

WILDWOOD

THE  
ART  
OF  
AVOIDING  
YOUR  
WEREWOLF

LOLA GLASS



*the art of avoiding your werewolf*

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# *contents*

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterthoughts](#)

[Stay in Touch](#)

[All Series by Lola Glass](#)

[About the Author](#)

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*To new years  
And stupid jokes*

*one*

LOVE

I SIPPED my glass of water, watching two couples swing dance in the corner of the rustic bar. The purposefully-scuffed jukebox was playing the newest country song—something about sex in the back of a truck—and my stomach growled mercilessly.

Was I hungry for truck sex?

Not even a little.

...okay, maybe a *little*.

But what I really wanted was blood, which in Wildwood, was hard to come by. The werewolves ran the city. While I could technically fit in with them, it would raise some major red flags if I popped my fangs out around them.

My best friend, Tori, and I made a run to another city when we needed to buy blood bags. They were insanely expensive, so we were barely drinking enough to survive.

If it was safe to live in the other city, we would've stayed. Living was cheaper there, and the few jobs we qualified for paid better.

But it wasn't safe for us, so Wildwood won.

Hunger did, too.

“Can I grab you something else?” the bartender asked me, her smile friendly. She was tall and curvy, with dark skin, and two full sleeves of tattoos. Enough of the ink depicted the forest and moon to tell me she was a werewolf.

Female werewolves were rare, for some strange biological reason. Most of them were made through mating, when the male werewolf bit his human mate and she became like him.

...except in my case.

I was made in a lab.

Or my wolf was, at least.

Most supernaturals would call me a blood wolf. Both vampire, and wolf. It was a shitty gig. I definitely wouldn't recommend it.

The people that didn't go with *blood wolf* stuck with *blood donor* or *lure*.

Of course, neither of those titles were entirely untrue.

They just didn't tell the full story.

Vampires created blood wolves to be their personal blood bags. Thanks to our wolves, we didn't require much outside blood to survive, and could regenerate our own rapidly. Our blood smelled incredible to vampires, functioning as a lure to let them know that we were the ideal food source.

Our blood tasted great too, from what we'd heard.

And suffered.

It was illegal to make us, because of the horrors of the transformation process. Tori and I existed, so some vampires clearly took the risk.

We had a third friend, too—Sienna—but she had been too afraid to leave when we did.

“I'm good. Thanks, though,” I said, giving the bartender a small smile. When she stepped away, I finger-combed my straight-across bangs. Other than the fringe, my medium-brown hair was cut to my chin, with an uneven wave pattern that made it look messy, but fun.

Considering I was only five feet tall and built soft, not strong, I worked with what I had. The short hair fit my face and personality, and it also made me look spunky.

All I had on was a simple black tee-shirt-dress that fell to the middle of my thighs, and a pair of scuffed gray high-tops. I'd tied my work shirt below my breasts during my shift, but tucked it in my bag on my way to the bar. Not only did I love the style, but it played into the image I projected to people.

*Fun and sassy.*

Nowhere near as weak as the vampires had always made me feel.

Anyway, I'd only be at the bar for twenty more minutes. Some days, Tori and I had shifts that started an hour or two apart. We shared a car, so one of us would end up walking or waiting.

The lack of blood affected her more than it affected me, so I almost always took the fall. She tried to argue, and I knew it killed her to let me do it, but she was hurting more than I was.

Usually, I'd just walk home.

Since it had been three weeks since my last blood bag, exhaustion was winning out. Waiting had sounded a hell of a lot better than walking.

So, I'd made myself at home in a truly lovely barstool.

A thick, muscular body sat down smoothly beside me. I took stock of him from where I sat, without glancing his way.

The massive size of him meant he was definitely a supernatural.

Given that we were in Wildwood, it was safe to assume he was a werewolf.

"Hey," the bartender said, flashing the man a playful smile.

Maybe she was his mate.

"How's Ethan? Haven't seen him in a while." The man's voice was low and rumbly. For some ridiculous reason, it made goosebumps break out on my arms.



What the hell was wrong with me?

The bartender's smile widened. "He's great. Still trying to talk me into having a pup."

Maybe they weren't mated.

"Sounds like him," the guy said.

The goosebumps spread over my shoulders.

How was it possible for someone's *voice* to be sexy?

Seriously, what was wrong with me?

"Mmhm. I'll grab your usual." The bartender stepped away, and the guy set his forearms on the countertop. My gaze slid over the tight white tee stretched across his back, and my nostrils flared as his scent hit me.

*Holy shit.*

My fangs descended in a heartbeat, my stomach growling ferociously.

Releasing my water glass, I quickly tucked my hands under my thighs.

Awkward?

Yes.

Necessary?

Also yes.

If I didn't restrain them, I'd likely give in to the urge to grab him and drink from him.

My body warmed as my eyes raked over him again.

Dark blond hair shaved on the sides, but longish on the top.

Thick muscles.

Black tattoos over almost every inch of his skin, their outline nearly visible through the thin fabric of his tee.

And hell, even sitting down, I could tell his ass was incredible.

Biting humans in Wildwood was a no go, but biting a shifter?

It was a one-way ticket out of the city.

Or into a grave.

Which meant I needed to get out of there, pronto.

Forcing myself to breathe in and out like a normal person, I slowly released one hand from under my thigh.

After a moment passed, and I was sure I wouldn't do anything crazy, I leaned down and pulled my bag off the floor. It was a large purse I'd found at a thrift store, made of dark green fabric that spoke to the wolf in me.

*"What is that incredible smell?"* she murmured into my mind, as if awakened by my thought of her. There was a bond between us, some sort of magical gap in our minds where one of us lived while the other was in control.

*"The guy next to me. I'm getting out of here before I accidentally drink his blood,"* I replied quickly, easing my wallet out of my bag.

*"He's definitely a werewolf,"* she said, studying him through my eyes.

*"I know. Over six-and-a-half-feet tall."*

*"And he smells like love."*

*"Like lust, maybe. Or food."*

*"The best food you've ever eaten."*

She wasn't wrong.

I liked steak as much as any other werewolf, but I'd take a bite of the guy over a steak in a heartbeat. And that wasn't because I was starving. He just smelled that good.

*"Did you talk to him?"* she asked.

*"Hell no. I don't have a death wish. If I talk to him, I'm going to bite him. And if I bite him, his pack will try to kill me."*

*“Might be worth it.”*

I snorted inwardly, and set a dollar on the counter. I hadn't had anything besides water, but still felt obligated to tip. Cultural standards were a bitch.

My gaze moved back to the guy when his body went rigid beside mine.

His head jerked toward me, and a pair of intense, dark green eyes collided with my own soft browns. His nostrils flared, and his eyes...

Dilated?

*“Ohh, he wants us,”* my wolf purred into my mind.

I couldn't respond. My fangs were throbbing too hard in my mouth, distracting me from whatever I might have otherwise been thinking.

Those bitches wanted to sink deep in his skin, find his blood, and —

Dammit, I needed to get myself under control.

*“What are you drinking?”* the guy asked, without looking away from me.

I silently willed my fangs to disappear, so I could answer him without revealing myself.

They didn't budge.

*“I'm leaving,”* I managed to say, careful to keep my lips over my teeth. *“Make me shift a little,”* I hissed at my wolf.

A tiny wave of her magic washed over me, and my fangs shrank back to almost their typical size.

That was better.

It made my body warmer, though, emphasizing my lust for the guy staring at me.

I slipped off my stool, tucking my wallet back into my bag and sliding it over my shoulder.

A large hand landed on my waist, blocking my path out.

The guy stood, and I sucked in a breath as he rose to his full height.

Damn, he smelled good.

My fangs slid back into place, throbbing as I, yet again, fought the urge to bite him.

His chest was broad.

His entire body was chiseled.

His tattoos were works of art, black-ink markings that spiraled down his thick arms and over his chest. A few even curled onto his neck.

Maybe that damn country song had a point with the truck sex thing.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

His voice was authoritative.

Strong.

Certain.

Another wave of my wolf’s magic washed over me, forcing my fangs into submission again.

“Lovene,” I said. “I go by Love. Yours?”

“Mad.”

Weird name.

Whatever. Ancient supernaturals had unusual names sometimes. And I had an antique name myself, so I wouldn’t judge.

“*Fuck him,*” my wolf whispered, her voice almost gleeful. “*He wants you. I’ll hold your fangs back.*”

“*I’m not going to fuck him,*” I protested mentally. “*If you lose control of my vampirism...*”

“*We won’t be hungry anymore. I’ll finally be able to shift again.*”

“*The whole city will hunt us!*”

She sighed dramatically. *“I could probably handle them.”*

I doubted she could take down even one normal vampire, but I couldn't say that to her.

“Stay for another drink,” Mr. Perfect said, his fingers pressing lightly against my side.

Warmth rolled through my body.

His touch felt good. Way too good.

“That's a bad idea.”

“Please, Love.”

Something about the massive, gorgeous man saying *please* was so ridiculously attractive, my lower half clenched.

“*Do it,*” my wolf urged.

“*I can't.*”

“*Do it!*” she insisted.

“*No!*”

“*DO IT!*”

My answer spilled out from me before I could reconsider, or remember why it was a shitty idea. “One drink.”

“Not counting the one you already had.” His hand didn't slide off my hip until my ass was on the stool again.

“That was water.”

He lifted the glass, inhaling lightly as if to make sure.

I didn't know why he doubted me, and he didn't give a reason as he set it back down where he'd found it.

His fingers caught the dollar I'd left on the counter, and he tucked it into the purse that was still hanging over my shoulder. “I'm paying.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from protesting.

Though the independent woman in me wanted to pay for myself, I really needed to save my money for blood. Hence drinking water in the first place.

“*Ohh, he’s gorgeous,*” my wolf purred. “*You’re so going to fuck him.*”

“*Seriously, do you have a death wish?*”

“Where are you from, Love?” Mad slid my purse off my shoulder and set it on the floor.

“Scale Ridge.” The lie flowed easily. It was the town we drove to for blood.

Typically, I wasn’t a good liar. But I’d had practice with that one.

“How do you like it here? Our mountains are a bit smaller.”

“The small-town feel is nice, despite the size of the city,” I admitted, trying not to let myself look at Mad too much. When I did, he was staring at me.

Shit, his gaze was intense.

And his eyes were definitely still dilated.

“The views aren’t as good,” he said.

“No, but I feel safer here.” The words were true, but not *entirely* true.

Why did it feel safer?

Because it wasn’t a place most vampires would walk into willingly.

His chest rumbled in satisfaction.

He was *definitely* a werewolf.

The bartender stepped back over to us, setting a red drink in front of Mad.

My eyes lingered on it.

The color was a few shades off, but I could almost let myself believe it was blood.

My stomach growled again, louder than it had before.

“Anything else?” the bartender asked him.

“Whatever Love wants to drink.” He gestured toward me. “And eat.”

Honestly, I wasn’t hungry. Not for food, anyway. I’d packed two PB&J sandwiches when I left for work—one for early lunch, and one for late lunch—and had eaten the last on my way to the bar. I was a baker, so I ate and slept at weird times.

“Perfect. What can I get you?” the bartender asked me. Her smile was brighter than it had been before, and her eyes were wider. I was suspicious of her reaction, but obviously couldn’t show that.

“Whatever he’s having, and some fries.” I didn’t have a copy of their menu, but what country-themed bar wouldn’t have fries?

“Fries and a Blood & Sand, coming right up.” She winked at Mad before she walked away.

Blood...

Ohh, that sounded so damn good.

My stomach rumbled yet again.

“She looked happy,” I remarked.

“I’m friends with her husband.”

I nodded like I didn’t know *husband* was code for *mate*.

Even a woman who wasn’t a supernatural herself would recognize Mad as one in a heartbeat. Human men just didn’t look like that.

And supernaturals had been a part of the general public for over a century, so they were just a part of life.

“Cool.” I didn’t ask another question, because I didn’t want to encourage him.

Though I’d agreed to the drink after my wolf all but forced me to, it would be

better if I left before we got to the truck-sex portion of the night.

And I *really* needed to get that damn country song out of my head.

“What do you do for work?” Mad asked.

That one was easy, at least.

“I’m a baker. I work in the bakery connected to the *Coffee & Toffee* over on Claw Road that’s always crazy busy.”

“*Cake Galore?*”

I couldn’t fight my grin at the ridiculous name in his gorgeous, rumbly voice. Thankfully, my wolf was still keeping my fangs under wrap. “Yeah, it used to be *Cake Galore*. The coffee shop owner bought them out a few months ago, though, and took down the sign pretty quickly. We’re *Coffee & Toffee & Cake*, now.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. It’s fun.” I took another sip of my water, to give my hands something to do other than grabbing him by his sexy white shirt and draining him dry.

“Here’s your drink. The fries will be out soon,” the bartender said, before leaving us alone again.

Mad still hadn’t touched his drink.

I picked mine up, hoping the alcohol would lighten my mood. It wouldn’t affect me for long, given the magic making my system function differently than a human’s, but it would relax me for a little while.

And hopefully dull my hunger.

That was a pipe dream, but hey, a girl could hope.

“What do you do for work?” I asked him.

“I’m a firefighter. My station’s a few blocks from here.”

Ah.

Well, that was sexy. No way around admitting it.



“What’s your favorite thing to bake?” Mad asked me, his attention still fixed entirely on me.

“Croissants.”

“Why?”

“They’re a challenge, and I like challenges. Plus, I like to eat them. We make these ham and cheese ones that are to die for. If I could only eat one thing for the rest of my life, I would pick ham and cheese croissants,” I said.

It was true, despite my need for blood. In an ideal world, I wouldn’t be a vampire at all, and could survive on baked goods. I’d add it to my list of pipe dreams.

Mad’s lips curved upward. “I’ll have to stop by and try them.”

I took a bigger sip of my drink. “What would you choose if you could only eat one thing for the rest of your life?”

Madd didn’t bat an eye at the question. “Steak, bathed in garlic butter. Every damn time.”

I smiled.

That didn’t surprise me even a little.

If I wasn’t so hungry for blood, and obsessed with croissants, maybe I would’ve even agreed with him.

“Have you ever been to Jollie’s, a few streets away from here?” he asked, gesturing behind us.

I knew what he was talking about. It was a sit-down restaurant. Way above my paygrade, considering the price of blood bags and my shitty apartment’s rent.

“Nope.”

“They have incredible steak. I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

I blinked.

Had he just...

Hot damn.

He had.

Mad had just shamelessly implied that there would be a second date. I wasn't even sure if our current situation counted as a first date—but whatever.

No way in hell would there be a second date.

I'd be lucky to make it out of the bar without feeding on him.

His confidence was sexy, though.

"Say yes," my wolf urged.

Saying no outright would only make him feel like I was a challenge, so that was out of the question.

"I think that depends on how tonight goes," I told him instead.

His eyes still flashed like I'd challenged him. "How do you want tonight to go?"

I lifted my shoulder in a shrug.

"Fuck him," my wolf said.

"Shh. You're distracting me."

She went quiet.

I'd only been attracted to a few men in my life, all of them vampires. And I'd never had sex with any of them, so I was inexperienced to say the least.

I hadn't ever considered having a one night stand with a werewolf, but... maybe I could make it work.

It would be a chance to have my first go at sex, which I *did* want. I was tired of feeling weird for being a 23-year-old virgin.

So maybe hooking up with him was exactly what I needed.

The fries arrived, and neither of us looked away from each other.

I took another sip of my drink.

Despite its name, it definitely didn't taste like blood.

"You didn't answer my question, Love," Mad said.

"Maybe I haven't decided on my answer yet."

His dark green eyes heated, and his hand landed on my thigh.

This guy was forward.

It annoyed me how much I liked it.

"Tell me about your family," he said.

That was a loaded question. I had to give an honest answer though, because I was a *really* shitty liar. "I don't have any family left."

He squeezed my thigh. "Neither do I. What do you do in your free time?"

"What is this, a personality test?" I tossed back.

He chuckled, low and deep. "I'm getting to know you."

I rolled my eyes, taking another sip of my drink. "I like movies and hiking. Not at the same time, obviously."

His gaze sharpened. "I spend as much time in the forest as I can."

In his wolf form, I would imagine.

I hadn't had the energy to shift in months, though my wolf and I both ached for it.

*"Focus on the sex," she whispered. "Eventually, we won't be so hungry, and we can shift."*

"Can you stay calm under pressure?" he asked.

I snorted. "I knew it was a personality test."

His lips curved upward wickedly. "I couldn't resist."

I took another sip of my drink. If there was alcohol in it, there wasn't much, because I couldn't taste or feel it. "Are you going to bring up the supernatural thing, or should I ask?"

His smirk remained. "I figured it was obvious."

"Kind of hard to ignore all of this." I gestured to his face, chest, and arms.

"All of *me*?"

"Mmhm."

He plucked my drink from my hand, and took a slow swallow of it.

The smooth, dominant action shouldn't have been such a turn-on, but it was.

He put the glass back in my hand a moment later, leaving me with a few sips of liquid. "It's hard to ignore all of you too, Love." His eyes slid down my figure.

That damn truck sex song started playing again from the radio.

Maybe I liked the song after all.

My phone buzzed on the counter, and I pulled my attention away from Mad long enough to look down at the screen.

TORI

Just locked up. A few things to clean, and I'll be ready to go.

You meeting me at the shop, or want me to pick you up at the bar?

"Who texted you?" Mad's voice was more serious than it had been a minute earlier.

I finished my drink and set the glass on the counter. "My roommate. She's almost done at work, and wondering whether she should pick me up here or wait for me to walk back to the bakery."

"You're not done with my personality test yet."

I rolled my eyes. "I can't justify making my friend wait for the sake of you learning whether I fold under pressure."

“Why not?”

...it was a valid question.

I needed to leave, but between his intoxicating scent, his sexy confidence, and the way my mind kept going back to truck sex, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

Correction:

I *definitely* didn't want to.

“Tell her you're coming home with me,” he said, his gaze intense.

My wolf howled in victory.

“That didn't sound like an invitation, Mad.”

“It was one. Come home with me, Love.”

“You didn't answer my supernatural question,” I said.

“I'm a wolf shifter.”

“Mated?”

“If I had a mate, I'd be in bed with her right now.” The answer was blunt. “A wolf who'd cheat on his female wouldn't live to tell the story. His pack would end him before he ever got the chance.”

I didn't know much about wolves. Only what little I'd been taught by the vamps, and what I'd learned over thirteen years of being a werewolf myself.

Wolf shifters ran in packs, and they were private.

We had potential mates, like all supernaturals, but I didn't know the signs of a werewolf meeting their mate. Or how the mating process worked.

“Hmm.” I picked up my phone, and feigned uncertainty while I looked at the texts from Tori.

The thought was damn near insane.

Going home with an unknown werewolf man, who could kill me easily on top of tempting me to drink his blood? It should be an instant no, however

attractive he was.

But there was something incredibly appealing about him.

A pull of some kind.

Plus, he was clearly interested in me, which was flattering. I couldn't remember the last time someone was attracted to me.

And it had been a long time since I did anything just for fun.

So...

I'd do it.

"Alright, I'm in," I said, sending a quick text to Tori.

ME

Met a guy at the bar. Go home without me.

TORI

OMG.

I'm jealous!

Have fun, and call if you need a ride of shame

She didn't need to know he was a werewolf.

Or that he smelled better than any man I'd ever met before.

My wolf was cheering, and there was a smile curving my lips. That was what really mattered.

Mad's chest rumbled in satisfaction.

He had my fries in a to-go box soon enough, and was walking me out the door a moment later.

*two*

MADD

“THAT SMELLS INCREDIBLE,” Love said, peering down at the steaks I was cooking from where she sat on the kitchen counter.

The drive had been easy, with music playing from my phone and her head bobbing to the beat. We’d chatted more about our lives, though the questions were still surface-level.

She didn’t seem concerned about going home alone with me, thankfully.

Some humans didn’t respond well to pushing. Maybe I hadn’t been pushing her as hard as I thought.

Pun not intended, though my cock had been straining against my jeans since the moment I caught her scent.

The fries hadn’t appeased her growling stomach, so my wolf insisted I feed her before I try to take things any further.

Our mate wouldn’t go hungry on our watch.

And just having her there, in my space, calmed both of us in ways I had never imagined were possible.

*“You need to seal the bond with her tonight, so she doesn’t have time to change her mind,”* my wolf warned me.

*“Change her mind? She hasn’t agreed to anything yet. I haven’t even told her what we are to each other. We’re not close to a sealed bond.”*

He growled. *“At least tell her, then.”*

*“When the time is right, I will. Let me handle this.”*

Though the bastard was reluctant, he agreed.

“I’ve cooked a time or two in my life,” I told her, grabbing the bag of steamed vegetables from the microwave. Though I usually didn’t bother with them, my mate was human. She needed the nutrients.

To go with the vegetables, instant potatoes and gravy were cooling in a saucepan. They weren’t the lavish meal she deserved, but they were better than nothing,

“Clearly.” She dipped her finger in the hot gravy, and I swatted it away.

“You’re going to burn yourself.”

She ignored me and popped her finger in her mouth, nodding her approval at the taste. “I’m tougher than I look.”

I nearly snorted at the idea.

She was a tiny human with short, bouncy hair, wearing a little dress, and carrying around a purse almost as big as she was. I’d spent an hour-and-a-half with her, and I was confident she was far more *in-danger* than she was *dangerous*.

But she was damn adorable.

And I’d been waiting to meet her for way too fucking long to be anything but enraptured by her.

My pack’s group chat was already buzzing with messages, thanks to Jerri, the bartender. She’d taken a picture of us and sent it out to everyone. If I wasn’t so caught up in my mate, I would’ve been irritated about it.

But she was sitting there, on my countertop, letting me cook for her.

Talking to me.



Joking with me.

Teasing me.

Fuck, that alone was more than I'd ever dared hope for.

"Want me to open the veggies?" she asked, reaching for the bag.

"No. I want you to sit there and watch me cook for you." I pulled the steaks from the pan and set them on the plates. They needed to rest before we cut into them, but that gave me time to plate everything else.

She rolled her eyes. "You're one of those overbearing types, aren't you?"

"Every werewolf I've ever met is one of those overbearing types, Love."

She made a face. "Maybe you haven't met enough werewolves."

I snorted. "Right."

The woman was cute, but I'd been an alpha more than long enough to be absolutely confident I was right.

"What about vampires? Are they all overbearing?" she asked.

"Vampires are annoyances." I opened the vegetables, dumping them on the plates and adding a little salt and butter. "Their hunger controls them."

"And demons?"

"Slightly less controlled by their hunger than vampires."

"So demons and vampires are nothing more than annoyances, because they're controlled by their hunger?" she checked.

"Not *nothing more than annoyances*. They're people, too."

"Annoying people?"

"Exactly."

When I lifted my gaze to her, I couldn't tell whether she looked irritated or amused.

I'd hope for the second one.

“I heard someone mention a vampire coming to town a few weeks ago,” she remarked.

I nodded, scooping potatoes and gravy onto our plates. “He came to meet with the alpha.”

Was it dishonest not to mention that I was said alpha?

Probably.

But the woman was tiny, and named “*Love*,” for fuck’s sake. I couldn’t start off by telling her I was the alpha everyone in town was either obsessed with or afraid of.

“What was the meeting for?”

“Vamp’s looking for his mate. Says she ran away from him.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

I added, “It’s highly unlikely. Mated vampires can only drink from each other to stay alive. Running away from him would be a death sentence for both of them.”

“Damn.” There was a moment’s pause before she finally said, “Werewolf packs are like families, right?”

“Yes. Tight, obnoxious families.”

She laughed. “Why do you say that?”

“We drive each other crazy. Right now, my phone’s blowing up with messages from the pack about them seeing me with you at the bar.”

“Really? Why?”

I grabbed our plates, carrying them over to the table. “I don’t date.”

She slipped off the counter, following me across the kitchen. “Why not?”

I didn’t like lying to her, but I didn’t think she was ready to have the mate bomb dropped on her yet. “I’ve never been interested in it.”

She looked curious, but didn't ask for more of an explanation.

I pulled her chair out, and she sat down without hesitation.

We dug into the food, and her bare feet brushed mine as we ate.

My cock throbbed against my jeans, but I forced myself to keep eating like I was unaffected by her touch.

“So, did you invite me here just to feed me?” she asked, sipping the glass of water I'd set out for her.

“That depends.” I set my fork down, though I hadn't finished my meal.

“On...”

“Did you come home with me just so I could feed you?”

“No.” She didn't have to consider her answer. “I assumed you wanted to fuck me. But if you don't date...”

I stood, my chair's legs grinding against the floor. “I date *you*.”

Eloquent?

No.

But I didn't give a fuck about eloquence.

She was in my arms a heartbeat later—and my mouth was on hers a beat after that.

When my tongue met the seam of her lips, they parted without hesitation. The taste of her flooded my senses, and I growled possessively, crossing the room in a few steps.

Her back hit the nearest wall, and I pressed her against it.

Her scent and taste were fucking otherworldly.

The feel of her in my arms was almost as good.

And her body pressed against mine...

Everything in my life was finally the way it should be.

Her tongue moved with mine, her hands buried in my hair, and her grip tugged me closer. I rocked against her core, and she groaned into my mouth, pulling my hair harder.

My hands were rough on her thighs, shoving her dress up her body.

I wanted it gone.

I wanted her bare.

I moved against her again, and she moaned.

The sound was so fucking sexy.

Rich, and rumbly.

Rumbly?

I was too lost to lust to care.

Something sharp sliced through my bottom lip, and I swore, ripping my mouth away from hers. Lovene's moan rolled through the air, going right to my cock despite the bleeding of my lip.

I lifted my hand to check the wound, and saw her mouth.

Her teeth.

Her *fangs*.

*Holy fuck.*

I'd taken a vampire home.

My potential mate was a vampire, and I hadn't fucking noticed.

Her eyes went red, her body shifting to her vamp form. Gorgeous, smoke-colored tattoos appeared on her skin as her body grew a few inches, her fangs lengthening.

My wolf didn't give a damn—he thought she was the best thing since sliced bread.

But the woman was going to bite me.

I spun around and had her in a headlock a moment later; one arm around her waist and another around her throat.

She snarled at me, the sound resembling a wolf's, but she didn't fight me.

Her chest rose and fell rapidly against my arm, and slowly, her body shifted back to its normal form.

I didn't let her go.

My wolf warred with me, still convinced she was his mate. I knew better. He had to have been mistaken.

But why the hell had a vampire woman snuck into my town and tried to seduce me? When had we pissed off a clan of bloodsuckers? We kept to ourselves for a reason.

"Who sent you?" I demanded.

"No one." Her words were strained.

"Tell me, or I'll drag your ass to my prison and get the answer out of you myself," I growled.

My wolf roared at me, trying hard to take control, but we had been partners for far too long for that to work.

Someone must've sent her after us.

And I was going to figure out why, before I killed her for making me think she was mine.

# *three*

## LOVE

ONE SECOND, Mad was making out with me.

The next, he cuffed my arms and legs and threw me in the backseat of his truck. Then, he hauled ass down the highway, snarling into a phone. He was going on about vampires and witches.

Witches were universally hated among both supernaturals and humans. No one really knew why.

But clearly, he thought I was involved with one.

That was better than him knowing the truth. Blood wolves were illegal, so I had no idea what the supernatural government might do to me if they learned what I was.

Then again, Mad was a werewolf. Learning that I had a wolf too might make him have more empathy for me.

If I had my phone, I would've texted Tori to make sure she stayed hidden away, but it was in my purse. Mad had grabbed my bag on the way out, and I obviously couldn't reach it.

Soon enough, he parked his truck and hauled me into a building. It was dark outside, but light enough that I could read the unlit sign over the building's doors:

*Wildwood Police Station.*

That wasn't good.

Hopefully, the police were human.

...And had blood to spare, because I was still starving.

Preferably blood that tasted as incredible as the tiny bit I'd accidentally gotten from Mad, because damn. The man was delicious.

*"Nothing helpful to add now?"* I grumbled at my wolf.

*"No."* She sounded sad.

Honestly, I felt a bit sad too. Aside from a few ridiculous remarks he'd made, I'd actually liked hanging out with him.

Clearly, accepting his invitation back to his house had been a mistake. Sharing a meal and letting him buy me a drink, too.

All there was left to do was make it out alive. If Tori found out where I was, she'd come for me in a heartbeat.

My chest rose and fell quickly as Mad hauled me inside the police station, growling at a few of the cops working there.

Soon enough, they were leading him toward a cell.

The cell was full of human men, which made my fangs slide into place.

Ohhh yes, I was going to like jail.

*"She's not going in there with any men. Find an empty one,"* Mad barked.

*"He means to say *please*,"* a gravelly male voice said behind Mad.

I couldn't turn to see who it belonged to.

We wove through multiple hallways, until I was led into a room with a cube-shaped cage in the center of it. All the cage contained was a few metal benches, and a toilet.

My ass met a bench before the door was slammed behind me, shutting me in.

I closed my eyes and took a slow breath, hoping that when I opened them, the situation would be different.

