



MATE
HUNT

TAKEN BY THE PACK

LOLA GLASS

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Stop By

About the Author

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*To my husband, for always believing in me, and for always
laughing with me*

ONE



MY EX-ROOMMATE'S boyfriend's hot friend—try saying that ten times fast—was a werewolf.

Red eyes. Sharp teeth.

Werewolf.

Mate.

He'd called me "*mate*".

What the hell was a werewolf's mate?

"Are you still breathing?" Teagan asked, glancing at me from the driver's seat. "Because I don't think you've heard a word I've said."

My gaze hadn't left the hot friend since Tea dragged me into someone's sports car. It was a sports car with a bench seat in the back—something I'd never heard of before.

But the back seat wasn't something that I should've been thinking about, given that I was watching Hot Friend transform into a wolf in front of my eyes.

"Stop fighting your wolf. We've got your girl," one of the men in the back seat told Hot Friend. The guy who'd spoken was blond with light skin, and he was nowhere near as gorgeous as Hot Friend.

Although, the werewolf thing was definitely costing Hot Friend a couple of attractive-points.

Okay, a lot of attractive points.

Maybe all of the attractive points.

Considering the wolf thing, I'd have to change his name to Not-Hot-Friend.

Dammit, I was rambling. Stress was not my friend.

A snarl-yell came from the one I'd newly-named Not-Hot-Friend, and I winced. He looked like he was in a lot of pain.

"We're keeping an eye on her," Tea's boyfriend corrected the other guy. Her boyfriend's name was Jesse—Jesse who I'd first met as a dog. A freaking *dog*. She had passed a werewolf off as a *dog*.

What the hell kind of world was I living in?

"Ford, I promise to kill anything with a penis that touches Ebony. Let your wolf take over so you don't scare the shit out of her," Tea commanded from the driver's seat.

Ford.

Not-Hot-Friend's name was Ford.

Why did he have to have such a sexy name?

Werewolves?

Not sexy.

"What's not sexy?" Teagan asked me, shooting me a curious look.

Dammit, I must've said that last part out loud.

"Eyes on the road," I barked.

I was a terrible backseat driver; always had been, probably always would be.

More growling in the back had me regretting calling her out.

I didn't want to be eaten by a damn *werewolf*.

"What in the ever-loving hell is going on?" I finally demanded, after my courage came rushing back when the wolf-man shut up for a minute.

"Long story, or short?" Tea checked.

“Just spit it out.”

“The guys are werewolves. Werewolves have soulmates. When they meet their soulmate—frequently referred to as their *mate*—they wolf out and sort of... hunt her.”

Soulmate?

He'd called me mate.

Aw, hell.

“Stop the car,” I commanded.

She didn't stop.

“Dammit, Teagan, stop the car or I'll throw myself out of it while it's still moving!”

A savage snarl came from the back seat, and both non-furry guys swore as they tried to hold down the half-wolf-man who looked like he was in some serious pain.

“If you get hurt, that wolf won't let you out of the house for weeks. Maybe even months. Jump out if you want, but you're the only one who'll suffer for it,” Teagan said, matter-of-factly.

I grabbed the doorhandle and considered my options.

No-Longer-Hot Friend finished transforming completely into a gray wolf—and then shoved his way between our seats and plopped down on my lap.

“What the hell?” I shrieked, shoving at the thing. “You're a freakin' monster! Get off me!”

“Honestly, they're more like dogs than monsters,” Tea said with a shrug. “The human can't sway the wolf, or vice versa. We're completely separate.”

We're?

Oh, shit.

I'd forgotten that she said she was one of them too.

Yeah, I was out.

My fingers unclicked the seatbelt, and I jerked the handle on the car door, ready to throw myself out from beneath this heavy-ass wolf-monster-dog.

It was locked.

Dammit.

My fingers reached for the lock, but before I could slide it, the wolf snapped at my fingers.

I screamed, jerking them away. “What the hell do I do here?” I demanded.

“Stop trying to escape, for one. Been there, done that—and it sucks, eighteen-thousand percent. With a capital SUCK, and not the fun kind.”

“You kidnapped me!”

“Well, not technically. You got in the car willingly,” Tea reasoned.

I reached for the door’s lock again, growing desperate.

That time, the werewolf licked my fingers.

A shriek escaped me.

My phone started to ring, and Tea immediately recognized the ringtone. It was the sexiest-sounding one that came with my phone, and we’d about died of laughter during our first semester when we’d assigned it to my *friend-with-benefits*.

“Aw, crap,” Tea muttered.

“What?” one of the guys in the back asked.

I’d nearly forgotten they were there.

“Whatever you do, don’t answer that,” she warned. “And not because I kidnapped you—which I didn’t—but because the wolf won’t—dammit.”

“Reed!” My voice came out a helluva lot higher than it should’ve.

“Ebony, where are you?” Reed wasn’t a particularly good guy. But things were easy between us, and—

I screamed as the gigantic wolf-monster-dog snarled in my face.

And then screamed again when he chomped his teeth at me.

My eyes closed as I prepared for my death... but then I peeked one opened when I didn't get eaten.

Instead, the wolf was chomping away at the phone I'd been holding a minute ago.

Tea sighed and tossed her phone—whole and uneaten, unlike mine—into the back seat. “Jesse, call Reed from my phone.”

“Who's Reed?” His voice was a bit cautious.

“We can't talk about this right now, or you-know-who will hear and want to kill him.”

You-know-who?

Was that the werewolf on my lap?

“The thing ate my phone,” I said, panic officially overwhelming every damned inch of me. “The thing—it ate my phone!”

“The *thing's* name is Ford, and he's just your average werewolf. No need to be judgy.”

Screw her reasoning.

The wolf snapped his teeth at her.

“What, you don't want to be called average? Fine; he's awesome.” Tea rolled her eyes at me, as if I could relate to her imagined argument with the monster making my legs go numb and my heart pound like a damned drum. “Jesse? How's the call coming along?”

“We should probably wait,” Jesse said.

“If we wait, he might call the cops. And I'm pretty sure the cops are going to see this as a kidnapping, even though she got in the car willingly.” She glanced at me. “You did get in willingly, you know.”

The wolf shoved his nose up against my neck, and sniffed a couple of times. Then, a mangled screech escaped me as an

animalistic snarl rattled the monster's whole damn body.
"Teagan!"

"Were you with Reed earlier?" Tea checked.

"Yes," I squeaked.

She sighed. "Hold on tight, then. We've gotta get you back to Moon Ridge, fast."

Her foot slammed the gas pedal, and the sports car flew through the forest fast enough to give me something to panic about other than the wolf on my lap.

TWO



THE WOLF KEPT GROWLING and snapping his teeth at me throughout the drive, but eventually, we made it to a town I'd never heard of before.

Alive, too, by some miracle.

She parked in the garage of a little townhouse that I refused to admit was cute, and gave me one last forced smile before getting out of the car.

“He can't actually hurt you,” she repeated, for at least the tenth time since we'd been in the vehicle.

“Yet he's still snapping his teeth at me,” I also repeated, through gritted teeth.

“Only because you smell like Reed,” she said, like that was supposed to reassure me.

Before I could reply, she hit the button to unlock the doors.

One of the guys in the back got out and quickly opened my door. Ford snapped his teeth at me one last time before jumping out, and I groaned in relief at the literal weight off my legs.

I wobbled a bit as I stepped out. The blond guy started to reach for me, but stopped when Ford snapped at him.

“For someone who's supposed to be my soulmate, that wolf's a real asshole,” I shot to Tea.

She gave me an apologetic grimace, crossing the garage and opening the door that would lead into the house. “I know.

They're protective, and possessive. It'll get easier after you take a shower and the guys leave, I promise."

"What? You're leaving me?"

"Yes?" Her face grew more apologetic. "The wolf won't settle until he has you to himself."

The blood drained from my face. "What kind of screwed-up, shitty world have you dragged me into?"

"Nothing bad—he won't do anything weird, I swear. That came out wrong. Can we just start over? I'm just going to start all of this over, whether you like it or not." She opened the door that led into the townhouse, and gestured for me to follow her in as she slipped inside.

I didn't move.

The wolf nudged the back of my leg with his nose, and I all-but sprinted away from him, into the townhouse.

"We're going to go grab the car," Jesse called to Teagan, catching the door before it could shut behind me. "I'll be back for you in an hour."

"Bring food," Tea called back, and then shot me a sheepish expression. "Werewolves are always hungry."

Great.

Ford was definitely going to eat me.

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you too!"

The door shut, and I heard the garage door open again.

There went my ride.

I glanced around the room, hoping for a get-out-of-jail-free exit or something. But all I found was a normal-looking townhouse with an open floorplan. The kitchen was sleek and modern with dark cabinets, gray walls, and white speckled countertops. The kitchen table was equally modern, matching the cabinets, with an oddly-high tabletop and chairs.

I could see the front door from where I was... and the gray wolf sitting right up against it, staring at me.

So much for a way out.

“So, starting over,” Tea repeated, walking over to the kitchen table. She jumped up into one of the chairs, making herself at home. I remained where I was, standing only a few feet in front of the door that led into the garage.

If it came down to it, I could probably get out the door and hold it closed to protect myself from the wolf. It wouldn't buy me a lot of time, but it would buy me a little.

“Basically, a werewolf is two creatures smooshed into one. You have the wolf, and the human.” Tea held up both her hands, holding them out in front of her. “It's some kind of curse. There are other supernatural creatures out there too, but they usually keep to themselves, so I haven't talked to anyone who really knows much about the other kinds of supernaturals.”

I blinked.

A lot.

Holy freakin' hell.

“And you dragged me into this why?”

“I didn't. None of us have any control over when or if a wolf chooses his mate. When your eyes collided, magic or nature just sort of happened. Anyway, like I was saying, you have a wolf and a human.” She waved both of her hands, which were still out in front of her. “In a werewolf, they're trapped together. Like this.”

She clapped her hands together, her palms pressed into each other flatly. “The wolf and human share one physical form, but they can't communicate at all. They see out of each other's eyes, and can only be wolf or human at any given time, so they're both aware of what's going on constantly. But they have no impact on each other. Does that make sense?”

“None of this makes sense,” I tossed at her, frustrated and annoyed and just plain panicked.

“Okay, but in the most basic way, this makes sense to you.”
She waited.

She knew how I worked, same as I knew how she did. Or thought I knew, anyway. We both picked things up really quickly, learning and memorizing faster than we probably should’ve been able to. It made life easier, most of the time.

“Yes,” I finally grumbled.

“So the mate thing.” Tea grimaced. “It’s a lot, okay? Ford-the-guy had zero say in this matter; his wolf picked you. And now that he’s found you, he’s hunting you.”

“Hunting?” My voice grew shrill again. I hated it, but considering the situation, wasn’t going to blame myself.

“Hunting.” Tea confirmed. “The wolf has complete control, and he’s going to hold on to that control until he bites you and you become a werewolf too.”

My lips parted. “What?”

She ignored the question, dropping her connected palms as she leaned toward me. “He’ll hunt you until he thinks you’re ready to change, or until he thinks he’s going to lose you unless he bites you. If Reed shows up here, there’s an extremely good chance that Ford will either kill him, bite you, or both.”

Wow.

This just got shittier by the minute, didn’t it?

“For now, he’s basically a big possessive dog. Remember how Jesse was when I brought him to our dorm? That’s how Ford is going to be. He’s not going to leave you. You might be able to talk him into going to the school with you, like Jesse did with me, but Ford is really different from Jesse. He’s intense and mysterious, and yes, funny, but in a different way. Plus he’s the pack’s beta, so his wolf is really different too.”

Pack’s beta?

Intense and mysterious?

How the hell had this become my life?

“Anyway, now I’m overwhelming you.” Tea changed the subject. “I’ll stop by my place and grab you some clothes for now; when Ford’s calmed down a bit we can go back to the dorm and grab some more of your stuff. My house is the only one in that direction, I’m on the end of the row.” She pointed toward the wall behind her as she slid off the chair. “For the record, Ebb, I really am sorry that you didn’t have a choice in all of this. Meeting Jesse was the best thing that ever happened to me, but it took me a while to feel that way. I hope you know you can trust me, and talk to me.”

She sounded honest, but there wasn’t a chance in hell that I was trusting anything she was saying at the moment.

She gave me a small, sad smile before striding toward the door. Ford stood and moved away, giving her space to get out, but she paused in the doorway before turning to look at me.

“I forgot to add, werewolves do this weird thing before meeting their mates. They call it nesting, and it’s like how pregnant women get ready for babies. The guys stock up on food and supplies, preparing their home for a woman. It’s weird, but nice too. So when you see girly shampoo in the bathroom, don’t be weirded out.”

She turned around, then paused, and turned back. “Also, hunting wolves don’t sleep. So if he acts like he’s sleeping, don’t believe him. And the wolves have been seeing the world through human eyes for most of their lives, so they’re smarter than they might seem. Okay, now I’m really leaving.” She finally slipped out, leaving me alone with Ford.

My eyes landed on the wolf. He stared at me with creepy red eyes—terrifying for sure.

I stared back.

He wanted me to shower Reed’s smell off of my body, according to Tea. We’d been together earlier, but his roommate had gotten out of class right after I got there, so we’d made plans to get together later that night instead. We usually slept together a couple times a week, but it depended on when his roommate was gone, because I’d never let him into my room before.

It was a weird thing I'd always insisted on; I just didn't want him to start feeling at-home in my room, because I was worried he'd develop feelings for me if he did... and I would definitely never develop feelings for him.

He was good-looking, but kind of a dick, and definitely not the kind of guy I'd ever let my grandparents meet.

So we were temporary.

I couldn't imagine ending things with him because of a wolf, though.

But the idea of his smell on my skin was... weird.

Really weird.

And I didn't like that, at all.

Giving up on my staring contest with the wolf, I peeked around the townhouse. It wasn't big; the downstairs was consumed by a decent-sized living room with a gigantic TV, and the kitchen. Up the stairs, I found two bedrooms and a bathroom. One of the bedrooms held a bed and a dresser, and was absolutely spotless. After seeing Reed's dorm room, I was surprised there weren't dirty clothes strewn everywhere or old food wrappers or anything.

But then again, Reed wasn't a werewolf.

I'd definitely take the messy room over the creepy red eyes and fur.

And the snapping teeth—I shuddered just thinking about that.

The other bedroom looked like an office.

There was an L-shaped desk nestled in the corner against a window that looked out on the forest. The view was actually really beautiful, not that I wanted to admit it. A laptop was the only thing on the desk, and a big, comfortable-looking chair was nestled in right in front of it.

I wondered at the purpose of having such a big desk with only one thing on it, but then my mind flashed back to Ford.

Not wolf-Ford; human-Ford. The tall, ripped man with that gorgeous brown skin and the carefully-trimmed scruff...

Damn, was I drooling?

I could not think about human Ford.

Not if I wanted to retain my sanity in the house I'd been dragged to and all-but locked inside.

I noticed the wolf staring at me from the doorway of the office, and flipped him the bird just to show him that I still wasn't happy with him.

Was it me, or did his wolfy lips lift in a slight grin?

Yeah, it was definitely me.

I was losing it, hard-core.

My attention flicked to a large bookshelf, and the nerd in me forced me to walk closer. I hadn't had much time to read fiction since I started the fast-track nursing program I was attending, but I read a lot up until I started college.

Like the rest of Ford's furniture, the shelf was modern and looked expensive, but gave away absolutely nothing about who he was as a person.

I recognized a few of the books on the bottom; all high-fantasy, and mostly ones I'd consider classics, like *Eragon*. But my eyes trailed up the shelves, and my lips turned downward.

He had multiple copies of the same books. Like two, three, or four of every single book. They were pretty thick books, and arranged neatly in rows by series.

And all of them were by one author:

L.F. Welsh.

I glanced over at the wolf in the doorway.

Why did he love this author so much?

My fingers reached for book one of the series that was right in front of my face, but then I paused, and looked at the wolf again.

Whatever his reason for having so many copies, he couldn't have hated this author.

And I didn't want to know what he loved, because if I did, I'd develop some kind of feelings for him. I was too sensitive not to, honestly.

So I withdrew my hand, and headed toward the shower.

The wolf let me pass, and luckily, didn't nudge me with his nose as I slipped out and stepped into the bathroom.

Before I could shut the door, though, he stepped in too.

THREE



I STARED at the wolf for a long moment.

Ford.

It was weird to think of him as the same sexy guy I'd been checking out shamelessly for months. He came to the sandwich shop with Tea and Jesse and a couple other guys every time Teagan and I met up, even though the guys sat at their own table and talked amongst themselves while she and I chatted.

We'd never greeted each other before, or looked each other in the eyes—which I guess was what cause the whole “mate” thing in the first place.

Maybe the way I'd been drawn to him before had been a sign of the impending wolf stuff between us, and I just hadn't realized it.

I didn't know, but now that I'd been alone with the wolf for a few minutes, I was no longer worried he was going to attack me.

“Turn around,” I told him, spinning my finger.

He spun, and sat on the floor smoothly with his back facing away from the shower. It was a fancy thing, all tile with two shower heads and some kind of techy keypad in front of it. I stripped behind the tile walls so the wolf wouldn't see me, then spent a solid five minutes figuring out how to work the damn shower. I was booksmart, not tech smart.

When I finally got the water running, it felt like a major victory.

I peeked out of the shower, just to make sure the wolf was still where I'd left him. Sure enough, he didn't look like he'd budged.

Still, I'd try to be quick. Didn't want him to get curious or anything.

I stepped under the water, eyeing two shelves built into one of the shower walls. The top one had a set of my favorite brand's shampoo and conditioner, with a man's shower gel beside it. The bottom held a common women's brand shampoo, conditioner, shower gel, and razor. I knew the brand and liked how it smelled. But I wasn't a fan of its effect on my tight curls.

I didn't particularly want to wash my hair in Ford's house, but considering my death sounded more likely while I still stank of Reed, I washed my hair.

Not with the girly stuff; with Ford's.

I did use the girly shower gel though, because I didn't want to walk around sniffing myself all day and feeling weird about it.

I wrapped myself in a towel before getting out of the shower, and heard Tea moving around downstairs. She sounded like she was talking to someone, and I hoped she hadn't brought her werewolf boyfriend back.

I was still reeling over the fact that I was right, and he was actually a werewolf.

The first time I saw the video of Jesse shifting into a dog—a wolf—I'd thought it was photoshopped.

Then I realized I knew the dog.

When I realized I knew the man too, it was impossible for me to deny that there had to be some truth to the video. Del, my RA, had a friend who was studying videography at another university, so I sent it to her. She thought the video was real—which was just another nail in the coffin.

Werewolves existed.

Humans weren't alone.

And now...

I was this one's mate.

Whatever that really meant.

As far as I'd gathered from everything Teagan had said, it was basically like a husband or wife.

And I did *not* want to be married to a damned wolf, even if knowing that werewolves were just as real as I'd suspected made me feel saner than I had in weeks.

"Ebony," Tea called out, and I heard footsteps on the stairs. I looked around for something to use to defend myself, but didn't find anything.

"I'm putting clothes for you on the bed. I'm sure everything will be too short since you're so damn tall, but I figured you would prefer a crop-top and capris from me over Ford's stuff."

She was right about that.

I didn't thank her though; she had still helped the other werewolves lead me to a car and drive me away from my home.

I had to find a way back; I had classes the next day that I needed to attend. My grades weren't as good as they should've been after weeks of obsessing over the video, trying to figure out if Jesse really was a werewolf and whether or not I should tell Teagan about my suspicions.

I'd worried for her, missed sleep for her... hell, I'd even gotten my first C on a test in my entire life because I'd been so damn afraid for her life. Yet the entire time, she was not only living with a werewolf... she *was* one.

The world we lived in was seriously, seriously messed up.

And if werewolves existed, what else was out there? Vampires? Ghosts? Unicorns? Leprechauns? Teagan had mentioned other supernatural creatures.

A shudder traveled down my spine at the thought.

Honestly, I hadn't been sleeping like I should've been.

Okay, I hadn't been sleeping much at all.

Now that I knew the truth, that lost sleep seemed wasted on my ex-roommate.

And honestly, I was pretty pissed about that, not that I'd tell her. I didn't want to offend her, and there was a chance I might need her as I tried to navigate this new screwed-up world I had been dragged into.

As soon as I knew she'd left the room, I grabbed the clothes Tea had left on the bed. Ford waited in the bathroom, seeming to assume that I'd be coming back in.

Excitement flooded me.

I wouldn't have a chance to escape before he howled loud enough for Tea to hear him, but I could at least get dressed in peace.

After slamming the bathroom door shut between us, I tossed my towel to the bed and grabbed the bra and underwear. Tea and I didn't wear the same size in anything, so I figured her stuff wouldn't fit me at all.

To my surprise, I found a pair of new, simple black underwear with a tag on them, and a matching sports bra. They weren't fancy, but they clearly hadn't been worn before. And that did make me feel fractionally better about the situation, because it reminded me that werewolves weren't just monsters. They were humans, too.

Sort of.

They at least had human emotions.

Before I could step into the underwear, there was a heavy, echoing thud followed by a cracking noise.

The bathroom door crashed inward, the wood literally breaking off in chunks where it was still screwed into the wall.

The removed portion of the door fell down, crashing to the floor and landing only a few inches from my feet.

Ford stepped out, his furry face twisted in an angry scowl as he walked over the bathroom door. When he stepped up in front of me, he stopped.

His head tilted upward, and our gazes locked.

“You broke down your own door,” I told him, slightly in shock at how close that hunk of wood had come to hitting me.

He gave me a wolfy scowl before sidling up to me and sniffing my belly button.

I was so surprised by the movement that I didn’t push him away.

He walked a slow circle around me, checking me out and nudging me with his nose at times. I tried to push his face away from me, but it wasn’t budging, so I eventually just gave up and let him walk around, sniffing whatever he wanted while I pulled my panties and bra on.

As long as his nose didn’t go near my crotch, we were good.

Mostly.

Mostly, because I was pretty sure Ford was still inside that wolf somehow. I thought Tea had said something about wolves not being able to communicate with the humans they shared their form with, and vice versa.

“Come on, Ebony. We have shit to talk about!” Teagon yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

I finished getting dressed, and with a heavy sigh, headed down to talk to her.

FOUR



“I NEED YOU TO CALL REED.” Tea said, holding her phone out in front of me.

My eyes dipped to the device. It was a few years old and had definitely seen better days, but Tea was kind of a cheapskate when it came to things like that. I knew she worked her ass off just to afford to eat, and I felt for her...

But only a little.

We’d both been raised in similar situations: with single moms struggling to pay the bills. But where her mom struggled because she was a teacher and they didn’t make shit, my mom had struggled because she’d been sick for years.

She managed to work enough to keep her job, even in the worst of times, and her job provided good enough insurance to pay most of her medical bills. And when she passed away a few weeks before my high school graduation, I’d inherited the home she had paid off before I was even born.

Even after paying off the rest of the medical bills, the house’s sale had provided me more than enough to get through college. I was careful with the money, but not so careful that I didn’t upgrade my phone every two or three years.

“I’m not calling him.” I told her, my eyes lifting back to her. “If you give me that phone, I’m going to call the cops.”

I probably should’ve just taken the phone and *called* the cops, but given the way the werewolf video had been brushed off by the police department already, I was pretty sure the government was in on the whole werewolf secret.

She sighed. “Thanks for the warning, I guess.”

Flipping the phone in her hand, she hit a few buttons before lifting it to her ear. She took a few steps back, leaning up against the kitchen cabinets, and waited a minute before speaking.

My arms folded over my chest.

“Hey, Reed, it’s Tea,” she said, and then paused. Her face wrinkled. “Teagan Foch? Ebony’s old roommate? We’ve talked in-person at least twenty times.”

Another pause.

She sounded annoyed when she spoke again. “Whatever; Ebony’s phone broke so she asked me to call and let you know that you guys are over. She met someone hotter, and nicer, and cleaner, and...” she glanced over at me, and then Ford, and her lips curved up wickedly. “And he’s got a bigger dick. So don’t bother calling again, even when her phone’s fixed.”

I snorted, and Tea hung up with a victorious smirk on her face. “Really?” I asked dryly.

“I’m a werewolf. We’ve all seen each other naked at one point or another, so I can verify the statement.” She shrugged. “And that guy’s a real douchebag, anyway. I don’t know why you’ve been sleeping with him for so long.”

A ferocious growl escaped Ford, and I jumped away from him with a small, weird noise. He shoved his side up against mine, brushing up against me.

“You’re being an asshole, Ford,” Tea stated.

My eyebrows shot upward, and she glanced at me.

“They understand what you’re saying; the wolves do. I told you, they’re smarter than you think. Watch.” She crossed the room and crouched down in front of Ford, so their eyes were level. “You’re scaring Ebony. If you want her to like you, you’ve got to be nicer. She didn’t know about you when she started hanging out with Reed, and now things are over between them, so you don’t need to worry about him. Be nice.”

She ended the lecture with a poke to his nose.

He snapped his teeth at her half-heartedly, and she shot him a grin before looking up at me with the same expression, and then standing up straight again. “The guys act meaner than they are. They’re all lonely, and I’m the first chick they’ve ever really spent time with. So they’ll act tough and mean, but really, they’re just big sweethearts.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, that monster’s a sweetheart.”

Tea looked contemplative for a second, then held out her hand. “Here. Give me one of your rings.”

I wore my mom’s engagement ring around my right-hand ring finger, and another one of her old rings on my pointer finger. Her wedding band was on my left thumb. My mom had loved her rings, and they were one of the only objects that I’d inherited that I’d been able to bring with me when I went to college.

Instead of handing one over, I eyed Teagan.

“I’m not going to lose it. I just want to show you something.” She wiggled her hand.

For some stupid, unknown reason, I sighed and tugged the ring off my pointer finger.

Of the three, I was the least-attached to that one.

Teagan tossed it over onto the couch. “Ford, fetch.”

He gave her a look so dry I almost snorted again.

“Come on, bastard. Show her you care. Fetch.”

When he dropped to his belly on the floor in obvious defiance, I *did* snort.

It shouldn’t have been funny.

I mean, I was trapped. By a werewolf.

One who thought I was his mate.

But... it was pretty damn funny.

Teagan gave him an exasperated sigh and looked at me. “Ask him to get you the ring.”

“He doesn’t look like he wants to get anyone anything.”

She rolled her eyes. “Just trust me.”

I shot Ford a look, and found him already looking at me.

My inner-pest urged me to refuse her request just because she’d helped the werewolves abduct me from the sub shop.

But... I was curious.

Just a little.

So, I asked. “Ford, can you get my ring?”

He didn’t hesitate a damn second.

Just stood smoothly, jumped over the back of the couch, and then jumped back. When he returned, he held the ring carefully between his teeth. The damn thing wasn’t even slobbery, because he was so careful with it.

I held my hand out, and he set it in my palm.

Then he licked my wrist.

I inhaled sharply and ripped my hand away from him at the same time. My ring fell from my hand as I moved it, but Ford caught the metal smoothly.

“What the hell was that?” I looked at Tea.

She shrugged. “A wolf kiss. Wolves lick to show affection. Don’t you remember how much Jesse licked me when I was in our dorm room that one night?”

“No. I was trying not to make eye contact with your huge-ass dog, because I was afraid he’d try to eat me,” I grumbled.

She grinned. “Believe me, the only one he’s got any interest in eating is *me*.”

I blinked at the joke—which was either intentionally or unintentionally dirty.

With Tea, it was hard to know sometimes. Her sense of humor was a bit odd.

“Speak of the devil.” She strode toward the garage door just before I heard it start to rise. Ford stepped in front of me, still

carefully holding my ring in his mouth.

I pointed to the stairs behind my calves. “Put it there.”

He ignored me.

“Put it there please?” I tried.

“He’ll pretend not to understand you if it’ll get him closer to touching or licking you,” Tea called over her shoulder. The door shut behind her, and then she disappeared into the garage.

I glanced at the wolf. “You’re not giving me my ring unless I let you lick me?”

He blinked slowly.

I wasn’t sure if that was a yes, or a no, or an, “I DON’T UNDERSTAND YOU,” but considering he’d just fetched my damn ring, I was leaning toward one of the first two.

“Fine. Give me my ring back and you can lick me here, once.” I closed my fist and pointed to the top of my hand. There was nothing sexy about a lick to the top of my hand, so I’d bargain with that any day of the week. “Ring first, though.”

My other hand extended, and he smoothly dropped the ring in it before licking the entirety of the top of my hand.

And sure enough, there was absolutely nothing sexy about it.

So... I was fine with it.

Even if it meant his ridiculously sharp teeth got ridiculously close to my skin.

The garage door opened, and Tea came back in with Jesse and the other guy. For the life of me, I couldn’t remember his name.

“How are they on food?” Jesse asked Tea, giving me a brief nod as he followed Teagan to the fridge.

“Didn’t check.” Teagan shrugged. “You guys are always super stocked-up on food.”

“Hey.” The guy whose name I didn’t know gave me a quick smile.

Ford growled at him, and my gaze jerked back down to the wolf.

“Don’t be a bastard, remember?” Tea yelled at him from the fridge.

He stopped growling.

That was... interesting.

“Sorry about the abduction thing. When a wolf starts his mate hunt, there’s not really a way around that unless we’re willing to let him go furry in the middle of a crowded place,” the guy whose name I couldn’t remember apologized.

“Mmhm. What was your name again?” I folded my arms.

Ford growled again, though slightly quieter this time. I still jumped a bit.

“Rocco.” He grinned. “And if you ever want him to calm down or shut up, you can just pat him on the head.” Gesturing toward Ford, he mimed patting the air at about the same level the wolf’s head was.

I wrinkled my nose. “Thanks?”

Rocco laughed. He had a good laugh, I decided, even if he wasn’t quite as gorgeous as Ford. It was the kind of laugh that made everyone else want to laugh too, and I liked that.

