

LOLA GLASS

MATE  
HUNT  
FERAL PACK

✦ CAPTURED BY THE WOLF ✦

# **MATE HUNT: FERAL PACK**

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*To all of the werewolf books that inspired my obsession  
and all of the authors who created them*

# ONE



I WEDGED my butter knife in the top of the can of Spaghetti-O's, wrestling with the lid. It popped up in a not-so-glorious explosion of sauce that dotted my bare, pale belly.

*At least I was only wearing my bra and underwear.*

An awful round of coughing erupted in the room behind me, and I heaved a sigh.

Sometimes, life felt like a struggle.

I had a vampire roommate and best friend who'd been sick with the mate fever for long enough that we were too far behind on bills to ever recover.

And a fifteen-hour shift that started in a few hours, at the demon-run nightclub I was assigned to work in.

Plus Spaghetti-O's for lunch—a five-year-old's dream, but a grown-ass woman's nightmare.

No, things were not going great for me.

Then again, had they ever been great?

*No, they had not.*

I wiped the sauce off my abdomen and grabbed a fork before padding to my bedroom. Money for food was nonexistent, hence the canned pasta. I couldn't even heat it up, because our gas and electricity had been shut off a week ago... and my bank account currently had a balance of eight cents.

The eight cents had only stayed because the bank threatened to close the account if I withdrew them, and I needed the account to get paid.

Credit cards were a pipe dream. I didn't have any debt, because I'd never qualified for any. That was a small miracle, I supposed, because there was no

way I'd ever be able to pay back money after I borrowed it.

After setting my can of pasta down on the end of the bed, I tugged one of my four remaining work tank tops over my head (it smelled like french fries and cleaning spray, but oh well) and then grabbed my jean shorts. The outfit wasn't a uniform, but it was summertime and people paid more attention to me when I looked frumpy at the bar-slash-nightclub, so the shorts and tank top were pretty much required.

I'd just finished buttoning said shorts when golden flames burst to life around me.

My magic always manifested itself in flames—I was a demon after all—but these flames weren't on purpose. Or even on accident. They barely felt like my magic at all.

I felt the world shift, and then stumbled and crashed...

Right into what felt like a large, naked man-chest. Me and said man-chest hit the ground hard, and my chin bounced off a rock-like pectoral before my cheek glued itself to the muscle.

"Oof," I mumbled, as my flames retreated back into my skin.

If I were less shitty of a demon, I would've been able to control those things better.

But I wasn't.

And wow, whatever man I had landed on *most definitely* wasn't wearing pants.

"What the hell?" the guy beneath me growled.

Yeah, this could get awkward.

Was he human?

*Please, don't let him be human.*

I seemed to have been transported somewhere, and there was only one reason my weak-ass flames would've been able to transport me somewhere.

It wasn't a *good* reason.

Not at all.

"Don't freak out, but you're my fated mate," I told the guy, peeling my face off his chest.

*Damn, he was massive.*

"What?" His growled response was somewhere between shocked and not-thrilled.

*Same, dude.*

*Same.*



My fingers prodded his chest a little; I couldn't help myself. Those muscles were huge. How much time did he spend in the gym?

His skin was golden, and I could tell without asking that the color was from all the time he spent in the sun. Unlike me, he must've liked the outdoors.

Knowing I couldn't avoid his question any longer, I finally lifted my gaze off those damned pecs of his.

Our eyes collided—his were a deep, dark brown.

At least, they were a deep, dark brown for a split second.

And then they turned red.

There was only one kind of paranormal creature—which the magical society I was unfortunate enough to belong to called “mysticals” or “mysts”—with red eyes.

*Werewolves.*

They were the outcasts of our shitty world, and they weren't supposed to be compatible with the rest of us.

But my magic had transported me to him, which meant our souls were already connected. And if his eyes were turning red, it could only mean one thing.

His chest rumbled beneath mine, and he growled, “*Mate.*”

His bones cracked beneath me, and he rolled us both so his body was over the top of mine.

Yep, he was definitely naked.

*Definitely.*

Did I already say that?

I needed to get my mind out of the gorgeous, filthy, *naked* gutter, so I focused on my surroundings.

*Where the hell were we?*

His body arched and changed faster than I'd realized was possible for one of the cursed creatures—and then there was a wolf pinning me down instead of a person.

His fur was dark gray with lighter patches around his face, and my fingers itched to reach up and touch him. I ignored the shit out of that urge, though, and turned my head to look around.

I saw...

Trees.

To the other side?

More trees.

“What the hell just happened?” another male voice asked.

The wolf above me snarled in the newcomer’s direction.

“Who are you?” I called back.

“Nico. Who are *you*?”

One name?

Useful.

Really useful.

Most mysticals would give a first and last name, followed by their type and power level. Instead of announcing my shitty magic, I stuck with his one-word introduction.

“Morgan. Where are we?”

“Middle of the forest. *What* are you?”

I bit back a sigh as the wolf snarled at the other man, again.

Guess we weren’t beating around the bush as much as I thought.

I changed the subject again, knowing that demons always got a bad rap—and I was even shittier than most. “How do I get him back in his human form?”

“Let him bite you.” Nico answered my question, even though he still sounded suspicious.

I looked back at the wolf, and offered an arm. “Here, have a snack.”

He just growled at me in response.

Nico snorted. “It’s not going to work like that.”

I heaved a sigh.

The wolf was still positioned over me, with my back on the rocky dirt. My long, pale blonde hair was going to be covered in bugs after this, and there was nothing I hated as much as I hated bugs.

At the thought of bugs, I shivered, and my flames ignited themselves.

“Shit!” I exclaimed, shaking my head as I tried to chill the fire out before it toasted my clothes.

It was no use; the damn flames made themselves known when I was worried, tired, panicky, or... well, every other random unhelpful time. Usually, they burned as much shit as they could, but this time the only things around me were my clothes, dirt, and a wolf. And the wolf wouldn’t burn for the moment, because of the demonic mating process.

Which I currently wasn’t a huge fan of.

“Why isn’t he on fire? What the hell are you?” Nico growled.

“A demon,” I said. “And as I already told your friend, he’s my fated mate. My magic might as well think he’s me.”

For now, at least. During the mate capture, which was the first part of the mating process, my flames wouldn’t let me so much as *try* to leave my mate’s side.

Even if he was a damn *wolf*.

The wolf dropped his face to my neck, nudging my chin to the side with his nose. My head seemed to turn of its own volition, and the wolf sort of... nuzzled my neck?

*Nuzzling?*

*Was that supposed to be cute?*

*Gah, I was not cut out for wolf-mate life.*

By some miracle, though, the nuzzling worked.

My fire went out completely.

I groaned in confusion, frustration, and relief, all at the same time.

The fire had burned long enough to ensure that I was naked, but I had bigger fish to fry than nudity.

“What’s going on?” I asked the sky.

It didn’t answer, of course.

I hadn’t expected it to, but I wouldn’t have complained if it did.

I heard paws on the ground, then, and the wolf above me let out a savage snarl that made both my stomach clench and my flames burst back into existence.

More wolves were coming, and his protective instincts were probably rearing their ugly heads. Even demon dudes were protective of their mates, but werewolves? They were obsessive about it to a whole different level.

And what was I supposed to do about that?

I had no clue.

None.

*Zero clues.*

Three large wolves ran into the small clearing—and one small one.

Okay, the small one was kind of adorable.

Was it a baby werewolf?

A werewolf... pup?

Oof, that was weird.

I mean, everything about my life was weird. Demon, living in a town full of mystical beings, living blood bag for a fevering vampire, janitor at a bar

that had been nicknamed *Hell*...

Yeah, my life was weird.

But thinking of small children as pups was definitely weirder.

The wolves shifted rapidly, and I blinked at them as they all pulled on shorts or pants.

I'd been under the impression that shifting to wolf form was horribly slow and painful.

Had the education system lied about that?

Obviously it had lied about *something*, because I was fated mates with a damn *werewolf*.

Which, again, was not supposed to be possible.

"How long is he going to be trapped in his wolf form?" I asked Nico. "If I can't convince him to bite me?"

"Indefinitely." The guy didn't bother beating around the bush.

So... maybe I didn't have a fated mate.

Maybe I just had a pet werewolf who used to be a sexy buff dude?

*Cool.*

I could roll with that.

"I need to get up," I told the wolf.

Had I learned his name yet?

Nope, didn't think I had.

Did I want to know his name?

Not really, to be honest.

I probably should've, though.

"Who are you?" one of the newly-shifted werewolves asked, staring at me with a look of utter bewilderment that almost made me snort. "How did you get out here?"

"I'm a demon," I said, scooting away from the wolf so I could ease up to my feet. Someone tossed me a shirt, and everyone turned around. Probably a good call, since my shiny new mate was already growling at the newcomer-werewolves. "Somehow, I'm fated mates with your... wolf friend."

One of the guys snorted. "Wolf friend?"

"Pack member," Nico clarified with a growl. "He's beta."

I tugged the large, manly-smelling shirt I'd been thrown down my thighs, eyeing the hem. It was really damn huge.

*How big was its owner?*

I assumed said owner was my new mate, considering he wasn't pissed off

that I was wearing some guy's shirt.

"Right. Well, then, Beta..." I trailed off, not sure if that was his name or what. "Let's get going. You've got to have a car around here, right? If I can't get back home before my shift tonight, I'll be roasted. Literally."

The wolf seemed to be frowning at me.

That was new.

I didn't have time for new, though.

My gaze lifted to the guys, all of which were huge and attractive. One of them looked like he was trying hard not to bust up laughing, while the others seemed to be varying degrees of pissed and bewildered. And the wolf pup had turned into a little boy with light skin and a head of blond curls, who was just really damn adorable. "Where's his car?" I pointed down to my wolf-mate.

"At his house, in town," Nico said. His expression was one of the more neutral, slightly-bewildered ones.

"What town?" I checked.

I honestly didn't know where any werewolves lived, but I was hoping it was one I'd heard of, at least.

"Moon Ridge."

I blinked. "Seriously?"

Moon Ridge?

As in one of the towns nearest to the myst city I lived in?

*Werewolves* lived there?

"Seriously." Nico's bewilderment was fading into a solemn expression.

I ignored it.

"Well, that's convenient." I brushed dirt off my ass. "Can one of you give me a ride to his car?"

"I've got it," Nico agreed, though he was now grimacing.

"Cool." I patted the wolf on the head. "Come on, Beta. Got to get back for work."

The wolf huffed.

Could he understand me?

One of the guys started chuckling, and I ignored him as I followed Nico to his car. I noticed a couple of tents and a big travel-trailer, but we didn't stop until we reached a gigantic, old truck.

I eyed the thing a little suspiciously.

"Get in the back," my temporary chauffeur called out, as he climbed into

the driver's seat. "Axel won't want you too close to me."

"Axel?" I tugged the door to the back seat open. "I thought his name was Beta."

"Beta is his position in the pack. Axel is his name," Nico clarified.

Oh.

Well, okay then.

That was awkward.

"You couldn't start with that?" I asked.

The guy shrugged. "Sorry. We weren't exactly expecting some chick to show up in our forest and end up being mates with one of our pack members."

"That makes two of us." My voice was clipped.

The wolf jumped into the truck with me, draping his body over the seat and his head over my lap. I fought a groan.

Nico pulled away from the pack's campsite and started driving down a dirt road that really didn't look like a road. "How does mating work for demons? You just transport to someone and claim them?"

"No. There are three parts; the capture, the release, and the possession. Right now, my own flames will burn me if I try to get away from Axel. Every myst type has their own mating process; what's the werewolf process?"

"The mate hunt, chase, and climax. Starts with him being trapped in his wolf form. The only way out is to convince him that you're not going to run away from him after he bites you and changes you into a wolf too."

I snorted. "He's not going to be able to turn me into a *wolf*. I'm a *demon*."

"Then you'd better hope your council has some kind of an idea about how to get Axel out of wolf form."

"The council doesn't even *like* werewolves. If they did, you'd be trapped in Mist Valley like the rest of us."

He lifted his head at that, looking surprised. "Mist Valley? Isn't that..."

"Less than an hour from here? Yeah, I'm just as shocked as you are. I had no idea there were wolves this close."

"Well that's a mind-fuck," Nico muttered. "Doesn't really matter, though. You'll have to move out here with the rest of us."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Why would I do that?"

"Mates can't live apart. His wolf would take over and find you."

Geez. It definitely didn't work like that for demons.

"Then I guess he'll be living in Mist Valley too, because I'll literally be

murdered if I try to move out.” I brushed a hand through my hair, cringing at the feel of the dirt that already caked the strands.

“Wolves are pack animals,” the guy countered. “He’d go insane without a pack.”

“Sounds like his problem. I’ve got too many of my own to worry about that.” I focused my gaze out the window. Though I was stroking the fur on the wolf’s head like he was a big ole’ dog, I didn’t let myself consider the fact that he was the same naked hottie I’d landed on earlier.

Or the fact that wolves were insanely possessive over their fated mates.

Or the fact that I’d just found my mate, and he was a *werewolf*.

Or... any of it.

I had to make it back to Mist Valley before anyone realized I was gone.

And that was my only focus.

Tense silence filled the truck for most of the ride. I studied the town as we drove through what seemed to be the outskirts of it. It looked really human, but in a charming way. Not that it mattered; I was never going to be allowed to live outside of Mist Valley.

Then again, I didn’t really *want* to live outside the valley. I just wanted... options. Freedom. A way out of the shitty hand I’d been dealt in life.

Being born with weak flames and little control over them was a ticket into poverty. Even my parents hadn’t wanted me; I’d been raised in a group home with a few other weak demons. The rest of them had been like a family, but they’d treated me like shit, so I was really damn glad to have gotten away from them.

Iris and I had a good thing going before she got sick. For vampires, the mate fever started anywhere from a week to a couple of years before they met their fated mate. Sometimes, it killed them.

I had been marching every vampire I could find in front of her since she got sick—most mysts ended up mated to the same type of creature they were—but hadn’t had any luck yet.

I couldn’t afford electricity, but our apartment was over the bar I worked at, and our rent was cheap as long as I kept working there. The head demons liked to make me feel like I had a choice, sometimes.

They were full of shit.

I *didn’t* have a choice.

And they barely paid me at all.

But I could afford rent for us and pay for enough Spaghetti-O’s to survive

as long as I kept working, so I kept working.

In Mist Valley, that was really the only choice a person could make.

Give in to the demands of the strongest mysts, or die.

Obviously, I hadn't chosen death.



## TWO



WE PARKED in front of a row of townhouses. There were five of them, and they looked nice. A lot nicer than the place I lived.

“If you have homes, why are you guys camping in the middle of the work week?” I asked Nico, not getting out immediately.

He shut off his truck. “We live in the forest. The houses are to keep our wolves settled, in case we meet our mates.”

Oh.

That was...

Thoughtful?

Ish?

Thoughtfulish?

“You don’t think your mates will want to live in the forest?” I opened my door when he opened his.

“Do you want to live in the forest?” he asked.

I grimaced at the thought.

“Exactly.” He strode up to one of the houses in the middle of the strip. “This one’s Axel’s. Beta wolves are known for having short mate hunts, so he probably won’t stay wolfed out for more than a few weeks, unless he can’t bite you. I’d recommend not leaving the house. We’ll bring groceries and have a friend bring you some clothes.”

“I told you, I have to go back to the valley,” I reminded him as I followed him up the three stairs that led to the porch. Axel remained right beside me, his side pressed against mine. I left my hand on his head, since he seemed to like that. “Staying isn’t an option.”

“Look.” Nico opened the front door—it was already unlocked, which was definitely not safe—but leaned up against the doorway so I couldn’t go past him. “I don’t know anything about how demon relationships work, but werewolves are possessive. Betas even more so than the rest of us. If you work somewhere that other men might be, stay home, or they’ll probably get attacked. If someone looks at you for too long, Axel will try to kill them. If someone tries to flirt with you, they’ll be dead before you can scream. My packmates and I live in the forest because we’re closer with our animals; the town calls us feral for it.”

I snorted. “No one’s looked twice at me since I was twelve. Believe me, I’ll be fine, and so will everyone else. Now, can you move? I really have to get back home.”

He reluctantly stepped to the side.

Axel snarled at him, and Nico quickly crossed to the other side of the porch.

“At least consider putting more clothes on before you risk anything?” Nico asked.

I flipped him the bird, stepped inside the house, and shut the door behind me—locking it, too.

And then I was alone with the wolf.

My eyes scanned the space.

It was really nice—especially compared to where I lived.

The floors were dark brown wood or wood-looking tile. The walls were white. The cabinets were light gray, and the countertops white with more gray.

It was also huge, compared to my apartment. The living room was to my right, the kitchen to my left, with a pretty dining table and a sliding back door, too. I liked it—but it wasn’t home, I didn’t think it ever would be.

Living outside Mist Valley really, really wasn’t an option. My hellfire was pretty much impossible to control, which meant I could accidentally burn the place to the ground any given second. There were other uses for hellfire magic (mainly, it could be used to change moods when added to certain drinks, hence the demon-owned bars) but I’d never learned any of those other uses.

In Mist Valley, the whole city was protected by witch runes. The runes prevented anything from being burned to the ground, or smashed by dragons, or... well, pretty much anything that could happen, the runes protected

against.

The place was made to keep us all safe. I only felt trapped because I didn't have the required magic to qualify for a better job, or a better house, or a better anything.

Something told me that showing up with a werewolf beside me wasn't going to help that in any way.

THERE WAS a paper folder sitting on the kitchen's island, so I headed over to that. My eyebrows lifted when I opened it and found a large picture of the whole pack. Or rather, what used to be the pack?

There were six men in the picture, and I recognized Nico a few of the others I'd met in the forest. They looked younger in the picture, and happier too. Two of the men had an X drawn over their bodies, and someone had scribbled above their heads, 'not interested in being feral pack'. Two other pictures had been added to the folder—one of the cute little curly-haired kid, and another of the guy who had been laughing in the forest.

Below each of them, there was a name written. The main picture had Kai, Enzo, Axel, and Nico. The little boy was Lucas. The man in the extra picture—the one who had chuckled—was Finn.

I moved the picture aside and found a typed sheet of paper.

It listed out the werewolf mating process first—the mate hunt, where the werewolf is stuck in animal form until he transforms his woman. The mate chase, where the transformed female wolf watches her man, studying him until she's satisfied that he'll be a good mate, and then bites him back. And the climax, which contains... lots of climaxes, unless you decided to ignore it and go the torturous no-sex route.

The torturous route was a hard pass for me.

Most mysts were pretty free with everything sex-wise. The more magic someone had, the more attractive they were considered. So basically, I was unattractive to everyone in Mist Valley. I'd only had sex a couple of times, but I'd enjoyed it for the most part. Having a permanent partner didn't sound terrible, at all.

Then again, we weren't going to be living together or anything. He'd want to be by his pack, and I needed to be in the valley.

So... I probably wouldn't have a permanent partner.

That was a shitty blow, but not any shittier than everything else I had

going on.

I skimmed the page.

Apparently, werewolves started hoarding deodorant and soap and toilet paper and stuff while waiting to meet their mate. They called it nesting.

That was... kind of cute, I guessed?

And weird.

Whatever.

Moving on.

They also saved money.

I was interested in that one. *Definitely* interested in that one.

The paper said Axel's money was in the freezer, under a bag of frozen vegetables, so I rushed over. When I found the envelope, my heart soared.

I opened the flap and stared down into it.

Tears stung my eyes.

There was a LOT of cash.

Enough that I could buy real food.

And electricity—fuck, it would be incredible to wash my clothes again. And microwave things. And have light.

“You're officially the best mate ever,” I told the wolf, hugging the money to my chest.

Maybe if I was a better woman, I'd just put it back in the fridge and walk away, but screw being a better woman.

I needed to fucking *eat*.

And maybe now I'd be able to.

I tucked the envelope under my armpit and started looking for the keys. After I found them in one of the kitchen drawers, I crossed the room and quickly slid out into the garage.

The car I'd been looking for was a massive truck—not what I had expected—but beggars couldn't be choosers. I let Axel in and then climbed on up to the driver's seat.

“Ready to meet my sick roommate and discover the horrors of Mist Valley?” I asked Axel, feigning cheerfulness.

He gave me a wolfy frown.

“No? Well, that makes two of us.”

I didn't have another option though, so I opened the garage and pulled out of the driveway.

Just as I was about to leave, a truck pulled up outside Axel's place. A

blonde woman in a t-shirt that said “Salty Heifer” and a pair of leggings stepped out, her hair falling to her waist in waves. She had a gnarly bite scar stretched over her throat, and I wondered if that was because of her mate. “Are you Morgan?” she called out.

“Yup,” I called back, but didn’t get out of my truck. “Tell me you’re not Axel’s lover. I really don’t want to get in a mate fight.”

She snorted. “Werewolves don’t take lovers until they meet their mates. Guess things are different for demons?”

“You have no idea,” I admitted, as she sashayed up to my window.

“Well, I’m Charly. Nico asked me to bring you something to wear so Axel doesn’t murder anyone.” She lifted a grocery bag of clothes.

“I’m headed back home, actually. Mist Valley isn’t too far, and I really can’t afford to miss work.”

Charly grimaced. “I get that. Shoot me a text if you come back or need anything.”

I made a face. “Phones don’t work in Mist Valley.”

Her eyebrows shot upward. “How do you survive?”

“With a lot of effort.” I flashed her a grin. “I really have to go, but it was nice to meet you.”

“You too.” She stepped back. “Just ask any of the guys where to find my place if you’re back in town and need anything. My mate, Ryder, is an honorary Feral Pack member, and we take care of our people.”

*They took care of their people?*

That thought made me feel... warm.

And confused.

Demons most definitely did *not* take care of their people.

“Thanks,” I said.

Though I wanted to stay and ask her what she meant, and how much werewolves really took care of each other, I really didn’t have time.

So, I pulled my truck—okay, Axel’s truck—away from the house and headed down the highway that I knew would take me to Mist Valley.

## THREE



WHEN I PULLED up to the city's gates, the dragon-shifter and vampire guards were already glaring at me.

Sweet smiles would get me nowhere with them, so I didn't bother.

Holding out my arm, I showed them the demon tattoo that had been done in magical ink shortly after my birth. They scanned it, and I waited.

"How did you get out?" one of them asked me, a suspicious look on his face as he peered into my truck. "And what the hell is that?"

"A werewolf. My mate-flames kicked into gear and took me to him."

Axel growled at the men. Honestly, I didn't know why he was growling. Probably because they were looking at him like he was a rabid dog.

The vampire looked sick as he processed my words. "You're mated to a werewolf?"

"Yup." I scratched the wolf's head, for good measure. "Poor guy's trapped in his wolf form for the first part of the process. Romantic, right?"

The dragon shifter grimaced. "We'll have to report this."

"I figured. Can I go now? Don't want to be late for work."

They stepped back and waved me through, though they were already talking in low voices about something.

Probably something related to my wolfy mate.

So I ignored them, and drove through the gates.

IT TOOK a while to weave through the city, but I finally parked Axel's truck in the reserved parking lot I'd never had a use for. Everywhere I needed to

go, I had to walk to. There was a grocery store down the road, so it wasn't a huge deal, but it was kind of nice to park in my own spot for once. Iris did have a car that I could use when I needed to, but gas was too expensive to make it worth the drive.

"Don't bark at anyone. I live above a bar, so it's going to start getting loud as they turn on the music and whatnot," I warned Axel. "I've only got twenty minutes to chow something and then get to work, so you need to keep things cool."

The wolf gave me a solemn nod, and I bit back a snort. He was kind of adorable.

I scratched his head, and he rubbed his side up against my thigh.

I flipped on the lights and went into the kitchen. We had a small folding table with two mismatching chairs—one was a cheap plastic lawn chair with a thick crack going up the middle, and the other a fuzzy green velvet thing that had peaked at least a decade earlier.

"Welcome home. It's not as fancy as yours, but it's mine. Sort of." I brushed some hair behind my ear. It still had dirt in it, so I'd be rocking a ponytail again.

That was fine though. Not like anyone looked at me anyway.

I dropped into the ugly (but comfortable) green chair and set the envelope of cash on the table. I may have exaggerated the *needing to eat* thing to Axel; I'd already eaten my last can of pasta. Or half of it, I supposed, since I'd left the can on my bed while I was getting dressed. I was supposed to be getting paid tomorrow, though, so I'd survive until the next day.

Iris coughed in the other room.

*Shit.*

*She was probably hungry.*

What was Axel going to think when I let her drink my blood?

Guess we were about to find out... after I counted the cash in the envelope.

I started pulling out bills.

My eyes widened when I realized they were all fifties or hundreds.

"Holy hell," I whispered to myself, staring down at the thousand-dollar piles I'd made.

There were ten of them.

Ten.

I had never seen that much money in my life. Never. Not one fucking

time.

That would be enough to pay a rune witch to fireproof Axel's house, if I wanted to leave.

Enough to pay for power for way more than a decade.

Enough to eat *real* pasta for years.

"No more canned spaghetti," I whispered to myself.

Tears were stinging my eyes, but I was 100% okay with the fact that I was crying over pasta.

Pasta was worth crying about.

"I take back every negative thought I had about being mates with a werewolf," I whispered to Axel, rubbing his head with both of my hands. "Every one. If you were a person, I'd kiss you right now. Pasta is definitely the way to my heart. Definitely."

He licked me across the face, and I snorted. "What a ham."

He licked me again.

"Remember how much you like me in this moment before I go down to work, okay?" I asked. "Because I'm probably going to be pushing things a little with that, but there's no way around it." He nodded, and I lowered my forehead to press against his furry one. "Thank you."

The wolf nuzzled my neck, and I hugged him tightly.

This definitely wasn't how I'd expected the day to go, but I was okay with it. Completely okay with it.

Iris coughed again, and Axel shot a suspicious glare in the direction of her room.

"That's my roommate. She's my best friend, and the closest thing I have to family. She's a vampire, and when a vampire's mating process starts, it begins with an illness called the mate fever. Or just the fever. I've been bringing every vampire I meet—and every other myst I can convince—up to her, but haven't found a compatible mate yet," I explained quickly, feeling my cheeks redden.

The wolf frowned at me.

"She can't go out and find her own meals, so I feed her. She drinks my blood, about once a day. It doesn't affect me, other than making me hungrier."

His eyes narrowed, and he growled.

It didn't take much imagination to see that his answer was a "no".

"She doesn't have family either, and I can't afford to pay someone else to



feed her. It's not a big deal; you'll see."

He snarled.

I took that as an, "I will *not* see."

"She's my pack," I told him, fiercely. "If your pack was hungry, you'd do whatever it took to feed them, right?"

He didn't growl at me, but his glare remained.

"If you don't let me feed her, I'm going to lock you in here while I go to work," I warned him.

He snapped his teeth, and I jerked away. "Back off, Beta."

He growled, and I pushed his head off of my lap. "If you're going to try to scare me into submission, this thing between us isn't going to work. In Mist Valley, mated couples only choose each other about half the time. Our relationship isn't a requirement."

He snarled again at that.

I jerked to my feet. "Don't touch me if you're going to lose your shit. I'm feeding my friend, and that's final."

When I strode across the apartment, his fur didn't touch me.

But he did follow right at my heels.

## FOUR



“IRIS,” I called out quietly, as I opened the door to her bedroom.

She groaned in response. It sounded like she tried to say, “I’m fine,” but it came out as a mangled sound that resembled “miffin”.

“I brought dinner.” I held my forearm out and wiggled it in her direction. She groaned again.

Demon blood didn’t taste great to vamps, but we healed rapidly, so I could feed her as often as she needed.

Axel growled beside me, and I fought a groan.

She propped herself up in bed as much as she could, her exhausted eyes widening when they landed on the wolf. Iris was ultra pale, her natural orange hair a few shades brighter than any human’s. The dark circles under her eyes were massive, and thanks to the fever, she actually resembled the humans’ TV depictions of vampires.

“Surprise, my fated mate is a werewolf.” I forced a grin, so she wouldn’t panic.

