



Her Former Bear Mate

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Description: After a terrible break-up with the love of her life, bear shifter Aditi has given up on dating. As much as Aditi wants to avoid her ex, Lena, they share a close friend which means they can't help but run into each.

While Aditi knows it's over, her heart doesn't seem to yet. An incident brings her and Lena back together but can they make it work this time? After all, they say an ex is an ex for a reason.

Her Former Bear Mate is a sapphic paranormal second-chance romance with fated mates featuring a bear shifter and her mate. It includes a standalone romance and a dash of steamy goodness. It is part of the Crescent Lake Bears series.

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ONE

Lena

Flustered and a little out of breath from shouting at an irresponsible driver, Lena bumped against the curb when she parked her car. She got out, cursing when a couple of empty bottles and an old receipt tumbled out with her.

It was amazing how quickly she'd turned back into a slob now she was single.

She grabbed the bottle of wine from the back seat, ignoring all the old energy bar wrappers and bottles. That was a problem for another day because it wasn't like anyone was going to see her car and she was already late.

With the click of her key, she abandoned her car and hurried along the row of old two-story houses. She had noticed it earlier but now she could fully appreciate the upscale area her friend had moved to.

A set of stone stairs brought her up to a red wooden door and she rang the doorbell, slightly nervous about the upcoming party.

Was Aditi going to be here?

She pushed the thoughts away, telling herself that it didn't matter if her ex was here or not. They wouldn't have to talk to each other and they could be civilised, couldn't they? At least, she hoped so.

The door swung open and Poppy appeared, already red and clearly slightly tipsy. "Lena!!! You made it!"

"Of course, I said I would," Lena replied, although she knew it meant very little. She'd said she would show up to many things, only to cancel last minute. Sheepishly, she held out her bottle. "Here, a little gift. Congrats on the new place."

"Thanks, babes." Poppy accepted the bottle and gave it a little shake. "I love red wine."

Lena smiled, quietly relieved about that. She'd picked a random wine from the shelf on her way here, one with a middle of the road price tag. She wasn't very good at gifts. Aditi had always been the gift giver.

She followed Poppy into the new flat which was pretty packed, not that it surprised her. As a veritable extrovert, Poppy was always the life of the party and surrounded by a crowd.

"So, how are you settling in?" Lena asked, her voice already raised so she could be heard over the crowd and the music.

Poppy gave her a thumbs up. "I love it! Everything works, fancy that."

"What about the fridge?" Lena asked.

Chuckling, Poppy gestured to a grand fridge, one with two doors and brushed metal. "Brand new, baby."

"So no freezer parties on the horizon then," Lena commented, smiling at the memory of the impromptu party that had been thrown in the honour of Poppy's fridge-freezer giving up. It wouldn't have been an issue if the landlord had replaced it straight away, like a good landlord ought. Instead, everyone had come together for the most eclectic

dinner party of fish sticks, ice cream, berry smoothies, and anything else that needed eating.

Poppy paused next to the counter where lots of plastic cups and half-empty bottles were taking up the entire space. "What can I get you? Wine? Beer? Cocktail? I've got everything."

"I can see that," Lena commented. "Anything non-alcoholic? I'm driving."

"Sure, I've got all the juices. Apple, orange, grape, cranberry, you name it."

"You don't do anything half-assed, do you?" Lena said with a smile. "Apple, please."

"One glass of apple juice for the lady," Poppy quipped, cheerful as always. She poured it with the skill and flair of a bartender and presented it. "So... How've you been? Is this the first time I've seen you since the break-up?"

Lena drank some apple juice to give herself a moment before she had to reply. "Yeah, it is."

"I'm sorry. I really liked Aditi."

A lump appeared in her throat. "Me too. Anyway, what's done is done. We no longer wanted the same thing. What about you? Are you still dating Assia, was it?"

"Oh no, that's long over. Done and dusted. No, I'm currently dating..." Poppy peered into the crowd, clearly searching for someone. She pointed out a heavier woman in leopard print who was shaking her shoulders to the song. "Sophie. She's amazing. I think it's going to last."

"I hope it does," Lena said, even if she was fairly sure it wouldn't. As much as she

loved her friend, Poppy was one of those serial monogamists. Not that there was anything wrong with it, it was just very foreign to Lena who hadn't dated anyone besides Aditi in the last four years and a half. Six if she counted the time before Aditi.

No, Lena wasn't exactly a social butterfly and she wasn't looking to be one either. If she was, she wouldn't have worn her old graphic shirt with her favourite design: an old retro computer with a rainbow screen.

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The doorbell went again which meant Poppy dashed off, leaving Lena to fend for herself. Not that she minded. She sipped her apple juice, watched some drunk people dance, and made short but polite conversation with the few friends she knew. It was actually a perfectly pleasant afternoon until she saw a flash of long dark hair.

Her stomach screwed itself tight right away and only lessened when she got a better look at the dark-haired woman.

Not Aditi.

Lena relaxed only slightly because despite her relief and her pounding heart, she was secretly also disappointed. She shouldn't be, they broke up for very good reasons, but it seemed like Lena wasn't quite ready to accept that it was over. There was still quiet yearning for what used to be, for the familiar comfort that was Aditi.

Desperate for some fresh air, she went out through the kitchen into the very, very small backyard. It was so small, there was just enough space for two chairs, a little table, and a handful of smokers.

Lena really wanted a cigarette herself but unlike the rubbish in her car, this wasn't a bad habit she wanted to pick back up. It had been hard enough to quit, she didn't want to go through it again.

"As I live and breathe, if it isn't Lena!" an excited voice called. "She's alive!"

Lena didn't have to turn around to know who that voice belonged to, there was only one of her friends who rivalled Poppy in dramatics.

"Alix.It's been a while," Lena said, a bit embarrassed when she thought of all the invitations to hang out she'd declined.It wasn't that she didn't want to see Alix but Alix had always been Aditi's friend first, Lena hadn't been sure if their friendship would survive the break-up.

From the warm hug that Alix gave her, it seemed so.

"You are a hard woman to get a hold of," Alix said affectionately."Let me have a good look at you."

"What are you, my mother?"Lena joked.

"If I were, you'd have some explaining to do, young lady!I've not seen you in months."

Lena grimaced."Sorry."

"You better not be skipping out on my birthday party.I know you saw my message about it."

"Umm..."Lena wanted to ask if Aditi was going to be there but it was a useless question.Of course, Aditi was going to be there.Those two were practically sisters.

"You won't have to talk to Aditi.There'll be enough people."Alix gave her her biggest begging eyes."Please, please, please, please, please?—"

"All right, all right.I'll be there," Lena conceded.Even if she wasn't a social butterfly, she did value the few friends she had.It had been a bit frustrating that most of them were mutual friends but maybe it was time to get over that.So what if her ex was also going to be there?They were grown-ups, they could spend an evening socialising in each other's vicinity without it turning into a big drama or meltdown.

Alix' face lit up."Great!I'll hold you to that."

"When is it?"

"Don't know yet!I'm still deciding on the venue."

"Venue?You're being fancy."

"I only turn twenty-four once.This is my last year being in my early-twenties.Next year, I'll be a quarter of a century.I'm not ready to be that old!"

Lena couldn't help but chuckle.She didn't really understand her friend's fascination with her birthdays or turning older but she wasn't going to rain on her parade.Different things were important for different people, something that had become very apparent towards the end of her relationship.

The tightness in her stomach only got worse.

“So, how’ve you been?”Lena asked, a desperate attempt at conversation.

“Not too bad.Busy with all of Trixie’s homework and school stuff.She has so many hobbies and of course, I have to drive her.”Alix rubbed her forehead.“You?”

“Busy, too,” Lena said.It wasn’t even a lie, shehadbeen busy with work.Not so busy that she couldn’t have made time for friends but it was what it was.

Alix nodded.“And how are you, you know, regarding the breakup?”

“Fine,” Lena said.Even she could hear the lie in her own voice.“I’m totally fine.”

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“Right.”

“It’s the truth. I’m sure Aditi is fine too.”

“Aditi is...” Alix bit her lip, no doubt wondering how much she was allowed to share. “Well, I don’t want to lie, she was pretty upset at the beginning. Devastated. It’s a bit better now.”

“Devastated?” Lena scoffed, anger bubbling up inside of her. “She’s the one who broke up with me. Why is she the one that’s devastated?”

“She didn’t want to break-up, you know that.”

“Yeah? Then she shouldn’t have insisted that we go into the sacred lake to find out if we’re fated mates. She knows I didn’t want that. She always said she didn’t want a fated mate either. She’s a liar.” Lena didn’t often spew out long rants like that but they came naturally. The pain and hurt from the break-up was still fresh and Alix had clearly pressed on a painful spot.

Alix gave her a look of pity. “It wasn’t a lie, you know. She just changed her mind.”

“Of course you’re picking her side,” Lena spat out. She knew she was directing her anger at the wrong person but it was impossible to stay calm. It hurt. It hurt that Aditi had chosen to throw all their time together away because they weren’t fated mates.

It was the very thing Lena always feared would happen and Aditi had assured her for years that she didn’t want a fated mate either. Then finally when Lena started to

believe her...bam. A good dose of reality.

She really should've known better. Shifters wanted fated mates and she was a fool for thinking Aditi was any different.

TWO

Aditi

The last thing anyone wanted when they were admitted to the hospital was an overworked, underpaid, caffeine-deprived nurse. And yet, some days, that was exactly what Aditi was. And recently, heartbroken had been added to the list as well.

Unfortunately for her, heartbroken wasn't an acceptable reason to call in sick so she had no choice but to come to work with a smile on her face and resentment in her heart.

So really not all that different than usual.

One of the only things that could make it better was a good strong cup of coffee. Usually, Aditi made do with the sludge from the staff room or the instant coffee in her cupboard but after a double shift and an ungodly early start, she really had no choice but to stop at Dragon Roast.

The coffee here was excellent but Aditi hadn't been here since her break-up with Lena. There were too many memories here that made the coffee taste bitter but it was an emergency this morning. At least it was quiet in the usually bustling coffee shop, but that was because she was ahead of the morning rush. All thanks to her shitty supervisor's demanding schedule.

Behind the counter, Renata turned around at the sound of the bell and looked

seemingly a bit frantic and unprepared."Oh, hello."

"Sorry, am I too early?"Aditi gestured to the sign at the door."It said it was open."

"No, we are," Renata replied quickly as she ran a hand through her long dark hair."Just running a little behind but that's fine.What can I get you?"

"Triple espresso, please.To go," Aditi replied, her usual order and the only thing that kept her functioning this early.

Renata cracked a smile."As a nurse, you should know that's not good for your health."It was something only a friendly acquaintance could say, one that had faithfully served her many triple espressos over the years.

"And as a barista, you should know pointing that out to your caffeine-deprived customers isn't good for your health," Aditi quipped back, a little sharper than she intended it to.

Renata chuckled, clearly not bothered or insulted."Fair enough.Triple espresso coming right up."

With a nod, Aditi settled at one of the tables while she waited.If she was sensible, she would go straight to the hospital but stopping for coffee was a small luxury she afforded herself and it was one of the few things that kept her sane.More or less.She supposed she could go without but then she risked killing one of her frustrating patients, or more likely, her supervisor.

The door above the bell rang, indicating the arrival of another customer.Aditi looked up, wondering what other poor soul was also in need of coffee this early on.Her stomach dropped instantly and she quickly looked away, but it was too late.

Lena had already seen her but didn't smile or nod in acknowledgment. Instead, she just looked at her with those cold brown eyes of hers, the very same ones that Aditi once thought were the warmest of colours.

Even though she hated herself for it, she checked Lena out while she ordered her coffee. Nobody could make casual look so good as her ex who was naturally tall and slender. At first glance, some might mistake her for a young man but Aditi knew the softness of what was underneath Lena's oversized shirt well.

It was really unfair that someone could look this good with so little effort, unlike Aditi who needed lots of conditioner just to tame her unruly thick black hair, an elaborate skin care routine to keep the spots away, and concealer for the bags under her eyes, special expensive concealer because regular brands didn't make it in her skin tone.

She'd always been jealous of Lena who could roll out of bed and run her hands through her hair, throw on a shirt, and look absolutely fabulous. If anything, the simplicity of her attire really let her own strong features shine. That prominent brow of hers, the slightly upturned nose, her sharp jaw that clenched whenever she was uncomfortable. Lena wasn't necessarily a classic traditional beauty but she turned heads wherever she went.

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And Aditi had been a sucker for Lena's intense looks from the first day they met.

She quickly looked away when Lena turned back around, unsure what the protocol was for when they ran into each other like this. Despite working two blocks away from each other and running in the same friend circles, there had been surprisingly few unplanned meet-cutes.

She suspected it was good planning and deliberate avoidance on both their parts.

Lena paused a few steps away, much further away than Aditi was used to. "Didn't expect to run into you this early."

"Early shift," Aditi clarified, as if that wasn't obvious from her attire. "What about you? All-nighter?"

"Mhmm," Lena responded, simply nodding. She looked around a little before turning her attention back to Aditi, like she realised there was nothing else to distract her but the ceiling. "I didn't realise you still came here."

"I don't, really. This is my first time since... in a while," Aditi said, not wanting to bring up the breakup. Lena would know what she meant anyway.

Lena hummed. "Hah. Same. Funny that."

"Yeah, it's almost like it's—" she really did swallow that last part of her sentence. The last thing she needed to bring up between them was fate. Blasted fate, the very thing that broke them apart.

Lena narrowed her eyes but didn't say anything. Instead, she ran her hand through her short dark-blonde hair to push it off of her forehead. It was a casual gesture, but it drew attention to her jaw and her nice strong hands.

Aditi quickly looked away. The last thing she should be doing was checking out her ex.

She swallowed hard. "So how've you been?"

"Fine. You?" Lena replied, although she didn't actually sound interested in the answer. It was more like a polite response.

"Yeah, fine too," Aditi replied. And to think they used to stay up talking for hours until late into the night. It was a sad reminder of what she lost.

"That's good to hear," Lena said in her cool customer voice.

Aditi wished she didn't know Lena well enough to recognise it for what it was and glanced over to the counter, wondering what was taking Renata so long. She considered just leaving and forsaking her coffee but she needed it to survive her shift. And it would make it so obvious that she was fleeing and if there was one thing Aditi didn't do, it was flee.

She faced Lena, boldly looking up into her eyes. "It's Alix's birthday soon. Did she talk to you about it?"

For a moment, Lena looked surprised. "She did. I ran into her not that long ago. She practically begged me to go."

"And you're coming even though it's at my mother's house?"

Judging from the expression on Lena's face, she wasn't aware of this yet. "It's at your mother's?"

"Mhmm. Alix didn't tell you?"

"Nope, she just said to come to hers and we'd go together." Lena shook her head. "That little shit."

Worry stirred in Aditi's gut. "It's not a problem that it's at my mother's house, is it?"

"Well, I don't love it but Alix's birthday is only once a year. Luckily."

"She did remind me that we need to be on our best behaviour because she's determined to stay friends with both of us," Aditi voiced, used by now to the twinge of guilt in her stomach whenever she remembered that their break-up had put their mutual friends in an awkward position.

Lena just shrugged. "Tell her it's fine. We're both adults, we can be at the same party for an evening, can't we?"

"Right." Aditi gulped, wishing she could be as aloof and casual about their break-up. It was still fresh in her mind, and heart, proven by the fact that it was aching just from this short interaction with Lena.

She was fairly sure she was the only one affected too, judging from Lena's slack shoulders and neutral expression.

Then again, Lena always had been much better at hiding her nerves and emotions.

There was relief when Renata called her name and she got up to pay, moving past Lena without looking at her. She went up to the counter where Renata pushed two

paper cups towards her.

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"Eight-fifty," she said.

Aditi frowned at the price before realising she was being charged for Lena's coffee too. It made sense, they used to come here all the time. Together. Sometimes for a quick lunch break, other times exactly like this where Aditi was about to start a shift and Lena was almost at the end of hers. Little stolen moments during busy days where they both walked past much closer coffee shops so they could meet in the middle to see each other. It was something two people desperately in love did, something Aditi had taken for granted until it stopped.