Ford growled again.

“What’s he mad about now?” I asked.

Rocco’s grin widened. “I’m laughing and you’re watching. For a wolf, that’s enough.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

How did that make sense?

“Werewolves are really, really possessive. Like look-at-my-mate-too-long-and-I’ll-kill-you possessive,” Teagan explained, coming back over with Jesse. Their fingers were locked together, their arms all but glued to each other. “It’s terrible at first, but you get used to it. Mostly.”

There was a look in her eyes that told me there was more to that story, but I wasn't in the right mindset to prod for answers.

And I wasn't sure I wanted to know, either.

I hadn't been able to sleep when I thought werewolves might be real, but now that I knew they *were*... where did that leave me?

Other than trapped by an apparently-possessive wolfy bastard and a few of his friends, of course.

"We're going to head to the store for you, but if you have any questions, just write 'em down and I'll answer them when I bring the groceries back." Teagan gestured over her shoulder. "If we leave the cute unmated Rocco here, Ford might *accidentally* rip his throat out." She winked at Ford, who growled.

It sounded like a growl of... agreement?

Was that even a thing?

Jesse tugged Teagan a bit closer, and his arm wrapped around her waist.

If they were really as possessive as she'd said, I imagined that was his response to her saying Rocco was cute.

"As fun as that would be, I'll pass," Rocco agreed.

"Remember, my house is that way. We're right on the end, so it'll be hard to miss." Tea pointed over her shoulder. "If you need anything, you can go over there. We'll answer if we're home, which we won't be for an hour or two. Elliot's house is on the other side of yours, and he's about the happiest, nicest dude you've ever met. Plus, he always has snacks. So if you don't want to cook, stop by. He's not the best chef—that would be Zed—but he makes a mean PB&J with chocolate chips."

I wrinkled my nose. "Seriously?"

"I know it sounds gross, but once you've tried it, there's no going back." Her face was solemn for a minute, and then she grinned.

Good ole' weird Teagan.

Apparently she'd stayed the same, even though she was a werewolf now. That was comforting, in a way.

Not *really* comforting, but *somewhat* comforting.

“Anyway, we’ll get out of your hair, but we’ll be back soon. Have fun with Ford.”

My gaze dipped to the wolf’s as they all slipped back out of the house.

His lips lifted in a wolfy grin that made me shudder.

Suddenly, PB&J with chocolate chips was sounding a hell of a lot better than being alone with a wolf who may or may not want to eat me.

FIVE



“I’M HUNGRY,” I told Ford, walking toward the front door without pause.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that I did *not* want to be home alone with a hunting wolf.

“Let’s go get sandwiches from your friend. Elliot, right? The one with the gross PB&Js.”

At that point I was talking to myself more than him, but my nerves were starting to get to me, so I wasn’t going to question that.

We stepped out on the porch, which was pretty small, but there was a hammock stretched across it. I glanced down the row of townhouses, and noticed that all of the porches had hammocks hanging off to one side of their front doors.

Trudging down the stairs and through the inch of snow on the ground, I glanced at the road that led away from their homes. I knew I couldn’t walk all the way back to my dorm room, so I didn’t bother trying to make a run for it. And it wasn’t like I could outrun the wolf at my side, anyway.

So I thought about the hammocks instead.

Did the group of werewolves just text each other a time and hang out in their hammocks together or something?

They wouldn’t be close enough to talk to each other given the distance between the hammocks, so it wasn’t like they could have a hammock-party or anything.

Maybe they hammocks had been housewarming gifts or something?

Honestly, I was curious.

I stepped up onto Elliot's porch and rapped on the door a couple times. Ford wedged his furry self between me and the front door, and I shot him an exasperated look even as I took a couple of steps backward to make room for him.

The door swung open, and my mouth went dry as a tan guy with thick, dark hair filled the doorway.

Damn.

"Do all werewolves look like this?" I blurted.

Shit.

Shouldn't have said that.

Elliot frowned, his gaze flicking to Ford and then to me before understanding dawned in his eyes. "Ebony," he said.

I jerked my head in a nod. "Forget that question. I'm awkward. Sometimes. It's hard to explain, I just—" I blew out a puff of air and forced myself to slow down. "I heard you like to make sandwiches, and I cannot be alone with this monster any longer." I shoved a hand toward Ford.

Ford growled as Elliot gave me a small grin. "Come on in." He tugged the door open, gesturing me inside.

Ford bumped Elliot further out of the way, making the man chuckle as he gave me and my overprotective wolf a bit more space.

"I'm surprised you're over here willingly on the same day you were abducted. Teagan refused to have dinner with us for months, even when she'd already established that she liked Jesse's wolf," he remarked.

"Tea's unnecessarily stubborn much of the time." I glanced around his house. Like Ford's, it was really clean, although his furniture was clearly less new and less expensive. His place was homier than Ford's, and though I preferred the sleek, modern feel that Ford's place had, I did like Elliot's style too.

Comparing the men's homes had me remembering Ford's face.

The chiseled lines, the smoldering eyes...

Hot freakin' damn.

Why was I getting so *warm* thinking about him? He'd abducted me, dammit!

Elliot grinned. "You should hear her and Jesse argue."

I sat down in one of the simple wooden chairs around his table. "Knowing Teagan, it's probably foreplay for them. That girl would argue with a cow if it would get her a burger."

Elliot snorted. "Jesse would too."

Ford snarled at Elliot, hopping up on the table and sitting between us, blocking our view of each other.

"Seriously?" I complained.

"I'm not flirting with her, bud. Just being friendly." Elliot's voice was light and sort of... comforting.

We'd only just met, but I already felt like I could trust him.

"Earlier, when I answered the door, your question wasn't stupid," he called to me, as he moved around his kitchen. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him. "Werewolves were created by magic, and something about it makes us all taller and stronger. Changed wolves aren't affected the same, so you don't have to worry about growing much after Ford's changed you."

I felt the blood leave my face.

Right.

They wanted to make me one of them.

Shit, that was terrifying.

"Great," I managed to get out.

"You don't have to pretend to be okay with it. We were all taught to expect our mates to have a hard time adjusting to this life. We'd spare you the messy abduction shit, too, if we could. But trying that would result in early biting, if not human deaths, so it's not on the table," he explained.

“Early biting?” my voice came out slightly strangled.

“Biting is how humans are turned. Tea must’ve told you that.” Maybe she had.

Hell, she *probably* had.

I was just... overwhelmed.

A lot.

“What are the hammocks for?” I changed the subject. Ford still blocked my view of Elliot, which was annoying, but not annoying enough for me to risk pissing off the wolf who already wanted to bite me.

“Sitting in.” Elliot sounded amused by the question. He walked around the table, then set a plate down in front of me. There was a stack of four sandwiches on it.

How much did he think I could possibly eat?

“I’m good with one, thanks,” I told him, grabbing the one off the top and then handing the plate back.

He shrugged and took it, stepping over to the other side of the table. When he sat down, he left an empty chair between us, and sat where we could see each other despite Ford’s furry butt in the way.

“So you’re a nursing student, like Tea?” he checked, biting into his sandwich.

I nodded, then took a small bite of my own. It was... weird.

Just your average PB&J, with the not-so-slight addition of mini chocolate chips. They were a bit crunchy, and I didn’t anticipate the flavors working out very well at all. But surprisingly enough, it was good.

Really good.

I demolished the sandwich, and Elliot slid the plate back to me with a knowing grin. He’d left two extras for me, only eating the one. He was sly, I’d give him that—and sort of sweet, too.

Ford licked my face, and I gagged and pushed him away. “Do *not* do that without permission. If you want to lick me, you

have to trade something of equal value to me. Like freedom.” I gestured toward the door.

Ford scowled, lowering his head to his paws in what was clearly a message that he wasn’t trading anything for my lack of freedom.

But at least he wasn’t licking me.

At this point, it was about the little things.

“I have classes tomorrow,” I told both Ford and Elliot. “I *don’t* miss classes.”

Granted, I had been zoning out lately as I dealt with the world-changing concern that werewolves might be real.

Maybe now that I knew they were, I could finally manage to focus again... though something told me that wasn’t exactly how this whole being-stalked-by-a-wolf thing was going to work.

Elliot gave me a look of amusement. “This is Ford, the beta, we’re talking about. I can tell you right now, there’s not a damned chance you’re going to class tomorrow unless you’ve got his bite somewhere on your body.”

I scowled. “What does him being *the beta* have to do with anything? I have no idea what your wolf words mean.”

“Alright.” Elliot nodded. “That’s fair.”

I thought the conversation was going to end there.

He got up, walked to the kitchen, and then came back with a sheet of paper and a pen.

My eyes narrowed at him as I watched him scribble something on the sheet of paper. After a minute, he turned it around so it faced me.

At the top of the page, there was one word with a square around it. It said: ALPHA.

I’d seen *Twilight* and *Vampire Diaries*; I knew the alpha was the leader of a werewolf pack.

“First off, I know you’re thinking about whatever werewolf books or movies you’ve read. I’ve heard from other guys that all new mates do. But just forget all that shit; that’s not how packs work. We don’t have mind-links, and we don’t get in fights. Like wolf packs in the wild, we’re a family. I’m the alpha because my wolf’s an alpha, and basically, most people consider the alpha like the glue of the pack. The alphas bring everyone together, and keep everyone together in various ways.”

He dragged his pen down to the box beneath alpha. This one said: BETA. “The list is arranged by which pack members have the most responsibility. It has nothing to do with importance, just day-to-day work involved in keeping the family functioning. And where the alphas are the glue, the betas are the guardians. They keep an eye on everyone in the pack, both physically and emotionally.”

He must’ve noticed that I wasn’t following, because he explained, “I struggled with depression for a few months back in high school after losing a family member, and Ford was at my place with breakfast every morning. He made me walk laps around the town until I could run, and then he made me run until the endorphins started helping me. If the depression hadn’t faded, I’m confident he’d still be at my door every damn morning with food and running shoes. The betas are there for everyone in ways the alphas can’t be, because we’re different people.”

His honesty caught me off-guard, and I thought it was really cool that he was open about his struggle with mental illness. He was lucky to have moved past it; my own anxiety refused to leave me be no matter how I tried to deal with it.

Hence the sleepovers with Reed, whom I had zero feelings for.

And the burying myself in homework so deeply that I didn’t have time to mourn the past or stress about the future.

Thinking about Ford showing up with food and dragging his friend out into the forest to help him get out of his own mind was...

Well, it made him seem more human than I wanted him to be.

Given that he was, you know, a werewolf.

Elliot pointed his pen to the third box. It said: DELTA. “The deltas are the watchers. They keep an eye out for stuff like what I was dealing with in high school, and bring others in to help when needed. I’m sure Dax, our delta, was the one who told Ford how bad I’d gotten.” He moved to the fourth box. It said: GAMMA. “The gammas are the entertainers. They keep everyone laughing, and having fun. It doesn’t sound that important, but it is; everyone is, in a pack.” He pointed to the fifth one: OMEGA. “The omegas—that would be Jesse and Tea—are the peacemakers.”

My eyebrows shot upward, and I gave him a critical look. “You’ve heard them argue.”

He grinned. “More than you have, I’m sure. But the thing is, if shit gets tense, those are the people we need. Tea can argue with you about whether a spork deserves to be considered a utensil so fiercely that you’ll forget how much you wanted to rip Ford’s throat out. And when we get together with other packs, you wouldn’t believe how good it is to have an asshole like Jesse who can convince anyone that it’s a good day for the football game Rocco planned, even if it’s pouring rain and cold as shit outside.”

“Since when is shit cold?”

His grin widened. “There you go.”

“What about the last box?” I gestured to the sixth one, which said: SIGMA.

“That would be the pack’s instigator.” His expression grew rueful. “They make sure none of us get too dry or boring.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

“Basically, they challenge us. Keep us growing. The sigma is the closest thing a pack has to a lone wolf; they’re more individual than the rest of us, and they get us into the most trouble.”

That didn’t sound like a good thing for the group, but I nodded like it made sense.

“So you think Ford’s too protective to let me go to class?” I checked.

“I think the chance of Ford letting you go anywhere that you might possibly run into another man will lead to him biting you earlier than you want him to.”

“I don’t understand. If he’s going to bite me anyway, why not just get it over with?”

Elliot frowned. “Didn’t Tea tell you? The wolf wants to give his mate the best chance at survival, and if she accepts what’s going to happen, her chances are much better. Theoretically.”

SIX



BEST CHANCE AT SURVIVAL?

What the hell?

“No, Tea didn’t tell me that.” I stood abruptly. “I think it’s time for me to leave. Thanks for the strangely-delicious sandwiches, and the lesson.” I paused, glancing at the paper.

Deciding to throw caution to the wind, I snagged it off the table.

“Wait.” He took it back for a minute, and scribbled a few more things onto the sheet before handing it to me. “There you go. You can put it on Ford’s fridge like a trophy.”

I snorted. “Worst trophy ever.”

“Give it a few months and you’ll see worse,” Elliot promised.

My curiosity almost got the best of me, and I almost asked what he meant by that, but the brush of Ford’s fur against my leg distracted me.

I grabbed the front door, and Ford waited until I was out on the porch before stepping out too.

Guess he was more worried about Elliot making a move on me than about me trying to escape again.

We walked back over to Ford’s place, and I felt absolutely uncomfortable as I pulled the door open. Walking into a stranger’s house with just a wolf at my side was weird, to say the least.

I snooped around the rest of the place, letting my curiosity run free as I leafed through Ford's mail, dug through his underwear drawer, and even opened up what looked like a leather-bound journal I found inside his nightstand.

Honestly, I would've *read* the journal too, but no matter how hard I tried, I could *not* make sense of Ford's handwriting. A toddler might as well have scribbled on those pages for all I knew.

"Ebony?" Tea's voice called from downstairs, as I was still squinting at the pages, trying to figure out what the damned man had written down.

Glancing up, I watched the door for a minute, my shoulders tensing as I waited for her to come up and open it.

Wolf Ford was sitting a few feet off to the side of me, his head perched on his front paws and those big red eyes of his staring at me like I was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

And if I was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen, I felt pretty bad for the guy.

Er, wolf.

Sure, I was fine, and decently easy on the eyes. But fascinating was a pretty damn big stretch.

"We're just going to put your groceries away!" Tea yelled again. "It's cool if you don't want to talk. I'll come over tomorrow morning with a new phone for you, and we can try to get Ford to follow you to class."

I eyed Ford.

Elliot had said he didn't think Ford would let me go into any public situation; was he right?

Tea didn't seem to think that would be a problem, though.

I hoped she was right; the semester had only been going for a few weeks, and I couldn't afford to miss many classes.

Tea and Jesse talked for a few minutes as they put the groceries away. I couldn't make out exactly what they were

saying, so I walked over to the door like a creep, and opened it just a crack.

“Your wolf was fine with it,” Tea argued.

“My wolf and Ford’s are practically opposites. If you thought I was difficult to deal with, just wait until you see Ford.”

“We’re all still wolves. And I’ve seen his wolf plenty of times; he always seems perfectly normal to me.”

“He’s hunting, Teapot. There’s nothing normal about a hunting wolf, period.” The fridge door closed. “Alright, let’s go.”

Teagan sighed. “Fine. I feel bad leaving her, though.”

“You helped abduct her,” Jesse pointed out. “She would probably rather be alone.”

I snorted, looking over at Ford.

The wolf hadn’t even let me close him in his own freakin’ bathroom; I definitely wasn’t alone.

“Technically she got in the car willingly,” Teagan pointed out, and I heard their footsteps on the floor as they crossed the room.

“Technically she tried to escape, but he sat on her and ate her phone,” Jesse countered.

“We’re leaving!” Tea yelled to me. “See you tomorrow, 7 AM!”

The door shut behind them, and I could no-longer hear their conversation.

Listening in on them talking normally though, not discussing murder or additional kidnappings or anything, made me feel slightly better. Werewolves were monsters, but they seemed kind of normal, too.

And Tea had been one of them for months, yet I hadn’t realized it.

I thought I would be saving her from Jesse by telling her what he was. If I’d known that I’d end up abducted by a werewolf, I...

Well, I wasn't sure.

I glanced over at Ford again.

He was still just staring at me.

And while some part of me wished I'd never realized what Jesse was, and that I'd given up on my friendship with Tea when she went AWOL, not all of me did.

Now that I'd seen werewolves and knew they existed, I couldn't honestly say that I wished I didn't know.

Whether that was because I liked understanding the world, or because of something else, I wasn't sure.

Crossing the room again, I sat back down on the edge of Ford's bed and picked up his journal.

I was going to figure out how to read his chicken-scratch if it killed me.

I flipped to the first page and started at the top. Dropping the journal for a minute, I ducked into the office and opened the desk's top drawer. There were a few sheets of paper in there, some with a few more chicken-scratch notes. I grabbed a sheet, and a pen, taking them back into the bedroom with me.

It wasn't until I passed through the doorway that I realized how stupid I was.

Halting abruptly, I looked at Ford the wolf.

He was standing, now, and only a foot away since he'd followed me into the office and back across the hall.

"The laptop," I said to him.

Why was I trying to read his journal? I could probably find as much as I wanted to know about him on his laptop, couldn't I?

I tossed the pen and paper onto the bed and headed back into the office.

The massive, expensive-looking chair was heavy and difficult to move, even with the plastic mat beneath it. I rolled it out a few inches before slipping into the chair, and wedged myself

between it and the desk. It was tight at first, but I managed to make enough space to sit.

My nose wrinkled as I tried to get comfortable in the gigantic thing. Comfort was impossible; it was as hard as a rock.

Giving up on that, I opened the laptop. The desk was much too high for me; my arms had to strain a bit. But considering how gigantic Ford was, I imagined he'd fit fairly well.

When I hit the power button, the screen lit up.

With... a password bubble.

I made a face.

What the hell would his password be?

How was I supposed to know?

Maybe if I managed to read the damn journal, I'd figure it out.

I tried a few things; Ford, werewolf, wolf, beta, Elliot, Jesse...

But nope, that didn't work.

I only managed to get myself locked out for ten minutes.

With a heavy sigh, I shut the laptop again and wrestled my way back out of the chair.

Ford was waiting by the door, his head crooked to the side, as he watched me. I stepped past him, my leg brushing up against his side as I went back to the bed.

I grabbed the journal, pen, and paper, then opened the book up to the last page that had been filled out, rather than the first one I'd opened to a few minutes earlier.

My eyes squinted, and I tried to read over the first few letters at the top of the page.

Was that a...

Oh, shit.

It was a date!

Victory pulsed through me, and I grinned down at the journal.

One by one, I picked the numbers out.

1-27-22.

I looked around for my phone, trying to figure out what the date was, but then remembered that Ford had eaten the damn thing.

Oh well, I knew it was currently one of the final days of January, which meant Ford had scribbled all of these incomprehensible words somewhere between one and four days earlier.

Hell, there was a chance he'd even written in it that exact day, if he had journaled before he went to the sub shop with his buddies.

Getting my paper ready, I slowly and painstakingly began transferring the letters on the first page onto the second one. It took some time, but I started moving quicker the longer I continued. By the time I finished, I was grinning again, looking down at an entire page written by the guy who was apparently supposed to be my mate.

It said:

1-27-22

My wolf is getting restless.

He's taking over more often, and when he takes over, he's more violent.

I glanced over at Ford, who had jumped up onto the bed at some point.

The wolf just stared back at me.

He didn't seem violent to me, at least, not when I wasn't trying to get away from him. Even then, the worst he'd done was eaten my phone, sat on me, and growled at me. That was annoying, but not *violent*.

And hadn't Teagan told me a few times already that it was actually impossible for the wolf to hurt me?

My eyes dipped back to the page.

I think he's getting ready to choose a mate. My house is starting to look like a damn grocery store; I've got four

different brands of tampons in the bathroom.

Tampons.

The nesting has gotten ridiculous.

Seems like I'm making multiple trips to the store every day, for random human girl shit that I suddenly feel like I desperately need to have on hand. Yesterday, it was nail polish.

Nail polish.

And then today, I realized I'd need nail polish remover to go with the damn things, and cotton pads to use the nail polish remover.

Jesse sure as hell never felt the need to buy nail polish, so I don't know what's going on at this point. I almost wonder if I've already met the chick, but never made eye contact.

Ebony...

Well, I've written plenty about her already.

I should've made it a point to look her in the eyes by now, but if she is my mate, I'd rather spare her.

But if the nesting urges get more insane than tampons and nail polish, I'll probably need to try, just to check.

Hell, now that I've written that, my wolf will probably take over and force me to if I don't do it myself.

She's having dinner with Tea tomorrow; maybe I'll try then.

Or maybe I'll try to deal with it for another week, so her life can stay normal just a little longer.

Guess time's the only thing that'll tell.

I LOOKED BACK at Wolf Ford, shocked.

He'd written about me before?

He had wondered if I was his mate for a while?

And he was stock-piling nail polish?

My gaze dipped to my nails. I always painted them in dark colors, usually reds, purples, or blues. Something about having them done made me feel more put-together, but I was too careful with money to pay to have them done every month.

How had he known that?

And what the hell was up with these *nesting urges*?

I set the journal down, determined to come back to it after I'd found the nail polish. I had already rifled through his closet and dresser, and everything downstairs.

The only place I hadn't searched through was...

The bathroom.

Because I'd already been in there earlier, I hadn't considered going through the cabinet.

I crossed the hall again, kneeling on the ground and opening the doors up.

Sure enough, four brands of tampons lined the back wall of the cupboard. A few brands of pads were organized in the corner, stacked neatly one on top of the other.

There were also extra bottles of women's shampoo and conditioner, along with two different razors, and an enough different lotions, bath bombs, and body scrubs to fill an entire Bath & Body Works.

I picked up one of the bath bombs—and then realized it was something different.

A shower bomb?

Weird.

I'd never heard of them, but I wasn't hugely into scented lotions and things. Up until recently, my classes had all of my attention. Lately, I was stretched between my classes and my obsession over whether or not werewolves existed.

I set the shower bomb back down, and found what I was looking for.

A neat row of nail polishes, lined up against a small stack of folded hand towels.

They were all the fancy, expensive ones that I'd sometimes stare at for a minute before grabbing the two-dollar ones off the other shelf.

And sure enough, they were all in dark colors.

SEVEN



“HOW THE HELL did you know to buy these?” I asked Ford, glancing over at the wolf and gesturing to the cabinet. “This is completely insane. This entire place—this entire world I’ve been dragged into.”

Ford stepped forward, and the way he moved toward me told me he intended to lick my face. I held up a hand, and he stopped immediately.

“Thanks for respecting me, I guess, but seriously, Ford. This is weird.” I grabbed a nail polish, holding it toward him. The wolf moved his shoulders in a gesture that reminded me of a shrug.

I wasn’t going to get anything out of him.

With a groan, I put the nail polish back in the cabinet, and shut the damn thing.

Standing up, I strode back to the bedroom, and sat back down with Ford’s journal. His human self could be pissed at me for breeching his privacy later; for now, I wanted to know what else he’d been up to.

And... when else he had mentioned me in his journal.

I flipped back to the beginning. The date at the top was about three years ago. Now that I’d mostly learned how to translate his crappy handwriting, I was able to slowly pick my way through it.

The first page described him...

Writing a book?

My gaze jerked back to the spare room, and then dipped back to the journal to keep reading.

The next few pages were about his pack buddies, and his family. He seemed close to them.

Then his book was mentioned again.

Insurrection.

I dropped the journal again, and crossed the hallway yet another time, stopping in front of the bookshelf.

My eyes scanned the many, many books, until...

Insurrection.

Bingo.

I grabbed the paperback off the shelf, and my eyes scanned the cover. It had a snake and a skull, and looked kind of epic, definitely something fantasy related.

Flipping the cover over, I scanned the blurb on the back.

It actually sounded pretty good.

And the author?

L.F. Welsh.

The F had to stand for Ford, and though I didn't know his last name, I would've put money on it being Welsh.

Damn.

Human Ford was an author. A fantasy author. With many books published, if the paperbacks were anything to go off of. And a *successful* fantasy author, if I was judging his house and car and whatnot.

I set the book down.

I was starting to teeter on that ledge of seeing the werewolf as a real person with thoughts and feelings and shit, and that was dangerous.

Really dangerous.

Not because he had abducted me; I was starting to get over that, as bad as that probably was. The werewolves ultimately

seemed like normal people other than the fur and growls and whatnot. And the mating thing, obviously.

But seeing werewolves as real people and seeing Ford as a real person were two entirely separate things, because he wasn't just a wolf; he was a guy who wanted me to be his girl.

Permanently.

I glanced to my side and found the wolf watching me again. "Are you ever going to leave me alone?" I asked him, my voice wary.

He shook his head emphatically.

With a groan, I sat down on the floor.

"I want to go home," I told him.

He padded over slowly, like he was waiting for me to push him away.

I didn't push him away, though.

And when he stepped closer, I put a hand on his back.

He went still, and I wasn't sure whether he didn't like the touch or just didn't want to scare me away.

"Is that okay?" I asked him.

It felt stupid, asking the wolf the question, but he nodded once and moved toward my face. I narrowed my eyes at him before he could lick my cheek, and he paused, tongue extended in front of him.

"Don't push it," I warned.

So instead of licking my face, he rubbed his wolfy cheek against mine.

The motion surprised me, and honestly... it was nice. His fur was soft, and he smelled good. Not sexy, good; just clean, and masculine.

When he pulled away, he sat down beside me and set his head down on my thigh. Though we couldn't communicate, I got the impression that he felt bad.

And even though I knew there was a good chance I was imagining that, it made me feel better about the whole thing.

“Hey, Ford?” I asked quietly.

He tilted his head to the side, so his eyes met mine.

“Can we go to my place? I know you’re not willing to walk away from me, and I’m not asking you to leave. I’ll even stay home from my classes for a few days if it’s the only way to make this work. But I really don’t want to be a prisoner here.”

The wolf stared at me, blinking slowly once, and then again.

And then his head dipped, just slightly.

Relief tore through me, and my lips curved upward. I gave the wolf a gentle hug, and he nuzzled his cheek against mine again.

“You’re not so bad,” I murmured.

He snorted, and I couldn’t help it; I grinned.

“Okay, you’re pretty bad. But I think I’ll get used to you.”

He nodded against my cheek, and my grin widened. “Let me grab my things.”

I didn’t have many things there, but gathered them quickly anyway. I didn’t want to risk triggering Ford again, so I left the clothes that apparently smelled like Reed in Ford’s dirty clothes basket. After he was in human form again, he could clean them and give them back.

My damn curiosity got the best of me before I could leave, and I ended up grabbing Ford’s journal, as well as a few of the series-starter paperbacks on the shelf... and then I snagged his computer, too, just in case I could figure out his passcode.

I put those things in the car, and then got a glimpse of my nails.

Yikes.

I’d chipped the polish in a couple places at one point or another; not cool.

I bit my lip... and then muttered, “What the hell,” and headed back up the stairs.

After dumping one of the tampon box’s contents into the cupboard, I put all of the nice nail polishes in the box and carried it back down the stairs, out to the car.

Then I remembered the fridge—and all of the perishable food Teagan and Jesse had bought to fill it.

Tea was such a penny-pincher that her spending any money on food for me at all was a huge sign that she cared. So even though I was still kind of pissed that she’d help the werewolves take me, I headed over to the fridge and threw most of its contents into the freezer. Most of the stuff that didn’t fit would be fine for a week or two, and even if I wasn’t back by then, I was positive Tea wouldn’t let the food go to waste.

Werewolves *were* always hungry, as she said.

Satisfied that I’d done all I needed to, I gestured Ford out to his car.

He trotted out beside me, seeming much more relaxed now that I was working with him instead of against him.

Guess it was easier to hunt prey that didn’t fight you.

I opened the garage and pulled out, glancing repeatedly at the other townhomes. Someone must’ve heard me leaving, but even if they did, they didn’t try to stop me.

That felt like a win.

I hit the button to shut the garage door as I headed down the road, tapping a few things on the car’s GPS to have it direct me back to my dorm.

A phone buzzed somewhere in the vehicle, and I looked around for it when I stopped at a stop sign. I found it on the floor in the back, and when I picked up the sleek, brand-new device, I immediately knew it was Ford’s.

Tea’s name was on the screen; she’d texted Ford. Though, a glance at the text told me the message was meant for me.

Tea: I heard you leave, and I know that mean's Ford's on board, so I'll leave you alone. Just be careful, please. I care a lot about both of you, and I'm sorry for everything.

Guilt tugged at me.

Yeah, Teagan had helped them kidnap me, but from what they'd said (and what had happened) there hadn't really been another choice.

Plus, I had gotten into the car willingly.

The situation was a difficult one, but I was figuring it out. And now Wolf Ford wasn't trying to eat me, so my life felt much more stable.

I turned on quiet music as I drove, not wanting anything too loud. Ford's head rested on my thigh, and honestly, I didn't mind the contact. Even if I probably should've.

IT WAS NEARLY midnight when I parked in the lot outside the dorms, and of course, there were still plenty of people outside. Mingling, making out, doing drugs... honestly, I didn't really know. I stayed away from parties and didn't have a group of friends that I liked to hang out with or anything.

I gathered everything I'd brought from Ford's into my arms, and started to open the door.

He growled.

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob, glancing over at him.
"What?"

He pointed his nose to his door.

I blinked.

He pointed toward his door with his nose, more aggressively.

A lightbulb went off in my head.

"You want to get out first?"

He bobbed his head instantly.

Damn protective wolf.

With a sigh, I leaned past him and tugged the handle, opening his door. He nudged it the rest of the way open, and then jumped out, and shut it with his gigantic side.

I watched him swagger over to my side of the car, and then sit down.

With a roll of my eyes, I opened my door and got out.