Spoiler: it wasn't.

And it was bringing back too many difficult emotions from my past.

Being trapped.

Helpless.

Used for nothing but my blood.

It took effort to keep breathing steadily and hold my panic at bay.

"So, what exactly happened?" the new male voice asked.

I opened my eyes and found the guy staring at me. He was built like a brick wall, with tan skin and long, light brown hair tied up in a man bun. Though his expression was serious, there was curiosity in his eyes.

"Don't look at her, Bauther," Mad growled, pronouncing the name like *bother*.

"Cool it, Madden. Tell me what happened."

Madden?

Ohh, shit.

*I didn't.*

But... I must've.

His name wasn't *Mad*, it was *Madd*.

With two *ds*.

And it was short for Madden, as in, *Archer Madden*. The alpha of the Wildwood pack. AKA, the biggest pack that existed.

I'd accidentally gone home with one of the most powerful werewolves in our world.

"*Whoops,*" my wolf whispered.



*“That’s an understatement.”*

I’d royally screwed myself over.

“I found her in a bar. My wolf claimed her immediately. All the mating signs were there. I kissed her, and her fangs sliced my lip. She *shifted*, and tried to drink from me.” Madd said, his voice still flooded with anger.

*“He claimed us?”* my wolf asked.

*“I don’t know. What does that even mean?”*

*“It sounds like it has something to do with mate bonds.”*

Bauther’s forehead creased. “So she’s your mate?”

“No, she’s not,” I called from where I sat in the cell, at the same time Madd snarled, “No.”

Maybe I should’ve kept my mouth shut, but I couldn’t.

Not when my life was on the line.

And if I was mated to Archer Madden, my life would most definitely be on the line. Probably even more than it usually was.

“Witch magic can’t change, mimic, or affect mate bonds. There have been thousands of studies at this point,” Bauther said.

“Then what the hell is she doing in our town?” Madd gestured toward me. “This can’t be a coincidence. A vampire shows up in Wildwood and just *happens* to be my potential mate?”

*“Are we really his mate?”* my wolf wondered.

*“No!”*

“I was at the bar first,” I tossed back. “Technically, you’re the one who just showed up.”

He hit me with an intense gaze and stepped toward me.

Bauther grabbed him by the shoulder. “Ease up, Madd. We need to get the

full story. Even if she's here to hurt someone, she *could* be your mate."

Madd's jaw clenched.

"I'm not going to hurt anyone, and he threw me in a cell. I'm not his *anything*," I said.

"Like hell you aren't," he growled.

Apparently, he hadn't moved on from the whole *my wolf claimed her bit* as much as he wanted to believe he had.

That didn't bode well for me.

"Do you have any proof that you're not here to kill him?" Bauther asked me.

"How would I prove myself not to be an assassin?"

"I don't know." Bauther glanced at Madd.

Madd glared back.

"Have you checked her phone? We can run through her contacts and see if she knows anyone we do."

My stomach rumbled, loudly.

Madden snarled.

Bauther stared at him. "Did you just snarl at her stomach for growling?"

He ignored the question and gestured to a chair off to the side of the room, where my thrift-store bag was sitting lifelessly. Poor thing. "Her phone's in the bag."

And wait, why was I still attracted to this bastard?

"So, the viable options are that she's either a vampire stupid enough to come to Wildwood, or a vampire assassin dumb enough to target you." Bauther asked, glancing at me again. "Which are you, Lovene?"

"Just a stupid, annoying vampire." It was the obvious answer.

"There has to be magic involved," Madd said, his voice still low and angry.

“My wolf is losing his fucking mind.”

He headed for my bag. As soon as it was in his hands, he gave my phone to Bauther and went through my shit without pause. He studied every tampon, snack, and receipt he found as if they held the answer.

They didn't.

Madd pulled my wallet out, and I grimaced as he checked out my ID. “Lovene Hansen. Vampire. Unmated.”

“There's a text on here from a Tori. Do we know who she is?” Bauther asked.

They both looked at me.

“Never met a Tori,” I said.

“What's the code for your phone?” Bauther asked.

I flipped him the bird in response, even though it would probably be better for me if I played along. I didn't want Tori dragged into my shitshow.

“She works at *Coffee & Toffee & Cake*. Let me see if they have a number for a Tori. Zander Villin's mate owns it, and the bastard owes me a few favors,” Madd said, lifting his phone to his ear and striding to the far corner of the room. His intense gaze lingered on me while he spoke to whoever answered.

A few minutes later, he was walking back with his phone, and hit the button to turn it on speaker. My eyes narrowed as it rang a few times, before Tori answered.

“Hello?”

My stomach clenched.

I didn't want her in danger again because of me.

“This is Alpha Archer Madden. We have your friend Lovene in custody, and won't release her until we know who she is and what she's doing here.”

There was a moment of silence.

A long moment.

“What’s this about?” Tori finally asked.

“The fact that we have a female vampire on our territory without request or explanation.”

Another pause followed.

“I’ll be there in ten,” Tori said, before the line went dead.

I grimaced.

Clearly, I had made a bad decision.

Potentially the worst in my life.

If I got my friend killed, I’d never forgive myself.

“There’s a solid chance this woman is your mate, Madden. If I were you, I’d try to smooth shit over sooner, rather than later,” Bauther murmured to Madd.

*“Tori is smart. She won’t come blazing in with the truth,”* my wolf said.

*“I sincerely hope so.”*

TEN MINUTES LATER, the police escorted a grim-looking Tori into the room.

She was tall and slim, with pale skin. Her strawberry-blonde hair was cut in a pixie, with the longest pieces in the front falling in curls to her cheekbone.

Her gaze landed on me, and I lifted my hand in a wave to show I was fine.

Tori’s lips quirked up a tiny bit. As always, she was wearing athletic clothes. She had on a pair of biker shorts, and a sports bra that resembled a cropped tank. It was the middle of the summer in Wildwood, so the weather was perfect, and we could wear pretty much whatever we wanted.

Her attention turned toward both of the men in the room after she was sure I was okay.

“Show me the paperwork with the reasoning behind Love’s imprisonment.”

The guys were caught off guard for a moment.

Tori added, “It’s not technically illegal for a vampire to visit or live in Wildwood, as long as they don’t drink blood without permission or attack the pack in any way. Did Love hurt anyone?”

There was another beat of silence.

She knew I couldn’t harm a fly with anything other than my fangs.

And while I *had* bitten Madd, it could qualify as a love bite, since we were making out.

“Open the cage,” Bauther commanded.

Two cops at the far end of the room immediately pressed a few buttons. There was a beeping noise, and the cell opened.

I slipped out, and Tori immediately tugged me to her side, hugging me fiercely. She wore a bunch of perfume to hide her scent, as always. She smelled even better to vampires than I did, for whatever reason. “You okay?”

“I’m good.”

“We’re not letting you leave without giving us answers,” Madd said bluntly, stepping between us and the door.

I put myself between him and Tori. “We pissed off some other vampires and needed a place to hide out. Believe me, we’ve come to understand why vampires don’t live here. None of your humans are interested in feeding us.” My words were clipped, and not *entirely* true.

We hadn’t tried feeding from any of the humans in town. Hadn’t deemed it worth the risk.

But there was enough truth in my answer to give the werewolves what they wanted.

“Now, since you clearly don’t have any legal grounds to keep us here, we’re leaving,” Tori said curtly.

Bauther stepped out of the way, but Madd caught my hand as I slipped past. With one tug, he spun me toward him.

Tori grabbed my arm, but Madd’s grip on my wrist was secure.

“You are my mate,” he said, his voice low.

“Fuck you.”

His eyes flashed in challenge. “Is that an offer?”

A humorless laugh escaped me. “Go to hell, *Madd*.”

When I yanked my wrist away from him, he let me go.

But if I really was his mate, the *letting go* bit wouldn’t last. I didn’t know how the process worked, but I was absolutely certain that supernaturals lived and breathed for their mates.

And that didn’t bode well for me in the slightest.

TORI and I kept our eyes down as we made our way out of the police station and to our car. I didn’t even think about my purse or my phone until we were driving back home.

I gave her a rundown of everything that had happened as she navigated us through town.

When I finished the story, Tori sighed, running a hand through her hair. Her eyes remained on the road. “What a mess.”

Blood would help, but I didn’t know if it would fix anything. I would need more than one blood bag to make myself feel better, and I only had one.

“If you’re really mates, it makes sense that you wouldn’t be able to stop yourself from biting him. You’ve heard what the vampires said about finding a potential mate. Their blood smells so good, it’s basically impossible to walk away,” Tori said.

The lump in my throat swelled with the reminder about his scent.

And the taste of him on my tongue.

I hadn’t meant to slice through his lip, but I didn’t really regret it. Not when he tasted like heaven.

My stomach rumbled loudly.

“You haven’t had blood in three weeks?” Tori checked.

“Nope.”

“That didn’t help either, I’d imagine.”

It definitely hadn’t.

“His truck is right behind us,” Tori said.

My head jerked, and my gaze landed on Archer Madden, in the front seat of his truck.

A truck I was way too well-acquainted with.

My body warmed at the sight of him, and my stomach rumbled again, louder than ever.

“How does he smell?” Tori asked, noticing me staring out the back window of our shitty little car.

“Like a drug.” My gaze didn’t leave his obnoxiously-gorgeous figure.

“Hopefully, the pull to him will get easier to ignore after you have a blood bag.”

I really hoped she was right.

Because if she wasn’t... well, I had no idea how long I’d be able to fight it.

*four*

MADD

MY WOLF GROWLED UNHAPPILY through the entire drive to Lovene's apartment.

It was difficult to pair the old-fashioned name with the feisty female I'd found in my pack's bar. Somehow, she was soft and playful... and a vampire too.

She'd been telling the truth when she said she felt safer in Wildwood—because whoever she was running from wouldn't dare search my city without coming to me first.

Considering the way Love had asked me about our vampire visitor, it seemed safe to assume he was the one looking for her and Tori. Thankfully, I hadn't given the bastard permission to look for his female in my city.

My stomach clenched at the thought that he could've killed or taken my mate right out from beneath my nose.

*"We need to figure out a sincere fucking apology,"* my wolf growled, for the fifth time since we realized the truth.

*"I'm aware."*

*"And you need to tell her she's drinking our blood, not anyone else's."*



*“I know.”* I couldn’t stop myself from snapping the words. The thought of my female’s teeth in another man’s throat made my fists tighten on the steering wheel, my wolf’s claws breaking through my fingertips.

Another bastard’s blood, running through her body...

I’d kill him.

*“We would’ve heard about it if there were female vampires feeding on humans in our city. People talk,”* he said. *“So she hasn’t been eating. She’s hungry. And you saw her fangs descend—it obviously wasn’t intentional.”*

Fur broke out down the lengths of my fingers. The throbbing in my lip had subsided, and the wound was on its way toward being healed. I wasn’t angry with her for hurting me. She hadn’t been in control—and I may have overreacted a bit.

Possibly.

*“She’s not feeding enough. That’s why her stomach kept growling,”* I said.

*“She didn’t need food, she needed blood.”*

*“I’ll talk to her about it.”*

*“If she doesn’t listen, I’ll force her into submission.”*

I scoffed. *“Did you miss the bit where she was pretending to be a human? She’s not going to be forced into anything.”*

*“I’m her mate. She’ll listen to me,”* my wolf growled.

*“Or you’ll listen to her.”*

He snapped his teeth at me, though he didn’t have any physical teeth to snap in that moment. We were basically the same being; it wasn’t as if the bastard could bite me. *“Not on this.”*

I hoped he was right.

Because I may have fucked things up with my mate, but there wasn’t a damn chance I was going to walk away from her. One way or another, I’d convince her she belonged to me.

And that I belonged to her, too.

WHEN WE FINALLY PARKED IN front of the fourplex apartment building, my lips twisted in a snarl.

My wolf tried to force a shift, then and there.

She lived in the shittiest building in the city. The place was all but crumbling. The other three apartments had been empty for months on end, and as far as I'd known, hers was too.

I watched her glance over her shoulder as she slipped out of her junker car. It was the only vehicle in the small lot, other than mine. Her gaze caught mine for a moment, before she looked away quickly.

I forced myself to continue breathing through my nose, trying to squash my anger down. She had lied to me and hidden the truth, but she was *mine*.

I would sit in my truck until I'd calmed down enough to apologize to my female... then, I would drag her cute little ass back to my pack's neighborhood and make sure she understood exactly what was going to happen between us.

Including her drinking my blood.

*five*  
LOVE

MY STOMACH CHURNED as I scrubbed my skin in the shower, trying hard to get Madd's ridiculously-delicious scent off of me. I'd had my way with a blood bag as soon as we got home, but after tasting the alpha, drinking it had been like swallowing watery dirt.

I'd managed to get it down, but it had only helped my hunger a tiny bit.

And on top of that, it wasn't sitting right. My nausea was growing by the minute.

A loud knock echoed through the paper-thin walls of my apartment. Despite the shower running above my head and the music playing in the kitchen, I could hear the knock without a problem.

That was what happened when you lived in an ancient apartment building. The walls were so thin, it felt like the whole place swayed with every gust of wind.

I sighed.

There was no question who was at the door.

"I'll deal with him," Tori said, not bothering to step inside the bathroom to tell me. We both knew the 'wood' barely muffled words at all.

I heard the front door open, followed by Tori's, "What do you want?"

"I have Love's bag. I'll give it to her in exchange for a conversation," Madd said.

Even with the shower on and walls between us, his voice still made goosebumps break out on my arms.

Something was seriously wrong with me, and I was starting to get nervous that it might *actually* be a mate bond.

"She's not having a conversation with you."

"Then she's not getting her purse or phone back," Madd said, just as bluntly as Tori.

My stomach churned, harder than ever.

I shoved the clear shower curtain to the side, crashing to my knees in front of the toilet just in time to vomit up the contents of my stomach.

The blood bag *really* hadn't agreed with me.

"What the hell?" I heard Madd's growl. The sound of a door cracking against the wall followed.

I was too busy clutching the toilet seat while the world spun around me to wonder what was going on.

Dizzy—I was so damn dizzy.

And hungry—I was so, insanely hungry.

"If you go in there, she's going to drink your blood," Tori warned.

The bathroom door slammed open a heartbeat later.

My entire body shuddered as his scent washed over me. My fingernails dug into the toilet seat, sharpening as I fought to stop from shifting to my vampire form.

"*Drink from him,*" my wolf urged.

The last thing I needed was her encouragement.

“Who did you bite?” Madd growled, flushing the toilet before he sat on the floor beside me.

My fingers dug further into the seat.

“She had a blood bag,” Tori said. “She’s starving. Has been for—what are you doing?” She cut herself off when Madd hauled me onto his lap.

He ignored her, pulling the neck of his stupidly-attractive white tee to the side and commanding, “Drink.”

I tried to ignore the order, and failed with flying colors.

My fangs sank into his throat.

The insane taste of him flooded every damn sense I had, overwhelming me and soothing me all at once.

His hands gripped my waist as bloodlust rolled through both of us, making us hot and bothered and horny as hell.

Somehow, the bastard managed to fight the need. His fingers dug into me a bit, but that was the extent of his reaction.

I drank until I was so full I was bloated—then I slowly came to my senses and forced myself to stop.

His grip on me didn’t ease until I withdrew my teeth entirely.

My wolf stretched out, her magic rolling through me.

“*Not now,*” I urged her. “*We can’t shift now.*”

“*We have to,*” she purred.

I tried to get off Madd’s lap, but his grip didn’t budge.

One last wave of her magic hit me, and the shift took over.

A moment later, there was a wolf on Madd’s lap.

He blinked, shock registering on his face.

My wolf nuzzled against his neck. She was small and soft, a light brown

fuzzball.

One that really liked Madd.

His fingers sank into her fur, and he stroked her behind the ears. My wolf leaned into his touch, enjoying the hell out of it.

“You’re blood wolves,” he said, his voice somehow still even. “That’s why you’re hiding here.”

“Seems pointless to deny it now,” Tori’s voice was tired.

“Who are you hiding from?”

“The people who made us.”

“Who are…”

“None of your business.” She didn’t bother beating around the bush.

Damn, I loved her.

My wolf leaned harder against Madd’s fingers, and he continued petting her without pause. “I’ll kill them for you.”

“For Love, you mean.”

“Of course. I won’t let anyone threaten my mate.”

Tori sighed. “If I thought you could, I’d tell you.”

“I’ve been the alpha of the most powerful pack in the world for a damn long time. I can handle it.”

“You’ll have to convince Love of that, then. I’m not telling you.” Tori’s voice left no room for questioning whether she was serious or not.

Madd continued petting my wolf.

“*Can I please have control again?*” I asked her. “*I’ll find a time for us to run as soon as possible.*”

“*You’re going to take me away from my mate,*” she grumbled back.

“*The mate thing hasn’t been decided.*”

*“Yes, it has. I decided it.”*

I groaned.

She reluctantly stepped back, and Madd let her go after a moment of hesitation. *“Don’t hurt him,”* she warned me, sitting down on the bathroom floor.

*“How would I possibly hurt him? Have you seen him?”*

Her deadpanned emotions told me she wasn’t amused.

*“I’m pretty sure I just got myself addicted to his blood, okay? If I kill him, we’ll starve to death.”*

That answer satisfied her, and she let me take control again. Our body shifted until my human legs were sprawled out in front of me, my bare ass on the ground.

It took me a second to reorient myself. It had been so long since I last shifted that it felt weird to do so. Plus, my body was much more relaxed than it had been in months. If ever.

*“Move to my pack’s neighborhood,”* Madd said, not acknowledging my nudity. Our clothes disappeared into the void when we shifted with them on. *“Both of you. We have empty houses. And we own most of the city, so no one worries about money. You would be safe and healthy.”*

*“We’ll need time to think and talk about it,”* Tori said. I was glad she answered for me, because I was still trying to adapt to my human body and my lack of hunger again. *“For now, you need to leave.”*

His chest rumbled unhappily, but he left. She followed him to the door, locking it when he was gone. It wouldn’t keep any real threat out, but it made us feel better all the same.

*“Well, that was something,”* Tori said, leaning in the doorway when she returned.

I sighed. *“Yeah.”*

*“You like him, don’t you?”*

“I would never do such a thing. I am a brick wall of disinterest. He doesn’t even smell good anymore.”

Tori smiled. “Sure.”

She didn’t push for more, so I leaned my head against the bathroom wall. It smelled like mold, but I was used to it.

I was tired, though.

And despite the way the night had ended, it was one of the best I could remember ever having.

Before he realized what I was, Madd had watched me intently. He’d listened carefully to every word I said. He stared at me like I mattered.

I’d felt important.

Attractive.

Fun.

But now that he knew who and what I was, I was going to have to maintain distance between us. He’d made it clear that he had no problem with going from kissing me to imprisoning me in a heartbeat, and I couldn’t risk that again.

So... I’d have to avoid him.

As much as he’d let me, at least.

AFTER I DRIED off and got dressed, I tucked myself into bed. It was fairly late, and my mind kept going back to him, so sleep seemed like the best plan.

He'd offered my phone and purse in exchange for a conversation, but obviously, I couldn't give him what he wanted. He was stubborn, and he was going to walk all over me if I let him.

The easiest way to avoid that was just to refuse to play along.

So, I went to bed.



STRESS WOKE me up half-a-dozen times in the few hours of sleep I managed, until I finally got up and ready for the day. I always tried not to wake Tori, since both our beds were in the same room.

It would be an early morning at the bakery, but every morning there was an early one. Tori's shift started two hours after mine, so I'd leave her with the car. Particularly since I was still full thanks to Madd's blood in my system.

"Are you sure you're okay with walking on your own this morning?" Tori murmured, while I got dressed as silently as possible.

"Yep. Madd will probably follow me there, if he's still waiting outside," I whispered back.

"I'm sure he is."

"I'll be fine either way. Go back to sleep." I gave her a quick smile before I slipped out of our bedroom, closing the door behind me.

I knew she hated letting me walk to make her life easier, but she legitimately didn't have the energy she would need to do it instead. So, she let me go.

My favorite high-tops were still at Madd's house, so my holey ones went on my feet. The t-shirt-dress I put on didn't hit the middle of my thighs, so I tugged on fishnets and spandex shorts beneath it. The fishnets had holes too, but it wasn't like I had money for new ones.

There was a picture of a band I didn't know on the front of my dress, but it looked cool, so I went with it. When you only shopped at thrift stores, you had to work with what you found.

I didn't bother grabbing breakfast, instead slipping out the door after I wet and blow-dried my bangs, then put some water on my hair to revamp the waves. I felt a little naked without my purse and phone, but I'd survive.

As expected, Madd was asleep in the driver's seat of his truck when I made it outside.

Damn, he was pretty.

I didn't let myself look too long, simply headed down the sidewalk. It didn't lead me too close to his vehicle, thankfully.

*“He threw us in jail. We should make him grovel,”* my wolf mumbled, still mostly asleep in my mind.

*“I was planning on it.”*

*“Make sure the groveling includes fucking. We still haven’t done that yet.”*

I sighed.

She fell asleep again almost immediately.

The sun hadn’t risen yet, but I could see well in the dark thanks to my plethora of supernatural genes.

It felt good to get out and moving while the rest of the world was asleep. It was about a thirty minute walk, so it wasn’t too big of a deal. My mood lifted with every step I took away from Madd—until I heard a vehicle’s door shut behind me.

A slow breath escaped me, but I kept moving.

There were never any other cars in the parking lot. If we had any neighbors, they didn’t own vehicles.

So, there was no question who had closed their door.

My wolf shook her fur out, waking up more fully with the knowledge that Madd was behind me.

The alpha didn’t say a word as he caught up to me, and I didn’t have to glance over at him to make sure I was right about his identity.

His smell was too damn good for that.

When I heard my purse jiggling, though, my head jerked to the side.

*“If you have a conversation with me, I’ll return your things,”* Madd said, his voice completely alert.

I supposed if he was a firefighter, he was probably almost as comfortable with early mornings as I was.

*“Tempting,”* my wolf drawled. *“Surely, he could come up with a better deal*

*than that. One that involves an apology for imprisoning us.”*

“I know.”

“No thanks,” I told Madd, as I continued walking.

He did too, though he adjusted his grip on my bag. From the corner of my eye, I saw him pull it over his shoulder.

“Your snacks are in here,” he said. “You’ll want them when you’re working.”

“They’re *emergency* snacks. I’ve decided not to have an emergency until you feel guilty enough to give it back.”

“What about the tampons?”

“I have extras at work.”

I also hadn’t bled since we’d started going hungry, but Madd didn’t need to know that.

“You’ll need your phone.”

“Actually, it feels nice to be inaccessible. I’m off the grid.” I shimmied my shoulders a little when I said that, unable to stop myself. “My purse looks better on you, anyway.”

I made a show of looking over at him and whistling, and my wolf barked out a laugh when he grumbled at me.

My lips curved upward of their own accord when I focused on where I was going again.

He had one of those faces that always looked angry. If he wasn’t so damn sexy, it would’ve been annoying. Because he was, the grumpiness was kind of hot.

“Why were you starving last night?”

“I have expensive taste.” I crossed a street, and he remained all but glued to my side.

I didn’t see anyone around, but that didn’t mean there *wasn’t* anyone around.

I wasn't about to risk speaking the truth out in the open like we were.

"I can see the holes in your shoes from here, Love."

A sigh escaped me. "Have you ever tried to buy my favorite kind of food? It's not cheap. Neither is my shitty apartment."

"Wildwood is an expensive place to live if you're not a werewolf."

I scowled. "If you're not an overbearing-male type werewolf, you mean."

"A *pack* wolf, yes. There are a handful of females woven through, too."

"I'm obviously not made for a pack. Tori and I even get tired of each other sometimes."

"I can remedy that," Madd said. "I'll move you into houses next door to each other, so you have your own space."

"At what price?"

He scoffed. "I wouldn't charge my mate."

"I wasn't talking about money, Madd."

He was silent for a beat.

"You don't need to follow me," I said, reaching the first real street in the city.

He made a noise of disagreement. "You must not understand mate bonds, if you believe that."

I didn't argue with him.

I *didn't* understand mate bonds.

"You do understand mate bonds, don't you?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Don't lie to me, Love."

I huffed, but didn't tell him I wasn't lying. He'd obviously realized the truth.

"*This could be good. We do need an explanation,*" my wolf said.

I agreed with her, even if I didn't want to admit it.

"A male werewolf spends his life looking for a potential mate. There's no magic to lead him to them. He recognizes her by her scent and his wolf's reaction, but that requires getting fairly close to her. About as close as you and I were at the bar."

"Most supernaturals that I know of aren't interested in taking mates," I said.

"Most aren't," he agreed. "Wolves are different. We're pack animals. We're not meant to be alone—we're meant to have someone to love and care for."

"I'm sure you'll find another potential mate. If you're smart, you'll try not to throw the next one in jail."

"There won't be another one. My wolf's set his sights on you."

"Do I need to tell you all the reasons that's a bad idea, Madd?"

"I've spent hundreds of years looking for you. There's not a damn thing in this world that could stop me from making you mine now."

I rolled my eyes. "Except *me*."

"I'll convince you."

"You haven't even apologized for throwing me in jail, so how the hell are you going to manage that?"

His amusement vanished. "I *am* sorry for that."

"Sure you are."

His chest rumbled unhappily. "You think I haven't considered how differently the night could've gone, Love? I could've had you bare, in my house. In my bed. I could've buried my cock in your body and marked you with my scent in every way there is. You're mine, and you don't even fucking smell like me right now. I'm sorry I prevented that. I regret hurting you even more."

"*Hot damn*," my wolf said. "*Maybe we should ask for a redo of last night. The blood drinking included.*"

*“We are not having a redo of last night,”* I hissed back at her. *“He was supposed to grovel. This is nowhere near groveling.”*

“You didn’t *hurt* me,” I said.

“Not physically.”

I flashed him a glare. “Just back off. I’m not interested.”

“Last night, you disagreed.”

“Last night, you were just some gorgeous werewolf guy I met in a bar who I wanted to sleep with. Today, you’re the asshole alpha who threw me in jail, stole my shit, fed me his blood, and won’t leave me alone.”

“You can add *sexy* before *asshole alpha*.”

“The *asshole* part cancels out the *sexy* bit,” I drawled back.

“For now.”

“Permanently.”

Thankfully, I could finally see *Coffee & Toffee & Cake* in the distance.

“If you’re so set on me being an asshole, I might as well tell you that I have my packmates getting houses ready for you right now. And in the future, the only person or thing that will be feeding you is me,” he said bluntly.

“Maybe in your dreams, Madd,” I tossed back, even though I was probably addicted to him already.

Every vampire was aware that drinking a potential mate’s blood led to either sealing a mate bond or suffering for a decade. All other blood would taste terrible for around ten years, at which point your body would finally move on.

“You enjoyed drinking from me.”

“I’d sooner starve than do it again,” I lied.

He chuckled, his voice low and gravelly. “My mate will never starve.”

“It’s too late for that.” I stopped outside the back door of the bakery. My keys

were in my bag, but I wasn't going to tell him that.

Instead, I rapped on the metal door.

My coworker would hear me; I saw her vehicle in the parking lot.

"I'll pick you up after your shift ends," he said.

The bakery's back door opened, and my coworker popped her head out. Her eyes widened when she saw Madd in front of me.

My wolf bared her teeth at her, though she couldn't see it. "*He's ours.*"

"Holy shit. You're Archer Madd —"

"He's leaving," I said, interrupting her.

I liked her, but my wolf's possessiveness was creeping into my veins too. So at the moment, I did *not* like her.

"I'm bringing you lunch," he called over my shoulder, as I stepped past her.

"I won't eat it." I just couldn't stop myself from arguing with him.

"I will," my coworker offered.

The snarl that escaped me as my head snapped toward her was all wolf.

Her eyes were huge as she jerked away from me, hugging the door while my wolf glared at her through my eyes.

Madd's rumbly chuckle followed me the rest of the way into the bakery—and lingered in my mind as I angrily loaded ingredients into the massive stand mixer.

"*What the hell was that?*" I asked my wolf, irritated with both her and myself.

That reaction wasn't *all* her.

If I was honest, it was equally her and me.

"*He's ours, even if we don't want him to be. And I still want a do-over of last night.*"

*“That is never going to happen,”* I told her bluntly.

It felt like a lie.



*six*

LOVE

I APOLOGIZED to my coworker after my breathing finally evened out, and she apologized too for overstepping. According to her, she'd been in awe of his size and beauty.

Yes, that was my personal translation of what she said.

But honestly, I couldn't hold it against her. Hadn't I been in awe of him too? There was no ignoring the way I broke out in goosebumps every time he spoke.

I wasn't as chatty as I normally was, but my coworker seemed to realize there was some shit going on outside the bakery for me. She wasn't offended when my responses weren't as enthusiastic as usual.

Tori got there two hours after I did, and immediately got to work on the cookies and cakes she always handled.

I waited longer than usual to take my lunch break, at my wolf's insistence. She believed Madd when he said he'd be bringing me lunch—and we were out of bread, so I hadn't been able to make myself a sandwich before work.

