



MATE HUNT

TRAPPED WITH THE WEREWOLF

LOLA GLASS

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*To my husband, for holding me when I'm anxious and loving
me even when I fall asleep before 8 PM.*

ONE



“I SHOULD TURN AROUND,” I told myself, as I parked my car in front of an adorable row of six townhouses. “Nothing good ever comes from socializing.”

That was my honest truth, and I felt it to my damned soul. Social anxiety was a bitch.

Ebony waved me inside.

“If I turn around now, I’ll be the asshole,” I mumbled to myself, waving back and grabbing my purse off the passenger seat. I didn’t really need the crossbody bag considering that I was going to a little barbecue with some friends, but it was the only shred of moral support I had, and I was going to be holding the damn thing like it was a lifeline.

“Why did I agree to this?” I asked myself, gritting my teeth as I opened up my car’s door and stepped outside.

My combat boot hit the ground, and by some miracle, I didn’t trip and land on my damned face.

I reminded myself that I liked Ebony and Teagan, and that I would be getting free food out of the barbecue. And... that I didn’t really have any other friends, outside of June. Considering June lived a handful of states away when she wasn’t traveling the world like it was going to vanish tomorrow, and had no plans to head my way anytime soon, this barbecue was probably my last actual chance to socialize before I hit the road.

And unlike June, I wasn’t hitting the road for fun. I just didn’t have anywhere else to go, and could only afford one security

deposit, so I needed to save my money until I found a job.

I gave Ebony a quick, awkward hug as I slipped into the townhouse. The place screamed “EXPENSIVE,” in a way I would never have been comfortable living in, but it fit Ebony. She was classy, all the way, and I was secure enough in my trashiness not to feel self-conscious about our differences.

But anxious enough to feel a hell of a lot of panic when I heard a masculine laugh outside, and saw a football fly past.

Shit, I sucked at football.

“Hot damn, girl,” I whistled, trying to fill the silence to prevent shit from getting awkward as we walked through her place. “This is your house? This place is sexy.”

It was, in an Ebony-esque way.

If some dude ever brought me back to his house and owned so much shiny shit, I was pretty sure I’d make up an excuse to leave before taking my pants off.

Not that I’d ever been taken to a guy’s house, or ever taken my pants off in front of a guy. I was way too awkward for that.

Ebony laughed, her dark eyes brightening with the compliment. “Thanks. I’d take credit, but Ford decorated everything. I just added a couple things here and there.”

She’d never smiled much or laughed much when we lived down the hall from each other, so I assumed her new man was to blame for her newfound rosy disposition.

I hadn’t seen Ford naked, but I mean, come on. The dude was a damned skyscraper; if I was banging a sexy skyscraper, I’d probably be rosy too.

And from what I’d seen of him, he looked like a guy who knew he’d found a good woman and didn’t plan on walking away. “He’s your man; take credit for it.”

We stepped outside, and I looked over the yard.

Hot freakin’ damn.

Men.

So many men.

So many skyscraper-sized men.

What the hell kind of sexy cult had Teagan and Ebony joined?

Four hotties playing football—one cooking—and one sitting at a plastic picnic table.

Hot friggin' damn.

Did I already say that?

Shit, I was getting tongue-tied and I hadn't even tried to talk to any of them.

So much man-meat. So damned much.

My voice strained as I mumbled, "Wow. Did you pay a football team to show up or something?"

"Del!" Teagan yelled from across the yard, wearing a massive grin with her gigantic blonde ponytail swaying behind her. Tea was a sass-ball, and I hoped she could do all of the talking and socializing so I didn't have to.

Was that a shitty thing to hope for?

I didn't know, nor did I care. I could socialize when required, but when not required, I was typically out.

"It's been ages!" Tea threw her arms around me, and I gave her a less-awkward hug back. Ebony had always been the quieter of the two of them, so Tea was the one who came to chat with me when I had to knock on the door and check in with them.

"How's that gigantic dog treating you?" I teased Tea, quietly checking the yard for said massive dog. Seriously, that thing was a monster. She said it was a wolf-dog, and I was pretty sure it could've eaten her if it tried.

Teagan's grin grew wicked. "Like a damn queen."

I fought like hell not to wrinkle my nose at the odd comment.

How would a dog treat you like a queen?

"Because that's not weird..." My hands were all fidgety, so I tucked a loose strand of my platinum hair up into the messy

bun on top of my head and sniffed the air, trying to change the subject away from massive dogs and their strange behavior. “Ooh, is someone cooking steak?”

“Yep.” Teagan looped her arm through mine, grabbing Ebony’s arm with her free hand before she dragged us both over to the grill. I tried not to drag my feet as we moved closer to two of the sexy skyscrapers I was nervous about talking to.

This was why I didn’t date; too much pressure. Talking to hot guys was awkward, or infuriating, or awkward and infuriating, so I tried to avoid it. Why put myself through that, right?

Teagan, of course, introduced me to the freakin’ hot guy cooking steak, of all things. Yeah, I was definitely drooling. “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 hand over her heart as Zed snorted.

She didn’t give me a chance to introduce myself, luckily, before grabbing me again and turning Ebony and I. Tea swept her hand toward the gigantor sitting at the picnic table, who was still facing the field and hadn’t so much as glanced my way.

Awkward.

Tea either didn’t feel the awkwardness or just plain ignored it as she flashed me a grin and introduced him anyway. “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.”

Hot freakin’ damn.

The guy...

Shit.

He was the prettiest dude I’d ever seen, on top of being one of the biggest.

Messy honey-blond hair, a scruffy beard, eyes as blue as a damned photoshopped picture of the ocean, muscles I sort of wanted to bite...

Crap.

What if she wanted me to talk to him?

There were dark circles under his eyes that told me he wasn't sleeping well, and despite the gorgeous color in those sexy blues, his eyes looked dull. Lifeless, almost.

He was still the hottest freakin' thing I'd ever seen.

"I'm sorry," Rocco said, finally realizing I was there and flashing a tiny uninterested gaze my way.

Something about the way he smelled—like freakin' heaven—made me inhale sharply, and my lips parted.

And then his eyes turned red.

His voice... changed, and he growled like a damned animal a word that sounded a hell of a lot like,

"Mate."

Should I run?

I knew I should probably run, but something about the way the guy looked and smelled had me frozen where I stood.

"Well, now it's a real party," Teagan remarked with a grin. "And this time, I don't have to abduct anyone."

"What the absolute fuck?" My head jerked toward Ebony, who'd invited me to this damned party. Tea had left the dorms a while ago, but I expected her less-crazy roommate to be the voice of reason here. "Ebony..."

"Remember how I said werewolves aren't real?" she asked, grimacing so deeply I worried the expression might be permanent. "It was a lie."

My eyebrows shot so far upward I worried they'd fall the hell off.

Yet, my stupid gaze jerked back to the guy.

Rocco, Teagan had said his name was.

Holy damned hotness, I'd never seen anyone so gorgeous.

And he was growling.

Like an animal.

Why the hell was I still attracted to him?

“Ford!” Ebony called over her shoulder.

I couldn’t peel my eyes off the hot guy long enough to glance over at her.

Rocco’s fingernails were digging into the plastic picnic table so hard I worried they might bleed. He looked like he was in pain, and I... wanted to take that pain away.

Seriously, something had to be wrong with me.

His face contorted, and I bit my lip as I fought the urge to step toward him and put my hands on him.

Why did I think touching an absolute stranger would help him?

He had called me mate though—which had to mean something, right? Was that why I felt so damned attracted to him?

But what was a mate?

I took a step back, hoping a bit of distance would clear my mind, but Teagan grabbed my arm before I managed to get anywhere.

“What’s a werewolf’s mate?” I asked Teagan, my eyes flicking between her, and Ebony, and Rocco.

“Oh honey, you’re about to find out,” Tea promised.

What the hell did that mean?

TWO



“GET HER INSIDE, FAST,” one of the other skyscrapers commanded, waving me toward the door. Teagan and Ebony both grabbed my arms, dragging me toward the townhouses to the left of Ebony’s. They didn’t seem to be aiming for the one directly left, but the one next to it.

“What? No. Let go of me.” I ripped my arms out of their grips. Ebony let go, but Tea grabbed me again quickly.

“Rocco’s wolf is going to be really possessive,” Tea said hurriedly. “We just want to get you in his house so he’ll chill out when he’s fully shifted.”

A pained yell-snarl came from the picnic table, and instinct took over.

I yanked my arm from Tea’s grip again, spinning around and booking it back toward the hot guy. Though what I was doing made absolutely zero sense, I just felt like... I needed to.

Rocco was on the ground, his body twisted painfully. Common sense told me to get the hell away from the werewolf, who seemed to be shifting forms extremely slowly and painfully, but walking away from him felt wrong.

So I dropped to my knees beside him, leaning over the man. His eyes snapped open when my shadow stretched over him, and when the red gaze bore into me, his body relaxed a bit.

The eyes flicked back to blue for a minute, and then back to red.

“Mate,” he rumbled again, the word coming out mangled in his shifting throat.

“Sure.” I patted his cheek awkwardly.

His hand lifted to rest on mine, and I watched in stunned silence as fur broke out on the skin—before the bone snapped.

Biting back nausea, I remained where I was.

“We need to move her,” one of the men warned, somewhere behind me.

Another one of Rocco’s bones snapped, and he snarled again, fury blazing through him.

“I don’t know why, but I’m not going anywhere,” I whispered to him, as fur broke out on his cheek.

The words seemed to relax him entirely.

My lips twisted in a grimace as the air filled with snapping noises, bones breaking and reforming. Now that he was relaxed, though, the change seemed smoother and faster. Two minutes later, my hand was on a furry wolf cheek.

“Jesse the dog is also Jesse your boyfriend,” I said to Teagan, not taking my eyes off of Wolf-Rocco as he stared at me, remaining where he was lying on the ground.

“Jesse is my mate,” she said, confirming it.

“Someone needs to tell me what that word means right now.” Somehow, I remained calm.

Probably because I was looking at Rocco the hairy animal, rather than Rocco the hot guy. Animals, I could manage. Hot guys, not so much.

“It’s like a husband or wife, but bigger. More permanent,” Ebony said quietly. “When a werewolf chooses you as his mate, there will never be anyone else for him.”

Silence reigned for a moment.

Wolf-Rocco continued to stare at me.

Just stare.

“Like an automatic marriage?” I asked, my emotions somewhere between shocked, thrilled, and disbelieving.

There was another moment of silence.

“Yup,” one of the guys confirmed.

I stared at the wolf. “So... that hot guy. I’m married to him.”

“Well, marriage is an agreement decided by two conscious individuals. Mating is determined by fate,” one of the guys clarified.

“But yeah, you might as well be married to him,” Tea added.

“Shit.” My face warmed. “Why did he go wolf, then?”

“It’s complicated. Can we explain in Rocco’s house? You’ll have to stay there for a few days. Maybe longer.” Teagan knelt beside me, gently taking my arm.

“Wait...” I trailed off. “My instant-husband comes with a house?”

There was another pause.

I finally looked away from the wolf, glancing back at the group behind me. All of the hot skyscraper dudes just looked sort of stunned.

“Yeah,” one of them said, his forehead wrinkled in confusion. “He’ll put your name on the lease as soon as he’s back in his human form, assuming you let him.”

Seriously.

Holy shit.

“I’m kind of in love with you,” I told the wolf.

He licked my face, and I grinned. “How do we get him back in human form?”

“Come to his house, and we’ll explain it,” Teagan tugged lightly on my arm. “Just be careful not to go near any of the other guys. Rocco will be possessive.”

I snorted, standing up. Though I tried to take my hand off the wolf’s face, he rose with me, moving so his face remained snuggled up against my palm. His fur was soft, so I didn’t

mind. “That’s definitely not going to be a problem. Do you know how many guys I’ve touched in the last five years?”

Silence sounded once more. “You probably shouldn’t,” one of the skyscraper dudes began.

“Zero. I have touched zero guys in the past five years. And I don’t plan on touching anyone today, including my insta-hubby, so let’s move on. To Rocco’s house.” I gestured toward the house.

A snort and a soft chuckle came from the men behind me as Teagan led me toward Rocco’s place.

“I can’t say this is how I expected today to go,” Teagan remarked, as we walked.

“Guess we’ve got that in common, then,” I tossed back. “Get explaining.”

“Alright,” Tea began, before we even reached the back door of the townhouse. “So basically, a werewolf is just a person who shares a body with a wolf. We can’t communicate with our wolves, but they exist on top of us. When we’re in wolf form, the human part of us can’t communicate with the outside world or move in any way. The opposite is true too; when we’re in human form, the wolf can’t communicate with the outside world or move in any way. That is Rocco’s wolf, not the same man you spoke to earlier.” Tea gestured toward the wolf.

Honestly, that was a relief. I could interact with his wolf, and not need to worry about the hottie he would eventually turn back into. “Cool.”

Tea continued, “Right. So when a werewolf meets his mate—all werewolves are men, it’s this weird nature thing—the wolf shuts the guy in a box and takes over. It’s called the ‘mate hunt’ and basically, he’s just going to follow you around and snap at anything that gets near you until he’s certain that you aren’t going to reject him. Then, he’ll bite you, and you’ll turn into a werewolf.”

“That’s simplifying it a bit,” Ebony pointed out.

“Eh, it’s her first day. She needs simple.” Tea waved her off.

“If you want more details, just say so,” Ebony added, as one of the guys reached the sliding glass of the back door. He tugged it open, and gestured all of us inside. I recognized the brown-haired dude as Jesse, Teagan’s boyfriend. Err, mate.

I nodded, telling the women silently to continue.

“When you’re a werewolf, the next stage of the mating process begins. That’s the mate chase, and your wolf will be watching him like a hawk and testing him to determine whether or not he’s a suitable mate. Which he will be, because he’s Rocco.” She tossed a hand toward the wolf. “After that, your wolf will bite him, and then all that’s left is the climax. During that, you’ll be overwhelmed with lust, and fucking like rabbits for a few days until it’s out of your system.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “You had me up until the sex.”

“The sex isn’t required,” one of the guys clarified. I glanced over at him, and dodged his gaze when he tried to make eye contact. Dark hair, a tiny bit of scruff... damn, he was gorgeous too. “The climax lasts around a month if you don’t have sex, you’ll just feel a lot of lust during it. It’ll be painful if you choose not to... find relief together, but you can choose that.”

Well, that wasn’t so bad, I guess.

A small price to pay for a free place to live while I searched for jobs.

“So after the mating thing is over, we can split and call it good?” I checked.

Honestly, I hated that idea. If I was going to get even slightly attached to someone, I didn’t want to walk away. I was tired of being alone, and the instant-husband thing would make up for that, at least slightly.

“Not exactly. Your wolves will constantly run to each other. You can choose to have a friendly mating rather than a sexual one, and if you choose that, you’ll remain companions rather than actual spouses who sleep together,” the same guy from earlier explained.

“Well, then, I’m in.” I flashed the wolf a quick grin. He gave me a wolfish grin back, then licked my arm.

“That’s a kiss,” Tea added. “When he licks you.”

“Of course it is. He’s just a big ole’ dog, isn’t he?” I crouched in front of him, scratching his head. “How do I draw the hunting part out? To keep him in wolf form longer?”

There was another pause. “Make him believe you don’t want to be a werewolf, I guess,” one of the guys offered.

“I don’t want to be a werewolf,” I informed the wolf, scratching behind his ears.

He licked my face, clearly not buying the words any more than I had.

“How long will he be hunting for?”

“Could be a day, could be a year.” One of the guys shrugged. “No way to know.”

Ah.

“I’ll just have to enjoy it while it lasts, I guess,” I said.

For the first time since we entered the house, I looked around. “Holy shit.”

The place was an utter disaster. It was an open floorplan, so I could see the entire dining area, kitchen, and living room from where we stood just inside the back door. It wasn’t massive, but wasn’t tiny by any definition. After living in a dorm room, it may as well have been a mansion.

But papers littered every inch of the countertops and table. Boxes of cereal and other foods were stacked up against the edges of the kitchen. The couch in the living room was a legitimate clothing mountain.

The floor was covered in more clothes, papers, and who knew what other shit. One corner of the living room had a literal tower of toilet paper, tampons, and other toiletries. The other corner held boxes of what looked like furniture, stacked all the way to the ceiling.

“Shit,” one of the guys muttered.

“Did you know his house looked like this?” Tea asked, and when I glanced at her, I realized she was looking at all five of the guys with us.

The wolf licked my arm a couple times, and I glanced down at him. He was looking at me with sad puppy-dog eyes, and when he licked my arm again, I realized he was trying to apologize.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “I won’t hold you accountable for the dirty human’s actions.”

The wolf licked me again, seeming happier, and I scratched his head again.

“Rocco’s had a lot going on,” one of the guys explained quickly. “His house didn’t used to look like this. I’ve been outside, dragging him around to do shit, but I didn’t realize...” he grimaced, his gaze sweeping the room. “Damn.”

“I don’t even want to see the upstairs,” someone muttered.

“It’s cool. I’ll deal with the mess.” I gestured toward the house.

“We’ll grab some cleaning shit and help,” one of the guys said.

“No.” My words came out much harsher than I intended, and silence met me. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I just... I like my personal space. I’d rather clean on my own.”

More silence.

Shit, I’d messed up.

Clearly, this was a tightly-knit group of people. I was instant-mates with one of their buddies, so they probably wanted to do something to help, right?

“You could get my stuff from my dorm,” I offered. “If you want to do something to help. I’ve got to be out soon anyway, and since you said Rocco won’t let me leave...” I shrugged, scrambling to come up with something that would persuade them. “It’s heavy.”

Nods went around the room.

“I can stay and explain things,” Teagan offered.

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I need some time to process all this first.” I gestured between myself and the wolf I was still scratching. “Maybe you can stay and chat for a bit when you drop off my stuff?”

“I’ve been writing things down over the last few weeks, to help myself remember it all,” Ebony offered. “I can email you everything I have.”

Why did it not surprise me that she’d taken notes about werewolves, of all things?

“That would be great,” I nodded.

“A mate manual? It’s perfect,” Tea declared. “I’ll add my shit to what Ebony has before we send it over.”

Biting back a snort, I nodded again. “Sounds good.”

“Alright, we’ll get out of your hair. Let me just...” one of the guys crossed the kitchen, tugging the fridge open. It wasn’t Ford or Jesse, or Zed, who had been cooking, but that was all I could say about the skyscraper’s identity.

A bunch of glass casserole pans fell out of the fridge, and the guy swore as he tried to catch them all. Somehow, he managed to catch them.

Ford crossed the kitchen too, helping the other guy stack the pans on the counter.

“We’ll need to go through these,” the guy who wasn’t Ford muttered.

“I’ve got it,” I said helpfully.

TBH, I was drooling at the sight of all that free food.

“Shit, the steaks,” Zed muttered.

He slipped out of the house, and my eyes followed him as he jogged away.

“We’ll grab your dinner, and then head off to get your stuff,” Jesse said, flashing me a guilty grin.

“Are you sure you don’t want any help with this?” Tea checked. “Because this is... well, it’s a lot.”

“I’ve got it.” I waved her off. “Bringing my shit from the dorms is plenty.”

Teagan didn’t look convinced.

I bit back a sigh. Honestly, the help did sound good, but I just didn’t want to deal with the chatter. I needed time to breathe, and process everything. “Fine,” I amended. “Tomorrow, you can ask again. But for tonight, I’m fine.”

“Alright, alright.” Teagan tossed a hand toward me. “We’ll leave you alone. Come on, Kettle.” She gave her man a teasing push toward the door.

He grabbed her by the waist, tickling her and laughing while she shrieked and swore at him.

Ebony flashed me an apologetic grimace. “I’m sorry. If I’d known this was going to happen...” she trailed off. “Well, I would’ve warned you. I wouldn’t change it. Meeting Ford was the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” She held up hers and Ford’s intertwined hands.

“Well, just cross your fingers that this wolf-man is just as good for me.” I held up my hand, fingers crossed.

Yeah, I was awkward.

Whatever.

My other hand gripped the wolf’s fur, and he snuggled up to my side while Ebony and Ford slipped out of the house.

“I’m Elliot,” the guy who had caught the casseroles offered, holding out a hand. I gave him an awkward wave, figuring I might as well continue along on my awkward roll.

“Sorry, possessive wolf...” I gestured to the wolf, who hadn’t done a damned possessive thing other than licking my arm.

Yeah, I was totally going to use him as an excuse. Sue me.

“Right. Good thinking.” He flashed me an amused grin.

“I’m Dax,” the other guy I didn’t know added, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Elliot’s off to that side of you, and I’m off to the other one. If you need anything, just knock on one of our doors. Or yell; we’d probably hear you.”

My lips quirked up in a tiny smile, and I dipped my head in a nod. I liked Dax, automatically. He seemed chill, which was a nice change of pace from Teagan's wild energy.

"Good to meet you both."

"I'll drop off the dinner in a few. Zed will be grumpy after burning the food, so I'll keep him away." Elliot winked at me, then he and Dax headed out the back door. "Just let us know if you need anything," he repeated, before he shut the sliding door.

And then, I was alone with the wolf.

My wolf, if Teagan and Ebony and the skyscraper squad were to be believed.

THREE



“WHEW,” I said, letting out a massive breath of air as I headed over toward the couch. Collapsing on the cushions—I couldn’t even see what color they were thanks to the mountain of clothes covering them—I kicked my feet out onto the lumpy ottoman and stared at the blank TV for a minute. One of my hands gripped the strap of my purse, which rested between my boobs, and the other still held the fur of the wolf who had jumped up on the couch beside me.

Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes and let out a slow breath.

Shit.

Things had just... changed.

Yep.

Definitely changed.

Then again, everything was changing, so I guess it wasn’t all that abnormal to me. I’d been pretty sure werewolves existed after seeing those videos Ebony had obsessed over, so I wasn’t exactly surprised to meet them. But it was still all just...weird. And unexpected.

I liked plans, even though I was shitty with following through with them. This definitely hadn’t been part of a plan... but I was actually glad it had happened.

“This will probably sound crazy,” I told the wolf, “But I’m really glad I met you. My life was about to go to shit. I was going to be living in my car, and that thing’s going to crap out

any time now. Job hunting... well, it's not looking great. I really thought my professor could hook me up, but it fell through, and now I've got nothing. Nothing, and no one. Yay."

The wolf licked my arm.

"Apparently, nothing and no one but you. If I can manage to convince myself to believe Tea and Ebony. But if you ask me, they kind of seem like they're on drugs."

The wolf snorted, and my lips curved upward. "Glad to hear that you agree with me."

My fingers stroked his fur. "I used to have a dog. Chewbacca. She made everything better. But she passed a few months before I graduated high school, and college dorms don't allow dogs. Not big ones, at least, unless you've got a medical reason. Which I don't, so here I am."

Rocco set his head down on my leg, and made a sad sound. Something told me it was an apology, and my eyes stung a bit.

I hadn't really made any friends in college. Most people talk about their college buddies for years after they graduate, if not their whole lives. But I'd spent all my time lost in my music, working my ass off and loving every minute of it. It hadn't led to any friendships, or parties, but I didn't really care about those things anyway. Not usually, at least.

Now that I'd graduated, and had nowhere else to go, and nothing else to do... well, it would've been nice to have a few buddies to go places with. A few couches to crash on.

I heard a knock at the back door and quickly stood up, drying tears up with the neck of my shirt. Letting go of Rocco's fur, I grabbed a tipped-over laundry basket and quickly tossed some clothes in it so it looked like I'd been doing something.

"Del?" Elliot called out. "I have a plate of food for you. Is it okay if I come in?"

"Sure," I called back.

He stepped into the kitchen, flashing me a small smile. "We were serious. If you need anything—even a snack, or a meal, or help doing the dishes—just stop by my place or Dax's."

“I will. Thanks.”

He nodded, setting the plate on the counter before leaving again.

I let out another massive breath when he was gone.

“Damn,” I mumbled. “I’m not cut out for this level of socialization.”

The wolf snorted again, licking my arm. I scratched his head, and collapsed back down on the couch.

Rocco snuggled up against me, and my arms wrapped around him. I held him against me, fingers burying in his fur. Despite the mess in the house, it didn’t smell bad or anything. The clothes off to my left actually smelled like laundry detergent, and the ones on my right...

I lifted a shirt to my nose, and inhaled deeply.

Then, I dropped the fabric like it was damned lava.

“Your human definitely wore that,” I squeaked at the wolf.

He licked my face and then picked up the shirt between his teeth, lifting it toward me before dropping it on my chest.

With a sigh, I lifted the fabric back to my nose and inhaled again. My eyes fluttered a bit as they closed.

Damn, he smelled good.

Like chocolate, and cinnamon, and... sex.

Okay, to be honest, I’d never had sex. My V-card was firmly in-tact, only because interacting with the male species made me feel panicked and weird.

But Rocco smelled like the way I imagined sex would smell.

I dropped the shirt again, heaving another sigh.

The wolf tossed it onto me again.

I shot him an annoyed glare. “I have clothes on, Rocco.”

He scowled, nipping at my shirt. It was a cropped tank that fell just above my belly button, and I’d paired it with some jean

shorts and my favorite combat boots. It was spring, technically, so the boots still worked.

“You don’t like my outfit?” I asked, shooting him an incredulous look.

He licked my belly button in response, eliciting a shriek and a shove against his face. “That tickles,” I complained.

The wolf gave a playful growl, and nipped at my belly.

I groaned. “Fine. Only because you’re annoying.”

He stuck his tongue out and gave me a goofy, wolfy grin.

“Can your human see anything through you?” I checked, assuming the wolf could answer given his many human-like actions.

He shook his head in a no.

Phew.

It was just me and the wolf.

“Cool.” I tugged my shirt over my head, exposing the sheer bra I had on beneath. It was made of this weird netting that for some reason, was about eighteen thousand times more comfortable than any padding I’d ever worn.

The wolf licked the gap between my boobs, and I snorted, pushing his face away again. “You’re weird.”

He grinned at me once again, and I couldn’t help but grin back.

“Your human’s lucky you’re a pain in the ass,” I warned the wolf, still grinning as I grabbed Rocco’s shirt and tugged it over my head. As I expected, it fell down my thighs, the hem hitting below my shorts. It would look like I wasn’t wearing pants at all, so I went ahead and unbuttoned my shorts before stripping them off and tossing them onto the pile of Rocco’s dirty clothes.

I tugged my combat boots off as I headed into the kitchen, and tossed them onto a pile of shoes Rocco already had near the garage door. Curiosity had me peeking into the garage, and my

lips curved upward when I saw the old, beat-up truck sitting inside.

There was just something about a shitty vehicle that spoke to my soul.

Maybe it made Rocco seem a little more approachable? Probably not, but I guess we'd see when the wolf decided to bite me and turn me into one of them.

It felt odd to be wearing nothing but my underwear and a shirt in another person's house, but the place smelled like Rocco and the mess definitely prevented me from feeling self-conscious about it. I sat down on a barstool in front of the island, inhaling the delicious smell of steak.

Wasting no time, I dug into the food. Free food... glorious free food.

My scholarship had paid for the school's basic meal plan, but honestly, the food there was shitty. I hadn't eaten anything more than was required to continue living during my four years there, and I'd skipped at least one meal a day most of the time.

So having a massive plate of delicious food, for the first time in years, was damned incredible. That was the reason I'd driven all the way out to Moon Ridge for Ebony's barbecue, anyway, and it was proving itself to be worth it in just the food alone.

Rocco licked my legs almost constantly while I ate, but I didn't mind. The wolf was a sweetie, and if I was his instant-wife, he probably liked the way I smelled. I sure liked the way Rocco smelled, so it wasn't hard to believe that I'd smell just as good to him.

Hopefully.

I cringed at the thought, though.

How weird would it be if a guy wanted to sniff me?

I mean, I'd like it. Hell, I'd love it. But I wouldn't know how to react, you know? Like, should I cringe away? Or kiss him?

The one time I'd kissed a guy had been in high school, before my parents got all crazy, and it had been so awkward I hated even thinking about it.

But the thought still made me sort of excited.

To have a guy want me... that would be different. In a good way.

But I mean, I couldn't get too caught up in that idea. There was still a good chance that he might not want me at all. He hadn't looked at me like I smelled good to him; hell, he'd hardly looked at me at all. So he might not want to be anything more than friends, and that was fine. Just having a built-in best friend sounded like a damned miracle to me.

Whatever happened, Rocco and I seemed to be pretty much trapped together. So that was good; I liked the thought of that. He was just as stuck with me as I was stuck with him, so we would have no choice but to figure shit out. Even if we were just house-mates, I could get used to that. I would have my own room, I assumed, and that would be plenty of space for me.

I devoured the entire plate of food, tossing the thick disposable plate in the trash and then setting the fork and knife off to the side of the overflowing sink.

Turning toward the house, I surveyed the room. There was shit... everywhere.

Yep.

Everywhere.

"Alright." I blew a puff of hair out of my eyes. Since I bleached my hair to get it to the platinum blonde I loved, there was always a bit of breakage. I didn't mind that, though, because I loved all the choppy strands that framed my face. "Where to start..." I trailed off, nibbling on my lip.

"If I start with the kitchen, I'll have to look at the awful living room through the entire time," I said, processing out loud. I talked to myself a lot; always had, probably always would. It kept me sane. "So, living room it is."