He insisted he walk in front of me as we headed toward my dorm, and he seemed to know which way we were going. I followed closely, but put another inch between us every time he growled at me.

He was being really, really protective.

And it was annoying, but kind of sweet.

“OMG, is that your dog?” some girl exclaimed, staggering away from her group of friends—and walking right toward me.

Ford’s growl immediately turned more ferocious.

Something about the way he bristled and the changing tone of his growl told me he was not going to play nice.

“No! Don’t touch!” I said quickly, cringing inwardly at my insane awkwardness. “He bites. He’s not nice.”

The girl stopped in her tracks. “Oh. Then why do you keep him?”

“Have a good night,” I told her, veering away from her. My hand landed on Ford’s neck, and I grabbed his fur pretty tightly. “I need to get a collar and leash for you,” I muttered.

He scoffed.

“You can’t just go around threatening people.” His huff said he disagreed. Well, or he just didn’t care.

EIGHT



WE REACHED my room without any problems, and snuck in without being caught by anyone. Luckily, I'd managed to keep my keys despite all the drama at the sub shop.

Ford made a big show of sniffing every damn inch of the place while I organized all of the new things I'd brought back from his human's house. I hadn't gotten a new roommate this semester, luckily, so I had both beds, desks, and closets to myself.

I wasn't sure what I would've done if I had to explain the wolf's presence to a roommate... obviously that hadn't gone well when Tea tried it with me, and she and I had been friends for an entire year by then.

When everything was put away, I sat down at my desk and cracked my laptop open, mentally going over the four different assignments I should've already had done, and the assload of studying that I still owed a few of my courses.

Ford wedged himself between my feet, the desk, and the chair, somehow weaving his furry self in-between my legs and the entire sitting contraption. I didn't know what he was hoping to achieve by doing that, but it was probably working.

I ordered some food on a delivery app, since I knew there was no getting the wolf out of the room without a fight—and that if I did manage to get him out, he'd probably kill someone for looking my way. There was a good chance I'd be paying a lot of delivery fees until I figured out what to do with the damn wolf snuggled up to my legs.

I worked in relative quiet until the wolf growled.

He lunged for the door as someone knocked, twice.

I shot after him, grabbing his face and hissing, “If they know you’re here, they’ll kick you out. You can’t let anyone hear you.”

The wolf growled quietly at me, but I could tell now when he was trying to threaten someone with the noise and when he was just using it to communicate. This time, he was just telling me he was frustrated by my grabbing him and basically telling him to shut up.

I peeked out the peephole, and when I saw the coast clear, ducked outside to grab my bag of food.

Ford was pissed when I opened the door, but he got over it quickly when he smelled food.

I eyed him. “This isn’t for you. I don’t know how much you eat, but based on what I saw in your fridge, I’m going to have to guess it’s a lot. So if you’re hungry, you’re going to have to go outside and hunt some poor small wild animal like the wolf you are.” I gestured to him.

He didn’t look offended, and jumped up onto my bed as I sat the bag down on my desk.

He watched me closely as I ate, staring at me like a damned stalker no matter the move I made. Tea had said something about werewolves not sleeping, which was weird, but so far Ford definitely hadn’t seemed tired at all.

After I ate and cleaned up, I grabbed my shower caddy and glanced at the door, before glancing back at Ford.

I wanted another shower, now that I smelled like the wolf.

But... he didn’t look like he was going anywhere.

Or going to let me go anywhere.

“I need to shower, and I can’t bring you with me,” I told Ford. “Growl once for yes, and two for no, to show me you understand me.”

He growled once, and then again.

Shit.

I was learning wolf.

About damn time.

“You don’t want me to shower?” I checked.

He didn’t respond, so I tried again. “You don’t want me to leave you here?”

He growled once for *yes*.

Ah.

He just didn’t want me to ditch him.

That didn’t surprise me one bit, although I didn’t much like the situation it put me in.

Guess I’d be putting off the shower for another day or two.

Hopefully by then, Ford’s possessiveness would ease up.

I put my shower stuff away and sat back down at my desk.

“Tomorrow, I’m going to need you to go to classes with me,” I warned. “You’ll have to wait outside the buildings.”

He bared his fangs and gave a threatening growl.

“I’m going to take that as an, ‘I’ll think about it,’” I remarked.

The wolf scowled.

I worked on projects until I was falling asleep at my desk, and then I climbed slowly into bed and tugged my blankets over me.

WHEN MORNING CAME AROUND, something warm moved against my side.

I ignored it at first, until a brush of fur tickled the strip of skin between my t-shirt and the sleep shorts I’d put on sometime before I fell asleep.

“Ford,” I mumbled a complaint.

He licked my arm, and I shoved lightly at his head. He gave a rumbly laugh-like sound, and I shoved again, though the

second time it was much more playful.

“I didn’t tell you that you could sleep in my bed,” I reminded Ford, as the playing died down.

He gave me a doe-eyed look that made me roll my eyes. “My sympathy cannot be bought.”

He lowered his head, and I resisted the urge to scratch him behind his ears.

“I know you think I’m your mate, Ford. And from what Teagan says, there’s no way around that. But I’m still going to have to keep living my own life and making my own decisions.”

The wolf licked at my hand, making his barky-laugh noise when he got a few of my fingers before I jerked my hand away.

“I’ve got to get ready to go to class, Ford. And if you don’t want me to go, you’re going to have to bite me.”

The wolf pulled his head back and studied me.

He didn’t look opposed to the idea.

“I can’t keep missing classes, okay? I’ve spent the last few weeks obsessing over whether or not werewolves are real, and I’m... well, I’m behind. Or at least, not as ahead as I’d like to be. I’ve got scholarships I have to keep my grades up for, and I’m in this fast-grad program so I can’t risk getting behind. Which means you either have to go to class with me, or bite me.”

He nudged my neck with his nose, sniffing me.

I started to push him away, but he growled at me for it. The noise wasn’t threatening, but I did let him keep going.

He sniffed at my arm, then my armpit, then my chest.

I rolled my eyes at that one.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

He made a noncommittal noise, and I rolled my eyes at him when he resumed poking and prodding my body, sniffing me

all over.

I probably should've felt like a piece of meat, but I didn't. He was being gentle, and my fingers actually managed to bury themselves in his fur and scratch his head while he was sniffing.

That may have encouraged him to keep sniffing; I didn't really know.

But I didn't mind it, even if I really needed to get ready for class.

"Alright, it's time," I announced to the wolf. "Either bite me, or let's get ready and go."

He studied me again, for a long moment, before he resumed sniffing.

I groaned and dropped to my back on the bed. "Are you just going to act like I never—"

Sharp pain in my ankle cut me off.

I opened my mouth to let out a cry, but the pain vanished too quickly, and the cry died in my throat. Instead of pain, I started to feel... numb.

The tingling numbness spread up my body as Ford licked my ankle. I thought the damn thing might fall off; it was throbbing like hell, and though it didn't hurt, it didn't feel great, either.

My fingers gripped the fur on Ford's back as he turned around, licking my face with soft whines. I tried to push him away, but found that my arms wouldn't move.

I wasn't sure what was happening, until I heard an awful crack.

My eyes shut as my body started to break.

I recognized the sounds from the car ride with Ford; it had sounded painful when he shifted, even when I wasn't focused on him.

Ford continued to explore my skin—not the naughty bits—with his tongue. He stuck to my face, arms, and legs while the awful sounds and throbbing numbness continued to fill the air.

I felt myself growing distant, like my control over my own body was shrinking and lessening, until I was looking down at furry paws instead of arms.

That was a damned shocker, for sure.

I tried to scream and move away from the paws, but it didn't work.

So I tried to move away from Ford—who seemed to be shifting back to human form—but I couldn't move.

Teagan's words about us being completely separate from our animals and detached from them in every way but bodily suddenly made too much sense.

My wolf licked at the brown shoulder that appeared in front of us as Ford finished his transition. He groaned up at me, his eyes groggy.

“Shit,” he muttered, his fingers catching in my fur. “That wasn't long enough.”

What wasn't long enough?

His eyes closed, and he fell asleep.

NINE



I REALLY NEEDED to go to class, though.

And I knew it was a ridiculous thought, I knew I was being obsessive, but I was just trying to cling to whatever semblance of normalcy still existed.

I tried to mentally nudge the wolf to wake up Ford, so he could somehow convince her to shift back and we could go to my classes, but she didn't respond.

I decided our minds probably weren't connected at all. Hadn't Teagan said something like that?

Honestly, I couldn't remember. I should've listened better, or they should've printed out a guidebook for me or something.

Ford slept for a bit. I wasn't sure how long, because my wolf wasn't looking at the clock on Teagan's old desk, or at my phone. But it didn't feel like an insane amount of time had passed when he finally stirred. His fingers buried into my wolf's fur, and she snuggled up closer to him.

His eyes cracked open, and the dark brown orbs stared into mine. "Your classes," he murmured, his fingers digging into the wolf's fur as he looked sideways. "I think we can still make it."

We?

Was he going to go with me now?

I sure as hell couldn't go dressed in my *fur*.

His hands cupped my wolf's face, and his expression grew serious. "I need you to let your human have control for a while. She didn't have enough time to get used to the idea of changing, and there's a lot she doesn't know. My wolf wants to run with you soon, but right now Ebony needs to go to her classes so that this doesn't ruin her life."

Maybe *ruin her life* was a bit dramatic of a statement, but it seemed to do the trick.

My wolf whined and brushed her face against Ford's, which made him chuckle, before she sort of... retreated.

The awful cracks and crunches began again, but this time, they were associated with pain. Horrible, horrible pain.

I cried out silently as Ford held my wolf in his arms, not seeming concerned with her sharp claws or teeth as our body slowly broke and changed back. All I could feel or smell was *him* when I was finally human again.

Human, and panting, and sweating.

And... naked, in Ford's arms. My wolf seemed to have shucked the pajamas I'd had on at some point.

My sweaty face was pressed up against his neck, and holy shit, the man smelled *incredible*. Like some kind of deodorant or cologne I'd never smelled before, that made me want to just rub up against him and lick him and—

Wow, okay, yeah, my thoughts had gone right to sexy places.

After I shifted from wolf to human.

What the hell was up with that?

His hands remained respectfully against the back of my head and my lower back. My hair was up in a puff, though I was positive it had seen better days, and my body was...

Well, very naked.

And very pressed against every part of his also-very-naked body.

And he was clearly more interested in me than his polite touches seemed to insinuate.

Clearly.

I inhaled against his neck, knowing I needed to move my face off of his skin, but also knowing that as soon as I did, things would be awkward.

And this was... well, it was hot.

Not gonna lie, my downstairs was definitely liking the feel of Ford's body.

Which was crazy, because I didn't know him.

And he was a werewolf.

But according to Teagan, he was *my* werewolf. And even as a wolf, he had taken better care of me than Reed ever did. Which wasn't saying much, because Reed was a jackass, but... still.

I tried to be sneaky about sniffing Human Ford again, but he must've noticed because his hand slid slowly and carefully up my back a little. The touch was still plenty respectful; he was only touching my *back*, after all. And not my lower back, my upper back. It wasn't even sexy, or *shouldn't* have even been sexy, but I just couldn't help it.

I arched against him, and we both groaned as our naked bits met.

My body was hot and bothered and ready, so... why not use him to deal with the problem? Given his wolf's obsession with me, I didn't think he'd be against it.

I grabbed his erection, lined it up with my opening, and sank onto it.

The feral groan/snarl I got in response had me panting as I sat up, reaching my hand down to my most sensitive bits. I'd never been with a guy who actually got me off himself, but I didn't mind doing the extra work while he was—

Ford flipped me over, his erection still throbbing inside me as he stared down at me with hooded eyes. I found myself trapped, both of us half-pressed against the wall while he held my wrists up above my head.

“What are you doing?” he growled at me, his eyes wild.

Damn, I’d forgotten how gorgeous he was.

Was there any man on the freakin’ planet as attractive as this one?

“Fucking you,” I whispered back.

His eyes closed, his face tensing as I rocked my hips again. “I got that,” he said, his voice strained as he grabbed both my wrists with one hand, reaching down to pin my hips with the other.

I made a noise of complaint, and he growled again. “With your hand. What were you doing with your hand?”

The words came out in two chunks, repeated, and I could tell he was struggling just to get them out.

My face flushed. “Getting myself off.”

Another growl escaped him. “That’s my job.”

“Never had a guy do it for me before,” I panted, as his hands left my hip and skated down to the wet heat at my core.

His big, rough fingers brushed me there, and a whimper escaped me as I bucked against him.

He groaned again, the sound tortured.

I froze, my body quivering as his fingers rubbed my clit again, and something occurred to me.

I hadn’t made sure he wanted me.

“Do you want this? I didn’t mean to attack you. Shit, I should’ve asked, and I—”

“I want this.” His voice was raw, and rough, and so freakin’ sexy I almost lost it then and there.

What was this guy doing to me?

“Oh. Good.” I breathed, as he eased away from me slightly, tilting his head as he rubbed me.

Was he... watching?

A moan escaped me as the idea had me bucking hard, my hips jerking at their own pace as my body reached the edge.

I cried out softly as I shattered, the intensity of the orgasm stealing my breath and sending shockwaves down my entire body.

What the hell was that?

That was so damn much stronger than any orgasm I'd ever had before, and—

He pulled out with a rough breath, and spilled all over my abdomen.

I watched his face and body as he came, completely captivated by the massive, sexy man losing himself to pleasure.

He didn't know I was on birth control, I guess. But he also wasn't wearing a condom—something I had always insisted on previously. I guess I'd lost myself to the heat of the moment.

Ford collapsed beside me on the bed, trapping me between him and the wall. His breathing was staggered, and for the first time since I'd started dating Reed, I *liked* the way I affected a man.

Guess I should've broken things off with Reed ages ago, not that there was much to really break off.

Ford grabbed a stray piece of clothing, propping himself up on one of his arms, and my lips parted as I watched him clean my abdomen.

I'd *definitely* never had a guy clean up his own mess before.

“Did that really just happen?” I whispered, staring at the absolutely gorgeous piece of man-meat beside me.

He wasn't just man-meat, either; he was an author. He created fantasy worlds, and I had a few of his books on my shelf, now.

Which meant he was smart, along with sexy.

A hot nerd.

I'd always wanted a hot nerd.

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing,” he murmured, tossing the dirty clothing into the basket. It was across the room, but something about those gigantic muscles of his told me he’d made the basket. “Hi,” he said, his lips curving slightly as those intense eyes bore into me.

“Hi,” I whispered back. “I, uh, I’m on birth control. In case you were worried. You pulled out, but—”

“I wasn’t worried.” His hand smoothed over my abdomen.

I waited for more of an explanation, but it didn’t come.

“Should we get you to class?” he asked, his lips curving upward again.

Shit, he was hot when he smiled.

“Right. Yes. Um, you’re kind of trapping me, though.”

He glanced down at the place our bodies still met; he was propped up on his elbow. “Right.” He started to move, then paused. “Was it... did I...” His fingers moved a bit on my belly, and my body tightened.

Shit, he was going to make me horny again.

“Was it good?” he finally asked. “For you, I mean. It was incredible for me.”

Oh.

He was seriously asking me that? I’d never had anyone ask if I enjoyed myself; they just assumed that I had.

“It was the best sex of my life,” I said bluntly. “Thank you.”

His smile returned, bigger and sexier. “Any time.” His lips brushed my cheek, and he rolled off the bed.

If this was what having a werewolf mate was like, maybe I could get used to it.

I GOT DRESSED QUICKLY while Ford flipped through the pages of one of the books on my shelf; one of the ones that he hadn’t written. He was naked, and hot damn, I could hardly take my eyes off him, or his gigantic erection.

“I’ll be back later,” I told him, grabbing my backpack off the hook I’d put on the back of the door and unzipping it, so I could tuck my laptop inside.

“Your wolf probably won’t let you go without me,” he said, rubbing his arm a bit. “You can try it, but you’ll feel her try to shift and take over. My friends didn’t give you all of the details, but basically, now that my wolf’s done hunting you, yours is hunting me. It’s called The Chase.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “The what?”

“The Chase. She’s going to try to test me, to decide if she wants to mark me as hers, too,” he explained. “She’ll be really possessive and territorial until she’s made up her mind. And after too, if she chooses me. The possessive and territorial thing doesn’t really change.” His expression grew sheepish with that last revelation.

“Shit.” I brushed a hand over my hair, and scanned his naked body again.

Hot friggin’ damn.

“I don’t have any clothes for you to wear.”

He rubbed his bicep again. If he kept doing that, I was going to have to give in to my urge to rub the damn thing myself, but it would probably turn into some weird-ass petting thing and then I’d end up licking him, which would just make things awkward. He’d probably been with dozens of chicks before me, and I bet none of them had ever licked his *arm*.

“Do you have anything of Reed’s?” His eyes seemed to darken as he asked.

Interesting.

“No. Reed never came here; I’ve never let *any* guy here. This is my space.”

The darkness in his eyes eased a bit. “Good.”

I wasn’t sure whether I should be worried or offended by his “good” but decided just to let it go.

“I’ve got extra clothes in my car, but I’ll have to squeeze into something of yours to get out there.”

“I can just go grab them,” I said, then remembered the problem.

Right.

I couldn’t leave his side.

“I can try, at least,” I edited myself.

He shrugged as I opened the door to my room and stepped outside.

It started to shut, and this feeling possessed me—this feeling like something foreign was rising within me, about to consume me.

I made a shocked sound, and Ford opened the door, tugging me back into the room and into his arms. The door shut us in, and the foreign feeling eased slowly until it disappeared altogether. His chest was to my back, his arms wrapped around my upper, upper chest and belly. He was being careful not to hold my boobs, I think, but it put his gigantic muscles right in front of my mouth.

“Shit,” I mumbled into his bicep.

Then licked it.

Dammit.

“Did you just lick my arm?” he asked, his voice somewhere between surprised and amused.

“No,” I lied.

“You did.”

“I did,” I sighed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me right now. I’m ridiculously horny, and you smell incredible.”

He chuckled. “I feel the same way. You’ve got no idea how hard it was not to slide down your body and taste you a few minutes ago.

Shit.

Holy, holy shit.

Had he just casually mentioned going down on me? Like that was a normal thing for a guy to do? Because I'd been with a handful of guys—well, four—and none of them had thought that was anything less than disgusting. I'd kind of worried I smelled bad or something, even though I couldn't smell anything myself.

“We should get going. I don't want to be late,” I said, changing the subject awkwardly fast.

Yup, I was doing that.

Subject.

Change.

Because if he was going to talk about going down on me again, there wasn't a chance in hell I'd be able to stop myself from telling him to go for it.

He let go of me, and I stepped over to my dresser, digging around for the biggest sweatpants I had. I was tall for a girl, coming in at 5'11", but he was built like a damn freight train. It was hard to find guys taller than me, and while I wasn't completely against dating a shorter guy, most of them just weren't interested. And the ones that were, *I* hadn't been interested in.

So, yeah, it was hard to be a tall girl when it came to dating.

But not around Ford, apparently. The guy had to be at least 6'4" or 6'5". He made me feel dainty and sexy, which I liked a lot, clearly.

“This is not going to be comfortable for you,” I warned, handing him the sweats. “They'll be too tight to hide anything at all, really.”

I found myself not liking the idea of a bunch of other girls checking him out as we left the dorm, even though it was unavoidable. For a guy who looked like him... yeah, he probably got a *lot* of looks.

“Guess it's a good thing I've suddenly found myself extremely comfortable then,” he remarked, stepping into the pants.

It took a second for the words to make sense.

Oh.

Oh.

My face heated, but I went with sass. “Glad to know you found hooking up with me to be relaxing.” I slung my backpack over my shoulder and tugged the door open.

“That’s not what I meant.” He grabbed his keys out of the top drawer in my desk.

Right; I’d almost forgotten those.

I’d been planning on swapping my car for Ford’s the night before, but had forgotten about that until after I got to my place. We’d have to go back and get it later that day; I didn’t want it to get towed or anything.

He shut the dorm’s door, catching my wrist as he paused to lock it. I rarely locked it when I wasn’t there; everything I had that was really worth any money stayed with me.

“You grabbed my keys too?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“We’ll need to go get your car, so it doesn’t get towed.”

I blinked at him. “I just thought the same thing. You can’t read my mind or anything, can you?”

He cracked a small grin. “No. That would be a useful trick, though. Responsible minds just think alike, I guess.”

He let go of my arm, and we resumed walking down the hallway.

TEN



I FELT a rush of inexplicable anger every time a girl looked at him as we made our way down the stairs. When we got out to the grass area before the parking lot, I felt like a pent-up rage machine.

Some chick stared openly at him, and the rage grew hotter.

I accidentally took a step toward her, my fists clenching at my sides as if I knew how to throw a punch (which I didn't), and Ford picked me up around the waist and carried me toward the car like I was a much smaller, much lighter woman. He opened the door and set me on the back seat before sliding inside with me. He did *not* fit, but he didn't seem too bothered by that fact.

"What the hell was that?" I demanded, gesturing toward the girl who was no longer staring (luckily for her).

Ford blinked at me. "You were getting possessive, so I got you out of there. I didn't expect it to piss you off."

"I'm not pissed about you grabbing me. I'm pissed that I wanted to punch her for looking at you! What the hell is going on?!"

He relaxed a little, which didn't seem like the proper response to me being pissed and freaking out. "Do you remember when Teagan and Jesse were telling you about werewolves being possessive?"

I thought back to the many things Teagan had said. "I was panicking and kind of tuned it out," I admitted. "But the gist of it was that werewolves don't like to share."

“Right. They want to protect their territory. Your wolf considers me her territory, so in her mind, she’s got to protect me. You probably felt her trying to shift when you saw the girl looking at me, right?”

I thought back. “No.”

He blinked again. “No?”

“No, I didn’t feel that thing like I did when the door closed between us, I just wanted to punch her. I don’t think it was the wolf. I think it was... me.” I paused. “Shit.”

He put a hand on my knee. “It’s alright, Ebony. We’ll figure things out.”

When he said it in that sexy voice of his, I almost believed him.

“My professors won’t be thrilled to have you in class,” I warned. “Most of them don’t like students sitting in.”

“I’ll make something up.”

He was pretty good at that, as far as I could tell.

I shrugged. “Your funeral.”

He didn’t have a parking pass, so after he was dressed, we walked to my first class. I usually got there early so I had time to read over the material, but we barely made it by the time the lecture started. The professor gave Ford a suspicious look, but lectured as if he wasn’t invading the class.

I was actually kind of amused that he didn’t say anything about it.

He wasn’t the only one staring at Ford though. We had to sit right in the front because we were late, and I felt eyes on him throughout the entire lecture. He kept grabbing my hand or rubbing my knee every time that violent feeling washed over me, and once when it got really bad, he even nibbled on my finger.

That was surprisingly arousing, and definitely distracting.

I was relieved when my class ended, and we slipped out before the professor could call us on Ford’s presence.

We headed to a study room, where I usually went over my notes in between classes. There were only ever one or two other students in there, and sometimes I was alone. I was slightly worried that we'd be alone this time, and things would get... steamy, but another girl was in there, so we were all clear.

She was snacking on an apple and barely glanced at us, much to my relief.

Ford sat down next to me, looking at something on his phone as I opened my laptop back up. I tried to focus on my work, but got too curious about what he was doing and leaned over.

He turned the phone so I could see. It looked like... a calendar. "My book release schedule," he explained quietly. "I'm trying to figure out what to push."

I frowned. "Why do you have to push anything." He lifted an eyebrow at me and gestured between us.

"Oh. Well, I'm not dropping out of my classes," I warned.

"I know." His lips curved upward, his expression amused. "You didn't make me hunt long, so I might not need to change any of the dates. I'm just looking at the schedule, so I can decide," he explained.

Ah.

I guess that made sense.

I nodded, and went back to my studying.

The next class was as bad as the first.

I barely got anything done while the professor spoke, and spent most of the time with Ford's hand on my thigh, squeezing and kneading and otherwise distracting me from my possessiveness in the most infuriatingly sexual ways. I was so damn horny when the class ended that I almost told him we needed to find a closet in the break between my courses or go back home or something.

But I didn't.

Instead, we went back to the study room. That time, the only people in there were two guys that I often ran into in there, so I relaxed for the first time all day.

Ford, on the other hand, did *not* relax.

The guys waved at me as we sat down, and Ford's entire body went tense.

"Hey, Ebony. How's it going?" one of them asked me.

"Pretty good." I gave him a quick smile, putting my hand on Ford's thigh like he'd done to mine. He didn't relax, but he didn't attack anyone either. "This is my boyfriend, Ford." I introduced him, hoping that would help. They'd never met Reed or even heard of him as far as I was aware, so I knew they wouldn't bring him up.

"Hey, man. It must've taken some serious convincing to get this chick to go out with you. She's barely looked up from her assignments as long as we've known her," one of the guys joked.

Ford relaxed slightly, but I frowned.

They made it sound like I'd been uptight.

I wasn't uptight, I was just... serious about my education.

Which I guess could translate to uptight.

Dammit.

Ford chuckled. "You must be pretty damn boring, then."

A laugh escaped me, and the guys looked at us both with raised eyebrows.

They mumbled an excuse before looking back at their individual laptops with more focus than usual.

"Thanks," I murmured, as it occurred to me what he'd done.

He'd stood up for me.

Defended me, in a way that barely even came off as defending.

And that was... really damn sweet.

And sexy.

It was really too bad we weren't alone in the study room.

"We should grab some food," Ford told me, slipping his fingers between mine. "If you're not hungry yet, you will be soon."

I remembered Teagan saying that werewolves were always hungry—which wasn't a great sign for my bank account or stomach, considering I didn't have a kitchen and rarely cooked.

I agreed, and we headed out.

THERE WAS about an hour between that class and the next, during which I usually ate a salad I picked up from the grocery store on the way to my first class. But given everything that had happened, I didn't have a salad.

I still wasn't that hungry though.

But Ford probably was, considering he'd been a wolf for half a day or so, and hadn't had dinner.

"So... I'm pretty sure Jesse was furry longer than you were," I remarked, as we walked. If we got any funny looks, I didn't really care. Too much had changed recently for that.

"He was," Ford agreed. "Every wolf is different, but they'll hunt until they think their mate will accept the change well enough to survive it. I've heard of wolves hunting for more than a year before... but I've also heard of wolves only hunting for about a minute."

My eyebrows shot upward. "Damn."

He nodded. "Jesse was hunting for a few months, which is probably about average. I didn't expect my wolf to bite you so soon, but I can't say I'm mad he did. You're fine, and now I don't have to sleep for a week."

I blinked. "A week?"

"Hunting wolves don't sleep, so if someone's been hunting for a while, they'll catch up on sleep for a week or two after they wake up."

Well, that was crazy.

“Did you tell your friends that you bit me yet?” I asked him, eyeing him closely.

“No. I thought you’d want a say in when they find out, given how yesterday went.”

I nodded. That, I could appreciate. “Let’s give it a few days. I’m still not sure I understand all of this.” I gestured between us, and his head bobbed as we reached the car.

He grabbed the handle on the passenger door and tugged it open for me before I could get it myself. “Werewolf rule number one,” he said, feigning seriousness. “Let your mate take care of you.” He paused. “In every way.”

My face heated, and he winked at me before he shut the door.

Damn horny werewolf, making me all hot and bothered.

Was being this turned on by him even normal? I needed to ask Teagan, but I still wasn’t ready for that yet.

“So should I go get tested for STDs?” I asked him, as he buckled himself into the driver’s seat.

“Did you have unprotected sex with Reed?” He asked without a pause.

I wrinkled my nose. “No.”

“Then don’t bother.”

I lifted an eyebrow at him. “When was the last time you were tested?”

He pulled the car away from the curb. “Never.”

Both of my eyebrows lifted then. “Shit. We’re hosed.”

“I’ve never been with anyone else, Ebony,” he said.

The car went silent, tires on asphalt the only thing I could hear.

“What?” I finally asked, assuming I must’ve heard him wrong.

He flashed me a small grin. “Werewolves wait for our mates. The wolves in us don’t give us much of a say in that matter.”

Shit.

“You were a virgin?” My voice raised with the last word.

He nodded.

Guess there wasn't much of an explanation needed for that one.

I smacked a hand to my face and groaned. “And I just jumped you like a total freak. Hell.” My head crashed into the back of the headrest, and his hand landed on my thigh again.

I was starting to feel like it belonged there, which was a weird but not entirely unpleasant feeling.

“It was perfect, Ebb. You were so fucking sexy. I'm glad there was no first-time awkwardness, and I don't want you to feel weird about it,” he said bluntly.

“You're an author! You probably write all these romantic first-time sex scenes,” I protested.

He snorted. “My books don't have sex in them. If I'd tried to write a sex scene before today, it would've been a hot mess.”

“Still,” I complained. “You've at least read sexy books.”

“I have,” he agreed. “And what we did was still fucking perfect.”

I sighed again, but stopped arguing with him. It was clear I wouldn't win, and somehow, he'd gone and made me feel better about the whole thing.

“I want you to tell me when you're horny,” he warned. “I want to take care of you in that way too.”

Dammit.

Maybe he wasn't an author; maybe he was a freakin' fictional character. He was too perfect to be real.

I sighed. “I've been horny for the entire day, Ford. You're like some kind of aphrodisiac. It's ridiculous, and frustrating, and having already slept with you doesn't make things any easier.”

He rubbed my thigh. “I'm sorry.” His hand slid up to the button on my jeans, and my eyes widened as he undid them while we pulled up to the drive-through line.

His hand slid into my panties, and my eyes nearly burst from their sockets as his fingers found my clit.

I gripped the armrests hard as he brushed my most sensitive part lightly.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“Apologizing,” he said with a dark look, as he pulled up to the speaker.

He ordered a ton of food while his fingers played with me, his touch lazy at first. It grew faster, pausing altogether when we reached the window. He turned his entire body to the side to shield me from sight of the woman in the window, but I was panting too hard to even care.