Sure enough, at 12 PM on the dot, one of the girls at the register called into the kitchen, "You have a visitor, Love."

Dammit.

My wolf celebrated, but I sighed.

“He had a Jollie’s bag, and said he’ll meet you behind the building,” she added.

“Go eat. Punch him if you have to,” Tori said, shooing me toward the back door.

I reluctantly washed my hands, then slipped out.

Madd was leaned up against the building, smelling like soap. His hair was damp, too. He held a large to-go bag in one hand, and a big foam cup from a gas station in the other.

I tried not to scowl when I realized I couldn’t smell my scent on his skin anymore, and failed.

Damn possessiveness.

“*He’s ours,*” my wolf said, her chest rumbling.

“*I’m aware of your feelings, even if they’re shitty.*”

Madd’s gaze moved over me slowly. “You look good in an apron.”

“If that’s your way of suggesting I become your housewife, you can walk away from me right now.”

“It’s not. You’d be a hot housewife, though.”

I rolled my eyes, but took the bag of food from his hands.

He gestured toward his truck. It was parked in the employee lot, facing a brick wall and a few tall pine trees. “Figured you’d want some privacy.”

I didn’t want to tell him he was right.

“What kind of soda do you drink?” I asked him, my gaze flicking to the foam cup.

“What is this, a personality test?”

I couldn’t hold back my snort at his reminder of our conversation the night before. “I already passed with flying colors, considering you won’t leave me

alone. So, I'd say it's my turn to test you."

He chuckled, opening the driver's door. I slipped in past him, claiming that seat so I wouldn't end up in the same position I'd been in the last time I was in his truck.

Madd closed the door behind me. A moment later, he'd taken the passenger seat, and set the foam cup on the console between us. "I drink Coke from time to time. This isn't soda, though."

So he'd filled a foam cup with water. Weird, but whatever.

I was already breaking one of the containers open. "Are these both the same?"

My stomach grumbled—for both food, and blood. I'd all but drained him the night before, but my body was still recovering from starvation. At my healthiest, I only needed to drink blood once a week.

"The bottom one has extra fries."

I handed the top one to him immediately, popping the second box open. I felt his eyes on me, and ignored them as I took a massive bite of the burger.

It was heavenly.

He focused on his own burger after a moment, and we ate in comfortable silence.

My fingers caught the foam cup.

I wrapped my lips around the straw and took a big gulp of the water.

It—

Ohhh.

It wasn't water.

My chest rumbled at the explosion of flavor on my tongue.

I was *purring*.

Madd was delicious.

Orgasmic.

My toes curled.

My eyes slammed shut.

I couldn't have stopped drinking if I tried.

"I *was* going to warn you," Madd said.

Too lost to the straw to care, I drained the large cup so damn fast, it was unbelievable.

It was empty too soon.

I sucked anyway, filling the truck with the sound of a straw in a nearly-empty cup as if more blood would magically appear.

It didn't.

Madd's hand was gentle as he carefully pried the smooshed burger out from between my fingers, setting it back on the bed of fries.

When he tried to take the cup, my sharp nails pierced the foam.

"You're the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen," Madd rumbled.

Another round of goosebumps broke out on my skin.

My stomach growled again, loudly.

"*Bite him,*" my wolf urged.

I was so damn lost to bloodlust, I couldn't argue with her.

The foam cup hit the console, and I was straddling Madd's lap a moment later. His food container was beneath me, but his hands landed on my hips, like he'd rather hold me than the burger.

I inhaled deeply, his scent making me purr again. When my chest rumbled, his did too.

He let go of me with one hand, just long enough to slide the food out from under me. "Don't—fuck." His argument turned into a strained curse when my

fangs sank into his throat.

His flavor was even better on my tongue than it had been in the cup.

I drank greedily, my hips rocking as the hot desire that came with feeding took control of me.

Madd's fingers dug into my waist nearly deep enough to draw blood, but otherwise, he didn't move. His erection was so hard, I didn't need him to.

The feeling was foreign.

The thickness of his desire, against my clit.

Exactly where I needed him.

He felt so damn much better than my fingers.

I couldn't have stopped myself if I tried.

I drank and rocked until I was moaning on his erection, his blood on my tongue while I climaxed harder than I ever had before.

Madd swore again, but still didn't move.

I continued drinking until my belly was swollen and my mind slowly cleared.

My fangs slid out of his skin without any effort on my part, and my tongue dragged over the puncture wounds on his throat before the weight of the situation set in.

Slowly, my eyes closed.

I let out a long breath.

Physically, I couldn't remember ever feeling so good. My shoulders were relaxed. My mind was calm. My body was at peace.

I wasn't hungry.

I wasn't fighting to stop myself from losing control and draining some unsuspecting human.

I wasn't in pain.

My wolf stretched in my mind. *“Ohh, he is perfect. I’ve selected the best possible mate. And an alpha, on top of it.”*

I ignored her.

The alternative was to agree, which was obviously off the table.

He was still the bastard who had thrown me in the back of his truck, then locked me in a jail cell. And he’d filled a damn foam cup with blood, without telling me! Who did that?

Then again, I hadn’t exactly waited for him to warn me what was in it.

Much of the blame was on me.

Not sure what else there was to say or do, I eased myself off his lap. I ignored his slightly-pained grunt when I rubbed against his rock-hard erection again in the process.

My hands were trembling slightly when I picked up my to-go box and lifted a french fry to my mouth.

He didn’t grab his food, remaining where he was. The expression on his face was sort of... dazed. His jaw was clenched, too.

I ate another fry, contemplating every life decision I’d ever made that had led me to where I was.

Staying with the clan that made me wasn’t an option. They’d used me for so damn many years.

Tori and I had tried to convince Sienna to leave with us, but she’d refused. She was too scared. But we couldn’t deal with the pain of being prisoners any longer. So, we had to run.

There was nowhere else as safe from vampires as Wildwood, as Madd had proven when he dragged my ass to his jail.

That meant the only choice I could’ve made differently was to leave the moment he sat down beside me.

Leaving so quickly would’ve created suspicion, though. And therefore, could’ve led to the exact same scenario that had occurred. If he caught my

scent and realized I was his mate, he would've followed me wherever I went.

So, there was no point in questioning my life's decisions. Even if they led to me getting off on a werewolf's cock while fully dressed, in the passenger seat of his truck, as I drank from him.

*Cool.*

When you added in the fact that the same truck had been driving me to a prison cell approximately sixteen hours earlier, it only got better.

I ate another fry, a bit more violently.

"In hindsight, a warning about the blood should've come much sooner," Madd finally said, his voice still strained and his body exactly where I'd left it.

"You think?" My next bite was even more violent.

Drinking from him was my fault too—but *not* drinking wasn't really a possibility. Unless I wanted to go ten years without enjoying a meal, at least.

And according to some people, it was *impossible* to survive on blood that didn't belong to your potential mate, no matter how long you waited.

Your body could reject it.

My body *had* rejected it the night before.

I was fucked. And not in the fun way.

"In my defense, I didn't have a blood bag, and a Ziploc bag didn't seem appropriate," Madd added.

"You donated blood, and they didn't put it in a blood bag?"

"I'm a paramedic. I know how to draw blood. Going to a donation center would've drawn attention we couldn't afford. It took a few tries, but I made it work."

"You drained *your own* blood into that cup? Are you fucking insane?"

He chuckled, though the sound was still more tense than I would've

expected. “Apparently.”

“Why would donating blood have drawn attention?”

“We don’t have vampires in Wildwood. You know they don’t sell blood here. If I’d donated it, it would’ve gone to the hospital. It’s no secret that I’m the alpha, so people pay close attention to me.”

He continued, “If I’d donated blood but taken it home, word would spread all over town. It wouldn’t take long for the packs to figure out who the blood was for, considering I sure as hell wouldn’t be giving blood to anyone but my mate.”

“They don’t know I’m your potential mate yet, do they?” I asked.

He lifted a shoulder. “I haven’t confirmed or denied it yet. Your bakery has been overrun with wolves and obnoxious humans trying to figure it out this morning, though.”

Damn.

“Guess it’s a good thing I work in the back.”

“For now. I’m going to introduce you to my pack tonight, so the secret will be out soon.”

I scowled at him. “I haven’t agreed to that, Madd. You don’t get to make decisions for me.”

*“I’ll decide with him,”* my wolf said.

*“Go to hell,”* I grumbled back.

She chuffed, the sound full of humor.

“I’m not changing my mind. My pack needs to know who and what you are to help me protect you.”

I scowled, but didn’t deny that I needed protection.

*“He’s right,”* my wolf agreed. *“On both counts. We need them to help keep us alive.”*



He added, “You would rather I keep your identity a secret, and I understand that. I’m sorry, but it’s not an option.”

There was no point in arguing with him.

He’d clearly made his mind up, and he seemed to be able to out-stubborn me.

“You’re shitty at apologizing.” I checked my bangs in his mirror, and found my face flushed after what we’d done.

Lovely.

I put the lid over my box of takeout food, figuring I could eat the rest later.

“This was... something... but I’m going to go. Thanks for lunch. Good luck with that.” I gestured toward his erection, then slipped out of his truck.

Honestly, I was kind of surprised he hadn’t fucked me. People were known to lose control of themselves the moment vampire venom flooded their system, and he wasn’t just *people*. He was my potential mate. My venom would hit him much harder than it hit anyone else.

Madd was out of his truck and walking me to the back door of the bakery a heartbeat later. “I’ll be waiting here when you get out of work.”

“Of course you will.” My voice was flat.

“With moving boxes,” he added.

“I haven’t agreed to move.”

“Your apartment is full of mold, Love. I could smell it before your friend even opened your door. My mate isn’t living in a mold-infested apartment. You can let me in and help me pack your shit, or I can break the damn door in and pack it myself,” Madd said bluntly.

“I’m not your mate, so the problem is solved,” I shot back.

“*Liar*,” my wolf said.

I reached out to knock on the bakery’s back door, but before my fist connected, Madd blocked me.

His arm was around my back, and his intense gaze was on mine. “Let go of your stubbornness for one damn second, and listen to me, woman. Your apartment is shitty, bad for your health, and expensive. I have more than a dozen empty houses in my pack’s neighborhood that are free to you, and surrounded by the forest. Tori can use the money she saves to buy more blood. No one needs to go hungry anymore.”

As much as I didn’t want to agree with him, I wasn’t a complete moron.

He had a point, and we both knew it.

“I’ll talk to Tori and let her decide what to do,” I said, pulling his hand off my waist. He let me remove it, but otherwise remained exactly where he was.

“You told me you wanted your own space.”

“In an ideal world, I would. But my situation isn’t anyone’s ideal world.”

His expression darkened, but when his hand cupped my cheek, I couldn’t stop myself from closing my eyes and leaning into the touch.

Madd made me feel... like I mattered to him, I guess.

It was a new feeling for me.

“We’re going to figure it out, Love. Trust me.”

“You want me to trust someone who doesn’t even know how to apologize,” I said, finally peeling his hand off my face and stepping away from him.

“I’ll google it.”

I suppressed a snort. “Good luck with that.”

“Thanks. Sounds like I might need it.”

I couldn’t hold back my smile.

Or the stupid way my chest warmed at the realization that he hadn’t argued with me, or tried to convince me I was wrong.

Maybe he hadn’t apologized, but he also hadn’t asked *me* to apologize for not telling him what I was when we met.

He finally rapped on the bakery's back door for me, then stepped aside. "I'll see you in a few hours."

I didn't know how the bastard had figured out my schedule, but I wasn't going to ask.

It *would* be nice not to spend the end of my day walking home or waiting for Tori to get off work.

## *seven*

### LOVE

“SO HOW DID IT GO?” Tori asked, leaning up against the sink with my leftovers in her hand. When her stomach had growled right before my shift ended, I’d handed them over without a second thought. “You look better. There’s color on your cheeks again.”

We were both hungry, and I knew I was damn lucky to have fed on Madd, even if I was still trying to come to terms with being dependent on him for food.

“He brought my favorite food, in a foam cup.”

“*What?*”

“Yep.” I sighed. “I drank without asking what it was.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.” I grimaced at the memory, even though my body warmed a bit in response to it too.

He tasted so insanely good.

“Did you drink it all?”

“Every last drop, and more,” I said glumly.

“Geez.”

“Yeah.”

“Was he mad?”

I snorted.

She grinned. “Guess I should’ve known the answer to that one. How do you feel?”

“Better than I want to. My stomach hasn’t growled once since last night.”

“Damn. I’m jealous.”

I lifted an eyebrow at her.

Her grin widened. “At least a little jealous. Not of the situation, but of the hunger solution.”

“Well, he has a solution for you too. Said he’s moving both of us into an empty house on his pack’s land, whether we like it or not. You can spend the money you save on *food*.”

Her eyes brightened. “I thought you were against moving for him.”

“I was. He didn’t take no for an answer. And ultimately, I don’t want you going hungry.”

“If you’re really his mate, he won’t let anyone hurt you,” Tori pointed out. “Sealing your bond could be exactly what we need to secure our freedom.”

If our bond was sealed, our lives would be tied together. Killing me would kill him, and vice versa.

So yeah, he would definitely protect me.

“*She’s right. The safest thing for us to do is bond with the gorgeous male,*” my wolf agreed. “*And fuck him.*”

“*I don’t see what sex has to do with this situation.*”

“*You feel good right now because of it, don’t you?*”

My body warmed at the reminder of the way I'd used his body to get off.

I forced myself to focus on my conversation with Tori.

"Sealing it would also tie me to him forever, though," I said.

"You don't want to be tied to your food source permanently?" Tori checked.

"I would think you've had enough starvation to last a lifetime."

She was right.

I sighed again anyway. "Logically, yes. But I don't feel ready to accept a permanent bond. Particularly not after the jail thing yesterday. Which he still hasn't apologized for."

There was a knock on the bakery's back door, and I glanced at the clock. I was ten minutes late, and had already clocked out, but wasn't in a hurry to leave.

Something told me I knew who was at the door.

"I'll finish the dishes. Go pack your shit with Prince Charming," Tori said, waving me out. "Send me the address when you get it, and I'll meet you there."

"Prince Alarming would be more accurate," I muttered, shutting the water off and peeling my gloves off.

She laughed, popping another fry in her mouth. "Tell him thanks for the burger. It's the best thing *I've* eaten in months."

Her wink told me the emphasis was made to point out that the best thing *I'd* eaten was Madd.

I flipped her the bird, and she laughed again, louder.

Since I didn't have my bag, or anything else, I just opened the door.

Sure enough, Madd was in the doorway, tense. My purse was hanging over his shoulder again, but I didn't ask about it. He'd hand it over eventually.

He relaxed as his eyes moved over me. "I thought you left."

“Nah. You would’ve chased me.”

“Definitely. You look good,” he said as we headed toward his truck. “Eating helped.”

“Eating always helps.” There was no point in lying about that.

“You finished the burger, right?” he asked, as he opened the passenger door for me.

I slipped right in. “Sure.”

He narrowed his eyes, waiting beside me.

“What’s this?” I reached for a large shopping bag on the center console, but Madd snagged it before I could.

“My apology. Give me the truth, if you want it.”

I met his gaze. “I didn’t eat the rest of the burger. Tori was hungry. She didn’t drain a massive werewolf nearly dry two days in a row, so I gave it to her.”

He set the present on my lap, and I peered into the bag. “I *am* sorry, Love. The internet told me I should bring flowers, but this seemed more personal.”

Was it... a shoebox?

I pulled the box out and opened it.

My eyes widened when I found a pair of high-tops almost identical to the scuffed gray ones I’d left at his house—minus the scuffs, scratches, and other hell their first owner had put them through.

I pulled one out and studied it, my throat swelling.

It might’ve been the most thoughtful present I’d ever received.

“Thank you,” I said.

“There’s more.” He lifted the shoebox, set it on the floor near my feet, and pulled out a second one. “These ones seemed more like you.” He pulled out a pair that matched the holey ones I was wearing—with a twist. They were

studded with metal spikes along the heels and toes.

I laughed. “Your personality test must’ve worked.”

His grin was victorious. “Of course it did.” He undid the laces on the shoes I was wearing, tugging them off for me. “The old ones are going in the dumpster, by the way. My mate isn’t walking around in holey shoes.”

“You have high standards for this poor woman,” I remarked, though my lips were curved as I moved my foot to help him get it on.

“Needing her healthy and safe is hardly a high standard. Most would call it the bare minimum.” He tied my first shoe. “In fact, some would call her lucky.”

“I don’t think being thrown in prison by her mate would be considered lucky.”

His chest rumbled unhappily. “I apologized, remember? You can’t hold that against me anymore.”

“I can accept your apology and still hold it against you. Even if we seal our bond, I’m going to tell that story to every damn person who asks.”

“I’ll give you a better story.”

“Good luck with that, Madd.” I couldn’t stop myself from messing up his perfectly-swept hair, and my wolf made a happy noise when I touched him.

She was still so damn horny.

He tied my second shoe on.

“We’ve had a number of conversations, so can I please have my bag back?” I asked, my hand outstretched.

“If you’ll talk to me about something I know you don’t want to discuss.”

I grimaced. “Fine.”

He set my bag on my lap, and I resisted the urge to hug it.

It was good to have it back.



He walked around the front of the truck, plopping down in the driver's seat. "I charged your phone, too. I'm replacing that next, by the way. It's got to be ten years old. And your bag smells like an old woman, so that'll be third."

"My bag is perfect. If she had ears, I'd cover them."

Madd snorted, and I couldn't stop myself from grinning.

He waited until he'd pulled onto the road to bring up the conversation I'd agreed to. "We need to discuss sealing the bond."

Shit.

I couldn't stop my grimace. "Right to the hard stuff, huh?"

He made a noise of agreement. "My wolf has been pacing nonstop. He won't be settled until we've secured it. Particularly after what happened last night, he needs assurance that you're not going to slip away."

"What happened last night, meaning, the jail thing?"

"Yes."

"Great." I leaned my head back against the seat, staring out the window. I didn't have to ask what the consequences were of having his wolf agitated; I was well aware of the constant discomfort. It was hellish for both human and animal, and if it went on long enough, it seriously messed with a person's mind.

I understood the difficulty firsthand. As much as I wasn't interested in taking a mate, I didn't wish that on anyone.

"Is there any other way to settle him?" I asked.

"The only real alternative would be moving in together."

My eyebrows shot upward. "Mating or moving in together? Great option list, Madd."

He chuckled. "I know."

"So you don't like it either?"

“Oh, I like it. I would survive waiting, if my wolf wasn’t interested. But I would still want it.”

I sighed.

I couldn’t see myself moving in with him *or* sealing the bond. “I’ll decide after I get out into the forest and run. It’s been months since I shifted, so my wolf is dying to take over.”

“You said you spend time outdoors.”

“I do. Hiking, remember? In human form, when I have the energy to do so. Shifting requires a hell of a lot more, and if I do it without drinking blood, I’ll legitimately pass out. My wolf understood, and was satisfied enough by the hiking.”

He grimaced.

“Can your wolf handle waiting until tonight for an answer?”

“He’ll be fine.”

I could work with that, since there wasn’t really an alternative.

“You really thought I was human, huh?” I asked. “Or just screwing with you.”

He chuckled. “Seemed like the only logical assumption, given you were my potential mate. You must know it’s rare for supernaturals to be mated across different species.”

I hadn’t known that, but it did make sense. “You’re disappointed I’m not human, aren’t you?”

He lifted an eyebrow at me, before refocusing on the road. “Disappointed? Not a fucking chance. I know a few male werewolves who’ve been looking for mates even longer than I have, who are still alone. I’m lucky.”

“Lucky? You do know vampires all over the world would kill for the chance to take me from you, right?”

“Gives me the chance to protect you. What more could an alpha ask for?”

I bit my lip to stop myself from grinning at his confidence.

He parked in front of my apartment building. As expected, I found a thick stack of boxes in the bed of his truck.

He had severely overestimated how much shit I had, not that I'd say as much aloud.

We didn't even have a TV.

Our mattresses and dishes had been purchased second-hand, and were decent. Other than that, all we had was a shitty couch that kind of hurt to sit on, some clothes, and the cheapest toiletries our local Walmart had to offer.

Madd grabbed a few boxes and a tape gun, then followed me up the stairs.

I pulled my keys out of my bag and unlocked the door, letting Madd inside behind me.

"No insulting my home," I warned him.

"Wouldn't dream of—*shit*." His expression was grim as he looked around the room. I didn't think he'd seen much when he barged in the night before. And he'd probably been dazed on the way out, considering how much of his blood I'd drained. "It's even worse than I thought."

I elbowed him in the ribs, and the bastard didn't even grunt.

He was too damn big.

"Be nice or get out," I warned.

He stayed quiet, though his face gave away everything he was feeling.

Mostly, just a whole lot of disgust.

And some anger.

I didn't think it was geared toward me.

Tori and I weren't messy. The carpet was just old and smelled bad, and the walls were yellowed with age. We'd tried to clean the carpets and scrub the walls, but hadn't made a dent in it. Everything needed to be redone or torn

out.

“I’ll take the kitchen,” Madd said, taping a box into shape and handing it to me. “Get started on your clothes.”

Though I wanted to argue, I accepted the box, and pulled out my phone to text Tori when I got to our bedroom.

ME

Madd’s wolf is being needy. I either have to seal the bond with him or move in with him.

She answered immediately. I knew the bakery was usually slow around that time of day, so the quick response didn’t surprise me.

TORI

Damn

That doesn’t bode well for you

ME

Nope

TORI

On the plus side, at least he feeds you ;)

If you seal the bond for freedom’s sake, you can do pretty much anything you want, and he’ll still keep feeding you

But sealing it is much more permanent than just giving mating a test run by moving in together

ME

You’re incredibly helpful

TORI

It’s your life, Love. Your choice

I sighed.

ME

Well, he’s packing the kitchen right now. I think he’s in a hurry to get out of here

TORI

Do you really blame him? Our apartment smells awful.

ME

I’ve been forcing myself to ignore the stench for months

TORI

Thank him for me. Or punch him ;P

My lips curved in a smile.

ME  
Will do

Frustration aside, I was glad for the help. And really glad to be moving somewhere nicer.

So, I piled everything I owned into the bottom half of the box, then dragged it out of the room.

“Ready for another one?” Madd asked me, without glancing over his shoulder. He was going through the last cabinet already, and had his box half-filled.

“No, I’ve got everything packed.”

“In one box?”

“Yep. I live the high life, as you can tell.” I gestured to the smelly, unattractive apartment around us.

He dropped the last pan in the box, walking over to peer down at my belongings. His chest immediately rumbled unhappily. “Tell me you’re joking.”

I grabbed the tape gun off the countertop. “I’m joking.”

“I’m going to *kill* the vampires you escaped from.”

My stomach clenched in response to his words. “You’re not going to do anything to them. We don’t want them near us.”

“That’s not your call.”

“The government will kill me if they find out what I am. If we’re bonded, that means you’ll die too. That makes it my call.”

“You’re my mate. It’s my right to pursue revenge against those who’ve wronged you. You didn’t ask to be made what you are, and no one will punish you for it. I’ll make sure of that.”

I gave him a bitter smile. “Have you ever been a blood wolf?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you have no idea what people will do to us.”

“Have you ever met an ancient werewolf alpha with connections all over the world, Love?”

Madd caught me off guard with the question. “Not until now, I guess.”

“Exactly. Everyone in every werewolf community knows who I am. If someone comes after me, they come after all of us. You’re my mate— hunting you is hunting me. Everyone in our society will fight for you, because you’re mine.”

“Why would I want a mate who doesn’t respect what I want?” I countered, dodging his point entirely.

He blinked.

“If I ever take a mate, I’m going to choose someone who listens to me. Someone who lets me take the lead when they don’t understand something as well as I do, and doesn’t take charge in a situation that should clearly be my call.”

He blinked again.

I taped my box shut, then left the tape gun on the counter for Tori. There were a few boxes left for her, but she’d only need one. “I’m taking my shit down to your truck.”

He grabbed it before I could, then stacked the open kitchen box on top of it. “I’ve got it.”

“Great.” I didn’t force a smile.

I was too damn tired.

“*We need to run,*” my wolf said.

Maybe she was right. One way or another, I definitely felt like I needed a break from my new soulmate.

*eight*  
LOVE

MADD WAS quiet on the way to his pack's neighborhood. I was too, after getting the address for the house Tori and I were potentially going to live in, and sending it to her.

My forehead leaned up against the glass window, and I dozed a little. After a sleepless night, I needed the rest.

When he turned down a road on the far edge of town, probably twenty minutes away from my place, I opened my bleary eyes and looked around me.

Madd's neighborhood was much different during the day.

Each house was pretty in its own way, all of them forming a few massive rectangles with monstrous stretches of thick, green grass in the center. There were dozens of houses, all of them spaced out so far apart that they all had their own privacy and a few acres of land.

I'd never seen anything like it before.

I recognized Madd's house when he parked in front of it. He was tucked away in the furthest corner of the neighborhood, with the back of his house facing the forest. He parked in the garage, and left my boxes in the back of his truck when he led me inside.

“If you need to get some rest, the couch is open.” He gestured toward it. “Or my bed, of course. There’s not a spare in any of the rooms. I’ve never needed one.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” I said, looking at his space with new eyes.

Everything was done in neutral, natural colors that reminded me of the forest. It was laid-back, and I loved that. The furniture looked comfortable and nice. There were massive windows everywhere that looked out at the trees surrounding the property, and the forest at the back.

Seeing the trees made me yearn for them.

My wolf, even more than me.

“I’m going to shift,” I told him, heading toward the back door.

“Perfect.” Madd didn’t bother asking for permission to join me, simply following me across the room.

I didn’t try to start a conversation with my wolf about not flirting with Madd’s. She was going to be all up in his grill no matter what I asked, and she was just as free to do that as I was to put distance between us.

Madd’s wolf would be equally all over her, if not more, so the flirting didn’t seem like a huge deal. They couldn’t seal the bond without both of us consenting, so it wouldn’t make my decision for me or anything.

We slipped out the back door, and I inhaled deeply.

The forest smelled incredible.

Like pine trees, rain, and...

Madd.

A shiver of magic rolled down my spine as my wolf pushed her way through.

I stripped my clothes off quickly, so I wouldn’t lose them when I shifted. It took effort not to let myself look over at Madd as he did the same beside me, but I was strong enough to handle it.

Another shiver rolled through me, and my body changed as my wolf took



over.

She shook her fur out, stretching her legs and paws before she looked to her side.

A massive, dark blond wolf sat on his haunches beside her, watching.

Waiting, too.

With the same intense gaze his human so often wore.

*“Hello, mate,”* my wolf purred, taking slow steps toward him.

He lowered his head a little. *“Hello, Love. You are absolutely stunning.”*

She preened. *“I know.”* After making her way to his side, she slowly began to walk a circle around him. He remained where he was, waiting confidently for her judgment.

The purr in her chest grew louder with every step. *“Ohh, you are gorgeous.”*

His chest rumbled with satisfaction, and when she stepped up to his side, he didn’t hesitate to brush against her.

*“Are you fast?”* she asked.

*“I’ve been the alpha for over a century. Of course I’m fast.”* He rubbed up against her side again, a little harder.

*“Faster than a vampire?”* Her voice grew playful.

His lips stretched in a wolfy grin. *“Run for me, and you’ll find out.”*

She returned his grin with her own, then took off into the forest.

THEY SPENT hours in the woods together, racing, walking while their sides rubbed, wrestling, and just enjoying their time out in nature.

It had been far too long since my wolf had a chance to just be a wolf.

I stayed quiet, letting her have fun with her mate. I loved the forest too, and I had plenty to consider.

Namely, me and Madd.

I made myself think about what my life would look like with both of the options he had given me.

Option A was sealing the bond, of course. Assuming we sealed it, we would be tied together permanently, but we could live apart. I knew some kinds of supernaturals physically couldn't live away from their mates in the first few years after their bond was formed, but it wasn't like that for vampires. I didn't think it was for werewolves, either.

Vampires relied on their mates for blood, and werewolves' animal halves would force us see each other fairly often, but that was the extent of the tie as far as I knew.

We had barely met, and my wolf already wanted me around Madd constantly.

I could live my own life, in my own house, if we sealed it. But my wolf would constantly push me toward Madd. She would never be satisfied living away from him—she had been unhappy about him leaving when I started work, and again after I drank from him.

So living with him was undoubtedly the best option.

If we didn't seal the bond, I might be able to keep things from getting too intense. We could live our own lives like roommates, which was much more manageable than being mates and living apart from him.

With us sleeping in the same house, my wolf would be calm. She would accept the emotional distance, because she would know we were going home to Madd. And I worked so much that I could avoid him most of the time, I hoped.

He'd been bringing me meals, but he *did* have a job. He was a firefighter/paramedic, and I'd gotten the impression that he worked a lot when we were talking about our jobs. He would be too busy to feed me all the time.

That would definitely help me avoid him more completely.

I made up my mind, slowly working out the intricacies of my plan while my

wolf ran with Madd's.

