could think about was wanting to be outside, wanting to roam. I waited until he fell asleep in front of the TV before slipping out my window.

I woke up in the woods naked and alone before the sun rose. It didn't take long to make it back to the house, to make it back into bed, but the peace lasted maybe thirty minutes before Dad confronted me.

We argued, all I remembered were the dreams... Dreams of running through the woods as a wolf, wild and free and powerful. I thought they were just that, dreams.

I hadn't known the truth, not really, not until I puked up a bunch of fur and guts from the rabbit I ate right in front of him. Not until my body contorted, until my screams became a howl as he watched just a few hours ago.

He reached a trembling hand out towards me.

"Don't touch me!" I jerked away from him and tucked myself tight into the corner by the refrigerator. I wrapped my arms around myself, huddled there in the corner with my legs against my chest. "Stay back. Don't come near me."

"Alright." He raised his hands in surrender and took a few steps back. His

tone softened, but his heart hammered just as fast as mine. “It’s, uh, it’s going to be okay.”

“No it fucking isn’t!”

We stared at each other in awkward silence for several long beats. Neither of us dared to move. Both of us stank of fear.

“I’m going to put on some coffee,” Dad finally said with a grimace. “Then we’re going to sit down at the table. I... I have questions.”

“You think I have answers?” I growled back, narrowing my eyes. “Because I don’t.”

“Let’s just sit down and talk this out—”

“No.” I rubbed at my face and climbed to my feet. My back leaned against the counter for support. “This isn’t happening. It has to be some sort of nightmare.”

“Pretty sure I would have woken up when you bit me if it was a nightmare,” Dad murmured from the other side of the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...” My hands fell away from my face. I stared down at them, my regular-ass hands, already dark for the summer season from spending so much time in the sun. They contorted, changed and turned into black paws just a few hours ago. “Oh god.” Nausea churned in my gut. I swallowed down the burning taste of bile in the back of my throat. “What the fuck am I?”

“You don’t know?” Dad sounded just about as scared as I did.

I shook my head, hung it, and stared down at my bare feet. My hands fell to rest on the counter behind me. At least my pajamas still covered my privates from the front. Couldn’t say the same for the back. The seam had blown out from where I’d grown a fucking tail. “Do you?”

“Fuck no.” He kept a healthy distance between us on his way to the

coffeemaker. His hand shook so badly it was a wonder he managed to fill the pot with water from the sink.

His well practiced motions of starting a pot of coffee were jerky approximations of his usual casual morning routine. It took longer than normal, but he did get a steady stream of coffee flowing into the carafe.

“But...” He lifted his head, his eyes met mine from halfway across the kitchen. “Last night was a full moon.”

I laughed. I didn’t know what else to do. “You think I’m what, a- a werewolf?”

He cringed. At least the word made him just as uncomfortable as it made me. “You did turn into a fucking wolf, Tony.”

“Yeah, and I bit you!” My mouth snapped shut as soon as it came out.

His eyes went wide, his throat worked, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, those wide green eyes fell to his wrapped-up arm. He stared at the appendage as if he just put two and two together.

“Is that how you got it?” he asked after a long silence.

“The last place I saw a wolf was in a fucking zoo. Pretty sure I’d remember one biting me.”

“How long have you known?”

I huffed out an indignant breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I didn’t know, not until this morning. Looking back, shit’s been real weird lately, probably the last three months or so.”

“Is this why you were skipping school?” he asked, sounding much more sympathetic than he had a few hours ago.

“I’ve been feeling off,” I admitted, my words catching in my throat. “My nose has been all fucked up and everything’s... too loud. Being around so many people is torture. I don’t know if I can go back.”

“You have to go back. You’re sixteen, Tony, you have two years left.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. My shoulders drew up in defense. “I don’t care.”

“You are not dropping out of school. Your mother and I—”

“You had a baby, Dad. You weren’t a monster!” My breath came faster and my heart beat a frantic rhythm. Panic sank claws in me, ramped my fear sky-high. “What if that happens while I’m at school? What if I change in front of a bunch of people? You think I won’t end up locked up somewhere to be studied for the rest of my life like some sort of science experiment?”

“That’s not going to happen.” He opened the cabinet with the mugs and pulled two down. After pouring coffee in both, he slid one over to me across the counter.

I caught the mug with a swipe of a shaking hand. I had to think, had to get a hold of myself. What happened to me a few hours ago could never happen again.

The scent of the dark liquid cleared my sinuses. Notes of chocolate, even in the crappy cheap stuff Dad bought, came out once brewed. It gave me a strong scent to focus on and helped drown out the overwhelming noise. A part of me must have known, but I ignored all the signs and changes. I hadn’t wanted to see or acknowledge them.

Dad turned his back to the counter and leaned against it like I did. He left a decent amount of space between us. He sipped at his coffee. “There have to be others like you out there, right? You can’t be the only one.”

“Fuck if I know.”

“We’ll... we’ll figure this out.” He didn’t sound convinced.

We stood there in the kitchen drinking our coffees. An uncomfortable silence stretched between us.

“Do you need to see a doctor about your arm?” I asked, unable to bring myself to look at him. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know why I did that, I—”

“It’s fine.” His reply came way too awkward. His ghostly pale face stared down at the towel wrapped around his arm.

He tugged at the towel and let it fall away to the floor. I’d left a gruesome wound with multiple deep punctures just below his elbow. What should have been a bloody mess of fang-mangled skin had already scabbed over. No way should his arm have healed up that much already.

He blew out a long breath with a whoosh. “That doesn’t look right.”

My blood ran cold. An urge crossed my mind, an instinctual drive. I listened to it and went right to him.

Eyes full of confusion searched my face as I leaned in and sniffed at him to catch his scent. What should have been if not quite comforting, then at least familiar, had a different edge to it.

He needed a shower. He smelled ripe, like BO and stale deodorant from yesterday, but there was something else there, a trace of a scent that didn’t belong. One some foreign piece of my fucked up mind recognized.

The almost empty cup of coffee slipped from my hand. The ceramic mug hit the tile and shattered. Sharp broken bits and the last remaining drops of coffee spilled across the kitchen floor.

“No.” I backed away from him with a shake of my head. Tears burned the corners of my eyes but they wouldn’t fall, not in front of him. “No, this can’t be happening.”

“What can’t be happening?” His words came shaky again.

“Your scent’s wrong.”

“My scent?”

I nodded my head with quick little jerks. A keening whimper sounded from

high in my throat. I had turned on him, bit him, and his scent... Whatever had gone wrong with me was going wrong with him, too.

He wore a pained expression. "So... you think...?" He swallowed, put on a brave face, and stepped closer to me. He lifted a hand as if to comfort me. "Hey, it'll be alright—"

"Don't fucking touch me!" I roared, backpedaling out of the kitchen. I grabbed at my head, desperate to silence the wild thoughts racing through my mind.

*It's all my fault. I'm a monster. What the fuck am I? What did I do?*

# Chapter One

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# Allison

**M**y phone rang the second I pulled into the single-car driveway. I came to a stop in front of my parents' old house and hit answer call.

"You make it there yet?" Mom's concern played heavily through the car's speakers. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry I can't be there to give you the biggest hug right now."

"Just pulled into the driveway," I said with a smile and an ever-so-slight roll of my eyes. "You always have such impeccable timing."

"Pretty sure it's something most mothers pick up at some point. I'm just so glad you finally made it home. Feel free to do whatever you like to the house. We want you to make it your own space if you're going to be staying there a while."

"First things first, I'm painting those kitchen cabinets." I pictured it with a grin. "I thought about it the whole drive. What do you think about teal blue?"

"Go for it," she replied with a laugh. "And don't worry about finding a job or anything just yet. I want you to relax and take a breather. Take some time to figure out what you want to do."

"That's the plan."

I needed to figure myself out since I'd come back home with my tail between my legs. Burnt out, broke... lost. The corporate life, it turns out, was not for me.

Three weeks ago, I broke down while on the phone with Mom. My rent had gone up again and I couldn't afford to renew my lease. Mom offered to let

me move into the house she and Dad had just moved out of so long as I took care of the place.

The house was a cute little number sized perfectly for two. The only drawback? It was just outside the downtown of an up-and-coming city in a southern state I'd never spent more than a long weekend in.

My parents moved there my sophomore year of college for Dad's job. They moved away again for the same reason. I knew no one in my new city except a few of the neighbors thanks to Mom's overly social nature, but that didn't scare me. I looked forward to a genuine opportunity for a new start.

As soon as they gave me the green light, I gave notice at my job and told my landlord I'd be moving out. After selling what I could of my meager possessions, I packed up what remained, got in my car, and hit the road.

"Oh! I know what you should do," Mom said in that airy way of hers. "You should take some time to explore downtown. There's this bar just a few blocks away that does the whole fancy cocktail thing. We never made it over there during any of your visits, but I think you'd like it."

She paused.

I waited for it.

"You might meet someone if you get out of the house every once in a while."

"I'm not really looking for a relationship right now," I said, using my gentle, non-accusatory voice. "I kind of want to sort myself out before I get all tangled up in someone else's drama again."

"Well, one might find you anyway." She laughed a bit at that. "As soon as I mentioned to Tilly you were taking over the place, she mentioned a single grandson of hers. He's an engineer, apparently."

"That's nice, Mom." Of course Mom's overly nosy neighbor across the

street would try to set me up with one of her many grandkids before I even crossed the threshold. “If you talk to Tilly before she catches me, please don’t encourage her.”

“I won’t so long as you promise not to be so hard on yourself. I don’t want you even thinking about getting a job for at least a month. You need to take some time to de-stress.”

My mother knew me all too well. “I’ll give it two weeks just to make you happy.”

“I want *you* to be happy, Allie. Take as long as you need. I put some money in your account to cover a few home projects. Get your hands dirty and take some time to figure things out. Your father and I will support you no matter what.”

I wiped away the tears before they had a chance to fall as we ended our call. What did make me happy? I didn’t have a clue, but I would figure it out one way or another. At least I could do it in a new environment without paying an arm and a leg for rent.

Mom was right. She usually was. I needed to get over my disappointment in myself and be thankful my parents were amazing. They didn’t just tell me to figure myself out on my own time and dime. Instead, they’d given me the opportunity of a lifetime.

And I refused to let them or myself down again.

# Tony

It was time to let someone down again. I'd let the situation go on far too long and couldn't stomach it anymore.

"Hey, Sarah?" I slid in next to her where she ran a card to close a tab. "Mind taking care of the woman in red for me?"

Sarah's blue-gray eyes lined with dark shadow gave the woman at the far side of the bar a quick once over. She raised a dark eyebrow. "Won't leave you alone?"

"Second time this week she's been in here," I grumbled.

"Three times." Sarah didn't glance back at either me or the woman who kept getting more and more insistent I should take her home for the evening. "She was in yesterday asking after you."

"Seriously?"

Sarah sighed and shook her head. "Honestly, I'm surprised she's back. I tried to discourage her."

"What'd you say?"

She glanced up to meet my glare with a smirk. I knew Sarah well enough to know if she said she tried to be discouraging, she'd tried to be discouraging. She knew how uncomfortable certain kinds of attention made me. She'd tease me every once in a while about it, but never hesitated to shut shit down when I asked. She was good like that.

"I told her she wasn't your type. Didn't seem to get through to her, though." Sarah's dark red lips twisted to the side. "You want to take a break? I can

handle it out here for a little while.”

I ran a hand through my messy hair and managed not to sigh in relief. “Yeah, I’ll be out back for a minute. Thanks, Sarah.”

“Anytime, bud.”

I didn’t think twice about breezing through the employee-only door to escape outside for some much needed air. The scents of the bar, all the people, their drinks, perfumes, and crap... I just needed a minute to regroup.

And maybe a few extra minutes for Sarah to take care of the woman in red who, in no uncertain terms, had propositioned me. She’d been rather direct. Most women weren’t. Most would smile, maybe act nervous, but politely back off when I showed not an ounce of interest. The woman in red doubled down.

Continuing past the breakroom, I stalked straight out the back door to meet the cool night air. Outside, I didn’t feel so caged in. Like an impostor that didn’t belong. Could be unbearable in the alley during the summer heat, but the cold of early winter muted the scents.

Taking a deep breath, I lifted my chin and looked to the sky. Clear night, kind of cold, a few stars out, no moon. Quiet. I liked it quiet. It took a minute, but the raw nerves settled back down again.

Why couldn’t I just be fucking normal? Or why couldn’t Ethan, another co-worker of mine, have caught that woman’s attention instead of me?

I could have been screwing around with a different partner every damn week like Ethan if I wanted, but I didn’t want. I couldn’t stand the attention, could barely handle people touching me, much less the thought of getting intimate with anyone. Unfortunately, I got propositioned more than I ever wanted, considering the profession I’d fallen into.

Being a bartender wasn’t exactly the best fit for a guy who was not the

biggest fan of being around people, but it paid the bills. My boss, Owen, knew all about my monthly problem and kept me on anyway. He even made accommodations here and there to make it work. As far as I could tell, no one suspected anything was up with me besides thinking I was a bit weird and had some sort of anxiety problem.

My life would have been so much easier if all I had was an anxiety problem.

Cold brick pressed against my back and cooled my skin through my dress shirt. It took some of the edge off. I'd given thought once upon a time to attempting to get close to someone. Managed it once, but it hadn't lasted long. It just felt wrong. Maybe it was wrong. I didn't truly want to be alone, but it was best for everyone, including me.

I gave myself a few minutes to calm down and the woman enough time to move on.

Sarah must have heard the back door open again. She peeked through the employee-only door before I ducked into the stockroom. I wanted to grab a few bottles so it might have looked like I wasn't completely useless.

"She's gone," Sarah said the second she laid eyes on me. "You can come out of hiding now."

Relief washed over me. "Thanks."

"You know, maybe it wouldn't hurt for you to get out every once in a while." Her darkly made-up eyes softened just a bit. "Making some friends might do you some good."

"I don't go out." I pulled open the stockroom door a little harder than necessary.

"You always say that, but just hear me out, Tony."

I paused, knowing it would go over better if I listened then politely declined

like always.

Sarah slid the rest of the way through the door, leaned against the door frame, and crossed her arms over her chest. “There’s this running group Ethan and I go to sometimes on Saturday mornings,” she started, her tone cautious. “There wouldn’t be much pressure to socialize. They’re a good bunch, really inclusive.”

“I’m good, thanks.” My eyes dropped to the floor. She wasn’t making a pass or anything. She tried once when we first met, but she respected my ‘not interested’ and hadn’t ever brought it up again. Still, she and Ethan occasionally tried to coax me out of the confines of the bar. They probably figured they’d wear me down one day.

They wouldn’t. I stuck to my own territory.

Sarah heaved a sigh so dramatic I almost smiled. “Maybe one day someone will be able to haul you kicking and screaming out of that giant shell of yours.”

That got a faint smile out of me, not that I let her see it. “Don’t count on it.”

# Chapter Two

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# Allison

“Will you please just go out tonight, sweetie? You’ve been working so hard on the house and it looks great, but I also want you to go have some fun.”

“I know, you’re right. I just feel weird spending money on myself while I don’t have a job.”

“Would it help if I said to think of it as an early birthday present?”

“My birthday’s not for another six months, Mom.” That didn’t stop her from putting more money in my account yesterday, though.

“Half-birthday, then?”

“Since when have we done half-birthdays?”

“No time like the present.”

I laughed. She could be persistent when she wanted to be. So could I, but I knew when to admit defeat.

“Okay, fine. I will go out tonight and tomorrow I will work on some sort of life plan.”

“There’s no rush,” Mom replied in her ‘I know best’ tone. “It’s only been two weeks since you moved in. Go grab some dinner, maybe get a nice drink somewhere. It’s okay to take a break, sweetheart.”

“I know,” my voice went all soft as I replied. “This *is* me taking a break.”

Mom tutted. “I’m serious. Go out, meet some people, make some new friends. Just because you aren’t looking for a relationship doesn’t mean you can’t have a good time with whoever catches your eye.”

“Please tell me you did not just suggest what I think you did.”

“What’s wrong with something casual? You’re young and single. If I didn’t have your father, I probably—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence,” I said with a half-hearted groan. “I’m hanging up now.”

“You’re so serious sometimes, Allie,” she said with a chuckle. “It’s okay to cut loose sometimes. Take a chance and walk on the wild side.”

“I am so not wild,” I muttered into the phone. “But I’ll take your suggestion under advisement.” Not that I really would. A good book and my vibrator were way less trouble than trying to find a compatible partner. Bonus, they didn’t expect me to cook for them or clean their nasty bathroom.

# Tony

“You do realize what tonight is, don’t you?” I hissed into the phone. “I can’t stay late, Owen, you know that.”

“Normally I wouldn’t ask, but Ethan called out and I cannot get out of this gig early. Is there any way you can make it three more hours?” Owen pleaded.

“I’m on edge enough as it is and Sarah leaves in a few minutes. I’ll be by myself until you get back.”

“You can handle this, Tony. I’ll be back in plenty of time for you to get home. However much you make in tips tonight, I’ll double it.”

I scoffed. “You still owe me for this. Big time.”

“I will make it up to you and I promise to start looking for another bartender tomorrow, okay?”

“Fine. Good luck with your... thing,” I murmured, already over-anxious. As much as I didn’t want to stay late, Owen had obligations of his own. It wasn’t his fault Ethan called out on the same night Owen was scheduled to work a Registry party. It was just a shitty combination of circumstances that fell on the worst day of the month for me.

“I don’t need luck. What I need is a registered employee to foist dealing with these assholes off on.”

“Well, good luck finding one, because that will never be me.” As a rogue wolf shifter, I would not be setting foot anywhere near an off-site party to mix drinks for a bunch of magic-slinging, hoity-toity mages. If a single one

of them found out about my existence, my quiet, lonely little life would be well and truly over.

The Registry existed to keep tabs on all magically inclined individuals, whether they were born that way or not. Magic ran in families, mages were born with it, at least according to Owen. Shifters like me, however, were born with jack shit. We were human until we weren't.

Owen should have reported my existence to the Registry when he met me. I should have been registered, added to some secret magic database somewhere, but Owen didn't trust them so neither did I. I remained a rogue, unregistered wolf, in a city full of mages and served quite a few of them booze right under their clueless noses. As long as none of them suspected a damn thing, the Registry wouldn't be after me anytime soon.

Owen let out one of those chilling laughs of his. "Guess I'll see you in a few hours, then."

Once we said our goodbyes, I dropped the phone down to my side, lifted my chin to stare at the ceiling, and groaned. Why, of all nights, did I have to get stuck working alone during a full moon?

Three hours, I could do three hours, right? Besides, it was a weeknight, it wasn't like it could get all that bad.

Less than ten minutes after Sarah bid me goodnight, a rowdy bachelor party waltzed in through the door. That made perfect sense because fuck me.

The scent of booze already clung to the group of barely legal-looking men. They jabbered on about last nights of freedom and balls and chains. There were close to a dozen of them, all loud and cheerful. Based on pure bartender's intuition, every one of them would want an overcomplicated custom concoction. It would mean bigger tips but be a complete pain in the ass.

Other than the party, a couple occupied a table in the back corner and a mid-thirties blond in a suit sat at the end of the bar. The suit hadn't ordered yet, but he was a regular and always ordered the same thing. I figured I'd get him out of the way first after throwing a hopefully friendly-sounding greeting at the bachelor party and laying out some menus for them.

"Evening, D." I produced a grimace that might have passed for a smile and tossed a coaster his way. "Didn't see you come in. What can I get you this evening?"

I may not have seen him come in, but there was no mistaking his scent. D was the only mage who came in more than once a week. He usually stopped by to chat with Owen, but sometimes he came just to sit, drink, and watch the world pass him by.

"Just the usual," he replied with a small wave of his hand and a glance around the suddenly much more occupied space. He grimaced as his light eyes roved over the party group congregating on the far side of the bar. "Looks like you're in for a rough night."

"Yeah, tell me about it," I muttered, reaching for the rail gin. At least the guy liked a simple drink.

"You here by yourself tonight?" He quirked an eyebrow as I poured a shot into an old-fashioned glass.

"Ethan called out and Owen's working a private party. Not like it's a big deal. I could use the money." Of course I could use the money, but in another hour I'd be past antsy and well into barely contained irritability. Not that I wasn't already irritable. "So, what brings you in tonight?"

"Oh, the usual." The impeccably dressed mage sounded almost bored, but amusement played in his eyes. "Just wanted a quiet drink tonight."

"This look quiet to you?" I asked with a snort, setting the gin and tonic

down on his coaster.

“No, but I think I’ll stick around for a little while.” He tipped his glass in my direction. “I’m up for a bit of entertainment.”

# Chapter Three

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# Allison

A full moon shone through a cloudless sky overhead. The cold winter breeze tugged at the corners of my open coat. Only a few people littered the streets other than me.

I wandered aimlessly after having gotten a bite to eat. Mom was right. I did need to explore my new home, to get out and familiarize myself with the area. Just about the only place I'd visited more than once in the past two weeks besides a hardware store had been the downtown library.

After dropping the library book I finished over dinner into the drop box, I checked the time on my phone. Just past eight, it was still pretty early. Another book sat in my purse, one I hadn't started yet. I could read a few chapters over a nice cocktail. What was that bar Mom kept mentioning she liked? Catacomb? Tomb? Something in that vein I seemed to recall.

An iron sign backlit with amber lights caught my eye. The Crypt. Right, that was the one. A dark brick building housed the bar. Faint light came through a single large, darkly tinted window. The door was a large, heavy wooden number, possibly the same one that had been mounted when the building went up more than a hundred years ago. Trusting Mom's judgment, I grabbed the iron handle and walked on in.

I entered a madhouse. An on-trend, upscale, dim, natural wood and iron madhouse. A group of cajoling young men occupied the plush couches in the far back corner. A few others stood around the open floor holding drinks while they chatted, and a few more sat at the wooden bar top.



While not packed, the place had a sort of hectic vibe. A lone employee worked as fast as he could behind the counter. A quick glance around confirmed he seemed to be the only bartender on duty. I didn't get a good look at him until I slipped onto an empty bar stool.

The bartender had rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt to reveal strong, dark tan forearms. He wasn't an intimidatingly tall or large man, but he had quite a nice shape to him. Every time he ducked his head down to cut some garnish or fire an orange peel, loose curls of dark hair curtained his face. He could have probably pulled most of that mop back in a tiny ponytail. And his eyes... a light shade, either blue or green. I couldn't tell the exact color at a distance, but they made for a striking contrast with his skin tone.

I didn't bother trying to get his attention. My plan had been to start reading another book over a good drink, but instead I sat my chin in one hand, hid the cover of my book with the other, and watched the handsome bartender make a gin martini. Having been a bartender for a year and a half in college, I knew how stressful it could be, especially on an unexpectedly busy weeknight.

The guy behind the bar was good. He worked fast, had quick and steady hands, but he couldn't keep up. No one could. He took orders, made drinks, and handled payments with well-practiced ease, but he fell further and further behind. He still hadn't looked my way, either.

I didn't mind. I enjoyed my quiet observation. Besides, I hadn't walked in wanting to do anything rash but watching the man about my age behind the bar...

He handed two more drinks off before turning and lifting his chin. His light eyes narrowed. A muscle in his five o'clock shadow covered jaw twitched the second he caught sight of me. He froze and stared at me with slightly parted lips. Those enticing eyes of his met mine.

Time slowed or maybe stopped altogether, but only a beat or two of my heart must have passed before someone else called for his attention. Then there he went, off again in a rush.

At least he'd finally seen me. I had sort of slipped in and tried not to be noticed. Sort of sat there and watched him for close to ten minutes without a word. He hadn't frozen like that when he caught anyone else's eye. So why that reaction to me? Had he noticed me watching him like a voyeur? Sort of an embarrassing thought.

I'd watched him work and saw how dexterous he could be with his fingers. My wandering mind imagined those fingers doing some rather interesting things to me. A tiny smile graced my lips. Maybe the bar would be empty. Maybe he could sit me up on the back counter, kneel in front of me, and use his pouty mouth to make me moan.

I shook away the sudden intense daydream and hoped I hadn't started blushing. Leave it to my libido to try and take the reins the first time an attractive man looked my way in months. As much as I wanted to fantasize about the overworked guy behind the counter, it wasn't right. He was at work and I was just a customer. Nothing would ever come of it.

He made a few more drinks and took a few more orders while I tried not to pay so much attention to him. He didn't need me fawning all over him. I pushed him out of my mind and studied the liquors displayed on open shelving behind him instead.

The Crypt carried an impressive variety of alcohols. Some of the fancier ones I'd never had the opportunity to taste. The bar I worked behind in college served up pitchers of beer over premium liquors, but I still learned to mix all the standard cocktails like a champ there.

The bartender must have made it through his backlog of mixed drink

orders. He appeared in front of me and tossed a coaster down next to my book without making eye contact. One of his hands grabbed a glass while the other snagged a bottle of well whiskey.

“What can I get you?” he asked in a noticeable southern accent.

Green, I noted in the dim light, his eyes were a stunning shade of green.

“Are you all alone tonight?” It came out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

It did at least get his attention.

# Chapter Four

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# Tony

I took orders, mixed drinks, and tried to make sure everyone stayed in good spirits while I wanted to run straight out the back door. For once in my life, I almost looked forward to letting go of myself for a few hours.

While mixing yet another fruity concoction, my brows furrowed. A peculiar scent caught my nose, fresh citrus mixed with a slight salty tang of what I expected sea air to smell like.

I finished mixing the drink without paying much attention to my surroundings, still ruminating on that scent and why I couldn't get it out of my head. I glanced around, sniffed the air, tried to be discreet on account of the room chock full of people. To my left, someone at the bar?

Her.

A woman about my age sat at one of the stools close to the door with her elbow on the bar and her chin resting in one hand. In the dim light, the short hair bushing against her cheeks could have been a dark brown or a black with a slight wave to it. She had a pretty, roundish face with clear, sun-kissed skin even in the dead of winter. The cover of a closed book lay hidden under her other hand, but she wasn't interested in her book. Dark eyes caught mine the moment I caught sight of her.

I fucking froze. I had to have seen women more beautiful than her before, right? Something about her... I couldn't put a finger on it. All I knew was I wanted her in a way I'd never wanted anyone before. That scent, it belonged to her. I wanted to bathe in it, needed it on me like I needed water to live.

“Hey, you forget my old fashioned?” a customer asked loud enough to startle me out of my... whatever the fuck I was doing.

“Working on it, sorry.” I shook my head hard, buried all the crazy back down deep to get through the next two hours. Since when had the wolf’s instincts had that much sway over my state of mind?

I made more drinks, got them out, but I couldn’t ignore the dark-haired woman forever. I took a deep breath, huffed it out and imagined building a tiny little cage around the wild thoughts raging in the back of my mind.

It had to be because it was a full moon. That was the only thing that made sense. I wouldn’t let Owen leave me alone during one ever again.

*Don’t look at her. Keep your head down, get her order and go.*

“What can I get you?”

“Are you all alone tonight?” the woman asked.

Fuck, her voice... all smooth and casual with no hesitation at all.

“Huh?” I made the mistake of lifting my head to meet her gaze and forgot how to use words.

Dark brows furrowed over soulful, dark brown eyes. “Are you the only one working?”

“Uh, yeah,” I sputtered out when my ability to form words finally kicked back in. “Just me tonight.”

“Kind of busy for just one bartender, don’t you think?” She set her other elbow on the counter and shot me a warm smile that may as well have been weaponized.

“Someone called in,” I replied with a wave of my hand, finally managing to get myself under some semblance of control, “and my other employee had a personal thing, so... here we are.”

“You want some help?”

I tilted my head and blinked at her for what felt like a long time. “You a bartender?”

“It’s been a while, but I could use a job.” Her elbows slid off the counter. She sat up straight and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “I just moved here and haven’t gotten around to looking for one yet.”

I couldn’t think of anything better to say besides, “You serious?”

She laughed, a melodic sound that should have been accompanied by an angelic choir as far as I was concerned. Sliding off her bar stool, she jammed her book into her purse and scooped up her jacket from the hook beneath the bar.

“Is that a ‘yes, I would like some help before the people in here start a riot’?”

“Y-yes?” I stammered out, watching her move from one side of the bar to the other towards the entrance to the back. She sidled around to the employee side before my brain could catch up to what was happening.

“Not going to ding me for not being in uniform, are you?” she asked, her lips curling into an amused sort of grin as her cheeks brightened to a rosy pink.

Her attire could have been dressier, but she wasn’t too far outside of our dress code in her dark wash jeans and plain silky blouse. She had a nice shape to her, one I found myself admiring. What would she look like wearing one of my shirts instead of hers? How much better would she smell with my scent all over her?

It took everything I had to keep a neutral expression as I shook my head.

“You have a coat rack somewhere back there and an apron I can use?”

“In the back,” I directed, still dumbstruck, following after her as if magnetized.

An intense, low rumble of a whisper clawed through my head, my chest, as I studied her back. It wasn't an actual voice, more like a feeling, an emotion, a truth of the universe.

*Mine.*

I shoved the rogue thought away. That was... new. I hadn't ever noticed anyone before. Was it some crazy wolf thing thanks to the full moon or had the wolf just clawed its way too close to the surface?

"Hey, can I get that diet soda I ordered like five minutes ago?" the sharp crack of a woman's voice cut through my hazy brain.

I snapped back to myself. "Yeah, right, sorry, I got it," I uttered apologetically, turning back to the bar to reorient myself. Just two hours to go before Owen made it back. I could make it just two more hours.

The curious woman reappeared a minute later with one of our black aprons tied around her waist. I vaguely wondered if letting her behind the bar was even legal, but I didn't have the fortitude to turn her down.

"Where do you want me?" She cast me a sideways glance before surveying our battleground full of loud bar patrons.

*Up against the wall in the back alley.*

*No! Down. What the fuck is wrong with me?*

"Bachelor party on the couches at the back wall. I haven't checked with them in a while," I managed to get out as I sat another finished drink on the counter for a middle-aged guy. "Then you can help me back here." Good idea to get her away from me for at least a few minutes. I hoped I could handle her working behind the bar in my state.

"I'm Allison, by the way." She stuck out her hand for me to shake.

"Uh..." I hesitated to take her hand. I hated having to touch or being touched by other people, but a part of me refused to deny the invitation.



As soon as our palms met, as soon as my fingers curled around hers, I forgot my fucking name. My thumb smoothed across the soft skin on the back of her hand. My abs tensed against the shiver that raced up my spine.

She lifted an eyebrow.

I probably should have let go of her hand. And told her my name. Before I could, her hand slipped out of mine and I fought the urge to reach out and grab it again.

“T- Tony Reynolds,” I finally stammered out.

“Well, nice to meet you, Tony Reynolds,” she replied with the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen. “Something tells me I found myself in the right place tonight.”

# Allison

It was kind of cute how flustered and overwhelmed poor Tony was. Anxious energy surrounded him and tainted his every interaction with me. Was that a normal thing for him? Did he get nervous around strangers? How long would it be before he didn't get all jumpy every time he glanced my way?

"How long have you been a bartender?" I asked as we prepped drinks side by side, him a margarita and me an old fashioned.

"Since we opened." He didn't glance up as he answered. "Eight, nine years ago, maybe?"

"You must like it here." I managed to catch his eye for one brief, heart-stopping moment.

He shrugged. "Not sure where else I'd be, to tell you the truth. What about you? How long you been a bartender?"

"It's kind of been a long time since I've done anything like this." I rubbed an orange peel around the edge of my glass, putting the final touch on yet another drink. "It's like riding a bicycle, though. Everything is coming back."

"How long ago?" He handed off his margarita as I handed off my old fashioned.

"Eight years," I admitted, reaching for a martini glass. I'd already made more than a few mistakes, but the more drinks I made, the more things came back to me. The Crypt had a good drink guide behind the counter for all their

custom cocktails. After the first half hour, I knew my way around the rail well enough to take some pressure off him.

“That long?”

“Yeah, sorry, maybe this was a dumb idea,” I replied with an awkward laugh. “But I do actually need a job. That’s still true. And I’ve got to say, of all the jobs I’ve had, being a bartender was by far my favorite.”

“Oh yeah?” He cast another sideways glance at me. His brows furrowed in this adorable, confused sort of way. “Why’s that?”

I may as well have melted into a puddle of goo right then and there. Why did he have to be so awkwardly sexy?

“I think I just like the chaos,” I admitted with a shrug. “There’s nothing quite like the crowds, the mess, and the craft of it all. It’s hard work, but there’s so much more energy here than in any of the offices I’ve ever worked in.”

“I always thought working in an office would be boring as shit, but don’t glamorize this job.” He pinned me with that intense green gaze of his. He dropped his voice to something low no one else would have been able to overhear. “It’s hard, you’ll get dirty, the hours and the customers can be brutal, but I guess the pay’s not bad.”

I tried not to blush as my brain pictured what he might look like hard, dirty, and brutal. That didn’t help things in the slightest.

I couldn’t help it. That intensity of his made me all weak in the knees. A bead of sweat ran down the middle of my back. I had to pause and take a breath. Was it my imagination, or did he smell really freaking good? Why was I noticing how good he smelled?

“I’m not glamorizing it,” I replied carefully. “I know how tiring it can be, how crazy. There’s just something about it I can’t put my finger on, you

know?”

“I guess?” He cast me a curious side-eyed glance, then flit off to the other side of the bar.

We stayed busy for quite some time. The pace and rhythm of it all came back bit by bit. The friendly banter with customers came easy and it didn't take long to figure out how to start and close out tabs. I worked my way around the bar to pick up empties and take new orders. It took some time before Tony and I ended up in the same place again.

I moved behind him, placed a hand on his lower back, and reached around him to grab the bottle of vodka right in front of him. He tensed up the moment I touched him. I wondered if I shouldn't have done it, but then the heat of his skin under his shirt hit my hand. That heat had me wanting to rip that shirt right off him and touch him everywhere.

A tremor ran through Tony's back as my fingers closed around the neck of the vodka bottle. I pulled it out from in front of him.

“Sorry, just, um, need to get by you.” Some of the heat from his back may as well have transferred straight to my cheeks.

His eyes found mine with a gaze that couldn't possibly have been as heated as it looked.

I did my best to shoot him a hopefully flirty grin, then scampered away to the other side of the bar. I wanted him. I wanted him bad. What the heck was wrong with me and why did I kind of like it?

“Wasn't sure I'd ever see the day,” a handsome blond man in a rather smart suit said to me. He had an accent I couldn't immediately place. “Glad I stuck around tonight.”

“I'm sorry?”

“He”—the man motioned to Tony—“didn't even try to stop you.” His eyes

never left mine as he took a sip of the gin and tonic he'd been nursing for the past hour. "He'll never admit it, but he needs all the help he can get."

I glanced over my shoulder. Tony stood at the far reaches of the bar with his attention entirely focused on taking the order of a group of younger women. They fawned over him. I didn't blame them in the least.

"Oh?" I set my elbows on the counter and leaned forward. My curiosity got the best of me. "And why's that?"

The blond's smile turned warm. "Because I'm quite sure fate brought you in here tonight." He tipped his drink towards me. "This place has been down a bartender for nearly a month now."

"You think I'll actually be hired on?" I desperately wanted to be if it meant I got to spend more time with Tony.

"I do know the owner. I'd say your chances are good."

He could have been joking with me, but on the off chance he wasn't, I couldn't help but ask, "Do you know if he's really been working here since this place opened?"

My gaze drifted to Tony again. He still had his back turned. He leaned forward against the counter himself, giving me a very satisfying view of the seat of his pants pulled taut across his behind. His shoulders tensed up as he chatted with the pretty girls in front of him. One of them reached out to touch his arm.

It shouldn't have bothered me, but a tiny twinge of jealousy bubbled up. I wasn't the jealous type. We'd known each other for barely an hour, so why did I care?

And why did I feel so satisfied when he jerked his arm out of her reach?

"Of course he has. He belongs here, same as you." A sly smile greeted me when I turned back around. The blond stranger set his glass down and thrust

his hand at me. “I’m D, by the way. Since you’ll be sticking around, I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other quite often.”

“Allie.” I took his hand and shook it without a second thought. “And I’m not sure if I’ve officially been given a job yet, so maybe don’t get your hopes up on seeing me again.” I shot him a careful smile as I finished making yet another martini from the special menu for a different customer. “This has been quite the unexpected night, though, I’ll give you that.”

He leaned forward, set his elbows on the counter, and clasped his hands together. “Oh, you have no idea.”

# Chapter Five

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# Tony

**T**he longer she hung around me, the more her scent shifted. She wore a hint of sweat, sure, but something else...

It lingered in the air, plain as day, and overpowered absolutely everything. As far as the animal was concerned, she wanted me, maybe even as much as I wanted her. I should have rebuffed her, could have lied and told her I had a partner or something since my self-control hung by a thread, but I liked it. I really fucking liked it and I wasn't used to liking much of anything.

*One more hour. I can last just one more hour.* I grit my teeth, finished cleaning up, and tried to get my ass back in line.

"You seem a bit on edge tonight." D regarded me with a concerned expression and a recently emptied glass. "Everything alright?"

"I'm fine," I snapped. "It's just been a long day." The crowd had thinned from its peak. Allison seemed to have everything under enough control for me to take a minute or two to just breathe. To try and calm down.

Claws poked at my insides. That side of me knew the time for freedom drew close but also knew better than to push at me too hard. Why did it have to be so loud? It pissed me off, frustrated me, and drove me so insane I could barely focus. At the center of it all, there she was. An angel sent to torture me with a hunger I'd never experienced before.

"Your new friend has made herself right at home back there with you," D said in a strangely soft sort of way.

"Y- yeah, she has." Did I sound like as big of a dreamy idiot as I felt?



He slid off his bar stool and grinned at me. “For your own sake, try not to push her away or scare her off.”

My brows knit together and my head tilted to the side like a confused dog’s.

D chuckled and dismissed me with a wave. “Goodnight, Tony.”

“Yeah, night.” My narrowed eyes tracked the strange blond mage all the way to the door.

Forty-five minutes later, the back door slammed open.

My head snapped up at the noise. “Heading to the back for a sec,” I threw over my shoulder at Allison before escaping through the employee-only door. I had to head Owen off before he could notice her, tell him... something, a short version of the truth maybe, before I got the fuck out of there.

“Hey, sorry I’m so late,” Owen said with a sigh, looking worse for wear. He untied his hair and quickly redid his low ponytail. “You doing okay?”

“Barely holding on,” I admitted with a shiver, not bothering to sugarcoat it.

He studied me with dark eyes. “Something happened, didn’t it?” He took his jacket off and started to hang it up, but paused. His usual coat hook held a cream-colored wool coat I had half a mind to take with me when I ran out the back door.

I wanted to roll around on it, to cover myself in the scent of it. Allison’s scent belonged all up on me and I wanted mine all up on her, too.

It was so stupid. Why wouldn’t the wolf settle the fuck down?

Owen eyed the out-of-place jacket. He hung his up on the hook next to it.

“Something you want to tell me?” he asked, raising those thin black brows of his.

I debated running out the door and leaving him to figure everything out via context clues, but I still had a few more minutes before things got dire. The slim man before me crossed his arms over his chest. He was dressed in his

usual all-black ensemble, but he smelled off. His normal smoky scent trended too spicy. Not surprising since he'd been stuck in a room full of mages for hours.

The door to the front opened.

“Tony?” Allison peeked her head through the doorway. “Could you get more well vodka while you're back—”

She cut herself off as soon as she noticed me and Owen standing halfway between the door to the front and the back one Owen breezed through not even a minute ago.

Owen's eyes narrowed. They crinkled at the corners as he glared at Allison. “Uh, hi? Who the hell are you?”

“Allie Bridges. Tony hired me a few hours ago,” she replied with caution.

Owen's mouth pressed together in a thin, harsh line. Dark eyes full of shadows landed on me. “Did he now?”

That glare of his had me cringing back like a fearful dog. I wouldn't have said I hired her. I'd just been too shell-shocked to refuse her offer to help.

Allison's eyes narrowed as she took in our two vastly differing expressions. “Are you the boss, then?” She set a hand against one perfectly curved hip.

“It's my bar,” Owen replied coldly.

“Well, you had one employee out there trying to serve a bar full of people, so I offered to help. If that's your normal management style, maybe this isn't the job for me, after all.”

Horror coursed through my entire being. “Whoa, wait, no, you can't leave.”

Two sets of eyes snapped straight to me, Owen's wide with incredulous shock while Allison's softened with a spark of amusement.

*Fuck. Fix it. Don't scare her away and don't be weird.*

“I mean...” I took a deep breath and tried to gather my thoughts into

something that wouldn't sound awkward as hell. My glower dared Owen to challenge me on it. "You said yourself we needed to hire someone. Well, she said she needs a job and I needed the help. Problem solved, right?"

Owen snorted, dropped his eyes from mine in submission, and threw his hands up. "Alright, fair enough, she's hired. Sure saves me some time." He cast me a suspicious glare but it quickly faded away, probably on account of how close to gone I must have looked.

Deep inside me, gnashing teeth and claws fought their way to the surface. I had just minutes before I lost myself. No way would I make it home before being forced to surrender.

"Go on," Owen's tone softened. He waved a hand towards the back door. "I've got it from here. Sorry I couldn't get back any faster."

I nodded, grateful for the dismissal. My rough, "Thanks. Night," came out a growl. I shook my head to try and clear it as I fought the urge to bolt for the back door. Instead, I managed to walk. Briskly.

"Come on," Owen said to the angel who'd so thoroughly saved me and wrecked me at the same time. "Let's get you that vodka. How late can you stay? I take it he..."

Owen's voice faded from my mind the moment I shoved through the back door and inhaled that first breath of cold night air. Man, the breeze... We were close enough to the city side of the mountain for the scent of the woods to hit my oversensitive nose. That's where I needed to be. That's where I belonged. In just a quarter mile, businesses gave way to homes and in another quarter, homes gave way to wilderness.

No way would I make it home, not on two legs, anyway. Damn Owen and his stupid Registry party, and damn Ethan for calling out.

A growl rumbled out of my throat as I stalked away from the door. I just

had to make it through the alley and down a block to get to the parking garage. My truck would have to sit overnight. At least I could stash my stuff first.

“Tony? Hold up a second?”

I should have bolted. Instead, I turned and watched with a slack jaw as Allison slid out the door after me.

“What?” I asked, my brows screwing together as human confusion overrode the all-consuming need to shed my skin and howl. “What’s up?”

“I, um...” she stammered, wringing her hands together as I guessed she couldn’t figure out what she wanted to say to me.

She smelled so good. Under the expected scents of the bar, the spilled fruit juices and sharp tinge of alcohol, she may as well have worn a flashing neon sign proclaiming ‘take me, I’m yours’ as far as my nose was concerned.

“Um, you think maybe I could get your number?” she finally said, staring up at me with those beautiful doe eyes of hers before dropping them away again. She crossed her bare arms over her chest and rubbed them against the cold. “You know, for scheduling and... stuff.” She kept her eyes on the ground, shook her head, and let out a quiet huff. “I’m sorry, I just- you’re probably—”

The wolf acted for me faster than I could pull it back. I took two long strides to her, grabbed her arms, and pressed my lips against hers with wild ferocity.

Her muffled squeal against my mouth almost deterred me, almost brought me back to my senses, but then that little noise of hers turned into a satisfied moan. She grabbed me roughly by the hips and pulled mine flush against hers. She worked me over with an eager edge that rivaled my own.

Her lips tasted as good as she smelled. A shiver ran through me. A ripple

under my skin warned I didn't have long, but if I wanted, I could have just long enough to make her mine.

"Your place or mine?" her breath whispered across my lips, only pulling away for as long as it took to get the words out. Her dark eyes searched mine, ones I prayed still looked human. "I agreed to work a few more hours, but I live nearby. Can meet up after—"

"Here, now," I cut her off with a growl as my hands roamed to the front of her pants. I didn't think I could stop myself even if I wanted to. I was just too far gone.

"Oh wow, um, yeah, okay," she moaned against my mouth. Her hands around my hips gripped me harder.