Pulling out of the drive-through, he parked in the lot before resuming touching me.

I was so close and so sensitive that it wasn't long before I was clutching his arm to my chest, crying out as I shattered.

He cupped me for a few minutes as I came down from the high, and lifted me up onto his lap when the pleasure faded. His arms were around my back, holding me securely to his chest. His erection dug into my ass, but he made no move to act on it.

I buried my face in his neck before groaning, “Why are you so damn perfect? I'm trying to hate you.”

He chuckled. “I'm glad it's not working.” Yeah, I was too.

My stomach picked that moment to rumble, loudly.

ELEVEN



“LET’S GET YOU FED,” he said, lifting me back to the passenger seat.

“You’ve got to be hungry too,” I pointed out.

He shrugged. “I can wait. When you’re a new werewolf, your body starts to change, to build up the muscles and reserves it needs to survive the frequent shifts back and forth. You need it more than I do.”

“Still, you better have bought food for yourself too.”

His lips curved upward in a slight grin. “I did.”

Accepting the answer, I grabbed the bag and pulled out the first thing on the top. It smelled like a bacon burger... yum.

I demolished it quickly, and reached back into the bag before I noticed Ford watching me.

“What?” I asked him, as I unwrapped the second one.

“You’re beautiful,” he said simply.

I wiped at my face self-consciously.

Reed had definitely never said anything like that to me.

And he’d definitely never touched me like Ford just had, without expecting reciprocation. Hell, I didn’t think he’d ever touched me like that for more than thirty seconds, period.

“Eat something,” I told him, grabbing another burger out of the bag and handing it to him. He accepted it with an amused smirk, unwrapping it and taking a bite.

I hit the button to turn on the radio, and lifted my feet up on the dashboard just to mess with Ford.

“Easy,” he said, reaching over and lifting my feet off the dash. Instead of lowering them to the floor, he put them on his lap.

“Worried about your car?” I teased.

“Sure. Between you and Teagan, she’s been through a lot in the last few months.” He patted the steering wheel nostalgically.

My eyebrows lifted. “What did Teagan do?”

His expression grew annoyed. “Kissed me and then stole my car.”

My jaw dropped open. “She what?”

“It wasn’t—“ He mumbled a curse. “She realized that Jesse’s wolf was so territorial he would attack us if she kissed us, and she wanted to get away, so she kissed a couple of us. It was nothing intimate, but while we were trying to stop Jesse from killing each other, she drove off in my car. That was right before we put a collar on him so she could walk him around like a dog,” he explained.

Damn Teagan.

I mean, I understood wanting to escape, but kissing people to do it?

To be honest, I wasn’t really that upset... except that it meant she’d kissed Ford.

And he said werewolves waited for their mates.

“So Tea’s the only girl you’ve kissed.” My voice came out flatter than I wanted it to.

“Technically, I didn’t kiss her.”

Smooth.

I leaned over the seat, and he turned his head in time for our lips to collide. I didn’t bother with a boring little peck; I slid my tongue into his mouth and made love to the damn thing.

He answered stroke-for-stroke, his hands finding my hips and then my ass as he lifted me onto his lap.

It had been a long time since I made out with anyone; Reed always wanted to get right to the “good part”.

But I was starting to think he was just an idiot, because kissing Ford was better than having sex with Reed.

The way he held me, like I was both strong and delicate... The way he touched me, like he couldn't get enough... And the way he kissed me, like I was everything he'd ever dreamed...

Well, I was starting to understand why werewolves saved themselves for their mates. No one else could hold a damn candle.

I pulled away when my stomach growled again, our chests rising and falling rapidly against each other. Our eyes were locked, and his fingers reached up to trail over my cheekbone.

“Now you've really been kissed,” I whispered.

And now I'd been ruined for anyone else.

His thumb trailed over my cheek again as he stared at me.

My stomach rumbled again.

“I've got to stop distracting you from your food.” He scooped me up and set me on the passenger seat. “And we need to get to your next class.”

I glanced at the clock.

Shit, he was right.

We ate on the way back to the school, and his hand returned to my thigh as soon as we were sitting down in my next class.

BY THE TIME we parked in front of my dorm, I was starving, utterly exhausted, and could hardly remember anything my professors had said. I'd taken notes on my computer during most of the lectures, but I was distracted to the point where I wasn't sure even the notes could do anything for me.

“I’ll order food,” Ford told me, his hand still on my thigh.

“That would be good,” I murmured, my head leaning back against the seat as I made no move to get out. “We need to go get my car from the sandwich shop’s parking lot so no one tows it.”

“I don’t know if your wolf will let me out of your sight long enough to drive,” he said, his voice apologetic. “I can ask a few of my buddies to grab it. They wouldn’t have a problem with that.”

I grimaced.

Right... the pack.

“They don’t know that you’ve already shifted back, though.”

“Nope.”

“And I don’t want Teagan coming over here and getting all up in my business yet. I want to figure this shit out first.” I gestured between us. “And on that note... we should probably slow things down. I mean, don’t get me wrong, the sex was incredible. You’re hot, and amazing, but despite all of that, we just met. Logic tells me that we need to do the getting-to-know-you thing.”

Ford nodded. “Alright, we can do that.”

I waited for a “BUT” that I would’ve expected from a person with a dick, but it didn’t come.

Reed had always made me feel like shit when I wasn’t interested in sex, and he’d threaten to sleep with another chick to have his needs met. We had never been dating, but I wasn’t on board with sleeping with a guy who was in bed with other girls on other nights.

I’d only just ended things with Reed (though Tea was technically the one who’d done that) and I already felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Reed had dragged me down for far too long.

But Ford didn’t seem like he had any intentions of dragging me down; if anything, he seemed pretty damn set on making things easier for me.

You know, when he was in human form. The wolf was an entirely different beast.

“Are there any guys in your pack who would come and keep their mouths shut about it?” I checked. “I don’t want them talking about us while we figure things out.”

Ford gave me a wry grin. “Not likely. The pack doesn’t do secrets, unless they’re between mates.” He gestured between us.

Right.

Mates.

So weird.

“Alright.” I drummed my fingers on my thigh—the one he wasn’t touching. “What if I call Elliot from your phone and just ask him to pick up my car? He’ll assume you’re still in wolf form since I’m the one calling, and neither of us will have to lie to your pack.” I paused. “*Our* pack.”

I didn’t really consider them mine, but I was pretty sure that the first step to adjusting to this shit show was to act like I’d adjusted to it.

He gave me a slow grin. “Evil genius.”

“I know. If I wasn’t going to be a nurse, I’d probably have to take over the world,” I drawled.

He chuckled. “Alright. We have to pick your new phone up in about an hour; we can have him grab that too if you really want him to feel useful. He loves running errands for the pack.”

“Tell me you’re joking.”

Ford flashed me a bigger grin. “Nope. He likes to feel useful. He wouldn’t call it running errands, but it is what it is.”

I laughed, and Ford met my grin with his own.

Damn, he looked good when he was grinning. Even better than when he wasn’t grinning, and he was freakin’ hot when he wasn’t grinning.

I changed the subject before I found myself getting too attracted to him again. “When did you order me a new phone?”

“Earlier today. Had to make up for my wolf eating that damn thing somehow.”

I grimaced. “Your wolf’s a dick.”

“I noticed.”

My head leaned back against the seat. “If you really don’t think Elliot would mind, then it would be nice if he could pick up the car and phone. He’d have to bring someone else with him, though, and I don’t want to bother them.”

“They really won’t mind, Ebb. You’re part of the pack now, and we look out for each other.”

I nodded, holding my hand out for his phone. He gave it to me, and I glanced over at him. “Code?”

“Twelve-twelve. Everyone in the pack uses it for everything, in case some shit goes down and we need to get into each other’s houses or phones.”

Huh.

That sounded kind of nice, actually. Having someone to turn to when you needed them, trusting them that much... that was the kind of thing a girl could get used to.

I typed the code, and then pulled up his contacts and called Elliot.

Ford’s hand found mine, and my body warmed when our fingers threaded together.

“Hello?” Elliot answered on the second ring.

“Hi, Elliot. It’s Ebony.”

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Ehh, you know...” I trailed off.

He chuckled. “Yeah.”

“I need to ask for a favor.”

“Alright, shoot.” He didn’t hesitate for even a second.

“My car is still at the sandwich shop, and I don’t want it to get towed. I have Ford’s but I don’t want to swap it for mine, because I don’t want his to get towed either,” I explained.

“Oh, no problem. I’ll grab Rocco and we’ll pick it up for you. Can we grab you anything else while we’re out? Groceries or something?”

Wow, Elliot really might be the nicest guy I’d ever met.

I was officially feeling bad for my lie-by-omission. I’d have to come clean soon so my conscience cleared.

“I don’t have a fridge, so I’ll have to turn down the groceries, but it would be nice if you could pick up my new phone. It should be ready in about an hour.”

“Sure. Just text me the location, and I’ll grab it for ya. Thanks for letting us help you out with this stuff, Ebony. It means a lot to everyone.”

The words surprised me. “You’re the one doing me a favor. I should be thanking you.”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. See you soon.” He hung up the phone, and I looked at Ford.

“Your friends are probably the nicest people I’ve ever met.”

He shrugged. “We’re family; we look out for each other.”

“Still, it’s really sweet.” I handed his phone over. “Let’s order that food. I’m starving.”

His lips curved upward. “I already did. It’ll be here in ten.”

I groaned. “I could kiss you for that.”

He flashed me a smirk. “Damn straight you could.” I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t hide my smile.

TWELVE



WE HEADED UP THE STAIRS, our fingers still entwined. Ford had taken my backpack from me before we got out of the car, and I was too glad I wasn't the one carrying it to protest.

Back in my dorm, I grabbed a pair of my lounge clothes. I wasn't sure what we were going to do about clothes for Ford since he only had the pair from his car and an extra pair of sweats, but I figured he could just put on the sweats and wash the others every night if he wanted.

Obviously that wasn't a permanent solution, though. We'd need to go back to his place to get him some more clothes, or move some of my clothes to his place, or...

Yeah.

I didn't really know.

We needed to do something, and I wasn't sure what, yet.

Ford turned around while I changed, leaning up against a wall while he did. Guys were allowed to sleep over in my dorm, as long as they only stayed for a couple of nights in a row, and as long as I talked to my RA about it.

So, when I had my stretchiest leggings on and a gigantic, comfortable sweater, I dragged Ford over to her room and knocked on the door.

She answered a few minutes later, large headphones hanging around her neck and her hair falling in pieces out of her platinum blonde bun. "Hey, Ebony," she said, though her eyes

immediately went to Ford. “Damn. You’re huge.” She looked back at me. “New boyfriend?”

I nodded.

“You know the drill; he can stay six out of seven nights a week.”

I gave her a thumbs-up, and she waved me back down the hall.

“Get out of here, love birds. Have fun.”

The door promptly closed in our faces. With Del, that meant things had gone well.

We got back to my room just as the food delivery driver arrived, and Ford grabbed the food from him while I opened the door.

Inside the room, I turned some music on while we ate. It kept the silence from being awkward, and prevented me from feeling pressure to talk.

I stared at the pile of wrappers when I finally felt almost sated, a grimace twisting my face.

“Shit,” I muttered.

That was a damn lot of food. I’d downed five burgers from a place I knew wasn’t cheap, and two entire things of fries too.

“It’s normal,” Ford assured me. “Werewolves spend a lot on food. Don’t stress about it.”

I nodded, but still wasn’t comfortable with the mass amount I’d consumed.

“Here.” Ford handed me another burger.

I stared down at it; I could definitely still eat.

“Your wolf will be more difficult to deal with if you haven’t eaten enough,” he said, his voice gentler than it had been.

I sighed, and opened the next wrapper in defeat.

When I’d eaten two more of the damn things, the bag was finally empty and I finally felt full.

“I’ve got to pee, but guys aren’t allowed in the bathrooms,” I told Ford, biting my lip. “The guys have their own bathrooms on the other side of the floor.”

“We’ll just stop at both,” he said easily.

It was what we’d done during the day, and thankfully, my wolf hadn’t flipped out about the momentary separation yet.

But the bathrooms had always been quiet and mostly empty when we’d done that earlier; I wasn’t sure how she would take it if there were other people around.

Time was the only thing that would tell though, I guess.

We slipped out of my room, heading down the hallway to the left. I really needed a shower, but I was afraid of tempting the wolves in us with that kind of separation. I could shower quickly, but I’d still need five to ten minutes, which was a lot longer than we’d been separated so far.

Maybe I’d try later. I rarely saw anyone in the bathrooms later than one or two AM; people were still awake then, but quiet and mostly keeping to themselves.

Luckily our bathroom trip was uneventful, and when we got back to my room, I sat down at my desk with my laptop. I should’ve already been mostly finished with my studying for the day so I could get ahead a bit, but thanks to my lack of focus, I had barely begun.

Ford opened his laptop, sitting on the floor off to my side like it was the most normal thing in the world to do. I noticed him every time he moved, since he wasn’t too far away, and I kept getting distracted by him as he typed.

Was he writing a book?

Or writing something about me?

Or doing something else entirely?

My curiosity was going to drive me insane.

After half an hour or so, he got up.

I turned my head to look at him just in time to see him strip out of his jeans, his t-shirt already sitting on the edge of the

bed.

My mouth dried at the sight of his tight ass.

Shit.

He was so hot it shouldn't have even been freakin' legal.

And no underwear?

I guess it made sense given how often werewolves probably had to strip down and shift forms, but...

Damn.

I barely managed to turn my head back to my screen before Ford came back to sit down on the floor, where he'd been earlier.

"You can sit at the other desk if you want, you know," I remarked, not wanting him to feel obligated to sit by me. "I'm pretty sure my wolf would be fine since I'd still be able to hear you and whatnot."

Whatnot, meaning, feel his eyes on me while he stared. And smell him; was he supposed to smell so freakin' good?

"I'm good here," he murmured. Said eyes were definitely staring at me; I could feel them devouring me whole.

Maintaining a calm facade, I nodded. "Your ass, not mine."

He chuckled. "I can assure you, my ass is very much yours."

My face heated.

Hot damn, was he trying to kill me?

I tugged at the already-gigantic neckline of the soft gray sweater falling off one of my shoulders, exposing the crimson strap of my bra. Ford and I had done everything all out of order so far... and I loved that more than I should've.

It took me another ten minutes before I was finally focused on my homework. Though it wasn't my typical ultra-focus, I'd take what I could get given all that had happened in the last few days.

A knock at the door ten minutes after that distracted my already-distracted self, though.

I knew it had to be Elliot; he'd need to pick up my keys before he could get my car.

Ford stood when I did, and though his position was casual, there was an underlying tension beneath it that told me he shared more characteristics with that possessive wolf than I'd been assuming.

He peered out the peephole while I grabbed my keys, and stepped back behind the door when I slid past him and grabbed the doorknob. He made plenty of space for me when I opened up the door without looking out the peephole myself, which told me he wasn't worried about whoever he'd seen outside.

Elliot, I was sure.

And yup, I was right.

"Hi," I gave him and Rocco a small smile when I saw them on my doorstep.

"Hey," Elliot said, as both men grinned back. "Good to see you still in one piece."

I tucked my ankle behind the door, mentally cursing myself for not thinking of the bite mark there, which had healed up just as fast as Ford's wolf had bitten me.

"Surviving," I agreed, as I handed my keys over. "Thank you so much for doing this."

"Any time," Rocco said with a wink.

A soft growl came from the other side of the door, and I sighed.

Ford was definitely still the possessive wolf.

Both of his friends chuckled, and Rocco offered, "Don't worry, we get it."

"Yeah," I said, fiddling with the doorknob.

A male hand tugged my sweater up over my shoulder, and I would've smacked it if the damn thing hadn't been half-hidden behind the door.

“I would be surprised if Ford’s wolf hunts for very long, so try to text me once a day to let me know you’re alright. We’ll need to bring a lot of food and keep an eye on you while Ford catches up on sleep after The Hunt,” Elliot added.

I nodded. “I’ll try to do it around dinner time every night.”

“Cool. If I don’t get a text, I’m going to show up with pizza.” I smiled. “Pizza is always welcome, but I’ll text.”

He gave me a tentative grin. “Good. We have dinner as a pack almost every night, if you ever want to stop by for free food. We’ll even feed the wolf,” he winked.

Another quiet growl had me shooting a glare at the door, even though I obviously couldn’t see Ford through it.

“Alright, you better get out of here before my wolf eats you.” I waved them toward the stairs. “Thanks again.”

“No problem.”

The guys turned around, and I closed the door, spinning to glare at Ford.

He was staring at me, his chest rising and falling a bit fast. The way his shoulders lifted with every breath...

No, I was not getting distracted by his gorgeousness.

“What was that?” I gestured toward the door. “Those are your friends.”

His eyes closed, and I noticed that his jaw was clenched.

Shit.

“I know.” He gritted the word out.

I waited for more of an explanation, but it didn’t come for another minute.

Finally, he opened his eyes and said, “You’re mine.”

Some feminist part of me wanted me to put my hands on my hips and offer an, “OH HELL NO.”

But that wouldn’t exactly be productive, would it?

And even if it was, it wasn't true. I felt like I was his, and I definitely felt like he was mine, as insane as the whole thing was.

There was no point in denying that. If I felt it that strongly already, I was pretty sure the feeling would only get stronger. So instead of arguing, I just said, "Yeah, I am. So why are you worried about your friends talking to me?"

There was a moment of silence, and then his arms engulfed me in a fierce, possessive hug.

I wasn't entirely against being possessed by this man.

Hell, maybe I was for it.

"It's instinct," he murmured into my hair. "I'm sorry." And well... I understood.

"It's fine. I can try to keep it more brief next time," I said into his yummy bare chest.

Licking him again was becoming a real, solid temptation.

"No. I want you to be friends with them; you're just going to have to be patient with me." He paused. "And if I'm touching you while you talk to them, I'll feel more secure."

I guess that made sense, given the way I'd felt during my classes.

"Why didn't your wolf get territorial during my lectures though?" I checked.

"He did, I'm just more used to the feeling than you are. Touching you was my way of marking you as mine, which made it easier for both of us."

Damn.

My voice lowered. "This is all kind of overwhelming. I can hardly focus on anything but you."

His voice was gentle when he said, "It'll get easier when the mating process is complete. The wolves will settle a little."

Something told me "a little" was the key term there.

I sighed heavily. “Alright, I need to try to focus on school before I get hungry again.”

He chuckled softly. “I’ll order us more food soon.”

At least I wasn’t going to be the only one pounding food like it was going out of style.

Before he released me, he added in a low voice, “And Ebony…”

Something about the way his tone changed had my stomach tightening a bit.

“The only person I’ll ever eat, is you.”

That shouldn’t have been a turn-on. I knew it shouldn’t, but I couldn’t help the way my entire body flushed in response.

THIRTEEN



THE GUYS CAME BACK with my keys and phone half an hour later, and despite Ford's claim that he wanted me to be friends with them, I claimed tiredness and kept the exchange really brief.

I studied until I was too tired to focus, and then stared over at my bed for a minute.

It was the only one in the room with bedding, and I wasn't bitchy enough to make Ford sleep on the floor after I'd already jumped him earlier. The mattress on the loft bed above me was bare, since I had both to choose from that semester.

Leaning my head down a bit, I casually sniffed myself, trying to be sneaky about it.

I didn't smell bad; I did use deodorant and perfume and whatnot.

"You smell good," Ford told me.

Dammit, he'd noticed me sniffing my pits.

"I need to shower," I countered. "I may not smell bad, but we had sex, so I'm sure it's not all clean and fresh down there." I gestured to my lady bits, and he flashed me a carnal grin.

"I prefer it dirty."

I snorted, grabbing a pen off my desk and throwing it at him. He caught it, and made a show of sniffing it. "Now this smells good too."

I laughed. "Weirdo."

“I’m pretty sure the wolf thing already confirmed that.”

True.

“Alright.” I glanced at the clock. It was almost one AM. “Are you up for a little rule-breaking?”

“If you and a shower are involved, absolutely.”

I threw another pen at him, faster that time, and it hit him in the arm before falling to the ground. He flashed me a grin. “There’s the sass.”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of sass.” I stood, grabbing my shower stuff and sandals. “You’re going to have to wait outside the stall, where I can see at least your shoulder or something. If anyone comes by, you can duck into another stall. My wolf will probably survive it.”

I was just going to wash up quick and hope we didn’t have to test the theory... because I was thinking she would not be okay with the idea of Ford out of her sight while half-naked in an empty shower, where any random chick could just walk in and join him.

Oof.

Yeah, I wasn’t a fan of that idea, and I wasn’t even the bitchy one with sharp teeth.

“Alright,” he agreed.

I tossed my towel over my shoulder, leaving my hair up. It sure as hell wasn’t getting washed again so soon after I’d used Ford’s stuff on it, even though he had decent hair shit.

Opening the door a crack, I peered out into the hallway and checked for anyone else. I could hear some music coming from somewhere down the hall, but it sounded like it was from the guys’ part of the building, so I didn’t pay it too much attention.

After looking both ways twice, I grabbed his hand and rushed down the hallway, tugging him with me. He had no problem keeping up, obviously.

Ford waited outside while I stuck my head into the bathroom, and when I was sure the coast was clear, I dragged him in with me. We went to the stall in the furthest, darkest corner, where no one would see us immediately.

I pushed him lightly into the wall just outside the stall, then tossed my towel over his shoulder before stepping inside and tugging the curtain closed. There were small gaps on either side of the thing, and I could clearly see his shoulder through one of them, which calmed me a little.

My rule-following heart still pounded though.

I turned on the water, tugging my shower cap on, and didn't wait for the water to warm before I grabbed my soap and started to scrub myself clean. Since my pits were too hairy to ignore, I rushed through a shave.

I was rinsing shower gel off when I heard another girl's voice, and Ford started to move away from the curtain.

My entire body clenched as the wolf surged forward fiercely.

Not seeing another option (outside of shifting in the middle of a damn public bathroom), I reached through the curtain and grabbed Ford's arm, yanking him backward, into the shower with me.

My front collided with his back and I hissed, "Duck!"

He spun us so my back faced the curtain, and his lips met my shoulder.

My eyes shut as I felt his erection against my belly, through his now-soaked sweats.

Hot friggin' damn.

I was so tall that double-showers had only ever meant awkwardly-bumping private bits when the sexy part was over with; I'd never had a guy's dick digging into my stomach.

And there was something insanely hot about that.

Our bodies were flushed as hot water ran over both of us, his erection throbbing against me while I clung to him.

It was a long few minutes while two other girls used the facilities and took off their makeup and whatnot, and I didn't really breathe until I heard the door shut behind them.

Then, I melted against Ford's chest, a soft "phew," escaping me.

"Alright," I whispered. "Let's get out of here."

Ford's lips pressed to my shoulder, and he licked me there.

Like I'd done to him earlier, and been thinking about doing again.

And shit, it was even sexier than I'd imagined it.

He lifted his head, then, and shut off the water. After tugging the soaking wet towel off his shoulder, he wrapped it carefully around my back, lifting my arms so he could get it all the way around me.

The towel was so wet that I knew it was just going to make me drip even more, but considering we were on a coed floor, I couldn't just walk out naked. And my soaked clothes would feel even worse on than the towel did, so that wasn't an option.

Ford grabbed my stuff, and we snuck out of the bathroom. I peeked outside, and when it was all-clear, we ran back to my room together again.

When the door was closed behind us, I turned to look at Ford, and found him grinning.

I couldn't help it; I burst out laughing.

He laughed with me, and when my eyes were watering so badly thanks to the laughter that I staggered into him, he held me lightly to his chest.

My laughter faded, and then I was just hugging him.

My arms around his waist, his around my back, my wet towel sandwiched between us...

It wasn't sexy, but it was nice. Really, really nice.

I felt important.

Cherished.

Maybe even a little bit loved.

When I stepped back, away from him, it felt like something had changed between us. I ignored the feeling though.

“The floor is so wet,” I said, stepping over to my closet. “I only have one extra towel.”

Ford smirked. “I can air-dry.”

I snorted. “Sounds like a great way to ensure we take things slow.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t bite my smile back completely as I gestured for Ford to turn around.

My soaked towel went over the back of Teagan’s old desk chair, and I dried off quickly with the other one while trying hard not to watch Ford while he was stripping again.

It didn’t work.

I noticed.

Definitely, definitely noticed.

Dressed safely in a clean pair of sweats and a baggy t-shirt that couldn’t have flattered a damned model’s figure, I finally told Ford he could turn around and handed him the towel.

Instead of using it, he tossed it to the floor and stepped on it, trying to dry the carpet.

That was probably a good call; it was soaked.

And he was naked.

Very, very naked.

And his only other pants were a pair of jeans.

Yikes.

“I can sleep in my wolf form,” Ford told me, flashing me a grin. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” I lied.

I was totally worried.

The last time he'd shifted from wolf to human, I'd totally jumped him. Why would this time be any different?

I guess maybe I'd be ready for it, this time.

Besides that... sleeping in a bed with him would make things feel pretty damn serious. Probably more serious than I was ready for. I'd only spent the entire night with Reed a handful of times, and only after the rare round of sex when I'd actually orgasmed.

Looking back, Reed had treated me pretty shittily.

Why hadn't I realized that earlier?

I guess the fact that I wasn't alone had seemed to outweigh the fact that I deserved better. And deserving better was subjective, while not being alone was clearly defined.

Things did already feel serious between Reed and I, in a way, but they also still felt new and pretty surreal. I wasn't sure how long it would take for me to be certain that Ford wanted me for something other than the wolf-mate connection, but we were definitely already attracted to each other.

Attraction wouldn't last forever, though. At least not to the level I was feeling it in that moment. And when the attraction faded, we needed to have a real relationship developed. If we were really, permanently mates, there had to be more to our relationship than just sex.

Even if it was really, really good sex.

A relationship needed... friendship.

Laughter.

Inside jokes.

"Is this permanent for you?" I blurted, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by the thought that he might change his mind when the mating stage thing was over.

His expression was serious as he met my eyes. "There will never be anyone for me but you, Ebb. When a wolf chooses,

it's permanent. If yours rejects mine, you'll find love again, but for me, you're it."

Holy shit.

No wonder he was so possessive of me, and didn't want to leave my side.

"What if we fall out of love? Or change our minds?" I pressed.

"Werewolves don't change their minds. Even if we fell out of love, we'd always be in each other's lives to some extent. The wolves wouldn't allow anything else. There are some mates who choose to be friends instead of lovers though, and roommates instead of spouses."

Why anyone would choose that was beyond me.

But... Ford and I were permanent.

And I wanted to get used to that idea.

"You can sleep in your human form, if you want," I told him.

"But you'd have to wear your jeans."

He flashed me a small grin. "My wolf's itching to have the night with you, so I'll give him this one. Tomorrow, I might take you up on that though."

"Who says I'll offer it tomorrow?" I shot back.

His grin widened. "I'll convince you."

Something told me he most definitely would.

I DID a little more studying while we waited for one last meal to show up, and after we ate, Ford shifted forms. While it sounded painful, he didn't yell or cry or anything.

His wolf was wagging his tail like mad when he finished shifting. He hurried over, and rubbed up against me. I managed to get away from him long enough to climb into bed, and then he was in the bed with me, rolling over the top of me. It made me laugh, but when he finally stopped, I had to pick hair out of my mouth.

That was pretty gross, but the warmth and soft fur made up for it when he snuggled up with me.

Maybe I didn't have as big a problem with his wolf as I thought I did.

When morning came around, we quickly got dressed, eating yet another ordered meal before heading out to my classes. I felt bad Ford was spending so much money on me, but he assured me that I didn't need to worry about his finances, and that he wanted to feed me.

And since he was the reason I was a constantly-starving werewolf, I let him.

He attended all of my classes with me again, and I was just as distracted as the day before. We touched throughout every class though, so I survived.

WE FELL into a pattern over the next week. Food, classes, more food, more classes, more food, homework, more food, and then sleeping together while he was in wolf form. And it was nice, honestly. I felt bad that Ford was constantly washing and re-wearing the same clothes, but he swore he didn't mind. We flirted, and teased, but didn't do anything sexy even though we both clearly wanted to.

But then the ninth day came around...

And we walked into my dorm after my classes.

And found Reed draped across my bed.

Naked.

FOURTEEN



THERE WASN'T A PAUSE.

There wasn't time to grab Ford, or to kiss him, or to throw myself between him and Reed.

By the time I even thought to do something, Ford's fist was already breaking Reed's nose.

I knew it was broken; I heard the awful crunch.

"Get the fuck out of my girlfriend's room," Ford snarled, grabbing Reed by the arms. He hauled him into the hallway in about half a second and shoved the guy into a wall, hard.

Ford's fist reared back again, and I finally launched into action.

"Stop!" I shrieked, lunging between Ford and Reed.

I heard one of Ford's bones snap, and I knew he was going to shift then and there if I didn't do something about it.

He ripped me away from Reed, his face still twisted in a snarl, which this time was directed at me. Probably for getting between him and the naked dick in the hallway, I imagined.

Instead of trying to fight or argue with him, I grabbed him by the face and kissed him.

His body didn't relax, but he let me kiss him. And after a minute, he kissed me back.

When he seemed fractionally calmer, I pulled away and spun to face Reed.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded, feeling eyes on us from the hallway. “I ended things with you.”

Well, technically, Teagan had ended things with him.

But that wasn’t important.

“You’ve been ignoring my calls, so I figured it was time for a house call. Imagine my surprise when I found another guy’s clothes in your dresser,” Reed sneered.

The one pair of sweats?

“You went through my drawers?” I snarled, suddenly feeling my wolf surge toward the surface. Ford’s body quaked behind mine; he was fighting to keep control of his wolf too.