I had this in the bag.

I was going to be so damn good at avoiding my mate.

MY WOLF NUZZLED up against Madd's for a minute when we got back to his backyard. He rubbed up against her, too, in no hurry to let her go. But, after a few minutes, she finally stepped back and shifted.

The magic felt good, rolling over my body and lightly stretching my skin.

Instead of shifting, Madd's wolf prowled up to my side and nuzzled my bare hip. I couldn't stop myself from sinking my fingers into his fur. He was insanely soft, and when I scratched him, he scooted in closer.

I continued rubbing behind his ears as I headed back toward his house. Much of the energy I'd had earlier was gone. I felt hungry, and for once, I couldn't tell whether I was hungry for food or blood.

It was strange, though, trying to wrap my mind around the idea that I was going to live in the gorgeous house in front of me.

I'd been a kid when my family died. After they were gone, the vampires had "adopted" me, and they always had money. We'd lived in extravagant mansions that felt like prisons. The nannies they paid to take care of us were nice enough, but they made it clear they saw us as property, not people.

There had been dozens of girls with me, and while we'd become family, I'd never had a place to think of as *home*.

Losing all of them except Tori and Sienna had only made everything worse.

Would I ever be able to feel at home in Madd's house?

Only time would tell.

I grabbed my clothes and shoes off the porch.

When I tugged the back door open, Madd finally shifted. His chest brushed my back as he straightened to his full height, and I sucked in a breath.

His bare skin felt incredible against mine.

Forcing myself to continue like I wasn't affected by his presence, I stepped into the house and pulled my clothes on quickly. He gave me privacy, remaining on the porch while he got dressed again too.

My gaze lingered on my new shoes as I tied them back on. I couldn't help the curve of my lips.

They were adorable.

"My wolf is much calmer now. Thank you for letting yours free," Madd said, when he came striding inside.

"It felt good to shift," I admitted.

"I can't imagine being trapped in one form for six months."

"Well, I survived." After a moment, I added, "Tori must have moved her things in by now. I need to go check on her."

"You need to *eat*."

"So does she."

"We'll pick up food for her too."

I couldn't exactly argue with that.

So, I let Madd lead me out to his truck, where I dutifully slipped into the passenger seat. His music relaxed my shoulders, and I leaned comfortably against the seat I occupied. Closing my eyes, I let my mind go back to the decision I'd made.

My stomach still clenched at the idea, but it was the best option in the situation I'd landed myself in.

"What do you think about sealing the bond now?" Madd asked.

If you didn't factor my wolf into the scenario, that was the best option. He didn't know enough about her to understand how she'd react, so he probably thought I'd go with sealing the bond over sharing a home.

“I’d prefer moving in together.” I kept my gaze on the window, despite the darkness outside. I just didn’t want to make eye contact with Madd, mostly.

He was too attractive for my good, and if I met his gaze, he might realize that I planned to treat him like any other roommate.

No kissing.

No snuggling.

Definitely no sex.

It took Madd a minute to respond. “Okay.”

I’d caught him off guard with my decision.

“Why?” he asked.

“My wolf would push me to be close to you anyway. Might as well make life easier by moving in. And if we end up being incompatible, not sealing the bond will make it much easier to split up.”

His grip on the steering wheel tightened.

I wouldn’t have noticed the reaction if I’d been looking at his face instead of literally anywhere else.

“We’re compatible.”

“Need I remind you of last night?”

“If you’re referring to the way we hit it off in the bar before we spent an hour flirting and cooking together, yes, I definitely remember. If you’re talking about the other bit, I’ve already apologized for that. It’s in the past. Do you need a recap?”

He *had* apologized.

And we *had* hit it off, and flirted like crazy. It had been playful, and fun.

“I remember.”

He let out a long breath, and his hand landed on my thigh.

My throat constricted a little.

His possessive grip felt good. Really damn good.

“Are you absolutely sure you’re serious about all of this?” I asked him, feeling slightly... well, vulnerable.

I had lost almost everything and everyone I’d ever cared about. My life had been one bout of pain followed by another, until Tori and I escaped. Since then, I’d finally had a chance to live.

To have value outside the taste of my blood, too.

I had gotten damn good at my job, and enjoyed working my ass off to do so. That had made me feel better than I’d ever imagined it could.

Madd parked in the restaurant’s lot, then turned to meet my gaze head-on.

My body warmed under the heat of his attention. The man was always so *intense*.

“Do you know how many times in my life I’ve bought a woman a pair of shoes, Love?”

My face warmed, too. “No.”

“Once. Today. I looked fucking insane in that shoe store, comparing the shoes you’d left at my place to new ones. The humans in the store acted like they weren’t taking pictures of me to post on their damn social media pages the whole time I was there. If I wasn’t serious, there’s not a chance I would’ve done that for you. I care about my pack, but I don’t *shop* for them.”

I’d definitely heard people gossiping about the alphas in the time I’d lived in Wildwood, but I hadn’t thought about it that way.

He was basically a celebrity in the city. Hell, across much of the world too.

People knew who he was and recognized him.

But he was an ancient alpha...

Had he really gone into a shoe store and spent time comparing my shitty shoes to new ones?

“Then we’ll go with my plan to move in together, I guess,” I said.

He made a noise of agreement. “We’ll get your stuff put away in my house after we check on your friend.”

“Is the house she’s staying in furnished?”

“Yes, I had my pack take care of that during the night. What do you want to eat? And what does Tori like?” he asked.

“We’ll eat anything. Whatever’s cheapest.”

The scowl he gave me told me he wasn’t on board with that plan. “Come in and pick what you want. I don’t give a damn about the prices.”

Madd stepped out of the truck, and I reluctantly unbuckled my seatbelt. He had my door open before I had a chance to get it myself, and took my hand to help me down without offering or asking.

I appreciated the gesture anyway.

“People will stare. Ignore them,” he said, parting my fingers with his thick, strong ones as we walked toward the entrance.

“Do you have any scorned lovers I should be worried about?” I asked.

He snorted. “No.”

That was all I got from him.

*Helpful.*

*nine*

LOVE

MADD HELD the door for me, maintaining his grip on my hand and staying close behind me. Though I wanted to ask how many of his actions were possessive, and how many were natural, I didn't.

There were a dozen groups waiting to be seated, and I inhaled the delicious scent of fresh bread and cooking meat while Archer led me past everyone else.

"Hi, Alpha," the hostess beamed, her gorgeous, tan cheeks reddening at the sight of him.

My wolf growled softly in my chest.

My grip on his hand tightened.

"We need to make a to-go order," he said, not returning her smile.

Her expression brightened anyway. "Perfect. I can take that right here."

My grip tightened more, and Madd squeezed my hand lightly. I wasn't sure if he was trying to tell me to stop cutting off his circulation, or that he was there with me, not her.

Maybe both.

He gave his order without looking at a menu, and I quickly read over the one



on the wall. I chose two completely different things, figuring Tori, and I could share both so we could try more food. Madd paid without asking for the total, and she handed his card back a moment later.

“Alright, that’ll just be a few minutes.” The hostess cheerfully gestured us toward the very-full benches where people were waiting.

I fought a grimace at the sight.

I really didn’t want to snuggle between Madd and a stranger, and since there were men on both sides of the small gap I could see, it would probably piss him off.

Instead of dragging me to the tiny gap, Madd led me to the far end of the bench. Most people had at least part of their attention on him, if not all of it, so he didn’t raise his voice when he said,

“My mate and I need to sit here if you don’t want a fight to break out.”

There was a pause, then everyone made space.

Not a *lot* of space, considering how large Madd was, but still. Space.

He sat down without hesitation, and I inhaled sharply as he plopped me down on his lap. My back nestled against his chest, my head tucked under his chin.

It was ridiculously comfortable.

My damn wolf purred, and my chest rumbled the tiniest bit.

“Sorry,” Madd murmured.

“Was the hostess a scorned lover?” I whispered back, turning my head as he tilted his toward me. Hopefully, no one else would hear us talking.

“No. I told you, there are no scorned lovers.”

“Then why are you apologizing?”

“Human women flirt with me frequently. You were uncomfortable with it, so I apologized.”

Oh.

“It’s not your fault you’re so damn gorgeous,” I said, turning away from him again.

His chin rested on the top of my head once more, the pressure light enough that it was comfortable. Definitely not painful.

I supposed it was thoughtful of him to apologize, even though he hadn’t done anything wrong.

He’d said earlier that he hadn’t made an announcement about whether I was his mate or not, but clearly, that had changed.

The word was out, and there was no going back from that.

WE WAITED ON THE BENCH, and as much as I didn’t want to, I enjoyed the hell out of it. The physical contact was comforting, and Madd’s body felt ridiculously good against mine.

He was warm and strong, with his heart beating steadily against my back.

I could get used to that.

The hostess brought our food out far too soon, still wearing that same brilliant smile as she handed it to Madd without batting an eye at me. “Congrats on finding your mate, by the way.”

“Thanks,” I replied for him, unable to resist. The smile I flashed back at her was almost as bright as the one she wore. “I’ve been waiting for him for *ages*.”

My irritation was too strong to suppress my sarcasm.

She looked a bit taken aback by the way I’d broken into her flirtatious conversation.

Madd tucked me closer to his side. “Let’s go, Love.”

“Aww, that’s a sweet nickname,” she finally said, pasting her smile back on.

“My name is Lovene, so it’s really not,” I called over my shoulder, as Madd walked me out of the restaurant. “And stop flirting with my—mate.”

The doors closed before I got the last word out.

When I lifted my glare to Madd, he was grinning. It almost looked like the bastard was trying not to laugh.

“Asshole,” I muttered, as he led me up to the passenger door and helped me inside.

He buckled my seatbelt for me with his free hand, as if I couldn’t handle doing it myself, then set the huge bag of food on my lap.

His hand cupped my cheek, his grin replaced with a faintly-happy expression. “You’re fiery when you get possessive.”

“And you’re not?”

He chuckled. “Lethal would be more accurate.”

That was good to know.

He walked around the truck, taking the driver’s seat and starting the engine.

“So when vampires come looking for me, I should just pretend to flirt with them, and you’ll kill them for me?”

His eyes flashed. “If you flirt with a vampire, I’ll tie you to my bed until you’ve forgotten why you bothered looking at the bastard.”

“How would imprisoning me make me forget why I looked at a vampire who wants to capture me and use me as his personal blood bag?”

“You would be naked. And experiencing many, many orgasms.”

I blinked, my body warming. “You can’t hold me captive and fuck me at the same time.”

“I’d be using my mouth and fingers. And feeding you my blood, so the touch would be very welcome.”

Damn my body for working for him so well in his unlikely scenario.

“You’d be painfully hard,” I finally countered. “For days on end. Probably weeks.”

“I’m getting my practice in right now. I’ll be ready.”

I snorted. “You are *not* hard right now.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me, and said nothing.

“You aren’t hard right now... are you?”

“I know how you can find out.”

The warmth in my body flared with his words.

Part of me wanted to ignore him. The other part wanted to come up with a clever counter remark.

Most of me just wanted to take him up on what was clearly a challenge.

“*Do it,*” my wolf whispered.

The horny bitch would never stop encouraging me.

And for once, I wasn’t sure I wanted her to stop.

So, after a moment’s hesitation, I reached across the truck’s console and pressed down lightly over Madd’s cock. His jeans didn’t have much give, but they definitely couldn’t hide the thick erection from my hand.

Shit, he really *was* hard.

“It turns me on when you’re possessive,” he said. “And when you’re not.”

“So... all the time?” I didn’t pull my hand away from him. I wasn’t sure I could.

“Yup.”

“Too bad you didn’t fuck me like I wanted you to last night,” I said, and he throbbed against my hand.

“I was a damn moron.”

The scent of the food on my lap was good, but considering how Madd smelled, it didn’t really hold a candle.

WE WERE quiet on the way back to his pack's land. When we got there, he parked in front of a house somewhere down the street from his. It was too dark for me to see exactly how far it was.

I unbuckled, and before I had time to grab the door myself, he got it open and took both the food and my hand.

My fingers were in his as I stepped down from the truck, and he only let go of them long enough to close the passenger door before he recaptured them.

When he slipped his fingers between mine, it made my body warmer.

Maybe I liked holding his hand.

TORI PULLED the door open moments after we knocked, her face bright and her gaze happy.

“Hey!” Surging forward, she threw her arms around me and squeezed tightly. “Have I ever told you I love you?”

“Not frequently enough,” I teased.

She released me, grinning. “Well, I love you. And your new mate. And my new house!” She grabbed my hand and tugged me inside. “Is that food, too? You brought me food?”

“Madd brought it,” I corrected.

“Well, thank you. I'm officially a fan,” she said, flashing a grin at him too.

I tried not to be irritated with her for being playful with him. She was just being nice, and talking to me as much as she was talking to him.

But man, the possessiveness was unreal.

Madd took the food to the kitchen while Tori gave me a quick tour of the place. It wasn't a mansion, thankfully—it would still be too soon if I never saw one again, after being turned—but it was a nice home with plenty of space. The furniture was nothing fancy, but it looked sturdy and comfortable, which was more than enough for us.

“It's perfect,” I told her, as we stopped in the master bedroom that was going

to be hers.

“I know.” She gave me another quick, fierce hug. “You’re sure you’re okay to move in with him?”

“I am. It’s not like he can hurt me.” I rolled my eyes at the thought, and she grinned. “The more I learn about mating with a werewolf, the more sure I am that he’s safe to be around. Even if he hates me, he can’t do anything about it. Fate tied us together. It sounds like there’s no chance he walks away from me now.”

“How bad would it be if I said I’m glad it’s you, not me?”

“Not bad. Just honest. I’d feel the same way in your shoes.”

She made a noise of agreement, and we headed back down the stairs together.

Madd was on his phone when we got down there, a crease between his brows. His food was untouched, though all three to-go containers were on the table. The lids were still closed, keeping the heat in.

His forehead smoothed when his gaze landed on me. He stood long enough to grab me by the waist and pull me onto his lap.

My body warmed as I straddled his knee unintentionally, his erection thick and hard against my ass. The position was definitely different to the way he’d held me in the restaurant, when I hadn’t even felt his hardness.

Tori’s expression was amused as she opened the box of food in front of her, and drooled over its contents. Madd opened mine first, followed by his.

“I have hands,” I said.

“I noticed.” He handed me the plastic fork and knife that had come with the food.

Though I wanted to roll my eyes, I accepted them.

“I saw the pictures of you two in the restaurant,” Tori remarked. “They’re already all over social media.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Seriously?” Madd handed me his phone, and I saw a text thread labeled “Wildwood Pack”.

There were a half a dozen pictures, in which we looked incredibly cozy.  
Like... insanely cozy.

The way his hand gripped mine, and my shoulder brushed his.

The way he held me, with his arms around me.

I scrolled through the messages, and my lips curved upward without my permission at all the responses to the photos:

Hot damn, that looks comfortable

Lucky bastard

At least he finally announced it

I got the fucking chills watching the video

Same

One of us should've dated the alpha while we had a chance

Congrats!

Hope he sends some of the mate-finding mojo my way

Agreed

We're excited for you!

I hope my mate is as enthusiastic about our bond as yours is

Her possessiveness was damn hot. Be grateful, man

The alpha's actually smiling in one of those pics

Where?

Someone resent the image.

The world must be ending

Or he's just obsessed with her

There were so damn many more.

He was right. They were totally a big, obnoxious family.

“Where’s the video?” I asked him.

He scrolled up higher, and hit the link in a message.

“It’s hot,” Tori said, grinning at me as much as she could with a mouthful of pasta. She was obsessed with pasta, so I’d gotten her one with steak in it. My food was some kind of chicken dish smothered in sauce and cheese, so I hoped it would be equally incredible.

I watched the phone screen as my lips curved at something Madd said. His arms were around me, his grip secure as we sat tucked in the far corner.

We stood up after a few minutes, and the happy hostess handed Madd a bag, ignoring me completely. “Congrats on finding your mate, by the way.”

“Thanks,” I told her, smiling sweetly. “I’ve been waiting for him for *ages*.”

Her forehead creased.

Madd tugged me closer, his grip tight and possessive. “Let’s go, Love.”

“Aww, that’s a sweet nickname.” The hostess tried to recover, smiling again.

“My name is Lovene, so it’s really not,” I said, as Madd walked me toward the doors. “And stop flirting with my—” the doors shut before the last word got out, though you could still hear my muffled, “mate!”.

And through the glass doors, you could see Madd grin at me.

The video ended, and I grimaced, setting his phone down on the table. “If the vampires didn’t know where we were, they do now.”

Tori’s smile faded.

“I’m introducing you to the pack tonight,” Madd reminded me. “And telling them what you are, so we can keep both of you safe.”

Tori’s eyebrows raised. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It’s the only option,” Madd said bluntly. “The pack is at risk if no one knows who you are and why you’re here. The more Love is on social media,



the better, because you need people on your side. The clan that created you has money, which means they have connections. And if they have connections, they'll try to use them to get you back."

"No one sides with blood wolves," Tori said. "They drilled that into our heads every day since we were kids. No one would side with us over them. No one would ever give us a normal life."

"They wanted to control you," Madd said. "Why wouldn't they lie to do so?"

I blinked.

I hadn't ever put that together—the warnings about how everyone would hate us and hunt us, and the fact that they wanted us compliant.

Tori's face told me she hadn't either.

"What do we do, then?" she asked.

"You meet the pack tonight, so you realize they'll have your back."

I finally took a bite of my food. It was so good, my eyes closed for a minute. "If there's no other option, I'll meet them."

"Me too," Tori agreed, her voice a bit glum. "I'm dousing myself in perfume just in case my potential mate is there."

"The chance of two blood wolves finding mates in my pack is highly unlikely. Fate may be drunk at times, but she does have a balance," Madd said.

"I'm not interested in testing that theory with my future." Tori took another bite.

I couldn't fault her for that. If I were her, I would've done the same thing.

Popping another bite of chicken in my mouth, I found myself questioning all of my past decisions again...

And realized once more that despite the shitty situation I'd landed in, life was better than it had been in a long time.

Hell, better than it had been since the vampires first took me.

I needed to knock on wood or something, just to make sure that didn't change.

*ten*

LOVE

WE WALKED down a few houses before slipping through a plain archway that Madd said led to the place his pack would meet. Tori reeked of perfume so strongly my eyes were nearly watering, but she grinned at me every time I gagged at the smell of her.

Something told me she was going to be wearing a ton of perfume a *lot* in the near future.

She'd downed both of the bloodbags we'd been saving before we left, knowing she would need to shift.

We saw a lot of other people walking from different parts of the neighborhood, and many of them waved or grinned when they saw us. Most of them were men, and less than a quarter were women.

Much of the pack was already waiting in the forest when we made it out there, with people still pouring in.

Madd led me to the front of the crowd with his hand on the small of my back. Everyone seemed to be facing the forest, and that's the direction he led me in.

The men gathered gave us more than enough space, with the crowd parting widely.

I was pretty sure the distance was for Madd's sake, considering his warning

about being lethal when he got possessive.

Tori followed behind us, and I heard multiple men coughing at the thick scent that followed her. I had to bite my cheek to stop myself from grinning when they did. Knowing her, she wasn't bothering to bite back that grin.

When we finally reached the front of the crowd, Madd turned us so our backs were to the trees. His arm went around my waist and remained there, holding me to him.

A few other men were already there—I immediately recognized one of them as Bauther, who I'd learned was Madd's beta. The beta was the alpha's right hand man, and the enforcers answered to both alpha and beta.

Bauther nodded at me, clearing his throat uncomfortably.

Tori snorted softly, and I bit my cheek harder.

"What should we do?" she asked Bauther, who was standing right next to her.

"Just let us do the talking," Bauther said.

"Want me to just let you do the talking too?" I murmured to Madd, as he eased me closer. His possessive grip on my waist definitely wasn't easing up.

"Yes. The pack knows and trusts me." His lips brushed my ear, and I tried not to shiver.

He was *definitely* more attractive than could be considered healthy.

I waited where I was as more and more shifters filtered in. When the flow had died down for the most part, Madd finally raised his voice.

"Madden pack," he said, his voice carrying over the crowd. An alpha could keep his wolves somewhat controlled with the magic of his role, but it was instinctual magic, not one that could truly be manipulated. "Meet my mate, Lovene Hansen. As you've already deduced, Love is a baker, and lived on the outskirts of the city with her best friend, Tori." He gestured toward Tori without glancing over at her. Through the corner of my eye, I saw her wave.

A few of the mens' eyes gleamed a little.

They probably looked at her and thought, "POTENTIAL MATE."

“Tori moved into the empty house on Gray that a few members of the pack prepared last night and this morning. Love has agreed to move in with me.”

Surprised murmurs and expressions rolled through the crowd.

“Love and Tori need our protection,” he said, raising his voice. The way his grip tightened on my hip told me he wasn’t as confident as he had pretended to be earlier. That made me a bit nervous, truthfully. “They’re blood wolves who recently escaped from the vampire clan that created them. They came here looking for peace, and we can provide that. Know that if you choose to leave, you will be free to do so, as always.”

More murmurs went through the crowd. “For those that wish to join, tonight, we run,” he called out.

Roars of approval echoed back, and I appreciated them tremendously.

The pack accepted us.

That felt really damn good.

“Shift, both of you,” Madd commanded, his voice low enough that I knew he was talking just to me and Tori.

Neither of us hesitated. Our wolves replaced our human forms, and they howled to the sky together, my brown wolf, and her ginger one.

Most of the pack shifted on the spot, howling with us. After Madd’s wolf brushed up against mine, murmuring into her mind that she needed to stay behind him, she purred in approval.

Then, he took off into the forest.

My wolf had no problem keeping up with him, and more shifters barreled into the trees behind us.

Excitement coursed through her veins.

Though I was unsure about the pack, she was thrilled.

They felt like family to her.

She felt like she belonged.

And hell, she *wanted* to be one of them.

Despite my own feelings, I was happy she felt so good about it. She was a part of me, but she was an individual, too. She deserved to feel happy, safe, and loved, even if I wasn't going to let myself fall into that trap.

I'd protect us however I had to—even though it included figuring out how to keep Archer Madden at bay, when I wanted him more than I had words to describe.

WE RAN FOR HOURS, finally making it back to Madd's house in the middle of the night. Though exhaustion weighed on me, my spirits were higher than I could ever remember them.

I felt... happy.

Insanely, ridiculously happy.

That was weird, right?

It had to be weird.

Tori had taken off with a group of female wolves a few hours earlier, so I didn't bother waiting for her. She started work later than I did, anyway.

I shifted back to my human form at the edge of the yard, a smile I couldn't erase stretched across my face. Madd's wolf rubbed up against my side, rumbling when I rubbed his fur, before he shifted.

His bare chest brushed my back again as we headed inside his house. My stuff was still in his truck, but I didn't give a damn.

"We only have one bed?" I asked him.

"Yes."

My smile faded slightly.

He was a giant, so I couldn't force him to sleep on the couch. And I knew him well enough to know he wouldn't let me sleep there.

So we'd be sharing.

But sharing a bed was a dangerous game. One that could easily lead to more. And I still wanted to experience sex, but I figured it would be hard to leave him after we were together like that.

Plus, I was supposed to be treating him like a roommate.

Maybe I could think of him as a roommate I snuggled with? It was a stretch, but I could do it.

Probably.

Ish.

Probablyish.

I'd figure it out.

"I'm a bed hog," I said, instead of arguing with him.

"Good. I want as much of your body on mine as I can get."

My wolf purred, and I bit back a sigh.

Horny bitch.

"How many showers do you have?"

"We have two. There's no soap in the spare, though."

Of course there wasn't.

And I'd left all my toiletries with Tori.

Snuggly roommates. That's what I needed to focus on.

Snuggly. Roommates.

Nothing more.

"You can shower first. I'll find us something to eat," Madd said, catching my hip and squeezing it lightly.

"We already had dinner," I pointed out.

"So?"

That was a fair point.

I could definitely eat. And drink from him, if I was being honest. My body was still trying to recover, and shifting drained the hell out of me. Shifting twice in a day and spending that much time running was rough on my body.

*“Tell him you’re hungry, and he’ll feed you his blood,”* my wolf murmured.

*“That’s not going to happen.”*

*“Don’t be stubborn.”*

*“One of us has to be,”* I grumbled back. *“Otherwise, we’d be making vows by now.”*

*“Vows would be good.”*

*“See?”*

I slipped into the shower and stripped my clothes and shoes off. The dirt on my wolf didn’t translate to me, thankfully, and she’d washed off in a creek on her way back to Madd’s house anyway.

I still felt dirty after spending so much time in the forest, though, hence the shower.

The glorious smell of Madd’s soap flooded the bathroom as I scrubbed my skin and hair. By the time I dried off, I was both horny and exhausted at the same time.

It had been a long day. A long, eventful day. And I needed to be at work in just a few hours, so... yeah.

I needed to get to sleep.

But the horniness was killer. The orgasm in his truck earlier that day had been like an electric shock to my body, I swear, reminding me how much I wanted to try having sex.

Then again, his scent could’ve been the culprit.

Or his body.



Or... well, pretty much anything about him.

As much as it pained me to admit, I absolutely loved how dominant the man was. If he didn't argue with me, I wouldn't have been attracted to him.

Maybe that meant there was something wrong with me.

That wasn't exactly a new revelation, though. I was well aware that there was plenty wrong with me, even if I liked to pretend I had my shit together.

I didn't see my box of clothes in his room, and didn't feel like going out to his truck in a towel, so I grabbed a shirt from his closet and slipped it over my head. I went with a dark one, so he wouldn't see through it.

He didn't seem to need any more help igniting the horniness than I did.

His shirt fell nearly to my knees, so I was covered even more than usual in it. Maybe that should've made me feel less horny, but it didn't.

I still wanted the gorgeous, stubborn bastard.

I searched his bathroom for a blow drier after I combed my bangs, but didn't have any luck. Tori and I had shared one at our old apartment, so I was officially in trouble if he didn't have one.

Music was playing and food was sizzling in the kitchen when I reluctantly padded out of his bedroom and leaned up against a wall nearby. His head was bobbing to the beat, and he was cutting something that his body kept hidden.

I watched him for a few minutes.

There was something sexy about finding him like that.

Relaxed.

Cooking.

Enjoying music.

Maybe it made him seem more human to me or something.

I let myself stare for a few minutes before my gaze caught on the microwave's clock.

Shit.

“Hey, Madd. Any chance you have a blow drier hidden somewhere in this house?”

He glanced over his shoulder, his gaze growing hot as his eyes slid down my figure. “Fuck, you look good in my clothes.”

My body heated.

I wanted him too much. Way, way too much.

“Blow drier?” I checked.

“Yeah. Uh, no. No blow drier. You don’t have one?”

“I left it for Tori.”

“I’m taking tomorrow off, so I can add it to the list and pick one up during the day.”

He finally pulled his eyes off my body and focused on what he was doing.

“Why are you taking the day off?”

“I just found my mate. She only has about four pairs of clothes, remember?”

“Five,” I corrected.

“Five, then.”

“Your mate can buy her own clothes.”

“Of course she can. I’m just doing it for her.”

I sighed. “You’re impossible.”

“So are you, Love.”

“No judging my hideous bangs tomorrow, okay?”

“I’ll be too busy checking out the rest of you to give a damn about your hair. What time do you work tomorrow?”

“I’m supposed to be there three hours from now, so I have to be awake in two

hours. Less, actually, since it'll take a while to walk to the shop from here. Any idea when the food will be done?"

"About five minutes. And you're not walking to work that early in the morning. I'm driving you. Also, what kind of car do you want?"

"You're not buying me a damn *car*," I growled. I tried to suppress my independence when it was logical, but this wasn't one of those cases."

"I work twenty-four hour shifts every third day. You're not walking to work when I'm gone, so I'm buying you a car. How many days a week do you work?"

"Seven. And this is another one of those conversations where you need to take my opinion into consideration if you want a future with me." I gestured between us, even though he wasn't looking. "You don't get to make single-handed decisions for me, Madd. That's not how a relationship works."

His gaze snapped to me. "Have you been in a relationship before?"

"That's not what we're talking about."

His eyes narrowed, and his chest rumbled in warning. "Who?"

Holy hell, he was even more of a possessive ass than I was.

"No, I've never been in a romantic relationship before. But if you want us to be mates, I think that requires friendship. I'm not going to spend forever with someone I don't even like as a person. The sex could be incredible, but it wouldn't make the dinners any less awkward. Not worth it."

His shoulders relaxed slightly. "I've never been in a romantic relationship either."

"Stop changing the subject."

He looked back at the food, starting to plate it. The guy didn't seem to do anything halfway; there were multiple components to the meal, despite how late it was. "Give me a solution, then. How are you going to get to work early in the morning without a vehicle, and without putting yourself in danger?"

"I'm not in danger when I walk to work."

“Then how are you going to get there without making me worry about you?” he growled.

I couldn't really argue with the worry.

He'd made it clear he was very concerned about everything that had to do with me. My safety seemed like a no-brainer as far as his worries went.