I dipped my head to the side of her throat. So close to her, I couldn't get enough of her scent. My nose pressed into the spot just below her jaw where her pulse beat hard under her skin. My lips brushed against her neck, then my tongue. I couldn't help tasting her. She let out a sexy gasp that made me just want her all the more.

"Condom?" Her hands fumbled with my belt buckle.

"Wallet," I mumbled against her neck, suddenly thankful for Ethan handing them out like party favors a few weeks ago. I'd taken one to avoid a bunch of unanswerable questions. The condom hadn't been in there long, it was probably fine. Wasn't like I could get her pregnant, anyway.

She didn't wait for me to tell her where it was before both her hands dove into my back pockets, taking a rather rough grab at my ass as she dug and came up empty-handed.

I laughed and nipped at her skin. "Front left."

"Oh, sorry," she awkwardly laughed back. Her hands slid out of my back pockets only for her right one to dig into the front left. She fumbled for my

wallet not near as aggressively as she groped my ass.

“Don’t be.” I grabbed my wallet away from her when she pulled it out. My hands shook so bad I almost dropped the damn thing. “You’re real aggressive. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“I’m just meeting you where you are.” Her cheeks took on a hint of color that had nothing to do with the cold. “But if you don’t like it…”

I should have cut things off right there and sent her back inside to safety, but instead, I dug the shiny wrapper out of my wallet as if on autopilot. “Do I look like I don’t like it?”

A mischievous smile brightened her face. Her hand landed against the tented front of my pants. She felt for me, slid her hand along the length of my rapidly hardening cock with a firm grip.

I cursed in appreciation, almost dropping the condom wrapper as I ripped it open.

“No, you do not.” Those beautiful eyes of hers rose to meet mine again. “You really want to do this? Right here, right now?”

“I don’t think there’s any stopping this,” I admitted, thankful that at least enough of my human sensibilities remained so I could keep talking.

“Mmmm,” she hummed in agreement, rubbing all up on my junk before she unzipped my pants the rest of the way. “This is probably a terrible idea.”

“The fucking worst,” I agreed, though I pulled out my cock, wrapped it up, and pushed her against the nearest wall all the same. “You sure you want this?”

Allie laughed as she helped me slide her jeans down her hips, past her knees, so she could kick one foot out. She reached a hand up and grabbed me by the shirt. “All I want is you inside me right now.”

Holy shit, she did not mince words.

“Ye- yes, ma’am,” I stammered as she wrapped a leg around me. My hands found her thighs and with her back pressed against the brick wall, I lifted her off the ground. Bare thighs wrapped tight around my waist. Heels smoothed against the backs of my fabric-covered thighs and her pants still hung off one ankle. She wasn’t a tiny little thing, but her weight barely registered to me.

I made sure we lined up right, then drove into her with an aggressive growl. The way she gasped and dug her fingers into my shoulders with my intrusion... I almost came right then and there.

Fuck, she felt good. Better than good. She felt so right and I didn’t deserve it, but I could forget about that for a little while. I could hate myself again in the morning.

“You better be fast, Tony,” she murmured, wrapping her arms around my neck. “If your boss catches us like this...”

“Our boss,” I corrected, “and yeah, he does not need to know about this.”

He would murder me. Not for sleeping with a co-worker, but for doing it while out of my mind. I’d only known the woman whose shapely legs wrapped around my hips for the past two-ish hours, but the wolf knew she belonged to me and me alone. We were perfect for one another, fated to be together.

*Wait, slow down, what the fuck?*

I kissed her neck as my fangs grew in. It would be so easy and she was willing, wasn’t she? Would she understand if I told her? Did some part of her know like some part of me did? Hell, would she be into it?

She moaned through short, harsh breaths. I loved how vocal she was with her little gasps and pleading whimpers. I was nothing if not eager to please. Next time, I intended to take my sweet time and figure out all the ways she

could be pleased, but our first time, I could only take her. I had to take her; she was mine.

My fangs grazed against her neck, the urge too strong to ignore. I wanted it, wanted her, needed to do it so fucking bad I couldn't hope to stop.

An icy bolt of fear broke through my lust-fueled haze. I buried my nose in her hair and gasped as I came inside her instead of burying my fangs in her neck where they belonged.

My breath came hard. Her hair stuck to my lips and her scent mingled with mine. I loved it, loved how she smelled of me. Pulling back, I sought her dark eyes as I slowed to a stop. My forehead fell gently against hers as I held her there against the wall. My hands still gripped her thighs while her arms relaxed around my neck until her hands settled on my shoulders.

Her shaking thighs around my hips relaxed and didn't squeeze against me so hard. Amusement played across her enchanting eyes. She looked at me like I mattered, like I wasn't just some mindless animal.

We untangled ourselves and I carefully set her back down on her feet. My heart still hammered in my chest, my blood still ran too hot in my veins, and my teeth still ached. My tongue ran over points too sharp to be human canines.

She bent over, wrestled with her pants for a second, and pulled them back up in the time it took me to dispose of the full condom in the dumpster just a few feet away.

Fur bristled under my skin in irritation. The wolf wanted to spill inside her, to fill her with my scent instead of discarding it, but that wouldn't happen. She couldn't be whatever the wolf thought she was. What had come over me? Even after finishing there wasn't any clarity there.

In the forefront of my mind, the wolf growled. It grew impatient. I wasn't



sure why I bothered to button my pants again, to buckle my belt. I wouldn't have time to make it to my truck before the change took me by force in another minute, maybe two at the most. Giving in to my lust for her had been a mistake. A fucking fantastic mistake.

“Well, that was something.” One side of her mouth twisted up into a lopsided grin. “Not sure what came over me, honestly.”

“Me neither.” My hand raked through my hair, my voice came out way too rough. “Needed you, though.”

“Yeah...” She shook her head as if shaking herself out of a daze.

I forced a smile. I wanted to talk to her, to reassure her, but I couldn't risk it. Not while the wolf gained ground and my fangs refused to go away. If she didn't head back inside within the next few seconds...

“This isn't going to make things weird, is it?” she asked, dropping her gaze as she straightened her shirt.

“No.” It came out soft, whispered, even though I had no idea how I'd feel about the whole affair in the morning.

“Good,” she replied just as softly. Her brows knit together a little. “Are you okay?”

My lips stayed mashed together as I nodded.

She crossed her arms over her chest, shifted her weight between her feet, and dropped her eyes down to the ground.

I went to her, lifted a hand, and brushed my fingers across her cheek. Nudging her chin up, I drew her in and claimed her mouth with a tender kiss, a faint press of my lips against hers. Told her without a single word that I'd always be hers if she'd have me.

She searched my eyes when we broke apart. All I could do was pray she couldn't see the other side of me bucking beneath my skin, the one that

longed to break free, to run. The side that wanted her there with me, beside me, always, even under the light of a full moon.

I managed not to scowl at the intrusive thought. That wouldn't ever happen, not in a million years. What the hell had gotten into me?

She blinked. Her dazed expression softened. "I'm... gonna go back inside now." Her throat worked like she wanted to say something else, but thought better of it. She didn't look back before she disappeared into the building.

The door closed behind her with a click, leaving me alone in the alley. I had just enough time to shed and stash my clothes before my world fell away.

# Chapter Six

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# Allison

I wasn't quite sure how to feel. I'd gone outside to ask Tony for his number and somehow ended up with my back against a wall and him inside me.

What had gotten into me? I'd never, ever, done anything like that before. I'd never slept with someone on a first date, much less a guy I knew barely more than two hours. He kissed me out of nowhere, shouldn't I have been mad? Instead, I leaned right into it and met his unexpected passion beat for beat.

Having to go back inside was rough. Having to work another few hours while I ached so good for the first time in over a year was also rough, but it gave me the chance to get better acquainted with my actual boss.

Everything about the man except his pale skin was black, straight black hair tied back at the nape of his neck, the clothes, shoes, even his eyes. The gothic look worked for the slim man who introduced himself as Owen Nagata.

"What's your availability look like?" Owen asked, eying me with suspicion when I joined him after my trip to 'the bathroom'. "I prefer to keep my roster small, so it would be great if you could work full time."

"I can work whenever you need me to." I offered him a friendly smile. "Sorry to impose on you like this. I didn't mean to get Tony into any trouble."

"Oh, he's not in trouble," Owen said with a smirk. "I'm just surprised he accepted your help."

“I think I may have steamrolled him into it, actually.”

We discussed regular things like expected schedule, average weekly hours, house rules, and pay. I hadn't intended to find myself a job so fast, but I for sure needed the distraction. The night's tips had not been disappointing in the least, either.

And the sex had been a very unexpected bonus.

Did Tony do that sort of thing often? Maybe he slept around a lot. He was an attractive guy, it wouldn't have been hard at all for him to find partners. There wasn't anything wrong with that.

I could deal with it if he decided we were one and done or if we didn't talk about it the next time we saw each other. I wasn't looking for anything in the romance department, just scratching a sudden, inexplicably intense itch. Seemed the same for him.

Must have been some itch... I'd never felt so wanted before. Tony kissed me like he hungered for me, like I was the only person in the universe that mattered. I didn't know how I felt about it. How many other people had he made feel the same way?

The rest of the evening into the wee morning hours flew by until the last patrons disappeared out the door and into the night.

“You can get on out of here,” Owen said as he turned up the overhead lights, casting the entire bar in a different light. Without the dimness, the place looked less magical, less special. “I know you weren't expecting to work this evening and it's pretty damn late.”

“I live just down the street,” I replied, skirting around the bar with a bus tray so I could pick up the remaining empties. “It's no trouble for me to stay and help close up.”

“Well, I won't say no if you insist.” Owen shot me a wary smile from

behind the bar. He pulled out a bucket of cleaning supplies and set out a clean rag. “You didn’t walk here, did you?”

“I did.” I grabbed up another few glasses and deposited them with clanks in the tub. “Why?”

“Maybe you should let me drive you home,” he suggested, glancing toward the heavy wooden front door. “It’s kind of late and cold. Never know what’s out there on a night like tonight.”

“I could use the walk,” I said, brushing off his concern. “I’ll be fine.”

Owen didn’t further insist. For the rest of our time together, we bantered on. Our conversation started with a bit of awkwardness, but his initial coldness warmed up while we got the place all cleaned up together.

Once our cleaning had been deemed satisfactory, Owen bid me a good night. I donned my coat and waltzed out into the night. The universe must have been looking out for me. I’d been nostalgic for my bar job for months before I crashed and burned out. The Crypt trended more towards upscale than the dive bar I worked in college. It would be a fun new challenge for a little while.

My mind drifted the entire walk home. I shoved my hands in my wool coat to protect them against the cold. The quaint, well-lit downtown full of old brick buildings became neighborhood streets lined with cute little houses just like mine. The hadn’t explored much of my new city yet, but I knew the way home without having to pull out my phone.

It had been such a strange evening. My interactions with Tony ran through my head on repeat. I hadn’t been overtly flirty with him, yet he’d seen right through me. That first frantic kiss of his seared through me and branded me like a hot iron.

I dragged in a deep breath, held it, then huffed it out. It fogged in the cold,

late night air. It wouldn't do to dwell on it. Tony probably meant nothing by it. How could he have? We knew nothing about one another. It had been a mutual lust thing, nothing more.

As I climbed the front steps and dug through my purse for my keys, the back of my neck prickled. Intuition tugged at my senses and warned me I wasn't alone. I shook it off. No one could be watching me, not at close to three in the morning.

A noise, a soft rustle of leaves from behind me near the road, startled me. My purse slipped from my hand and crashed down to the welcome mat, spilling the contents everywhere. I spun, my eyes swept the sidewalk and down the street. Was it leaves blowing in the wind?

A giant black dog stood at the end of my short driveway. The streetlamp in my neighbor's yard illuminated the shadow of an animal. It held its head low as if it had been stalking something in the night, but as soon as I turned, the dog straightened up and stood tall. Its bright eyes rose to meet mine.

If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would have laughed at the notion a dog that size could exist. The animal before me had to outweigh me and if we stood side by side, I was sure its back would have been even with my hip.

And its eyes... They practically glowed a bright emerald green. It had to be a trick of the light. Dogs weren't supposed to have green eyes, were they?

Could it have been someone's escaped pet, possibly an overgrown German Shepherd? One of its ears had been torn, the right one, the top half was missing. I didn't see a collar. Could there be one under that thick ruff of ink-black fur?

The dog stepped forward and started to approach. Its ears laid back and its nose worked as it scented the air. Those eyes searing me with intensity stayed on me the entire time.

My breath caught in my throat. It didn't strike me as an unfriendly animal, not when it approached so slow. It really was a beautiful dog, its fur looked so soft and shiny. What would it feel like beneath my palms? Was he lost? It was so cold out. Did he need a warm place to stay for the night?

The dog continued those slow, careful steps forward until half the distance between us vanished. He nearly reached the front steps when his head lowered again. His soft whistle of a whine tugged at my heartstrings. A pink tongue flicked across his muzzle. A fluffy black tail twitched back and forth, its arc grew wider with every step.

A hiss snapped me out of my astonished daze. A cat darted out of one of my front bushes and bolted across the yard with an angry yowl.

The dog's gaze whipped over to the gray tabby and off he, the dog was definitely a he, went at a lazy jog after the cat. I recognized the cat and knew it would be safe. The neighbors it belonged to had a fence and a cat door. The dog hadn't been enthusiastic about giving chase, anyway.

With a yawn, I kneeled to gather my things. My eyes lingered on the cover of the new library book I meant to start that night. The paperback had fallen out along with my wallet and keys. Its cover taunted me, not because of the woman in the foreground wearing what might have been a black leather ensemble, but because of the wolf behind her. The black dog I'd just seen had easily been larger in comparison.

I stuffed the book and the other spilled contents back into my purse and suppressed a smile. Back inside my house, the book found its way to my nightstand, but there would be no reading before bed, not after such a long night. Besides, I had my own alleyway liaison to ponder as I drifted off to sleep.



# Chapter Seven

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# Tony

**I**t stank. Where the fuck was I?

My fingers groped against rough concrete. I tried to sit up and banged the back of my head on the underside of a dumpster. Muttering curses to myself, I awkwardly crawled out from under my shelter.

The sun hadn't risen yet, but imminent dawn lightened the sky. I found myself in the back corner of the alley behind the bar. At least my clothes were still right where I stashed them. I even picked up a faint hint of Allison's scent, our mixed scents, there in the alley.

The realization hit me hard, harder than I hit my head. I slept with the woman who walked into the goddamn bar smelling like... like...

*Mine.*

I didn't do that. I hadn't slept with a woman since I was a hormone-driven sixteen-year-old, and that had only ever happened once. After becoming a wolf, I couldn't stand being touched. Hell, I flinched more often than not whenever anyone dared to make physical contact, yet I'd been all over Allison with zero hesitation. I kissed her and everything spun out of control.

Had I even been in control? Or was it the wolf? I couldn't make sense of it. I didn't even know where to start.

I threw on my clothes and prayed no one saw me on my walk of shame back to the parking garage. The thirty-minute drive over the mountain and out to the farm took slightly less than twenty thanks to the lack of traffic at such an early hour.

After stopping to open the gate, I pulled up the long driveway in desperate need of a new layer of gravel right as the sun rose over the horizon. The front lights of the place I'd always called home were off, the house quiet, just as I left it.

A sense of weariness washed over me as I let myself in. I hauled my tired ass straight to the bathroom and stripped down. No way could I think straight until I washed Allison's scent away.

Unable to help myself, I sniffed at the crotch of my slacks. Her scent still lingered there, the smell of her sex so strong and intoxicating I debated washing them at all. How could one woman smell so fucking good?

With a frustrated groan, I threw the pants in the hamper and carted the whole thing to the washing machine. The load got an extra cap of detergent. Would she smell just as enticing to other wolves? Was she just... special in some way I didn't have a clue about?

What the hell happened last night? My mind was still stuck in a muddy haze. In the back of it, a low, rough voice wouldn't stop growling.

The wolf was nothing more than a primal side of me, the monster I carried beneath my skin for the past fifteen years. I hated it, resented the hell out of it, wherever it had come from. It shared my body, my mind, and it knew me. Knew how to get what it wanted.

And for some unfathomable reason, the wolf wanted her.

A horrifying memory played in my head. Not a human memory, one of the wolf's.

I followed Allison home. I knew where she lived. She'd seen me. She'd fucking seen me.

# Allison

“You’re positively pensive,” Sarah, one of my new co-workers, gently ribbed. “It’s like you have so many questions but have no idea how to ask.”

I stared down at my hands in the small bar sink filled with soapy water, then lifted my head and shot her an embarrassed, tight smile. We had started cleaning during a lull. Well, more like a standstill. After the chaos of the prior night, business on my second day flowed like molasses.

Sarah wasn’t wrong. My focus had been lackluster pretty much all evening. I couldn’t stop thinking about Tony.

Sarah studied me with gray eyes ringed with heavy smoky eyeshadow and pursed her dark red lips. Then she laughed and dropped her attention back down to the pile of fruit she’d been cutting.

She was rather beautiful in the modern sense, slightly shorter than me, and had more of an athletic build. Her cool-toned brown hair had been tied back in a neat bun. She’d already given me the impression she wasn’t shy about speaking her mind.

“So, Tony hired you yesterday, huh?” A devilish grin pulled at the corners of her lips.

“More like I offered to help and he didn’t say no,” I replied with a little laugh. “It was sort of a spur-of-the-moment thing.”

She snorted. “Sounds like it. He wasn’t an asshole to you, was he?”

“No, not at all.” My brows furrowed at her question and accusatory tone. “I thought he was”—rough around the edges in all the right ways, strong,

capable, a little flustered... wild, and oddly enough—"kind of sweet."

"Sweet?" She sounded taken completely by surprise. "You sure it was Tony you met last night? I'm pretty sure 'sweet' is one of the last words I'd use to describe that man."

"Okay, fine, maybe he was a little intense, too. Why, what words would you use?" I asked.

"Distant," she said without hesitation. "He's not one for idle chatter. I know he and Owen are close, so he must have some sort of personality hidden away in there, but I've only seen bits and pieces of it and I've known him for two years now."

"But he's a bartender." My brows furrowed as I turned her words over in my brain. "Doesn't he talk to customers?"

"Not more than he has to to be polite," she said with a shrug. "The only one I've ever seen him say more than a few sentences to is one of our regulars, another friend of Owen's. Come to think of it, that guy's pretty weird, too."

"You don't mean the blond guy with the accent, do you?" I'd seen him and Tony share a few words, which was more than I'd seen him interact with other customers.

"D?" she said with a smirk in her voice. "Yeah, that's the one. No idea what his deal is. All I know is he's got money to burn and he burns a lot here. Says the weirdest things sometimes, though. I've found nodding and smiling goes a long way with that one."

"So, Tony... do you know if he's seeing anyone?" The thought spilled from my mouth before I could pull it back.

I hadn't asked before we got intimate. The question hadn't even crossed my mind until our topic of conversation rolled over to him. Was Tony the type to take anyone and everyone to bed as soon as possible? He hadn't asked me if I

was single, either. What if he cheated on someone with me? My stomach sank. That would be so horrible.

“Tony? Seeing someone?” Sarah let out a cackle of a laugh. “Girl, please. People flirt with him all the time. I mean, he’s hot and there’s alcohol involved, why wouldn’t they? But he never engages. He’ll be polite at first, but if they keep pushing, I’ve seen him get downright rude about it if he doesn’t run away first. Always says he isn’t interested.”

That... couldn’t be right, could it? He slept with me the same night we met and came at me with so much passion.

“So, he’s not the type to just hook up with someone?” Oh god, why did I ask that?

Her shoulders shook. What would have been a peel of laughter came out as a loud snort, but she recovered fast. Her amused grin mellowed. “I promise I don’t blame you for wanting to hit that, but don’t hold your breath. I tried when I first started working here and he in no uncertain terms told me to bark up another tree. If you’re interested in a fling, though, Ethan might be up your alley. He’s very much a casual, no strings sort of guy who is both hot and great in bed.”

My cheeks must have turned a rather noticeable shade of red as I sputtered, “I’m not- I wasn’t, no.” My voice slid into a higher register, “I think I’m good. I’ll let you know if that changes, though.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. If you’re more interested in the dating scene, there might be a few folks in my running group who are single. I could ask around. You said you’re new in town, right?”

“I just moved into a house over on Cedarwood just a few blocks from here,” I admitted, glad for the change in subject.

“Oh yeah? I’m near there, we’re practically neighbors. You ever do any

hiking? I go every week. We could go together if you'd be interested."

"I'm not really an outdoors person," I said with a sigh. "I'd probably be a bad hiking buddy."

"You'll do fine. We should go next week! We can go get coffee afterward, too."

"Maybe." Her enthusiasm took me a bit by surprise, but I had to admit, I could have used a friend. "I'm not against trying to set something up. I wouldn't mind getting out a bit."

"What's she trying to rope you into?" Owen asked as he stepped out of the back with a bucket full of ice. His dark brows arched. "Not trying to scare her away, are you, Sarah?"

"Of course not!" Sarah flung an arm around my shoulders. "I actually like this one. Says she might go hiking with me next week."

Owen dumped his bucket of ice in the ice drawer. "Sounds fun."

A maniacal glint twinkled in Sarah's eye. She squeezed my shoulder and said a little too loudly, "Maybe we should invite Tony along since you seem so keen on him. He's never accepted an invitation out anywhere, but who knows, maybe he's keen on you, too."

"I'm not keen on him," I protested as my cheeks began to burn. "And I haven't said yes to hiking yet, either." My lips mashed together as I frantically tried to get the subject as far away from Tony as possible. "You haven't seen, like, stray dogs up there, have you? I saw a huge black one on my way home last night. I think it might have come out of the woods."

"Oh my god, don't change the subject. You totally are into him!" she chided with a good-natured grin. She finally released my shoulders. "Why else would you ask if he's single?"

Why would she say that with our boss right there? My shoulders drew up

towards my ears. I wanted to sink into the floor and die. Especially since she was right.

Thankfully, Owen didn't say anything. Instead, he turned and headed right back through the door to the back. Sarah's comments didn't seem to concern him at all.

Sarah caught on to my horrifically embarrassed cringing and started back a little.

"Oh, damn." She actually sounded apologetic. "Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you, Allie. I was just kidding around."

"I'm not embarrassed," I muttered, turning back to my sink of soapy water. My denial wouldn't fool anyone with an ounce of brain power.

She sighed a sad, sort of resigned sigh. "Look, it's nothing to be ashamed of. He's hot, I get it! It's just I've known the guy for like two years and he's never shown any interest in anyone before. I don't want to discourage you, but don't get your hopes up."

"I won't." My heart sank, but I forced a smile anyway. It was just my luck that the second I found myself interested in a guy, he turned out to be more complicated than he first appeared. "Thanks, Sarah. How about we go for that hike sometime next week?"

She beamed at me. "Heck yeah, that's the spirit!"



# Chapter Eight

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# Tony

**T**hank fuck I had the day after the full moon off. After finishing the laundry, I took a restless nap and spent the rest of the day doing a few of the heavier chores I'd been putting off. They kept my hands busy and my mind from wandering too far.

I took apart my old tractor's engine in the barn. Instead of a simple fix with the tools I had on hand, the engine needed a replacement part to get it running again. It would be at least a month before the back-ordered part could be delivered, so I moved on to replacing a few shingles on my old farmhouse's roof. The roof took up most of the rest of the afternoon while I spent the evening in the kitchen preparing meals for the next few days. Normally I wouldn't have bothered making so much in advance, but restlessness kept me moving.

Lying awake in bed, I fought through bouts of frustration and anger all directed inward. Why did I have to kiss Allison? Maybe my head wouldn't have been so screwed up if I hadn't. The second my lips touched hers, though, I was done for.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. About how she'd try to tuck her hair behind her ears but it wasn't long enough to stay tucked. About the way she moved through the crowd with natural ease and conversed with customers as if they were all old friends. About how her mouth tasted, how her aggressive tongue tangled so perfectly with mine.

Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see were those beautiful brown eyes, those subtly tinted lips, the delicate curve of her neck...

What the hell was I going to do about her? What would happen when I saw her again?

The next day, I was on the schedule to open with Owen. Good thing, too, since he was the only person on the planet I could talk to about almost anything.

I unlocked the back door to the bar and flung it open with a bang against the wall. It stuck thanks to forcing the hinge open too fast. I hadn't meant to use that much strength.

"You break it you buy it, asshole!" Owen shouted back through the propped-open employee-only door.

"Sorry." I heaved a sigh and fixed the door without breaking it. Up front and behind the bar, Owen had already started juicing limes. I washed my hands, picked up a knife, grabbed a lime and got to work beside him. "In case it's not obvious, I'm not in the best mood right now."

"I saw your truck still in the garage yesterday when I left," he volunteered, his tone softer than it had any right to be. "I'm sorry. I never should have put you in a position like that. I should have let you close up and go home early."

I set down my knife and raked my hands through my hair, not even caring if I got lime juice all in it. "I know you wouldn't have asked if you didn't think I could handle it. Just... just drop it, okay?"

"What happened?" He set his knife down and turned himself to the side so he could fully look at me.

"I woke up in the alley out back before sunrise," I admitted. "Shifted back there, too."

Owen regarded me with those black eyes of his. The light around his

shoulders seemed to twist and bend, a barely perceptible change. Just as I didn't try to hide my true nature around him, he didn't hide around me, either.

I bowed my head and dropped my eyes. "I guess I hung around downtown or something. I don't know, it's all kind of fuzzy." Except it wasn't. I knew exactly what I'd done even if my memory of it wasn't perfect.

"I'm really sorry." He did sound properly apologetic. "You might have been seen because of me."

"It isn't your fault." I leaned heavily against the prep counter. "I could have gone home, it wouldn't have even taken me all night. It's not that far through the woods."

"But you didn't." He blew out a long breath. "You know what will have to happen if you're noticed. You need to reconsider going legit."

I fought back the snarl that threatened to rip from my throat.

"I can get you registered, you'll be—"

"That's not an option for me and you know it," I snapped.

"But it is." He reached out, tried to touch my shoulder, but I jerked away. "Tony, I can take care of it. I have a few connections, I can try—"

"No." It came out more of a growl than a spoken word. "You know I'm not comfortable with that." Impossible to sort through emotions ran through me, all fear and anger and sadness and loathing and everything in between.

"You can have a more normal life if you want it. I know you don't want to believe that, but things are different now. Five, ten years ago, yeah, things would have been dicey, but not today." He said it so matter of fact I could almost imagine believing him.

I scoffed. "You can't know that for sure." Besides, I was perfectly content with the locals having no clue I existed.

“I know you have this likely terminal case of ‘woe is me’, but you do deserve to be happy. You do know that, right?”

“Fuck you.” It came out low, close to shaky. I hung my head, felt so damn tired. “You don’t know what I do or don’t deserve.”

“If not happy, then at least not miserable.” Owen turned back to his limes and started juicing again. His playfulness returned as he changed the subject. “Seems you made an impression on Allie, at least. I walked in on Sarah teasing her about you yesterday.”

Just the mention of Allison elicited a low, feral growl from me. Even if I did deserve a woman like her, I wasn’t sure I could handle it. I’d find some way to fuck it up beyond repair. Best to push it out of my head, ignore it, keep from obsessing over it.

I tried to sound uninterested. “What’d you hear?”

“Just that Allison might be a bit into you.”

“Great,” I grumbled. My inescapable attraction to her was already a nightmare to navigate, especially after I slept with her like an uncontrollable animal.

“She also mentioned she saw a dog on her way home,” he said in an offhand sort of way. “A huge black one.”

“So?” I tried not to clench my jaw, tried not to give any reaction.

He’d never seen me as a wolf and if I had my way, he never would. No one was supposed to see me, but Allison had. I didn’t even know what I looked like beyond what I could see with my own eyes. In fifteen years, I never realized my fur’s dominant color was black, the same as my father’s.

Owen saw right through me. He always did.

“You followed her home.” Just a simple statement. Non-accusatory. It’s not like he knew for sure, but he threw me a rope with an educated guess and

waited for me to hang myself.

I snatched up another lime and sliced clean through it. My nose twitched and wrinkled at the strong burst of citrus scent. Not because it bothered me, but because it reminded me of her.

“Why?” he asked, turning to me again.

If only I knew the answer to that question. It had to be some wolf bullshit thing. Would Owen know if I asked him? I really didn’t want to ask him.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head and didn’t bother trying to hide my conflicted confusion. My knife dropped onto the cutting board, my hands clenched into tight fists on top of the counter. “I honestly don’t fucking know.”

*Liar.*

Claws raked across my consciousness. Fur bristled under my skin as the wolf rose to the surface with such a powerful surge, it caught me completely off guard. I gasped against the pain of it and doubled over. It wasn’t a full moon; it was the middle of the goddamned day. Why did I feel like I was about to lose myself?

“Are... are you okay?” Owen sounded so far away as my heartbeat hammered in my ears.

I drew in shallow, quick breaths and wrapped my arms around my middle as another wave of pain hit me. I clenched my eyes shut tight.

“I don’t know,” I snapped as the panic set in. “I- shit, it- it won’t stop.”

“What’s happening? What won’t stop?” he asked, his hand landing on my shoulder.

I flinched away. I didn’t want him touching me. No one should have ever touched me. I desperately tried to pull the wolf back, to bury the claws and

fangs again and lock them away where they belonged, but they wouldn't submit to me.

Panic tore through me. The last time I shifted outside of a full moon, I bit and turned my father into a monster just like me. I wasn't about to let the wolf take control like that again.

"Owen," I snarled through the pain, through the awkwardness of trying to speak around the fangs growing in my reforming mouth. I opened my eyes and blinked hard against the shifting colors in my vision. Reds, greens, and browns bled together, but the definition in everything sharpened. I lifted my head to meet Owen's wide, terrified eyes. Somehow, I garbled out, "Make it stop."

He didn't hesitate, just clenched his jaw and laid his palms against the sides of my face. Every shadow in the room came alive and converged. I sank into cold, merciful darkness.

# Chapter Nine

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# Tony

*T*ick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

The ancient clock on the wall in Owen's office roused me. Grogginess threatened to pull me back under. I'd been out a little over two hours according to that damn ticking clock.

Owen must have dragged me to his office. His strangely smoky scent, while strong, wasn't fresh. I lay on my side on the floor facing the wall with the clock. To his credit, he must have dropped me fast since my clothes hadn't taken any damage.

I flopped over onto my back and rubbed my temple with a hand. The wolf stayed silent but I could feel it there, watching through my eyes. Waiting patiently. I let out a loud groan.

The squeak of a shoe across the tile outside the office was all the warning I got. The door swung open right into my head.

"Ow, fuck!" I added a headache to my ever-growing list of complaints and clutched at my head. "Fucking asshole, you knew I was in he—"

Allison's scent hit me harder than the door she slammed into my head. She stared down at me through the half-cracked door. Warm brown eyes grew wide as they met mine.

Every ounce of anger drained away. Sleeping with her had done absolutely nothing to get her out of my mind. My first instinct told me to pull her into the office, to get her down on the floor with me, and to bury myself in her right then and there.

I shoved the thought far, far away.

“Oh, hey Tony, sorry,” Allison started, her voice music to my ears. A small frown tugged down those perfect lips. “What are you doing on the floor?”

I managed to sit up, kept my back to the door so I didn’t have to look at her while straightening out my shirt. I wouldn’t have fussed like that if I’d have known it was her.

“Did you need something in here?” I asked, dropping the anger from my tone, replacing it with the weariness that washed over me.

“No.” She opened the door wider. More light spilled into the dark office. “I heard a noise and didn’t think anyone was back here. Sorry I interrupted your, um, nap?”

Taking a deep breath was an unexpected mistake. Her scent got all up in me and messed with my head. She smelled all fresh as if she’d taken a shower recently. Whatever soap she used left behind a lingering hint of honey. I let out a heavy sigh. I was in trouble. She was in trouble, and she didn’t even know it.

“Are you okay?” Surprisingly, she sounded like she actually might care.

“No,” I grumbled, dropping my head into my hand to rub my forehead. My limbs didn’t want to cooperate thanks to the lingering exhaustion. Probably a holdover from Owen having to knock me out.

“Let me see your head.” She stepped into the small office space behind me. “I might have gotten you pretty good.”

I should have stopped her. Should have said ‘no, I’m fine,’ but I didn’t. I let her approach, didn’t know what she was doing until she laid a hand down on my head.

My throat tightened. I flinched, but then her fingers smoothed over my hair and everything, absolutely everything, fell away.

Gentle hands caressed the top of my head. She massaged my scalp with the tips of her fingers. No one had touched me like that since before I became a wolf. The last time must have been when I had my hair cut at a barber shop instead of doing it myself in front of the bathroom mirror.

My eyelids fluttered closed. I leaned back against her legs as she stood behind me. She only meant to check my head for injury, but the way she pet me broke my damn brain. A shiver of pure bliss ran down my spine with her ministrations. I groaned and melted under her touch like ice over an open flame. She could touch me whenever she wanted, wherever she wanted. Wolf me may as well have rolled onto his back and presented his fucking belly.

“Pretty sure you’re fine.” Her fingers carded with slow, steady motions through my hair. “You must have a hard head.”

I snorted. “You have no idea.” Another part of me would certainly be hard soon if she kept petting me. Would she want to sleep with me again? There in Owen’s office, on his desk, right then?

“What the heck are you two doing?” Owen asked.

Allison’s hands immediately left my head. She stepped back so fast I almost fell over backwards.

I scrambled to my feet. At least the interruption put a damper on my out-of-control libido, but it didn’t do a thing for the awkward bulge in my pants. All I could do was pray Owen didn’t notice it.

Owen stood in the doorway. His face did this thing where I couldn’t tell if he was pissed or amused.

“I heard a noise and when I opened the door to check, I sort of smashed him in the head,” Allison quickly explained as I tried not to look guilty. “He said it hurt pretty bad, so I was just checking him over.” She may have sounded sincere, but she acted all guilty, too. She ducked her head in submission,

clutched her hands together in front of her, and tried to look small under Owen's scrutinizing gaze.

I wanted to defend her from him, but when he looked to me for an answer, I dropped my eyes to the floor. I'd gone from giddy to horribly uncomfortable in two seconds flat.

If there was one thing Owen knew about me, it was that I barely tolerated being touched. He'd just walked in on me leaning into her, on her petting my head, and I'd been enjoying it so much I hadn't even heard him approach.

"Uh huh," Owen replied, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring daggers at me. "Allison, can you go cover the front?"

"Of course, yeah," she replied, keeping her eyes glued to the floor. Her ears reddened just a touch. She didn't glance back at me. "Sorry, Owen."

Owen stepped to the side, and Allison breezed out of the room, taking all the warmth and light with her. Owen joined me in his office. He closed the door behind him, trapping me in the room with him. Which was exactly how I felt, trapped.

"Tony," he started, his tone surprisingly soft.

I didn't look up from the floor, kept my eyes down like a dog getting yelled at for getting into the trash and dragging it all around the house.

"You know you don't have to do that. Just look at me, please."

"It's not like I mean to." My eyes narrowed as they lifted to meet his. I fought the instinct to keep my head down. It was a polite request, but I still resented the hell out of him for it. My hands clenched into fists. I didn't want to talk. I had no idea what the fuck I would even say.

"I know and I'm sorry, but I'm worried about you. I'm gone one night, I come back and it's like there's something severely off with you. I've never seen you lose it like you did a few hours ago."

“I know...” My words sounded so small and ineffectual. I took a deep, shaky breath and averted my eyes again. I couldn’t help it, stupid wolf instincts.

“And what was that just now with Allison?”

“She was telling the truth,” I snapped, clipping my words short. “Door hit me, end of story. You should have come to wake me up or locked me in. Allison shouldn’t have had to find me like that.”

He ignored my attempt to turn the conversation. “Was she the trigger? I asked you why you followed her home and you freaked out.”

“I don’t know, maybe,” I grumbled. “This is so fucking stupid.”

“What’s stupid, Tony?” He tilted his head to could catch my eyes. “You don’t keep secrets from me. What aren’t you telling me?”

I growled and rubbed my face with my hand. Faint whispers deep in the primal wilds of my mind wanted me to shove Owen aside, walk out to the front, grab Allison, and drag her out the door with me. They urged me to just take her, that she was mine, and everything would be okay if I gave in. None of it made any sense. I felt powerless, more lost than I had in years.

“Tony, please,” Owen urged as if he could possibly understand. “This is serious. What’s stupid?”

“This! This is stupid!” I didn’t quite shout but I might as well have. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me and I’m terrified.” My voice dropped back down to a near whisper as I looked him in the eye. “I don’t know how to explain without sounding crazy, but it’s like the wolf, I desperately want something and I just... I’ve never had this problem before. I’m so fucking confused.”

His brows furrowed. “What is it you want?”

“Her,” I admitted as my shoulders began to shake. “I want her.”

# Chapter Ten

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# Tony

Owen's concerned brow furrow smoothed out. "That's... really out of character for you."

"I know." I dropped my eyes again. My breaths turned shallow, almost panicked. "Something happened the night of the full moon. Between me and Allison."

"I mean, I know you followed her home—"

"Not that, I- we- um..." I shook my head, dropping my voice to a whisper, "We slept together."

He took a second to parse what I had just admitted to. His eyes went all wide in complete shock. "You slept with her?"

I closed my eyes and nodded, feeling like a total dirtbag.

He made a few noises as if he tried to start speaking but gave up a few times before finally getting out, "Wha- when?"

"She followed me out the door that night," I said, simultaneously wanting to sink into the ground and boast. "Stopped me as I was trying to leave. I don't know why, but I kissed her." I swallowed the lump in my throat and wet my lips. "She kissed me back... it all happened so fast."

"She told me she had to use the bathroom and was only gone like five minutes! You slept with her? Tony, what the fuck?"

I moved behind the desk and collapsed into his comfortable, well-worn chair. My elbows ended up on my knees and my head fell to rest in my hands.

He followed me to the desk. “So you had sex with her before you turned, and then what? Waited around and followed her home?”

“Yeah.” I almost wanted to cry, but it wouldn’t do me any good. “Maybe I was trying to make sure she got home safe or something? You know my state of mind is all altered when I’m like that.”

“Your state of mind seems pretty altered right now,” he muttered.

“It is.” I dropped my hands away from my face, lifted my head again to look at him. “What the hell is wrong with me, Owen? You know me, this hasn’t ever happened before, not once. It was like as soon as I caught her scent, all rational thought took a fucking vacation. It’s... it’s like she’s special or something. I don’t know if it’s just me or if another wolf would have the same reaction to her, but I got one whiff of her and it’s like something inside me snapped.”

A muscle under his left eye twitched as he studied me. Then, oddly enough, he blinked. His eyebrows rose and he straightened up to his full height.

“Oh shit.” He uncrossed his arms and dared to start laughing. “No way.”

A warning growl bubbled up from my throat. “Why are you laughing? This is serious. Something is wrong with me!”

“Nothing is wrong with you, dude,” Owen said, still laughing a little. He reined it in and dropped to one knee in front of me so he could catch my eyes again. “You remember when we broke up? How I told you we weren’t made for each other?”

I rolled my eyes. “We were kind of a dumpster fire, but that wasn’t your fault. I just... I can’t. I’m too fucked up.”

“You have a lot of issues, sure,” he admitted with a resigned sigh, “but people like you, they...” It was like he wanted to say something but couldn’t



figure out how to say it, so he changed his approach instead. “Be honest with me. How do you feel when you think about her?”

“Possessive.” My lips curled up with a snarl. “I keep thinking she’s mine. Whatever the fuck that means.”

Owen considered my reluctant admission for a half second before he drove forward. His arms wrapped around me and pulled me into an almost bone-crushing, awkward hug due to our positions.

I startled back in the chair. My body went rigid with complete confusion, but he didn’t let me go, just hugged me tight around my shoulders.

“What it means…” he said in such a soothing way, “Tony, what it means is Allison is your mate. You found your mate, dude! I’m so happy for you.”

“My what?” I gaped in horror. “That’s what this is? Some stupid wolf bullshit?” I balked, shoved at him, and pushed him away. “No. No! Absolutely not. I don’t want this! How the fuck do I get it to go away?”

“I don’t think you can.” His soft tone hardened to something more akin to chastisement as he got to his feet again. “At least not as far as I understand it.”

“What the fuck do you know? You aren’t like me.” I pushed to my feet, clenched my hands into fists, and stared him down. Owen may not have been a wolf, but he wasn’t a mage like he claimed to be, either. I didn’t know what he was besides inhuman. The longer I knew him, the more I got the feeling I really didn’t want to know.

“Look, this is going to sound terrible, but when we started getting close, I had a few questions. I wanted to know how to handle you,” he explained, looking much calmer and more relaxed than me, “so I did some digging.”

My lips curled with a snarl. I didn’t care enough to hold it back. Owen had seen me at my worst plenty of times. He could handle being snarled at.

Asshole.

“Shifters like you... sometimes they meet someone and it’s like they just know.”

“Know *what?*”

“You really have no idea what I’m talking about?” His brows pinched together and dark, shining eyes studied me like a science project.

“You think a manual fell from the sky or was beamed into my head when I started shifting at sixteen fucking years old? I don’t know shit about what’s normal, Owen. Everything I know I learned from you! What the fuck is a mate?”

“It’s like a one true love, soulmates for life sort of thing.” He shot me a weak smile. “It’s one of the reasons I broke up with you. I knew there was someone out there for you and that person wasn’t me.”

“You broke up with me on the off chance I ended up running into my literal soulmate?” If glares could murder, his shadowy ass would be toast.

“Well, that and I believe you just described our relationship as, and I quote, ‘a dumpster fire’. Let’s not mince words. What we had was never a healthy relationship.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I stared at him as if I’d never seen him before. “And you didn’t think to tell me about this whole mate business? What the fuck, Owen?”

“Pretty sure if I told you about it, you wouldn’t have believed me.”

He was right. I hated that he was right.

“What does this mean for me, then?” My hands flexed and clenched back up into tight fists. “And what’s it mean for Allison? She’s human, not a wolf.”

Owen wouldn’t meet my eyes. He didn’t say anything. He stood there

awkwardly and waited.

A lump formed in my throat. I swallowed, but the tightness wouldn't go away. I remembered my thoughts from that night, my fangs. My chest heaved.

"That night- I- I wanted to..." I struggled to get a full breath of air as reality hit me. I doubled over, set my hands on my knees.

"No." My voice rose an octave and tears stung the corners of my eyes. "No no no."

Owen grabbed me roughly by the shoulders, yanked me upright, and wrapped his arms around me. I buried my face in the collar of his shirt and let my arms wrap around him, too. Normally, I would have pushed him away, but I held on and accepted his comfort. I fought back tears at the thought of Allison ever finding out what I was, much less turning her into a monster like me. It made me so sick to my stomach I thought I might puke.

"Tony, she's your mate for a reason." Owen kept his voice gentle as if afraid of spooking me. "If she couldn't handle what you are, what you have to do and everything that comes along with that, it wouldn't be her."

"I can't, not after... not after what happened to Dad."

"I promise you, what happened to him won't happen to her. Allie's your mate," he said, giving my back another reassuring rub. "You're meant to be together. She'll understand."

With one final sniff, I pulled away from him, took a deep breath, then steeled myself. My expression hardened. I shoved every emotion, every feeling, every instinct deep, deep down.

"She won't have to understand if she never finds out."

"Tony, you can't just—"

"I can keep it under control. I've been doing it for years."

“I don’t think this is going to work like that,” Owen said with a shake of his head. “You almost shifted behind the bar just two hours ago when I mentioned her. There’s no way you can control those instincts forever.”

“You can fire her,” I snapped. “If she’s not here, I won’t have to see her.”

“I’m not firing her and it wouldn’t help. You know where she lives. What do you think is going to happen?”

I didn’t want to acknowledge it, much less think about it. Instead, I shoved past Owen and headed for the door. Screw him. I could keep the animal inside me under control. I would keep it under control.

“Tony, wait—”

A cloud of frustration loomed over me as I stormed out of his office like a hurricane. I would just do what I always did when it came to the beast that shared my body.