Mine had been quiet, letting me stay human, but apparently she was just as upset by this breach in our privacy as I was.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Reed shot back. “You’ve been ignoring me.”

Yes, I had ignored both of the texts he sent me. But it wasn’t a damned crime to ignore a douchebaggy text of,

Hey, come over so we can bang.

How had I ever been interested in having sex with that guy?

I mean, I had needs, sure, but he was shitty at meeting them anyway.

“That’s not a reason to break into a woman’s fucking room,” Ford growled.

“What’s going on out here?” Del asked, striding into the hallway.

A few people disappeared into their rooms, but I could see most of them still peeking out. No one wanted to miss the drama, even though most people had a decent fear of Del. She was nice, but she was very blunt. And when she was pissed, she wouldn’t hesitate to lay into you.

“This fucker broke into Ebony’s room while she was in class,” Ford said, his voice coming out sounding human—but pissed human.

“I didn’t break in. I have the spare key.” Reed folded his arms across his chest, unconcerned by the erection clearly on display.

He didn’t actually have a spare key,
did... Shit.

Yeah, he did have the spare key.

After Tea moved away, he became the person I was closest to. So even though he had never been in my room, he had a key, in case I ever lost mine or got locked out for any other reason.

“Ebony?” Del looked at me.

I bit my lip but nodded. “He has a key. But I broke up with him, and definitely didn’t give him permission to come in while I was gone and wait on my bed *naked*.”

“Alright, so this isn’t a call-the-cops situation.” Del held her hand out toward Reed, her other hand going to her hip. “Key.” He reluctantly took a step toward my door.

“I’ve got it,” Ford growled, striding into my room. He never left my line of sight, and came back with the key a few seconds later, tossing it to Del.

“Alright. Naked guy, put some pants on and scram or I’ll make that call to the police. Everyone else, delete the video of his bare ass and unimpressive cock so we can get on with our lives.” She waved her middle finger toward the hall on either side of us, casually flipping everyone off.

Doors shut and people vanished, though the sound of the gossiping immediately grew louder from behind said doors. Our walls were not thick.

Ford went back into my room and grabbed Reed’s clothes. When he came back out with them, he shoved them into the guy’s arms so violently that Reed legitimately made an “oof” sound.

Del followed me and Ford into my room while Reed swaggered down the hall with his clothes in his arms, calling

something to me about how much I'd miss his dick and how soon he expected me to show up at his door begging for sex.

I pretended not to hear, but the fury in Ford's eyes told me he hadn't missed it.

"Sorry girl, but there's not a chance in hell that doesn't end up on the internet." She gestured toward the hallway. "Is he going to be a reoccurring problem?"

"I don't think so?" I shrugged sort of helplessly. "I didn't think he'd show up here, though. I've never even let him in my room, despite the key thing."

She handed me the key back. "Next time, just give it to me." She glanced at Ford, waving her hand up by her nose. "Hope he doesn't press charges against you for the broken face."

"I'd like to see him try," Ford growled.

Shit, he was sounding really wolfy.

I grabbed his hand, but it was stiff in mine.

Was he mad at me for giving Reed a key?

"Hey, what did you ever figure out about that video?" Del changed the subject.

Shit.

I purposefully didn't glance at Ford, knowing she was talking about the werewolf video. "We don't know. June thinks it's real, but we don't have any proof. And when I brought it up to Teagan, she laughed so hard she cried. So I've given up." I shrugged, as if I was sad about my search's lack of results.

"Hmm. Well, even if they are real, it's probably better that the general public doesn't know. Who knows what kind of shit that could stir up in our already-messed-up world." She waved her hand through the air. "Anyway, gotta get back to my music. See you later. Try not to attack any more naked bastards, you two." She strode out of the room.

"We should hook her up with Rocco," I remarked.

Ford shot me a dark look.

“Not *hook her up*, hook her up. Not for sex. I just think they could be friends,” I said quickly. “They’ve got the same sense of humor, from what I’ve seen of Rocco.”

Granted, I hadn’t seen him a whole lot.

“You’re thinking about Rocco after that?” Ford threw a hand toward the hallway. “I almost killed that bastard, Ebb. He was waiting in here to fuck you. And you conveniently forgot to tell me you gave him a *key*.”

My defenses went up immediately. “Back the hell off, okay? I never lied to you. I gave him the key after a weak moment when I felt really damn alone because your friend abducted my roommate, and he was the closest thing I had to someone I trusted here.” I threw a hand toward the door, like he had. “And he deserved the broken nose and anything else you considered doing, so I really don’t give a damn about the fact that you nearly killed him.”

Ford paced the room a few times, his chest starting to rise and fall quickly as he paced. “My wolf—” he let out a ragged breath. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, okay?” I folded my arms over my chest. “It’s over.”

“The whole damn room smells like him,” Ford snarled.

“Then we’ll wash the sheets, and spend the night at your place,” I shot back.

He paused in his pacing. “You’d do that?”

“Of course I would; I’m not an unfeeling *bitch*. I don’t want to force you to sleep in a bed that smells like me and some other asshole.”

“I never said you were.” He crossed the room, and I just knew he was going to hug me or do something else that would make me forgive him instantly.

My hands went out in front of me, and he stopped a foot away. “Don’t touch me. I’m pissed at you, okay? You just verbally attacked me for doing absolutely nothing wrong, Ford. That’s not cool. I thought we were supposed to be a team, and that

was not you being a team player.” I gestured toward where he’d been standing.

His body tensed. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want an apology; I want you to not accuse me of lying and wanting to sleep with my bastard of an ex-hookup.”

He jerked his head in a nod. “I get it. I screwed up.”

“Do you?” I shook my head. “Give me my backpack.”

Ford’s eyes narrowed. “We’re not ending the argument like that, Ebb.”

“It’s not an argument. You yelled at me, and I defended myself, and if you want to talk about it anymore, you’re going to have to wait until I’ve had some time to cool off because right now I’m so damn pissed at you I can hardly think straight.”

His expression smoothed. “Fine.”

“Fine,” I shot back.

He handed my backpack over, and I set it on the desk chair a little harder than I needed to. After yanking the zipper to open it, I folded a clean outfit and some lounge clothes and tucked them into the bag.

Ford ripped the sheets off the bed. Maybe I should’ve been concerned with his angry outburst, but that wasn’t what had me worried. I knew without a question that he wouldn’t hurt me.

What worried me was that he didn’t trust me.

And yeah, we hadn’t been together that long. Logic told me that there were still going to be some rough patches. Or a lot of rough patches. But if he didn’t trust me, what was the point of any of it?

We were supposed to be together permanently, as friends at the very least. But I wanted us to be more. To be partners, in every way.

And we couldn’t do that if he was going to attack me for giving Reed a spare key in case I ever got locked out.

Would I do it again? Obviously not. But Ford didn't understand the level of loneliness I'd felt when Teagan left, or the shit-show that Reed and I had been.

That whole sex-friendship we'd had was just an awful trainwreck. He had treated me terribly, and I stayed because I was too lonely not to.

What did that say about me?

Nothing that would make Ford want to stay with me, that was for damn sure.

"Ready?" he asked me, his voice gruff as he grabbed his keys off the hook. We'd been taking his car everywhere; I think because he didn't want me to have to pay for gas, which was stupidly sweet.

"Let's go."

I followed him out to the car, my fingers gripping my backpack as my mind continued to run over all of the shit that Reed had said to me. All the times he'd talked me into having sex with him when I didn't want to, all the times he'd sent me douche-y texts and I'd gone running because I didn't want to lose him.

But I hadn't wanted to date him, so why had I been worried about losing him?

And why had I thought it was better to be with someone who treated me like shit than to be alone?

The questions disturbed me throughout our entire drive to Moon Ridge.

"Do you want me to park and shift?" Ford asked me, his voice still rough as we made it into town.

Though the question came out of the blue, I knew why he was asking; his friends still didn't know he had shifted back.

And that was a messed-up thing for me to ask of him in the first place; keeping it a secret from the people he loved.

What was wrong with me?

“No. You should tell your friends that your wolf’s not hunting me anymore.”

He nodded, and then remained silent until we pulled into his garage. As the door rolled shut, he turned to me, catching my hand on the buckle. “Wait,” he said abruptly.

I waited.

“I’m sorry, Ebb. I shouldn’t have yelled at you; that was a dick move.” His voice was low and raw. “I... panicked, I guess. The jealousy was brutal, but I never should’ve taken that out on you, and I’m sorry,” he repeated.

“Jealousy?” I asked, incredulously.

“Of course.” He looked surprised that I hadn’t realized he was jealous. “You slept with him dozens of times, if not more. That made me want to rip his damned throat out so much it disturbed me even before I met the guy, and finding him on your bed like that...” He shook his head almost violently. “Part of me expected you to be glad to see him.”

I bit my lip, turning my head to look out the window at absolutely nothing while my head spun.

Should I tell him about me and Reed? Open up to him? I was pretty sure I’d already told Ford that he was the best I’d ever had in bed, but things had stayed firmly PG since then. And... well, I had never told anyone about me and Reed. Even Teagan only knew the basics; if she knew everything about how he treated me, she would’ve probably called him and cussed him out or convinced me to stop seeing him already. She’d never liked him, but she would’ve hated him for me.

Which I guess is why I’d never told her.

“Reed wasn’t good to me, like you were. Are.” I pulled out my phone and pulled up my text thread with the guy, handing it to Ford. I hadn’t told him when Reed texted me earlier that week, because I figured it would hurt him or piss him off, and I didn’t want either of those things to happen.

Ford’s expression darkened as he scrolled through.

Reed had never insulted me or anything; he was just selfish, and treated me like an object. Which I had enabled him to do, by showing up when he told me to.

“I didn’t always want to go,” I told Ford, turning my attention back out of the window. “When he invited me. I’m sure you saw it in the texts. If I said I wasn’t feeling it, he’d threaten to sleep with someone else, and I’d feel guilty or hurt and I’d show up where and when he told me to. And the sex...” My throat swelled. “I don’t know how much you want to know. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“All of it,” Ford growled.

“It usually wasn’t great. It was a distraction that was fun sometimes, and I could usually get myself off, but he was always focused on himself. It was never about me, or us. It was about him, and the sex. It wasn’t like the time you and I were together, or what happened in the car. Those times were raw, and they felt real. You made it about me, and I felt... important. It was never like that with Reed. Not once. I was lonely, and he was something to fill the void. So don’t be jealous of him; what you and I have is already much more important to me.”

My voice was barely above a whisper, but I knew I had his full attention. Ford didn’t ever half-ass anything when it came to us.

Or even just *me*.

“Can I touch you now? Just on the knee?” he asked me, his voice low.

I nodded.

“Say the words, Ebony.”

“You can touch me however you want to right now, Ford.”

He clicked my seatbelt undone, and then lifted me out of the chair. Depositing me on his lap, he nestled me up against his chest and hugged me.

FIFTEEN



HIS ARMS ENGULFED ME, and it was just... sweet.

Not sexy, or hot in any way. He held me, his arms wrapped around me like I was fragile and he was worried I might break.

“I’m sorry, Ebony,” he said again, his voice softer this time.

“That Reed treated me like shit?” I whispered back, tears stinging my eyes.

I didn’t want to cry, and I hated that I nearly was.

“That I got angry at you. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that, and I wish I could take it back.”

“If we’re really going to be stuck together permanently, you’re going to get angry at me again,” I said quietly. “It’s okay to get angry, Ford. We’re not always going to agree. I’m not mad that you were pissed; I’m mad that you didn’t believe me when I told you it was over between me and Reed. Or I *was* mad, I guess. Now that we’ve talked, I know that you were just hurt, and you know that I’ll never consider going back to Reed as long as you’re around.”

“As long as I’m around? What the hell does that mean?”

I shrugged, dragging his arms up and down with the movement. “I know you said werewolves never change their minds about each other, but as far as I’m concerned, that’s still just a theory.”

Ford let out a slow breath. “Alright. We’re going to have dinner with the pack tonight, and I’m taking you to my parents’ place for dessert.”

“*What?*” My voice came out sounding shrill.

“You’re still so damn new to the way our wolves work; you just need more exposure. Our culture isn’t like what you’re used to. Everything revolves around the pack; the family. You’ll see.”

“Elliot made me a list about that stuff, but I don’t see why that would change anything,” I countered.

“That’s because you’ve never seen it in action, and my wolf bit you too damn quickly. You didn’t see him following you diligently without sleep for weeks on end, like he would’ve if you’d been less willing to change. I had insanely-powerful nesting urges for *months* because the magic connecting us kept telling me I needed to prepare for you, Ebony. This shit is real, and it’s not going anywhere. And I’m sorry if you’re not thrilled about it, but I’m making the executive decision here. We’re telling everyone that my wolf’s done hunting.”

I’d been waiting for him to decide that. As much as I liked that he was trying to ease me into everything and was willing to make his life about me, I wanted to know what he thought and what he wanted. I wanted to see who he really was, outside of the kindness and the letting-me-take-the-lead shit.

“Alright,” I agreed.

“Alright?” He sounded surprised.

“Sure. I’ve been waiting for you to stop following me around and start acting like a man,” I teased.

He gave me a playful growl, poking me in the side.

“Cheeky.” “That’s not news to you, is it?” I shot back.

He chuckled, his hand sliding over my ass in a way that made me want to arch against him. “No, it isn’t.”

I sat up, still wanting to take things slow like we’d been doing. I was having fun getting to know Ford. “What’s the next step, in your eyes?” I asked him. “What do you want to happen?”

He studied me for a moment, like he was trying to decide whether or not I really wanted an honest answer. Finally, he said, “I want you to move here, with me. Where I can cook for

you, and do your damned laundry, and where we don't have to sneak around to shower days after we already stink. I want you to consider this your home, and to consider me yours the same way I consider you mine. I want your family to be my family, and mine to be yours, and I want us to spend our lives together." His expression was completely, entirely serious.

"Alright, let's start with the moving in thing, and deal with the rest as it comes."

He chuckled. "You'll move in with me?"

"Half." I held up two fingers, a fraction apart. "How about we switch off, every other day? Then you can still do my laundry—though that seems like a weird thing for you to want to do for me—and have me in your space, and I can still have my own space too. And when I feel comfortable enough with what we are to call this my home, I'll move the rest of the way in."

"Done." He didn't hesitate.

Maybe that was more than he'd been hoping for.

"Alright, then it's settled." I leaned back, resting against part of the steering wheel with some of my weight. I was trying hard to make sure not to honk the horn; that would be awkward.

"Good. We've got to get to Rocco's place for dinner."

Right.

Dammit.

"I'll take the blame for keeping it a secret," Ford said, flashing me a smirk. "I'll tell them I wanted to keep you all to myself."

I snorted. "Teagan won't buy that, but you can try. It would probably be better if I just admit that I wasn't ready to make it official."

"Only if you're comfortable with that." His hand slid over the curve of my hip.

"Why not?" I shrugged. "They seem like they'd probably understand. And considering it sounds like it took Teagan

multiple months to come around to all of this, I think I'm winning."

He chuckled. "I'll be sure to rub that in Jesse's face." I laughed. "Alright, I'm hungry. Let's go."

He opened the door and set me outside, then slipped out himself. He grabbed my stuff from the back, then grabbed my hand and led me inside the house. After he set the bag on our kitchen table, we headed out through the front door.

Ford's fingers were laced through mine as we walked past Elliot's house, and then up to the front door of Rocco's. I reached a hand out to knock, but Ford grabbed the doorknob and opened the door up without a moment of hesitation.

"What the hell?" Teagan exclaimed, she and a few of the other guys leaning over her phone. "He's not hunting anymore?"

"He didn't kill the naked guy?" One of the men I didn't recognize raised his eyebrows.

Shit.

Were they watching the video of what had happened outside my dorm room?

"Surprise," Ford drawled.

All of their eyes lifted to ours.

I waited for their anger, but instead, grins burst out around the room.

"You're human!" Tea jumped up, hurrying across the room.

My wolf surged forward, and I stumbled out in front of Ford. Tea stopped a foot away, her expression growing mischievous. "Possessive, huh?"

"A little," I grumbled.

She laughed, and instead of hugging Ford, threw her arms around me.

The other guys came over, slapping Ford on the back and congratulating him. They greeted me too but didn't touch me, which was probably a good call.

Elliot and one of the other guys—Zed—cooked up burgers in the kitchen while Ford and I explained what had happened and how quickly his wolf had bitten me. Everyone seemed to think it was hilarious that I'd told him to bite me so soon after meeting, though I saw jealousy in a few of the other guy's eyes, and couldn't help but remember what I'd read in Ford's journal that first night.

The werewolves wanted mates so badly but they also didn't want to disrupt the humans' lives, which made the whole thing a mess for everyone involved.

But... I was kind of glad about the mess.

Though he had made my life much more complicated, Ford had also made it better already.

After we finished telling our story, the dinner turned into a get-to-know-you thing. We all asked questions and traded answers, and it was actually kind of fun.

I learned that all of the guys except Jesse and Ford had graduated with various degrees in the past year. Rocco and Elliot were high school teachers of history and math respectively—which seemed to fit them perfectly—and Zed was a chef. I'd already known that Jesse was a software engineer thanks to Teagan, but I also learned that Dax was an accountant. He was the quietest one of the group, but there was something steady about him that I liked immediately.

Though I tried to remember which guy had which of the pack roles on the sheet Elliot had written up for me, I couldn't recall who was what or what each of the roles were, which annoyed me. I'd decided to memorize the paper's contents ASAP before the dinner even ended.

We pigged out on brownies after dinner, which were made out of a box-mix since Zed apparently hated baking desserts. It was funny to see Teagan eating just as much as I did, and it made me feel less self-conscious about my own ridiculous hunger.

We all stayed and chatted until Tea and Jesse announced that they had homework and ducked out. Ford and I followed them

out, since I also had homework, and we walked back to Ford's place together.

"Have fun," Teagan called, as she and Jesse continued walking past us while we headed up the steps to Ford's porch. Their townhouse was on the end of the row, with Ford's sandwiched between theirs and Elliot's.

The door closed behind me and Ford, and he led me back to the garage. "Ready to meet my parents?"

I grimaced. "No."

He flashed me a grin. "Don't worry, they have no choice but to like you."

"Sorry, but I call bullshit on that. They might have no choice but to *pretend* to like me, but that won't make it any less awkward if they don't *actually* like me."

"They like everyone," he promised. "And after you meet them, you'll see what I mean about mates being permanent."

I wasn't thrilled about it but followed him out to the car.

Maybe it wouldn't be as awkward as I thought.

MY FEET TAPPED the floormat anxiously as stress rose uncomfortably in my chest. Breathing was starting to feel difficult.

Ford parked in front of a cute, moderate-sized house, and then looked over at me.

My stress must've been written on my face, because he picked me up and put me back on his lap, his arms wrapping around me and squeezing tight.

"It's going to be alright, Ebb," he murmured.

"Yup," I said, struggling to breathe as the panic surfaced. I was usually fairly good at avoiding my anxiety, but dammit, this was stressful. "I've never met a guy's parents before."

He squeezed me tighter. Something about the gentle pressure of the hug made me feel slightly better. "You're my mate,

Ebony. They're going to love you."

Maybe they would, but... maybe they wouldn't.

There wasn't a way of knowing, was there? And I was going to be stuck with them just as permanently as I was stuck with Ford and his pack. Our pack. I still wasn't sure whether or not I considered them mine too; everything was just sort of up in the air.

"Ebony." He repeated my name, his arms loosening from my body so he could cup my face in his hands. He tilted my head back, and our eyes met for a brief moment before he brushed his lips against mine.

I didn't hesitate before kissing him back.

Our lips were soft and light against each other, but I wanted more. I wanted him to distract me, and make me feel more secure or at ease. Or even just horny. Anything was better than anxious.

My tongue stroked his, and his fingers left my face, hitching around my thighs as he dragged me closer so we were pressed together tightly. My body loosened as we made out, and though his hands remained on my thighs, sliding over my ass a few times, I knew he wasn't going to pressure me into anything more than kissing.

And knowing that, I kissed him without holding back.

My fingers were on his face, on his shoulders. Under his shirt, skimming his abdomen, gripping his biceps. I explored every bit of skin within my reach, loving the way his tongue made love to mine without a single assumption or obligation.

His hands tightened on my thighs as we kissed and I touched him, but other than that, he kept them to himself. I got the feeling he was trying to be a gentleman, but I really just wanted him to enjoy touching me the way I was enjoying touching him.

Lights flickered off to our side, and though it took a minute for us to notice them, when I did, I pulled my swollen lips off of Ford's. His teeth scraped my neck before his lips sucked there lightly, and I shuddered.

Until my eyes collided with those of someone peeking out a window.

SIXTEEN



“SHIT.” I swore, scrambling off Ford and practically falling out of the car. He caught me, setting me steadily on my feet.

“What?” he stepped in front of me, his gaze scanning space.

“Your family saw us,” I hissed.

He relaxed. “They don’t care. They’ll probably congratulate me; everyone’s always worried a guy’s mate will decide she just wants to be friends with him.”

I scoffed. “Bullshit.”

He chuckled. “I’m serious. Everyone knows and accepts that it’s a possibility, but we all dread meeting the one woman we can be with only to have her not interested in us as anything more than a friend. So imagine my excitement on the first day I met you, when you not only found me attractive, but literally climbed up my body and—”

I slapped a hand over his mouth, my eyes jerking back to the window, which was now empty. He was grinning into my palm as I glared at him. “If you’d like your balls to remain attached to your body, don’t finish that sentence.”

Assuming he was suitably afraid (despite his lingering grin), I removed my hand from his mouth and wiped it on my jeans.

His hand wrapped around my waist, and he tugged me closer as he leaned his head down to my ear, and murmured, “Used me for her pleasure.”

My body flushed instantly. “I didn’t use you.”

“You did.” He licked my neck, then caught my earlobe between his teeth, making me shudder against him. His voice was barely a whisper as he said, “And it was fucking sexy. You can use me any damn time you want, Ebb. We’re taking things slow for your sake, not mine. If it were up to me, you’d be naked on my kitchen table while I devoured you right now.”

Holy hell...

I swallowed roughly as he straightened, his fingers sliding between mine. “Ready?”

How he managed to look unfazed by what he’d just said to me when I was shocked and horny as hell, I didn’t know.

But I didn’t ask, either... just let him lead me up to the door like he hadn’t just told me there was nothing he wanted more than to go down on me on his damn kitchen table while I used him for whatever the hell I wanted.

Ford didn’t knock on this door either, just twisted the handle and waltzed on in with his hand on mine. There was music playing in the kitchen, and I could hear people talking in the other room.

I glanced over at Ford, frowning. “I thought it was just going to be your parents here.”

He shrugged. “They might’ve invited my brothers.”

Brothers?

I had not been warned about brothers.

I wanted to stop and turn around, but it was too late. If I left after already walking into the house, I’d look like a big ole’ chicken.

So I tightened my grip on Ford’s hand and kept walking.

We found his parents in the living room, sitting cuddled up on a loveseat together. Across from them, on a larger couch, a guy who looked a hell of a lot like Ford sat with a pale, dark-haired girl with almond-shaped eyes on his lap. Another guy who looked like Ford sat on the other side of the couch, alone.

All five of them grinned at us, and Ford's mom waved us over. "Come on in! Ford, introduce us to your beautiful mate." My face heated.

Maybe meeting his parents wasn't so bad after all.

"This is Ebony," he said, lifting our connected hands. "Ebony, these are my parents, my bastardly older brothers, and my sister-in-law."

The mated brother grinned, and the girl on his lap swatted him on the arm before springing to her feet and coming over to offer me a hand. "Hi," she said, her smile soft. "I'm Elizabeth. The Welsh brothers can be pains in all of our asses, but they're some of the good ones."

"Hi," I smiled back, feeling pretty damn awkward. I was pretty sure she was the one who'd seen us making out in the car.

Ford's brothers waved from where they sat on the couch as everyone introduced themselves.

The only seat left (other than the one between his brothers) was a big, cushiony chair, so Ford sat down in it and I plopped down on his lap. I didn't fit quite as well on his lap as his brother's teeny mate fit on her man's lap, which I was slightly self-conscious about, but I kept my mouth shut about it.

And the way Ford's fingers slid just under the hem of my top, brushing slowly back and forth over the strip of skin on my back just above the waist of my jeans, distracted me from my self-consciousness pretty damn thoroughly.

"I can't believe how fast you came around to all of this," Elizabeth said, gesturing around the room. "Christian hunted me for almost five months before I'd finally wrapped my mind around the idea that we were going to be stuck together forever. It was another two months before my wolf decided she was in." She rolled her eyes, and I wasn't sure whether she was rolling them at herself, or me, or what.

"My wolf doesn't seem to be in a hurry either," I admitted with a shrug.

“Beta females are usually much slower about the process than beta males,” Ford’s mom agreed.

I glanced over, surprised that she’d brought the whole pack-organization thing into it.

“Betas are the pack’s guardians,” she explained, noticing that she had my full attention. “Beta males are more physically protective than anyone else in the pack, while the females are more emotionally protective. The beta men usually claim their mates quickly, so they can better protect them, while the females hold their hearts close to their chests and wait until they’re absolutely certain to make a move. I’ve never met a beta female whose wolf made her decision in less than three months.”

Three months?

That wasn’t that long.

“My wolf chased this hunk for almost a year,” she said, patting her husband on the leg.

Damn.

That was definitely longer than three months.

And... it made me feel better, knowing that my wolf wasn’t in a rush. That I had time to get to know Ford before we jumped into the next level of whatever we were.

Alright, I knew what we were.

Mates.

But she was right; I wanted to take my time getting there. Because even if we were living together, and sharing our lives, it would be a while before I really felt sure about Ford, and all of the werewolf stuff.

Playing along was one thing, but really being confident in calling it my life was a completely separate one.

“She tells us that all the time,” Ford’s unmated brother drawled. “She loves to remind me and Ford that we’ve got to be patient, since we’re betas.”

“What are you guys?” I asked Elizabeth, curious.

“Deltas.” She flashed me another smile.

I knew Dax was Ford’s pack’s delta, but other than that, I still couldn’t remember what Elliot had said about them.

“So Ebony, you’re in school?” Ford’s dad prodded. “What are you studying?”

I launched into an explanation about my nursing degree and the fast-grad program I was in, which led to everyone else (except Ford) sharing what they did for a living.

The evening went by quickly, and it wasn’t anywhere near as bad as I thought it would be. Elizabeth didn’t bring up the make-out session she’d witnessed, and Ford’s mom brought out a plate of what had to be the best cupcakes I’d ever tasted.

When we got back in the car, Ford pulled out of the driveway and turned the music on quietly. The drive back to his place was less than ten minutes, and his hand was on my thigh the whole drive.

He seemed to realize that I needed the time to go over my own thoughts, to figure out how I felt about all the werewolf stuff after the time we’d spent with his family.

“So?” he asked, as he turned the car off.

“It was nice. Dinner, and dessert, and second dessert.” He nodded, waiting for more of my thoughts I assumed.

“I don’t know, Ford. It’s just going to take me some time to get used to everything. I believe you about mates—Tea and Jesse are about as perfect for each other as it gets. I’ve never heard anyone argue like that or have as much fun doing it. And your parents are clearly deeply in love, despite being together for what, three decades?”

He nodded. “Thirty-five years.”

“My grandparents have been together even longer, and the way they look at each other... I don’t know, I’ve just never felt that way about anyone. And you and I can probably get there, but it’s not going to happen overnight. We’re mates, but relationships don’t just appear out of nowhere. And communication doesn’t just happen. We’ll have to work at it.

Which I'm willing to do, and I think you're willing to do too, but it's going to take some time."

Ford nodded. "You've got all the time in the world, Pretty Girl."

"Pretty Girl?" I tilted my head sideways, recognizing the nickname immediately—or half of it.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Not a fan?"

"That's what you were going to say to me in the sandwich shop? Before your wolf took over?"

"I may have been subtly checking you out every time I had dinner with Jesse."

I had noticed that he was always with Jesse when Teagan and I met up for dinner; I hadn't thought he was doing it on purpose, though. And I definitely hadn't thought it was because of me.

"I asked Teagan if you were single," I admitted. "More than once."

He chuckled. "I heard you. That was the first time I wished my wolf would let me date."

I bit back a smile. "See, we've got a good thing going. We'll just take it slow, and it'll work out."

"Mmhmm." His hand slid over my thigh lightly. "For the record, we can take it slow and still have sex though. If you want to. Because I'm definitely up for it."

I snorted. "I've created a monster."

He flashed me a grin, and I held up a hand. "Whatever you're about to say, don't say it."

"I was just going to say that I can think of bigger problems you could have than a mate who's perfectly willing to have sex in pretty much any given time or place."

I groaned. "That. That was what I didn't want you to say. We're taking things slow, Ford." I opened my door, stepping out of the car, and he followed my lead.

“What does that really mean, though?” He pressed. “Physically slow? Emotionally slow? Are we dating like humans, or just moving through the werewolf mating steps at a slow pace?”

Dating like humans was one of the options? Sign me the hell up for that one.

“We’re dating like humans,” I decided.

“Dating humans have sex,” he pointed out.

Dammit, I’d walked right into that one.

“Not all of them; that depends entirely on the humans,” I pointed out. “There are plenty of people in different cultures and religions who take the physical part of a relationship slowly. Mainstream media doesn’t want you to think that’s true, but it is.”

“I’m one of those people, Ebony. People in my culture save ourselves for mating.” He gestured around us while he held the back door open wide enough for me to slip into his house.

I opened my mouth to tell him that “werewolf” wasn’t a verifiable culture, but then closed it and decided not to say so. Who was I to determine whether or not werewolves had their own culture? They were definitely unique.

“Technically we haven’t finished mating until my wolf picks yours,” I pointed out.

“Technically the mating process won’t end until we’ve ridden out The Climax,” he countered.