“I can drive you to work on those days,” I suggested. “Since your shifts are longer. You can drive me the others.”

“Do you sincerely want to rely on me for a ride when I offered to make you independent by buying you one, Love? In most situations, you're very clearly an alpha. No alpha I've ever met would allow what you're talking about.”

I grimaced.

He had a point.

I'd never thought of myself as an alpha, but we sure butted heads a lot.

And I definitely didn't want to rely on him for a ride.

“I'll *think* about letting you buy me a car,” I finally said.

“Thank you. That wasn't so hard, was it?”

“Don't push it,” I warned.

He chuckled, carrying both of our plates to the kitchen table. “I want us to be friends, too,” he said, pulling a chair out and gesturing me toward it. I sat down without asking questions, and he pushed my chair in. I waited to dig into my food until he was seated too, and we ate together.

His music continued playing, but otherwise, the room was quiet. It was... peaceful.

My body was tired, but calm. My hunger was at the back of my mind, the tiniest of needles.

And I couldn't help it when my thoughts went back to the dinner we'd shared the day before.

Shit, it felt like a lifetime ago.

“Not all vampires are driven by their hunger,” I said, as we ate.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” he admitted.

“It was true, wasn’t it? That’s how you feel about vampires. That’s how a lot of people feel about vampires. And in some ways, we *are* driven by our hunger. It annoys us too, not just you.”

His lips curved downward. “You don’t annoy me.”

“Well, you annoy me.” The words were half-hearted. He was a pain in my ass, but I still found myself liking him. Not just physically, but as a person. That damn dominance was going to be the death of me.

“Liar.” He took a big bite of his steak.

I took a bite of mine.

“I should’ve realized I wouldn’t be paired with a human,” Madd said, grabbing his glass of water and taking a sip. My gaze lingered on his Adam’s apple as it bobbed. “It would be a shitshow.”

“You’d bulldoze her with your good intentions in a heartbeat,” I agreed.

“At least you realize they’re *good* intentions.”

“She’d probably be terrified of you. You growl more than anyone I’ve ever met. You’re at least as driven by your wolf as any vampire is by their hunger.”

He chuckled. “More, probably.”

We both ate in peaceful silence for a few minutes before he finally said, “You’re not driven by your hunger. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I am, actually. It’s just a sore subject.” I took another bite of my steak.

“There are good and bad vampires, like any other supernatural. I didn’t mean to suggest that there weren’t.”

“It’s fine. Vampires have a bad reputation, but it’s deserved in some cases.

I'm used to being the bad guy, whenever I'm not being used by one."

"You're not the bad guy, you were trapped in a shitty situation. It's different."

"You don't know me," I said bluntly. "Maybe I asked to become a blood wolf."

His eyes narrowed. "I know how the process works, Love. It's not a secret to those of us who've been around long enough."

"What is it, then?" I countered, not believing him.

He set his utensils down. "They adopt orphaned human girls between eight and ten, as if they're kind souls who don't want the little things to suffer anymore. They put all of the girls together in groups, with chefs feeding them highly regulated meals. Doctors visit them monthly and run bloodwork, making sure they're all as healthy as can be. They follow exercise regimens that are strict, but not brutal enough to delay puberty."

With every word he said, my stomach clenched tighter.

My body did, too.

"When the girls' hormones begin to change during puberty, they're forced to ingest a large amount of vampire blood. Then, they're injected with an assload of werewolf venom. The first shift is much more painful for the young girls than it is for grown women who've taken mates."

The horrors of my past flickered through my mind as he continued speaking.

Every moment I'd lived—every one I'd spent in agony.

But he went on. "Less than half of the young girls would survive it, even without further intervention, yet the vampire bastards interfere further. While the girls suffer through the long, traumatic shift, they slowly drain their blood. Then, they watch their hearts stop. Most of them never restart, but a fraction of the time, they do. Their hearts restart, and they finish the transition to a vampire. Their bodies finish shifting, and they become wolves, too. They —"

"Stop." My word was sharp.

My hands shook, hard.

My emotions were growing wilder, harder to contain, and even my sleeping wolf was growing discontent within me.

He took my hand, and I held his for dear life, even though a part of me wanted to rage.

Most of me just wanted to cry.

“You didn’t ask to be a blood wolf, Love. No one does. You did the best with the shitshow you were dragged into, because you’re a survivor. I barely know you, and you’re already the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

I blinked quickly, fighting tears.

My throat was so thick, I wasn’t sure I could keep breathing. “I’ve never been strong. I just wanted to survive.”

“You’re a fucking miracle. Less than 1% of the humans usually make it.”

My whole body trembled as faces of the other girls flashed through my mind.

Faces, and bodies.

They hadn’t allowed us to take or keep any pictures.

All I had of them was my memories.

I stood abruptly. “I need a minute.”

And without further explanation, I fled.

# *eleven*

LOVE

I LOCKED the bedroom door behind me before I tucked myself into Madd's bed, dragging my knees up to my chest. My tears soaked the pillow under my head, and my breaths grew into sharp, desperate gasps.

I'd never talked about the details of my transformation with Tori or Sienna.

None of us had ever wanted to revisit the horrors of the past.

But now, I was remembering—and fuck, it had been hell. Worse than hell.

Vaguely, I heard the doorknob twist, stopping on the lock. A moment later, I heard it again, and it opened right up.

Of course the bastard had keys to his own damn doors.

I couldn't stop the panic attack.

I wanted to, but I couldn't.

I couldn't stop him from tugging his shirt off and climbing into bed with me, or pulling me into his arms.

I couldn't even stop myself from turning to face his chest, and wetting his skin with my tears.

The arm he didn't have around my back, holding me securely to his chest,



was stroking my hair.

Slowly, my breathing evened out.

He was humming softly—when my breathing evened, I noticed that.

“Is that a Tara Brisk song?” I whispered.

“Mmhm. She’s got a song for everything.”

I couldn’t help it—I laughed. It was a teary, quiet laugh, but still a laugh. She was a global supernatural popstar, and had been for ages. No one knew what kind of supernatural she was, though.

My humor faded quickly, and my mind went back to where it had been.

The past.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. My hands were curled between us, my fingers digging into his chest harder than could’ve been comfortable. “Why did you take your shirt off?”

“Physical contact is comforting for wolves.”

“It is?”

“You tell me.”

There *was* something peaceful about having him pressed up against me the way he was. About how warm and soft his skin was against mine.

“Maybe it does.”

His lips brushed the top of my head. “I still shouldn’t have pushed.”

“I encouraged you to do it.”

“Still.”

“We’re both pushy, Madd. No point in pretending otherwise. I’m not upset; you don’t need to apologize.”

“You *are* upset, Love.”

“No, I’m just... sad. I’ve never talked about that part of my life with anyone before. Not even with Tori and Sienna.”

“Sienna?”

“Usually, only one percent of us survive. There were a hundred girls in that mansion, and three of us made it through the transition. Me, Tori, and Sienna. The clan was *ecstatic*. Three blood bags, for the price of one.”

“Where’s Sienna?”

My eyes stung again.

Once the tears started, it was hard to stop them.

“She wouldn’t leave with us. She’s always been more paranoid than us—more afraid. She was worried about what would happen if they caught us, and refused. We only had a few minutes to get away—we couldn’t spend the time it would take to convince her.”

He pulled me tighter to his chest. “When you’re ready to tell me which clan it is, we’ll get her out of there.”

My emotions were overwhelming.

Mostly, with gratitude.

“Do you remember any of your family?”

“Not a lot. I have a few memories, and an image in my mind of my mom’s smile—and a feeling that I was loved. Really, really loved. I remember the way my dad would say my name, too. He called me Vee. But there was a car crash, and there was no one willing to take me after my parents were gone. Except the vampires.” I wiped at my watery eyes again. “Fuck, this is turning into a therapy session.”

“Welcome to my office, Love. It’s also a great place for sex, when you’re in the mood.”

I couldn’t hold back the laugh that made my whole body shake. “You’re a terrible therapist.”

“Undoubtedly.”

My smile grew sad, and faded away again.

Damn, the past hurt.

“Vee fits you better than Love.”

“I know.” I wiped my eyes, though it seemed a bit useless to do so. “When I was in the system, my caseworker told me I’d have a better chance of finding a home if I went by Love, because it made me sound sweet and kind.”

“Then I’m going to call you Vee, if it’s okay with you.”

I nodded, more tears stinging my eyes.

Damn, I was a mess.

“I think you need to hum more pop songs so I can get my shit together,” I said, wiping more tears away.

His lips brushed the top of my head before he started humming again.

I pressed my face to his chest. He held me close, the soft rumble of his hum vibrating just lightly against me.

Though I didn’t intend to fall asleep, the soft peace of the moment overwhelmed me, and I slipped into a dreamless rest.

MY ALARM MADE my lips curve downward and my body move a little. A thick arm tightened around my back, squishing my face harder against a strong, hot chest. Fingers tangled in my hair, and a long sigh escaped me as I remembered where I was.

And why I was there.

I’d been crying... and Madd had held me. He talked to me, too.

I was supposed to be avoiding him, dammit, and he kept worming his way deeper into my life.

I didn’t even have the energy to be mad about it.

So it was time to put more space between us, somehow.

“I’ve got to go to work,” I mumbled against his chest.

He grumbled and groaned, but slowly released me.

I headed to the bathroom, making a face at my red-rimmed eyes and wild bangs when I saw them in the mirror. Without a blow drier, the best I could do was wet them down and hope for a better outcome.

When I emerged, I found Madd putting my clothes in his closet. He was still shirtless, only wearing the pair of jeans he’d had on the day before, and hot damn, I was drooling.

*Drooling.*

If I saw him naked, I wasn’t sure I could go back. If his abs looked like that, what did his thighs, ass, and calves look like?

I was *really* going to drool if I started imagining that.

While I got dressed, he disappeared into the kitchen. The smell of food cooking made my nose twitch while I attempted to fix my waves without a curling iron, and my bangs too. They were growing increasingly hopeless, and slightly greasy on top of it, so I abandoned that soon enough.

My new shoes made it difficult to fight a smile when I pulled them on over my ripped fishnets again, but I managed.

I was a grown woman, after all.

I could handle being given thoughtful gifts and shown small amounts of love.

And I *had* to handle it well, because I needed to start avoiding Madd, pronto. It had felt good to confide in him the night before—too good.

I couldn’t let myself keep growing attached to him, or risking my heart. In theory, we were supposed to be mates, but I still wasn’t entirely sold on that.

And anyway, he was a steamroller. I wasn’t a fragile daisy, but who wanted to be steamrolled by the person they were supposed to share their life with?

Not me.

I was stubborn, but not steam-rolling stubborn. Or I didn't think so, at least.

But anyway, things had gotten too intense, too fast. Maybe in time, I would be willing to consider opening my heart more, but it hadn't been long enough.

I didn't tell anyone about my past, but I'd told him.

And hell, he'd managed to convince me to *like* telling him. If my wolf wasn't sleeping so soundly, she would've been actively reminding me how much I liked him, too.

So it was a mess.

But hey, it was better than the mess I'd been in before Tori and I escaped. That was a plus, even if I still got sad and worried every time I thought about Sienna.

I desperately hoped she was okay.

When I stepped out of the bedroom, I found my purse hanging off Madd's shoulder—yes, he was *still* shirtless—and a plate of food sitting in his free hand. “Ready?”

The man may as well have walked straight out of a dream.

How the hell was I going to put distance between us?

We were both quiet while I ate during the drive to the bakery, and I took my bag when he parked behind the back door.

It was time to set my unfortunate plan into action.

“I eat lunch with the other bakers most days, so don't worry about trying to meet me,” I said, fiddling with my bangs.

It was only going to make them greasier, but I was feeling self-conscious knowing they looked bad. And I was slightly worried I wouldn't be able to pull off my stay-away-from-the-sexy-werewolf plan.

Madd's forehead creased. “Is this because of the cup of blood?”

“Of course not. I just don't want to lose my friends.”

It was a stretch of the truth, if not an outright lie.

I was using them as an excuse to buy myself space from Madd, nothing more.

“Alright. I’ll buy coffee during your first break, and we can sit in the shop and drink it, then.”

Something told me that was as much compromising as Madd was going to do. I didn’t think it was worth a fight, so I agreed.

It wasn’t like it would hurt to let him buy me a delicious, overpriced drink.

“I want to see a picture of your lunch, too,” he said.

“What are you, my babysitter?”

“You haven’t been eating enough. I put cash in your bag—buy food with it.” He stepped out of his truck, and I did the same, not giving him a chance to grab my door again. Though he didn’t look happy about that, he captured my hand and walked me all ten steps to the bakery.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said.

Instead of responding, he wrapped his arms around me, engulfing me in a massive hug. I couldn’t stop my eyes from closing or my arms from wrapping around him too.

I was clearly terrible at putting distance between us.

“You look really damn good, Vee. Stop worrying,” he said.

I gave him a dramatic sigh, despite the goosebumps that erupted on my skin when I heard my old nickname in that sexy voice. He finally released me, and rapped on the door.

“I’m the first one here.” I opened my bag and dug for the keys while he looked around the empty parking lot in surprise.

“I don’t like that.”

“You don’t like a lot of things.”

“It’s normal to want my female healthy and safe, Vee.”

I finally found my keys, tugging them out of my bag and slipping the right one in the lock. When I slipped through the door, Madd caught it before it shut.

I stopped just inside, turning to face him.

The man clearly had something else to say.

“I put my number in your phone. Use it. I’ll worry about you, and will check in as the day goes on.”

“You can’t handle a few hours apart?”

He lifted a shoulder, very unashamed of his overprotectiveness. “If we seal the bond, it’ll get easier.”

“It’s always about sealing the bond with you.”

“Or sex,” he agreed. “Or eating.”

My lips curved upward, just slightly. “On the last one, we can agree.”

His expression softened slightly, humor reaching his eyes. “I’ll be in the parking lot until at least two of your coworkers show up. If they’re men, I’ll be sitting in your bakery all day.”

“The only guy we have is a high school student, and he works afternoons at the register. You’ll be fine.”

His eyes flashed. “Text me when his shift starts.”

“That’s not going to happen, Madd.”

“It wasn’t a request. Text me when his shift starts, or I’ll get the info from one of your coworkers. Something tells me one of them will be thrilled enough at the sight of me to tell me what I want to know.”

I scowled.

But of course, one of them pulled into the parking lot just then.

“Fine. I’ll check the schedule and let you know.” I bit out the words.

They satisfied him anyway.

“Holy shit,” my coworker said, from behind Madd.

My wolf surged to the surface, and my face twisted in a snarl.

Madd had me turned around, with my back to his chest and his hands on my hips a heartbeat later. The beat after that, he’d stepped outside, taking me with him. The physical contact of his body pressed to mine calmed my wolf so rapidly, my expression fell back to neutral. My wolf all but purred.

“Excuse us,” he said.

“Are you really mates?” my coworker asked Madd, her eyes glued to the man.

My body stiffened, and his hands slid off my hips, moving possessively over my abdomen. “Yes. And we’d like a moment alone.”

Her eyes widened. “Of course. I should’ve—I’m sorry. Congrats!” she vanished into the door I’d unlocked.

“Are they always going to be like that?” I wondered, my wolf stretching languidly within me. Madd had settled her thoroughly enough that she was going back to sleep.

“Hard to say. It’ll last a while, at the very least.” His lips brushed my cheek, and I barely suppressed a shudder.

That felt way too good.

The emotional connection we’d started developing the night before made it feel good more than just *physically*, too. It felt good *emotionally*, on top of the physical bit.

“Be safe. Text me. I’ll wait in the lot until someone else gets here,” he said, before he released my waist and grabbed the door for me.

Groaning inwardly, I slipped through it.

I was screwed.

So insanely screwed.

And not in the fun way.



Well... probably in the fun way, considering I was going to have to feed from him again at some point. But in the shitty way, too.

## *twelve*

### LOVE

THE MORNING PASSED QUICKLY, thanks to the exhaustion that set in as I started making croissants on auto-pilot. Tori got there two hours after me, and then it practically flew by as we caught up in hushed whispers.

“How did you like last night?” I asked.

“It was the best night of my life,” she admitted, her expression a little dreamy.

“Did you find someone to drink from?”

“A lot of someones. The women in the pack announced that they’re adopting me, and they’re going to convince a bunch of the unmated guys to start donating their blood for me. I’m going to have a *stash*, Love.”

“Well, you deserve it. At least one good thing came of this mess.”

She frowned. “You should have plenty of blood too. I’m sure Madd will feed you whenever you’re hungry.”

I made a face. “I’m trying to avoid him.”

Her eyebrows raised. “How? Why?”

“I don’t want a mate any more than you do.” I shook my head. “And it’s weird. Things are getting too intense. It’s too fast, and... uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t look uncomfortable to me.”

“Shut up,” I grumbled.

Tori smiled.

“You’re trying to avoid taking a mate too,” I pointed out. “For all you know, one of the guys in the pack could be yours.”

“Yes, but it’s much easier to avoid someone before they become your mate than after. I think it’s too little, too late, Love. He wants you. You want him. Why not let it happen?”

“We can’t be friends if you’re going to talk like this,” I warned.

She laughed. “Good thing we adopted each other as sisters years ago.”

We continued chatting as we worked. Though Tori kept bringing the conversation back to me and Madd, I kept changing it.

Soon enough, my phone vibrated in my pocket, and I slipped my gloves off and pulled it out of my apron. My boss didn’t care if we kept our phones on us as long as we sanitized properly, and all of us bakers kept an eye on each other.

ARCHER

Ready for your break?

My eyebrows shot upward when I saw his first name in my phone. He had introduced himself as Madd, and I’d never heard anyone call him Archer. So why had he put his name in that way?

I texted him back.

ME

Sure. I need ten to finish up.

ARCHER

OK. What drink do you want?

ME

Not picky. Something sweet. Surprise me.

ARCHER

I’m not a fan of surprises

ME

It's just coffee, pick something

He sent me a gif of someone sighing, and I couldn't stop my lips from curving.

That damn alpha.

"I thought you were avoiding him," Tori teased me, as I grabbed a fresh pair of gloves and started working again.

I gave her an exasperated look. "There's an art to avoiding a werewolf. If I pull away too much, he'll realize what I'm doing."

"And if you don't pull away at all, you won't really be avoiding him."

"Exactly."

"Well, good luck. I can't see the avoidance working out, but I'm on your side anyway." She winked at me.

I flipped her off, and she laughed.

When I took my gloves off, grabbed a few croissants, and made my way out to the register and seats, every eye in the building turned to me.

I wasn't used to being stared at in Wildwood... but I was used to being watched by vampires. Many, many vampires. So honestly, it wasn't a huge deal.

I pretended they weren't there.

If news of our conversation and pictures of us circled the city, what did it really matter? The vampires looking for me undoubtedly knew where I was. The more they saw Madd with me, the more untouchable I would seem. Hopefully, it would somehow scare them into sending Sienna after me.

She hadn't been willing to leave... but they knew the three of us were attached to each other.

Madd was sitting at the table furthest from the counter, with two coffee cups in front of him.

Even my coworkers stared at me as I made my way out from behind the counter, then through the crowd.

They parted for me, and Madd's eyes were moving over my figure when I made it through the biggest wave of them.

"You didn't text me," he said, as I sat down.

"I answered when you texted me, though. That seemed like enough."

He slid one of the coffees over to me, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

I handed him two croissants, on a napkin. One was plain, the other was ham and cheese. I'd mentioned the latter on our first, well, *date*, and I wanted to see if he remembered.

Was I testing him?

Maybe a little.

Considering the situation, I didn't think it was a bad thing to do.

"You put yourself in my phone as Archer," I said, sipping my drink. A wave of sugary, creamy goodness made me groan softly.

Madd's eyes heated.

Something told me his mind was going back to his truck, the day before.

"Why did you put your first name in?" I prodded. "I've never heard anyone who actually knows you call you that."

"My family did, before they died in the war with the humans. If I get to use your family's nickname, you get to use mine."

Well, that was sweet.

He was making it really hard to avoid him.

"Alright." I took another sip of my coffee.

At least I had the sugary goodness. That would make my avoidance-failure more tolerable.

“Are these the famous ham and cheese croissants?” He lifted one up, checking it out.

“Not famous, but delicious. One is plain, in case you’re not a fan.” I took a bite of my own. My boss was cool, and put it in our contracts that we could have a few free baked goods every day if we wanted them. I took the max amount I was allowed, every shift I worked.

“Adding meat and cheese makes everything better,” he said, taking a bite of his. Approval rumbled his chest as he chewed. “Damn.”

“You want to add ham and cheese to steak?”

“Don’t see why not.”

I took another bite to stop myself from smiling.

There was something about his blunt, simple humor that I liked tremendously. I guess fate wouldn’t have paired us if our senses of humor didn’t work.

“What about ice cream?”

“I don’t eat much ice cream, so that would probably make me like it more.”

My eyes widened in mock horror. “You have plenty of money, and you *don’t* spend it on ice cream?”

He chuckled. “Nope. You like ice cream?”

“Of course. I have a *soul*. Unlike you, apparently.”

His lips curved upward further. “What’s your favorite?”

“Cotton candy, actually. Made me feel like a five-year-old every time I went to the store and bought it.”

“I’m sure lots of adults like cotton candy ice cream.”

“No, seriously. Once, when I was still with the clan, I went out for ice cream with Tori and Sienna. The only cotton candy flavor they had was full of gummy bears. When I told the worker I wanted it, he double-checked *twice* that I wanted the ‘kid flavor’. His words, not mine.”

It was Madd's turn to snort. "What an ass."

"Eh, it's fine. He still gave me the ice cream, so that's what mattered."

"How was it?"

"The frozen gummy bears were disgusting, but the ice cream was heavenly. Definitely worth the effort of eating around the candy."

Madd's lips curved upward a little further.

"How many pictures of us do you think are going to be on social media after this?" I asked, tilting my head toward the many people whose eyes I could still feel on us.

"We haven't given them much to look at, so probably not too many. If you sit on my lap again, the internet might explode like it did last night."

"You just want me to sit on you."

"I'd hope that's obvious. I can prove it to you again, if you want."

My body warmed at the reminder of him proving that he was hard the day before. "I think I'm good."

"Offer always stands."

"Of course it does." I leaned back in my chair, taking another bite and glancing down at the time. "I've only got two more minutes."

"You're sure you can't skip lunch with your friends?"

Honestly?

I wanted to.

I desperately, madly wanted to.

But I needed to stick with my damn avoidance plan, for my sanity.

And my safety, too.

It was becoming clearer and clearer that I could fall into feelings for Madd easily. Very, very easily.

So, the plan was a must.

“Nope.” I ate the last bite of my croissant. “I might need to work late, too.”

I was going to have to take the last few hours of Tori’s shift to make that happen, but I’d manage. She’d be thrilled.

I was positive she was going to be scaling back on her hours significantly, anyway. Now that she had free housing and a steady blood source she didn’t have to charge for, she didn’t need to work the eighty-four-hour work weeks we’d been pulling. I wasn’t even sure if the hours were technically legal, but considering our blood wolf status, we didn’t give a damn.

We worked, and we slept.

And that was all.

“Your shift is already twelve hours, Vee.”

It made me warm every time he used that nickname. I hated how much I loved it. I could never give myself a chance to be that vulnerable with him again.

“One of my coworkers has to leave early,” I lied.

His eyes narrowed. “And *you* have to take the shift? Why? I’m sure someone here is working a more reasonable schedule than seven twelve-hour shifts a week.”

“I volunteered. I like working, and I need the money.”

His palms spread on the table as he leaned toward me. “You will *always* have enough money. I own the whole fucking city.”

“You aren’t me, remember?”

His eyes flashed, and his wolf glared out at me. “I’m yours as much as you’re mine, female. Everything I own is yours.”

“I haven’t agreed to seal the bond yet.”

My wolf moved unhappily within me, warning me that she was considering taking over.



She did *not* like the idea that I might not ever seal a bond with her mate.

“You will,” Madd said.

My wolf settled a bit.

She liked his dominance as much as I did, if not more.

“I’ve got to go. Thanks for the fancy coffee. Enjoy the croissants.” I rose to my feet smoothly, and managed two steps before he caught my arm.

With one motion, he spun me on my toes and pulled me into his arms. My chest met his, and my eyes closed automatically as my arms slipped around his back too.

It was like my body refused not to hug him back.

I breathed his scent in deeply, ignoring the goosebumps on my arms as I did so.

He was gorgeous.

He smelled like heaven.

Damn, I wanted my fangs in his throat.

I ignored those throbbing bitches and tried not to let their points cut into my lip. I’d proved how much damage they could do when I sliced Madd’s that first night, after all.

When he relaxed his hold on me after a minute, he tilted my chin back and lowered his mouth to mine.

The kiss caught me off guard.

It surprised me, but not in a bad way.

Not even a little.

It was just a soft brush of his lips against mine, but it was significant.

It was possessive.

It was telling everyone watching us that yes, we didn’t agree on some things,

and were still getting to know each other... but we *were* mates.

He belonged to me, and I belonged to him.

He squeezed my waist lightly, then released me. “Take your coffee. I want a picture of your lunch. The cash is in your wallet.” Some of his words were a repeat from earlier, but I didn’t mind.

He was taking care of me, and I honestly couldn’t remember anyone else ever doing that.

It was sort of sweet.

So why was I trying to avoid him?

My mind was getting foggy about that.

Still, I needed to stick to my plan.

I walked back into the kitchen, and didn’t say a word when I found Tori and the rest of my coworkers watching a video of Madd—Archer—kissing me, and telling me to take my drink and send a picture of my lunch. Plus, letting me know he’d put cash in my wallet.

I didn’t go check.

That would’ve been letting him win.

And given our conversation earlier, it seemed safe to assume he’d put an assload of money in my bag.

I handed Tori the rest of my coffee as I passed her, and her whole face lit up with excitement. We never had treats like that, with all our money going toward blood.

She groaned when she tasted it, the same way I had.

My phone vibrated in my pocket before I started working again.

ARCHER

You didn’t send the guy’s schedule

Dammit.

ME

Give me a sec

I pulled it up on my phone—I never looked at the schedule, knowing I worked every day—and scrolled through until I found the kid's schedule.

ME

He's here at 3 pm

ARCHER

I'll be in the lobby at 3 then

ME

That's really not necessary

ARCHER

Didn't say it was

Doesn't mean I'm not going to be there

ME

You know you'll have to work while I'm here sometimes. You won't always be able to stalk me

ARCHER

Where there's a will, there's a way

ME

Nice cheesy one-liner

He sent a gif of a guy bowing.

ARCHER

After I've watched him for a few hours, I'll know whether he is or isn't a threat. If he is, one of my wolves will be thrilled to keep an eye on him while I'm at work.

ME

He's definitely not a threat

ARCHER

Then I won't need to stalk you tomorrow

ME

Yeah right

ARCHER

You'll be ready for dinner after work, right?

ME

Yes

ARCHER

What time do you usually go to bed?

ME

Around 8 PM

ARCHER

Ouch

ME

Yep. Baker life is a bitch

ARCHER

I'll adjust

ME

You don't have to. We don't need to be on the same schedule.

ARCHER

I never said we did

ME

But you said you'd adjust

ARCHER

Because I want to be on the same schedule. Want and need are very different.

ME

Anyone ever tell you you're infuriating, Archie?

ARCHER

I'm the alpha. Pretty much everyone agrees with that

I take it as a compliment

ME

It isn't one

ARCHER

Yet I'm flattered anyway.

Do you realize your typical schedule gives you less than four hours of daytime outside of work?

ME

I've noticed that, yes

ARCHER

It's insane. You work too much.

ME

Then walk away. I don't have you on a leash. Even if I did, I think you're big enough to figure out a way to pull free.

I'm not going to be your housewife, remember?

ARCHER

I don't want you to be a damn housewife. I want you to work a normal amount. You're more than double full time right now.

ME

Bet I could hit triple if I really tried.

It was a lie.

I'd hit ninety hours a few weeks, and it made me feel like death incarnate. So, I capped it at 84.

Though, with my avoidance plan, I'd have to go up again.

ARCHER

Think of all the ice cream I could feed you if you weren't working so much.

Finally, he was talking my language.

Too bad I couldn't take him up on it.

ME

I'll let you know if I change my mind, but for now, it's a no.

ARCHER

Damn stubborn woman

ME

Damn overbearing man

ARCHER

How often do you need to eat?

ME

Not as often as a normal vampire

ARCHER

I need a number, Vee

ME

Once a week to once every other week. My stomach starts growling when I get really hungry.

ARCHER

Every Monday then? We can swap to Tuesday the weeks it lines up wrong with my work schedule

ME

Sounds good

The conversation ended, and despite the fact that we'd argued a bit, I couldn't shake my smile when I started working again.

# *thirteen*

MADD

THE GUY WASN'T A THREAT, so I didn't stay to watch him for long. I did catch Vee for her second break, though, and she accepted another cup of coffee with immense appreciation. That made me feel good.

She worked fourteen hours that day, and sent me a picture of her lunch after I reminded her to. It was smaller than I would've liked, but at least I knew she ate.