I'd worry about the upstairs after I had the downstairs dealt with.

Stepping back into the living room, I started sorting the clothes. It was easy to tell the cleans from the dirties, thanks to Rocco's yummy smell, so I made quick work of the clothing mountain. There was actually only one load's worth of dirty clothes in the mass of fabric, which reassured me slightly as far as my new roommate's cleanliness went.

I started the one load, reluctantly leaving out a few t-shirts and a sweatshirt that smelled like Rocco. Doing that made me feel kind of creepy, but he'd turned into a wolf that was hunting me, so I was pretty sure the two things balanced out.

Mostly.

The clean clothes, I folded up and left in piles on the couch. As I folded, I revealed the fabric beneath. It was a nice dark gray that I really liked, and the throw pillows were all in other shades of gray. Ultimately, it was a lot more manly than I preferred, but I didn't mind the colors. With a couple of black-striped or polka-dotted pillows, it would've actually been cute.

When Rocco was a human again and we figured out whether or not we were going to live together, I would change shit up. Until then, I'd deal with the manliness.

After I folded all the clothes, I decided to leave the toiletries and boxed furniture until I cleaned the rest of the townhouse. Furniture-building and organization would just have to wait a bit.

"To the kitchen," I announced to the wolf, who had followed me absolutely everywhere I went. His fur brushed my legs with every damn step I took, and it was actually pretty nice. Maybe I'd been lonelier than I realized.

Fine, I had realized I was lonely. There just hadn't been anything to do about it, so I'd tried to ignore it.

But... it was nice not to be lonely anymore.

Really nice.

FOUR



CLEANING the kitchen took much longer than cleaning the living room had, but I found a Bluetooth speaker on the counter, and hooked my phone up to it. With music playing loudly, I jammed out while I cleaned, and actually found myself enjoying it. It had been years since I did dishes, and there was something therapeutic about it.

Wolf-Rocco looked hungry, so I fed him a few questionably-aged casseroles that I found in the fridge. I didn't give him anything that was clearly expired, of course, but everything was pretty questionable since there weren't dates on any of it.

He gobbled down everything I put in front of him, which definitely made my job easier since I wasn't going to eat the possibly-old stuff anyway. Werewolves had to be tougher than humans when it came to sicknesses, considering how awful his shifting had been. Thinking about the sound of those bones breaking was enough to make me shudder.

"Is it weird to tell a wolf he's a good boy?" I checked, scratching Wolf-Rocco's head as I scrubbed down the sides of the sink, my hips and head still moving with the beat of the music I had playing.

He nodded his head, but licked the inside of my wrist as if letting me know he wasn't offended that I'd asked.

"Not a dog. Got it." I leaned my face down, and he lifted his up. His cheek rubbed up against mine, and my lips curved up in a smile. "You do like to cuddle though."

He licked my neck in agreement, and my smile grew.

There was a knock at the front door, which about scared the actual shit out of me. I jumped away from the wolf, swearing and dropping the sponge in the empty sink.

“Del?” Tea called out.

Dammit.

Biting back a sigh, I glanced at the clock as I headed for the door. It had been a few hours; plenty of time for them to eat, stop at my dorm to grab my stuff, and then come back.

I tugged the door open just as the lock on it turned, and my stomach clenched when I found myself face-to-face with Jesse, who was holding a key to Rocco’s house.

“How many people have keys to this place?” I asked, as a greeting.

“All of us have keys to each other’s houses,” Jesse explained, gesturing to the homes on either side of Rocco’s.

Yeah, that was going to have to change. I could be pretty cool with the werewolf shit, but I drew the line at giving other people open access to my living space. I needed my privacy to feel secure.

“We’ve got your stuff,” Tea exclaimed, slipping past Jesse with two massive duffel bags over her shoulders. All of my breakable equipment was in the hard suitcases, so I knew it would be fine.

“Just leave it at the bottom of the stairs. I haven’t figured out where I’m going to put everything,” I told everyone quickly, not wanting them to go upstairs. While I didn’t care whether or not there was a mess, I didn’t want them walking all over the space I’d probably be living in.

That would be *my* space.

I guess maybe I was already as territorial as the werewolf they said I was going to have to become.

Whether or not that was a good thing, I didn’t know.

All five guys and both girls carried my shit in, leaving it at the bottom of the stairs as I directed. Elliot made a path in-

between all the stuff so I could get through. I stood off to the side awkwardly, my hands still soapy and wet from doing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen.

“It looks so much better in here,” Teagan remarked. “If you ever want a job cleaning my place, just let me know.” She winked, telling me she wasn’t serious.

I snorted. “Right. That’s exactly what I want to do with my music degree.”

“As if Tea would ever hand money to someone to do something she could do herself,” Jesse teased. “My girl’s way too cheap for that.”

She grinned. “You know me too well.”

“Hell yeah, I do.” He swatted her on the ass, and I ignored the rising discomfort in my chest.

“Alright, let’s give Del some space. Everyone out,” Elliot announced, waving them all back toward the front door. “We’ll stop by in the morning to see if there’s anything we can help with. I’ll take care of finding a sub for Rocco at work and making sure his family’s aware of what’s going on.”

I shot Elliot a grateful grin before he shut the door.

The lock turned behind them, and I grimaced.

That, on the other hand, did not feel safe.

I picked my sponge back up, weighing the pros and cons of pushing the couch over to the door and locking it that way. Even if I did, the guys could just get in through the garage.

Theoretically, they were supposed to be decent people, but I didn’t know them. I didn’t even really know Teagan and Ebony. And if there was one thing life had taught me, it was to expect the unexpected from people you were supposed to be able to trust.

I glanced down at the wolf up against my legs. “If your buddies try to come in tonight, will you eat them for me?”

He looked at me with a very serious expression, and nodded twice.

Strangely enough, I believed him.

“Then I guess I’ll survive. Tomorrow, I’ll go buy new locks.”

The wolf shook his head and gestured to my phone, where it rested on the counter.

“What is that going to do as far as the keys go?” I checked.

He gestured to the phone, and then to the door.

“Call the door?”

He scowled, pointing to the phone with his nose before padding over to the door and poking the lock with his nose. Then, he walked over to one side of the house and poked that with his nose, then crossed to the opposite side of the wall and poked that one too.

Walking back to my phone, he emphatically gestured to it with his nose again.

“You want me to call your buddies?” I guessed. “And... key them?” I bit my lip, mind turning. “Oh. You want me to call and ask for their keys.”

He nodded his head, face relaxing when he realized I’d figured out what he was trying to say.

“Wouldn’t that be rude, though? I don’t want to offend them.”

He rolled his eyes. I’d never considered what it might look like when a wolf rolled its eyes, but it made me snort.

“I’ll figure it out tomorrow,” I told him, scratching his head. “Let me finish up in here, and then we’ll tackle the upstairs.”

He licked my arm, and I went back to scrubbing the sink. My music was still playing pretty loudly, which I hoped wouldn’t bother the other guys, but I left it on. The next time I wanted to listen, I’d put on headphones. This time, while everything was packed up, I’d listen out loud.

I finished scrubbing the sink and stove, then dropped the sponge in the sink and rinsed my hands before tackling the microwave. I’d looked around already to determine just how dirty the countertops were, but I’d quickly realized that the papers were the only mess on the counters and table. They

were all in stacks, too, though the stacks were pretty damn messy. They seemed to be worksheets and essays and shit from the history classes he taught, and only about a tenth of them looked graded. Which meant dude-Rocco had a hell of a lot of grading to do.

After drying my hands, I went from stack of papers to stack of papers, straightening them. After digging through the drawers, I found a box of paperclips, and used those to keep my neat stacks of papers together.

When everything was straightened and paperclipped, I piled all of the paper stacks on one end of the countertop, rotating between setting them short-wise and long-wise so they'd be easy to pull apart.

With all the papers cleaned up, the kitchen looked pretty damn spotless. I was proud of that, too.

I grabbed my sponge again and wiped the counters and table down though, just to make sure everything was *really* clean.

When that was done, I looked back at the living room.

The stacked furniture boxes, and toilet paper, and other toiletries... yep, wow, there was a lot.

"Clean, then organize," I mumbled to myself, scratching Rocco's head absentmindedly. "Let's check out the upstairs."

The wolf licked my arm—shocker—and we headed up the stairs together. I was damned glad Elliot had made a path through all of my shit, because I definitely would've managed to fall on my ass if I tried to climb over everything. Since I couldn't leave any of my stuff at my parents' house—they had sold their house and donated every penny they had to some weird charity that revolved around pecan trees—everything I owned was currently on the floor in Rocco's house.

That was fine, though. At least it wasn't in my car. I'd been worried about trying to shove everything in there as well as live with it all that way. Now, there was no need to worry.

At least not about my living situation.

The werewolf thing was something else entirely.

As long as I could keep thinking of Rocco as the massive dog who had a slight obsession with licking me, I could wrap my head around the wolf thing. As soon as I had to talk to hottie-Rocco, we were going to have problems.

But hey, I could pretend for now.

Wolf-Rocco and I headed up the stairs. They were covered in dark carpet that was soft beneath my toes, and like the rest of the house, luckily, it didn't smell bad. I was starting to think that hottie-Rocco wasn't actually a dirty dude. He just had a slight hoarding problem when it came to boxed furniture and bathroom shit.

Maybe he was worried about not having anything to wipe his ass with during a pandemic? Hard to say.

Though, the tampons were something else entirely. Considering no one had mentioned a girlfriend or any other woman he might have been living with, I didn't have an explanation for those.

The upstairs was pretty simple: one bathroom and two bedrooms. I peeked in the bathroom first, and found it surprisingly clean. There was an air freshener that smelled like clean laundry plugged into the wall, and the counters were bare.

When I checked the bathroom cupboards, I found them full of... you guessed it, toilet paper. There was also another unopened box of tampons, as well as a bunch of differently-scented soaps, shampoos, and shower gels. One of them was pink and smelled like flowers, but since I wasn't questioning hottie-Rocco's odd hoarding tendencies, I didn't bother asking the wolf about it.

The top cupboard held a few unopened makeup items, including mascara, eyeliner, and lip gloss. I rarely put more than a smidge of mascara on, so I shot a raised-eyebrow at the wolf.

"Is your human hoarding, or questioning something?"

He snorted, and licked my arm multiple times before licking my thigh.

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean,” I told him, closing the cupboard and checking the toilet and shower. They both looked cleaner than any I’d seen in my own house growing up, which was refreshing.

“Maybe he was working on getting the place cleaned up,” I mused, stepping across the hall and to the first bedroom. When I walked inside, the smell of hottie-Rocco hit me hard, and I stopped in my tracks.

My eyes closed as I inhaled.

Holy hell, yum.

I kind of wanted to eat this guy.

Was that weird?

Yeah, that was weird.

I should definitely not mention my desire to eat him to the man when he took over for the wolf.

Despite the glorious smell, the bedroom was pretty much empty. There was a mattress in one corner with tangled sheets and blankets on it, and absolutely nothing else in the room. Not a stray sock or a pair of the boxer-briefs I now knew hottie-Rocco liked to wear. No dresser, no desk, no... well, anything else.

“I guess this explains the furniture,” I remarked to the wolf. “Guess your human was redecorating.”

He nodded his head, and I scratched his ears.

There was a door to a walk-in closet standing open too, and I saw that it was also completely empty.

Yeah, he was definitely redecorating. I didn’t know why he’d needed to move all of his clothes to the living room to do so, but figured everyone moved shit differently. Maybe he’d been going through everything to decide what to keep or donate?

Stepping out of the bedroom, I crossed the hall and slipped into the second room. My forehead wrinkled when I found another mattress in there. It was bare, without a single sheet or

blanket in sight, and nothing else was in the room either. But there was definitely a second mattress.

So who was he planning to live with?

I glanced at wolf-Rocco. “Your human is kind of an enigma at this point.”

He snorted, shaking his head. His nose poked me in the thigh, and then he trotted over to the mattress and poked it.

“You think the bed’s for me?” I checked.

He nodded his head.

“I guess that’s not entirely impossible to believe,” I mused. “Maybe he knew he was going to meet his mate soon and didn’t want to share a bed with her.”

The wolf scowled, but nodded again.

“You don’t approve of human-Rocco not wanting me to share a bed with him?” I asked the wolf.

He nodded violently.

“You *really* don’t approve of human-Rocco not wanting me to share a bed with him.”

He nodded again, even more violently.

“Wow. Okay, then. I guess it’s good to know that your human’s not going to try to jump me or hump me or anything.”

The wolf’s scowl deepened.

“It’s fine, buddy. I’d be shitty in a relationship anyway. I’m sure your human and I will be much better off as friends.” I rubbed his head in apology. Though his expression was still grumpy, he did seem to appreciate the head scratches.

“Let’s go deal with my stuff, Rocco’s clothes, and then the furniture,” I decided.

The wolf licked my leg, and we were off.

FIVE



I WAS SWEATING balls by the time I finally got all of my shit up to the room that was going to be mine, and was wheezing like I was dying, too. The last thing I wanted to do was walk back down the stairs to grab Rocco's clothes, so I took a break by hanging my shirts up in the closet. There were already about two hundred hangers packed into that thing, and while I only had enough tops to fit ten percent of those hangers, I did appreciate the thoughtfulness human-Rocco seemed to have put into preparing the space for me.

While I hung shit, my mind went back to the tampons and floral shampoo.

Were those for me too?

When I asked wolf-Rocco, he confirmed my suspicion. And honestly, I was kind of touched.

Human-Rocco might have been grumpy at the party, and he might have had less than zero interest in looking at me or sharing a bed with me, but he had still gotten his house ready for me. He'd made sure I wouldn't run out of toilet paper, or tampons, or shampoo, or hangers. He'd even gotten me a damned *bed*.

I was actually starting to think that the whole house-sharing thing could work out nicely for us.

When I finished hanging up clothes, I was still sticky and smelly, but I was no longer actively sweating, so I grudgingly headed back down the stairs.

Carrying Rocco's clothes up only took three trips. Like me, he didn't have a whole ton of clothing. I noticed that his closet was equally split between button-down shirts and old t-shirts as I hung things up for him, and realized he probably had to get a bit dressy for his job. Considering I had always been on the messy side of casual, I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Then again, we were just going to be friend-mates instead of spouse-mates. So it really didn't matter.

There wasn't a dresser to tuck his other clothes into, so I left the folded piles of jeans and joggers on the floor of his closet. He didn't own any slacks, and as I headed back down the stairs, I couldn't help but picture the freakin' gorgeous blond guy in jeans and a button down.

Hot friggin' damn... maybe I didn't mind the dressy shirts he had after all.

When I headed back down the stairs, my gaze landed on the boxes of not-built-yet furniture.

And I grimaced, hard-core.

That shit was going to suck to drag up the stairs.

I headed for the toilet paper, and spent the next twenty minutes dragging that crap up instead. Most of it went on the storage shelves in Rocco's closet, since the bathroom was packed too full.

When that was done, I grudgingly walked over to the pile of furniture. I'd never built a piece of furniture before... which really freakin' sucked for me.

"It's better than living in my car," I muttered to myself, as I leaned over the pile and wrapped my arms around a massive box.

Wolf-Rocco licked my thigh. Whether it was a "condolences" lick or a "I'm glad you're here" lick, I didn't know.

I heaved the box up—and let out a screech as I wobbled. That thing was even heavier than it freakin' looked.

And I dropped it right back down onto the stack.

Swearing under my breath, I leaned over and tried one more time.

Somehow, it was even heavier the second time.

I panted, sagging against the couch.

This sucked.

Not the whole situation—just the damned heavy furniture.

“I’m going to have to go ask one of your buddies for help,” I grumbled to the wolf.

He nodded his head, and something in his gaze told me the bastard had always known I was going to have to do that. I scowled at him, and he whined in apology before licking my leg.

I pushed him away with a grunt, standing up and heading toward the door. The wolf growled, and lunged between me and my way out.

I blinked at him.

Had he growled at me before? I didn’t think so.

He growled again, and poked me in the bare leg with his nose.

It took a moment for me to register why exactly he was poking my thigh.

Tea had said he would be possessive... and what possessive guy wanted his chick walking around half-naked?

“Ohhh. You want me to put pants on.”

The wolf nodded violently.

I sighed. “Buddy, I’ll put on pants this one time, but the possessiveness is going to have to chill. Most of my actual clothing covers less of my skin than this t-shirt.”

The wolf growled at me again.

“Don’t make me flip you off,” I warned him.

He growled yet again.

“Fine. Keep growling and I’ll restrict your licking privileges. We both know you don’t want that.”

The wolf glared at me for a moment, and then let out a huff and a whine.

Then he licked my thigh.

“I didn’t think so.” I scratched his head, and the two of us headed up the stairs. “I just had an argument with a wolf,” I muttered as I walked. “Think I’m actually losing my mother-freakin’ mind this time.”

The wolf licked my leg again, oh-so-helpfully.

I found a pair of old leggings that had been worn so many times they were no longer tight to my skin, and tugged them on. Glancing at the wolf for permission, I waited for his nod before heading down the stairs again.

And yeah, I was starting to really hate those damned stairs.

Who had decided a house would be better-off cut in half with freakin’ *stairs* dividing it? Who the hell *wanted* to walk up and down stairs every day?

I left my shoes where they were and tugged the front door open, glancing both ways. The nights were still a bit cold, since it was springtime, but I ignored the chill in the air and considered my options.

Ebony’s house was two doors to my right—but if I went to her, I’d have to talk to her and Ford.

And they were so sickeningly in-love that they were probably having naked time at this point in the evening. My nose wrinkled at the thought of interrupting that.

Elliot had said his house was to my right, between mine and Ebony’s. He was nice, but definitely pretty enthusiastic. I grimaced at the thought of all that enthusiasm, and the chatter that I’d definitely have to survive while we hauled shit up the stairs.

To my left, I knew, was Dax’s place. He was much quieter than Elliot; I couldn’t recall him saying anything up until he introduced himself.

Not having to chat much definitely sounded the best, so I headed to my left, not bothering to shut the door behind me.

Hopefully, I'd be back in less than two minutes.

I crossed the grassy yard between our houses, my toes growing icy as the damp grass tickled my feet. When I stepped up onto Dax's porch, I rapped my fist against the door three times.

To be honest, I kind of hoped the guy wouldn't answer.

Of course, the door swung open less than a minute later. A shirtless, sleepy-looking Dax stood in the doorway.

I took a step back, panic rising in my chest.

What the hell was I supposed to do with a hot, shirtless skyscraper?

"Del?" He looked just as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

Rocco let out a furious snarl, stepping between me and his buddy.

Dax's gaze dipped to the wolf. "Shit. One second."

The door closed, and the wolf's snarls cut off. He looked pissed though, as he stepped back beside me.

My heart was still pounding rapidly, awkwardness and stress raging.

Why the hell was I afraid of him? A hot guy was just a person, same as the rest of us. I did not understand my anxiety, but still couldn't get the shit to leave me alone.

When the door opened again, wolf-Rocco stepped in front of me, his body between mine and Dax's. I wasn't sure whether he was trying to keep me away from the other guy or was responding to my anxiety, but I was glad anyway.

"Hey, Del. Sorry about that. Elliot's usually the only one who knocks this late." His expression was a bit sheepish. "What's up?"

"Rocco has this massive stack of furniture that needs to be built, and I'm not buff enough to haul it up the stairs myself," I admitted. "I was hoping you could come help me carry it up, but obviously you were just sleeping, so I can just go..." I bit my lip, awkwardly taking another step back.

“I’m already up, might as well help.” He shot me a quick, small smile.

Rocco growled at him.

I glanced down at the wolf, grimacing. “Sorry, I don’t know what his problem is. He didn’t growl at all until I tried to leave the house without pants on.”

Dax chuckled, stepping out on the porch and shutting the door behind himself. “No need to apologize. His problem is that he’s a wolf.”

I shot him a confused frown as we started walking back to Rocco’s place, the wolf standing between us at all times and growling at Dax whenever he got anywhere near me.

“They’re possessive. Well, *we’re* possessive. In general, werewolves as a whole are. If you tried to hug Jesse, Tea would have to fight the urge to claw your eyes out. The other day, Tea threw something at Ford, and Ebony snarled at her even though they were all in human form.”

I snorted. “Seriously?”

“Yep.” Dax wore an expression that was somewhere between a grin and a grimace.

A grimace, I guess.

“Since Rocco’s hunting you right now, he’ll be really possessive. If you’d knocked on my door without pants on, he’d probably have attacked me, and Rocco’s one of the most laid-back guys in the pack.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “Damn.”

I did like the sound of being mated to one of the most laid-back guys in the pack, though. Laid-back, I could dig.

“Yeah. It’s a shitshow if you’re coming from the human world, but it’s just life around here. Ebony and Tea don’t have any hard feelings toward each other after their possessiveness dies down, and neither do us guys. We expect it; it’s natural.”

“Not for me.” We reached my porch, and I gestured Dax in first, just so wolf-Rocco didn’t flip out about Dax seeing my

ass when I walked in before him.

I followed Dax inside, feeling much more comfortable with the guy than I'd expected to.

"Damn. You fixed this place up fast," Dax whistled, his gaze sweeping the house.

"Eh, it really wasn't that dirty to begin with. The dishes were really out of hand, but other than that, most of it was fine. The papers were assignments from his students, I think, and the clothes were mostly clean."

"I wondered about that. I saw him hauling a couple of rolls of carpet in the other day," he remarked.

"You think he changed his own carpet?" My eyebrows shot upward. "Why?"

"Rocco's pretty handy. His dad fixes and renovates houses for a living, so Rocco and his brother learned to do almost everything when it comes to that kind of thing. He mentioned that the nesting instincts have been driving him crazy, and it's not hard to believe that changing the carpet out might have been part of it."

My nose wrinkled as I closed the door behind us. "Nesting? Like a bird?"

"More like a pregnant lady." Dax flashed me a small grin, and we both ignored wolf-Rocco's growl. I did scratch the poor guy behind his ears though, to make up for ignoring him.

"What?"

"When pregnant ladies are near their due dates, they get the urge to get their house ready for their baby. Werewolves have the same urge, but for their mate. That's why everyone was pretty surprised to see Rocco's place in such bad shape."

"I guess that explains the tampons," I told the wolf, who snorted and then nodded.

"Yep," Dax agreed. "Is this the furniture?" He gestured to the stack of boxes, remaining near the entryway until I nodded and waved him toward it.

“Go ahead. I can go ask Elliot for help if it’s too heavy.”

“We’ll see,” Dax grabbed the first box without a problem.

“Which room do you want this in?”

The one on top was a nightstand; from what I’d seen when I checked it out, there were two identical full sets of furniture.

“Either one. Half the stuff will go in Rocco’s, half will go in mine,” I explained.

Dax shot me a frown as he headed toward the stairs. “Rocco bought two separate sets of furniture?”

SIX



“YEP.” I nodded. “From what I’ve gathered, he’s got zero interest in anything to do with all of this.” I gestured to my body.

“That’s weird.” Dax headed up the stairs. Rather than following him and staring at his ass while Rocco growled at me, I leaned up against the couch, scratching the wolf’s head while I waited for the other guy to return.

He came back down the stairs empty-handed, but still frowning. “He’s been having a rough time, but I wouldn’t have thought he’d go this far.”

I shrugged, eyes on the wolf as Dax grabbed another, larger box without a problem. “Doesn’t seem like a stretch to think he’d want to just be friends with his mate.”

Dax shook his head as he started back up the stairs. “You don’t understand,” he told me, then disappeared for a moment. He continued as he came back down. “A werewolf waits for his mate in every way. He physically cannot be with anyone else. There’s not a wolf in this entire town that hopes for friendship. Rocco sure as hell doesn’t. Or at least, he didn’t...” Dax’s forehead remained wrinkled as he headed back up with the next box. I couldn’t believe the asshole still wasn’t sweating; I panted like mad when I reached the top of the stairs every friggin’ time.

“I’ll see what Elliot knows, and tell you,” he said, when he came back down.

“You can just ask the wolf,” I told him with a shrug. “He’s the one who told me the spare bed was for me, so somehow, he must know dude-Rocco’s secrets.”

“The wolf sees through Rocco’s eyes when Rocco’s in human form, just like the man does when the wolf’s in control.” Dax disappeared back up the stairs as I dropped my shocked gaze back to the wolf.

“You lied to me,” I told him.

He flashed me a feral grin.

“Bastard,” I swore, withdrawing my fingers from his fur and pushing his head away from me while my face burned.

I’d stripped in front of the wolf after he told me the human wasn’t home. That meant hottie-Rocco had seen my tits, since my bra did absolutely nothing to hide them. He’d probably seen my bare ass and the matching sheer panties I’d had on too, which meant the damned human had pretty much seen me naked.

“Dammit, bastard!” I huffed at the wolf, pushing his face away again when he leaned in with an apologetic whine. “What the hell is wrong with you? I let you lick my damned legs so many times, the least that should guarantee me is the freakin’ truth.”

“What did he do?” Dax checked.

“Told me the human couldn’t see through his eyes,” I huffed. “I stripped in front of him.”

Dax grimaced. “Can’t say I’m surprised. If Rocco’s decided he doesn’t want anything to do with his mate physically, the wolf was probably hoping that seeing you naked might help.”

“Why would it?” I asked, incredulously.

Dax ducked up the stairs again, wiping his hands on his sweats when he came back down. “I’m not going to give you all of my thoughts on the subject, to avoid getting attacked by the wolf, but basically, a werewolf’s draw to his mate is pretty much irresistible. You’ll be the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, you’ll smell so good to him that he’ll have a hard time

stopping himself from licking every damn inch of you, you'll be everything he never realized he wants."

He disappeared back up the stairs with another box while I glanced down at the wolf I'd pushed away.

He licked my arm with a grin, as if agreeing with everything Dax said.

"Besides that, if I were to walk into a room of women and pick out one that I thought Rocco would like, I'd pick you," the man said bluntly. "You're small and witty, unique, and chill. Rocco would hate to deal with someone as high-maintenance as Teagan or Ebony for the long haul, but he needs someone who's got enough fire to set him straight when he takes a joke too far. Seems like that could be you." Dax took yet another piece of furniture up, still not sweating.

My eyebrows lifted. "Thanks, I think."

"It was a compliment," Dax called out behind himself. "As much of a compliment as I can give you without pissing off the wolf."

I snorted, glancing back at the wolf, whose head was now resting on my lap.

"So what's he like?" I asked Dax, as he came back down. "Rocco the guy, I mean."

Dax's expression grew contemplative. "I'm not sure, to be honest."

I frowned. "What does that mean?"

Hadn't he just been talking about the guy like they were friends?

"Rocco recently lost his brother. I won't give you the details, but in the months since, he's changed. I'm not comfortable setting you up to expect him to act one way when I'm not sure how much of the change is because of that loss and whether or not it's permanent," Dax explained, grabbing another box.

My gaze lingered on the wolf, my expression falling a bit. "I'm sorry," I told him.

“The wolf doesn’t consider his brother gone, really, which is probably why he was telling you what Rocco has planned and doesn’t agree with it. The way Rocco’s brother was lost has soured him toward the concept of mates, I’d imagine, though Rocco hasn’t confided in me.”

He went back up the stairs yet again.

“Hmm.” I stared at the wolf. He licked my arm. “Well, you definitely like me,” I told the wolf.

He stuck his tongue out and gave me a goofy grin, which made me snort.

“He seems to at least have decided that he wants me to live in his house,” I remarked, gesturing toward a box as Dax grabbed it up off the pile and hauled it toward the stairs. It was the second massive dresser, and there was no way Rocco himself would need more than one of them.

“You won’t have a choice, during the chase. I’m not sure why he thinks this is a good idea,” Dax remarked. He was finally sweating, hallelujah. I was starting to worry the asshole had super-strength or was impervious to exercise or some other crazy shit. “Your wolf will force you to stay close enough to him that you can see him at all times.”

My eyebrows lifted in horror. “What if I need to pee?”

He shrugged. “Some wolves are fine with that much separation. Others aren’t.”

Dammit.

Something told me my wolf would be the obnoxiously-difficult kind who wouldn’t even let me walk away from hottie-Rocco long enough to take a piss.

“Well that sucks,” I muttered.

The wolf licked my arm again, as if telling me it would be okay.

With a sigh, I forgave him for lying to me and scratched him behind his ears. “Don’t lie to me again,” I warned him. “Or I’ll make you sleep on the floor, and we both know you’ll want to jump in my bed.”

The wolf huffed in annoyance, but nodded his head before resting it back down on my leg.

At least that was settled.

“Alright, last box,” Dax announced, as he grabbed the final one. It was the second headboard. “You’re not planning to put all this stuff together on your own, are you?” he checked, glancing over his shoulder at me as he walked.

“Uh...” I trailed off, not wanting to admit that I definitely was.

“Do you know how to use an impact driver?” he asked me.

“The better question is, do I know what an impact driver is,” I muttered to the wolf. “And the answer is a big fat ‘no’.”

The wolf snorted.

“I heard that,” Dax said with a grin, as he headed back down the stairs. “I’ll text Elliot and Zed.”

“You don’t need to,” I protested.