“The Climax?” I frowned. “No one told me about that.”

“After your wolf claims mine, we’ll go into a period of sealing the mating. We’ll either have sex for multiple days straight or we’ll be in horrible pain for two weeks or so,” he explained. “My pack didn’t explain the mating process to you very well.”

“No kidding.” I sat down in one of the kitchen chairs. “At least we know we’ll have fun with it.”

He sat across from me. “Why are you so against it?”

He thought I was against sex?

Oh, hell no.

“I’m not against the sex. I love the sex. It’s just that it becomes overwhelming fast, and then that’ll be all either of us thinks about, and we’ll spend our spare time naked together instead of studying or working or being otherwise productive,” I explained.

He looked a little more understanding after that explanation.

“Alright, I get it. I’ll wait until you give me the all-clear.”

“You can kiss me, though. I’m not against that.” I bit my lip.

Okay, maybe I was really, really for that.

Maybe I was even really, really for having sex again.

Maybe I just needed to stop worrying about things and let everything happen the way it was going to happen between us. Even if we did get super horny and had a sexathon for a week without *The Climax* spurring us onward, eventually we would get tired of sex. And I wasn’t a pro or anything, but I was fairly confident that when we got tired of sex, all there would be left to do was spend time together doing more normal things.

So... maybe I just needed to loosen up.

Let go of some things.

Or maybe not.

I’d have to keep weighing my options before making my mind up about that one.

SEVENTEEN



FORD FOLLOWED me to the bathroom, and leaned up against the cabinets while I turned the water on. I felt my wolf rise up when he was out of my sight, and frowned as I stepped back to look at him.

He was staring at the wall of the shower with a strange expression on his face.

“Are you okay?” I checked.

“Hmm?” His head jerked toward me, and his lips curved upward. “I’m fine. Just had an idea, that’s all.” He tugged his phone out of his pocket, and I watched his thumbs fly over the keyboard while he stared down at the screen.

A book idea?

I didn’t want to interrupt him with the question, so I slid into the shower again and started to strip.

A cupboard door opened—Ford was grabbing something—and I froze as my wolf surged forward again, much harder than she had last time.

My knees gave out, and I crashed to the floor, my back cracking as she took over.

Ford was in the shower in a heartbeat, his hands smoothing over my face and hair after he lifted me carefully into his arms.

Tears dripped down my face as I remained draped over his lap, paralyzed by pain.

My body was consumed by fiery agony as it changed, Ford cradling me until all sensations faded and I stared through the eyes of my wolf.

“You did so good, Pretty Girl,” Ford murmured, his hand stroking my wolf’s head. I knew the words were directed to me, not the wolf. “And my wolf’s fighting me hard for control right now; he can’t wait to run with you.” Those words were for my wolf, obviously.

She licked Ford’s hand, nuzzling his neck before she turned and trotted down the stairs. I heard his quiet chuckle before the shower turned off, and then his footsteps were on the stairs.

My wolf sat down in front of the back door, her tail thumping against the floor while she waited for her mate. His fingers scratched her head lightly as he tugged the door open, letting her out.

She bounded out into the forest, not waiting for him to shift or anything.

Curiosity took hold in me while she ran, weaving through trees and jumping over logs. The few inches of snow on the ground didn’t seem to bother her at all.

I had no idea what she was doing, but when she rolled in the snow, it occurred to me that wolves had really good senses of smell.

Was she rolling to try to erase her smell, or fade it a bit?

Was she testing Ford’s wolf?

Or did she not want him to find her?

I was pretty sure she did want to be found; she hadn’t hesitated to rub up against him in the house.

The running had to be some part of her mating game. And since her part of the mating process was called The Chase, it didn’t seem like a stretch to imagine that she wanted him to actually physically chase her.

Though, I wasn’t sure how he would do that if she could really wipe her smell out with the snow.

She continued sprinting further into the forest, her movement energetic. I couldn't feel her emotions or anything, but the way she ran told me she was excited. And that made me feel connected to her, in a way. The fact that Ford and his wolf made her excited, or happy... well, he made me feel that way too. The man, at least. I had started coming around to the wolf while we were snuggling at night over the last few days, too.

As she kept running, she rolled in more snow, rubbed up against some kind of smelly bush, and plowed through a few different dangling branches that scratched us both. Interestingly enough, the only real sensation I got from her was pain. Everything else felt dull, like I could almost feel it but not completely.

I seriously doubted that Ford's wolf would ever catch her. We hadn't seen a damn sign of him.

After she'd been running for a while, she caught a whiff of a delicious smell, though, and I instantly recognized it as Ford's. Damn, he smelled good.

She ran harder, her heart pounding like a freight train as she sprinted faster.

How had Ford's wolf found her?

My curiosity had exploded into full-blown interest. I had so many questions to ask Ford about how our wolves tracked, how they could hunt each other. How good was their sense of smell? It had to be insanely strong if he had been able to smell her even after she rolled in the snow

Ford's smell grew stronger, until I could hear his paws crunching in the snow as he ran. She glanced over at him as he caught up to her, running at her side with his fur brushing hers. She licked at his muzzle, and he moved a bit so his side was pressed to hers as they ran together.

Though they slowed a little, they continued covering ground in the forest, their bodies almost constantly pressed together as they explored. Eventually, they stopped long enough to wrestle a bit and ended up snuggling on the ground, unbothered by the

snow beneath them as they licked each other and rubbed their faces together.

By the time they finally made their way back to Ford's townhouse, the sun was starting to rise.

I was relaxed when my wolf gave the control back to me, so even though the pain hit me, it was over faster than it had been the last time.

And the first thing I felt when the pain faded? Hunger.

I groaned as Ford picked me up, my hands pressed to my abdomen. The whole damn thing was one big, empty cramp.

Ford's lips brushed my forehead. "I'll feed you."

It was odd; being kissed on the forehead. I couldn't remember ever having anyone kiss me there before. My grandparents had kissed the top of my head, and my mom had kissed my cheek, but my forehead...

Apparently, I liked being kissed there.

Guess you learned something new every day.

Ford tugged his sliding glass back door open, stepping through and shutting it. The blissful heat of his house had me groaning again, for an entirely different reason. I hadn't realized how cold I was before, but damn. I'd been freezing.

Ford set me down on one of the chairs at his kitchen table, tucking my feet up onto the footrest before he slid the chair in and headed to the kitchen.

My cheek rested on the smooth wood of the table as I watched Ford's ass. He tugged the fridge open, peering inside for a moment before grabbing a few things and setting them on the counter.

I'm pretty sure I was drooling when he opened the freezer, pulling out a bunch more things. I'd frozen the majority of the fridge's contents before I left his place with his wolf, so I knew there was plenty to eat in there.

My arms wrapped around my chest when he walked back around the counter, giving me an eyeful of his gloriously

naked body.

Hot.

Damn.

If I hadn't been so hungry, I would've jumped him again.

My thighs pressed together and my arms tightened around my bare tits.

There was far too much gorgeous nudity in that room for me to be anything other than turned on.

I didn't say a word as I stared at Ford while he got out a couple of pans. Eggs were cracked into them, frozen vegetables chopped, cheese tossed in on top...

And I just stared.

My mind was so deep in the gutter it wasn't even funny.

Not so deep in the gutter that I didn't pick up the fork he handed me and immediately start shoveling eggs down my throat, though.

Ford refilled my plate every time I cleared it for at least the next half an hour, not uttering a word of complaint. His fingers brushed my shoulder, tugged lightly on my ear, trailed up my spine. He touched me differently every time he was near me, like he couldn't help himself.

And I was still so freakin' horny.

When I finally started to feel full, I glanced at the clock.

7:45 AM.

Still decently early, though I was completely exhausted thanks to my wolf's all-night run and cuddle-session.

I reached a hand up to touch my hair—yuck.

Dirt, mud, leaves... I didn't want to know what the hell was in it, but it definitely needed to be washed out sooner rather than later. It was Saturday, so we'd have the whole day—weekend, really—for studying and whatnot. Though, I had told Ford we'd be switching off days in my dorm and his place...

We could still go back to my dorm that afternoon or evening, I guessed. But we hadn't really spent the night at his place, given that we'd been in the forest.

So maybe I'd stay one extra day there.

That wouldn't be too much of a stretch on the schedule I'd suggested, right?

"So what's the plan?" Ford asked me, sitting on the chair beside mine with a massive plate of his own. It hadn't occurred to me that he wasn't eating while I was shoveling food in, but now that I thought about it, I realized he hadn't taken a single bite yet.

He'd fed me first, even though he had to be hungry too.

Aww.

"Why do you assume there's a plan?" I countered, setting my fork down in front of me and sliding my plate across the table to him, so he could finish off the rest of it.

Ford flashed me a smirk. "You always have a plan, or are in the process of making one."

Dammit, he already knew me too well.

"Well, I was planning on going back to my dorm this afternoon. But that was before we spent all night doing that." I gestured to the back door. "And we still haven't washed my sheets or anything, so... maybe we'll just stay here for the night, if that's okay with you."

"Of course." The side of his hand brushed mine.

"As far as the specifics go," I began, and noticed him smirking again. "Are you making fun of me?"

He chuckled. "Of course not. I think it's hot that you're always four steps ahead."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Sure you do."

"I'm serious, Ebb. Your brain is the sexiest thing about you, and given how sexy all of this is, that's saying a hell of a lot." He gestured to all of me.

“Well thanks then, I guess.”

“Alright, tell me the specifics.” He waved a hand, like he was beckoning me to go on.

“We’ve got to shower, obviously. Separately, but we’ll have to be in there together, for furry reasons.”

He nodded, resuming eating.

“And then I’ve got to study, for most of the day. But we could maybe do dinner with the pack again, if you want. That was fun last night.”

He nodded again, sipping at a glass of water before suggesting, “Or I could take you on a date.”

I blinked. “A date?”

“You want to date like humans, right? What do humans do for a first date? Dinner and a movie?”

“Um, I guess so. Usually those dinners are kind of boring, though. Or awkward.”

Ford lifted an eyebrow at me. “I don’t think dinner would be boring or awkward.”

“Probably not.”

“But if you want something more creative...” He swirled his water cup a bit, and I watched his face as the gears in his mind turned. “How about a painting night?”

“Painting?” I lifted an eyebrow. “Have you met me? You’re the creative one in this relationship.” I gestured between us.

His lips curved upward. “I don’t know how to paint, Ebb. You’re not supposed to be good at it. There’s a little place on Current Street; we would hang out and eat cheese and crackers and drink fancy shit while trying to recreate whatever painting they’ve got up on an easel today. I’ve heard good things about the place; it’s supposed to be fun.”

He had me at cheese, crackers, and drinking fancy shit.

“Alright, I’m in. But you aren’t allowed to laugh when my painting looks like a toddler’s rendition of it,” I warned.

He flashed me a grin. "Ditto."

EIGHTEEN



WHEN HE WAS DONE EATING, we headed up to the shower. Honestly, I was kind of nervous about the whole thing. Not because of my wolf taking over like last time; she hadn't made a peep since I shifted back to human form.

But because Ford and I were both very, very naked, and I was still insanely aware of that.

I'd kind of hoped I'd get used to Ford's body, that it would stop affecting me so damn much, but no luck.

I still wanted him.

Badly.

He walked ahead of me—I think he was trying to be polite so I didn't feel his eyes on my ass or anything—but watching his legs and butt as he climbed the stairs sure as hell didn't help anything.

I followed him into the shower, and when he turned the water on with a tap to the keypad thing, I abandoned all logic and ducked under one of the showerheads without giving the water time to warm up.

My body shuddered as the icy stream washed over my skin, and Ford's arms wrapped around me before he dragged me off to the side. "What are you doing?" he growled at me.

"Cooling off?" I said, teeth chattering. "Why the hell would you need to cool off?"

"Because I'm so damn horny I can't even think straight."

His arms pulled me tighter to his chest. “You know I can help you with that. I’d be *thrilled* to help you with that.”

I groaned and dropped my head to his shoulder. “That definitely doesn’t make me *less* horny.”

“How often were you with Reed?” he asked me. The words came out sounding a bit gruff, and I got the feeling he *wanted* the answer as much as he *didn’t* want the answer.

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“You were with the guy for a reason, Ebb. Even if I’m currently imagining his body in a casket.”

I snorted. “Sounds like a healthy train of thought.” “Healthier than actually committing murder.” Valid point.

“It doesn’t really matter, though. How often we were together—it doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means you’re used to having a certain amount of sex, and you’re going to feel the lack of it. And I don’t want you to feel that.”

Damn it all, why was I even arguing with him about this? “Fine. We were together at least twice a week, sometimes three or four times,” I grumbled into Ford’s shoulder.

“And how often do you use that vibrator I found in your underwear drawer?”

Shit.

“Ford,” I started, then stopped. “Alright, fine. I like sex, and it’s killing me to look at you without touching you and licking you.”

“Good.” He tilted my chin back and captured my lips with his, walking me backward as his tongue tangled with mine. We tasted like eggs and dirt, but somehow, the way his mouth collided with mine was still just *everything*.

My back hit the wall of the shower, and Ford caught my wrists one at a time, lifting one over my head, and then the other.

Though the tile was cool and smooth against my skin, my body was heating right up.

And... I didn't want to take things slow anymore.

Not physically, at least.

I hooked a leg around his hips, and he groaned into my mouth when his erection slid against my core. I moaned.

"We're not doing this again until you're sure you want it," he growled at me, even as his hands squeezed my tits, then raked down the curve of my hips. "Shit, Ebb."

"I'm sure," I breathed.

"You're not." His fingers slid around my thighs, and he lifted my second leg to his hip before tugging me up off the ground.

Then, he carried me out of the shower.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my breathing picking up with every step he took, the friction against my core crazy-intense.

"This." He set me on the bed, ignoring the fact that I was dirty and dripping. My legs hung off the ledge as he lightly pushed me to my back. Then, he slid down my body.

My heart dropped into my stomach when he kneeled between my thighs. "Ford."

His dark eyes met mine. "Tell me I can taste you, Pretty Girl." Holy shit.

"I'm dirty," I protested weakly.

That wicked glint was in his eyes again. "So am I."

Hot freakin' damn.

I wanted it.

So, so badly.

"Are you sure?" It was my final attempt at reasoning with him.

"Positive."

Well, then.

“Alright, I’m all yours. Touch me however you—ohh shit,” I hissed as his tongue found my clit.

No hesitation, no pause. He just parted my legs, and devoured me.

My fists clenched in the blankets, my body arching into his face as he made love to me with his mouth. When his fingers joined the party, I shattered, hard.

His tongue traced a trail up to my tits, not minding the dirt, and they latched onto my nipple while his fingers continued to work me, slowly at first, and then faster.

After I came on his hand, too, he picked up my boneless body and carried me back to the shower, ignoring his raging boner as my face buried into his neck, moaning my thanks.

He set me down on my feet, and I swayed for a minute as the hot water carried away the dirt. Dazed—I was definitely, definitely dazed.

And tired; now I was really feeling the effects of the all-night run.

I felt his erection against my hip as I leaned into him, and... I *wanted* to help him with it.

I’d never actually *wanted* to jerk a guy off before, but for Ford, I wanted to.

There was mild soap on one of the shelves, so I wormed my way out of his arms before I stepped over and pumped some into my hand.

Grabbing his wrist, I tugged him over to me. He stepped over, curiosity in his eyes, and said eyes grew hooded as I wrapped my hand around his erection.

He put a hand on the wall of the shower for support the first time I stroked him, his body tense and tightly-wound.

The idea that I could unwind him, relax him, brought me immense satisfaction.

“You can touch me,” I told him, sliding between him and the wall he was using for support. My hand remained around him,

trapped between us, and I slowly pumped up and down his length.

He hissed when I swiveled my hand, his free hand finding my tit, and he jerked his hips when I picked up speed.

He came quickly all over my belly, already primed from touching me, I guess.

And tasting me, maybe.

Crushing me to his chest, he held me tight as he leaned heavily on the shower wall.

“Fuck, Ebb,” he groaned into my still-disgusting hair. “You’re so damn incredible.”

I bit my lip, trying not to smile against his chest. “I try.”

His hand stroked slowly over my back. “Thank you.”

“I don’t want you hurting any more than you want me hurting,” I told him, my voice soft. “I know I haven’t been a werewolf long, but I still feel strongly about you.”

“Thank you.” His hand dipped down and squeezed my ass. “For the record, you can touch me like that any time you want.”

I laughed. “I know.”

“Good.” He chuckled again. “Alright, I need to get you cleaned up so you can get to studying.”

I nodded against his chest, though I was starting to feel pretty damn tired.

We washed up quickly, and then made a trip down to the garage, where he pulled a box containing a second desk identical to his off a shelf. He explained that he’d bought it when he’d redone his office the year before, just in case his mate had a desk job like his.

He set the box down in the middle of the office, and then we went back to the garage so he could grab the box that held the matching (though slightly smaller than his) chair.

I got comfortable in the hallway, where I could still see him, my laptop set up on the ground in front of me while I plopped down on my stomach with one of the bed's pillows under my chin for support.

Though I opened one of my courses' pages online, my gaze lingered on Ford, watching him set up the parts for the desk.

Brainy, handy, and sexy... he was the perfect package.

My eyelids grew heavy as I directed them back to my laptop's screen, trying to get my mind to focus. I only made it maybe five minutes before they closed completely, and I was out cold.

"EBB," Ford murmured, his hand stroking my arm lightly. The smell of coffee had me cracking my eyes open, and my gaze immediately landed on the cup in his hand.

I didn't drink coffee every day, but I did when I needed it. And this was definitely one of those days.

My exhaustion was heavy, but I sat up and reached for the cup.

Ford handed it over, his lips curved in a soft smile as I rubbed my eyes with one hand while lifting the coffee to my mouth with the other.

I took a sip then murmured, "How long was I out?"

"About three hours. I figured you'd need a little rest to focus on your schoolwork." He gestured to my laptop, which was closed and plugged in a few feet away from me, on the nightstand.

I wasn't in the hallway anymore... I was in his bed.

"You moved me?"

"Yup. Didn't want you waking up sore after sleeping on the ground."

That was sweet.

The bed was only wrinkled on one side, which told me he hadn't joined me beneath the blankets or anything. Not that I

was opposed to that—hell, I’d probably have decided to sleep away the entire day if he joined me in bed.

So it was a good thing he hadn’t, because I was still a little behind on my schoolwork.

“Thanks.” I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, my hand brushing his bicep. He’d put a shirt on after our shower, but even a shirt couldn’t hide those muscles.

“Now, come see your throne,” Ford said, giving me a half-bow as he swept his hand toward the office.

I snorted, but stood and dipped in my best attempt at a curtsy, still maintaining my hold on the coffee cup. “Thank you, kind sir.”

He flashed me a grin that could’ve melted a freakin’ iceberg, and grabbed my hand before leading me into the office.

The L-shaped desks fit with only a few feet between them, facing the same wall with the window smack in the middle of them. Ford had already set my stuff up on my desk, and I noticed that everything was positioned identically to the way it would’ve been on my desk back in my dorm.

I was a bit of a neat freak when it came to shit like that, so the fact that he’d noticed the exact angle I set my pens at made me feel slightly teary-eyed.

“It’s perfect,” I said.

“Good. Now, study.” He swatted my butt, making me laugh as I stepped over to the chair, pulling it out a bit.

When I sat down, he fussed over the back support on the chair (which was apparently adjustable) until he’d determined that it was set up perfectly. The rest of the office was already clean, so after I was settled, he got situated in his own seat.

My chair was uncomfortable despite its ergonomically-correctness, but I’d get used to that. I hoped.

I still only managed a grand total of four minutes of studying before my stomach growled.

Loudly.

I gave a defeated sigh, and Ford just chuckled. “I already ordered food. It’ll be here in ten minutes or so.”

Perfect.

He was the freakin’ perfect man.

“You’re the best,” I told him, completely honestly.

“I know.” He flashed me a quick grin before opening up his own laptop.

I didn’t get a whole lot done with hungry-brain going on, but I managed to get some studying before there was a knock on the door.

NINETEEN



WE ATE the best damn burritos on the planet before actually going back up the stairs and working. I'd heard Ford typing plenty during the days we'd spent in my dorm room, but he seemed faster now that we were back at his place. When I glanced over at him, he looked a lot more comfortable than he ever had writing on the floor next to me, or on Teagan's old desk, or on my bed.

I felt a little bad for making him stay with me for so long, but then again, he felt a little bad for turning me into a werewolf. So, I figured we were probably even.

Around dinner time, I decided to try my hand at cooking for the first time in ages. I'd helped my grandma in the kitchen during holidays, but that was pretty much it over the past year and a half or so, since I'd started college.

Ford, of course, came downstairs with me, and though I frequently felt his gaze on my back, his fingers were still flying over the keyboard while he sat at his kitchen table.

I danced and hummed along to some music while I chopped borderline-old potatoes and frozen sausage, throwing them in a massive pan with cheese, onions, and peas to make what my grandma had always called "goulash" even though it in no way resembled the actual goulash that normal people made.

My laptop was open off to the far side of the sink, too, and I was memorizing terms for one of my classes in-between stirrings, after I'd finished chopping everything. My hair was still up on top of my head, as it had been since our shower, and

I was crossing my fingers that it had dried looking decent since I hadn't put much effort in and had fallen asleep on the floor soon after washing it.

My baggy sweater was hanging off my shoulder, my black leggings hugging my curves beneath it as I leaned over the counter. Drumming my fingers, I closed my eyes and tried to silently recite the last few things I'd been memorizing.

Ford's typing paused, and when it didn't resume immediately, I opened my eyes and looked at him.

And of course, he was staring at me.

"What?" I stopped drumming my fingers. "Is something wrong with my hair?" I reached up to touch it.

"No. You're just really fucking gorgeous, that's all." He stared at me another minute before his attention dipped back down to his laptop. A moment later, the typing resumed.

My cheeks were warm as I turned back to the stove to stir everything again, his words running through my mind.

"You're just really fucking gorgeous, that's all."

Did he have to be so damn sweet to me?

I mean, I was glad he was.

Really glad.

But it made it really hard for me to want to take things slow when he was that adorable.

And sexy.

And... argh, I was overthinking things.

I really needed to figure out a way to focus on my work.

Focus... yes, that was what I really needed. Why was it so freakin' difficult?

And how was he focusing so well while I was struggling so badly?

Maybe I needed a plan of some sort.

I thought it over as I stirred the potatoes, my mind turning until I subconsciously noticed Ford's typing quiet again.

"What are you thinking so hard about in there?" Ford asked, from his chair at the table.

Was it tacky to admit I was thinking hard about how difficult he made it to focus on school?

I didn't know, and didn't really want to overthink that on top of everything else.

"I can't focus, and I can't figure out how to," I admitted. "And you're just over there, creating worlds or writing sex scenes or some shit."

He snorted. "I told you I don't write sex in my books. Or at least I didn't... I'm finding my imagination has leveled up in the last two weeks on that front."

My cheeks heated again at that.

"And I haven't been able to focus on what I was writing before we met," he admitted. "I started something new. It's been a long time since I've worked on a passion project, and it's fun."

"Fun?" I lifted an eyebrow at him. "Writing essays has always felt like ripping my own eyelashes out for me. I can't imagine writing being fun."

"It's not the writing, necessarily. It's the way the characters come to life on the pages, and the way the story tells itself. I never really know what's going to happen, so I feel like I'm putting a puzzle together with only a vague idea of the final outcome. And then when everything comes together, it's just... magical." He paused. "That's cheesy, I know."

"It's not cheesy." I was still stirring the damn goulash, even though I probably should've been leaving it alone at that point. "It's cool. Which one of your books should I start on?"

He barked out a laugh. "None."

My eyebrows lifted. "What? Why not?"

"You could hate them."

The words were surprisingly vulnerable, especially coming from the man who'd always been so confident, and sexy.

"Even if I did, I would never tell you that."

"Exactly." He gestured toward me. "Regardless of whether or not you like them, I'm going to feel like you hate them. It's hard to accept compliments about something like a book, because it's a bundle of ideas in this world you've created, and..."

He trailed off, then resumed. "It's hard to explain, but basically, even if you read them and enjoy them, at some point you'll mention one thing you didn't really like or something you expect to happen. And regardless about how I felt previous to whatever you said, it would change how I felt about the books entirely. It happens all the time, with everyone I meet. But with you, it'd be more significant, because your opinion carries all of the weight."

All of the weight?

I wasn't sure whether to be flattered, or to worry about abusing the power of my opinion carrying so much weight.

"Then you'll have to tell me everything," I warned. "We're talking in-depth summaries of everything that's happened in every book you've ever written."

He chuckled. "Alright, I can manage that."

"Good." I finally stopped stirring the goulash, stepping back over to my computer. "We can make it a nightly tradition or something."

"We'd have to share the bed in human form to do that."

I shrugged. "Then I guess we'll have to share the bed in human form."

His lips curved upward slightly. "What do you say we make a plan?"

A plan?

This man knew me way too well already.

"I'm listening."

“We’ll list out our week, and schedule times for things like pack dinners, and dates, and whatnot. We could even go as far as to schedule out the basic timeline of each day, if you want.”

“I want.”

His lips curved further. “And we can schedule in an hour a day for snuggling in bed before we fall asleep, sex optional. If you’re interested, we can fool around a bit before or after I tell you about my books. And if not, we’ll just talk.”

Ooh.

He was too damn clever for my good.

“What about what you want?”

“Oh, I’ll always want sex.” He didn’t even freakin’ hesitate.

And damn, that was hot.

“But I’ll be plenty satisfied just to hold you in my arms and talk to you without any distractions or interruptions,” he added.

Come on.

How was I supposed to turn that down?

“Write up a schedule and I’ll consider it,” I agreed.

He flashed me a full-on grin. “You can count on it.”

When he resumed typing, I was biting my lip hard to hide a smile.

WE MANAGED to clear the entire pan of goulash much more quickly than I expected, so I made a mental note to buy a bigger pan and to triple whatever I thought we’d need the next time I cooked. Ford didn’t seem offended in the slightest by the fact that we’d run out of food, and had assured me that he’d keep me fed.

It wasn’t like I questioned whether or not he’d feed me—the guy was practically a superhero on that front.

We worked for another hour before getting ready and then heading out for our date. I felt kind of bad that I didn't have a dress with me to change into, but Ford assured me that he wasn't at all offended by my slouchy sweater and leggings.

And considering he squeezed my ass and kissed my shoulder when he said it, I believed him.

WE PARKED in front of a cute little shop called Paint of Heart. Inside, the place was painted in calming colors, with art pieces lining the walls. There were various easels and stools spread around the room in pairs, and as far as I could see, four other couples were already painting.

One of the couples was fairly old, both with completely gray hair, and they sat near the front. What I could see of the woman's easel looked like a damned masterpiece.

Off to the side, there was a couple who looked somewhere around mine and Ford's age, grinning. Both of them had a few smears of paint on their arms, and he had a big blue streak up the side of his cheek.

Near the center of the room, two middle-aged couples sat together, all four of the people chatting as they worked on their paintings and the drinks set on stools between their easels.

I suddenly felt very, very out of place.

This was mine and Ford's first official date; we still didn't know each other all that well, and everyone else there was probably mated and crazy in-love and—

Ford's hand landed on the small of my back as he guided me to the front left set of easels. We would be far enough from everyone else that we'd have some semblance of privacy, and especially, far enough from the giggling, paint-speckled couple that I wouldn't be staring at them and comparing us to them.

Ultimately, we were still pretty close to the beginning of our relationship.

And even if we'd been years in, I didn't see us as the giggling, painting-each-other kind of couple.

Who really knew though; people changed a lot, and there was no predicting when those big changes would arise. I sure as hell hadn't expected Teagan to "adopt" Jesse and move out, but look at them.

Ford and I would figure our shit out; I was sure of that. We were already on the right track, and like I'd said, he already knew me better than he probably should've. It was only a matter of time before my wolf decided to chomp down on him, and then we'd be permanent.

And some part of me could hardly freakin' wait for that day.

But, the logical, realistic side of me knew it couldn't be rushed, and I was patient enough to follow through with it.

TWENTY



“YOU NEED MORE RED, DEAR,” an older woman explained to me, gesturing toward my paint brush as if she was going to take it. She was the owner, and had greeted us with smiles almost immediately after we’d sat down. Apparently she had spoken to Ford on the phone about booking us in earlier, so that was all taken care of.

It was really damn nice to have things taken care of by someone other than me.

“I know, I’m not sure how to make it look like that,” I explained, gesturing toward the painting Ford and I were trying to recreate. It was a tree whose leaves had changed colors for the fall, with leaves blowing in the wind and on the ground and whatnot. Mine was way too orange, but every time I tried to add more red, it got *too* red, and I had to add more orange.

But then it was too orange.

She patted me on the arm. “You’ll figure it out, dear.” I bit back a snort.

“I think she just called you a lost cause,” Ford murmured, cracking me a grin.

I mirrored his expression “I’d be pissed if she wasn’t completely accurate.”

My attention went back to my painting.

Definitely too orange.

Orange wasn't so bad though; it could've been worse.

Deciding to leave the orange the way it was, I cleaned my brush off and focused on trying to create clouds. I was definitely copying what Ford was doing to make his own clouds, but he didn't care. His painting wasn't much better than mine, but at least the colors were somewhat accurate.

The perfectionist in me wanted to rear her ugly head, but Ford and I were having so much fun that I decided to just shove that part of me down and enjoy what we were doing. It was kind of fun to forget about perfection for a few minutes and just create something. Though I loved that there was a correct and incorrect answer when it came to anatomy and chemistry and my other classes, it was nice to do something that I knew I couldn't truly do wrong.

Later, when the painting was done and looked shitty, I could throw the damned thing away.

