



My Blind Date is a Werewolf

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Magic. Mayhem. And a little romance!

After a string of bad blind dates goes horribly wrong, Olivia has given up on men. She has plenty to keep her busy in her little—slightly magical—small town, running the most popular bakery and coffee joint around. But after a tall, dark, and handsome man comes to her rescue, she might just change her mind—until she finds out he's one of the town's resident werewolves. Should Olivia stick to her resolve? Or take one last chance on finding true love?

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CHAPTER 1

It was a Tuesday night, and instead of curling up on the couch and reading the latest Eloisa James release with a nice glass of pinot grigio or getting myself in the mood for Halloween with a re-watch of Van Helsing followed by a binge re-watch of Castlevania, I'd decided to give this online dating thing one last go.

My date had not made a great impression thus far, and we hadn't even met yet.

Timmy—the name alone was already a strike against him; any man over forty should have dropped such a diminutive nickname and used either his full name or just plain Tim by now—insisted that I be the one to drive over an hour to meet him in Beckford. And then, his choice of date venue was...well, not first-rate material. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with driving all the way to Beckford, but given the fact that Timmy (ugh!) was the one who asked me out first, shouldn't he have been the one doing all the heavy lifting? I should have just said no.

Joe's Steakhouse, really? I enjoy a juicy steak and baked potato as much as the next gal, but if he was trying to make a great impression, a rowdy family restaurant was not the way to go.

A sigh escaped me as I stared at my reflection in my compact mirror, trying to psych myself up for the night. Honestly, all I wanted was to go back home and relax. After being on my feet the entire day, forcing a smile on my face for customers, and getting my hands elbow-deep in dough, all I wanted was a quiet night in. I was fine with being a spinster—Oh, wait. Divorced women are not considered spinsters. But all the same, after my calamity of a marriage and track record of trainwreck blind dates

behind me, I was content to have me, myself, and I for company until death do me apart. But apparently, my family and closest friends were not okay with this choice, hence me sitting in my car staring at the steakhouse with exhausted resignation.

“It’s not too late to go home, Liv,” I groaned, my fingers twitching and reaching for the car keys. As if she was spying on me from the bushes, my sister’s face flashed on my phone screen, the loud and obnoxious ringtone she’d assigned herself blaring throughout the car.

“Yes, Angie?” I answered, a sigh escaping me as I rolled down my window to peep out into the inky darkness where the lights from the steakhouse could not reach.

“Just checking to make sure you made it to Beckford safe and that you weren’t having a meltdown in your car,” she sang into my ear. I heard someone cackle in the background, probably our cousin Eden. It figured that the two of them would get together the one night I had a date.

“First of all, I do not have meltdowns, and yes, I just pulled into the parking lot.” Frustration colored my tone. I loved my sister, but if she was going to give me another spiel about giving love a second chance, I might just drive back home to put a bullet in her skull. Now that she had found true love on her third go-around, she was determined to spread the cheer all around.

“Oh, please, I’ve seen you go full-on Britney Spears when you thought you were out of flower just before the breakfast rush at Jumpin’ Beans. You have meltdowns every other Tuesday, and I know for sure you’ve been sitting in your car for the past ten minutes, talking yourself out of going on this date.”

“No, I haven’t,” I answered quickly. Way too quickly, which Angie picked up on right away. She snickered and said something to Eden that I couldn’t make out before coming back on the phone.

“Sweetheart, it’s just a date, not a baking competition. Put your big girl panties on and charm the heck out of what’s his face. What could go wrong?”

I groaned the moment she said those words. “Now you’ve gone and jinxed it. With my track record, everything and anything could go wrong. My date before this one brought his wife because he thought I was a swinger like them.” Goosebumps broke out across my arms when I thought of what I almost got myself into.

“And the one before that was basically looking for a nanny for his kids; the whole night, I felt like I was at a job interview. And the guy before that had a blood fetish!”

“He was a vampire!” Angie cried in exasperation. I could almost hear her roll her eyes through the phone.

“A vampire with a blood fetish. Did I tell you what he wanted to do with my—”

“Okay!” Angie cut me off before I went on a long tirade. “Pause and take a breath. I know all your dates have been duds thus far, but keep digging long enough and you’ll eventually strike gold. Just keep the crazy hidden until it’s too late for him to back out,”

“Your metaphors suck. I can’t believe you’re an English teacher,” I scoffed.

“And I can’t believe you’re such a coward when it comes to love. One would think you’d be more of a romantic since you always have your nose stuck in a romance novel. Or do you just prefer men from times gone by? Because I have bad news for you, honey. You ain’t going to find yourself a tortured duke or reclusive earl who looks like a swashbuckling pirate these days. You gotta make do with what you got.”

“No thank you. I’ve already settled once in my life and look where it got me. Anyway, let me get this over and done with.” I sighed and said goodbye to my sister

before she went off on a tangent about my ex-husband. Sean was lucky Angie was not a witch or else he'd have a lot more to worry about than his new wife blowing through his money like it fell from the sky.

I could hear the chatter of patrons coming from the restaurant the moment I walked out of the car. Smoothing my hands down my peplum dress, I took a deep breath before I walked in—not before checking that I didn't leave sweaty handprints on the dress.

It was like walking to my execution, every pair of eyes looking up at me as I walked through the restaurant trying to find a single man in a red shirt who resembled the profile picture from the dating app. We'd both decided to wear something red so that we could easily catch the other's eyes, but I'd already spotted about three men with red shirts on.

One was with a woman and three kids, so he was out. The second was engaged in a heated conversation with an older woman and had his back to me, so I couldn't tell if it was Timmy Sloane or not. And the third, he and his boyfriend needed to get a room before they got thrown out for indecent exposure.

I did a 360-degree turn around the room in search of someone who matched my date's description and came up empty-handed. I pulled my phone out of my bag, planning on giving Timmy a call. If he told me he was running late, I was getting outta here.

“Olivia? You're Olivia Michaels, right?” a voice called out from behind me. Pasting on the most cheerful smile I could manage and ignoring the slight ache of my cheek muscles from doing so all day, I turned around...and that smile died a swift death.