And now they were over and it wasn't like they had broadcasted it to the world. They certainly hadn't told the barista at their favourite coffee spot.

Not wanting to explain that they weren't here together, she just paid for both. It stung to carry the cups back to Lena though, it stung to hand one over without getting a little wink and smile in return, without that spark of electricity when their fingers brushed together. Instead, there was just the dull throb of her heart.

"You didn't have to pay for mine," Lena said.

"Renata charged me for both and I didn't feel like explaining that we didn't come together."

Lena's expression stayed frustratingly natural. "I see. Thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome, I guess," Aditi replied, almost wishing she had told Renata they were broken up so she could've avoided this insincere lukewarm thank you. There was

nothing worse than social pleasantries coming from Lena who always believed it was reserved for strangers and colleagues.

Aditi almost scoffed at the thought of them being strangers. They were each other's most important person for four years, they were far from strangers. And yet, when she looked at Lena and her detached casual stance and clear vibe that she would rather be anywhere but here, it was clear that they were exactly that. Strangers.

"I need to go," Lena said, not looking at Aditi.

"I guess I'll see you at Alix's party," Aditi said, cursing how hopeful she sounded. She'd even raised her free hand before she realised what she was doing and ran it through her hair to hide that she'd subconsciously had reached for Lena.

Luckily, Lena didn't look like she noticed and turned away. She managed one step before turning back, a gesture that had Aditi's heart leaping up in her throat, until Lena said, "Next time, tell Renata to charge it separately."

THREE

Lena

Lena couldn't say she was looking forward to Alix's birthday party, least of all because it was held at Rheka's house. While Aditi's mother had always been perfectly pleasant when they were dating, there'd always been this slight edge of something that made it very clear that she didn't approve.

Even so, approval or not, she couldn't imagine Rheka would be warmer towards her now she'd broken her precious daughter's heart.

Lena grimaced just thinking about it while she parked her car a few houses away, not

at all surprised by how busy it was. Alix had lots of friends.

She grabbed her present from the back of the car, wondering how many more shitty impersonal gifts she'd be giving throughout her life now she no longer could rely on Aditi.

Oh well. Alix conveniently kept the location of the party a secret, she deserved a generic scarf - and a swift kick to the buttocks but it was her birthday, so Lena was going to let that slide.

With leaden feet, she made her way up the familiar drive of Aditi's parental house. There were more bushes and plants in the garden beds, which wasn't a surprise since Rheka worked in the local garden centre. If Lena was still dating Aditi, she would've made polite conversation about the latest shrubbery or unruly monstera, but that was no longer needed.

She was just a guest. Alix's guest, even. Still, that didn't stop the nerves from making her hands twitchy as she rang the doorbell. She really, really hoped it wasn't Rheka who would let her in.

Luck wasn't on her side because within ten seconds, the door swung open wide and the much shorter mother of Aditi appeared. "Lena Brown. Well, well, well."

"Hello, Rekha," Lena said, already annoyed at being full-named. "May I come in?"

"Of course, you may," Rheka said, only moving back a step. "It's good to see you."

Loud yapping came from inside and quick as lightning, Rheka blocked the entrance, preventing a very small and angry chihuahua from running out.

"I'm getting real tired of your behaviour," Rheka said, reaching down to pick up the

dog."You shut your tiny snout."

Princess barked and tried to run in the air, the little drama queen that she was.Lena would never understand the appeal and she felt for Alix having to put up with this siren of an animal.

"There.Now, be quiet."Rheka put the chihuahua under her armpit."So, Lena, how've you been?"

Lena could hear the unspoken rest of the sentence.How've you beensince you broke up with my daughter?

She forced a smile."I've been all right.How about you?"

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"Oh, so and so. My health is a bit shaky but that comes with age. I've picked up some more hours at the garden centre which has been very fun. Joan recently retired, that was quite a hoot. I've mentioned Joan before, haven't I?"

Lena nodded dutifully as she followed Rekha into the house, listening in a way that a daughter-in-law would, not just a random party guest. She wished she could tell Rheka she didn't give a shit about Joan and the garden centre but that wasn't the sort of thing she could say to someone who had almost become her mother-in-law.

Because even if things were over between her and Aditi, insulting Rheka would be like sleeping with Alix, if Lena was so inclined. It was a boundary that couldn't be uncrossed. It would be a death sentence for any possible reconciliation.

They reached the living room where Alix jogged towards her and took Princess. At least she had the decency to look guilty.

"Lena! You made it!" She already looked a little tipsy. "It's so good to see you."

"Hmm-hmmm." Lena relaxed slightly when Rheka went off to the kitchen and held out her present. "Happy birthday."

"Yay!" Alix tore into the wrapping and gasped. "Oooh, that's so cute. I love that. I needed a new scarf."

Whether it was true or not, it was nice that she at least pretended it was a good gift.

"Interesting venue for your party," Lena remarked dryly. "Were all the commercial

venues booked?"

"No but they were bloody expensive.This is free and Rheka fired up the grill and she made homemade naans."

"Don't try to distract me with homemade naans.You tried to trick me."

Alix didn't look guilty anymore."That's your fault for cancelling ladies' night five times in a row.Five!"

"You can't blame me for not wanting to grab cocktails with my ex," Lena defended herself.

"I understand, which is why I had no choice but to trick you.I never see you anymore.But I am sorry, I know it was selfish of me."

With a sigh, Lena nodded."All right, all right.Next time, just tell me.I knew in advance and I showed up, didn't I?"

"You did."Alix's eyes sparkled."Does that mean you'll come to the next ladies' night too?"

Before Lena could answer, she caught a dash of dark hair in her peripheral.It wasn't Aditi but one of her cousins who didn't even look all that similar to her.Lena wondered when she was going to stop seeing Aditi every time she saw a flash of black hair.Maybe never.

Alix tapped her arm."Lena?"

"Sorry, got distracted.What were you saying?"

"Ladies' night. Well, evening. We're doing dinner because it's better for Maria. Say you'll come."

"Sure," Lena said, still distracted. They were in Rheka's house, Aditi was going to be here. Somewhere. It was going to be virtually impossible to avoid her and she wasn't sure if she was ready for it.

That being said, she was going to try her damndest.

No more than fifteen minutes passed before Lena saw Aditi carrying some trays from the kitchen into the garden. They locked eyes and her heart jumped up in her chest, quickening as if it was the first time they saw each other.

Stupid heart.

Lena finished her juice, wishing she had taken a taxi so she could've had some wine, and mustered up the courage she needed to address the elephant in the room. She sauntered over to Aditi, painfully aware that this was all wrong. They should've come to this party together, celebrated Alix's birthday together, listened to Rekha boss them around together.

But that wasn't how things were anymore.

"Hey." Aditi flicked her dark hair over her shoulder. "I wasn't sure I'd see you today."

"I promised Alix," Lena said simply, doing everything she could not to notice just how beautiful Aditi looked. The light touches of mascara really emphasised her big brown eyes and she had such an adorable little crease in the bridge of her nose.

Maybe this would be easier if Aditi wasn't so bloody stunning.

"So...What did you get Alix as a present?" Aditi asked curiously.

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"I don't think that's any of your business," Lena murmured, not so loud that Rheka might overhear. She wasn't trying to be rude, she just knew whatever Aditi got her was better.

Aditi's pouting face was deadly. "I just wanted to make sure we didn't get her the same thing. We usually buy presents together, so..."

Lena sighed, trying to banish the memories of their gift-shopping adventures from her mind. It was true that they usually did this together but it was always more Aditi's thing. "I got her a new scarf, one with little bears. You?"

"Aw, that's so cute. She was just saying she needed a new scarf. And I got her a massage coupon because she's been quite stressed recently. And one of those little dog crowns for Princess. Not a crown, but you know, it's kind of thinner and got those fake diamonds—" She snapped her fingers to jog her memory.

"A tiara?" Lena said before she could help herself. It was so easy to get drawn in by Aditi, like a moon that could never escape its planet's orbit. Lena was angry at herself for still being so susceptible.

Unaware, Aditi just snapped her fingers. "Yes, that! I thought she would find that amusing. She loves that yappy little dog so much, it's honestly admirable."

This was all wrong.

Small talk with Aditi was wrong and Lena wanted no part in it. The last person she wanted to make small talk with was someone she'd poured her heart and soul out to

before. All the deep conversations they had, about their pasts, their secret desires, their grand aspirations, she'd rather not speak another word to Aditi than cheapen what they used to have.

"I need to use the bathroom," Lena squeaked out, dashing off before Aditi could say anything else. At least the advantage of this party being in Rheka's house was that she didn't need to ask anyone where the bathroom was.

FOUR

Aditi

It was already two hours into the party and Aditi hadn't had another conversation with Lena yet. In fact, they hadn't exchanged a word or even a glance since that first brief meeting. She might as well have been air. Actually, air was pretty crucial to someone's existence.

She was less than air, dammit.

Frustrated, she ate the last of her chicken burger and crumpled her napkin into the tightest little ball. This was ridiculous. Was Lena going to literally avoid her the entire afternoon when they were at her mother's house?

Against her better judgement, she crossed the garden. She didn't know what she was looking for, or why she was so desperately seeking out a conversation. She was well aware that they were over. And yet, she couldn't help herself. Something inside her yearned. She wanted, needed, to talk to Lena.

"Hey." Aditi nervously ran a hand through her hair.

Lena's voice was ice cold. "What?"

Ouch.

Aditi smiled through the sting."Did you try the garlic and coriander naans?I know they're your favourite."

What a rubbish opening line.She really should've come up with a better reason or excuse to start this conversation.

Lena scratched her nose."No, I wasn't in the mood."

"Oh.That surprises me.You always used to devour a whole one by yourself."

"And you always told me you didn't want a fated mate," Lena bit back."People change."

Double ouch.

For a moment, Lena glared at her with a familiar intensity, except that it was filled with hostility instead of passion.Then, she looked away."Whatever.Is there a reason you came over here?"

"No reason, I just wanted to chat.We're meant to be civil, Alix was very clear about that."

Lena's shoulders sank slightly."Right.It's not fair to put her in the middle."

"It's not."Aditi took a tentative step closer, taking the flow of their conversation as a good sign."So how've you been?"

"Fine."

"Anything exciting happen at work?"

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"Not really."

This was painful. Aditi was sure she'd had more engaging conversations with her comatose patients. Maybe she was wasting her time, maybe there was no coming back from this.

Lena finally looked at her. "We don't have to talk, you know."

"I was just trying to be friendly."

"Don't. We're not friends."

The words stabbed Aditi straight into the heart, even if she knew they were true.

An arm was suddenly slung over her shoulder and she and Lena were pulled into a weird three-way embrace by her overly enthusiastic cousin. "Look who it is, my favourite couple!"

Kiara always had the worst timings.

Aditi shrugged her cousin's arm away, not for the first time wishing she was allowed to hit people. "We're not?—"

"We broke up," Lena said simply. It sounded so cold, so diminishing like she was sharing a fact about the weather or something boring and unimportant.

"You're joking me." Kiara's bright smile fell away. "Oh, goddess. You're not joking. I'm

sorry, I didn't know that. Aditi, why didn't I know that?"

Aditi shrugged, trying to come across just as aloof. She wasn't sure if she managed since her heart felt like it was pounding out of her chest. "We haven't seen each other in a while."

"Still...I'm hurt, I thought we told each other these kinds of things." Kiara pouted and stood between them with an expectant smile, as if she was about to get the juicy details. When nobody said anything, she finally got the message and sheepishly excused herself like she hadn't just thrown a bomb on the conversation.

Lena looked anything but amused. "I need some water."

"I can?—"

Without another word, Lena marched away and Aditi wasn't so foolish to chase after her ex. It was obvious that whatever she was after, connection or closure, she was the only one yearning for it. Somehow, that made her feel even lonelier. She thought that even if they were over, at least they were doing this breakup together.

She was clearly mistaken.

While she picked up her drink, Alix came from the other side of the garden. The expression on her face made it clear she saw it all and had lots of thoughts about it.

Aditi sighed. "Can you pretend you didn't see any of that?"

"I wish but I got some serious second-hand embarrassment from that." Alix was never anything but honest.

"Was it that bad?"

"I physically cringed."

"What a disaster. I don't think this is salvageable." Aditi swirled her glass and downed the last of her cocktail. "I'm such a fool. We're not going to get back together, are we?"

"I don't know... I believe in you two. You're perfect for each other."

"Are we though? I want to get mated, she doesn't. That's kind of the end of the road, isn't it?" Aditi muttered, well aware that it was delusional that she ever thought they could work past this. The truth was a bitter pill she needed to swallow. And ironic, so damn ironic, considering it had been Aditi who spent her whole life claiming she didn't want a fated mate. She'd considered herself so lucky when they started dating when Lena agreed, thinking they were defying all that fated-mate bullshit. That what they had was real true love, something that was built upon their trust and belief in each other instead of something like fate.

But when that trust broke, the relationship inevitably toppled with it.

She glanced at Lena one more time, marvelling at how devastatingly beautiful but cold she looked.

Everything inside Aditi ached but she knew it was time to let go.

FIVE

Lena

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Lena cracked her fingers and squinted at her screen, trying to make sense of the code in front of her. She was once again reminded why she hated working on someone else's program because it was an absolute mess. This was going to take hours to clean up and fix the errors.

With a sigh, she reached for her mug but misjudged the distance. The back of her hand hit the side and it tipped over, spilling all over her desk and splattering onto her screen. She cursed and picked it up, to no real avail. Everything was wet. At least the coffee was cold instead of scorching hot.

She used some tissues to clean it up while thunderclouds brewed in her head. After the birthday party, she was already in a bad mood. This was just making everything worse. And to really top it all off, she had that dinner party at the end of the week that she somehow mysteriously agreed to.

Alix was a witch with magical persuasive powers.

Lena contemplated cancelling but she was fairly certain that Alix wasn't going to give up so easily. It was better to just get it over with. After all, she and Aditi did agree that they would stay friends even if they broke up. Granted, that was an agreement they made before they started dating.

What the heck did they know back then? Could they have imagined or predicted that the breakup would leave such a painful wound?

Maybe it would've been better if they never dated at all.

Lena grimaced at the thought.No matter how heartbroken was, she could never regret her time with Aditi.That was part of the problem, how was she supposed to get over this?

She tossed the wet napkins into her bin and got up for some coffee since hers was all gone now.At least her colleagues looked all just as unhappy with the current assignment so nobody was going to question why she was in such a foul mood.

At least it paid well.If the money hadn't been good, she wouldn't put up with this job.But it was no exciting job up North.

She got to the communal kitchen but the coffee pot was already empty.Typical.If she had to assign blame, she would put it at Brian's door who always took the last of the coffee and never bothered to make more.

To make matters worse, they seemed to be out of coffee entirely which meant she had to go up a floor for some coffee and risk getting chatted up by Mandy from Finance.

But Lena wanted coffee and she didn't want to walk all the way to Dragon Roast in case she ran into Aditi again.She didn't bother with the lift and just ran up the stairs, two steps at the time.She was embarrassingly out of breath when she reached the next floor and took a small break to compose herself.

That was enough exercise for the week.

Once her breathing was under control, she left the stairwell and went into the break room of the finance guys.Everything here looked the same, from the shitty metal chairs to the awful outdated wallpaper.She pulled the cupboard open in search of coffee and noticed they all had stupid mugs with dumb sayings too.

So similar and yet, for some reason, their departments did not get on.

"Aha!" Lena finally spotted a packet of coffee grounds and grabbed it. It might've looked like stealing but it was all paid for by the company. She deserved this coffee just as much as the finance people.

She turned around and froze.

"Hiiii!" Mandy had spotted her and was coming her way with big strides. Her blazer was a little tight around the chest, as always, and her platinum blonde hair was starting to show its dark roots.

Lena forced a smile. "Hey."

"I haven't seen you in a while. What brings you up here?"

"Coffee," Lena said, holding up the bag. As if her day wasn't bad enough, now she had to deal with Eager Mandy.