I was going to ignore the shit out of it and try to deny its existence.

# Chapter Eleven

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# Allison

Tony wore an unexpectedly blank expression once he reappeared and joined me behind the bar. There was no longer any warmth there, not like when my fingers ran through his loose curls or when he laughed and leaned against my legs before Owen interrupted us.

Had Owen gotten onto him about catching us together? We hadn't been in that much of a compromising position. It wasn't like he'd caught us going at it in his office.

"Everything okay?" I asked Tony after the first few minutes of tense silence between us.

"Yeah."

I got a lot out of that curt response combined with the rigid way he carried himself. He may as well have said, 'I'm not okay, but I will refuse to talk to you about it so leave me alone, 'kay thanks bye'.

I decided I would try anyway. "I'm sorry again about your head. I didn't mean—"

"Just drop it," he said with another cold, even-keeled response.

"Okay." If that's how he wanted to play it, that was how he wanted to play it. Who was I to argue?

Did he regret what happened between us two nights ago? Did he not like me after all? Was it screwing with his head as much as it screwed with mine and he didn't know how to deal with it just like I didn't?

Tony lasted another hour. He kept his distance and ignored me in awkward, stony silence. With no noticeable trigger, he threw open the employees-only door and stalked to the back without a word. Owen came out front another minute later to take his place.

“What’s up with Tony today?” It hadn’t taken more than two minutes before I cracked. I had to know, seeing Tony like that, so... cold and closed off made my chest feel all constricted.

“He’s... going through some stuff,” Owen replied after a moment of careful consideration.

“He seemed fine earlier,” I pointed out as I straightened up behind the bar to prepare for the afternoon rush. “Is it like a personal sort of thing?” I tried to keep my tone light since I didn’t want to seem too interested or eager for any little scrap of information I could get. I still didn’t know a thing about Tony and couldn’t shake wanting to know everything about him.

“Pretty personal, yeah.”

Owen didn’t seem to want to talk about it either, so I let it drop. I didn’t comment when Tony never reappeared. He must have gone home. What happened during their conversation to change Tony’s demeanor so fast?

It took a few hours, but I broke after the afternoon rush died down to a quiet lull.

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t sure what I was apologizing for, but I felt I should apologize anyway.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” Owen asked, his voice all low and gentle.

My eyes stayed trained on my working hands. I hoped Owen didn’t notice my flushing cheeks. “For... for being in your office with Tony. I know I was supposed to be getting more fruit from the fridge instead of messing around.”

He sighed. “Don’t worry about it. I was just surprised, is all.”

I made a non-committal noise to say I heard him but didn’t have anything to contribute to the conversation.

“He’s...” Owen started, pausing to search for a word or phrase, “he’s kind of different. It caught me off guard seeing him like that with you. He doesn’t usually let people get that close, much less touch him, and much, much less does he ever seem to enjoy it. You get what I’m saying?”

A rather large lump made itself right at home in my throat. I had a good idea of what he wanted to get at, but I still said, “No, I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“He likes you, Allison, and he doesn’t like anybody.”

“He seems to like you just fine,” I stammered.

“He’s known me for a long time and I know him.” Owen crossed his arms, leaned forward, and rested his elbows on the counter. He stood only a foot or two away from me and the bar had emptied almost completely out, but he still dropped his voice low enough to not be overheard. “He just needs some time to sort himself out. Don’t worry too much about it.”

I could understand that. I moved across the country so I could sort myself out. The Tony I interacted with and the Tony everyone else described seemed to be two completely different people. As much as he intrigued me, maybe I needed to step back before things got too complicated.

That, and it hadn’t been my imagination that Tony treated me differently.



# Tony

It took less than an hour for me to break. Being in the same room with Allison after having the ‘she’s your mate’ bombshell dropped on me had been absolute torture.

I had to get out of there. She smelled too good and I wanted her too bad. The wolf in my head would not sit down and shut up. Fur bristled deep under my skin, a ‘you can’t ignore me forever’ warning.

I couldn’t take it. Without a word, I walked to the back and stopped at Owen’s open office door.

“I can’t do this. I’m going home. If you won’t fire her, at least fix the schedule so I don’t have to work with her.”

“I can do that,” he agreed way too quickly, “but you can’t avoid her forever.”

“Watch me.”

I walked out, went home and dug around in Dad’s liquor cabinet, the one I hadn’t had the courage to empty out yet. He stopped drinking after Mom left but never threw out his stash. It didn’t take long to find the mostly full bottle of top shelf whiskey he must have been saving for some special occasion.

I never drank more than a sip or two of test drinks at work, but for once in my life, the urge to find clarity at the bottom of a bottle hit me hard. I drank... more than I should have. Way more. Enough to get me drunk for the first time in my life.

It was a bad idea, but my mind was so fucking fractured. I had to do something to shut up the growls in my head that would. Not. Stop.

A boom of thunder startled me awake. Too loud, everything was too loud and my head pounded. Everything hurt...

I rolled over onto my front. Damp leaves stuck to my skin as the first drops of rain began to fall.

*I'm outside? When did that happen? Where the hell am I?*

Realization hit me. I reeled. Then I puked. It was not pretty. I shifted, killed and ate something, judging from the broken bits of tiny bone and fur and who knows what else.

My lips pulled back off my teeth in a silent snarl. I couldn't remember anything. Usually I could remember a place, a scent, a feeling, something, sometimes everything, but there was nothing. I blacked out completely. Was it the alcohol?

Sitting back on my knees in the leaves, I rubbed at my aching head. A cozy little house sat behind me, one that backed up to the woods. I was in the back of someone's yard, close to the trees. It was dark enough, the shadows would keep me hidden as long as no one turned on a porch light. Confusion bubbled through me as I scented the air. I'd marked the place as my territory.

A floodlight flicked on. I scrambled frantically for cover behind the tree line. Somewhere way too close, a door with a squeaky hinge opened.

"Yeah, Mom, I'm bringing it in right now."

*Allison. Fuck fuck fuck, why am I not the least bit surprised?*

"I know. I can't believe we're under another tornado watch tonight."

I peeked through the trees to see her on her back deck. She cradled a phone against her shoulder and bent over to grab one of the flowerpots lining the deck railing.

I wasn't anywhere close to the house and darkness had already fallen. Judging by the position of the still mostly full moon peeking through the clouds, it had to be close to ten. She must have gotten off not that long ago. Her chances of seeing me in the dark were slim, but I still panicked. What if the thunder hadn't woken me up? Would she have found me passed out naked in her backyard? How the hell would I have explained that?

She wrestled with the large pot for a moment before her whole body froze. She jerked upright, let out a startled cry, and covered her mouth with a hand.

I noticed it when she did. Guilt, anger, and more than a little embarrassment heaped on top of me. Wolf me had a mind of his own, apparently.

"Sorry, Mom, I'm okay, I didn't mean to scream. I just... um, there's a dead rabbit on the stairs."

I sank back down behind the tree, turned and leaned heavily against it. The back of my head beat against the rough bark a few times. What the hell had I been thinking?

"Looks like something killed it then just left it here. A coyote, maybe? Do we have those here?"

Nope, not a coyote. The ones on the mountain knew better than to come anywhere close to my territory.

"Or I guess it could have been that stray dog I saw the other day."

I took a deep breath and held it for a count of ten. The light sprinkle of rain steadied out to a drizzle.

"I don't know, it's starting to rain. Let me call you back." And with that, Allison disappeared back into the house, hauling the pot inside with her.

Before she decided to rescue another one of those pots from her deck, I bolted into the woods as fast as I could.

# Chapter Twelve

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# Allison

“Tony’s been acting all strange lately,” Sarah said out of the blue when we both ended up in the breakroom at the same time. “You know anything about that?”

“Can’t say that I do.” A tiny pang of heartache hit me at the mention of his name. I didn’t know why I cared so much. “He’s barely said two words to me since my first day, not for my lack of trying.”

So what? He slept with me then wanted to forget my existence? It wouldn’t be the first time such a thing had happened. I went out with a guy a few times, finally decided we could make it official, slept with him, and afterwards he ghosted me. With Tony, there were no emotions involved. We had been strictly physical. So why did his avoidance for the past three weeks feel so much worse?

“Really?” She shot a small frown my way, set a finger against her purple lips, and thought for a moment. “Because whenever someone mentions you, he gets all... weird.”

“Why? What’s he doing?” I tried to sound disinterested as I opened my locker and grabbed my latest library book and purse from inside. My shift had just ended and Sarah had arrived to replace me.

“I don’t know, it’s hard to describe.” She came to lean against the locker next to mine. “Last night he asked how our hike went and he never asks about stuff like that.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“I told him we had a great time, that you were a good hiking buddy and afterwards, we went and got coffee.” A wicked grin spread across her face. “I may have also insinuated there were some cute guys there that flirted with us,” she boasted, half snickering.

“There was only coffee, Sarah,” I reminded her. “There were no guys, except the one in the corner with a laptop you couldn’t stop staring at.”

She scoffed and mumbled, “I was not staring at him.”

“Just ask him out already.” I closed my locker and turned to face her. “I don’t get why you won’t. He kept looking your way, too. You said you see him in there all the time.”

“I haven’t even talked to him,” she admitted with a heavy sigh. “It’s like I just can’t bring myself to do it. Besides, you’re one to talk. Why haven’t you cornered Tony yet to ask what his problem is?”

“Because we’re never scheduled at the same time.”

“You could text him. I’ll give you his number.”

“That sounds a little too stalkery for my taste. If he doesn’t want to talk to me, he doesn’t want to talk to me and that’s fine.”

“Well, you are working together in a few days. I made sure of it. You’re welcome.”

My lips mashed together. I wanted to protest but couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“What?” She had the audacity to look offended by my reaction. “Communicate like adults already. Figure your shit out so you can be in the same room with one another without it being all weird. It’s getting ridiculous. At first I thought it was just a coincidence, but there is seriously something going on with him.”

“What would I even say?” As much as I hated whatever stupid game Tony

was playing by avoiding me at all costs, nerves rattled me at the thought of confronting him about it. Not only was I still interested in him, I also couldn't stop thinking about him.

“How should I know?” she asked with a shrug. “Maybe y'all should just fuck it out, see if that gets it out of your systems.”

My face might have gone scarlet. “I- I'm not having sex with him,” I sputtered out.

Her eyebrows rose as she took in my expression. She lit up. “But you want to. You've thought about it. Oh my god, when's the last time you slept with someone?”

“It's... it's been a while.” If my face could get any redder, it would have. Technically, it wasn't that much of a lie. Before I slept with Tony, the last person I'd been with was well over a year ago.

“Girl, you need to get laid,” she said. “Has Ethan asked you out yet?”

“What? N- no,” I squeaked out. Ethan had been perfectly professional towards me. Friendly, sure, and sometimes flirty, but he hadn't made any sort of obvious move.

“Maybe he's trying to give Tony a chance first before he makes a move,” she said with a light laugh.

“I'm not going to sleep with Ethan,” I muttered.

Sure, the guy was quite attractive. I felt so tiny next to him and it was obvious he worked out a lot. Tall, built, blond hair, blue eyes, could probably bench press at least two of me, there was a lot there that should have sparked my interest, but I could not get one particular broody man with a southern accent out of my mind.

“Why not?” Sarah asked. “You only live once, girl. He's hot, you're single, live a little.”

“You sound like my mother,” I sighed.

She cackled at that. “See, even your mom has my back on this. I’m not saying you have to sleep with him, or anyone else, for that matter. Maybe you should just flirt a little, see if you can make Tony jealous enough to come out and admit to your face that he likes you.”

“That is childish and manipulative,” I replied with a huff, “and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t like me, so what’s the point?”

“Uh, to have fun?” Sarah shot back with a single raised eyebrow. “Girl, you’re gorgeous. You should be out there getting your groove on with some lucky sap, not moping around hoping a certain someone will finally get his head out of his ass.”

“I don’t really do the whole casual sex thing, Sarah,” I said softly. “There’s nothing wrong with it, but it’s just not my thing, you know?” Except apparently it was my thing as far as Tony was concerned.

“To each their own.” She smiled and gave me a little wave. “Have a nice night. Figure out what you’re gonna say to Tony!”

I shook my head and had to laugh a little as I walked out the door. Sarah meant well, I knew that. Was it really that obvious I had a thing for the guy? I shouldn’t have. I knew better, but it was like my head and my heart had gone completely out of sync. My head screamed, ‘he’s a giant walking red flag, what is wrong with you?’, but my heart...

My heart was a traitor. I’d promised myself I wouldn’t play the needless drama game anymore. At thirty years old, I was too old for it yet there I was, still enamored with a man that would barely speak a word to me before fleeing.



# Tony

“So, I’ve been thinking about asking Allie out,” Ethan announced out of the blue while we were neck-deep in inventory together.

The unopened bottle of gin in my hand shattered, dousing my pants with booze and sending shards of glass tumbling to the stockroom floor.

Ethan yelped, startled by the sudden explosive noise while I stood there like an idiot clutching empty air.

“Whoa, you okay?” he asked from behind me. “What happened?”

“Bottle slipped.” At least he hadn’t seen me crush the damn thing with my bare hand. That would not have gone over well.

“You got that or you need me to go get some towels?”

“Get some towels,” I snapped with more aggression than intended.

“Alright, take it easy. It was just an accident.” He skirted around me to grab some towels as I kneeled down and started gathering shards of glass with my fingers.

“Right, take it easy,” I grumbled, staring helplessly at the mess, “because I’m not going fucking crazy.”

Ethan and I rarely closed together, but Owen made some last-minute schedule adjustments. I’d been alone with him for the past few hours. The tall and muscular blond was everything I wasn’t, an outgoing, flirtatious man who got around and wasn’t ashamed of it. He shouldn’t have been going after Allison, though, not when she was mine.

He returned with the promised towels, handed them to me, and continued conducting his inventory as I mopped up the floor and broken glass. It took a few minutes to get everything cleaned up, minutes I used to stew before I finally had to ask, “Why?”

“Why what?” he shot back over his shoulder. He kept his back to me while he counted, probably already having forgotten what he said about Allison. “How about why don’t you speak in complete sentences half the time anymore? Why have you been so testy lately? Why—”

“Why Allison?”

Ethan turned and adopted a roguish grin. “Why not? She’s cute and it’s not like she’s seeing anybody. I’m sure she could use a fun night away from this place.”

A growl rumbled deep in my chest. I didn’t bother to rein it in. If he heard me, he made no indication of it, only turned back to the shelf he’d been counting bottles on.

“That is,” he started, pausing with his hand over yet another bottle, “unless you’re into her? Just say the word and I’ll back off.” He glanced over his shoulder at me and raised an eyebrow.

The wolf wanted to put him in his place, but Ethan didn’t mean anything by it. He was fishing for a reaction.

Instead of speaking up, I sighed and dropped my eyes to my feet like a coward.

I may have been trying to keep my distance, but wolf me hadn’t. I’d woken up in bed with dirt on my palms or in the woods behind Allison’s house more times than I wanted to admit. The other side of me had been paying her visits, not that I remembered spending my nights guarding her territory or keeping an eye on her.

It terrified me. She must have noticed, might have even seen me, but it wasn't like there was much I could do. I hung by a thread as it was. I hadn't had a good night's sleep since she walked through the front door of the bar three weeks ago.

"Really?" Ethan gave his head a shake before turning back to the shelf. "Honestly, man, if you like her, just say so." His words came out oddly enough, warm.

I stared down at my notebook, unable to find the words to reply.

The air behind me shifted as he moved. An unexpected hand landed on my shoulder.

I jerked out from under his grasp and spun to face him. My eyes narrowed with a warning glare.

He outweighed me by at least thirty pounds of well-earned muscle and had half a head of height on me. Without a doubt I could overpower him, but his size still gave some primal human part of my brain pause.

"I know you have some sort of thing for her," he said. "In all the years I've known you, you've never behaved like this. It's like you're so scared of whatever it is you feel that you don't want to go anywhere near her.

"Just relax and stop avoiding her. She likes you, too." He rolled his eyes. "God only knows why, considering how you act sometimes."

"She shouldn't." My gaze dropped right to the floor in submission. He wasn't a wolf, wasn't a mage, wasn't anything except human, but he still saw right through me.

"What? Like you?" When I nodded, he scoffed. "Well, she does anyway. Always asks after you. She tries to be subtle about it, just like you do. You're both hopeless."

My nostrils flared. I huffed out a breath of indignation.

He grabbed me by the shoulders and grinned in that charming, playboy way of his. “Either man up and tell me right now you like her or I’m asking her out tomorrow. I thought I’d give you a fair shot before trying my luck, but you just don’t have it in you, do you?”

Fur itching for release bristled under my skin. The wolf longed to show him what I did have in me. My fingers wrapped around his wrists before I could rein it in. I squeezed hard enough he got the message, the one that said, ‘I am stronger than you and I can break you’.

“Don’t,” I snarled through clenched teeth. I was done being submissive to him, done being submissive to anyone. “Allison is mine.”

I gave him a light shove and pushed him away from me. I could have thrown him clear through the wall if I wanted and a feral part of me really wanted, but I held it back.

Ethan let out a surprised yelp and stumbled back a few steps. He didn’t deserve my aggression. Ethan was generally a good guy, a bit of an idiot sometimes, but decent.

Hell, he was being decent by talking to me first. He obviously noticed my attraction to her. It wasn’t like we were friends; it wasn’t like he had to ask my permission.

“Okay, I get it! I wasn’t really going to ask her out. Sarah put me up to it.” His eyes fell away from mine and he raised his hands in surrender. “Anyone ever tell you you can be scary as hell when you want to be?”

“Sorry.” I dropped my eyes to the side, too. The tension in the room ratcheted back down to a much more manageable level. “That side of me just comes out sometimes.”

He straightened back up to his full height. “If I ever hear you tried to intimidate Allison like that, you and I will be having words.” He said it with

confidence though a part of him must have known he stood no chance going up against me. He might not have been a wolf, but he would have made a good one. His first instinct was to be protective of his packmates. I respected the hell out of that.

Which meant he saw me as a potential threat. I'd given him just a tiny taste of how aggressive I could be. He had to be thinking about how I could turn all that animal ferocity on Allison, how easy it would be for me to hurt her.

And just like that, I hated myself again.

"I wouldn't ever hurt her," I practically whispered.

"You better not," he replied, his tone cautious. "I know you're just a little... off, so word of advice? Drop the possessive crap. Most women don't like being objectified unless it's in bed and that's only after a long conversation about what all parties involved are cool with."

"I'm not objectifying her," I protested, taken aback by his choice of words. Heat flared across my cheeks at the thought of having to have that kind of conversation with Allison.

"You literally just called her yours, as if you think you own her or she owes you something. You don't, she doesn't. That's all I'm saying." He fidgeted with the cuff of his folded sleeve for a second before lifting his eyes to mine again. Concern played across his irritatingly handsome features.

He must have seen something in my expression. His head tilted. Blond eyebrows knit together and his eyes narrowed a touch. "You have been with a woman before, haven't you?"

"Yeah," I muttered. "Of course I have." The heat across my cheeks burned hotter as I crossed my arms over my chest. I didn't feel quite so powerful anymore.

He read me like a book. "Oh, boy." He lifted a hand to his forehead. "You

have no idea what you're doing, do you?"

"I- of course I do!"

"No, you don't."

I lowered my head, stared at the floor, and leaned into the tenseness of the muscles pulling tight across my chest.

"I'm curious," Ethan started as he stared me down. "What is it about Allison that's got you all hot and bothered for once?"

"I don't know." I spoke to the floor rather than to him. "Wish I did."

To him, I lied, but I couldn't lie to myself. I knew the reason, just not the why. Why Allison? Why did the wolf pick her? Owen said she was my mate, but did I believe him? Did we really belong together because of some wolf fate bullshit?

He laughed at that. "Fine, whatever, let's just chalk it up to some sort of love-at-first-sight thing for simplicity's sake."

I cringed. He unknowingly struck the nail dead on.

"So what are you going to tell her?" he asked, sounding so sincere I wanted to throttle him to avoid the awkwardness of continuing the conversation.

All I could manage was an exceptionally tense shrug and a scowl.

"Wow, I don't want to say you're completely hopeless, but you might actually be completely hopeless."

"Fuck you."

He chuckled. "Do you want some advice?"

"No."

"Too bad. You're getting it. Just tell her how you feel and ask her out to dinner with you or something. Most women love being wined and dined and who knows, you might develop some sort of personality after a glass or two of booze."

“I don’t go out,” I shot back with a whole lot of bitterness.

He took for granted how easy things like that were for him. Me? I couldn’t stomach being out in public. All the smells, the noises, it was too overwhelming. I could handle the bar most days without too many problems. It was part of my territory, but anything beyond that was too much of an unknown and I shied away.

Not to mention I was an unregistered shifter in a town with a robust population of mages. I did not ever want to attract attention to myself. The chances of things going horribly wrong were too damn high.

“Then make her dinner? You can cook, can’t you?”

That wasn’t a terrible idea.

# Chapter Thirteen

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# Allison

I made up my mind. I was going to woman up and ask Tony what his deal was. Based on his reaction, I would finally know if he was worth all the silly pining.

My eyes stayed pinned to the clock my entire shift. Three rolled into four. Four rolled into five. The schedule had Tony coming in at six while I was set to leave at the same time.

Six rolled around, still no Tony. I stayed out front, made an excuse to check if anyone needed another drink, an empty carted away, or to be tabbed out. Anything to delay having to leave. Anything to increase my chances of catching him for once.

“Allie, isn’t it time for you to be getting off?” Owen asked at fifteen after.

“Oh, right, yeah, sure is.” My shoulders tensed alongside an awkward laugh. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow, Owen.”

He just shook his head. “Right, yeah, see you tomorrow.”

How could Tony be so late the one day our schedules overlapped? Could he have done it on purpose? If so, why go through that much trouble to avoid me? Was he that immature?

I trudged back to the breakroom in total defeat, but as soon as I opened the door, there he was.

Tony’s head jerked up the second the door swung open. He looked at me with wide, wild eyes, sat up ramrod straight, and fumbled his phone. A low curse slipped out of him as the phone fell from his hands.

It dropped towards his lap. He made a mad grab for the device but instead of catching it, he swatted it halfway across the room. The phone hit the ground, bounced, and skittered across the floor to a stop right in front of my locker.

“Hi,” I managed to say after we both got over our mutual shock.

His eyes flew to mine then dropped away again. His whole body drew up tight. He sat there, still as a statue, seemingly unable to get up and grab his phone.

“Uh, hey...” he mumbled without looking up from the table.

“I, um,”—almost immediately lost my nerve—“just need to get my purse.” I ducked my head and made my way to my locker so I didn’t have to look at him. My cheeks began to burn. Why did being in the same room as him make me feel so out of sorts, so... on edge, like a single spark was all it would take to either make or break us?

I grabbed my purse from my locker and slung it over my shoulder. There was my opportunity right there on the floor. I bent down and picked up his phone. It was an older model, an Android instead of an iPhone. The small crack in the screen was likely the result of a prior drop instead of the one I witnessed. I almost wished the screen hadn’t blacked out so I could have peeked at what he had been so engrossed in.

I stood again and found him studying me with those intense eyes of his. My heart either stopped entirely or started pounding, I wasn’t quite sure which.

Something in his expression... changed, softened maybe. He scrutinized my every movement as I approached. I didn’t know how to feel about how he studied me or how he got to his feet as soon as I got close.

“Here.” I lifted my chin to meet his eyes as I held his phone out.

“Thanks.” It came out so soft it was almost a whisper. His fingers brushed

mine for one much too brief moment before he pulled the device away and jammed it into his pocket.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” I asked, clutching at my purse strap, before I could lose my nerve.

“Because I’m a coward,” Tony muttered without looking me in the eye.

I blinked. That was so not the answer I expected.

He looked worse for wear. His shoulders sagged and he hung his head. His dress shirt was so wrinkled he obviously hadn’t bothered throwing it in the dryer for a few minutes before work, much less ironed it, and the coarse stubble across his jaw told me he hadn’t shaved in a few days.

“And because I feel something for you I haven’t felt before and it scares the shit out of me,” he continued in that low, sexy rumble of his.

“Wow,” I finally managed to say after a long, awkward silence. “That’s... heavy.”

He wasn’t the only one feeling things. I still wasn’t sure if it was just lust or if there was something deeper between us, something I didn’t quite understand.

He raked a hand through his messy curls and lifted his chin towards the ceiling. “Yeah, yeah it is. Sorry, my head’s been all over the place lately.”

The urge to touch him, to reforge the connection between us, hit me hard. I reached out. My fingers brushed against his bare forearm.

At first, he flinched like the last time I touched him, but then he took a deep breath and some of the tension straining his body drained away.

He didn’t jerk away from my second attempt. He let me make contact, allowed my palm to settle with a light touch over his forearm.

“Are you... are you sleeping okay?” I kept my voice soft, having gotten close enough to notice how bad the dark circles under his eyes were.

“No,” he replied in a low rumble, “not in weeks.” He closed his eyes, took a deep breath in through his nose, and let it out slow. When he opened his eyes again, a sharpness flickered in that deep green.

My throat tightened, my hand on his arm grasped him harder. His gaze slid down to my mouth. He wet his lips and, as if he had to fight an urge, lifted his eyes back to mine.

“You should go,” he whispered in too rough of a voice.

“What if I don’t want to?” I both wanted to flee before I did something I might regret and to never leave his side. How could I be so conflicted? Why did I want him so much when we had barely said more than a few words to each other? How I felt around him scared me. It was like I hungered for him and only him. All I wanted was for him to kiss me again, to claim my body as his.

“This is dangerous, Allison.”

“What is?” My voice sounded far away. A dreamy haze clouded my mind. My hand slid up his arm and my lips parted. God, I just needed him to kiss me.

“Us,” he said it so quietly it hardly registered.

“I don’t care.” My heels lifted from the ground. I made the connection myself by pressing my lips to his.

He reacted instantaneously. His hands grabbed me roughly by the hips and pulled my body flush against his.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, opened my mouth for him, and his tongue eagerly met mine. My hands smoothed across his shoulders and he growled against my lips. His teeth caught and nipped at my lower one.

One of his hands slid over my hip and down the front of my thigh. He came at me with so much aggression at first, but then he bowed and touched his

forehead to mine. I tried to remember how to think, how to function, as his gaze searched mine.

“I want you so damn bad,” he murmured before he kissed me again, just a faint press of his lips against mine. His hand on my thigh squeezed, his thumb trailed dangerously close to my aching core.

“I know I shouldn’t, not after you’ve been avoiding me like I’m plagued.” My hands slid over his neck, my thumbs brushed over the sharp scruff covering his jaw. “But I want you, too.”

He ducked his head to the side of mine. His nose smoothed against my skin, sniffed at me, breathed me in deep. His whole body shuddered as he exhaled heated breath across my neck.

My body threatened to overheat as I surrendered. I shouldn’t have pursued it. I should have let it go, let him slip my mind, let him walk away, but I couldn’t. It wasn’t rational, but in the moment, I couldn’t find it in me to care.

Our hands were everywhere as we made it down to the floor. His fingers made quick work of my belt, the button, then the zipper of my slacks.

A tiny whimper escaped me as he yanked my pants and underwear down my legs. Eager eyes raked over bare legs I hadn’t shaved in close to a week. With a rumbling growl, he grabbed my thighs, spread my knees apart and ducked his head down to my pussy without uttering a single word.

I bit my lip to keep from crying out as his tongue tasted me for the first time. He fumbled and didn’t seem to know exactly what to do, but his enthusiasm more than made up for his apparent lack of experience.

Tony licked me everywhere he could down there. A lingering, careful tongue explored every fold and teased against my opening. It felt good, I

wouldn't have minded him taking his time, but not while we stood a chance of being caught.

I reached down, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and tugged to get his attention. Tony growled like an animal and refused to budge.

"Let me show you how I want it," I whispered.

He lifted his head, blinked a few times as if trying to break out of a trance, then nodded.

"Show me," he said in that raspy, low voice of his.

With a shaking hand, I spread myself with my index and ring fingers. "Here." I stroked my clit with my middle finger as he watched with rapt attention. The familiar sensation sent an arc of electric pleasure straight through me. "I want your mouth right here."

He followed my instruction without complaint or hesitation. Once he knew where to focus, he went to freaking town.

"Yes," I moaned as quietly as I could. "Yes, Tony, just like that."

"What else I can do?" he asked between eager strokes of his tongue. "Let me please you."

"Use your fingers," I panted, already breathless, "inside me, please."

"Like this?" he asked, prodding my entrance with a finger.

I nodded and bit my lip, my hand still clinging to that mess of hair of his. "You can use more than one."

He grinned and slipped two fingers inside me, nice and easy. A low laugh rumbled out of him when my head tipped back with the sensation. My breath caught as he ducked his mouth down to my mound again. He felt so good inside me. My hips rolled with the motion of his fingers and his mouth.

"You're so damn wet for me," he murmured, eliciting a full body shiver thanks to the way his words whispered over my sensitive bits.

“You... you can go harder. I like it a little rough.”

“You want more?” he asked as his fingers left me. I whimpered at the loss, but then he pressed against my opening again and I bit back a moan. “I’ll give you whatever you can take.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. “Yes,” it came out barely audible, “please, ah —”

Three fingers slid back inside to gently stretch me and give me that sense of fullness I loved so much. With his fingers inside me and his enthusiastic tongue lapping at my clit again, it wouldn’t be long before I came.

I loved the sounds he made, loved how he seemed unable to control himself around me. I wanted him to lose control, wanted every bit of wild passion he had to spare.

My pleasure built. His fingers delved as deep as they could in me, harder and harder. My legs trembled more and more the closer he brought me to the finish line.

“Just like that,” I murmured as my endorphin-filled brain hazed over with pleasure.

He breathed in deep through his nose. His hand on my thigh gripped me hard. From how he moaned, he might have been close to coming, too. The warmth of his breath and the feral sound of his voice threw me straight over the edge.

My back arched, my jaw clenched, and I groaned as I came. His tongue worked me right on through it even as my legs began to shake. He only slowed his rhythm when my pussy stopped clenching around his fingers, but he didn’t stop.

“I- oh god,” I heard myself whisper.

“You taste so fucking good,” he murmured, licking away my juices from

around his fingers before slowly removed them, leaving me empty and trembling.

Funny how we could go from not speaking more than two words to one another for weeks to him eating me out in the breakroom, but I wasn't about to complain. Not after he made me come that hard.

I lay there panting, not just to catch my breath, but to give my mind time to process what had just happened.

He studied the fingers he used on me as if in awe. Without any fanfare, he brought them to his mouth and licked them clean.

Then he blinked. His brows furrowed as he gazed down at me. That heated expression of his cooled, turned instead to something like confusion. I watched, totally bewildered, as Tony got to his feet and bolted out of the breakroom without a single word.



# Tony

Cold morning air whipping against my face woke me from a dream. I wanted to fall back asleep and sink back into that perfect fantasy. The one where I was perfectly normal, human, and had never heard of the existence of magic, mates, shifters, none of it. Instead, in my dream, Allison walked down the aisle to me in a church full of people I couldn't have possibly known, all smiling and happy, looking like the most beautiful angel in a wedding dress to ever grace the earth. And I was so fucking happy.

But then I woke up naked and alone, not in my bed where I'd gone to sleep, not even in my house where I'd taken great care to lock all the doors and windows. No, just like yesterday, a few days before that and I lost count of how many times by that point, I woke up with my body tucked under the protective limbs of a fallen tree.

Fifty feet from Allison's back yard.

I sighed and picked a leaf out of my hair. I should have stayed, spoken to her, something, instead of fleeing like a coward.

Getting through my entire shift last night had been utter torture. Owen knew something had happened. He read it all over me, but he didn't say a word about it. I didn't know if I hated him for that or was thankful he didn't confront me. I felt like the worst fucking person.

With a growl, I grabbed at my head. If only I could just... silence the stupid animal that got louder by the day. Before I met her, I hadn't realized how blissfully quiet my mind had been.

I still had my wolfish tendencies, sure, but it had never been at war with me. It didn't steal my body so it could run around without my input, leaving me with nothing but a blank spot where a memory should be. Last night she touched me and I broke. I couldn't get anywhere near her without the wolf insisting she was mine and I... I was starting to believe it.

I scrubbed my face with my hands, then stared down at them and turned them over. They were hands that gave way to black paws, paws that destroyed more than just my own life when I lost control and bit my father fifteen years ago.

He hadn't deserved it. He hadn't been the best father, but he tried really fucking hard. I sealed his fate with that bite. I worried the same would happen to anyone else who got too close.

But the wolf in me wasn't content with staying buried anymore. It... *I* wanted her. I wanted to wake up next to Allison in the morning, wanted to wrap my arms around her and bury my nose in her hair. I wanted her to want me, to accept me for what I was, even if I couldn't accept myself.

Allison wasn't my father. According to Owen, she was my mate and we were meant to be together. He kept trying to assure me what happened to Dad wouldn't happen to her, that fate chose her for a reason. Could I believe him? Would it actually be okay? The more time passed, the harder it was to stay away from her. The more I didn't want to stay away from her.

Would she accept it if she knew? Would she understand? If I somehow found the courage to tell her what she was to me, would she believe me?

One thing was for sure, my original plan to stay the hell away from her was an abject failure. Owen had been right. I couldn't keep losing myself to the wolf night after night. What if it got impatient? Would I completely lose myself to it, go feral and not be able to come back? I couldn't risk it.

It was time to stop running. The next time I saw her, I would finally make a move.

# Chapter Fourteen

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# Allison

“Anyone interested in another drink?” I cast a warm smile at the group of five slightly younger guys who had taken over the back two sofas facing each other.

They’d been conversing and carrying on. All of them nursed at least one beverage over the past hour. I’d been happy enough to handle them. Groups of men tended to tip quite well, doubly so if I tried being extra friendly.

“If I get a round of shots for my friends here,” the slight blond with a ponytail started, “would you do one with us?”

“Mmm, that depends,” I replied, raising an eyebrow and propping a hand on my hip. “What’s your poison?”

“Vodka. Six well shots, one for each of us.” He grinned up at me with a liquor-loosened smirk.

The Crypt wasn’t really the type of bar to do shots. We mostly served cocktails or higher end alcohols with large clear ice cubes most would sip at instead of throw back, but if that’s how they wanted to spend their money, who was I to argue?

“Be right back with those shots.” I threw a smile over my shoulder at them before grabbing a few scattered empties and heading for the back behind the bar.

After adding the shots to their tab, I started pouring. Two shots in, the back of my neck prickled. Glancing back over my shoulder, sure enough, I caught

Tony staring at me with an undecipherable expression. I ignored him and finished the pours with my head held high.

Our shifts overlapped for a few hours thanks to Sarah's meddling. She said she needed a few extra hours during the day to run some errands, so Owen had Tony come in early to cover for her. Meanwhile, I worked the early shift with Ethan. Ethan had gone home, Tony came in, and he still hadn't said a word to me.

Last night in the breakroom, he'd gone down on me. He tasted me, brought me to orgasm, then ran away without a word.

I didn't get him. He claimed I was something to him, that he was afraid of how he felt about me, but it was like he had no idea how to talk to me about it.

I didn't want to fight to drag a conversation out of him. He could come to me when he was finally ready to talk. I was through trying to figure him out.

He did kind of awaken something in me, though, a hunger, lust. Maybe I would go talk to Ethan, maybe I would join a dating app, maybe I would seek something casual and have some fun. Inside me was an ache I couldn't describe or put my finger on. Maybe I did need to get laid, as Sarah so eloquently put it.

I sauntered back over to the group of five lounging on the couches and set the tray of shots on the coffee table between them.

"Here you go, gentlemen," I said with a smile I hoped rated close to sultry. I reached for the shot glass closest to me. "One for each of us, right?"

"That's right," the blond replied with a laugh and reached for his own shot. The other four each grabbed one, too. "Sit down a minute, we're commiserating."

"And what are we commiserating?" I asked, taking the empty middle

cushion between the small blond and the attractive dark-headed guy whose downcast scowl gave off serious ‘leave me alone’ vibes.

“Parker here just broke up with his fiancé,” one of the guys on the opposite couch said. He motioned to the dark-haired guy beside me. “Good riddance, am I right?”

Well, that would definitely explain the quiet broodiness I’d been sensing from him.

“Sorry to hear that, Parker,” I said softly. “You doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” came Parker’s sullen reply.

“It’s okay if you aren’t,” the long-haired blond guy on my other side said.

“Yeah, man, she cheated on you. You deserve better,” the one with a head full of curly, light blond hair across from me added. He stuck out his hand towards the long-haired blond. “Here, give me your phone, Jamie.”

Jamie rolled his eyes but dug his phone out of his pocket and handed it over. “And why am I giving you my phone, Mike?”

“So we can prove Parker’s out having fun instead of moping around at home,” Mike, the one sitting across from me with the phone replied. He tapped a few times on the screen before he held it up as if he wanted to take a picture. “Put your arm around her, Parker.”

“What?” Parker startled and sat up straight. “Why?”

“Because we’re having a good time.” Mike left off an implied, sarcastic ‘duh’. “I’ll post it so it won’t be like you’re bragging about it. Come on, dude, live a little.”

Parker scoffed and shot me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry,” he said to me, his cheeks flushing with color, “you don’t have—”

I laughed. “Why not?” I raised my shot glass to Parker and grinned at him. “If anything, at least take your shot with me.”

“See, there you go!” The blond with the ponytail, Jamie, clapped me on the shoulder.

With some reluctance, Parker raised his glass to mine.

“Here’s to newfound freedom,”—I clinked my glass against his and leaned in close—“and to new beginnings. I’m sure the right person for you is out there somewhere and you’ll find them someday.”

He sighed and stared at his little glass of clear liquid as if he might find meaning swimming around in it. He gave his head a quick, clearing shake, then threw back his shot. I threw back mine as well. There was a click as his friend took a photo of us and the other four guys laughed and jeered as Parker made a face.

“Ugh, that is terrible,” he muttered, staring at the empty shot glass.

“Gee, sorry if my cheesy rallying speech didn’t do anything for you,” I teased and crossed my arms over my chest. I tried to look mildly offended.

Parker snorted. “No, not you.” He took a deep breath and let it out with a woosh before leaning forward to set his empty shot glass down on the coffee table. He sat back up again and gave me a small, genuine smile. “You might be kinda doing something for me, though.”

His buddies laughed. One of them even wolf-whistled.

“Uh huh.” I rolled my eyes with a light laugh as I got back to my feet. “You guys have fun tonight.”

“Wait wait wait.” Jamie reached forward and grabbed my wrist to keep me from moving away. A grin spread across his face as his gaze shifted between me and Parker. “How about another round of shots?”

I stared down at him and fought off a frown. “I kind of have other people to attend to, guys.”

“When do you get off, then?” Jamie asked. “We were planning to be out for



a while. You could come hang out with us.”

“Yeah,” Mike added with a grin. “Come on, for Parker’s sake.

“I’ll pay for your drinks,” Jamie pitched in.

Now, that was an interesting offer. It had been a long time since I’d been out for a night of fun and even Mom had been telling me it was time to cut loose a little. It would help me get Tony and his inexplicable behavior out of my mind. Not that the group of guys and I would likely ever qualify as friends, but they seemed fun enough to hang out with for an hour or two. I was finding myself, wasn’t I? Maybe I needed to get out of my comfort zone and go for it.

“Where’s the next stop? I get off in a few minutes. I could come meet you.”

“Heck yeah,” one of the other guys said. “We’re going to Miller’s next.”

“Okay,” I replied with a casual, noncommittal air, “maybe I’ll see you there. You ready to tab out?”

They paid their bill, left me a rather generous tip, and after a bit of lingering banter, made their way out into the night.

Sarah had already taken over at the bar, but I made myself useful. I closed out a few tabs and made a few more drinks before heading to the back to grab a few bottles to refill the rail.

The stockroom door opened behind me. Startled, I spun with two bottles of whiskey already tucked under my arm.

Sharp, wild eyes raked over me. “What do you think you’re doing?” Tony asked in a low, rough voice.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I motioned to the bottles of whiskey under my arm. “I’m restocking the rail before I get out of here.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

My eyebrows scrunched together. “I honestly have no idea what you’re on

about.” I shook my head and turned back to the wall of booze.

My hand reached for a bottle of gin. His flew over my shoulder and grabbed the same bottle. He directed the bottle back onto the shelf while his other hand settled against my hip.

I could feel his body so close behind mine. I didn’t know whether I should have been freaking out or glad he finally decided to talk to me, to touch me. The heat in his palm sank into my skin and I found it hard to think about anything beyond everywhere else I wanted him to touch.

“You shouldn’t go out with those guys,” he murmured into my hair. His breath whispered across the top of my ear.

I let go of the bottle of gin and lowered my arm back down to my side, but didn’t turn around. He stood way too close to my back for me to turn and face him. As much as my body screamed yes yes yes to his presence and attention, my head urged me to be cautious.

How did he even know I was considering going out with them? He couldn’t have heard our conversation from across the bar.

“Why do you care?” I asked, keeping my tone light. “You refused to talk to me for weeks until last night. Now suddenly it’s okay for you to corner me in the stockroom, breathe down my neck, and tell me what I should and shouldn’t do?”

“Why don’t you come home with me tonight?” His words may have been on the suave side, but they came fraught with nerves.

There was no ignoring the heat of him behind me. I should have grabbed what I needed and skirted on out of there, but something held me back. I turned around, lifted my chin, and met his intense gaze.

Tony didn’t move a muscle. His eyes burned into mine. He looked down at me through long black lashes and I swear my heart skipped a beat.

Why did I react to him so much? Was it because I found him so attractive? That had to be it, right? Since when had I become so shallow?

“And why would I want to do that instead of going out for a few drinks to be social for once?” My eyebrows rose. I refused to look away even though the intensity at which he stared threatened to give me third-degree burns.

“Because we really do need to talk.” One corner of his mouth quirked up a touch. Careful fingers brushed a piece of hair back behind my ear. “Please, just come with me.”

I bit back a laugh. Even though the thought of spending some quality alone time with Tony sounded entirely too enticing, his behavior over the past few weeks made me balk. Especially after last night.

“I don’t get you and I don’t like whatever game you think you’re playing. I’m too old for fuckboy drama, Tony.”

His face screwed up in obvious confusion. He blinked a few times, put a bit of space between us, then let out a weary sigh.

“I-I’m sorry.” Weirdly, he did sound apologetic. “You’re right. I’m an asshole and I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Yes,” I agreed, raising my eyes to his again, “you are an asshole and really need to work on your social skills.”

It was his turn to avert his eyes. He raked a hand through his hair and rubbed at his neck. “Can we... I don’t know, start over? I kind of hate this.”

“Hate what?” I prodded.

“Avoiding you.”

“Are you scared of me or something?” I asked. “We just had sex, big deal. We’re both adults, it’s not like it matters.”

“It does matter,” he said with a soft sigh. “Matters to me.”

“Why?” His sincerity threw me off entirely.

“Because I can’t stop thinking about you.” His tone hardened as if that bothered him. “It’s why I’ve been trying to avoid you. I’m afraid of hurting you, but seeing you hanging on that guy just now...” He shook his head. “I’ve been going about this all wrong. I can’t lose you.”

Well, that was unexpected. And maddening.

“You can’t lose me?” An awkward, angry laugh bubbled out of me. I crossed my arms, still clutching my whiskey bottles. “Tony, we aren’t a thing. We had sex then you ignored me for weeks. We got intimate again last night and you ran out of there without a single word. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?”

“No, Allison, I—”

“Why are we even talking about this?” I asked, cutting him off. “I don’t care what you do. Sleep with whoever you want. I’m sure going to.”

“I don’t sleep with other people.” He took a step closer and oh so slowly raised a hand to my cheek.

I should have stepped back, batted his hand away or something, but I let him touch me, let him brush his fingertips across my cheek and down my neck. A tremor ran through me at his delicate touch.

“You’re the first person I’ve been with in a very long time,” he crooned, “and I only want to be with you.”