The dude who'd been arguing with the older woman? Timmy—effing—Sloane. His guest, or whatever, was glaring daggers at me like I'd stolen the last butterscotch

cookie.

“I thought that was you.” Timmy gave me a beaming smile, pushing his thick glasses up his face. He was not bad looking at all, the whole Poindexter vibe he had going on worked for him if you discounted the fact that the picture he’d used on the site was likely from a decade ago. I should have known it was too good to be true. I gave myself a mental facepalm.

“This is me, and that is you.” How much more lame could I get? I stretched my hand out and instead of shaking it, Timmy pulled me closer and gave me a hug and, possibly accidentally-on-purpose, grazed my butt when he did. My left eye twitched. If I smiled any harder my face was going to crack in two.

“Wow! I can’t believe you’re actually here...and that you’re actually this gorgeous. I mean, you won’t believe the pictures some people put out on the internet only to meet them and find out they’re...oof.” He shuddered.

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“Oh please. She’s at least ten pounds heavier than in the picture. And why are you wearing heels when you’re already as tall as a tree? Do you really want to be looking up at your woman for the rest of your life, Timmy? You should have just gone out with the Montgomery girl like I told you to,” the older woman piped up. She had on thick glasses like Timmy, and the longer I looked at her, the more the family resemblance stood out. Her white-blond hair had so much hairspray in it a hurricane could blow past and not a single strand would be out of place.

“Ma, please. You promised you would be nice. If you can’t control yourself, go find another table to sit at!” Timmy snapped.

Oh, dear lord, I was on a date with a mama’s boy and his mom. Someone kill me now!

“Please forgive my mother. Her bark is worse than her bite, I promise.” He trailed his hand down and stopped at my elbow. When he tried to help me to a seat, I dug my heels in and remained standing.

“What is she doing here, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Timmy opened his mouth to answer, but his mother beat him to it. “I came to make sure he comes out of this unscathed. I don’t know what kind of water y’all are drinking in Mystic Cove, but I ain’t never met anyone who came from there who was right in the head—”

“Ma!” Timmy whined. I’m talking a stomp your foot on the ground, cross your arms, and pout kind of whine. See, Angie? This is exactly what could go wrong, I thought

bitterly. Which witch or warlock did I cross to get this kind of bad luck? None of this was normal, right? It couldn't be. Or did I just naturally send out a signal that attracted all the crazies in the world?

“Now, you hush, Timmy. I'm doing this for your benefit. Poor Mrs. Jones's son went out on a date with a girl from that cursed town and had nightmares for months after the fact. I'm told the poor boy is still wetting his bed to this day. And every time someone asks him what happened on the date, he screams bloody murder,” she huffed, taking her glasses off and wiping them with the hem of her blouse. “I'll be damned if I let my son fall prey to a Jezebel from that town.”

Her story scratched a faint memory. If I recalled, the woman she was talking about was Jessica Price, one of Eden's friends. I remember her telling us of her nightmare of a date who'd gotten too handsy and insistent at the end of the night. Jessica was a witch, so she placed a mild hex on him—though I was beginning to doubt her definition of the word “mild” if her victim was still suffering from the effects.

Timmy babbled out a weak apology between trying to put his mother in her place and appease her at the same time. I let out a weary sigh, my gaze flickering between mother and son, imagining how the night would unfold if I stayed. Without saying a word, I noped out of there, leaving the Sloanes arguing amongst themselves.

I was already pulling out of the parking lot when Timmy burst through the doors of the steakhouse, frantically chasing after me. I was half-tempted to roll down the window and give him the middle finger, but I stepped on the gas, the tires squealing on the asphalt as I sped out of there. That was why I'd chosen to give up on dating. That was well and truly the last blind date you'd catch me going on.

I was content with my life the way it was. Every day at Jumpin' Beans was—pardon my corniness—an adventure. I loved chatting with the customers, baking to my heart's content, and providing the best coffee in town. Even with a certain coffee

store powerhouse opening up a branch in Mystic Cove, it was Jumpin' Beans everyone came to when they needed their caffeine and pastry fix.

All men could choke on their tongues and die for all I cared. Okay, not all men. I'd loved my dad dearly and still felt the keen pain of his loss after all this time, and I adored my uncles almost as much, but everyone else was fair game. If I wanted companionship, I'd adopt a goldfish or something.

CHAPTER 2

The sound of glass crashing had me wincing and gritting my teeth for the second time that day. I wiped my hands clean on a dish towel just as Wendy burst through the doors, an apologetic grimace on her face.

"Peter again?" I didn't even have the energy to be angry as this had become a daily occurrence by now. Peter was a level above having butterfingers. At this rate, I was going to go into debt replacing coffee mugs and drinking glasses. Maybe it was time I switched to disposable cups instead of only using them for takeout. It was either that or firing Peter before he bankrupted me, but I didn't have the heart to do it since I knew just how much he and Wendy were already struggling to care for their younger siblings while dealing with a mother who was battling ovarian cancer.

"We're so sorry, Liv. We'll find a way to make it up to you somehow, but please don't dock his pay." Wendy's big brown eyes could convince the devil himself to switch to the light side.

"I won't dock his pay, but Peter's on kitchen duty for the next month. Get the mess cleaned up before we open and tell him to stop hiding from me and actually apologize for himself once in a while. I'm not some kind of monster who'll chew his arm off." I rolled my eyes at Peter's cowardice. He was as timid as a church mouse despite being older than Wendy by a year, who, in contrast, was as fierce as the wolves that

prowled around town.

“Have you seen yourself when you’re pissed? Did you know that Michelle Wentz crosses the street whenever she sees you coming after that dressing down you gave her?” the nineteen-year-old exclaimed, walking toward the broom closet and fetching a broom and dustpan.

“As she should. She loves parading around the town and acting as if she’s better than everyone when she’s just as mundane as the rest of us non-magical folk. It was high time someone put her in her place once and for all.” I punched the dough I was kneading probably a little harder than necessary as I resumed working the dough for the Madeira cake I was making.

It was only around six in the morning, but I had been there since four, making all the pastries for the day. I preferred to serve my goods fresh most of the time, which meant dragging myself out of bed at the ungodly hour of three a.m. It was the only way I could be sure I would be done baking in time for the seven o’clock breakfast rush.