“We can get everything done in a couple of hours. It would take you a week on your own without any tools other than what the stores throw in the boxes,” he countered.

I grimaced, still not wanting to agree.

Since I had absolutely nothing on my schedule, it wasn’t like I was in a hurry. But there were always things I could do with my music, and I needed to apply for jobs, and...

Fine, I didn’t want to spend the next week building shit. It would probably end up wobbly or lopsided if I did it myself, anyway.

“You can stay down here while we work upstairs if you want,” Dax added, as if realizing that I mostly just didn’t want to have to socialize. “I understand not wanting to be overwhelmed, but Zed’s pretty mellow. Elliot adapts to the room, so he won’t be a pain either. Jesse and Tea are probably the loudest, especially when they’re together. And they’re always together.”

“I got that feeling,” I agreed, digging my fingers further into wolf-Rocco’s fur as I fought anxiety. The wolf snuggled up closer, and strangely enough, it worked to calm me down a bit.

“Alright, you can text them. Or I can just go knock on their doors, I guess. If they’re busy, that’s okay, I don’t want to—”

Dax already had his phone out and was typing on the screen, so I cut myself off.

“Don’t worry about inconveniencing us,” he told me, flashing me a small grin. “We’ve got nothing going on, and it’s good to see Rocco with you while he’s trapped in his wolf form. The other girls didn’t really let us around them while their guys were hunting, and we’re curious.”

“Oh.” I bit my lip. “Then you’re welcome, I guess?”

Dax chuckled. “I’ve got to go grab my tools, but I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Alright.” I didn’t really want him to leave—I was actually starting to like the gorgeous skyscraper, surprisingly enough. Not romantically, obviously, since we’d just met and he was waiting for his mate for—

Wait, he’d said werewolves waited for their mates?

“Are you a virgin?” I blurted out, then groaned, “Shit.”

Dax laughed, and Rocco snarled, shoving his furry self over most of my body as if he was going to physically prevent me from jumping his friend.

“I wasn’t trying to flirt,” I said quickly. “I just meant—dammit, this is weird.”

“It’s not weird.” He flashed me a grin, much bigger than any he’d given me before. “All werewolves are virgins until we meet our mates. A werewolf’s mate will be his first, and his only. So yes, Rocco’s a virgin.”

My face was on freakin’ fire. “What about the girls? Are they usually supposed to be, like, experienced?”

His grin didn’t budge. “It doesn’t matter to us. Most guys would want to murder any asshole who’s been with his girl, but it doesn’t change anything for a werewolf. If you’ve slept around, it won’t matter to Rocco. Unless you bring your exes around—then he might eat them.”

I snorted. “I haven’t touched any guys, remember?”

“In five years,” Dax pointed out. “I don’t know how old you are; that doesn’t mean you’ve never touched anyone, ever.”

Rocco snarled even more furiously, and I patted his head in condolence.

A knock at the door distracted both me and Dax. I tensed as I waited for it to unlock and open, but it didn’t.

Dax followed my line of sight to the lock. “Are you comfortable with us having keys?” he asked.

The question relaxed me, honestly.

“Not really,” I admitted, as Dax headed over to the door and undid the lock.

“We’ll have everyone bring them over and leave them under the mat. We handed them out as a convenience thing; not to cause stress.” He tugged the door open.

Elliot stepped inside with a grin and a drill-thing that I assumed was Dax’s *impact driver*. “Hey, Del. Thanks for letting us come help.”

He was thanking me for asking for help?

Damn, what kind of world had I walked into?

“You’re welcome?”

He chuckled, and Dax stepped past him. As he went, Dax asked, “Can you tell everyone to drop their keys to this place under the mat sometime tomorrow? Del wants some privacy.”

“Sure.” Elliot leaned up against the couch, pulling his phone from his pocket.

He was just as gorgeous as the rest of them, but after talking to Dax for so long, I was a lot less intimidated by him.

“Thanks,” I told them both, shooting Dax a grateful look as he left.

“No problem,” Elliot replied for both of them. “We want you to be comfortable here, since you got dragged into this mess.” His fingers moved over the screen on his phone for another

moment, and then he put it back in his pocket. “The furniture is upstairs?” he checked.

I nodded.

“Any rooms you want us to stay out of?”

The question surprised me, but in a good way.

They would respect it if I didn’t want them going into one of the rooms, and that was a big deal. Especially considering that I hadn’t wanted anyone upstairs at all a few hours earlier.

“No. Just don’t touch Rocco’s bed, maybe?”

It was stupid, but I didn’t want them to screw up his scent on the blankets.

“Sure.” Elliot didn’t so much as bat an eye at the request, which made me feel a lot better.

SEVEN



ZED CAME WALKING up to the open door, his own tool bag dangling from his fingers. He nodded toward me, not bothering with a friendly smile. I appreciated the neutrality, honestly.

“How much shit do we have to build?” he checked.

“A lot,” I admitted.

“Good. Elliot needs to take his anger out on some screws.” Zed patted Elliot’s shoulder.

I snorted as Elliot gave his buddy a lighthearted shove. I’d only known Elliot for a few hours and could already tell that he didn’t have a damned ounce of anger inside his gigantic body.

“I’ll start in Rocco’s room, you take the spare?” Elliot asked Zed, as the two men headed up the stairs without so much as a backward glance. They were treating me normally, and it meant a hell of a lot to me.

“Alright. I’m sending the wolf your way if he attacks me for her room smelling like me, though,” Zed grunted.

I felt infinitely better as the guys vanished up the stairs, leaving me without making me uncomfortable at all.

Dax stepped back in, and gave me a quick smile as he headed up. “You can come hang out and question us, or you can do whatever else you want. We’re easy.”

I nodded, gratitude warming my chest. “Thanks.”

Walking over to the fridge, I looked over the contents of the thing. There was more than enough food for one person, and I glanced over at the wolf. Remembering how much food he had gulped down, I figured he probably needed to eat even more than a normal huge guy.

After I grabbed a bag of leftover pizza, I threw a couple of slices on a plate. My gaze flicked to the stairs, and I bit my lip as I considered going up and hanging out with the other guys.

That wasn't something I'd ever done before. Choosing to socialize when there was another option? Not me.

But... I did want them to tell me what they knew.

And honestly, I kind of liked them. Just as friends, of course, but they seemed cool when I got past the outrageously-attractive bit.

Wolf-Rocco nudged my leg toward the stairs, prodding me up toward his friends. Considering his possessiveness, I figured that was as good a sign as any that I should just swallow my anxiety and go for it.

My reluctant feet carried me upward. I heard the sounds of cardboard being ripped, along with some kind of drill—I mean impact driver, and heard a low chuckle about a comment I didn't hear.

I cringed as I stepped into the doorway of Rocco's room, expecting it to be awkward when I joined the guys.

They waved my way while I leaned up against the doorway, and Elliot continued telling a story about some kid in his class who had decided to try to sell him and everyone else in the class on the fact that one plus one equaled one. As the story went on, I found myself grinning and fighting laughter while he described the teenage punk he'd been dealing with.

He filled me in on the fact that he taught high school math at the same school as Rocco, who taught history.

When the story ended, the guys kept working on the things they were building. Elliot was working on a dresser, and Dax was working on a bed frame/headboard combo. I hadn't seen

one of those since I was a kid, and my parents still believed in “worldly” shit, but from the picture, they looked good.

Rocco seemed to have chosen furniture made out of a dark gray wood that almost matched his couch, but I thought it was gorgeous. It was neutral, sort of industrial, and could be easily made to look feminine, masculine, or a nice neutral.

I wasn't going to think about how easily I could throw a couple of patterned pillows and a bedspread on one and make it look just right for both me and Rocco to share.

“Do you want help?” I asked the guys, getting pretty full of pizza despite the two slices remaining on my plate.

“Nah. Go ahead and relax.” Elliot waved me over to Rocco's mattress. “You probably need a break after all the shit today. Didn't you just graduate?”

“I finished my last exams today, yeah.” I crossed the room with wolf-Rocco at my side, and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Technically, the ceremony's tomorrow. I'm skipping, though.”

“What?” Elliot protested. “Why would you skip?”

I shrugged. “A graduation gown seemed like a waste of money, and I'm not really into ceremonial shit.”

Plus, I had no one coming to attend, so what was the point? I sure as hell wasn't going to sit through long, boring speeches that had nothing to do with me for *myself*. That was the kind of thing you did for the people who loved you. Or at least, it was the kind of thing *I* would only do for the people who loved me.

Not that there were really many people in that boat, anymore.

I wasn't going to think about that either, though, because that shit was painful.

“Come on,” Elliot protested. “You'll regret skipping it.”

“I definitely won't. If I was going to celebrate, I'd go eat my weight in ice cream, or watch four movies at the theater in a row, or spend all day playing laser tag or something. All of those things would probably cost less than the damned graduation gown, and I'd make memories I'd never forget

rather than wasting my time sitting in an uncomfortable chair while some chick who graduated a decade ago rambles on about where she used to sit during the ‘best days of her life’.” I took a violent bite of pizza.

Yeah, my memories of my high school graduation weren’t my favorite.

“Damn. You’ve got strong feelings about this,” Dax said, then drilled some shit into a chunk of wood.

“Rise against and all that.” I shrugged.

Wolf-Rocco was eyeing my pizza, so I held it out to him. My fingers remained on the food while he took very human-like bites from it, and then I tossed him the crust. He caught it in the air, and gulped it down quickly.

My lips quirked upward at that.

“You’re adapting to all this really quickly,” Elliot remarked.

“Eh. I’ve just learned to deal with whatever shit life throws at me at this point. A fuzzy dude to snuggle with is a hell of a lot better than some of the crap I’ve had tossed my way.”

Elliot nodded, looking contemplative as he continued putting the dresser together.

The room lulled into a comfortable quiet while the guys worked, and I fed wolf-Rocco another slice of pizza. He licked my fingers as much as he licked the pizza, but I pretended not to notice.

“So do you guys ever give your wolves different names than you?” I checked, curiosity getting the best of me as I scratched Wolf-Rocco’s head again. He set it down on my lap, and I resisted the urge to lie down and snuggle up with him.

While the other guys were in the room, that would’ve been weird.

“Nah. Our wolves are used to going by the same names we do,” Elliot explained.

“Some guys’ mates give their wolves nicknames to separate them, though,” Dax added. “Or they give the men nicknames,

so they avoid the mix-up.”

I nodded.

I’d come up with a nickname for Rocco’s wolf, then, because I was currently much more attached to the wolf than to the deliciously-hot skyscraper of a man.

What should I call the wolf, though?

Fuzzy? Softy?

Something told me the wolf would roll his eyes at those name suggestions.

I’d keep thinking about it.

I tried to come up with all of the werewolf words I knew.

Mate... growl... snarl... bite... snap... alpha...

Alpha?

That one was from movies and tv shows and shit.

“Do werewolves have alphas?” I checked.

“Yup. That would be me.” Elliot gestured to himself.

“They’re not like in the movies though. The alpha’s not the boss. He’s more like the... den mother,” Dax explained.

I snorted.

Den Mother Elliot?

It was perfect.

“Not the Den Mother,” Elliot protested. “More like the...pack dad.”

“Pack Papa?” I grinned. “Even better.”

Rocco chuffed beside me, and I scratched his head as Elliot grimaced and Dax grinned.

“Be real, man. How many snacks do you have in your pockets right now?” Dax checked, leaning over the bed frame.

I turned my gaze back to the wolf I was scratching, not wanting to be a creeper.

“Three?” Elliot dug into the pockets of his sweat pants, and came up with a Twix and two Clif Bars.

I laughed. “Seriously? I don’t even remember to put a bra on half the time.”

Rocco growled, shoving himself between my boobs and the other guys in the room, making me laugh harder.

“That’s because you’re a gamma,” Elliot said, flashing me a grin. He didn’t look ashamed in the slightest of all the snacks he’d brought.

“A gamma?” I checked.

“It’s a role in the pack, like alpha.” Dax tossed a hand toward Elliot, still focused on the bedframe he was building.

“The gamma is basically the pack’s entertainer,” Elliot explained. “They keep everyone laughing.”

“Well, I can tell you straight-up that I’d be the shittiest comedian any of you have ever seen.” I gestured around the room.

“Your pack role is only one aspect of your personality,” Dax said with a shrug. “Elliot’s the Pack Papa, but he’s also really into boxing, which is a pretty violent sport. Rocco’s a pretty funny guy, usually, but he loves history more than anyone you’ll ever meet and can rattle off dates that all kinds of random shit happened.”

My eyebrows lifted, and I glanced over at the wolf. “Guess your human wouldn’t forget my birthday or our anniversary.”

The wolf snorted, and shook his head no.

I glanced back at the guys, who were still working on building shit. “So what day do you guys celebrate for anniversaries? The day two mates meet? Or the day you bite each other, or what?”

“It’s up to the couple,” Elliot said with a shrug. “Some celebrate the day the mate hunt started, others celebrate the day the female wolf bites her mate, or the day after the climax ends. The majority eventually have a wedding for the human’s

sake, and celebrate the wedding day as their anniversary just to make things easier for extended family and whatnot.”

My chest hurt.

Even if I wanted a wedding—which I didn’t—I wouldn’t have had anyone to attend it, other than June. She would definitely show up if I asked her to, but I’d feel bad even asking her to because I knew her heart was on the road. She hated being in the same place for more than a day or two.

That thought was depressing, but I didn’t let myself linger on it. I may not have had any say over my parents’ choice to abandon civilization, but I’d made my own decisions when it came to keeping to myself and avoiding crowds. If I had tried, I could’ve made friends. I wasn’t bad with people; just anxious.

“So Rocco can hear everything we’re saying right now, right?” I checked, before I asked a question that might be awkward for hottie-Rocco.

“Yes,” Elliot confirmed.

Never mind, then.

I’d keep that question to myself.

“You look like you want to ask us something,” Dax observed.

Damn him.

““Do you think he even wants to be friends?” I finally asked them. “Rocco, I mean. Dude Rocco, not Wolfie here.” I patted the wolf’s head awkwardly. “He has you guys. That’s plenty of friendship for one guy, I’d think. And I’m,” I waved a hand toward all of me. “Weird.”

Dax and Elliot both shot me raised eyebrows, and didn’t reply right away.

My face reddened. “Guess that’s a no.”

“Rocco’s never met someone he didn’t want to be friends with,” Elliot said, shaking his head. “It’s not a no. He gets along with everybody.”

Except me, probably. He hadn't even wanted to look at me, or say hi to me, the first time we met so it was probably safe to assume that he wasn't interested in being friends.

"Hmm." I made a noise that I hoped didn't portray my feelings on the matter.

"Mates almost always find that their personalities fit together perfectly. I'm sure you guys will hit it off," Elliot added.

I already knew that "almost" was the key word in those two sentences, especially as they applied to me.

"Maybe," I said, not wanting to let myself hope for something unlikely.

Zed stepped into the doorway, leaning up against the wall with an impact driver dangling from his fingers. "You're going to have to build your own bed frame," he drawled to me. "There's no way I can do it without making it smell like me—which will piss off Furry over there."

Damn.

He must've been listening, and heard how awkward shit was getting.

My freakin' hero.

"Yeah, I want to learn how to use an impact driver anyway," I said quickly, standing up. Wolf-Rocco stood with me, of course. "In case I buy more furniture or decide to decorate or something."

"The walls are pretty bare," Elliot agreed, flashing me a grin that said he knew what I was doing and wasn't offended.

These guys needed to be careful, or I was going to start to actually like spending time with them.

"They're *completely* bare," I corrected him, crossing the room.

"You seem like a girl who'd like a colorful place." Elliot was still grinning.

"If by colorful you mean multiple shades of black, then yes." I tossed him a grin of my own as Wolf-Rocco and I crossed the hall behind Zed.

EIGHT



ZED SHUT the door behind us unceremoniously, but I wasn't nervous about being alone with him. Wolf-Rocco had already agreed to eat anyone who tried to mess with me.

"Here." Zed handed me the impact driver. I took it, and was surprised by the weight. That thing was heavier than it looked.

"Thanks." I followed him to the bed frame that looked like it was pretty much already put together. The gray wood headboard would cover part of the wall, then stretch under the bed and around to the front of it. It was pretty, and the mattress would be massive compared to the twin I was used to sleeping on. I'd had my own room for three of my four years in college, but if I wanted a bigger mattress I would've had to pay for it myself, and that wasn't in the budget in any way, shape, or form.

"You just fit it into the screw and pull the trigger back. It'll turn on, and screw it in." Zed gestured to a few screws that had already been set into the bed frame.

I kneeled beside it, grimacing, and started to pull the trigger. The thing whirred to life, and I dropped it on its mechanical ass, standing quickly.

"Nope," I said, shaking my head as my heart pounded. "Not interested in impact drivers after all. Give me the crappy tools the furniture people tossed in the box."

Zed snorted, grabbing some tiny wrench off the ground and handing it over. "Start tightening the bolts over there."

I jerked my head in a nod as if I knew what a bolt was, heading over to the place he'd gestured to.

My gaze swept the furniture.

Bolt, bolt, bolt...

Rocco bumped his nose against a weird-shaped screw without a line or star built into the top of it.

Ah.

Bolts.

Made sense.

Sheesh, there were a lot of them.

I spent the next twenty minutes tightening bolts (Zed probably could've done it in two, but I was calling it a win) while mentally running over possible names I could call Wolf-Rocco.

Licorice...

Popsicle...

Apple...

Shit, why was I thinking about food? Guess that steak dinner had reeled me back into the land of humanity, and most humans liked food.

Nope, food names were a negative.

I went over human names next.

Bob...

Robert...

Dick...

That last one made me snort.

Hard pass.

Get it? Like, hard as in—alright, I'll stop while I'm already behind.

I ran over a few newer human names.

Jordan.

Kai.

Dylan.

Hmm, nope. None of those fit the very-much-not-human wolf.

I went through nature-related words next.

Leaf.

Tree.

Stone.

Boulder...

I eyed the wolf.

Definitely not Boulder.

Plant.

Branch.

Rock...

Rock?

As in—

“Ha!” I exclaimed triumphantly. “I’ve got it! Your human can be Rocco, and you can be Rocky. Not creative, I know, but similar enough and different enough that—“

The wolf licked my face while I was in the middle of speaking. I gagged when his tongue accidentally brushed mine, bending over and dry heaving.

“No kissing,” I croaked at the wolf. “That’s nasty.”

Rocky had the audacity to flash me a wolfy grin, the bastard.

“Bad wolf,” I grumbled, straightening back up so I could tighten the last of the bolts.

I glanced back at Zed, remembering he was there and feeling a bit guilty about forgetting. I found him working, but also watching me with an expression I couldn’t read.

Almost... wistful?

The other guys had said they wanted to meet their mates; Zed must've too.

“So do you have as much toilet paper stocked up as Rocco?” I checked, speaking to the man in the room instead of the wolf.

He chuckled. “Nah. Not really my style.”

I waited for him to tell me what his style was.

He finally admitted, “I’ve got four freezers full of meals that just need to be thawed or cooked in the crockpot. Good meals; not just grocery store shit.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “Damn.”

He grimaced. “It’s overkill, but the nesting...” he shook his head. “Not really controllable.”

“Hey, Rocco changed the carpets through the whole house. That’s probably more expensive and more overkill-esque.”

He chuckled. “Rocco changed all of the flooring. He made me come over and help with the tile. It looks like wood, but it’s not, and it was a beast to put in.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “No one noticed?”

Zed shrugged. “It’s about the same color as the old stuff, and the old stuff was still in good shape. The new stuff is supposed to be tougher though.”

Damn. “See, your meals are far from overkill compared to that.” I gestured to Rocky, who licked my hand playfully.

I scratched his head in response.

“How long do you think your wolf will be hunting for?” I checked.

Zed shrugged. “Sigmas are notorious for having longer hunts, hence the multiple freezers full of food. But sigma females are pretty much the only ones who ever reject their mates, so I should probably start redoing the flooring, and painting, and decorating shit.”

I wrinkled my nose. “If she rejects you, she doesn’t deserve you.”

“On that, we can agree.” Zed bobbed his head as he continued working on the bed frame I was supposed to be dealing with. “Unfortunately, nature feels differently. A male wolf has only one mate, and if his mate rejects him, she’s free to hunt down her own mate.”

My eyebrows lifted. “What about the guy?”

“He’s lost,” Zed said simply.

My throat may as well have closed. “Damn.”

“Mmhm.”

We were both quiet for a while longer. I glanced over at Rocky, and found him resting his head on my thigh. I hadn’t even noticed, and I’d been scratching his head.

“Whoever your mate is, I’ll go fuzzy and claw her in the boob if she tries to reject you. That’ll hurt like a bitch, and she’ll have no choice but to change her mind,” I told Zed.

He snorted. “If she rejects me, she’ll probably deserve it.”

I flashed him a grin, and he met it with his own.

We continued building shit, descending back into a comfortable silence. He was working on the bed frame as well as the dresser, so I knew I was slowing him down, but he didn’t seem bothered by that at all.

The other two guys joined us after a bit, and they finished everything up quickly. They insisted on putting the furniture where I wanted it, so I told them where to move it before I sent them on their way.

Elliot promised to get me all of the spare keys on his way out, and that made me feel a hell of a lot better about everything.

It was late—almost 3 AM—when I finally crashed. There was only one set of sheets that I found, and they were already on Rocco’s bed, so I made myself at home on that one.

Rocky snuggled up against me, and I fell asleep snuggling a wolf.

IT WASN'T the sun that woke me up the next day, but the heat.

I groaned, stumbling out of bed. Somehow, I managed to knock my knee against a dresser—and then slammed my face right into a wall.

Another groan escaped me.

Something wet licked my bare knee, and I remembered where I was.

Rocco's house.

Werewolf mate.

Instant-hubby.

Right.

Cool.

Okay.

“Think I bruised my nose,” I mumbled into the wall I'd crashed into, my body plastered to it for support.

It came out like absolute gibberish.

Not like the wolf cared though.

He proved me right about that by licking my knee again, right where I'd bumped it.

I remained against the wall.

“I'm sweating frickin' balls,” I grumbled, to the wolf that time.

He snorted.

“Why is it so damned hot in here?”

I needed to pee badly, but stumbled around looking for a thermostat like a drunkard for a bit first. Though I crashed into three more walls and almost met my demise via falling down the stairs, I finally found it right next to the door leading to the garage.

I stabbed digital buttons with my finger until I managed to get the settings to show up.

The ac was set at 85 until...

I blinked.

5 PM?

That was a hot damn hard pass from me.

I cranked that sucker down to 72 and prayed like hell that Rocco hadn't made himself poor by replacing the floors when all that really mattered to me was the sweet, sweet bliss of air conditioning.

Sleeping in a pool of my own sweat?

Hella miserable.

I slicked my hair off my face. The damn stuff was sweaty as shit, and I considered buzzing it all off for at least the eighteen-thousandth time in my life. Then I remembered that I liked it, when I wasn't sweaty and grumpy and tired.

It was almost noon, so I had gotten enough sleep, but...

Okay, there really wasn't an excuse.

I just needed to change my damn attitude.

After stripping off the shirt and panties I had on, I threw myself into the bathtub and drowned my misery in lukewarm water. Rocco was probably getting the show of his virgin life, but I didn't give a damn. Dude wasn't interested in me anyway, and we would have much bigger problems than my instant-husband getting an eyeful of my coochie while his wolf was in control of their shared body.

Yeah, that whole deal was pretty damn screwy.

Oh well.

The screwiness could drown in my lukewarm bathtub with my sweaty stench.

There was a set of girly shampoo, conditioner, and body wash on one side of the tub, which I helped myself to readily. Rocco had put it there for me, after all, whether he liked it or not.

There was no razor, so I'd be rocking hairy pits and lady bits, but that was cool. Wasn't like I needed to impress anyone,

since my instant-husband wasn't interested in my body.

Maybe I was more bitter about that than I'd realized the day before.

Pushing that thought away, I washed my hair quickly. Rocco's stuff would definitely make the platinum more than a little yellow, but I could deal. My shampoo was packed in one of the bags on the floor of my room, so I'd just let the purple shit I usually used sit on it for a little extra long the next time I washed it.

After I got out of the bath, I threw another one of Rocco's shirts on, free-buffing it while I slipped into my room to organize shit. Those sweaty panties weren't going anywhere near my clean butt.

Organizing the mess I'd made while packing took a lot longer than I expected. When my stomach started growling, Rocky started growling too, and I let him nudge me down to the kitchen.

I found some yogurt in the fridge, and some kind of breakfast casserole that smelled like biscuits and gravy and sausage. That smell reminded me too much of my childhood to resist it, even if it was of a questionable age.

Loading up a plateful, I popped it in the microwave and downed my yogurt quickly. It was strawberry, which wasn't my favorite, but I did like the idea of Rocco sitting at a table, eating yogurt like he was just a normal person.

Considering he was pretty enough to pass as an actual god, thinking about him like a normal person made me feel slightly less intimidated by the fact that fate had paired us together.

And slightly more offended by the fact that he wasn't attracted to me.

I ignored that though.

After I pounded my biscuits and gravy, I stepped out onto the porch with Rocky and watched while he trotted into the edge of the forest that was our backyard, disappearing behind some bushes.

I knew he was just doing his business away from my line of sight, which I appreciated.

There wasn't a chair on the porch or anything, so I sat down on the steps, my gaze sliding over the scenery in front of me.

It really was beautiful, despite the monsters probably running around out of my line of sight.

Rocky was gone for longer than I expected, but when he returned, he was licking his lips. I realized that he'd probably hunted some poor small animal, and grimaced as I followed him back inside.

I kind of wished I could get the werewolf, instant-mate shit without the actual wolf shit.

But hey, maybe I could take a nap or something while my inner-wolf took over and pranced through the forest. And who could argue against a nap?

NINE



I SPENT the rest of the day organizing my stuff. The rest of the pack left me alone, by some blessed miracle, though Teagan sent me half a dozen texts checking to make sure I really didn't want to go to graduation. After the sixth time, I assured her that I would rather rip my own fingernails off, and she got the message.

When I'd finished putting away the last of my things, I glanced at the time on my phone and grimaced.

Graduation was starting.

It felt weird not to be there, even if I didn't necessarily *want* to be. Whether it was my anxiety or just my personal issues, I felt sort of guilty about ditching out.

"What do you say we head out and grab some sheets for my bed, and some ice cream?" I asked Rocky, scratching his head.

He was a surprisingly good companion, following me around and licking me an insane number of times, snorting at my stupid jokes and giving me his wolfy grin whenever I teased him.

Though he definitely wasn't anything like a normal dog, I liked having him around.

He gave me another wolfy grin in response to my question.

I tugged some panties and shorts on, considering how it would go if I tried to bring a gigantic wolf into Walmart like he was my pet. Pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it into a pile of other dirty clothes I'd made near the door, I mumbled to

myself, “Should probably call one of the pack dudes and ask...”

Rocky growled threateningly, and I glanced down at my boobs before looking back at him. “What? They’re just nipples. You saw them yesterday. And your human has them too, though his aren’t quite as squishy.” I grabbed my bra, buckling it on. “Or squishy at all. I don’t think your human has a single damned ounce of fat. The man may as well be a statue carved by...” I glanced back at the wolf. “You know, I’m just going to stop myself there before I bury myself any deeper in this weird-ass hole.”

I grabbed a clean cropped tee out of my closet, tugging it into place.

The wolf growled at me, poking his nose at my belly before glaring at me and then shaking his head.

I wrinkled my nose. “You don’t want my belly showing?”

He nodded emphatically.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a belly, dude. Get over it.”

Grabbing my purse off the dresser, I threw it over my shoulder and looked at my contacts, checking my options.

Tea... Ebony... Dax... Elliot... Zed...

I knew Elliot would probably be just leaving his job, and Tea and Ebony weren’t back at school yet. Zed would be heading into work in an hour or two, probably, since he usually worked nights. Dax... well, I didn’t know what his job was. Probably should’ve asked.

Chewing my lip, I weighed my options before finally lifting my phone to my ear.

“Hello?” Zed answered almost immediately, his voice gravelly.

“Hey, it’s Del.” I paused, and added quickly. “Rocco’s mate, in case you forgot.”

He snorted. “I didn’t forget.”

“Good, I guess. Anyway, uh, do you think they’ll let me drag wolf-Rocco to Walmart with me? I saw a few other wolves walking the streets on my way here yesterday, but I don’t want to get kicked out or anything.”

“Moon Ridge is full of werewolves. There are humans here too, but all of the humans know that we exist. No one will bat an eye at Rocco following you through the store; you might get a few sympathetic looks, or offers for hugs from other women in your situation, though.”

“Oh, wow. Alright. Thank you.”

“Sure. Anything else?”

I glanced at the wolf. “Are there any like... signs that’ll let you know when the wolf’s going to bite you?”

“Nah. If he thinks he’s going to lose you for any reason, he’ll lose his shit and bite you early, but otherwise he’ll just follow you around until he’s decided that you’re not going to leave him.”

I nodded, even though Zed couldn’t see it. “Okay. Thanks again.”

“Mhmm. See ya.” He hung up without giving me a chance to echo the goodbye.

I dropped my phone in my bag and shoved a hand through my messy hair.

“Okay,” I told Rocky.

He blinked at me.