"You ran out, huh?" Mandy nodded in understanding. "Don't worry, I won't tell that you snatched a bag. I can't function without coffee either."

Not really in the mood for small talk, Lena just chuckled awkwardly. "Right. Better get back to it."

"Hey, I heard about your break-up. I'm sorry. You and Aditi seemed like a really solid couple," Mandy blurted out with a strange shimmer in her eyes.

Lena froze. So her break-up had somehow made it up to the finance floor then. She wondered how, considering most of her colleagues couldn't care less about her personal life and she barely talked about it either.

Mandy continued without pause. "I know how hard break-ups can be. If you need

someone to vent to, I'm available."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm alright," Lena said, glad that she could hide her disinterest behind her customer voice. She wasn't interested in Mandy and the break-up was far too fresh in her mind. She was still coming to terms that all the forever plans she'd made with Aditi had fallen in the water. Although if she was honest with herself, she wasn't sure if she'd ever really come to terms with that.

Lena held the bag of coffee grounds out, using it as a sort of shield. "They need me downstairs."

"Right, of course." Mandy moved to the side, just enough to let Lena squeeze past. "You know, there's this really cute coffee shop not too far from here. Dragon Roast, have you heard of it?"

"Yeah, I know it."

"Their coffee is amazing, isn't it? Much better than this cheap stuff. Why don't I buy you a cuppa sometime? My treat."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Lena replied. She was sure Mandy was lovely and that some people might really like how forward she was, but she wasn't interested. She hadn't been when she was dating Aditi and she wasn't now she was single.

Mandy didn't look all that discouraged and strategically stayed where she was, blocking the exit. "How about dinner then? You've been working late this week, it'll be good to relax a little, maybe have a glass of wine."

"Umm...I've still got a lot on my plate so I don't think so," Lena said, wishing she could escape. If she were a dragon shifter, she would have the option of jumping out of any window but unfortunately, her genes were a let down on that front.

It seemed like Mandy finally got the hint. "Alright, but you know where to find me if you change your mind."

Lena was pretty sure she wasn't going to but she smiled and nodded anyway, just glad she could get out of here. She made it halfway back to the stairwell when she was cornered by Craig.

"Ahh, Lena!" He waved and jogged over, clipboard trapped under his armpit. "I've been meaning to talk to you."

"Really?" Lena replied. For the life of her, she couldn't work out why he wanted to talk to her. If anything, she was surprised he even knew her name.

He paused in front of her and held out his fist for a fist bump.

Lena refused. "What can I do for you?"

"You remember that last staff party? You brought a really pretty friend with you. Darker skin, really nice eyes. What's her name?"

"Why are you asking?" Lena asked instead, an uncomfortable feeling stirring in her stomach. She could already guess why he was inquiring. It was always the same reason.

Craig grinned. "Just thought she was really cute and I've been wondering if I could get her number?"

"No," Lena said coolly. It wasn't like she begrudged Aditi love, but she wasn't going to play matchmaker for her ex. Over her dead body.

"Why not? I'm a pretty nice guy," he insisted.

"I said no. And that wasn't my friend, that's my girlfriend," Lena hissed out, not even caring about the pedantics of how they were technically not girlfriends anymore.

Craig looked pretty disappointed. "Oh, I didn't realise you were... No, you know, that makes sense."

"And why is that?"

"Well, cause you look so—" He gestured her up and down before seemingly realising

he was being incredibly rude."Sorry, I'm stereotyping.Anyway, well done on the relationship.Hot stuff."

Lena seriously considered assaulting him with his own clipboard but that might facilitate a meet-cute with Aditi in the hospital.

This was why she hated coming up to here, there was something wrong with the people here.

She stomped to the stairs, glad when she made it without another interruption.She thundered back to her own floor while her mind replayed the insistent requests from Mandy and the shiver-inducing conversation with Craig.

What a way to make a bad day worse.Especially because claiming Aditi as hers had been such an automatic response, something that just rolled off her tongue like a fact because once upon a time, it had been a fact.An irrefutable, universal truth.

And now, it made her a liar.

Lena hated being a liar just as much as she hated liars.

With a sigh, she settled back at her desk.The picture of her and Aditi was still sitting on the corner of her desk, a little memento from their first weekend trip away.She should've thrown it away when they broke up but the silly sentimental part inside her was not managing to let go.

She picked up the small frame and brushed her thumb over Aditi's face.They looked young and carefree and so, so happy.It was making Lena's stomach churn.They'dbeenso happy, why couldn't it have lasted?

She glanced at the bin next to her desk, really tried to throw it away, but put the frame

back next to her monitor in defeat.

Who was she kidding?

SIX

Aditi

Aditi truly,desperately hated dating apps.She wasn't ready to be on the apps either but she was tipsy from the margaritas and Alix had already hijacked her phone.

"Hobbies!"Alix shouted, entirely sprawled out on Aditi's sofa like she owned it.

"Ha!Funny.I don't have time for hobbies.I work and sleep."

“Yeah, but you can’t say that.You’re trying to make it sound like you have time for a partner.”Alix hummed.

Frustratingly, Aditi had to concede that saying she never had time was a good way to start a relationship.“What if we wrote down hiking?”

“You hikedoncetwo years ago,” Alix pointed out in the way only a lifelong best friend could.“Oh, what about poetry?You write those really snappy poems about your job.”

"That's not really a hobby," Aditi rebuffed, heat rising up to her cheeks.She felt embarrassed enough that she'd drunkenly shown her awful poems to Alix that one time, she didn't want to be reminded of it.And she certainly didn't want it on her dating profile.

Alix groaned in frustration."Why is this so hard?"

"Let's just cancel the whole thing," Aditi said with a sigh. "Maybe this online dating thing isn't for me."

"Don't be silly. You know what? I'm just going to write down that people need to ask you if they want to find out." Alix grinned, seemingly proud of herself for that solve. "There. Now we just add some bear emojis so people know you're a bear shifter and tadaa! Alright, now pictures! At least that should be easy, you gorgeous thing."

Aditi winced when her gallery was opened and her latest pictures started filling the screen. Her and Lena at the beach at sunset, her and Lena at the food fair, her and Lena at their favourite restaurant, her and Lena in be---

She snatched her phone back and quickly swiped past the intimate pictures. They weren't doing anything spicy, they weren't even naked, but they both wore such deep genuine smiles. It hurt seeing themselves so happy, so blissfully in love and blissfully unaware what was coming.

"Definitely not those," she muttered, sighing as more pictures of them together flew by. All those snapshots of their life together, it was bringing tears to her eyes which was how she knew she had to move on because these beautiful moments were gone. What was even the point of keeping them?

"I should delete these, I just haven't got around to it," she mused. And yet, she couldn't bring herself to press the delete button. Even if she was moving on, she wasn't really ready to accept that it was truly over.

She didn't want it to be over.

Alix gave her a compassionate smile. "You also don't have to. She was a big part of your life, you don't have to pretend it didn't happen."

As comforting as that was, it was also haunting. What if Aditi never got over this? What if she spent her whole life missing Lena and cursing herself for not just being brave and impulsive and going along with the move.

Why did she have to ask for the one thing she knew Lena didn't want, never wanted. A fated mate.

She sighed. Maybe it was for the best that they never went into Crescent Lake. At this rate, they would've likely discovered they weren't fated anyway and that would've been the end of the relationship too.

Yeah, once these thoughts of fate grabbed hold of her, there'd been no winning in Aditi's book. It was cruel, cruel, cruel that she'd started wanting this, especially because her younger self actively rejected anything related to fate.

Maybe fate was just making her pay the price.

She kept swiping, passing over the picture in her bear form. As nice as her dark coat looked, this wasn't something she just showed to anyone. She'd even been reluctant to reveal this form to Lena, back when they just started dating.

The next pictures all included Lena, all with that beaming bright boyish smile of hers. Aditi was glad when she found a selfie that didn't include her ex. It wasn't the best picture but she was smiling and didn't have those dark bags and worry lines that she currently sported.

"How is this?" she asked, twisting her phone to show it to Alix.

"Hmm?" Alix squinted at the picture. "Yes, that's nice. You look hot."

"Thanks." With a sigh, Aditi finished creating her profile and her parameters. She set a

small radius because if she wasn't going to move for Lena, she definitely wasn't going to move for a stranger. She ticked only women since she had no interest in men and added the box that stated she was looking for love.

Ugh. Love. It sounded horrible but that was what she was here for.

Then it was time to match. The profiles were already queued up, all Aditi needed to do was swipe.

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"Too old," Aditi said for the first woman. She continued swiping, not in any way, shape, or form interested or intrigued by the steady stream of selfies. "Too young. Too perky. Too macho. Too tall. Too short."

Alix rolled her eyes. "Come on, you're not giving anyone a chance. You're the one who wanted to try online dating."

"But none of them do it for me," Aditi complained, still swiping without even bothering to look. This had been a terrible mistake. None of these women were Lena.

"Stop!" Alix almost slapped the phone out of Aditi's hand. "Fuck, that's Veronica."

Aditi sat up, instantly distracted from her own woes. "Oooh! Hello, hot step-sister."

Not to her surprise, Alix gave Aditi's head a swat. "Don't call her that!"

Aditi flicked through the various pictures of Veronica, far more invested in this than her own love life. So this was the woman that Alix almost hooked up with last week? It was so unlike her friend to just go out and sleep with a stranger so of course, Aditi was intrigued.

This Veronica looked classy. Expensive bags, designer clothes, just a vibe that only people with money had. Not stupid generational money, but flashy cash.

"She's cute. Not my type, though," she added quickly, so her friend wouldn't think she was interested.

"Thank the Goddess for that," Alix muttered. It sounded like a joke but knowing her, it was likely genuine relief. For some reason, Alix seemed to believe that Aditi was far more attractive than her.

Aditi disagreed. While she didn't think of herself as ugly, she did have eyes and mirrors, she also knew that some people would always dismiss her because of her heritage. She didn't mind, she never minded because her own preferences were specific too. Tall women, smart women, sweet women with a heart of gold. All those boxes had been ticked in Lena.

A picture of Veronica in a red bikini appeared and Alix fanned herself. "Told you. Smoking hot."

Aditi felt herself smile. "You should make yourself a dating profile and match with her." Maybe that would distract her friend from trying to match her up with all these random women.

"No! Were you not listening to the whole story? I need to stay the heck away from her," Alix protested.

"Why? She's not your real step-sister. Your mum and her dad happen to be dating each other. Big deal," Aditi said, eagerly jumping on the change in topic.

Alix looked comically mortified. "And I have to go to dinner with them and Veronica, the woman who I almost hooked up with. No, that makes it sound hot and steamy when I fell asleep in the middle of our hook-up. How embarrassing!"

"I've had that happen to me. I've totally fallen asleep in the middle of sex when I had a super long shift."

"Yes, but with Lena. With your long-term partner, your best friend, the love of your

li—" Alix paused mid-sentence."Sorry."

Aditi's stomach turned and she could suddenly feel all the margaritas at once.She pressed her hands over her mouth but she still felt horrible.

Alix patted her back."You okay?"

"Mhmm," she hummed before shaking her head."Hmhm."

"Need some water?Fresh air?A bag?"

"No, I'm fine."Aditi slid her hands up until her fingers reached her temples."Why couldn't I just say yes when Lena asked me to move with her?What does it matter if we're fated mates?"

Alix didn't answer.

"I'm such a coward," Aditi continued, her head heavy with regret and despair."I should never have asked her to go to the lake with me."

"It's alright to want a fated mate, though.It's in your blood.You're a shifter, a bear shifter at that.Wanting a fated mate is in your DNA," Alix said.

Aditi cringed at the statement."I hate that so much.I've always hated the idea of fate dictating my choices, my love life.I wanted to love someone freely, simply because I love them.Not because of any Moon Goddess' will or the universe's plan or something like that."

"And that's beautiful too.But now you want more."

"I don't even know if I do!I just panicked.Like moving to the country is a big

deal. Leaving my mum behind, leaving you behind. For someone who could leave me at any moment?" Aditi knew how pathetic and insecure she sounded. She could hear it in her own voice and she hated herself for it. She shouldn't have felt like that after a four-year relationship. And she certainly shouldn't have dealt with it this way, demanding something that they both previously agreed to not doing.

But then the moment Lena refused to go into the lake with her, all those insecurities had multiplied. Why didn't Lena want to find out if they were fated? Would Lena rather break-up then do this? Did Lena think they weren't fated mates?

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It all spiralled from there on and what Aditi once thought of as a secure relationship came crashing down.

She didn't even have anyone to blame but herself.

Alix gave her a pitiful look. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

"That's okay. I fucked this up. Me. Nobody else." Aditi pushed her hands up her forehead, resisting the urge to pull out all her hair.

They sat in silence for a little longer before Alix reached for the pitcher. "More margaritas?"

"I shouldn't. I've got work tomorrow."

"And we have dinner with Maria and Lena too."

"I forgot about that. Fuck." With a heavy sigh, Aditi held out her empty glass. "Fill it up to the brim."

SEVEN

Lena

Lena entered the restaurant with nerves making her stomach tense. She should've told Alix to shove it with her ladies' nights that included her ex. What kind of person hung out casually with her ex?

A man greeted her at the entrance. "Hello, do you have a reservation?"

"Yes, it's under Alix Jones," Lena replied, already peering into the restaurant.

The man nodded and checked his list. "Yes, table for four. You're the first."

Lena wasn't surprised, she was often the first. She didn't mind, it meant she got the best seat at the table and she got to raise her eyebrows judgmentally at everyone who arrived late.

While she waited, she ordered herself a glass of wine and checked her phone to see where everyone was. Everyone was ten minutes late and the group chat had no new messages. Lena was starting to fear she had the date or place wrong but then she spotted Aditi by the entrance of the restaurant.

Her chest tightened instantly. Just as she expected and feared, Aditi looked absolutely breath-taking and there were multiple people taking note of her arrival, not that Lena blamed them. Aditi wore red in a way that most people couldn't, like it was part of her. The rhythmic click of her heels served as a hypnotising beat as she approached, a confident no-nonsense walk that made people move out of the way.

Lena had no issue admitting that it was Aditi's beauty and vibe that had lured her in when they first met. It was the wonderfully kind and dedicated person underneath that had made her fall head over heels in love.

And now it was over and all Lena could do was clench her teeth and force a smile. It didn't matter that once she thought they would be together forever, now they were just friends. Or rather, they were friends with the same people.

Aditi arrived at the table but remained standing. "Where is everyone?"

"How would I know?I'm not a mind reader," Lena grumbled.She had that exact same question and she was going to give her friends more than a judgmental look when they arrived.This was what she feared might happen.

"Did you message in the group?"

"I did, no answer."

Still standing, Aditi checked her phone."Hmm, you're right."

"Of course, why would I lie?"Lena bit back, harsher than intended.She didn't like this side of her, this sharp edge in her voice that cut her own tongue.She hated how it sounded, how she was coming across.Especially towards Aditi who always used to soften her hard edges.

Surprisingly unbothered, Aditi sat down as far away from Lena as a four-man table allowed.They sat in awkward silence, both on their phones typing urgent messages to their friends.

"Where are they?"Lena muttered, wondering at what point she should start calling emergency services to report her missing friends.This wasn't too out of character for Alix but Maria was always on time.

Aditi held up her phone."Oh, it's Alix!"

"Answer then."

"Hi!Where are you?"Aditi shouted into the phone which she helpfully put onto speaker.

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"I'm so sorry! I missed my bus. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Maybe thirty." Alix thought for a moment. "Definitely thirty, traffic is a bitch and this bus driver keeps slowing down for bikers and to let other people on."

Lena pinched the bridge of her nose. Great.

"Have you heard from Maria?" Aditi asked.

"No? Isn't she there yet?"

"No. It's just me and Lena."

There was a beat of silence on Alix' side of the line. "Yikes. Is it awkward? I bet it's awkward."

"You're also on speaker," Aditi said, looking horrified.

"Hey, Alix," Lena said, not sure if she should be amused or embarrassed.

The phone stayed silent for a few seconds before Alix replied sheepishly, "Hi, Lena. Sorry, didn't know this was on speaker. Thanks, Adi. You should really let people know that at the start of the call."