“Go finish setting everything up and then you and your brother can help yourselves to a blueberry muffin each before the masses grab them all.” I shooed Wendy out of the kitchen.

An hour later, I was manning the cash register while Peter and Wendy took care of the orders. The aromatic scent of coffee filled the air, accompanied by the mouthwatering scent of freshly baked bread. We had a pretty good crowd going, most of them familiar faces ranging from bleary-eyed high school students scrolling through their phones as they waited their turn and frustrated suits who kept glancing at their ridiculously expensive watches and then glaring at me for not moving the line along faster.

A familiar face was also waiting in line, a fat grin on her face.

“For someone who’s going to be spending the day drilling conjugate verbs into the heads of kids who couldn’t care less what they are, you seem extra chipper this morning,” I drawled in a dry tone as Angie stepped up to the counter. Without her having to ask, I picked out the two biggest cinnamon rolls on display for her and a bran muffin just so she wouldn’t accuse me of sabotaging her diet.

Peter was already working on her espresso order. Angie, like most of our customers, was a creature of habit, so we knew our most regular customers’ preferred orders by heart.

“That’s because I practically had to pry Paul off of me this morning if I didn’t want to be late for work.” She beamed at me, her cheeks flushed red.

“Eww, I do not need an image of my big sister and brother-in-law doing the horizontal tango stuck in my brain, so please keep the details to yourself. Or to your gossipy friends in the English and Literature department.” I shuddered.

“Judging by your grumpy face and the fact that you never got back to me or Eden last night, methinks you didn’t get so lucky last night. What was wrong with him this time? He didn’t have piercing blue eyes that cut right through your soul?” Angie mocked, laughter in sky blue eyes.

“He brought his mom on the date,” I deadpanned. My sister choked on air and started chortling in the middle of my cafe.

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“You’re kidding me.” She slapped a hand on the counter, her eyes tearing up.

“Why would I kid you about that? Apparently, she doesn’t trust anyone who comes from Mystic Cove and wanted to make sure nothing nefarious was afoot after Jessica left the last Beckford looser a bedwetting, screeching mess,” I told her.

“Hey, cut the chit-chatting and get a move on, will ya? Some of us have jobs to get to!” Officer Schmidt hollered down the line, tapping his foot impatiently. His bushy mustache wiggled as if it wanted to scurry off his face. There was an ongoing debate around the town as to whether the facial hair was real or fake.

“Oh, shut your trap, Schmidt,” one of the local crones barked. “We all know that once you’ve had your doughnut fix you’re going to pack your cruiser behind the Welcome to Mystic Cove billboard and pretend you’re running a speed trap while you snore the day away in the car.”

That drew some laughs from the other customers. Everyone knew that it was rare to get pulled over for speeding when Officer Schmidt was on traffic duty. Either way, Angie paid for her order and moved down the counter to fetch her coffee, but not before promising to pry more details from me later.

The day seemed to totter on at a snail’s pace after the breakfast rush. I was scheduled to work until the afternoon since I’d been pulling full-day shifts for two weeks straight. I’d planned on doing all the admin crap back home and finally getting to some housework and then sweet, sweet sleep.

My gaze wandered to a table in the far back, away from the sunlight—a seat reserved

for possibly one of my favorite people ever. And it wasn't only because he was one of my favorite authors ever and I had the pleasure of being his go-to beta reader... Okay, it was exactly for that reason.

Grabbing a carafe of black coffee from the special menu, I walked over to give him a refill and get a sneak peek at his latest project.

"Hey, Emil, you need a refill?" A pair of startling citrine eyes met mine. Those eyes were a shade darker than his shoulder-length hair that was gathered in a man bun at the nape of his neck. Jury was out on whether Emil's hair was naturally yellow or if he dyed it. Vampirism tended to cause weird mutations in some vampires.

Emil lowered the screen of his laptop before I could get a sneak peek at the top-secret project he would tell me nothing about.

"Yes, please—even if your ploy is glaringly obvious." The hundred-and-sixty-eight-year-old vampire smirked at me. I couldn't imagine what it felt like to be an adult stuck in a sixteen-year-old's body for eternity, but Emil had figured it out.

"How's the latest project coming along?" I poured him his coffee. It was a little thicker than most people liked it and left the sides of the carafe tinged with red.

The blood coffee was an experiment of mine so that Jumpin' Beans could cater to everyone in the town, and it had taken me a couple of tries to get the ratio of blood to caffeine right—some vampires preferred more blood than coffee, while others only wanted a hint of blood in their coffee. The idea came to me when I accidentally drank blood-laced red wine at a friend's place, and it had become a hit with the vampire community.

"The project is coming along just fine. And for the hundredth time, you'll get your grubby hands on it when I am done with the first draft," he gently chided. I tried

haggling with him for a few minutes before I relented and left him in peace. With a lull in the shop, Wendy was busy scrolling through her Instagram, seated on a stool behind the counter while her brother wiped down tables and returned mugs and plates to the kitchen. Before she knew what was happening, I'd snatched her phone from her and stuffed it in the front pocket of my apron.

"I feel like I should point out that you should be the one carrying all the valuables back into the kitchen instead of Butterfingers McGee over there. And could we stop with the elevator music already?" I glared at the speakers mounted on the wall behind us. Wendy had a Lo-fi playlist, and relaxing as it was, it made me want to curl up in bed and sleep.

Wendy opened her mouth, already armed with a retort, but cut herself off at the glare I shot her. Luckily for her, two customers walked through the doors. Shooting up like there was a spring under her butt, she went to help them.

A glance at the wall clock showed that the lull would end in about half an hour when the lunch masses came swarming in. Sighing, I walked back into the kitchen to get started on making sandwiches for those who called ahead for orders, and the cold sandwiches for those who would not want to wait too long for an order. Once I was done with those, I was going to be swarmed by incoming orders and working like a headless chicken trying to keep up—I needed to hire one or two more people to assist me in the kitchen, but between the house needing renovations and the coffee shop also needing a little facelift, my finances were strained. But if I wanted Jumpin' Beans to continue growing, I'd have to dig deep into my accounts. I was thinking of hiring another chef to diversify our menu. As much as I loved cooking, baking was my forte, but I wanted to offer more than just sugary treats.