“We’re going to do it. Go out in public, like it’s no big deal. Whew. Yay.”

The wolf licked my belly again, growling at me once more.

“Can it,” I growled back. “Or I’ll leave the house in just my damned bra.”

He snarled at me.

“That’s what I thought.” I grabbed my keys out of my bag and headed for the front door. No way in hell was I going to try to

drive Rocco's truck; guys could be weird about that shit. And anyway, I hated big vehicles. Mostly because I was terrible at parking.

Rocky walked to my car at my side, grumbling under his breath as we went. The damned wolf was becoming something of a menace, but I was glad I wasn't alone.

If not for the werewolf, I would've been in my shitty car, driving toward the nearest job interview while praying like hell that I'd find some place to work and live before my vehicle broke down. If that wasn't my nightmare, I didn't know what was.

So yeah, I was glad Rocky was there, even if he was kind of a pain in the ass.

I opened my passenger door to let him in first, then walked around to my side. He licked my cheek when I sat down, and with a sigh, I pushed his face away.

"Maybe I should start drinking," I muttered to myself, turning the key to start my car.

I probably would, if I had the money to fund the habit.

So it was probably a good thing that I was broke, if for that reason alone.

The engine sputtered to life, and I patted the steering wheel to say thank you.

My phone guided me to Walmart, and after we got there, I gestured for Rocky to follow me inside the store. Grabbing sheets only took a few minutes, but I wasn't ready to head back to Rocco's place yet, so I wandered the store for a while.

The wolf kept licking me, but that was to be expected.

The place was pretty empty, and I wondered how many other people in the werewolf town had gone out to my graduation. Maybe I should've gone.

But if I had, I would've regretted it.

And if I was going to regret it whether I went or not, I might as well regret it while spending my two-hundred bucks on a

movie and enough ice cream to fill up a whale, right?

With that decision made, I bought my sheets, trying not to do the mental math at how much money that left in my bank account, and then headed to the movie theater.

I was probably going to cheap out on the ice cream and popcorn—because I hadn't managed to force myself not to do mental math—but at least a movie would distract me for a bit.

Rocky went with me, and practically sat on top of me throughout the movie. It was a horror movie—a romcom would've made me feel depressed—and the wolf kept whining, making me pet him.

By the time the movie ended, loneliness had set in.

I had never wanted to be alone. I hadn't wanted to lose my family to the damn wilderness, or leave the only friend I'd ever known. But June wanted to stay on the road, and my parents made their own decisions, whether I agreed with them or not.

And now, everything was uncertain.

Rocco might not like me enough to share a house with me.

He sure as shit wasn't attracted to me.

The wolf was a fun companion, but we couldn't have a conversation about life, or music, or despair, or love.

As much as I hated it, there was a good chance that I would be alone like this for the rest of my life.

I wanted to go home and bury myself in music for a few hours, or maybe sit on the floor of the shower while screamo played for a while...

But I couldn't.

Because wherever home was for me, I hadn't found it.

The movie ended horribly, as expected, and I was discreetly wiping tears away as we slipped out of the theater.

The only other people in there had been couples— go freakin' figure.

I let Rocky into the car before taking my seat, then stared forward for a minute, ignoring the frustrated tears that welled in my eyes.

Rocky licked my arm, and it probably would've comforted me if I knew him better. But he was still a stranger, and I was still in this insane situation, and I still didn't know him.

And he was still going to turn into a hot skyscraper who didn't give a shit about seeing me naked. Who was friends with everyone, but hadn't so much as attempted a smile or conversation with me.

An urge to escape hit me hard, but where would I go? My stuff was in Rocco's house, and it wasn't like I could outrun a wolf. Even if I did, I wouldn't want to hurt him like that. Or Tea, or Ebony, or any of the others I'd met.

Zed had told me that when a werewolf's mate rejected him, the man was lost. Whatever the hell that meant, it sounded terrible, so I couldn't subject Rocco to it.

And that meant I couldn't run away. Not today, at least.

Trying to swallow my emotions as well as I could, I twisted the key in my car's ignition.

The engine made a weird clicking sound, and didn't start.

Panic set in, hard.

I tried again, and again.

With a defeated sigh, I dropped my head to the wheel, and let a few tears out.

A few tears were followed by many more, and then Rocky was whining, weaseling his way onto my lap. His head snuggled up against my shoulder, his entire body pressed into mine. When he lifted a paw up to rest on my left shoulder, I realized he was trying to give me a hug.

I squeezed him back.

"I'm going to have to call one of the guys for a ride back," I said glumly, into his fur.

Rocky made a noise of agreement that had me choking back a teary laugh.

I nearly told him that I wished his human felt the same way about me that he did, but held my tongue. Rocco would hear me, and I didn't want to screw up the platonic arranged marriage thing we'd have going on. And while I'd always hoped I'd eventually fall in love and give my v-card to whatever dork worked his way into my heart, I could get over it. Platonic friendship could be enough for me. Just having a roommate could be enough for me.

Maybe if I kept telling myself that, I'd eventually believe it.

After a few more minutes, my tears had stopped falling. I wiped my face, and picked up my phone.

Honestly, after talking to Zed, he was the werewolf I felt like I had the most in common with. But I knew he would be at work, so I wasn't going to be the jerk who called him and asked him to leave for his wolf friend's platonic wife.

I could've called Dax, too, but I still felt bad about waking him up the night before.

So, with a sigh, I hit the button for Elliot's contact and lifted the phone to my ear.

He answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, Elliot. It's Del." I paused, but before I could add, "Rocco's mate," he said,

"Hey. What's up?"

I grimaced.

"Need some food? Or a ride somewhere? Or another set of hands?" Elliot checked.

"A ride, actually," I admitted. "I went to a movie theater, and when I tried to start my car to leave, it wouldn't work."

"Damn, I'm sorry. I can be there in about ten minutes, if that's alright?"

If it was alright? What was my other option; walk the eight miles back to Rocco's place?

“That would be perfect. Thank you so much.”

“No thanks required.”

Ten minutes later, Elliot picked me up—with a tow-truck a few minutes behind him.

TEN



AT MY INSISTENCE, the tow truck parked my car in Rocco's driveway instead of a mechanic's shop. My job search needed to pick up speed quick, because I was all but stranded, now that my car was broken.

Unless I used Rocco's truck, but I still felt pretty weird about that.

I'd been going along with everything since the beginning, trusting my gut. And I didn't think that was a bad call, necessarily. But... it was intense.

And weird.

And... I really didn't know how the next period of my life was going to look, which was pretty damn terrifying.

Rocky and I slipped into the house through the back door, and I sniffed the air.

Then frowned.

Was that... food?

Was someone cooking?

What the hell?

I glanced down at Rocky nervously and whispered, "Do you have a roommate?"

He blinked innocently at me.

The fact that he wasn't concerned by whoever or whatever was cooking set me at ease, slightly.

Not completely, though.

I could see into the kitchen from where we stood at the back door, but I couldn't see anyone inside it.

A pan sat on the stove though, with something that smelled freakin' delicious simmering inside it.

My mouth watered.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs, and my stomach clenched.

I'd walked out of a movie theater and into a damned horror movie.

This was it—the moment I got my head chopped off with an axe.

All because I decided I was on-board with having an instant platonic marriage.

Why the hell was I so gullible?

My fingers gripped Rocky's fur tightly.

I should've run—why didn't I run?

“Where have you been?” a low, gravelly voice asked.

My stomach clenched tighter.

Two more heavy footsteps sounded, and then I saw the toe of a thick black boot.

Shit.

Murderer—definitely murderer.

What normal dude wore combat boots?

Another two steps and the massive dude was actually at the bottom of the stairs. I didn't recognize him—he wasn't part of the pack. At least, not that I knew.

“Shit.” The guy looked from the wolf I was clutching onto, and then to me.

Another moment passed.

My fingers tightened in Rocky's fur.

The guy let out a slow breath, and then resumed walking. He made it to the stove and grabbed a spatula, then stirred whatever delicious shit he was cooking.

A minute passed.

Then another.

And another.

My anxiety was a hurricane ravaging my abdomen. I fought the desire to find a blanket to hide beneath somewhere—anywhere would work, really.

“Who are you?” I blurted, before my brain legitimately shut down thanks to anxiety.

My stomach churned harder.

“Ryder.” That was all the explanation I got.

I looked at the guy closer.

Despite my fear, he wasn't holding an axe.

He wore some soft-looking black joggers, a tight black t-shirt, those big combat boots, and had dark blond hair styled up in a man bun.

My mind went back to the mental image of Rocco that I hadn't managed to get out of my head completely since I saw the guy. He was gorgeous. Not only gorgeous, but kind of pretty too. If I was any less confident in my own figure I would've felt weird with the thought of a platonic marriage to a pretty guy. But no, I didn't feel weird about his prettiness—just my own social awkwardness, and the whole platonic marriage thing itself.

But the way Rocco looked...

And the hot skyscraper cooking in his kitchen...

And the platonic marriage thing...

“Rocco's gay, isn't he?” I asked.

The wolf next to me choked.

The guy in front of the door didn't laugh. “Not that I know of.”

“You’re not his boyfriend then?” I checked.

“Nah.” The guy kept cooking.

I looked down at the wolf, who was still choking. Whether that was his version of laughter or he was furious with the fact that I’d had to ask, I wasn’t sure. He wasn’t growling though, so I was leaning toward laughter.

“Then who are you?” I pressed.

“Rocco’s brother.”

There was a long pause.

A long, long pause.

“I thought Rocco’s brother died.”

“If you ask anyone but Rocco, that’s the answer you’ll get.”
The guy kept cooking, still not glancing backward at me.

My mind went back to the two sets of furniture.

Two beds.

Shit.

“Alright, then.” I let go of Rocky’s fur and quietly walked up the stairs, trying not to glance behind myself to make sure Ryder didn’t follow me.

I stepped into the bedroom I’d claimed as mine. It was exactly as I’d left it, which told me Ryder hadn’t made it into my room yet.

Quietly, I grabbed the duffel bag I’d left in the closet.

I should never have assumed I’d be welcome to stay in Rocco’s house—or in his spare room.

And now my car was broken—I’d have to sleep in his driveway, pay a tow truck to drag my car to the nearest mechanic, and cross my fingers that whatever was wrong could be fixed very, very cheaply.

If it couldn’t...

Well, guess I’d be living in the woods, like I was a damned werewolf myself. I supposed I could always ask Rocky to bite

me, so I could sleep as a wolf. At least then, I'd be warm.

When I grabbed the first armload of clothes from the closet, Rocky realized what I was doing, and growled at me.

"Shh," I warned him, pressing my finger to my lips. "I'm intruding, and it's time for me to go."

He snarled, and sat down on my bag.

I gave him an exhausted stare.

He glared back.

"Clearly, your human intended this room for his brother." I gestured to the room. "Which you lied to me about. Again."

He at least looked slightly ashamed about the lie.

"I get it, okay? You want a mate. Rocco doesn't. That's fine; I'm not the girl who's been sitting around, hoping for Prince Charming to whisk me away. Clearly, there's some weird shit going on with your family, and that's fine too. I understand weird family shit. But I'm not just going to sit around here because you want me to, alright?"

I continued, "I've got to find a job, find a place to stay, find a way to make money so I don't end up on the streets—or in the forest. There is no backup plan for me, which means I literally cannot afford to wait around and drain my bank account buying sheets and food and shit."

"I've never seen someone pour their heart out to a wolf before," Ryder drawled from the doorway.

I jumped, screeching a bit while I glared at him. "What the hell, dude?"

"You were talking loud." He shrugged.

I glared back. "I'm moving out, alright? Rocco's friends are the ones who put all this shit together and told me I could move in here. I wasn't trying to push any boundaries or make shit weird."

"You're being chased by a werewolf. Isn't that weird enough?"

I scowled. “Just give me ten minutes to pack up.”

He said nothing, turning and walking down the stairs.

My heart was still pounding hard when I shoved Rocky off the bag. He moved easily, which told me he was alright with me packing—finally.

I stuffed the clothes into the bag and then turned back to the closet.

When I turned back around with another armload of clothes, Rocky was stepping into Rocco’s bedroom, with his jaws on the strap of my bag.

“Damn you,” I mumbled, hurrying across the hallway. I tripped on the way, and the side of the dresser jumped out of nowhere and smashed my knee. Swearing, I crashed to the ground in a heap of wrinkled clothing, broken hangers, and damaged pride.

The wolf licked my head.

I groaned at him.

He tugged at the pile of clothes wrapped around me, and I was slowly let out of the fabric prison I’d created for myself. When my eyes were free, they tracked the wolf across the room.

I watched him go up on his back legs, standing up like a human just long enough to set the hangers on the rack in his closet.

He came back for the last load of clothes. When those with functioning hangers were all up, he replaced the broken hangers one by one, carefully using his teeth and paws to do so.

I watched in a stunned, reluctantly-amused silence.

When he’d hung up all of those, he disappeared into his brother’s bedroom again, and then returned with a mouthload of clothing.

I sat up after a bit, shooting him a warning stare as he stepped across the hallway again.

“When your human is back, I’m leaving,” I warned him. “I’m not sharing a bed with a stranger.”

He snorted, and continued across the hall.

Biting back a sigh of defeat, I got to work helping the wolf haul the rest of my shit over to Rocco’s room.

Which was apparently, temporarily my room.

It didn’t take all that long, honestly. I didn’t have that much crap. But we put it all away, and then I dropped onto my ass on the middle of the mattress.

Damn, it smelled good.

With another sigh of defeat, I stripped my clothes off, grabbed a shirt from the dirty clothes basket beside the bed, and tugged it over my bare skin.

My legs slipped beneath the blanket, and I glanced over at the wolf standing beside the open door.

He shut it with his nose, then went up on his back legs and used his teeth to twist the lock before padding over to me.

After jumping up on the bed, he ducked under the blankets and snuggled up against me. I fought the urge to cuddle up to him for a moment, and then gave in.

Might as well enjoy the few nights I had the chance of sharing a bed with someone, even if that someone was a wolf, after all.

Just as I started to doze off, there was a sharp knock at the door.

My eyes opened blearily, and I glanced over at said door.

I waited for an explanation, but didn’t hear one. And just a moment later, the door across the hallway closed.

Biting back another sigh, I shut my eyes.

Rocky nudged me in the side, tickling me.

Swearing, I pushed his head away.

He nudged me again, then slipped out from beneath the blankets and trotted over to the door.

After he twisted the lock back, he opened the door with his mouth and gestured to the hallway.

I studied it.

A plate of something sat there, on the floor.

If Ryder really wanted to kill me, this was his chance. Poison could definitely take me out.

Deciding that I had bigger problems than a possible (but unlikely) poisoning from the brother of my maybe-platonic-mate, I slipped out of bed long enough to grab the plate. It was piled high with something that looked a hell of a lot like pot roast and mashed potatoes, which made my stomach growl immediately.

Carrying the food to the bed, I plopped down on the mattress on my ass. The plate rested on my knees as I poked everything with a fork, checking for signs of anything that might resemble poison. That lasted all of three seconds before I said screw it, and dug into the food.

Rocky watched me eat as if I was the best movie he'd ever seen, staring at me constantly.

I offered him a chunk of meat, checking to see if that was why he was staring, but he shook his head toward me.

Shrugging, I stuck it in my own mouth.

Rocco's brother might be a gorgeous, obnoxious asshole, but he was a damn good cook.

I'd only made it through a quarter of the massive pile of food on the plate before I felt stuffed, and then set the plate on the ground so Rocky could eat it.

He went over to check the door first—locked—and then came over and ate the food while I tucked my legs back under the blankets.

The whole bed smelled like a damned sex dream, but there wasn't anything I could do about that while my platonic-husband watched through the eyes of his wolf.

So I forced my own eyes to close, and tried my best to relax.

Rocky hopped back up and slid under the blankets to snuggle with me a moment later. It wasn't until his warm fur was snuggled up against my face that I really calmed down, and as stupid as it was, his presence had my eyes closing. It was only a minute or two after that when the steady in and out of his breathing lulled me to sleep.

ELEVEN



I WOKE up snuggled against the wolf still, though I'd kicked the blankets off at some point during the night. My sweaty face was buried into the fur on his lower back, my arm slung over him. His head was turned, though, and staring at my ass.

I jerked my head backward, glancing at it, and found my legs sprawled out behind me, my bare ass left on display thanks to the shirt that had ridden halfway up my back.

My vagina was completely exposed—and I was 95% sure Rocky could see it from where he was. The remaining 5% was my attempt at lying to myself.

“Still trying to persuade your human to want me?” I grumbled at the wolf, tugging the blanket over my body.

He bobbed his head at me, giving my cheek a little lick.

I sighed and dropped my head back to the pillow. “You don't need to do that. I'll be fine alone. We'll get through the mating shit, and then figure out a way to split up. Maybe I can live in the next town over, and you can hang with my wolf every night or something. It'll be a while before I can afford a place to live, anyway.”

The wolf scowled, and gestured toward the bed with his nose.

I sighed again, turning my head into the pillow.

“I'm not a moron, Rocky,” I mumbled into the pillow. “The only reason you put me in the spare bedroom is because you knew your human wouldn't want me in here.”

The wolf gave me a frustrated growl.

“It’s fine, I get it. I’d probably do the same thing in your shoes. I’ve just got to find some place that will hire me here until I can get out and find a job I actually want.”

He growled at me again, poking me in the arm with his nose.

I ignored him.

He had no idea how shitty it felt to do what I had.

I’d gone to college with a full-ride scholarship and the intention of studying something reasonable and boring, like accounting or engineering. I’d promised myself I’d only take one music class a semester, to help me enjoy life a little more. When my favorite professor told me he believed in me, and promised he could get me a job at a big studio, I thought life was apologizing for the shitty path it had taken me on when my parents ditched me.

And then my last semester had come along, and my professor admitted he’d lied to me, because he hadn’t wanted so much talent to go to waste.

My scholarships, my degree, my effort... down the drain.

I’d applied, of course. Called around. Offered to be the coffee girl, and the janitor, and anything else to get a foot in the door at one of those studios.

And I’d been rejected at every turn.

Honestly, I wasn’t even sure I wanted to make music anymore.

Maybe I could get a job at an ice cream shop. At least it’d have delicious benefits.

I gave myself two more minutes to mope, ignoring the wolf poking me and growling at me. When those two minutes were up, I threw on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, zipped my combat boots on my feet, and then headed downstairs.

There was a plate of bacon and scrambled eggs on the counter. I hadn’t heard or seen Ryder since the night before, but I assumed he was the one to leave food for me. That was a kind enough gesture that I decided he wasn’t a terrible roommate...

Unless it was poisoned.

But it probably wasn't.

My wolf would probably reject Rocco if he let his brother poison me, so Ryder probably wouldn't want that, anyway.

I ate as much as I could before setting the plate down for Rocky to finish the rest, and then I grabbed my bag, and headed out through the front door.

There was no reason to go out the back, since I couldn't take my car.

I slid a hand under the doormat, looking for the keys everyone had left. All five were there, so other than the key Ryder apparently had, and the one on Rocco's keychain, I now had all of them. I'd have felt better about that if I hadn't found myself living with a roommate who barely answered any questions, and a wolf who liked to annoy me as much as possible.

He was sweet, though, even if he was annoying.

I googled "ice cream," and then started walking toward the nearest place. It was two miles, which sucked, but I was used to walking all over campus so it wasn't a huge deal.

They opened a few minutes before I got there, so the place was still empty when I stepped inside. The door jingled though, so I figured someone would be out soon.

Sure enough, a middle-aged man stepped out of a back room.

His gaze flicked over me, and lingered on Rocky. "Mate hunt?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Rocky bobbed his head in a yes before I could.

"What pack?" The man finally looked at me.

"Uhh..." I trailed off, looking to Rocky.

He didn't so much as glance at me, just watching the other man closely.

"Who are the alpha and beta?" the middle-aged guy prodded.

Guess that was how packs were identified.

“Oh. Elliot, and...” I mentally ran over what I’d been told.
“Ford, I think?”

Rocky nodded again.

Understanding crossed the man’s face. “The last Hughes boy is in that pack.”

“I don’t know any of their last names,” I admitted.

“He’s blond, spiky hair, teaches at the high school...”

Oh.

“Yeah, that’s probably Rocco. He’s right here.” I awkwardly patted the wolf’s head. Ryder really wasn’t wrong about everyone thinking he was dead. But why did they? What had happened?

His expression grew grave. “Don’t allow your wolf to reject him. His parents can’t take the loss of another child.”

Shock had my eyebrows raising. “I wasn’t really planning on it, but thanks.” Fighting the urge to fold my arms and get defensive, I asked, “Are you looking to hire anyone?”

He glanced back at Rocco. “Sorry, no one in town will hire a woman who’s being hunted. It inevitably leads to someone getting attacked for looking at her too long.”

I grimaced. “Thanks anyway, I guess.”

Turning, I stepped out of the shop. After that conversation, I wasn’t really in the mood for ice cream anymore. The mood would doubtlessly return, and probably soon, though.

I walked to the next ice cream shop, and got the same answer. Then I walked to another place, and another, and another. I started going into every store, every place I could find, and kept getting more and more of the same. Condolences for Rocco’s loss, apologies that they didn’t hire women who were being hunted by their mate, and warnings not to reject Rocco.

I wasn’t sure which answer I hated the most.

BY THE TIME I stepped into the thirtieth storefront, I felt ready to rip my hair out—and ready to accept defeat. I could learn how to drive Rocco’s truck that night and drive into the nearest town, but what job could I possibly get? There wasn’t any employer who would be happy with a grumpy, possessive wolf constantly at my side.

Even if I tried to pass him off as a dog, what excuse could I possibly come up with? I wasn’t going to lie about the emotional support animal thing, like Tea had, and it wasn’t like people normally refused to be separated from their dogs.

The last store was some kind of home improvement place. For the most part, all I could see was paint, tile, and carpet samples.

“Welcome,” a friendly woman greeted me with a small, pinched smile.

Her gaze moved over me, then landed on the wolf at my side.

Her smile vanished, and her eyes flooded with tears.

I started to take a step backward. I hadn’t wanted to offend anyone—I was just looking for a job.

“What can I help you with?” the woman asked, her voice cracking.

“Um, I’m looking for a job.” I slipped my hands into the wolf’s fur so they wouldn’t fidget awkwardly, and Rocky brushed up against my side, trying to comfort me.

“Oh, honey. No one will give you a job with a hunting mate.” She wiped at her eyes quickly.

“I’ve realized that. I just really need money,” I admitted.

She frowned. “Rocco should have money saved for you.”

I blinked. “What?”

Glancing down at the wolf beside me, I realized his tail was wagging. He shot the woman a wolfy grin, and her lips curved upward the tiniest bit.

“I should introduce myself.” She stepped around the counter, wiping her hands on the worn jeans that covered her legs. “I’m

Rocco's mother." She held a hand out as she approached me.

My eyebrows shot upward as I took it, and gave it a quick shake before letting go. "Shit. Shit, I shouldn't curse. Dammit, I—" I shut my mouth for a minute, and watched her lips curve upward further. "Sorry, I'm awkward. Social anxiety and whatnot."

And whatnot?

What the hell was the whatnot?

Dammit.

"It's refreshing. My older son's mate was..." her voice trailed off, and her eyes watered. "Sorry. It's still new. I—nothing prepares you for losing a child." She fanned her watering eyes again.

"I'm sorry. Nothing prepares you for losing your parents, either." My throat was tight and constricted.

Her eyebrows lifted. "You buried your parents?"

Oh.

Shit.

Dammit, I was terrible.

"No, uh, they're not dead. They just sold everything and joined a cult, basically. Disowned me when I wasn't willing to abandon life with them." I scratched the back of my neck. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have compared that to your son. That was insensitive."

Grief flashed in her eyes. "Loss is loss."

Her gaze dropped back to Rocky, and lingered. "If you're willing to work hard, my husband could use an extra pair of hands. He does home renovations and improvements."

That sounded awkward, working with Rocco's dad. Really awkward.

"Thanks, but I don't have a vehicle right now," I apologized.

Or the money to fix mine.

“I’m sure there’s enough in the cash stash. Elliot will know where it is—all of his pack members probably will.”

I bit my lip, but nodded.

“Here, let me give you my number, and my husband’s too. You can take some time to think about the job, and let us know,” she said, quickly. Turning, she grabbed a business card off the counter, and handed it to me. Though I was fairly confident I wouldn’t take the job for furry reasons, I couldn’t just shoot her down. Not when her eyes were watery and her son was my damned platonic, arranged husband.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Of course.” She gave me a tiny but genuine smile. “If you’re ever comfortable with it, we’d love to have you over for dinner sometime.”

Dammit, I couldn’t turn that one down either.

“Okay,” I nodded.

“Just text me if that’s something you’re alright with, and we’ll set it up. At your house, if you’re more comfortable there.”

Wow.

She really wanted to have dinner with me.

That was odd to me, after so much time alone.

I nodded again. “I will.”

The small smile the words put on her face made me decide to follow through with the promise.

It meant a lot to her, and I wouldn’t take that from her.

Turning, I headed toward the door. My eyes caught on a plaque beside the exit.

I stopped, my gaze scanning the words and pictures.

Oscar Ryder Hughes.

Always loved, and never forgotten.

The pictures were a collage of Ryder on his own, and him with Rocco. They were both grinning massively in every photo,

with so much light in their eyes it was insane.

Neither of them had looked like that when I saw them. They were gorgeous, and much bigger than they looked in the photos, but also, sad. And dark.

“I’m sure you’ve heard what happened to my older son by now,” Rocco’s mom said, quietly.

“I’ve heard his passing mentioned many times, but I’m not one to push someone for details they don’t want to share.” I kept my voice as low as hers had been.

She nodded. “He was a sigma. Hunted his mate for an entire year. Anastasia—she was rude, and cruel. Insulted the wolf constantly, reminding him how he’d ruined her life and how much she hated him every damned day. I don’t think he would’ve ever bitten her—but then they got in a car crash. She had been drinking, and wrapped the vehicle around a tree. Werewolves heal almost instantly, but she was still human, and was dying. And Oscar’s wolf reacted. He bit her, she changed, and then her wolf rejected his. She’ll find another mate eventually, but Oscar... male werewolves don’t survive without mates long enough to have that option. They lose their minds either instantly, or over time.” Her voice grew softer and softer as she spoke.

My throat swelled.

It had caught me off guard when she called him Oscar, but the plaque made it pretty clear why. Maybe he had gone by his first name before, and needed a change after everything.

I didn’t understand why he hadn’t told his mother that he was alive, though. The woman was absolutely heartbroken; why let her remain in pain?

“I’m so sorry,” I murmured.

“I am too.” Her voice was barely over a whisper.

A moment later, she wiped beneath her eyes and turned toward me with a fraction of a smile. “I need to start on inventory, but don’t forget to let us know what you decide. Both about the job, and dinner.”

I gave her a quick smile. “I will.”

She gave Rocky a hesitant smile of his own. “Be good to your mate. And don’t forget to show her where your money is stashed.”

The wolf licked my arm, and then nodded.

Rocky and I slipped out of the store, heading back in the direction of Rocco’s house. The walk was pretty long at that point, at least an hour. By the time we got back to Rocco’s place, I was dripping in sweat and completely exhausted. It was the middle of the afternoon, though, so I couldn’t exactly call it a night and crash.

After grabbing a clean set of clothes, I glanced at Ryder’s room—the door was open, and clearly empty, so he must’ve gone somewhere—and stepped into the bathroom.

Rocky followed me in, and I ignored his wandering eyes (for his human’s sake, of course) while I stripped and got in the shower. The curtain was one of those clear ones that hid absolutely nothing, so the dude trapped inside the wolf definitely got a hell of an eyeful while he watched me scrub myself clean.

I let my purple shampoo sit in my hair while I shaved every damn bit of myself, and when I washed it out, the yellow tint was replaced with the pretty platinum I preferred.

After I dried off and changed in the bathroom (just in case Ryder was still there), I headed downstairs for some food. Throwing together a PB&J sandwich took all of one minute, and then I plopped down on one of the stools to eat it.

A text came through while I was scrolling nearby job listings on my phone.

Tea: I’m not sure if we told you or not, but we all do dinner together six nights a week. Not everyone makes it every time, but we rotate between houses, and do Elliot’s twice if someone is hunting

My fingers hovered over the screen.

I expected the invitation to hit me with an assload of anxiety at the thought of socializing, but strangely enough, it didn't. I liked Elliot, Dax, and Zed. A lot. I'd talked to the three of them while they built furniture for longer than I'd talked to anyone else but June in years.

Tea: It's at my place tonight, and Jesse's making coffee ice cream. He spent a shitload on the ingredients so you should come; coffee is pretty much his life so it'll probably taste damn good

Tea: Also, Ebony's printing the mate manual as we speak. So we can give it to you there.

Damn.

Tea really wanted me to go, apparently.

It was strange to be wanted.

After one more pause, I finally replied.

Me: I'll be there. What time?

She answered immediately.

Tea: YESSS

Tea: 5

Tea: Zed cooks whenever he makes it there, but that's only half the time. He'll be there tonight, I think he's doing burgers

Me: Cool

I paused.

I should bring something, shouldn't I? It would be rude not to.

Trying not to grimace at the thought of spending a couple more bucks on ingredients, I texted back.