Shock rocked through my entire body. My stupid heart wanted to believe him. It wanted me to jump into his arms and drag him back home. My co-workers had told me the same thing, right? That he didn’t sleep around. That he didn’t do relationships.

The warmth of his touch against my neck reminded me of all the other ways he could touch me. Of all the other ways I needed him to touch me. Why did

I desperately want him to kiss me? Why did I wish his mouth was on my neck instead of his hand?

“You’re mine,” he whispered as those green eyes of his burned through me like a brand. “You belong with me.”

My body believed him. That made total sense to it.

The rational part of my brain that still functioned, however, threw a fit. Red flags, red flags everywhere. Abort abort abort.

“Excuse me?” My eyes narrowed down to annoyed slits. I bat his hand away from my face. “What is that, some wannabe, alpha-male garbage pickup line you read on a misogynistic blog somewhere?” I asked with a haughty laugh and an eye roll. “Spare me. I do not belong to you. I don’t even know you.”

“It’s not a line, Allison!” His features contorted in something akin to horror. “I- I’m trying to be serious here.”

“Sure,” I muttered with an awkward chuckle, turning back to the stockroom wall to grab the other bottles I needed. “Because I’m just so special, right?”

“You- you are special—”

I snatched up a bottle of gin. “Couldn’t possibly be because you have some misplaced sense of entitlement over me because I lost my mind and slept with you against my better judgment.” I snatched a bottle of vodka. “And then last night I did it again, god only knows why.”

I fumed, turned, and clutched the bottles to my chest as if they could protect me from the way he made me feel just by being in the same room with me. Even though I could say out loud I didn’t belong to him, that I didn’t trust him, my heart sure wanted to betray me.

He would not look at me. His whole head turned to the other wall, giving me a good view of his face in profile. His stubble-covered jaw clenched hard

enough to risk breaking a molar. He physically shook, his shoulders drew back tight, and his lips mashed hard together as if he fought back the urge to open his mouth again.

His demeanor frightened me. He had some kind of issue, something wasn't right with him, but I had no idea what. I knew he wouldn't hurt me, but the way he referred to me in such a possessive manner got my hackles up.

“You don't own me,” I reiterated for both his sake and mine as I brushed past him on my way out of the stockroom. “I can do whatever I want, Tony, and what I want right now is to not be anywhere near you.”

# Chapter Fifteen

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# Tony

**H**ow the hell was I supposed to find the courage to confess to Allison, to tell her I was a wolf and she was my mate, if she hated me? She said she didn't want to be near me. I didn't want to be near me. Fuck!

“Wow, you're all dark and stormy and Allie just stomped on out of here like someone pissed in her Cheerios. What happened, bud?”

Sarah's voice caught me off guard. I hadn't heard her approach, hadn't even moved since Allison left me standing there like an idiot in the stockroom just a minute or two ago.

“Have you been in here this whole time? You've been gone like fifteen minutes.”

Okay, maybe more than a minute or two.

Sarah snapped her fingers.

The noise started me so bad I yelped. As soon as I turned to acknowledge her, I dropped my eyes to the side.

Sarah's bright pink lips set in a thin, angry line. “Earth to Tony, hell-the-fucking-oh.” She snapped her fingers a few times in quick succession. “What is with you? What did you say to her? It had to be something. She was in a good mood before she came back here.”

“I fucked up,” I admitted out loud, tipping my head back to stare at the ceiling and grabbing it in pure frustration. “I said the wrong thing and I don't know how to fix it.”

Sarah's angry tone faltered, softened. “To Allie?”



“I am so fucking stupid.” I huffed out a sigh. My arms crossed my arms over my chest and I hung my head with shame.

“So... what did you say, exactly?”

“That she should go out with me instead of with the guys she was flirting with.” Normally, I would have kept my mouth shut, but Sarah had gotten friendly with Allison almost as soon as the two met and she’d always been respectful. Sarah didn’t push my boundaries once she figured out where they were. Maybe she would know what to do because I sure didn’t.

“That’s... not that bad,” she started, still scrutinizing me. “What else did you say?”

“I might have... insinuated that she belonged to me.”

“You what?”

“I know I shouldn’t have, but I said it anyway like a fucking idiot.”

“You realize how messed up that is, right? You’ve known her like three weeks and y’all have barely spoken. What in the world possessed you to say such a thing? Besides you just being you?”

“Just... how do I fix it?” I wasn’t about to admit anything close to the truth. ‘Wolf instincts’ would never be an appropriate answer. The damn animal wouldn’t stop tainting my mind in ways I couldn’t predict. Allison had to see me as a total creep after that disastrous interaction.

“I don’t know,” Sarah said, crossing her own arms over her chest. Her tone softened even further. “What did she say in response?”

“That she doesn’t want to be near me.”

“Woof,” Sarah muttered. “But she is justified in that reaction. You get that, right?”

“Yeah, I do.” I uncrossed my arms and shoved my fingers into my pockets instead. “Can I even salvage this, Sarah? I can’t... I can’t lose her, she’s—” I

cut myself off before I said 'mine' again.

Claws raked at my insides. My whole body tensed with the accompanying pain. I barely kept from doubling over with it as my arms wrapped around my middle. Anger rose to counter the unwelcome intrusion.

"Uh, you okay?" Sarah asked carefully from the doorway.

"Fine," I growled out, straightening up with a grimace. One arm stayed cradled over my mid-section as the wolf fought for control.

"You don't look fine." Concern played across her features, but she didn't move from her spot in the doorway. "You look pretty awful. What is with you lately?"

"Nothing."

"Liar," Sarah muttered under her breath with a shake of her head. "This all started when Allie showed up. It's like you have gone completely off the rails. Why are you so stuck on her?"

"I can't explain it." I closed my eyes and tried to tamp down the raging wolf. "It's not something I can help."

"It's like you've fixated on her or something." Sarah stared at me as if she didn't know me. Which... she didn't, not really.

We'd worked together for two years, sure, but it was in her eyes, that realization, the recognition that even though I'd been physically present, a hell of a lot went unsaid.

"Tony," Sarah started, her voice hardening as if she issued a command, "maybe you should go home for the evening and try to sort yourself out."

All I managed to do was nod. Claws tore against my insides again. My heart already pounded. I didn't have long. There would be no stopping it.

In front of me, Sarah's hard glare softened. "You really have it bad, don't you?" she asked gently. "Ethan told me it's like you're... you're lovesick or

something. I wasn't sure what he meant, but I see it now.

"I know you have your quirks. I know you're trying. Figure out what you want to say to her tomorrow and fix it. She'll probably give you another chance if you apologize, but if she tells you to leave her alone, you leave her alone, understand?"

I blinked hard and nodded again. My teeth bit down on the inside of my lower lip hard enough to hurt. The pain served as nothing more than a benign distraction from the roiling turmoil inside. Sarah backed out of the doorway. I strode past her and headed straight for the back exit.

I wasn't strong enough to contain the raging animal. My body belonged to it, not the other way around. I wouldn't make it out of the alley before the wolf took over. Only a prayer would hold off the physical changes until I made it out of the building.

"And Tony?" Sarah called to my back right before I pushed through the door to the alley.

I paused but didn't turn, afraid of what she might see.

"Against my better judgment, I am rooting for you. Don't fuck it up."

I exhaled a sharp breath. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it, bud. Good luck."

With that, I pushed out the door.

A spasm wracked my body and already shortening fingers scrabbled at my belt buckle the second the door closed behind me. I managed to kick my boots off, to nudge them under the dumpster, but the rest of my clothes wouldn't survive unscathed. My organs began to shift, to change and move inside me. I couldn't hope to describe the pain.

*Is this what I'm going to do to her? Put her through pain and horror like this?*

Both my mind and body reeled. I fell forward with a choked cry that came out more the whine of an animal in distress. I caught myself with hands that weren't hands at all anymore. My palms grew rough and padded beneath my paws. Black fur spread down my exposed forearms, forelegs. My pants ripped across the back seam as my tail grew out and had nowhere else to go.

Panic coursed through me. I couldn't lose myself to oblivion, not again. Inside, I screamed, desperate for once to maintain some semblance of control instead of letting it all go. I needed my mind. I needed to remember... needed to see through the wolf's eyes, my eyes.

Muscle shifted under skin, under fur. Bones locked into new configurations. What remained of my clothing hung awkwardly on my frame and dug into my body in all the wrong places. I didn't lose myself. My perspective just... shifted.

# Chapter Sixteen

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# Allison

Crisp winter wind greeted me like an old friend. I bundled my jacket tighter around my middle and stalked over to Miller's. A half-moon shone overhead and let off enough light I didn't feel unsafe walking alone. It was barely after nine. Working an earlier shift certainly made it easier to go out and enjoy myself after work.

Who did Tony think he was, telling me what I should and shouldn't do, as if he had any say at all? Yes, we shared some sort of mutual, inexplicable interest in one another, but he didn't own me. No one owned me. I could do what I pleased.

And so I did.

"Hey! You made it!" Jamie exclaimed, running up to me almost the second I walked in the door. The dark beer in his pint glass sloshed up to the edge with his animated gestures, but didn't spill over. "Someone get this woman a beer!"

Three of the other guys stood around one of the many pool tables towards the back of the sports bar. They all had pool cues in hand. Parker had been lining up a shot, but he glanced over his shoulder and shot me a smile at Jamie's loud proclamation.

One of the guys whose name I still didn't know scurried off to the counter as I made my way over to Jamie's group.

"Oh, we're playing pool?" I asked with a grin. "Any money involved?"

“Not yet,” Jamie replied, slinging a loose arm around my shoulders. “But now that you’re here, we could play for something a little more interesting.”

“And what might that be?” I asked, accepting the beer the black-haired guy with glasses handed me, a dark ale just like the rest of theirs. Taking a sip, I recognized it as a common dark Irish stout. “Did we lose someone? I thought there were five of you?”

“Dustin had to get home to take care of his dogs,” Parker explained. “This is Fitz, by the way.” He waved a hand towards the larger guy with wireframe glasses who handed me my beer. Fitz wore quite a friendly smile and even waved back when introduced.

“That’s Mike,” Parker continued, motioning towards the smaller, curly-haired photographer. “I’m Parker, obviously, and that’s Jamie with his arm all over you.”

“Well, thanks for finally introducing me.” I gently untangled myself from Jamie’s arm. “I’m Allie. So what’s this interesting thing we’re playing for now?”

“You,” Jamie said with a wolfish grin. “How about whoever wins the most rounds gets your number?”

“Alright,” I said with a laugh, charmed by his audacity and irritated enough at Tony to agree. I was single and the four of them were all charming enough in their own ways. If anything, it would be entertaining to play along. A phone number wasn’t anything serious, anyway. “I’m down. Let’s do it. Who’s going first?”

We played round after round pool. I won the first game against Jamie to many laughs and jeers. The guys all played several games against each other. There was plenty of trash talking, teasing, and encouraging cheers to go

around. Mike and Fitz left after a few games since they both had had too much to drink and wanted to crash, but Jamie and Parker stayed.

They played a few rounds against each other before Jamie bowed out, saying he knew when he'd been beaten, which left me to go head-to-head with Parker. Parker hadn't seemed all that skilled before, but he pulled ahead fast with a few well-placed shots.

"You have to be cheating," I groaned. "You weren't this good an hour ago!"

"Maybe I'm just really determined to get your number," Parker replied with a loose smirk. "Hope you're ready to give it to me because I'm starting to get a few ideas about what we could do together."

I smirked right back. "Oh, and what might those ideas be? I hate to disappoint you, but I work most evenings."

"Yeah, but you don't work mornings," he rightly pointed out, "and I make a mean stack of pancakes."

"He's not wrong," Jamie piped in with a wave of his almost empty beer glass. He downed the last swallow of beer and tipped his glass towards Parker. "He does make some damn good pancakes."

"Are you offering to cook me breakfast?" I asked, raising an eyebrow as I lined up my next shot. I made the shot, sank the ball and moved around the pool table to line up the next one.

The two friends exchanged a look as I leaned over the table. Parker stood somewhere behind me while Jamie stood with his hands on his pool cue. Jamie wore a wily grin, but it wasn't me he eyed when Parker's hand landed on my hip.

I didn't flinch and made my shot. My cue struck the ball dead on. The ball careened straight for the corner pocket, but curved just enough at the last



second to hit the edge and bounce away.

“Too bad,” Parker murmured from behind me. “Looks like I’m getting that phone number.”

“Looks like you might be right.” I could feel him there close behind me. I couldn’t move back an inch without pressing against him.

I straightened up. A part of me wanted to do it, to lean back enough to feel the weight of his body against mine. I’d had the vodka shot and another two probably higher-than-necessary ABV beers. I felt pretty good, pretty loosened up, and frankly, irritated enough at Tony to mull the thought over.

“It’s your shot.” I cast a glance up to the man towering over me from behind.

Side by side, Tony would have been a few inches shorter than Parker. They both had dark hair and light eyes, though Parker’s were a soft blue compared to the intense green of Tony’s. Parker seemed in good shape, considering the fit of his sweater and jeans, but I’d felt Tony’s body. He hid an impressive physique under the clothes I hadn’t quite managed to get him out of yet.

Comparatively, Jamie only had an inch or two of height on me. He was a rather slim guy with sharp brown eyes that seemed to catch everything. I got the feeling I’d been set up, that Jamie’s intention had always been to play wingman for his recently single friend and, as I learned over our several games of pool, his roommate.

Instead of moving away from me to line up his own shot, Parker set his pool cue aside and laid his other hand on my other hip.

“I’ll go close our tab.” Jamie stuck his cue back into the closest rack and made a hasty retreat from our pool table.

With Jamie out of earshot, Parker leaned down just enough so I could hear him over the noise of the bar.

“Maybe I’m taking my shot right now,” Parker’s warm breath whispered across my ear. “You wanna get out of here? Come back to our place with me? I’ll make you breakfast.” He slurred his words ever so slightly. He might not have been falling over drunk, but he wasn’t at all sober and neither was I.

I appreciated the forwardness. Parker was an attractive guy and it was nice to feel desired. I might have been willing to agree to a breakfast date, but I wasn’t the one-night stand type, Tony notwithstanding. I wasn’t interested in sleeping with Parker or pursuing him, at least not until I figured out what was going on between me and Tony.

“I don’t think I’m ready for something like that just yet,” I replied with a strained smile. “But I wouldn’t mind getting a coffee somewhere to sober up a bit.”

“Sure, we can do that,” Parker quickly agreed.

My strained smile turned more genuine. “I think a place a few blocks down is still open.”

“Sounds good. You ready to go?”

I wobbled a bit thanks to the alcohol as we made our way outside. We waited for Jamie and as soon as he joined us, I mentioned coffee and off we went.

Being social and spending some time out making new friends should have helped me forget about Tony, but no. The more I tried to picture going out with Parker, the more I couldn’t imagine being intimate with him. Or anyone else, for that matter. Tony continued to be the only man my tipsy mind had any interest in fantasizing about.

Parker wrapped an arm around my shoulders and Jamie fell into step on my other side. They guided me out the door and down the street.

“Isn’t the coffee place back that way?” I asked. We were heading towards

the outskirts of downtown, towards nearby apartment buildings, not towards the one coffee shop I thought would still be open.

“We might have taken a wrong turn a block or two back.” Jamie said almost sheepishly. “You think we should double back?”

“Our place is really close by. We could just get you some coffee there,” Parker suggested, rubbing my arm as we walked.

“Oh yeah, we have one of those fancy espresso machines. I could make you whatever you...” Jamie trailed off as if suddenly distracted and slowed his pace.

Parker cast him a questioning look, but he slowed, too. His arm around me tensed up, then withdrew.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I thought I heard something,” Jamie murmured, keeping his voice down. His head swiveled. Sharp eyes darted from shadow to shadow. “Maybe I’m just—”

A shiver ran up my spine. A low, rumbling growl filled the darkness. I couldn’t pinpoint the eerie sound. It seemed to come from everywhere at once.

My breath hitched. The back of my neck prickled. I whirled around and clutched a fist to my chest.

Green eyes seemed to glow out of the darkness as a shadow of a beast stalked out of the alley we just passed. Light from a closed storefront’s sign did nothing to help illuminate the pitch-black animal. The overgrown dog from a few weeks ago didn’t look anywhere near as harmless as he had before.

Dark lips pulled back off huge fangs. One pointed and one torn ear pinned back. The fur on his neck and shoulders stood as he drew closer, one slow,

calculated step at a time.

“Jamie,” Parker started in a low, shaky voice, “tell me that’s not what it looks like.”

“Pretty sure it is.” Jamie’s soft reply came sure and steady. He sounded quite sober all of a sudden.

I stood frozen in place, unable to tear my eyes from the beast in front of me. Where did he come from? Had he gotten loose from his yard? He didn’t belong downtown, not with so many cars on the road.

The dog went from growling in that low, menacing manner to snarling and snapping. It drew close enough to lunge if it wanted to.

“Allie…” Parker kept his unsteady voice low, “you need to move. Now.”

“I know.” I slowly raised my hands in front of me as if to tell the dog to ‘calm down’. It wasn’t quite fear that seized my chest. I knew the animal, knew his huge paws were the ones leaving frequent footprints in my backyard.

They had to be his. No other dogs roamed the neighborhood. If he enjoyed hanging around my home so much, would he would recognize my scent? He had been friendly the first time we met, wagged his tail and everything. Maybe he wouldn’t hurt me.

The dog prowled forward another two steps as I tried to remember how to breathe. My legs refused to carry me backwards. Parker and Jamie didn’t have the same problem. The scuffs of their shoes against the sidewalk retreated further back.

“You’re a good boy, aren’t you?” I asked the ferocious beast before me. My shoulders slumped and I bent forward to not look so big. I couldn’t imagine I posed any threat to him, but it wouldn’t hurt to look weak and unappetizing. “You don’t want to eat me, right, sweetie?”

The dog did not stop growling. Eyes as bright as emeralds flicked between the three of us. His whole body tensed. Was it a bluff, or was he going to attack?

“Get away from it,” Parker snapped. “Don’t let that thing anywhere near you.”

“It’ll be fine,” Jamie said in a much calmer fashion. “Just don’t provoke—”

The dog lunged with a powerful burst of speed and flew straight at me.

“Allie, no!” Parker roared.

The dog was fast, so fast I didn’t have time to run or do anything other than tuck my chin into my neck and cover my face with my arms, but the only thing that hit me was a breeze.

Startled, my head jerked back up again to follow the animal’s motion, or sudden lack thereof.

The huge dog skittered to a stop right between the three of us. He stayed close enough ahead of me I could have stroked his hindquarters with an outstretched palm. That muzzle full of sharp fangs still snarled and snapped at Jamie and Parker. The vicious dog gnashed his teeth as if a mere hair trigger kept him from ripping the two men apart.

Jamie held his hands raised in front of him. He shielded Parker’s body with his own. Parker clutched at Jamie’s shoulders as if the smaller man could save them both from a mauling. Jamie’s wide eyes had been full of fear, but as the dog lowered his head and the fur on the back of his neck bristled with renewed ferocity, Jamie’s expression hardened. Determination radiated off him like the heat from a campfire.

“Is- is it going to attack us?” Parker clutched Jamie’s shoulders as if his life depended on it.

“Doubtful. If he wanted to, he already would have.” Jamie’s challenging

glare lifted away from the dog and found me. “Do you know him? He sure seems to know you.”

“He’s not my dog!” I insisted. “I mean, I’ve seen him before, but he wasn’t all growly then.”

“It seems to like you a whole hell of a lot more than it likes us,” Parker snarled.

Why did Parker sound so accusatory, as if he blamed me for the dog’s aggressive posturing? Sure, I recognized the animal, but we hadn’t interacted beyond the first time we met face to face. He had been curious about me then, had approached on his own and hadn’t been the least bit intimidating. Could I talk him down if I could get his attention?

“It’s okay, big guy,” I started, lowering my volume to just barely above a whisper but pitching it high as if lavishing love on the most adorable puppy in the world. “No one’s going to hurt you.”

Those ears lying almost flat against his skull swiveled a tiny bit towards my voice.

“Pretty sure we’re the ones in danger here,” Parker muttered, still using Jamie’s smaller body as a shield. His voice dropped lower to whisper something to Jamie I didn’t hear.

Jamie snapped a few unintelligible words back at Parker. Parker’s stance relaxed a touch, but he didn’t let go of Jamie’s shoulders.

I pursed my lips together and whistled softly in another attempt to get the dog’s attention.

The dog’s ears perked up. I wondered how he lost the tip of his right one. The edge was jagged, as if it had been torn off. He turned his head just enough to peek at me with one of those bright green eyes. The snarling quieted. His black nose twitched.

Both men stared at me as if I'd gone completely insane.

"Yeah, there you go. I'm friendly, see?" I offered my hand to the dog, hoping he would recognize my scent.

The ruff around his shoulders and neck relaxed as he sniffed the air. The dog didn't move from his position. He still faced the two men, but he closed his jaws. A flash of pink tongue cleared away the flecks of saliva from his muzzle.

"Come on, sweetheart," I said, feeling a bit silly trying to sweet talk a vicious dog. "You remember me, don't you?"

The dog's aggressive stance relaxed and his front feet shuffled until he stood tall again. He raised his head and let out a quiet whine. His stiff and motionless tail began to twitch back and forth.

With one last piercing glare at the two men in front of us, the dog finally huffed, turned and came to me. He sniffed my offered hand, then stretched out his neck. His ears laid back but not in anger or aggression, they went back with his submission.

"Good job, that's it," I said softly, lifting a trembling hand to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

The dog hesitated, but when I stood straight again, he turned a half circle and leaned his substantial weight against my hip.

"Hi there." I couldn't help smiling down at the beautiful animal. I dared to stroke the black, silky fur along the back of his neck. "You're such a good boy, yes, you are."

The dog looked up at me with adoring eyes. He wiggled with the slow wag of his fluffy tail and his huge head butted into and rubbed against my belly.

I laughed at the formerly terrifying animal. "See, you aren't so scary." I pet his head and scratched behind his ears. "Yeah, you like that, huh?"

“I’ll be damned,” Jamie uttered under his breath. He sounded more amazed than anything.

“We should call this in,” Parker hissed to Jamie.

“I’ll do it.” Jamie dug his phone out of his pocket. He looked down at the screen, his thumbs poked at the display. “I know who to call.”

“That... that *animal* shouldn’t be anywhere near here.” Parker’s jaw clenched, his hands balled into fists. “And it certainly shouldn’t be behaving like that.”

“Allie, I know he seems to like you, but you might want to get away from him,” Jamie said, still poking at his phone screen. “At least for now, okay?”

“For now?” Parker bit back at his friend. He waved an aggressive arm in the dog’s direction. “Like hell, Jamie, that thing is acting like she’s—”

My hold over the dog’s attention expired so suddenly there was no time to react. He lunged straight at the two of them with a vicious snarl.

Jamie had no weapon besides his cell phone, which he hurled at the animal.

The dog caught the phone in his teeth and bit down. A loud crack punctuated the air as the phone shattered in those powerful jaws.

Jamie snapped a few choice words I didn’t catch, grabbed Parker by his jacket, and yanked him into motion. The two men turned tail and fled.

The dog dropped the phone on the sidewalk. Parts of it broke off as it hit the ground. The dog sniffed at the scattered bits, snarled at them like they personally offended him, then came right back to my side.

“Well, you either really didn’t like them or you really like me.” I didn’t bother with the baby talk voice as the dog returned to me with his head held high. “Or maybe both?” I sighed and rubbed my temple with a hand. The dog licked at my other one. I tried to wave him off, but he leaned his shoulder harder against me, whined and pleaded for attention.



“So much for coffee,” I muttered, ruffling the fur between the dog’s shoulders. “What’s your deal anyway, huh?”

As if answering my question, the dog snorted. He rubbed his giant snout against me and let out a content-sounding groan when I scratched at a good spot behind his torn ear.

“At least you’re sweet to me.” I smiled down at him. My fingers stroked through the soft, slightly coarse fur around the side of his neck. “I think it’s time for you to head home, though.”

I gave him one last pat on his head and began walking. My night obviously drew to a close. After that disaster, I just wanted to head home, get in bed, and maybe read a few chapters of my latest book before falling asleep.

The dog followed me block after block, turn after turn. I thought for sure he’d run off somewhere along the way, but he never strayed more than a few feet from my side the entire way home. He even followed me up onto my front porch.

I glanced down at my new friend before opening the door. “You, uh, have a home to go back to, don’t you?”

The dog lifted his eyes up to mine and tilted his head to the side. He chuffed and licked my hand with a pathetic whine.

I gave his head another friendly pat. “I don’t need a dog,” I said more to convince myself than to chastise him, “especially not one as big as you. Maybe if you were like fifteen pounds, but you’re bigger than I am.”

He gazed up at me with those stunning green eyes and somehow managed to look completely harmless, more like a big cuddly fuzzball than the rabid monster he’d been towards Parker and Jamie.

“But it is going to be below freezing tonight…” I sighed and scratched at the spot he liked behind his torn ear.

He leaned into the scratching, closed his eyes, and groaned. So much for being a feral beast. His fur was all silky and clean, not like a dog that spent all his time outdoors. Was he an escape artist? Did he have a microchip? If I took him to a vet in the morning, they could scan him for one. Maybe I could get him back to his owners that way.

“Alright, you win.” I gave his head one last pat before I dug into my pocket for my keys. “You can stay, but just for one night.”

# Chapter Seventeen

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# Tony

**M**y thoughts weren't as simple as expected. Not entirely human, not entirely wolf either. I couldn't comprehend it, didn't know if I'd even remember it when I woke up human again.

I stayed plastered to my mate's side and refused to stray once I found her. Allison needed my protection, and in a way, I needed hers. What if the ones with magic tried to come back for her? What if they tried to send me away?

I wouldn't leave her, I couldn't, so when she held the door open for me, I went right inside. As long as I stayed with my mate, nothing would ever come between us.

Inside, her home smelled distinctly hers. I sniffed the air, the entryway rug, whatever I could to catch a trace of anyone else, but came up empty beyond a lingering hint of fresh paint. She lived alone and had no visitors, male or female.

"Just... stay right there for a minute," she directed, stopping in the doorway to take off her coat and slip off her shoes before hurrying past me, muttering to herself.

I caught something about 'fur everywhere' and 'maul me in my sleep'. I wanted to laugh. She could trust me. Instinct told me to bite her, to make her like me, but she had to know first, to consent to it. I'd find some way to tell her.

The couch smelled like it didn't belong. It must have been new. Spotless hardwood floors held the vague scent of citrus cleaning solution. A bookshelf

in the corner, a short one, had been filled with a few dozen neatly organized paperbacks. There weren't any other obvious personal items sitting out.

Allison came back to me not having moved a muscle after a minute or two. "Good boy." She gave me a smile and a head pat. "I really hope you're house trained."

My tail wagged. I couldn't help it. I did want to be a good boy for her.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "Let's see..." She trailed towards the kitchen. "I think I have some leftovers, but nothing really substantial."

I trailed after her. My claws clicked across old tile. Her worrying over what to feed me warmed my heart.

The cozy kitchen's cabinets had recently received a bright new paint job, same as the walls. A two-person table sat off to the side in a tiny dining nook. Some of the grout was missing in places, a few of the tiles had cracked over the years. It wouldn't have been too bad a job to rip it out and redo it for her.

Allison dug around in the fridge for a moment before she pulled out a bag emblazoned with the logo of a local Chinese takeout place. After producing a plate from a cabinet and a container from the bag, she dumped some sort of chicken and rice dish out onto the plate.

"Here you go." She set the plate of leftovers down on the floor for me.

I wasn't that hungry, but ate it anyway since she'd gone through the trouble. For good measure, I lapped at the water bowl she put down, too.

"You seem pretty well behaved. Maybe you just don't like men?" she postulated as she took a seat at the little table.

"You also need a name." A sweet smile spread across her face as she watched me eat.

*You know my name.*

"Shadow is too obvious."

I licked the plate clean and lifted my head to stare at her.

“You have such pretty green eyes,” she said, setting her elbows on the table and dropping her chin into her hands, “like Tony does. What kind of dog has green eyes?”

My head tilted. She said my name while I stood right there in front of her. Part of me wanted to run far, far away, while the other part of me wanted to lick her face. I settled on a slow, content tail wag.

“I wish I knew what was up with that guy,” she muttered, sounding oh so frustrated. “I mean, I like him for some unfathomable reason.” She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s so, ugh. He’s not even nice to me, he’s just... I don’t know what he is.”

I lowered my head and slunk to her side. My chin settled on her thigh. My eyes flicked up to hers then away again. *I’m sorry, I whined. Let me fix this. I want to fix this.*

“Why am I dumping my problems on you? You’re just a dog.” She smiled down at me and pet my head. “A really pretty dog that would eat me out of house and home.”

*Like I wouldn’t provide for you,* I huffed.

“What about Chief?” she asked, gently scratching at the ruff of my neck. “You look like you could be a Chief.”

*Just call me yours.* My eyes closed with a contented sigh. I didn’t want to get used to being loved on, but I could. Before her, just the thought of anyone touching me so intimately caused a visceral negative reaction, but Allison was special. She was mine.

“Well, Chief, I think it’s time for bed.” She leaned back in her chair, stretched her arms up above her head, and yawned. “It’s late and I’m exhausted.”

My head lifted off her lap with another whine. I hadn't thought past escorting her home. I wasn't sure what she intended to do with me.

"Come on, then." Her blinks grew heavy. She got up and turned off the kitchen light.

I followed as she asked, trailed after her through the house.

"I guess you can sleep with me tonight. You look way too clean to be a stray and I don't want to be alone." She opened one last door and waved me into her bedroom.

It smelled so strongly of her, I nearly swooned. The furniture had that pristine new look to it. It smelled new, too, but the sheets, pillows, and even the small knit rug at the foot of the bed must have come with her when she moved.

I turned back and faced her, unsure of what to do.

Right in front of me, Allison unbuttoned her dress shirt and slid it off her shoulders.

I found a framed pressing of a few vibrant flowers hanging over her dresser to study. As much as I wanted to watch her undress, it wasn't right. A belt buckle jangled, fabric rustled, and then she stalked past me wearing nothing but a pair of dark underwear.

God, she was beautiful. I found it impossible not to stare. She was perfect in my eyes, my gorgeous angel. I stood there like a love-struck idiot as she disappeared into the bathroom.

She came back a few minutes later dressed in a pair of cotton shorts and a long t-shirt. She eyed me curiously as she climbed into the bed and slid under the covers.

"Come on then," she said with a smile, patting the covers. "Up up."

She wanted me on the bed with her? I couldn't fall asleep in her house, I'd

wake up human. Dad had been able to stay in his wolf form through a nap, but I didn't have the control he once did. I'd have to be careful.

Gingerly, I jumped onto the bed, turned in a circle and laid down. My weight settled against her side over the covers while she lay beneath them. My head rested across her belly just below her chest.

Her arm snaked around me. She smelled so damn good, so damn perfect. I could still make out her features even in the dim light, my night vision being what it was. My tail beat out a happy, steady rhythm against the bed.

“Goodnight, Chief,” my mate mumbled softly. Her fingertips smoothed over the fur between my eyes, stroking upwards. Her gentle touch soothed me in a way I never thought I'd know. “I'm glad you came to find me tonight.”



# Chapter Eighteen

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# Allison

**F**or such a giant dog, Chief sure was cuddly. I arched my back to stretch against the heavy weight across my ribs. My arm curled around him, but when my fingers flexed, it wasn't fur I felt beneath them.

My fingers stroked bare skin. That couldn't be right. My breath caught in my throat and my brows furrowed. I forced my eyes open and blinked against the darkness. It took a few seconds to adjust to the low light.

Was I dreaming? Even in the dark, I recognized the loose curls spilling over my chest. Tony lay nestled against my side with an arm thrown over my waist. He used my ribs as a pillow and mumbled something as I moved.

I faltered, unsure of what to do. My fingers cautiously trailed down over the back of his head to his neck.

He shivered at the light touch and let out a quiet moan. He leaned into my hand even as it moved further down his bare back. His cheek rubbed against me like an affectionate cat.

A strong hand curved around my waist, slid up my side, and under my shirt. A trail of warmth blazed across my skin. He took a deep breath in through his nose. When he exhaled, it came out as a low, impossibly sexy growl.

He looked so... serene. I had to be either dreaming or hallucinating in my tired, still inebriated state. Because Tony, the odd, awkward, and strangely possessive man I couldn't get out of my mind, could not be lying in bed with me.

A lucid dream, then? I had been on a bit of a paranormal romance kick for the past few months. The book on my nightstand featured possessive werewolves, same as the one I had been reading when I first met Chief. And of course I wanted Tony naked in my bed instead of a giant black dog.

Chief was such a strange dog, too. He even had green eyes like Tony. Was the switch my subconscious telling me to give him another chance?

*Would I be crazy to give him one?* I thought as I slipped back to sleep.

# Tony

Allison's sweet scent roused me. Why could I smell her so damn close?

I had to be dreaming. I couldn't be in her bed with my arm around her. It wouldn't be the first time I dreamed of waking up with her in my bed, of kissing her, making love to her, and spending the rest of my days by her side, but that's all they were, just... dreams.

But I remembered a lot more of last night than I normally did. Instead of flashes of memory, scents and sounds, I recalled entire scenes. After talking to Sarah, I shifted in the back alley, stuck to the shadows, and confronted the mages walking with my mate.

The two men she'd been with reeked of magic. There was no mistaking that sharp scent of preternatural spice. That was going to be a problem, a substantial one, one I didn't want to think about while lying in bed cuddled up with Allison. I followed her home so I could protect her and didn't put up a fight when she invited me into bed. She pet me with gentle brushes of her fingers across my muzzle and I fell asleep...

I would have hurled myself off the bed if every muscle in my body hadn't locked up tight. Curses of every variety and severity ran through my mind at warp speed. My situation grew more precarious with each passing second.

Deep and even breaths told me she slept soundly. I couldn't risk jostling her, couldn't risk waking her up. It didn't matter that I wanted nothing more than to hold her in my arms until she woke. In no universe would she not completely flip her shit if she found me there.

I couldn't leave, either. Those two assholes knew where Allison worked. If they reported it, whatever Registry Officer caught the case would go straight to Owen. He would cover for me as best he could, but there was a chance not even he could fix my mess before it spun out of control. Until a better option came along, I had to stay. If I stayed, I had to shift again.

What if I couldn't? What the hell would I even say?

I had to win her over before I told her what I was and what she was to me. My only hopes were she wouldn't hate me for it and the two handsy mages wouldn't out me before I had enough time to break it to her myself.

With slow, steady movements to not disturb her, I lifted my arm off her middle and rolled onto my back. From there, all I had to do was not jostle the bed too much as I climbed out of it. Luckily, she didn't stir.

The early morning sun cast gentle rays of golden light through the closed blinds. She kept her place clean. There weren't any dirty clothes on the floor or stray dishes lying around. I'd have to be more proactive with chores once we lived together.

If we ever lived together. Would she want me to live with her? Or would she want to live on the farm with me? Her place was smaller, but being able to walk to work would be kind of nice.

I gave my head a shake to disrupt the wishful thoughts. I needed to focus instead of getting ahead of myself.

She didn't have any clutter sitting out in the open, unlike all the crap at my place I hadn't been able to get rid of. The only thing out on display was a single paperback book on her nightstand.

Curiosity got the better of me. I leaned closer to better see the cover in the low light and studied the picture. The corners of my eyes crinkled.

"You have got to be shitting me," I muttered under my breath and snatched

up the book. I turned it over to read the back blurb just to make sure I wasn't completely misunderstanding.

No, the blurb painted a pretty clear picture. The bookmark sticking out more than halfway through the thing did, too.

Of all the things I thought I'd find, a steamy romance featuring werewolves had not come close to making the list. My brain didn't want to process it as real. I wasn't stupid, I knew stuff like that existed, I just hadn't expected to find my mate reading it. A tiny glimmer of hope had my mouth twitching up into the faintest of smiles.

Besides, my abs were nicer than that shirtless asshole's on the cover.

I set the book back down and looked at Allison. She hadn't moved. Her back faced me and her short hair spread across her pillow in a dark tangle. I couldn't join her, not like I was, but I reached across the bed, grabbed the blanket, and covered her back up.

*Please make it quick*, I thought to the wolf as I called it forward.

The expectation of oncoming pain had me grit my teeth against it before it even started. Tension pulled every muscle in my body tight. My hands clenched into tight fists and my breath came faster. It sat there right under the surface of my consciousness, ready and waiting as it always was, but instead of surging forward at the opportunity, the wolf hung back.

A low growl of pure frustration rumbled in the back of my throat. I imagined growing claws to rip the other side of me to shreds with my own two hands. The wolf never had a problem ripping me away from my humanity before. Why didn't it jump when given the chance?

My lungs drew in a deep, calming breath and let it out nice and slow. I needed to be the wolf again. Dad never had a problem shifting whenever he

wanted. He found it easy, found it comfortable and freeing while I saw it as more of a prison sentence.

I never liked how my thoughts changed, how my instincts took charge, or how I felt so foreign in my own skin. With Dad, it wasn't so bad, I didn't feel so alone, but even back then, the guilt ate me alive.

No wonder it wouldn't come on command. My shoulders slumped and I sank to my knees.

How could I win Allison over? How could I convince her she belonged with me when I hated myself so damn much? When I thought I deserved to be alone? As much as I didn't want to bite her, the more I tried to deny it, the more the wolf fought me on it. Allison was my mate, I could accept that.

I closed my eyes again and tried to let go of the tension stringing tight between my shoulders. I breathed in through my nose, let the scent of her space fill me. If I shifted, I could get back in bed with her. My body could press up against hers and as soon as she woke up, she would probably pet me.

The two mages with her last night knew what I was as soon as they saw me. They probably knew more about shifters than I did. Did they understand she was my mate, that she belonged with me? Did I not have the right to defend her from them?

Heated anger built in my chest. Allison was mine. They wouldn't take me away from her without a fight. I leaned into that anger, that drive to stay with her at all cost.

"Chief?" Allison mumbled almost incoherently.

I didn't dare to even breathe. I bit my lip to keep from making a single sound.

"Where'd you go?" She groped against the covers to pat the spot where I should have been.

She sounded more asleep than awake, but that was my cue. My options were shift, run, or just sit there like an idiot and wait for all hell to break loose.

I opened myself to it, welcomed it. The wolf came when called. I bit down on my lip to keep from crying out and prayed she couldn't hear whatever horrible sounds my body made as my form bled from human to animal.

Allison rolled over and sat up with a groan. She rubbed her eyes as pure panic filled mine.

My vision swam, colors changed, there was an odd shift in my thought patterns as the animal's instincts grew stronger. One second ticked by, two. I cowered and a high-pitched whine erupted from my throat. Bleary eyes flicked my way, but by the time they did, everything settled into place.

"There you are." She blinked a few times. Her brow furrowed and her head tilted.

My tail wagged the moment she met my eyes. My mouth opened in a happy wolf's grin.

Her expression softened. "You need to go outside, big guy?"

I jumped back onto the bed as my answer.

She didn't hesitate to pet me, didn't protest at all when I laid down next to her. With a pleading whimper, my head settled in her lap. My tail thumped against the bed as she stroked the top of my head.

"Guess not." She yawned and reached over to check her phone. "It's too early anyway." She collapsed back against the pillows with a sigh. Her fingers continued stroking over my head. Soon enough, she fell back to sleep.

My body cuddled up to hers. A warm, fuzzy feeling wrapped around me but I had enough sense to stay awake. The sun rose and brightened the room. I refused to leave her side.



It took a few hours before I caved. I licked her face until she groaned and tried to push me away.

I whined, wagged my tail and didn't back down.

"Ack, no, down," she mumbled, pushing at my muzzle again. "I'm awake..." She sat up, rubbed her eyes, blinked a few times and cast a curious expression my way.

My tail wagged so hard my whole backside wobbled with it. It wasn't very dignified, but I didn't give two shits about dignity when the other option was her realizing I wasn't a dog at all. I pawed at her leg and whined again.

"Okay, okay, you win," she said with a laugh as she captured my face in both her hands.

I leaned in and lowered my muzzle until my forehead rested against hers.

Her fingers stroked through my fur. She let out a soft sigh.

I could have stayed there like that forever. I loved how she wasn't afraid of me, how she touched me, how good it felt to be held.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?" She planted a soft kiss on my muzzle. "But I don't think I can keep you, Chief."

*Yes, you can.* I licked her face, met her eyes with my pleading ones and furiously wagged my tail. *Fuck everything else, I'm yours.*

# Chapter Nineteen

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# Allison

As luck would have it, Mom had gone through a dog fostering phase after I moved away for college, so I found a few old collars and leashes in a small box tucked away in the laundry room. She said it helped make the house not feel so empty. She was right, my quiet little house didn't feel near as empty with Chief's sweet face greeting me the moment I opened my eyes.

With some adjusting, the biggest collar on its loosest setting barely fit around Chief's broad neck. He didn't seem to care for it, but I cared more for him not running off on me than if he thought a collar was comfortable or not. My backyard wasn't fenced in and I didn't trust him not to book it the second he went out to use the bathroom.

A vet could check him for a microchip. If he had one, he could be returned to his owners, but if he didn't, I gave serious thought to adopting him myself.

We came back inside to my phone buzzing on the kitchen table. I snatched the thing up and answered without checking the name. I already knew who would be calling.

"Hey Mom." I tucked the phone against my shoulder and unclipped the leash from Chief's collar. "Little early for you to be calling, isn't it?"

"Sweetie, it's after ten. Is your sleep schedule getting all messed up because of work?"

The after ten part was news to me. A quick glance at the microwave clock confirmed it. I had work in another hour and a half. What the heck was I

going to do with Chief on such short notice?

First things first, I needed my morning coffee. I went through the motions to start a pot as Mom and I talked.

“I wasn’t up late because of work. I...” I hesitated to tell her, but she was my mother. Using her as a sounding board always helped me sort out my feelings. “I went out last night with some guys I met.”

“Really? Good for you,” Mom said proudly. “I hope you had a good time.”

A steady stream of coffee ran into the glass pot. From behind me, Chief’s nails clicked across the tile as he approached.

“I guess I did.” My arms wrapped around my middle. “One of them was interested in me, but I’m still hung up on Tony.” Mom already knew all about my troubles with him. She even knew of the breakroom incident, though the version I told had been much less explicit. “And don’t get me started on him. He’s completely infuriating.”

“Oh no, I know that tone,” Mom chuckled. “What did he do?”

Chief watched me from just a few feet away. His head tilted to the side.

I lowered one of my hands and motioned for him to come to me. He didn’t hesitate at my invitation. He leaned up against me with a soft whine.

My hand trailed through Chief’s fur. I didn’t want to get into my drama with Tony, not when I was still so conflicted.

“Maybe I should just get a dog or something.” I ruffled the thick fur on Chief’s neck while he looked up at me with the biggest, sweetest, most affectionate eyes ever. I couldn’t help but smile down at him. “Men are too confusing. Dogs are a lot easier to read.”

Mom’s hearty laugh echoed through the phone.

What was I going to do about Tony? Or Chief, for that matter? Had I really dreamed of a naked Tony in my bed? I shook the thought away. I’d been

nothing more than tipsy and wishful.

Why was I still so hung up on him after his abhorrent behavior? From the look on his face when I walked out of the stockroom, he knew how badly he messed up. Did I want to give him a second chance? Did he deserve one?

If he apologized and tried to make it up to me, great, I could work with that. However, if he doubled down and tried to pull the 'you're mine' card again, I would make sure he knew in no uncertain terms I never would be.

# Tony

‘Completely infuriating’. She called me completely infuriating and I couldn’t blame her for it. I infuriated myself, found it impossible to use the right words with her.

If she were a wolf, she’d understand. She’d know I would be at her beck and call forever, that I would do anything to protect her and to facilitate her happiness. I wanted my mate to adore me like I already adored her, wanted her to run by my side, to wake next to me every morning, to lick my nose and eat the meals I hunt down for her. I would care for her every need if she let me.