“Fuck,” she managed.

I understood that one completely.

“Yep. The council will probably be at the door tomorrow.” I brushed a hand through my tangled hair. “We’ve got to do this quick, because I have work in a few.”

“With the wolf?” Her words were rasped, and her expression told me she didn’t think that was a great idea.

I didn’t think it was a great idea either... but losing my job wasn’t an option, and that was exactly what would happen if I didn’t show up to work.

“Yup.” I crossed the room, stopping just in front of her and handing her my wrist. “Order’s up.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “He’s going to kill someone.”

“It’s a possibility,” I said cheerfully. “Now hurry up. I really have to go.”

She heaved a sigh, eyeing Axel as she lifted my wrist to her lips.

“I already threatened to castrate him if he attacks you,” I offered, when she hesitated.

I hadn’t threatened that exactly, but I was pretty sure that the threat of locking him up would impact him more, because he likely wouldn’t believe I was willing to castrate him.

And since I wasn’t, he would’ve been right not to believe it.

Iris reluctantly bit me, her venom numbing the pain as her teeth slid into my skin.

Axel growled, low and angrily, as she drank from me.

“I’m fine,” I told him, though I was getting a little light headed.

Iris finally released me a minute later, and her coloring looked slightly better. “You still taste awful,” she whispered to me, though she settled back down on her pillow.

I grinned. “Good. Sleep well. I’ll try to pick up a few new vamps tonight.” I flashed her a smile even as Axel roared at me.

“Careful with that thing,” she hissed at me.

I smirked. “That’s what she said.”

She grumbled at me as I grabbed a fistful of Axel’s hair and tugged lightly. The door closed behind us, and I stepped into my room. It was exactly as I’d left it, with just my scratchy sheets and old, thrift-store quilt on the weird-smelling mattress. There was no other furniture in the room, but it was home.

Ish.

Homeish.

Could I think of something homier? Of course.

My mind flicked back to Axel’s house, and I had to push back against the wisp of yearning that swelled in my chest.

Mist Valley was home.

I needed to accept that.

My hair went up in a high ponytail, and I shoved a couple of bobby pins into the back part so the little thin strands didn’t end up plastered to my neck in the next ten minutes.

A glance at the clock had me swearing under my breath as I yanked a cleanish pair of shorts on, followed by a black tank top. My clothing supply was nearly nonexistent, but that was tomorrow's problem.

I grabbed my can of pasta from a few hours earlier and shoved the last two bites into my mouth, hoping that could tide me over until halfway through my shift, when I'd get a free meal from the bar.

"No growling at anyone," I warned Axel, as I headed out of the apartment. My ponytail swayed behind me, and I noticed him watching it closely. "Definitely no biting, either."

His eyes darkened suspiciously at that.

"No biting me *or* anyone else," I clarified. "Save it until we're back here, alone. Okay?"

His silence was not a satisfying answer, but it was the best I was going to get.

"Please, don't screw this up for me. If I lose this job, I'm hosed," I told the wolf honestly.

He huffed at me.

Also not a satisfying answer, but it was going to have to do.

I strode down the stairs, rubbing the wolf's head as I went. He remained glued to my side, his fur brushing my bare leg as I walked.

Something told me I was going to regret not wearing clothes that covered a little more skin, but I ignored that something.

I legitimately didn't have a single clothing option for that, so there was no point in dwelling on it.

"No biting," I reminded the wolf, one last time.

His grumbly growl made me sigh.

It was probably a bad time to make a joke about keeping his teeth in his mouth, akin to keeping his dick in his pants, so I stayed quiet.

I tugged the heavy door open and stepped into the bar-slash-nightclub. It wasn't fancy, but it was huge, and was the most popular place for night life in Mist Valley.

"What the hell is that?" The bartender demanded from across the room. He was a demon not much more powerful than me, but because he worked for tips, the bastard had a much higher quality of life than I did.

Axel gave a low growl in his direction.

I supposed that if I was attracted to extreme douchebags with red hair and a preference for penises, he would've been a threat to the buff, bronze god

the wolf could transform into.

“A werewolf. We’re fated mates.” I patted Axel’s head in demonstration. The bartender made a gagging noise.

I felt Axel’s body tense, and dropped to my knees, hugging the wolf tightly enough to trap him in place. “We’re adorable,” I called to the guy. “Shut up and focus on your booze if you don’t want your throat ripped out. Werewolves might not be popular, but they’ve definitely got sharp teeth.”

He turned away, luckily, ignoring the hell out of me.

I remained on my knees, hugging the wolf, until I was pretty sure that he wouldn’t murder the redheaded dude.

When I thought it was safe, I slowly released Axel.

He didn’t immediately attack anyone or anything, so I let out a relieved breath and stood up.

Crisis averted.

This was going to be a really damn long night, though.

WE DIDN’T SEE anyone else as we made our way through the building. Another breath of relief escaped me when I opened the door to my custodial closet and we stepped inside, away from the possibility of drama.

While I loaded the cart for the first tasks of my shift, I talked to the wolf.

“Look, I know you’re possessive, but you really don’t need to worry about anyone here,” I told him. “None of them are interested in me. I might as well be dirt. Demons are one of the least-popular types of mysts, and I’m literally the least-popular demon. No one spares me a second glance. When the bartender looked at me, he wasn’t seeing *me*. He was seeing *you*.”

The wolf grumbled at me in response, and I heaved a sigh.

This was getting us nowhere.

“If you attack anyone while I’m here, I’ll be homeless,” I told him bluntly.

His ears perked up at that.

I did *not* like the way they did, either. That perkiness didn’t bode well for me.

“I can’t move to your house in Moon Ridge,” I added. “It’s not fireproof, and I can’t control my magic. I’d burn it down.”

He chuffed at me, like he didn’t believe that.

I huffed back at him. “Seriously, Axel. This is my life, okay? I’ve worked

extremely hard just to keep food on my damn table. If you attack anyone, this thing between us isn't going to work out."

In which case I'd probably need to give back his money.

Yikes.

Maybe I could convince him to let me keep half?

There was no point in worrying about something that hadn't happened yet, I decided.

Not while there was already so much other shit to stress about.

"Don't bite anyone," I repeated, as I finished loading my cart. When I pushed the door open, I grabbed the handle and started towing the cart behind me.

His side brushed mine as I stepped out—and stopped along with me as we both halted when I saw who was in the hallway.

Three *whos*, more particularly.

Three large, strong, powerful *whos*, actually.

"Chrishien," I blurted. "Hi. Wow. You never come down here."

It was my boss, with both of his henchmen.

AKA bodyguards.

*Shudder.*

He was rich and powerful which yes, should've meant he didn't need bodyguards. I assumed they were more of a status thing. He was also tall and slim, with pretty amber eyes, spiky white-blond hair, and a chiseled jaw.

Not as chiseled as the werewolf dudes I had met in the forest, but still chiseled.

The bodyguards were scarier than he was, and logic told me they were probably powerful, too.

Axel, of course, snarled at all of them.

I grabbed the wolf by the fur, though he wasn't currently trying to get away from me.

*Better safe than sorry.*

"What the hell are you doing?" His eyes blazed. "In what universe is it alright to bring a fucking *werewolf* to work with you?"

He didn't use my name, and honestly, I didn't think he even knew it.

"The universe where he's my fated mate, and both my flames and his possessiveness won't let us be apart?" I tried not to sound too cheeky, but dammit, I was cheeky.

And honestly, I was only there because I knew I had no other choice.

The wolf had refused to bite me so he would turn back into his man form. My flames would transport me back to him—while burning me—if I tried to lock him in my apartment like I'd threatened.

We were trapped.

“You should have promptly quit your job and cleared out of your apartment when you discovered that you'd managed to lower your status even further by associating with the mutts,” Chrishien said in a low, cold voice.

The next moment happened way too quickly.

Axel lunged.

I felt Chrishien and his bodyguards tap into their fire—which could definitely burn the werewolf, unlike mine—and reacted by throwing myself between my fated mate and my shitty boss.

Axel's teeth cut through my throat.

There was no pain, though.

None at all.

But everything spun around me as I staggered forward and crashed into a massive, bare chest. Muscular arms wrapped around me, and lowered me to the ground.

I heard cracking, too.

*Shifting.*

*Axel had to be shifting.*

*Didn't he?*

My mind was too shocked, too dizzy, too dazed, to consider any alternatives.

“Back off,” Axel snarled at the men.

My eyes were closed, but there were still cracking noises.

*Could he talk while he was shifting?*

“What's happening?” Chrishien demanded.

“She's shifting.” A warm, large hand ran over my forehead.

*Wait, what?*

I wrestled with my eyelids, but couldn't get them to lift.

“Just breathe, Morgan,” the werewolf said in a low voice. “Let your wolf take control.”

My wolf?

I couldn't feel any fucking *wolf*.

I tried to force my eyes open again, and this time, won the fight. They

opened, and I stared up at the man fate had paired me with.

Shit, he was gorgeous.

So pretty my chest almost hurt when I looked at him.

I'd seen the picture of his younger self already, but refused to let myself look too long.

Now that I was looking...

Damn.

Just damn.

"That's it." His hands stroked my head, but it felt different.

Like he wasn't touching my skin.

I looked down at myself, and yelped when I saw fur.

And paws.

Lunging to my feet, I jerked my head back and forth as I looked around the hallway.

A wolf.

I was a fucking *wolf*.

How the hell was that possible?

"Why is she on fire?" one of Chrishien's bodyguards asked, his voice low and uncertain.

"I think she's a hybrid." Axel's gaze was intense, and he held a hand out toward me. "Come here."

I shook my head in a no, quickly.

Really damn quickly.

*What had that pretty bastard turned me into?*

I'd been fine with the wolf-mate thing. Or at least dealing with it.

But then he'd changed me.

And I really *wasn't* fine with that.

What would I do?

Where would I go?

How would I take care of Iris?

"Gather her things and get her out of the building within the next hour," Chrishien said coldly. "I'm not dealing with the council when they hear about this."

Him and his bodyguards turned to leave, but Axel grabbed my boss—or ex-boss—by the expensive t-shirt. All of the men were tall, but Axel had at least a few inches and a hundred pounds of pure muscle on the demon. The bodyguards were about the same size as my mate, though.



“Get me someone who can fireproof a house,” he growled at the other man. “Or I’ll bring the rest of my pack into this fucking nightclub and make sure the whole city knows that it’s overrun with wolves.”

Fury blazed in the demon’s eyes, and he caught fire.

Axel released him and stepped back, maintaining eye contact even as my boss’s clothing burned to ashes, leaving him naked.

My gaze dipped to Axel’s backside, and my eyes widened.

Apparently, my boss was just as naked as my mate.

I tried not to stare at the ass of the gorgeous man fate had paired me with, but damn.

Who looked like that?

All tight, curvy backside with chiseled muscles?

Not me, that was for sure.

“Egan,” Chrishien said in a clipped voice. “Fireproof the bastard’s home and return quickly.”

One of the bodyguards scowled, but nodded.

Axel turned back to me. His eyes were red, like his wolf’s.

Instinct told me to step back.

I didn’t know him, after all.

I didn’t even know *myself* anymore, given the *fur* I was now sporting.

“Walk at my side,” the red-eyed werewolf told me. “Or I’ll kill anyone who gets in my way.”

*Shit.*

I didn’t want to agree. Compliance would make him think he could just order me around, and that was *not* okay with me.

But he definitely didn’t seem like he was joking.

And I didn’t want to be responsible for anyone’s death.

So I stepped up next to him.

His thick fingers slid into my fur, stroking the back of my neck lightly. It didn’t feel anywhere near as good as it had when his hands were on my skin, but it was still kind of nice.

Not that either of those facts mattered. I was not going to be with this guy as his mate.

He’d turned me into a werewolf-demon-hybrid thing, which definitely disqualified him from all of the many sexual thoughts that had come to mind when I looked at that ass.

We began to move, quickly. I had to run a little to keep up with the

massive werewolf man, but luckily I didn't trip over any of my *four* feet. That felt like a miracle, but I wasn't about to thank Axel for it.

He was the reason I had *four damn paws* now.

The nightclub hadn't opened yet, so we only passed by a few other employees, all of which gawked at the sight of my wolf-self (which was apparently on fire) jogging next to a massive, naked, golden god of a man.

Chrishien's bodyguard was following behind us, as if he frequently tracked wolves and sexy naked dudes.

Yeah, we were quite the sight.

A few minutes later, Axel was opening the door for my apartment, barking at the bodyguard to wait outside.

When the door shut behind him, Axel crouched in front of me.

I tried like hell not to look down at his junk, and he helped me do so by distracting me with words.

"Hey, beautiful," he murmured to me. His hands were buried in my fur, and he sure as hell took me aback with that nickname.

*Beautiful?*

*When the hell had he decided to call me that?*

"My wolf wants to run with you soon, but for now, I need you to let your human—or demon, I suppose—take control. We only have a short time to grab her things and get out of here."

Understanding had my eyes widening.

The man and wolf were separate for him. Two different beings, sharing one form.

But I didn't have a wolf.

It was just me.

I had no idea how to tell him that, though.

Or how to shift back.

A noise came out of me that sounded like a whine.

"It shouldn't be too hard. Just let her take control of your body, and the shift will follow automatically."

I whined again.

There was no one to let *take control* of me.

"Not working? Not a big deal. I'll ask her roommate what to grab." He stood, scratching the back of my head lightly as he jogged to Iris's room.

I followed him quickly and tried to stop him, to tell him he needed to put pants on. But even when I bumped his thigh with my nose, he didn't

understand what I was saying.

So, he just waltzed right into Iris's room, naked.

## FIVE



IRIS CHOKED on her own spit when she opened her eyes and saw my golden god of a mate in her bedroom, naked.

“We have an hour to clear out of here,” Axel told her, his gaze flicking to me. “Morgan is stuck in her new wolf form, so I need you to tell me what all to grab for her.”

Iris’s face turned a little green as she struggled to a seated position, but Axel didn’t offer her a hand.

Considering he was naked, and she didn’t know him any better than I did, that was probably a good call.

“Don’t have much,” she managed to rasp. “Furniture was free. Ignore the kitchen. Just grab the clothes.”

Talking was always much easier for her soon after I’d fed her, so it was a damn good thing I’d insisted on doing so before I attempted to go to work.

Axel nodded, jogging to my bedroom and stepping inside. I had one duffel bag from the day I’d moved into the apartment a few years ago, and he found it folded in the corner of my closet.

His jaw was set harshly when he saw the one tank top hanging up, next to five other empty hangers.

Maybe he’d thought Iris was joking when she said we didn’t have much.

Axel plucked the shirt off the hanger, then went to the plastic drawers I’d set up underneath the hanging clothes. He seemed to grow more tense when he realized most of them were empty.

My dirty-clothes pile held the few outfits I had left. He shoved them into the bag a bit more harshly than he needed to, then went to the bed and peeled

the old quilt off of it, shoving that in the duffel as well.

Picking up my pillow, he lifted it to his nose and inhaled. When he pulled it away, his eyes were red, and he quickly stripped the sheets off the bed before sticking them and the pillow into the duffel as well.

After zipping it closed, he tossed the strap over his shoulder and stepped into Iris's room. She was sitting on the floor by her closet, her head tucked between her knees as she struggled to breathe.

Fear for her wellbeing hit me hard, and I whined.

"I'm going to carry you down to my truck," he told her in a low voice. "I can take you back to Moon Ridge with us, or drop you off somewhere safe."

"Moon Ridge," Iris panted.

There was nowhere safe for her.

She had a few friends at work, before the fever took her, but now all she had was me.

At least the damn werewolf hadn't been determined to leave her behind.

"Alright. Ready?" he asked her.

She nodded jerkily, and he looked at me. "I have no romantic feelings or attraction toward your friend. She won't make it down the stairs without my help, so I'm going to carry her. Is that okay with you?"

Why the hell was he asking me that?

Of course it would be okay with me.

I nodded anyway.

He plucked Iris off the ground and strode toward the front door.

"Why'd you ask her?" Iris panted.

"Female wolves are almost as possessive as the males. Touching another woman or looking at one too long can set the wolf off, and Morgan's doesn't know you yet. She may see you as a threat."

"Damn." Iris muttered, side-eyeing me.

I huffed, and her lips lifted slightly.

Axel reached the bottom of the stairs, and then opened the back door of his truck and put her inside on one of the seats. He dropped the duffel bag near her feet, then grabbed another duffel bag out from *beneath* her seat and stepped away.

"I'll be back soon with your clothes and anything else I find."

"Thanks." Iris's whisper was quiet, but I saw the gratitude in her eyes.

Axel jerked his head in a nod, shutting the door before he jogged back up the stairs. "Can you drive the vampire's car to Moon Ridge?" he asked the

bodyguard, who was still waiting outside my door. I knew the bodyguard had to be a rune witch—they were the only ones who could fireproof houses.

“Sure.” The man looked far from thrilled by the agreement.

“Thanks.”

Inside the apartment again, he shut the door for privacy before he opened the duffel he’d brought inside and pulled out a pair of sweats.

*Oh.*

I guessed it made sense that he had extra clothes, considering he probably shifted a lot.

I peered inside the bag, and saw a bunch of pairs of pants. At least seven or eight of them—which was more than I currently owned.

If I’d been in my demon form, I would’ve flushed.

My financial situation wasn’t my fault. There was no way to move up or apply for a new job in Mist Valley, and I had no control over that.

But I was still self-conscious about it.

Axel pulled the pants on, then packed the envelope of cash into his duffel, and grabbed a trash bag from the kitchen and took it into the bathroom. His jaw got all clenchy again when he found the cabinets pretty much empty. He remained silent as he packed the few toiletries we did possess into the trash bag.

When that was done, he moved to Iris’s room and packed her shit quickly. She had a lot more clothes than I did, but she’d had a better job than me before she got sick, so that didn’t bother me. If we’d been the same size, I knew she would’ve let me borrow them, but she was tall and skinny, while I was short.

When I’d had enough to eat, I had curves. Now I didn’t, but my hips, tits, and ass were still built wider than Iris’s, which meant none of her shit fit me.

I was desperate enough to have tried on pretty much everything she owned, but no luck. She had always dressed in bouncy dresses and skirts anyway, so nothing she owned was really my style. I preferred ripped shorts and comfortable tank tops.

Her stuff took longer than mine, but Axel had it packed into all three of her suitcases a few minutes later, and then he was going through the kitchen.

He paused when he found the stack of overdue bills, leafing through them for a minute, then tucked them in the side pocket of his duffel bag before he started opening the rest of the drawers and cabinets. He saw everything, but didn’t grab any of it.

His jaw did get all clenchy again, though.

A few minutes later, we were walking back down the stairs again, this time with the bodyguard.

Axel was tense and silent, which probably didn't bode well for me. I decided to pretend not to care, though, because I was still pissed about the whole thing where he'd turned me into a damn *hybrid*.

And particularly pissed about the part where I didn't know how to shift back, and he kept talking to me like I wasn't me, but a damned *wolf*.

He opened the driver's side door, gesturing for me to jump in. I blinked at him, and he frowned.

I was pretty sure that I was currently on fire, so... jumping in an un-runed truck?

Bad call.

"The flames," Iris called from outside.

Her words kicked off a round of coughing.

Axel looked over at the rune wizard.

The wizard scowled but stepped up to the truck's door, withdrawing the long, thin dagger that all witches and wizards used for drawing runes. There were runes specifically created for protecting things from demon flames, so I knew the rune wouldn't affect the truck negatively.

He quickly traced the rune onto the side of the truck, the tip of the knife just a fraction of an inch from the vehicle's door. There was no visible sign of the rune settling in, but I knew there wouldn't be.

Axel probably *didn't* know that, though. So when the wizard finished, I stepped past him and jumped smoothly up onto the seat, showing him that it was now safe.

"Thanks, Egan." Axel handed him the keys to Iris's car—a ten-year-old Honda Civic with white paint.

The bodyguard looked surprised by the gratitude, and dipped his head before he asked, "We're headed to Moon Ridge?"

"To the eastern edge of it," Axel confirmed. "I don't have my phone to send you the location, but you can follow me."

"The council doesn't allow phones in Mist Valley, anyway. I'll stay close."

With that, Egan strode over to Iris's car, struggling to climb in because of his height and muscles. He had light brown skin and thick curls cropped close to his head, and was hot, but... now that I'd seen Axel, I was pretty damn

biased in favor of anyone who looked like him.

Or maybe just *him*.

He had been created for me though, if one were to believe mate theory. Which not all mysts did.

Now that I'd seen him, maybe I was one of them, though.

Then again, mate theory would also require me to believe that I was made to become a hybrid, which sounded like bullshit.

So...

Well, I didn't know what to believe.

There would be time to worry about that later though.

Axel pulled out of the parking lot, following the same roads I'd taken to get to my apartment on the way in.

*Was that really earlier in the same day?*

*Shit, it was.*

We now had plenty of money, which meant food.

So much food.

I'd buy real pasta, and drown myself in actual spaghetti until I couldn't move.

My stomach growled loudly at the idea, and Axel's jaw got all clenchy again. His fists turned white on the steering wheel.

What the hell was his problem?

The truck was uncomfortably silent as he made it to the border of town. The guards at the gate peered inside, and when they saw me—a flaming wolf—their eyes widened and they waved us through quickly. Axel warned them that we had a rune witch following us out too, and they reluctantly agreed.

I would've corrected him about Egan being a rune wizard, not witch, but I couldn't talk.

So I sat.

Rock music played from the radio as soon as we crossed the border, and I relaxed a little.

There was something incredibly freeing about being out of the valley and away from the rules and regulations—and fired from my shitty job.

Then again, the money in Axel's bag helped with that feeling of freedom.

Inside the city, we had TV and the internet but not phones or radios, so I'd seen how humans lived before. Maybe not an accurate idea, but as accurate as it could be without actually living out there.

From what I'd seen, humans had so much freedom. They could apply for



whatever job they wanted. Get training for others if that was what they dreamed about.

Sure, there were no guarantees, but they could try. And try. And try.

And shit, the idea of being able to talk someone into hiring me instead of just being *assigned* to a shitty dead-end job with no way out was really damn incredible.

I was optimistic enough to survive in Mist Valley for a lot longer than I should've; I would definitely be optimistic enough to make it in the human world.

Probably.

If it went about like it did on TV, at least.

THE DRIVE WASN'T TOO bad.

Iris opened her window at one point, murmuring about how fresh the air was outside the city. Her coughing seemed to have abated, and I was relieved that she seemed to be doing okay.

Axel unrolled the rest of the windows, and I let my head hang out of mine like I was an actual wolf or dog. I didn't stick my tongue out, at least.

I did enjoy the fresh air, though, just like Iris. I wasn't really ready to admit that, considering how rapidly everything was changing, and that I might get dragged back into the city by the council.

When we reached the town, Iris was enraptured by the charm of Moon Ridge as we drove through. I tried not to show it, but I was too.

It was really damn charming.

AXEL FINALLY PULLED up in front of his townhouse, parking in the garage but leaving it open. Egan was parked behind us and climbing out of Iris's car a minute later. My flames had gone out sometime during the drive, which was nice. I didn't know when they'd turn back on, but hopefully I had some freedom first.

Egan opened the door nearest to Iris. "Can you walk?" he asked her, as Axel opened his own door and gestured for me to get out too.

I walked across the seat, then jumped down as Iris admitted that she couldn't walk.

Egan scooped her up, carrying her into the house. Axel's jaw got all clenchy when he watched the other man waltz in, but he didn't comment on it. Instead, he just grabbed all of the bags.

I waited for him, not wanting his eyes to go red or anything.

He opened the door for me a minute later, and when we walked in, we found Egan setting Iris down on the couch.

"The runes will only take a few minutes, and then I'll need a ride back to the valley," Egan told Axel, as he stepped away from Iris. I saw her gaze tracking him with a little too much hope, but kept my mouth shut about it.

Not that I could've said anything even if I wanted to.

"I'll call one of my pack members," Axel said, striding to the kitchen.

Despite all the bags he was carrying, he didn't have a problem opening one of the drawers and pulling out a phone. After typing a few things on it, he dropped it on the kitchen counter. We didn't have phones in Mist Valley, but we still knew all about them—and I could tell that one was new, and nice. And probably expensive.

"Iris, I'll put your things in the spare room," Axel told her, dropping a hand to my head and scratching my fur lightly as he passed me to go up the stairs. "It's the second door on the left. The bathroom is first to the left. Morgan will be in my old bedroom, through the only door on the right."

"Thanks," Iris rasped.

I followed Axel and his stupidly-hot butt up the stairs, already dreading the fact that we were going to be sharing a bedroom.

On the plus side, there was electricity.

And I'd be able to eat real pasta.

That was probably worth sharing a room with the mate I didn't know.

## SIX



THE BEDROOM IRIS was going to be sleeping in already had a queen-sized mattress in it, which was nice. The thing was covered with a drop cloth, which I found strange, but I watched quietly as Axel removed the cloth and made the bed quickly and efficiently.

“I don’t live here,” Axel explained to me, as he got the room situated. “Housing is really cheap in Moon Ridge, and the older generations make sure that as we reach the age of finding mates, we all have our own space. It prevents a lot of fighting, and helps make the newly-turned women feel more at home.”

He crossed the hallway, and I followed him.

“Male wolves can’t control the nesting urge as we get closer to meeting our mates. We stock up on supplies and food, toiletries, and pretty much everything else you can think of, so that we’re prepared to provide for our females. My pack doesn’t live like the rest of the werewolves in town, but there was no way out of nesting, so we keep homes prepared for our mates. Honestly, we’re a few years older than most wolves are when they find their females, so we were fairly confident that we’d end up permanently single.”

Shit.

So he was saying, without actually coming out and saying it, that he didn’t want a mate.

And considering that he had just said ‘*Morgan will be in my room*’, and that he only kept the home prepared for his woman, he didn’t intend on us being actual mates.

Which didn’t bode well for me.

At least, not in many ways.

I mean, I hadn't wanted a mate. Not really.

But I kind of did.

Finding one so suddenly was a shock to my system. I had been trying to stay afloat since my fire transported me to him. I hadn't rejected him or anything, so the fact that my stupidly-attractive, possessive werewolf mate didn't want me even though he had only just met me?

Kind of a kick in the ass.

I was still free from Mist Valley, though.

And that was what really mattered.

Axel took the drop cloth off his bed—which was going to be my bed—and started making it too. He'd brought my bedding from my house, but for whatever reason, didn't even pull it out of my bag.

Actually, he had yet to put my bag down.

"Female beta wolves are known for having long mate chases," he explained to me as he made the bed. "So I don't expect you to bite me soon. As you know, that's what will end the second phase of the mating process. Or the werewolf mating process, at least. I'm not sure about the demon side of things."

I scowled.

He'd love the hell out of the demon mating process, from the sound of things. During the first part, he wouldn't be able to leave me without my flames bringing me back to him. During the second, he wouldn't be able to touch me, or my flames would burn him.

The third part was the same as the wolf one; allll the sex.

Or all the pain, if you avoided all the sex.

No one avoided the damn sex, though.

Maybe I'd have to figure out a way to do that. The alternative would probably be me getting way more attached than I should when we had sex, given the fact that Axel didn't want a mate, and I was kind of a sucker.

Or maybe I'd just let myself enjoy being with him for as long as I had. It wouldn't be long until he ditched me and all my craziness to live in the forest like he was damn *Tarzan*.

Either way, without realizing it, he had just given me a ticket out of my wolf form.

*Biting him.*

It would trigger the climax, which would trigger me to shift, right?

*Shit, I hoped so. I was really tired of being furry.*

I studied Axel as he finished making the bed.

He'd bitten me on the neck, probably giving me a gnarly scar just like the one on that girl who had brought me spare clothes.

What had her name been?

Oof, yeah, I was drawing a blank.

It had been a long day.

Anyway, if I was going to have an awful throat-scar, he deserved one too. That was probably next-level pettiness, but who the hell cared? He'd turned me into a fucking *wolf*.