Me: What can I bring?

There was another pause.

Tea: Just texted Zed, he says pasta salad, but only if you can do it right

Tea: *snorts*

Tea: How could anyone make pasta salad wrong? It's literally just pasta and dressing

I fought a grin.

Me: I'll ask him for his recipe. I'm sure his version is "right"

Tea: Hahaha alright. Thanks girl, I can't wait! See you tonight!

I liked her message, and with a sigh, pulled up my text with Zed and asked for his recipe. He sent it over a few minutes later, and I scanned the ingredients.

It was actually pretty simple, with just some rotini pasta, a store-bought Italian dressing, and some olives and tomatoes. I needed to get to work on it, but couldn't do so without a trip to the store.

So, with another sigh, I glanced over at Rocco's keys. They hung innocently from the hook beside the garage door, as if using them wouldn't require driving a massive, unwieldy vehicle.

I reluctantly grabbed the keys, and then my purse. Before I could open the door to the garage, Rocky poked me with his nose.

Though exasperated, I let him lead me to the stairs, and then sat down at his insistence.

Waiting less-than-patiently, I watched him walk over to the fridge.

He jumped up onto the counter—somehow managing not to slide right the hell off—and then went up on his back legs as he reached up to the top of the fridge. He nudged a few boxes of cereal out of the way, sticking his face behind them to grab a big yellow padded envelope.

Jumping down in one smooth motion, he carried the envelope over to me and dropped it on my lap, his tail wagging.

I grabbed the envelope and opened the flap at the top, peering inside. When I saw what was in it, I dropped the damn thing like it was on fire.

Rocky calmly picked it up and put it back on my lap.

I didn't even want to look at the thing.

"How much money is in there?" I demanded, my eyes narrowed at the wolf.

He shrugged a bit.

Damn wolf.

I opened the envelope and tried to flick through. My count wasn't accurate, but from what I saw, it was at least seven or eight *thousand* dollars.

I had legitimately never had more than fifteen hundred in my bank account.

"I will hide this for Rocco," I warned Rocky, "But I will not use this. This is your human's money, and I'm not being bribed into this whole instant-platonic-mate situation. As insane as it might make me, I have entered into it willingly."

Rocky scowled at me.

I scowled back.

After standing, I put the envelope back where it had been, hidden behind an assload of cereal boxes.

When the money was safe, I headed back into the garage. Although he'd made a show of not being happy with me, Rocky remained at my side, licking my arm every couple of seconds as if to remind me he was still there, and that he still liked me despite our fight.

I opened the garage and turned on the truck. Despite its rough outer appearance, it started right up without a problem. The engine sounded better than anything I'd driven in a lifetime, so I assumed it worked just fine.

Fighting a grimace, I turned my head over my shoulder and surveyed the driveway.

Backing up would be easy enough; I'd manage.

Rocky's head rested on my lap as I pulled out, and he walked into the grocery store with me as I tugged my phone out of my

pocket.

I needed money, which meant I needed a job. And if the only one available to me was with Rocco's dad... well, then I'd have to take it.

Might as well get to know my platonic husband's family anyway, right?

So I texted his parents that I was interested, before grabbing a shopping cart and starting through the aisles.

A job was a job, after all.

DINNER WAS FUN. I was no longer anxious around the guys, and decided to forgive Tea for not warning me about the shitshow I'd walked into. It wasn't as if they knew that I was going to end up as Rocco's fated mate, after all.

Ford and Ebony weren't there. Apparently, they were going through their climax—which meant they were having a lot of sex, much to Elliot's grimacey discomfort and Jesse and Teagan's humor, since they lived on either side of the couple.

Ryder wasn't there when I got home afterward, but I was fairly sure he hadn't been there the first night I spent there either. I didn't know what the guy was up to, or how often he'd be sleeping there. And I needed to ask, but after the crappy answers he'd given me, I didn't see much of a point to it.

I had already showered earlier, but now that I was home and had nothing to do, I filled the tub and plopped down into the bubble bath, scrolling through the short list of instructions that Rocco's dad had given me for work tomorrow.

-Bring Rocco's truck, and the tools from his garage.

It was going to take me an hour on Google to figure out what tools matched the names of the ones in Rocco's dad's list, but I'd figure that out.

-Wear thick jeans or work pants and be prepared to change into a company polo or long-sleeved shirt.

That was going to require a trip to Walmart. Or maybe I'd just steal some from Rocco's closet and tie them up with an old shoelace to make sure they didn't fall off. I was going to have to buy the work pants eventually, but I'd feel better about the expense when I was positive that I could handle the job and wasn't going to get fired for utter cluelessness. I could learn quickly, but there would definitely be a lot to learn.

Unless...

Pulling up my phone, I texted Teagan.

Me: Want to go to the thrift store with me? I think they're open another two hours, and I need work pants for my new job

She answered immediately.

Tea: When thrift shopping is the question, the answer is always yes. Ready now?

I glanced down at my pale, bare legs stretching out in front of me in the tub.

Me: Give me ten. Can you drive?

Tea: Yes ma'am. But if you've got a wolf, I'm bringing Jesse.

Me: As long as he doesn't drive.

At dinner, I'd heard all the horror stories about his driving skills.

Tea: LOL alright. We'll be behind your place in ten.

I shot her a thumbs-up emoji before pulling my ass out of the tub and skimming the rest of the list.

-Work boots.

Would combat boots count?

I was counting them.

-Rocco's hard hat, also in the garage.

-First aid kit

We're they really that worried I'd hurt myself?

Then again, I was worried. So yeah, they were allowed to be too.

-Rocco's gloves

-Water

-Snacks

The list was pretty damn endless, and I wasn't sure whether to resent them for babying me so much or to thank them for taking the time to think of everything I could possibly need.

A thought occurred to me while I was getting dressed, so I shot Elliot a quick text as I tucked a few loose strands of hair into my messy bun and grabbed my boots.

Me: What happens with Rocco's job after the hunt is over? You said my wolf won't want to be separated from him?

Elliot: You'll decide together. Most male werewolves don't return to work or school until the mating process is over, but some continue working and just bring their lady along with them. None of the students would find it weird if you went to class with Rocco—they'd get a kick out of it.

Yikes.

Me teaching a high school class? Something told me that wouldn't go well.

But maybe Rocco would be fine with staying with me while I kept working for his parents.

Or... maybe he'd hate that I was working for his parents.

Apparently I hadn't thought this all the way through.

It was too late to back out, though.

Me: thanks

Elliot: any time

There was a pause.

Elliot: I think Tea and Ebony put a section about that in the mate manual too. You're free to ask me any question, any time, but I know there are probably things you haven't asked just because it seems weird to ask aloud.

He was right.

Me: forgot about that, actually. Thanks again, you're a good guy

Elliot sent me back a weird emoji face, and I snorted as I shut the phone off.

Rocky growled at it and poked the device with his nose, so I scratched him behind the ears. "I was asking Elliot a question, Bud. No need to get possessive."

He licked my face, and then my arm.

Tea honked outside, so I hurried out. Rocky trotted alongside me, waiting while I locked the door, and then followed me out to Jesse and Teagan's car.

As we drove and then shopped, I found myself opening up a bit with the couple, and even enjoying the conversation. It was fun, honestly.

And by the time I crashed back in Rocco's bed, engulfed in the delicious smell of the human, I was feeling pretty damn happy that the wolf snuggled up against me had wreaked havoc on my life.

TWELVE



THE NEXT MORNING, I dressed in the big, scratchy clothes we'd found me for work, and zipped my combat boots on too. Rocky remained beside me, and my fingers were tangled in his fur when I met Rocco's dad in the driveway of his house.

He gave me a tired grin when he saw me. Though I hadn't seen Rocco smile in person, I immediately saw the resemblance between him and his dad thanks to the pictures on the plaque his mom had hung on the wall in the store.

He held a hand out. "I'm Oscar Hughes the second—Ozzy, to friends and family. Which includes you now." He winked at me.

My cheeks warmed a bit as I took his hand, and shook it with the one that wasn't tangled in Rocco's fur.

"I'm Madeline Wooley the first, but I usually go by Del." I winked back.

His grin widened. "Let's get your tools moved over to my truck then, Miss Del. You'll be riding in the company vehicle with me."

I nodded. "Sounds good."

We got Rocco's assload of tools into the back of his dad's truck, and then Rocky and I climbed into the passenger and middle seat. Rocky was in the middle one, which was so tiny that he pretty much ended up sitting on my lap, but I didn't mind.

“Thanks for this,” Rocco’s dad said, giving me a quick smile. “Oscar used to work with me, before his wolf started hunting, so it’s been a long year and a half on my own.”

“Thanks for giving me the job. I’ll be more of a distraction than a help for a bit, but hopefully I’ll figure everything out quickly.”

He flashed me another grin that reminded me so much of the Rocco I’d seen in the pictures. “We’ll turn you into a professional.”

I laughed. “I look forward to it.”

As he pulled away from the house, I couldn’t help but hope that Rocco didn’t hunt me for a whole damned year. Though I knew he wouldn’t be interested in me as anything more than a friend, life couldn’t really move forward until he was back in his human form.

THE DAY WAS INCREDIBLY LONG. When I got home, I showered, then ate a shitload of food at the dinner with the pack, and then crashed. I wasn’t used to waking up early for work, but I’d get used to it.

Rocky and I fell into a pattern after that.

Work, dinner with the pack, sleep. Work, dinner with the pack, sleep. Work, dinner with the pack, sleep.

It was exhausting, but in a good way. It felt good to be working hard, strangely enough. And I was definitely not a fast learner when it came to home improvements, but Ozzy made everything easy. He was never annoyed no matter how many times I had to ask for help or ask questions, and he joked around constantly, making me laugh and grin throughout the day.

I’d never had a great relationship with my own dad before he and my mom abandoned me, but Ozzy started to feel like the father I’d never had. I ate dinner with him and his wife whenever I didn’t eat with the pack, and we always ended up

playing cards or board games after cooking and cleaning up together.

I'd always wondered what it would feel like to be a part of a close family... and now I knew.

And I loved it.

Ryder only came by Rocco's place every couple of days, and even then, we only ever saw each other for one or two minutes. He never really spoke to me, even though I was dying to ask why he hadn't told his parents he was still alive. I felt terrible for keeping that secret, but I assumed that there was a reason Rocco hadn't told anyone. And even though I didn't know Rocco, given the way everyone loved him, I trusted his judgment.

I talked to June on the phone every couple of days, but since I couldn't really explain the werewolf shit that had become my life, we didn't talk for long.

A MONTH PASSED QUICKLY, and then another.

We were halfway through my third month in Rocco's house when Rocky and I got home late, after a night of teasing and laughter with the pack.

I was ready to collapse in bed, but as soon as the door shut behind me, my eyes landed on the man on the floor.

Or... not a man.

Ryder was on his hands and knees, parts of him partially-shifted as he panted and snarled. His entire body was twisted painfully, and horror clutched my chest when I saw him.

I'd seen the pack members shift a few times, and it had never looked like that.

It looked... wrong.

He snarled at me, wolfy eyes wild as his face contorted, more fur breaking through the skin.

Rocky sat down beside me.

There was a look of sadness in the wolf's eyes that made my chest squeeze.

Finally kicking into gear, I dropped my bag by the door and rushed across the room, kneeling next to the wolf-man.

“What happened?” I demanded. “How can I help?”

Ryder panted and snarled some more, before finally grinding out the word, “Rocco.”

Rocco?

I looked back at the wolf.

Rocky obviously didn't think he could do anything. But Rocco... maybe Rocco had helped Ryder through this kind of thing before? Or maybe he would know what to do?

“Are you sure?” I asked Ryder, looking back at the man.

His head jerked in a nod, more fur cutting through his skin.

I turned back to Rocky, panic clutching my chest, and said, “Bite me.”

The wolf blinked.

“We both know I'm not going to walk away from this. You've been putting it off because you don't approve of the decisions Rocco's going to make, but they're his decisions. Bite me, so he can help his brother.”

Rocky studied me, his expression wary.

And also... sad.

He was afraid Rocco would screw things up, and my wolf would reject him because of that. Even without having an actual verbal conversation with him, I knew that.

A few of Ryder's bones cracked, and panic clutched me harder.

“Please,” I begged the wolf.

An expression of sad acceptance crossed his face, and then he lunged for me.

Sharp pain cut into my upper thigh.

I crashed to the ground, my arms clutching the massive wolf.

The pain faded rapidly, and the bite grew numb even faster. That numbness slowly descended through my leg, and then into the other one, as Rocky lowered me to the ground.

My head met the tile as numbness engulfed the rest of me, and I lost complete control of my body. Bones snapped and limbs changed, and I closed my eyes to wait out the transformation.

After a minute, my body felt completely foreign. I didn't open my eyes, but my eyes opened—and I found myself staring into the most gorgeous blue eyes I'd ever seen.

Rocco's eyes were distant, a bit dizzy, but his hand rubbed my wolf's head as he staggered across the kitchen, sitting on his ass next to his brother.

He found Ryder's hand somehow, and spoke to the man in low, raspy words that my wolf didn't listen to.

The man's head jerked in a nod, and Rocco continued rasping to him as Ryder slowly shifted back to his man form.

When Ryder had collapsed to the ground, all signs of his wolf completely gone, he was still panting, but his eyes were closed in what looked like gratitude.

Rocco turned toward me, and his expression gave away nothing but utter exhaustion.

His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he dropped to the ground like a damn rock.

My wolf blinked, slowly.

Her gaze moved from one man, to another.

I couldn't tell what she was thinking, or what she wanted, and I hated that.

She padded over to Rocco, lying on the floor with her side pressed to his. Her nose nudged him a bit as she sniffed pretty much every part of him. He was completely naked, but she didn't pay his manly bits any more attention than the rest of him. When she was satisfied that he smelled okay, she dropped her head on his chest and rested it there.

A few minutes later, Ryder finally groaned and sat up. My wolf barely glanced at him, apparently uninterested in her mate's brother.

Ryder slowly stood up, and made his way over to Rocco.

His eyes dipped to meet the wolf's. "I'm going to put him in his bed," he said, slowly and clearly.

My wolf eyed him warily.

Ryder waited a long moment, until my wolf finally gave him a grudging nod.

The man crouched down, slowly draping Rocco's upper body over his shoulders. When he stood, my wolf pushed past him, leading him toward the stairs.

Ryder followed her without hesitation, carrying his brother right into Rocco's bedroom. My wolf climbed into the bed, and used her nose to gesture for the man to be placed right beside her.

Ryder put his brother down where my wolf had told him to, and when she looked down, I got an eyeful of dick and balls before she turned her head, dragging the comforter up Rocco's chest.

"I've got to go," Ryder told my wolf, his voice low. "But my dad will come by in the morning when you don't show up for work, and he'll get the pack over here, feeding you both and keeping an eye on you. You'll be fine."

My wolf stared at him.

He gave her a small, empty smile. "Thank you."

Turning, he left us in the room.

My wolf snuggled closer to Rocco, and closed her eyes. When she fell asleep, I was dragged under too.

SHE DIDN'T WAKE up until the next morning, when Ozzy knocked on the door incessantly.

He yelled that he was coming in—followed by an apology, but an admission that he was worried Rocky had bitten me—and a few minutes later, he was standing in the doorway.

My wolf batted sleepy eyes at him. Rocco's arms were around her, his ass facing the doorway but hidden by the blankets.

Emotion crossed Ozzy's face. I knew him well enough to know that it was both gratitude that Rocco and I had moved on to the next part of the mating process, and sadness that Oscar, aka Ryder, had never made it to that point with his mate.

"I'll let the pack know what's happened. Call me when you're back in human form, and we'll figure out whether or not you want to continue working with me."

My wolf nodded a bit, licking Rocco's shoulder.

The man tasted surprisingly good.

Ozzy's lips tilted upward a bit before he slipped out of the room, and I heard him talking on the phone before the front door closed behind him.

My wolf snuggled deeper into the arms of her mate, her nose resting against his neck so she could inhale his scent.

He smelled different to her than he did to me, but still good.

And his scent had faded from my sheets a few weeks earlier, so as stupid as it was, I was glad he was back in them, making the bed smell good again.

A few minutes later, the front door opened, and Elliot called out, "We're coming in."

My wolf's head didn't move from where it was snuggled against Rocco.

Elliot, Zed, Ebony, and Ford stood in the doorway, staring at us for a moment.

Rocco's arms tightened around my wolf, though I was confident he was still asleep.

"Are you hungry?" Elliot asked my wolf.

She considered it, and then nodded a bit.

“We’ll get some food cooking. Just growl if you need anything,” the alpha said, flashing us a small grin before he and the others left the doorway.

Rocco seemed to relax a bit when they were gone, and I couldn’t help but wonder how much of the werewolves’ possessiveness was just plain old instinct.

And, if it was instinct, how would we fight it to maintain a platonic relationship?

THIRTEEN



THE NEXT WEEK crept by at a snail's pace.

The pack took turns feeding us, and keeping an eye on us. School started back up for Elliot a few days into the week, so he wasn't there until the evenings. Tea and Ebony were both in the fast-grad nursing program, so they were swamped, but still hung out in the evenings too.

People came and went constantly, and my wolf retained control of our body the entire time, snuggled up against Rocco and licking his face and arms while he slept and she rested.

On the eighth day, Rocco finally stirred.

He shifted around a bit in bed before his eyes finally cracked open, and then he stared at her for a moment, dazed. It looked like he was trying to remember what all had happened.

If I'd been in human form, I would've said or done something awkward. But my wolf just stared at him.

Then she leaned forward, and licked his nose.

His expression softened, his lips tilting upward slightly as he scratched her behind the ears. She melted against him, forcing him to take most of her weight so he couldn't move or stop petting her.

Rocco's eyes closed again as he continued scratching her.

He dozed for a bit, his hands pausing and resuming multiple times as he petted the wolf and warred with his exhaustion. Despite how long he'd been asleep, he still looked tired.

A few more hours passed before Zed brought a plate of food in, and Rocco opened his eyes to say hi.

Zed checked how he was feeling—tired—and grabbed him some pants at Rocco’s request. Rocco dragged the sweats up his legs beneath the blanket before actually sliding out of bed.

My wolf followed him as he took the plate, thanking Zed before he stepped into the bathroom.

A glance at my wolf told me he was wondering whether or not she’d let him piss alone.

He started to close the door, and she gave a fierce growl.

With a grimace, he gestured her into the bathroom, and shut the door behind her.

She turned around while he peed—awkward, on so many levels—and waited while he washed his hands. He admitted that he wanted to take a shower, and she shrugged at him—apparently not caring whether or not he showered.

He stepped into the bathroom before stripping out of his pants and tossing them to the floor outside the tub. It would’ve kept him modest, if not for the clear shower curtain that hid absolutely nothing.

A weird feeling engulfed my chest, and then pain raced through my spine—wherever the hell it was.

I bit back a scream as the pain grew worse.

Rocco glanced over at me, and when he realized what was happening, he was out of the shower in a heartbeat, kneeling beside me with a hand on my back.

Cracks and breaks filled the air as my body changed, and awful shrieks and cries escaped me.

“Don’t fight it,” Rocco murmured to me. “Let her go.”

The bathroom door opened just as the pain vanished, leaving me on my hands and knees on the bathroom floor, absolutely naked

Zed’s gaze skimmed over me, checking to make sure I was alright as Rocco snarled, “Get out.”

Zed didn't move to leave, instead meeting my gaze with his own.

Rocco stood swiftly as I nodded to Zed that I was alright, and the blond man surged toward the sigma, snarling as he slammed into him.

The men crashed to the ground together, and my lips parted in horror as Rocco's arm pulled back, ready to punch his friend in the face.

Another guy reached the top of the stairs—Ford. He grabbed Rocco, shoving him to his feet and then again back into the bathroom.

With one last swift movement, he slammed the bathroom door shut in Rocco's face.

The hot blond guy was snarling, his chest heaving as fury practically radiated off his body.

What the ever-loving hell?

“What was that?” I sputtered, trying not to notice how freakin' sexy Rocco's ass was. Rising to my feet, I put my hands on my hips, making an effort to look angry instead of a little bit afraid.

He spun toward me, and his fury caught in his throat and died in an instant as his gaze slid down my bare body.

The anger shifted as the scent in the room changed a bit, and I tried not to choke on my own damned spit as Rocco's attraction to me became very, very evident.

And very, very large.

Rocco ripped his gaze from my nether-region, shaking his head a bit as his eyes locked with mine. “If one of my friends sees you naked again, I will fucking *kill* him.”

I blinked.

And blinked again.

Rocco stepped back into the shower, turning away from me. I stared at his ass way too long as he started to scrub his hair and body, his movements jerky and frustrated.

What an *asshole*.

No, “Hey, Del, it’s nice to talk to you after watching my wolf follow you around for two months.”

No, “Hi, sorry for all of this awkwardness and that angry outburst, I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

Not even an, “I’m glad you’re willing to be my platonic mate.”

Just a damn snarl, and a damn erection.

Screw that.

I threw the shower curtain to the side, and stepped inside with the asshole I currently wanted to strangle. He turned toward me, surprised.

I put my hands on my hips. “We need to talk. I don’t give a shit whether you want to or not—you at least owe me a damn conversation before I move out of here.”

He blinked.

And blinked again.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what? Your wolf picked me—he freakin’ bit me, on the damn inner thigh of all places,” I gestured down to my leg, just below my vag. Rocco stared longer than he should’ve before shaking his head hard again, and meeting my eyes. “So the least you can do is tell me why you’ve been lying to your parents about your brother being dead, and why you’re so damned set on hating me.”

He scoffed. “I was asking ‘what’ to you saying you were moving out.”

I laughed humorlessly. “I’m sure as hell not sharing a bed with a dude who looks at me like he’s not sure whether he wants to kill me or have sex with me. Now answer my damned questions, *now*.”

He scowled deeper, fiercer. “Oscar is dying. His pack thought he had been lost to the wolf, but he hadn’t. It’s only a matter of time until he’s gone, so neither of us want to hurt my parents more by telling them he’s still alive.”

Shock and anger coursed through me. “How stupid are you?”

He blinked.

“Your parents would be forever grateful to spend just one more day with him—just one more *hour*. You’re both spoiled bastards, and you have no idea how lucky you’ve been to have all of this your whole life.” I tossed a hand out, though I wasn’t sure what I was gesturing to. The whole town? The pack? The family?

“I’m losing my brother because of all of *this*,” Rocco snarled back, tossing a hand in the same direction I had. “Because some human girl decided she didn’t want him, and because our lives are screwed-up enough that her rejection can take his life.”

“Bad shit happens to everyone, Rocco. Not just you, not just your brother, not just werewolves. You got dealt a shitty hand—choose to survive anyway. That’s not an excuse to be a damned bastard to me, or anyone else.”

Shaking my head, I stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel off a hook before throwing the bathroom door open and striding out.

Ford was waiting in the hall, arms folded. His gaze was trained on the ceiling, and I wasn’t sure whether he was looking away for his sake, Ebony’s, mine, or Rocco’s.

“Your wolf won’t let you get far from him,” Ford murmured to me.

“Then she can go to hell,” I snarled back.

I felt her pulling on me, though, as I stepped into Rocco’s room and slammed the door behind me. My spine itched as she threatened to take control, painful tingles burning my muscles a bit.

After quickly throwing one of Rocco’s t-shirts over myself—I’d claimed a few of them, and wasn’t giving them back even after I left—I grabbed my duffel bag from the closet, and shoved all of my clothes inside it within a matter of seconds. My wardrobe had been shrinking, not growing, and I’d had a

feeling Rocky had been hiding the shirts and shorts of mine that he hated the most.

The pain in my spine vanished completely as the door slammed open, and then shut again.

Ignoring the man in the room, I didn't turn around to face him until he was right behind me.

His fingers landed possessively on my hip, and he stepped around to the front of me. His gigantic hand caught both of my small ones, and those gorgeous blue eyes of his were so hot they threatened to burn my damned soul.

Before I could yank my fingers from his grip, he said the one thing that surprised me enough to make me wait.

"I'm sorry."

I blinked.

That... wasn't what I expected him to say.

"I was out of it, and angry. Seeing Zed look at you when I know you're already closer to the other guys than you are to me..." He let out a slow breath. "I overreacted, and I'm sorry. We got off on the wrong foot, and I've been in a shitty mood, and I'm sorry."

Sheesh, how many apologies was that?

Enough to make me question how much I hated him, at least.

"Is this where you ask if we can start over?" I drawled, pulling my hands from his grip. He let them go, and his lips curved upward.

"Why would I want to start over? We've been snuggling for months, and my damned wolf turned my life into a porno."

I rolled my eyes. "A porno would have sex, and all you've seen is nudity."

Turning, I reached back into the closet and grabbed two pairs of my shoes.

"What would I call it, then?" he countered. "A constant strip-tease? A living boudoir photo shoot?"

“You’ve been living with a woman who isn’t ashamed of her body; no need to give it a dirty name.” I put my last two pairs of shoes into my bag, and noticed it was less full than it had been a moment ago.

Frowning, I looked at the closet—and found Rocco hanging up my clothes.

Dammit.

“I’m leaving,” I reminded him.

“We’re going to have a calm, rational conversation first,” he countered. “After you’ve put on pants.”

I scoffed at him. “Go to hell.”

“Underwear, at least?”

Flipping him the bird, I walked back into the closet and grabbed the clothes Rocco had put back. When I carried them back to the duffel bag, I blinked down at the place I’d left it.

Gone.

Definitely gone.

Glancing back at the closet, I found Rocco putting everything away just as quickly as I’d gotten it out.

“Damn you,” I snarled. “You’re the only asshole who would ask a half-naked woman to put on more clothes.”

“I want to have a conversation for five minutes without staring at your legs in hopes that you’ll move them and I’ll catch a sight of more of you,” he said, matter-of-factly. “Does that make me a bastard?”

I opened my mouth, and then closed it. After a few seconds, I finally agreed, “Fine. Five minutes. Go. I’m not putting on pants, though.”

FOURTEEN



“FOR STARTERS, I was never looking for a platonic mate, as you continued to assume,” Rocco started, without so much as taking a second to think about it.

I guessed he could’ve been considering what to say to me the entire time he was trapped in his wolf form.

“The second bed was always for Oscar—Ryder, as he’s decided he would rather be called. I still haven’t gotten used to calling him that, but I guess I don’t have time to talk about that.” He gestured between us, and I felt a bit guilty for a minute.

“I caught your scent in the dorms a few months before we met, when I was helping Ebony move some things. I didn’t realize it was yours, and I was in a dark place, so they didn’t tell me until the day of that damn barbecue. I was going to come looking for you after the party was over—though I didn’t know it was you, exactly, that I would be looking for.”

My eyebrows lifted high. “Ebony didn’t tell me that.”

“The pack does a decent job at keeping each other’s secrets.” Rocco shrugged a bit.

He rolled his towel tighter around his waist, and I tried not to watch his fingers near his abs.

“Things have been rough. Oscar has good days, and really, really bad days. He’s hanging on by a thread much of the time, so I hadn’t been sleeping much when we met. I’m sorry I wasn’t friendly, but that had nothing to do with you, and everything to do with my own shitty mood and struggles.”

His gaze focused on nothing for a minute, and I wondered if he was trying to come up with what to say, or trying to remember what else I'd said to him.

My arms folded around my stomach, as if trying to protect me.

He finally added, "Despite what you seem to think, I have never *not* been attracted to you. You're sexy, and beautiful, and I'm damned jealous that my wolf's the one who's been holding you and getting petted for the last few months."

My face flushed.

Damn him for complimenting me.

"Alright, my five minutes are up, and I've said everything I needed to." He lifted his hands up beside his head, as if surrendering. "What are your thoughts?"

What *were* my thoughts?

I shoved a few wet strands of hair from my eyes. "Thanks for telling me the truth, but none of that changes anything for me." I gestured toward him.

His expression remained neutral, though his lips pressed together a bit.

"It's easy to say all of that, and a lot harder to prove it. As far as I'm concerned, we're still just going to be platonic mates. Maybe in a few years, we could look at taking our relationship to the next level, but for now, I'm not interested in being anything other than friends."

Rocco's head jerked in a nod. "Alright."

Alright?

That was easy.

"Now, can I have that duffel bag?" I held out a hand, giving him a dry look.

"No." He didn't so much as budge. "If you move out, I'll have to move with you. Your wolf will take over and chase me down if you try to go far from me; and even if you could, I don't want you to. I need your wolf to pick me, even if just

platonically, because I wouldn't survive the shit Oscar's going through right now," Rocco said bluntly.

I dipped my head. "Alright, that's fair. I'll sleep on the couch."

"I'll sleep on the couch, in here, where I can still see you," he countered.

Dammit, he was so stubborn.

"Fine."

That was that.

We both put on slightly more substantial clothing, and then headed down the stairs to make sure everyone knew we were okay.

Rocco grew more tense as we descended the staircase, and I glanced over at him when his entire body stiffened as we stopped at the bottom.

Ford flashed Rocco a knowing look. "It takes some time to get used to the connection. I'll make sure everyone keeps their distance for a bit."

Gratitude flashed through Rocco's eyes, and he dipped his head in a thankful nod.