The phone call ended, leaving them in an even more awkward atmosphere than before. Lena drank some of her wine just to have something to do.

"I didn't know she was going to be so blunt," Aditi said with an uneasy chuckle.

"It's fine, I'm used to Alix' bluntness by now." Lena twirled her glass around, drawing circular indents in the tablecloth with the foot. This was torture.

"Yeah, but---"

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of the front door open and both turned to look at it, only for their hopes to be dashed when two unknown women walked in. They looked to be arguing even while they settled at the bar.

"I wonder if Maria is okay," Aditi said. "It's not like her to be late."

"Pregnancy-brain does funny things to people. Maybe she went into early labour," Lena wondered.

"Unlikely, but you never know." Aditi drummed her fingers on the table. "I suppose I could call into work, see if she's been admitted. That's probably overkill though, right? I'm not my mother."

Lena couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah, it's a bit premature to start calling all the morgues."

With a mortified look, Aditi sank her head into her hands. "I still can't believe my mother did that. What was she thinking?"

"She just loves her little precious baby girl," Lena teased. There were many things she missed about Aditi but her overbearing mother wasn't one of them. She never got the impression that Rheka approved of their relationship either so it wasn't like there was any love lost there.

The harsh sound of shattering glass interrupted their first positive conversation since they sat down and both looked at the bar. The two women who came in earlier seemed

to be fighting still and it was unclear whether the glass on the floor had been an accident or on purpose.

It was followed by one of the women throwing her glass of water in the other's face which promptly earned her a slap. Before the bartenders or staff could even jump in to intervene, one of them stormed off with a surprising amount of poise for someone who was dripping.

Lena and Aditi exchanged a silent look with each other.

"Wow...wonder what that was about," Aditi murmured. "What do you think? Friends or couple fight?"

"That has to be a couple. Maybe one of them confessed to cheating," Lena guessed. "Or they're best friends and one of them is sleeping with the other's husband or wife."

"Maybe they're sisters and one of them stole the other's inheritance."

"Or business partners and one of them embezzled money. We have overactive imaginations."

Aditi chuckled. "Not at all, you wouldn't believe the stories I heard from my colleagues in A&E. Yesterday, there was a man who came in with a knife in his shoulder. He had a habit of critiquing his wife's food and she got fed up with his complaints."

"Ouch."

"And there was an elderly lady who got into a fistfight with her sister at a will reading. They had to be checked for concussions." Aditi leaned on her hand. "And two

teenage boys got into a fight in the lobby over some trading cards or something?I don't fully understand what that was about but one of them stabbed a pen into the other's eye."

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Lena winced and automatically touched her eye. "Vicious."

"You have no idea. That---" Aditi gestured to the lone woman at the bar who was softly sobbing. "Was actually pretty mild."

"I'm realising our fights were pretty tame then," Lena remarked, thinking back to their worst days. There would be screaming and slamming doors but never anything close to this scale.

Aditi hummed in agreement. "Yeah, we were never that bad. Maybe we just loved each other a lot more than those people do."

The words cut through Lena but she managed to keep a neutral expression even if it felt like salt into a fresh wound.

Loved.

Not love.

Loved.

She finished her wine with one big swig and turned around, searching for a server so she could order more. Instead, she spotted Maria arriving at the restaurant with a head of chaos hair.

"I'm so sorry, I totally overslept!" Maria announced when she got to the table. She sank down and poured herself a massive glass of water that she downed in one

go."Goodness.Have you been waiting long?"

"Just a little while," Aditi said diplomatically.

"Where's Alix?"

Lena tried not to let her frustration get the better of her."Delayed by traffic."

The look on Maria's face was worth a picture."So it's just the two of you here?Goodness."

"We didn't do too badly, did we?"Aditi said, looking at Lena for the first time since she sat down.There was a softness in her eyes, a sparkling warmth and traces of genuine affection.

It melted Lena's frustration away like snow under the first sun.

"Yeah, we didn't kill each other unlike the couple at the bar," Lena replied.Her chest contracted when Aditi laughed.It was amazing what such a simple sound could do to her poor heart.

EIGHT

Aditi

Aditi pushedthe cherry tomatoes to the side of her plate, not particularly enamoured with them.She liked tomato fine in soups or sauces, but not seedy and squelchy like this.

She used to pawn them off to Lena but she wasn't sure if that was still allowed.That was something couples did and they were no longer a couple.

It was just tomatoes though.

She decided against it. The atmosphere at the table was great, warm and full of laughter like the old days, and she didn't want to ruin that.

"I have a potentially weird question, and you don't have to answer this," Lena said, her attention on Maria. "Could you give birth in bear form?"

"I wish, that would be so much easier, but no." Maria stroked her belly. "Apparently, my body won't let me shift when I'm too close to giving birth. Don't ask me how it works because I've got no clue."

Everyone looked at Aditi who held up her hands. "Don't look at me. It's not my area of expertise either."

Lena hummed. "It's probably for the best. It would be weird to see a human baby come out of a bear."

The group chuckled in agreement and Aditi had to do everything she could not to stare at Lena with little stars in her eyes. She always loved the way Lena's brain worked, the way she asked things that other people didn't dare or think of.

Brains and beauty, she really was the whole package.

"Speaking of babies. You're all coming to my baby shower, aren't you?" Maria asked, mostly looking at Aditi and Lena.

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"I'll be there," Aditi said dutifully. Even if things were tense between her and Lena, she wasn't going to miss such an important event.

Lena nodded too. "Yes, I've got it in my calendar."

"Good. It wouldn't be right without you all. Now I've got that squared away, I need to pee. Again." Maria got up with a groan, one hand on her belly, the other supporting her lower back. "This baby thinks it's funny to press my bladder."

Everyone waited until she was out of earshot before the conversation resumed.

"Oof, I couldn't do that," Alix commented with a grimace. "The peeing, the strict diet, the swelling. And then after all that, you have a baby. No thanks."

Aditi didn't say anything, noticing that Lena wasn't commenting either. They'd talked about kids plenty of times, so often, that Aditi had pictured it. Beautiful mixed-race babies, always with Lena's warm brown eyes. Just thinking about it was making her sad because that was another thing that was never going to happen.

Luckily, the server came to check on their food and refill water so the topic naturally changed.

"How are things with Veronica?" Aditi asked Alix.

"Don't talk to me about Veronica. We're supposed to go on a holiday with them, as if we're one big happy family. How ridiculous is that? I don't know this man. My mum barely knows him." Alix cut her piece of chicken so angrily, it looked like she wanted

to saw through her plate."Delusional."

Her phone chimed with the familiar little ping of her dating app and the whole table stared at her, in particular Lena.

"Is that, umm...Is that Fate Date?"Lena asked in a way that made it clear she knew exactly what that sound was.

Aditi's face suddenly got very hot."I didn't realise the sound was on.I must not have muted my phone after I was playing Bubble Bears."

"I didn't realise you were already on the apps."

"I'm just swiping.I've not gone on any dates," Aditi said quickly, not sure if that was better or worse.

Any hint of amusement or levity was totally gone from Lena's face.She cut a piece of her steak with enough force to saw through the plate and plastered on the fakest smile ever."Well, it sounds like you just made a match.Good for you."

The chill in her voice gave Aditi actual goosebumps but stupidly, something inside her was fluttering.Lena cared that she was on a dating app.She was jealous.Did that mean there were still feelings there?

Was there still hope for them?

Maria got back to the table, totally unaware of the tension hanging over it.She just rubbed her belly as she sank down in the chair, groaning."Woo, I know it's too much info, but I did the biggest pee in my life.In my life, I tell you.What are we talking about?"

Nobody answered.

The awkward silence was enough to make Maria wince. "That bad? What's going on? Are we talking childbirth? Pooping during birth? Child death?"

"Aditi is on the apps and she just got a match," Alix chimed in, as if she wasn't partially to blame for this. Mostly, actually. She had the brilliant idea to make margaritas. And to install the dating apps. She was the one who swiped right on the handful of people who didn't look like they were after a threesome, were men, or had shifter vibes.

Actually, in a roundabout way, this was entirely her fault.

Maria grimaced. "Oh, yikes. Now I'm wishing I stayed in the bathroom."

Lena set down her glass with a noticeable thud. "Why is everyone making a big fuss over this? I don't want to date Aditi so why should I fucking care that she's on the apps?"

And with that last, harsh, statement, dinner was well and truly over.

Aditi clenched her teeth. It shouldn't have stung but it did. A silly foolish part of her had been holding onto the hope that maybe they would work things out, but that clearly wasn't happening.

She felt like such an idiot.

NINE

Lena

Lena couldn't say she was in the mood for a baby shower and she'd genuinely considered not going, especially after the mess she made at dinner. But Maria was one of her oldest friends and it would be petty to miss such an important event simply because her ex was going to be there.

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Especially because she didn't have all that many friends and she was grateful that none of their mutual friends had picked sides in the break-up.

She groaned as she carried her gift through the front garden. She had to pay extra for one-day delivery on her expensive car seat but all the small stuff from the wish list had already been picked.

This was what she got for leaving it till the last minute.

A large homemade welcome sign hung on the front door, pointing guests towards the side entry. Lena followed it where she entered their kitchen. She'd been here enough times to not feel awkward for just entering but the truckload of balloons were new. She kicked some out of the way but almost tripped, off-balance from the large box she was carrying.

"Let me get that," a chipper voice said.

The load was lifted out of Lena's arms and she smiled upon seeing Alix. "Hey, thanks."

"No problem. Gosh, this is heavy." With a grunt, Alix set it down on a side table with a lot of other presents on it already. "There we go."

"Am I late?" Lena asked, already glancing around the room for that familiar face, voice, head of hair. She was always looking for Aditi, a habit she still hadn't beaten.

Alix made a thinking noise. "Ehh, you're not the first to arrive, not the last either. Aditi

isn't here yet, if that's what you're asking."

"I wasn't," Lena lied, instantly relaxing now she knew her ex wasn't here yet. At least she could greet Maria without worrying.

She used the opportunity to do exactly that. She greeted her pregnant friend with a warm hug and apology for what transpired over dinner.

Maria squeezed her tight with that understanding smile of hers. "It's all right. I know it's selfish but I really do hope you and Aditi can figure out how to be around each other. I want this baby to have all her aunts in her life, that includes you."

"That's sweet," Lena said, a little emotional. She'd been feeling so upset with the rescinded job offer that she'd forgotten how much she loved her life here. While her job wasn't perfect, all her friends lived here and they were her family, regardless if she and Aditi were together or not.

She got herself a drink, chatted a bit with a variety of Maria's friends and family, and helped Maria's husband move some chairs into the room. She didn't stop glancing at the door, always looking for Aditi. At this point, she wasn't sure if she was looking forward to seeing her ex, or dreading it. Maybe a bit of both.

Aditi arrived not much later with not one, not two, but three gifts in her arms. As expected, she'd overdone it and nobody was surprised by that. Aditi was a giver, had always been a giver. She loved taking care of people, something Lena had reaped the benefits off while they were together. It was one of the things that had drawn her to Aditi. That, and those irresistible lips of hers.

She pulled her gaze away and focused it on a spot in the garden, embarrassed she was even thinking these kinds of things. She pretended not to listen or notice Aditi making her rounds, greeting people with that upbeat tone of hers. Every room became

instantly brighter once Aditi entered, something Lena was well aware of.

Lena waited for that unavoidable moment where Aditi would approach her but it didn't come. She glanced around, trying to work out if she was imagining it or not. Did something, or someone, prevent Aditi from making her way to this corner of the room? Or had Aditi simply not noticed her?

She spotted Aditi at the table where she was pouring herself a drink. The moment they locked eyes, Aditi quickly looked away and pretended someone on the other side of the room had called for her attention.

Lena was baffled. She knew they weren't exactly on great terms but she hadn't expected to be outright ignored. Not by friendly, chatty, always-had-to-say-something Aditi. Had she done something wrong? Or was she just overthinking it?

She stewed on it for a little while, watching Aditi flit from conversation to conversation, never making it over to this corner of the room. She never even looked this way which was ridiculous because Lena was standing right next to a gorgeous potted plant that she knew Aditi loved.

After half an hour of being ignored, Lena was fed up. She finished her juice, wishing it was something stronger, and intercepted Aditi on the way to the table with snacks.

"Are you avoiding me?" Lena asked, not bothering with small talk or polite greetings.

Aditi glanced up at her and shrugged. "Maybe. It's not like you want to date me though so why do you fucking care."

Lena flinched at the painful echo of her own words. She really shouldn't have lashed out like that no matter how jealous and hurt she was. How much of a punch to the gut it was to know that Aditi was swiping on the apps, no doubt capturing all the hearts of

the lonely singles with her adorable pictures.

"I'm sorry," Lena said sheepishly.

Aditi gave her a surprised look. "For what?"

"I shouldn't have said what I said. And certainly not the way I said it." She scratched the back of her head, her gaze travelling to Alix and Maria. "We're going to keep running into each other so it wouldn't hurt to be on friendly terms."

"That's what I said."

"And I'm saying you're right."

Aditi's perfectly shaped eyebrows raised up. "My, my. Lena Brown admitting someone else is right? Call the newspapers."

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"It's not that unusual. And nobody calls the newspapers nowadays."

"No, but 'call the gossip blogs' doesn't have the same ring," Aditi replied, finally smiling. "But is this your way of calling a truce?"

"I suppose it is." Lena took a deep breath but she wasn't as annoyed as expected. "There's no reason to always be at each other's throat, right?"

"I couldn't agree more." Aditi nodded. She held out her hand, making her bracelets clatter together. "Friends?"

"Friends might be a bit too much," Lena said, hesitating to slip her hand in Aditi's. She ignored the little thrill shooting up her arm and the warmth of Aditi's hand, managing to keep her composure. "But sure, friends."

Aditi's smile radiated pure joy and was so bright, it was blinding. Lena's heart skipped a traitorous beat, not that it surprised her. Aditi was as irresistible now as when they first met. That didn't mean Lena was going to jump her, there was too much baggage for that.

Still, she could appreciate that beaming smile, the one that felt like the rising morning sun after a long cold night.

"So, what did you buy Maria?" Aditi asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"I got the car seat. I know it's boring but it's all I could get last minute," Lena replied, glancing at the table with presents that was even fuller now. "I saw you went

overboard with the gifts. Why am I not surprised?"

"I would've bought Maria's entire registry if my budget allowed it," Aditi said, beaming with affection. Knowing her, she meant it too.

"You could always ask your supervisor for a raise," Lena joked.

Aditi chuckled in disbelief. "I didn't realise you wished me death."

"I don't think Katherine would kill you. Who would pick up all the odd shifts then?" Lena said, realising she'd slipped so easily into casual banter, she hadn't even noticed until it was too late. There was just something about Aditi that relaxed her, it always had.

Frustratingly, that still seemed to be true.

"Very true. She needs me alive," Aditi conceded, her nose crinkling when she smiled. "So how've you been? How's work?"

Lena grimaced thinking about her colleagues. "Ehh. I'd rather not talk about work."

Luckily for her, Maria's sister, the one who was organising the baby shower, called everyone's attention from the front of the room. She introduced herself quickly and announced the start of the baby shower games. "We've assigned everyone a partner with whom you will go through the baby bear trials! The pair who accumulates the most points will win a prize."

Everyone cheered except for Lena who suddenly got a bad feeling. Surely she wasn't paired up with Aditi...? Coming to a truce was one thing but having to spend the entire afternoon together, playing silly games, that was a whole other matter.

Maria's sister handed her a little card and it confirmed what Lena feared.

Yup, her partner was nobody else than Aditi.

TEN

Aditi

Aditi wasn't sure whether to be excited or frustrated that Lena was her partner for the baby shower games. She was trying so hard to maintain distance and just when she seemed to be in control of herself, Lena swung down her fragile walls with that sledgehammer of a smile of hers.

At least Maria looked horrified. "I'm so sorry, I forgot to tell my sister about the breakup. I blame baby-brain. I'll ask her to get someone to swap with you."