I went down the rabbit hole, fantasizing about the kind of cafe I wanted Jumpin' Beans to be one day. I'd been on track before the divorce three years ago. I'd sold my first iteration of Jumpin' Beans in the city and moved out here to be closer to my

family and the people who really cared about me instead of the emotional and financial vampires I had been constantly surrounded by—my ex chief among them.

My pockets might be a little emptier now, and, sure, I did miss the financial security that came with being married to a corporate shark, but boy did my heart and shoulders feel ten times lighter—my finger too after I pawned off the monstrosity of an engagement ring he'd given me.

No! Do not give that pig a second thought, Liv—he's moved on and you've...kinda moved on, I thought to myself. I grimaced, images of all my failed dates and relationships post-divorce flashing through my mind. I don't need a man to feel complete, so stop acting like a lovelorn ninny and focus on something that really matters.

I got sucked into the repetitive routine of sandwich making until Peter came into the kitchen, face flushed and looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

God, what was it like to be that painfully shy? I felt bad that this job forced him to socially interact with others when he so obviously did not want to, but, hey, he'd get better at it eventually, right?

“Hey, Petey, is something wrong?” I tossed a slice of cucumber into my mouth before completing the takeout order I was working on and packaged it so that he'd take it out front.

“Th-there's...uh...someone who wants to talk to you out front. Wendy sent me back here to c-cover for you.” His voice was a soft whisper, so I had to strain to catch what he was saying.

It was never good news when a customer brought out the “I want to speak to the manager” card. Most of the time—in my experience at least—the customers tended to

be entitled twats who thought the sun rose and set on their command.

Taking off my gloves and hairnet, I checked my reflection in the mirrored surface of the fridge and re-fastened my high ponytail. “Did something happen?”

I didn’t hear any of the usual rants coming from the front, so at least I wasn’t at risk of walking out there and having coffee splashed into my face. It had happened to me twice before, and the only reason I didn’t get burned was because Michelle Wentz had terrible aim.

Peter shook his head. “He says he’s a friend of yours and just wants to talk to you.”

A friend?

The line was six people long when I walked out, and half of our tables were already taken up, chatter filling the small shop. Wendy was busy ringing up a customer, but she flicked her head to the far end of the counter where a familiar face was waiting for me. “He’s back,” she mouthed, grimacing.

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“Give me strength,” I whispered under my breath. Dustin bloody Rathinger. A one-time mistake that was still haunting me.

Sandy blond hair gelled to within an inch of its life and slicked back, a chiseled face that would make a marble sculpture weep, and deep, rich chocolate brown eyes that could suck any woman in. And they had—for one stupid night. When my judgment may or may not have been impaired by one too many cosmopolitans.

In my defense, though, I’d heard via the grapevine that my ex Sean and his new wife were expecting their first child just two and half years after getting hitched when we’d been struggling for six years to conceive. Having my worst fears confirmed—because I’d been too scared to seek help from a fertility specialist—had been a blow to my fledgling confidence. So much so that I’d let Dustin talk his way into my pants.

His smile could have lit up the room when he saw me walking toward him, but as charming as it was, something about it rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe because he reminded me a lot of Sean, and that was just plain wrong. From the tailored suits to their shared profession to the drink he’d ordered when we were on our date. How messed up was it that the first man I slept with post-divorce was cut from the same cloth as my ex-husband?

“Dustin, what a...surprise!” I couldn’t bring myself to call it a pleasant one because...buddy, there was a reason why I never went back for seconds. You’d think that conveniently losing his number would have been enough of a clue, but no. Every time his job blew him through Mystic Cove, he made sure to stop by.

Another reason why I had no problem tossing my skirts for him was because he was a pharmaceutical sales rep, which meant he was only ever in town for brief periods to carry out his business and then was gone again. It was an unspoken rule here, and probably of all small towns, that if you're going to have a one-night stand, it better be with a tourist so that you won't have to see their face at every intersection.

"A good one?" he asked hopefully, and all I could do was nod and offer him a bland smile. If he noticed my standoffishness, he didn't let on, his smile widening and showing off his gleaming chompers. I gotta say, whatever dental plan he was on was worth the fortune he must have forked out to get them all sparkling and aligned like that.

Subconsciously, I ran my tongue across my top teeth and licked my lips before addressing him. "Can I get you something? Coffee and a large BLT?" I offered, hoping to move this along as fast as possible before Disaster Peter struck again in the kitchen.

Dustin leaned on the counter, showing off his ritzy wristwatch and giving me a whiff of his headache-inducing cologne. I had a feeling the move had been made to come across as slick and sexy, but Dustin was stiff and awkward.

"I've been calling you while I was away. I wanted to tell you that I'd be passing through Mystic Cove and wanted to see if you'd be interested in going out for dinner again." He cleared his throat and adjusted the knot of his steel-gray tie. "I'm going to be here for a couple of weeks and thought this would be the perfect chance to explore our relationship and see where it takes us. After all, we got on like a house on fire the first time around." Another toothy smile, his brown eyes boring into mine.

Nervous laughter bubbled out of my throat. I was aware of all the ears listening in. No doubt the gossip mongers amongst my customers were already raring to rush out the doors and spread the word.

“Yes, I...um...” I cleared my throat, keeping my gaze square on the lanky man in front of me and not all the other gazes I felt burning a hole through me. “Here’s the thing, Dustin, you’re a sweet guy and all, but I’m really not looking to date anyone right now. I have a lot going on in my life at the moment and romance is the last thing on my mind, so I’m sorry, but I can’t start anything with you.”

His smile fell, something dark slithering beneath the surface. Standing up straight, he smoothed his hands down his suit jacket and tugged on the lapels. “I know all about having a jam-packed life, believe me,” he told me with a self-effacing smile. “I’m not asking to put a label on things, just dinner between two friends who shared an intimate night—”

“Dustin!” I slammed a hand on the counter, my face burning. Why’d he have to be so explicit for everyone in earshot? Wendy coughed and a second later the music volume went up a few decibels.