Ebony flashed a smile my way. My stomach clenched when she flashed one at Rocco, too, and I tried not to let my own possessiveness get the best of me.

The two of them and Zed both slipped out of the house, and Rocco crossed the room, turning the lock on the door when they were gone.

With the lock turned, and the thick wood separating us from anyone else, Rocco's body began to relax.

"I need to go back to work," I told him, slipping my hands in my pockets.

"My dad will get by without you."

The words stung, and I scowled at him. "I need the money."

He strode to the fridge, grabbing the big envelope of cash and tossing it to the counter. "You *don't* need the money."

I scowled at him. “I’m not taking your money, which you already know.”

“Alright, then we’ll go back to work tomorrow. For today, I just need some time to relax, and eat. I’m starving—and you’ve got to be too.”

Now that he mentioned it...

“I’m hungry,” I admitted. “We can hang out and watch a movie or two.” I glanced at the clock. “Or eight.”

Rocco snorted. “I’ll get the popcorn.”

“We’ll need a lot, for eight movies,” I warned. “Don’t skimp out.”

He gave me a tired grin as he headed toward the fridge. “I won’t.”

I turned the TV on and pulled up Netflix, flicking through Rocco’s watchlist. There were only a few movies, all action movies or with superheroes.

“Don’t watch much TV?” I called out to him. Honestly, I’d only turned the thing on once since I’d been there, and I’d fallen asleep without watching anything.

“Nah. I keep pretty busy with work and the pack.” He threw some popcorn in the microwave, and I went through a list of recommended movies while it popped. “Why don’t you watch much?”

I shrugged. “Eh. Got to a point where pretty much everything I watched made me sad or bitter for one reason or another, so I stopped. Music replaced that for me.”

He nodded, but didn’t say anything to that. I realized after I’d said it that it was probably a shitty thing to say—that I was always sad or bitter after watching TV.

Should’ve thought it through before I spoke again, I guess.

“What do you want to watch?” I called out.

“Don’t care,” he pulled the first bag of popcorn out and dumped it in a bowl while the next bag started. “Something funny, maybe.”

I nodded, navigating to the chick flick section. Seeing a movie I'd liked back in high school, I hit the button to turn it on. It'd been so long since I saw it that I hardly remembered anything, so I figured we might as well rewatch it.

"How about this?" I checked, looking over at him as he brought me the first bowl of popcorn.

"Looks good." He nodded, handing me the bowl before heading back to the kitchen for another one.

I set the remote down beside me, grabbing a blanket off the floor and tugging it over my legs as I tucked them up on the couch beneath me. Rocco came back with the second bowl of popcorn, as well as two plates of leftover food I hadn't noticed him throwing together.

"Thanks," I said, flashing him a small smile.

"Any time." He mirrored the expression.

Things had changed between us. Not necessarily for the worse, but not for the better, either. He seemed to be getting back to the guy his friends said he was, which was good. And we weren't angry at each other anymore, which was also good.

But it was strange too, and a bit awkward, because I'd told him we weren't going to be anything more than friends after he told me he thought I was sexy.

And... because being platonic mates kind of sucked.

But it was better than being alone, which I had to remind myself continually.

I turned on the movie while I stuffed my face with food and popcorn (not at the same time), and we spent the next two hours grinning and laughing. Even the stupidest jokes triggered sarcastic remarks from me or Rocco, which had us snorting and laughing together.

We turned on another movie and ate another meal when that one ended, and repeated the same process two more times before we were both laying sprawled out on the couches, pretty much sleeping.

Our legs bumped a bit, but I stuck tightly to the inside part of the couch, and Rocco remain firmly on the outside.

I wasn't really tired since my wolf had slept so much over the last few days, but Rocco was clearly exhausted.

After a few minutes, he started snoring.

My lips curved upward a bit.

A moment later, he rolled toward me a little. His arm draped over my feet, and he hugged them to his chest.

I bit back a grin.

He continued right on snoring, not realizing at all that he was cuddling my feet of all things.

I wasn't sure whether or not sleeping on the couch would hurt his back or something, so I knew I'd need to wake him up in a bit, but... not yet. It was late in the afternoon, so he could nap first. And even if he slept all the way until it was time to go to bed, he'd be fine. He was exhausted.

The moment reminded me of an indie song I liked, and I spent a few minutes scrolling through my music, looking for it. When I found it, I turned it on and listened to the song quietly.

My eyes closed, my head nodding to the slow beat. When the words I'd remember played, my lips curved upward again.

Cuddling and snoring, no cares in the world.

Falling in love with each mundane moment.

My eyes opened, and landed on Rocco.

Damn, he was gorgeous.

I wasn't falling in love with him—we hadn't known each other long enough for that.

But after the initial arguments, it had been a good day.

The rest of the pack had been right about Rocco having a great sense of humor, and about us getting along. I'd laughed more, and harder, with him than I had with anyone in a long, long time. And even though he was gorgeous, I hadn't felt weird or self-conscious in any way. We'd just had fun.

My phone started ringing, then, and I lifted it to my ear quickly, whispering into the phone, “Hello?”

“Why are you whispering?” June checked.

“My, uh, roommate is sleeping.”

“The one with the weird brother who comes and goes?”

“Mmhmm.”

“He’s finally back, then?”

I’d told her that Rocco been out of town on an extended vacation. She loved traveling enough to believe it.

“Is he nice? Not creepy? You know I think it’s weird that you’re living in some random house with one and a half dudes you don’t know, Delly.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved it off. The sarcasm didn’t really come through the whisper, but she knew me well enough to know that it was there. “I’m fine. They cook for me, which is nice.”

“But are they good cooks?”

Looking at Rocco, I realized I didn’t know. His brother was good, though, so I’d give him the benefit of the doubt. “Really good.”

June sighed. “Then I guess it’s okay. I’d give up at least a pinky toe for a dude who would cook good food for me.”

“Why not a middle toe? Those ones seem a lot less necessary.

“My pinky toe is shaped weird. I could learn how to balance on four easier than I could learn to love that ugly thing.”

I snorted. “Poor pinky.”

“I know, right?”

She went on to tell me about her latest trip—to Thailand, this time—and how well the photos were doing on the sites she sold them through. I listened quietly, my gaze stuck on Rocco.

His face was mostly buried in the couch, but there was something incredibly calming about watching his chest rise and fall steadily as he slept.

June and I talked for ages before I realized it was getting late—and I was getting hungry.

I tried to slip away from Rocco, but his grip on my legs only tightened.

The movement pulled my thigh against some very hard, protruding part of the man, and a small squeak escaped me.

Rocco's snore cut off abruptly.

Shit.

I remained frozen in place, my heart pounding.

That was definitely, definitely an erection pressing into my thigh.

A big one.

Would that thing even fit inside me?

Not that I was going to have sex with him—we were platonic. Just platonic.

But... shit.

No way it would fit.

I grabbed my phone and googled, "How big of a penis can a vagina handle?"

There was no clear answer to that, but the general consensus was that a vag could stretch big enough to fit out a baby, so there was no such thing as a dick too big to hold.

That made me feel a bit better about Rocco's gigantic cock, not gonna lie.

FIFTEEN



AFTER A FEW MINUTES OF WIGGLING, I finally got Rocco to wake up. His eyes were bleary, and exhausted, and I felt bad for making him get up immediately afterward.

“Let me grab some food, you can head up to bed,” I told him, squeezing his hand.

“I’m supposed to be feeding you,” Rocco mumbled, attempting to stand up. He stumbled and I ducked under his arm, grabbing him around the waist. His arm draped over my shoulders. “Thanks.”

“Yep.” I helped him over to the barstools and sat him down.

My stomach rumbled.

“I’ll grab food really quick, and then help you up the stairs. You hungry?”

He shook his head that he wasn’t, but his eyes tracked me to the fridge, so I figured he really was hungry.

Getting two plates together only took two minutes thanks to the casseroles someone had left in the fridge. Rocco carried one of the plates as we walked up the stairs, his arm over my shoulder and mine around his waist again.

I’d been planning on sleeping on the couch, but Rocco had said he’d drag it into his room. That clearly hadn’t happened, which left me two options:

The bed, or the floor.

Rocco and I sat down on the edge of the mattress, and we ate in comfortable silence. I was kind of shocked by how much food I could eat since I'd become a werewolf, but there never seemed to be a lack of food when I was in Rocco's place or with the pack, so it didn't seem like a huge deal.

When we were done, we stacked our empty plates next to the bed, and Rocco scooted backward, sticking those sexy legs of his under the blanket and tugging his shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor.

I tried not to stare and/or drool at the bare muscles he exposed in the process, because hot damn, they didn't lead me to want to be platonic mates.

"I'll bring the couch up tomorrow," Rocco mumbled, his eyes closed and his body so relaxed that he was clearly almost asleep. "Just sleep here tonight. You can build a pillow wall to keep me away."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not building a pillow wall." Grabbing a pillow, I stepped away from the bed. "The ground's fine. Go to sleep."

Rocco's pretty face twisted in a scowl. Instead of arguing, though, he rolled right off the bed and plopped down on the floor right next to me.

I blinked.

"I'm not letting my mate sleep on the floor alone," he grumbled to me. "We'll sleep on the bed together, or on the floor together."

Sighing, I said, "Stubborn bastard."

"I know you mean that with so much love," Rocco mumbled. "All the love."

I snorted. "Right."

He remained on the floor, and I glanced at the mattress.

It wouldn't really hurt anything for us to share a bed. I mean, he already knew that I only wanted us to be friends. Or at least that I was only going to let myself be friends with him.

Even if we ended up snuggling a bit, it wouldn't really hurt anything, would it? I'd snuggled his wolf every night for months, and it hadn't affected either of us negatively.

So... mattress it was, I supposed.

"Alright, get back in bed," I grumbled at Rocco.

His lips curved up into a sleepy smile that made me hot in all the wrong places for a platonic cuddling session.

He wordlessly climbed back up onto the mattress, and I reluctantly joined him.

Rocco stuck to the far side of the bed, giving me plenty of space. I got comfortable, and stared up at the ceiling.

I'd been snuggling Rocky for so long that it felt strange not to have another warm body pressed up against mine as I tried to fall asleep.

Soft snores came from Rocco's side of the bed moments later, and I at least felt better about the fact that he was getting some rest.

Me, on the other hand...

I sighed softly, and then scooted a bit. Just a bit.

My side didn't meet Rocco's, so after a few minutes, I scooted a bit more.

Still not close enough to snuggle.

Biting back a groan, I scooted one last time.

My side met Rocco's, his warm skin pressing against me.

I let out a slow breath as I relaxed against him.

We could still be just friends. Friends could cuddle.

Right?

I didn't quite manage to convince myself, but it was worth a try, I supposed.

A minute passed, and my eyes closed.

Another moment passed, and Rocco rolled. His massive arm wrapped around my torso and pulled me into his chest. My

back pressed to his front, my eyes facing the door as his entire body melded to mine.

His erection pressed into my ass, and that was still a new thing to get used to, but...

Honestly, it felt good.

Being held.

Being snuggled.

Rocco was holding me in his arms like I was absolutely everything to him, and I loved that.

A lot.

But I couldn't just jump into an actual mating, could I?

We'd just met.

I loved his friends, and his family, but I still didn't know him well.

His erection throbbed against my ass, and heat bloomed in my lower belly.

Damn, I wanted more.

My horny brain showed me flashes of Rocco's fingers between my thighs, his hands spreading my body to give himself more access to whatever the hell he wanted to touch.

I bit back a groan.

Why the hell did I think I could handle a platonic mating?

I forced myself to repeat the lyrics to songs I liked until I eventually managed to fall asleep, my body achy and needy.

AN ALARM WOKE me up the next morning—my work alarm.

It was bright and early, only a little after five, but I was used to getting up then.

Rocco's arms tightened around me when I tried to roll away to find the device on the floor, where I'd left it.

I wiggled a bit, trying to get free, and earned a throbbing erection against my ass, and a groan.

Rocco's hands planted on my hips. "Stop," he whispered, his voice rough.

I froze, and his dick throbbed against me a few more times.

"What?" I whispered.

"You're too damned sexy for my virgin cock," he mumbled.

A snort escaped me; I couldn't help it.

"Nice to know you get pleasure from my pain," Rocco mumbled into my ear again, still holding me in place.

The throbbing was slowing, but not stopping.

"Can I move now?" I whispered.

"No."

The throbbing continued, slowly, and I waited.

"I have to go to work," I reminded him.

"You didn't tell my dad you were going in," he reminded me back.

Shit, he was right.

"I know where he is, though. He'll be glad to see me."

Rocco growled, and tugged me tighter against him.

Shit, he was hard.

And I was fighting like hell not to imagine that rock between my thighs, sliding over my—

Dammit, I needed to get my head back in the game.

Platonic mates.

Platonic mates.

Platonic mates.

I shifted my hips a bit, and Rocco swore, his grip on my hips tightening.

“You’ve got to stop that, or I’m going to soak your ass,” he grunted, holding me close.

Why did that sound so damn erotic?

“I’ll text your dad,” I choked out. “Let him know we’re coming in. But you have to let me go first.”

Rocco’s nose met the back of my throat. “The smell of your arousal makes it so damn impossible for me to think,” he mumbled.

Shit.

He could smell that?

My face flushed, and my body warmed even more for some reason.

“I could get you off,” he remarked. “As friends. Since we have no choice but to be loyal to each other, we might as well help each other out with that.”

My face flushed further.

He wanted to do that?

I was not prepared for this.

At all.

I’d never even had a guy touch me like that, and...

Shit, it sounded hot.

“Just as friends?” I asked, my voice a bit uneven.

“Just as friends,” he agreed. “To relieve the pressure.”

Shit, he was right, there was so much damn pressure.

“Alright,” I breathed. “But just hands.”

“Just hands,” he agreed. His hips rocked a bit, and his erection slid between my ass cheeks, my thin panties doing almost nothing to keep us apart.

He groaned softly as his hand slid up my thigh, dragging my big shirt upward and finding the hem of my panties.

Shit.

Double shit.

He played with the hem for a minute before sliding his fingers down, brushing them over the front of me. I was so damned soaked, and his growl told me he liked that.

My breathing picked up as he moved his fingers lazily over my core, rocking his hips a bit now and then, rubbing himself against me through both of our clothing.

His hand finally found the hem of my panties again and slipped under the fabric, and I swore when his big, warm fingers found my clit.

I rocked against him as he explored me painfully-slowly, learning what made me crazy and what just felt good.

When he finally picked up the pace, working my clit, it only took me a minute to shatter. I cried out as I rocked against him, pleasure rolling through me, and earned a snarl and a curse as he moved with me, soaking my ass as promised.

We sagged into each other, breathing hard as we came down from the highs, Rocco's hand curved around my core possessively, holding my whole damn crotch.

I don't know why it was erotic, but it was.

"That was..." I trailed off, panting.

"Fucking incredible?" Rocco's hand squeezed me, and I fought a groan.

"Yeah," I admitted. "But now we need to go to work."

He sighed. "Alright. Don't touch my dad, okay?"

I snorted. "When have I ever *touched* your dad?"

"You hug him sometimes. Just give me a few days to get used to the bond before doing that again."

I guess he wasn't wrong. I did hug his parents sometimes—they felt more like my parents than my own. But it was a parently-hug, not an intimate one.

"The thought of you touching anyone else makes me want to rip throats," Rocco admitted. "Platonically."

I choked on a laugh. “I’m *sure* platonic throat ripping is common here.”

“Mmhm.” He confirmed, though I felt his grin against the back of my neck.

“Alright, let’s go.” I rolled away from him, and he reluctantly released me.

SIXTEEN



WE GOT DRESSED QUICKLY, not taking the time to shower, and then headed to work. Ozzy was thrilled when we showed up together, and that made me feel pretty good.

I thought things would be awkward between me and Rocco after what we'd done earlier, but it wasn't at all. We exchanged grins and made jokes just like we had the day before, when we were watching movies, and it was nice.

Really nice.

Who was I kidding?

It was absolutely damn perfect.

I had to take like five different snack breaks, but Rocco and his dad both assured me that was normal, and Rocco bought me enough food to make me feel needy (even though I tried to pay for myself a few times, he refused).

By the time we got home, we took turns in the shower really quickly before getting dressed equally fast, and heading over to join the pack for dinner.

Dinner was...

Weird.

Rocco was no longer playful, his gaze dark every time one of his buddies tried to talk to me. I could tell he was struggling with his possessiveness, so I told everyone we were bowing out before dinner was even ready.

My fingers wrapped around his gigantic bicep, and I towed him out of the townhouse quickly, waving a hand toward all of the understanding calls behind us.

His body drained of tension as we walked, but his face twisted in a grimace more and more the further we got from the pack. “Sorry,” he apologized, his expression remaining dark.

“Don’t apologize for being a wolf. I like your wolf,” I said bluntly, continuing forward with a grip on his bicep. At first, I’d been holding his arm to make sure he didn’t turn around and go rip anyone’s throat out. I hadn’t let go even when we were in the clear, because his bicep felt so damned good in my hand.

“I’m not apologizing for him—I’m apologizing for me,” Rocco grumbled.

“Well, stop. Werewolves are possessive; I’m pretty sure that’s one of the first things the pack told me when we met.”

He sighed. “I know. That doesn’t make me any less annoyed with myself, though.”

I scowled, stopping in front of the door as I turned to face him. He stopped just a breath away from me, his arms folded over his chest and nearly brushing my nipples.

“I’m possessive of you too, okay? Should I apologize for glaring at Tea whenever she looks at you too long? Or for wanting to punch Ebony in her damned gorgeous face because you grinned at her?” I demanded.

He looked a bit taken off-guard. “Of course not. It’s sexy when you’re possessive.”

“Then don’t you think I like your possessiveness, too?” I shot back.

Turning around, I grabbed the doorknob and twisted. Still unlocked, it opened without a problem.

Rocco followed me inside, his hand catching my hip and stopping me in place before I could walk any further. “I don’t know what you think, Mads. You haven’t told me, and I’m not a damned mind reader. All I know is that you want us to be

just friends, which is your right. But it doesn't exactly make me think you enjoy me being possessive of you."

"I don't know what I want, okay?" I tossed a hand in the air. "I don't know how to do relationships, or even friendship, really. All I know is that I haven't felt nearly as alone since I met your wolf, and that I like spending time with you. I'm sorry if that's not enough for you, alright? But I'm not ready for a relationship. I'm sorry if—"

Rocco shut me up with his lips.

On my lips.

Our mouths bumped awkwardly, one of his hands cupping my face as he tilted my head back, the other one pressed against my lower back.

He pulled his head away after a moment, and those gorgeous blue eyes studied me.

His erection stabbed me in the lower belly, but I didn't dislike the feeling.

At all.

"What was that?" I whispered to him.

"A kiss. Not sure if I did it right," he admitted, flashing me a small, guilty grin. "We can be just friends who kiss too, you know."

Could we?

We'd done some hand stuff earlier, and our relationship still felt the same. So why couldn't we kiss too?

"We should probably do it again. Just to make sure we're doing it right," I said hastily.

Rocco's lips cracked in a massive grin before our mouths touched again lightly.

My hands found his shoulders as I tilted my head a bit, parting my lips and slipping my tongue toward his tentatively. His lips parted for mine, and he groaned as my tongue brushed into his mouth.

He walked me backward, toward the couch, his hands still on my back and face, as our tongues slowly explored one another's mouths. We were both tentative, not in any kind of a hurry, though I could smell something on the air that was so thick and sexy that it had to be the scent of his desire.

He wanted me, and damn, I loved that.

The backs of my calves met the couch, and he caught me before I fell. Instead of sitting over the top of me, he spun us quickly, his ass crashing to the couch as he dragged me up onto his lap.

I moaned as his erection pressed into my core, my knees on either side of his hips, and his hands on my waist. He didn't grab my ass, never touching me anywhere I hadn't given him permission to touch.

Our mouths continued getting to know one another, and we ignored the need rising in both of our bodies as we continued to kiss, rubbing against each other enough to take some of the pressure away without shattering.

I have no idea how long we were making out for, before the back door opened.

Rocco had me on my back in an instant, and was on his feet, snarling toward the intruder.

There were two footsteps into the kitchen, followed by a curse, and then the same door shut.

No other footsteps followed.

I stood on shaky legs, my body aching in ways I hadn't even known were possible. "Who was that?"

"Osc—Ryder." Rocco's arms went around my back, his forehead pressing to mine. Our eyes shut at the same time, both of us breathing rapidly as our hearts pounded together.

I wasn't sure what would come next.

Did we keep kissing?

More kissing sounded pretty damn good to me.

Or did we take it a step further?

Have a repeat of what we'd done in bed earlier?

My body was sure as hell throbbing.

"I should feed you," Rocco said, his lips brushing mine just the tiniest bit as he spoke.

"Should you?" I whispered back.

"Mmmhmm." He nodded, our noses brushing with the movement. "Got to be a good mate."

"What you were doing a minute ago was pretty good," I murmured.

His lips curved upward. "You took the words right out of my mouth." His lips brushed mine, and then he let go of me and stepped back. "Come sit down while I find us something."

"I could find us something," I pointed out, though I let him take my hand and drag me across the kitchen.

"Of course you could. But I offered, and you would never turn down free food." He flashed me a grin as he sat me down on a stool, then walked over to the fridge.

"You're too damned smooth," I grumbled, ignoring the ache in my nether-regions as he studied the contents of the fridge.

"There's no such thing." He grimaced at our food. "No more casseroles. Guess I've got to cook."

"Or we could go over to your parents' house," I pointed out.

His grimace deepened.

All of my remaining desire vanished, though the ache remained. I leaned across the counter, toward Rocco. "They deserve to know the truth. Whatever your brother has decided to be called, he's not dead, and they deserve to know that. They're ridiculously good people, and ridiculously kind."

Rocco shut the fridge, crossing the kitchen and dropping his hands to the counter. His face was tight, his grimace deep. "Oscar doesn't want them to know."

"I don't think it should be his decision to make. You've been keeping him here, away from the people who brought him into

the world and love him enough to talk about him almost constantly; you're lying to them as much as he is."

Rocco's grimace twisted further. "Right to the gut, huh?"

"You know I'm not one to coat things in fluff."

"I know. I love that about you." His expression was distant as he considered it, and neither of us touched on the "L" word he had dropped.

Though my lower belly did clench a little more.

"I'll need to talk to him, first," Rocco finally said.

"He's out there somewhere." I gestured toward the porch. "Let's go talk, and then we can go to your parents' place with or without him."

Though Rocco looked a bit nauseous at the idea, he dipped his head in a nod and headed toward the door. "I'll buy you food on the way."

"I don't understand your obsession with feeding me," I remarked, following him out of the room. He slowed, so I fell into step beside him.

"You know how you couldn't help but touch my wolf all the time?" he checked.

"Yes." That would be a hard one to forget. Rocky was snuggly as hell.

"You're driven to provide for me and him through touch. We're driven to provide for you through food and protection."

"Sounds like you got the shitty end of the deal, then."

His lips curved upward a bit. "I'd cook for you all day if it meant you'd kiss me like you just did again. So I'd say I got the better end of the deal, by far."

He tugged the sliding door open, and I tried not to blush. It mostly failed, but Rocco didn't show any sign that he'd noticed the blush.

As much as I hated feeling like things were a bit cheesy between us, I also loved it.

A lot.

SEVENTEEN



I WAITED on the porch while Rocco hiked into the forest a bit. My wolf tugged at me, not liking having him so far away, but I could still see flashes of his hair through the trees. The hair flashes kept her calm, luckily enough for me.

Rocco came back a few minutes later, with a scowling Ryder at his side. Rocco's hands were in his pockets, and he wore a guilty grimace.

I felt a bit bad for forcing him to do it. I mean, I hadn't really forced him, but I kind of had. It was the right thing to do, though.

As the guys approached, Rocco stepped between me and his brother. His hands remained in his pockets, but I could tell he was stressed. I wanted to take his hand or something, but felt too awkward about it, so I didn't. Instead, I walked beside him.

Rocco tugged the drivers' door open of his truck. Expecting Ryder to take the passenger seat, I stood awkwardly next to the back door, planning to sit in the back seat.

Rocco reached down and grabbed me by the waist in one smooth motion. I squeaked as he hauled me over his lap and set me in the truck's middle seat, while Ryder climbed into the back.

Though Rocco let me go after he put me down, I could still feel his hands on my waist as if the touch had been burned into my skin.

Damn, I liked him.

Platonically.

So platonically.

Maybe if I kept telling myself that...

We drove in silence, and it was both tense and awkward. Luckily, the drive wasn't too long.

"Do you want me to tell them, or do you want to tell them yourself?" Rocco asked, staring straight ahead.

Something told me things were not all well between them.

"I'm not a damned pussy," Ryder snarled at his brother, flinging the truck's door open and striding toward the house. The door slammed behind him, and I tried not to flinch.

Rocco sighed as his brother rapped on the door.

"This is the right thing," I whispered to him.

"I know. I've known for a long time," he admitted. "I tried to respect Oscar's wishes, but..."

The door opened, and I saw the immediate shock on Rocco's mother's face.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then she flung her arms around Ryder, and hugged him fiercely. Even from the truck, I could see tears dripping down her cheeks.

Ozzy appeared in the doorway beside her, and an equal measure of shock and emotion flooded him too as he hugged both his son and wife fiercely.

Rocco backed the truck up out of the driveway.

"What are you doing?" I asked him, my gaze locked on the emotional reunion.

"Oscar wanted to explain himself alone. He wasn't going at all if I didn't agree to let him tell his story without his baby brother there."

I scowled at Rocco as he drove off down the street. "He damn well better not have called you his 'baby brother'. You kept him alive for months, right? Gave him a place to stay, and

talked him down from the edge when his wolf tried to take over permanently, repeatedly?”

“Yes,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Then drive us back so I can punch him in his obnoxious face.”

Rocco snorted, still driving straight. “It’s cute that you think you’re stronger than him.”

“I don’t think I’m stronger than him; I think he’s an asshole, and I should teach him a lesson.” I held up a fist toward Rocco. “That bastard won’t know what hit him.”

Rocco fought hard to keep his expression serious as he nodded. I did too.

We both bust up laughing a moment later, as Rocco turned into the parking lot of a fast-food place.

EIGHTEEN



WE ATE Rocco's sorrow away in the form of way too many burgers and fries before driving back to our place. Rocco closed the door behind us, and leaned his back against it, standing there for a moment and closing his eyes.

I waited a few feet in front of him, slipping my hands in the pockets of my jean shorts.

Not sure what I should say, I waited.

And waited.

He finally opened his eyes a moment later, and his gaze was soft. "The second bedroom is open, now. Oscar refuses to risk a repeat of what happened on the couch, so he's moving in with our parents." Rocco gestured toward the place we'd sat earlier, making out.

My cheeks warmed a bit. "I'll move my stuff over."

"I can move mine; you've been sleeping there for months. I'll drag the couch upstairs, and sleep in the room with you until we've had time to ride out the chase."

Biting my lip, I nodded.

I wanted to tell him that I didn't want him to sleep on the couch—that I wanted him to share the bed with me, and kiss me again, and touch me again like he had that morning.

Hell, I wanted that so damn much.

But... I still wanted to take things slow, too.

And I didn't want to rush things, or push him into anything.

And I didn't want to make him think I wanted us to be anything more than friends when I still wasn't sure if I *did* want that.

So I just nodded.

Rocco dragged the couch up the stairs with a surprising amount of ease, only needing me to help steer the thing from the back a couple of times. He set it against the wall of his bedroom, as far from the bed as you could possibly get while still remaining inside the room.

"Alright, give me a few minutes and we'll be set." He gave me a quick smile, and I nodded again.

I was doing a lot of that.

When I helped him haul his clothes and shit, it took a grand total of a minute and a half to move him to the room across the hall.

After that was settled, we brushed our teeth, taking turns rinsing our mouths before shuffling back into our room.

My room, I guess.

I shucked my shorts, t-shirt, and bra, tugging on one of Rocco's shirts that I'd claimed.

Rocco dropped to the couch with his pillow and a spare blanket he'd grabbed from Ryder's old room, and I tucked myself into the bed.

It was... lonely.

But it smelled good still, so I closed my eyes and eventually fell asleep.

WHEN MY ALARM WENT OFF, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and blearily shut it off.

Then, I blinked at the screen.

And blinked again.

Dropping the phone, I closed my eyes and sighed heavily.

“What’s wrong?” Rocco’s voice sounded as drowsy as I felt.

“Not wrong, necessarily,” I mumbled. “Ryder is going to start working with your dad again, so I’ve pretty much just been fired. Nicely. And invited to dinner tonight in the same text.”

Rocco groaned. “Dammit. I’m sorry.”

“Why? You have a job.”

“You liked it.” The words were simple, and took me longer to process than they should’ve. “You could start looking for music-related jobs again.”

“I’d have to move to have a real shot at most of them. Do you want to move?”

There was a pause. “I mean, I don’t want to, but for you to follow your dreams, I will.”

My lips curved up slightly. “That’s really sweet of you, but I like it here. And I already got rejected from all of the jobs I really wanted, so there’s not much of a point.”

Rocco scoffed. “Not with that attitude.”

“Mr. Positivity, are you?” I drawled.

“Miss Give Up, are *you*?” Rocco countered.