After she got off work, I cooked for her. The conversation flowed easily, and she seemed to get over whatever nervousness she'd had that morning.

When we were done eating, we took care of the dishes together, and she promptly stumbled into bed and fell asleep.

It made my wolf and I violent to know that she'd be up in a few hours. It wasn't nearly enough time to catch up on the sleep she'd lost when we stayed up late the night before. But she was determined to be independent. What choice did I have but to let her?

I hadn't anticipated mating with an alpha female, but there was no argument that she wasn't one. My girl was an alpha, through and through.

And it was sexy as hell.

I'd thought I was attracted to her when she was sweet and delicate, but that

desire had nothing on the insane lust I had been raging against since she started arguing with me.

Staring at her unconscious form in our bed, my wolf had one thought I agreed with:

*“She belongs to us.”*

Desire burned in my body, but I could fight it.

Before I made her mine physically, I needed to persuade her to see that we would be better together than alone.

And all I needed for that, was time.



# *fourteen*

## LOVE

WHEN MY ALARM went off the next morning, I already felt like shit.

My body had adjusted to drinking from Madd—Archer—quickly, and it wasn't ready to be downgraded to *hungry* again.

Madd—Archer, dammit—groaned something incoherent as he rolled out of bed. There was still a wall of pillows between us that I'd put there before I fell asleep, so there was no detangling my limbs from his.

He'd legitimately put *five thousand dollars* in my wallet for lunch the day before, so I felt obligated to call him by the name he'd put in my phone. He obviously wanted me to use it, and I wasn't enough of a bitch to refuse. Especially considering how much effort he was putting in.

And the soul-deep conversation we'd had after our run together.

I still felt vulnerable after that, and it wasn't a feeling I liked.

I stumbled to the bathroom, and blinked at what I found there.

An expensive blow drier sat in a simple, classy holder on the wall.

A curling iron was beside it. It was the same size as the one I usually used to fix my waves when necessary—which I'd left with Tori, since she used it even more than me.

A thick robe hung on the wall beside the dark gray towel hooks.

Bottles of fruit-scented lotions sat on the counter.

A peek in the fancy shower showed fruit-scented gels, shampoos, and conditioners.

“Shit,” I whispered.

I definitely had to call him by his first name.

Reluctantly, I grabbed a bottle of shampoo out of the shower and washed my bangs in the sink. They were dry soon enough, and admittedly, smelled awesome.

I didn't bother fixing my waves or putting on mascara before I stepped out of the bathroom. When I wasn't so exhausted, I could start again with my cheap mascara.

Of course, I only made it to the closet's doorway before I halted, staring into it.

His section of clothing was exactly the same.

Mine?

Not the same.

Definitely not the same.

There were at least a dozen more dresses nestled in with mine, all of which still had tags on them. When I tried to check the price on one of them, I realized he'd cut that part off the tag.

More pairs of new shoes lined the floor beneath the dresses, too.

His closet was a fancy thing, with built-in drawers to remove the necessity of a dresser. So, I ignored the quick beat of my heart as I opened the drawers he had given me when I originally moved in.

Sure enough, there were two dozen new pairs of panties. All of them were the same cut as my old ones, in varying dark shades that meshed with the black I typically bought. I'd tried thongs for the sexy factor at one point, but despised

them too much, so I wore the cheeky ones in an attempt to stay sexy without any discomfort.

The bra drawer was more of the same. Two dozen bras—who the hell needed *two dozen* bras? I could wear the same one for a week, easily.

All of them were the same unpadded, underwire style I always wore, but the lace was in varying shades that matched the panties. The fabric itself was clearly more expensive, and felt a hell of a lot softer than anything I'd ever worn.

I found a dozen pairs of fishnets and similar tights in the drawer below the bra one, and an assload of socks in there with them.

With a sigh, I slipped into the new clothes.

They were stupidly comfortable.

I'd noticed a tall, decorative mirror had been added to the bedroom before I fell asleep the night before, so I padded out to it in my new outfit and checked myself out.

Dammit.

Everything fit perfectly.

And looked a hell of a lot better than the old thrift-store version I'd been dressed in. As much as I loved thrifting, and as much as it had been a life saver for us, the new clothes were more comfortable, and more attractive.

I didn't like admitting that, but it was the truth.

I fluffed my hair a bit before stepping back into the bathroom to find my mascara. I hadn't planned on wearing it, but I wanted my face to fit with my pretty, new clothes.

Of course, when I found the makeup tucked away neatly in a drawer, the usual cheap tube was gone. In its place was a half a dozen expensive options, along with even more colors and brands of eyeliner.

I took a minute to apply both.

I didn't have the heart or willpower to refuse to use the things he'd bought

me. They were along the lines of what I would've bought myself if money wasn't a factor anyway.

And I wasn't a bitch. Not unless it was necessary, at least.

When I was done, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand. It had also been replaced with the newest model at some point after I fell asleep.

"We need to get going, don't we?" Madd—dammit, maybe I'd only call him his first name to his face—asked, shutting off the stove and grabbing the plate of food he'd cooked for me. The man was shirtless and dressed in nothing but a pair of sweats.

The sweats really did it for me.

The erection tenting them did too, especially when his eyes moved over my body.

"Yes." I accepted the plate, and he grabbed a fork. Followed by his keys. When we stepped into the garage, it didn't surprise me one bit to find a new, yellow SUV beside his truck. "Really, Archer?"

"I'm not leaving you stranded," he said bluntly.

Though I sighed, when he opened the passenger door to his truck for me, I slipped inside. "You didn't need to replace all my stuff."

"I wanted to. More dresses are coming today, too. I had to order them. Does everything fit well?"

"Perfectly," I admitted. "For future reference, three or four bras is plenty for most women."

"Then I'd only get to see you in three or four different bras."

I rolled my eyes, biting into the eggs and bacon he'd cooked for me as he pulled out of the garage. "I haven't let you see me in *any* of my bras yet. What makes you think I'll change my mind?"

"Determined optimism."

I snorted.

“Are you on birth control?” he asked. The question was random, but safe. Considering the way things had gone the last time I drank his blood, it seemed like a good sign that he was asking.

I took another bite of my food. “I have an IUD. The clan didn’t want their prized blood bags accidentally getting pregnant, so it wasn’t optional.”

He growled, but didn’t say anything.

I actually appreciated that he didn’t. There wasn’t anything to say.

“We can get it taken out, if you’d prefer.”

His words surprised me.

My eyebrows lifted. “You would want to have a kid right after meeting your mate?”

“Not particularly.” His grip on the steering wheel was tight. “But I don’t want you controlled by them in any way.”

We definitely agreed on that.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m nowhere near ready to be a mom. Not sure I’ll ever be. I don’t even know *what* our kid would be, if we had one. Vampire? Werewolf? Your guess is as good as mine.”

“A blood wolf. Both vampire and werewolf genes are always passed down.”

“Then our kid would always be a target.”

Archer scowled. “I’ll protect them just as much as I’ll protect you, and they’ll have you too. No one will *ever* hurt our children.”

There was something sexy about his fierce certainty.

And honestly, it made me believe him.

That didn’t mean I was anywhere near ready to be responsible for another living being. I had been starving up until a few days earlier, and was already walking myself back toward starvation again.

So, I was quiet through the rest of the drive.

I wasn't sure what else to say.

HE MET me behind the shop during my break, and we talked for a few minutes while a few people tried to watch us.

They weren't sneaky about it, but we ignored them anyway.

I talked Tori into letting me take the last few hours of her shift again—she was so excited, there wasn't much convincing required—so I worked late.

And fell asleep early again.

THE REST of the week passed similarly. Madd finally went into work on Monday, which bought me one last day of freedom.

And hunger.

Going to sleep alone on Monday felt weird, honestly, but I didn't let myself think about it too much.

When Tuesday came around, he picked me up for lunch after texting me that he was on his way home from work.

So, he'd been up for more than twenty-four hours.

He knew I was hungry—and he had to be exhausted.

Which meant I would have to feed from him.

There was no way he would let me put it off any longer.

And of course, he didn't waste any time, bringing it up as soon as he pulled away from the bakery with me in the passenger seat of his truck.

“When do you want to drink from me?”

Something told me it was too late to ask him to fill a foam cup again. After I'd had my teeth in his throat, I was pretty sure I'd lose control and drink from his veins anyway.

“After work, maybe.”

“This isn’t a maybe, Vee,” he said bluntly. “I’m not letting you go hungry.”

My stomach had started rumbling at work two days earlier, but I’d managed to hide that from him in the short amount of time we were home together.

I was going hungry by choice, though, which was...

Well, it was shitty.

No way around that.

“We’ll do it tonight, at home,” I said.

His chest rumbled in disagreement.

“We’ll need time to talk about rules,” I added. “There needs to be space between us. I’m going to want to have sex with you while I drink from you, and you’re going to want that too.”

“We can refrain if that’s what you want. There’s no reason to wait until tonight, when you’re probably hungry now.”

I wasn’t sure *I* could refrain, and I was definitely hungry.

Hopefully he had more self-control than I did.

“What do *you* want?” I asked.

His chest rumbled again. “I think I made that pretty obvious the first night we were together. You’re my mate; I want to be inside you every fucking chance I get.”

My body flushed.

I was getting slick between my thighs with just the words we were trading.

“*We should definitely have sex with him,*” my wolf said. She was getting restless, and ready to run again. But, with how much I was working, it just didn’t seem possible.

“*That’s a terrible idea.*”

“*Why?*” she countered.

I didn't have a real answer for her.

I didn't want to have sex with him, because I didn't want to let my feelings for him grow any stronger. *She* wanted my feelings to grow.

"It'll be better if we maintain space between us. Sex is probably a bad call," I finally said.

His eyes were narrowed when they flashed toward me. "*Maintain space?*"

Shit.

"Is that why you've been working extra?" he growled.

Double shit.

He was exhausted and grumpy...

And apparently, putting the pieces of my plan together in his mind.

"They need me at the bakery," I said.

It was mostly true, but it really wouldn't be a big deal to hire another person to take half my hours. I'd still have plenty of time to handle the croissants.

No one could make them as well as me.

He pulled off the road, parking in the lot of an empty gas station so he could turn to face me. His eyes blazed with anger, which didn't seem like a good omen. "You've been avoiding me on purpose."

Was there any point in lying?

Probably not.

"Things got too intense between us, too fast," I said bluntly. "You brought back my shitty memories, and held me when I cried. That makes me feel really damn self-conscious, and I'm not comfortable with how quickly we got to that point."

His nostrils flared. "You pushed me to tell you what I knew about blood wolves. I wasn't trying to bring back shitty memories."

"Well, maybe we're just toxic together," I shot back.



“Like hell we are. I take care of you, and you do the same for me, whether you can admit it to yourself or not. You bring me two croissants every time we meet for coffee, and only keep one for yourself. Purposefully or subconsciously, you’re caring for me the same way I do you.”

“Believe what you want to believe, *Archie*. Just pull back onto the road. I need to get back.” I turned away from him, gesturing to the road.

He growled again.

Then he pulled back out into traffic, heading in the opposite direction of the bakery.

I was totally screwed.

“Where are we going?” I demanded.

“Away.” His voice was rough and angry.

“So you’re *abducting* me now? Do you really think that’s a good idea, Arch? It’s not exactly going to make me like you more.”

“My mate is *purposefully avoiding me*, so yeah, I think it’s a great idea.”

Well, he was really mad.

I dropped the back of my head against the seat’s headrest and sent a text to my boss, letting her know I was sick.

She immediately told me to take off as much time as I needed—and thanked me for all the work I put in every week. It was good to feel appreciated, even if frustration was my main emotion at the moment.

WE WERE both tense as he drove out of the city and into the forest. I had no idea where we were heading, though I knew we weren’t going toward Scale Ridge.

Despite being pissed, when he rolled the windows down, I took a deep breath of fresh air.

The forest smelled incredible.

And being out in the trees, even while in his truck, made me feel whole in a way nothing else ever had.

As much as I'd been trying to avoid it, I knew working that many hours wasn't sustainable for me. I couldn't avoid Archer forever. I was shitty at staying away from him—and I didn't want to do it anymore.

And man, I was exhausted.

Two hours down the empty highway, Archer pulled onto a dirt road.

We left the windows down, neither of us minding the dirt. I noticed a few cabins buried in the trees as we made our way through, and my curiosity grew.

“What is this place?” I called out, having to raise my voice to speak over the sound of the wind.

“The original pack land,” Archer called back. “I built here first, but when our numbers grew too rapidly, we had to move to the current city to bring the building costs down. Now, a handful of us maintain cabins here. Some of the wolves rent them out. I don't.”

I didn't blame them for keeping the homes. The forest was stunning, and outside the cabins and dirt road, the land looked untouched.

Plus, there were probably a lot of humans who would pay a ton of money to stay in a cabin on the original Wildwood pack land.

WE DROVE another half an hour before we finally pulled into the garage of a cabin. Despite how old it must've been, the place was gorgeous. The siding was painted a rich green color, and looked like it had been done recently. The large windows were clean. The boards making up the porch were lined up perfectly.

Unsurprisingly, Archer had taken good care of it.

He closed the garage behind us, and was there to catch my hand when I stepped down. I accepted his help, despite my defensiveness creeping back in.

When I started to pull my hand from his, he slid his fingers between mine.

My throat swelled at the gesture, and the blissful warmth of the contact.

“I come here when I need to clear my head,” he said, leading me inside. “It’s smaller than our house in the city, but it’s quieter. You can see the stars easier at night, too.”

We stepped into the house’s kitchen, and I looked around the space. The cabinets were a dark shade, and the countertops were creamy granite. The walls were warm white, and the floors were dark brown wood—old, and worn in a way that made the place feel lived-in.

It was homey.

Really, really homey.

My throat swelled more.

“How long are we staying?” I asked.

“As long as it takes for us to figure out how to get on the same page.” He released my hand and strode up to the fridge. When he opened the freezer, he seemed to be cataloguing what he had.

“I really don’t want to lose my job over this,” I said, leaning against the cabinets.

Truthfully?

I was so exhausted, I didn’t even really give a damn about my job in that moment.

And hungry—I was hungry too.

As if propelled by my thoughts, my stomach rumbled loudly.

Archer’s head turned, and he glared at me. “You said your stomach wouldn’t growl if you drank from me once a week.”

I was tired of fighting with him, and ran a hand over my short, tangled waves. “All the shifting made me hungry.” After a moment, I added, “I’m going to take a shower. I need space.”

I slipped into the first bathroom I found, and didn't bother locking the door behind me.

There was a shower... but there was also a bathtub. It was nothing fancy, but I suddenly had the urge to sink into the bath. So, I turned the water on to start warming it up, then stripped.

It had been a long time since I took a bath.

A long time since I relaxed at all, honestly.

When I plugged the drain, I squirted some of Archer's shower gel into the water in an attempt to make my own bubble bath. When it worked, my lips curved upward.

Maybe relaxation would help me make sense of everything, somehow.

# *fifteen*

LOVE

MY PHONE BUZZED on the ledge of the tub as I slid into the water, and I grabbed it as I sat down.

TORI

You're sick? With what, the love bug?

ME

Ha ha.

TORI

What's going on?

ME

Archer abducted me

TORI

Umm... what?

ME

He learned about my avoidance plan and dragged me to his cabin in the middle of the forest. According to him, we're not leaving until we work our shit out

TORI

Ohhhh

I told you that plan was a bad idea

ME

Don't pretend you're not doing everything in your power to avoid finding a mate

TORI

I told you, it's different before you've met them. I'm avoiding an unwanted bond. You're avoiding an existing connection that scares you.

ME

Bitch

TORI

Why yes, I am. Thank you. My wolf preens at your compliment

ME

I don't want to be attached to him.

TORI

I know. Everything we love dies, except each other.

ME

Knock on wood

TORI

Done

Do you think the pack is really going to rescue Sienna?

ME

I do

Hopefully, we can convince her to join it too

TORI

Fingers crossed

I've got to get to work, but good luck in Loveland

That joke just made me snort, btw

ME

See ya

Make sure no one screws up my croissants

TORI

Yes ma'am

I sent her an eye-rolling emoji, she replied with a wink, and that was the end of the conversation.

I leaned my head back against the wall behind the tub, closing my eyes and relaxing into the water. The smell of Archer's soap filled the air, and honestly, it felt like heaven.

My heaven lasted all of five minutes, because as soon as I shut off the water,

the bathroom door opened.

I sighed, not bothering to open my eyes. The bubbles would keep me covered, but I wasn't really worried about my nudity anyway. As much as I tried to put distance between myself and Archer, I'd still ridden his cock to orgasm over his clothes the last time I drank from him.

"Scoot over," he said.

I opened my eyes in time to see him push his jeans down his thighs, exposing a massive erection raging against his boxer briefs.

My response was sharp. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Joining you. Scoot over."

"I didn't invite you," I shot back.

"If I wait for an invitation from you, I'll be waiting for the rest of my damn life, Vee." He stripped his boxer briefs off, and my gaze met his boner.

Hot.

Fucking.

Damn.

He was gorgeous.

*"That'll feel good inside us,"* my wolf murmured.

I didn't even bother to disagree.

The horny bitch was right.

He stepped into the bath, and I finally had the sense to pull my legs up to my chest, turning sideways. It was a normal-sized bathtub, but he was not a normal-sized man.

"I don't think this is going to work," I said, as he sat down on the opposite side of me. His shoulder hit the water spout awkwardly, but he didn't seem to care.

I huffed when he tucked one of his legs on one side of my hips, then did the

same with the other.

“We’ll be fine. Give me your feet.”

“I’m good here.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me.

After a moment of hesitation, I finally gave him one of my legs.

He set it over his thighs without dragging it against his erection or anything.

“See, we made it work.” His hands settled on my shins, big and warm.

“But why did we *need* to make it work?”

“Because you’re here right now, trapped with me, without a way to escape the conversation.” He squeezed my legs lightly, and my lower belly clenched.

I should’ve skipped the bubbles. I would’ve had a much better view of him.

Then again, I wasn’t supposed to even be looking at the bastard.

Obviously, I was failing at that.

I let out a long breath. “Alright, let’s talk.”

“No more lies?”

“No more lies.”

“How often do you need to eat?”

“I didn’t really lie about that. Once a week would be plenty in most cases, but I’m still recovering from the starvation, and we shifted a lot this week. Shifting is harder on my body than it is on a normal werewolf.”

He nodded. “So if we shift, I’ll need to feed you twice or three times a week.”

“Unfortunately.”

He squeezed my thighs lightly. “If you didn’t notice, I *enjoy* feeding you. That’s not unfortunate for me.”

“I don’t think you realize how much danger being with me puts you in,



Arch.”

“And I don’t think you realize how much power being mated to me gives *you*, Vee.”

I studied him.

His eyes moved slowly down my shoulders and collarbone, lingering on the swell of my breasts. There were bubbles covering me, but I felt like he could see through them.

He couldn’t, obviously, but the feeling was there anyway.

“Our conversations always go back to this. Talking around the same point isn’t getting us anywhere,” I finally said.

“Then why don’t we stop talking?”

I blinked.

His gaze lifted back to mine, and it was more intense than I’d expected. “You’re not comfortable with me, Vee. Did you think I hadn’t noticed?”

“I was more comfortable before I spilled my past.”

“Yeah, I should’ve pulled back sooner in that conversation. I’m sorry.” His apology sounded genuine. “But I’m not sorry that you opened up with me. I’m not sorry that you gave me the privilege of knowing your past.”

“I don’t give that to *anyone*.” I lowered my gaze to the bubbly water. “I don’t see what that has to do with not talking anymore.”

“You’ve been tense ever since that night. Talking isn’t helping, but touching will.”

My gaze snapped back to him. “Excuse me?”

“You know physical touch is a big deal for wolves. Let me rub your shoulders. Let me hold you. Let me kiss you. Let me bring you pleasure.”

“That’s a pretty big request, don’t you think?”

“A mate bond is a pretty big connection, don’t *you* think?” he countered.

He wasn't wrong.

"I don't know." I shook my head, looking out at the bathroom just so I wouldn't have to meet his intense eyes anymore. "I'm just... tired."

"It will help with that, too."

"I don't think a shoulder rub will wipe away my exhaustion, Arch."

"Just try it. Come over here and sit on my lap. Let me hug you, and see how you feel."

I flashed him a look. "I'm not sitting on your cock right now."

He chuckled, his voice low and gravelly. "I was asking for a hug, Vee. Not sex. There's no ignoring my cock, but I wasn't planning on taking advantage of the situation."

I believed him.

"What's in it for me?" I asked.

"Other than ultimate relaxation and enjoyment?"

I bit back a snort. "Yes, other than that."

He considered it for a long moment before he finally said, "I'll give you my truck's key. You can hold on to it the whole time we're here. If you decide to ditch me, there'll be nothing I can do to stop you. I'll have to run back."

His wolf wouldn't mind the run.

But ultimately, I understood what he was really offering me.

Power.

He'd had the power when he turned around and drove me into the forest. If I had the keys, I had the power to decide how long we stayed.

And as much as I knew I should turn him down to maintain the distance I'd attempted to create... I just couldn't.

Not when power was on the line.

And not when all he was asking me for was a hug, which I already wanted desperately.

“Alright, fine.” I finger-combed my bangs. They looked like shit, but he didn’t seem to care. “Right now?”

“Yes.”

He remained where he was, not moving an inch.

I had the power in that situation, too—and he was making it clear to me as much as he could.

I didn’t want to appreciate that, but I did anyway.

“Close your eyes,” I said.

He dutifully closed them.

It was silly not to let him look at me when I was about to climb onto his naked body with my own, but it made me feel slightly less vulnerable.

Slowly, I eased myself out from between his legs.

He still didn’t move as I slid one leg over his waist, followed by the other.

His body was a damn statue as I lowered myself onto him. His thick erection pressed between my ass cheeks when I slowly pressed my chest to his. It throbbed as I tentatively slipped my arms around his back.

He felt incredible.

Hot, and hard.

He smelled even better.

Like the forest, safety, and... shit, I didn’t even have a word to describe it.

“Can I move now?” he asked.

“Mmhm.”

His arms wrapped around me, his grip firm but not tight.

His heart beat like a drum against my chest. “Why is your heart pounding?”

“Because I’ve got my mate in my arms.” His voice was gravelly, his chest rumbling against mine and sending goosebumps down my arms.

I felt safe.

Secure.

*Happy.*

How could a simple hug do that for me?

“Is this what you wanted?” I whispered.

“Fuck, yes.” His arms tightened a bit, his chest still rumbling softly against mine. He was the one purring, for once. “I’ve wanted this for so damn long, Vee. More than I could ever explain. Male wolves aren’t meant to be alone.”

“I don’t think female wolves are either,” I admitted quietly.

His chest rumbled a bit louder. “Is it helping?”

“Unfortunately.”

He chuckled.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. He wasn’t massaging my shoulders, but they slowly relaxed anyway. Every muscle I possessed seemed to soften. Every ounce of stress in my body seemed to fade out.

And damn it all, even my exhaustion slowly disappeared too.

My stomach rumbled again, though, after a while.

Archer grumbled. “My wolf tries to rip control from me every time your stomach growls.”

I laughed softly. “Is he planning to catch me a deer or something?”

“Yes. In his mind, if it’s fresh enough, you could drink from it too.”

I made a face at the imagery. “I’ll pass.”

“Thank fuck.”

My lips were still curved upward when he adjusted his grip on me, his erection still against my ass. “Want me to drink from you now?”

“As long as you’re not going to be pissed when you get yourself off on my cock,” he said.

My smile widened. I still hadn’t told him I was a virgin... but I was hoping I could somehow avoid the awkwardness of that conversation. “Doesn’t sound so bad anymore.”

“I told you the hug would work.”

“You were right.” I closed my eyes, still enjoying the embrace thoroughly. “Are you going to get off too?”

“Only if you give me permission.”

I considered his words.

I did want him to... I just didn’t know how it would change things between us. And that scared me.

But sitting in his arms the way I was, the fear didn’t seem like such a big deal.

So, I eased my hips up away from him and slipped a hand between my thighs. He swore when I caught his erection, and swore more viciously when I lowered myself against it, so the length of him was pressed up against the front of me. The pressure on my clit made my breathing pick up, and I hadn’t even started moving yet.

His hands landed on my ass, and I arched lightly against him, making him swear again.

“I want you to feel good too. How long has it been for you?” I asked, dragging my tongue lightly over the pulse point on his neck.

“Over a century since I’ve been with someone.”

My hips jerked at the intense growl behind his words.

Shit, that was a long time.

“Maybe we should wait until—” I started.

He used his grip on my ass to rock me against him, and a moan escaped me. “We’ve waited more than long enough. Bite me already, Vee.”

My fangs lengthened at his words, and I didn’t hesitate any longer before sinking them into his skin.

His groan was deep and rumbly, nearly feral.

Mine was desperate.

Overwhelmed.

The taste of him was *unreal*.

He dragged me up and down his length.

I swallowed his blood as quickly as I could, drinking as he moved me.

The orgasm hit me too fast, and too hard.

I cried out on his throat, hips jerking as the pleasure cut through me. He snarled, and I felt his release on my abdomen and tits.

I needed more of him, though.

There wasn’t a chance in hell I could pull away.

He continued moving me against him, slower at first, then faster as my pleasure built.

Finally, I shattered again.

My cries filled the air as my fangs slid out of his throat, and he roared as he covered my abdomen in his pleasure once more.

When I collapsed against his chest, my body was trembling.

The blood running through me made me feel almost as good as his hug did.

His grip was tighter as he held me to him.

“We should probably clean off,” I mumbled against his shoulder.

“Later. I like knowing I’ve marked you.”

The possessiveness in the words made my toes curl.

“You were right about the hug.”

“I know I was.” One of his hands slid back to my ass, and squeezed lightly. “I’m not trying to make your life harder, Vee. That’s not what I want at all.”

Some part of me knew that was the truth.

I just... well, I didn’t trust people easily, if at all.

And our situation required not only trust, but a *lot* of trust. Trusting him to treat me properly, and trusting my judgment about him.

Trusting fate.

Trusting my wolf.

“I think I believe you,” I said. My uncertainty was paired with honesty, which I hoped could balance it out.

He squeezed my ass again, just lightly.

The physical contact made me feel connected to him. Hell, it made me trust him more, even. Which was clearly needed.

Touch didn’t seem like a good basis for trust, though.

Well, my wolf thought it did. But me? Not so much.

“I know you don’t want to give me space, but I really do need time to think,” I said. “As great as this felt, I was doing my best to avoid you up until this morning.”

“You can’t avoid your mate, Vee.”

“Apparently not.”

He squeezed my ass one last time, then eased me off of his lap. When I was settled back in the place I’d started, he cleaned his chest off with soapy water, then stood.

Bits of bubbles clung to his chiseled abs, thick erection, and monstrous thighs. He didn't pay them any mind as he stepped out and grabbed a towel. It was wrapped around him far too soon.

His low, sexy voice made goosebumps break out on my arms again as he said, "Thank you for the conversation, feeding on me, and letting me touch you. Enjoy your bath." The backs of his knuckles brushed my shoulder before he strode out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

The back of my head thudded against the wall behind the tub.

I couldn't avoid him the way I'd been trying to.

And I didn't *want* to avoid him anymore.

Which left me with one option:

Embracing the bond.

The thought of it scared the hell out of me, though.



## *sixteen*

MADD

WHEN LOVENE finally emerged from the bathroom an hour later, her hair was wet, and she'd abandoned both her shoes and the fishnets she'd had on earlier. All she had on was her short dress.

The woman was so damn gorgeous, I could hardly think straight.

Letting her feed on me and watching her unravel only made me more certain.

I wanted her.

I *needed* her.

But she had to agree to be mine on her own. I couldn't pressure her into it or force her to make the decision, so I needed to be patient.

*"Fuck patience,"* my wolf growled in my mind.

*"Pretty sure I did that in the bathtub."*

*"And look where it got you. Your mind hasn't been this clear since we caught her scent."*

I wished the bastard was wrong.

*"She's proven she'll fight with me as much as she needs to,"* I said. *"I can't force her to do a damn thing."*

*“Convince her to run with me, then. I’ll talk to her wolf.”*

It was probably a bad idea, but what could it really hurt?

Before I opened my mouth to ask her, Lovene reached the kitchen and leaned over the countertop. “My wolf wants to explore. Can you point us in a good direction for a run?”

“We’ll join you,” I said.

She dipped her head in a nod. There wasn’t an ounce of surprise on her face. We hadn’t known each other long, but it had been long enough for her to figure out how I’d react to her walking away from me in any form.

I grabbed her a bottle of water from the fridge, handing it over before I led her out to the porch. She drank as we walked, then set the bottle down near the swing. We stripped together in silence, then walked down the porch steps.

As soon as our feet were on the dirt, our wolves took over. Even after a lifetime of shifting, it still felt good.

Vee’s wolf rubbed up against mine immediately. Her chest rumbled with a soft purr, and my wolf nuzzled her back, glad to have her close.