Lifting up the door on the counter that separated us from the guest area, I dragged Dustin further away from the customers, coming to a stop in front of the hallway that led to the bathrooms.

“I was trying to let you down gently, but you need to understand, I was...somewhat drunk when I slept with you.” Yes, I’d been buzzed, maybe even tipsy when I let him take me back to his room at the Scarlet Season. But not so out of it that I didn’t know what I was doing. “But that was a mistake, and one I don’t wish to repeat again. So, please, let’s just agree to part ways on amicable terms right here and now.”

It was like watching a switch flip. One second, Dustin was this unassuming, sweet-faced man who, quite frankly, I thought had the personality of a wet blanket, and the next thing I knew I was shoved against the wall.

He realized what he’d done almost immediately and backed off, hands raised. “Sorry!

I'm sorry, Olivia, I didn't mean to be so rough with you. Ca-can we please start over?" He reached his hand out for me and took it back when I flinched.

"There is nothing to start over from, Dustin. You're making a scene. You need to leave," I said, more bravery in my voice than I felt.

"No, not yet. Not until you hear me out. Tell me what to do. How can I make you see that I am being serious and completely earnest in my feelings for you? Just give us one last chance. One—" He took a deep breath, holding one finger up. "—last chance to prove that what we have is real, that we could make this work. I promise you won't regret it."

I opened my mouth to say something and found that I didn't know what to say, so I clamped my mouth shut again.

"The lady already said no. So cut your losses and leave, buddy, instead of trying to guilt her into a pity date with you," came a deep voice from behind Dustin. Adrian Cooper, my brother-in-law's best friend and current white knight. If there was someone who could get Dustin off my case with a single glare, it would be him.

Dustin whirled around to tell him off, but he did not expect the bear of a man—or rather, the wolf of a man—who loomed over him. To his credit, though, Dustin faltered for a moment before drawing himself to his full height, which still only came up to Adrian's chin.

"And who do you think you are to interrupt a private conversation?" I could hear the sneer in his voice even with his back turned to me.

"Who I am doesn't matter. The only reason why I haven't planted your face through the wall yet is because I don't want to cause an even bigger scene. The lady has already given you your answer, so take it like a gentleman and book it before I make

you,” he growled.

“Listen here, buddy—” Dustin started in a condescending voice, his statement choking off when Adrian’s eyes flashed and he placed his huge, meaty hands on Dustin’s slim shoulders.

“I won’t ask again, douchebag. Leave or I toss you out on your rear end.”

CHAPTER 3

“Is this oaf the reason why you’re turning me down? You’ve been screwing him behind my back and leading me on like a dog on a leash?” Dustin whirled to face me, hatred burning in his eyes and etched in the curl of his frowning mouth.

Indignation swelled in my chest and before I knew it, a loud thwack was heard across the room and my hand was burning from the impact of slapping Dustin as hard as I could.

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His expression was priceless. Too many emotions played across his face to place them all, and the glaring handprint marring his cheek stood out against his pale complexion.

“Uh...” I gulped, curling my fingers into the palm of my throbbing hand. Should I apologize? My gaze flickered to Adrian’s, but he gave a subtle shake of his head as if he could read the question dancing around my brain.

I expected Dustin to blow up and throw another tantrum, but he turned on his heel, shoulder checking Adrian on the way out in a huff. You could have heard a pin drop from across the street with the shocked silence that filled the cafe after he’d slammed the door shut behind him.

“That was intense!” Wendy squeaked from the counter. All the strength in my legs deserted me, turning them into wet noodles. Collapsing against the wall, I held a hand over my chest to keep my heart from pounding right through my ribcage.

“Hey, are you okay? Should I call the chief to go after that guy?” Adrian reached out for me before I crumpled all the way to the floor. He smelled like pine and cinnamon, making me nostalgic for Christmas even though it was still two months away. I raised my head to tell him there was no need and every thought I had disintegrated into dust at the sight of those whisky-colored eyes. This was not an observation that was new to me, but I couldn’t help but get a little weak-kneed and tongue-tied at the sheer masculinity of Adrian Cooper.

There was no way not to notice the man. He was just so...there and so tall, one of the largest men in the town, standing at six-foot-five and built like a dang lumberjack, or

maybe a Viking warrior. As if his hulking body size was not enough to draw attention wherever he went, his copper-toned red curls and bushy beard stood out amongst the many blonds and brunettes in any room. He was more grizzly bear than wolf, but I supposed he also had the whole animal magnetism thing going for him. Any straight, red-blooded woman could not not notice him, and I was no exception, especially when his amber eyes were laser-focused on me and me alone. Which side of him was peering out at me, I wondered—the man, or the beast within?

With other shifters in our community, it was easy to tell when the wolf took over. Their normal eye color turned amber or arctic blue. With Adrian, they were always this dark, red-tinged amber color in both forms. He had a smattering of freckles down the bridge of his prominent nose and beautifully curved eyelashes many women would kill for. Adrian was not magazine perfect or model handsome in the way of Dustin and my ex-husband. He was a barbarian compared to their delicately chiseled aristocratic features, but no less handsome.

“Olivia, did you hear what I said?” The deep rumble of his voice dragged me out of my one-sided admiration. A calloused hand cupped my cheek, his ginger eyebrows knitted in concern, and I assumed his lips were pressed in a thin line under all that beard. One brush of his thumb across the slash of my cheekbone was all it took for me to want to explode out of my skin.

A slight tremor moved through my body. Adrian misread the situation as me still being shaken up over the whole Dustin issue and ushered me to one of the free tables, muttering curses under his breath.

“I should have pummeled his face into the wall. Who does he think he is?” He pulled out a chair for me and waited until I was sitting down. “Should I ask Wendy to bring you something? You don’t keep whiskey or any other stiff drinks in the back, do you?” Adrian squeezed into the chair next to mine, looking like he’d just settled down at a doll’s table with the way he dwarfed the furniture.

I smiled at his adorably infuriated expressions—two words that normally didn't go together, but that was the only way to describe how he looked at that moment.