“Eh. More like Miss Work Smart, Not Hard. As much as I wish it was possible, my dream isn’t going to work out. So now I’ve got to dream a new dream.”

Rocco didn’t seem to agree, but asked, “What’s the new dream, then?”

“Not sure. Still trying to figure that out.” I closed my eyes. “Right now, my new dream is to sleep until noon.”

Rocco snorted. “We can make that happen.”

My stomach growled, and I sighed. “After we eat, I guess.”

Neither of us put on any extra clothes as we headed down to the kitchen; Rocco wore only a pair of basketball shorts that practically framed his erection, and I wore just the t-shirt and panties that probably framed my nipples almost as effectively.

“Want to know something about me?” Rocco asked, as he peered into the fridge while I went up on my tiptoes to grab a few boxes of cereal off the top of the fridge.

“Duh.” I didn’t bother to pretend I wasn’t interested.

“I hate planning meals,” he admitted. “I don’t mind the cooking, but when it comes to sitting down and figuring out what to cook, I’d rather be shot in the damned ass.”

I snorted. “Dummy.”

The insult earned me a face-splitting grin.

Pushing past him, I ignored the goosebumps that followed the brush of his chest on my arms and his erection on my lower back as I grabbed the milk out of the fridge. “We’re having cereal for breakfast, and then I can make us a meal plan, and we can go shopping. Maybe afterward...” I trailed off, biting my lip. “Well, we can either start looking for a new job for me, or we can stop by your school and see if you’ve still got your job.”

“I’ve still got my job.” Rocco didn’t go sit down, remaining where he was so our bodies brushed again as I pulled the milk out. “One of the retired werewolves will have taken over my classes until I’m ready to go back to work; that’s what we always do if someone finds their mate.”

Huh.

It was pretty cool that the community stepped up like that.

“So we’ll go find another job for you.” He didn’t sound completely sold on that, though.

“What aren’t you saying?” I asked, shutting the fridge and spinning to face him.

He grimaced. “The job situation is pretty much the same for the mate chase as it is for the hunt. We’ll both be pretty volatile until after the climax, and even then, it’ll take some time to adjust.” He gestured between us, his hand nearly brushing my breasts.

I fought the urge to drag it to my chest, and plop it down right on my boob.

“Well, alright. How long does the climax last if we don’t have sex?” I checked.

“Around a month.”

Shit.

A month of absolute *hell*.

Yay.

“That’s all?” I drawled.

Rocco poked me in the nose. “We didn’t even last a few minutes in bed together the other morning.”

I made a face. “You make it sound worse than it was.”

His eyes darkened. “It was damned incredible. Have you forgotten that?”

“That would be impossible.” I grabbed the cereal boxes in one arm and the milk in the other, hauling them to the table. “But we can’t be platonic mates if we have sex for a whole week straight, so the climax is off the table. We’ll just have to endure. Maybe buy some bags of frozen peas for our throbbing bits or something.”

He grimaced, grabbing bowls and spoons as he followed me to the table. “Sounds like hell.”

“It’s going to suck,” I agreed. “But we’ll be strong.” I flexed my arm, and Rocco’s grimace faded into a tiny bit of a grin.

We weighed the pros and cons of job hunting for me before the hellish climax hit, and ultimately decided that it would be best for Rocco and I both to either hang out at his job until then, or just call it quits on work altogether for a bit.

I knew there wasn’t a chance in hell that I’d be able to avoid smashing my naked body into his if we were home all day together every day for who-knew-how-long, so we settled on working his job together.

Really, I’d just be sitting at his desk, doing pretty much nothing while he taught, but I’d figure out something to do. Maybe I’d become a pro at online blackjack or something.

With that settled, we got dressed, and then headed out.

After a quick stop inside the school, they agreed to let him come back until the climax, and get the substitute back in until that ended.

I was quiet as we drove away, my mind spinning a bit.

Rocco wasn't going to be able to work during the climax, whether we had sex or not. He'd be too horny, which was obviously not appropriate for a high school teacher.

But not working meant a hell of a lot of time together.

Alone together, probably.

And all the horniness.

Shit.

Rocco glanced over at me, and then turned the wheel sharply. I grabbed the oh-shit handle above the door, shooting him a concerned look. "Where are we going?"

He flashed me a grin. "On an adventure. We've got to do something to remove all that stress, and I think I remember you putting sex off the table."

I snorted. "You think?"

His grin widened. "I could be persuaded to forget."

A laugh escaped me, and I watched out the window as he drove us down a road I didn't remember driving before. He turned the music up, and a song I loved blasted through the speakers.

My phone was hooked up to the radio, so my music was playing, which I loved. Rocco and I had talked about music a little, and from what I understood, he liked it but it wasn't his life the way it was for me.

Or the way it used to be for me, I guess.

I'd still listened to it a lot, while I'd worked with Ozzy, but hadn't been making my own stuff anymore. And I'd never posted my videos to any websites or anything, focused on school and on that career my professor had promised me.

I had been so damn stupid.

“Hey now, I can see you going dark again. Chin up, Mads. You’re about to explore the forest through a wolf’s eyes,” Rocco remarked.

Surprisingly enough, I did brighten a bit at that. “What’s it like?”

“Gross in some ways. Incredible in others.” Rocco shrugged, his lips lifting in an easy grin. I loved how easily he smiled, and how often he joked. “But both of our wolves will take tomorrow more easily if we’ve let them run together for a bit. Prepare yourself to watch your wolf consume a small animal, though.”

I grimaced at that. “Nasty.”

“Yup. It’s the circle of life.”

I nodded, staring out the window as the asphalt road turned to dirt.

Running around in wolf form didn’t sound romantic, or necessarily even fun, but it did sound relaxing. Soothing, maybe. It would be nice to have a break—to watch the forest fly by, and to see the world through my wolf’s eyes, like Rocco had said.

“Do you think my wolf will like yours?” I asked Rocco, my voice quiet.

“Serious answer, or joke?” he checked.

The question made my lips curve upward. The fact that I was stuck with a guy who was perfectly happy with either answer made me feel better about pretty much everything.

“Serious.”

He considered it for a moment, and I studied him while he did.

Damn, he was gorgeous.

But funnily enough, his attractiveness wasn’t what I liked most about him. That would be his attitude, and his personality. And his smile; he had a really contagious smile.

“Naturally-speaking, our wolves will be more drawn to each other than they could ever be to anyone else. They’re literal soulmates; she exists within you because of him. I’ve never heard of a pair of mated wolves not liking each other, unless she’s going to reject him.”

I nodded. The words relieved me, honestly.

“Logically speaking, your wolf will have a personality similar to yours. She’ll be playful, with a great sense of humor, a stubborn-streak a mile long, and a massive heart. Female wolves resemble their humans much more than males do, because the males have had more time to grow separately. And given that she’ll be just like you, I’d imagine that my wolf will be absolutely obsessed to the point where he’ll do anything it takes to get your wolf to fall for him.”

My lips curved upward further. “Obsessed, huh?”

“Oh, yeah.” He nodded my way. “I don’t think he took his eyes off you once while he was hunting, and he’ll be even more ensnared by her.”

Biting my lip, I fought a full-out grin. “Rocky is pretty cool.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rocco tossed a hand through the air. “I’m cooler.”

I snorted. “You’re a history teacher. He’s a wolf.”

“Exactly. Brainy is the new sexy.”

A laugh escaped me. “Right.”

“You’re mocking me now, aren’t you?” he protested, though he was wearing a grin.

“Never,” I lied, fighting another laugh as I stared out the window.

“It’s a damn good thing you’re cute, because you are a terrible liar.”

I laughed again, unable to fight the grin any longer. “Thanks, I think.”

NINETEEN



ROCCO PARKED in the middle of the forest, and reminded me how to shift forms. The shift was a hell of a lot more painful than I remembered, but the pain eventually faded, and then my wolf was at the helm.

She snuggled up against Rocky's side, letting him sniff her and nuzzle her and check out every damn bit of her. Her chin was held high, except when the other wolf came close enough for her to nuzzle or poke him back—then she nuzzled or poked him.

Seemed like Rocco had been right about them being obsessed with each other.

They didn't even run right away, just rolling around, snuggling, and playing together right next to the truck for a while.

When my wolf had her fill of that, she barked at Rocky, then growled at him and sat.

He tilted his head, but followed her cue and sat.

She nodded at him emphatically, before taking off running into the trees.

I wasn't sure what she was doing—maybe playing a game of tag or something?

He didn't follow her right away though, so he either didn't know what was going on, or understood something that I didn't.

I watched the forest fly by, awe filling me as I took in more of the untouched world. It looked completely different than it had when I'd hiked years and years ago; it was wild, completely and absolutely.

It was incredible to me, the way things seemed to have grown so differently without guidelines or trimming. The plants were crazy and reckless, the trees in so many different shapes and colors that it was insane.

Everything was so... *alive*.

I wasn't sure I'd ever felt that wild or free before.

I loved music, but even the creative high I got sometimes wasn't like that. It didn't breathe life into me. It was just an obsession. Something I loved, but not something that made me feel alive.

Would it be possible to find a job that would make me feel that way?

Suddenly, I understood why June traveled so much. Why she always wanted to be out there seeing the world, and experiencing more of life.

She wanted to feel *alive*.

And that made so damn much sense now that it almost hurt.

As my wolf ran, I tried to think of things that had made me feel alive in my life.

My family, before my parents quit the real world?

Hanging out with June?

High school?

No, definitely not high school. I'd rather poke my own eyes out than go back there.

College hadn't brought life to me. I'd blindly pursued my degree, trusting the asshole of a professor who hadn't deserved my trust.

Sometimes I'd liked being an RA, when it meant helping someone. Girls had confided in me on so many different

occasions. I'd fought for them after they'd had problems with their parents, and with their teachers. When they weren't sure whether or not they should go to the hospital or call the police after being raped. When they needed someone in their corner and didn't have anyone, I was there, fighting for them.

And... I'd liked it.

Loved it, even.

As crazy as it was, the job I'd worked just so I didn't have to share a room with anyone was the only thing that had really made me feel alive for most of my life.

And... well, the pack.

I felt alive when I was with them. The conversations flowed, the jokes abounded. We respected each other, and cared about each other.

That made me feel alive.

And as much as I didn't want to admit it, Rocco had made me feel alive, too. With the jokes, and the teasing. With the light conversations. With the way he casually tried to get to know me, and shared facts about himself too.

With the way he'd touched me.

With the way he'd kissed me.

We hadn't known each other long, but... there was a genuine possibility that he made me feel more alive than anyone or anything else ever had.

I wasn't going to go all-in with him blindly after a couple of days, but... maybe I could consider the possibility of being with him in a more-than-friend way.

Maybe we could learn to love each other.

Maybe we could be romantic mates, in time.

OUR WOLVES RAN until long after the sun went down, and then reluctantly stumbled back to the truck together. One

awful shift later, I was crashing into Rocco's arms, and he caught me without a damn problem.

My tits were smooshed against his chest as he looked down at me and I looked back up at him.

He flashed me a grin. "Shifting is hard on your body the first few times."

"Apparently," I managed to get out.

Rocco carefully let go of me, not releasing his grip on me completely until he was satisfied that I wasn't going to fall on my face or ass.

Of course, the moment he stepped away from me to grab our clothes, I went down. Attempting to catch myself on a rock nearby only led to bleeding hands and a spinning head.

"Mads," Rocco chided me, scooping the clothes up off the ground and striding back over to me. He dropped to his knees beside me, not seeming to notice the rocks that were slicing into his own knees and calves.

"I'm fine," I protested. "Just... wobbly."

"Arms out," he instructed.

I blinked at him.

He reached out and grabbed one of my arms, which was wrapped around my naked chest, and tugged it out until it stuck straight in front of me.

Another tug, and the other one was out straight too.

Rocco hooked the straps of my bralette over my arms, and slid them up to my shoulders before quickly reaching around my back. His fingers struggled with the buckle, and he swore. "Why the hell are these things so difficult?"

I bit back a grin. "I don't know, they're pretty much torture devices. I'm glad my boobs aren't big enough to force me to wear padded bras."

Rocco scowled. "They're perfect. And if you don't want to wear a bra, then don't."

I lifted an eyebrow. “Do you know what happens if I don’t wear a bra?”

He shrugged. “Free boobs?”

I snorted. “*Pointy* boobs. On display, for everyone to see.”

His fingers paused, and there was a moment of silence. “Never mind. You don’t have to wear a bra in our house, but outside, they’re still required.” He resumed struggling with the buckle.

“Last I checked, you’re not my boss,” I pointed out.

“Last I checked, neither of us wanted me to kill some random bastard for seeing your tits through your shirt,” Rocco countered.

“Touché.” I nodded. “Here, I can do it.” I started to reach around my back, but he swatted my hands away with his arms.

“You’re bleeding,” he growled at me.

“You’re never going to figure this out in the dark,” I shot back.

With another growl, he abandoned the buckle, and tugged the straps back down my arms. “Braless it is.”

I rolled my eyes as he tossed the bralette to the ground and tugged his shirt over my head, then maneuvered my arms through the sleeves as if I couldn’t do it myself.

Despite my eyeroll, I didn’t hate being taken care of.

Hell, I kind of loved it.

Rocco settled the end of the shirt over a few inches of my thighs before standing up. I unintentionally got an eyeful of his massive erection, and unintentionally found myself getting horny, too.

Yeah, the climax was going to be hell without hooking up.

He ignored his erection, stepping into his jeans and tugging them up into place. The guy was so ridiculously attractive, it made it hard to breathe sometimes.

My eyes tracked his hands as he tugged the zipper up, then did the button.

“Ready?” he checked, grabbing my clothes off the ground.

Shirtless; he was definitely still shirtless.

“Hmm?” My gaze lifted to his face, my cheeks heating.

His lips lifted in a devastating grin, and I found him holding a hand out to me. “Ready to go?” He tilted his head toward the truck.

“Hmm? Yeah. Um. Right. Ready.” I jerked my head in an awkward nod, face on fire as I carefully took his hand since my cuts were still healing.

Rather than gripping my cut hand hard, he reached down with the other one and grabbed me around the waist. I wasn’t expecting that, and my legs wrapped around his hips in response.

“You’re still bleeding,” he reminded me. His voice alone told me he was still grinning.

“Don’t make fun of me,” I complained.

He set me down in the passenger seat with a chuckle, then walked around to his own seat while the heat in my face only burned hotter.

“Don’t be embarrassed.” His hand stretched over the console and caught mine gently, dragging it over to his crotch. My fingers brushed his erection—harder, and maybe even bigger than it had been before. “I’m glad you’re attracted to me, Mads. Really damn glad.”

Lifting my hand from his hardness, he pressed his lips gently to my palm, before carrying it back over to where it had been resting on my leg. He carefully set it back down, then turned the truck on.

My cheeks burned all the way back to the house, and I couldn’t get the image of that damned hand-kiss out of my mind.

TWENTY



MY HAND WAS HEALED COMPLETELY by the time Rocco parked in the garage—though we had stopped to eat way too much fast food on the way. It stunned me, a lot, but Rocco reminded me that rapid healing was part of being a werewolf, so I tried not to freak out about it.

We were headed up the stairs, our hands bumping as we walked, when there was a hard knock at the front door.

I frowned, and looked over at Rocco.

He frowned at the door.

“You can get dressed, I’ll get it,” he told me, stepping off the stairs.

Though my wolf may possibly have been okay with that much separation, I wasn’t testing it. Mostly because I wanted to see who was knocking so late.

Rocco tugged the door open, and my eyebrows lifted when I looked over his shoulder and found the entire pack outside.

A low growl rumbled Rocco’s chest, and his arm snaked out behind him, wrapping around my waist. He tugged me against him, his arm so low it was nearly wrapped around my ass.

“Oscar is alive?” Elliot demanded, his gaze angry for the first time since I’d met him.

Shit.

I knew I should’ve told them—I kept the secret for Rocco, and only for Rocco. I did like Rocco, though...

“He’s struggling with his wolf,” Rocco admitted. “The wolf is still trying to take control permanently. He asked me not to tell anyone.”

His arm was still around my back, holding me tightly to him.

“We could’ve helped,” Elliot growled at him, his gaze growing darker and angrier. “You didn’t need to do this alone.”

“I realize that now, and I’m sorry.” Rocco’s apology sounded genuine to me.

“We’ve been worried about you,” Tea countered. “And this entire time, we didn’t need to worry?”

I couldn’t let them assume the worst.

Side-stepping Rocco’s grip (and wrestling his arm a bit), I stopped beside him. “Rocco has been trying to convince Oscar—who goes by Ryder now—to come out and tell people ever since his mate rejected him. Ryder is the one who didn’t want people to know. And for the record, Rocco was still struggling. Ryder is still dying, and it’s still horrible. You can be hurt that you didn’t know, but that doesn’t mean you get to reduce Rocco’s pain because of it.”

Male eyes dipped to my bare legs—and probably my tits too.

Rocco snarled, his arms locking around me so he could drag me back behind him. “I’m sorry,” he growled at his friends. “But I’ve got to go before my wolf tries to rip your damned throats out.”

The door slammed in their faces.

Rocco released me, his chest heaving as he crashed into the door, his forehead pressed to the wood.

I wasn’t sure whether to give him space, or try to worm my way into his arms so he knew he wasn’t completely alone.

But as someone who sometimes preferred being alone, I felt like my judgment on the matter was probably at least somewhat decent. Since I would’ve rather had someone hug me and tell me they were there than stand by silently, I slipped between Rocco and the door, and wrapped my arms around his waist.

He crushed me to his chest, holding me tightly while he breathed hard.

“Do you want me to make a joke, or be serious right now?” I whispered into his shoulder.

“Joke,” he growled back, his hands on my body as he held me tightly against him.

“At least you didn’t pee all over me to mark me as yours,” I said into his shoulder.

He snorted, his chest rumbling with a bit of silent laughter as he held me. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“If I was cold, maybe. In all other situations, I prefer not to be soaked in piss.”

He barked out a laugh. “Damn, you’re cute.”

“That’s exactly the right response when imagining me soaked in your urine,” I drawled back.

Another rumbly laugh escaped him, and he lifted me up off the ground without releasing his hold on me. “Come on, we’ve got to get you in the shower.”

With that, he hauled me up the stairs.

My head was buried against his chest, my body so comfortable I may as well have melted against him, and I didn’t protest his carrying me for one damned second.

After setting me down on my feet, he turned toward the shower/tub combo and twisted the handle, starting the water.

“You can shower first.” His hand rubbed my arm. I wasn’t sure whether the gesture was meant to calm him or me, though I would’ve put money on it being for him, whether he realized it or not.

He had said before that I was driven to spend time with him and touch him, while he was driven to protect me and feed me. In that moment, he seemed like he needed me.

“Shower with me,” I blurted.

Shit, maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

It was too late to take it back, though.

“Platonically,” I clarified. “We would both wash ourselves, and keep our hands to ourselves, but would be in there together.”

His eyes brightened so damned much I could actually see his happiness. “Are you sure?”

“Yep.” I bobbed my head.

His lips parted in a grin. “Alright, let’s do it.”

He was so damned excited that I wondered if I’d offered more than I realized. But, after mentally running over my offer, I was forced to admit to myself that I hadn’t. Rocco was just really damn happy about showering with me, even without touching me or being touched by me.

We both stripped, and I tried not to stare at his erection, or his ass, as he tugged those pants down.

“Am I allowed to check you out, or is that not platonic enough?” he asked, kicking his jeans to the other side of the room.

My cheeks heated. “You can look, as long as you don’t touch.”

His grin widened. “You’re welcome to look and touch all you want.”

My face flushed further, but I rolled my eyes at him. “Shocker.”

He chuckled, tugging the shower curtain to the side. I felt his eyes on my back as I stepped into the shower in front of him, and couldn’t help the goosebumps that broke out on my whole damned body as he stepped in behind me, our skin only a breath away from touching.

Grabbing my shower gel, I kept myself occupied by scrubbing my body. My eyes kept drifting to Rocco, and I caught myself watching him wash himself too.

It sounds so much dirtier than it was, but... yeah, he was gorgeous, and something about watching him wash all those damned perfect muscles was incredibly sexy.

He'd inhale deeply every minute or two, and I'd look away as I knew he caught the scent of my arousal. He didn't mention it—though I could sure as hell smell his too.

We were a hot freakin' mess, and I didn't hate it.

Not at all.

We didn't say much until we got out, both of us insanely hot and bothered but neither of us pointing that out. After we dried off, we grabbed clothes—him a pair of basketball shorts, and me one of his shirts that I'd confiscated—and then collapsed into our separate beds.

Well, he collapsed on the couch, but never tried to push me into sharing the bed or anything.

Despite Rocco's attraction to me, he respected me. I didn't doubt that for a damned second, and it made me feel good. Really good.

WHEN THE MORNING CAME AROUND, Rocco's alarm went off, and we stumbled out of bed together.

He pulled on some nice jeans and buttoned up one of his nice shirts before rolling the sleeves up a bit. He was so ridiculously sexy that it almost annoyed me.

Almost.

But then he flashed me a sleepy grin, and my annoyance disappeared.

I tugged on my one pair of old leggings and the nicest shirt I had—which really wasn't very nice at all. Honestly, I didn't own a damned dressy thing.

“We'll have to go to a clothing store after work,” I mumbled to him, rubbing my eyes with one hand as I tugged my hair out of the neckline of my shirt with the other.

“You look perfect,” he countered.

I rolled my eyes, following him to the bathroom. “This is the only almost-dressy thing I possess, which you know.”

He flashed me a guilty grin. “We’re not crazy strict about looking professional.”

“Rocco,” I shot back. “Do you know what happens if I walk into a room full of horny teenage boys, all of which are virgins, and none of which have girlfriends, dressed in my typical clothing?”

His grin faded to a near-glare, his eyes darkening.

I nodded. “Yeah. We’re going to the store after work.”

He jerked his head in a nod.

We brushed our teeth, and he threw some gel in his hair while I put mine up in a bun, not bothering with makeup or anything like that. I didn’t want to encourage the teenagers, or stress Rocco out, after all.

He was still stiff and looked a bit stressed as we headed down the stairs, so I wrapped my hand around his bicep, holding on to him loosely as we descended. Rocco relaxed a bit when we were in contact like that, so I followed him to the fridge and told him which ingredients to grab out for the loaded scrambled eggs we were making.

I finally released him as I threw my bag together, getting ready for a day of sitting in a room with absolutely nothing to do but stare—either at my computer, or at Rocco.

And the latter was far nicer to look at than the former.

TWENTY-ONE



THE DAY WAS EVEN LONGER than I'd expected.

Rocco only growled a couple of times—much to the entertainment of the classes, some of which tried to get a rise out of him by staring at me.

We ate lunch together at his desk, our feet tangled a bit while we downed far too many sandwiches and snacks together.

The afternoon crept by even slower than the morning had, and I found myself wandering YouTube with a headphone in my ear, and only a fraction of my attention on Rocco. He was giving the same lesson he'd already given five times, and I was pretty damn bored of it, despite the passion he clearly had for the subject.

Somehow, I ended up listening to some indie musicians I'd never heard before. I found myself tapping my foot to the beat, thinking about how I would change a few of the songs a bit if I were them, and how I had already changed some others when I'd put my own twist on them for classes I'd taken.

The musicians were good—but I was too. I felt a bit awkward admitting it, but I knew my music wasn't awful.

I'd been focused on saving my music for my career, but why not stick it on the internet and see what happened?

I was uploading my first video when Rocco came over to me, leaning over the desk to watch what I was doing. His chest brushed the back of my shoulder, his head resting comfortably against mine.

“What?” I asked him, glancing over at the classroom. It was empty. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Can I listen?”

My face heated a bit, but I handed him the second earbud. He tucked it into his ear as I watched the video I’d put together, making sure it turned out as well as I’d thought.

He nodded his head a bit as we listened, his arm draping over my other shoulder and wrapping around the top of my chest as if he was giving me a bit of a hug.

I loved it.

“Damn,” he whistled, as the song ended and I hit the button to confirm the video.

My face heated. “Bad damn, or good damn?”

“Definitely good. You’re incredible, Mads.”

“Thanks.” I bit my lip, shutting my laptop. He released his hold on me, stepping back to give me a bit of space. I cleaned my stuff up in two seconds, and then stood up while he grabbed his bag off the ground beside where my feet had been sitting.

“You’ve got to be starving. Want to stop for food?” he checked.

“The answer to food is always yes.” I pointed toward the door.

He flashed me a grin, and we headed out together.

WE FELL INTO A PATTERN, after that.

Work, food, work, food. My YouTube page didn’t explode, but it did slowly start to make me money, which I definitely wasn’t going to complain about.

Three months passed quickly, and I was making more on YouTube than Rocco was as a teacher. He was so damned proud of that fact that I couldn’t help but be proud too.

It didn’t make me feel alive, like running as a wolf did, but it was fun, and it felt good to be getting something out of all the

music I'd spent so much time creating in college.

Christmas break came in hot, and the pack split up to go spend the holiday with their families. They'd gotten over Rocco's lies, and had admitted that he had been in an impossible situation with his brother.

We spent the majority of Christmas day with Rocco's family, and it wasn't awkward at all. They all knew my situation with my family, and June (who video chatted with me for a few minutes to say merry Christmas from some country whose name I couldn't pronounce).

Ryder's mood was just as dark as it had always been, and he was just as quiet as he had always been too. When we left, Rocco was grimacing, and I put my hand on his leg as we drove away in an attempt to make him feel a little better.

"It's not your fault that she rejected him," I told Rocco quietly.

"I know. I just hate that there's nothing I can do to help," he said, frustrated.

"You help by being there, and looking at him the same despite what happened. Most people in town act like he's a damned pariah," I reminded him.

Rocco's mood only darkened. "I hate that."

"I know. But..." I trailed off, not sure what I could say to make him feel better. "Alright, there's no good response here. But you know I'm not going anywhere, right?"

He flashed me a ghost of a smile. "I know." His hand landed on mine, still on his thigh, and squeezed it lightly.

We didn't trade, "I love you's, though I was fairly confident that we did love each other.

We had never so much as broached the topic of a physical relationship since the time we'd made out, sticking with the platonic mating I'd wanted when we met.

I... wasn't sure I still wanted that.

In fact, I was pretty sure I wanted to be un-platonic mates with him.

But I also didn't want to risk screwing things up between us, which put me in an impossible position, because I wasn't a risk taker.

So once again, I didn't bring up my feelings for him, and he didn't bring up his feelings for me. And instead, we talked about how good the food his mom made had been, and how entertaining the white elephant gift exchange was.

Rocco parked the truck in the garage, and we headed into the house together. He carried the bag of presents we'd won, and the gift cards his parents had given us.

We hadn't exchanged gifts before heading over that morning, so I headed to the tree, crouching down and grabbing the small, wrapped rectangular box that held my gift for him. I'd spent hours debating how to buy a present that wouldn't be too intimate, or not intimate enough, for our currently-platonic relationship, and then settled on a silly gift when I couldn't come up with anything.

Rocco grabbed his own large box for me from under the tree, and we both dropped to the couch together.

"You first," I said, handing him the box.

He set his down with a grin, taking the rectangular present and ripping the paper off. I bit my lip as he revealed the glasses-case.

His grin widened as he opened the case up, and his laughter boomed through the room as he pulled out the non-prescription glasses.

"Perfect," he declared, still grinning widely.

"Now you can be the nerdy teacher you're supposed to be," I pointed out, still biting back a full-out grin of my own.

He slipped them onto his face and pursed his lips toward me.

I busted up with laughter, and he laughed with me, pulling me in for a massive hug. We hugged each other a bit longer than we should've, before Rocco cleared his throat and released me.

“You’re up next,” he told me, still grinning and wearing those damned glasses as he handed me my own present.

Somehow, he was even sexier with the freakin’ glasses on.

“This better not be a whoopee cushion,” I warned, tearing the wrapping paper off.

“It’s not.” His grin had widened though.

I wrestled the big box open, and blinked.

Sitting inside it, was a small, square box.

My lips parted a bit, and I looked back up at Rocco, without picking up the box.

He lifted his hands up by his head. “It’s for both of us.”

My fingers shook a bit as I reached in and grabbed the fancy black box. It took me a minute, but I managed to open the smaller one up.

And then I blinked at it, shock tearing through me.

A ring.

It was a damned diamond ring.

And not just a simple band with a single sparkling gemstone in the center; the sides were intricate, looking almost like lace, and there was a gorgeous frame encircling the diamond.

“Shit,” I whispered, staring at it.

It was the prettiest piece of jewelry I’d ever seen.

“We can send it back if you don’t like it, and pick out a different one,” Rocco said quickly. “I made it online. It was surprisingly easy, and—”

“Shut up,” I whispered, dropping the box and throwing my body at Rocco’s. He caught me easily, holding me up as I pressed my lips to his.

Though I’d caught him off guard with the kiss, his lips weren’t hesitant against mine. Our mouths moved together, our tongues finding each other the way they had the first time we’d made out, months ago.

Time had passed, but neither of us had forgotten.

His hands were hot on my hips, holding my core to his erection as he groaned into my mouth.

When his teeth scraped my lip, I froze.

He paused.

A shudder tore through me, as my wolf surged forward.