I didn't want to bite his throat.

The thought made me sick.

But I desperately needed a way back to my demon form, so there wasn't much of an alternative.

Axel set my duffel bag down on the end of the bed, then turned toward the door.

I got between him and the way out and growled at him to stop him. Surprisingly enough, it worked.

He halted, his forehead wrinkling.

I growled again, pointing to the floor with my nose.

It took him a minute to figure out that I was telling him to sit down, but eventually, he dropped to that gorgeous ass on the floor, his back to the wall.

Before he opened his mouth to ask me why I wanted him on the ground, I forced myself to act.

To bite.

*Shudder.*

My paws landed on his thighs, and I slowly lifted my teeth to his throat.

The man went very, very still.

His hands slid into my fur, his grip light.

*I did not want to do this.*

Then I remembered the way his wolf had torn into my throat.

Anger rolled through me, and I forced my pettiness into action.

My teeth slowly sank into his skin.

It was easier than I expected; biting him.

And his blood tasted stupidly good.

I wasn't a damn vampire though, so I withdrew quickly and stepped away from him.

Axel was staring at me, his forehead wrinkled.

The bastard was probably wondering why I hadn't just torn into him, the way his wolf had done to me. He still thought I was actually a wolf, after all.

I sat down and waited for heat to overwhelm me.

It didn't happen, and I frowned.

For wolves, biting was what triggered the next phases of the mate connection, but for demons and most other types of mysts, it was kissing that ignited the transition between the first and second part of the process. A declaration of love separated the second and third portion—which would likely never happen for me and Axel.

I watched the skin on his throat heal as he stared at me.

Then he slowly stood up, and crossed the bedroom.

Damn, that butt...

He walked right down the stairs, ditching me.

Outrage warred with self-consciousness.

According to him and the packet of papers I'd found in his kitchen, the climax should be starting any time now.

And he was walking away from me for that reason?

*What a bastard.*

I stormed down the stairs, stopping at the bottom when I found him on the phone.

“Hey, Ryder. I need you to pick up Morgan's vampire friend when you grab the rune witch, then find her a place to stay. Kai's townhouse should be fine, but you'll need to check in with him. And she's sick, so someone will need to feed her. I don't know how often.” There was a short pause before he went on. “The climax is about to start. We'll need a few days to figure out how to fight it, if we decide not to ride it out.”

I blinked.

He was... taking care of Iris?

Making sure she had a place to stay?

And he had friends who would just be *okay* with helping out with all that shit?

Iris shot me a wide-eyed look.

I sent her the same one back, though I was still furry.

“Thanks, man.” Axel hung up the phone, then set it down and looked at me.

Shit, his expression was intense.

Was the room starting to feel a bit warm?

His gaze remained on me as he spoke to my roommate. “I’m going upstairs, Iris. Ryder, my packmate, will be at the door in the next few minutes for you and Egan. Have him take your bags too. When Morgan and I figure things out, we’ll let you know.”

Iris nodded wordlessly, her eyes still wide.

“Morgan.”

My gaze jerked to Axel at the low tone of his voice.

“Let’s go.”

My first instinct was to argue.

I hated being told what to do.

But given the heat that was unfurling in my body, in strange ways that it never had before, I figured arguing wasn’t a great call.

So I rubbed my head against Iris’s knee, and then I trotted over to Axel.

His fingers slid deep into my fur as we started up the stairs, the side of his thigh brushing against me.

When we were back in his bedroom, with the door shut—and locked—behind us, he kneeled down in front of me so we were eye-to-eye.

“You don’t have a wolf, do you?” he asked me. It wasn’t much of a question; I could see in his eyes that he’d realized the truth.

*Finally.*

I shook my head.

He nodded slowly. “I don’t know what it would feel like to shift for you, then. Your bones still have to break and reform, so there probably won’t be a way to avoid the pain.”

I grimaced, but the heat that had started to burn within my body was already making me feel loose and achy.

Shifting was definitely a necessity.

“Try to imagine yourself in your human form—or demon form, I guess. See if that works.” His fingers were buried in my fur, again.

I was pretty sure I’d caught fire, too.

I closed my eyes and focused on my normal body. On the way it felt to have arms. To stand tall. To feel my fingers move.

The way my hair would sway as I walked, the way my body felt when my stomach growled.

Random, inconsequential things.

But I wanted to feel them again. To feel like *myself* again.

And that was when I felt my body stretch, and change.

There was no pain, despite what Axel had said. It felt good, and right.

A long, relieved breath escaped me when I felt my palms and knees on the carpet.

But then the heat inside my lower belly flared its head, and *shit*, I was hot.

I lifted my eyes to Axel's, and found the damn things practically burning into me.

"Any pain?" he asked.

"Only anger that I've been turned into a wolf against my will."

His lips curved upward, just the tiniest bit. "Welcome to Moon Ridge, then."

He started to reach for me, but I leaned back, and he paused.

Any hint of amusement vanished from his face.

"Kissing will move us into the next phase of the demonic mating process, during which you won't be able to touch me. Don't kiss me, or the climax will be extremely long and extremely painful for both of us."

Understanding dawned in his eyes.

We were both silent for a minute.

I finally groaned and shook my head. "This is so damn awkward."

He snorted. "At least we can agree on that."

"What do you want do about all this?" I gestured between us, even though I was pretty sure I already knew.

His hesitance told me I was right.

"You plan on living in the forest with your pack, right?" I asked.

"I do," he admitted. "We're family. They need me. Our Omega, Kai, has a son, and—"

Lifting a hand in the air, I cut him off.

"I don't want to know," I said simply.

He looked a bit taken aback.

"I can't live in the forest," I explained. "Or rather I could, but I don't want to. You saw the place I lived. I've been hungry for nearly a year at this point. I couldn't afford clothes. My apartment didn't even have power, because I couldn't pay the damn bill. Now that I'm out of Mist Valley, for however long I have, I plan to enjoy it. Eat real pasta. Take long baths. Get a job, if the council doesn't drag me back to hell in the next few days. I have freedom now; I'm not going to throw it away so I can live in a tent and have



dirt in my hair constantly. And if I'm not going to live near you, or with you, then I don't want to know you."

A moment of silence passed.

I added, "I've never had any steady relationships in my life other than Iris, so I get attached too easily. Being attached to someone or something that isn't permanent will just lead me to heartache, and I've had enough of that."

Axel finally said, "Our connection will be permanent, regardless of our preferences. My wolf will seek you out, even if you don't have a wolf to hunt me down too."

I shrugged. "Then I'll scratch his head, feed him some spaghetti, and let him sleep on my feet until he gives the control back to you. We can just be acquaintances."

Whatever Axel was thinking behind those intense eyes, I didn't know.

The desire in my lower belly was clenching painfully, though, and I'd officially decided that I was not interested in suffering through the climax when I could enjoy it.

"Alright," Axel finally said.

"Good, that's out of the way." I brushed some hair out of my eyes, knowing I probably looked like an absolute wreck but not caring in the slightest. The need that had swelled inside me was unreal, and I was ready to do something about it. "If you're on board, I think we could manage an acquaintances-with-benefits thing. Since we're not going to do any of the emotional attachment shit, we might as well enjoy each other's company through the climax, right?"

Heat flared in his eyes. "Right."

"You can't be with anyone else, and I haven't found anyone interested in me, so—"

"No." His voice was a harsh growl, and his hands landed on either side of my face, tilting it up so our gazes collided. "You can't be with anyone else, or my wolf will lose his fucking mind. End of the discussion. You may not have a wolf, but we are mates. Even without an emotional connection, physically, you belong to me."

The possessiveness in his voice made me shudder a bit.

"Fine," I said.

As long as he didn't kiss me, we could have sex whenever the hell we wanted, for the rest of our lives if that's what we wanted.

Actually... that would require us not getting too far from each other,

considering the impact of my flames.

So I would have to kiss him after the climax ended. Then he could go back to his pack. Considering that he'd never fall in love with me, the climax would probably be the beginning and end of our sex lives.

Before I could say any of that, Axel added, "And if we go through the climax together without talking about our lives, or our families, or anything of substance, the sexual relationship doesn't end. If you need me, or I need you, we meet up. I'll get you a phone to make it easier."

I couldn't agree completely without lying, so I scowled. "I'll get myself a phone."

"Fine. You agree?" He bit out the words.

Guess I wasn't going to spring the shit about needing to kiss him to live our separate lives on him until the climax was ending, then.

He kind of deserved that, though, since he had so little interest in even giving things a chance between us.

"Yes. Sex without strings attached, and mates without love. Easy enough."

He jerked his head in a nod. "How do you want to do this?"

*This, meaning sex?*

*He couldn't even start by telling me that I was beautiful, like he had when he thought there was a wolf making decisions for me?*

"I don't know." My defenses were rising.

A hot flash of pain in my lower belly had me groaning and moving, dropping to my ass on the ground.

Axel's eyes turned red for a moment, but then faded back to normal.

"Would it offend you if I took control?" he asked me.

"Hell no."

I wasn't going to mention how sexy it was when a guy got bossy.

Didn't want him to know how I felt, after all. That wasn't part of the agreement.

"Good." He grabbed me by the thighs, and hauled me to the bed.

## SEVEN



HE SET me down on the middle of the mattress and opened my legs. I tried to close them, since I was already naked and whatnot, but he growled at me, “Let me look at every gorgeous fucking inch of you.”

The words stunned me into letting him open me up completely, and that earned me a satisfied growl as his eyes slowly stroked my skin.

“Hands above your head,” he said, as his eyes slowly slid down my body and he tugged his sweats down those massive thighs.

I tucked them beneath my hair, unable to stop my back from arching a little under the intensity of his stare. I was already stupidly horny, and now that we’d decided we were going to ride out the climax in bed together, my body was really damn ready.

“You should not be this fucking sexy,” he growled at me, as he kneeled between my thighs. His hands landed on my bare tits, and the way he squeezed them made my breathing pick up.

“Guess fate knew what you needed,” I said as he released my tits, dragging his hands down the curve of my hips and beneath my ass.

I bit back a moan when those massive hands squeezed roughly. My legs started to close a bit, and he released my ass to pry them back open as he lowered his face to my core. My eyes widened when I watched him inhale deeply.

His chest rumbled, and he dragged his tongue over my clit.

I cried out, arching my hips. He held me open, slowly dragging his tongue over me again.

“How can you taste so fucking good?” he growled at me, as I rocked my

hips. He pinned me down tighter, and dragged his teeth slowly over my clit. “Let me take my time with you, female.”

I groaned. “I just want you inside me.”

He dragged a finger over my opening in response, as he slowly licked my clit again. “You’ll be good and ready before I fill you.”

Axel slowly picked up the pace with his tongue as he teased my opening, and whatever I was about to say died in my throat.

Pleasure cut through me with a cry when he slid two fingers inside me, and my body rocked uncontrollably as I shattered.

My orgasm seemed to push him over the edge.

He snarled against me as I bucked my hips, and the man fucking attacked my clit with his tongue and teeth.

A strangled cry escaped me as he launched me into another orgasm.

He added another finger while I lost control again, stretching me wide.

The need for more—for him—inside me—was desperate. I grabbed him by his stupidly-perfect, long, golden hair, and pulled.

He fought me for a minute, snarling and biting and making me so damn close to the edge again, but finally climbed up my body. His chest heaved as much as mine did, his cock already dripping, but he paused to take my nipple between his teeth.

I cried out again as he gently bit me there, his erection settling between my thighs. When I tried to close them around him, he shoved them open, and slid home.

I lost it again when he bottomed out inside me. The pleasure of the climax, paired with the insane way it felt to be filled with his massive, hard heat, was just too much.

He snarled, slamming into me again and again as I unraveled around him. When he found his pleasure too, he did so with a roar, and his teeth cut into my breast.

The pain made me scream and buck, my body moving desperately with his as the most intense orgasm of my life *shattered* me.

He slid out of me with another snarl, making my body clench and cry for more.

“Fuck, Morgan,” he hissed at me, taking a few steps back so there was more space between us.

“Yeah,” I panted, aching to feel his skin against mine again.

“I fucking *bit* you.”

“You did,” I agreed, moaning and arching with the memory of it.

The climax was way too strong. *Way* too strong. I should’ve felt some relief by then, shouldn’t I?

“Your blood tasted incredible. What the hell is wrong with me?”

“We’re fated. You taste good to me too.” I slid a hand between my thighs, knowing it would drive him insane.

His cock was still thick and erect, and I knew he wasn’t any more ready to be done than I was. His eyes burned into me as he wrapped his fingers around it, and my hand paused between my thighs.

“You touch yourself, and you don’t get my cock,” he told me in a low voice.

I nearly whimpered.

Shit, I was so stupidly horny.

My hips arched, and his scorching eyes followed the movement.

I slowly withdrew my hand from between my thighs, lifting it back above my head.

He gave his cock a slow stroke that made me squirm.

“You touch yourself, and you don’t get to lose it inside me,” I shot back, using his damn words against him.

His lips curved wickedly. “Get over here and stop me, then.”

Ohhh.

I slid off the bed, ignoring the shaking in my legs, and strode over to him.

When I started to wrap my fingers around his cock, he released it so I could take it.

*Shit, holding him like that made me feel powerful.*

“Where do you want me, female?” The low, sexy tone of his voice made me shudder. Hell, even the primal way he called me *female* got to me.

“On your back. On the floor,” I whispered.

His eyes gleamed. “Force me there, then.”

My other hand landed on his massive shoulder, and I tugged him downward. He moved for me, crashing to his knees and then dropping to his back.

When I leaned over him, one of his palms slid around my ass, finding my center.

My body throbbed at the contact, and he stared at me hotly as he waited to see what I’d do.

I wanted him inside me... but I also wanted to see him lose control the

way I had, with his mouth on me.

So I leaned over him, wrapping my lips around the thick head of his cock.

He hissed when I dragged my tongue over the underside of him. The bastard was right; we tasted ridiculously good.

I wrapped my free hand around the base of him as I took him deeper into my mouth, and he snarled at me.

My ass was in his hands seconds later, and as I dragged my tongue over the sensitive underside of him, he yanked my core to his face and sat me on his tongue.

I cried out around his cock as he bit down on my clit again, and the orgasm cut through me as my legs quivered.

He roared, bucking his erection deeper into my throat as he lost control. I swallowed his pleasure as I rocked against him, still so damn needy.

Was this what the climax would be like, for days on end?

Insatiable desire?

Sex that only got hotter and hotter?

I released him from between my lips with a popping noise, dragging my soaked core away from his face. That earned me a snarl, and a light smack on the ass that made me hotter.

I turned around, lining his erection up with my slit.

His eyes were absolutely *feral* as I slowly slid down his cock until we were completely connected.

His hands gripped my ass, his chest rumbling as I started to move.

The pleasure had taken ahold of both of us, and shit, it was all-consuming.

DAYS PASSED.

Five of them, to be exact.

We had sex and slept, and went through every single food item in his fridge, freezer, and pantry storage. But we didn't talk about our lives, or our opinions, or our desires. We didn't snuggle, either.

I texted Iris's new number from Axel's phone a few times during my more coherent moments, to make sure she was being fed. I'd been taking care of her for too long not to worry, but according to her, she was doing great.

And by the time the sixth day finally started to wane, the constant neediness the climax had imposed on me was fading fast.

It had started transforming into a sad sort of emptiness, which I didn't like at all.

When we finally collapsed on the bed together, and the need was gone, tears stung my eyes.

I closed them, to hide my emotions from Axel.

The sex had been incredible, but the knowledge that we would never be together like that again was too much for me.

I felt sort of... used.

Not by Axel, but by myself.

I hadn't asked for more.

I hadn't let myself want more.

And now, I was going to have to accept that.

We'd had stupidly, ridiculously hot sex. In every position that probably fucking existed.

And now, I was going to spend the rest of my life alone.

I mean, Iris would probably come back. I'd take care of her again, until I found her mate so the fever didn't kill her. We would always have each other, though.

The council hadn't showed up yet, which meant Axel's pack had probably intercepted them, but I'd have to deal with them too.

I wouldn't be alone.

But I wouldn't be with the man fate chose for me.

Oof, I didn't know how to deal with any of it.

I needed space from him. And time to work through everything. And...

I didn't even know what else.

I'd figure it out though.

I always figured it out.

First, I had to give Axel the freedom he wanted so he could go back to the forest.

And that meant I needed to kiss him, to transition us into the second portion of the demonic mating process.

There was no point in delaying it.

The sooner I got it over with, the sooner I could move on. Reframe my outlook on life. Get over everything.

I rolled on top of Axel, and his eyes collided with mine. They were red, I realized, which meant I was looking at his wolf.

Maybe that would make it easier.

I dipped my mouth and pressed my lips to his.

He went still.

A shudder went down my spine, and my flames burst to life around us.

Axel swore, tossing me to the bed and rolling off the edge, slapping at his burning arm hairs to put out the flames.

When I looked up at him, his gaze was *furios*.

“My fire would’ve dragged me back to you as soon as we parted ways,” I told him, forcing my gaze to remain steady and sure. “Now you can go.”

He blinked slowly, but his fury didn’t fade. “That’s what you want.”

I dipped my head in a nod.

It *wasn’t* what I wanted.

But Axel wanted to live in the forest with his pack, and I refused to become someone he resented for ripping his life out from beneath him. And ultimately, we didn’t know each other. We’d both made sure of that.

Axel’s voice was low and angry when he said, “You agreed that this would be permanent. That we would meet up when either of us wanted to fuck. How long will your fire burn me?”

I bit my lip.

*Until he loved me.*

I couldn’t say that, though.

He was never going to love me.

“Until we get to the third part of the demon mating process,” I said.

That was the truth.

“And how do we get there?”

It was time to lie my ass off. “I don’t know,” I said, as if I was admitting something unfortunate.

His eyes flickered to red, and the wolf snarled through the man, “You belong to me, female.”

“Physically, yes. I know. I won’t touch anyone else.”

I was tempted to tell him that he belonged to me too, but I didn’t say that.

I didn’t have to.

The wolf would be loyal; his nature wouldn’t give him any other choice.

He just didn’t want to have anything else to do with me, which was fine.

Or maybe not fine.

Whatever it was, there was no way for me to change it.

The man’s body shuddered once, and then again.

His eyes closed for a moment.



When they reopened, they were no longer red. He said stiffly, “I’ll give you your space, then. The house and everything in it are yours—I’ll have your name put on the papers.”

My throat swelled, and I nodded.

I closed my eyes as he turned and strode out of the room, leaving the bedroom door standing open. I waited to hear the garage door rise, but the sound never came.

Instead, the back door slid open—and then slammed shut.

When I hurried to the window, I got there in time to see a gleam of his golden hair and skin disappear into the trees.

Tears leaked from my eyes.

My hands shook as I walked to the shower.

I was hungry—really hungry.

And dirty.

The hunger could wait.

I’d shower, and then I’d get dressed. When I was clean, I’d go out and find Iris, and then stop at the grocery store. My stomach could wait until I had restocked the pantry with pasta and spaghetti sauce.

The water took forever to heat up, but when it was warm, I finally stepped beneath the heat. The familiar comfort soothed me a little, and I told myself I was going to be fine as I scrubbed my skin with some generic floral-scented soap that didn’t smell a damn thing like Axel.

## EIGHT



WHEN HIS SCENT was off of my skin, and my hair had soaked long enough that I hoped I'd be able to tug a brush through it, I finally got out and dried off.

There was a loud knock at the door when I stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel.

I paused.

The front door opened a second later, and my eyes widened.

"Morgan, it's Charly and Iris. You and I met about a week ago," a female voice called out.

I remembered the girl with the scarred throat, and relaxed even as my hand lifted to my neck.

My fingers slid over the uneven skin.

"Axel texted me. He sent us money and had us buy you some clothes a few days ago," she added.

I frowned.

Clothes?

"Okay, thanks," I called back. "Just a minute."

"No worries."

I stepped into the bedroom, and my eyes scanned the space for the duffel bag.

It was gone.

I remembered closing my eyes when he left...

Had he grabbed it, and taken it with him?

Why would he have done that, though?

All it had inside was some dirty clothes, an old sheet, and my thrift-store quilt.

After walking to the closet, I pulled it open. I knew there were only a few sets of Axel's clothes inside, but something was better than nothing.

I tugged one of his t-shirts over my head, then grabbed a wide-tooth comb from the bathroom and started working at the knots in my hair as I walked down the stairs.

Charly, the platinum-blonde chick I'd met in the driveway, was already putting groceries away in the fridge.

Iris was on the couch, her eyes bright and her expression happy.

"You look good," I said to her, shocked.

I mean sure, she still looked sick. She had looked sick for a long time. But she looked less sick than she had for the last twelve months or so, which was a significant improvement.

She smiled. "Apparently werewolf blood strengthens vampires."

My eyebrows shot upward. "Seriously?"

She nodded. "There's some kind of magic in it, I guess."

Huh.

That was nifty.

"Damn." I continued brushing out my hair. "Which werewolf have you been snacking on?"

"A lot of them." She made a face. "When they caught wind that you and Axel are fated, the town realized that I was a potential mate. Now I get dozens of texts every day from men asking to be added to the damn queue."

My eyes lit up as excitement flooded me. "If you find your mate, the fever will finally end."

"Yeah. And honestly, I hope he's a werewolf. Moon Ridge is so damn much better than Mist Valley. I haven't found the one yet, but there's a whole list of them, and I'm only letting myself eat once a day, so..." She shrugged.

I nodded in agreement. "Has the council come by?"

"Yup. They interviewed me extensively, and decided you're far too dangerous to be allowed back into the valley." Her expression was apologetic. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "Don't be. I was hoping they'd decide that. I want to get a job I actually like at least part of the time, you know?"

"I know." She gave me a small smile. "And a certain werewolf is here."

Instead of crying about the fact that Axel had ditched me so easily, I

wrinkled my nose. “That’s not a factor.”

Iris’s eyebrows shot upward.

“What happened between you and Axel? Other than copious amounts of sex?” Charly called from the kitchen.

“Not much, honestly. He refuses to live anywhere other than in the forest, with his pack. I refuse to spend the rest of my life in a tent now that I’m finally free. I told him I didn’t want to get to know him if we weren’t going to have a future together, and he respected that. So, just sex. That’s all that happened.”

I was rambling a bit, and I knew it, so I changed the subject and started rambling about other shit. “I want to go out and look for a job. I’m going to have to save up to pay for someone to fireproof whatever place I end up working, but I’m hoping Moon Ridge has a bar or two. Demon flames can change the effect most drinks have on a person, so I can probably talk someone into giving me a job at one of the bars. I think I’d like interacting with people a lot, if I had the chance.”

Iris was looking at me with narrowed eyes, but Charly’s eyes were bright. “We have a bar. It’s not popular, because werewolves can’t get drunk. If you can mix drinks that actually affect us, you’d flood the place with women who used to be human, looking to have their favorite drinks again. And where the women go, their mates go.”

Her words nearly made me tear up again.

Not the bar shit—the thing about the men going where their mates went.

“Why wouldn’t Axel be willing to compromise with you?” Iris argued.

Dammit.

I knew she was going to bring this back up.

Mainly because she knew me.

“You’re not capable of having sex with someone without developing feelings for them, Morgan. Did you tell him that?” my best friend pressed.

“No, I didn’t tell him that. He doesn’t want me, Iris,” I shot back. “I’m not going to share my damn fragile heart with someone who’d rather roll around in the dirt than live with me in an actual house.”

Charly snorted, and we both looked at her.

She lifted her hands. “Sorry. It was funny, and kind of accurate. The rolling in the dirt part—not the other bit.”

“Werewolves are supposed to be super possessive of their mates,” Iris told Charly. “Why wouldn’t Axel want to be with Morgan?”

Charly's expression grew hesitant. "I don't think it's as simple as him not wanting to be with Morgan. Werewolves always want to be with their mates. And I want to explain what I know about the feral pack, but it would feel like breaking their trust."

Iris frowned.

"In the famous words of whoever wrote that one human movie, *he's just not that into me*," I told Iris. "Get over it. I am."

She scowled at me. "You are *not*."

Okay, I wasn't.

But eventually, I would be.

Iris looked back at Charly. "Do you know any werewolf girls who can answer my questions and discuss this with us without breaking anyone's trust?"

Charly's eyes lit up. "I do, in fact. Give me a few minutes."

She pulled her phone out of her pocket.

"I can't walk around much right now, but we did buy you some clothes. They're in bags over there." Iris pointed to some Target bags by the door. "And Target is just as glorious as humans make it out to be, by the way."

I snorted. "Good to know." As I crossed the room, I asked her, "Did Axel tell you why I needed clothes?"

"Nah. I told Char that you only wear tiny tank tops and shorts, though, and she figured that would probably make him all possessive and pissy."

I grabbed the first of two large bags and opened it up, peering inside.

Just one look didn't tell me anything, though.

"What did you buy, then?" I asked her. "And how did you get around in Target?"

"Char's been wheeling me around in a wheelchair. I feel bad about it, but the alternative is sitting on the couch. And I bought you short shorts and tiny tank tops, of course. I may be useless these days, but when I can, I try not to be the worst friend in the world."

I tossed her a dirty look, and she flashed me a grin.

It made my heart happy to see her like this again. Full of life, and sass.

I'd missed this.

"You could eat more than once a day if you wanted to," I told her.

She grimaced in response. "I could. But what if none of the men in town are my fated mate?"

Ah.

“You wouldn’t have the same blood supply.”

“Exactly.” Her expression was sheepish. “I feel bad for doing it, but if I don’t set limits, I could end up back in the same boat as before. And I don’t want that for either of us.”

Yeah.

I didn’t want that for us either.

I GOT DRESSED in the living room, not bothering with modesty. Iris and I had lived together for years, and werewolves were constantly getting naked to shift, so neither of the women were bothered by a little skin.

“June will be here in five minutes,” Charly offered from the kitchen. “Also, I put your new phone next to that envelope of cash. You should probably deposit it soon. Moon Ridge is safe, but you never know what’s going to happen.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “Axel left the cash?”

“Of course. It was in the mate stash, wasn’t it?”

I nodded.

“It’s yours. The men call it apology money. Usually, they ruin the lives of whoever they end up mated to.”

I blinked at that.

“The women don’t usually feel that way,” she added hastily. “At least, not for too long. But some do.”

I guess that made sense.

Crossing the kitchen, I picked up the envelope—which was exactly as thick as I’d left it—and then dropped it again in favor of the cell phone on the counter. It was sleek and new, and in a clear protective case.

“Damn,” I whistled. “What if I melt it?”

“Axel invested in the complete protection plan.” She winked at me, and I grinned.

It morphed quickly into a grimace.

I noticed a pot of water boiling on the stove, and a few boxes of dry pasta.

My stomach growled, and she grinned knowingly. “Being a new werewolf is a bitch, huh? The hunger is insane.”

“It is,” I admitted, dropping into one of the barstools.

Iris walked into the kitchen slowly, taking a seat on a chair of her own.

I eyed her with worry, and she rolled her eyes at me.

A knock at the door distracted me, but it swung open a moment later, and a gorgeous woman with light skin and long, deep red hair came walking in.

She grinned at me and Iris. “So this is what demons and vampires look like.”

“Fevering vampires and demon-wolf hybrids? Yes,” I drawled.

Her grin widened. “I’m June.”

“Morgan.”

“Iris.”

“June is a part of my other pack,” Charly explained to us. “Ryder, my mate, is formally a member of her pack. He’s only feral pack by heart. And nature, honestly. The man’s kind of rabid, but I’m here for it.”

Yeah, I understood that.

A rush of heat had me fighting the urge to fan my face as memories of the climax came to mind.

“So you have werewolf questions?” June asked, strolling into the kitchen and leaning up against some cabinets.

“Not really,” I said.

Iris rolled her eyes at me before looking back at June. “Yes. Morgan’s mated to Axel, which you’ve probably heard about.”

She nodded confirmation. “The whole town knows.”

Yay.