Aditi was about to agree when Lena surprised her.

"No, it's fine. We don't want to cause trouble. Besides, it's just a few games, Aditi and I can handle that much." Lena glanced at her, conspiringly. "Can't we?"

"Sure," Aditi agreed with a dry mouth. This was so unexpected, it was making her question her sanity. Was this truly just platonic and for the sake of their friends? Did Alix tell Lena off? Or did Lena still have feelings for her?

What in the goddess' name was going on here?

Maria eyed them up cautiously but nodded. "If you're sure, then great. I'm glad to see you two getting along."

"Of course," Aditi said, pleased that at least they weren't causing stress for their

pregnant friend. She didn't understand why Lena had just agreed to be her partner for the games when not that long ago, it seemed like Lena couldn't even stand being in the same room as her.

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And frustratingly, Lena's neutral expression had always been one she found hard to read. Even when they were together.

Uncomfortable and out of sorts, Aditi exchanged a nervous smile with her ex. She had no idea what this meant but she was kind of curious to find out.

She followed everyone out into the garden where the games were set up. Aditi tried not to focus too much on that or Lena, instead pouring all her focus into trying to win. The first round, a blindfolded obstacle course, was a piece of cake. She shouted instructions at Lena who easily jumped over all the scattered toys and laundry with her long legs. It was an easy win and they celebrated with a hesitant high five.

She was determined to win the next round too but her ambitions were quickly squashed when they were given a stuffed bear. The challenge? To put on a diaper while blindfolded. Since neither of them had any experience with it, it turned into a talcum powder disaster. Aditi nearly choked on the cloud of perfumed dust and she was glad when the game ended.

Lena snorted. "You've got some here." She touched her own cheek.

"Is it gone?" Aditi asked as she wiped her face.

"No, you actually added even more. Go like this." Lena slapped her own cheeks while she shook her face.

Aditi couldn't help but laugh at the silly sight. She mimicked the action, surprised by how much powder was flying off of her.

"You look like you've been in a crack den or something," Lena joked, snickering under her breath.

"So just the hospital then," Aditi joked back as she coughed out some of the powder.

Lena patted her back which turned into soothing repetitive circles. There was something calming and stirring about the motion, it made Aditi sink into it. Nobody gave better back rubs than Lena.

She relished in the familiar feeling until she snapped back to reality and remembered this was not something to find comfort in.

They played a few more games, all baby-themed. She particularly loved the guess round with baby pictures of all the guests, mostly because baby Lena was the cutest thing in the world. And while Lena didn't say anything, she did look at Aditi's baby picture with a strange intensity.

Aditi considered making a joke about it but decided against it. The afternoon was going remarkably well, she didn't want to spoil it by becoming overly sentimental. Not when they were getting along better than they had since the breakup. This wasn't where she thought they would be but it was better than the usual frosty tension.

A little whistle was blown to announce the next round. Maria's sister held up a stack of papers with pens. "The last round is the calendar relay. One person in the team will have a schedule, the other person needs to write it all down. You may not show them your schedule. But there's a catch! I'll be playing loud music and crying baby noises to distract you."

Everyone groaned and some of the couples looked confident, while others already looked defeated. Aditi was fairly confident about the task, communication had never

been an issue between her and Lena, and she wasn't going to be distracted by some noise.

What she hadn't counted on was the distraction that was Lena whispering in her ear. Even while she was saying the most boring and mundane things like, Aditi was unable to focus. Lena's breathy voice made it impossible to concentrate because her ear was warm and every instruction whispered by Lena was like liquid electricity crackling down her neck.

It was a good thing they were in public because it was bringing back memories of passionate nights and intimate mornings.

"Aditi? Are you even listening?" Lena gave her a little nudge.

"Yes, I am, sorry." Aditi focused on her empty piece of paper and wrote down some random events in random boxes while she tried her best to listen.

The game was over before Aditi realised it and they placed last. She didn't even care, she was focusing too hard on getting her heartbeat under control. And the worst part was that Lena knew far too well that this was a turn-on.

Awkward, awkward, awkward.

"That was an, umm, interesting game," Lena said, looking everywhere but Aditi. She totally, totally knew. Of course she knew, there had been plenty of nights that started with whispers and ended in screams.

Beet red and flustered, Aditi excused herself to get some water and calmed herself down by washing her hands under cold water. Very cold water. This was her ex, for fuck's sake. Her heart shouldn't be pounding like crazy and she hated her body for reacting like this. It was like it had forgotten the horrible heartbreak and intense fights,

it was just ready for make up sex.

That was not going to happen. Aditi knew Lena well enough that there would be no back-sliding. Lena was far too unyielding for that, a quality Aditi always admired in her. She wished her own spine was made from whatever material Lena's was because she was always far too quick to bend.

Even now, she couldn't help the hope springing up in her chest even if her head knew there was no future for them. As long as they disagreed about commitment, there was no path forward.

"You're such an idiot," she whispered to herself, disappointed with the woman in the mirror. "Get a grip."

ELEVEN

Lena

Lena pushed her trolley through the biscuit aisle of the supermarket, not really paying attention to the brands or prices as she just mowed packets into her cart. Was eating her weight in carbs and sugar going to solve her problems?

No.

Would it make her feel better?

Only temporarily.

Was she going to do it anyway?

Yes.

After the biscuits, she got herself chocolate, sour gummies, and lots of salt and vinegar crisps while thanking her genes for blessing her with a fast metabolism. So she couldn't shift into a bear but at least she could eat lots of carbs.

She skipped the aisle with fresh vegetables and meat, heading straight for the ready meals.

And of course, who was waiting in front of the ready meal section with her cart in the middle of the aisle?

"Aditi," Lena acknowledged, her heart jumping up in her throat at the sight of her ex. Why was this bloody city so small?

Aditi looked up with panic in her eyes. "Oh. Lena. Hi."

"I see you still like midnight shopping," Lena said, smiling when she thought of their little grocery dates in the middle of the night when the supermarkets were empty and

quiet. It was so much less stressful and so much more fun. That was the magic about Aditi, she could turn the most mundane things into a new experience.

Aditi brushed some of her hair out of her pretty face. Even tired, she was so damn charming. "I had a late shift and an empty fridge." Her gaze went to Lena's cart. "Ahh. That time, huh?"

Lena would've denied it but what was the point? After four years of a relationship, it was only understandable that Aditi knew what her period comfort food looked like. And the box of tampons was a clear giveaway regardless.

Lena just shrugged and gestured at the ready meals. "Can I?"

"Yeah, all yours," Aditi replied as she stepped back. She held out the bangers and mash ready meal in her hand. "Here, I was going to have it but you take it. It's the last one."

Lena protested automatically. "That's alright. You got here first."

"Yeah but I know how grumpy and picky you get when you've got your period. This is really a service to the country."

Lena hesitated, deliberating whether it was right to take the ready meal. On the one hand, it felt like acknowledging that they still knew each other really well. On the other, it really was the last of this kind and it was one of her favourites.

"Are you sure?" Lena checked. She wouldn't have even considered it if she wasn't aching so much.

Aditi just put the ready meal in Lena's trolley. "It's just bangers and mash. I'll get something else."

It wasn't just bangers and mash. It was an action born out of care and consideration and it was making Lena weak to her knees. She felt ridiculous for it too. She was swooning and melting over some stupid ready meal.

Not for the first time since they split up, Lena wished things had turned out differently.

"I might just get myself some sausages and potatoes and make my own version," Aditi thought out loud, humming and nodding in that way she always did when she was pleased with her own suggestion.

"That's a good idea," Lena agreed.

"Oh, I can't forget to get some more butter then." Aditi grabbed her trolley when she noticed it was in the way and pulled it to the side. "And I need more kitchen paper. I used almost half a roll cleaning up an unfortunate oil spill last night. It was a disaster. Not important."

Before Lena knew it, they were walking side by side through the aisles, chatting and shopping like they used to. She grabbed the kitchen paper that Aditi liked that was out of reach on the highest shelf and hid a smile when Aditi threw a box of painkillers her way. It was so damn easy to slip back their familiar rhythm, it was a relief and frustrating at the same time.

While Lena eyed up some of the fancy cheese and crackers, Aditi leaned against the cooler. "I've been trying not to worry about it but I have to ask. During the baby shower, during the last round. Did you notice that I...?"

Lena's breath hitched when she remembered the tortured expressions Aditi had made when she'd been whispering in her ear. She kept a straight face and picked up some blue cheese, even if she didn't like blue cheese. "Notice what?"

"I can't tell.If you didn't notice, you didn't notice," Aditi deflected with a cute pout.

"Did I notice that you got flustered?"Lena finished the sentence, trying not to smirk."Yeah, of course.I know what your turned-on face looks like."

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"I feared as much." Aditi hid her face behind a packet of crackers with a little shriek. "That's so embarrassing."

So cute. Why was she so cute?

Lena put the hunk of blue cheese back and grabbed some random crackers. She couldn't care less about it but she needed something to keep her hands busy before she did something stupid. Like kiss her ex in the middle of the supermarket.

"I'm sure nobody else noticed," she said eventually, hoping it came across as reassuring. It was the truth too, she'd only noticed because she knew exactly what Aditi's face looked like when she was getting flustered. She'd be able to recognise the raspy breaths, the unfocused look in her eyes, the sighs anywhere anytime.

Aditi bit the corner of her bottom lip. "You're not as freaked out as I thought."

"Why would I freak out? So you still find me attractive? What's the big deal? We didn't break up cause we stopped finding each other attractive," Lena said with a little shrug that she hoped came across as easy and casual. It wasn't a big deal. It didn't matter that Aditi still liked it when she breathed on her ear, that it still got her heart pounding and stomach fluttering and legs squeezing together.

It. Didn't. Matter.

Lena's grip on the bag of crackers tightened. She really, really needed to convince herself that it didn't matter.

"I suppose so," Aditi murmured in a flat voice. "Yeah, you're right, it's not a big deal. I still find you attractive, so what? Right?"

"Exactly," Lena pushed out, turning away before she lost all sense of control. She would never have guessed that one of the biggest trials in her life would be over cheese and crackers.

She was glad when they moved on and the conversation switched back to safer topics. Her heart was still pounding and she kept hold of her trolley with both hands, afraid what she might do now she knew Aditi was definitely, definitely still attracted to her.

Reality came crashing down like a cold shower when they reached the check-out and she was reminded that despite shopping together, they were paying separately and going to their separate homes.

They weren't together and it didn't matter if she still made Aditi flutter. They were still broken up and wanted two devastatingly different things from life and their romantic partners.

Not even good chemistry could fix that.

Aditi paused after paying, lingering really. "You know, I could come over and make you proper bangers and mash. I know how you get when you're on your period. I've got everything for it now anyway and it'll be better than your ready meal. And all those chocolates in your bag."

Lena's heart leapt up although she couldn't pinpoint if it was eagerness or panic. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"It's a friend-offer. I do this kind of thing for Alix too."

Which was true. Lena knew it was true because she'd been there for it. Aditi was just this kind of person, warm and thoughtful and caring. Would it really be so bad to take her up on this offer? It wasn't like anything was going to happen, Lena's period was killing her. And she really wanted to be pampered instead of going back to a flat that wasn't quite home.

She nodded, against her better judgement. "I do like the way you make mash."

Aditi looked pleased, maybe too pleased. "Great. Plus, I'm kind of curious to see your new place."

"Right, you've not been." Lena's excitement died and it twisted the knife in her heart. She already regretted saying yes because now she had to take Aditi to her sad little flat and host her like a guest, as if they hadn't lived together and shared their lives for the last four years.

What the heck was wrong with her?

TWELVE

Aditi

Aditi wasn't sure what she'd expected from Lena's new flat but it was both a surprise and so very Lena. It was all bare and functional, which could've been explained by the fact that she only moved here recently but that wasn't the case. Lena was just like that, functional but surprisingly agreeable to buying cute little pillows and nice bed sheets and colourful paintings for the walls.

She was always agreeable. Maybe that was why it came as such a surprise that she hadn't been willing to budge even a little on the fated-mate conversation. Then again, it wasn't really something to compromise on. There was no in between going and not

going into the lake of fate.

"Pots are in there," Lena said, snapping Aditi out of her thoughts. "I think I've got a colander somewhere. I'm sure I bought one."

Aditi pulled open another cupboard and knelt down, not at all surprised to find it stuffed with kitchen utensils with their labels still attached. A brand new colander was one of them and she pulled it out. "Found it."

Lena looked stunned, as if she'd forgotten that they lived together and knew all these cute slash frustrating little habits about each other. Like how Lena left her socks everywhere and how Aditi's hair clogged up the shower drain. Or that Lena was an expert at stacking the dishwasher, unlike Aditi, and only had three drawers for clothes. Shirts, trousers, all her underwear and grey socks.

That was, for someone like Aditi who liked a walk-in closet, one of life's greatest bafflements. It wasn't something she wanted to change about Lena, rather she found it quite endearing. It also meant that she knew her way around Lena's flat even though she hadn't been here before.

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It was all so frustratingly aching familiar. Especially when she opened a cupboard and was faced with their old bowls and plates that Lena got in the breakup.

Aditi's heart tightened when she remembered the outrageously expensive furnishing trip at the beginning of their relationship. "You're still using our plates."

"There was nothing wrong with them," Lena said, practical as always.

"Right." Aditi tried not to think about it too much as she grabbed a small bowl so she could whisk an egg. She whisked it for far longer than necessary, trying not too hard to think about Lena watching her from the small kitchen table with a blanket over her legs.

As she whisked, Aditi could feel her thoughts wander. Was this a good idea? No. Should she just have gone home? Obviously. What in the goddess' name was she doing cooking food for her ex?

"Maybe I'm a potato," she muttered to herself as she mashed the boiled potatoes with a fork. It wouldn't make a smooth mash, the way she liked it, but she knew Lena didn't mind a lump or two.

"What?" Lena said.

"Nothing. How many sausages do you want?"

"Three. And lots of gravy," Lena said.

"I know you want lots of gravy, this isn't my first rodeo," Aditi said as she filled their plates, their old familiar plates. Something about it felt so wrong and so right at the same time. It was honestly a little ridiculous. Was she really getting sentimental over some old grey plates?

She carried the food to the table and set the plates down. Only when she sat down, she realised just how small the table was. Her knees were practically touching Lena's and she could see the specks in Lena's brown eyes. It was an intimate setting, much more than expected.

It was making her stomach flip-flop.

Aditi picked up her fork and cast her eyes down before she did something stupid. "Tuck in."

"I will." Lena instantly went for a piece of sausage and a good bite of mash. "Mmm. That's good. I missed your cooking."

"Thanks?"

"No, thank you. I really appreciate this." Lena gave her a warm smile. "Maybe this friend-thing isn't so bad."

Friend.

Aditi had already forgotten she said that. She'd used that word to get herself in the door but now it was backfiring on her. Did she really want to be friends with Lena?

Goddess, no.

But the alternative was not having Lena in her life at all and that would be worse than

this teeth-grinding distance. This was better than nothing, at least that was what Aditi told herself while she relived some of her fondest memories.

Nobody ever talked about how wonderful the mundanity of life could be. How having a simple meal in a small kitchen with the right person could be better than a lavish dinner in the fanciest restaurant. Nobody ever said that the simple breathing and an occasional smile from the right person would be enough to make Aditi's pulse roar in her ears to the point she was worried she was having a heart attack.

This was what she gave up? For what? To conform to the norms of their society, to get assurance from a higher power that they were perfect for each other? Why did she crave a fated mate bond when she could just look at Lena and feel so full, it was making her heart spill over.

"Yes?" Lena said without even looking up.

"Nothing."

"I can feel you staring at me. I know your silences very well."

Aditi's stomach twisted into a knot. "I was just thinking that this was nice."

"It is." Lena put her fork down and looked up. "If we can be like this, maybe we're not going to drive our mutual friends up the walls after all."

"Yeah. Maybe." Aditi ate some of her mash but she couldn't really taste any of it. All she could taste was the bitter fragrance of regret.