*“Your partner is being difficult,”* my wolf grumbled to Vee’s, though he was still snuggling with her.

*“Yours is being too demanding,”* hers countered. *“He needs to stop fighting with her.”*

*“He’s going to ease up,”* my wolf said.

I sure as hell hadn’t agreed to that, but he wasn’t wrong. If I had to relax to make peace with my mate, I’d figure out how to do it.

*“She needs to stop avoiding him,”* my wolf added.

*“Her boss told her to take as much time off as she needs to. I’ll make sure she doesn’t leave this cabin until they’ve figured their shit out.”*

I didn’t think Vee would be thrilled about her wolf sharing that information, but I was glad she did. I’d been fighting the urge to call the bakery’s owner and ask what it would take to get her a few weeks off work. I’d known it

would piss her off, so I'd resisted, but it hadn't been easy.

The wolves slipped into the forest together, and spent the rest of the day out in nature. They ran, played, and hunted together. The simplicity of it made me ache to find that with my female.

Not just the simplicity, but the peace.

Fuck, there was nothing I wouldn't do for a bit of that peace.

WHEN OUR WOLVES gave us control again, it had been dark for a few hours.

Vee's side bumped mine as we finished shifting, and I couldn't stop myself from grabbing her waist to keep her upright.

The woman didn't need my help, but I couldn't resist the urge to touch her anyway.

"Sorry," she murmured, pushing her wild bangs off her face before she stepped away.

"Don't apologize for touching me," I said, squeezing her hip lightly before I forced myself to release her.

She nodded, striding up to the porch's stairs.

I couldn't stop my eyes from following her figure. They travelled over her smooth, toned shoulders, down that gorgeous back, and to her small, tight ass.

My fists slowly clenched.

I could almost feel the soft flesh and muscle in my hands.

I wanted her again.

I *needed* her again.

And I always would.

She pulled her dress over her head. "How many bedrooms does this place

have?” Her eyebrow lifted when she saw me standing in the same place, my cock hard and my fists clenched. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I gritted out. “There are three bedrooms.”

My fists clenched tighter when I remembered that all three of them had beds. I’d loaned out the rooms when the pack had first started growing, and hadn’t bothered removing the furniture since.

“Great. I’ll claim one that doesn’t have your stuff in the closet. Thanks for the run.”

With that, she left me where I was.

I let out a long breath through my nose.

*“You’re being too demanding. She’s not leaving, so you need to give her freedom,”* my wolf said.

*“That’s easy for you to say when you’ve spent all day with her wolf.”*

*“She’ll come around.”*

I hoped he was right.

Trudging up to the stairs, I grabbed my pants off the floor but didn’t bother stepping into them. I’d put money on her already being hidden away.

I tossed my pants on the kitchen counter and picked up my phone, seeing the message from the shopping and delivery service I’d paid for.

Groceries would be on their way soon.

My gaze immediately lifted to the door she’d shut herself behind.

There wasn’t a chance in hell I’d be able to sleep while there was that much space between us, which meant I needed to distract myself.

Guess the cabin was getting a clean-up.

# *seventeen*

## LOVE

I STARED up at the ceiling, trying not to think about Madd, but failed with flying colors.

He hadn't slept since he got off work, and looked much more haggard and exhausted than I'd ever seen him before.

Yet I could hear the vacuum running outside the door to the room I'd claimed.

Which meant my stubbornness needed to come to an end.

We were going to get physically closer as I continued to drink his blood, whether we liked it or not. Whether that connection was all physical was up to us.

If there was no way to avoid the bond, I wanted more than physical closeness. I wanted us to be friends, like we'd talked about.

That had to start with me interrupting his vacuuming, and making him get some sleep.

I got out of bed, fluffed my wild hair, and straightened my dress

When I stepped out of the room, he lifted his gaze from the rug, and I forced myself to look at the man.

At the dark circles beneath his eyes.

At the tension in his shoulders.

At the wildness of his hair.

At the way he gripped the vacuum just a little too tightly.

“What are you doing?” I called to him over the sound of the vacuum. He’d stopped moving, but hadn’t turned the machine off, so the thing was probably going to leave a weird patch on the rug if he didn’t move it.

“Vacuuming,” he said, still not moving.

I walked up to him. Leaning over, I studied the machine. When I found the switch, I flipped it, and the noise finally died.

I straightened, and found him staring at me. His gaze was intense... and exhausted.

“Go sit down.” I gestured toward the couch, taking the vacuum’s handle from him.

“I—” he started to say.

My eyes narrowed at him, and he cut himself off.

With a jerk of his head, he made his way to the couch and sat down. Considering it was past dinner time, it was safe to assume he was hungry.

He watched me over his shoulder as I made my way into the kitchen and pulled some burritos from the freezer. I heated them up quickly, then carried the plate to the couch.

When I set it on Archer’s lap and sat down next to him, he glanced down at it with a crease between his brows before looking at me.

“You need to eat,” I said bluntly.

His eyes widened fractionally, and he didn’t hesitate to take a bite.

“Thank you for giving me space.” I turned in my seat, lifting a knee onto the cushion so I could look at him better. “I haven’t really had time to think any

of this through since the night we met, so I appreciate it. I don't like that you're clearly exhausted, and cleaning instead of sleeping, though."

He dipped his head, still chewing. "I can't sleep with a door between us, let alone two."

"Then you need to tell me that."

He grimaced. "Alright."

Shit.

I was already screwing the conversation up.

He took another bite of his food.

"What would the ideal relationship between mates look like to you?" I asked him.

We'd already talked about being friends, but I was pretty sure I'd instigated that conversation. I hadn't asked him what he wanted, as far as I could remember. And even if I had, it seemed safe to ask again, now that more time had passed.

The question seemed to surprise him.

A moment of silence passed before he swallowed his food and said, "The happiest mated couples I've seen are the ones who become friends. They have fun together. They turn to each other when things are easy, and do the same when life gets difficult. They communicate openly. That's what I've always hoped to have with my mate," Archer explained.

I looked at him again as he took another bite of his food.

He was so strong.

And intense.

It was hard to imagine him yearning for anything, let alone a woman or a friendship.

"You want your mate to be your lover too, right?" I asked.

“You, Vee. Yes, I want *you* to be my lover, as well as my friend.”

“Is that you, or the bond?”

His eyes narrowed, “The *bond* isn’t making me wonder whether you’re wearing anything under that shirt, Vee. That’s all me. The *bond* isn’t pushing me to shove the fabric up your thighs and bury myself inside you. Or to kneel in front of you and feast on you until I’ve had more of your pleasure on my tongue than any other man on this fucking planet.”

My body heated.

I pressed my knees together to hide the wetness between my thighs.

He didn’t know there’d never been any other man.

I needed to tell him that... but I had no idea how to do so without making it awkward.

“Work on your food,” I told him.

He took another bite, chewed, and swallowed.

My gaze followed his throat as it bobbed.

“It turns me on when you look at me like that,” he said in a low voice, setting his burrito down without a second glance.

“Like what?”

“Like you want me inside you.”

“I’ve been looking at you like that since the first night we met, Arch.”

His gaze heated. “Give me a chance to redo it, then.”

My first instinct was to say no.

To put more space between us.

But I wanted him, badly.

And even more than that, I wanted to figure out how to make things work between us.



So I said, “Alright. Show me what that night should’ve looked like.”

Madd abandoned his plate on the couch and grabbed me by the thighs, lifting me off the cushions. His lips crashed into mine as he crossed the room. A moment later, my back hit a wall.

Our tongues found each other, and I swear, it was like finding heaven.

His hands were hot on my legs, digging into my skin as he kissed me.

I kissed him back just as intensely, our lips and tongues warring. My fingers slid over the short, prickly hairs at the back of his head before they found the length at the top, and sank into the strands.

His hands moved over my ass hungrily, and he pulled his lips from mine. “Cut my lip with your fangs.”

“Past experience tells me no,” I breathed.

His tongue stroked mine again, distracting me for a minute. “That wasn’t a request, Vee. I want my do-over.”

I forced my fangs to descend.

His eyes flashed with heat.

When I captured his lip, cutting the sensitive skin, he rumbled with pleasure.

Madd’s hands slid up my thighs, finding my ass and squeezing. His fingers were smooth, and his grip was rough.

His mouth still moved with mine as he parted my legs further, rocking his erection against my bare, wet center. He was still wearing a pair of sweats, but I was too lost in the moment to care.

He slid my shirt up, revealing more of me. His chest rumbled in satisfaction as my body came into view, and his hands slid up to take my breasts the moment the fabric hit the floor.

When Madd’s thumbs dragged over my nipples, I couldn’t stop my moan.

“I wanted you on my tongue that night,” he said, his hands sliding back down my body. His thumbs dragged over my slick core, and I moved against them.

“But I knew I didn’t have the patience. I was going to fuck you with my mouth while our pleasure leaked from you after we climaxed.”

He circled my clit.

I rocked harder, more desperately. “Damn, you have a dirty mouth.”

“You have no fucking idea. The things I want to do to you, woman...”

“Prove it,” I breathed.

He had his pants halfway down his thighs and was driving into me a heartbeat later.

The back of my head hit the wall as he hit something partway through my channel, and I choked on a pained breath.

The size of him...

The thickness...

The heat...

He’d hurt me a little, but he felt incredible, too.

“Fucking hell,” he snarled, his hot, angry eyes colliding with mine. “You’re a virgin?”

“Maybe,” I managed.

“Don’t lie to me.” He started to ease out of me.

My grip on his hair tightened. “If you stop now, I won’t forgive you.”

He squeezed my ass hard, but stopped moving. “Give me the truth.”

My heart beat erratically. I was still trying to adjust to the feel of him inside me, but he deserved to know. “The clan didn’t let anyone touch us. They saw us as their property. If we’d had sex, it would’ve drained our energy, making us produce less blood.”

Madd growled, “Which clan?”

I still didn’t want to tell him.

But I wanted him to free Sienna... and I wanted to be safe from them.

“Garver,” I said.

“Thank you.” He captured my lips again, and my mind left the clan.

It left the past.

He thrust slowly into me.

There was another moment of pain—followed by hot, intense relief.

He bottomed out inside me, and I gasped into his mouth. My hands left his hair, and landed on his shoulders.

“Tell me how you feel,” he commanded, his body still while he waited for my answer.

“Incredible,” I managed, my lips brushing his while I spoke.

He pulled out and thrust into me again.

A strangled cry escaped me.

It was unreal.

*He* was unreal.

“Fuck, you’re wet for me.” His chest vibrated against mine. My fingers dug into his shoulders deeper.

“You want me just as much as I want you—ooh damn,” I moaned as he thrust again, exactly where I needed him.

“No, Vee.” He bottomed out in me again, and I cried out. “I want you so fucking much more.”

He thrust again.

And again.

With every movement, my cries grew louder, until I finally lost it.

He drove into me harder and faster, chasing my orgasm with his own. His cock throbbed, and he snarled as he flooded me with his release.

I dropped my face to his shoulder, my chest rising and falling rapidly as his chin landed on my head. He was still buried inside me, and his hands were still on my backside.

“How are you even fucking better than I imagined?” he rumbled.

“Must be a blood wolf thing.”

“Must be a *you* thing.” He adjusted his grip on my ass and stepped out of his pants.

He paused for a second, grabbing his phone. His fingers were on the screen for just a moment, before he dropped it and lifted me away from the wall. I was too lost in the moment to wonder why.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he strode across the cabin, his cock moving inside me with every step.

When he sat down on the edge of his bed, I couldn't stop myself from rolling my hips.

He slid his hands up the curve of my waist. “Bite me.”

“If I do that, we'll lose what little self-control we still possess.”

“Forget self-control. Feed, Vee.”

I wasn't stupid enough to refuse the offer.

My fangs were buried in his throat a heartbeat later.

His blood flooded my mouth, and the taste of him was so damn erotic, my brain stopped functioning altogether. My hips rolled, my body arching against his.

He managed to stay where he was for all of a minute while I drank from him, before my venom stole his control entirely.

With a growl, he rolled us over, pinning my back to the mattress. My legs wrapped around his ass as he thrust into me, and I continued draining him, lost in the lust.

He fucked me.

I fucked him.

And soon enough, I let go of his throat with a gasp while he snarled, filling me with his release again.

I couldn't help my groan when he pulled out of me far too soon—or my curse when he kneeled between my thighs and dragged his tongue over my clit.

The next orgasm hit hard.

So did the one that followed.

I have no idea how much time had passed when I grabbed him by his hair and dragged him back up the bed so I could take his cock again, but one thing was for sure:

A mate bond was already looking a hell of a lot better than it had a few hours earlier.

# *eighteen*

LOVE

I ENDED up sprawled over Madd's chest in his bed when we were done. His cock was still buried inside me, but the thick pressure of it felt too good for either of us to move.

He stroked my back lightly as I closed my eyes, relaxing in his embrace.

I didn't think I'd ever felt that content. Definitely not with the clan. Or while Tori and I were starving together.

The feeling was surreal.

My wolf was purring so loudly that my chest rumbled lightly, nonstop. Madd's was doing the same, so I didn't think it was anything to worry about.

It only took a few minutes for him to fall asleep, the weight of his hand resting in the middle of my back. After so many hours awake, it didn't surprise me at all that he had finally crashed.

I stayed in his arms for a while. Though I was tired after the day of drama and running, his blood had woken me up.

I was a little hungry for food—and I kind of wanted to bake.

So... maybe I could make something for him.

I had no idea what his favorite foods were, though. Other than steak and

potatoes, but he cooked that all the time.

The ding of a phone in the other room distracted me from my brainstorming session. It wasn't mine, so it had to be Madd's.

Curiosity got me moving.

His hand pressed harder against my lower back when I moved, and he grunted as I slid free of his erection. Somehow, he stayed asleep.

I bit my lip to fight a grin when I had to peel myself off him to get free. I lost the fight when I tugged the blanket over him and saw how it had tented over his cock.

When he wasn't so exhausted, the sex would be even better.

That thought made me warm, but I ignored it, snagging a clean tee from his closet and tugging it over myself before I headed out to find his phone.

It dinged again when I was on the way to the kitchen, and I veered to the side when I realized the sound had come from his pants, which were on the floor.

It only took me a second to grab it off the top of his pants, and I glanced down at the screen.

There were a few messages and a missed call from Bauther, but a text from a grocery delivery service was on the top.

GROCERIES

Last chance to add more items! Order closes in thirty minutes.

Huh.

He must've put in an order.

BAUTHER

How's it going? I heard you abducted your mate.

I couldn't stop another grin. Tori must've been talking to the other women in the pack, which made me feel better about abandoning her.

After a moment's consideration, I hit the missed call button, and the phone called Bauther back without requiring a passcode.

He picked up on the second ring. “Hey, Alpha.”

“Hey, yourself.”

Bauther chuckled. “Hi, Love. Where’s Madd?”

“Sleeping. I need something. Well, two somethings.”

He didn’t answer, so I went on.

“I need a list of his favorite foods, and the passcode to his phone.”

There was another beat of silence.

“I have his keys right here,” I added. Though it was a lie, he’d promised to give them to me, and I could probably find them without much effort. “If I wanted to get away from him, I would just leave.”

Bauther grunted. “Alright. The code is the date the pack started—December 1<sup>st</sup>. I’ll send the list to your phone. What’s your number?”

I rattled it off. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He paused a moment, then added, “Tori seems to be getting along well with the pack. They like her a lot, and added her to the group texts already. They want to add you too.”

He surprised me with that.

Though I’d known Tori was fitting in well, I hadn’t expected an invitation to do the same. I guessed it made sense, given that I was mated to their alpha, but...

I don’t know.

It still surprised me for some reason.

“I’m glad. Is she getting enough blood?”

“Every unmated male in the pack has brought her multiple blood bags, so I’m sure she’s set.”

“Including you?” I teased.



He chuckled. “Yes, including me.”

“Well, good luck. And send the list quickly, if you can.”

“Will do. Thanks for asking.”

“Mmhm. See ya.” I hung up without letting the conversation go on any longer, and pulled up the app Madd had used to order groceries. A glance at the clock told me I only had twenty minutes to add things, so I headed to my room to grab my phone.

The list came through as I picked it up.

BAUTHER

Here’s what I came up with off the top of my head. If you need more, I can think harder.

Jelly donuts

Steak & potatoes

Fudge

S’mores

I blinked down at the list.

It was so random, and *human*.

How could I not like a guy who liked jelly donuts, steak and potatoes, fudge, and s’mores? Especially when you paired his random, quirky likes with his looks and intensity?

It only took a minute to find a jelly donut recipe with a ton of reviews on the internet, so I added the ingredients to Madd’s order, as well as the stuff I’d need for fudge and s’mores.

I got the order’s additions confirmed, then wandered around the cabin, finally exploring.

It wasn’t huge, but it wasn’t small either. *Comfortable* described it perfectly. Not only were the sparse decorations comfortable, but the size was too. Nothing was too small, or too tight.

The place was spotless, so I didn’t bother looking for any chores to take on.

And the groceries wouldn't get there until the morning, so I had more than enough time for... something.

I headed outside to sit on the swing I'd noticed on the porch.

Madd's phone buzzed while I pushed the swing slowly with my feet, and I looked down at the screen.

EDISON

12 pm territory check is done. Land is secure.

I clicked on the message, and ended up in a group chat labeled "Enforcers".

Another person I didn't know messaged.

SMITH

None of our eyes or ears have reported news about vampires. I'll check in again at midnight.

BAUTHER

I got Love's number. Adding her to the groups.

He texted my contact into the group, and multiple people liked the message.

SMITH

Just added her to the women's groups. Thanks!

I looked down when my phone vibrated.

I'd been added to two different women's group chats. One was labeled "Enforcers <3", and the other was called "Wildwood Bitches" with a wolf emoji next to it.

I couldn't bite back my snort.

Smith must've been a woman, since she'd added me to those two messages.

My phone vibrated a few more times as they added me to three more group chats.

It seemed like an excessive number of message threads, but the pack *was* supposed to be like a massive family.

I left my phone on the swing next to me, and clicked around on Madd's.

I immediately found a new text I hadn't noticed earlier, from a guy named Vex. When I clicked on the message and skimmed the words, my stomach clenched.

Madd had texted him earlier, after I told him the name of the clan that had created us.

MADD

Garver clan is responsible. Take them out. Make sure you find and protect Sienna.

VEX

Getting a team together now. Already surrounding them in Wildwood, just prepping the team to hit their HQ. I'll let you know when they go in.

He hadn't messaged since then, so I didn't think they'd taken action yet.

Though my stomach was still clenched, I felt...

Relieved.

Madd was doing exactly what I would've expected him to. Protecting me. I didn't know who Vex was, but I'd known when I gave Madd the clan's name that he was going to attack them.

And rescue Sienna.

It caught me off guard that he'd done it so quickly, but it didn't *surprise* me. If anything, it fit what I knew of him perfectly. He wasn't the kind of guy who sat on information or waited after he'd decided to do something.

But I was still nervous.

I definitely wouldn't be able to sleep until I heard back from Vex about the teams going in, or how it went after they did.

Particularly as far as Sienna's safety was concerned.

With nothing else to do to occupy my mind while I waited, I went back to poking around on Madd's phone.

Despite my anxiety, I was curious when it came to his messages.

We were mates, but I'd only seen how he was around me. His constant

intensity. His focus and determination. What if he was different, around his pack?

What if he was happier around them?

I wanted to know.

But the more I read (and snooped), the more settled I felt.

Madd gave short, unemotional answers to every message he received. He never tried to have a long or playful conversation over text. He didn't use emojis, gifs, or anything else.

Except with me.

He'd kept our conversations going when I tried to let them end.

He used gifs and emojis.

He *tried*.

And that made me feel... well... *desirable*.

It made me believe him more, too.

It was one thing for him to say he was serious about me, but it was something entirely different to see that he tried with me in ways he didn't with anyone else. Even when I scrolled back a few *years* in his texts, the conversations were all the same.

Short.

Unemotional.

Lacking effort.

The more I read, the more curious I became.

Who was Madd, really? What was he like? How was he different with me?

The only way to find out was to talk to him, to get to know him.

I CONTINUED SNOOPING on his phone until I was completely sold

that I'd pinned down the way he acted around other people.

Serious.

Aloof.

A bit grumpy.

He kept everyone at a distance.

Then, I finally pulled up the pictures he'd mentioned of him in the shoe store, when he was buying my apology sneakers.

My lips curved upward when I saw the thick crease between his brows as he held one shoe up beside another.

When I found a video, I didn't hesitate before hitting the play button.

It was a solid twenty minutes of Madd walking around the store, comparing shoes. As ridiculous as it was, my eyes were glued to the screen the whole time.

He wasn't just grabbing the first pair he saw—he was thinking about them. Debating them inwardly.

How could he get more thoughtful than that?

I looked back through the social media stalker's page, checking out more pictures and videos of Madd through the years.

Sure enough, my theory about his personality checked out.

He looked irritated or downright angry in every picture and video.

I didn't find one picture of him smiling, or otherwise happy in any way. And while he didn't smile *often* with me, he did smile from time to time.

Something told me the smiles would be more frequent if I wasn't always pushing him away or avoiding him, too.

Deciding I would bug him until he told me his whole life story, the way he'd gotten mine out of me, I pulled up my texts with Tori.

I hear you have a huge stash of blood from all of the pack's most eligible bachelors

TORI

LOL

It's true, but you already knew that

Who told you?

ME

Bauther

I asked him for a list of Madd's favorite foods, and he updated me about you

TORI

Cute that he thinks he needs to update you

ME

Mmhm

How's his blood taste?

TORI

I'll let you know if I ever find it in my many freezers

We should've hooked you up with Madd months ago

ME

Ha ha.

TORI

His favorite foods?

ME

I've had enough avoidance. Now, I'm trying with him

TORI

DAMN. Look out, Archer Madden. You're about to lose your heart to my girl.

ME

Forget who you're talking to for a minute there?

TORI

Nah, just got carried away

But you know I'm happy for you. His stubbornness will work well with yours

ME

My wolf says something similar

TORI

That you're both alphas?

ME

Perhaps

TORI

My wolf said that the first time she saw you two together

ME

Has your wolf shown interest in any of the blood bags?

TORI

Thankfully, no. You'll know if she does, because I'll be out of this city before you realize what's happened.

ME

LOL

Yeah, right

If running was a possibility, we would've been gone months ago.

TORI

Shh. Let me enjoy lying to myself.

ME

Alright. You'd be gone quickly.

TORI

Exactly.

ME

I told him the clan's name earlier. He sent a message immediately to someone, telling him to take them down and rescue Sienna. The guy hasn't messaged about sending his team in yet, but I'm watching closely

TORI

Finally

I've been worried about her.

ME

Me too. I should've told him sooner.

TORI

You were scared of your situation too, and it hasn't been that long.

ME

I still feel bad.

TORI

They won't hurt her. With us gone, she's all they have left.

ME

I know. Still.

TORI

Stop worrying. She'll understand. She made her choice.

ME

With more time, we could've talked her into going with us.

TORI

The past is in the past, Love. Leave it there.

My eyes lingered on her messages.

She was right.

I needed to focus on the present.

ME

I'll update you when I hear back from Vex.

She gave me a thumbs-up.

I stared out at the darkness for a few minutes, and finally admitted to myself that while I couldn't sleep, I wanted to be close to Madd.

So, I carried both of our phones back into the cabin, and to his bedroom.

When I slipped into bed beside him, he pulled my back flush against his front. His erection wedged between my thighs, but it didn't turn me on. It just relaxed me a little.

I felt safe with him, after all.

I spent the next few hours wasting time on Pinterest, snuggled up with Madd and waiting to hear back from Vex. Sleeping was still far out of the realm of possibilities.

But he finally messaged at 5 AM.

VEX

Both teams going in now. Stay tuned.

My stomach clenched harder.

My whole body tensed.



The next half an hour was the longest of my life, before he finally messaged again.

VEX

Vamps in Wildwood are all secured. Half the clan's HQ is too. They have the leaders, so it's just a matter of time before they find Sienna. I'll let you know when it's done.

The next hour was even longer than the thirty minutes prior.

When the next text came in, I couldn't stop my audible sigh of relief.

VEX

The team has her. They're putting her on a plane to Wildwood as we speak. I'll make sure the clan's leaders suffer before they're killed. The rest of the vamps will be headed to prison.

There was a supernatural prison deep in the mountains, run by dragons. Vampires died slowly and painfully there. Maybe I should've felt bad that the clan was going to be experiencing that, but I didn't.

I was just glad I'd never have to see them again.

"You okay?" Madd murmured, his fingers soft on my face as he pulled my hair back lightly.

"I'm good. Vex found Sienna."

He lifted his head, his gaze growing alert quickly as he took his phone from my hand. He looked over the messages quickly, before relaxing a bit.

"Good. I'm glad she's safe." His lips brushed my cheek. "You should've told me you were up and waiting to hear back. I would've distracted you."

"You needed to sleep."

He captured my mouth with his, kissing me slowly. I lost myself in the sensations for a few minutes before I pulled away. "We need to get back to Wildwood. I want to be there when she gets there."

"Of course." His lips brushed mine again in one last, soft kiss before we got out of bed.

I put on my clothes from the day before, and he got dressed too. There was a

knock on the door while we grabbed our shoes, and a glance at the time told me it was our groceries.

“I got the code to your phone from Bauther and added some things to your grocery order. It’s supposed to be a surprise, so don’t look closely at anything,” I told him, as I pulled the front door open.

His hands caught my hips lightly, stopping me in the doorway. “The groceries are *ours*. And if you’d asked me for the code to my phone, I would’ve given it to you myself.”

“Even if I was going to snoop?”

“I have nothing to hide. Go ahead.” His lips brushed the side of my neck, and he squeezed my waist lightly before releasing me and stepping past me.

I definitely hadn’t expected his approval of my snooping.

But it didn’t surprise me at all when he grabbed all of the grocery bags before I had the chance, loading them into the truck without letting me help at all.

We were on the road a few minutes later, flying toward Wildwood.

# *nineteen*

## LOVE

WE DIDN'T HAVE time to pick Tori up on the way to Wildwood's airport from the cabin, so we went straight there.

Thanks to Madd's connections, we were outside waiting for her when her plane landed. I squeezed his hand tightly, and he didn't say a word about my death-grip.

She stepped out of the plane after a few huge, inked-up werewolf guys.

My stomach clenched harder when I saw her.

Her light skin was paler than usual.

There were dark circles under her worried brown eyes.

She was thinner than she'd been the last time I saw her.

Her straight blonde hair fell kinked and tangled to the top of her ribs.

All she had on was a pair of loose, threadbare gray leggings, and a light pink sweater with blood stains on it.

I released Madd's hand and rushed toward her. The big guys in front of her stepped out of my way, their gazes lifting to the mate I'd left behind me, and I crashed into Sienna hard.

She hugged me tightly, and I squeezed her even tighter.

“I should’ve left with you,” she whispered. “Thank you for sending them after me.”

“I should’ve talked you into leaving with us,” I said, my eyes stinging.

“It’s not your fault.” Her tears hit my shoulders.

We held onto each other tightly for another minute before we finally released each other. Her gaze immediately landed on someone behind me, and her eyes widened.

I glanced over my shoulder, relaxing when I saw Madd standing there, his hands in his pockets.

He was trying to look friendly, or relaxed at the very least. He really was. He just had one of those faces where if you didn’t know him well, he always looked like he was thinking about killing you.

“Sienna, this is Archer Madden. My mate.” I grabbed her hand, squeezing lightly. “He’s the alpha of the Wildwood pack—and the one who sent the other guys to rescue you.”

“Well, thank you,” she said, the uneasiness in her voice and face very clear.

“Of course.” Madd’s voice was smooth.

I pulled Sienna closer to my side, holding on to her. Though she was a few inches taller than me, she’d lost enough weight in the time we’d been apart that I was worried she’d blow away in the wind.

We made our way out of the airport, and to Madd’s truck. On the way to the pack’s neighborhood, I sat in the back with her and gave her a rundown of everything that had happened while we’d been apart.

By the time we reached Tori’s house, she seemed slightly more comfortable. Not a lot—but a little.

Enough that I knew she would bounce back from everything that had happened. The three of us were nothing, if not survivors.

THE STRONG SCENT of citrus made my eyes water as soon as I crossed the threshold of Tori's place. I waved my hand in front of my face, trying to diffuse the smell, to no avail.

"Holy shit," Sienna coughed, mirroring my motions.

"She really doesn't want to end up mated," I said, blinking quickly as we continued moving.

"No, she doesn't," Tori called back. She was in the entryway a moment later, throwing her arms around Sienna and hugging her just as tightly as I had. "Tell us everything," she ordered, pulling food from her fridge and making a massive plate for Sienna.

Madd sat down in one of the kitchen's barstools, pulling me with him as she launched into the story about what had happened since Tori and I left. He rested his chin on top of my head, and having his arms around my middle made me feel secure despite the anxiety of knowing what one of my best friends had suffered through.

When Tori started telling her side of our story, my body slowly relaxed.