But she wasn’t a wolf. She didn’t understand. She didn’t know fate threw us together.

*At least she likes this me.* The weary thought ran through my mind. It came tainted with bitter sadness. *Probably because I can’t open my stupid fucking mouth.* My ears laid back with a whimper as I submitted to the angry thoughts clouding my mind.

“What’s wrong, baby?” she asked in the high-pitched, sweet talk voice she used with wolf me. “You need to go out again?”

I glanced up at her and huffed, my way of saying, *I’m not moving unless you make me.*

She smiled down at me from her spot on the couch. She held her phone while I lay with my head and paws across her lap. Her palm stroked my head with a soothing touch.

Her phone had been going off intermittently. She must have been sending messages to someone, but she should have been preparing for work soon. I didn't know what she planned to do with me in the meantime.

She set her phone down on the arm of the couch, took my face in her hands, and leaned down. Her lips pressed against the ridge of my brow.

“Sorry, big guy,” she said softly. “As much as I like you, it’s probably best we try to find your family.”

What family? Owen was the closest thing I had to family since I met him some twelve-odd years ago.

“Lucky for you, a friend of mine offered to help. He’s coming to pick you up and take you to a vet for me.”

*That’s what she’d been doing?* I whined, wiggled in her lap, and licked her nose. My tail thumped against the couch with nervous flicks. What the fuck was I going to do?

“I know, I’ll miss you, too,” she said with a laugh. Her hand ran through the thick fur around my neck and the collar jingled. “He promised they’ll call me if they can’t find your family. I get first dibs on you.”

I’d bolt when she opened the door. That’s the only thing I could do. I settled in her lap again with a groan. *Thwack thwack thwack*, went my tail against the couch cushions.

I adored her. I didn’t even care that the human side of me barely knew her. She was my mate, and she was perfect.

“I know, Chief,” she whispered, rubbing that perfect spot behind my mangled ear. “I’m sorry, but it looks like we just weren’t meant to be.”

# Allison

The doorbell rang not quite thirty minutes after my first message to Owen. I only meant to ask permission to come in late, but the second I mentioned I took in a stray dog, Owen volunteered to come get him. He said he had a soft spot for animals and wanted to help. He wouldn't take no for an answer, so I finally agreed once he promised he wouldn't take Chief to a kill shelter.

Chief's head popped up out of my lap. He jumped off the couch and bolted to the front door with a mean snarl.

I scrambled after him with a, "No, Chief, easy!" but by the time I came around the couch, his angry snarl fell silent. Instead, he snuffed at the bottom edge of the door as if trying to catch the scent of whoever was on the other side. His head tilted as I came up behind him and grabbed him by the collar.

"Hey, thanks for coming," I shouted through the door as I unlocked it. "Let me just get him under control real quick."

I tried to haul the giant dog away from the door, but he would only budge if he felt like it. He wouldn't lunge at Owen, would he? Over text, Owen tried to assure me he knew how to handle dogs, but Chief was quite big and unpredictable. If things went south, I would send Owen away and find some other solution to my Chief problem.

"Come on, Chief, back up for me, please," I pleaded with another gentle tug on his collar.

Chief glanced up at me and let out a pathetic whine but backed up with no further complaints.



“Okay, I’ve got him. You can come in now.”

The door opened. Owen’s eyes widened once he caught sight of the animal. He must have known I stood no chance of holding Chief back if he decided to use Owen as a chew toy, but Owen didn’t seem at all bothered. He closed the door behind him with an awed, “Whoa, he is huge, isn’t he?”

“I told you he was big,” I said, glancing down at the whining dog whose ears brushed against my chest. Leaving one hand on his collar, I gave Chief’s head a polite pat.

Chief wagged his tail appreciatively.

“You’re sure you want to take him?” I asked Owen.

“Yeah, positive. He’ll be fine coming along with me.” Owen waved a dismissive hand and leaned down. His dark eyes settled on Chief. “Won’t you, buddy?”

Chief huffed and stared out the front window instead of paying Owen any attention at all.

“Well, at least he doesn’t seem to hate you.” I tucked a strand of hair back behind my ear and kneeled next to Chief.

He immediately sat by my side and swung his head around. His tongue flicked across my cheek.

I laughed and hugged the giant, friendly canine. “He’s such a good boy, yes he is!”

Chief wagged his whole back end in response.

“Uh, he hasn’t bitten you or anything, has he?” Owen’s gaze flit between me and Chief.

“No, of course not,” I replied over Chief’s high-pitched whine. “He’s been perfectly well-behaved since I got him home. I’m glad he seems to like you, though. He was pretty aggressive towards the guys I was with last night.”

Owen lifted an eyebrow. “Well, that’s... good.”

Chief didn’t seem to have any issues with Owen, so I let go of his collar. The polite dog didn’t move a muscle as I got back to my feet. I ruffled the fur between his shoulders. “Yeah, he’s quite cuddly too, aren’t you, Chief?”

Chief made a soft ‘oof’ noise before leaning against my hip. He glanced in Owen’s direction, but other than that, continued mostly ignoring him.

“He really does seem to like you, huh?” Owen shot me a half grin before striding forward and kneeling in front of Chief. “Well, too bad, bud, you are coming with me. Say bye-bye to the nice lady, now.”

Chief’s lips pulled back enough to show a small sliver of teeth. His ears laid back with a huff.

Owen narrowed his dark eyes at the giant dog. “Don’t start with me when I’m doing you a favor, dude.”

“Um, I’ll go get his leash.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right here getting acquainted with my new best friend.” Owen smirked up at me from his spot on the floor.

It didn’t take long for me to grab Chief’s leash from the kitchen. I returned to Owen leaning against the front door with his arms crossed over his chest. Chief sat in the same spot he’d been in when I left.

Chief’s head swiveled as soon as I rounded the couch. Warm, loving eyes found mine. He stood and whined softly when I clipped the leash to his collar.

“I know, Chief, I’ll miss you, too,” I crooned, giving his head a gentle pat. The corners of my eyes tickled. I fought back a sniffle. Why was it so hard to let the sweet dog go?

“Eh, don’t worry, he’ll be fine.” Owen uncrossed his arms and held out his hand for the leash. “I’m sure he’s got a home of his own to get back to,

Allie.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” I asked, reluctant to hand over the leash. My shoulders drew up, but I did set the loop end in Owen’s outstretched palm.

“You’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“Of course.” Owen’s hand closed over the leash. His features softened with a warm smile. “Besides, who knows? He might find his way back to you after all.”

# Chapter Twenty

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# Tony

**M**y eyes fluttered open to stare up at a familiar popcorn ceiling. Owen's smoky, cold, and inhuman scent hung in the air.

It wasn't my first time waking up on his couch. I'd spent a handful of nights at his place back when we tried to make a go of it. I could still hear his exasperated sighs when I retreated to the couch instead of staying in bed with him. It's not like I wanted to spend every night alone, but Owen didn't have the biggest bed and I needed my space to sleep.

I groaned and rubbed my face with both hands as everything came back to me. Thank god Allison messaged the only other person in the world I would have let anywhere near me.

"Owen?"

A chair wheel squeaked from down the short hall. He must have been in his home office.

"Owen, we might have a problem."

"What, no 'thanks for saving my fuzzy ass'?" Owen appeared in the doorway to the rest of the house both wearing an amused smirk and already dressed for work. "You are hella lucky she texted me, dude."

"I know, and thanks," I replied in a gruff, almost growl.

"So?" His smirk faded away. "What is it? Besides the obvious you being an idiot."

"I was seen." I clutched at the throw blanket covering my middle. Unchecked nerves had my legs shaking. "The two guys she mentioned, the

ones I scared off? They were mages. They knew exactly what I was when they saw me.”

Owen’s cheeks puffed out. His eyebrows rose and he blew out a long breath. “Well, that’s not great.”

“How fucked am I right now? This one asshole had his arm around her. I damn near went after them, but Allison talked me down.” I rose from the couch and wrapped the throw blanket around my waist. My mind went into overdrive. I paced back and forth as I tried to think. “What do I do? How do I fix this? I can’t just take her and run, can I?”

“Tony, sit down,” Owen said, his tone soft but commanding. “Take a breath. You being all anxious is making me anxious.”

I paused my pacing, forced myself to take a deep breath, and lowered myself back down onto the couch with a whimper.

He waited until I lifted my eyes to his to ask, “What really happened last night?”

“I tried to talk to her after I saw her flirting with some guys.” I ran both my hands back through my hair and groaned. “She said she was going out with them after work and I just... the wolf flipped its shit. I didn’t realize two of them were mages until I confronted them. I tried to talk her out of it, but was already half out of my mind and fucked it all up. I barely made it out of the building before I turned.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that, considering the pile of shredded clothes in the alley. You’re lucky Sarah didn’t take out the trash last night.”

“I never had a problem controlling it until I met her.” I rubbed at my temples with both hands and stared at the carpet under my bare feet. “Just the thought of someone else taking what’s mine...” I knew if I wanted, if I leaned into it, I could have claws to rip and tear into something instead of useless,

brittle human nails. The thought comforted me for once. I needed the claws to keep Allison safe.

“You have to tell her.”

“You think I don’t know that? You have no idea how hard this is!” I got to my feet again, my hands clenched into tight fists at my sides. It took effort to force them back open. My shoulders sagged. “Where do I even start?”

“That’s for you to figure out.” He shot a reassuring smile my way. “And don’t run, okay? We can figure this out. I can find out if there was a rogue wolf sighting reported through official channels. If there was, the Registry might send an officer to ask Allie some questions, but she’s still human. If they talk to her, they’ll be super vague. The only non-flashy way a mage would be able to tell a shifter from a human is by aura, and mages with that particular talent are beyond rare. No officer in their right mind would cast anything in front of a human on a mere hunch.”

“How are you not more worried about this?” I collapsed back down onto the couch. My elbows settled on my thighs and my head dropped into my hands.

He scoffed. “I am worried about it, but I doubt a single report by two drunk mages will be high on the Registry’s list of priorities. If someone comes sniffing around, I’ll call D. He’s a contractor, he’ll fix anything for the right price, but we don’t even know if anything needs fixing yet.”

“D can’t fix everything.” I ran my hands through my messy hair. “You’ve been harboring me for twelve years, Owen. You told me when we met—“

“I told you what was true back then,” he said softly. “And I’m telling you now, things have changed.” He uncrossed his arms, came over to the couch, and sat on the arm furthest away from me. “Fifteen years ago, a hunter would have been called in to track you down and kill you for confronting two mages

like that. Ten? Relocated instead of terminated, but since that officer got herself bit a few years ago, policy has changed.

“If it’s found I’ve known you were a wolf this whole time, I’ll be the one with the problem, not you. I’m registered, I’m obligated to report shifter activity to the Registry, but I never did. Instead, I made a promise to you. I said I wouldn’t let them send you away and I still stand by that promise, but we’re at a crossroads now. You can’t hide anymore, not after publicly claiming Allison as your mate.”

I trusted Owen. He claimed he never lied and not once had he given me reason to doubt him. All I had to go on was his word. He had been mentioning for years it was getting safer, that policies regarding shifters were becoming more lenient and I should think about going legitimate, but I always refused.

Fear kept me stuck in my tiny little world. If I wasn’t at work, I was at home. I stuck to my territory; it was safer that way. As long as no one knew I existed, I couldn’t be hunted down, captured, and shipped off to some pack of animals like myself for safekeeping away from everything I had ever known.

I couldn’t stand the thought of suffering that fate, to disappear into the shadows without being given the chance to say goodbye. I’d been on my own and in hiding for so long, I had no idea what anything approaching a normal life was supposed to look like. I didn’t want what little I’d been able to scrape together over the years coming undone all over again.

“But I haven’t publicly claimed her,” I said, letting my face fall back into my hands.

“You may as well have announced your intent last night as far as the Registry will be concerned. You’re lucky the guys she was with didn’t reveal themselves to her. They would have been within their rights to defend



themselves just as you were in the right for trying to protect your mate. Wouldn't you rather tell her yourself before some Registry Officer shows up and outs you before you can do it?"

"So... I find a way to get her alone and I tell her." I leaned back against the couch. "What if she doesn't want to talk to me? As far as she knows, the last time she saw me was in the stockroom when I was being a total dick to her."

"Maybe apologize and don't be a dick this time?"

"I don't want to do this to her, Owen," I whined. "She doesn't deserve to have to put up with my bullshit."

"Plenty of your bullshit doesn't have a thing to do with what you are." Owen's reassuring words carried a sharp bite. "She's your mate, she's supposed to fall in love with you. You might as well make it easy for her. You're resourceful and have a lot to offer. Find a way to show her that. Plus, you know, you're hot. I'm sure that counts for something."

"Shut up." I slumped against the couch in defeat. Why couldn't my problems be solved by lying back down and passing out for the rest of the day? "I already hate myself enough, I don't need you making fun of me, too."

He regarded me with curiosity. "You're still fighting it tooth and nail, aren't you?"

"You think I want to turn into a damn animal?"

He pinned me with a frustratingly sympathetic gaze. "It's a part of you. Have you ever considered it might benefit you to try to work with it rather than against it?"

My eyes narrowed. A low warning growl resonated in my throat.

"You have a mate now, Tony. If you want her to accept you, you need to make peace with yourself, too."

I took a deep breath through my nose. Owen's familiar scent played

through my sinuses. It reassured me. He only wanted the best for me, he always had.

I uttered a weak, “I know.”

“Staying away from her isn’t doing either of you any good,” Owen said. “You’re meant to be together. It’s fate.”

“Fate?” Sudden anger got the better of me. “Fuck fate. Allison doesn’t deserve to get dragged into this life!”

“You mean you don’t deserve her,” he corrected, “because the last thing you think you deserve is to be happy after what happened to your dad.”

I stared at him in shock, unable to formulate a reply. Instead, I hung my head and scowled at the floor. He wasn’t wrong. Not by a long shot. Still hurt to hear him say it, though.

“You’ve been like this since I met you,” he said with a beleaguered sigh. “I’ve always hated seeing you suffer over it. Not every shifter hates what they are, you know. Besides, she might be into it.”

I balked. “No way would she be into this.”

“I dunno, man,” Owen chuckled. “Have you seen some of the books she reads?”

A surprised snort snuck out of me. “You mean like the one on her nightstand with some shirtless asshole and a wolf on the cover?”

“Fucking hilarious, if you ask me. When she first showed up, I wasn’t sure I could see it, but I do now. She’s already smitten with wolf you, now you just need to, you know, try to win her over for real.” The half-smile he adopted faltered. “And tell her the truth. Sooner rather than later.”

With another wave of his hand, he motioned towards the bathroom. “Now hurry up and get your ass in the shower so I can get us to work. We’re going to be late.”

“Do you even have any clothes here that will fit me?” I tilted my head, staring at him like he’d grown a second head.

“Well, no, but I know you keep some spare clothes in your truck.”

“Not work clothes,” I grumbled.

“Then it’s a good thing you aren’t working today.”

“I’m not?”

“No. She’s at work right now, so you’re going to go in there, you’re going to talk to her, and you aren’t going to be an asshole. You don’t have to tell her tonight, but you need to start thinking about what you’ll say. If questions start getting asked, trust me, you do not want her finding out from someone else.”

# Allison

I spent what little free time I had left before my shift cleaning my house. As pretty as he was, Chief was quite a large dog with quite a lot of fur. He left a generous coating of it everywhere. My vacuum got a decent workout picking it all up.

I had to wonder what Chief and Owen were up to. What would Owen do with him, since he was supposed to come in a few hours after me for the evening shift?

Ethan greeted me with a grin once I put my stuff up in my locker and clocked in.

“Sarah mentioned you and Tony finally talked yesterday.” Ethan looked, for lack of a better term, highly amused. He raised a dark blond eyebrow at me. “Apparently it didn’t go so well?”

I groaned. I hadn’t mentioned anything to Sarah about my conversation with Tony in the stockroom, but she’d seen me come back out practically seething. Had she talked with Tony? Maybe he mentioned our conversation to her. I wondered how he would have spun it.

“What did she say?” I asked with a resigned sigh.

Sarah and Ethan were closer than they appeared. They were more than just friends though neither would admit it. I’d seen the way Ethan looked at her when she wasn’t paying attention, the serene little smile he wore only when she was around. They’d be good together. Both of them were kind of health

nuts, Sarah with her running and hiking and Ethan with his rigorous gym schedule.

Ethan's grin mellowed out. He studied me with calm blue eyes. "That Tony knows he said the wrong thing and that he's an idiot."

"He is an idiot," I huffed.

Ethan laughed. "Now I have to know what it was he said. You going to spill, or am I going to have to browbeat him until he either tells me or punches me?"

Instead of answering, I asked a different question. "Do you know what his problem is?"

"Is that a rhetorical question...?"

"It isn't," I sighed. "I just want to know why he acts the way he does. At first I thought he was avoiding me because he didn't like me, but that is definitely not the case according to him."

"Oh no, he totally has a thing for you," Ethan said without hesitation. "He just doesn't have a clue how to deal. I'm not even sure if he's ever liked anyone before, much less been in a relationship, so it's not exactly surprising he's making a mess of it."

"Is that why he's so, I don't know, is he fixated on me or something?" I didn't know what to think. Why had Tony slept with me so fast if he avoided other people like everyone told me he did? Why was he so... feral when it came to me?

"Maybe. Honestly, Allie, the guy's always been a little off," Ethan said with a carefree shrug of his shoulder. "But not like, secret serial killer off. It's more like he just doesn't know how to talk to people."

"He's a bartender, Ethan. He has to talk with tons of people every time he's here."

“More like in the personal relationships sort of sense,” he explained. A small smile pulled at the corners of his lips. “He’s civil enough to take orders and make drinks, but anytime he’s asked even the simplest personal question, he shuts right down. Don’t get me started on what happens if someone tries flirting with him.

“I know he doesn’t have any family and he’s been on his own longer than he’s worked here. He refuses to be social outside of work and never talks about himself except for the odd comment, usually about something he’s fixing. He’s never mentioned any friends or hobbies outside of work and he never takes vacations. What little I’ve managed to piece together over the years paints a pretty lonely picture.”

I took all that in and lowered my eyes. “That does sound lonely.”

“He at least wants to try when it comes to you, he just has no idea what he’s doing.”

“You really think so?”

“Oh yeah,” Ethan chuckled. “The question is, are you willing to give him that chance, or do you want him to leave you alone?”

“I’m not really sure yet.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I think I’m leaning towards giving him another chance if he apologizes for yesterday.”

“It does sound like he knows whatever he did was wrong.”

I looked up at Ethan. He was so much taller than me. He even stood several inches taller than Tony. Ethan was quite an attractive man, he spent a ton of time in the gym and ate a strict diet to maintain his muscular physique. His smiles were always warm, friendly, and reassuring. I should have been attracted to him, but... I wasn’t. I only had eyes for Tony.

“I do like him, Ethan. It’s like there’s something there I can’t explain.”

“Love at first sight, maybe?” he asked with a laugh.

I laughed, too. “Do you actually believe in that sort of thing?”

“Sure, why not? It would explain why he got all weird as soon as you showed up.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I fought back a smile. Maybe that was it. Maybe it was something as simple as love at first sight. My parents met and married fast. They were still together and still loved each other. Maybe something like that was in the cards for me, too.

“Well, just let me know if he crosses a line and you don’t want to give him that chance anymore. I’ll make sure he knows not to bother you again.”

I just had to hope it wouldn’t come to that.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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# Allison

The rest of my shift went by in a blur of activity. We got busy mid-day, but business petered out again before the dinner rush. Most of the bar stools were empty when a familiar figure strode in through the front door.

“What are you doing over there? I thought you were working the closing shift today.” I raised a brow at Tony as he slid onto a stool in front of me.

I didn’t know whether to laugh at his lackadaisical wardrobe choice or be irritated he wasn’t clocking in so I could prepare to clock out. Had Owen changed the schedule on me again? The back door slammed shut a few minutes ago signifying Owen’s arrival, but he hadn’t made his way up front yet.

Besides, I was still supposed to be mad about what Tony said to me in the stockroom yesterday.

Tony sat his elbows on the counter across from me, laced his fingers together, and set his freshly shaved chin on them. Damp curls hung around his head as if he took a shower mere minutes ago. He didn’t say anything, only studied me with that intense interest of his.

The urge to run my fingers through those dark strands hit me. I shook away the thought with a tiny shake of my head and chose not to repeat myself. Instead, I continued refilling a pour bottle with simple syrup, hoping I gave off more of an aloof air than a simmering in irritation one.

After a long, awkward silence, Tony’s thick brows knit together. He scowled for a second, then his expression softened. Finally, he opened his

mouth and spoke in that low rumble with a slight southern drawl of his.

“I spent the whole drive over here trying to figure out what to say when I saw you. I forgot every word as soon as I sat down.”

I couldn't help it, I had to fight back a smile. “Not what I was expecting, but okay.” I focused on my work, on cleaning and straightening behind the bar before the inevitable evening rush blew in. I didn't want to come off as hostile, but I didn't want to let him off for his behavior, either. He still owed me an apology. “So you're what? Drinking tonight instead of working?”

He certainly didn't look like he'd be working considering his bleach-stained jeans and threadbare sweater that had seen better days.

“I... I'm sorry about yesterday,” he said, his words cracking with obvious nerves. “That wasn't... it wasn't right what I did, what I said. I want to try again if you'll let me. Maybe I won't make such a mess of it this time.”

“What did you have in mind?” My brows scrunched together. I didn't bother glancing his way, preferred to keep my attention trained on what my hands were doing.

At least he wasn't avoiding me anymore. At least he was voluntarily speaking to me. And voluntarily approaching me. And initiating without cornering me and being all aggressive about it.

“Dinner?”

“Is that your way of asking me out?” I glanced up and caught him watching me with those sharp eyes of his.

“Sort of.” A muscle in his cheek tightened as his jaw clenched. “I thought I could grab some groceries and meet you back at your place. Make you dinner. Tonight.”

I scoffed at his audacity, but kept my tone light and teasing. “So after what you said to me yesterday, you're now inviting yourself into my home to

destroy my kitchen?” My attention returned to the bottles needing refilling in front of me.

“You think I won’t do the dishes, too?” he asked, dropping his voice to something low and a little seductive.

“You just assume my place is fit for company? Maybe I’m a hoarder who hates having guests. You wouldn’t know.”

“I bet the worst I’d find is a dirty plate in the sink.” He bowed his head. “Public places are... hard for me. I thought you’d be more comfortable at your place than mine.”

“Hypothetically, let’s say I agree,” I started, letting a bit of amusement creep into my tone because while I found his offer unorthodox, I also found his newfound bravado refreshing. He also apologized first without any prompting from me, which I greatly appreciated. I lifted my chin and found his eyes with mine. “What would you be making for me?”

“I was thinking steak.” One corner of his mouth turned up just a touch into the tiniest of smiles. “How do you like yours?”

“Practically still mooing,” I replied coolly.

He visibly relaxed as if I said the exact thing he wanted to hear. “Is that a ‘yes’?”

“It’s a ‘maybe’,” I shot back, dropping my attention back to my cleaning to try and hide the wry smile I couldn’t suppress. Why did I find him so... magnetic? Irresistible. Why did I want him to call me his again?

Was it stupid inviting a man I barely knew into my house where we’d be all alone together? Especially considering the kinds of things that happened every time we did end up alone together? I shoved the thought away and hoped I hadn’t started blushing.

“I’ll bring some wine, feed you a great meal, and clean your kitchen

afterward. What else do I need to say to convince you? I just..." he paused and bowed his head with a sigh. "Sorry, I know it's unconventional."

He was trying. I had to give him points for that. Tony wasn't exactly a conventional guy, Ethan said as much not more than an hour ago. It sounded like going out on a more traditional date would be uncomfortable for him.

"Is dessert on the table, too, or no?" I asked after mulling it over.

Tony perked right up. "Sure, I can make dessert." He smiled then. That little upturn of his lips ignited a pile of kindling in my lower gut.

My expression remained neutral, but just barely. "You better be a good cook," I said, studying him right back, "and if you leave my kitchen a wreck, you won't get another chance to impress me."

"I am and I won't," he replied in a rush. He sat up straighter and pulled his elbows off the counter. "I know I don't deserve another chance, but I promise, I won't let you down."

Something between a snort and a laugh came out of me. "You are so weird," I muttered under my breath. "You're lucky I find you oddly charming."

"I'll take weird and oddly charming over weird and totally off-putting," he mumbled back. He dismounted his stool and cast a sheepish glance my way. "I'll see you at your place in like an hour, then?"

"Yeah, okay." If Tony had been any other guy, I wouldn't have ever accepted, but I was curious about him and wanted to give him a chance. He seemed eager to please, almost overeager. "Give me your number and I'll text you my address."

"Oh, right." His shoulders tensed up. He let out an awkward chuckle. "That would be smart since I don't know where you live."

He gave me his number and I texted him my address. With assurances he

wouldn't be late and I'd see him in an hour at my place, he hustled out the door and off into the night.

"Did he ask you out?" Ethan asked as he reappeared from where he must have been hiding.

"He did." I gave my head a small, incredulous shake. "He's coming to my place to make dinner for me." My brows furrowed. "I'm not insane for having him over for a first date, am I?"

"It's probably fine. If anything, your biggest problem might be getting him to leave." Ethan grinned at me. "Call me if you can't get him out. Sarah and I both live close, we'll be happy to come drag him away for you."

Ethan left me with a few words of encouragement and reassurance that Tony would, in all likelihood, be a perfectly fine house guest. He did say he knew Tony was proficient in a kitchen, which did help put my mind at ease.

Owen, who must have been working the closing shift alone, chose to come out of the back a few minutes after Ethan left. He made no mention of having known or not known Tony had come in. I chose not to mention it. The less Owen knew about me and Tony, the better.

"Did you find out if Chief had a microchip?" I asked as soon as Owen joined me up front.

"Oh, uh, yeah." Owen rolled his shirtsleeves up his forearms. "Your giant, fuzzy friend is back where he belongs now."

"That's good to hear." I managed a small smile. A part of me was sad to know I likely wouldn't see Chief again, but it was for the best. He didn't need me if he already had a family. "As much as I'll miss him, I'm glad he was able to get back home."

"You and me both." Owen spared me a grin. "It's going to take at least half an hour to clean his fur out of my car."

A few minutes before the end of my shift, the door chime had both Owen and I looking to the door.

D walked in wearing one of his usual pristine suits, but also a small, rather uncharacteristic frown. A more casually dressed guy I didn't recognize followed hot on D's heels. The man in a camel-colored bomber jacket open over a polo held the door open for a third, much more familiar figure.

Jamie tapped the stranger's arm to get his attention. He motioned towards the bar, towards me. The two exchanged a few words while D stalked right to the bar and sat down on the stool Tony vacated a few minutes ago.

Heat flushed my face remembering the last time I'd seen Jamie. After all, Chief ran him and Parker off. I shouldn't have been surprised to see him, but his new friend didn't fit in with Parker and the other men he'd been with. They had all been young, twenty-three to twenty-five, I had checked each of their IDs, while the new guy had to be closer to D's age.

I chose to ignore Jamie and his new friend. Instead, I focused my attention on D.

"Evening." I gave D a warm smile and set a coaster down in front of him. "We don't usually see you this early."

"Sorry, I'm not here for a drink this evening, Allison." He shot me a small, strained smile, then turned to nod to Owen. "This is more of a business thing."

"And what sort of business would that be?" My curiosity piqued. With as much as his suits must have cost, I'd taken him for a big shot lawyer or maybe a guy in finance. He and Owen chatted sometimes in the back, but I just thought the two were friends or dating on the down low. I didn't think they were in any sort of business together.

"Hey Allie? Why don't you go check the stockroom to see how many cases

of wine we have left? I'm about to place an order," Owen said casually but with an odd, cold tinge. It was a tone of voice that may as well have said, 'I need you to leave the room right now'.

"Sure thing." I knew better than to argue with that tone of voice. Hanging out in the stockroom sounded like a fantastic idea, especially since I had no interest in talking to Jamie after how last night ended. The more I thought about it, the more I was pretty sure he and Parker had not been interested in taking me to the coffee shop. That instead, they intended to convince me to come back to their place.

I wiped my hands on the nearest bar rag when the guy in the bomber jacket opened his mouth.

"Think I can get a drink first before you go?" The stranger had quite a friendly smile. He was decent-looking in your average, suburban dad next door sort of way. I didn't get any bad vibes from him. He had this effortless charm to the way he held himself, like he had plenty of confidence in his place in the world.

"I can make your drink," Owen replied, which got my attention again. Owen tilted his head towards the backroom door, obviously indicating for me to get moving. I started towards the door as Owen asked the stranger, "What is it you want?"

"I'm not here to cause trouble, Mr. Nagata." The stranger slid onto a bar stool next to D. He pulled out what could have been a wallet and flashed something inside at Owen. "This isn't anything official. Just following up on... well, I guess a business sort of thing, if that's what we're calling it?"

Curiosity got the better of me. I paused with my hand against the door.

"Not if it's any of your sort of business. This establishment is officially unaffiliated," came Owen's arctic reply. Owen's body language read relaxed,

even if his tone didn't.

I shook off my unease and went through the door to the back. Whatever their business was, it did not involve me in any way.

In the stockroom, I got down to my assigned task. The whole room needed reorganizing. Whoever planned the layout hadn't kept up with whatever original system had been put in place. Why was the top shelf vodka next to the Prosecco? If Owen would give me a few hours, I could get the room into a better functioning state. I was up on a ladder counting bottles of Pinot Grigio when the door to the stockroom groaned open.

"Allie?" Owen's voice called from just outside the door. "Sorry, but I need you out here real quick."

"What for?" I asked without looking up from my task.

Owen blew out a hard breath and joined me in the stockroom. He let the door close behind him. "This guy's got a few questions for you. He mentioned something about an incident from last night."

Was it my imagination, or did Owen sound strangely nervous?

"What incident?" I climbed down off the ladder and turned to face Owen. My eyebrows screwed together until I felt the lines form between them. "Is that guy a cop? Did Jamie not pay the bill last night?"

"So, you were with that kid last night?" Owen's brows rose. "The one that came in here with D and the officer."

"So, that guy is a cop?"

"No. Well, sort of, but not—" Owen cut himself off with a shake of his head and a groan. "Never mind. How do you know that kid?"

I crossed my arms over my chest, not really wanting to tell him since he and Tony were close. "He was here last night with a group of friends. They



invited me out and I met them after work for a few drinks. Why does it matter?”

Owen pinned me with an intense glare. “Okay, look, two of those guys you were with last night are...” he paused. His mouth twitched up into what might have passed for a smile if it had met his eyes. “Well, the one out there has some influence because of his family. I guess he’s mad about something, so he’s raising a bit of hell. All you need to do is answer a few questions and they’ll go away.”

I took all that in, processed it, tried to make it make sense, but it didn’t. “Owen, what sort of business are you into with D? It’s not anything illegal, right?”

“What?” He blinked, his expression blanked, then he snorted and tried not to laugh. “No, though that would probably be easier to explain.”

“Then what is it? This doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“Well, reality doesn’t make any sense either.”

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear with a flick of my fingers. “Okay, you know what, I don’t have time for this right now. I have plans after work.”

“Just don’t elaborate and you’ll be free to go in like five minutes.” Owen’s nervous grimace shifted to more of a sly grin. “I know you’d rather be prepping for your date—”

“Who said anything about a date?”

“Tony did.”

I blanched, unable to tell if my face went pale or red as a beet. When I finally managed to speak, it came out more of a squeaked, “He what?”

“We’re friends. He tells me everything,” Owen said with a nonchalant shrug. “Don’t worry, I’m cool with it. Just don’t start making out behind the bar or whatever and we’re good.”

“Tony and I aren’t a thing,” I protested. At least we weren’t officially, not yet.

“Sure you aren’t,” he muttered with a roll of his eyes. “Yes, he can be kind of an asshole sometimes. He’s complicated and has his demons, but he’ll do right by you.”

“Is this you trying to sell me on him?” I replied with a scoff. “Maybe you should just date him.”

“I did. We weren’t exactly meant to be.”

That got my attention. I blinked. Several times. My mouth fell open. “You... you did?” I knew they were close, but didn’t realize they’d been that close.

He shrugged. “It was a long time ago, before I opened this place. We were never that serious. Turns out we make better friends than partners.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I think you should know. There are a lot of things about him you should know. He’ll tell you when he’s ready.”

“Or you could just tell me now and save me the trouble.” Considering Tony’s awkward behavior, he could have been hiding any number of skeletons.

“Nice try, but you’ll have to drag any more info out of him yourself. Come on.” He motioned to the door. “Go answer their questions and then you can get out of here. What’s Tony doing, by the way?”

“Making me dinner,” I admitted with a forlorn sigh, following his motion and heading for the door.

“Nice. He never made me dinner.”

“Maybe he just likes me more,” I teased as I pushed the door open.

“Oh, I know he does.”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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# Allison

**B**ack out front, the bar had emptied except for D, Jamie, and the mystery guy who was sort of, but not really, a cop, according to Owen. There hadn't been more than a half dozen customers inside when I'd gone to the back, but not one of them remained. Had Owen kicked everyone else out?

"Okay, here she is," Owen announced, setting a hand on my shoulder. "Ask your questions then get the hell out. I have a bar to run."

The mystery guy didn't seem bothered by Owen's cold attitude. He slid off his bar stool next to D and motioned towards one of the arrangements of plush chairs around a small coffee table.

"Are you or aren't you a cop?" I asked as I followed him to his choice of seats. "No one's been real clear on that."

"Think of me like a sort of private investigator," he replied with a charming smile and offered me his hand to shake. He wasn't at all intimidating, especially height wise. "Registry Officer Tristan Zimmerman, but this isn't anything official. Just call me Zed."

"What's a Registry Officer?" I asked as I shook his hand.

Zed shrugged. "Not important. What is important is what may have happened last night while you were with Mr. James Edwin over there." He pointed back towards the bar where Jamie conversed in low, hushed tones with D.

D's shoulders were unusually tense. I'd never seen him so on edge. Then again, I'd never seen him without a drink in his hand, either.

Zed took a seat in one of the chairs while I took the seat across from him. He continued, “And Mr. Parker Croft, who said he wanted nothing to do with, and I quote, ‘that inevitable shitshow’.” He even used finger quotes.

“Jamie did pay the bill at Miller’s, didn’t he?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “If he didn’t, I didn’t realize and will be more than happy to pay for my drinks.”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” Zed chuckled. “But how about you tell me a bit about what happened last night?”

I perched on the edge of my seat and folded my hands in my lap. “I met up with them and a few of their friends at Miller’s after I got off work.” I felt a presence behind me and glanced up over my shoulder. Owen stood there, silent and observant.

“And after you left Miller’s?” Zed leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs as he studied me. “You were heading back to Mr. Edwin and Mr. Croft’s place, right?”

My face heated. “No,” I immediately corrected. “We were going to get coffee. There’s a place around here that stays open pretty late.”

Zed snorted and cast a glare back towards Jamie. “Uh huh, but you never made it there?”

“W- we didn’t.”

“So, in your own words, what happened?”

“Well...” Why did he care about what happened last night? Was he with animal control or something? Is that who Jamie called? That was the only thing that made any sense.

“We had all had a good amount to drink,” I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. “It was late. I wanted to get a coffee to sober up before heading home. We walked a few blocks, a big dog showed up, and yeah, he was kind

of aggressive towards them, but Parker and Jamie got all weird and ran off. Why does that matter?”

Zed studied me with steady, gentle brown eyes. “It might matter. You get a good look at the dog?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, my brows knitting together with my confusion. “Why?”

“So, what did it look like?” Zed sat back in his chair and crossed an ankle over his knee.

“Oh, uh, he was big.” I crossed my arms over my chest and sat back, too. “Solid black. He looked like a really big German Shepherd to me.”

“It was not a German Shepherd,” Jamie’s cold comment pulled both our attentions. He’d dismounted his stool and had been listening in from a few feet away. I glanced around for D, finding his stool empty, too. With a quick sweep of the room, I found D next to Owen behind my chair.

My brows furrowed again. “Then what was it?”

Jamie ignored my question and instead turned to Zed. “I know what I saw. You know what has to be done here.”

“I’m not doing anything drastic until I have a decent picture of the situation,” Zed replied with a beleaguered sigh. He turned back to address me. “So, this... dog, he was behaving in an aggressive and dangerous manner?”

“I mean, he was at first.” My shoulders drew up towards my ears. “But he warmed up fast. Turns out he was a total sweetheart.”

“I’m sorry?” Zed’s blanked expression slid over to amused. “How do you know he was ‘a total sweetheart’?”

I relaxed back in my chair, feeling completely ridiculous. “Because he followed me all the way home and stayed the night. He was a well-behaved house guest.”

“You let him in your house?” Jamie’s face went ghostly pale.

“Um, yeah?” I flushed, having grown a bit self-conscious. “He was surprisingly affectionate and quite cuddly.”

“So the dog stayed with you all night?” Zed asked, his brows lowered as he continued to study me.

“Yeah, he even slept in bed with me.”

Behind me, Owen coughed as if he choked on something.

“And he didn’t bite you or anything?” Zed clasped his hands together.

“Of course not.”

Zed got to his feet and stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. “Sounds pretty cut and dry to me. You’re free to go, Miss...”

“Bridges,” I supplied coolly.

“That’s it?” Jamie threw his hands up as if frustrated. “I thought you’d actually be useful considering who you work with.”

“You didn’t make an official report so I can’t make official determinations, Mr. Edwin. You know my limitations here. If you wanted something concrete, you would have called Officer Caine instead of me,” Zed shot back over his shoulder at Jamie as he headed straight for the door. “Just drop it and come on. We’ve taken up enough of their time.”

Zed reached the door, turned, and motioned for Jamie to follow him. Zed hesitated, his brow furrowed for a second as his smile widened into an all out grin. “Oh, and we’ll have that catch-up lunch later this week, D.”

“Looking forward to it,” D replied, keeping his tone casual.

Jamie did not follow Zed. Instead, his expression hardened. His hands clenched into fists and he stalked towards me.

Both Owen and D stepped in front of him and blocked him from approaching me.

“Why aren’t you concerned about this?” Jamie asked them. He tried to slide between the two, but D placed a firm hand on his shoulder and held him back. Anger, frustration, fear, I saw it all there on Jamie’s face, plain as day. “You know exactly what’s going—”

“Edwin!” Zed snapped from the door, cutting Jamie off.

Jamie sank into silence again before he could finish his sentence.

What was going on? What warranted Zed asking me those particular questions after kicking the rest of the customers out?

“You are not helping and so not your place,” Zed chastised the younger, dejected man. “Do you want a grievance filed against you? Because I guarantee one will be coming your way if you do not exert some chill right now.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jamie retorted, glaring daggers not at Zed, but at Owen.

“This establishment is unaffiliated, Mr. Edwin,” Owen chimed in, his voice cold and slightly off, spitting the name as if it were a curse. “You don’t get to drag an officer in here to harass my employees just because you thought you saw something.”

Jamie’s face paled. His words came shaky instead of sure. “You aren’t taking this seriously at all.”

“I assure you, I am,” Owen carefully enunciated each word. “Now, do you care to further test my hospitality, or are you leaving?”

Jamie’s mouth snapped shut with a scowl. “Fine.” He pulled himself out of D’s grasp with a yank. “I’ll leave. Allie—”

Owen and D both tensed as if ready to pounce.

“—just... be careful, okay?”

“Okay?” I replied, full of confusion.



Jamie nodded. "I'll see you around then."

"Not in here you won't," Owen practically snarled.

"Fine." Jamie raised both his hands in surrender. He headed for the door, almost made it there before throwing over his shoulder, "She deserves to know, that's all I'm saying."

"Let's go, come on." Zed gave his head a shake as he pulled open the front door and held it open. As soon as Jamie got close enough, he grabbed Jamie's shoulder and gave him a light shove out into the night. "I've got more important things I could be doing right now, like catching up on *90 Day Fiancé*."

What did I deserve to know? Why was no one telling me what was going on?

Owen marched to the front door and twisted the dead bolt. As soon as the lock clacked into place, he turned and leaned so hard against the door it rattled in its frame. He let out a hearty exhale as his head fell back to rest against the door.

"That particular officer won't be a problem," D volunteered loud enough for Owen to easily hear halfway across the empty bar.

"So you do know that guy?" Owen asked back, sounding weary.

"We've known each other for years," D replied with a slight shrug. "He actually called to suggest I be here since he knows we're well acquainted. He works with Officer Caine, so he's... let's say sympathetic to your current problem."

"How do you know what my problem is?" Owen demanded. His pale features seemed to lose what little color they had.

"I can see auras, Owen," D simply stated, as if that explained everything.

Owen's dark eyes went wide. "Since when?" Maybe it did explain things,

at least to one of us. Owen seemed to take the claim at face value.

Auras were a metaphysical construct. No way they really existed, no way could D actually see them. As much as I would have liked there to be real magic in the world, it was simply a fun bit of fiction and nothing more.

Could D have been one of those overly spiritual types? I wouldn't have ever suspected such a thing from a man who presented himself as professionally as D did.

“Since always.” D's gentle smile held more than a little warmth.

An awkward laugh bubbled out of Owen. He bowed his head, lifted a hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose between his eyes. “This whole time you knew?”

“I did.”

“And you didn't say anything because...” Owen prodded with a wave of the hand that wasn't rubbing at his face.

“Because it doesn't change anything. I'm a contractor, I wouldn't be one for long if I couldn't keep secrets.”

Owen's shoulders slumped. He huffed out a frustrated breath and looked to the ceiling. “Well, this is great. I'm super fucked, aren't I?”

“Not necessarily,” D said with a bit of a chuckle. “No one but me knows, I'm sure of that. You do have favors you can call in, mine included. The Crypt itself may be unaffiliated, but you aren't required to be.”

“Um, 'scuse me.” I raised my hand. “Are either of you going to tell me what the heck is going on?”

They both turned to stare at me like they forgot my existence. Owen's cheeks brightened with an unexpected blush. D adopted a nervous smile.

“What was that just now?” I demanded.

“You have nothing to worry about,” came D's confident reply. “At least not

in my opinion, but I am considered somewhat more progressive than most of my colleagues.”

“W- what?” I blinked and tried to parse what that could possibly mean. A sense of unease turned over in my gut. What was I missing?

D turned his attention back to Owen. “You are handling this, aren’t you?”

“Yes, D,” Owen’s weary reply threatened to make me weary, too, “I’m certainly trying to.”

“I can get to work on the paperwork if you’d like.”

“Yeah, fine.” Owen rubbed at that spot between his eyes again. “Just give me a few days before you file anything, please.”

“I believe you have three until the next—”

“Yeah, I got it,” Owen interjected before D could finish his sentence. “Trust me, I know. I’m working on it, but things are complicated.”

D sighed. “They always are. Call me if you have any concerns, I’m more than happy to assist.” He straightened his suit jacket and nodded to me. “I hope you have a nice evening, Allison. I really am sorry for all the unnecessary fuss.”

“I still have no idea what’s going on and neither one of you are going to tell me, are you?” I narrowed my eyes at them, wondering if I should back away slowly and forget the entire exchange or demand some actual answers.

“It’s not my place to interfere,” D replied with a gentle smile directed my way before he started towards the door. “I’ll keep you posted, Owen.”

“Yeah, you do that.” Owen moved out of the way and let D out, leaving me and Owen alone in the bar. He took a deep breath and locked the door as soon as it closed again. His forehead fell forward to rest against the old wood with a groan.

“Owen, please tell me what is going on.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I tried,” he said, dragging his head up to look at me. He may as well have not slept for days as tired and worn out as he appeared. “Come on, I’ll give you a ride home.”

“What about the rest of the night?” My brows screwed together in confusion. It wasn’t even eight o’clock yet. We’d only been open since noon, the place normally stayed open until two AM.

“It’s shot,” Owen replied with a sigh. “I have a lot to process and I’m not letting you walk home alone tonight.”

“But—”

“Yeah, I know, I won’t crash your date, I promise.” He shot me a very thin-lipped, terse smile. “I’ll just drop you off. Besides, it will save you a few minutes’ worth of walking. Don’t you want a few extra minutes to get ready for your date?”