Iris added, “But he told Morgan he’s not willing to live away from his pack, and she’s not willing to live in a tent, so they can’t be together.”

My best friend looked at me, as if making sure she understood correctly.

It wasn’t exactly right, but I nodded anyway.

“We were under the impression that mates come first for werewolves,” Iris went on, looking back to June. “And Charly can’t talk about Axel, because they’re packmates.”

Iris waited for June’s response.

June blinked. “Damn.”

Iris nodded.

I chewed on the inside of my lip, fighting the urge to run the hell away from this conversation.

“Well...” June trailed off, looking at Char. Charly shrugged in response, and June looked back at us. “I don’t know the feral pack, but everyone in town knows the gossip, so I don’t see why I can’t share. Their omega, Kai, is this gorgeous, inked-up hottie. He was mated to a total bitch who had cancer

—may she rest in peace. Becoming a werewolf didn't cure the cancer, or the shitty personality.”

She continued, “His bitchy mate tricked him into getting her pregnant, not because she wanted a kid but because she wanted the *experience* of pregnancy. Getting pregnant is difficult for werewolves, so the woman literally used her human eggs from before she went through chemo, and Kai's sperm. She died a few months before the end of the pregnancy, but the doctors saved her baby. Kai's baby. The baby turned out to be a full werewolf, and is totally fine. But after that shitshow, he swore off women, and he and most of the pack decided to retreat into the forest, to live as one with their wolves.”

June went on, “The gossip says that most of them swore off their fated mates, wherever they are or were. Two of their original members—I think it was the gamma and the sigma—decided to stay in town, and said the rest of them were insane. Ryder became their honorary sigma, and the gamma from another pack was rejected shortly after they retreated to the forest. He joined them, too. Finn, right?” She looked at Charly.

Char nodded in agreement.

June looked back at me and Iris. “So, I'd say Axel's current issues probably stem from whatever promises he made his pack about not taking a mate, and the responsibility he feels toward them. But honestly, you guys are still in the very beginning of this shit. He hasn't had time to process things, and you haven't either. His wolf *won't* accept the man's decision to abandon you—which is exactly what he did, whether he admits it right now or not. The feral pack guys live very much in tune with their wolves, letting the furry bastards dictate their lives. Which isn't bad, as Char pointed out. Most of us in town are trying to be more like that, too. But I would guess that it will make it incredibly hard for Axel to actually stay away from you.”

“If they're in tune with their wolves, how can they swear off their mates?” Iris pressed. “In school, we were told that werewolves live and breathe for their mates.”

“Oh, werewolves are obsessed with their mates. But it's the men just as much as the wolves.” June lifted a shoulder. “I'm not pregnant, nor do I hope to ever be, but if I want cake at two AM, what does Zed, my mate, do?”

Char's lips curved upward. “He makes cake at two AM.”

“And then we have a naked cake party in the kitchen,” June agreed.

“Male werewolves also have wolf-like instincts when it comes to taking



care of their mates,” Char added. “The wolves enforce those instincts. When we were in the mating process, Ryder couldn’t control his wolf when the beast knew that I was hungry and he hadn’t fed me. So Axel can tell himself he’s not interested in living in town, but those urges won’t disappear. He’ll show up at your door with food, or toilet paper, or clothes... whatever he thinks you need. Eventually, he won’t be able to ignore it. He’s probably fighting his wolf hard right now, which won’t feel natural to him at all, after so many years in the forest.”

Char was starting to sound excited, and look it, too. “Plus, if you start working in the bar, the news will get to them out in the forest. They make money by training people how to get along better with their wolves; the people they see will ask about his mate, and mention you, and it will drive him insane.”

“I don’t even *want* him to come back here,” I protested weakly.

Iris snorted.

Charly grinned.

June smirked. “What happens if you want cake at 2 AM, Morgan?”

I grimaced.

They all waited.

“I don’t eat cake,” I finally admitted, my voice glum.

June’s smirk grew. “Then honey, you want your mate.”

“Fine.” I shoved a hand through my damp, still-half-tangled hair. “But I can’t just accept him. He didn’t even ask me if I wanted to live in the forest, guys. He didn’t even try. Just walked out, without a backward glance. If I just let him in when he shows up here, it would be so damn pathetic.”

“We *never* said you had to take him back.” June stood up straight, walking up to the island before leaning over the stone countertop so her face was only a few feet from mine. “If that man isn’t everything you want and more, you should turn him down. You should walk—or run—away. You should flirt with other men in the bar, if that’s where you decide to work. You should do whatever the fuck you want with your life. If that man and his wolf really and truly want you, he’ll do whatever the hell it takes to prove it to you. My mate followed me across the country for an entire year in his wolf form before my stupid, stubborn ass finally let him in, Morgan. If yours deserves you, he’ll do the same.”

“She’s right,” Charly admitted. “I love the feral pack, but Axel doesn’t deserve you just because he exists. My mate was rejected by the first woman

his wolf chose, so believe me, fate doesn't always get things right the first time. If that's what happened here, then we'll support you."

"Why?" I asked, the question completely honest.

"Because we were you, years ago." June lifted a shoulder. "And because women stick together in this town." Her phone started buzzing, and she pulled it out of her pocket. "Oh, Zed wants to know if I can run to the grocery store before dinner tonight." She looked up at Char. "Are you guys coming to pack dinner?"

"Yup. It's been too long since I had all the baby snuggles," Char confirmed.

"Sweet." Her fingers flew over the keyboard, and she looked back up at us. "Do you guys want to come too? Zed's a professional chef, so it'll be damn good. And you're practically pack, since you're connected to Char now."

I hesitated.

"We'll pass tonight. I can't get around much, and Morgan's going to try to sweet-talk her way into a job at the bar," Iris said with a grin.

Her expression was contagious, and I found myself reluctantly smiling too.

"Okay, the other girls are going to want to meet you though. So let's do something soon?"

"Deal," I agreed.

Despite everything, my heart was starting to feel really damn happy.

WE CHATTED for a little while longer, and then both of the visiting women had to go.

"Ready to check out that bar?" Iris asked me, as soon as they left.

"So damn ready." I flashed her a grin.

Regardless of whatever decisions Axel made or didn't make, I was going to enjoy the hell out of my life.

That, I was absolutely certain of.

**NINE**

AXEL



MY FIST COLLIDED with the sandbag. Hard. The cracked knuckles had been bleeding for an hour, but I couldn't walk away from the bag.

If I did, there was no fucking question what would happen. My wolf would take control from me, and he would run.

*Straight to her.*

I had to figure out how to reign the animal in before I could walk away from the bag or bandage my damn hands.

“So you want me to teach you control to help you *avoid* your female?” Ryder growled at me. He'd finally arrived; the rest of my packmates hadn't been a damn shred of help. Nico, the alpha, and Finn, the gamma, were still sitting in camping chairs off to the side of me and my sandbag, watching me lose my shit. Now Ryder was in a camping chair of his own.

Other than him, the rest of us preached—and practiced—letting our animals have control when they wanted it.

Usually, the animals made decent enough decisions. The trust we built with them also prevented the wolf from trying to take over at random times, because he or she understood that their opinion and outlook would be respected.

“Yes.” I gritted the word out, slamming my fist into the sandbag yet again.

“You're bleeding, Axel. Stop throwing punches and come over here if you want my help.” Ryder's growl was an annoyed one, that time.

I said harshly, “I can't.”

Ryder scoffed.

“I *can't*. If I stop, the wolf will take control. We were in the climax; I

haven't shifted in a week. He's fucking pissed right now."

There was a long pause.

I hit the bag again.

"Why don't you want her?" Ryder finally asked me.

I nearly tripped over my own damn feet. "Of course I fucking *want her*." I snarled the words out. "She agreed to be mine, but she can't live out here. Won't live out here. And I can't abandon the pack."

"So you abandoned her instead?" Ryder drawled.

I snarled at him again. "She's still mine; I didn't abandon her. We agreed to be friends who fuck. It was her idea. I made sure Char and Iris were bringing her food, and clothes, before I left. And there's money on the table. All that shit should've settled my wolf. And even if I was with her, I couldn't touch her. Part of the demonic mating process is flames that burn me too."

"How do you stop the flames?" Ryder asked.

"I don't know. She said she didn't know either."

He snorted.

I looked over at him, and found Nico fighting a smirk. Finn was grinning, too.

"What are you fuckers so happy about?" I grunted, turning back to the sandbag.

"Have you ever met a werewolf who didn't know the mating process like the back of his hand?" Finn asked me.

I...

Hadn't considered that.

My fist slammed the bag harder than it had in a while, and blood splattered all over the fabric

Despite what the town seemed to think, my pack and I didn't have any damn vows against taking mates. Kai and Finn already had women in the past—Kai's mate had died, and Finn's rejected him. Nico, Enzo, and I were the only single men left. But the three of us knew that most females wouldn't be willing to live the same lifestyle we'd chosen, so we tried to protect them from that.

And honestly, having women around triggered Kai, after everything Elle had put him through. So altogether, finding mates had seemed like a shitty idea for us.

Which had now been proven accurate.

"Your wolf probably realized she was keeping something from you,"

Nico said calmly. “And if she’s keeping secrets from you, then you and Morgan aren’t on the same page, which would make the wolf try to take control. If you don’t want to live with her, you’re going to have to make sure you and the beast both see that decision in the same exact way, because the wolf will side with her in a fight. Not you.”

He was right.

I knew that; I’d had the same damn conversation with other men dozens of times.

I was the bastard who helped them understand that they weren’t on the same page as their mates, and that it was causing issues.

And yet here I was.

Having issues that I hadn’t fucking addressed.

“So you should go talk to her, asshole,” Ryder growled.

“If he shows up there this soon after walking away, he’ll look desperate,” Finn pointed out. “There was nothing Jo hated as much as desperation in a man.”

“Jo rejected you,” Ryder said frankly. “And most women don’t care about that shit. She’ll want to know that you want to see her.”

“She doesn’t want him to have feelings for her, though,” Finn pointed out.

They were both right.

My head fucking hurt.

“None of us know the girl. Just ask Char what she thinks,” Nico finally said.

Our damn alpha was always the voice of reason.

*Asshole.*

“I’ll do it,” Ryder grumbled. “Even though I already know she’s going to agree with me.”

She was his mate; he knew her better than the rest of us by a long way... and because of her, he probably knew women in general better than the rest of us.

The phone didn’t even finish ringing once.

Char’s cheerful voice came through the speaker immediately. “Hey, Ry. What’s up?”

*Shit, what would it be like to have a woman who answered so enthusiastically when you called?*

“Hey, Kelley, you’re on speaker. The guys have a question.” The way

that harsh bastard softened when he talked to her...

Fuck me.

“Okay, hit me.”

“Axel’s wolf is riding him hard. He needs to talk to his girl to make sure they’re on the same page, but some of us think it’s too soon. That he might seem desperate. What’s the female take on it?”

Charly scoffed audibly. “Seriously? They were locked up in his old house having sex for an entire *week*, and he’s worried about seeming desperate? There are a million other things he should be worried about when it comes to her.”

In that instant, my wolf tried to rip control from me and force a shift.

I clenched my jaw and hit the bag again, as hard as I fucking could.

“We’re going to need an explanation, Mouse.” Ryder’s voice wasn’t any angrier, despite my own fury.

“Well, you’re not going to get one. Axel can figure that shit out himself.”

“What has she told you?” I practically snarled at the phone. “What does she need?”

“If you really wanted to know, you’d ask her,” Charly shot back. “Morgan is a hell of a lot stronger than she looks. She’ll survive without you. The question you should be asking yourself right now is, do you want her to?”

There was a moment of tense, heavy silence.

“I’m going to go, Ry. You’re coming home in time for dinner, right? I told June we’d be there.”

“Of course.” He clicked the button, taking her off speaker and lifting the phone to his ear. “I’ll see you soon. Love you, Kelley.”

His lips curved upward, just the tiniest bit, and then he nodded. “I will.”

Hanging up the phone, he dropped it on his lap and looked at me, but didn’t say anything.

I glowered at him. “What did she tell you?”

He lifted a shoulder. “My woman wants another tattoo. I’m supposed to ask for her.”

I scoffed. “Liar.”

His eyes flashed. “If you have questions for your mate, she’s the one you should be asking. I’m not going to support you staying away from a perfectly nice woman. If she treated you poorly, I’d help you get the fuck away. She hasn’t, so I’m done.”

He stood up, striding toward the place he always parked his damn truck. I turned back to the sandbag, throwing a few more punches at it.

“You could text her or call her,” Finn offered. “You got her a phone, didn’t you?”

I had.

And that actually wasn’t a terrible idea.

“I’ll think about it,” I grunted, focusing on the bag.

I’d think about all of it—probably way too fucking much.

AN HOUR LATER, the sun had gone down and I’d decided that a text would be the easiest way to chill my wolf out.

He’d see that I was messaging her, and understand that I was making an effort.

Alone in my tent, sprawled out over my mattress pad, I typed out a quick message. The blankets I’d taken from her apartment were thin and scratchy where they met my skin, but her scent coming off them was fucking incredible. It calmed my wolf, too.

AXEL

Were you lying about not knowing how the demon mating process works? All werewolves know ours.

I waited for some sign that she’d seen the message.

Finally, the dots popped up to show that she was typing.

My abdomen tensed.

MORGAN

Yes.

*Fuck.*

Relief and tension both rolled through me as one as I texted back a simple question.

AXEL

Why?

My body was so tight it fucking hurt as I waited for her answer.

Minutes passed.



The dots remained there.  
Finally, the message came through.

MORGAN

You would have to fall in love with me to push us into the third portion of it. Which isn't possible, since we're just going to be acquaintances. There wasn't a reason to tell you the full truth, because it's not going to happen.

My heart dropped into my fucking stomach.  
Her flames wouldn't let me touch her again until I was in love with her.

MORGAN

I have to go.

The dots disappeared, and I knew she'd walked away from the conversation.

My whole fucking body ached, but my wolf had finally stopped trying to take control from me.

“We would have to choose her or the pack,” I told the wolf in a low voice. “There's no alternative. And Charly said herself that Morgan will be fine without us. The pack won't be.”

I couldn't feel my wolf.

I couldn't hear his voice, or connect with his emotions.

But the fact that he'd stopped fighting me felt a hell of a lot like an answer.

I wanted her more than anything.

We both did.

But we weren't ready to abandon the pack.

I shut off my phone and closed my eyes.

My cock ached for my female, and my chest hurt at the fact that I couldn't roll over and look at her gorgeous, bare body beside mine.

But I didn't fucking dare touch myself.

We'd made that a rule between us during the climax—and I sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to break it.

The next time I saw her, I'd make sure she wasn't going to either, if only because I couldn't handle the alternative.

**TEN**

MORGAN



I HANDED Iris my phone when we got to the bar, like I had since the first day there, because my magic and my phone didn't exactly work together. She was currently living in the townhouse that belonged to Kai, whom I wasn't sure if I'd met, and was loving the privacy. I officially hated living alone, and probably annoyed the hell out of her with my constant neediness, but she was enjoying feeling more alive again too much to tell me to fuck off.

It was my third day of work, including the night I went in to ask about a job, and shit, it had all happened like a dream.

The owner, who had been working at the time, gave me the job on the spot. He spent hours that afternoon, evening, and night teaching me how to make the drinks, too, and then we'd done the same for nearly fourteen hours for my second shift. I was used to working a lot, and wanted to get everything down.

And honestly, it had been a fucking blast.

I was good at it. Good at something, *finally*.

Even the drinks I didn't make perfectly became delicious with the addition of my magic. I'd never had a reason to use them on anything on purpose, but now that I'd tried, I was an addict.

It was just *fun*.

And watching people's eyes widen as they tasted the magical drinks was even better.

He hadn't told anyone about me the first two nights I worked, content with teaching me the drink combinations. But when the werewolves showed up, and tried my drinks, they went home and told their friends.

And so, for my third shift, the place was absolutely packed.

The owner and I were both working together. He mixed three-quarters of the drinks, but I was getting faster, and he handed each of them to me before I gave them out to the person who had ordered them.

“Can I get a mojito?” Ebony, who was one of the women from Charly’s pack, called from the other side of the bar.

The music was loud, and there were people everywhere. My face was flushed, and my happiness undoubtedly had me beaming. “Of course!”

I made it quickly, dipping a (well-scrubbed) fingernail into the glass to catch the drink on fire. I didn’t actually touch the liquid as I focused on the blissed-out sensation people were looking for, and then handed the glass over to her after my fire was burning in the cup.

She smiled and thanked me, before crossing the room to her mate. He was just as sexy as the rest of the werewolf men, but he was taken, so I didn’t look too hard.

There was a whole group of single werewolf dudes staring at me from their section of the bar anyway, if I had been looking.

But I wasn’t.

Or at least, I was trying not to.

And sort of failing.

But one of the guys kind of looked like Axel, and it was messing with my mind, so I kept migrating in that direction like a stupid firefly to a lightbulb.

He had basically rejected me.

I hadn’t heard from him, or seen his wolf, since he abandoned me in his townhouse. Now mine, according to the paperwork I’d signed yesterday morning.

Full-on rejection never really happened in Mist Valley, but the silent kind, where a person wasn’t willing to fall in love with their partner?

All the fucking time.

Hence the reason so many people weren’t with their soulmates.

I’d always expected I’d be rejected when I found my mate, even if I’d hoped quietly for a different outcome.

I just hadn’t realized how much it would hurt.

AS THE NIGHT WENT ON, the mated couples slowly made their way out. I had it on good authority that there was way too much car-sex happening out

there, while everyone waited for their rides to come pick them up, and I was pretty damn proud about that.

The bar's owner was turning people down; that was his call, not mine. I wasn't experienced enough to know when they were acting like they'd had enough, he said. I didn't think he had any experience with that either, but kept my mouth shut about it.

The guy who looked like Axel waved me over, so I crossed to the other side of the bar. He hadn't been cut off yet.

"Hey, beautiful," he teased me, giving me a massive grin.

Not gonna lie, the stupid nickname made me smile. "Hey yourself."

The only time I'd ever been called *beautiful* was when Axel said it while I was in wolf form. He thought he'd been talking to my wolf, too, so he hadn't actually meant the compliment for me.

"You too busy for a dance?" he asked me with a grin.

"I'm pretty sure werewolves don't dance with anyone but their mates," I tossed back, also with a grin.

"I'm older than I should be for someone who isn't mated. Makes a guy question if the traditions are really all that helpful," he called back. "I know your mate's not in the picture, and I'd like to dance with you. Think about it?"

"Maybe."

His grin widened. "I'll be waiting."

Iris was eyeing me when I walked back to the owner, who gave me a short list of other drinks to make.

A few minutes later, some guy carried her up to the bar. I hurried over to meet her, leaning over the counter as she said, "The feral pack's alpha just texted you. Axel is on his way here. He just found out that you're a bartender, and he's not happy."

Her eyes were wide, and her face pink.

I grimaced, but didn't blush or anything.

He was going to throw a fit about something, if I had to guess. Why else would he be on his way to me? We were coming up on seventy-two hours without seeing each other or communicating in any way, so clearly the man wasn't bent out of shape about our relationship.

If he were, he knew exactly where to find me.

Or at least, he thought he did, since he hadn't known where I was working.

Iris made a face. “We need to find you a sweater or something to go over that.”

I frowned. “Why? He can throw a tantrum if he wants; he’s not interested in me.”

Her face flushed redder. “I have to admit something.”

I waited, leaning closer.

“I texted him from your phone and told him the truth about the mating process.”

My eyes widened as I processed the information. “Iris...”

“He deserved to know. I thought he’d show up with flowers or something,” she said quickly.

I groaned. “Seriously?”

“I know, it was stupid. But I didn’t want him to blindside you with it, if he showed up.”

“Have you texted him again?”

“No.” She shook her head.

I believed her.

And honestly, I wasn’t surprised by what she had done. Iris was the girl who would tell a random person if they had something between their teeth, or if their shorts were stuck in their panties, or if they were being cheated on. It was a great quality in a best friend, most of the time.

Maybe not this time, though.

“I hate you right now,” I warned her.

“As you should. Good luck.”

I sighed, and she told the man holding her that he could take her back to her table.

Walking over to the owner, I gave him a quick warning. “Hey, I just found out that Axel is heading this way. Do you want me to meet him outside or something? I’m not sure how he’s going to react to all this.” I gestured to myself and the bar.

The owner grinned wickedly. “Drinks and a show? You’re the best employee I’ve ever had.”

I couldn’t help but mirror his grin. “Thanks, I think.”

“Don’t meet him outside. The whole town will be talking about my bar after tonight.”

Nodding, I accepted both of the drinks he handed me, setting the liquid on fire in one after another.

I tried not to think about the impending confrontation, focusing on taking the drinks as the owner handed them to me. He waved me away when I tried to start mixing again; I was too nervous to pay the attention that would require. And the drinkers had slowed down, anyway.

“Here.” The owner handed me a glass of what was either water or clear alcohol. “Splash some of this on yourself and fluff your hair. You want to look like sex.”

I lifted an eyebrow at him, but accepted the glass.

He shrugged shamelessly. “Not hitting on you. I’ve been in a platonic mating myself for nearly three decades. It’s hell. I like you enough not to want that for you.”

*Damn.*

Honestly, that *did* make me want to really piss Axel off. The bastard hadn’t even put up a fight when I told him to walk away from me; he didn’t deserve me.

But I still didn’t want to spend my life alone.

I dipped my fingers in the liquid—it was alcohol—and flicked some of it over my neck and tank top. The thing was already white, and cropped just above my belly button. Since I’d paired it with ripped jean shorts, there was a hell of a lot of skin on show.

He took the glass back, and I flipped my head upside down, shaking my hair out and hopefully fluffing it up.

When I straightened, my boss gave me a grin of approval and resumed making drinks. I washed my hands quickly, then returned to work.

A few more tense minutes passed.

I chatted with customers as I handed them their glasses, or accepted them back.

This job made me feel so much more alive than I had in a long time, if ever.

Finally, there was a commotion by the entrance.

Murmurs went through the crowd, and people stumbled out of the way. My boss put a drink shaker in my hands, and I turned away for the most part, so I could only see the entrance from the corner of my eye.

A massive, golden god of a man stormed up to the bar.

I acted like I hadn’t noticed him coming in, grabbing a glass to pour the drink into.

“Morgan,” Axel snarled at me.

The music was loud enough to give me plausible deniability.

So, had I heard him?

Nope.

I calmly poured the drink into the glass, then dipped my finger into it and lit the thing on fire.

What it was, I had no freaking idea.

As I turned, a massive hand plucked the glass from my grip, then slammed it on the countertop.

There was no more ignoring him, so I finally turned toward Axel, my jaw set firmly.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Working.” I gestured to the drink, which was still flaming. The fire would go out soon.

“In that?” He tossed a hand toward my tank top.

“Would you prefer I made drinks in the nude?” I drawled.

Fury blazed in his eyes, but they didn’t turn red. “Come on. We’re leaving.”

Now it was my turn to feel the anger. “Excuse me?”

“We. Are. Leaving.”

“My shift doesn’t end for another hour, and last time I checked, you can’t force me to do a damn thing without getting roasted. Literally.” I grabbed the glass off the countertop. The fire had gone out, but the magic would still be embedded in the liquid.

“Don’t test me on this, Morgan.” His voice was low and feral, and I was fucking *here for it*.

Not that I could let him know that.

“Why? What are you going to do if I disagree? Stare at me?” I taunted. “Leave again?”

Cold, hard anger blazed in his eyes.

He looked over his shoulder, and found his packmates standing near the front door, watching us.

They apparently weren’t getting involved.

And Char and Ryder had been there for a few hours already—so I knew they weren’t going to help Axel either.

Axel finally ground out, “We need to talk.”

“You didn’t want to talk until you found out I was working here, so I think that’s going to be a no from me. Solid effort, though.” I snagged the



drink off the bar.

My emotions were all over the place as I turned away from him, lifting the glass to my lips and tipping it back. My magic wouldn't work very well on me, as far as I was aware, but there would still be a buzz. And I needed that.

I'd never gotten drunk before, but this seemed like the perfect night to try that shit out.

The sweet flavor of the drink lingered on my tongue as I put the glass away and accepted two more drinks from my grinning boss.

When I turned around to deliver them, Axel had taken a seat on one of the barstools, and was staring at me with that same hot fury.

Not gonna lie, it was kind of turning me on.

My body started to warm with the effects of the alcohol, and my hips swayed with the music as I decided to ignore the hell out of Axel and just do my damn job.

## ELEVEN



AS SOON AS the rest of me started to sway with my hips, Axel stormed over to Iris.

I considered hurrying after him, to see what he was going to ask her, but my drunk self decided not to worry about it.

She'd tell him what she felt like she needed to tell him, and that was that.

Not a damn thing I could do about it.

I was good to roll with the punches, though.

Peachy, with a capital—

My hand caught fire.

I halted where I was and stared at it.

Then stared some more.

*Was I doing that on purpose?*

...no, I didn't think so.

"Are you good?" my boss asked me.

"I don't know," I whispered, still staring too hard at the flames.

"Give her another drink," Axel growled, striding right behind the bar as if he owned the damn place. His shirt went over his head, and his muscular abdomen made me drool. "Iris told me how to get her out of here. If she's drunk enough, she won't be able to catch this place on fire."

"No problem." My boss didn't bat an eye.

I still couldn't get my eyes off of Axel's abs.

My boss poured two shaker bottles into a huge glass, filling it nearly to the brim before he handed it to Axel with a warning of, "Don't fuck this up. You only get one chance to work things through with your mate. Piss her off

enough, and you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Axel took the glass, his jaw clenched as he turned toward me. "Morgan, I need you to drink this."

My drunk self made a pouty face. My hand was definitely still on fire, too. "No cute nickname? I thought we were *mates*, Wolf Man."

His eyes burned into me. "You want a cute nickname?"

I shrugged my shoulders, turning away from him.

He caught me by the belt loop.

I shot a pouty look at Iris, whose expression was guilty. "You told him the damn loophole, too?"

"Sorry," she apologized, her voice too quiet to hear over the sound of the music. I read the word on her lips, though.

If Axel didn't touch my bare skin, he wouldn't catch me on fire. Anywhere clothed was fair game.

The bar was still packed, but the place had gone silent, outside of the music. That was still bangin', so my hips were still swaying.

Axel spun me around with a tug to my belt loop. His intense gaze met my buzzed one. "Mo, what do I have to do to get you to drink this?"

I scowled at him. "Mo? I am *not* a man."

"You definitely aren't a fucking *man*." He growled his agreement. "But I still need you to drink this, before you burn this damn place to the ground."

I glanced down at my burning hand, and blinked at it when I realized my whole arm was on fire now.

That wasn't good.

"I want a better nickname," I told him, my buzzed self not swayed by the sight of the flames.

"What nickname?"

"I don't know."

Axel growled at me again. His voice was strained when he said, "Your fire is spreading. Drink this and I'll come up with a damn nickname while I take you home."

I pouted, but took the glass from his outstretched hand.

My flames ignited the drink immediately, and I lifted the glass to my lips without pause.

A shiver rolled down my spine as I swallowed the liquid, and the flames curling up my body vanished.

I pulled it away, making a face. "I liked the first one better."

“Just drink it.”

I glared at him.

He glared back, but added a, “Please.”

Resigned to my fate, I lifted the cup back to my lips and slowly drained the contents. My belly felt sloshy and bloated when I finished it, but Axel didn't give me time to think about that.

He tugged his t-shirt over my head, trapping it and my hair to my back. I blinked as he scooped me up, careful to touch only the parts of me that were covered by the fabric.

“She quits,” he growled to my boss.

“She doesn't quit!” I yelled back, my voice sounding odd in my own ears.

My boss only grinned back at me as Axel hauled me out of the building.

My ass hit the passenger seat of his truck, hard.

Axel tried to let go of me, but then I swayed back and forth.

He swore as he held me up without grabbing my arms. They reached for him, of course, but he dodged them.