THIRTEEN

Lena

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They stood side by side, elbow to elbow, washing dishes in a way they had done hundreds of times before. Aditi washed, Lena dried and put things away because she could reach the upper cupboards. That was how they always did it, that was how it was always done.

Even in Lena's flat, the one Aditi never had been in before, she was still in command.

Funny how some dynamics just never changed.

Lena flapped out the damp towel and hung it over the handle of the oven. "Thank you for helping out with the dishes."

"I know what you're like, especially on your period." Aditi turned around and for the first time since she got here, looked a bit lost. "Well...I've probably imposed enough, I should---"

"Do you want some tea?" Lena interrupted what she feared was the beginning of Aditi's goodbye statement. Maybe it was her period, maybe it was the food, but it was the first time since she moved here that the place felt warm and homey. She wasn't ready for Aditi to leave and everything to turn back grey.

Aditi hesitated. "I suppose some tea wouldn't hurt."

"Great. You sit down, I'll make you some."

"No, I can do it. I came here to help you out. You sit down and take some more painkillers."

Lena would never admit it to anyone else, but she liked being fussed over like this. Not by just anyone, definitely not by her mother, but she loved it when it came from Aditi.

She missed it. She missed all this. It hadn't hit her just how much until this moment, where Aditi was bringing her a cup of tea with that cute little smile of hers and everything inside Lena's body ached like she'd been running non-stop for months.

"Thank you," she said because she couldn't say what she really felt. Don't go. Stay. I missed you. Can we wind back time?

I love you.

She blinked away the tears and sipped her tea, hissing when it burned her lips.

"Careful, it's hot," Aditi said in a tone that hid her amusement.

"Now you tell me."

"You're a clever woman, I didn't think I needed to tell you boiling water is hot."

"It's technically no longer boiling," Lena replied pedantically, causing both of them to chuckle. Aditi even nudged her knee against hers, conspiringly, like the good old days were still upon them.

They drank their tea in comfortable silence and Lena felt so very warm and not because of the technically-not-boiling liquid filling her stomach. This was what she pictured for the rest of her life, the two of them together at the end of a long day, winding down in a little bubble that belonged to just them.

Why couldn't this have lasted? Was it always going to be like this? Almost like the real

thing but not quite?

She glanced at Aditi, her heart leaping up in her throat when she found the other woman already looking at her. Embarrassed to be caught, Aditi quickly averted her eyes up to the wall.

Lena's calendar was up there, the one that she bought with good intentions. There wasn't much filled in on it except for an event that had been creeping closer.

"The murder talk is coming up," Aditi said, clearly noticing it too. "Two more weeks."

Lena hummed while she held onto her mug like a life buoy. "I know. I've got the tickets somewhere."

"Right, because you always print out these things."

"If you saw how often programs and computers glitch, you would be printing everything out too," Lena defended herself. She knew the dangers of technology well and kept her home as smart-free as possible. Nobody needed a voice-activated device in their homes or a fridge that could be remote controlled.

What kind of controlling did a fridge even need?

Aditi smiled in the same way she always did when Lena talked about unreliable technology. "It's a shame I'll have to miss the talk. It's promising to be a really good one too. Murders committed in broad daylight. Such a niche topic."

"I know. I want to know what goes through a person's mind that they don't even care about killing in the middle of the day. Is it necessity? Desperation? Or simply not caring about being caught?" Lena was getting excited just thinking about it. "And it's our favourite speaker too."

"Retired Detective Sloan, isn't it?"

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"Yes.It's so fascinating how he brings up his own old cases.Much better than those enthusiasts who just speculate and theorise about what happened without actually having all the facts."

"Well, you can still go," Aditi said with a chuckle."You're clearly looking forward to it."

"Yeah, but it's not the same on my own.The theorising afterwards is part of the fun."Lena scratched the back of her head, fondly remembering all of the cute dates they had after going to a murder talk."And if I go on my own, that's kind of suspect, isn't it?Like, what kind of person goes to a murder show on their own?A murderer, maybe."

"Maybe you should take a friend with you then," Aditi said in a strange voice.

Lena hummed while she thought it over."Okay."

The surprise on Aditi's face came with hurt flitting through her eyes, as if she couldn't believe Lena said yes to her suggestion.

"Want to go to a murder show with me?"Lena asked, smiling as she ignored the slight sting."Since we're friends now."

"Oh."A smile of relief bloomed on Aditi's face."Yeah, sure.I do love a good murder talk."

"You don't say," Lena quipped.They both knew it was Aditi who dragged them to the

very first murder talk. It was her fault that they hadn't missed a single macabre talkshow in their city.

And now they were going to another one. As friends.

FOURTEEN

Aditi

Aditi nervously smoothed out her dress as she waited in front of the theatre for Lena. This felt like a date. A first date even.

It wasn't but that didn't stop her from being so nervous. What if Lena had changed her mind and stood her up? It would be understandable, who hung out casually with their ex?

Then again, Lena wasn't flakey. She liked commitment and held her promises. Some would call her rigid but Aditi thought of it more as reliable. Lena was someone she could rely on, someone rockfast and steady. The kind of person one could build a life with.

Aditi's hand went up to her stomach where she could feel her shifter mark through the fabric of her clothes. She shouldn't have put so much stock in it. She didn't even realise when she started caring about traditions and fate because she sure as hell didn't when she was a teenager. Her mother had been so, so, so upset when she came back with a tattoo through her bear mark. It was a proper slap in the face to fate, a refusal to comply.

When did she lose that rebellious streak inside of her?

She pushed the thoughts away when a taxi arrived and Lena clambered out of it

which always looked a little funny and endearing since she was so tall. Like a baby deer who wasn't quite used to its legs yet.

Aditi raised her hand and waved, ecstatic when Lena sort of waved back. She was wearing nice trousers and a shirt with buttons that she only put on for special occasions like weddings, funerals, ...or dates.

Hope rushed through Aditi like a gust of hot air. If Lena was dressing up nicely, did that mean this was more than just a friendly-date? Or was she reading too much into the situation? Maybe Lena was simply not comfortable enough to wear her usual graphic shirts anymore.

If that were the reason for the button shirt, it was the opposite of a good sign.

Before she could overthink it, Lena was right in front of her with her hair sticking up slightly. "Have you been waiting long?"

"No, maybe five minutes or so. You're actually here earlier than expected, it's still twenty minutes until it starts."

"I knew you'd already be here," Lena said as she checked her watch. "I should've set off even sooner."

For someone who was perpetually late and disorganised, Aditi was touched and charmed and she felt so very special. There were very few things that Lena really genuinely cared about but she'd always been one of them.

"You look nice," Aditi said against her better judgement.

Lena ran her hand through her short hair, messing it up which made her look even hotter. "Thanks. So do you. But you always look good."

Heat rushed up to Aditi's cheeks and she felt that tingle in her stomach, the one that she only ever got with Lena. She ignored it and turned her attention back to the theatre.

"Shall we grab a drink first?" Aditi suggested, doing everything she could to stay neutral and casual and friendly. A drink before a show was normal, lots of people would be doing it. Maybe not people who had come on a non-date with their ex but that was because most people weren't gluttons for punishment.

They headed inside and Lena presented their tickets, the ones she printed out and folded into meticulous perfect squares. Aditi always found it so adorable how Lena could be such a scatterbrain in one part of her life and so neat in others.

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"Oh, I should probably pay you back for the ticket," Aditi said, realising their finances were separate now so it did matter whose bank account the money came out of.

Lena shrugged. "It's fine. If you hadn't come along, I'd still have had to pay for two tickets."

Aditi could've argued that someone else could've gone along, although she wasn't sure who. Alix wasn't good with blood or murder and Maria was heavily pregnant. She supposed that in the time they were broken up, Lena could've made a new friend but that was unlikely to be the case.

"Thanks," she said instead, wondering if this was Lena being thoughtful or Lena being practical. It was hard to tell sometimes.

Once they reached the lobby, they joined the queue for the impromptu bar. There wasn't a whole lot of choice so Aditi ordered some cider, just to take the edge off. She was well aware that wasn't necessarily a good idea but one problem at the time.

The woman behind the bar set the drinks down and held out her card machine. "Separate or together?"

Aditi hesitated, her thoughts flitting back to their meeting in Dragon Roast, to Lena's hard cold voice when she said to charge it separately. Then again, this was a very different situation. They were on better terms and Lena was paying for the tickets.

"Together," she decided, especially when she saw Lena reaching for her

phone.Maybe it was the wrong decision, and paying for drinks together wasn't magically going to make this a date, but Aditi wasn't going to be the one to point it out.

The woman behind the bar didn't give them a second thought, naturally unaware and uncaring to what was going on.Aditi completed the payment and took her drink so they could move out of the line.

"Thanks for the drink," Lena said with a lopsided smile.

"You paid for the tickets, it's only fair," Aditi replied as casually as she could, shrugging for good measure, like this whole thing wasn't making her heart race.So what if she was here with her ex?Friends could go out for an event, she did that all the time with Alix.

She didn't want to kiss or touch or hold Alix's hand the way she wanted to with Lena, but that was kind of irrelevantFeelings didn't make something a date, intent did.

A date was something two people decided on together, something they planned ahead of time, something for just the two of them because they wanted to spend time together.

Fuck.Was this a date?

Lena nudged her in the side."Aditi?"

"Yes?"

"I was asking if you wanted to grab our seats."

"Sure, good idea."Aditi nodded, still a little dazed.Why did she think coming along

was a good idea?Who was she kidding?She was still desperately in love with Lena and every missed kiss and moment she needed to restrain herself from reaching out was like dribbling lemon juice in an open wound.It wasn't going to kill her but who knew how long she could bear it?

Lena counted out the rows until they got to theirs and pointed out their seats, the ones at the end because it was much nicer not to have to crawl over people's lap to get in and out.

Without discussion, they settled in their seats.Aditi on the left, Lena on the right, just like how they always did it.She didn't even think about the lack of conversation until the lights went out and she realised that with anyone else, there would be this considerate chair dance.

Not with them.They knew how they fit together.

Aditi felt the urge to take Lena's hand but that would be inappropriate so she trapped them under her leg.

Not.A.Date.

FIFTEEN

Lena

The cold airmade Lena shiver and she wished she'd brought a thicker coat.The talk had gone on longer than expected and had been surprisingly grim.

"It's a good thing it was about murderers in broad daylight," Aditi said, gesturing into the dark night."Goodness..."

"Hmm," Lena hummed affirmingly. "I never realised there was a serial killer in our city."

"No, me neither. You think that's the kind of thing you would know. Especially one that preys on women."

"Well, he's dead so it's not an issue anymore," Lena said, although the talk had ended quite ominously with some statistics about the likelihood of a murderer being in their midst or how likely an encounter was like that was.

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It was the first time a talk like this had unsettled her and a good reminder that murder was not a cute topic.

She paused, her gaze drawn to the bar that they used to drink at every now and then. Before she knew it, she'd made an unwise suggestion. "Do you want to grab a drink, shake off the thought from the talk?"

"Hmm, better not."

Lena's disappointment made her stomach heavy and she admonished herself for temporarily forgetting that they weren't together anymore. It was just so easy to slip back into their familiar rhythm but she had to remember that Aditi didn't love her like she used to.

"It's getting late, I should probably go home," Aditi said.

Lena nodded even if everything inside her wanted to grab hold of Aditi. "Yeah, probably."

"I'm glad it's only a short walk home," Aditi said, peering off into the distance. "How are you getting home? Taxi?"

"Yeah, I was just going to walk up to the station where all the taxis queue."

"Maybe you should order one through the app instead, that way there's a trail. You know, just in case."

As sweet as her concern was, Lena was also looking in the direction of their old home. It was a relatively safe walk back, that was true, but there were some dodgy parts.

Not to mention, Aditi seemed a bit uneasy.

"What about you? Maybe you should also take a taxi home," she suggested, her stomach twisting at the thought of danger befalling Aditi. "Or I could walk you home."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Yeah, I can just take a taxi from there. It's not that much more expensive."

Aditi gave her a poignant look. "I wasn't asking for money-reasons."

It took Lena a moment to catch on. Maybe it was weird to walk Aditi back to the flat they used to live in. Even if they agreed to be on friendly terms, that was too much, wasn't it?

"I suppose it might be a bit weird," she conceded.

"On the other hand, it's only weird if we make it weird. And I don't really want to walk home alone," Aditi admitted, sounding a bit more decisive than before.

Something inside Lena leapt and she nodded. "Alright, then we should set off. The night isn't going to get any younger."

The walk back was filled with nostalgia that was somehow warm and familiar but also like a noose tightening around Lena's neck. This was weird. This used to be her route, her local chippy, her corner shop. This used to be home.

She'd gotten all quiet by the time they reached their flat.

Lena had to correct herself. Not their flat, Aditi's flat. Just thinking that made her stomach turn.

This was a mistake.

"I should go," she murmured, unable to look Aditi in the eye. If she did, she might just cry. This was why they couldn't just hang out, it was far too loaded, far too painful.

She turned away, turned back, didn't say anything. What was there to say?

"You should wait inside for your taxi," Aditi said, her keys already in hand.

"You're inviting me in?" The surprise briefly lightened Lena's heavy stomach. She'd written most of the night off as Aditi being Aditi but no matter how friendly and warm she was, she didn't just invite people into her home. Not without an ulterior motive.

Aditi leaned against the wall and looked at her with those big innocent doe eyes of hers. "Well, I don't want you to get murdered right in front of our house."

Our house.

It felt like Lena couldn't breathe. "Is that a good idea?" she asked, much more aware of the precarious situation they'd gotten themselves in.

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"What is?" Aditi asked, playing dumb.

"Me. Coming inside."

"It's just for a little bit. Isn't it?" That last bit almost sounded like a dare, like Aditi was challenging her to refute it.

The cold air made Lena shiver. If she were sensible, she would say no and walk away. If she were sensible, she shouldn't have invited Aditi out for this evening. If she were sensible, she would stop staring at Aditi's lips.

But Lena wasn't sensible. She just nodded wordlessly and followed Aditi into their old home, desperately chasing after the tiniest flame of hope that they hadn't fully burned out yet.

SIXTEEN

Aditi

Aditi carried two glasses with her favourite wine to the living room where Lena was sitting on her usual spot on the couch like they'd been transported back in time. The sight was enough to make her heart stop but she carried on like normal, handing over the wine and settling on the opposite side of the couch. Far, far away from Lena's long legs and with a pillow between them just in case.

Just in case of what?

Aditi quickly took a big sip of wine. She felt foolish for inviting Lena inside and hoping that something might happen. Then again, Lena had said yes. And she'd said yes to a glass of wine too.

Did any of that mean something?

It was impossible to tell.

"When is your taxi arriving?" she asked.

"It's still trying to find a driver," Lena said, twisting her phone around to show the screen. "Maybe I should've got a taxi from near the station after all."

"Maybe," Aditi said but she didn't mean it. Any extra moment she got with Lena was so very precious. "I had a lot of fun tonight."

"Oh, good. I worried it might be awkward." Lena put her phone on the coffee table and stretched out into the pillows, groaning when she did. "I missed this couch. The one in my flat is shit."

"Is the couch all you missed?" Aditi asked before she could stop herself.

Lena drank some wine before she answered. "No, I miss all sorts of things."

She couldn't stop herself. "Like what?"

A long sigh escaped from Lena's lips. "Do you really want to go there?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know, it sounds like a bad idea."

Aditi gritted her teeth."Yeah, you're probably right."She got up from the couch, not wanting to show the emotions threatening to spill out.She knew she was being silly, that this whole thing was foolish, but it still hurt to have it confirmed.

The screen of Lena's phone changed colour.

"They found a driver, by the way.Lucky you," Aditi said, her voice catching in the back of her throat.

"Aditi.Wait."Lena chased after her."Adi."

"Don't," Aditi warned, her hands trembling so much, she had to ball them into fists.

Lena easily caught up with her with those long strides of her and caught her wrist, her touch so soft and deliberate at the same time."I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For tonight.For everything.I don't know."

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Aditi's heart felt like it was being ripped into pieces. "What are we doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are we hanging out and pretending we're friends? We're not friends. We used to be, then we were more, now we're less."