“Fine, but only if you tell me what that was just now.”

Owen shook his head and headed towards the back room. I followed him, intent on getting answers.

“Seriously, Owen,” I muttered, getting more and more angry the more he tried to ignore me. “Jamie said I deserve to know and while he seemed a bit unhinged just now, every one of you seems to know exactly what he meant. What does he think I deserve to know?”

Owen grabbed his keys off his desk and flipped off the light to his office. He frowned at me.

I braced myself in the doorway to his office, blocking him in. I raised an eyebrow, not knowing if I wanted to scream or give up, walk out, and chalk the whole thing up to another fever dream.

“Allie, I can’t lie to you and I don’t even know where to start.” Owen bowed his head and rubbed at his forehead as if fending off a headache. “At

least not tonight. Can you give it a few days? I promise everything will make sense in just a few days.”

“Three, right?” I asked, holding up three fingers. His eyes widened, so I clarified, “That’s what D said. He mentioned there were three days until the next something.”

“Yeah, give it three days.” There was an odd sense of sadness there. “If you haven’t gotten the answers you need by Friday, then I will take care of it. You have my word.”

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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# Tony

The phone in my pocket blew up right as I lugged an armload of groceries to my truck. The incessant buzz wasn't the constant, steady vibration of a phone call, it was multiple short bursts at random intervals signifying text messages. I pulled it out and checked it as soon as the groceries were safe in the passenger-side footwell.

The messages all came from Owen. I scrolled up through the stream as I climbed up into the driver's seat. The last one simply stated, please don't freak out, which drove my already anxious self right off the cliff of nervousness and straight into barely controlled panic.

A RO showed up to talk to Allie but he didn't seem that worried, at least not yet

She knows something is going on

Thought I should warn you in case she mentioned it

Didn't want you to be blindsided

Please be good tonight and good luck

See you tomorrow

Don't fuck up dinner

You have to tell her by Friday or I will

I'm sorry

Please don't freak out

My heart pounded by the time I got through his stream of messages. I'd been right to worry. Owen wouldn't elaborate over text so I'd have to ask him what went down later. That or grill Allison without making her suspicious.

I shoved all my nerves back down again. At least I tried to. Friday. I had until Friday to tell her everything? To tell her what I was and what she was to me? I needed more time. No way could I figure out how to break it to her in just three days. And Friday, Friday was the next full moon.

Did he intend for me to turn her by then? That fast?

I sent a quick reply.

Thanks for the warning. I'll try

I set my phone face down on my lap and leaned back against the seat. What was I going to do? How to even start? I dragged in as deep a breath as I



could, held it, counted to some arbitrary number and let it back out. The phone in my lap vibrated again.

She also said you slept in her bed. Seriously dude?

What started as a snort became a full-on laugh at the absurdity of it all. As a kid, I always thought life would be so much easier as an adult, but at thirty-one, it was still such a fucking struggle. Dad wanted better for me than what he had by my age. I might have made better money than he ever did, but I couldn't call myself successful, not when being a wolf affected every aspect of my life every waking moment of every goddamned day.

What would it be like to not live a life of near-total secrecy? Getting myself registered wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if it meant I could exist without the constant cloud of anxiety hanging over my head.

It wasn't a long drive from the grocery store to Allison's place. I sat there parked in her driveway for a minute or two and took the time to compose myself. With my nerves gathered and forced back down as deep as they could go, I finally shoved my phone back in my pocket, grabbed the bags of groceries, and headed to her front door. I wondered how different her home would look to human eyes.

My knuckles rapped against the door. Seconds later, she pulled it open with a broad smile.

Just like that, I couldn't form words. All I could do was take her in.

She changed from her dressy work clothes to a pair of baggy jeans and an old t-shirt with the logo of a coffee shop emblazoned on it. Even dressed down, she appeared so full of warmth and light.

Before I could stop myself, I set the bags of groceries down on the ground and reached out to cup her face between my palms. Gorgeous brown eyes searched mine as I leaned in and touched my lips to hers. I wanted so badly to claim those lips, to claim her body, to claim her soul, and give her every bit of me in return. The animal's impulse overwhelmed me. For once I accepted it, went with it.

Her hands drifted to my hips and she kissed me back. We kept it gentle. Our connection remained light and didn't falter. The taste of her lips caused the wolf to stir, but it was an almost pleasant sensation, one I didn't bother tamping down.

After a long, tender moment, I broke it off to rest my forehead against hers instead. My hands against her cheeks slid down her neck and to her shoulders.

She opened those mesmerizing eyes of hers again so she could catch my own. Her smile reformed and her cheeks tinted. She let out a quiet little laugh that threatened to undo me right there.

“‘Hey’ to you, too,” she said.

“Sorry.” My face heated with embarrassment. “Don't know what came over me.”

“Don't be sorry,” she whispered. Her lips found mine again for the briefest touch before she pulled back a step. With a quick swipe, she smoothed her hair back away from her face and tried to tuck it behind her ears. “Now get in here and make me dinner.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I chuckled, reaching down to pick the grocery bags back up.

She moved out of the doorway and let me in. After I kicked my shoes off, she showed me to the kitchen with bright teal cabinets and sunshine yellow walls. The colors were much brighter than I remembered, but they suited her.

I already knew her place would be clean and would smell like her. I'd seen it just that morning but she'd done a once over of it, anyway.

The place looked spotless, neat and almost minimal, with little personal touches here and there. She'd laid out some supplies on the counter for me, a cutting board, chef's knife and two wineglasses.

A smile crept across my face. I set the bags down on an empty expanse of counter and started pulling things out. A package of the best ribeyes I could find, a variety of vegetables, a bottle of wine and ingredients for a blueberry cobbler all came out of the bags in haphazard fashion. She started trying to help, but I shooed her away after asking how to work the oven.

"I've got this. I even promise I won't burn your house down," I teased. "Where's your spice cabinet?"

"That one." She pointed to an upper cabinet to the left of the stove. "You sure I can't help with anything?"

"You can open the wine and pour us some."

She found her bottle opener and poured a generous amount of wine into both glasses before handing me one. She stared at her glass for a long moment before downing half of it in two swallows.

My eyebrows rose.

"What?" she asked, already refilling her glass back up to a reasonable level. "Work... got a little weird after you left."

"Oh?" I tensed halfway through quartering a potato and hoped she didn't notice. "How so?"

She leaned a hip against the counter and kept her eyes trained on her wineglass. "You remember those guys from last night? The ones you didn't want me going out with?"

"Yeah," I replied, trying to keep my tone light. "What about them?"

“Well, one of them came back in today with a friend.” She wrapped an arm around her middle and took a slow sip of her wine. “A guy who said he was some sort of officer. He asked me a few questions about... about something that happened last night. It was all rather strange. Owen acted all weird about it, too. I don’t know, I’m just trying to make sense of it.”

Her hesitation had to be because she didn’t want to talk about what really happened last night. I could either grill her on it to see what all she’d tell me or try to lighten her mood. I threw the cut potatoes in a baking dish, coated them with some oil, salt, and seasonings before they ended up in the oven to roast, then turned to her.

A small frown pulled at her lips. Her eyebrows drew closer together.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I desperately wanted to make that frown go away.

Her lips quirked up just a touch. She carefully shook her head. “I’d rather focus on being here with you than trying to puzzle out whatever that was, but it’s going to take a lot to get it off my mind.” She motioned with her wineglass and took another sip from it. “The way they talked, it’s like they thought I was in some sort of trouble.”

“That does sound weird.”

But it tracked. Mages and shifters didn’t really see eye to eye, at least not according to Owen. None of the mages I came across at the bar would have known what I was on sight alone. It would take time for them to suss me out. Normally, they’d have to use magic to verify I wasn’t human, but all it would take for me was one of them noticing my ear and connecting the dots.

When I first met Owen, he told me that to a mage, a shifter would rate barely more than a rabid animal. We were too dangerous to live and let live since one shifter could cause pure mayhem. It only took a single bite to

change someone forever, turn the wrong person and one could turn into a dozen or more real fucking fast.

Outright killing us was frowned upon and considered unnecessarily cruel unless we were causing trouble, but no one would think twice about a stray getting rounded up and sent off. The Registry preferred we live with our own kind, well away from any city with a robust population of mages, a city exactly like the one I called home.

Owen originally offered to help me find a pack. He said I might be happier, live easier with other wolves. He tried to talk me into it for months before he gave up and decided to keep my secret instead.

My worst fear was being discovered and in my drive to protect my mate, I'd gone and outed myself to the enemy. If a Registry Officer had come to speak to Allison, it was only a matter of time before they tracked me down, declared me dangerous, and took me away from the only home I'd ever known. I'd be separated from my mate and shipped off to god knows where to live with a bunch of animals like myself.

No matter how many times Owen tried to reassure me that wouldn't happen, that things had changed, I couldn't find it in me to believe him. The fear ran deep. It kept me hiding in plain sight and living my quiet, lonely life within the boundaries of my territory.

What did I expect to happen when I took Allison as my mate? Did I expect her to live like I did, to confine herself to a quiet, lonely existence with me? I hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Yeah," Allison replied softly. "Seems like it had something to do with a dog that followed me home last night."

By the skin of my teeth, I kept my chest from heaving and my whole body from tensing up. Inside, the wolf pawed at me while she studied me with mild

curiosity.

“A dog?” I managed to ask. “Like a stray or something?”

“He was a runaway.” She turned her attention back to her glass of wine. Her brows smoothed back out. She took another sip as she watched me season the steaks. “I took him in for the night and when I tried to call out, Owen offered to pick him up this morning. He said he found the dog’s owners.” Her lighthearted tone faded away as she spoke. By the end, she sounded downright sad.

I almost felt bad about it, about having to leave her.

“You sound disappointed,” I pointed out. I felt myself smile, though I didn’t look her way.

“I’m glad he’s going back to his family, but I hope they fix their fence or something. That same dog has gotten out a bunch of times. I’ve seen his giant paw prints around my yard for weeks now.” She adopted a bright smile and let out a tiny little laugh. “Maybe I’ll think about getting a dog. I did like having him here. It’s funny, though, I didn’t take Owen for an animal person.”

“Yeah.” I found myself smiling, too. “Owen has a soft spot for animals.” At least he had a soft spot for me.

While she watched the steaks sizzling in the cast iron pan, she contemplated for a second, then asked, “Where did you learn to cook?”

“TV mostly. What about you, you cook?”

“Not as often as I should,” she admitted with a forlorn sigh. “My mom would be aghast at how much toast I eat because I’m too lazy to make something that qualifies as a complete meal.”

“Keep me around and I’ll make sure you eat like this every day.” It came out of my mouth faster than I could bite it back.

She blinked as she took my comment in, but after a moment she laughed, a rich, silky sound that sent a shiver of pleasure down my spine. “Maybe I will if that tastes as good as it smells.”

“Sorry, I don’t think I’m very good at this,” I admitted as my face heated with my embarrassment.

“I think you’re doing just fine. Better than yesterday, at least.” She raised her glass towards me. “I’m curious, though. You never seem to have as much trouble with other people as you do with me.” She tilted her head as she studied me. “Why is that? What’s different about me?”

“Maybe it’s because I actually like you.” Yeah, I could stand behind that answer.

Her cheeks took on a bit more color. She let me work in silence after that, long enough for me to get everything ready to plate while she set the small dining room table with silverware and took a seat. The entire time I stood in front of the stove, I could feel her eyes on me watching my every move.

A few minutes of back and forth later, everything had been plated except the cobbler, which still needed more time in the oven. We took our seats across from each other at her tiny dining room table just big enough for two.

She stared down at her plate overloaded with a perfectly seared giant steak, roasted potatoes, Brussels sprouts, rolls, and even a small salad with a sweet smile. She glanced up at me as if waiting for some signal.

Did she expect me to say grace or something? I shrugged and dug in.

We ate in silence for a few bites, the clinks of our silverware against plates the only sound to break up the comfortable, quiet ambiance.

“No one’s ever made me dinner like this before,” she admitted after eating another bite of steak. “It’s nice. I’ve always been the one that’s gone out of my way to try and impress someone.”

“Does that mean you are impressed?” I asked, raising a brow.

“I am,” she said, sipping at her wineglass. “This is probably the best meal I’ve had since I moved here.”

What was that feeling in my chest that threatened to overwhelm me? Pride? Satisfaction? ... Contentedness?

“Good,” I finally managed to say around another bite of steak, “least I know I can do something right for you. Next time, I’ll thaw out some deer steaks and cook those up. I prefer wild game to the farmed stuff. Tastes better, at least to me.”

“You’re a hunter?” she asked, picking up her fork and knife again.

I swallowed, not because I had a mouthful of food, but because I found my mouth a bit too loose around her. Yeah, I hunted deer with a compound bow during deer season to fill the deep freezer, but I also knew how to stalk a target through the underbrush, how to rush in, crush a throat with my teeth and drag my prey to the ground. How blood tasted in my mouth, how to rip through fur and skin to get to the still-warm meat.

“Yeah,” I finally admitted. “I go every once in a while.” I took another bite of my food and sent her a half smile. I almost wanted her to ask me about it. Almost.

Her smile edged into smirk territory. “So you’re a bit of a country boy, is that it?”

“The accent not give that away?” I asked with a smirk of my own. “I’d offer you a ride on my tractor, but it’s in pieces in the barn right now.”

Her brows pinched together with sudden conflict. “I can’t tell if that was a joke or if you’re being serious.”

“Little of both, maybe?” I cut another piece of my steak and ate it, making sure to swallow before opening my mouth again. “I do have a tractor and I’m



waiting on a back-ordered part so it is in pieces, but you won't be riding on it unless you want to sit in my lap. There's only one seat."

She blushed, which was both adorable and hopefully a good sign. She focused on her plate again, ate a few bites, then asked, "Do you do a lot of your own maintenance stuff? Like fixing tractors?"

"Give me the right tools and a few DIY videos and I can fix damn near anything, if that's what you're asking," I replied with a confident grin.

At least I could be honest about that. Being handy was one of those things that might sway her opinion of me. I never hesitated to get my hands dirty, to maintain everything I could on my own. I learned real fast, real young, trial by fire, how to troubleshoot problems and fix what was broken.

"That's a useful skill." Her gentle smile almost undid me right there. "I could have used you a few weeks ago when I was doing a bunch of work on this place."

"You buy the place yourself? Can't imagine you'd be doing a bunch of work if it was a rental."

"This was my parents' house, actually." Her smile faltered. "They moved recently and...well, they're giving me this place. I know how that must sound —"

Like she had parents who loved her and were well enough off to give her a whole freaking house? It wasn't jealousy I felt, more like awe. I hoped her childhood had been the exact opposite of mine, that it had been idyllic instead of contentious. From the sound of it, both her parents were not just still in the picture, but still together. Statistically, some families had to be close to perfect. Why shouldn't hers be one of them?

"—but the only reason I came here was to try and get my life back on track." She hung her head and stared down at her food. Her fork poked at a

piece of potato.

“What happened?” I gently asked.

I knew so little about her. Everything I knew I either overheard or got second hand except that one brief conversation we had the first night we met. The one where she told me she used to work in an office.

“It’s just really hard to survive on your own these days.” She frowned for a moment before she lifted her head. A thin smile pulled at her lips. “Turns out I couldn’t even though I did everything I was supposed to. I went to college, got a degree, and moved to what I thought would be a fun new city for a job, but I never made enough to live very well. I could have asked my parents for help, but I wanted to make it on my own.

“I managed okay for a few years, but my rent kept going up. I was able to save less and less each month. Work was so demanding I had little time for myself, much less friends or any hobbies. I ended up burning out.”

“That sounds rough.” I knew how hard mere survival could be. I’d been on my own damn near half my life. Even without a mortgage payment, there were still bills to keep up with. I did what I had to, blundered through it my first few awful months alone before I found a way to make it work.

“It was. I thought there had to be more to life than the one I was living.” She heaved a sigh, set her utensils down, and picked up her glass of wine instead. A smile brightened her face and shone in her dark eyes. “A few weeks ago, I finally confessed to my parents how miserable and broke I was. They suggested I move here to save on rent, so here I am.”

I loved her smile. I would have done damn near anything for the woman sitting across from me.

“How are you liking it so far?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m loving it. I like the city more than I thought I would and while I

didn't expect to pick up bartending again, it's much more entertaining than sitting in front of a computer all day. I could maybe see myself sticking with it for a bit." She speared a piece of potato with her fork and eyed me with interest. "What about you? Is bartending a career for you, or is it just a job?"

"I only got into it because Owen wouldn't let me say no." I managed a small smile. "Not quite sure where I'd be without him these days."

Her smile softened to something sweet, something full of tenderness. "You two are pretty close, aren't you?"

"I guess you could say that." My eyebrows pinched together, then smoothed out again. I would have to tell her about my history with Owen at some point, but didn't want to get into it over dinner. I wasn't sure how she'd feel about our romantic involvement. "We've been friends for more than a decade now and he's not a bad boss, either."

"He is sort of the reason we met." She ate another piece of potato and took a sip of her wine. She eyed me over the top of her glass and tipped it in my direction. "If you hadn't been alone that night, I wouldn't have had any reason to try and come to your rescue."

Our eyes met. No doubt nagged at me. She walked into the bar that night for a reason.

"You did more than save me that night, Allison."

She laughed a little at that. "Did I?"

"Do you believe in fate?" It slipped out before I could pull it back. I grabbed my glass and downed the rest of my wine searching for a scrap of bravery. "I didn't before I met you, but now, I... I think I'm starting to."

The oven timer went off at that very moment. I scrambled to my feet and excused myself to take care of it. The way her eyes had widened, the raise of her brows, the little 'o' her lips made as soon as it came out of my mouth had

me wanting to get the hell out of there in case I said the wrong fucking thing yet again.

Pulling the cobbler out of the oven, I set it on top of the stove next to the remains of the roast vegetables. My palms met the counter to either side of the bubbling, berry-filled baking dish. I braced myself and hung my head. What the hell possessed me to say that?

“You okay?” she asked from behind me.

I had been too stuck inside my head to hear her get up. I should have plastered a smile on my face, should have turned around and told her I was perfectly fine.

But I shook my head and didn't turn around. “Sorry,” I finally said. “I shouldn't have said that. It's like I keep saying the wrong thing.”

Her hand landed on my back between my shoulder blades. I flinched as soon as she made contact.

I hated that I always flinched when someone touched me, but it wasn't something I could help. I wasn't used to any sort of comforting touch like that. Never really had been, but after I became a wolf, I felt like too much of a monster to let anyone get too close. My aversion to it had been a huge source of conflict in my relationship with Owen. Even after fifteen years, I still pulled away at unexpected contact, even my mate's.

I thought she might back away, but instead she rubbed her hand against my back. My eyes closed. My focus shifted to the pressure of her hand through my sweater. She pet me plenty already, but she didn't know that. She didn't know how much I liked it. How much I needed it.

“You're fine,” she said, keeping her voice all soft and sweet. “I don't know if I believe in fate, but... there definitely is something between us I don't know how to explain.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” I leaned into her touch. A shudder ran through me. The wolf... I enjoyed the hell out of her rubbing on me.

I had to tell her within the next three days and still had no idea how to broach the subject. What expression would she wear when I confessed? Would her face go pale with horror? Would she deny it or try to fight it when I told her she was my mate, that she belonged with me?

Her hand slid down my back and curved around my waist. She pushed in next to me. I didn't think twice about straightening up so I could wrap an arm around her shoulders and pull her close.

“Everyone keeps telling me you're complicated.” She lifted her chin and smiled up at me with such sweet eyes.

All I managed was a grimace in return.

“I'm okay with complicated, Tony. I haven't seen anything that's a total deal breaker yet. A few caution flags, sure, but I can tell you're trying.”

Before I could figure out how to react, she set her sights on the blueberry cobbler I'd just taken out of the oven.

“That looks so good. I can't wait to try it.”

The wolf in me welled with pride, but I faltered. Her admitting that out loud threw me. She felt something deeper between us but I still toed a line in the sand. If I stepped over it by saying the wrong thing one more time, if I couldn't keep my instincts under control, my mate might abandon me forever.

“Um, thanks,” I muttered, removing my arm from her shoulders. “I'll get some plates.”

# Chapter Twenty-Four

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# Allison

We ate dessert in mostly awkward silence.

W Tony refused to meet my eyes. He wore a conflicted mask, like he had to make an impossible decision involving a scrumptious blueberry cobbler.

“Did I say something wrong?” I asked after swallowing my last bite of cobbler.

He lifted his head as I spoke. His eyes swam with some emotion I couldn't place.

“No, Angel,” he rumbled with a faint rasp. “You didn't say anything wrong.”

I blinked. My head tilted at the sudden use of a nickname and kind of a sappy one, at that.

He cringed as soon as it came out of his mouth and averted his gaze. His throat worked as if he fought from saying anything else by accident, too. Obviously, he hadn't meant to call me that based on his reaction.

His fork dropped with a clatter onto his plate. He snatched up the dish and nearly knocked his chair over in his haste to get away. Once at the sink, his plate clanked loudly against the counter as he set it down and turned the water on. He kept his back to me but ducked his head, grabbed a sponge and started attacking one of the pans he left to soak with gusto.

I didn't know how to react. My first instinct said to follow him. I wanted to take the sponge away, make him look at me, and kiss him to tell him it was

okay. Actions could speak louder than words and so far, the two of us had better luck with actions. Like how he kissed me when I opened the door. He said so much with that kiss, things I wasn't sure I could believe.

My head didn't have time to catch up to my gut before I came out of my chair. I remembered to grab my plate before making my way over to the sink. My plate joined his beside the sink and my arms wrapped around his waist. I liked how his body felt against mine, how solid he was.

Tony froze like a block of ice. He didn't move a muscle for several long beats. The only noise punctuating the quiet house was the running water faucet.

He drew in such a deep breath his back flexed with the expansion of his lungs. He reached forward, shut off the water and crossed his arms over mine. Warm palms settled over my hands. A tremor ran through him.

"I'm sorry," he said. His words came at such a low rumble I almost couldn't make them out. "This... I don't know how to navigate this. It's hard, my head isn't right. I don't know what to do." His fingers gripped my hands, hard, desperate. "All I know is I want you so bad it hurts. It scared me at first but... I don't want to be afraid of it anymore."

I rubbed my cheek against his shoulder as I clung tight to him. "I think I can relate," I said against his back. "I don't understand what this is, but maybe I don't have to. Maybe it can just be."

He tugged on my arms and I loosened my grip enough so he could turn to face me. I buried my face against his neck instead. My chin rested against the collar of the slightly scratchy sweater he wore. His arms wound around me and held me close. His nose pressed into my hair.

I breathed in the scent of him. I'd been close to a few people before, but none of them came close to smelling as good as Tony did. It wasn't anything



strong and overwhelming like a fancy cologne. Was it just his natural scent that got me so worked up? Men didn't normally smell so enticing.

"Anyone ever tell you that you smell really good?" I asked, drawing in a breath through my nose.

A low chuckle resonated in his chest. "No, but I like your scent, too. It's the first thing I noticed about you." His nose ruffled a strand of my hair on top of my head and his hands against my back trailed slowly downward. "Makes you irresistible to me."

"How'd you know how I smelled?" That had been a curious thing to say. "You weren't anywhere near this close to me when we first met." At least he hadn't been until he kissed me in the alley out behind the bar.

"I just have a good nose."

A silly thought struck me. Some of Tony's behavior drew striking similarities to that of a werewolf, at least to the ones in the spicy novels I'd been reading recently. He would get all growly and intense. Animal-like desperation drove him when we were together. He avoided almost everyone else, but with me, Tony couldn't stay away.

Chief had been the same, hadn't he? Possessive of me, but... he'd been so affectionate. They even had the same color eyes. And when Owen arrived, Chief lunged with a growl but stopped as soon as he caught Owen's scent through the door, as if he recognized him.

I suppressed a bubbly laugh and shook the errant thought away. I had always been team werewolf over team vampire, but werewolves were quite fictional. Tony couldn't be one, no matter how much the thought entertained me.

My wineglass definitely did not need a refill if those were the kinds of thoughts running through my head.

“What else can you smell then?” I asked with a roguish grin as I pulled back to meet his gaze.

Tony’s brows rose at my question. His lips parted then closed again. He studied me with that burning intensity for a moment before he replied, “Your hair smells like oranges and whatever soap you use has honey in it. I like it.”

I drew back with a smile and poked the tip of his nose with a finger. “You do have a good nose. What else you got?”

“Oh, I’m full of surprises.” He smiled. I wanted to melt under the warmth of it, but then his smile faltered. “Not all of them are fun. I promise I’ll tell you everything soon, but for tonight, can we just…” he trailed off, like he wasn’t sure how to finish his thought. His eyes dropped away from mine. His arms around me loosened but didn’t fall away. Instead, his strong hands settled on my waist.

“We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.” I lifted my hands to his shoulders. My eyes roved over the loose collar of his sweater. “Do you want to put on a movie or something?”

An uncomfortable lump formed in my throat. I couldn’t look at him as I said it because I didn’t want him turning me down. I wanted to be near him and couldn’t bear the thought of him leaving quite yet. It surprised me how much I didn’t want to sleep alone.

“O- or maybe we could cuddle in bed?” I stumbled a little over my words. “You can leave the dishes. They can soak for a while.”

I didn’t care if we had sex or not, I just wanted to lie tangled together with him. To be close, to fall asleep with that scent of his all caught in my nose, to feel the heat of his body next to mine.

“You want me to stay?” he asked and there was that intensity again, that heat in his gaze.

“If you want to.” My hands on his shoulders slid down to rest against his chest. “You don’t have to, but I think I’d like that.”

Tony lifted a hand to my chin, tipped it up, and touched his lips to mine. It was a gentle kiss, nothing filled with lust or uncontrollable passion, just something sweet and careful and cautious.

I kissed him back, meeting him with the same almost tentative energy.

He broke it off to whisper, “I want nothing more than to wake up next to you.” He dipped down and suddenly my feet weren’t on the ground anymore. Without even a low grunt of effort, he lifted me into his arms as if I weighed nothing at all.

I let out a squeal of protest and threw my arms around his neck in case he dropped me, but he didn’t wobble or stumble. No one had ever picked me up like that before.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” he said as he carried me right to my bedroom. He picked the right door the first time and everything.

“I can walk, you know. You shouldn’t do that, you could hurt your back. I’m not all that light.”

“I’m stronger than I look.” He laid me down on my freshly made bed. Thank goodness I changed the sheets after Owen picked up Chief.

I scooted over to the middle of the bed to give him room to climb on next to me. He mirrored me, rolled onto his side to face me, and settled a firm hand on my hip.

“You look plenty strong to me,” I said, lifting my own to touch his arm. My palm slid up a quite solid bicep. “You feel strong, too. You work out a lot like Ethan does?”

“No, but I live on an old farm and haul a bunch of heavy shit around all the time. That probably counts for something.”

“You said you had a tractor. Do you actually grow things?” Under the surface, Tony wasn’t at all what I had been expecting.

He graced me with a warm smile. “The tractor’s mostly used to mow the field a few times a year, but I do keep a good-sized garden and planted a few fruit trees a while back. Whatever I don’t eat, I can or freeze for later.

“It’s a self-sufficiency thing. I don’t... I don’t go out much.” His good humor faded. “Ever, actually. Work, home, hardware or grocery store if it’s something I need right then, internet for stuff I can wait on or can’t make myself. That’s it for me.”

“Is that what you do when you aren’t at work?” I wasn’t sure what I expected him to do in his spare time, but gardening hadn’t been high on the list of possibilities. “Sounds lonely.”

“Keeps me busy. What about you? What do you do when you aren’t at work?”

“I started reading again recently, that’s been kind of fun,” I replied with a small smile. “I never had the time before, but I’ve made it through a handful of books since I moved. Sometimes I’ll go hang out somewhere with a coffee or a beer and a book. I like being around people, but I like having time to myself, too. Friends are nice, but being social can be taxing. I don’t go out as often as I probably should. Work is usually more than enough social time for me.”

“What about last night, then?” Those eyes of his turned a little dark, a little dangerous. “You left to go meet up with those guys.”

I immediately scoffed. “I don’t have to justify my actions to you.”

Even though I rebuffed him, that dangerous glare of his threatened to set me aflame. As much as it shouldn’t have, his possessive streak sent a throb of desire straight through me.

That glint in his eyes grew even more intense for a fraction of a second before it faltered. His eyebrows knit together and he sucked in a sharp breath through his nose. Finally, he closed his eyes and let that breath go in a long, steady exhale.

“You’re right. You don’t. Sorry.” His hand around my waist gripped me harder, as if it took a lot for him to pull back from his negative emotions.

“Why are you so possessive of me?” It was already out of my mouth before I could pull the errant question back.

“I- what?”

“You called me yours before,” I pointed out, watching my fingers trail down over the sleeve of his sweater. I kept my eyes low so I didn’t catch his. I didn’t want to see how he looked at me, but I could feel the hunger radiating off him. Or was that me? Truth was, in my heart, I felt like his. Like he did have some kind of claim on me. “Do you want me to be?”

He moved fast. Before I knew it, he was on top of me and my back hit the mattress. His knees settled to the sides of my thighs and his hands fisted in the sheets next to my shoulders. He leaned down and got a bit close for comfort.

My heartbeat sped right up even though the aggression didn’t scare me. I clenched my thighs together against the growing need pooling between my legs.

“Yes,” he growled in that feral way of his as he captured my mouth with his. It wasn’t anything like the sweet, almost chaste kiss we shared in the kitchen. He threatened to devour me whole. I wanted to hand him a freaking spoon.

My hands wound their way into his sweater and began to pull. His mouth left mine just long enough for him to back out of it, leaving him bare down to

his waist. With a flick, the sweater disappeared over the side of the bed. My hands didn't have near enough time to explore his newly exposed skin before he grabbed my t-shirt and practically ripped it off me.

He paused then, still caging me in with his body. I couldn't help but feel the heat of his gaze as I took in every detail. He was more than hot enough with his clothes on, but with his shirt off... dear lord. Tony had nicer abs than a lot of the cover models on the types of books I liked to read.

"You are so fucking beautiful," he said, his words a harsh rumble in his throat. "I still can't believe you're mine." He leaned in to kiss me again, gently instead of with the insatiable passion from before.

"Seriously, is this some sort of thing with you?" I turned my head so he kissed my cheek instead of my lips. "Like you have a possession kink or something?"

He paused. "Kink? I don't- what?" I could almost hear the gears turning in his head.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm kind of getting into it." My hands ran over his sculpted middle. How did he have such a nice body when he skipped the gym? Chores burned calories, sure, but they couldn't account for that kind of definition. "I'm just trying to understand."

He shook his head. His dark mop of thick hair brushed against my cheek and he nibbled at my neck below my ear. "You're the only one I've ever wanted to call mine."

"Does it go both ways?" My hands slid up to his shoulders. "Does that make you mine, too?"

"I've been yours since the moment I met you, Angel. I know I belong to you."

How could he sound so altruistic? Was he a sappy sort of guy? One who

used words of affection as his love language?

“I kind of like the sound of that,” I found myself saying.

I raised my chin, turned my head to the side so he could kiss on my neck all he wanted. It felt good, amazing really, but I needed more. I needed him, all of him.

I pushed against his shoulder and Tony flopped over onto his side. We settled down next to each other again. Our lips met and our hands roamed. Tentative fingers brushed the back strap of my bra and fumbled against the smooth fabric.

“Isn’t there supposed to be a clasp?” he mumbled into my shoulder as he leaned far enough forward to see what he was doing.

“I have a few sturdier ones with clasps, but most of mine are built for comfort these days.” I pushed him back enough so I could sit up and pull the stretchy bralette off over my head. “Are you a sexy lingerie kind of guy? You want me to dress up for you?”

As soon as the bra came off, his hands gripped my waist. Fingers dug in and he rolled under me, taking me with him. I yelped, thinking he meant to drive me down against the bed again, but he wanted me on top of him. My thighs straddled his hips and my palms settled against his chest to steady myself.

“Would be wasted on me,” Tony murmured in that low, sexy rumble of his. “Wear whatever you want, it’ll all end up on the floor, anyway.” His hands on my waist trailed up to my ribs. Fingertips brushed against the sides of my breasts.

“Well, that makes it easy,” I replied with a smirk. “And you can manhandle me if you want. You don’t have to be coy about wanting to touch me.”

He took my encouragement and ran with it. That gentle brush of his fingers

across my skin shifted to rather eager, full-on groping of both my breasts. Maybe I shouldn't have used the word 'manhandle' with him.

"Little easier," I pleaded, sitting up and grabbing his wrists with my hands. "I don't mind you being rough, but not quite that hard, okay?"

"Sorry." He relaxed his hands and his grip on my girls gentled to a much more pleasant knead. He let out a low chuckle. "If it's not obvious, I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing."

"Mmm, everyone I asked about you said they thought you were inexperienced." I rolled my hips against his and could feel the hard length of his cock separated by our jeans. Those needed to go. With a slow, teasing slide, my hands slid down his forearms and fell to the waistband of his pants. Deft fingers made quick work of the button. "But I didn't think someone without any kind of sexual history could have taken me up against a wall in an alley like you did. So which is it?"

"You're only the second woman I've slept with." One of his hands lowered to grip my waist while the fingers of his other hand brushed over my nipple in a light, teasing way. His eyes followed his fingers as I tugged at the zipper of his jeans. "And the first was when I was a teenager. And that just happened once."

With each 'and', my eyes went a little wider. I nearly choked on my next breath. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, yeah, I am." He wouldn't look up at me as his cheeks darkened.

"What about men?" I asked. Owen mentioned they'd been together at one point.

Tony's eyes widened at my question, but with a tiny shake of his head, he finally admitted, "Just... just Owen. We were together for a short while more than a decade ago. Does that bother you? That I was with a guy before you?"



I leaned forward, placed a finger under his chin, and directed him to look up at me.

“If it did, I’d be a hypocrite. I’ve dated women before.”

“How did you know to ask about that?” His brow furrowed as he studied me.

“Owen told me right before that weird interview today.”

My expression must have soured, because his hands smoothed over my flanks, trailed down to my jeans, and tugged at the button.

“Don’t think about that right now.” His voice stayed all soft as he pleaded, “Just be here with me.”

I couldn’t imagine being anywhere or with anyone else. His fingers made quick work of my button and zipper as I leaned down to kiss him again. With a bit of awkward shuffling, he helped slide my jeans and my underwear down my hips. His pants and boxers went next.

For the first time, nothing separated us. Naked skin glided over naked skin. I straddled his hips and ground against his length. My body filled with aching need, but I didn’t mind teasing him first, making him desperate for me.

“You are one of the most attractive men I’ve ever seen and somehow I’m only the third person you’ve slept with?” I tucked a bit of hair back behind my ear. “Why me? Why sleep with me like that, that fast?”

“Was instinct,” he said in a harsh, dangerous rumble. “I needed you so bad I couldn’t think about anything else.”

I really liked the way he eyed me. He had such a raw, feral sort of intensity. His hungry, penetrating gaze saw me all the way down to the depths of my soul. I didn’t understand him. I wasn’t sure I needed to.

“And what’s instinct telling you now?” I teased, tracing a lone finger down the center of his torso.

He bucked his hips with a groan. “Tells me that you’re mine, that I should take you, but I’ll let you lead.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Do you want me like this?” I leaned forward and my hands fell against his chest while his fell to my hips. He gripped me with strong, steady hands and licked his lips.

We shouldn’t have, not without a condom, but if he was telling the truth, the chances of him having any sort of STD were low. I’d been tested after my last partner and received the all clear.

“Yes.”

My brows furrowed. “You’re not worried about getting me pregnant?”

Horror lit across his face. He turned his head to the side with a scowl. “I can’t have kids.” That feral growl of his softened to more of a purr. “Don’t want them either. Sorry, should have mentioned it. Hope that’s not a deal breaker for you.”

“It’s not.” Relief flooded through me. He must not have thought about it for the same reason I didn’t. Did he have some sort of medical issue that made him sterile? Or maybe he had gotten a vasectomy? I leaned down and kissed his cheek. “I can’t either. I had a tubal ligation a few years ago. I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Yeah?” Thinly veiled hope played in his eyes, as if he was unsure of me.

“You would not believe how hard it was to find a doctor to do it,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I had so many issues with birth control and never saw myself wanting children, so I went ahead and had it done.”

He lifted up to kiss me and nipped at my lip. “Fuck, you are perfect for me, aren’t you?”

He opened for me and my tongue tasted his. His kissing technique could have used a little work, but what he lacked in experience he made up for in

raw passion.

“Mmm, am I?” There was no doubt in my mind he wanted me. No nagging suspicion I would be nothing more than another notch on his bedpost he would drop as soon as he got what he wanted out of me. “What about you? Are you perfect for me?”

He paused under me, pulled his lips away. His hands smoothing across my skin stilled.

“I’m nowhere near good enough for you,” he muttered. His hands slid through my short hair. His eyes met mine. Honesty burned there. He believed every word. “But I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to prove myself if you’ll let me.”

“That’s...” I paused, unsure of how to continue. We barely knew one another and he wanted to make such intense declarations? He said things like that to me yesterday, too. He called me his and told me he couldn’t lose me. “That’s kind of a lot for a first date, Tony.”

“I know.” He lifted his head to kiss me again, but I pulled back just enough so he couldn’t reach. His head plopped back down on the pillow. “Sorry, but it’s true.” His words caught in his throat as he whispered, “I just... I know.”

Confusion marred my good mood, but I smiled down at him, anyway. I still wanted him and he certainly wanted me. I sat back on my thighs and teased against him. Wet folds slid along his rigid cock and my fingers trailed lightly across his chest.

His fingers dug into me harder. “I need you really fucking bad right now.”

“Then let me take you.” I reached my hand down between us and took hold of him.

“I’m already yours,” he whispered without hesitation.

His cock pressed up against my entrance and with a rock of my hips, he slid

inside me. I worked with him, let myself sink down bit by bit. We took it slow, almost cautiously, not at all like our frantic first time. I bit my lip as he filled me until he had no more left to give.

Tony threw his head back with a curse. He let me lead so I rode him at a leisurely pace. I wanted to enjoy the feel of his body inside mine, for us to take our time and explore one another. His warm hands on my hips slid up my back. He held me in such a tender embrace.

I encouraged him with a moan and leaned over him. My hands rested against his chest for support so he could play with mine. He groped me and I arched towards him, encouraged him when his fingers pinched and teased my nipples.

He cursed a lot, groaned a lot, even growled at me when I picked up my speed. I kissed his collarbones and ran my tongue over his neck while he stayed so deep inside me.

He moved with me, thrust up into me, and moaned in desperation when my teeth grazed the skin of his neck. All the while I languished in the pleasure of it, the pleasure of him filling me with every roll of our hips. We fit so perfectly together. He felt so right to me, so perfect, so... mine.

Beneath my lips, his pulse hammered in his neck. Tony was mine to take, mine to do with as I pleased. The urge to bite him came on impossibly strong. I lost myself in the moment, let instinct guide my actions. My tongue lashed against the side of his neck. I gave him no other warning.

I bit him, I bit him really freaking hard.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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# Allison

“Fuck!” Tony dragged in a ragged breath and sat up as soon as my teeth pinched the skin of his neck, taking me upright with him.

I let out a surprised little yelp at how easily he disregarded my weight. I jerked back, but his arms wrapped so tight around me I couldn't hope to escape.

“I'm sorry!” My eyes went wide with my embarrassment. “I don't- I don't know why I just did that.” My body was very aware he was still seated deep within me.

I'd never bitten anyone like that before. Sure, I liked a bit of rough sex every once in a while and I had been reading salacious paranormal romances recently where biting was like... a thing, but I hadn't ever had the inclination before.

“Fuck, Angel,” he exhaled. In the dim light of my bedroom, his vivid eyes almost glowed. His grip on me stayed strong. He held me in place against him. “You just... fuck.”

I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I set them on his shoulders. “Did I hurt you?” I asked, cringing as the words came out of me. God, I bit him. What the hell was wrong with me?

He shook his head. “Would take a lot more than that to hurt me.”

An angry red mark remained on the side of his neck. I traced a finger around it. “I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me. It... it doesn't look

too bad.” I may have apologized, but some primal side of me got a serious kick out of seeing the mark my teeth left on his skin.

“Don’t apologize.” He tilted his head to the side to capture my mouth with his. He kissed me with surprising tenderness. His lips moved against mine to whisper, “I want your mark on me.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Why would I be mad?” he asked in such a way it threatened to rev me right back up again. “You just surprised me, is all.” The uncharacteristic grin he wore made me think he appreciated my unexpected aggression.

“Oh.” I lifted my hands up to the sides of his face. “Well, good then.”

His grip on me loosened until his hands settled against my waist. He moved with me, urged me to get back to riding him.

I moaned at the feel of him as he moved beneath me and had to laugh a little. It was so unconventional, but he wasn’t exactly a conventional guy. Maybe he liked it rough and sort of primal.

The dream from last night ran through my head again, the one where I ‘woke up’ with Tony in my bed instead of Chief. The thought of Tony sinking a set of fangs into my neck struck home and my face heated.

“You can bite me, too, if you—”

Tony cut me off with a kiss full of eager passion. He moved a hand to the back of my head and wouldn’t let me pull away. Not that I wanted to. He rolled us to the side, then he was above me with my back against the mattress and his hips still between my thighs. He thrust into me; we hadn’t ever come apart.

I moaned against his mouth and opened for him, letting his tongue invade me like his cock did. My fingers speared through those dark curls of his. I loved touching him, loved petting him, and he seemed to like it, too.

He kept me pinned down. I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. His mouth stayed on mine until he finally broke away and kissed a line down my jaw.

Exploring fingers ran over his ears. They fumbled over his right one. Instead of a smooth arch, I met a sharp, jagged edge.

The moment I found it, Tony grabbed my wrist and forced it down against the sheets. He slid his hand forward until his fingers entwined with mine.

That couldn't be right. Wasn't that the same ear Chief was missing? Tony wore his hair long enough to cover his ears, but had I really never seen them? Had I never noticed he was missing a piece of one?

“Your ear—”

He cut me off with another aggressive, mind-numbing kiss. “Lost it in a fight.”

“But—”

He shoved his tongue in my mouth to shush me. I surrendered. There would be no resisting him. I never wanted to resist him. Errant thoughts rolled around in my mind as my pleasure built, the ones that whispered, ‘what if’?

We moved together in perfect harmony. For such an inexperienced man, his body sure knew how to please. His hips stayed nearly flush with mine and he used short, grinding thrusts to hit a perfect spot deep inside me. Lips trailed down my jaw, down to my neck, and all I wanted was for him to bite me like I'd bitten him.

“Yes,” I pleaded. My hand in his hair took hold of a handful and pulled. He growled against my neck in warning, but I tugged on his hair again. He needed to hear it, I knew he did.

“Yes, what?” he murmured against my skin.

“Yes, I'm yours.” If he wanted to be all possessive of me, I'd let him. And



if on the tiny little insane off chance it hadn't been a dream, that Tony really somehow was Chief, that he was some sort of...

I rolled my eyes. It was too insane, but the idea sure was entertaining. If Chief really was a wolf instead of a dog, if Tony really was a werewolf, then I would have been all in. The thought made me so hot for him. Who was I kidding? I totally wanted werewolves to be real.

"Bite me, Tony," I demanded, my voice low and needy as I got caught up in the wistful fantasy.

"I can't—"

"Please." My hand in his hair relaxed. I smoothed it over his head instead in a gentle, encouraging caress. Another gasping cry escaped me as I drew close to finishing. My body was aflame. The only thing that had any chance of bringing it back under control again was him. "I need you. All of you."

With a moan muffled against the side of my neck, his lips opened and teeth grazed against my skin.

"Yes," I whispered, my voice breathless. I wanted nothing more than for him to submit to his desires just as I had, for him to mark me with his teeth as I marked him. It was such an intense desire, passionate and raw. We should have discussed boundaries and desires first, but in the moment, I craved the intimacy of such a possessive action. "Yes yes yes."