The exhaustion of my sleepless night finally started to set in.

"I think Love's ready for bed," Tori remarked, after a while. I shook my head, trying to wake myself up.

"Not tired at all," I mumbled.

"Get out of here," she said, waving us toward the front door. Madd stood smoothly, setting me on my feet and slipping an arm around my waist to steady me when I wobbled.

Sienna's stomach growled loudly while she ate, and she grimaced.

She needed blood.

"My freezers are full, so I'll hook you up. Love and the alpha can show themselves out," Tori declared. She led Sienna toward the door that went into her garage, where I knew she had two extra freezers. Both were courtesy of some guys who had brought her bags of their blood.

They were all hoping she'd end up mated to one of them.

We got back in the truck and drove past a few people coming and going into the forest on our way home.

Madd rolled the windows down when the first of them tossed a greeting our way.

The second group waved. The third grinned and nodded at us.

A woman I recognized as the bartender from the night we met—Jerri—smiled when she saw us. She continued on her way, but called out, “Congrats on your mating, Alphas!”

The title woke me up a bit more.

Madd squeezed my leg lightly.

WE MADE IT HOME QUICKLY. I could hardly believe I'd started to see it as my home, but I had.

I inhaled deeply as I stepped inside. Madd was behind me with the groceries, which he'd refused to let me help with again.

It even smelled like home. Like me, Madd, and... comfort, somehow.

His lips brushed my cheek on his way to the kitchen with the bags. We put them away together quickly, though he didn't touch the bags until I'd pulled out everything I didn't want him to see.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep my baking-for-him plan a secret much longer, but I'd do my best.

There was a knock at the door as we finished up. Madd opened it a moment later, and when I didn't hear him greet anyone, I looked over my shoulder.

My eyebrows lifted when I found him carrying a huge aluminum dish of food off the porch.

“Your pack is pretty great,” I admitted.

“*Our* pack is,” he agreed. “Though I'd rather be in bed with you than have

dinner right now.”

My smile widened. “Sleeping, right?”

His eyes slowly moved down my body before he made a noise of agreement. “Sleeping.”

When I laughed, his expression softened.

I grabbed forks and knives, then joined him at the table. “What did they leave us?”

He took the seat beside mine and peeled the aluminum foil off the dish.

My stomach growled when I saw the food.

Chicken, rice, and vegetables, bathing in sauce.

Yummm.

“I think I’m in love with *our* pack,” I said, taking a set of utensils and digging in. It was so good, I couldn’t stop my groan with the first bite.

He took a bite, noticeably lacking a groan. The way he ate told me he liked it too, though.

And I knew how to make him groan, if I wanted to.

“I’m not sure I’ll fit in,” I admitted, between bites. “I’ve never been in a pack before.

“You’re mated to me. They’ll like you by default.”

I shot him a dirty look.

He set his fork down and cupped my face, holding me so my eyes remained on his. “You’re lively, determined, and playful. You’re *fun*, Vee. They’ll want to like you because you’re mine—but even if you weren’t, you’d find a place with us. They’ll like you because of who you are.”

My throat swelled.

I dipped my head.

Compliments and I... well, we weren't acquainted. Tori, Sienna, and I mostly functioned based on sarcasm and shared trauma. Everyone else I interacted with was either a coworker at the bakery or a member of the clan that had tortured and used me.

He finally released my cheek. "You smell so damn good right now, it's driving me insane."

A laugh escaped me at the change of subject. "How are you horny after the way the day has gone?"

"Guess I've still got too many years of loneliness to fuck my way through."

"Loneliness?" I took another bite of the food, but tilted my head slightly.

He took another bite too.

I waited while he chewed before he finally answered.

"The pack eased the pain of my loneliness, but it didn't erase it. My wolf wanted his mate. I wanted to find and hold my female. Sleeping alone year after year, decade after decade, felt like hell."

I studied him for a long moment.

He went back to the food.

Obviously, my avoidance plan had worked too well despite its failure.

I'd distracted myself too thoroughly from the man fate had paired me with.

He didn't care that I was a blood wolf.

He just... wanted me.

And I wanted him too.

Maybe even more than anything.

But I also wanted to know his story. Who he was, and what he'd been through.

"I'm sorry you had to suffer so long," I finally said.



“You were worth the pain.”

“I’ll do my best to make that true.”

His eyes narrowed at me.

He set his utensils down.

And a moment later, the gigantic, muscular alpha was on the kitchen floor.

Parting my legs.

Dragging my ass to the edge of the chair.

Pulling my panties down.

And licking my clit.

I dropped my fork and knife.

“Care to tell me again you aren’t worth it?” he growled between my thighs.

I moaned when his tongue dragged over my clit again.

And again.

And again.

“Nope,” I managed.

“This is what I’ve wanted. *You* are what I’ve wanted, Vee. You’re mine. Got it?”

His tongue dragged roughly over me again, before he waited.

“I’m yours.”

His chest rumbled in satisfaction, and he parted my legs further.

My fingers tangled in his hair as he worked me with his tongue and fingers, dragging me to the edge way too fast. When I shattered on his mouth, he rumbled again, licking every drop of my pleasure.

Finally, he kissed the inside of my thigh.

Then he pulled my dress back down to cover me, and slid out from beneath the table.

His hand landed on my leg as he sat back down beside me, scooting his chair closer.

When he took another bite, I was still dazed.

He loaded my fork and handed it to me, so after a moment, I obediently took that bite too.

It took me a few minutes to find my way back to reality, especially with him massaging my bare thigh while we ate.

When I did, my mind settled on the fact that he hadn't asked for anything from me when he got me off.

The thought lingered.

As it did, I was forced to accept another fact.

A more difficult one.

He wasn't getting nearly as much from our relationship as I was.

I wasn't *giving him* nearly as much.

I'd already taken steps to fix the gap by having that conversation on his couch, along with the sex, and the food I was planning on making. But overall, he was still getting a lot less than me.

And honestly?

I wanted to change that.

Possibilities rolled through my mind as we ate. Many, many possibilities.

I waited until we were both slowing before bringing any of them up, though.

"How do you feel about me cutting my hours at the bakery down when everything with the clan is settled?" I asked him, as he lifted his fork to his mouth.

It halted abruptly at his lips.

“Most of the other bakers work four ten hour shifts a week. A few of them do five eights. I’m sure my boss would agree with three twelves, considering my current schedule. We could try to line my work days up with yours at the station, too, if you think it would be possible.”

He lowered his fork slowly back to the dish, then turned in his chair so he could face me more. His hand was still on my thigh—and I hoped it would stay there.

“I would love that, Vee.”

My shoulders relaxed a bit.

I’d known he would be all over the idea, but it still felt good to hear him confirm it.

“I have my schedule a few months in advance, so we should be able to line them up.”

“Think of all the free time we’ll have,” I mused, turning to face him too. Our knees knocked, but neither of us moved away. “We could hike, let our wolves run, watch movies together, have morning sex on the days we don’t work...”

*“I love that idea,”* my wolf purred.

“That sounds incredible. I particularly like the last idea.” Madd’s eyes gleamed.

I nodded, biting my lip. “And if we’re both sure, there’s no reason not to seal the bond.”

“Are you serious?” His gaze was intense, sliding over my face.

“I wouldn’t joke about that, Arch.”

“Well I’m ready to seal the bond at any given moment. The sooner we make it permanent, the better.”

My body warmed.

And I made my final effort to even things out between us as I slipped off my chair, kneeling in front of Madd. “What are you—” he cut himself off when I

slid my hand over his erection through his shorts.

He swore when I freed him.

His language grew more colorful when I leaned forward and wrapped my lips around him.

“Fucking hell,” he all but snarled, as I bobbed over his length. I didn’t know what I was doing, but the idea was pretty simple. And I figured he’d tell me if I did something wrong.

His hands tangled in my waves, gripping almost painfully hard as I took him deeper. “You look so fucking good with my cock in your mouth. I’m not going to last.”

I hummed at his compliment, and he swore violently, his hips jerking as he lost control in my mouth.

His curses filled the air as he came down from the high, still holding my hair for dear life. “I was way too fucking fast,” he finally growled, as I slid my mouth off him.

“I thought it was perfect,” I said dragging my tongue up the underside of him just to watch him jerk and hear him curse again. “I like it when you’re at my mercy.”

“I’m always at your mercy, woman.”

“Yeah, right.” I eased myself to my feet, before I sat down on his lap.

His hands released my hair, wrapping around my ass instead. “It’s true. You tell me to jump, I ask how high.”

“I told you to leave, and you dragged me off to your cabin,” I countered.

“Actually, you told me you were avoiding me.”

“Semantics.”

“You’re stuck with me, Vee. Unless you’re telling me to walk away, I’ll do anything for you.” He squeezed my ass.

“Even fuck me in this chair?”

His eyes gleamed wickedly. “Difficult one.” He captured my mouth, lining us up as he kissed me hard and fast.

I sank down on him, moaning into his mouth as I took him inside me.

Maybe a mate was exactly what I’d needed.

Maybe I just hadn’t ever had the chance to realize it until it hit me in the face...

Or threw me in jail.

# *twenty*

LOVE

WE FINISHED EATING LAZILY after we were done, with me sitting on Madd's lap. My panties were still abandoned on the floor, but I didn't care.

Given the way Madd kept sliding his hand over my slick core every minute or two, I was pretty sure he would take them right back off if I tried to put them on.

"Are you always hard?" I asked him, curious.

"Since I met you, it's been pretty much constant."

"You weren't horny before?"

"I was never interested in sex with a woman who wasn't my mate."

"But you weren't a virgin." I leaned back against him.

His fingers slid over my clit again, teasing me slowly. "I was as horny as most teenage boys are, back then. A few attempts proved I was uninterested in a girl I knew wasn't mine. I've met a few who smelled nice since then, and thought they might be my mate, so I had sex with them."

"And?"

"And my wolf realized he wasn't interested right around the time I got my dick wet. I pulled out, got the woman off with my fingers, and left."

My eyebrows shot upward. “So you haven’t had an orgasm with a woman since you were a teenager?”

“I’ve never had an orgasm with a woman until we were in the bathtub together, actually.”

Shit.

“Seriously?”

“Mmhm.” His lips brushed the side of my throat.

“I’m not sure if I should apologize or congratulate you.”

He chuckled. “Let me touch you instead.” He stroked my clit again, using the slickness of our releases.

It felt ridiculously good.

“Touch me in apology, or congratulations?”

“I don’t give a damn.” He circled my clit slowly. “You feel so fucking good.”

“So do you.”

He put a little more pressure on my clit, and I grabbed his arm, holding tightly as he touched me. My eyes closed, my hips moving with him.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this,” he rumbled, his finger still moving lightly.

It was perfect.

Insanely, intensely perfect.

“Don’t think I want to know,” I managed.

His chuckle vibrated his chest against my back.

“I found pictures of you online. You never smiled for them,” I said.

“I wasn’t interested in them.”

“But you’re interested in me?”

“Really fucking interested.” Madd pressed harder on my clit, and I swore, my body jerking as I chased the pleasure. One of his thick fingers slid inside me, and I lost control.

My cries filled the air as I climaxed hard, his hand still on me and in me. My chest rose and fell rapidly while my pleasure faded, but he was still touching me. “You shouldn’t be so damn good at that.”

His lips brushed my throat with a quick, light kiss. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It is one.” I turned around, straddling him again. His hands landed on my ass as he moved me, setting my slit against the length of his erection.

His eyes burned into me. “I wasn’t done with you.”

“I didn’t ask if you were.” I lifted his hands to my hair. “If you get to be in control sometimes, I do too. Let me get us both off,” I said, moving my hips so the head of his cock lined up with my opening.

A vein in his forehead bulged, and his fingers dug into my hair roughly. “It’s hard for me to let go.”

“I noticed.” I moved my hips, taking a few inches of him, and his jaw clenched. “Feel good?”

“You have no idea.” His voice was strained. “I want you bare.”

“I’m in charge,” I warned him, but I peeled my dress over my head, followed by my bra.

His shirt disappeared next.

Wanting to feel more of him, I leaned down so my bare chest met his, and slipped my tongue into his mouth.

His grip on my hair tightened.

I took the rest of his cock slowly as we kissed, our mouths warring while I sank down on him. He groaned in my mouth when he finally hit the back of my channel—and I moaned into his when I swiveled my hips, using him exactly how I wanted to.



He moved with me, lightly, and I didn't try to stop him. It felt too damn good—and I was already getting close to the edge, with him buried inside me like he was.

Soon enough, we were losing control together. His snarl melded with my cry as we found our pleasure, and I collapsed on his chest to catch my breath.

“Think you can get used to that?” I asked him, still breathless. “Letting me take over sometimes?”

“If it always ends like this, I'll figure it out.” He tugged lightly on my hair. “I didn't realize how intensely I'd love your body. It's unreal.”

“Well, I *am* perfect,” I mumbled. “Worst parts of a vamp and worst parts of a wolf all in one.”

“The worst parts of a vampire wouldn't feel this good.” He thrust his hips lightly, earning a soft laugh from me. “And I happen to like both your hunger, and your wolf.”

“I'm just glad you don't want to use me as your personal blood bag,” I admitted. “It's hard to move on from a lifetime of that.”

“My past is too full of shit to use someone that way,” he said. “Especially my mate.”

“What do you mean? I thought your past was full of offering wolf shifters a home.”

He was silent for a moment.

A long moment.

He released my hair, sliding his hands down to my ass. “I couldn't save my family. During the war, I led one of the armies. One of the packs. My family was in my army. My parents, both of my brothers, and my sister. I didn't bother trying to talk them into sitting out of the fight. They wouldn't have listened. We were on the front lines the first time the humans turned their bombs on us. All of us were hit, but I survived, just barely. They didn't. I couldn't save them.”

Shit. “I'm sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m just glad you’re here with me now. And I hope you know I’ll protect our family, no matter the cost. I won’t lose the people I love again.”

My throat swelled. “I know.”

“I created the pack after losing them, but it wasn’t intentional. I retreated and built my cabin to grieve on my own, after the war ended. Others who survived followed me. More followed them. We were all in pain, and we couldn’t turn each other away. So the numbers grew, and we were forced to relocate to town. Wildwood wasn’t built on joy—it was built on shared grief.”

“Maybe I belong here after all, then.”

“Of course you do. You’re mine.” He captured my hand off his shoulder and lifted it to his lips, brushing a kiss to my knuckles.

“There’s the possessiveness,” I teased lightly.

“There will always be plenty of it.”

“That, I don’t struggle to believe.”

His lips curved upward again.

“So, how do we seal the bond?” I asked.

His gaze warmed. “It’s as simple as one of us invoking the magic, and the other agreeing to the bond. There’s a Latin word that does it. *Aeternum*. It means forever.”

“That simple, huh?”

“Mmhm.” He kissed my knuckles again.

“Then *Aeternum*, Arch. I’m yours, and you’re mine.”

His eyes grew molten. “I’ll spend the rest of our eternity doing everything I can to make you happy. *Aeternum*, Vee.”

The magic of the bond washed over me.

It wasn't sharp, or painful.

It was soft.

Intimate.

Strong.

Tears stung my eyes as I felt something stretch between us. Something powerful, and permanent.

Madd kissed me slowly.

His erection was rock-hard inside me, but I wasn't horny. And after he released my lips, I noticed that he still looked tired.

"You need more sleep," I said, my fingers brushing lightly through his hair.

"So do you."

"Take me to bed then, Mate." I flashed him a smile.

There were emotions in his eyes that I couldn't read. A lifetime's worth.

He stood, scooping me into his arms. A surprised laugh escaped me as he grinned down at me, a new light in his eyes. "My pleasure."

## *twenty-one*

MADD

RATHER THAN TAKING Lovene to bed, I carried her to the bathroom. She leaned against me, closing her eyes, and more emotions swelled within me.

Pride.

Gratitude.

Hope.

Joy.

I had no idea what to do with those emotions, but I wouldn't trade them for anything.

When the water was warm, I plugged the drain. We relaxed as the tub filled, her body still pressed up against mine.

"I feel like I haven't discovered the depths of your horniness yet," Lovene murmured, still curled up against my chest.

I chuckled. "You haven't."

"One of these days, we'll both have enough sleep and food in us to explore it."

“Sooner rather than later, I hope.”

“Me too.”

I leaned my head against the wall, still so damn glad to have her in my arms, and scratched her back lightly.

She sighed contently as I continued.

“You feel too nice,” she mumbled.

“So do you.” I couldn’t stop myself from kissing her forehead.

We washed up soon enough, and dried off before we tucked ourselves in bed.

Lovene pushed my chest lightly, so I rolled to my back at her soft command. When she slid on top of me, burying her face against my neck again, my body relaxed more completely than I’d imagined it could.

My female was safe, and in my arms.

She was *mine*. Permanently.

With an unbreakable bond that I wouldn’t trade for any fucking thing in the world.

“*I chose the perfect mate for us,*” my wolf rumbled.

“*You did,*” I said, with no grounds to protest.

I hadn’t dared imagine a life where I was mated and happy...

But now that I had it, I’d never let it go.

Never let *her* go.

# *twenty-two*

LOVE

I WOKE up in Madd's arms.

It felt really damn good.

He was still asleep when I slipped out of bed to use the facilities. When I was done, I studied him.

Yep, still unconscious.

Which meant I could finally bake for him.

Jelly donut time.

I didn't bother getting dressed before I closed the door quietly and set to work in the kitchen. The recipe was fairly simple, and I had fun with it.

Madd came shuffling out of the bedroom, completely naked and definitely hard, just as I finished filling the first batch.

He inhaled deeply. "I'm going to have wet dreams of you making donuts for me after this."

I laughed. "You could just fuck me instead."

His hot gaze slid down my body.

The man never got tired of checking me out, and I was 1000% on board with

it.

“Deal,” he said, finally crossing the kitchen to take a donut.

He groaned when he bit into it, and a moment later, dragged me into his arms.

I laughed again when my back met his front. He held me to his chest while he polished off three more filled donuts in the blink of an eye—and plucked the one I’d been working on from my hand.

“That one’s not filled,” I protested.

“*You’re* not filled.” He finished off the whole thing anyway.

I couldn’t hold back my snort, and when I looked over my shoulder, found his lips curved in a grin.

Damn, he was gorgeous when he smiled.

And he was mine.

*Forever.*

It was probably a good thing he usually looked angry. Otherwise, most of the world’s women would’ve melted into puddles of desperate, desperate lust.

“I’m not,” I agreed, grabbing my piping bag of jelly.

“I can fix that.” Madd gripped my waist and squeezed lightly. “Fuck, it doesn’t get sexier than you baking for me in the nude.”

I wiggled my ass against his erection, and he didn’t hesitate to slide his hand between my thighs.

When he dragged a finger through my folds, I set my piping bag down.

“Always so wet for me,” he growled, walking me closer to the cabinets.

My hands sprawled out over the stone countertop as he stroked me again.

His cock was against my slit a moment later, and he lifted my feet off the ground so he could fill me.

I sucked in a breath as he bottomed out inside me, and moaned when his hand worked my clit while he moved.

The motion was rough, but not painful, and I found myself nearing the edge quickly. My cries filled the air soon enough, and he lost it with me, flooding me with his pleasure.

I was still catching my breath after the intense orgasm when he slid out of me.

I groaned at the loss—and cried out when my ass hit the counter, and he kneeled in front of me, dragging his tongue up my center.

He grabbed the piping bag off the countertop and spread my thighs before he squeezed the jelly over my core.

I inhaled sharply at the cold gel on my center.

He licked me clean a moment later, and I moaned at the sensation.

“We taste so fucking good, Vee,” Madd growled against me, dragging his tongue over me again.

And again.

And again.

When I lost control, he didn't stop.

When I shattered again, he still kept going.

Another orgasm hit before I pulled his hair, making him rise to his feet as I struggled to catch my breath.

“Holy shit,” I panted, tilting my head back. “You're insanely good at that.”

His chest rumbled as he stepped up to me—and again when I wrapped my legs around his hips, taking him inside me again. “We should start every morning like this.”

I buried my fingers in his hair. “Donuts and orgasms. Perfect.”

“You taste better than the fucking donuts.” Madd's mouth captured mine, and



the taste of our pleasure met my tongue.

Salty and blissful.

I didn't ever want it to end.

He thrust inside me, and I groaned.

It wasn't going to last forever.

I was too sensitive to keep going much longer.

But hot damn... the sensations were otherworldly.

"Does that mean I shouldn't bake for you?"

"Hell no. Bake for me—and let me eat you afterward."

"Sounds like *hard* work," I teased, then gasped when he hit me just right.

My grip on his hair tightened.

He repeated the motion, hitting me exactly where I wanted him again.

And again.

And again.

"You can handle it." His teeth scraped my shoulder. "Bite me, Vee. I want my blood in your mouth."

The pleasure was already way too intense for me to say no.

So I bit him.

And drank.

WE FINALLY STOPPED when we were both breathing too hard to continue.

My body was spent.

"Eleven out of ten," I panted, smacking Madd lightly on the shoulder. "Think you nearly killed me that time."

His laughter boomed through the room. “Guess I’ll have to try harder next time.”

There was a knock on the front door.

Both of our heads snapped in that direction.

We were still naked—and our bodies were connected.

“Maybe if we ignore them, they’ll go away,” Madd said.

I snorted.

Ever the responsible alpha, he sighed and pulled out.

He grabbed my dress from the night before off the floor and tugged it over my head, then scooped up the rest of yesterday’s clothes and strode off to our room. I headed for the door, trying and failing to fix my hair.

I probably looked like a poodle who hadn’t been brushed in a few months, but it was what it was.

When I pulled the door open, I found a guy on the doorstep. He had dark hair just long enough to curl around his ears, and wore nothing but a pair of ripped jeans. He was just as big as most werewolves, with light skin covered in ink, and his eyes were electric blue.

He blinked down at me. “You’re smaller than I expected.”

“You’re less-clothed than I expected,” I fired back. “Who are you?”

He glanced down at his chest and realized he was shirtless.

“Hey.” Madd stepped up behind me, wrapping a possessive arm around my middle. “Vex, this is my mate, Lovene. Vee, this is Ronin Vex. He’s a part of the supernatural government, and as you know, ran the clan’s takedown.”

Madd pulled the door open, and I shot him a panicked look over my shoulder before my attention went back to the kitchen.

My eyes moved over it, and I relaxed.

No visual evidence of sex in sight.

Maybe we were golden.

Well, minus my wild hair.

And the pleasure dripping down the insides of my thighs.

I strolled back to the kitchen, washed my hands, and calmly grabbed my piping bag as if I didn't desperately need to go clean myself up.

I'd fill a few more donuts, then make my escape.

...After I cleaned the piping bag. It didn't look like it had gotten messy, but still. The germs.

"So you're a blood wolf," Vex said to me, as he and Madd sat down in bar stools. Considering he was probably as ancient as Madd, I hoped the man wouldn't comment if he noticed any, er, sexual evidence.

"Unfortunately for me, yes," I agreed, finishing cleaning the piping bag, then filling another donut.

Madd plucked it off the counter as soon as I set it back down, and took a big bite.

We'd definitely worked up an appetite.

The men discussed how everything had gone down while I finished filling the donuts.

Vex said he was going to stay for a few months—which was interesting. Hopefully something fun would come of it.

When I slipped away to shower and get dressed, Madd caught my hand and pulled me back, planting a kiss on my lips before he released me.

I WAS RINSING conditioner from my hair when I heard the front door shut again. A minute later, my gorgeous alpha strode into the shower, naked for me again.

His hands immediately found my hips, and pulled my back to his chest.

I closed my eyes at the blissfulness of the physical contact. When he turned

me around so my front was pressed to his, I leaned against him, wrapping my arms around his back and squeezing him lightly.

“Those donuts were delicious,” he rumbled, burying one of his hands in my hair. “You’re damn good at your job.”

The compliment made me warm.

“Obviously, you’re just as good at yours. Probably better. Your pack respects the hell out of you.”

He made a noncommittal noise. “They just don’t want me to leave. I’ve got more connections than the rest of them combined.”

I snorted. “*And* you’re humble.”

“So humble.”

“So what’s on the schedule today?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“Any ideas?”

He slid his hands over my back. “I was thinking we could hit the theater and give the obsessed humans something else to post pictures about.”

I smiled. “That sounds like fun. Will there be popcorn?”

“Of course. Candy, too.” He cupped my face and dragged his thumb over my lip. “You’re gorgeous, you know. Not sure if I’ve ever told you that, but it’s true.”

“Hey, compliments are always welcome. I’m not used to them, but I do like them.” I leaned against his hand, and he dragged his thumb over my bottom lip again.

When he leaned down, he kissed me.

It was soft.

Sweet.

Intimate, but not sexual.

We were naked, but we weren't horny. We were just... peaceful together.

When I finally pulled away, I admitted, "I'm falling in love with you, Arch."

His eyes burned into mine. "I've been in love with you since the moment I learned what you were to me. You're fucking perfect."

I smiled, and he kissed me again.

Then, we finished washing up together. Though we were playful, and we had a good time, neither of us tried to make the moment more intense.

We were just enjoying being together, as friends.

And I couldn't help but think maybe that was what a true mate was supposed to be.

A partner.

Someone you could trust and hold on to for your whole life.

The sex was incredible... but simply having a companion to share my life with was starting to sound even better.

I'd never expected to find a mate.

I'd never expected to care about a werewolf.

But I was so damn glad I'd failed at staying away from him.

*"I was right about him from the beginning,"* my wolf purred.

I laughed. There was no point in lying about it. *"You were. You picked the perfect mate."*

And life with him was going to be so damn good.

## *epilogue*

MADD—A FEW MONTHS LATER

A POPULAR COUNTRY song about having sex in a truck played on the radio while we drove down the dirt road toward our cabin.

The windows were down, and the wind tossed Love's short hair around wildly. It kept catching my attention. Every time it did, she smacked my arm lightly, laughing and telling me to focus on the road.

I didn't give a damn about the road.

Not when my mate was right next to me, her gorgeous smile lighting up everything around her.

Our pack had been growing even faster since word got out that we'd provided sanctuary to multiple blood wolves.

*"You don't get to hike for long,"* my wolf grumbled at me. *"I want to run with my mate."*

*"You'll get the chance,"* I said.

The grumpy bastard didn't think it was fair for me to spend time in the forest without giving him the reins. I didn't disagree completely, but Love had asked me to hike with her in my human form, so the wolf was going to have to deal with it.

Despite his complaints, I knew he wouldn't mind.

Not when she smiled at us.

Love had settled into the pack more quickly than I'd ever expected after she reduced her hours to three days a week. She was involved in everything, and both the mated women and the unmated male enforcers listened to her and respected her more than they did me.

If it didn't make me so damn proud, it would've annoyed me how much they liked her. She belonged to *me*.

She squeezed my thigh as she stared out the window, her body relaxed and her expression happy. "Life is simpler out here," she said. "We should get away from Wildwood more often."

"I wish it was easier to do," I admitted.

She squeezed my leg again. "The city is nice too. When the pack's growth slows down, everything will get simpler."

I hoped she was right, if only so I could have more time alone with her.

I'd already dropped my hours at work too, so I was doing twenty-four on, seventy-two off, but it still didn't feel like enough time with her.

I was starting to realize I'd *never* have enough time with her.

"Oh, I know this song," she said, turning the volume up as the song launched into the final chorus. I parked in front of the cabin, and she flashed me a grin. "Truck sex sounds much more appealing now than it did the first time I heard it."

My cock hardened on cue. "We can make that happen."

Her grin grew wicked. "Oh, really?"

"Yup." I dragged her onto my lap, and she laughed before I kissed her.

I'd spent my entire life waiting to meet her—and I'd do it all over again, if it would bring me back to that moment, with my mate on my lap and her lips on mine.

She was worth the pain, and so fucking much more.



## *afterthoughts*

There's something I just love about werewolves. If you've read many of my books, I'm sure that doesn't come as much of a surprise, but it's true.

The combination of beast and man just makes me excited.

When you throw in vampires, too?

Well, then I've found my happy place hahaha.

In all honesty, I had to edit this book a lot.

A lot, a lot.

For the life of me, I just couldn't figure out exactly what blood wolves were created for. I even took a few weeks off in the middle of this book and

painted my whole house, before I finally figured out what I'd gotten wrong  
and fixed it.

I've written 90-something books now... and I still haven't figured it out yet!

Oh well. At least I have fun with it :P

Anyway, I snorted to myself way too many times with this one—and I hope  
you're loving Wildwood as much as I am! I'm excited to see where our pack  
goes next!

Tori's story will be up next, and spoiler, it might involve a certain alpha  
*vexing* her.

Not gonna lie, I had way too much fun coming up with these last names.  
Madd, Bauther, and Vex? Wayyyy too much fun. Man, I love my stupid  
jokes.

As always, thank you so much for reading!

All the love,  
Lola Glass <3

*stay in touch*

If you want to receive Lola's newsletter for new releases (no spam!) use this

link:

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Rejected Mate Refuge

## *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 though they're fun stories about sassy women and huge, growly magical men ;)