Hurt flashed across Lena's face. "You're the one who insisted on being friends."

"For the sake of our mutual friends. Not because I wanted to hang out with you like this. Was it a date? Was it not? What is this? I don't know but it feels awful." The words tumbled from Aditi's mouth like leaves falling in autumn, once it started there was no stopping it.

Lena let go of her hand. "Wow, I didn't realise you were having such a bad time."

"No, that's not what I meant?—"

"If it's so awful being near me, why did you come?" Lena asked in that bitter voice that she used for most of the end of their relationship.

"Because I love spending time with you, you idiot! Because I love—" Aditi swallowed the rest of her sentence, horrified by what she almost confessed. Her stomach was twisted so tightly, she felt actually nauseous. She couldn't even look at Lena, not when her emotions were so fraught.

This had all become so messy, maybe staying friends just wasn't an option.

Thick silence hung between them, only making everything worse.

Aditi let out a heavy sigh, hating that this was how they were finishing the evening. "I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"It's not awful. Being near you. But it does hurt."

And there was the truth, the frustrating truth that Aditi couldn't escape no matter how much she tried. Being near Lena hurt because it only reminded her of everything they lost and what could've been. Everything she still wanted.

"You don't think it hurts for me?" Lena returned, her voice no longer sharp. "It hurts me too. It hurts so fucking much, I hate it."

To Aditi's horror, tears pooled in Lena's brown eyes and fell before she could blink them away. It was rare to see Lena cry and it broke Aditi's heart all over again.

"Oh, Lena." Aditi reached up before she thought it through. She just wanted to comfort her so she wiped the tears away with her thumb but the sadness remained in Lena's eyes. "Oh, my love."

Lena's tears kept falling and they stayed like that, hand to cheek, while both sobbed quietly.

"What are we doing to each other?" Aditi whispered, not sure if she even wanted to know the answer.

"I don't know," Lena cried. "I thought being apart was supposed to be better than fighting all the time. But it's not."

Another frustrating truth, one Aditi had found herself confronted with too. When they called it quits, there had been relief. It had been fresh air after a long sequence of suffocating fights. It was what convinced Aditi that breaking up was the right thing to do.

But now she wasn't so sure. She still couldn't breathe and she had this deep awful feeling inside her that she made the biggest mistake of her life.

"Let's sit down," Aditi suggested gently when she realised Lena wasn't going to stop crying any time soon. She guided her back to the couch and nestled her into the pillows, sitting down much closer this time.

It felt strange to be so close, to share something so intimate, but it also felt so right.

She held Lena in her arms and stroked her hair in the same way she'd always comforted her. It seemed strange and cruel that she was the source of both the tears and the comfort but Aditi didn't want to think about that.

For now, she just wanted to make the tears stop.

SEVENTEEN

Lena

It was dark and warm when Lena woke up from what felt like the deepest pit of oblivion. There had been no dreams, no nightmares, no recollection of how she even got into bed.

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She turned on her side, only realising she wasn't alone in the bed when there was resistance when she pulled on the blanket. Her breath hitched and she didn't need her eyes to adjust to the darkness to know who was next to her. Every fibre of her being knew. She could smell the sweetness of Aditi's musk, feel the radiating heat from her body, hear her soft even breathing.

For a moment, Lena wondered if she was still dreaming. Or maybe, the entire breakup had been a horrible terror of a nightmare.

Aditi stirred and from the changing in her breathing, it became clear she'd roused too. "Lena?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you awake?"

"Yeah, I just woke up." Lena's eyes had adjusted to the dark by now and she could make out the faint lines of Aditi's silhouette. There was something so very intimate about that, it was making her heart race.

The blankets rustled as Aditi moved. "How are you feeling?"

"Rough," Lena said, very aware of the abrasion at the back of her throat and the sting in her eyes. Indicators that it hadn't all just been a dream. The breakup was real and yet somehow, she'd ended up in Aditi's bed.

Their bed. The mattress underneath her remembered her in the same way as she

remembered it. This was her spot, her side of the bed.

The sheets moved again and the bed dipped. Lena couldn't remember if she'd ever been so aware of her surroundings, of every minute movement and motion. It was amazing she could hear anything over her hammering heart in her ears.

The first touch felt like it might've been her imagination, a ghost of her memory. But then she could feel Aditi's fingers on her bare arm, hesitantly, tentatively, carefully.

Lena wasn't sure how to react, whether to stay still so she didn't scare the touch away or to press into it. She just knew she didn't want it to end.

"You still snore," Aditi murmured in that soft voice of hers that only existed in the bed.

"Did it bother you?" Lena asked, still breathless and hyper-aware that the touch had turned into strokes. She didn't know how, but the touch was sending sparks directly into her brain.

Aditi let out a soft hum. "Not at all. It was soothing."

"Only you would say that."

"Does anyone else's opinion matter?" Aditi whispered.

Lena couldn't hold back anymore and shuffled closer. Those ten centimetres of mattress felt like the most treacherous ravine but she wasn't thinking about falling or failure or rejection. She just wanted, needed, this distance to be gone. She moved until their knees bumped together and Aditi's fingertips turned into a proper touch.

They were so close, she could see the dim light reflected in Aditi's eyes, the slope of

her nose, the swell of her lips. Lena wetted hers, entirely caught up in the moment.

Aditi's hand slid up and touched Lena's cheek much like when she'd been crying. It was such a soft and comforting touch, Lena sank into it.

"Is this one of the other things you missed?" Aditi asked, sounding like she was holding her breath.

Lena just nodded, enjoying the feel of Aditi's touch. It just felt right, like pure dopamine. It was making her feel so very relaxed and warm.

"Me too," Aditi whispered. "I missed you."

She was always so much braver when it came to expressing how she felt.

Lena reached out, her hand landing on Aditi's waist, slightly above where her bear mark was. There was no resistance when she pulled her closer. It seemed to be all she needed to do, all the encouragement Aditi needed. Before Lena knew it, the distance between them was gone. Aditi's hands were on her arms, on her hips, on her face pulling it down towards hers. Lena moved like she always did and found Aditi's lips with her eyes closed. Her whole body tensed and relaxed at the same time, rejoiced by the familiar thrill and thrum in her veins.

It was all so devastatingly familiar. The smell of their bed, the warmth, the shape of Aditi's mouth that fitted so perfectly with hers.

A sigh that sounded like a smile escaped Aditi. "You okay?"

Lena hummed, still lavishing in that wonderful feeling running through her body. She felt so warm, it was making her sleepy again.

Aditi's fingers brushed over her cheek. "It's okay, close your eyes."

"Hmm." Lena fought against the sleep, not wanting to be pulled away from this lovely moment. "We're going to need to talk about this in the morning."

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Aditi chuckled, noticeably this time. "I know. That's a worry for later."

Sleep pushed Lena's eyes shut again and she gave in, letting her worries and thoughts slip away until there was only the feeling of belonging left. As she sank into another dreamless slumber, her last thought was that she would do anything to stay like this.

EIGHTEEN

Aditi

When morning came, Aditi was too afraid to open her eyes and find out that this was all a beautiful dream. Instead, she kept them firmly closed and snuggled more into the warmth pressing against her back.

There was nothing more comforting than being spooned by Lena who was much taller and gave such all encompassing hugs. It was heaven. Bliss.

And real.

Lena's arms tightened around her and she could feel the other woman pushing her face into her hair. Lena's breathing was making Aditi acutely aware of herself and the way they fitted together. One of Lena's hands was resting on her hip and her whole body was noticing just how nice it felt to be pressed together.

"I know you're awake," Lena whispered in her ear.

"No, I'm not," Aditi denied, even warmer now she knew that Lena was cuddling her

deliberately.Or rather, hadn't moved out of the cuddle.That knowledge gave her the courage to press herself more into Lena's body, grinning when she could feel the other woman do a sharp intake of air.

It was so easy with someone she knew like the back of her own hand.She arched her back, pressing her bum more into Lena.

"This isn't talking," Lena murmured, her voice already slightly raspy.

"Mhmm," Aditi replied.If she was sensible, she would've rolled away but Lena's hand on her hip was now moving, slightly grazing up and down, getting bolder with every stroke.The teasing touch was doing silly things to Aditi's stomach and she could feel herself getting warmer.

The first sigh escaped her lips, not quite a moan but definitely something that came from deep within.She pushed her leg back until her foot hit Lena's shin and she dragged it up, tracing the length as slowly and sensually as she could.

Lena gripped her hip."You're inviting trouble, Adi."

Nothing sounded sweeter thanAdicoming from Lena's mouth.

"I love trouble," Aditi breathed back, surprised by how throaty her own voice sounded.She arched even more, pleased when Lena pushed back and buried her face even more in her hair.

The first kiss on Aditi's neck was hesitant, almost shy, but the second wasn't.Lena's lips lingered, her breath hot and ticklish.It was just as good as Aditi remembered it, maybe even better because it was new and tempting and they were playing with fire.

She felt Lena's lips move up her neck, dragging across her skin up to her sensitive

earlobe. Shivers ran down her spine and heat followed, sinking right down into her belly where it woke something needy and demanding.

“This feels nice,” Aditi whispered, so very aware that Lena’s fingertips were tracing up and down the valley between her breasts. Her palm grazed against Aditi’s nipple and sparks shot directly to her lower belly. She could feel it right between her legs, making her even more eager.

Lena kissed her more while she let her hands wander, clearly growing more confident with every passing second. It was so frustratingly good but Aditi wanted more. She wanted rid of their clothes and for Lena’s hands to move lower.

Those thoughts disappeared when Lena pushed her leg between Aditi's and hitched it up. She hissed when she felt Lena’s thigh against her, so smooth and strong and perfectly angled.

Aditi needed no more encouragement. She rocked her hips, slowly at first, allowing herself to savour the moment. Lena's breath in her hair, her large hands on her hips, on her arms, on her breasts. Every touch so deliberate and careful, it was magical.

Aditi twisted her head as much as their position allowed and kissed Lena like her life depended on it. She didn't know if this was the end or a new beginning so she wanted to etch this feeling into her mind, soul, and body.

The kiss ended when she could feel the strain on her neck and she took the opportunity to remove her clothes. She tugged on Lena’s, grateful when there was no resistance and they came off as quickly as her own. A shiver ran down her spine when Lena pressed herself into her again, the perfect big spoon, and let her hands roamed over Aditi’s body, all free and without any more restraints.

“I can feel how excited you are,” Lena said, the grin in her voice so very obvious.

It was beautiful torture when Lena's hands finally slid further down, grazing over Aditi's skin, all the way down. She pressed her long fingers in the right spot and Aditi shuddered from the sudden touch. It felt so good to be teased, to be touched, to have Lena's lips on her neck.

"You smell so good," Lena murmured into the crook of Aditi's neck.

"You feel so good," Aditi said in return, moaning with every arch of her back, every roll of her hips. She was getting close already and it hadn't even been very long.

Lena pulled on her arm. "Turn around. Please."

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She sounded as desperate as Aditi felt and she obliged even though she was close. It didn't matter because Lena slid her leg back into place and captured her in a kiss that lit up every sensitive fibre in her body.

It quickly became too much. The building pressure and friction, the touch of Lena's tongue against her own, the heat in her core. She gripped Lena's arm, desperate to keep it in place as she met the circling fingers with thrusts of her own. Her whole body was working in sync, chasing after the inevitable release.

Knowing perfectly well what she needed, Lena's hand slipped between her legs and Aditi cried out when she was touched without the barrier of fabric. It felt so much better, so much more intimate.

"Don't stop," she moaned.

Lena nipped at her jaw. "Do I ever?"

Aditi managed to look up into Lena's unguarded eyes, those gorgeous brown eyes that were warm again. She could see her own feelings reflected in them too. Longing, desire, hope. Love.

There was no doubt in her mind that Lena still loved her. It drove her over the edge and she kissed Lena as her orgasm ripped through her, entirely consumed and filled by their connection. It was so overwhelming, so beautiful, it brought a rush of emotions with it that spilled out as tears.

Lena looked horrified. "Are you crying?"

Aditi wiped her cheek. “They’re good tears, I think. I just really, really missed you. This.”

“An orgasm?”

“Waking up in your arms, you doofus.” Aditi smiled through her tears. She loved nothing more than that familiar banter, the kind that only existed between people who knew each other well.

“I missed it too,” Lena admitted softly. “Where did it all go so wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Aditi snuck her arm around Lena. “I think doubt crept in. And I think it was my fault. I didn’t want to leave my friends, my mum. Instead of saying that, I made it about us.”

“Wanting a fated mate bond.”

“Yeah... But then that made you feel like I didn’t love you enough.” A hard lump appeared in the back of Aditi’s throat and she had trouble swallowing it away. She loved Lena so bloody much, it had hurt that suddenly that was in doubt.

Lena hummed. “It certainly felt like that. Like you’d only move for someone who was your fated mate.”

“It wasn’t that. But then you refused to go and that made me wonder if you thought we weren’t going to be fated so then I thought you didn’t love me enough and well...”

“We’ve been over this.”

“We have.” Aditi looked up at Lena, not sure if she was brave enough to ask what was really on her mind. This was such a peaceful moment, she didn’t want to ruin it with

reality. Instead, she trailed her fingers along the lines of Lena's body. This was so much easier than talking.

Lena kissed her forehead. "It's a crescent moon in two weeks."

Aditi froze, not sure if she heard it correctly. "What?"

"We could go then."

"Am I still dreaming? Are you really suggesting we go into the lake to find out if we're fated mates? Just like that?" Aditi sat up, more bewildered than she'd felt in a long time. She hadn't been this disoriented since the first morning after their break-up.

"It's not just like that. It's been a pretty awful few months and I hated being apart from you." Lena suddenly got quiet. "Unless this was just a one time thing for you."

"No!" Aditi didn't know where to go from here or what was coming next, but she knew this couldn't be just it. This couldn't be the end for them.

"Then what?" Lena challenged.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"That's unlike you."

Aditi pulled the blankets towards herself, not sure why she was covering up. "I'm sorry, this is all a bit sudden. You fought tooth and nail against this."

"You want to go to the lake," Lena said simply.

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“But you don’t want that.”

“I want to be with you. I’ll do anything so let’s just go.”

“No.” Aditi reached for her shirt, determined to cover up. She didn’t feel warm anymore and this conversation was somehow worse than all their fights.

“No?” Lena let out a sigh. “But this is what you wanted.”

“It was what I wanted, six months ago. I don’t want it as some sort of appeasement.”

“It’s not. I changed my mind. You said that was allowed.”

Aditi let out a frustrated growl. “No. Yes. No!”

“Great.” Lena kicked her side of the blanket away and turned as far away as the bed allowed. She muttered the last bit under her breath but it was definitely loud enough for Aditi to hear. “Should’ve just gone fucking home.”

NINETEEN

Lena

Lena didn’t look at Aditi when she accepted a mug with tea. “Thanks,” she muttered. She might be upset but that wasn’t a good enough reason not to say thank you for a cup of tea.

She took a sip, humming when it had just the perfect amount of milk in it. She didn't know why, but tea always tasted better when Aditi made it. Maybe it was about how long she steeped it, how hot she boiled the water. Maybe it was just because it was made with love.

"So you don't want to go into the lake?" Lena checked, deciding that there was no point in making idle small talk. This was something that they needed to sort out once and for all because it kept coming back to this.

Aditi was pacing back and forth in the kitchen. "I do."

"But not with me."

"No, I do want to go with you."

"But you don't."

"But I don't," she confirmed.

Lena rubbed her forehead, her fingertips warm from her mug. "This is giving me a headache, Adi."

"Take some painkillers then."

"Wow. Are those the same bed manners you use in the hospital?" It was an unfair remark but it slipped out all the same.

Aditi glared at her. "You know it's not."

"Sorry."

"I'm just tired of going round and round and round on this."

"Me too. That's why I'm trying to break the cycle. Let's just go into the bloody lake," Lena said, exhausted with the whole thing already. Why were all her answers causing a fight?

She refused to go. Fight.

She agreed to go. Fight.