Tony bit me. Hard. A lot harder than I'd bitten him. So hard he must have broken my skin.

I cried out. The shock of it had me arching my back with the sudden pain, but as soon as I dragged in a lungful of air, that pain bled over to the most intense pleasure I'd ever known. Every inch of my body came alive with the ecstasy of it.

The wave I'd been riding crested. The building crescendo crashed down

and carried me away. I'd never felt more complete, more whole. I barely heard myself as the spasms wracked me, as my body clenched around his cock deep inside me.

He let out a hoarse cry against my neck as he thrust harder into me, as he came inside me. Once he finished, he collapsed against me. His body pressed into mine and pinned me down with his weight. His tongue traced over the mark he no doubt left as he caught his breath.

Neither one of us moved. Aftershocks had us both trembling. My neck ached where he bit me, but the sensation wasn't anything approaching pain. Pure bliss hazed my thoughts. Not once had I orgasmed with penetration alone, certainly not our first time together, but Tony's bite somehow got me there.

He lifted himself with shaking arms. One hand stayed locked together with mine. His grip tightened around my fingers, almost painfully so. His lower lip trembled. A breath caught and shuddered out of him. Tony's eyes rose to meet mine.

Instead of a satisfied grin or even a sweet smile, what might have been horror contorted Tony's features. His eyes grew so wide, the white showed all the way around his irises. His whole body froze. He didn't even breathe.

"Tony?" My heart threatened to stop. "What's wrong?"

# Chapter Twenty-Six

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# Tony

*O*h god, what the fuck did I just do? I bit her, I bit her!  
“Tony?” Allison’s carefree, satisfied smile faltered. “What’s wrong?”

*I didn’t tell her. I was supposed to tell her first. Why the fuck did I do that?  
She wanted me to.*

*But she doesn’t know!*

Fuck, my head was so scrambled I couldn’t tell which thoughts were human and which were wolf.

“Tony?” Her voice grew sharper, became more of a command. “Breathe. Just breathe, okay?” Her hand slid out of my hair and down to my shoulder. Concern marred her formerly sex-dazed expression as her thumb stroked over my collarbone. “Is this... are you having a panic attack?”

Was I? Did I have those? I couldn’t remember, couldn’t —  
*Easy. Breathe. You’re okay.*

“Can you hear me? Nod if you can hear me, baby, please.”

*She’ll hate me.*

*She wanted it.*

*But she didn’t know what she was asking for! What if I lose her like I lost Dad?*

*That’s not going to happen. She’s my mate. We belong together.*

I took a deep breath, then another. My eyes closed. I nodded like she asked. I could hear her, could feel her hand on my shoulder.

*Focus on that, I told myself. Focus on her.*

She was going to need me. I couldn't fall apart. I couldn't blame the wolf for it, either. I heard 'bite me, Tony', so I fucking bit her.

It took time to come down from it, but bit by bit, overwhelming fear dulled to manageable anxiety. I hung my head, rested my forehead against the hollow of her throat, and focused on taking as many deep breaths as I could manage.

She stroked the back of my head with her free hand and told me everything was fine, that I was okay over and over again, but I wasn't okay because she wasn't okay and she would never be the same because of me.

I swallowed down the taste of blood and ran my tongue over my teeth. My fangs were gone by the time I climbed off her. I collapsed onto my side, then flopped over onto my back. My hand finally let go of hers.

She turned onto her side to face me but didn't touch me. She stayed silent for a long time and let me lay there, let me catch my breath, let me come down from it.

"What happened?" she asked after my breathing steadied out. She kept her voice low and gentle, as if afraid to spook me.

"I'm sorry," I managed to garble out.

"What are you sorry for?"

"For hurting you."

"You didn't hurt me," she said with conviction.

She couldn't mean it. I knew she couldn't. I claimed her as my mate and she had no idea.

"What's this about, really?" she asked. "Having a panic attack isn't a normal post-sex response."

"I know."

“Was it some sort of trauma response?” Her words became more delicate, as if she feared hurting me. “You ran away after going down on me in the breakroom, too.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just...” I heaved a sigh, stared up at the ceiling for a moment before I turned my head to her. I lifted my hand, went to touch her face, but pulled back before I made contact. There they were, the marks from my fangs, right there on her neck for all the world to see. Drops of blood welled up from the punctures. I feared touching her again. “You’re bleeding.”

“Am I?” She lifted a hand to her neck. Her palm pressed down over the bite wound before she brought it up in front of her face to see a faint smear of blood there.

“Wow, uh, you bit me kind of hard, didn’t you?” She laughed then, actually laughed. “I didn’t even realize. That, um, that was really hot.” Her cheeks darkened. “I didn’t know I’d be so into that.”

“You... you liked it?” I couldn’t find it in me to believe her words.

“Yeah. Didn’t you like it when I bit you?”

I nodded. It felt fucking amazing. Hell, even with my mind all mixed up, my body still hummed in pure contentment. If only my brain would have chilled out, I might have been able to enjoy it.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever come that hard before.” She couldn’t look me in the eye as she said it, but a coy smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. “It was intense.” She paused, then reached towards me. “Can I touch you? Is that okay right now?”

I nodded. I didn’t want her to think she couldn’t touch me. She could touch me whenever she wanted.

Cautious fingers brushed my chest. I surprised myself by not flinching with the initial contact. When I didn’t try to pull away, she settled her palm against

me, over where my heart still beat faster than it should have. Her comforting touch soothed me more than words ever could.

“Whatever it is that’s up with you,” she started, keeping her voice low and soothing, “I know you’ll find the courage to tell me. You don’t have to tonight, but soon, okay?” She moved closer until her body pressed up against my arm. Her arm beneath her nudged under mine and before I knew it, our hands joined. “I worry about you.”

“Don’t,” I whispered, my words hard and rough where hers had been all sweet and smooth. “I’m fine, I’m—”

“You aren’t fine,” she cut me off with her reply, though her tone stayed sweet. “If you were, you wouldn’t have freaked out like that.”

My first instinct was to deny, to insist, but I tamped it down. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, she was right.

“I know,” I choked out. “I’m just sorry, I should have talked to you first, and I’m—”

“Shush,” she murmured, nestling her face against my shoulder. “The problems will be there in the morning. Right now, I just want to hold you and for you to be with me. Does that make sense?”

I had to get over myself for her sake. Yes, I bit her, and no, I couldn’t take it back.

Allison’s scent lingered on my mind. She was everything to me. She filled my heart and soul with her light. I couldn’t drag her down into the darkness with me. That would ruin her, not what I’d done to her.

“It does.” I let go of her hand. With a bit of shuffling, I got my arm around her back and pulled her in closer to me.

She rested her head on my chest with a soft, contented sigh and threw her leg over mine. “Promise me you’ll be here in the morning,” she whispered.

“Promise me you won’t run away again.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Angel.” My hand rubbed up and down her spine. “Wherever you want me, that’s where I’ll be from now on. You’re my world.”

“Mhmm,” she hummed in agreement. “Good. I don’t want you going anywhere. Besides, I won’t let you.”

“You won’t let me?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Mm mmm,” she mumbled with a shake of her head against my shoulder. “You’re mine now, you can’t ever leave me.”

She had no idea how right she was.

I held her to me and rubbed her back. I took pleasure in the way her body pressed against mine. “I am yours. And you’re mine. Always.”

“That’s right.” Her words came like syrup, thick and viscous as she began to slip off to sleep. “You can do the dishes in the morning while you cook me breakfast.”

I was pretty sure she wouldn’t remember saying it in the morning, but yeah, I would do that for her. I’d finish washing the dishes from dinner and fix her the best damn breakfast she ever had in her life. Then do the same thing over and over again, day after day, because I wanted to make her happy however I could.

Her breaths came deeper, her body relaxed as she drifted off to sleep. Already, her natural scent began to shift. Something new enhanced her aroma. The faint, barely detectable change would grow stronger by morning. It would be undeniable in another two days when she shifted for the first time, when my mate took the form of the wolf I unleashed inside her.



# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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# Tony

Allison was still in my arms when I woke up. My nose nuzzled against her head and took in her newly wolfish scent. I found it hard to believe in just two more nights, I'd be running with my mate through my, our, territory.

But she didn't know that yet.

I brushed a stray strand of hair off her cheek. She hadn't moved during the night. She still lay plastered up against me, practically on top of me. I loved it, loved having her so close, so naked and raw. I was an animal, I couldn't blame myself for that.

The thought made me smirk instead of cringe for once. I rolled to my side so her head fell against the pillow instead of against my chest. I wanted to see the mark I left on her skin.

She wore a serene smile and let out a sexy little moan as soon as my fingers brushed over the already healing fang marks. They were an angry bright pink but would heal down to small white scars that would stand out against her skin. Good, I wanted the marks to show. I wanted there to be no doubt she was a mated wolf.

Her brows furrowed up. She rolled onto her back, then onto her side to face me. "Tony?" she mumbled, still more asleep than awake.

"I'm right here," I whispered, taking her hand in mine.

"I don't..." A shiver wracked her whole body. She curled in on herself. Her breath came harder, panicked almost, as she started to get out of bed before I

had a clue what was going on. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

She wobbled as soon as she tried to stand. I jumped out of bed and picked her up in my arms before she fell to the floor. Her skin burned hot to the touch. Was she sick? Had my bite caused it?

It had been so long since I bit Dad. I wracked my brain trying to recall the aftermath of those first frantic few days when neither of us had a clue what we were dealing with. I couldn’t remember the details, but he got sick for a day or two, hadn’t he? Ran a high fever and shit?

Would Owen know what to do?

I didn’t know a thing about how shifters worked other than what I experienced myself or what Owen let slip over the years. Owen was how I knew I couldn’t have kids. He was how I knew it was supposedly normal to want to shift at other times of the month and not just during a full moon. Not that I ever had. I hated it so much the thought of it maybe being... enjoyable instead of torture put me off. At least it had before I met Allison.

I wasn’t sure where I stood anymore. The thought of running through the woods on a moonless night didn’t scare me as much. I wouldn’t have to wake up alone and confused anymore.

“You gonna puke?” I asked.

She groaned. “Maybe?” Her cheek pressed against my chest and she inhaled through her nose. Her brow furrow... furrowed harder as I carried her to her bathroom. “You... you smell...” She jerked in my arms and her eyes flew wide open. “Put me down right now. I’m gonna—”

I set her down on the floor just in time for her to fall to her knees. She hurled all over the plush rug in front of the sink before she even made it all the way to the ground.

“Oh, not the rug,” she moaned. “I just bought that a month ago.” A choked

sob escaped her as she dry heaved again.

I did the only thing I could think to do, grabbed her under her arms and hauled her to the toilet. She hung onto the seat for dear life and immediately threw up again right on target.

“You’re okay, you’re gonna be fine.” I rubbed her back as she teared up, as she panted and spit to try and clear her mouth. “I’m so sorry. Everything is going to be fine, I promise.”

If only I believed my own words.

“Could you...” she started, but paused to dry heave, “paper towels? They’re in the kitchen.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll take care of it.” I kissed the back of her head with so much guilt hanging over me, threatening to crush me beneath the weight of it. I rushed out of the bathroom, paused in the bedroom to find and put my boxers back on, then ran to the kitchen.

Everything was so organized I easily found what I needed. I grabbed a roll of paper towels and a plastic grocery bag for the trash from the pantry, then took the time to get her a glass of water. I rushed back, arrived in time to see her spit into the bowl again.

She flushed the toilet with a weak groan. Her body trembled with her ragged breaths and hair limp with sweat hung down into her face. Even hunched naked over a toilet, she was the most beautiful woman in the world to me.

She glanced up from the toilet bowl. “Here, I can do it,” she muttered, sounding so damn out of it. To prove her point, she held her hand out as if she actually expected me to let her clean up the mess in her sorry state.

“Like hell you are. I’ve got it.” I handed her the glass of water then dropped to my knees and started cleaning up the mess as best I could. The rug had

been white, but I could get the stain out before it set. I'd been doing laundry since I was a kid. I could handle something as simple as a stain.

She rinsed her mouth out as I did a quick pass on the rug. I wanted to get her back to bed before I really got to work on it. At least the rug gave me something to focus on other than my impending doom.

After a minute or two, Allison flushed the toilet again and started trying to get up. She let out a pathetic groan, used the toilet as leverage, and managed to make it to the counter.

I dropped everything, jumped to my feet, and grabbed her elbow to hold her steady. "You think you're alright for now? Want me to carry you back to bed?" I asked, gently rubbing her back with a stroke of my hand, trying to do what I could to comfort her.

"I can make it," she mumbled, wobbling on uneasy feet. "I need to put some clothes on, anyway. I don't like you seeing me like this."

"Let me help you," I urged. "Please."

She considered me for a moment, then tried to take a step, but only my hand on her elbow kept her from tumbling back to the ground.

"Okay..." she finally uttered. "Maybe I do need your help."

She directed me to the closet. I helped her dress in some comfortable pajamas and carried her back to bed.

"Just rest, Angel," I urged from her bedside, smoothing the hair back off her forehead. "You'll feel better soon."

Her eyelids fluttered closed. She groaned again, sounding so weak as she muttered a faint, "Sounds good."

I lingered by her side for a minute or two to make sure she fell asleep. I had a feeling she would be out for a while. Her body had a lot to go through in just two days.

With a sigh, I threw my pants on but didn't bother with the sweater. Once finished cleaning up what I could in the bathroom, I left the rug to soak in some detergent and headed to the kitchen. As much as I didn't want to do it, I had to fess up to Owen. He needed to know neither of us would be making our shifts for the day.

Hey

It took a minute for him to respond.

Hey yourself. How'd dinner go? You wine and dine her and tell her all your secrets?

My fingers flew over the screen. I typed and retyped a message with more and less text. It took some time to figure out what to say. Finally, I settled on less is more.

She's sick. We're not coming in today.

So you spent the night? Right on

You did tell her everything, right?

I claimed her but she still doesn't know

The dots bounced on my screen as he typed a succinct reply.

...

Dude wtf

There was no point in falling over myself to try and explain. I fucked up, but it was done. My only option was to accept the consequences of my actions, whatever they ended up being.

It just sort of happened. Sorry. You have any idea how long this sickness thing is going to last?

No clue, but she should be fine by Friday, I would think. I'll find some coverage for the next few days. I expect to see both of you Saturday morning before work. I have a proposition for you.

Proposition? Really?

Yeah, really. We'll get your paperwork all sorted out Saturday

No getting around it now. I'm registering you both on D's recommendation

You told him about me?

Didn't have to, apparently he's known all along. Let me worry about handling the Registry stuff, you just worry about taking care of Allie

I gaped down at the phone. D knew about me? I first met him the day Owen opened the bar. If he knew about me the whole time, why hadn't he turned me in?

You trust the Registry to not fuck us over?

It's what Owen beat into my head from the moment we met. He assured me the Registry was dangerous, that they and the mages who worked for them couldn't ever be trusted to do the right thing. Owen had always insisted he didn't trust a single mage, much less the Registry. I figured a mage must have burned him hard in the past for him to be so vitriolic.

I trust D.

D came into the bar fairly often and the two of them talked a lot. When I first met him, D hadn't been more than polite with a cold, professional demeanor. Over the years, though, he warmed up. For the past year or two, he'd been straight-up friendly.



It had been such a subtle change over such a long period. Looking back, I hadn't really noticed the shift, but Owen had warmed up, too, hadn't he?

I hadn't once considered it, never saw anything to make me suspect, but...

There something going on between you two?

It took an impressively long time to get a reply.

You think I don't have friends other than you? He's helping,  
be thankful

A corner of my mouth ticked up. Owen didn't outright deny it. There could have been something going on he wasn't ready to admit to yet. Owen had been single just as long as I had, at least to my knowledge. If there was something growing between him and D, good for them.

As for Owen's impending proposition, if I were a betting man, I would have put my money on Owen handing me more work-related, possibly Registry-related responsibilities. Why wouldn't he if he had a newly registered wolf under his employ?

I wouldn't complain. I could accept that even if it meant I might have to tend bar for Registry-related events like the one Owen worked the night I met Allison. After all, I didn't want Allison having to live in self-imposed seclusion like I did. It didn't sound like I had much of an option except to trust Owen at his word.

I am. I owe you one

Yeah ya do. Good luck

I set my phone back down with a sigh. I did owe him, owed him a lot. He'd been a solid friend and ally ever since we met. Even when we were at one another's throats, he never threatened to out me. Owen was good people. I'd protect him like he protected me if I ever had to.

Allison tossed and turned as she slept. She ran a pretty bad fever for quite some time. All I could do was keep an eye on her and make sure she had anything she needed. Her phone went off a few times and I made sure to charge it for her. According to the home screen, it was her mom. Allison seemed to have such a normal relationship with her parents.

What was that like, having a normal family? Mom had walked out on me and Dad before my tenth birthday and I'd been on my own since a few months after my seventeenth. I'd have to tell Allison everything. About my life, about my dad, about why I was so afraid of claiming her.

All I could do was try to prove my worth to her. And I started with cleaning the vomit stain off her bathroom rug.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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# Allison

I faded in and out I didn't know how many times. Tony doted on me and made sure I stayed hydrated. He even carried me to the bathroom and helped me take a cold shower to help with my fever. I had no idea how much time passed between bouts of restless sleep, but he always showed up when I opened my eyes to assure me whatever had its hold on me would pass.

The first time I woke up and didn't immediately feel like passing out, light didn't filter in through the blinds anymore. It had already gotten dark? How could I have slept so long? And... even though he wasn't in the room with me, Tony was in the house. Based on the savory scents wafting through the air, he had to be cooking in the kitchen.

My head held a lingering ache. Sounds came too loud to oversensitive ears. I would have asked Tony to turn the heater down because of the noise if it hadn't been close to freezing outside.

Dread struck me. If it was dark, I was super late for my afternoon shift. Throwing back the covers, I scrambled to get out of bed, but before my legs made it over the side, heavy footsteps thumped down the hallway. A shirtless Tony flew into the room.

"Easy, Angel," he said, rushing right to my side. Concern marred his handsome face. "Do you need help getting to the bathroom again?"

"What time is it?" I asked, raking my hands through my hair to smooth down the inevitable bedhead. "I'm supposed to be at work."

"It's after six. Don't worry about work. Owen knows we aren't coming in."

“We?” My eyes went a little wide. “Aren’t you closing tonight?”

“Told him I’d be taking care of you.” He sat on the bed next to me and touched the back of his hand to my forehead. “I think you’ve finally worked through the fever. That’s good.”

My anxiety drained away with his reassurances. I batted his hand away with a pathetically weak swing of my forearm. “I’d ask if you gave me food poisoning, but you seem just fine.”

Being sick wasn’t how I wanted to spend the day, especially since Tony spent the night. Instead of waking up in his arms and having a nice breakfast together before we parted ways, he spent his morning babysitting and cleaning up after me. He was right to call out for me, though. I was in no shape to be mixing drinks.

“You feel good enough to eat a little?” he asked, ignoring my statement.

“What are you making? I heard you messing around in the kitchen.”

“Rice and beans.” He smoothed a lock of my hair away from my face with a brush of his fingers. A cautious smile lit up his eyes more than it pulled at his lips. “Figured something a bit bland might be easier for you to handle right now.”

I managed a smile. “That sounds great.”

Tony waited by my side while I repositioned myself in bed so I could eat. He seemed reluctant to leave again. Instead, he sat on the edge of the bed facing me with his thigh up against mine. His smile faded to a sad little frown I didn’t know how to interpret.

“I’ve been sick before, Tony. You don’t have to stay.” My eyes fell to the folded together hands in my lap. Even though I said it, the truth was, I wanted him to stay. “I appreciate you taking care of me, but it isn’t necessary.”

He reached out and covered my clasped hands with his. “I’m not leaving

unless you make me.”

“My nosy neighbor is going to call my mom and tell her about your car being in my driveway two days in a row.”

He cringed. “It’s, uh, it’s Thursday, Angel.”

“What?” He had to be teasing me. It had been Tuesday when he came over. “I missed a whole day? What about work?”

“I wasn’t about to leave you alone like this.” His head bowed and his grip over my hands firmed up as if he expected me to try and pull mine away. “It’s fine. Owen is... aware of the situation. You’re not expected back at work until Saturday.”

“You’ve been here two whole days?” What could have caused me to be so out of it for so long? Tilly, for sure, had called Mom and I bet I had a million text messages to answer. I vaguely recalled sending a few at some point to let her know I was sick. She mentioned something about the flu going around and I hadn’t rebuffed it. Whatever I had, it was not the flu, a cold or maybe not even food poisoning like I first thought.

“I can move my truck to the garage downtown and walk back if you’re really worried about your neighbor causing problems.”

It was sweet how quickly he jumped to try and solve my protest. I turned my hands over so we could clasp ours together.

“No, I just—” I cut myself off with a laugh. “Who am I kidding? Tilly probably called Mom the moment she got up yesterday morning. I’m not a teenager trying to sneak a boy in through my window. I’m thirty, I don’t care what Tilly thinks.”

“You want me to get you that dinner? Your phone’s on the nightstand if you want to text your mom.”

That had been thoughtful and I told him as much. He shot me a tiny smile

before disappearing to clank around a few plates and silverware in the kitchen. When he reappeared, he carried two bowls full of fresh smelling, not over-seasoned black beans and rice.

“Here we go.” Tony held his head high as he climbed onto the bed while balancing a bowl in each palm. Once he settled in front of me, he held one of the bowls out for me to take. “Careful, it’s hot.”

Tony’s fingers brushed mine as my palms cupped the bowl. His touch warmed me more than the bowl did.

My cheeks warmed, too. The man sitting in front of me had seen me at my worst and he hadn’t run away, not like he had before. He stayed, took care of me, and made me dinner. The closer we grew, the more Tony’s softer, sweeter side rose to the surface.

“Thanks, Chief.”

The bowl in Tony’s hand just sort of... exploded. Bits of beans, rice and shards of ceramic former bowl splattered across both his lap and my bed spread.

“Oh my god.” I set my bowl aside on the nightstand and reached for his hand. “Let me see your hand. Are you okay? What happened?”

Tony stayed silent, but his fist opened with some gentle prodding. A large shard of broken ceramic had sliced deep into his palm. Blood pooled around the embedded piece and threatened to drip onto the bedspread.

“Come on, let’s get you a towel.” I hurried off the bed as I delivered the order.

He didn’t move a muscle. Tony kept his head down and stayed so utterly still it scared me.

“Tony?” I grabbed his shoulder and gave it a shake. “Bathroom, now. We need to get a better look at that.”

My prodding roused him enough to break him out of it. His chin stayed tucked and his eyes stayed down, but he did get off the bed.

I hauled Tony to the bathroom by the arm. A lingering hint of nausea threatened to return, but having a task kept it at bay.

“Sink.” I waved Tony towards the sink and turned the water on before opening the linen closet to grab a pile of hand towels. Nudging him to the side, I snagged the first aid kit from under the cabinet. Shaking hands flicked open the clasps and threw the kit open.

All the while, Tony held his bleeding hand by the wrist over the sink. The running water whisked the blood drips and splatters right down the drain.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” His shaky words told a very different story.

I reached for his injured hand, but he beat me to the punch. He grabbed the shard still stuck in his palm and yanked it out with a sharp intake of breath. The offending, blood-covered piece fell with a clank into the sink. Running water whisked the blood away as soon as he stuck his hand under the faucet.

His words came strained. “It’ll heal pretty fast.”

“We should go to the emergency room,” I squeaked out. The blood didn’t bother me, but Tony being injured did. The wound didn’t look awful at first glance, but better safe than sorry. “You might need a few stitches.”

“Why did you call me that?” he asked, his every word a shaky mess.

“Call you what?” My brows furrowed. I looked up at him for the first time since the bowl exploded. “Chief?”

He nodded. He was all intensity and lowered brow and clenched jaw. Why he was being all weird about it? He called me a nickname, too. It wasn’t that out of left field.

Ignoring Tony’s incomprehensible expression, I reached for the gauze. I would wrap his hand as best I could, then haul him to a doctor whether he



liked it or not. I took hold of his hand, glad to have something to focus on besides how he stared at me. My face heated under his scrutiny. It had been a silly slip.

“I’m sorry, it’s kind of stupid.” He was going to think I was completely crazy, but he had his own quirks. He could deal with mine. “You remember I mentioned a dog that followed me home two nights ago?” I asked, winding gauze around his bleeding palm.

“Yeah,” he practically growled.

“Um, so, the thing is,” I started, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear, “I kind of named the dog Chief. He slept in bed with me and I sort of had this weird dream about you that night.”

“A dream?” He sounded so very tense. It had to be because of the pain. I’d have probably been a crying mess if I’d been cut like that.

“It was like I was awake, but I know I wasn’t, if that makes any sense?” I tried to concentrate on the task at hand instead of on the coppery scent of blood hanging in the air alongside a bitter, foreign scent I couldn’t put a finger on.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I was in bed, just like I’d been when I went to sleep with the dog, but instead of Chief being with me, it was you.”

“You *saw* me?”

I didn’t know why he sounded so surprised. It was just a stupid dream.

“Yeah. Like I said, it’s a little dumb. I noticed a few similarities between you and Chief, and I guess I linked you two in my mind. It sort of slipped out. Silly, right?” My face heated with embarrassment as I glanced up at him. “Obviously I shouldn’t be calling you a dog’s name and super obviously you aren’t a werewolf.”

Tony did not look amused. In fact, he might have been about to pass out.

His face had gone rather pale. He took a single step backward.

I tilted my head to the side. “Tony?”

He took another slow step back. His eyes had gone wide and his breath came faster, as if he started to panic like he had right after we slept together.

But then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and clutched his injured hand hard to his chest. It took him a few seconds, but he blew his breath out again in one long exhale, blinked, and gave his head a tiny shake. Some of the tension he carried fell away.

“What if it wasn’t a dream?” he finally asked.

I snorted back a peel of awkward laughter and stuck my hand out. “Give me your hand back. I should finish wrapping that.”

He offered me his hand. “Tell me, Allison.”

He had to be teasing me. He’d probably taken a good look at the book on my nightstand. I focused on his hand again and wrapped another few layers of gauze around it.

“Well,” I muttered under my breath, “it certainly would explain a whole lot about your behavior.”

“Like?” he asked in that sexy rumble of his.

“Like you being so reclusive outside of work. Like you being so growly and intense. Like you... fixating on me. Not to mention Chief. You’re both missing the same ear, you both have green eyes, and I was with two guys when he came out of nowhere and chased them off. Should I keep going?”

He stayed silent. The bitter tang in the air started fading away. I had to be imagining it.

I shook my head. “You are just... so improbable.”

“Am I?”

I used up the last of the gauze roll on his hand and secured it with some

medical tape from the first aid kit. “You are.” I sent a smile his way. “I still like you, though.”

“You never answered my question.” He scrutinized me. A tiny frown tugged at his lips, but his eyes shone with a sharp intensity.

I turned my back on him both to clean the sink and to keep him from seeing how red my face could get. “Is this your way of teasing me about the book on my nightstand?” I used my hand to direct the stream of water around the sink, washing away the red splotches left from Tony’s injured hand. I wouldn’t let him embarrass me for choosing a romance novel over something like a biography or a crime thriller. If he had a problem with my choice of reading material, he could either get over it or take a hike.

“No.” His arms wrapped around me from behind. He nuzzled his cheek against the side of my head as I washed my hands.

In the mirror, I watched him tuck his face into my neck as if he wanted to hide. His hair tickled against my earlobe.

“But what if...” he hesitated and breathed in deep through his nose, as if capturing my scent. “What if I can turn into a wolf?” he asked quietly, like he could barely convince himself to get it out. “What if you’re my mate?”

He sounded so completely serious I barked out a nervous laugh. Even so, I leaned against him when I straightened up after turning the water off.

His lips pressed against the side of my neck over the spot where he’d bitten me. My breath caught as his teeth grazed my skin.

“I didn’t know how to tell you,” he murmured between little nibbles. “I didn’t want to claim you before you knew, but you begged me to bite you and... I couldn’t stop—”

“Whoa, okay, back up.” I pulled at his arms around me to get him to let me go, but he just tightened his grip on me. “Tony, let me go. This isn’t funny,

I'm being serious."

To his credit, he did let me go and took a step back so he wasn't all pressed up against me. I turned to face him. I couldn't figure him out. He couldn't possibly think...

"So am I." His eyes bore into mine and bless him, he did not sound like he was kidding. His jaw clenched and his hands curled into fists at his sides but he didn't retreat or crack a smile to show he was messing with me.

The lines between my eyebrows couldn't possibly get any deeper with how hard they jammed together. I tried to make sense of him. I ran through it all again in my mind.

The similarities between him and Chief. How Owen had come to get him at the drop of a hat. How Chief ran Jamie and Parker off. Jamie showing up again, proclaiming Chief to be dangerous and insisting there was something I needed to know. The strange officer guy who asked me questions about Chief the dog. Tony's strange behavior around me and my completely incomprehensible feelings for him.

He... he couldn't actually be serious, could he? He really didn't seem to be the type of guy who would joke around in such a way.

"So..." My mind blanched but my body didn't. I reached out, closed a little of the distance between us and set my palm against his bare chest. "Tony, what, um, are you saying, exactly?"

His warm hand covered and curled around mine. He drew my hand up to his mouth where his lips brushed across my knuckles. One corner of his mouth turned up in a cautious, almost sweet smirk.

"What I'm saying is after I was an ass to you in the stockroom, I lost control, turned into a fucking wolf, and followed you. I shouldn't have, but I did." Heaving a sigh, he bowed his head. He lowered our hands, took mine in

both of his and grasped it like a lifeline. “You fed me chicken and rice that came out of a Chinese takeout container.”

I gasped and yanked my hand away from him to cradle it to my chest. He couldn’t have known that unless... unless he had been there. Unless he was telling the truth. Unless he really was Chief.

“Y- you’re really—” I couldn’t force words out of my own mouth. It was too insane, even if it did suddenly seem quite possible.

“I’m a wolf, Allison,” Tony said with complete and total sincerity. Intense, hungry eyes burned through me. The urge to look away crossed my mind, but I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe as Tony growled, “And you’re my mate.”

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

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# Tony

**I**t had to come out at some point. I'd been trying to work out how to do it without freaking her out. Instead of being able to feed her a decent dinner, cuddle her to sleep, then fix her a nice breakfast in the morning before sitting her down at the table and gently breaking it to her, she called me Chief out of nowhere and I broke a damn bowl.

The whole conversation could have gone better, but I did it, I confessed. That's why she stood there in front of me with her hands clasped to her chest and her big brown eyes all huge, but her forehead all scrunched up as if she had no idea what to make of me.

"Huh. So... you're a werewolf?" She let out the most stunned, awkward chuckle I'd ever heard. "And I thought the girl that wanted me to move in with her after two coffee dates in college was kind of out there. This is on a whole other level."

"Wolf shifter, though werewolf would be an accurate description." I lifted my bandaged hand to brush my fingers across her cheek. "I knew the moment we met you were special. It took me some time to accept it myself, but... what we are, supposedly, it's fate."

Her eyebrows rose quite high. "So not only are shape shifters real, but... I'm your mate? Like, soulmate, together forever, perfect for one another, instant love kind of mate?"

The way she scrutinized me, with her eyes all wide and her chin trembling, I didn't know what all went on in her head. A part of me was terrified she

would bolt out the bathroom door, but I had to trust in our bond. We claimed each other. She was mine and I was hers until death do us part. As strong as my feelings were for her, as a wolf, she'd fully share them.

My fingers pushed her hair behind her ear and slid down the side of her neck. I attempted to smile, but it might have come across as more of a grimace.

“Yeah, Angel. Does that scare you?”

She shook her head in quick little jerks. “No.” It came out an adorable high-pitched squeak.

I could barely believe her, but she wasn't running screaming from the room. She was taking it about as well as she could have.

“To be fair, I didn't know it was a thing either until after it happened,” I said with a chuckle. “I met you and it's like I went crazy. I had to have you and that hadn't ever happened to me before.” The hand against her neck fell away and instead raked through my hair. “Owen had to explain it to me.”

“Is Owen also—”

“Owen's not a shifter,” I said before she could finish her sentence. “He's never told me what he is, but he's not human.”

Her throat worked like she wanted to say something. She turned her head and took a shuddering breath, but then she laughed, such a sweet, almost carefree sound. Her hands fell away from her chest and she studied me with soft eyes.

“You have no idea how much I want to believe you right now, but I just can't, Tony. You know how insane that sounds, right?”

I huffed out a sigh. “Trust me, I know, and it's not just me. I know people who can use magic, including those two assholes I chased away from you. They knew what I was the second they saw me.”



“Magic is real?” She sounded like a kid allowed to get whatever they wanted at a toy store. “Like... really real?”

I marveled at her excitement, though I knew she was still dubious. “I’m not exactly an expert, but yeah, it’s real.”

“So... Jamie and Parker knew? That’s why that cop guy came in with D and Jamie and asked me questions?”

Owen hadn’t told me D was there. Made sense, though. The mage for hire had all kinds of interesting contacts, Owen included. It’s possible he’d heard through a contact that a Registry Officer was going to show up to question Allie.

“Everyone seemed to know what was going on except me. D even mentioned paperwork.” Allison’s gaze hardened. Her accusing stare had me wanting to cower. “Why would there be paperwork?”

I couldn’t help it, I whimpered like a fucking dog. “Allison, I, uh, you should probably sit down.”

Her eyes went huge and her lips fell open. She let out another nervous laugh, then stalked out of the bathroom.

I followed without a word, watched as she gathered up the bedspread into her arms and carried it out of the room. My tail might as well have been between my legs as I trailed after her to the kitchen.

She dumped what she could of the beans, rice, and bowl mess into the trash. She still didn’t say a thing. Just had this... tense sort of look on her face. Her heart hammered loud enough I heard it and her hands trembled as she shoved the bedspread freed of bits of bowl and food into the washing machine. She dropped a detergent pod in and started it.

Only then did she turn to face me. Her lips pressed into a thin line. She rubbed her fingers over the healed bite mark on her neck.

“It’s contagious, isn’t it? You... you bit me not just to claim me as your mate, but to make me like you?” She paused for a half second. Her tongue worked in her mouth as she swallowed. “That’s what tomorrow is, isn’t it? A full moon?”

My stomach rolled. I clenched my jaw against the rising turmoil inside. I was a horrible monster and I cursed her forever because I couldn’t control myself. She would hate me, she did hate me.

“What’s the rule set here?” she asked, her tone oddly light when I didn’t respond. “Am I going to be running around with you howling at the moon tomorrow night?”

“I don’t howl at the moon,” I grumbled, full of utter misery.

“I knew something happened between us,” she said with a dazed expression. “I just never thought...”

She lifted her chin with defiance. Dark eyes seemed to lighten and took on a wilder, wolfish edge. Her scent had changed to the point where there was no denying it. The scent of fur beneath her skin called me like a fucking siren.

“Prove it,” my mate demanded. “Right here, right now. If you really are a wolf, then show me, Chief.”

# Chapter Thirty

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# Tony

I tried not to panic, I really did, but the thought of Allison seeing me so vulnerable and raw filled me with abject horror. Shifting wasn't a pretty or painless process. I'd seen it, seen how Dad's body twisted and deformed from human to beast. His anguished screams from his first full moon still plagued my nightmares. It got easier for him after his first time; he shifted fast and said he barely felt it, but I couldn't say the same for myself.

I raised my hands in protest. "Allison, I don't want—"

She cut me off with a searing glare. "Show me, Tony." Between one breath and the next, that glare softened. "I want to believe you, I really do, but until I see it for myself, it's all just talk, fantasy."

"I don't know if I can. It's... it's hard for me." A shiver ran through me. I growled at myself. "I'm so sorry. I should have stayed the hell away from you the second I realized what you were to me. I don't want you to think I'm some sort of mindless animal. I feel like such a monster—"

"You aren't a monster," she said with unexpected conviction. "The dog, um, wolf, Chief? If I was afraid of... of you, do you think I would have let you in my house? Let you sleep in bed with me?"

I hadn't noticed she moved, but her hand landed on my arm. The second she touched me, I jerked away. How could she stand to be anywhere near me?

I took a step back, another. Could I run? No, I couldn't leave her. I didn't want to be anywhere without her but panic set in and there was that negative

feedback loop dragging me down into unrelenting self-hatred again.

“Tony, please,” she said at a near whisper. “I don’t want to doubt you. I’m not afraid if you are telling the truth. It’s... insane, but honestly, it makes more sense than it should. I’m not upset. I wish you would have told me first, but I would have agreed to it. Whatever you feel for me, I feel it, too.”

I wanted to believe her, but I didn’t know if I could shift in front of her. The last time someone saw me shift, my life changed so horrifically I hadn’t ever recovered.

Her fingers brushed against my arm with more care than they had before. I didn’t jerk or flinch away. Once she realized she could touch me, she wound her arms around my neck and hugged me tight.

Full of uncertainty, I closed my eyes and buried my face against her neck. In her embrace, my shoulders shook. Tears threatened to fall. She should have been so mad at me. She should have never wanted to see me again, but she held me in her arms and comforted me.

Allison was my mate. The wolf in me fully accepted it, and I did, too. If my mate wanted to see me shift, I owed it to her to try. It took some time before I felt ready, but finally I pulled back just enough to gaze down into her beautiful dark eyes.

“Okay,” I said on an exhale full of nerves, “I’ll try.”

The wolf sat close to the surface. It felt... ready, as if it waited silent and observant for my call. We shared the same instincts, the same wants and desires. It wasn’t a separate entity, fighting it only meant fighting myself.

I didn’t have to fight it, not anymore.

Instincts took the reins. With a tilt of my head so my nose didn’t slam into hers, I kissed her before I could convince myself not to.

She didn’t try to push me away or pull back. Instead, she grabbed my

shoulders and moved with me until my back hit the closest wall. Her tongue teased against my lips until I opened for her. Moaning against my mouth, she grabbed me by the face so I couldn't escape her.

She was so damn hot. Her scent shifted, the smell of her arousal perfumed the air. Her body pressed hard up against mine.

I was about to not be able to control myself. I didn't want to control myself.

“Shift for me, Chief.” She pulled back from me then. A sexy half-smirk tugged at her lips and a maniacal glint shone in her eyes. “I want to see you again.”

The response from inside was damn near instantaneous. A gasping cry tore out of me. I braced a hand against the wall to not fall to my knees as familiar pain bloomed in my gut.

There was no shying away from the uncomfortable sensations. I accepted them, welcomed them. I only remembered my pants had to come off when my nails hardened and sharpened into claws. The bandage she painstakingly wrapped around my hand fell off, too loose to stay on as the changes really started. The cut would be scabbed over by the time my paw pads hit the ground, anyway. It took a bit of fumbling, but I got my pants undone before my hands became completely useless.

My legs gave out. I worried more about how my growing tail didn't have anywhere to go while still trapped in my jeans and underwear than the shocked, squeaky gasp that came from Allison. My vision swam. The bright colors of her kitchen distorted and muted.

She covered her mouth and her eyes had gone wide, but it wasn't a look of horror she wore. Behind that hand, a laugh bubbled up and then she dropped to her knees before my shifting body.

Scents came stronger through my wolf's nose. No bitter scent of fear

tainted my mate. She wasn't afraid of me. Thank fucking god for that.

I wiggled my back end, twisted to bite at the fabric still covering my hips. She dove forward, grabbed my jeans and boxers and held on so I could awkwardly step out of them. I gave my whole body a shake once freed, once everything settled into place, once I was fully a wolf again.

With a whimper, I ducked my head, tucked my tail between my legs, and cowered away from her.

“Hey, Chief,” Allison whispered. She opened her arms to me as a euphoric smile spread across her beautiful face. “Welcome back.”

With a high-pitched whine of pure glee, I hurled myself into her arms. My tail wagged as fast as it could. She caught me around the neck as I licked her cheeks, her ears, her nose, whatever I could reach as I whined, as I said ‘I love you’ over and over again in the only way I could without words.

She laughed, a magical, musical sound, and I wanted to hear that laugh every day for the rest of my life. Her hands ruffled my fur and I relished in it. I even rolled onto my back so she could rub my belly. I didn't give a single fuck anymore. I was so in love with her. She knew and she wasn't afraid. She was amazing, my wonderful, perfect mate, and I was hers. I was so totally and completely hers.

It took a few minutes for my excitement to wear down. She played with me, let me chase her as she laughed and egged me on. My tongue lolled out as I panted, as I wore the grin of a happy wolf. I doubted my tail had ever gotten such a good workout.

I cornered her in the kitchen. I jumped up and planted my giant front paws against her shoulders. She tried to catch me, but stumbled backwards and fell to the floor.

She growled out a sharp, “Hey! Come on now, be gentle.”

I didn't want to be. Especially when I could smell her, could smell that she wanted me and I wanted her with every piece of my soul.

Instead of getting off her, I pushed forward. My head nuzzled against her chest until she lay back against the kitchen floor. She didn't try to push back, she submitted to me. I stood over her, caged her in, licked her chin one last time with my wolf's tongue, then surrendered my body again.

Fur receded and hair regrew. Every part of me shifted and changed until the paws next to her shoulders were hands, until my knees dropped to the ground astride her thighs because my legs grew too long to hold me up comfortably on human toes.

Allison's eyes had gone wide as it happened. They went even wider when I kissed her with everything I had before the change ran its whole course. I didn't give a shit. She didn't either, apparently, because she kissed me back with reckless abandon.

I grabbed her shirt and ripped it off over her head as fast as I could. Both of our hands fought with her pajama pants, which likely worked against us, but she was just as desperate as I was to get them off her.

There was no point in pulling them all the way off. Once we'd gotten them halfway down her thighs, she flipped over. She got her knees up under her and bowed forward, leaving her hips right where I wanted them. Her scent overpowered me, her body was more than ready to take mine.

I grabbed her by the hips and buried myself deep inside her pussy with a growl of pure need.

She cried out with the sudden intrusion. Her pleading little gasps turned to blissful moans as my hips met her backside. Hers canted back to better meet mine with every thrust.

I drove into her hard and fast like a rutting animal. The thought didn't scare



me or put me off anymore. My heart pounded. My body wound so tight with tension every muscle in my legs clenched up as I grew close.

“You’re mine,” I growled in a gravelly mess of a voice as I leaned down over her and kissed the back of her neck.

“Yes!” Her voice pitched high with her need. “Yes, Tony, I’m yours.”

I longed to bite her again, to reforge our connection made without consent. I kissed her shoulder, licked her as a warning.

She knew my intention. Her body tensed and trembled in anticipation.

My fangs pierced her skin again as I bit her. My mate accepted me not just as a man but as a wolf, as her mate. She cried out. Her whole body came alive as she orgasmed around my cock.

There was no holding mine back, either. I spilled inside her with a groan. My hips stayed flush with hers. Lingering aftershocks had us both shaking. It took a few moments for our ragged breathing to slow. I took the time to lick her wound, the one that would heal over in a few hours, and to pet her, to love on my mate.

She whimpered when my cock finally slid out of her. She sat up, we both did, so we could face each other.

Seeing my effect on her, how her chest heaved, how her body shivered, the fucking fantastic way her lower lip quivered, every tiny thing about her just made me love her more. I grinned at her, satisfied that it seemed like I’d done a good enough job.

Half-lidded eyes met mine and my heart damn near stopped. Instead of familiar warm gentle brown, a stunning amber orange peeked out from behind dark lashes.

I cupped her cheek with a hand and leaned in to kiss her with a cautious peck.

“I can already see it,” I found myself whispering.

“See what?” she asked in a dreamy sort of way. Even as she asked, her eyes darkened down to their human shade.

“The wolf in you,” I rumbled with a small laugh. “You’re so damn perfect, Angel. I can’t believe you’re mine.”

She smiled at that. “Not even a half hour ago, you were calling yourself a monster. You have a change of heart all of a sudden?”

“Something like that.” I dipped my nose down to her neck and sniffed her. “You smell so good with my scent all over you.”