“I can help you more when we're home and I can wrap you up in a blanket,” he told me, slamming the door shut to trap me inside.

My eyes followed him loosely as he stalked around the truck before climbing back into the front seat.

I frowned, and my lips wobbled as tears stung my eyes. “You said it's not your home. Your name's not even on it anymore.”

He raked a hand through his hair, scowling. “It's yours. I should've called it yours.”

My eyes watered. “Do I still get a nickname?”

“Fuck,” he hissed, as he backed out of the parking space and pulled out onto the road.

I leaned against the window, suddenly too tired to hold myself up.

“What kind of nickname do you want? Love? Sassy? Sunshine?”

“You don't even want to give me a nickname,” my drunk ass mumbled, tears still trailing down my cheeks.

He clenched his jaw tightly, and then slowly unclenched. “The last few days have been hell for me, Morgan. Just being in this car with you is so fucking much better than I've been since I walked away from you. I thought I could choose the pack, and I was wrong. If you want a nickname, I'll give you a nickname.”

Aww.

Now I was crying happy tears. “That’s sweet.”

“It’s not.” His voice was gruff.

A few moments passed, and they weren’t tense.

“You really don’t like Mo?”

I made a face. “I never let people call me that. I tried to get them to use Momo, but they said it sounded like a monkey name.”

Axel scoffed. “Who are these bastards?”

I sighed dramatically. “The other kids.”

“Momo *doesn’t* sound like a monkey name, but I’m partial to Mo. And if no one else calls you that, then it can be mine.”

I did like it when he said things were *his*.

Mostly when he said *I* was his.

My eyes stung again. “It doesn’t matter. You’re just going to leave me again.”

“Don’t put words in my fucking mouth.”

“You don’t even say words. You just growl them,” I said miserably.

He snorted, and I giggled like a damn little kid.

Drinking was clearly not good for me.

“You’re not wrong.” He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel, relaxing slightly. “And you don’t smell like any of the other men, so I don’t have to kill anyone.”

“They can look, but not touch,” I agreed.

His nostrils flared. “No. They can’t fucking *look*. You and I are going to go shopping together after this shitshow, since apparently Charly and Iris can’t be trusted to choose clothing.”

“They know what I like.”

“*You* don’t know what you like. If I take you shopping, and all you actually feel pretty in are your tiny shorts and tanks, then fine, I can get the hell over it. But the clothes in your bag were falling apart, so it’s been too long since you went shopping for you to know what you like.”

I glared out the window. “You don’t know me.”

“Physically, I think it’s safe to say that *I* know you better than *you* do,” he growled back.

Damn him for being right.

The things he had done to me...

Shit, the memories were making me all hot and bothered.

“You’re a bastard,” I whispered to him.

“Never said I wasn’t.” His eyes remained on the road.

The sudden urge to touch his thigh came over me, and my foot shot out. He went still when it landed on his thick leg, and his jaw clenched again when it poked at his pants and found a raging hard-on.

“You’re turned on?” I asked him.

“You’re in this truck with me, wearing hardly anything, and smelling better than any dessert I’ve ever had,” he growled back. “The memory of your taste has me struggling not to pull over and rip those damn tiny shorts down your thighs. Of course I’m turned on.”

*Ohh.*

I liked that a lot.

My eyes watered when I remembered that I couldn’t touch him without burning him, and he groaned quietly.

“You’re such a sad drunk, Mo.”

“I am not,” I sniffled.

“How does this even happen for someone so determined to be upbeat with everything else?”

“I’m not!” I exclaimed.

He sighed heavily. “We’re almost home, baby.”

*Baby.*

*Oooh.*

I liked that too.

“Thought we were just acquaintances,” I said, even though I was pretty sure I didn’t believe that anymore.

“I’m pretty sure that’s a pipe dream,” Axel grunted.

I couldn’t help but hope he was right.

AXEL GOT me into the house easily enough. I did make the mistake of grabbing his hair, and nearly burned the glorious golden locks off, but he doused the fire almost immediately.

I cried after that.

Then he bundled me in a sweatshirt, long socks, winter gloves, and a pair of his sweatpants, putting them on right over the top of my shorts and tank. He even pulled the hood over my head before carrying me down to the couch and setting me on the middle of the damn thing.

I was still crying when he left me there, disappearing upstairs for a few

minutes.

When he came back down and was wrapped in the same getup I was, it made my heart happy.

So of course, I cried some more.

“I need to distract you,” he muttered to me, as he settled onto the couch with me. We hadn’t snuggled at all during the climax—just fucked and slept and ate and fucked.

So when he dragged me into his arms, snuggling the entire back side of my body to the entire front side of his, even burying his nose in my hood-covered neck, it made me even happier.

And tearier, but that was beside the point.

He turned on a romance movie. It took a few minutes, since he had to call Kai to borrow his login for the streaming site, but I was way too comfortable to mind that.

When the movie started playing, Axel’s arms tightened around me.

“I can’t breathe,” I whispered to him, mesmerized by the scenes that marked the beginning of the movie.

“You don’t need to breathe,” he grumbled back.

But he did slightly loosen his grip on me.

“Why are you holding me so tight?” I asked him.

“Because it’s this or embracing the desire to pet your damn soft skin, and having burnt hands would make shit difficult.”

My eyes burned. “I’m sorry. I should’ve left us in the mate capture forever.”

“Mate capture?”

“The first part of the demon mating process,” I admitted. “The second part is the release. The third is the possession.”

“Why the hell would anyone want to release their mate?”

“It’s just a test. Or it’s supposed to be, anyway. Haven’t you ever heard that if you love someone, you’re supposed to set them free? And if they don’t come back, it wasn’t meant to be?”

He was silent for a long moment before he asked quietly, “Is that what you did with me, Mo?”

I blinked as a few tears rolled from my eyes. “Shh. I’m trying to watch.”

His nose buried back in my neck, giving me goosebumps as I relaxed against him. He didn’t laugh at the jokes that I did, so I wasn’t sure whether or not he was watching at all, but I was too buzzed to care.

He was holding me.

And for the moment, I was safe, and warm, and happy.

That had to be enough for me.



**TWELVE**

AXEL



I WAS FUCKED.

Why?

Because as I sat on that couch, holding Morgan's bundled-up body to mine, smelling the salt of her tears, I knew I was never going to be able to let her go.

My pack would just have to deal with it.

I wasn't abandoning them... but if it came down to a choice, I had to pick her.

Having her body against mine while she spoke to me in that sexy little voice made me feel settled in a way I never had before.

Having her scent tangled with mine while she laughed at the stupid jokes in the movie made me feel wanted, and needed, and important.

And despite that damn agreement we'd made, I wanted to know her. To understand her. To hear her thoughts and opinions.

She had been keeping shit from me, and that infuriated me.

I'd learn every one of her fucking secrets.

They were mine.

*She* was mine.

And regardless of whatever the future held, I knew that was one thing that would never change.

I wanted her.

*Needed* her.

And I'd fight like hell to keep her.

**THIRTEEN**

MORGAN



I WOKE up in the same position I'd fallen asleep: buried in Axel's arms, both of us bundled up to the point of sweating.

Or maybe I was the only one sweating, and it was because of the hangover.

My stomach churned, and panic blazed through me.

I shoved Axel's heavy-ass arms off of me, then crashed hard to the floor, landing on my knees.

"The fuck?" my wolfy mate's voice asked groggily.

I was already scrambling toward the bathroom.

My knees hit the ground again—purposefully this time—as I reached the toilet, just in time to lose the contents of my stomach.

Axel was behind me a moment later, his front pressing lightly to my back as he steadied me with one hand and held my hair back with the other.

My body was shaking as my ass settled on the backs of my heels.

Demons didn't get sick, usually. And holy shit, it sucked.

Poor Iris.

"You good?" Axel asked me. I was probably imagining it, but I thought I could hear worry in his low voice.

"Peachy," I croaked.

His responding chuckle almost made me smile.

"If I'd known it would make you sick, I wouldn't have talked you into drinking that shit," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

The apology surprised me.

My eyes closed as another wave of nausea churned my stomach. "It's fine. The alternative was probably me burning something down. Or someone."

It was a good call.”

“Unlike your decision to work at a damn *bar*,” he grumbled at me.

I scowled, my eyes still closed. “That was a freaking awesome decision, actually. I get to talk to so many people. None of them look at me like I’m a freak, or a weakling, or like anything else is wrong with me. Making the drinks is fun, too. And I actually think I’m starting to understand my magic, now that I’m allowed to use it.”

Axel growled at me. “Not in those tiny shorts, Mo. I’m sure at least one or two bastards even hit on you. There are always a few guys in town who don’t want to wait for their mate.”

If I wasn’t already so sick, my face would’ve heated at the reminder.

The guy who looked like Axel *had* asked me to dance.

“I’m not quitting,” I finally told him.

My stomach churned, and the world spun a little.

“You’re shaking again.” He leaned against me a bit harder, pinning my chest to the front of the toilet to hold me upright.

*Yeah, I was shaking again.*

*Not a great sign.*

“Think I’m going to puke again,” I admitted with a small groan.

“I’ve got you.” His voice was gentle, but his grip was firm.

And damn, it felt good to be held like that.

I VOMITED two more times before my stomach was officially emptied. Axel pulled my gloves off my hands as I shook like a damn leaf, then tugged his own down his fingers and dropped both pairs on the bathroom’s floor.

He carried my sweating, moaning body back to the couch, growling at me to stay where I was while he went into the kitchen. I listened with my arms wrapped around my stomach as he called one of the food places in town and ordered an assload of soup.

Chances were, the large amount of food didn’t even faze them. This was Moon Ridge, after all.

With the order put in, Axel padded back over to me. I’d never thought he could look better than he did naked. I mean, come on. His naked body was really damn hot.

But somehow, in his navy blue jogger-style sweats, thick black wool socks, and dark grey hoodie, he looked even sexier.

Maybe because he'd been holding me all night.

Which was... well, it was messing with my mind.

He needed to leave before I started to feel even more things for him than I already did.

"I'm fine, now. Not going to puke again. You can go." I waved a hand toward the front door. "Don't need you here."

"Like hell you don't." He glowered down at me. "I'm not fucking leaving."

"Well, that's a first for you," I shot back, my defenses rising.

"With you, yes." He sat down next to me, the movements a bit more violent than they needed to be.

Then he dragged me up onto his lap, so my back met his chest.

I wiggled a bit, trying to get free, and he wrapped an arm around my abdomen to trap my body to his.

Frustration flooded me. "I told you, I don't want us to be friends if we're not being actual mates, Axel. I've had more than enough of people who are supposed to care about me coming and going; I don't need any more of that shit."

With the arm that wasn't acting as an unfortunate seatbelt, he turned on the TV, pulling up the list of chick flicks he had chosen from at random the night before.

"You can't just trap me here and ignore me," I growled at him, fighting against his grip.

"I'm not ignoring you; I'm turning a movie on for you."

"At least you don't deny trapping me," I shot back.

"Can't lie to you," he agreed.

"Then why won't you leave?"

"Because I'm not letting you go," he said simply.

As if it was some easy, little thing.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You're mine, Mo, and I'm yours. That's what it means. I'm not walking away again."

Well, he shocked me to silence with that one.

He was...

And I was...

He wanted us to be mates?

*Actual* mates?

“I don’t believe you,” I finally said.

“I know. That’s why I was keeping my mouth shut about it.” He scooted a foot or two across the couch, then eased us both down until we were laying together. His head was on a simple throw pillow, and mine was on his arm. It was surprisingly comfortable, despite the fact that it was made almost entirely out of muscle.

His chin rested on the top of my head as the movie started, and my throat swelled.

Dammit, he was going to make me feel things.

I didn’t want to feel things.

Even if I wasn’t sick, I wouldn’t have wanted all those emotions.

But he was still holding me.

And it still felt incredible.

Like I was safe. Steady. Secure.

Loved.

*Home.*

If he walked away now...

Shit, I wasn’t sure I could take it.

THE SOUP ARRIVED HALF an hour later. I was so relaxed I might as well have been half-dead.

“Don’t move,” Axel murmured to me, before he eased me out of his arms and strode to the door.

Despite living in the forest for ages, he didn’t seem to have a problem reincorporating himself back into the real world.

He opened the door and grabbed the food, then brought it back to the couch.

“We can’t eat here. What if we spill something?” I mumbled to him, as he sat down next to me with both bags of t0-go food. They went on the floor, and he eased me up to a seated position. I gave him a death glare, but he just smirked at me.

“If we spill, then we’ll clean it. It’s just a couch.” He pulled out the first tub of soup, setting it on my lap and then placing a spoon in my hand. “Start slow.”

“I don’t know if I can even eat at all,” I grumbled back. “And this isn’t just a couch. It’s a *nice* couch.”

“If we wreck the couch with soup—which I find highly unlikely—then I’ll buy a new one, Mo.”

“That’s expensive,” I argued.

He leaned over and pulled the lid off my soup. “I can afford it.”

“I’m not letting you pay to replace the furniture in the house that’s officially mine. I even have the damn paperwork,” I argued.

“Well, then I’ll charge you. Put my name back on the title, right alongside yours, in exchange for a new couch.” He lifted my hand, and used it to put the spoon in the soup.

I shot him a dead-panned look, but lifted a spoonful to my mouth.

Damn, it was good.

After swallowing, I continued the argument.

“Assuming we did wreck the couch, and you were so insistent on replacing it, why would I add your name to the title in exchange? I may be shitty at everything else, from your perspective, but I’m smart enough to know that a couch costs a lot less than a townhouse.”

“Because assuming this was a real situation, we would be in love, living as real mates, sharing everything else anyway.” His eyes narrowed at me. “And I don’t think you’re shitty at anything—except properly covering that perfect ass when you leave our house. You can be as naked as you want for me. In fact, nudity is preferable here. But as soon as you walk out those damn doors, you should fucking cover what’s mine.”

I scowled. “By that logic, I’d better start wearing a ski mask everywhere so no one can see my face. Or my hair. Or the color I painted my toenails.”

“Exactly. I’m being generous by letting you show your damned ankles, Mo. Glad we’re finally on the same page about that.”

I snorted, and he finally, *finally* gave me a small but wicked grin.

“If it really bothers you that much, I’ll consider trying on some other clothes whenever I next make it to a clothing store. I’m not promising anything, though.”

“It does. And, thank you.” He gestured to my soup.

I reluctantly lifted the spoon back to my lips. It was good, but I wasn’t ready for another round of vomiting.

He opened his own bowl, and started eating too. The room was silent for a few minutes, but it was comfortable silence. I eyed him, and he just outright stared at me, like he was trying to memorize my every feature.

“So, why is it such a big deal to you?” I asked. “The clothes thing?”



He considered it, and finally said, “It feels to me a lot like it would for you if I were to walk around in public in boxer-briefs and nothing else, with a raging hard-on.”

I blinked at him, trying to picture that.

If he’d walked into the bar, with his erection tenting a pair of tiny shorts, and nothing else on...

Damn.

I wouldn’t have been pissed. That wasn’t really my thing.

But I would’ve felt like everyone was staring at him. Checking him out. Seeing pretty much every part of him.

I wasn’t possessive the same way a male wolf was, but I could see how it would make them insane.

Me... it would just make me doubt myself.

Or feel on guard.

I didn’t really know, since I’d never been in that situation. But suddenly, I understood his perspective a lot better.

That didn’t mean I was going to start dressing like a nun, but I would try on clothes that covered a little more skin.

Axel added, “Some people would be fine with that, and that’s their call. I don’t judge them for it. But when I see all those eyes on you, my possessiveness rears up, and my wolf fights me. And the instinct to pin you to a wall and claim you in front of everyone in the room grows difficult to ignore.”

*Well, damn.*

“Thanks for explaining.” I lifted my spoon back to my mouth, before Axel decided to snag it and feed me himself. “I’ll definitely try on some other clothes. If I’m just as comfortable in something that covers a little more skin, I’ll wear it.”

He nodded. “We’ll go tomorrow. When I’m sure you’ve recovered from the alcohol.”

It was kind of touching that he was so worried about me.

“I’m still not convinced you’ll actually be here tomorrow,” I countered.

“Then tomorrow, you’ll be convinced.” He flashed me a bit of a smirk, scooting a little closer to me.

He turned the TV back on, and we ate together while we watched, our elbows bumping every now and then.

As stupid as it sounds, that simple contact gave me the damn butterflies.

## FOURTEEN



WE SPENT the rest of the day laying around, bingeing a TV show, and eating a disgusting amount of food. Everything Char had brought was gone by the time the sun went down.

“What are we going to do for dinner?” Axel mused, walking those long legs and that gorgeous ass of his over to the pantry. “Shit, I haven’t restocked this. How did I forget to do that?”

“You were busy running away from me,” I reminded him, heading for the stove. “We can just do pasta again.”

“We had spaghetti for lunch.” He glanced over at me. “Why would we eat it again?”

I shrugged, and lied. “Pasta is the best.”

His eyes narrowed at me. “Does this have something to do with the canned shit you were eating in your old apartment?”

“No,” I said too quickly.

His eyes narrowed further.

I carried the pot over to the sink and started the water to fill it up.

“Mo,” he warned me, his voice getting all growly in the way that made my toes curl just a little bit.

I had to at least give him half an answer. “Pasta is cheap. It just seems silly to waste money on food that costs more, when pasta is an option.”

He stepped over to me and plucked the half-filled pot out of my hands, setting it off to the side of the sink before turning off the faucet.

Then he stepped between me and the counter.

The sides of our socked feet pressed against each other.

So did our chests.

“Morgan,” Axel said, in that stupidly attractive voice.

“Yes?”

“Fuck, it’s killing me not to touch your face right now.”

My cheeks heated.

“I need you to look at me, Mo.”

I lifted my eyes to his, slowly, so he knew I wasn’t going to give in *too* easily when he started bossing me around. I mean, I would give in. That bossiness was hot. But I’d be slow about it.

Our gazes collided.

“I am not a small man. Werewolf genes are responsible for that, for the most part. Genes which you now have.”

I wasn’t sure that was entirely accurate, but wasn’t about to argue with him over something that small.

“Do you know what happens to a werewolf who doesn’t eat enough?” he asked me.

I blinked. “No.”

“They shrink. Their body basically cannibalizes itself. Do you think that’s something I’m okay with yours doing? Or mine, for that matter?”

I blinked again. “No.”

“Then you understand that not eating is no longer an option for you.”

“I always *wanted* to eat,” I said defensively.

He studied me.

I stepped back from him, giving myself space to breathe.

He watched me as I paced the kitchen a couple of times, my arms wrapping around my abdomen.

“Look, I just...” I bit my lip. “It’s not eating that I have a problem with, okay? It’s spending money. Like, the soup?” I gestured toward the couch, where we’d eaten said soup. “With the money you probably spent on it—*don’t* tell me the total—I could’ve paid my power bill for a month. I could’ve eaten real spaghetti for at least a week, too. Maybe longer. In the last year, there wasn’t money for that. For *anything*.”

I continued pacing. “Our damn *water* got shut off for a week, at one point. Do you know what it’s like, living without water? Not being able to flush the toilet? Or shower? In your own home? I know there are bigger problems, out there in the world. Fuck, I know I’m a whiner. But money, for me... I just have a stress reaction to spending it. I always feel like there’s

something more important I should be using it for, like if I spend the money, I'm going to end up screwing us out of something we need. And I know that makes me sound stupid, and ridiculous, and—”

“It doesn't.” Axel's voice was firm.

His hands caught my hips as I walked by, and he dragged my reluctant ass back to him until our pelvises met. My head tipped back, so I was looking him in the eyes. “It doesn't?”

“No, it doesn't.” He was so damn calm. “It's been a long, difficult year for you since Iris got sick. Not only have you been feeding her with your own blood, you've been paying for both of your living costs without any help—and with a shitty job that underpaid you. One you had no way out of. None of that was your fault.”

My throat swelled.

My eyes started to get slightly watery.

I think I needed to hear that—that it wasn't my fault.

I'd known it wasn't, of course.

But still, hearing him say that...

Shit.

I needed it.

“Can I give you a solution to this problem, or would you prefer to figure it out yourself?” he asked me calmly.

I blinked.

My independence said that I could figure it out, but...

Screw independence.

If he had an instant solution, I was sure as hell going to take it.

“Solution, please.”

“I'll add you to my bank account. Money isn't a problem for me. I make it, and don't really spend it. Or haven't for the last five years, at least.”

I blinked again.

“I'll make sure you have cards for the accounts we share, and a log-in, so you can get online and see that we're fine at any given moment. At the same time we do that, we'll open up an account just for you. I won't have any access to it, not even to look and see what's inside it. We'll deposit the money I had stashed in the envelope, and you can set it up so you get paid there. Or you can take part of your paycheck and deposit it in your own account; whatever you're the most comfortable with. If you start to feel stressed, you can log in and see that we're fine on money.”

Oh.

Well, that did sound like a good solution.

“Okay.” I jerked my head in a nod. “That sounds like it would help. But I think you should have your own account separate from mine, too, until I’m more used to this.” I gestured between us, second guessing myself even as the words left my mouth. “And so that I don’t get worried or irritated with you if you buy cake or something.”

He flashed me a grin.

*Shit, he was pretty.*

“If I buy cake, it’s going to be for you.”

“Well, I’m not going to complain about that.” I leaned my head against his chest, and he wrapped his arms around my back.

Breathing in his scent, I suddenly understood why he was always sniffing me.

He just smelled *good*. Like comfort, and happiness.

Like home.

Not that I was trusting him completely, or going all-in with him.

We were fated, but we weren’t mates. Not yet, at least. Not completely. He said that was what he’d wanted, but we’d only spent the one day together. And we hadn’t talked about what he was going to do about his pack, or why he felt like he couldn’t leave them in the first place.

“Alright, we’re going grocery shopping. And you’d better not strip down to your shorts—I might accidentally grab your ass while it hangs out of those damn things,” he grumbled at me.

I laughed. “How do you accidentally grab someone’s ass?”

“Not *someone’s*; My female’s. When it taunts me like that, there’s no telling where my hand might end up.” His palm grazed my butt, and I pressed against him a little harder. His erection met my lower belly, and I grinned.

“Horny, huh?”

“How could I not be, with you pressed against me like this?” He squeezed my ass.

My grin widened. “I’m wearing a lot of clothes.”

“I know what’s underneath them, and can’t fucking touch it.” His grip on my butt tightened, almost painfully.

“About that…” I trailed off, feeling slightly guilty about Iris’s admission at the bar. “I feel like I should probably tell you, I wasn’t going to admit how you could move from the release to the possession part of the mating process.

Iris texted you the answer from my phone, while I was working. I didn't know until last night, right before you got there."

He nodded. "Not surprising. I deserved it."

"You did," I agreed.

His grip on my ass tightened further, and I inhaled sharply. During the climax, we'd definitely learned that we liked to be rough with each other.

*Definitely.*

"Who hit on you at the bar?" he asked me, his voice low.

I made a face, and said nothing.

"Mo." His voice was gravelly.

"Pretty sure I signed an NDA before I started working there," I lied.

"Not a fucking chance Saul has an NDA."

Saul was my boss's name, not that I called him that. He didn't seem anything like my old boss, but I wasn't risking it with that shit.

Not worth it.

"Tell me," he growled at me.

"I'm not going to do that. You can go to work with me and watch out for flirty bastards if you're that worried about it." I patted his back in condolence.

"You're lucky you're so damn cute," he grunted into my hair. "I'm going to kill whoever flirted with you."

I rolled my eyes at that, even if it made my toes curl a little bit.

WE GRABBED our shoes and headed out. Axel grumbled to me that he was replacing my shoes too, when he saw all of the holes in them. I would've argued, but my baby toe could fit through the hole closest to it.

It was too late for shoe or clothes shopping, though, so to the grocery store we went.

Axel refused to let me push the cart when we first walked into the store, but after he realized I wasn't one to throw random shit into the basket, I became the cart-pusher and he took over the shopping part.

He filled the damn thing to the brim with things that would last a long time, like the rice, beans, pasta, and canned fruit and veggies we had blown through while we were in the climax. We bought all of that, then loaded up the truck and went back in for other stuff.

After more shopping, and anxiety that I fought like hell to control, we

finally finished and headed toward the front of the store again.

On our way to the check-out, we passed an older woman with bright white hair. A similarly-aged man walked beside her as she pushed her cart, his arm wrapped around her waist in a way that reminded me of Axel's possessive tendencies.

The woman did a double-take when she saw us, then steered her cart into our path. I halted, and Axel's hand landed on the cart too, just in case I didn't stop fast enough I guess.

"Axel Ellsworth!" she exclaimed.

His expression grew soft, and he stepped around my cart, then wrapped his arms around the woman and gave her a gentle hug.

"Hi, Gram."

*Gram?*

*Oh, shit.*

I glanced behind me, looking for somewhere to retreat to, but there was nowhere.

And I'd look like a bitch if I ran from his *grandma*.

"The audacity!" she exclaimed. "My grandson finds his mate, then lets me know with just one text. And when he comes back into town for the first time in years, he goes grocery shopping without even sending me a damn invitation! Does that sound like love to you, Joey?"

Axel's grandpa flashed me a grin and a wink. "Not at all."

"Exactly." She released Axel and gave him a stern glare. "Now, introduce me to your pretty mate and tell me why I heard you abandoned her in that townhouse right after spending the climax in her arms. And why you're wearing a sweatshirt when it's so damn hot out."

Axel stepped back to my side with a chuckle. His arm went around my waist, and he pulled me closer. "Gram and Grandpa, this is Morgan. Morgan, these are my grandparents. They have names, but Gram's wolf will bite me if you don't call them Gram and Grandpa."

Gram's glare turned into a reluctant smile. "At least you remember *some* things."

"Morgan and I are still figuring things out, but we'll get there. You know you don't have to worry about me."

"And you know I'll worry about you regardless." She looked at me. "How are you doing? I know becoming a werewolf is a lot to take in. Probably even more so, considering you're a demon. I know other types of

supernaturals don't much like us."

"We actually call them mysts, like mystical creatures," I offered, feeling stupid for correcting her as soon as the words had left my mouth. "And honestly, Mist Valley wasn't a good place for me. Moon Ridge is already much better."

Gram beamed at me. "As it should be. Now, what about the sweatshirts?"  
I bit back a grimace.

"The demon mating process is more complex than the wolf one," Axel said. He explained the process to her quickly, and her eyebrows were furrowed when he finished.

"Well that's a pain, isn't it?"  
I fought a laugh.

"It is," he agreed. "But worth it." His lips brushed the side of my head, kissing the hood that was still over my hair.

Happiness and uncertainty warred within me at his declaration.

Sure, he seemed to have decided that he wanted to be with me, but how long would that last? How long did I have until he decided that his pack was going to come first again? How long until he realized he hated running water and having a roof over his head, and decided to go back out to the forest?

That uncertainty kept my trust for him at bay, even though my feelings of attachment were growing.

There was nothing I could do about those bastardly feelings, though.

We said goodbye to Axel's Gram and Grandpa a few minutes later, and as we went, she called out, "Remind that feral pack of yours that they're always welcome for dinner!"

He waved in response, maneuvering me toward the checkout.



## FIFTEEN



“YOUR GRANDPARENTS SEEM NICE,” I told him, as we climbed into the truck.

“They are.” He lifted the middle console up, and gestured for me to scoot closer.

I lifted an eyebrow at him.

He reached across the seat, grabbed my thigh, and dragged me to the middle.

I gave him a dry look. “You wanted to sit next to me?”

“Yup.” His hand landed on my thigh and squeezed it roughly.

He pulled away from the store, leaving his gigantic palm on my thigh. Every minute or so, he squeezed it, his chest rumbling a bit every time.

Honestly, it turned me on.

I didn’t act on that, though. It wasn’t like we could get naked together.

I had heard about people working around the flames, getting themselves off together or using toys on each other, while they moved through the process and fell in love or whatever.

But Axel had been extremely against me touching myself, so... he probably wouldn’t be into that shit.