“Unfortunately, I don't have a liquor license, so the only thing back there is all kinds of teas and coffee. I'm okay, Adrian. A little shaken up, but it's nothing I won't get over.” I smiled and covered his hand with mine, noting with appreciation just how much bigger his hand was than mine. It was tanned from all his time spent working in the sun because of his construction company. His hand also had a light smattering of freckles and a fine layer of hair covering the ropey muscles of his forearm.

“I still think you should report him. What if he comes back?” he insisted, flipping my hand over and engulfing it in his. He was hot, and I don't mean his looks. His temperature was way too warm for the mild fall weather. If he were a normal person, I'd jump to rush him to the hospital to get treated for a fever, but this was the way shifters were built.

Having been born and raised in Mystic Cove, I'd picked up a lot about the other beings who lived amongst us. Shifters—primarily the MC wolf pack—had hot tempers and the body heat to match, while the undead vampires were cold and sometimes as pale as corpses. Witches and warlocks were pretty much humans with magic, but the lot of them were capricious, if not a little eccentric and flighty.

“I can deal with Dustin. I don't think he'll be around for longer than a couple of weeks. After embarrassing himself like that, this is the last place he'll come back to.” I wished I believed my own words, but I needed to talk Adrian down before this turned into a bigger deal than it was. “At least I learned a lesson.” I smiled brightly at him, wanting to add some levity to this situation.

His eyebrows arched up to his hairline, a loose copper curl falling over his left eye that he flicked back with the impatience of a man who did not spend hours fretting over his looks. “Oh yeah, and what's that?” he rumbled.

“Never swipe right just because you see a pretty face on a dating app. You won’t believe the number of creeps I’ve been out on dates with over the last few months,” I groaned, chatting with him as if we were old pals.

Adrian was a contemporary of my sister Angie. The two of them were former high school classmates, and he was also a good friend of Angie’s husband, Paul, the two of them usually grabbing a drink or two at The Drinking Hole every week.

His mustache twitched. I got the feeling he wanted to say more about what had just happened, but he leaned back in his chair and scrubbed a hand over his beard. “Call me old-fashioned, but I never got the appeal of the whole internet dating thing. I prefer meeting women in a more...natural manner. Get to know her as a friend first before making the jump into romantic territory.”

A snort escaped me without meaning to. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to laugh at you.” I slapped a hand over my mouth to stifle my laughter. “It’s just that, you could snap a finger and have any woman in this room.”

“Maybe that was true when I was just a simple lieutenant, but now that I’m Alpha—” A weary sigh escaped him. “There are no rules that say an Alpha can’t fool around before settling down with a mate, but I don’t know... I guess now that I have all this added responsibility on top of running the family’s construction firm, I guess I feel like I should be dating for keeps, not just to scratch an itch.” He shrugged helplessly, the gesture fluid and drawing the eye to the way his shirt stretched tautly across the broad expanse of his chest.

“Congratulations on being recognized as Alpha. The pack couldn’t be in better hands.” I bumped my shoulder into his. His mustache twitched again as he gave me a small smile.

“So I’ve been told, but between you and me, the imposter syndrome won’t let me

sleep at night. Rod Holland left some really big shoes for me to fill when he retired. Every single wolf in the pack respected him even if they didn't like him, likewise with the members of the council. Compared to the likes of Catherine Hawthorne and Landon Grayson, I am but a pup barely weaned off its mother's teats. They're going to eat me alive at the next council meeting."

"The only reason you feel like that is because you've officially been Alpha for a little over three weeks while Rod had been Alpha for over twenty years. The respect you all had for him and the experience of leading such a large pack was built over all those years. And he had the support of his family and friends just like you do. You're one of the finest men in this town, Adrian. I have a feeling you'll do just fine."

The shells of his ears were red, and it was hard to tell under his beard, but I think he was blushing. His eyes flickered toward mine, sucking me into their golden depths while everything around us fell away. A loud crash came from the kitchen, causing us to jolt apart, and it was only then I realized just how close to each other we'd been seated.

Jumping up from my chair like something bit my butt, I smoothed my hands down my apron and jabbed a thumb in the direction of the kitchen. "I better go sort that out."

Yeah, my voice came out all breathy, so what? It didn't mean anything because as fine as Adrian Cooper was, I was on a dating hiatus.

"I should get going too. The crew must be wondering where I am with their lunch," he mumbled. I thanked him once again for helping me and rushed into the kitchen, ignoring Wendy's knowing smile.

“That’s it! You’re getting blocked, mister, and then maybe a girl can get some work done around here,” I hissed under my breath, jabbing angrily at my phone as I blacklisted Dustin Rathinger’s phone number and tossed it to the other side of the couch.

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The jerk had been calling me nonstop since I'd gotten home about thirty minutes previously, and that was after he had two dozen apology roses sent to Jumpin' Beans an hour after his little fit. Those had promptly gone into the dumpster behind the cafe. Switching on the TV for some background noise, I pulled the tray table over my lap, switched my laptop on, and stuffed my mouth with a huge slice of Hawaiian pizza. I know, I know, pineapple on pizza. But, hey, I quite liked the juxtaposing tastes. The bite of sweet fruitiness mingled with the cheesy goodness and the saltiness of the bacon. Better yet, it went down really well with the chilled glass of red wine that I'd poured for myself. The bottle was on the table and I planned to drain it all despite it being a Wednesday evening and having to wake up before the sun was even up the next day. I deserved to let loose after the day I'd had, and the booze helped quiet the nagging voice that kept reminding me of the five weeks' worth of laundry waiting to be done and the lawn that needed to be mowed and the flowerbeds that needed weeding.

And that was just the tip of the iceberg. The house needed a fresh coat of paint, and for the longest time, I'd been meaning to contact a contractor to remodel my kitchen and set up a home office.

I'd been living in the house for close to two years, and each year I pushed all the work that had to be done onto the next. I was settled in the neighborhood, but not completely. I felt like a tree that still had its roots exposed, on the verge of being felled over by the next gust of wind blowing my way.

I was born in Mystic Cove and had lived there for most of my life except when I went to culinary school and the six years I was married to Sean. But why did I still feel like a stranger in my own town?