“Shit,” I whispered, wrenching my lips away from Rocco’s as I jerked away from him, trying to give my wolf space to shift so she wouldn’t hurt him.

He realized what was happening, and his eyes gleamed.

His glasses went back into the case, and he tossed them to the other side of the couch as he stripped his shirt over his head.

I cried out as my spine cracked, but gave my wolf all the control, so we could get it over with as quickly as possible.

My body contorted, and my wolf emerged.

Rocco’s shoes and pants landed on the floor beside his shirt, and he sprawled out over the couch. “I’m all yours,” he promised my wolf.

She gave a growl of agreement, studying him. Though I couldn’t read her mind, I would’ve put money on her contemplating which gorgeous part of him to leave her mark on.

Her eyes finally settled on his inner thigh, concealed by his boxer-briefs, but the exact same place his wolf had marked me.

And then, she lunged.

TWENTY-TWO



ROCCO'S HANDS stroked my back and hair while I shifted back, panting and groaning at the pain. It would be a long while before I was used to the assload of pain that accompanied shifting.

“Almost there,” he murmured to me, as the last wave of painful cracks and breaks rolled through me.

My body settled, and I panted against his chest, in his arms.

His arms cradled me to him, his body hot and hard against mine.

My clothes had torn during the shift to wolf form, so I was bare-assed, and he was pretty close to that too.

“How bad is the pain?” I whispered, my eyes closed and my face buried against his neck.

“No pain.” He continued rubbing my bare back. “Just a whole damn lot of gratitude.”

My face warmed a bit, and I said into his neck, “Asshole. You bought me a ring.”

His laugh made my lips curve up in a grin too. “I want people to know you’re taken when they meet you.”

“Ah, so the possessiveness drove you to it,” I said, feigning solemnness as I nodded against his neck. “Good to know.”

A flood of heat rolled through my body, and I arched against him, moaning.

Rocco groaned. “That would be the climax.”

“Shit.” I wriggled off his lap, and though he let go of me, his eyes raked my body while I stepped away.

We’d seen each other naked plenty of times in the past few months, considering we showered together every day, but he’d never looked at me like *that*.

And hot damn, I liked it.

“Shit,” I ground out again, fighting the urge to jump him.

His eyes closed, his jaw clenching as his erection throbbed visibly. “You’re so damned sexy,” he ground out.

“I’ll grab clothes. I need clothes,” I blurted, stumbling toward the stairs.

Rocco’s footsteps were on the stairs behind me as I rushed upward, shutting the bedroom door and locking it behind me.

His head thudded against it, and his groan through the door was enough to have me slipping my hands between my thighs.

There was a cracking noise, and then the door crashed open before I could grab the clothes I’d gone in for.

Rocco stared at me, his eyes dark as they swept over my body.

Every piece of me ached.

Rocco’s hand was wrapped around his erection, over his underwear, and I tried not to drool as he pumped himself a few times.

Shit—hell.

“Platonically,” I panted. “We could fuck—platonically.”

“No,” he growled back.

I groaned. “Rocco.”

“Mads,” he shot back. “We both know this isn’t platonic. If we ride out the damned climax together, we’re not doing it as friends. We’re doing it as damned mates—and we’re going to keep doing it after the climax ends.”

Shit.

I wished I didn’t like the sound of that so much.

My body ached so badly that my mind spun, though, my thoughts not functioning properly.

“This is insane,” I moaned.

“Agreed,” he growled.

“This is not good.” My fingers slipped between my thighs again. “Hands—we could use our hands on each other and call it platonic.”

“Why are you so damned set on staying platonic?” Rocco stalked across the room, stripping his boxer-briefs off and dropping them to the ground. I could see that his erection was dripping, and couldn’t help but moan and writhe a bit.

“I don’t know. I lose everyone,” I panted, rubbing myself harder.

It wasn’t working—it wasn’t even building up the pressure there.

I needed Rocco—I needed *him*.

“You’re never going to lose me.” He dropped into bed beside me, rolling toward me. His arm was on my shoulder, though his erection didn’t touch me.

“Why do you call me Mads?” I blurted, knowing I’d never asked him and trying to distract myself in any way I could.

“Because you drive me fucking *mad*,” he groaned back, his lips crashing into mine as if he couldn’t help himself. I kissed him back, desperately, while our hands remained on our own bodies. He ripped his lips away long enough to breathe, “With need, and happiness, and so damned much joy I don’t have the words to explain it. You drive me mad, and I love every damned second of it.”

A moan escaped me as our mouths moved together, and I pulled away a few minutes later, trying hard not to throw my leg over his hip and figure out how to get him inside me. “Hands only,” I finally panted. “I can’t make a decision like this while under the horny influence. We use our hands—and no matter my decision after the climax is over, we’ll keep doing that. Helping each other out.”

He groaned, his lips finding my throat. “You’re fucking killing me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” My head tilted back as his lips moved down my throat.

“Lips too—let me use my mouth on you too,” he growled, between sucks and bites on my neck.

“Okay,” I panted. “You can touch me, and taste me. And I’ll ___”

His lips latched onto my breast, and I cried out as I arched upward. Rocco’s fingers tugged mine off my core and took their place, rubbing me lightly.

The pressure was too intense. I shattered with a cry, coming all over his fingers.

A ferocious growl escaped him, and his lips left my tits, sliding down my abdomen as I lost it. There was no time for me to come down from the high—his lips were sucking on my clit a second later, my legs parted and over his shoulders.

I screamed as another orgasm ripped through me, the pleasure so intense I lost all control of my body.

Rocco snarled into me as he lost it, and I arched into his face as he continued to work my core with his lips, teeth, and tongue.

Shit, he was perfect.

So damned fucking perfect.

“Rocco,” I panted.

He growled into my core in response, his tongue still moving brutally over me while his finger slid inside me, making me buck against him.

“I think I’m in love with you,” I cried out, as his teeth scraped over my core.

“I’ve been in love with you since the moment you held my wolf and told me you weren’t going anywhere,” he snarled back, his lips and teeth brushing my most sensitive parts as he

spoke. “We’ll talk about it again when the climax is over, and you’re wearing my damned ring.”

He sucked on my clit, and the heat of the last part of the mating process tightened its hold on me. I shattered so hard I nearly blacked out, his finger pressing into the most pleasurable spot inside me as he dragged out my pleasure longer than I’d even known was possible.

“Put your cock in my hand,” I moaned as the pleasure faded enough for me to speak.

He didn’t waste a damn second, teaching me how to touch him. Rocco lost it in my hand seconds later, and as he snarled into me again, we lost ourselves to the pleasure of both of our bodies.

TWENTY-THREE



THE NEXT WEEK WAS INTENSE, to say the least.

We could both feel it when the majority of the climax's effect wore off, but the need didn't disappear completely. Even as I stripped the sheets and blankets off our bed and threw them into the washing machine, my body ached with need, my core throbbing.

"Dammit," Rocco mumbled, stumbling down the stairs behind me. His lips brushed my collarbone as his body rubbed against mine. We were supposed to go back to school that day—and we'd assumed we would be fine. Plus, our pack mates had let everyone know that we were riding out the climax, not resisting it, so we were expected back.

But that horniness... hell, it had only budged a little bit.

"I thought it was supposed to be over," I told Rocco, letting a slow breath of air out through my clenched jaw.

"It is. But we didn't actually fuck," he nibbled on my shoulder a bit, rubbing his erection against my ass. "I don't see any other reason for it to continue."

"Dammit." I leaned my head back against his shoulder. His hand slid into the front of my shorts—the only damn thing I'd bothered to put on—and we groaned together. "We'll go one more time, and then you'll leave me here. The distance will help. Hopefully."

He growled at me, his teeth scraping my earlobe. "I'm not leaving you."

“You can call me whenever,” I panted back. “And come home for lunch. And your free period.”

“You’ll be waiting naked?” His voice was still low and gravelly, his fingers playing with me the way he knew made me crazy.

“Hell yes.”

His fingers undid the button on his jeans rapidly, and his cock slid between my ass cheeks as he dragged me over to the stairs.

We groaned together as he sat me on his lap, his erection throbbing against my butt while he worked me with one finger, slipping another one inside me. He had me shattering so damned fast it was almost embarrassing.

But then he sucked my taste from his fingers while I rubbed him off, and the almost-embarrassment faded to prideful pleasure as he lost control with me in his mouth and my hand on his cock.

He set me down on the stairs and stumbled over to the sink, grabbing a rag. After he cleaned us both, he tossed the rag back into the sink and tugged his pants up those gorgeous thighs of his.

“I’m coming home if I can’t focus,” he warned. “Not giving the students an eyeful of my boner.”

“Better fucking not,” I growled back, my wolf rising a bit at the thought.

He was *mine*.

“I don’t want to go to jail, Mads.” He flashed me a bit of a grin as he grabbed his keys off the counter. Guess we’d left them there after Christmas.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” I warned him. “And don’t take care of your own need.”

I didn’t want to say it out loud, but I felt like that was my job—like his pleasure belonged to me.

His eyes flashed. “Touch yourself while I’m gone and I’ll tie you to the bed for a week when I’m back.”

Damn, I loved it when he got possessive.

And I guess we felt the same about each other’s pleasure.

“I won’t,” I promised.

“Good.” He grabbed his bag. “Dammit, I should never have gotten a job,” he grumbled, heading toward the garage. “Text me if you need me for anything. Even if you’re just desperately horny. I can get a sub in, if I make a few calls.”

“I’ll be fine.” I shooed him toward the door. “Go.”

He sighed heavily, then strode back over to me, crouched in front of me, and kissed me hard. After squeezing my boob, he stood up and disappeared into the garage.

The house suddenly felt quiet and empty without him.

I waited until I heard the garage close after he drove away to get up.

My body wasn’t sore—my new werewolf healing took care of that, I guess. But I was exhausted.

The horniness did fade mostly, though, with Rocco gone. That was good. At least, I tried to convince myself it was good.

The sexathon that the climax was had been a damned blast, even without having actual penetrative sex.

I crashed to the couch, and winced when I realized I’d landed on two different hard, lumpy items.

Pulling Rocco’s new glasses out from beneath my lower back, I didn’t fight a smile as I looked at them. They were cheesy, and silly, and maybe even stupid, but he’d loved them. And that made me feel good.

The next thing I pulled out from beneath my shoulder, was the ring.

I stared at the box for a long moment before opening it again. There was no question what Rocco had been trying to say when he gave it to me.

He didn't want us to be friends; he wanted us to be mates.

Husband and wife.

Or at least engaged.

I swallowed roughly as I stared at the gorgeous, sparkly gemstone. I'd never seen myself as a traditional diamond ring kind of girl, assuming that if I ever got married, I'd get a colored gemstone or something.

But looking at the intricate silver ring, which didn't look traditional at all, my throat swelled.

It was absolutely perfect.

I still didn't put it on, though.

When I put the ring on, things would change between us. Permanently.

We wouldn't be platonic mates—we'd be mates, with a solid connection, completely committed to each other, and completely in love.

And engaged.

I brushed my finger over the bumpy side of the ring.

Did I want to be in a committed relationship?

The goosebumps that traveled down my bare arms, legs, and tits told me that the answer to that question was a solid, definite yes.

So what was I afraid of?

That Rocco would change his mind when I stopped putting the platonic wall between us?

Why the hell would he do that?

It wasn't like we'd been playing a game, or flirting a lot. We'd been friends; really, really good friends.

Having actual sex and wearing rings wouldn't change that.

We'd still have to put in effort to put each other first. We'd still have to focus on spending time together, and making our relationship a priority.

And we'd still have to have fun together—an assload of fun.

What was so bad about that?

Nothing, I realized.

Nothing was bad about that at all.

I wanted Rocco to be mine permanently, and he wanted me to be his, so... why bother dancing around the idea?

Why not just say the vows and commit to each other, with our complete hearts and souls?

Our wolves were soulmates; why wouldn't we be just as perfect for each other as they were?

So I carefully pulled the ring out of the box, and slipped it onto my finger.

Marriage was about commitment; about being loyal, and making decisions together, and worrying about us as a whole rather than individuals.

I could do that; I could freakin' rock that.

And I was going to.

As soon as I convinced Rocco to marry me.

There probably wouldn't be a whole lot of convincing involved, but if there was, I was positive I could handle it. He loved me, after all. And I loved him too.

And what else mattered?

I grabbed Rocco's cash envelope off the top of the fridge, leafing through to determine our budget. I wasn't going to go crazy on anything—I really wasn't a big party kind of girl—but I wanted to make it something Rocco and I would like to remember.

Grabbing my phone, I pulled up the number for the nearest dress shop and lifted the device to my ear.

TWENTY-FOUR



“THAT DRESS IS NOT DOING you any favors,” Ebony remarked.

“It makes me look wide,” I complained, smoothing my hand over my hips and abdomen.

“Or pregnant,” Tea countered, wearing a shit-eating grin.

I snorted. “Not a damned chance.”

I did study her abdomen, though.

“Not me.” She shook her head emphatically. “This baby box is locked until I’ve got my nursing degree in my hand and plenty of savings in the bank. Jesse is well aware of those requirements.

We both looked at Ebony.

“Nope.” She shook her head just as hard as Tea had, gesturing toward Teagan. “We’re in the same boat as them.”

“Considering that you’re skinnier than both of us combined, I don’t think this is the dress,” Tea drawled.

On that, all three of us agreed.

I shuffled back into the dressing room, and the stylist helped me into another one. So far, there had been four duds, and I was losing hope fast. Especially since I was running out of time to meet Rocco back home.

For a last-minute wedding, I didn’t have many dress options, either, so it wasn’t like I could traverse the whole damned store and pick anything I wanted.

Luckily enough, Tea and Ebony didn't go back to school for another week, and they were so damned enthusiastic about helping me with the wedding that they made it much more doable.

The stylist zipped me into the dress, and for a moment, I just stared at myself.

The top was a sweetheart-shaped corset, made of gorgeous white lace that almost looked see-through thanks to the nude fabric beneath it. The bottom was made of thick chiffon, a tiny bit see-through, but not enough to show the goods.

And it was absolutely the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen.

"Shit," I whispered.

The stylist flashed me a smile. "It's beautiful."

I thought "beautiful" was an understatement, but nodded.

She helped me out of the room, and I strode back out to the stand where the other girls were waiting.

"Damn," Tea whistled.

"That's gorgeous," Ebony admitted.

We all stared.

I didn't feel my eyes water; I wasn't really the girl who cried over a wedding dress.

But damn, it was perfect.

"This is it," I said.

Both women nodded.

"Want us to facetime June?" Ebony checked.

I nodded, biting my lip as she pulled my phone out of the bag I'd left with them, and hit the button.

June picked up on almost the last ring. "Hey, Delly—fuck, is that a wedding dress?" Her cheerful greeting turned into a yelled demand when she saw me.

"Yes?" I shrugged a little, trying not to cringe as I held up my ringed-hand. "I'm marrying my hot roommate."

Roommate seemed like a better word than mate, still. When it came to June, at least.

“When?” she demanded.

“Tonight?” I bit my lip, trying not to freak her out.

Honestly, I was so damned excited I could hardly take it.

And Rocco was going to be so freaking happy, it was perfect.

Her lips rounded. “You’ve lost your damned mind. I’m getting on a plane right now. Don’t even think about starting without having an in-person conversation with me about this.”

Shit.

“He’s a werewolf,” I admitted to her.

She blinked.

“Remember the video Ebony showed us? Werewolves are real. They have soulmates—and I’m his soulmate. I have been this whole time, I just didn’t want to freak you out. You don’t need to worry about me,” I explained quickly.

“I most definitely *do* need to worry about you,” she yelled. “I’m hanging up now, to change my damned flight. Don’t even fucking think about getting married without me there!”

With that, she hung up.

“That went well,” Tea drawled.

Ebony grinned. “So well.”

I laughed. “It’s fine. June’s not going to change my mind; Rocco’s going to be damned excited.”

“He is,” Tea agreed. “Maybe I should talk to Jesse about a wedding too...”

“I was just thinking the same thing about Ford,” Ebony admitted.

Both of them stared a bit too long at the dress I had on.

“Alright, I’ve got to get home. Can I pay with cash?” I asked the stylist, who was waiting beside us.

She agreed, and I headed back to the changing room to throw my clothes on quickly.

After I'd paid, I left the dress with Tea and Ebony, who were headed out to grab the flowers I'd already ordered online. The rental company was already setting up for the ceremony in the forest, where Rocco and I had shifted together the first time, and his mother was supervising.

Ozzy and Ryder were picking up the desserts I'd ordered, including a cake of course, and the materials for the dance floor too.

It was going to be so damned perfect.

...As soon as I got Rocco to agree.

I walked in the door and just barely had time to throw my shoes and bag up to the top of the stairs, followed by my clothes.

Rocco walked in the door as I draped my naked body over the couch, making a not-sexy face at him and earning a grin and a booming laugh.

Whatever remaining magical-shit there was to the climax kicked back into gear. "I want us to be romantic mates," I blurted to Rocco, as he unbuttoned his shirt.

His eyes brightened. "You sure about that?"

"Yes." I nodded. "My mind cleared when you were at work, and I made my decision. This is all yours." I swept my hand up and down my body.

He grinned so massively that it actually made my heartbeat pick up.

He had me in his arms a moment later and was carrying me up the stairs, his lips on my tit.

"I'm calling in sick for the rest of the day," he told me, as I buried my fingers into his hair.

"Do it."

"Give me a minute." His phone was in his hand, and he was growling into it a minute later.

“A week,” I told him, fighting a grin. “Take a week off.”

His eyes may as well have burned into my damned body as he told them he was going to be sick for the next week at least.

As soon as the call ended, his phone hit the ground, and he was positioned over me.

His lips captured mine, and my body arched up into his. His fingers worked my breasts and core, making sure I was dripping and desperate before he finally lined his erection up with my opening.

I rolled myself on top of him and slowly sank onto his core. We were both panting, and sweating, and swearing as he slid inside me, stretching me in so damn many good ways that it about made me see stars.

“Fuck, Mads,” he groaned, his teeth and lips still working desperately on my nipple.

“We are,” I moaned back, moving my hips just a little.

The pleasure was growing rapidly, my body desperate to lose it.

“I’m not going to last,” he growled at me, holding my hips still to stop me from moving anymore.

“I’m not either.”

His snarl as I rocked my hips again was enough to tell me that he’d lost control—and then we shattered together.

I cried out while he bit my breast, flooding my body with the warm heat of his pleasure.

The bliss of the moment had me collapsing in his arms, my chest heaving as I caught my breath. His was too, but he held me so tightly that we both struggled to breathe.

“That was so fucking incredible,” Rocco growled. “I love you, Mads.”

“I love you too,” I whispered, my eyes stinging a bit. I wasn’t sure why they were stinging, but the moment was really damned perfect. “We’re getting married, Rocco.”

There was a moment's pause, and then he wrenched my hand up off his chest, and stared at the ring on my finger. "I was supposed to put this on you," he grumbled at me, kissing the ring and then the back of my palm.

"You can ask. But... I planned a wedding. Sort of. I want you to marry me tonight. I want us to be official in every way—committed, completely. Then I won't worry that you'll change your mind, or that I'll want to be platonic again, or—"

He had me on my back in a heartbeat, his gaze somewhere between shocked and proud. "Even if it was possible for me to change my mind, I wouldn't. You're it for me, Mads. Everything for me. To me. Fuck grammar—fuck everything. Be my wife."

I nodded.

"Say the damned words," he growled.

"I'll marry you," I agreed, fighting a smile.

He shot me a blinding grin before taking my lips in a brutal kiss. "Good," he growled against my lips. "Now open your legs. I want to fuck you again before we have to go out in public."

I laughed. "Was that an order?" I teased him.

"A firm request." He nuzzled my neck, nibbling on the skin.

"I firmly request that we have sex at least *two* more times before we go out in public, then," I shot back.

"Request granted." He grabbed my thigh, moving it enough to give him the space he needed to sink inside me. Our lips melded together as our bodies became one, and everything in the damned world was perfect.

TWENTY-FIVE



WE STAYED in bed a bit longer before consuming far more food than any human could imagine. Then we showered, and headed out.

I did my makeup on my own while Rocco headed out to find his tux—which Zed was holding on to for him. We were planning on meeting at the wedding, since he wasn't supposed to see me in the dress and whatnot.

My hair went up in a messy bun, and I didn't bother with a veil, since I wasn't all that traditional.

The other girls arrived with my dress as I finished up, and they helped me into the thing while quickly doing their own makeup. We weren't bothering with bridesmaids or groomsmen, since the wedding would be tiny and intimate, and I didn't really care about that stuff. No one seemed offended about that, luckily.

We arrived in the forest just on time, and parked in the space Ozzy gestured us toward. He grinned at me, offering his arm as Tea and Ebony helped me out of the car.

"This is crazy," I whispered to them.

"It's perfect," Tea told me, beaming at me.

Her grin was contagious, and I couldn't hold back my own smile.

"You wanted an instant-husband," Ebony reminded me, grinning just as widely as Teagan. "We'll be on June watch.

Just enjoy the ceremony.” She and Tea left me with Ozzy, heading down the aisle before me.

My fingers landed in Ozzy’s elbow as I stared into the forest. Anxiety and excitement warred in my chest. I hoped Rocco grinned at me when he saw me—I hoped he was as happy about it as I was.

“Maybe I should’ve planned this out more,” I whispered to Ozzy.

He chuckled, still grinning. “The best moments in life aren’t the ones you plan, Del.”

I didn’t think truer words had ever been spoken.

“Thanks for doing this,” I told him, as the song came on that cued our walk.

“It’s a privilege to walk my only daughter down the aisle,” he told me, his grin fading to a genuine smile.

I returned the smile, and off we went.

TWENTY-SIX



EVERYTHING HAPPENED PERFECTLY.

Rocco smiled when he saw me—the biggest, teariest-eyed grin I'd ever seen from him.

He swept me into his arms when I reached him, and planted a kiss on my lips long before the preacher said we could kiss.

Laughter went through the crowd, and I turned to look out at everyone just as June arrived.

Tea grabbed her and yanked her into the empty seat between her and Ebony. Their men sat in front of them, and didn't seem annoyed by the distance between them. I supposed they'd been told to deal with it.

June didn't look happy at all, but Tea and Ebony spoke rapidly to her. I trusted them to prevent her from causing a scene, and focused on Rocco as we promised each other our hearts.

In sickness and health...

In pleasure and pain...

In love, and loss...

In sadness and joy...

We would be there for each other, no matter what the future held for us.

We would be a *team*.

That was what both marriage and mating were about, wasn't it? Working together? Seeing things from each other's point of

view?

Rocco and I would make decisions together, and do what was best for *both* of us. It would take us time to figure that out exactly, but we'd get there.

Of that, I had no doubt.

He kissed me again when he was told to, and cheers went through the crowd. Afterward, we slipped away with everyone else to the area that had been turned into a foresty dance club.

The night passed by in a blur of hugs, congratulations, dancing, and delicious desserts (which Rocco shoved into my mouth every time he thought I might be even slightly hungry).

June sat at a table at the back of the room, looking somewhere between pissed and disappointed.

As the party came to an end, I finally slipped away from Rocco long enough to sit beside her for a moment.

"Hey, Jay," I said, leaning back in my chair.

"Aren't you the picture of bridal bliss?" she drawled.

I smacked her lightly on the arm. "How drunk are you?"

"Not drunk. If I drink, I won't be able to make an escape." She shook her keys toward me. "I've been downing root beer like an alcoholic, though. Who has root beer at a wedding?"

I shrugged. "People who can't get drunk on alcohol?"

She sighed, brushing a chunk of her long, red hair out of her eyes. "This was a mistake, Delly."

"Maybe. Maybe not." I shrugged lightly. "Either way, I'm happy. And that's what matters to me."

Her expression darkened. "What does it feel like? The happiness?"

My slight smile faded, and I studied her. "Are you okay?"

"No," she said honestly.

Then chugged her entire glass of root beer, making a face after she drank it. "Seriously, this is not wedding appropriate shit." She lifted the glass, shaking it toward me.

“Why don’t I get you something more appropriate, then?” a male voice drawled behind her.

Her back stiffened. “Do I need to grab my pepper spray, Delly?”

I glanced back at Zed with a grin. “Nah. Zed’s probably on board with you when it comes to the wedding-appropriate drinks.”

He dropped into the chair next to June, setting a bottle of red wine beside her. “You won’t regret drinking this.” He nodded toward it, not bothering to look over at her. Him and the other guys were pretty much professional at not developing feelings for whatever women they came into contact with randomly.

“I will when I can’t make my escape,” she drawled back, jingling her keys toward him. “I’ve got a plane to catch when this shitshow ends.”

“Jay,” I warned, leaning toward her. “You might not approve, but this is still my wedding. Don’t be a bitch.”

She sighed, and held a hand toward Zed. “Give me the wine.”

“Nope. It’s mine now.” He lifted it to his lips, tilting the bottle back.

“Asshole,” she muttered, spinning to glare at him.

Their eyes met.

The bottle dropped back to the table as his eyes shifted to red.

“Shit,” I mumbled, turning to find Rocco.

He was already approaching, and I saw Elliot and Dax right behind him.

“We’ve got it,” Rocco promised me, shooting me a grin as Zed rumbled,

“Mate.”

“Like fuck you do,” June hissed, standing swiftly. She dodged Zed’s transforming hand, turning and sprinting away.

Zed crashed to the ground as his wolf took over slowly.

“What do we do?” I asked Rocco, a bit panicked.

“Enjoy your night,” Elliot told me, flashing me a grin. “We’ll take care of it.”

He and Dax broke into a run, chasing June toward what I assumed was her car.

Zed finished shifting, and sprinted after her.

Rocco’s eyes met mine, and I couldn’t help it; I laughed.

He laughed with me, crashing into the chair beside mine and pulling me into his arms.

“It’s not a party unless someone finds their mate,” Tea said cheerfully, her and Jesse taking the chair next to mine.

“I guess not,” I said with another laugh. “She’s so screwed.”

“In so many ways,” Ebony said, flashing me a sultry smirk as she and Ford took their own chairs beside us.

Laughter went around the table—and the wine followed it.

It wouldn’t make us drunk, but it would take the edge off a bit.

“So where are we going for the next week?” Rocco asked me, his lips brushing my ear as he spoke.

I settled back against his chest, tugging his arm tighter around me. “I figured I’d let you make that decision.”

“Mmm.” He nodded, nibbling my ear a bit. “How about Hawaii? I’ve never been.”

“I haven’t either,” I admitted.

“Then it’s a date.” His lips brushed beneath my earlobe. “We’re going to eat an assload of ice cream and watch a shitload of movies when we’re back though, because I owe you a graduation celebration.”

I laughed. “Deal.”

His lips brushed my cheek, and then my ear again. “Let’s get out of here.”

I stood, and he swept me up into his arms.

Cheers went through the crowd that remained, Tea and Ebony hooting and hollering the loudest.

I flipped them off over my shoulder, grinning at them too, and they only cheered louder.

EPILOGUE

ROCCO



OUR HONEYMOON FLEW by in a rush of beautiful sights and blissful moments, and we came home a week later, tan and happier than ever.

I opened my email after we got back, checking to see if I'd gotten anything from work.

Del sat down beside me, opening up her own laptop next to me on the couch.

My eyes scanned the email. "Huh."

"Huh what?" she peered at my computer screen.

"The school's looking for another guidance counselor. One of them decided to quit to spend more time with her kids," I explained, still reading the email. "They're asking if we know anyone interested."

"Really?" Del leaned over me further. "What are the requirements?"

"Bachelor's degree." I shrugged.

"Give me that." She plucked my laptop off my lap, and quickly typed,

My mate is interested in the position.

She added her degree information, then handed my computer back.

"I didn't know you wanted to be a counselor," I said, glancing over at her with a bit of interest.

She shrugged. “I liked being an RA. It won’t be much different than that, and I’d like to keep busy for now. Until...” she trailed off, and shrugged.

“Until?” I prodded.

She blushed a bit. “Until we decide to have kids.”

I put my computer down, and turned to face her. “Is that something you’re considering?”

“Sometimes.” She shrugged, biting her lip.

I tugged her lip free, warning, “Mads.”

She sighed. “Alright, I think I’d like to have kids. Maybe soon. I don’t know.”

“You know.”

“Alright, fine. I think I’d love being a mom. We haven’t been using condoms, so I’ve already been thinking about it. If you could think about it, then—”

I dragged her into my lap and captured her lips in mine, kissing her thoroughly before pulling away. “I would love that,” I told her honestly. “I’d love to have kids whenever you’re ready.”

Her lips split in a small grin. “Really?”

“Hell yes.” I kissed her again, then leaned away. “I’ll warn you, though, it’s hard for werewolves to get pregnant. You have to line your cycle up with the wolf’s, and—”

“We’ll figure it out.” She kissed me, that time.

My hands were on her face, our mouths exploring one another.

I couldn’t help but think that there wasn’t a life more perfect than the one we were living.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

I LOVE Del and Rocco's story. Between Del's sass and their jokes, I had so much fun writing for them. They're a blast, and probably one of the most sweet, wholesome couples I've ever written for.

I can't wait to see where June's and Zed's story goes, too!
What a fun meeting, right?!

Anyway, thank you so much for reading!

All the love,

Lola Glass

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 :)