As Ford had promised, there were all kinds of crackers and cheeses set out on a tray between our easels. We ate our way through the first tray, and a second, while we chatted and painted together. Ford told me stories about growing up with his brothers and packmates, and though I was hesitant at first, I opened up and told him about my mom. A lot of those memories were difficult ones, but after he got me started, he had me smiling about the happy memories I had of her.

It had been a long time since I focused on those happy memories, and it felt good to do so.

By the time we finished our paintings, the little shop was closing anyway. We thanked the couple running it and headed out, with Ford carefully carrying both of our canvases.

He spread a towel out in the trunk before setting them both down back there, and then we were off. After a quick stop at a drive through for even more food, we made it back to his place.

As he carried the canvases in, I felt an excited sort of nerves rushing through me. I knew I should probably study, but... well, I didn't want to.

I wanted to get a head start on Ford's schedule. To snuggle up with him and listen while he told me about his books, and, well, maybe to fool around a bit too. Ford was a massive distraction, but one I wasn't sure I wanted to shake.

Okay, fine. I knew I didn't want to shake him.

It was more a matter of knowing that I *needed* to shake him for the sake of my grades and scholarship, but not being able to. The wolf prevented it physically, but emotionally... well, emotionally, I couldn't even consider walking away from him.

And that level of attachment already was slightly alarming, but not so alarming that I was willing to do anything about it.

Not that there was even anything I *could* do about it.

"I've got a schedule for you to look at," Ford told me, grabbing his laptop off the kitchen table before taking my hand.

"Oh really?" I feigned shock. "You seemed so hesitant about the whole thing, I thought you'd take some time to think about it first."

He cracked a grin. "You're cute. Come on." He led me to the couch, sitting down in the middle of the large sectional and dragging me down with him. Our sides pressed together as he opened his laptop, his arm draping over my shoulder and pulling me in closer.

He pulled up a week's calendar, and my eyes scanned it quickly. He'd blocked out all of my classes, apparently remembering what times everything was at, as well as how long the breaks between them were.

He had scheduled every other weekday at "the townhouse" and "the dorm," never specifying either place as belonging to one of us in particular, which felt significant to me.

The weekends were all blocked out for the townhouse, and although it wasn't exactly what we'd discussed, I could see the reasoning behind it even without discussing it. We had more privacy at his place, as well as access to a kitchen, and showers, and laundry facilities.

Honestly, it would've made a lot more sense for us to just permanently move into the townhouse, but I just didn't feel ready to agree to that level of commitment yet. By keeping my dorm room and spending two or three days a week there, I would give myself time to warm up to the idea of moving and adjust to all of the recent changes.

So, the dorm was a necessary evil for the time being.

Each individual day had time blocked for work and studying, as well as meals, and driving on days we needed to drive. There would be a lot of that, but I hoped that within a few months, I'd feel more confident about moving in with him completely.

And maybe next semester, I could try to do what Teagan always did and book all of my classes back-to-back on two or three days a week.

That would mean less driving... and more time with Ford.

Both of which sounded pretty damn good to me.

At the end of the day, there was an hour on the schedule that was just labeled "snuggling". It seemed like too cute of a word for a big, buff guy like Ford, but he was plenty secure enough in his masculinity to use it. And I liked that there was no obligation attached to it; it was our time to do as much or as little as we wanted together.

"It looks perfect," I admitted, still scanning the individual boxes. He'd included everything from getting ready to cooking breakfast on the days we were home, which only confirmed my belief that I'd found the perfect man.

Or that he'd found me, I guess. In a sandwich shop, of all places.

I probably owed Teagan a thank you for that.

"Good." Ford shut the computer, setting it down on the couch.

"I'll print it out tomorrow. Let's go get ready for bed."

Something about the words made my body warm. They sounded so... comfortable. Intimate. I'd done a decent amount

of shit with guys before, but I'd never gotten ready for bed with one.

The few times I slept the whole night at Reed's house, there was no "getting ready for bed" together. He was always snoring by the time I squeezed into his bed with him, and I spent the night either squished against the wall or trying hard not to fall off the small dorm room bed.

I suddenly felt a little bitter that I'd wasted so much time with him.

But then again, if I'd been with someone who actually treated me right when I'd met Ford, things between us would've been much different.

And Ford's wolf probably would've killed whoever I was in love with... so yeah, it was better that I'd been with Reed. Though I guess the most ideal situation would've been me being single when we met.

Anyway, that didn't matter.

What mattered was that I was with Ford now, and that he respected me.

WE WENT through our night-time routines together. Ford hadn't really had much of a chance to follow his while he was living in my dorm room for the past week and a half, but I kept peeking over at him while I washed my face and threw on some moisturizer.

I hadn't seen a guy take care of his skin like that before, with a scrub, serum, and moisturizer similar to what I used. Most of what he used was either the same brand or the exact same products I'd been using since I was in high school.

It was weird that we shared the same taste in that sort of thing, but I guess it could've just been a coincidence.

Or... well, it could've been the whole mates thing.

It was hard to really know with that.

I pulled on my pajama shorts and top while he used the bathroom, and luckily my wolf didn't flip out the moment he was out of sight. She'd been silent throughout most of the day, and I wasn't sure whether to be glad or worried about that.

On one hand, I was glad she was letting me live in peace.

On the other hand, I was forever going to be worried that she'd just surge forward and take control again like she had in the shower.

My curiosity arose as I slipped between the sheets on Ford's bed. We'd gotten everything wet earlier, but it all seemed dry now. The sheets were so damn soft they felt like silk on my mostly-bare legs, and I legitimately groaned when I dragged the heavy blanket over me. It was fairly cold in the house, and the smooth weight felt like heaven.

My mind drifted back to my wolf after I got comfortable on the side of the bed closest to the window. When Ford stepped out of the bathroom, shutting the light off as he headed toward the closet, I asked, "Is there really no way to communicate with our wolves?"

"There's not. The Main Alphas have had people researching it and working with witches for nearly a century, but no one has figured out a way to alter the spell that made us what we are enough to allow us to communicate with our wolves. Part of the punishment was not being able to control the beasts inside us," he explained.

"I feel like I'm missing something."

Ford came out of the closet in nothing but a pair of boxer-briefs, and my mouth dried as he launched into an explanation about how werewolves were brought to be. It wasn't long; he didn't really know the details, but he finished the explanation as he sat down on the edge of the bed and tucked his legs under the blankets with mine.

I'd thought the blankets were comfortable, before, but they had nothing on Ford himself.

The man rolled me up halfway over his chest, and my head rested over his heart.

“Does that make sense?” he asked.

It took me longer than it should’ve to remember that I’d asked how werewolves came to exist.

“Yep.” I nodded a bit, just so I could rub my face over his chest.

The urge to lick Ford was returning, fast.

And the gist of his story was that there was magic involved. I was sure I’d need more details another time, but for now, my focus was on the man holding me.

His hands moved lightly over my arms and the exposed part of my back. I’d left my hair up, not wanting to deal with it, so it was probably tickling his face and neck like crazy, but he didn’t seem bothered by that.

“So you want me to tell you about one of my books, huh?” he asked me, his hands still moving lazily over my skin. It was like he just couldn’t resist touching me, and that made me feel really damn sexy.

“Yes.” I said, though I didn’t feel convinced. “But... first let’s just lay here for a minute. I can’t focus right now.”

He chuckled, and I couldn’t resist the urge anymore; I licked his pec.

His chuckle turned into a rumbly growl, and his fingers slid down to my ass. “Is laying here all you want to do?” he grabbed my butt over my pants, and I groaned.

Dammit, I was horny.

The fun we’d had at the painting place, and the casual intimacy of sharing a bed so comfortably... it was just too freakin’ hot.

“No,” I admitted with a sigh.

“Why do you sound upset about that?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t want to be the weird sex-obsessed chick. I want our relationship to have substance, too. And—”

“Ebb, if you knew how much I think about having sex with you, you sure as hell wouldn’t think you were weird.” His hand slid further down my ass, brushing my core and making me inhale sharply. “If you want me, you don’t need to be ashamed about it. That’s what I want, too.”

His fingers brushed me again, a little harder.

“Alright.” I slid further up his chest, propping myself up above him a little. “Have your way with me.”

The ear-splitting grin the words earned me was all man.

He flipped us over, and his erection rubbed against me for all of a second before he was halfway beneath the blankets, tugging my shorts down to my knees as he parted my legs.

He devoured me, bringing me to orgasm before he climbed back up my body and captured my lips with his. We were both breathing raggedly as he slid inside me, and after a few sexy minutes, we shattered together.

Afterward, he held me in his arms and told me the beginning of the first book he’d ever published. I fell asleep warm, and comfortable, and feeling so damn loved that there weren’t even words to describe it.

TWENTY-ONE



WE SPENT the entirety of the next day studying and exchanging steamy looks every chance we got. Whatever shame I'd felt about wanting him seemed to have vanished entirely.

Breakfast somehow turned into sex on the kitchen table (which I definitely cleaned afterward), lunch turned into couch sex, and dinner turned into actual, honest-to-goodness floor sex.

I'd never wanted to make love on the floor, but damn.

It had its perks.

Dessert turned into a game of eating off of each other's bodies, and I'm sure you can imagine how that ended.

When we drove back to my dorm the next morning, everything seemed... good.

Really good.

But then we went to my first class.

It was so damn tense. Whether or not anyone was actually staring at Ford, I didn't know. But I sure felt like every other woman in the room was staring at him, and it messed with me.

A lot.

My wolf made herself known multiple times throughout the day, but never made an appearance. I was insanely uncomfortable and on-edge, waiting for her to take over and attack the first chick she looked at, but she never did.

By the time we got back to Ford's car after my last class, I jumped him much like I had in my room that first day we met, needing to blow off some steam pronto.

We drove back to the dorm when I was slightly calmer, the car smelling like both of us. His fingers were wrapped securely around my upper thigh, and I clung to his arm, my anxiety strong despite the utter bliss he'd made me feel minutes earlier.

"How am I going to do this for months, Ford?" I whispered, as he parked the car.

"I'll be here the whole time," he murmured, plucking me off the seat and setting me on his lap. I hugged him fiercely, my body shaking a bit.

"She's going to kill someone."

"She won't. I'll make sure of it."

"She kept trying to come out and then stopping at the last minute, right before my body changed. I swear, she's going to take over and eat someone just for looking at you."

His arms tightened around me. "If she takes over, I'll get you out of there before she can hurt anyone."

"Teagan attacked some girl on campus though, didn't she?" I asked, my voice shaking a bit. "Isn't that why the video was made in the first place?" We'd talked about it at the pack dinner, though Tea hadn't given me any specifics.

"Yeah. But you know Teagan; she was constantly fighting her wolf. If you listen to yours, she won't have to do anything like that," he assured me.

"How do I listen to her?"

"She was trying to tell you that she was uncomfortable, right? That's why she kept trying to get out. So tomorrow we'll sit in the very back, where there won't be so many eyes on us." His arms remained securely around me, and we were still sitting in his car. "Letting her out more can help, too. The wolves don't seem to like being cooped up too long."

I couldn't blame them for that. I would hate being cooped up like that too.

And... well, sitting in the back was a good idea. Even if it didn't solve the problem completely, it could make the classes bearable.

"We'll have to get there earlier," I said.

"It'll save you studying time though, since you'll be able to focus better."

That was a good point.

I sighed, and nodded against his neck. "That's a good idea. Thanks, Ford."

"Of course." His lips brushed my forehead.

It occurred to me then that I'd never asked about his penname.

"What does the L stand for? On your books, your name is L.F. Welsh."

"Lewis. My first name's Lewis; Ford is my middle name." I frowned.

How had I not known that?

"Your family didn't even call you Lewis, though."

"It's Zed's last name, so it was a pain in my pack when we were kids. I decided to go by Ford when I was five or six, and after a while, my family went along with it. It fits me better, anyway."

I agreed with that.

"Alright, so what's the plan?" I asked him, sitting up a bit straighter.

"Study, eat, cuddle, then sleep," he said, ticking off the items on our schedule.

My lips curved upward at the easy way he listed them off. "I can't believe you're so comfortable calling it 'cuddling'."

He chuckled. "What else would I call it? Pillow talk? Fucking? If I wrote that on the schedule and someone else saw it, I'd

have to kill them.”

I laughed. “I guess cuddling is the most neutral term.”

“And if any of the guys teased me about it, we’d both know they were just jealous that I’ve got you while they’re still waiting to find their mate.” His fingers brushed my arm. “It was rough for all of us when Jesse found Teagan. We were all glad he found her, and glad that the pack was growing, but it hits you hard when your brother’s found his girl and you’re still living alone, hanging with the guys. Werewolves are driven to form families; none of us wants to be alone.”

My heart hurt for them.

“Well, at least you didn’t have to wait long for me. Jesse and Tea have only been together three or four months.”

“Mmhmm.” His lips brushed my forehead again. “And a lot of that time, he was in wolf form. I got lucky that my wolf didn’t hunt long.”

I guess he had. I was already wishing my wolf would finish chasing him so we could get on with our lives without being so connected at the hip.

“After The Chase is over, we’ll be able to be apart, right?”

“Yeah. Our wolves will take over and find each other if we’re apart for more than a day or two, though. Some wolves can make it a few days away from their mates without acting up, but... well, I don’t think my wolf will be one of them.

I didn’t think so either.

“That’s alright. It’s not exactly painful for me to be around you,” I teased him lightly.

He chuckled. “Really? And here I thought you were dying to get away from me.” He tickled the back of my neck with his knuckle, and I squirmed as a laugh burst from me. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” He dragged me back to his chest, holding me close. “Let’s go in and get to work. I’ll order the food.”

“Of course you will,” I sighed, turning my head to kiss him on the neck. “Because you’re perfect.”

“I’m far from perfect.”

“Agree to disagree on that one.” I licked his neck, and then nibbled at his skin there before picking my head up. “Alright, let’s do it.”

“Again? Already?” He flashed me a devious grin, and I knew he was teasing me.

I laughed and swatted him on the arm. “Jerk. You can’t make fun of me for being horny when I can feel your erection.”

“Touché.” He plopped a kiss on my cheek, still grinning. “Let’s go.”

We finally got out of the car, and I let him take my bag for me before we headed up the stairs. He liked to carry it, and I sure as hell didn’t mind letting him.

Our hands were intertwined, and they swung between us as we walked. It was cheesy, but I liked it anyway.

My fingers tightened on Ford’s when we passed a pair of girls who stared at him openly, and my jaw clenched when another girl clearly checked him out.

I tried to remind myself that I’d done the same thing before we were together, but it didn’t work.

My wolf still rose to the surface.

We started up the stairs, but she didn’t shrink back away, even when we were alone.

I felt my body start to change, and stumbled backward, nearly falling down the stairs. Ford caught me, scooping me up and then running up the last of the stairs three at a time.

He had me in my dorm and on my bed—still stripped of the sheets—before the first crack of my bones.

I bit back a cry as the pain assaulted me.

“Just breathe, Pretty Girl,” Ford murmured. “Don’t fight her. The more you fight her, the longer it’ll take and the more it’ll hurt. Let her take over; I’ll be right here the whole time.”

I forced myself to relax as much as I could while pain tore through me. By the time the shift finally ended, I was glad to be free of my body, just to be free of that pain.

When my wolf was in control again, she bit Ford's shirt, dragging him up onto the bare, rubbery mattress. He chuckled, climbing up obediently.

She used her nose to nudge him until his back was up against the wall, and then proceeded to lick his entire face, neck, and arms.

When her scent was all over him, she turned on the bed and plopped down on top of his lap, her eyes on the door.

His hands stroked her fur, and though he was quiet, he didn't seem upset or annoyed in anyway. Just relaxed, and at ease.

The wolf continued to stare at the door, and it finally occurred to me what she was doing.

Guarding him.

Like a hen, guarding her nest.

Never mind that she was his mate; she was totally sitting on him and keeping guard over him.

The attention of all those other women—whether real or imagined—must've really done a number on her.

I waited for her to calm down, but her hearing was better than mine. Every time a door closed in the hallway, or another girl laughed loudly enough for her to hear, or people walked past, she grew tense.

Ford continued to pet her, murmuring to her that he was hers and that he had no interest in any other woman, dragging her attention back to the marking on her ankle repeatedly.

She pretty much just ignored him, her focus remaining on the door.

After a few hours, Ford fell asleep despite his uncomfortable-seeming position, but it wasn't until late, late at night when the dorm was finally quiet enough that my wolf slept.

WHEN MORNING CAME AROUND, she was finally relaxed enough that Ford could talk her into shifting.

After the pain that accompanied the shift back, I collapsed on Ford's lap with a groan. My face was in his crotch, but sex was the last thing on my mind after that miserably-tense night.

"I think we're going to have to move to your place." I mumbled the words into his jeans.

"We can make this work if we need to," Ford told me, his hand petting my back the same way they'd stroked my wolf's fur.

"I can't," I said, my voice utterly miserable. "I barely slept, and didn't get a damn thing done. I'm going to fail my classes, and lose my scholarship, and get kicked from the program, Ford. And the money isn't the problem, but if I'm kicked from the program, the money won't matter, and—"

He slid down to a laying position and dragged me further into his arms. "I'm not going to let that happen. We're going to sit in the back of your classrooms today, and I'll be your damned drill sergeant if I have to until The Chase ends, alright? Trust me."

"I trust you," I moaned. "I just don't trust me."

"Well, get over that." His voice was light and playful. "We're going to make this happen, Ebb. You're not failing anything."

I sighed, but nodded. "Alright."

"Good, because it's time to get dressed and head to your first class."

Another groan escaped me, and he rubbed my back soothingly. "Fine," I sighed. "Let's go."

TWENTY-TWO



WE WERE EXACTLY fifteen minutes early for my class, and the room was almost completely empty when we walked in. Ford led me up to the very top row and into the furthest corner of the room.

When we sat down there, I immediately felt better. There were walls to both of my sides, and Ford was the only thing between me and them. We'd probably piss someone off by taking their seat, but it was better to piss someone off than to go wolf and eat them.

I pulled up the power point for the day's lecture while the room filled. Ford's hand remained on my leg as people settled in, and he only tensed slightly when a guy sat down next to me. I scooted a bit closer to Ford when that happened, and he relaxed for the most part.

My wolf didn't try to come out once.

Not one damn time.

Why hadn't I considered sitting in the back earlier?

I managed to focus for almost the entirety of the class, only getting distracted when Ford's fingers gripped my thigh harder because the guy next to me shifted positions a bit and was sort of leaning toward me.

Rather than going to my typical study room after the class ended, we headed right to my next class and sat down on a bench just a few feet from the door. It wasn't very comfortable, but we sat pressed close together and both managed to get a little work done. The moment the other class

cleared out of the room, we headed inside, and immediately went back up to the furthest corner of the room.

“This was such a good idea,” I whispered to Ford. “Thank you.”

“It’s the least I can do, considering I’m the reason we’re in this situation,” he said with a soft chuckle. “I should’ve come up with it sooner, but I’ve been distracted.”

“I’m pretty distracting,” I teased him.

“The most distracting.” He brushed a kiss on my forehead as the first people started to filter into the room.

THE REST of the day passed similarly, and when we returned to my dorm that night, I felt so relieved it wasn’t even funny. I’d actually learned things, which was a damned miracle after the way the last few weeks had gone.

Since I knew there wasn’t a chance my wolf could handle staying in the dorms like we’d planned, we started packing as soon as we got back after my final class.

While we packed, Ford called Elliot to see if he could come pick up my car to drive it to Moon Ridge, because my wolf still wasn’t letting Ford out of my sight. Elliot promised to grab Rocco and be there in half an hour. They got there right on time, *and* they brought extra boxes.

“Glad to see you’ve come to your senses about moving out of this tiny little room,” Rocco grinned, grabbing two of my suitcases and a duffel bag. Elliot grabbed the biggest suitcase and the big plastic storage bin full of my clothes.

“Eh. My wolf made the decision, really,” I admitted as I pulled the door open for them while Ford continued packing my boxes for me.

The man was meticulous about packing things in a particular way, and I was all for letting him do it however he wanted because it meant I wasn’t packing alone.

“I think Ford’s real love is organization,” Elliot teased, following Rocco out of the room. Ford flipped him off over his shoulder, and both other guys grinned. I bit back a smile of my own, because they were kind of right.

Rocco stopped in his tracks as a door closed down the hall, and he sniffed the air. “Do you smell that?”

My wolf immediately rose to the surface. “Smell what?”

“You must have some kind of air freshener going out here. It smells fucking incredible.”

My eyes went round.

Elliot sniffed. “I don’t smell anything.

“I don’t smell it either,” I agreed, shooting Ford a wide-eyed glance. The same thing had happened to Ford, when he smelled me in mine and Teagan’s room before we really met.

His lips curved upward, but he continued packing.

I figured we probably shouldn’t interfere if Rocco was smelling whichever girl he was going to mate with... even if I really, really wanted to.

“We’ll be back for more in a minute,” Rocco called behind him. “Everything should fit in the bed of Elliot’s truck.”

“Sounds good,” I called back, shutting the door behind them and spinning back toward Ford. “You smelled me before you realized we were mates, didn’t you?” I demanded.

“I did. But if there wasn’t a girl in the hallway, there’s no way to know whether or not that’s what Rocco was smelling. And if we tell him, he’ll probably go door-to-door looking for her. Which is just a bad idea overall.”

I sighed. “Fine. We have to tell him about it later, though. When we’re away from here, and we know he won’t go door-to-door immediately.”

Ford agreed, and that was that.

I STUDIED during the drive back to Moon Ridge, though I interrupted myself to talk to Ford a few times. He didn't interrupt me, but was cool to talk every time I asked him something or told him something. And as always, his hand lingered on my thigh every chance it got.

Elliot and Rocco helped us carry our boxes in, but Rocco ducked out to take a family call before we finished. When he didn't come back, we decided we'd have to tell him the next time we had dinner with the pack. Elliot left when the final box was inside, and we went on with our evening.

Ford helped me get everything organized and put away, and by the time we sat down at the kitchen table to eat dinner, his expression was so satisfied that I had to laugh.

"Glad to have me here?" I teased.

"You have no idea." He took my hand, lifting it to my lips and pressing a kiss to my knuckles.

We played footsie while we ate dinner, trading grins and laughs and sharing food. It was so freakin' nice.

The day was set up to be the best day I'd had in a long time... until Ford's phone rang.

We saw Elliot's name on the screen, but he ignored it, setting it on silent and flipping it over so the screen faced the table.

But then *my* phone rang, and I glanced down to see Elliot's name on my screen, too.

My stomach turned.

Elliot wouldn't have called me after Ford clearly ignored him... without good reason.

Ford grimaced and took my phone, lifting it to his ear. "Hello?"

His expression grew grave as Elliot spoke, and though I couldn't hear the exact words, I could make out the tone of his voice and it didn't sound good.

Ford's voice was low as he said, "We'll be there in ten." Then, he hung up the phone.

“What happened?”

“Rocco’s older brother’s been hunting a girl for about a year now.” Ford’s hand scrubbed over his face. “There was a car crash. His wolf bit her afterward, so she changed, and now her wolf’s rejected him.”

My heart clenched. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“It’s a death sentence. Wolves who have been rejected go insane, either quickly or over a number of years. Sometimes they live full, lonely lives. But other times...” His voice trailed off, and he shook his head roughly, standing up and taking my hand. “We’ve got to go. He’s going to need support.”

I wasn’t sure support from a couple in the mating process was going to help given the situation, but I didn’t know Rocco well enough to say that for sure.

Ford knew him better, so I trusted him, and stood too.

We headed out to Ford’s car, and he peeled out of the driveway so fast it almost scared me.

He slowed when we reached a larger residential area, but wove through the town like he knew every damn street. It occurred to me that he probably did, but we hadn’t talked much about our childhoods, so I didn’t really know.

When he parked in front of a normal-looking house, I slipped out of the car without waiting for him to open the door. We got out just as Teagan and Jesse pulled up behind us, parking too.

Teagan gave me a sad smile as Ford took my hand, and he and I headed inside without waiting for the other couple.

Ford didn’t bother knocking, just opened the door and led me into the house. I could hear yelling in the back, and braced myself for some kind of fight. I wasn’t great with confrontation, or arguments. I could stand my ground if I needed to, but usually I avoided the yelling and angry people because I wasn’t really like that.

But something told me there was no avoiding this.

Ford needed to be there for Rocco, and if this really was a death sentence for Rocco’s brother... well, then we definitely

couldn't leave. Even if Rocco didn't want to be around us or there was nothing we could do, having Ford there to show that we cared might mean something to him.

We walked straight through the house and into a fenceless back yard. There were other houses nearby, but none of them were insanely close to each other.

"I had no control," a guy who looked like Rocco, but with darker hair and broader shoulder snarled. They were clearly brothers. Rocco's brother had his arm draped over Rocco's shoulder, and was having a hard time remaining on his feet. The dark circles under his eyes looked like massive bruises, and even from across the yard, I could see that his expression was crazed. "I didn't make this fucking decision."

"He needs rest, James. Not a fight!" A middle-aged woman yelled. "Walk away."

A middle-aged man stormed past us, and Ford maneuvered me out of his path so quickly and smoothly that I wouldn't have realized he was protecting me if I hadn't been paying such close attention.

Rocco's mother threw her arms around both of her boys, hugging them fiercely.

"We'll get through this," she swore to them. "We'll figure something out, and we'll get through this."

Rocco's brother snarled, "There's no getting through losing your mate, mom. She was my whole fucking world."

My stomach clenched at the pure pain in his words.

Elliot jogged up to us, his face red and sweaty like he'd been running or something. The expression on his face was a grim one.

"Now she'll move on, and I'll be fucked for life," Rocco's brother snarled again, then staggered.

A group of five guys who all looked a few years older than us came jogging up. One of them carried a baby in a backpack thing over his chest, and they all looked as grim as Elliot.

Ford tucked me behind him, and I didn't have any desire to step around him so I could see what was happening better.

I did peek over his shoulder, though.

"Come on, Oscar. Let's get you home," one of the guys said, his hands outstretched. I noticed the guy with the baby hanging at the back of the group, and the casually protective way the others formed a barrier between him and Rocco's brother, whose name was apparently Oscar.

"I don't have a home," Oscar snarled. "She fucking left me, and she lives in my house. It's hers; it's not mine. I don't have a damned thing left to my name, or to live for."

"Cam and I have a spare room," the man at the front said, his voice calm as he stepped closer to Oscar. "And you're a part of our pack; you know you'll always be part of the family."

A feral snarl left Oscar's lips, and it didn't sound anywhere near human. Not that he was entirely human, anyway, but it sounded like a full-on wolf snarl.

"There's nothing for me without my mate. Nothing." His back snapped, and he collapsed. Rocco held him up, and the guy with the outstretched hands ducked under his other arm. He and Rocco lowered Oscar to the ground, dodging flying limbs as the man's body kicked and fought as it broke and reformed.

I watched in horror as Oscar howled, snarled, and cried, clearly in physical, mental, and emotional agony.

My fingers gripped Ford's biceps, and I held on for dear life.

"Shit," Teagan whispered, from where she stood behind Jesse. He was protecting her the same way Ford was protecting me, though she had to lean to the side to see past her mate.

His mom collapsed to her knees, her hands lifting to her mouth as she sobbed. Rocco kneeled beside her, his arms wrapping around her. She leaned on him for support, but I couldn't take my eyes off of the horror of Oscar's shift.

It didn't look... right.

He was bleeding; he shouldn't have been bleeding, should he?

When he finally made it fully into his wolf form, the wolf tilted his head back and let out a howl of so much pain that it felt like a knife in my belly.

My wolf surged to the surface, but Ford's arms reached behind him and he pulled me tighter to his back, holding my body against his.

The wolf took off into the forest, and I noticed that all five of the other guys who'd come running had shifted too, while Oscar was shifting. There was no blood on their fur, though.

Elliot walked over, wearing the carrier and baby of the guy from Oscar's pack. I hadn't noticed him slip away and take the other guy's baby, but it made sense that he had.

The pack was a family; they needed to be there for Oscar.

Rocco's mother wailed up at the sky, and her husband—James, I think—came back out of their house.

He dropped to his knees beside her, and pulled her into his arms, hugging her fiercely.

"My baby," she sobbed.

"He's going to be okay, right?" Teagan whispered.

Though I didn't know exactly what was going on, something told me that wasn't the case.

"No. He's not," Jesse said quietly.

Ford pulled me even tighter to his back.

Four women came running from the same direction Oscar's pack had earlier.

"Did he shift?" the one at the front asked, her expression grave.

"He did," Elliot said in a low voice.

Two of the women wiped at tears in their eyes. Another jogged over to Elliot, reaching for the baby, and they transferred him or her and the carrier over to the woman's chest instead of Elliot's.

“We’ll stay with Melody. The two of you, wait for the men to return,” one of the crying women said, to two of the others.

The girl with the baby and the one who had given the order jogged back in the direction they’d all come from.

“What happens now?” Teagan asked Jesse, her voice barely above a whisper.

“We wait for Oscar’s pack to return,” he murmured back.

“Without him.” Ford added quietly.

My throat swelled, and tears stung my eyes. I asked, “Just because her wolf rejected him?”

“A male wolf can only ever have one mate,” Ford said softly, finally releasing his grip on me just long enough to maneuver me around to the front of him. My back nestled to his chest as his arms went around me, holding me securely to him.

I was sure Ford and the other guys wanted to go over to Rocco to hug him or something, but at the moment, he needed to stay with his parents.

Elliot walked back to us, and the remaining two women sat down up against the house, off to the side a good distance from Rocco and his parents. Neither of them moved to go into the forest, and no one else did either.

Dax and Zed showed up soon afterward, with spare blankets and coats for the rest of us. Elliot brought a few of the coats to Rocco and his parents, who waited in the few inches of snow on the ground, clinging to each other.