She laughed and pushed at my shoulder so she could get up. Instead, I got my feet under me, scooped her up off the tile, and carried her back to her bed. She kicked her pajama pants the rest of the way off and I flopped down beside her with a content sigh.

We cuddled for a minute or two before she got up again, insisting she needed to clean up a little. I watched her go with a huge smile on my face and she came back to bed before even five minutes had passed.

As soon as she settled back into bed, my arms wrapped around her. I held her so damn close. If I was dreaming, I never wanted to wake up.

“Is it always going to be like this, you think?” Allison asked, toying with the hair on my chest as we both lay there naked and uncovered.

“Like what?”

“This intense,” she clarified. “Everything is just... so wild with you.”

“I don’t know.” I tightened my arms around her. “But we have the rest of our lives to figure that out.”

She whispered as if in a dream, “I guess we do, don’t we?” Her cheeks flushed with a bashful smile. “So, um, are you moving in with me now? Because I like being able to walk to work.”

My head tilted to the side like a confused dog's for half a beat before I laughed. Nothing like my usual low chuckles or quiet laughs. It was genuine, I even grinned.

"I'll go wherever you want me to go," I said, "be wherever you want me to be as long as it's with you."

Allison lit up, beamed with a bright smile as she snuggled up against me and started asking question after question. I answered whatever she threw at me to the best of my ability, but there were plenty of things I hadn't ever sought the answers to myself. She had an insatiable curiosity for anything and everything supernatural. I only hoped Owen, or maybe D, would fill her in to her heart's desire.

"You're really comfortable, both like this and as a wolf," she said with a content sigh after she finished grilling me on what little I knew about vampires. Her hand on my chest snaked the rest of the way around me until she hugged me like a body pillow. "Your fur is really soft and warm."

I wasn't sure how I felt talking about it, but if she found it so easy, then maybe it didn't have to trip me up as bad as it did. "What does it feel like?"

"Sort of silky, but also a little coarse. Not as soft as your hair, but as far as fur goes, it's nice." She tensed, then asked, "Do you think I'll be black like you? Does whoever turned you have an effect on what you end up looking like? Or is it random?"

I rubbed her back as she leaned into me. "I have no idea what the wolf that turned me looked like, I don't remember being bit, but if I had to guess, I'd say genetics might influence it. My—" I cut myself off, unsure if I wanted to say it or not, but... she was with me, she was mine. I needed to tell her sooner or later.

"My dad," I started again. My words shook with my sudden bout of nerves

as I let her in on my darkest secret. “He was a black wolf like me.”

# Chapter Thirty-One

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Fourteen and a Half Years Ago

# Tony

**T**he aches when I came to were nothing new. The overwhelming scent of blood was.

My right eyelid didn't want to cooperate. It took effort to force it open. Cautious fingers touched the right side of my face. They came away sticky with blood.

Was I bleeding? Why was I bleeding? I probed around my right temple. Bits of dried blood flaked off with each swipe of my fingers.

"Ow, fuck!" I cringed as soon as I found the jagged, scabbed over edge where the top curve of my ear should have been. My stomach turned over with sudden nausea.

*I lost my ear. I lost my fucking ear!*

"Dad!?" I yelled, not even caring if anyone else heard me in my panic.

I scoured the clearing for him with a frantic, panicked whine, but he wasn't there. His scent had grown faint, as if he'd run off hours ago and just... left me there.

It took some effort to climb to my feet. I wobbled, but a supportive hand against a tree trunk kept me upright even as my head swam.

There was so much blood my nose wrinkled with the stench. Could it all have been mine? What the hell had happened?

I had no memories from my time as a wolf. It had been the night of a full moon, we'd been at home...

Dad finally found the paperwork, the letter hidden in my closet confirming my status as a high school dropout. Tension had been sky high. I fessed up to having dropped out weeks ago, that I'd been working instead of sitting in an unbearable classroom all day. We got into it; I didn't remember the catalyst, but we both said a bunch of ugly shit. I barely remembered losing myself.

It had to have been him. How else could I have lost my ear? There would be hell to pay once he dragged his ass back home. No wonder he wouldn't answer me.

"Fucking coward," I grumbled as I took the first stumbling steps towards home.

Dad could be such a dick. He let the wolf in him call the shots way too often, but I'd been giving him a pass for it. He enjoyed it so much more than I did and far be it from me to begrudge him some semblance of happiness, but maiming me was a step too far. He and I were going to have a serious talk once he got back home. Enough was enough. He had to get his shit together.

With each step, I grew stronger. It didn't take long before my legs carried me at an easy lope through the woods back towards the house. By the time I made it home, the sun peeked over the horizon.

The lights were all on, but we'd left them that way. Dad hadn't beaten me home. He stayed gone for a day or two at a time on a regular basis, but he always stuck by my side on full moon nights. I figured he knew what he had done, that he'd show up again when he found the courage to apologize. I wasn't about to track him down.

It had been so hard the past few weeks. I did everything I could to keep myself together, but Dad surrendered more and more to his wilder urges. He enjoyed being a wolf, even tried to get me to see the brighter side of our

cursed natures, but I just couldn't. Dad craved the freedom, the strength, the power. He even admitted he found it so much easier than being human.

If Dad wanted to fuck off into the woods for another few days, he could be my guest. I would keep shit going at the house like I always did. After all, he had taught me decent enough, which was why I didn't bother calling in for my shift that day.

A startling amount of blood washed away with a shower. In the mirror as I toweled off, an odd, mostly healed wound caught my attention. I poked at the fading bits of pink right under my jawline. That could have easily been why I woke up covered in blood.

If Dad had gone for my throat, could I have caused a similar injury back? He had run off, his stale scent had been there when I woke, and he hadn't left an obvious trail of blood behind. Wherever he was, chances were good he would be home by the time I got off work.

I bandaged my ear as best I could before throwing on my work shirt and a ratty pair of jeans. The door slammed behind me on the way out. I didn't bother leaving a note saying I'd taken his truck. There was no point in waiting around, it wasn't like he had a job to get to.

He couldn't hold one down anymore. The wolf affected his behavior so much worse than it did for me. He didn't act quite right, behaved a bit too odd. I told him to take it easy for a few months, to get a handle on his more wolfish behaviors, but instead of sorting himself out, he slipped further away from his humanity. It was even in his scent. He smelled more and more like a wolf even when he didn't look like one.

"The hell happened to you?" my crew lead asked the second he saw me.

"Accident." I kept my head down, my eyes on the ground. "I'm fine to work."



He raised a dubious eyebrow and consulted his assignment sheet. “If you say so, kid. You’re edging for team two today.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t bother hanging around the building waiting for the rest of the team. Team two’s truck had already been hitched up to the trailer full of lawn mowers and weed eaters. A day’s worth of labor outdoors would keep my mind off my aching ear.

I made it home to an empty house near sunset with the day’s meager pay in my pocket. I gave thought to heading back out, to tracking down Dad’s trail and dragging him back home, but ultimately decided not to bother. He could figure himself out, he could limp back whenever he felt like it.

Days passed. My anger at him ebbed, shifted to mild concern, then worry. I went out, tracked back to the spot where I woke up covered in blood close to a week ago, and sniffed around. There was no trail to pick up. I never once caught his scent on my trek through the woods. He usually hung around close to the house if he went out without me. I should have come across some trace of him somewhere, but found not a damn thing, not even a track.

Anxiety set in. Another week went by, then another and another. I checked the news religiously, dug for any random sightings of an unidentified naked man or reports of a found human body, but there wasn’t anything. If he got hit by a car or wandered onto someone’s property and got himself shot, would I just... never know? Would they find and dispose of a wolf’s body instead of a man’s?

Weeks became months. I kept my head down, my mouth shut, and did what I could to survive. I made deposits through a night drop to Dad’s account, wrote checks in his name to pay the bills. As far as the world was concerned, Anthony Reynolds Jr. was still alive, at least until I reported him missing two

years after he disappeared. As far as I was concerned, he had to be either dead or he lost himself to the fucking animal in his head.

The one I put there.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

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# Allison

**T**ony spoke for quite some time. I hung on his every word.

He told me how he didn't know anything about his nature until he found Owen. Owen took Tony in and told him everything he knew. Apparently, back when Tony first started shifting, he was lucky to have not been discovered. He admitted to staying hidden, to keeping to himself as best he could. He had been terrified of being found out, of being sent away.

It's a fate his father might have suffered. Tony had no way to know what truly happened to him. He could have died, been found by the Registry and shipped off to a wolf pack somewhere, or he could have gone feral, which was Tony's main suspicion. It happened in rare cases. Sometimes a shifter would resonate better with their animal form and would spend less and less time as a human until eventually, they would lose themselves entirely.

"Maybe he's still out there somewhere, but at this point, I doubt he's alive," Tony said with a sigh. "I can't even hate him for it if he is, can't hate him for leaving me, can't blame him for losing himself to an easier life. I did for a long time, but now? I don't know, I just hope whatever happened to him, he found peace."

"I hope so, too." Some of the things Tony did and said, the way he acted and seemed afraid of himself, it all made more sense after he explained. "Thank you for telling me."

"It would have come out eventually," he murmured, carding his fingers through my hair. "I don't want to keep anything from you anymore."

“Good.” I yawned right as my phone vibrated against the nightstand. I reached for it with a groan.

“Who is it?” Tony propped himself up on an elbow as I answered the call.

“Hey Mom,” I said into the phone as normally as I could. Considering everything was no longer normal, I thought I did a decent job.

“Hey sweetheart,” Mom started in her usual chipper tone. “How you feeling? You getting over whatever you caught?”

“I am.” I glanced at Tony and smiled. “I’m feeling a lot better today.”

“That’s good. I just wanted to check in.” She paused and I waited for it. It didn’t take long. “And to let you know Tilly called me earlier today.”

Of course that nosy woman tattled on me. I took a deep breath. Beside me, Tony failed to fight back a smile.

“Did she?” I crossed an arm over my chest and sat up in bed. “What did she say?”

“That there’s been a truck in your driveway since Tuesday.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s Tony’s.” I didn’t feel like denying it. “He came over for dinner and sort of never left.”

“I take it you worked out whatever it was between you two?” I practically heard her raise her eyebrows. “Considering he’s been there two whole days.”

Tony sidled up closer to me and laid his cheek against my thigh. Without thinking about it, my fingers carded gently through his hair.

“I guess you could say that. I kind of don’t want him to leave.”

Mom laughed. “Well, it is your house and you are an adult capable of making your own decisions... no matter how questionable they might be on occasion.”

“You’re one to talk,” I said with a wistful sigh. “You and Dad got married after knowing each other for just a few weeks and you’re still happy

together.”

“Sometimes you just know you’ve met the right person.”

“Maybe Tony is the right person. Maybe he’s my soulmate.”

“He very well could be, but don’t get too ahead of yourself, sweetie. It’s not like you need to rush.”

We didn’t stay on the phone very long. I had the great excuse of Tony still being there to convince her I needed to go. Once I set the phone down on the nightstand, Tony’s hand on my thigh idly rubbed at me.

“Your family one of those that’s gonna be pissed if I don’t ask your dad for permission?” Tony casually asked without looking up at me. He wore a loving smile I couldn’t have imagined him wearing just a few days ago.

“No,” I squeaked out as my heart skipped a beat.

“You one of those women that’s been dreaming of your wedding day since you were a little girl?” His smile grew into a sly smirk.

I pet his cheek. “I can think of so many better things to spend money on than a wedding, like redoing the tile in the kitchen.”

Tony’s eyes lifted to mine. He sat up and held out his hand palm up to me. I set my hand in his.

“Then how’s tomorrow sound?” A corner of his mouth turned up as he asked, “You want to marry me?”

“Tomorrow?” I repeated, my eyes widening before a huge smile spread across my face. “You want to get married tomorrow?”

“Well, it’s too late to do it today, so yeah. As soon as the courthouse opens,” he said in his low rumble of a voice. “That work for you?”

“Yes.” I never spent much time fantasizing about potential proposals or wedding bells, but I couldn’t imagine Tony doing it any other way.

He sat up and kissed me, all soft and sweet. “We can’t wear rings,” he

murmured against my lips. “Hope that’s acceptable to you.”

“We can still get tattoos, right?” I asked, settling my forehead against his.

He chuckled. “Don’t see why not. You sure about this, Angel?”

“Are you? You’re the one that asked and you haven’t even told me you love me yet.”

A slow smile spread across his handsome face. “I love you,” he crooned in that sexy way of his. “And I am one hundred percent sure I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“Is it going to bother you if I don’t want to change my name?”

“Of course not.” His arms wrapped around me and mine around him. I rested my nose in the hollow of his throat and his chin rested on the top of my head. “I’d rather take yours. I’m done carrying around a dead man’s name.”

“You want to be Tony Bridges instead of Tony Reynolds?”

“So long as that’s fine with you.”

We fell asleep in one another’s arms and woke up that way, too. It wasn’t just the morning of my first full moon, it was the morning of our wedding. He made me breakfast, did the dishes, and left to go pick up a few things from his place while I dug around in my closet for a dress I didn’t mind getting married in.

Tony met me at the courthouse in a nice button down and a pair of slacks looking as handsome as always. An hour later we walked down the courthouse steps, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, lawfully wed. By the time late afternoon rolled around, matching black bands had been tattooed around our left ring fingers. We spent the rest of the afternoon cuddled up on the couch, just enjoying each other’s presence.

“How you feeling?” Tony asked, petting my head as I lay across his chest.

“You nervous?”

“I’m excited, actually.” I rubbed the mostly healed band around my left ring finger with my thumb. My cheek smoothed against his chest. I breathed in deep through my nose to catch his scent. It grew stronger by the hour thanks to my new wolf’s sense of smell.

Never in a million years did I think it was possible, but a wolf recognized me as his mate. Undeniable changes shifted my view of the world with each passing hour. Soon my body would shift, too. I could hardly wait to run under a full moon with my mate by my side.

“Okay, maybe I am a little jittery, too,” I finally conceded.

A chuckle shook his chest. “You aren’t afraid at all, are you?”

“Nope.” I sat up and grinned at him.

“It won’t be long now.” The way he smiled at me with such loving eyes ignited the kindling in my belly, stoked it straight into a bonfire. “You want to try to stick it out for another hour, or—”

“I’m ready if you are.” I leaned in and captured his lips with mine. “I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life for this. I don’t want to wait a moment longer.”



# Tony

Night fell and the full moon rose. Allison's hand shook in mine as I led her out into the woods, our woods. I didn't take us far, just to the fallen tree I woke up under so many times in the past few weeks.

Her throat worked. Her eyes darted around and made note of every rustle of leaves, every tiny scampering critter. I didn't see an ounce of fear in her, just... amazement. My wife let out a tiny little laugh and clutched at my arms.

My own need built under my skin, a slight itch I could hold off for a few more hours. I didn't want her to have to wait, though, and for once, I didn't want to wait either. Her first time would be a special, positive experience. Allison would never have to suffer or be scared out of her goddamn mind like I was when the wolf clawed its way to the surface all those years ago.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked, dragging in a deep, shaky breath.

"Well," I started with a sly grin, "you should probably take your clothes off first."

"Oh." She laughed that beautiful, melodic laugh of hers. "Right. Guess I should, shouldn't I?"

I didn't bother turning away as she undressed one item at a time. She neatly folded and tucked everything into the backpack I brought along until she stood naked before me. The full moon's light illuminated her body while the trees overhead cast scattered shadows across her perfect form.

I stripped down too, even took extra care placing my stuff in the bag with hers so none of it would get all wrinkled. Once the stuffed backpack lay

under the protective branches of the fallen tree, I stood and faced my mate.

Steady hands found her trembling ones. She lifted ethereal eyes to mine. They weren't dark brown anymore. With the change so close, they lightened to a breathtaking dark amber.

A smile spread across my face as I leaned in and kissed her. I said everything I needed to with that one kiss. That I loved her, that she was perfect, that I would take care of her for the rest of our days.

She understood. Her chest rose and fell faster with each breath. A grimace crossed her face.

"Don't fight it," I gently urged, letting go of her hands so I could take gentle hold of her face. "Just let it take you. I'm right here."

With a nod of her head, she closed her eyes. Her brows furrowed and her jaw clenched.

My thumbs stroked along her cheekbones. I feared for her, but I knew I shouldn't. She was strong, stronger than me.

She was my mate, my wife, my one true love. And she was a wolf. Just like me.

"You can do this," I whispered. "Let me see you."

She nodded again, then with a gasp, the wolf inside her broke free.

I'd never seen anything so strangely beautiful. We sank to the ground together. I never let her go even as the change took her. Dark fur erupted under my hands still cupping her face. Muscle and bone shifted, reformed and reconfigured. The bright amber eyes of a wolf met mine.

"Oh, Angel." My heart soared at the sight of her. "You're so fucking beautiful."

Most of her fur was black like mine, but the fur around her face, around her shoulders, her feet, and the tip of her tail came out a dark storm cloud gray.

She let out a soft whine and my hands fell away. She shook herself out and her tail began to wag. She leaned forward and gave my nose a lick.

I wanted more than anything to be with her. I let go of my humanity and surrendered to my wilder side. For once in my life, the usual pain registered as nothing more than mild discomfort as my body changed to match my mate's.

I licked her muzzle, whined, and butted my head against hers.

She nuzzled me back, nipped at my neck, and together, shoulder to shoulder, we disappeared into the woods.

I had so much to show her, so much to share with her. With my mate at my side, I was finally right where I belonged.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

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# Allison

“**Y**ou two look chipper,” Owen said, sporting a knowing smirk as Tony and I strode up to the front door of The Crypt, hand in hand, at 9 AM sharp. “I take it last night went well?”

I leaned up against Tony and lifted my chin to meet his gaze. “Went great, didn’t it, Chief?”

Tony settled an arm around my shoulders. He smiled down at me with soft eyes full of love. “Sure did.”

Owen rolled his eyes. “Great, well, you both have a mountain of paperwork to sign this morning, so let’s get to it.”

Tony’s arm fell off my shoulders but he took my hand as Owen led us inside. The overhead lights were all on. It was strange walking into the place I knew so well with a whole new set of senses. The smell of the bar almost overwhelmed me. Tony’s scent permeated the place right alongside Owen’s colder, smoke-like smell.

So many people came and went, but the core was all right there out in the open. Owen and Tony, both of them existed so long in that space there was no divorcing their scents from it. Then there were the other long-time employees, Ethan’s ocean-scented cologne mingled up with Sarah’s fresh greens sort of smell, followed by the customers who drifted in and out, the citrus scent of the cleaning solution we used, the lingering fragrance of various drink adornments, and the sharp scent of the alcohol itself.

Ultimately, the bar smelled like home, like pack. I belonged there, just like Tony did.

Two men at the bar spun around in their chairs as soon as the three of us breezed through the door. I recognized Officer Zimmerman, or Zed, as he wanted to be called, and the much more familiar, fancy-suited blond who always ordered gin and tonics. Both carried a spicy sort of overtone to their scents, one that marked them as wielders of magic according to Tony.

“Well well well,” the officer said as he rubbed his hands together, “didn’t think I’d be seeing you again quite so soon, Miss Bridges.”

“It’s Mrs. now,” I corrected, my cheeks flushing with the admission.

“We got hitched yesterday,” Tony announced with all the pride in the world before planting a kiss on my temple.

Owen rubbed at a spot between his brows and grumbled, “Why does that not surprise me?”

D said a much warmer, “Congratulations. Should we update your name on everything to Reynolds, then?”

“No,” Tony replied, “but you can change mine to Bridges.”

“How about I get both your licenses so I can make sure I’ve got everyone’s name spelled right,” Zed said as he stood. D also got to his feet and they both motioned us over to the couches in the far corner of the room.

“I’m R.O. Zimmerman, by the way, but you can call me Zed.” Zed thrust a hand towards Tony. “I’ve already met your ma-, er, your wife.”

Tony glared at the hand the shorter, friendly mage offered as if confused, but after a moment of hesitation, gave it a quick shake. “You’re not exactly what I pictured when I imagined a Registry Officer.”

Zed laughed. “Well, I’m not exactly your average R.O., which means I can get away with crap like this and no one’s ever going to look that close.”

Tony scrutinized the mage with a critical eye. “What sort of crap are you trying to get away with?”

“I can’t retroactively register you on the down low after what you did, so we’re going for a bit of a different approach.” Zed waved a dismissive hand. “I’ll go over it all with you both, don’t worry.”

Tony and I took seats on the same couch next to one another. Owen perched on the armrest next to Tony while D and Zed took the opposite couch. Tony and I pulled out our wallets and laid out our temporary licenses. It would be a few weeks before Tony could get a new license changing his name from Anthony Dale Reynolds III to Tony Dale Bridges, but he updated his address at my request since he was moving in with me on a trial basis.

We both knew it likely meant he wouldn’t ever leave, but he was going to keep his own place, just in case. He admitted he wasn’t sure if he would take to living in the city very well since he was such a country boy at heart. Tony didn’t exactly say it, but I thought a part of him couldn’t bear the thought of abandoning his territory if, against all odds, his father did come back someday.

“Alright,” Zed started with a mischievous glint in his light brown eyes, “let’s get this party started.” He held a hand palm down over the coffee table between us. Before I knew what was happening, a pale blue glow emitted beneath his palm and from out of nowhere, a robust stack of papers appeared. The glow subsided and Zed sat back on the couch, leaving the stack of papers on the coffee table.

My eyes went wide. I was enthralled.

“Did you just... make those appear?” I asked with a high-pitched squeak before Zed could continue whatever he had been about to say.

“Huh?” His brows lowered for a second then he adopted a boyish grin. “Oh,

right, you two probably haven't seen magic before, have you?"

I shook my head. "What are your powers?" I asked, clutching my hands together in my lap. I bit my lip and told myself not to get too excited.

"I'm nothing special, just a construction mage," Zed explained with a nonchalant wave of his hand and an awkward chuckle. "I can fix small broken things like basically all construction mages, but my specialty is conjuration. Those were sitting in my car. As far as powers go, mine are considered kind of lame."

"That sounds pretty awesome to me," I said with a pout. "I wish I had magic powers."

"You do." Tony bumped his shoulder against mine. "You can turn into a wolf whenever you want."

"Oh, right, guess that is true, isn't it?" I snaked an arm around my mate's back and gazed up at him with pure adoration. "Guess that means you're pretty awesome, too."

Tony wrapped an arm around my shoulders and gave my forehead a quick kiss. "If you say so."

"Let's get back to the subject at hand, shall we?" Owen said, nudging Tony's shoulder. "We really don't have all day. Ethan's coming in at 10:30 for prep."

"Right, yeah." Zed crossed his arms over his chest and picked up right where he left off. "First things first, I've got to say it was such a surprise to hear one of Mr. Nagata's employees was bitten by an unknown wolf shifter while camping a few hours away from here six months ago. It's just such a funny coincidence that you, Mr. Bridges, have been an employee of Mr. Nagata's for going on nine years now. You never knew a thing about the



Registry, shifters, or magic until a few days ago when there was a little incident involving your then unclaimed mate and two mages.

“Luckily, your employer put two and two together after I dropped by and asked some questions per the request of one James Edwin. Mr. Nagata confronted you, confirmed it, and followed proper procedures to alert the Registry of your and subsequently, your newly claimed mate’s status as shifters.” He uncrossed his arms, leaned forward and set his elbows on his knees. “That sound about right to you, Mr. Bridges?”

“Uh...” Tony glanced at Owen, who merely nodded in an exaggerated fashion. “Sure, that’s exactly what happened.”

“Great! Welp, that’s one thing taken care of.” Zed reached out and picked the top few pages off the stack of papers he conjured. He flipped through them, separated them into two sets, and held them out, one in each hand. I took the set he offered me while Tony cautiously grabbed the other. “Both of you sign the bottom of page three, please. Those are your Registration forms.”

“I don’t have a—”

Zed held up his hand. There was a small flash of blue light, and two pens appeared. He gave me a wink and a good-natured grin.

“—pen. Thank you.” I took both offered pens and handed the second over to Tony, who showed little interest in Zed’s blatant display of magic.

I flipped through the form. It looked like a bunch of bureaucratic legalese I didn’t really care to read through all at once. “Will we be given copies of all this to go over later? I’d like to know what it is I’m signing.”

“I can email you a digital copy,” Zed replied. “All that says is you are registering your existence as a supernatural entity. The first two pages are ones everyone gets when they register no matter their designation and the

third page is shifter specific. I'm sure you'll figure out all the nuances soon enough."

"Why should we care?" Tony asked, his tone cautious. "I have no intention of getting any closer than I already am to your world." He turned his attention to D. "It already weirds me out that you've apparently known about me this whole time."

"Like you've no doubt known about me this whole time?" D pointed out with a polite smile.

Tony started to reply but thought better of it. He sank back into sulky silence.

"You should care because I'm promoting you, Tony," Owen said with a smirk. "I'm putting you in charge of an official Registry sanctioned neutral ground complete with its own dedicated space. The Registry has been harassing me about holding private events up here for years and with two Registered employees under me now, I'm out of excuses. I'm giving you the basement. Run it however you want, I don't care so long as I don't have to be overly involved." A frown tugged at Owen's lips. "I like my relative peace, quiet, and obscurity, thank you very much."

"I'm supposed to what? Run my own bar?" Tony's brows knit together so hard his forehead wrinkled. "But for... like, mages and shit?" He did not sound thrilled with the prospect.

Meanwhile, the idea elicited nothing but unbridled excitement for me. I wanted to know everything about the world I found my way into thanks to Tony.

"I figure you'll start with limited hours maybe two days a week to get your feet wet, then ramp up from there," Owen said with a shrug of his shoulder. "There's no one else I trust to do it, you know that. It's not like you'll be by

yourself, either, you've got Allie, too. You'll both keep working up here for a few months while everything is set up and I can hire some more help, then you two can do whatever you want with the place. If everything goes smoothly, I'll transfer full ownership over to you in a year or two."

"That's what the rest of this paperwork is for." Zed picked up the remaining stack of papers. "Establishing Owen Nagata as the proprietor of a Registry sanctioned neutral ground for social purposes with you as his second-in-command." He held out the paperwork to Tony.

With obvious reluctance, Tony took the papers from Zed.

"I don't know about this, Owen." Tony shook his head slowly as he leafed through the pages. "You know me, know how I am, how I've always been. What you're asking... it's a lot."

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't think you could handle it," Owen said. "You won't have to hide anymore. You can just be yourself for once in your life."

"Don't mages hate shifters?" Tony asked, lifting his head just enough to address both D and Zed. "I mean, no offense, but I was told if any one of you found out what I was, I'd be hauled off in the middle of the night never to be seen again."

Zed reclined back on the sofa, laid an arm over the back of it, and crossed an ankle over a knee. "Times, they are a changing," he said, chuckling to himself. "Those days are, well, they're mostly over. I even have a teammate who's a wolf shifter. That would have been unheard of just a few years ago, but here we are. Some will be jerks about it, but it'll be your bar, your rules. You can ban anyone who decides to be an asshole. There's a surprising number of mages in this town and we really need a place we can all talk shop and gossip."

"What do you think, Allison?" D asked with that careful smile of his. "How

would you feel about having a seat at the proverbial table? Really find out what there is out there you've been missing all these years."

I bit back a smile. "Sounds exciting to me. I want to know everything." I looked at Tony and placed a hand on his arm. He didn't flinch, not at my touch, not anymore. "What about you? You willing to give it a try?"

Tony heaved a put-upon sigh and wrapped his arms around me. He pulled me close, almost into his lap, so he could grumble in my ear, "Angel, for you and only you, I'll try."

There was a lot to discuss. Opening timetables, retrofitting the space, expected costs, all sorts of stuff. Owen assured Tony they'd write up an actual partnership agreement between the two of them and Tony signed on all the required lines.

By the time they finished, it drew close to 10:30, so Zed gathered up the signed documents and tucked them under his arm. He even made sure to change Tony's name in the necessary spots with a bit of magic and a swipe of his finger.

Zed said his goodbyes, mentioned he would get everything filed and let Owen know once we were good to go, that it should only take a day or so. Owen followed Zed to the front door and offered the mage his hand.

"I owe you one," Owen said to Zed as soon as the mage took and shook his hand.

"No you don't," Zed replied with a grin, and that was that, the officer left with a wave.

"You want to see the space real quick?" Owen asked me. "Tony's been down there plenty of times, but I know you've never seen the basement."

"Yes, please!"

With an adorable smile, Tony took my hand and led me to the back room

after Owen. D followed along behind. Owen unlocked a sturdy door I hadn't noticed before, flipped some light switches and led us down a narrow wooden staircase.

"There's a set of stairs around the other side of the building so this place has its own entrance," Owen explained as we reached the bottom of the stairs. We continued down a narrow, dark hallway. Of the four evenly spaced lights above our heads, only one of them worked. The others must have burned out and hadn't been replaced. "It's pretty easy to miss and you won't be open to the public, so I'm thinking we'll just put a keypad lock on the door to keep anyone who's not supposed to be down here out."

"I can handle getting proper protective wards in place," D said from behind us. "Wouldn't do to attract too much attention or pique any curiosities."

"We have a lot to learn before we open, don't we?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder at D.

D chuckled. "You'll pick up everything you need to know over time, but I can let you borrow a few books if you'd be interested."

I nodded and shot him a beaming smile.

"Alright, so this is the place," Owen said, stepping into a long open space filled with a bunch of dusty boxes haphazardly strewn around. "It's just been storage for years so we'll have to clean it out before we can get some furniture in here, but it was actually a bar before, so it should already have a lot of the necessary crap down here."

I moved to the center of the room and looked around. A heavy wooden counter bisected the space from the door we came through with a long, L-shaped bar. Some small boxes had been stored on open, dusty shelving where bottles of alcohol must have lived in the distant past.

A half-dozen booths with tall partitions for privacy lined part of an exposed

brick wall opposite the bar. They had seen better days, but with some elbow grease, they might have cleaned up nicely. The floor could have been original to the old building. The ancient wood planks had so much character I wouldn't have wanted to refinish them. A large steel door in the far opposite corner must have led outside. All in all, it was a long but narrow space with 'dive bar' written all over it.

"This is amazing." I spun around to take it all in.

Tony watched me with his hands in his pockets. A soft smile spread across his face. "You really think so?" He glanced at Owen and his smile flattened out. "This is going to be a colossal pain in the ass, isn't it?"

"Oh yeah," Owen agreed with a snort. "But it's going to be a pain in your ass, not mine." Owen clapped Tony on the shoulder. "If you decide you can't handle it, just tell me and we'll figure out something else, but I think you'll manage. You're basically a free man now. No sense hiding yourself away anymore."

Tony took a deep breath in through his nose and surveyed the place himself without further comment. His smile returned and brightened when his eyes met mine.

"Lot of changes for you in the past few weeks." He took his hands out of his pockets and came to me, wrapped his arms around me. "If I do this, I'm going to need you with me."

"I'm always with you," I whispered into his neck. I'd never felt more certain of anything in my entire life.

It was hard to believe just six weeks ago, I had been a burnt-out mess with no discernible plan for the future. In those six weeks, I found more than a path forward. I found a job, I found love, and I found a whole new world to explore. It was everything I ever wanted and then some.

Tony buried his nose in my hair. “Then where do you think we should start?”

# Chapter Thirty-Four

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# Allison

“Thank god you’re finally back,” Sarah groaned dramatically the moment she walked in the front door to start her late afternoon shift. It was Sunday, only one day after Tony and I agreed to turn the basement into a Registry sanctioned bar. “I was starting to worry you rage quit or something.”

“Nope,” I replied, unloading yet another pile of glassware from the dishwasher. “Pretty sure I’ll be here forever now.”

“What’s all that crap?” Sarah waved a hand at the counter half-covered in dusty glassware. “I haven’t ever seen glasses like that in here before.”

“They’re from the basement.”

She made her way into the back, put up her coat and came back. She tied her apron around her waist and joined me behind the counter.

“Why bring a bunch of beer mugs up here?” She picked up one of the dirty, heavy-handled pint glasses and frowned. “We don’t keep beer on tap.”

“We’re, um, we’re going to be clearing out the basement for a special project sort of thing.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear with my left hand. We already decided we would be running things a lot more casually down there. Draft beer would, without a doubt, be on the menu.

“Who’s ‘we’?” Her eyes crinkled in the makeup-darkened outside corners as they narrowed. “And what’s wrong with your finger?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it.” I rubbed at the black band tattooed around my ring finger as my cheeks heated. I had no idea how to even begin to explain

that Tony and I tied the knot two days ago.

“Is that a ring tattoo?” Several emotions crossed her face. She settled on a subtle frown. “Is that new or have I just never noticed it before?”

“It’s, um, it’s pretty new.” I turned back to the glasses and began to reload the dishwasher. I wasn’t sure I was ready for the inevitable questions that were sure to come.

“Why is it on *that* finger?” she asked.

From the back room, heavy footsteps beat across the floor. The door opened and my husband waltzed right through it. Tony held his head high and carried with him another two boxes from the basement. The contents clinked with each step. They must have both contained more glassware. My nose wrinkled from the sharp scent of yet more dust.

“Because she got hitched.” Tony’s reply came full of newfound confidence. He set the boxes down in the remaining clear spot next to the pile of dirty glassware.

“To who?” Sarah’s face twisted up with horror as her attention flew back to me.

“To me,” Tony said as if he didn’t understand how she couldn’t have already known.

“Nuh uh.” Sarah turned back to Tony with an incredulous scoff. Her eyes raked over his dust-covered dress shirt down to his left hand. She made a grab for it.

His hand twitched as her fingers closed around his wrist, but he didn’t pull away.

Sarah yanked on his hand. He lifted it up and spread his fingers to better show off the one sporting a black band identical to my own. Her lips mashed together. She let go of Tony’s hand and snorted as if biting back a laugh.

“Cute prank.” She gave Tony a dismissive wave and looked back at me. “No way those are real. This was your idea, wasn’t it?” A mischievous sort of look took over her face. “Have you tried it on Ethan yet? I bet he’d actually believe you.”

“It’s not a prank.” I clutched my hands together awkwardly. My face heated and my shoulders slumped. Of course she thought it was a joke.

Tony wrapped an arm around my shoulders, drew me into him, and kissed the side of my head. For a man who had the hardest time coming to terms with his feelings for me, he sure wasn’t shy about showing them anymore.

“We got married Friday.” Tony’s smile radiated with happiness I wasn’t yet used to seeing. “Didn’t see any point in waiting. Just felt right.”

She might have been less shocked if we both shifted right there in front of her, but she recovered fast.

“No, you didn’t.” She rolled her eyes and turned her back to the both of us. “I refuse to believe it. Not even y’all are that crazy.”

“We might be just a little crazy,” I said with a laugh, casting a warm smile up at Tony. “But I’m more than happy he’s all mine.”

# Tony

It didn't take long at all to whip the basement into shape. We cleared out all the crap within a week. It took another to make basic repairs and clean the place from top to bottom. Allison and I worked overtime on the project. Owen lent a helping hand where he could, and less than three weeks after Allison's first full moon, we opened Neutral Ground.

"I can't believe we're doing this," my wife said with a laugh as my fingers traced along the backs of her bare thighs. Her legs wrapped around my hips and squeezed me hard.

"Having second thoughts?" My teeth grazed against her shoulder. Her ass sat on the edge of a table with my cock still buried in her tight pussy. I ground against her. She liked it when I stayed balls deep.

"Never when it comes to you." She tilted her head back with a sexy little moan and speared her fingers through my hair. She grabbed a handful, pulled on it a little. I liked it when she got rough with me.

"Mmm, you were the one to suggest it," I teased. My lips trailed up her neck to whisper in her ear, "This is pretty hot."

"Having sex on a bar table has been a fantasy of mine since college," she admitted. "Never thought it would happen, though, and certainly not in a bar like this." With one hand in my hair, her other raked nails down my back hard enough to elicit a growl out of me. "You have any fantasies you want to fulfill?"

“Living out the rest of my days with you,” I admitted. “That’s all I’ve fantasized about since we met.”

“Sometimes you do have a way with words.” A loving smile lit up her whole face, at least until she let out a little gasp and threw her head back as I hit on the right rhythm.

It didn’t take much longer for us both to finish. We quickly cleaned and sanitized the table so we could open Neutral Ground for the first time.

Business was slow the first week or two. We didn’t want to advertise our presence so we could feel out the general sentiment of the locals. We got a bit of pushback, but anyone who tried to start shit got tossed straight out the door. As luck would have it, not many were willing to suffer a permanent ban from the only Registry approved watering hole in the tri-state area.

At opening time, I threw open the deadbolt and took my place behind the bar to wait for our first few customers of the day. It didn’t take more than two minutes before in walked a guy I thought I would never see again.

The short blond with the ponytail slunk in with his shoulders so tense they edged up towards his ears. His eyes raked across the place and finally settled on me, the lone wolf behind the bar. Allison and I almost always worked the same hours, but she ran off a few minutes before we opened to grab a few books from the library before they closed.

My eyes narrowed at the man. I bit back a low growl as he approached and crossed my arms over my chest instead. At least he had enough sense to not look me in the eye.

“So, uh...” he started as he reached the bar. Light brown eyes darted up to mine then fell away again. “I’ve been trying to find the courage to come in since you guys opened. Officer Zimmerman told me you’re... well, you’re the wolf I saw a few weeks ago.”

“Where’s your friend?” I kept my tone in check. I didn’t want any trouble, but I also didn’t want him to think we were good.

“Not coming,” he replied with a nervous smile. “He doesn’t drink anymore.”

Some of the tension in my shoulders eased. “What is it you want? Money for a new phone?”

“No, insurance paid for the phone. I... sort of came to apologize?” He pulled out a stool at the bar.

“For what?” I asked with a frown. “Shouldn’t I be the one apologizing to you? I’m not sorry for confronting you, but my aggression might have been a bit excessive.”

He gingerly sat down on the stool. “You aren’t going to kick me out?”

“Not if you’re buying drinks.” I uncrossed my arms. “And you apologize to Allison for leaving her with me if you thought I was such a danger to her.”

“Once you started guarding her, I figured hurting her was not what you had in mind.” He wouldn’t lift his head to look at me while he spoke. “It’s why I didn’t officially report it. I didn’t want to bring you two any more trouble than necessary, but I had to do something. If I didn’t, Parker might have made an official report and he’s not...”

The guy shook his head. His lips mashed together and he finally lifted his chin to look me in the eye. “That’s what I’m sorry for. You had to out yourself not just to Allie, but publicly, because of us.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t expected that. My posture relaxed. I figured it was only polite to throw the kid a bone. “Well... sorry for eating your phone.”

He stuck his hand out as if he wanted me to shake it. “James Edwin,” he said with a cautious smile, “but I go by Jamie.”

“Tony Bridges.” I gave his hand a quick but firm shake.

“So...” He huffed out a breath and his smile turned genuine. “If it’s all the same to you, could I get a beer?”

# Epilogue



# Allison

“Officer Caine, nice to see you again.” I greeted the younger woman who slid onto a stool in front of me with a friendly smile. “What can I get for you today?”

“Beer me, please. I don’t care what kind, just... the hazy IPA is fine. This has been... it’s kind of been a day, hon.” She tossed her long, platinum-blond braid over her shoulder before shrugging out of a heavy cardigan. Every time I saw the one other wolf shifter besides me and Tony in town, she always seemed to come straight from an office.

Registry Officer Charlotte Caine wasn’t only a wolf shifter, though. She wore both the dusky scent of fur and the spicy tinge of magic.

She looked a little more on edge than she usually did. I’d always seen her in mostly good spirits and we saw her a lot since we opened a few months ago. She came almost every day we were open, sat at the bar and nursed a drink or two, usually alone, but sometimes Zed or one of her other teammates would join her. Sometimes the group of four would take a table, throw up a ward, and talk about work away from prying ears.

She didn’t wait to occupy a booth before she activated a ward with a wave of her hand. A faint tingle of magic washed over me. A small scarlet red rune appeared midair in front of her palm then faded away again. As used to magic as I had gotten, I still got a thrill seeing it in action every time.

“What was that one for?” I asked as I turned my back to her to grab her requested pint of beer.

“Just a basic silence ward. I don’t want anyone overhearing us. Act natural, please.”

“Okay,” I said at normal conversational volume. If she’d been human, she wouldn’t have been able to clearly hear me over the ambient noise, but she was a shifter, her hearing was as good as mine. “What’s going on? Why the ward today?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she asked, “Where’s Tony? He’s here today, too, right?”

“Is this official?” My eyebrows rose as I finished drawing her beer. The way she answered would determine how cooperative I would be. The Registry as a whole didn’t have much love for shifters. As a shifter and employee of said Registry herself, Officer Caine would have known all too well why I asked.

She clasped her hands together on top of the bar as I set her drink on a coaster in front of her. “It both is and isn’t. Officially, it is my duty to question you both regarding a situation that occurred last night around approximately 9 PM three blocks from here.”

Yesterday had been a full moon. That did not bode well.

“Unofficially, you need to be aware of a situation that occurred in what I consider your territory. I’ll let you decide how you want to handle it.” She took hold of her beer and threw back several gulps before setting it back down on the counter. “I don’t want anything blowing back on you two. I know you didn’t have anything to do with it.”

That downright worried me. It didn’t take more than a minute for me to drag Tony away from a supply order.

“Officer Caine,” Tony greeted her with a polite nod. He even offered her his hand over the top of the bar. “What can we do for you this evening?”

She shook Tony's offered hand and gave a curt nod of her own. Their eyes met and didn't fall away from one another's. They were more formal when they interacted, she was always much more relaxed when it was just me.

Tony explained once when I first commented on it that the formality felt right to him. Both of them carried innate authority due to their positions of power. Between Caine as a Registry Officer and Tony as the acting proprietor of Neutral Ground, it had been a little awkward for them to find a way to show they respected one another's position and wouldn't step on any toes on purpose.

Because of course there were underlying behavioral expectations between wolves that weren't considered pack.

Caine looked each of us in the eye for a long beat as she spoke. "I'll get right to the point. Last night, an unregistered wolf shifted in the park a few blocks from here."

Nerves drew the back of my neck tight with tension. There was another wolf in town?

"How do you know that?" Tony immediately asked. "Did someone see and report it?"

"Actually, because of a minor incident I'm sure you're well aware of, the powers that be decided to throw up a bunch of wards downtown to alert them of any shifter activity in the area. They went off as soon as he shifted." She threaded her fingers together and rested her chin on them. "I'm sorry. I didn't know about the wards until this morning. If I had, I would have warned you, so consider yourselves warned."

"Point is, wards went off and my team was called in to track him down. Officially, we verified the presence of a previously unregistered wolf shifter. Unofficially, he's brand new. We found him holed up practically in your

territory. If you want to make contact, that's your call. I already told him he's not the only wolf in town and needs to watch his step."

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. "He's new?"

"Last night was his first full moon," Caine clarified. "Poor guy was completely clueless when we found him this morning, but he seems to be taking it well enough, all things considered."

The tense set of Tony's shoulders eased. "As long as the guy doesn't cause trouble for me and mine, I'm content to just let him be if he wants to be left alone."

"Oh, he's going to cause trouble, alright," Caine said with a sigh.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"Because he has a human girlfriend." Officer Caine took a generous gulp of her beer and tipped the mostly empty mug in our direction. "And he seems to think she's his mate."

# Afterword

If you enjoyed this book, it would be super awesome if you could leave a review and/or join my mailing list right on my website!

[keierapearson.com](http://keierapearson.com)

Allison and Tony Bridges will return but not star in

*Existential Crisis for Three*

*Neutral Ground: Book 2*

Coming in February 2024

# About the Author

Keiera Pearson is an accountant by day and a writer by... pretty much all other times. Seriously, her husband has to drag her away from her computer some nights. She dreamed of being a published author and wrote a ton in her teens, but fell out of love with writing during college to instead fall into a boring, but safe, career.

Life went on, more than a decade passed, and then the world shut down. While going nuts at home, she thought, *Hey, why don't I write that book I've had kicking around in my head since college?*

And now we're here.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keiera Pearson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a decorative flourish underneath the name.