“Why are you guys called the Feral Pack?” I asked him, hoping that a subject change would distract me.

“It started as an insult. We moved to the forest and worked through our shit, developing trust with our wolves. People talked poorly about us, until a fight broke out in a restaurant a little over three years ago. Fights break out all the damn time, in Moon Ridge. Most people’s wolves take over the moment

there's a sign of danger, and everything escalates really damn quickly. Nico, my pack's alpha, was there for a family thing."

He continued, "Everyone in the restaurant shifted, except Nico. He remained calm and in his human form, and deescalated the situation rapidly. Everyone was stunned. Word travelled fast, and people started coming to our pack's land, asking us to teach them to control their wolves like that. We did it for free at first, but no one took it seriously. When we started to charge, they actually tried. The town has transformed since then, and we almost constantly have a pack or two staying with us for lessons. Some even come from other towns, across the country."

"Damn." I whistled. "So I'm a huge disappointment because I have no wolf for you to practice your mad taming skills on."

He snorted. "No. Wolves make everything more complicated. It's part of life, and I've figured that shit out, but not having to factor yours into everything happening between us is actually a relief for me. I'm sure my wolf feels a loss, though. He'll still want you to run with him, and play with him in your wolf form. They're like big, extremely intelligent dogs."

"I've never had a dog."

"Well, you do now." He squeezed my thigh again. "He's still processing everything right now, but he's not the laid-back type."

"Well, he did bite me on the *throat*. Can't say I'm doubting his possessiveness."

Axel chuckled as we pulled up to the townhouse, and parked in the garage. "Your phone is in the glovebox, by the way. Iris gave it to me yesterday before we left the bar."

"Oh." I pulled it out and checked for messages. Iris had texted me a few times, telling me to be safe, wishing me luck, and then requesting updates a few times.

I shot her a quick message, saying I was fine and Axel wanted to take a shot at being real mates, so I was hanging out that day.

There was another message, this one from my boss. He told me to let him know when I'd figured things out with Axel and was ready to come back to work, and that if I was up for it, sooner was better than later.

I responded that I'd need one more day off, and then be good to come back.

Sliding it into my sweatshirt pocket, I climbed out of the truck and helped Axel haul the groceries inside. He grumbled at me that he could get it all, and

I told him to get over it.

After a few trips, we settled into a calm rhythm while putting things away together. Some part of him brushed my ass pretty much every time I passed him, and my tits a few times too.

It was stupidly erotic, given that we were just putting things away.

I was horny, and needed to do something about it.

“I’m going to shower,” I told him, as he finished putting away the last bag of groceries. “Want to watch another movie afterward?”

“Sure.” He was still in the pantry, so I headed up the stairs without giving him time to change his mind or anything.

I swung the door shut, but a giant hand stopped it before it could close all the way.

*Shit.*

“We can shower together,” Axel told me, though he waited in the hallway like he expected me to shoot him down.

I didn’t know how to do that without clueing him in to what I had planned to do in said shower, or making him think I was mad at him or something. So, I nodded.

He stepped inside, and I turned on the water so it could start heating while I stripped.

Wrestling his sweatshirt over my head was a pain in the ass, and I let out a huff of relief when I finally got it off. My tank followed, and then my bra.

Axel’s chest was rumbling when my hands landed on the waistband of the sweats I had on. My shorts were still on beneath them too, so I was pretty sure I’d feel like a whole new person when I wasn’t wearing them anymore.

I glanced over at him, finding him already stripped down to his damn socks.

His erection was huge.

And his fists were clenched.

“What?” I looked up at his face, though it took major effort. “Why do you look like you’re considering starting a fist fight with me?”

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he told me, through a clenched jaw. “And I can’t touch you.”

Oh.

Well, yeah.

There was that.

“Your mating process is torture,” he growled.

“Hey, I wasn’t the one who came up with it.” I pushed the sweats down, stepping out of the puddle of material before unbuttoning my shorts and stepping out of them.

Axel’s eyes were then glued to the cheeky, red lace panties. “Those are new.”

I made a face. “Iris and I have very different taste in underwear.”

“What would you choose?”

“Black, probably. Not lace. I’ve always preferred thongs.”

“We’ll add underwear to the list.”

I peeled my panties off, then my socks, and then opened the clear glass door of the shower and stepped inside.

Axel caught the door before it shut, and stepped into the space with me. It wasn’t a small shower, but damn, he was a big man.

And the knowledge that we couldn’t touch made me shudder a little.

“Think this is going to kill me,” Axel muttered, as he grabbed the soap.

I squeezed some shampoo into my hands and lifted it to my hair, scrubbing at my scalp.

We washed ourselves in tense, hot silence, taking turns beneath the flowing water.

When we were done, I shut off the shower and he reached for the towels.

Shit, I was *stupidly* horny.

He bundled me in the towel, and I closed my legs tightly, hoping he wouldn’t realize how turned on I was. The smell of the soap we’d used was strong enough to hide it, I thought.

Axel dried himself off just outside the shower as I crossed the hallway, my heart pounding rapidly.

I wasn’t sure I could make it much longer.

He walked in while I was pulling a clean sweatshirt over my head, not bothering with another pair of panties.

They’d just get drenched.

He dressed the same way I did. Neither of us broke the tense silence, even when we made our way back down the stairs.

I sat on the couch while he grabbed the remote and turned on a movie. When he dragged me into his arms, laying sprawled across the furniture with his erection pressed against my ass, I didn’t make a peep.

His hand wrapped around my thigh, squeezing again as the opening credits for the movie started.

I struggled to keep my breathing even as he pulled on my thigh, widening the gap between my legs.

Axel inhaled sharply, and his chest rumbled beneath my back. “We need to talk about how we’re going to make this part of the mating process manageable, Mo.”

“Do we?” I asked, struggling to keep my breathing even as his hand slid further up my thigh. If I moved just a little, it would be pressing right where I wanted it.

“I can smell your desire for me, and you can feel mine for you. We decided not to touch ourselves, so I haven’t. Have you?”

“No,” I admitted.

I mean, I was going to in the shower.

But every time I’d tried in the days since he’d abandoned me, I remember the way he told me that I belonged to him, and couldn’t do it.

“Good.” His satisfaction was heavy in my ear. “The way I see it, we have a few options. Getting ourselves off together, while we watch each other. Buying a few toys. If we’re careful enough, condoms could work. Or, we can touch each other through our clothes. Any of those sound appealing to you?”

“All of the above?” I managed.

His growl of approval only made me wetter. “I need to watch you unravel. Be right back.”

With that, he slid over the back of the couch and stalked up the stairs.

Excitement had my heart beating rapidly as I waited.

He didn’t leave me for long.

When he came back down, he had a pair of boxer briefs in his hands, and was wearing a different pair of pants. They looked like soft, black pajamas.

“Put these on, and then pull the sweats up to the bottom hem of them,” he said, taking the seat where my head had been when I sat up to make the quick change. His underwear were thin and soft, with plenty of extra fabric since I was smaller than him. Suddenly, I understood why he’d grabbed them.

When I’d done as he instructed, he pulled me closer, parting his legs and leaning me up against his chest as we both sank into the couch a bit. His erection was against my lower back, and when I rocked against it slightly, he let out a low growl that made my toes curl.

The movie was still playing, but neither of us was paying a single shred of attention to it.

“Do you remember when you sat on my face?” He growled at me, lightly

cupping my core with his massive palm. I arched against him, fighting the urge to command him just to grab me.

“Which time?” My voice strained a little.

“The last one. Describe it to me.”

*Shit.*

*Okay.*

“You woke me up with your face between my thighs,” I said, and he rewarded me with a stroke to my clit, against the fabric of the shorts.

I groaned, rocking my hips, but his hand paused again.

He wanted me to keep talking, to get closer to the edge.

Damn him.

“I lost it, and you told me that wasn’t enough. You rolled us over, and set me on your face. Your chin dug into my ass while you licked my clit.” He started stroking me again, the touches rougher than usual because of the fabric separating us. I wanted his skin on mine, but knew that wasn’t going to happen.

When I got distracted by his touches and stopped talking, he stopped petting me.

A groan escaped me, and when I started talking again, I was panting. “I lost it again, and then leaned forward and wrapped my lips around your cock. We got each other off that way, and then you put me on my hands and knees. You filled me up, so fucking full. It was too much, and I lost control as you slammed into me, losing yourself inside me.”

“That’s fucking right.” He bit down on my covered shoulder, pushing harder against my clit, and I shattered with a cry, rocking against him. He throbbed against my back, and I felt the fabric between us grow damp.

I struggled for breath. “Hot damn.”

“Fuck, I want to touch you,” Axel growled into my ear.

“We should probably watch the movie instead,” I said, feeling dazed.

“Damn you for being reasonable.” He dragged me into his arms, clutching me tightly to him. Neither of us cared that we were a bit, uh, messy.

“Soon enough, I’ll be so fucking in love with you that your magic won’t keep us separated anymore,” he said, into my ear. “Prepare to be fucked and cuddled, Mo. I had more than enough of you refusing to snuggle with me for a damn lifetime during the climax. You’re mine now, in every way.”

My eyes stung a little, and I didn’t respond.

What could I possibly say, when I still felt like there was a damn good

chance he'd change his mind about being with me at all?

## SIXTEEN



THE NEXT DAY, we headed out bright and early to go shopping. There was a larger variety of stores in the nearest city, which was around an hour away, so we didn't bother shopping in Moon Ridge.

I probably should've expected it, but Axel dragged me right to the pants section the moment we arrived in the store. He filled a cart with shit for me to try on while I wandered around, looking for things that caught my eye. I didn't like anything super girly, with flowers or lace, so I avoided that shit. But I'd read about how comfortable leggings were, so I put a bunch of different styles of those in the cart too.

None of the tops really caught my eye, and Axel had thrown such a massive variety of them into the cart already that I didn't bother grabbing any more.

Trying things on took forever. Axel made me show him every single item, so after the first few times, I just dragged his muscular ass into the changing room and sat him down on the small bench inside it.

The way he watched me said he definitely didn't mind the insane number of times I had to take my clothes on and off.

The more things I tried on, the more I decided that leggings were just as glorious as the internet proclaimed—and the more I realized that I really loved my simple tank tops.

When I told Axel the bad news, he took it better than I expected.

Probably because he'd been watching me dress and undress for an hour, but whatever. I'd take it.

He refused to let me look at prices as I tried things on, and proceeded to



buy me way too many new tank tops and pairs of leggings.

While he checked out, I walked a lap around the store.

We both knew I wasn't ready to hear that damn total.

He met me at the exit, stealing my hand and lifting it to his lips so he could kiss the back of it.

After that, the bastard forced me into an underwear store, and a shoe store too. He didn't have as much fun watching me try on shoes as he did bras and panties, but he didn't complain one damn time.

WHEN WE FINALLY DROVE AWAY FROM the shoe store, I was completely drained.

"Want to stop for food?" Axel asked me.

I grimaced. "Pasta would be good."

His hand was on my thigh, since I was in the middle seat again, and he squeezed lightly. The bastard was in the best mood I'd ever seen him in, and I was pretty sure it had something to do with the fact that he had been providing me with clothes, food, shoes, and anything else he could come up with all day. "I have a favor to ask."

My grimace deepened. "You know I owe you anything you want. Including a blowjob, although that would probably be a bad call right now."

He laughed. "You don't *have* to agree, Mo. And you don't owe me anything. Taking care of your mate is a basic need for a werewolf. Today made me feel a hell of a lot better about pretty much everything."

"Then what's the favor?"

"I'd like you to officially meet my pack. The guys have been asking me when and if I'm coming back, and I need to tell them in person that I'm moving back into town. I've got to figure out a way to do that without making them think I'm abandoning them."

"I thought they hate women?"

He shook his head. "They're just jaded. Kai was the peacemaker in our group—the omega—and kind of kept all of us from losing our shit. He met his mate first, and she was manipulative in pretty much every way there is, until she left him with a newborn baby less than a year after they met. She had cancer. It's a long, shitty story. Finn grew up in a pack across the country, and moved here to join us after his mate rejected him. The rejection should've killed him, but didn't. Nico was raised by his grandparents, after

his mom refused to stay in Moon Ridge. Enzo's mom despises what she is, and hates him for being a werewolf."

My eyebrows lifted. "Ryder's a part of your pack too, though. Right?"

"Yeah. He's been with Char for a handful of years, so we don't see him often."

I nodded. "So what's *your* reason for being jaded, then?"

He was silent for a long moment.

Long enough that I knew he *was* jaded, but also knew that he didn't really want to talk about it.

That hurt a little, since he had seen how bad things had gotten for me and Iris back in Mist Valley.

"Never mind. We can stop and talk to your pack if you want, but I don't want to make any of them feel uncomfortable or make them hate me."

"You won't." His voice was firm. "They'll be on their best behavior."

Somehow, I doubted that.

I didn't scoot away from Axel when he pulled into the drive-through of a chain restaurant I hadn't been to before... at least not physically.

But mentally, I'd taken a big ole' scoot.

Because if he wanted me to share my life story, but didn't want to talk about his, we sure as hell weren't on the same page about what it meant to live like real mates.

I WATCHED the trees fly by as we drove down a bumpy dirt road. We'd been on the dirt for at least twenty minutes, and Axel had rolled the windows down a little bit earlier. Honestly, the wind felt nice against my face and in my hair.

He kept looking over at me, like he was waiting for me to tell him to turn around or something. Even if I'd been dying for him to do that, I wouldn't have said it aloud.

His pack was important to him. He was trying to decide whether or not I was too—even if he'd made that big declaration about how certain he was. We were still too new for him to be as sure about anything as he'd claimed, honestly.

He'd been willing to walk away from me right after we finished with the werewolf side of the mating process, so... I don't know. I guess I still didn't trust him.

And knowing that he was keeping shit from me made that worse.

“What?” I asked him, having to yell a little because of the noisy wind.

“You’re gorgeous,” he called back.

I blinked.

My chest warmed a little. “Thanks.”

A moment passed, and then he finally admitted, “I’m nervous.”

There it was.

“It’ll be fine,” I said with a shrug. “I’m used to people not liking me.”

He growled, and his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

But he said nothing.

Things were more tense after that, but I turned my face back toward the window and closed my eyes.

I’d never liked the outdoors, but something about the fresh air felt soothing in a way it never had before.

Then again, I’d never been out in nature this way before, other than the first day I met Axel. And that had been a hell of a day for so many reasons.

And, I supposed, I hadn’t been a werewolf then.

Whether that changed anything other than my ability to shift into a furry monster, I didn’t know.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, we finally reached the pack’s territory. Axel backed into the gap between two trucks, parking and then walking around to my door. He caught it when I opened it, and tipped his head toward the back seat. “Would you mind...” he trailed off, grimacing a bit.

I lifted an eyebrow, knowing exactly what he was trying not to ask.

I wasn’t going to make this shit easy for him, though.

“Would I mind what?”

His grimace deepened. “Putting some of the new clothes on?”

“Of course I wouldn’t mind it. We spent hours at the damn store, remember? I picked everything myself.”

“I remember.” He grabbed the nearest bag and pulled it closer to me, but of course, didn’t touch me.

I grabbed a pair of leggings and one of the new tank tops, then shimmied out of my old clothes and into the new ones. When I tugged my hair free of the tank that had trapped it, Axel’s fingers dug into the door’s hand-hold.

“You okay?” I checked, sliding my legs toward the door.

He stepped back. “Just fucking desperate to touch you.”

Ah, yes.

I can't say I minded his desire to touch me, even if things were weird and uncertain between us.

Granted, he didn't seem uncertain.

He just wanted me to be his without having to share whatever shit he'd been through.

"Ready?" he asked me.

No.

Definitely not ready.

"Yep." I climbed out of the truck, wishing I had pockets to shove my hands into, or something to hold.

But since my phone could easily be melted, I'd left it in the truck.

And off we went.

## SEVENTEEN



THERE WAS a small campfire a short distance from the large travel trailer that I had been told belonged to Kai and his son Lucas. All of the guys I'd seen in the forest on the day I met Axel were there, sitting in camping chairs around the fire.

When I saw the camping chairs, I wondered how permanent the men really saw their forest-life as. Because if they were really planning on spending their lives out there, wouldn't they have gotten benches or something?

I supposed I didn't know how outdoor living really worked, though.

Nico gave me a two-fingered wave, his expression neutral. The little boy next to the gigantic tan and tatted monster (who somewhat resembled the younger version of Kai I'd seen in pictures) took a few steps closer to his dad, looking uncertain.

The other two guys, I knew, were Finn and Enzo. Enzo had lightly-tanned skin and an assload of curly dark blond hair tied in a bun at the base of his neck. Finn had light brown skin and long locs put up in a thick ponytail.

I heard laughter and saw more flames off in the trees a bit to my right, and peered off in that direction for a moment before Axel introduced me to everyone.

"Hey, guys. As you know, this is Morgan." He gestured toward me with one hand, and the other wrapped around my hips, low enough not to touch the thin strip of skin between the hem of my tank and the waistband of my leggings.

A few of them nodded.

Kai murmured something to his son, whose name I'd been told on the way over was Lucas, and the little boy waved at me.

I waved back, ignoring the heat flooding my cheeks at the awkwardness of the situation. "Hi, again."

The men were silent as Axel all but dragged me to the one empty camping chair.

No way in hell was I sitting on his lap with all those guys just staring at me. I—

Axel sat down and tugged me onto his thigh, still careful not to touch my skin.

"Which packs are here right now?" Axel asked the other guys.

They gave him a run-down of the answer, listing off a handful of names. I glanced back toward the other fire, and figured it must've been one of the packs they were talking about.

"So you have a bunch of other packs hanging out here?" I asked, not sure which of the guys to look at.

None of them answered me.

*Awkward.*

Kai handed Lucas a marshmallow, and the little boy stuck it onto the end of a stick before walking closer to the fire.

*Shit, this was awkward.*

"Most of the newly-graduated wolves signed up for our training classes," Axel explained to me, his voice low and frustrated. "The same thing happened last year, and it went well for everyone."

I bit back a sigh.

"That's cool," I said, nodding a bit.

When I glanced at Axel, I saw him glaring at his buddies across the fire, and my face heated further.

*Somehow, this was going even worse than I expected.*

"So what do demons do?" Enzo asked.

Damn.

Nope, I didn't really like that question.

"Mostly, we run bars and nightclubs. Sometimes, coffee shops or smoothie bars," I explained quickly. "We have flames, in here." I tapped the center of my chest. "And they're just flames, until we combine them with food or drinks. The magic wears off too quickly in food, so mostly, we do things involving drinks."

A few of the men looked a little interested by that explanation, at least. Interested was good.

Better than awkwardly ignoring me, at least.

“If you can’t send people to hell, then why are you called demons?” Finn countered.

“Why are you called werewolves instead of wolf-shifters?” I shot back. “Word of mouth. Media. No one really knows. We’ve gone by a lot of names, but demons stuck. Probably because a strong hit of our magic comes with a gnarly hangover.”

I could attest to that.

Lucas whispered something to Kai, and Kai shot me a dirty look. He plucked the now-burnt marshmallow off the roasting stick, then handed it to his kid, still glowering at me.

“What?” I asked, growing a bit defensive.

He didn’t respond to me, but murmured something quietly to his son. Lucas nodded, and both of them walked to their trailer. The door shut hard behind them, and frustration welled up inside my chest.

Axel’s hand stroked my hip through the high-waisted leggings I had on. Maybe it was supposed to relax me, but it didn’t.

“So you could’ve worked at a coffee shop, but you picked a bar?” Finn drawled.

My defenses rose higher. “The bartender offered me a job within the first five minutes I was there. I need a way to make money, and bartending comes with large tips. Coffee shops and smoothie bars don’t.”

He smirked. “I’m sure all of the single men showing up to try your drinks was a damn good motivator, though.”

Axel’s grip on my hip tightened painfully.

“I couldn’t care less about that,” I retorted.

Finn chuckled. “Sure you don’t, Sweetheart.”

The conversation shifted quickly.

I tried to play nice. Tried not to get offended when they ignored me—and the glare Axel was shooting them.

Until Finn brought up my bartender job again, drawling about all the men hitting on me.

*Enough.*

*That was enough.*

I was done sitting on my ass, on Axel’s damn *knee*, while the pack of

assholes insulted me—or let one of their buddies insult me.

“Must be fun to watch every single guy in town drool over you,” Finn drawled.

I pushed Axel’s hand off my hip, forcing him to release me, and stood.

“It’s better hiding in the forest, afraid of interacting with an entire gender because someone might possibly hurt me again,” I said bluntly. “Some of us have to actually face our problems, or we don’t get to fucking *eat*.”

Spinning toward Axel, I flung my hand out toward him. “Keys. Now.”

His nostrils flared.

I could see in his eyes that he was going to argue. Ask me to stay. Or maybe just insist on driving me home.

“Your friend insulted me. You didn’t stand up for me. Now, I’m walking away. Give me the keys, or I’ll throw your shit out the window when I get home like we’re living in a damn chick-flick.” The level of rage I was dealing with was probably unhealthy, but screw health.

Axel’s eyes burned into me.

I stared right back, fury blazing too hotly to care about his glare.

Or his feelings.

The bastard had hurt me, whether he realized it or not.

He finally put the keys in my hand.

When I stalked back to the truck, he followed hot on my heels. “I wasn’t a—,” he started.

I cut him off with a snarl. “You don’t get to decide you didn’t hurt me.”

I opened the truck’s door, and slammed it shut behind me. The window was still open, though, so it wasn’t like there was a wall between us.

I turned the truck on, and he leaned into the window.

“Mo,” he growled. “You’re running away from me.”

“Yeah, I am. You know why?” I asked.

There was a moment’s pause.

“Because you don’t know what you want.” I tossed a hand toward the tents outside. “You don’t want to live without me, because of your instincts, and yet you don’t really want to live *with me*, either. If you did, you would’ve already packed your shit and brought it back to our house. *My house*.”

His jaw clenched, but he didn’t deny it.

“You want to be a part of my life, and yet you don’t really want me to be a part of yours. If you did, you wouldn’t have lied to me about your past—and you sure as hell wouldn’t have let your friend mock me like that. That



was awkward for everyone involved, and despite what all of you seem to think, it had nothing to do with women. All of this? It was on you guys.”

“You wanted us to be friends and nothing else,” he growled back. “You don’t want me to be a part of your life; you said that clear as fucking day.”

“Do you seriously think I ever wanted a mate who would be my *acquaintance*, Axel? You told me you weren’t going to live in that house with me, and I told you what I could handle in that situation. I grew up reading fairytales; I wanted Prince Charming. Not a fucking sex friend.”

Dropping my hand to the gear-shift, I put the truck in reverse.

Axel didn’t move, and I shot him a warning glare.

His grip on the truck’s windowsill was so tight I worried he’d break something.

“You can pick up your shit tomorrow morning. I’ll pack it up tonight,” I said.

His fingers dug into the truck, and his eyes went red.

But when I began to reverse the vehicle, he finally stepped back.

I didn’t let myself look in the mirror to see if he was still there when I drove away.

TEARS TRACKED down my cheeks as I drove. I’d seen flashes of fur outside my window, and was nearly positive wolf-Axel was following me through the forest.

My feelings for the wolf weren’t nearly as complicated as they were for the man.

I knew the wolf wanted to be by my side, snuggled up with me, protecting me.

And I knew the man hadn’t decided what the hell he wanted.

Halfway through the dirt road, I tugged my phone out of the glove box and dialed Iris’s number. I wasn’t on fire, by some miracle.

“Hey,” she said, sounding sleepy.

“Hey,” I managed.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Axel just...” I trailed off as my eyes stung. “It’s fine.”

“You’re crying, Morgan. It’s not *fine*. Tell me what he did.”

I gave her a quick summary of the day and what had gone down with Axel’s pack in the last hour. By the end of my explanation, she was cursing

his name and gorgeous, buff face.

The gorgeous and buff part were my addition.

They didn't soften the blow for her, though.

"I'll meet you at your house," she promised. "We'll burn his shit together."

"We're not burning anything," I said with a sigh. "It's fine."

"For the love of blood, Morgan, it's not fucking fine!" She practically yelled the words at me. "My sick, exhausted ass will be sitting on your damned porch when you get there, whether you like it or not. And you are going to be angry, because you should be."

My eyes stung more. "Okay."

At least I knew my vampire friend wasn't going to abandon me.

## EIGHTEEN



THE DRIVE back to my townhouse felt like it lasted forever.

When I finally pulled into the garage, Iris was indeed sitting on the porch—but my tears had dried.

My anger had faded, too.

And it had left a sad, resigned acceptance in its place.

Axel would probably come back. He'd apologize. Maybe he would offer to change.

I just...

Didn't know.

Was I even interested in his apology? Did I even want to be with him?

Those moments we'd spent on the couch, bundled up in our sweats and sweatshirts, had been some of the best moments of my life. The peace I'd felt, wrapped in his arms... nothing had ever compared to that for me.

What if I could come home to that kind of comfort after a long day or night of work?

What if I could wake up to it?

What if things could just always be happy?

If life with Axel could be like that all the time, and he showed up and apologized, I didn't know if I'd be able to turn him away.

Or if I even *should*.

I closed the garage, calling out to Iris that I'd come and help her. She flipped me off, which made my lips curl up in a half-smile as I headed into the townhouse.

A minute later, I had the door open and was helping her *sick, exhausted*

ass inside.

“You don’t look pissed,” she grumbled at me, even though she was breathing hard as I practically dragged her to the couch.

“I’m not pissed anymore,” I admitted, as I eased her to the cushions and then plopped down next to her.

The damn furniture smelled like me and Axel, which made me all happy and confused.

“You should be,” she argued.

“This is all new for him just like it’s new for me,” I said. “I might’ve overreacted.”

“If someone treats you like shit, you’re allowed to overreact,” Iris countered. “And from what you told me, it doesn’t sound like you did.”

“I’m just oversensitive about that stuff.” I lifted my knees up, dragging them to my chest as I curled up a little. “They were judging me, and I just panicked. I shouldn’t have.”

“They were being dicks on purpose, and you had an emotional response because most of the people in your life have been dicks to you,” Iris shot back. “That’s not oversensitivity.”

“Still, I could’ve calmly told them to fuck themselves.”

“You basically did.”

I heaved a sigh. “Why won’t you just let me throw myself a damn pity party?”

“Because you’re pitying them, not yourself.” She glared at me. “Tell me what you’re really thinking, Morgan.”

I wrapped my arms around my knees. “I want Axel. I want the life we had yesterday. The way he held me. The way I felt.” I bit my lip. “I walked away from him, and he deserved it. But what if staying and talking about it could’ve helped me reach the life I want?”

Understanding flooded her gaze. “He makes you feel good?”

“Exactly.” I leaned my head against the couch.

“And he didn’t say anything rude about you?”

“No.” I closed my eyes. “And you know how men are.”

“They don’t always pick up on social cues or know how to react in the moment,” Iris agreed. “Even if he did pick up on the cues, it probably surprised him to have his own friends acting like jerks to you.”

“Yeah. The guy saying the jerky shit was smirking while he was talking. If I were violent, I would’ve wanted to punch him in the face.”

Iris snorted. “You’re a werewolf now. Pretty sure that’s the definition of violence.”

My lips curved upward slightly. “So what do you think I should do?”

She sighed. “Give him a chance to explain, probably. If he doesn’t do a damn good job, though, you should kick his ass to the curb.”

I nodded. “Probably.”

“Not probably, Morgan. Definitely. Anyone who doesn’t treat you right can watch your foot enter their rectum.”

I made a face. “Gross.”

“But deserved.”

She was probably right.

I was just...

Tired.

Drained.

“I’ll make you some popcorn, and we can watch a movie while we wait for your furry man to realize he fucked up and come back here,” she offered.

I lifted an eyebrow toward her. “You’re going to make popcorn?”

Iris nodded. “I should’ve informed you, but I have gotten incredibly skilled at standing for short periods of time.”

A snort escaped me. “Your mate is going to be so screwed when he meets you.”