The rest of our little pack all sat on the edge of the porch, quiet for most of the night, waiting with them though we maintained our distance.

Sometime early in the morning, Oscar’s pack emerged from the forest one by one.

I counted them.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Behind them, the forest was silent.

The wolves walked with their heads down, their movement slow and sad.

I shut my eyes as they started to shift back, and Ford pulled me closer, holding me tighter.

No one had given me or Teagan the details about what would happen in the forest, but I didn't want to know. She didn't ask, either.

One of the guys, the one who had talked to Oscar earlier with his hands raised, walked up to Rocco's family.

There was another terrible cry as his mother threw her arms around the other man, sobbing into his bare shoulder.

The way the packs were, everyone was close. They were family.

Rocco's dad hugged his mate and the other man fiercely, too, while Rocco just took a step back.

I could only see the side of his face, but he looked... stunned.

He clearly had known about whatever was going to happen to his brother in the forest, but I imagined that hearing the words was something else entirely.

We waited, our pack hovering closely together, as if everyone was trying to protect each other while fighting the urge to go and grab Rocco in a fierce hug.

More time passed before Rocco and his parents finally walked toward the house, Oscar's pack members heading back in the direction they'd arrived from.

Ford let go of me just long enough to hug Rocco and his parents. Then, his arm was around me again, holding me to him.

I wasn't sure whether I was supporting him or he was supporting me. Both, maybe.

His parents made their way into their home, and Rocco waited outside to talk to us.

"Thanks for staying, guys." He ran a hand through his messy blond hair. "I'm going to make sure my parents eat something and then crash on their couch."

"I'll call the school for you," Elliot said. "And I'll stop by your parents' pack's houses to let them know what happened.

"We'll bring food over," Ford added, firmly. "Don't worry about cooking."

He nodded. "Thanks." He got choked up for a minute, and scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand.

The other guys all moved toward him, closing in on him for a massive group hug. I'd never been a part of a group so big or so close, but it felt... special.

Important.

"We'll be back with food in twenty," Ford told Rocco, his voice leaving no room for argument.

Rocco nodded, visibly struggling to hold back tears.

After one last round of hugs, we all parted.

TWENTY-THREE



FORD'S EXPRESSION was stony as he drove, his left foot tapping the floor of the car. I wasn't bothered at him; Rocco's brother had probably been a friend to him too, if not a brother. But I didn't know what to say or do to help him, so I just gripped his hand tightly in mine and remained quiet.

We stopped at one of those drive-through places with healthy food, and I didn't say a word when Ford ordered at least three times more food than even three werewolves could eat. He set it all on the back seat, maintaining his grip on my hand.

He pulled away from the drive-through and parked in one of the spaces, letting go of my hand as he leaned over the steering wheel, his breathing hitching as he swallowed roughly.

Instinct told me to ask him if he was okay, even though I knew it was a stupid question and he was clearly *not* okay.

"What can I do?" I whispered instead.

"I don't know." His voice was gruff, his head lowering to the steering wheel. "Fuck it all."

I put a hand on his thigh, knowing he wasn't cursing at me. Even if he was, I could take it.

"He didn't deserve that," Ford said, his words low. "Usually the guys who get rejected are the bastards. The ones who abuse their mates, physically or verbally. That's not... it shouldn't have happened. There's no fucking *reason* for it."

He flung the car door open, ripping his seatbelt off before pacing in the parking lot.

I remained where I was for a minute, watching him. His hands were on his head, buried in his hair while his eyes faced the sky, his expression twisted. I didn't know how to help him, and there was no way to take away his pain.

But... when I was hurting, he'd always hugged me and held me. And when he held me, even though the pain remained, it was easier to carry.

I unbuckled my seat belt and got out of the car, walking around to the other side. My door stayed open, and the assload of food inside the car was getting cold, but I didn't give a shit about that.

Stepping up to Ford, I went up on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around him. He stiffened for a long, long moment, so I squeezed him tighter.

His arms finally locked around me, and he turned me, pressing me into the car as he hugged me fiercely. "I'm a bastard for even thinking about it right now, but what if your wolf rejects me?" He whispered into my neck, his voice harsh. "My pack would have to..." He trailed off, swallowing hard. "Fuck."

Though my natural inclination was to worry about it with him, I knew that wasn't what Ford needed. Shoving my own fear aside, I said firmly, "My wolf isn't going to reject you; she's just as obsessed with you as I am. We don't know what was going on between the two of them, but they're not us. And we're fine. Right now, we're just going to stick together and take care of Rocco, okay?"

He nodded against my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. No one can be strong all of the time, Ford. We all need other people."

He held me tighter. "Thanks, Ebb."

"Of course." I squeezed him.

"You're going to miss your classes," he said, his voice still rough. "I don't want to cost you your scholarship."

"I'm starting to realize that some things are worth losing a scholarship for." My fingers reached up around the back of his

neck and pulled him tighter to me. “But this won’t be the thing that loses me mine.”

“I love you,” he said, his words almost just a breath. “I know you’re not there yet, but I love you.”

My heart hurt. “I think I love you too. But I’m not sure, so don’t—”

His lips collided with mine, desperate and needy. Our tongues melded, our hands gripping each other while we kissed.

He pulled away a minute later. “Sorry. I needed that.”

“Don’t apologize for needing me.” I squeezed his bicep lightly. “Let’s get this food back to Rocco.”

Ford’s head dipped in a nod, and we both slipped back into the car.

He seemed a little steadier on the way back, though he still gripped my hand just as tightly as he had a few minutes earlier.

WE DROPPED off all but one bag of the food. Neither of us looked at the bag; we didn’t care what we ended up eating.

Ford asked if Rocco wanted us to stay, but he admitted that he wanted to be alone for a while and was going to try to get some rest, so we headed back to our place.

Elliot texted us to let us all know that Rocco’s parents’ pack would keep them fed for a month or two to give them time to cope, so we didn’t need to worry about feeding them again. And that meant Rocco was the only person we needed to think about.

But... there was a lot to think about.

We took our food up to our bed, forgetting to grab forks on the way. When we realized what we’d done, we were too tired to go grab them, so we mutually decided to eat with our hands. It wasn’t our finest moment, but we didn’t give a shit.

After we finished eating, we stripped to our underwear and just held each other. I closed my eyes and listened to Ford’s heartbeat for a long while, until he whispered, “Ebb?”

“Mmhm?” I murmured back.

“What are we going to tell him about the hallway?”

I knew immediately what he was talking about.

The fact that he might’ve smelled his mate.

And after losing his brother because of his brother’s mate... well, I wasn’t sure he would be ready to meet her anytime soon, whoever she was.

“I don’t think we should tell him anything unless we know he wants to know,” I finally admitted. “After what just happened...”

“I know. I don’t want to lie to him, though,” Ford admitted.

“That’s a good point. We don’t want him to feel like we kept something from him; we want him to trust us.”

Ford’s hand stroked my arm softly. “We’ll wait until he’s moved back home, and tell him then.”

I nodded lightly, my cheek rubbing slightly on his chest.

“Does this happen often?”

“No. Not more than once or twice a year. Most matings work out.”

“Good.” I closed my eyes. “I don’t know if I can sleep.”

“I don’t know if I can either,” he admitted. “When a wolf decides to end The Chase with a rejection, she won’t let the guy who hunted her touch her ever again; she’ll physically take over to stop it from happening. Every time I close my eyes, I see you stepping away from me in horror as your wolf starts to take control.”

I sighed, and pulled myself further up Ford’s body. “I’m sorry. That’s never going to happen, but I understand why it scares you.”

Honestly, it scared me a little too.

The fact that my wolf could make a decision that could possibly mean the end of Ford’s life, and I might have no say over it? It was terrifying.

I didn't want to know what had happened... but at the same time, I felt like I needed to know so I could be aware of what could potentially happen to Ford.

"What happened out there?" I whispered to him.

"Did you see the blood, when he shifted?" Ford murmured.

I nodded.

His hand stroked my arm. "That happens when the human's given himself to the wolf. There's no returning from that. You become fully-animalistic. The pack has to follow the wolf until they figure out whether or not he's become violent, and if he has, they have to end his life for the safety of other humans and wolves."

"What if he's not violent?" I whispered.

"Then they let him go."

Tears stung my eyes.

I'd thought for sure that he was dead.

"Which one happened to Rocco's brother?"

"I don't know. The males of a pack never share that, because either way, the human is gone."

My tears dripped onto Ford's chest, and he hugged me closer.

"That's not going to happen in our pack," he murmured. "I'm not going to let it."

"You were just worrying it was going to happen to us!"

"I know we're not in the same place they were, Ebb. It had been a year and his wolf still hadn't felt confident enough to bite her; everyone knew they didn't get along well. We're clearly not having that problem. When your wolf is confident in me, she'll bite me. But she is a beta, so she'll take her time getting there. That's normal."

I squeezed my eyes closed. "What was Oscar?"

"A sigma." There was a soft pause. "Most of the wolves that end up in a situation like this are sigmas. So if we're going to worry about someone, it should be Zed."

“How about we don’t worry about anyone who hasn’t met their mate yet, except Rocco, right now?” I whispered.

He nodded, but was quiet.

Something told me Ford was someone who would worry about everyone, regardless of their mating situation.

His hand moved to my back and stroked up and down there. He unbuckled my bra at some point to give himself better access, but his touch never became sexual.

I finally dozed off a bit later, and though my heart hurt for Rocco, I felt more grateful than ever for the man holding me in his arms.

TWENTY-FOUR



THE NEXT MONTH WAS A BLUR. We spent most of our spare time with Rocco and the rest of the pack, doing extra-long dinners in which everyone tried hard to make things as normal as possible. Rocco was much quieter than his usual jokester self, and every time Ford and I tried to get him alone to tell him about the scent in the hallway thing, he made up an excuse and left before we could.

I didn’t blame him, of course; everyone dealt with trauma and loss differently. Eventually, he’d listen, and if he wanted to do something about it, he would.

Ford and I continued to attend my classes, though he was a little quieter too. Honestly, I think all of us were. What had happened to Rocco’s brother scared us, and it made life feel more fragile.

Me and Ford were both less horny, too. We fooled around a little, once or twice a week, but we were both trying to deal with what we'd seen.

And honestly, the longer we went without my wolf making a decision, the more scared I got that she wouldn't choose Ford.

And if she didn't choose Ford... well, I was pretty sure it would break me.

Things got easier during the second month after Oscar's death. Rocco remained distant and quiet, but Ford and I started to talk more openly, and started going on dates once or twice a week again. He told me about his books every nigh

showed me a bunch of secret book covers he had stored on his computer for his next few releases.

My semester ended in the middle of the third month after Oscar's death, and before heading back to Moon Ridge, I needed to swing by my old dorm room to pick up the few things I'd left there and leave my old dorm keys with Del.

Teagan and I had planned a pack barbecue to celebrate the end of the semester, since the snow had melted and it was nice enough to actually eat outside without coats on, but it wasn't for a few hours.

"We should call him," I warned Ford, as we walked back to his car after my last exam. My wolf had not been thrilled about being separated from Ford for long enough for me to take the exams, but thankfully, she'd allowed it. I was pretty sure I'd done well enough to keep my scholarship, but only time would tell.

"That would be a shitty way to find out your friends know where your mate lives," Ford countered.

"We've been holding onto the information too long as it is. He's avoiding us, which he's allowed to do, but we can't keep this a secret anymore. Call him, or I will."

Ford grimaced, but grabbed his phone. He put it on speaker, and lifted his finger to his lips to tell me to keep quiet. I mimed zipping my lips and threw the invisible key at him while the phone rang. He pretended to catch it, holding it to his chest like it was a dagger in his heart.

I snorted, but cut myself off when the ringing stopped.

"Hello?" Rocco sounded exhausted.

My heart hurt for him.

"Hey, man." Ford shot me a look that told me this was my fault. I was fine with taking the blame, though. "Do you remember that day a few months ago when you helped us move Ebony's stuff to my place?"

"Sure. Did you lose something? I don't remember what was in any of the boxes."

As if Ford the Organizer could lose anything, ever.

“Nah, we didn’t lose anything. That day, in the hallway, you smelled something. Do you remember?”

“Yep. Air freshener. Smelled nice.” Now Rocco just sounded annoyed. “Can we do this later?”

“The first time I was in Tea and Ebony’s room, Ebb wasn’t there, and it smelled like an air freshener to me too. I was the only one who could smell it then, like you were that day.”

There was a long, drawn-out pause.

“And you’re just now telling me this?” Rocco’s voice was strained.

Ford leaned his head back against the seat. “It was the same day...” he trailed off, not wanting to finish that sentence. “I was going to tell you after we finished moving all of the boxes, but you got a call.”

More silence ensued.

A lot more.

Ford finally said, “Hello?”

“I’m here.” Rocco didn’t sound any happier. If anything, he only sounded worse. “I don’t want a mate right now. I’m sure you can understand. Maybe in a few years, I’ll feel better about things and change my mind. I’ll know where to start looking if that ever happens. But listen, I’ve got to go. Tell Tea and Ebony that I’m sorry I can’t make it to their barbecue.” He hung up the phone.

Ford sighed and dropped the phone in the cup holder between us. “That went better than I expected.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “How could it have gone worse?”

“He could’ve said I was a bastard for keeping it a secret and told me to fuck off.”

True.

“Alright, well, we tried. I’ll annoy him about it in a few months, when he’s in a better place.”

Ford nodded, and we headed up the stairs.

Though I'd figured out ways to keep my wolf from taking over and trying to rip anyone's throat out, she still got pissy when Ford was around a lot of other women, so I wasn't surprised that she made her presence known to me when we heard a bunch of other women laughing in my hallway.

Ford's hand left mine so it could drape around my shoulder, marking me as his as we approached a group of laughing girls.

"Look, the rules are the rules," Del said, her face growing red as she flung her hands out at her sides. "Respect them, or get the fuck out of my dorms."

"Madeline," a stuck-up male voice barked.

She spun around, and I caught a glimpse of Sterling, the asshole who was her male counterpart. "The hall director wants to have a word with you."

She mumbled something under her breath that sounded a lot like, "Dammit."

Without another word, she turned and headed down the hall.

I bit my lip, watching her go. I still owed her an extra thank you for introducing me to her videographer friend, and for helping me with the Reed incident earlier in the semester. Plus, I needed to give her my keys and wanted to say goodbye. I knew she was walking at graduation the next day, having finished up with her degree.

Ford and I slipped into my room, packing the things I'd left a few months ago, just in case we needed to stay the night in the dorm or anything. That only took a couple of minutes, and then I gave one last look to the room that had been the beginning of the next chapter of my life.

If not for the room, I would never have met Teagan. And if not for Teagan, I would never have met Ford. So I was really damn glad that I'd ended up in that exact dorm, at exactly the right time.

I flipped the lights off and stepped into the hall, while Ford carried the backpack stuffed full of our things.

Catching his hand, I tugged him toward Del's room. It wasn't too far down the hall, and I knew she might still be talking to the hall director, but I knocked anyway, and then waited.

No response.

"Dammit," I sighed.

"Damn what?" Del asked from behind me, scaring the shit out of me.

I spun around, my hand going to my chest as my heart pounded.

"Damn you!" I exclaimed. "Don't sneak up on people like that!"

She flashed me an unapologetic grin. "Sorry."

I lifted an eyebrow at her and she opened the door, gesturing for Ford and I to come in.

"All packed up?" I checked, looking around her room. Everything was in suitcases, duffel bags, and trash bags. Her car wasn't big, so I figured she'd forgone the boxes just so she could shove everything in.

"Yep." She popped her lips on the "p".

"Where are you headed?"

"Eh." She shrugged. "I'll drive until my car breaks down. Probably won't make it far. One state over, maybe?" She pointed north with her thumb.

I frowned. "Don't you have family to stay with while you figure your shit out?"

Del and I were friends, but since she was two years ahead of me and in a completely different major, we'd never been close.

"Nah. My parents are pretty granola; they're living out on the land somewhere. Told me if I wanted to go to college and work for the man, I'd be on my own. Hence the shitty RA job." She gestured to the dorm room.

"You were on a scholarship too?"

Her lips curved upward. “Yep. Music scholarship. But none of the professors had many connections, so I don’t have any jobs in the works yet. I’ll figure something out though; I always do.”

My heart hurt for her. “Come stay with me and Ford.”

His fingers tightened on mine immediately, and I knew what he was thinking.

Bad idea.

Bad freakin’ idea.

But she’d already said she didn’t blame werewolves for keeping themselves a secret if they did exist, so how bad could it be if she found out the truth?

“Nah. I’m not a big fan of the ole’ sharing-a-place-with-lovebirds thing. The things I’ve seen.” She shuddered.

I was disappointed, but nodded. I really didn’t want her out on her own. She’d been good to me, and I wished I could help her too. “You can at least come to the barbecue Teagan and I are throwing in Moon Ridge. It’s not going to be big, but there’ll be free food and probably a football game or two. You can pick the music...”

She sighed dramatically. “Fine, you know I can’t turn down free food. Text me the info?”

“I will,” I promised. “Can we haul some boxes down for you?”

“Nope. I’m staying until they kick me out, so I’ve got two more days,” she winked. “Thanks though.”

“Of course.” I flashed her a smile and let Ford tug me toward the door. “See you in a bit.”

“See ya.” She waved, then shut the door behind us as we slipped down the hall.

“Ebb...” Ford began.

“I know exactly what you’re going to say, and I don’t want to hear it,” I warned. “No one is going to go furry at my barbecue, and Del isn’t the flirty type. She’ll stop by, eat some food, and duck out when no one’s looking.”

He didn't look happy about it, but nodded. "Alright." We slipped into the car, and headed back to Moon Ridge.

TWENTY-FIVE



TWO HOURS LATER, we had music playing out of a speaker while everyone was hanging out in the open yard area behind the townhouses. Zed was grilling, and Teagan was playing football with the rest of the guys minus Rocco while I sat at a plastic picnic table.

My back was against the edge of the table while my legs were sprawled out in front of me, mostly-bare thanks to the jean shorts I had on. The sun felt nice on my skin, and the light breeze kept the yard from getting too hot.

Listening to the sizzle of the grill and chatting with Zed about a chef he worked with, I felt at peace in a way I hadn't in a long time.

My eyes caught on a glint of gold, and I turned my head to see Rocco crossing the yard, his hands tucked in the pockets of his basketball shorts. His hair was longer than I remembered and messy as shit, but he was there.

I was glad he'd decided to come, even though he'd made it clear he wasn't planning on it over the phone earlier.

I smiled at him, and he gave me a faint smile back.

"Hey, man. Good to see you," Zed gave him as big a grin as I had, which was real effort for him. I couldn't remember seeing Zed grin, ever.

"You too." Rocco nodded, sitting down a few feet from me. Everyone knew to give me a little distance, since Ford and I still hadn't completed the mating process, but no one seemed worried about that.

Other than me, of course. And Ford, though he played it off like he wasn't. We'd been warned multiple times that beta female wolves took a long time to make up their minds, but that didn't completely take care of the lingering anxiety after what had happened with Rocco's brother.

One of the teams out in the grass scored, and Elliot, Tea, and Jesse hooted and hollered, doing some weird-ass victory dance. Dax and Ford brushed it off, though I caught their amused grins. The game resumed, and I tried to follow it even though football wasn't something I'd ever claim to be interested in.

"So you think she's in that hallway somewhere?" Rocco asked, his voice soft. I was sure Zed heard him, though he gave no outward sign of it.

"She was. The semester just ended though, so she might already be gone. If she's not, she's either packing her shit or staying for the summer half-semester. If she's coming back, it probably won't be for a few more months. We can go walk the hallway tonight if you want; it's probably not the best idea, but if you're worried she'll walk away for good..." I shrugged.

Immediately after I finished talking, I knew I'd gotten too excited, and was worried he'd get scared off.

His eyes followed the ball, but I knew they were tracking Ford.

"It would be better for her to leave," he finally said. "We fuck up our mates lives, and get ours fucked in return."

"That's not true. My life is so much better since I met all of you guys. I was sleeping with a guy who treated me like shit, and I was lonely, and all I had in my life was school. Now I have Ford, and the pack, and my wolf..." I trailed off. "I wouldn't trade it for anything."

It struck me as I said it, how very true it was. My life had changed in so many ways since I met Ford, but none of them were bad. Or at least not bad enough to change the fact that I loved who I was, and who I spent my time with, and the people in my life.

It was definitely time to introduce Ford to my grandparents.

“Maybe I screwed Ford’s life up,” I added. “But he wanted it screwed up.”

“And he’s happier than he’s ever been. Look at him,” Zed added, gesturing toward Ford with his big metal grill-spatula. Ford, Elliot, Dax, and Jesse were in a big dog pile, wrestling over the ball. Ford was on the top and clearly winning, wearing a grin so massive it made me grin too. Teagan was laughing so hard she was crying, her hands on her knees as she remained bent over.

“Did you ever see Ford grin like that before Ebony?” Zed checked. “Because I didn’t. He grinned, before. But not with his whole damn body. He’s disgustingly thrilled with life.”

I scoffed. “How can someone be disgustingly thrilled with life?”

“Like that.” He gestured to Ford, who finally managed to roll off the dogpile with the football in his hand.

He whooped, and his eyes went straight to me. I pumped my fist into the air, and his grin somehow grew even wider.

My phone buzzed and I picked it up, answering immediately when I saw Del’s name on the screen. “Hello?”

“Hey, girl. What the hell is this town? It’s like a Hallmark movie threw up all over it. There are people walking around the streets and smiling and shit.”

I grinned. “Then you’ve found Moon Ridge, I’d say. No one in our school seems to know about it, but I think they’ve been here longer than the school.”

I glanced over at Zed for confirmation. When he shrugged, I looked at Rocco.

“It was established in 1921,” Rocco said absentmindedly.

Wow.

Had definitely been there longer than the college, then.

“Who are you talking to?” he asked.

I held up a finger, telling him to give me a minute as Del added, “Alright, Google tells me I’ll be there in six minutes. Are any douchebags going to flirt with me? What kind of party is this?”

I grinned. “Definitely not the kind you get flirted with at. None of the guys here date. It’s a... cultural thing.”

“Huh. That’ll be a nice change, I guess.” She swore. “Shit, that’s a huge dog.”

I bit back a laugh. Apparently she’d seen one of the locals. “I’ll see you soon. Park in front of any of the townhouses.”

“Alright, alright. Get back to your hunk. Save me cake, if there’s any.”

She hung up, and I set my phone down on the table. “I invited a friend who’s moving away,” I explained to Rocco. “She’s graduating tomorrow, so this is probably the last time I’ll see her in who-knows-how-long. She’s not flirty though; she won’t try to hit on you or anything.”

Rocco nodded, not looking upset about the idea. “Let’s go to your dorm, afterward. If my mate’s not there, I’ll take it as a sign that I’m doing what I’m supposed to by staying away.”

“What if she *is* there?” I checked.

“Then maybe I’ll introduce myself.” He shrugged. “Or maybe I won’t. I’ll decide in the moment.”

That wasn’t my kind of plan, but I nodded. It was his decision to make, not mine.

I heard a car and got up, heading out to walk through mine and Ford’s house. I stayed where I could see my man with just a half-turn, so my wolf didn’t flip out, but strode to the front door and waved at Del.

She waved back, and gave me a quick hug before we walked through the house and to the yard together.

“Hot damn girl, this is your house?” She looked around, whistling. “This place is sexy.”

I laughed. “Thanks. I’d take credit, but Ford decorated everything. I just added a couple things here and there.”

“He’s your man; take credit for it.”

We stepped outside, and her gaze scanned the yard. “Wow. Did you pay a football team to show up or something?”

“Del!” Teagan yelled from across the yard, grinning as she jogged over. “It’s been ages!” She threw her arms around our old RA.

“How’s that gigantic dog treating you?” Del teased. Teagan’s grin grew wicked. “Like a damn queen.” Oh, Tea.

I bit back a laugh.

“Because that’s not weird...” Del tucked a loose strand of her platinum hair up into the messy bun on top of her head and sniffed. “Ooh, is someone cooking steak?”

“Yep.” Teagan looped her arm through Del’s, grabbing mine with her free hand before she led us both over to the grill. “Del, meet Zed Lewis, chef extraordinaire. He pretends not to like you, but then he feeds you so well that you know he cares.” She let go of me to pat her heart as Zed snorted.

She grabbed me again and turned all of us, sweeping her hand toward Rocco, who was still facing the field. “And here’s the world’s hottest history teacher, Rocco Hughes. He’d break hearts if he gave anyone a chance, but—“

He turned around, shooting Teagan a warning look. “Tea.”

The old Rocco would’ve laughed at her joke, but he was still struggling. Maybe he was permanently changed, after what had happened. I wouldn’t blame him for it; losing a sibling like that had to be horrible.

“I’m sorry,” Rocco said, finally looking at Del.

She inhaled sharply, and my lips parted.

His eyes shifted to red, and his wolf rumbled through his lips,

“Mate.”

“Well, now it’s a real party,” Teagan said cheerfully. “And this time, I don’t have to abduct anyone.”

“What the absolute fuck?” Del looked at me. “Ebony…”

“Remember how I said werewolves aren’t real?” I checked. “It was a lie.”

Her eyebrows lifted to the damn sky.

“Ford!” I called, turning to look for him.

The guys were already jogging over, and Rocco’s fingernails were digging into the plastic picnic table so hard I worried they might bleed.

His face contorted painfully as he fought his wolf.

Del took a step back, but Teagan grabbed her arm.

“What’s a werewolf’s mate?” Del asked, looking between Teagan and I.

“Oh honey, you’re about to find out,” Tea promised.

EPILOGUE



“DO you think she’ll be okay?” I asked Ford, as we stripped in the closet.

“She seemed pretty interested in the whole thing, although she didn’t look thrilled with the state of Rocco’s house,” he said with a shrug.

Oof, yeah. That place was a disaster.

“Wasn’t he supposed to be nesting?”

“He was definitely nesting. There was a stack of packages of toilet paper all the way up to the roof in the living room.” Ford pulled me to him, our bodies almost completely bare. “We can help her clean it up tomorrow. We’ll figure it out.”

We always had before.

“Let’s not talk about Rocco,” Ford suggested, dragging me to his chest and walking me slowly toward the wall. “I can think of a lot of things I’d rather do.”

“Is that so?” My lips curved up in a smile.

“Hell, yeah. Starting with this...” His fingers found the clasp of my bra and undid it, tugging the fabric off of me before dropping it to the floor.

My back met the wall, but instead of going to his lips, or those gorgeous muscles, my eyes went to his neck.

I had a sudden urge to bite it.

What the hell?

My wolf surged to the surface, and I immediately surrendered to her. When I gave up control like that, our shift was so much smoother and less painful.

Ford's eyes gleamed as he stepped back, moving a few steps away from my wolf. He knew exactly why she'd shifted... and he was really damn excited.

His arms went out at his sides. "You know I'm yours, Ebony. Claim me."

My wolf lunged, tackling him to the ground. He landed with a breathless laugh, and then her teeth sliced into his throat.

I was glad I couldn't taste his blood on her tongue.

Ford's fingers gripped her fur as she whined and licked the mark clean. He grinned up at her, pride in his eyes. "You want everyone to know I'm taken, huh?"

She licked his face, which I was thinking was a big fat YES.

He chuckled, stroking her hair until his wound healed up completely, so incredibly fast that it stunned me.

My wolf receded and I shifted back, feeling every damn crack and break yet again.

I was breathing hard when I dropped my head to Ford's chest, groaning. "Did she seriously bite your neck? You're going to look like a damn mobster."

"A sexy, mated mobster," Ford growled.

His erection was already digging into my hip.

"Do you feel it?" His fingers dug into my thighs a bit as he opened my legs.

Did I feel his erection stabbing me? It would be hard not to—
oh.

Shit.

Heat coursed through me, and a moan slipped out.

Holy shit.

"The Climax?" I moved my hips so his hardness rubbed me where I wanted it.

“Hell yes,” he slid me down onto him, and we both groaned together.

“I fucking love you,” Ford growled, sucking on my neck.

“I love you too,” I breathed.

I guess we weren’t going to be cleaning Rocco’s house for Del the next day.

Tea and Jesse could handle it, anyway.

AFTERTHOUGHTS



I already expressed most of my thoughts about this book on Kindle Vella while I was drafting it, so I won't go too much into detail here, but I'm loving the Mate Hunt world. It's such a fun take on werewolves!

To be honest, this book got a lot steamier, a lot faster than I thought it would! I don't plot when I write standalones, I let the characters determine the story, and Ford and Ebony were just a bit freakier than expected.

The next story (as I'm sure you can tell) will revolve around Rocco and Del, and should release sometime in June. The last three will release much quicker because of all the love you guys have been giving the first book!

Anyway, thank you so much for reading. I hope you loved Ford and Ebony's story as much as I did!

All the love,

Lola Glass

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BONUS EPILOGUE



Join my mailing list with this link to read a bonus epilogue.

It's not a necessary part of the story, but if you want a glimpse at a cute moment in Ford and Ebony's future, just put your email address in.

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You'll receive new release updates as well as news about any freebies or deals. No spam!

PLEASE REVIEW



Here it is. The awkward page at the end of the book where
the author begs you to leave a review.

Believe me, I hate it more than you do.

But, this is me swallowing my pride and asking.

Whether you loved or hated this story, you made it this far, so
please review! Your reviews play a MASSIVE role in
determining whether others read my books, and ultimately,
writing is a job for me—even if it's the best job ever—so I
write what people are reading.

Regardless of whether you do or not, thank you so much for
reading <3

-Lola

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lola is a book-lover with a *slight* romance obsession and a passion for love—real love. Not the flowers-and-chocolates kind of love, but the kind where two people build a relationship strong enough to last. That's the kind of relationship she loves to read about, and the kind she tries to portray in her books.

Even if they're about shifters :)