This really was doing her head in and she wondered if the walls were getting tired of their arguing.

"See. This is why I don't want to go." Aditi pointed one slender but angry finger at her. "I don't want to go because you're just placating me. You have to believe we're fated mates. Otherwise, what's the point?"

Lena wanted to pull the hair out of her head. "I do believe it. I mean, if it's not you, it's nobody!"

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"Really?" Aditi grew quiet and stopped pacing. "I thought you didn't want to go into the lake cause you thought we weren't fated."

"That's not it at all. I don't want you to be with me because you think I'm your fated mate. I want you to choose me because you love me. Me. Not your fated mate."

"And I do!" The intense fierceness in Aditi's eyes made it clear she meant it too. "I love you more than anything. The only reason I think we're fated mates is because I love you so."

"Then why do we have to go into the lake to prove it?"

"Aaah! We have been over this!" Aditi screeched and stomped her feet. "Fine, no lake! Let's just get mated and married. Screw fate. I don't care about fate. I just want you."

A warmth washed over Lena but it wasn't a gentle kind, more like a burning uncomfortable heat. "No."

"No?"

"No. I might not like all the traditions from our society but being mated is a big deal. You're a shifter, you shouldn't mate without anyone that's not your fated."

"I thought you believed that was you."

"I do." Lena sank down on her chair and practically hid her face. She voiced

something that had been in the dark depths of her heart but she hadn't wanted to give power to."But I'm scared I'm not."

Aditi's hand rubbed up and down her back."Oh, Lena."

That was the second time that she needed Aditi to comfort her and it felt so good.The soft strokes of Aditi's hand were soothing and Lena hadn't realised how much she missed it, how nice it was to have someone who took off the sharp edges of her mood.

Aditi sat down, finally, and took Lena's face in her hands."We don't have to go.We can just be happy together, you and me.Right?"

Lena didn't have to know Aditi so well to know she was trying to convince both of them in the same breath.Something really had changed in Aditi and she'd come to believe in this silly fated mate system.

She really should've known.All shifters eventually got that craving.Or maybe because they'd been alive for much longer, the beliefs of their society had become internalised.Whatever it was, she couldn't see that burning rebellion in Aditi anymore.Instead, there was just longing.

"We're going to the fated lake," Lena said firmly, quickly adding more on before the other woman could protest."This isn't to placate you.We're going because I love you and you want this more than I don't want it.And I mean, what's the worst thing that could happen?We'll break up?"

Aditi chuckled but there was no humour in it."You're right.What do we have to lose?"

"Only each other and that's already happened."Lena took Aditi's hands in her own, marvelling as always by how much daintier they were."Let's find out once and for

all."

TWENTY

Aditi

Nerves tingled through Aditi in places she didn't even know she had nerves. After thinking about coming to Crescent Lake, it was a little surreal to be actually here. Especially because she'd only been once, way before Lena, and hadn't even gone into the water out of protest.

And now she was here, and all the possibilities were flooding through her, pinging on all her anxieties. It didn't help that she was wearing a bikini that was ever so slightly too small because she hadn't needed one in a while.

What if she was wrong and Lena wasn't her fated mate? Would that really mean the end for them?

That thought was so scary, she could see why Lena hadn't wanted to come here. This was all too much.

Lena's hand slipped into hers and she instantly felt a little better. Even if it didn't work out for them tonight, she got two more weeks of bliss out of it. And if they broke up this time, maybe she would be able to let go properly.

"It's busy," Lena mused, looking around at all the other hopefuls gathering around the lake.

Aditi hummed. "I never knew so many people went. This is wild."

"It is. Oh look, there's two bears there." Lena pointed out two black bears strolling

towards the beach."Recognise them?"

"Not all bear shifters know each other," Aditi grumbled."But that looks like it might be some Honeywells."

Lena chuckled in amusement and bumped her arm into Aditi's shoulder."You could shift too, if you wanted to."

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The idea tugged on something inside Aditi and she felt actually tempted to do so. It had been a while and she always felt a bit twitchy when she didn't shift. There were just not that many opportunities to do so when she'd been so busy with work.

"Maybe I will," Aditi said with a little noncommittal shrug.

"Oh yeah?" Lena's eyes shimmered. "Are you going to strip here?"

"So what if I were?"

"Hey, you wouldn't hear any complaints from me. I'm all for it."

Aditi snorted. Maybe if she were a little younger and more carefree, she would've shifted into her bear form. Instead, she gave Lena a gentle nudge. "Don't be silly."

"Oh well, guess I'll just look at your naked body later," Lena teased, speaking a wish out into the world.

Later.

Aditi hoped there would be a lot of laters in their life.

They made their way further towards the lake where everyone was gathering for the ceremony. The two groups were already forming, shifters on one side, and humans and kin on the other.

The idea of splitting up didn't seem all that appealing to her and she hesitated. Did she

really want to go through with this?It was like opening a box that she wasn't sure she wanted to open.

Lena paused too."Everything okay?Did you change your mind?"

"No.Just...It's a bit intimidating."

"You stitch up dying people and this is intimidating?"

"I don't stitch up dying people.Sometimes, they're not anywhere near death."Aditi's gaze went back out to the crescent-shaped lake.The moon was reflected in the calm surface of the water and everything looked so peaceful, it was strange to think thatthiswas what caused her so much turmoil in recent days.

"You know," Lena started in a conspiring voice."We don't have to do it the traditional way.We just have to go into the water together, all that up there on the beach is kind of bullshit for bullshit sake."

Aditi chuckled."What are you proposing, Lena Brown?"

"I say we just run in.Splash around a bit.Call it done."

A laugh bubbled up from deep within Aditi and brought some bubbles of relief with it."You don't think the Moon Goddess would mind?"

"Nah.There's loads of stories about people getting mating marks after falling into the lake by accident.I don't think the Moon Goddess cares one single bit about all this."Lena gestured out to the people on the beach and the Elders who were gathering to start the ceremony.

There was something very appealing about not doing this therightway buttheirway.So

what if it wasn't traditional?She never cared much for that.

Maybe this was a good way to honour their old selves.After all, they were the ones who got them here.

Amusement rose up within Aditi and she tugged on Lena's hand, urging her towards the water.Surprise made Lena's face look even more beautiful.

"Wait, are we really doing this?"

Aditi chuckled."Come on, then!Hurry or we won't be in time to crash the ceremony!"

It only took Lena a second to chase after her as they ran towards the water.The idea of jumping into the lake to get fated was very daunting but it was a little less so this way.With Lena's hand tightly in hers, her laughter in her ears, and the disapproving glares of the village Elders in their back, this was as much them as it could be.

The cold water lapped at her feet and she cried out.Lena was laughing now too, the most beautiful sound in the world, and she jumped in the shallow bit like they were little kids.Aditi shrieked when water sprayed up at her and she jumped until she was breathless.Then she pulled Lena towards her and firmly laced her arms over her shoulders.There was magic in the way Lena put her hands on her waist and embraced her, so intensely and fully, it was taking the last of the air in her lungs but filling it with something else, something she needed more than air.

People came running in around them but she didn't notice any of it.There was just Lena, the feel of her soft lips, and the warmth in her heart.

TWENTY-ONE

Lena

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Morning came far too quick and not nearly quick enough. Lena hadn't quite managed to sleep, partially from nerves, partially from the fantastic desperate sex. She didn't know if it was because they both knew it could be the last time but it had been more intense than ever.

But with the first sunlight peeking in through the curtains, the time for laughter was over.

Lena turned on her side, not at all surprised to find Aditi awake already. She never slept well when something big was happening and this was possibly the biggest thing they had dealt with so far.

"Do we have to look?" Aditi whispered, looking adorable tucked in under the blankets.

"You want to have sex the rest of our lives with clothes on?"

"Only you would have to keep your clothes on," she teased.

A chuckle escaped Lena and she was glad that even after everything, they could still joke around. "We've delayed this long enough. You check."

Aditi looked surprised. "You want me to check? You don't want to do it on your own?"

"No, we did this together. We should find out together." Lena reached under the blankets for Aditi's hand and guided it onto her body. "Touch me."

The briefest flicker of desire flitted through Aditi's eyes before a far more serious expression came on. She shuffled closer and let her hand glide down. Lena enjoyed the sensation, the slow move, the gentle exploration. They could've just thrown the blankets off and the lights on but this was far more pleasant, far more intimate.

Aditi's fingertips travelled over her elbow and she giggled.

"That tickles."

"Have I never touched your elbow before?" Aditi wondered, her hand moving further down.

Lena shrugged. "Maybe not."

"I'll make it up to your elbow later then."

The mattress dipped when Lena turned on her back so Aditi could touch her other side. Even after a whole night together, her touch still felt new and exciting. Aditi explored every part of her. Her arms, her stomach, her shoulders. She even patted Lena's face even though that was totally unnecessary, but it still made them giggle.

Then Aditi's fingers touched her hip and a spark jolted up Lena's spine. Her eyes widened at the feeling and she could see the same surprise in Aditi's eyes.

This was it.

All patience gone, Lena tossed her side of the blanket away and twisted, raising her hip to examine it. An orange pattern had appeared on her skin, with slightly raised lines that tickled when she ran her own fingers over it.

"Is that...?" Lena looked at Aditi, suddenly overwhelmed.

Aditi nodded. "That's my mark."

"Show me?"

With a nod, Aditi pushed the blanket away too. Lena's gaze went down to her waist where she knew Aditi's shifter mark was located. There was a little tattoo over it too, one Aditi had gotten when she was eighteen. A little fuck-you to fate.

Lena brushed her fingers over it. She'd seen the mark plenty of times over their relationship but she'd refused to pay attention to it. Maybe it was strange that she knew every inch of Aditi's body like the back of her hand but didn't know this.

"Is it really the same?" she asked.

Without saying anything, Aditi pulled her in for a kiss. It instantly created unprecedented sparks and Lena could feel her heartbeat in the new marking on her hip. Or maybe it was Aditi's heartbeat. It was hard to tell, she just knew that it felt so very right.

Of course, it was right.

"I love you," Aditi said when she pulled back from the kiss, her voice laden with emotions.

Lena brushed her fingers over Aditi's cheek. "I love you too. Now what?"

"Now we'll be together forever."

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"Oh, is that so?" Lena asked, chuckling despite the excitement welling up in her. Forever. What a beautiful word it was, what a beautiful promise. Except it wasn't just a promise, not with shifters. It was more. It could be more.

And she wanted it. She wanted it more than anything, which was quite surprising but their time apart gave her new insights into what a life without Aditi would be like.

She took Aditi's hand and guided it to her hip, to the new mark. "I accept."

"Huh?" Aditi sat up, the blankets sliding away from her body. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I want forever. So..."

"Are you talking about the mating bond?"

"I am."

"Who are you and what have you done to my Lena?"

Lena chuckled. "I know, I'm surprised too. But I really, really want forever with you. I always wanted that. Unless it's too soon."

"No, it's not, it's... perfect." Aditi threw herself onto her.

They kissed so deeply, Lena could feel it in her soul. It was making her feel so warm and full and so very light. She really never wanted this to end.

Aditi pulled back, her eyes dark and somehow bright at the same time. “Are you sure? When I bite you, that’s it. You and me, forever.”

“I’m ready,” Lena said, enjoying the way anticipation was rushing through her body. She never knew it would feel this good to have this kind of confirmation, the security, the commitment. They talked about forever many times before but there’d always be this hint of doubt in the back of her mind.

That wasn’t here anymore. This time, when Aditi said forever, Lena believed it.

She relaxed and enjoyed the trail of kisses that Aditi peppered over her body. Some of the kisses made her shiver, others tickled, and some sent an instant bolt of desire down to her core. Everything felt more intense, more charged, she never wanted it to end.

And after today, it never would.

Aditi reached the mark on her hip and pressed a soft kiss on it first. An unexpected rush of pleasure tingled up Lena’s body and she made a funny noise.

“You okay?” Aditi checked.

“Mmm,” Lena hummed, reaching down to stroke Aditi’s shoulder. “Don’t stop.”

A little grin appeared on Aditi’s lips. “Do I ever?”

The next kiss made Lena sigh and she let herself fall into the sensation. She could feel everything so very clearly. Aditi’s hand on her thigh, some of her ticklish hair draped on her belly, the press of her chest. Even the scrape of her teeth, gentle at first, but then surprisingly sharp and yet painless. It filled Lena, like an ocean trying to fit into a lake, all too much and yet exactly right.

Aditi's voice was hoarse when she spoke again. "How did that feel?"

"Wonderful," Lena murmured, dazed and clear-headed at the same time. She reached out, touching Aditi's beautiful face. There were so many things she wanted to say, so many emotions contained within her, but she didn't know how to explain them. She didn't need to either, she knew Aditi could feel it too. "I love you."

"I love you too." A tear slid from Aditi's eye and she kissed the inside of Lena's hand. "I'm so happy."

"Me too. We should've done this sooner," she joked. "Too soon?"

"A little." Aditi rolled closer for another kiss. "I love you so, so much."

"You better. I'm your fated mate." The word sounded incredibly foreign to Lena's ears but it also came with a little thrill. Fated mate. It was no longer a threat or something to fear. Instead, those two words embodied a life with Aditi.

If only she'd seen it that way sooner, she could've avoided all this heartbreak. But then again, maybe in sixty years time, they could fondly look back at it and laugh about the time they were both so stubborn and silly.

Lena wrapped her arms around Aditi, enjoying the intimacy of their new bond. "What are we going to tell our friends?"

"Alix is going to scream," Aditi speculated.

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"Totally. Maria might pop out her baby prematurely," Lena joked, sighing into the wonderful embrace.

"Imagine. That would be something."

"I guess it's a worry for later."

"It is. This is about you and me and nobody else." Aditi touched her face. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"It's a little late if I wasn't," Lena replied, touched that Aditi was checking though. "But yes, I'm okay. I thought I'd be freaked out more but actually, no. I feel really calm, calmer than I have in months. This is right. This is what I want."

Aditi looked relieved. "Good."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, this feels like a dream."

"It's not a dream." Lena pulled the blankets over them, chuckling when it made Aditi shriek and giggle. "And I know just how to prove to you that it's not a dream."

"Really? What did you have in mind?"

Grinning so much it hurt her cheeks, Lena nipped at Aditi's earlobe.

Aditi's laughter was muffled from the blankets. "You do that in my dreams too."

"Oh? What about this then?" Lena said as she pressed her lips into Aditi's neck. Maybe this was a dream but if that was the case, she never wanted to wake up. This was just so right.

Her own bed, Aditi in her arms, the rest of their life ahead.

This was home.

EPILOGUE

Aditi

Aditi pushed the cart through the aisle, pausing it in front of a small stuffed bear. "Oooh, look at this guy."

"We already have six presents," Lena reminded her, practical as always.

"Yeah, but this is too cute." Aditi picked the stuffed plushie from the shelf. "Aww, he's perfect. Don't you think Maria's new baby is going to love him?"

"I guess? But this one is massive, it's bigger than a newborn." Lena scanned the shelf and stood up on her toes to pick a much smaller bear. "What about this one?"

It was just as cute so Aditi nodded. "Okay."

"That's the last one though. We're already spending enough money," Lena warned, even though she said that three gifts ago too.

Aditi looped her arm through Lena's for a rare moment of public affection. She didn't care who saw them, she just wanted her beautiful fated mate to know how much she

loved her.

"Maybe one more?Eight is a lucky number," she said.

Lena chuckled."Is it?I've never heard that."

"It's a thing, it started yesterday."

"If you say so.I suppose too many gifts is better than no gifts.I did buy that super expensive car seat for the baby shower cause I didn't know what else to get and then I forgot."

Aditi snorted."Is that why?I don't know why I'm surprised.What would you do without me?"

"Cry."A rather serious look slipped onto Lena's face."I know what it was like to be without you.I never want to do that again."

The mark on Aditi's stomach tingled and it made fireworks explode in her stomach.This was everything she wanted.Nothing grand, nothing extravagant, just the simple mundane things that made up a life with the woman she loved.

She smiled and pushed the trolley, wondering how she got so lucky.

Yes, this was perfect.

* *