She flashed me a grin. “And so furry, if I’m lucky.”

I laughed. “I never would’ve expected you to hope for a werewolf.”

“Me neither,” she agreed. “But *damn*, they are sexy.”

Before Iris even managed to get up and start on the popcorn, I heard the front doorknob being turned. It was locked, of course, so the attempted-intruder knocked harshly.

“Let me in before I break our damn door down, Mo,” Axel growled outside the door. His voice was barely audible, but the threat was undeniable.

And he definitely had the guns to back up the threat.

“Mo?” Iris asked, shooting me an amused look.

My face reddened. “I tried to talk him out of it.”

“It’s cute. I’d leave you two alone, but I don’t think I can walk right now.” She made a face.

“I’ll help you back to your house,” I told her, standing and crossing the room.

Axel banged again, harder, just before I reached the door. “You have five

seconds, woman.”

I undid the lock and yanked it open, trying hard not to suck in a breath when I found myself face-to-face with six and a half feet of pure muscle.

And sex appeal; can't forget about the sex appeal.

Yeah, I totally sucked in a breath.

He was completely naked, and utterly furious.

“You don't get to fucking run away from me, Mo. That's not how this works. If I piss you off, you yell at me, I apologize with every fucking tool I possess, and we fix things. I don't care how angry you are, or how badly I screwed up—you don't fucking run.”

“So if you cheat on me, I'm what? Supposed to stand there and wait for you to deem me worthy of an apology?” I shot back, unable to resist fighting with him.

He stepped inside and slammed the door hard behind him, then spun me around. He stepped up so close to me that I had to spread my arms out so my bare skin wouldn't touch his. His abdomen was against mine, my tank top only just barely covering me enough to stop my fire from kicking in and burning him.

“I'd sooner cut off my own dick than hurt you like that, Morgan. Werewolves may be shitty at a lot of things, but loyalty isn't one of them.” His voice was a low growl. “But if you ever thought I was cheating on you, yes, I would expect you to stand there and wait for me to explain. Because there would sure as hell be an explanation.”

“When you walk into the bar tomorrow and see me talking to some guy while I make his drink, are you going to stand there and wait for an explanation?” I countered.

His jaw clenched.

He knew that I had him with that one.

“You can't have it both ways,” I added. “If you get to attack without a second thought, I get to leave without one.”

He gritted his teeth. “Fine. I'll work on not attacking any assholes who look at you.”

“Then I'll try not to run next time.”

Axel let out a long, slow breath, and then went stiff as soon as he started to inhale. “You smell like Iris.”

“Yeah, I'm right here,” she called from the couch. “You have a really nice ass, by the way.”

His eyes closed.

I fought a snort.

Honestly, I was possessive of the guy, but not with Iris. I knew she had no interest in him, and would never have any. We were basically sisters.

“You forgot to put on pants,” I told him helpfully.

“I didn’t forget. Some sexy little blonde took off with my truck, which has all of my spare clothes in it.”

Ohhhh.

Right.

*Whoops.*

Yeah, I wasn’t sorry.

He grumbled, “I’ll wait while you help Iris get back to her house. Run from me again and I’ll tie you to the damn bed for the next week of your life, woman.”

I rolled my eyes at him, stepping past him. Iris was already on her feet, though she was leaning heavily against the couch.

“And you thought you could make popcorn,” I told Iris, half-heartedly playful as I wrapped an arm around her waist and she slid hers over my shoulder.

“I may be weaker than I previously insinuated,” she admitted. We headed for the door, and I felt Axel’s eyes on my back.

“It’s alright. Eventually, we’ll find your hopefully-furry Prince Charming.”

We made it through the door, and headed down the stairs leading off the porch, so we could cross the shared grassy yard.

I still felt Axel’s gaze on me, and when I turned my head I found him on the porch, leaned up against the wall of the townhouse, watching me.

The place Iris was staying—Kai’s place—was at the end of the row of townhomes, but only two doors down from mine. It was kind of weird knowing that all of the other homes around us were empty, waiting for the mates of the other Feral Pack members, but I didn’t let myself think about it too much.

Not when a probably-shitty conversation with Axel was about to go down.

“You going to be okay without me there?” Iris murmured to me, as I helped her into her house. When she gestured toward the stairs that would lead to the second floor, we headed that way

I flashed her a small smile. “I’m tougher than I look.”

She scowled at me. “I know you want him, but don’t bend for him. Stick to your guns. You can choose him and still be unhappy with the way things went down—and tell him that he needs to do better if he really wants you.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“Don’t just know, Morgan. Put on your big girl panties and do it. It’ll suck, and it might be awkward, but the alternative is a shitty relationship in which neither of you are happy. Have the hard discussions. Talk about the shit, so you can fix it.”

I made a face. “I liked it better when you told me to ditch his ass.”

She laughed lightly. “If he’s not worth the effort, walk away now. If he is, then take the time. It’s pretty damn simple.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I lowered her to her bed, and she collapsed with a sigh. “Get some sleep, okay?”

“I definitely will,” she mumbled. “I’m proud of you.”

My throat swelled.

Axel might not have been happy that I’d ditched him in the forest, but I was proud of me for doing it too.

When he hadn’t treated me right, I’d walked away. If I’d been able to do that years ago, my life would’ve been so damn different.

Then again, I might also have gotten murdered for doing so in Mist Valley.

So... it wasn’t really an option, then.

But now, I was free.

And Iris was right; Axel was worth the effort it would take to have an uncomfortable conversation or six. The good times between us had been really, really good. I wanted more of them, so I had to do something about it.

Granted, I wasn’t excited about that.

But excitement didn’t determine my happiness; I did.



## NINETEEN



I GRABBED Iris's keys and locked her door behind me as I left. Though I knew Moon Ridge was safe, she was pretty damn incapable of protecting herself at the moment. She could call me when she woke up, and I'd bring her keys over and help her back down the stairs, whether she liked it or not.

Axel was still standing on the porch as I crossed the grass. It was soft against my bare feet, and I tried to focus on it so I wouldn't have to look at the man waiting for me.

Which failed, of course.

He was too damn pretty.

His arms were crossed over his chest, his muscles bulging. And of course, after watching me cross the lawn, his erection was practically waving at me.

"I didn't know arguing would turn you on," I drawled at him, as I stepped past him.

He caught me by my damned yoga pants, dragging me back to his chest. His erection met my lower back, and I ignored the way my body flushed at the contact.

I was pissed at him—or at least trying to be—and he was *not* going to distract me from that.

"Fighting doesn't make me hard. The way you move does." His words were low in my ear. "We're going to the shower. You smell like clothing stores, dirt, and your friend, and it's screwing with my head."

I huffed out a frustrated breath. "I don't want to shower with you while we argue."

"We're not going to argue. We're going to get ourselves off together in

the shower, so we can have a calm, rational conversation about all of the shit that just happened.”

I flashed him a scowl over my shoulder. “No.”

“Yes.” He leaned forward and flicked his tongue over the tip of my nose. The motion was so fast that when my flames kicked in, he had already backed away.

“You’re a bastard,” I told him with a sigh.

“*Your* bastard.” He squeezed my hip lightly. “Shower with me, Mo? I need to watch you come undone. I need to see that you’re still okay, that I haven’t fucked up everything between us.”

“Well, I need...” I trailed off.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure what I needed.

An apology, probably.

“You need me to apologize,” he said, as if he’d read my mind. “And I will. Thoroughly. When you’re wrapped in sweats and a sweatshirt so I don’t have to keep fighting the urge to grab your juicy ass and take a fucking bite out of it.”

My face burned. “Fine. We’ll shower—but it has to be fast. And I don’t want you to get off. If we could touch each other, I wouldn’t let you fuck me right now.”

“That’s fair.” He wrapped his hand around my crotch, gripping it hard as he dragged the base of his palm over my clit. Then, as if he’d made up his mind about something, he lifted me by that grip on my core and hauled me back inside.

The door slammed—and then locked—behind us, and I tried like hell not to grab his gigantic arm as he carried me up the stairs like that.

My ass met the bathroom’s countertop.

He started the shower, then growled at me, “Tell me I can touch you.”

I blinked. “You can’t, remember?”

“Through your clothes, Mo. Tell me I can touch you and taste you through your clothes.” He leaned toward me, stopping when our noses and lips were only a breath apart. Something about the look in his eyes was wild. Feral. Savage. *Desperate*. He finally added, “I need you.”

A shuddered breath escaped me. “Okay.”

His fingers hooked in the waistband of my leggings a heartbeat later, and he lifted me off the counter long enough to rip my leggings down my thighs, exposing those little lace panties

A rumble rolled through him when my pants hit the ground. My tank top followed, and then my bra landed on the floor too. “Spread your legs,” he growled at me. My breathing picked up as I silently opened my thighs for him. A fierce groan escaped him. “Fuck, I miss watching my cock slide in and out of you.”

*Shit.*

*I missed that too.*

I was breathing fast already, when he leaned in and dragged his tongue over the fabric covering my clit. He’d made me wet a few times that day—when he’d gripped my ass in every pair of panties I’d tried on. When he’d had to tuck his erection away every damn time we left a changing room. When he growled to me that the next time we went shopping, I’d ride his cock on that tiny little changing room seat between outfits.

Yeah.

He’d made me wet.

Which he’d undoubtedly taste on the fabric against his tongue.

With a snarl, he surged forward and captured my clit between his teeth.

A hiss escaped me. “I need soft and slow right now, Ax.”

He bit down on me harder, and I fought to keep myself from wrapping my thighs around his head. But a heartbeat later, he released the swollen, sensitive bud, and dragged his tongue slowly over the front of my panties.

I rocked against him, moaning and gripping the countertop until I was crying out, my body clenching around nothing.

*Shit, I missed him.*

He finally released me, carefully peeling my panties down my thighs and then lifting them to his nose, inhaling our scents.

His chest rumbled. “Shower, Mo. We need to talk before we keep going.”

*Damn.*

I climbed into the shower on shaky legs, and we were both silent for a minute while I scrubbed my hair and skin with soap. After I rinsed the suds, I slid out from beneath the water, shutting it off and heading toward the bedroom.

Before I could get myself dressed, Axel started doing it for me.

He pulled a soft gray sweatshirt down over my head—I knew he’d realized that one was my favorite, even though I’d never said it out loud and he had never asked.

I stayed quiet while he helped me into sweatpants and socks too, then drooled silently over the curve of his ass as he pulled his own matching getup on. His erection formed a harsh tent in the front of the pants, but he didn't bother trying to hide it from me.

Not that I wanted him to.

I was actually pretty damn in favor of seeing that tent.

When he scooped me up off the ground, I murmured, "We need to get the condoms out of the truck for next time.

He hugged me fiercely to his chest. "We're not talking about condoms yet. You threatened to move me out of our house, Mo."

"I was angry," I said, closing my eyes.

"Which is why we're going to talk."

As much as I wanted to avoid the uncomfortable conversation coming my way, I still knew Iris was right.

Axel was worth the discomfort.

So I nodded, and braced myself for the awkwardness.

## TWENTY



HE SET me down a few feet away from him on the couch, with my back to the arm rest so my legs were sprawled over the cushions. I assumed the distance was for the sake of our focus.

“Alright, Mo. As far as I’m concerned, we’ve got a damn good number of things to work through,” he told me, turning sideways on the couch so he could face me head-on. I tried not to let my gaze linger on the tent in his pants, which sure as hell hadn’t started shrinking yet.

“Okay,” I said, trying to bring my mind back to the forest. My good mood faded when I remembered Finn’s thinly-veiled suggestion that I was looking to hook up with someone other than Axel, and Axel’s silence.

“First, the fact that I haven’t moved my shit back here.” He held up one finger, ticking that off the list. “Second, the things that happened when I was a kid. I shouldn’t have dodged your question. My past is sensitive, and I don’t much like to go into details, but you deserved a much better answer than the one I didn’t give.” He ticked another finger. “And third, as we both know, I was a shitty mate when we were in the forest. There’s always some tension, but Finn attacked you. I wasn’t expecting it, and I didn’t react properly.” He ticked a third finger.

I bit the inside of my cheek, but nodded.

“Fourth, the way you lied about wanting to be just acquaintances before the climax.” He ticked another finger, and then another as he added, “And fifth, the way you ran from me and threatened to move me out.”

My face was hot.

I felt like he was about to attack me, even though he was keeping a level

head and voice.

“Fine,” I said, my defenses rising.

“I feel like both of us are having a hard time adjusting to this,” he told me, gesturing between us. “Which makes sense. Most werewolf couples have weeks—if not months—to adjust to the idea of being with each other, before they meet in person. Granted, most of the women start out human, but that time still helps with the processing. Without time, everything’s been dropped on our heads. If my wolf had hunted longer, I would’ve been ready to be what you needed right after I shifted. Instead, I questioned what I wanted, and I regret that immensely. I know it makes you question how much I really want you, and I wish like hell that there was a quick fix, but there isn’t. That trust will take time.”

I agreed with him about that—about needing time.

Time was the only thing that would convince me he was really dedicated to me.

“I don’t have a whole lot of stuff in my tent out there, with the pack,” Axel told me. “I never got around to moving it, because it didn’t feel important to me. I have enough clothes between my duffel bag and the townhouse to survive a week or so, and there’s a washing machine here. When I go back to work, I’ll end up back in the forest again anyway. The classes to help other werewolves find peace with the beasts inside them were my idea; the other guys can’t run them without me for long. You saw what they’re like.”

“Bad with people?” I offered.

His lips curved upward just the tiniest bit. “Yes. Finn’s bitter. Kai’s quiet and threatening. Nico prefers not to get involved unless it’s necessary. Enzo and I keep things running, but Enzo is better one on one. He doesn’t much like large groups of people. I wrangle the packs, give out assignments, keep shit moving. If I don’t show up to help for a few more days, one or more of them will inevitably show up here to apologize and ask me to come back.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “They’d apologize to *you*? After being shitty to *me*?”

“Yup. We’re all bastards.” He lifted a shoulder. “I plan on letting them know that they fucked up. When they come to apologize to me, they’ll quickly learn that it’s not me they need to make things right with. They’ll end up on their knees if you want them to.”

I snorted, and his lips curved upward further before his expression grew serious again. “What happened in the forest will never happen again, Mo. I

swear that to you on my damn life. I didn't think I'd need to protect you from them, but I was wrong. And next time, even if they've promised to be on better behavior, I'll be ready."

"Thank you," I said.

Honestly, I appreciated the promise. And I believed him, even though I would undoubtedly get stupidly nervous the next time I saw his pack.

Maybe if I hoped hard enough, I could make it a few months before going back. Or even a year.

That wasn't likely though, considering he was still going to be working with them. And I wouldn't ask him to quit his job. He was clearly passionate about helping people connect with their wolves, and I would've put money on him being good at it.

"About my past," he said, his expression growing a bit distant for a moment. "I don't really want to get into it right now, when we've got other shit to discuss. But long story short, my mom cheated on my dad with a human man. It's not usually possible, but she and her wolf are enemies. The wolf ran back to my dad as soon as she'd done the deed, and he smelled the other man on her. He was a good man, struggling with a mate who didn't want him. When he smelled it, he lost his mind."

There was a short pause, before Axel surged on. "He killed the human, even though the guy didn't know that my mom was married with kids. The town ended up putting together a search party, and when they found him, they killed him. That happened when I was nine. I was furious with my mom, and devastated to lose my dad. My twin brother sided with her. They talked shit about dad constantly, so I moved in with my grandparents after a few years. My mom and twin officially disowned me when I moved to the forest with my pack, and I haven't seen them or heard from them since."

A moment of tense, heavy silence passed.

"Fuck," I finally said.

"Yeah." He let out a slow breath. "Shit. That was a lot."

"No kidding."

I scooted forward on the couch a little, lifting one of my sock-covered feet to rest against his leg. His hand lifted to it, stroking the top of my foot lightly.

Axel didn't want to discuss it further at the moment, and I respected that. There was more shit to share about my past too, at some point, and I felt a world better knowing what he was keeping from me. Even if it made me hurt

from him.

So I knew it was my turn to share something.

“I shouldn’t have told you I just wanted to be friends,” I admitted to Axel. “But I saw the way you were talking about the forest, and your pack. I knew you didn’t want to live with me, so I thought it would be better to claim I just wanted to be friends than to deal with the rejection that would follow admitting I knew I’d eventually want more. I didn’t want to let you hurt me.”

Axel dipped his head in a nod. “I can understand that.”

“And I’m not going to apologize for walking away from you,” I added, my voice growing slightly defensive. “Yes, maybe I could’ve reacted differently, but what I did wasn’t wrong. Pretty much every person I’ve ever associated with has treated me like shit, and I was never allowed to fight back. Now that I can, I’m not just going to sit there and take it.”

Axel studied me for a long moment.

I folded my arms over my chest, waiting for him to argue.

But instead, he finally said, “I’ll do my absolute fucking best not to ever make you feel like you need to run from me again. But if I screw up again, can you swear to me that you’ll open the door and listen to my sorry ass apologize before throwing any of my shit out the window?”

I snorted, and his lips curved upward just the tiniest bit.

“I promise to let you apologize,” I agreed.

“Good.” He grabbed me by the waist, dragging me over the couch and up onto his lap before setting me down. His erection hadn’t budged—I was pretty sure I’d broken the damn thing by having sex with him without letting him finish. “You accept my apology?”

“I do.” I rocked against him, just a little.

“Good. Now take your damn clothes off,” he growled.

“I’d rather let you do that.”

My lips curved upward wickedly as he ripped the sweatshirt back over my head.

Then he dropped me on the couch for a minute, disappearing into the garage. When he came back, he was rolling a condom over his cock, his pants dragged a few inches down his thighs.

“It’s a good thing we’ll be going into another climax after the release is over,” Axel rumbled, lifting me back up onto his lap and then sliding my own pants down to my knees. “I need to re-taste every inch of you.”

“And this time, maybe you’ll actually snuggle with me between rounds of



sex,” I teased him.

“You can fucking count on it. You’ll be so damn tired of cuddling when we’re done,” he said, grabbing me by the backs of my knees, since they were still covered.

A laugh escaped me, and I lowered myself over his cock. “Tell me how you want to make love to me, as soon as you can touch me.”

“You’ll be spread across the countertop,” he told me, his voice low and rumbly as the tip of him found my entrance, but didn’t slide inside. “My own personal feast. I’ll probably tie you to the fucking thing.”

My body flushed at the thought.

“I’ll eat you out until you’re begging for my cock, and when I finally give it to you, you’ll be so relieved you fucking cry.”

I slid down him, taking an inch of him inside me.

“Hard and fast?” I asked him, panting.

“Fuck, no. So slow and intimate you won’t be able to think straight when it’s done.”

Groaning, I slid down the rest of the way until my body was wrapped around every long, thick inch of him and my breathing was coming out in short, rapid bursts.

Axel yanked my pants further up my thighs, covering more of my skin so he could use the fabric to move me up and down. I was riding him, but he was in control, and I absolutely loved that.

When I lost it with a cry, he pulled out and pumped his cock, coating my belly with his pleasure as promised.

And then he tugged his sweatshirt right the hell over me, and pulled me into his arms. Rather than turning on a movie, Axel just held me close.

After a few blissful moments had passed, no sounds in the room except the soft murmur of our breathing, he asked me a simple, soft question.

“I know you worked too hard to have hobbies, but if you could have one, what would it be?”

The question warmed me. “I think I’d like to learn how to dance,” I admitted.

His chest rumbled against my back. “Then I’ll find you dance classes.”

“I want to take some with you, too, when we can touch each other. I think it’d be fun.”

He chuckled. “I’d be a shitty dancer.”

“So will I,” I teased him.

“Then we’ll suck together.” He nuzzled the side of my neck with his nose.

“What are *your* hobbies?”

“Running in my wolf form, mostly. My wolf likes to check out the forest, to see if there’s anyone trying to invade our pack land or something. He’s constantly looking for a fight,” Axel said with a low laugh.

“Maybe we could run together, then. Sometime soon? But I guess I’d be running with him, and not you.” I bit my lip.

Maybe that was a shitty idea.

I shouldn’t have—

“I would love that,” Axel told me. His voice rang with honesty. “And my wolf would too. I can see through his eyes and hear through his ears when he’s in control, so I’d still be experiencing it with you. And the wolf is as much a part of me as the man, as difficult as that sometimes makes things.”

“Do you think he’s disappointed that I don’t have a wolf?” I asked him quietly. We’d talked about it a little before, but I still felt guilty about it.

“Only if it stops you from spending time with him. You’re his mate, too.” Axel’s hand stroked slowly up and down the curve of my side.

“Okay. Well, tonight, I just want to stay like this,” I admitted. “But maybe tomorrow morning, we could shift together.”

“Deal.” He inhaled deeply. “Shit, you smell good.”

I laughed. “Now that I smell like you?”

“Hell, yeah. I’ll wash you off later, but for now, this is everything.” He squeezed me tight with the arm that was wrapped around me. “Tell me how you met Iris.”

“It’s a long story,” I said with a sigh.

“I’ve got nothing but time, Mo.”

So I launched into the long—and humorous—story about meeting Iris at our high school’s massive graduation, of all places, and how we’d ended up wandering Mist Valley’s streets all damn night long, talking.

And then how we’d moved in together, and struggled, but had the time of our lives.

As I talked, Axel interacted. He asked questions. Made jokes. Teased me. It made me feel like he was really paying attention to me, and by the time I fell asleep in his arms, early in the morning, I felt more loved than I ever had before in my entire damn life.

I had hated fighting with Axel... but shit, I loved the way it forced us to

have difficult conversations and start opening up to each other more.

## TWENTY-ONE



WE STARTED the next morning by shifting together, and then heading out on a run. Though I call it a run, we started out by just walking together. I was trying to adjust to the forest while in my wolf form, and it was kind of slow-going. Everything was new, and sort of surprising for me. Axel's wolf had no problem watching me take everything in at my own speed, and made it fun for both of us.

He was a big sweetheart, brushing up against me too fast for my fire to kick in multiple times every hour, jumping in creeks and ponds just so he could shake off next to me, and sending dirt flying all over me every chance he got.

It made me laugh, and made him grin too.

When I'd established my bearings, we started to jog.

Quickly, I realized how much fun it was to move fast through the forest—and that I wasn't getting tired, the way I would if I tried to run in my human form—and we started to run.

Hours had passed when we finally made it back to the townhouse. No way in hell was I going to eat an animal for lunch, regardless of how furry I was, so that bit wasn't optional.

We shifted back to our human forms—my shift, fast and painless, while Axel's was slightly slower. I waited for him, though, leaning up against the wall of the townhouse and watching in fascination as his body remade itself.

“So when you and your wolf are at odds, the shifting hurts more?” I asked him, eyeing that delectable ass as he stepped into the house. His fists were clenched to prevent him from wrapping his arms around me, since we were

both bare-assed.

“Yes. It also takes a lot longer. That’s a large part of the reason we have so many packs offering money to be trained in building trust with their wolf,” Axel explained. “The waitlist is really damn long right now.”

“So you jackasses are revolutionaries?” I teased him.

He flashed me a grin. “Nah. We just discovered the perks to being *feral*, and figured out a way to use them in our favor.”

I supposed I could understand that. It was basically the same reason I’d gone to the only bar in town when I was looking for a job, wasn’t it?

Figuring out your strengths and then using them to create a life you didn’t want to run away from sounded like the only real way to live, if you asked me.

Then again, I’d spent so much of my life feeling trapped and wanting to run away that my perspective was probably skewed.

Axel made me spaghetti—even though he warned me that it wasn’t going to be a regular thing, because I was *not* struggling to put food on the table anymore—and I sat on the counter, questioning him about how their wolfy trust training went. The more I learned, the more it fascinated me.

None of the concepts were all that complex, but the men were putting things into words that other people could only just basically feel. Their ideas revolved around giving the wolf enough control and considering the beast’s opinions and emotions long enough to establish a sort of partnership and trust.

Without that trust Axel had with his wolf, he assured me that the furry bastard would’ve taken over the first time he walked away from me—and he would’ve refused to leave, or give the human back control.

It was actually pretty damn cool.

I could see the passion in Axel’s eyes as he explained their program to me, and shit, it made me warm all over.

So, of course, we showered together—and got steamy in said shower—before getting dressed for my shift at the bar.

“Did some part of you hope that your mate would be passionate about training wolves too?” I asked him, as we got dressed. “Does it bother you that I’d rather spend my time chatting with half the town?”

Axel snorted. “I didn’t think I’d ever find a mate, Mo, and assumed that if I did, she’d want nothing to do with me. The fact that you didn’t scream and run when you saw me is more than I hoped for. You being outgoing and

friendly, while embracing your magic... that makes me happy. I just need to wrap my possessive brain around the fact that you'll talk to other men."

A grin tugged at my lips. "I won't let them touch me."

"I know you won't." He clenched his fists, and I assumed he was resisting the urge to pull me into his arms and kiss the hell out of me. "Just prepare to be smothered when we walk out of that damn place."

A laugh escaped me. "Deal."

His uncertainty and that fierce overprotectiveness would fade in time, I hoped. When he was used to the idea of what I did for work, he'd come to accept that there was nothing sexy or romantic about it for me—and then he wouldn't be so paranoid about it.

"Maybe the next time I have a few days off, we could try camping together?" I suggested, as we headed back down the stairs. "I don't know if I'm ready to deal with your pack again, but it could be fun to get out in nature together. And your wolf would be thrilled."

"That would be incredible." Axel dragged me into his arms. We were both careful not to let our skin touch—and we were getting better at it by the day, as shitty as it was for both of us.

"Just imagine, sex under the stars," I said into his shirt.

"I am," he agreed, lifting his hand to tickle my waist. A shriek escaped me as I wormed away from him, and he flashed me a wolfish grin as I backed away.

"Don't do it," I warned him.

His grin only widened—

And then he tackled me.

WE WERE both sporting a couple of rapidly-healing burn marks by the time we climbed into the truck, but we were grinning widely enough that neither of us cared.

Now that we'd been talking more, things were just easier between us.

Easier, and happier.

And a hell of a lot more fun.

Something told me that by the time we were in-love enough for our flames to let us touch each other, the possession—which was the demonic version of the climax—would be a complete blast.

An orgasmic one, of course, but still. I was thinking that if we had that

much fun wrestling while trying not to touch each other's skin, sex could be even more playful—and hot.

It was hot enough as it was, but add in that sexy way we had started to tease each other...

Whew.

Axel sat at the far end of the bar throughout the late afternoon and evening, sipping water and watching me work. I would've thought he'd be bored, but he shooed me away with a light smack to the ass whenever I went over there to check on him.

I was getting slightly better at making the drinks, my memory working overtime. It was fun to focus on it, and to try to learn something new after so long at my dead-end job.

But the more I saw the blissed-out looks in people's eyes, the more I remembered the way I'd been bent over the toilet, vomiting.

I... hadn't felt like myself.

And I wasn't sure I liked it.

I didn't have a problem letting the werewolves put themselves in that boat—they could make their own choices, and I didn't give a shit about that.

But I wasn't so sure I wanted to put that look in people's eyes five days a week, for the rest of my life.

The night passed quickly and uneventfully, and when we went home, my man did indeed smother me. He was way more snuggly than I'd ever considered.

We fell asleep in each other's arms, and it was perfect.

A FEW WEEKS PASSED SIMILARLY—HE took them off from work, like most werewolves did when they were hunting. Things were different for us, since we had to deal with both mating processes, but he told me he wasn't ready to leave me during the day yet.

And I only protested a little.

We both knew things would be rough when he started his job again, since he worked days and I did nights. But we were trying not to notice the way that loomed over us.

His packmates had texted apologies, but I'd ignored them. Eventually, Axel said they'd feel guilty enough to show up and give real apologies. So I waited.

I worked evenings and nights at the bar, and Axel always went with me, talking to me during the less-busy moments and buying dinner before my break. The owner was raking it in, and I still wasn't over the shock of counting my tips at the end of the night. It didn't make up for my uncertainty about whether or not I wanted to keep bartending, but it definitely helped a lot.