Stop being an idiot, Liv. The sooner you get this done, the sooner you get started on your laundry. I was down to my last pair of pants, unless I wanted to go to work wearing a pair of ratty sweats and a faded fleece hoodie that used to belong to my ex. And before you judge, that sweater was comfortable as all heck. It felt like wearing a warm hug. Sean's scent had long faded, leaving only the smell of lavender fabric softener and warm yeast.

Between eating and guzzling down the wine like it was water, I drafted a help wanted ad for an extra set of hands in the kitchen. I was planning on advertising for two vacant positions: a chef who could prepare proper lunch and dinner meals and a dishwasher who could double up as a waiter. After posting the ad on the cafe's social media accounts and emailing it to the local paper, I got started on something that I really loved—planning out this year's Halloween theme and ordering decorations. I was thinking of going for an Alice in Wonderland theme this year and already had my eye on a Queen of Hearts costume.

My love for Halloween eclipsed that of any other holiday, and I always went all out for it. It was only out of pure laziness that my house was still bare of decorations even though we were ten days into October. And the best part about living in a town rife with the supernatural? No one celebrated Halloween better than Mystic Cove. Every establishment around town would soon start getting decked out in their finest—and creepiest—decorations and paraphernalia and duking it out for the best Halloween display. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I was the reigning champion from last year after beating out my neighbor, The Book Coven, owned by one of the witches, Beverley Barnes.

Last year, I'd gone for a Steampunk horror theme, dressing up as Van Helsing: Monster Hunter. Most people found it hilarious considering the melting pot of races that called Mystic Cove home. Beverly already had a head start this year, but my Alice in Wonderland theme was going to blow her House of Horrors out of the water.

I didn't realize I was smirking to myself until my phone buzzed again. The number had been set to private, making me think it might be Dustin calling from a different number, so I ignored it, finished my dinner, grabbed the wine bottle, and went down to the basement to load the washing machine and do a little bit of cleaning.

CHAPTER 4

ADRIAN

"Heads up," Carter warned me, flicking his head in the direction of The Drinking Hole's exit. Three men walked in and headed straight for the pool tables: Logan Holland and his cousins West and Will. The three of them didn't immediately spot us, and for that I was thankful. I had no beef with Logan. In fact, I'd been to his place the previous weekend to help him fix a problem with his leaking roof, but his cousins had had it in for me since Rod stepped down as Alpha and handed me the reins.

As if I had any choice in the matter.

Alphas were born, not chosen by the pack, and yet, for whatever reason, West and Will had gotten it into their heads that Logan would take over once his father stepped down. It had been clear since Logan and I were both young pups that the one born with the mark of Alpha was me, and not our former Alpha's son. Sure, in most instances, leadership of the pack was hereditary, but there were cases like mine where the mark of the Alpha was passed on to someone not within the current Alpha's bloodline. I grew up knowing that the MC Pack would one be mine to rule over, and so did everyone else in the pack. I just never expected the responsibility to fall to me so soon. At only seventy-nine, Rod Holland was still pretty spry and had some life in him yet, but he'd stepped down, insisting he and his mate wanted to roam the world for the next couple of years and just enjoy life.

I was happy for him and did not begrudge him the need to spend quality time with his

mate without having to mediate in pack and council matters, but I just wish he would have talked to his nephews before setting off. In the weeks since I'd taken over, West and Will had been like burrs stuck to my fur and between my paws, questioning everything I did. I was this close to challenging them to a duel—which I would win with ease and would give me just cause to exile them. But I respected their parents, not to mention Logan and Rod, too much to do that. So, for now, I'd put up with their surliness and work on consolidating my place.

“Pay them no mind and finish up your drink. We'll leave as soon as we're done here,” I told my younger brother. Carter scowled at me, his eyes flashing amber before flicking back to their natural forest-green color.

“If we leave now, it will look like you're running away from them. You're Alpha, Adrian. If anyone should be running away with their tails tucked between their legs, it's them.” He growled and chugged back his beer.

I smiled at his indignation on my behalf. People made the mistake of thinking I was the one closest to my wolf even in human form just because Carter was so quiet and composed most of the time. They missed the fact that his wolf prowled closer to the skin than most. Carter was always ready to claw someone bloody if they so much as looked at him funny or, worse, made unnecessary criticisms of his architectural designs.

“We're not running away. We have an early meeting with the Council to present our bid and showcase the design specs you've drawn up for the school, remember? The last thing I want is for both of us to show up hungover and bleary-eyed for what could be our biggest contract to date.”

Carter rolled his eyes at my dodgy answer. We'd both had two beers each, nowhere near enough to get us drunk, not with our wolf metabolism. “Sometimes I think you should have been born a sheep shifter, as pacifist as you are,” he grumbled.

“Do those even exist?” I laughed out loud, drawing some attention our way, quite a lot of it of the female variety. Not even a blind man could miss the invitation swimming in their eyes, and I knew they didn’t care who took them up on it. Carter and I would both do just fine. Too bad those days of picking up faceless women in the bar were behind me. But my mind seemed to fixate on one woman whose stare always looked right through me.

Today, she’d sat down and talked with me. Granted, it was only after I’d saved her from that walking red flag of an ex, but it was more words than I’d gotten out of her in a long, long while. It still made my blood boil when I thought of how that worm shoved her against the wall and dared to raise his voice to her. He was lucky Olivia stopped me from calling the cops, but if he dared lay his hands on her again, I would eviscerate him.

“Heck if I know. There are deer shifters in Colorado, and I’ve heard rumors of snake shifters, so why can’t there be sheep shifters? I need something to go with this beer. You mind if I order chips and salsa or are you ready to book it?” If anyone else gave me the exact same condescending attitude and lip my little brother gave me, I would have planted my boot in his mouth.

“As long as you’re paying, I have no problem with that. We might as well go over our pitch for the witches’ academy anyway.”

“I still think it’s ridiculous they’re making us bid for the project against outsiders. Hawthorne and the mayor know that Cooper Construction is up for the job. Not only that, but they don’t have to hide anything from CC since you sit on the Council with them and you know what the school is for. All this posturing is for what?” He sneered, raising his hand to catch the attention of a waitress who passed by. I waited for him to place our order before responding to his statement.