I was adjusting, though. And for the most part, loving everything about Moon Ridge.

IN THE MIDDLE of the fourth week, Axel waved me over a little before my break the way he always did. He called to me, over the music, that he was going to find me some food and that he'd be back soon. He almost added something, to the end of the explanation, but hesitated.

Then flicked the tip of my nose with his tongue, told me to try to look a little less sexy, and headed out.

I grinned at his back as he walked away from me, the expression widening when he glanced over his shoulder before he left, studying me for a moment before he slipped outside.

There were too many people in the building already for my thoughts to wander, so I got back to the swing of things. Making drinks, lighting them on fire, delivering said drinks, chatting with the customers when things slowed down a bit... it was nice.

But the more time passed, the more I wondered if it was really what I wanted to do with my life, now that I was free from Mist Valley and all of the shit that accompanied being a weak demon.

I grabbed a drink when my boss handed it to me, lighting it on fire as I carried it in the direction he'd pointed me in. There was only one guy clearly waiting for a drink over there, but I sort of reeled back when I saw him.

*Shit.*

It was the guy who looked so much like Axel, from a few weeks back. He had the exact same long golden hair, though he was built a little less thick in the arms, and chest, and... everything visible.

Still, *shit.*

Axel had told me more than enough about his twin brother, Ethan, and considering the resemblance, this had to be him.

Had I told him I'd think about dancing with him? I hadn't agreed to



anything, as far as I could remember, so at least that worked in my favor.

“Hey, pretty girl,” he said with a grin.

If this *was* Axel’s brother, he’d played a large part in making Axel feel unwelcome in his own damn family. And the cruel things he’d both said and done, the rumors he’d spread about the feral pack...

Yeah, I was *not* playing ball with him.

I set the drink down in front of him, ignoring his remark as I turned around. Before I could walk away, a large hand grabbed my wrist.

Anger ballooned within me as I spun back toward him. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

He grinned at me. “Down, girl. I’m here for that dance you promised me.”

“I didn’t promise you anything,” I shot back. “And like I said the last time, I’m taken.”

When I tried to tug my hand from his grasp, he only tightened his grip.

A tiny shred of panic cut through me, and I tried to tap into my flames. Of course, whenever I absolutely needed them, the damn things wouldn’t appear.

“Let go before my mate shows up here and rips your head off,” I called over the music.

Yeah, my heart was pounding a bit.

Ethan’s grin only widened. “I’d enjoy the fight.”

A man I didn’t recognize with light skin and brown hair grabbed Ethan by the back of the neck. His grip looked tight and painful, but the other werewolf barely flinched. “Walk away, Ethan,” he warned in a low voice.

Ethan sneered at the man. “Fuck off, Jesse.”

A few more men shoved through the crowd, joining them. I recognized one of them—Ryder, Charly’s mate—and then another one, who was Ebony’s mate. Ford, maybe?

Of course, Axel just happened to walk through the door just in time to see Ethan releasing my wrist with a glare. “Demon whore,” he spat at me.

My flames chose that moment to *finally* burst to life. They burst to life all over my arms, blazing up and burning Ethan’s hand.

An unnatural scream cut through him, and I stepped back quickly, heart pounding heart.

*Served the bastard right for touching me.*

The group of guys that I assumed were Charly’s other pack escorted Ethan out.

Axel grabbed his brother by the throat, snarling something in his face that I couldn't hear. His brother's cheeks drained of color though, and when Axel gave him a shove, the other guys towed him out of the building.

As soon as Ethan was gone, Axel's eyes collided with mine. Those long legs of his covered the ground between us rapidly, and then the bastard was leaning over the countertop, growling, "Did he hurt you?"

"No." I leaned toward him. "He grabbed me and wouldn't let go. My flames decided to protect me, I guess."

Axel took my wrist and slowly inspected every damn inch of it.

When he was satisfied that I was okay, he let out a slow breath before lifting his eyes back to mine. "Fuck, Mo. I'm sorry."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Did you choose your family?"

He scoffed. "No."

"Did you send Ethan here?"

His scowl grew heated. "Of course not."

"Then you don't need to apologize to me. I get it. We don't get to decide who gives birth to us, or how much magic we have in our veins." I wiggled my fingers toward us. "How we live despite all that shit is what determines who we are."

He stared at me for a long, long moment.

I flashed him a grin. "I think I singed off some hair here." Leaning closer, I blew a puff of air toward a chunk of shortened strands that stood out awkwardly from the rest of his glorious hair.

Upon closer inspection, I'd singed it off in a few places. It was looking pretty damn choppy, actually.

I really wasn't all that good for his golden-god look.

When I started to lean away, he grabbed the front of my tank top and used it to pull me in closer.

"I love you, Mo," he told me. "And that better be fucking good enough for your mating process, because I can't go another day without touching you."

A tingle rolled down my spine.

"I love you too," I admitted.

He dragged me up onto the bartop, capturing my lips in his.

I waited for the flames to react, to respond to his touch, but they didn't.

*Finally.*

His hands felt like heaven on my skin, his lips so damn soft as they

brutalized mine.

He finally pulled away a few minutes later, when heat was blazing through both of us as the possession started to take over.

“I think I want to quit my job,” I breathed to Axel.

“We can find you a better one,” he agreed with a growl.

I jerked my head in a nod, sliding back across the countertop before jumping to my feet.

My body was already flushed, the need blossoming inside me so much stronger the second time around, now that I knew how good sex with Axel was.

“I don’t want to do this,” I told my boss.

There wasn’t even any apology in my voice.

“I’m sorry,” I added.

He grinned at me. “Think I’m going to sell the place anyway. I talked my mate into giving me a shot at making her fall in love with me, and she’s always hated that I run it.”

Hope for him swelled in my chest. “Good luck, then.”

“You too.” He nodded at me, and I returned the gesture before spinning back around and striding right back to Axel.

He hauled me over the countertop—and then threw me over his shoulder.

Cheers erupted in the crowd around us, and my gaze connected with the large group of grinning, whooping werewolves that Charly, Ryder, and June were a part of. It looked like their whole pack had gotten together for some kind of group date night—and I hoped that eventually, we could have that kind of closeness with Axel’s pack.

It would mean everything to him...

And maybe to me, too.

For now, I was thrilled just to finally have Axel’s hands on me again.

## TWENTY-TWO



HE TOSSED me onto the middle seat in the truck, and laughter sputtered out of me.

The man flashed me a feral grin. “Pants off, Mo. I’m not waiting until we get home to feel you wrapped around me.”

*Ohh.*

*Deal.*

I shucked my leggings, dropping them on the floor as Axel slid into the truck, slamming the door and turning on the engine at the same time.

My panties followed my leggings as the werewolf backed out of the parking lot, and I slid closer to him, unbuttoning his jeans and pulling his erection out as he got us onto the road.

Not wanting to cause a car crash by climbing my man like a damn tree, I eased myself down to my belly, tucking my legs up against the window as I wrapped my lips around his cock.

A ferocious snarl rattled the whole damn truck. “I don’t want your mouth, woman; I want to be inside you. Get the fuck onto my lap.”

*Ohh.*

“Don’t think you’ll be able to see,” I told him, speaking around his cock.

“You know I won’t do anything that risks your life,” he growled back at me, dropping a hand to my ass and digging his fingers into my center from behind.

A groan escaped me when my wetness engulfed his hand, but he didn’t give me the attention I wanted.

Instead, he used his hold on my crotch to drag me up to his lap, setting

me right the hell on top of him.

His eyes could still see over my head, I realized, as he dragged me closer. But the bastard wasn't going to be able to focus on the road and line us up, so I wrapped my arms around his neck and arched my hips, reaching down for his erection.

A fierce growl escaped him when I slid down his length, my body swallowing the silky hardness of him. A gasp left me as he bottomed out inside me, and shit, the feeling was so much more intense than it had been with a condom.

"We'll be home in five," he told me, burying his free, wet hand in my hair and using it to drag my face closer to his shoulder. "You'd fucking better get yourself off on my cock before we make it, Mo."

"Or what?" I shot back, already rocking my hips, using him to drag out the flaming need that had my body arching and clenching and throbbing.

"Or I eat you until you scream," he snarled back, his grip on my hair tightening.

And shit, I loved it when he was rough like that.

"Not much of a threat," I panted, though I was already nearing the edge.

"Give me what I want, baby." He dragged his hand down my back, grabbing my ass and squeezing fiercely. "All of this is mine."

I moaned, a breath away from shattering.

"Take your pleasure, woman." His words sent me over the edge, and I cried out as my body tightened uncontrollably around him.

He roared, losing himself inside me with a jerk of his hips as my pleasure made him shatter too.

And *shit*, it had been good before, but it was *so much* more intense now that I had feelings for the guy.

Now that I loved him, too.

*My mate.*

He dragged me into the house and made good on the promises from weeks ago about what he was going to do to me when he could touch me again, and damn, I was the luckiest woman on the planet.

BY THE TIME we emerged from the possession, we didn't feel like two separate mystical creatures who'd been shoved into an unexpected mating bond anymore.

Instead, we felt like a team.

It was so much more than I'd ever dared hope for.

And despite the shitshow my life had been up to that point, I had never been so fucking glad to be a shitty demon before.

Because I wasn't meant to be a demon at all; I was made to be a wolf.

Or at least, to be with Axel.

**TWENTY-THREE**

AXEL



MORGAN WASN'T one for sitting on her ass, so almost as soon as the possession was over, she started looking for another job. She ended up with a stupidly-high offer from the town's most popular coffee shop, and was a hell of a lot more excited about it than I ever expected.

But when she had everything figured out, the woman was pure fucking fire. She moved quickly and efficiently, making delicious drinks crafted particularly for her customers. Some needed her magic to relax them a little—others needed a boost of supernatural energy, or a dose of optimism.

My mate gave them what they wanted with a grin on her fucking beautiful face.

Every time I saw her, I fell more in love with her body.

And every time she teased me, she became more embedded in my fucking soul.

That woman was a part of me—and I'd do whatever the hell I had to do to make sure she never walked away from me again, for the rest of my damn life.

WEEKS PASSED before the Myst Council showed up at our door while we packed our shit for a weekend camp out with the rest of our pack.

Or rather, the Myst Council's magical-marking crew showed up at our door.

I'd made a habit of licking Mo's demon tattoo, so neither of us complained for a damned second when they inked the base of her neck with



the magical paw print that now marked her as a werewolf hybrid. The tattoo framed the bite scar my wolf had given her, and my girl wore them both with pride.

And when they insisted on inking me with the same tattoo, Morgan's grin was so excited that I didn't bother trying to argue.

As soon as they left, she fucking attacked me—and I ravaged her just the way she liked it.

WE WERE SNUGGLED UP on the floor together afterward, our new tattoos already healed up nicely thanks to the magic running through our veins.

"I think I burned off more of your hair," she whispered to me, apologetic as she fiddled with the strands. "Sorry."

"I already scheduled a cut," I told her, with a chuckle.

It was time for the long strands to go.

My pack mates and I had all started growing our hair out when we moved into the forest, deciding it marked us as the feral wolves everyone had taken to calling us. Now that I had my Mo, I didn't feel feral.

Just really fucking lucky.

"Is it going to piss the pack off?" she asked me, working her fingers through the tangles she'd probably put in my mane herself. We'd reached a tentative truce with them, and they'd all apologized for the shitshow that had gone on the last time we visited. Now, she was giving them a second chance with this camp out. And if they fucked it up, I'd rip out their damn throats.

"Nah. They already think I've been tamed."

She snorted. "You kind of have."

I squeezed her bare ass in my palms. "Want to say that again?"

A laugh escaped her. "You're *very* manly, and *very* wild. How's that?"

My chuckle rumbled both of our chests. "You're lucky you're so damn cute."

"Oh, I know." She nipped at my neck. "I love you."

"I love you too." I stole her lips, sliding my tongue into her mouth without pause. Her fingers dug into my pec as our tongues and lips danced, the motion so damn intimate after all the time we'd spent practicing.

"Are you sure about this camp out?" she asked me, breathless as she pulled away.

"Positive. Kai's even dropping Lucas's old shit in his townhouse, so the

place doesn't look as bad when you walk in. They're taking it seriously this time."

Morgan frowned, her sexy little forehead wrinkling with the expression. "Did he text Iris before just showing up?"

"I'm sure he did. Ryder told him she was staying there ages ago." I stroked her long, pale hair. "Ready, baby?"

"So ready," she drawled.

A snort escaped me. "You're fucking adorable."

"So you've said." She flashed me a grin as she eased herself up off my chest, grabbing my hand and dragging me to my feet alongside her. "Let's go."

Morgan towed me to the bedroom, and as I watched her hips sway, a simple thought rolled through me.

I was really fucking glad that fate had decided to pair me with this sexy little demon.

And even more grateful that she let me call her mine.

# EPILOGUE

KAI



“THANKS, MOM, BUT WE’RE FINE,” I grunted into the phone. It was sandwiched between my shoulder and ear, while the box of old clothes and coloring pages I wasn’t allowed to toss (under the orders of my five-year-old) was in my arms. I’d been collecting shit for nearly a year since the last time I dropped a box off at the townhouse I kept but never used.

But at the rate my kid grew—and colored—it was long-past time for another trip. Plus, Axel wanted to give Morgan a tour of the entirety of our pack’s land during their “camp out” that night, which included my trailer.

And forced me to finally clean that shit.

Probably a good thing, though it was an annoyance.

“I hate that you’re alone out there,” my mom protested.

“We’re not alone.” My nostrils flared as I inhaled a strangely sweet smell.

Was that... citrus?

My nose led me to the kitchen, and my forehead creased when I found a candle burning on the countertop.

*What the hell?*

Why was someone in my house?

And burning a fucking candle while they were at it?

I peered down at the candle.

Blood Orange.

*What kind of weird-ass smell was that?*

“I’ve got to go, mom,” I said, cutting her off more rudely than I intended to. “I think I’ve got a squatter in my townhouse. Call you later.”

I hung up without waiting for a response.

The explanation would soften the blow of my assholeness. Not that I

wasn't usually an asshole—I was.

Just not to her.

Or my son.

Everyone else could fuck themselves.

The box of clothes and masterpieces landed on the table, and I shoved my phone in my pocket before I stormed up the stairs.

Whoever was trying to take possession of my house would go in the fucking ground. I didn't use it, but that didn't make it their damned property.

I halted on the last stair when I heard something that sounded like...

Vomiting?

My forehead wrinkled.

Nausea clenched my abdomen.

I had a weak stomach, as much as I hated to admit it. Whenever Lucas got the stomach flu, the two of us ended up puking together because I couldn't fucking take the smell and sound of it.

Hesitation had me stalling.

*My squatter was puking?*

*Why?*

I supposed they deserved it, if they were trying to establish my townhouse as their own.

A feminine moan made my fists clench.

Of course my squatter was a fucking *woman*.

That was just my damn luck.

At least I'd already found my mate. That was over and done with; I'd never have to relive that particularly awful brand of hell. I hadn't been rejected, so my wolf wasn't dying, or warring with me. And the bastard seemed just fine living the single-parent life, so there was no reason to worry about anything mate-related.

I heard a hard thud, and my fists clenched tighter.

The vomiting woman had just passed the fuck out, hadn't she?

I scowled fiercely, and then tried to loosen my expression a little.

If she was unconscious, I'd have time to drag her out of my house, drop her on her sick ass in my lawn, and remove all of her shitty candles and whatever else she'd brought with her.

Hell, if I got lucky enough, maybe I'd even have time to drive her and her shit out to the middle of town and leave her there before she woke up.

I strode through the bathroom's open door, my mind made up completely

—until I saw the woman in question.

*Fuck.*

I'd never met her in person, but I recognized Morgan's best friend from the description I'd been given—and the blood in the toilet.

Which the vampire had undoubtedly just vomited.

I didn't know why she was in my house... but I knew I couldn't drive her out to the middle of town and drop her there.

I flushed the toilet quickly so my stomach would settle down, then kneeled next to the unconscious woman. With one hand, I checked for her pulse. With the other, I fished my phone from my pocket and dialed Axel's number.

"Hey," he said easily. The bastard was way happier than any fucker had a right to be now that he was with his little demon.

"Why is there a vampire in my townhouse?" I growled back at him, letting out a slow breath when I found the steady beat of her heart.

My eyes kept trying to trail over her figure, but I went to war with them. One glance had been enough to see that the woman was fucking stunning, but I didn't deal with women anymore. Not a damn chance.

"Ryder and Charly moved her in when Morgan and I first brought her to town. Didn't he call you to make sure you were good with it?" Axel checked.

"No, he fucking did not." I stared at the vampire female's face.

Her bright orange hair should've looked stupid with her ghostly-pale skin, but it didn't.

It looked fucking gorgeous.

I forced my gaze to lift to the cabinets.

"Shit. Sorry, man. I thought you knew," Axel apologized. "I'm sure Nico would be fine with letting her stay until his mate comes around. We just assumed your place would be the safest."

The safest, because I wasn't going to wolf out and drag my mate back there.

Fuck it all, the bastard had a point.

"Is it normal for her to vomit blood and pass out?" I growled into the phone, changing the subject.

Axel paused. "I don't think so. Morgan's right here; give me a minute."

A few seconds passed.

My gaze dipped back down to the gorgeous, unconscious woman. All she had on was a thin, light pink lace bra without any damn padding—her

fucking nipples were showing through—and a pair of matching panties.

Not that I noticed.

Fuck it, fine, I noticed.

I wasn't blind.

But still, I shouldn't have been into her. I'd never looked twice at a woman since Elle screwed me over so badly. Lucas was the only good thing to come of the mating that was supposed to be the highlight of my life.

No number of gorgeous women had been able to catch my attention this way.

So why did I find her so attractive? I shouldn't be getting a hard-on in my fucking bathroom, with an unconscious vampire.

"Morgan is panicking," Axel said into the phone, finally. My gaze jerked away from the vampire. "Apparently that only happens when the mate fever gets dangerous. Iris is either really close to meeting her mate, or to dying. She didn't tell Mo about the vomit, so it either just started, or she doesn't want Morgan to know."

The length of time the vampire woman had been unconscious told me that it probably hadn't *just started*.

"Okay..." I trailed off. "What do I do?"

"You don't need to worry about it. Mo's already on the phone with one of the guys at the top of Iris's potential mate list. She's going to get every unmated bastard in town to the vampire's door, to heal her and see if one of them is her mate. We'll head into Mist Valley and start offering the other vampires cash to come to town and meet her if that doesn't work."

Fierce possessiveness surged inside me.

That couldn't have been a good sign—but I couldn't fight it.

"No. I'll feed the vampire," I practically snarled into the phone.

There was a long pause. "We need to find her a mate or the fever's going to kill her, Kai."

Fury was blooming within me, and I didn't even fucking know why.

"Keep the unmated bastards away," I roared into the phone, before hanging up and dropping the damn thing on the tile floor.

Iris was still unconscious—and I still needed to do something.

My clumsy fingers pushed a few strands of hair away from her face. It was damp with sweat, and her forehead was burning up. Lucas was still in that stage where he picked up a new virus or bug every time we went out in public, so I was no stranger to fevers—but the vampire was much hotter than

my son had ever been.

Something told me that was a bad sign.

I lifted my wrist to her lips, uncertain about how to make her drink from me. In TV shows, I'd seen people tear into their own skin to make it easy for someone to drink from them. But Finn had asked Axel how Iris drank a few times, and he had said it was just two tiny pricks of the girl's fangs in the person's wrist.

So...

I didn't fucking know what to do.

Iris didn't bite down on my wrist. She was still unconscious, so of course she didn't.

But how the hell did I wake her up?

I forced my breathing to level out so I could think straight.

Maybe it was a natural, survival-instinct thing.

If I just... I don't know, sank her fangs into my skin, would she start feeding on me?

It was the only real idea I had, so I was going with it.

With the wrist that wasn't pressed to that sexy little mouth, I carefully pulled one side of her top lip upward, exposing a wicked-sharp fang.

*Bingo.*

I pressed my wrist lightly against the fang, then lifted the other side of her mouth so I could find the other one.

*There it was.*

Those damn little teeth shouldn't have been a turn-on, but shit, they were.

I carefully cradled the top of her head, and then with one quick motion, shoved my wrist against her fangs.

The sharp pricks were only painful for a fraction of a second—and then pure fire was running from her fangs and into my blood as her lips met my skin and sucked.

A fierce groan escaped me as my cock throbbed, *hard*.

My whole fucking body heated up.

It was like someone had attached me to an electric fence. The hot pleasure burning through me was fucking unreal. I flexed my abdomen, trying to halt my body's response to her venom, but it was no use. I was about to lose it in my pants like a damn teenager.

Her tiny hands wrapped around my arm, her eyes still closed as those pretty little lips moaned against my skin.



And just like that, I erupted with a snarl.

My erection throbbed with my release, her back arching as her fangs sank further into my skin. The pleasure had me cursing, clenching my jaw, and fighting like hell not to grab the little vampire and pull her up onto my lap so I could sink my cock into her the way I so desperately wanted to.

The damned jeans I had on were drenched, and yet I still felt an intense need to take her.

To fuck her.

To *claim* her.

One of her long legs hooked around my waist, dragging her core to my hip as she used it to pull herself to me.

And *shit*, those little lace panties were drenched.

She rocked against my hip, and my hand lifted to cup her little core.

Her cry had pleasure surging through me, as she sank her teeth further into my skin.

It had been six years since I touched a woman, and even then, my damn mate had made sure I knew I hadn't been fucking *good* at it.

Yet I found my fingers sliding beneath the hem of her panties, dragging over her silky, swollen flesh.

My cock throbbed at the wet heat that drenched my fingers.

And it didn't even fucking occur to me that my wolf had gone silent in my chest.

"More," Iris moaned against my wrist. "Harder."

I wasn't a fucking moron.

I gave her more, and I gave it to her harder.

My thumb made circles around that soft little clit, pressing down more firmly. The cries she made as her hips bucked wildly, my hand thankfully trapped against her by her soaked panties, told me I was doing it really fucking right.

I slid a thick finger inside her, and she finally arched and cried out against my wrist. I lost it in my fucking pants again, snarling as my hips jerked.

The bathroom was filled with frenzied breathing, Iris's eyes still closed, her fangs having slid out of my arm when she shattered.

And I was still staring at her perfect little body. Long, and slim, with soft, slight curves...

She was a fucking wet dream.

The need to see the rest of her, bare, had me clenching my jaw.

Even though my hand was buried inside her, the evidence of her pleasure soaking it, I hadn't gotten to see her gorgeous little pussy.

And that pissed me the fuck off.

I let out a slow breath, trying to release some of that anger before I said or did something I'd regret.

Though I didn't know what the hell I wanted from the vampire, I knew I'd just had the most intense, erotic experience of my life. And my wolf hadn't protested it for one damn second.

Which meant I needed to keep my assholiness hidden, so we could have a repeat.

Because if it felt that good with Iris even without having her wrapped around me, how fucking incredible would she feel on my cock?

I slowly started to withdraw my fingers from her panties, even though that was the last thing I wanted to do.

If I wanted a shot at making this happen again, I had to figure out a way to get fucking respectful, fast.

Because... what I'd done probably wasn't really cool.

Then again, she *had* drugged me with whatever she had in those sexy little fangs of hers.

She reached down lightning-fast, and yanked my hand back into place.

My cock throbbed as she clenched around my finger.

"Not yet," she whispered to me. "I'm not ready."

Well I definitely wasn't going to argue with that.

I slowly started to move my fingers inside her, feeling around for the spots that would make her go wild for me. She was so fucking tight, it made my cock throb. When I found the rough patch I knew had to be her g-spot, she bucked against my hand.

Her moan had me digging my finger in, dragging hard over it.

Her teeth pierced my wrist again, and as her body arched, I pressed her clit hard. She writhed against me, and then fucking *screamed*.

Liquid drenched my hand, and a thick wave of pride swelled in my chest—and cock.

I fucking *knew* I could pleasure a woman.

Elle hadn't been interested in me, but I had been fucking right.

And now, I was going to figure out a way to drag this vampire back home with me.

I blinked as the thought of home brought mental images of Lucas, and his

crayons, and his adorable little grin.

What the hell was I doing?

I couldn't just fuck around with some random girl—and Morgan's best friend, for that matter.

I needed to get the hell out of there before she realized who I was, and force myself back to reality.

Single-fatherhood.

Trailer-living.

Home-schooling.

That was what I needed to focus on, not this random, sick vampire girl who was searching for a mate.

The thought of her mate had my attention jerking toward the door, a growl vibrating my chest.

Axel had said they were sending unmated men this way—to find Iris.

To let her drink from them.

A snarl escaped me.

“Are you okay?” she asked me, her expression dazed as she cracked her eyes open just the tiniest bit. I couldn't see the little things, but she could see me. “Holy shit,” she whispered. “You're huge.”

“How many men are going to show up here?” I demanded, my fingers still digging into her channel.

“Easy,” she grumbled back. “Your nails are sharp.”

Fuck.

I carefully started to withdraw my hand again, but she clenched her thighs around me as she grabbed it, stopping me.

“I have to go,” I told her.

The poor little thing was going to have whiplash.

I was a damn mess.

“There aren't any men coming here. The door was locked, so I don't even know how you got in,” she countered. “Not that I'm complaining.”

I let out a slow breath. The woman still had me trapped—one of my wrists was against her lips, the other hand jailed by that little scrap of pink lace.

The thought of that little strip of lace made me see red. “I came to drop off my son's shit,” I growled back. “And found you unconscious. Who were you waiting for?”

“Death, I guess.” Her voice was quiet.

Her gaze lifted to the ceiling. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I’ve been vomiting blood for weeks. Went through the whole list of single male werewolves. The only other option was going back to Mist Valley, and I’d rather die free than live enslaved,” she said softly.

“You’re telling me you put on these tiny scraps of underwear to meet *death*?” I snarled back.

Something about the thought of her dying in my bathroom, alone, made me feel like my fucking brain was about to explode.

“If I’m going to die, I might as well do it looking as cute as possible. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had a good orgasm? Before this, I mean.” She waved toward my hand, still trapped between her thighs.

Another snarl tore through me, and her legs tightened around my wrist, holding me where I was.

“I don’t want to hear about your orgasms,” I snapped. “I need to fucking leave.”

She finally looked at me.

When her gaze collided with mine, it felt like I’d been punched in the balls.

My eyes shifted, and my wolf spoke one single, damning word through my lips.

“*Mate.*”

## AFTERTHOUGHTS

Whew, this book was up for preorder for a LONG time. At least, a long time for me. I can honestly say that I'm a completely different person than I was when I put this one up, and when I came up with the idea for it.

A lot has changed for me in the past nine months or so.

I've found a lot more balance than I had nine months ago. I'm so much happier now than I was then. I've given up on forcing myself to fit molds that I created for myself in my head. I stopped stressing over the small things (as much as any anxious author can).

All this to say, for a good long while, I wasn't sure if I'd even write this book. If it was going to cause me stress, I wasn't going to do it at all.

When the characters started bugging me to tell their story, and the writing began, I was pretty sure it was just going to be a cute little novella. But these characters just had too much drama for a novella! Honestly, I made myself laugh with all the drama in this one. It just kept going. Usually, I feel like there's not so much of it in my books, but that was just the story these characters had to tell.

Anyway, I hope you laughed at Morgan's antics and inner thoughts as much as I did. And I hope you had a blast stepping back into the Mate Hunt world with me. It was so much fun for me to incorporate Char, Ryder, June, and a few others from the original series. I think of this one as its steamier cousin ;) It'll probably be a handful of months before I get back to this series for Iris's story, so you may want to join my FB group or sign up for my newsletter if you want to stay up to date on the next release!

Thank you so much for reading!

All the love,

Lola Glass <3

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Join my email list with this link to read a free novella featuring an adorable werewolf couple you may have met in the Mate Hunt series ;)

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## 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

## STAY IN TOUCH

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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 :)