“It’s precisely because I’m on the Council that they are going through this entire

bidding process in the first place. The mayor doesn't want to be accused of favoritism or anything like that. But I'm ninety percent sure that we got this in the bag. Once they see your blueprints and models tomorrow, we'll cinch the remaining ten percent." I clinked the mouth of my beer bottle against his.

Carter was an artist, and one of the major factors in why Cooper Construction was so successful outside of Mystic Cove. Ever since he relented and left his lofty job at an architect firm in Berlin, we'd seen a ten percent increase in profit margin at the company simply because he was that good at what he did. And now with an academy for witches and warlocks slated to be established in Mystic Cove, this might very well be the project that would give us the capital to expand the company even further.

We talked a little bit more about our presentation for tomorrow, ignoring the heated gazes coming from across the bar. West and Will were keeping to themselves, I suspected because Logan was with them, but their animosity had my fur standing on edge.

"I heard there was a situation at Jumpin' Beans today and you stepped in to save the ravishing Olivia Michael." There was a teasing glint in Carter's eyes as he smirked at me over the rim of his bottle.

I felt my cheeks and ears burn up. One of the perks of being a ginger: everyone knew when you were feeling bashful or embarrassed. One of the reasons why I grew my Santa beard, as my sister Talia liked to call it. It gave me something to hide behind without looking shy.

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“It wasn’t a big deal. The guy was getting rough with her, so I stepped in. I would have done it for any other woman in her place,” I said, tugging at the collar of my neck. Why did it become stuffy in here all of a sudden?

I wanted to get away from the infuriatingly smug and knowing smile Carter gave me and shirk my clothes off and run. Run for miles and miles until I was too tired to think of all of the crap weighing me down.

“I never said otherwise, except this wasn’t any other woman, was it? And since you’re here spending your evening with me, I’m guessing you didn’t ask her out after psyching yourself up all weekend?”

“You know, I really hate that you’re the guy I choose to confide in sometimes,” I groaned. I still had no idea how Carter had realized that I had a Texas-sized crush on Olivia Michaels. All this time, I thought I’d hidden it well. Not even Paul knew the depths of my feelings for his sister-in-law.

“You could always talk to your best friend about it. He’s in the perfect position to set you two up,” Carter pointed out, as if picking up on my line of thought. I choked on a tortilla chip and gaped at him.

“Are you kidding me? Angie would rip my stomach open if she knew that I thought Liv had the finest body this side of the equator. As far as she’s concerned, I am a monk when it comes to her little sister,” I grumbled. Paul, Angie, and I had been friends since middle school. I’d practically watched Olivia grow into the woman she was today, and there was a time when she considered me a big brother of sorts.

And then she married that stuck-up jerk in a suit and we barely saw her for six years. She'd moved back to Mystic Cove three years ago. The little girl I'd taught to surf and tutored in AP Physics was all grown up and the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen. But she was off-limits to me. The light in her cornflower blue eyes had dimmed and her smile was not as carefree, open, and wild as it once was.

I didn't mean to fall for her. It was like being zapped by lightning. One second I was watching her laugh at something Paul had said during a dinner party at his and Angie's place, and suddenly my wolf was clawing at me from the inside out, urging me to claim her, to mark her as ours. All this time, I'd been holding back, telling myself that it was too soon. That she needed to heal from the pain and betrayal she'd suffered at the hands of her ex-husband. Telling myself that she needed to get back on her feet first, and then I would go on the hunt. Charm her, seduce her, play with her until she fell into my arms willingly. But it looked like I'd taken too long to make my move because now she'd sworn off men.

I didn't realize I'd said some of that out loud until Carter replied, "It sounds like you're making excuses not to pursue her. You told me you think she's your mate, Adrian. Are you so willing to let her slip through your fingers like that?"

"But what if she isn't? I mean, I'm the only one who feels this pull to her. Olivia has been nothing but indifferent to me since she came back." I may or may not have been pouting as I said that. I could count on both hands the number of times I'd tried flirting with her and it all went over her head. Courting Olivia was a hopeless cause and I needed to quit while I was ahead.

"Again, how are you our Alpha when you're such a scaredy-cat? Bro, if you're having trouble making moves, just ask Paul to help you. Olivia is a full-grown woman now, and Angie can't do anything about that. Or better yet, have Beverley help you."

“A matchmaker? No way. Are you insane? What will the pack think if they hear that I went to consult a witch about finding a mate for me?” I balked at his suggestion. Whatever answer Carter was going to give me got cut off by my phone ringing. “It’s the chief,” I told him before picking up and instantly wishing that I hadn’t.

“I don’t like the look on your face. What happened?” Carter asked once I was done with the phone call. I drained the rest of my beer, needing the fortification before heading out.

“A couple of juveniles were picked up by one of the officers for underage drinking and driving.” This was a run-of-the-mill procedure between law enforcement and the pack. If the offense was not all that serious, I was called in to discipline them; and if I wasn’t available, one of my lieutenants would be called in my place. Except for the mild annoyance of having my night interrupted, I usually didn’t mind getting such calls except... “Sharon West was one of the pups they have locked up in a cell right now. Which means—” My gaze trailed over to the pool table, and Carter groaned behind me.

“You need backup?”

“Nah, I can handle this myself. Get yourself home before your mate rails on me for keeping you out too late.” Despite Carter having declared dinner and drinks on him, I pulled out some bills and placed them on the table and picked up my jacket before heading over to Logan and his cousins.

West was the first to spot me, his eyes going wolf and an ugly sneer twisting his otherwise handsome features. How such a hot-headed idiot became a teacher I’d never know. I was half expecting him to snap the cue stick in half.

Letting my wolf rise to the surface, I didn’t bother masking my dominance like I usually did to make everyone around me feel at ease. But West and his little brother

needed to get it into their thick heads who was in charge here. The two of them weren't even lieutenant material, but Logan was, and it was him I chose to address. West and Will had no choice but to avert their gazes and back off when faced with the full force of my dominance.

"Hey man, what's up?" Logan smiled at me, coming around the table and putting himself between his cousins and myself. A wise move. Unlike his cousins, Logan could hold my gaze for much longer, but not indefinitely. He was the obvious choice to become my Beta, but I was holding off on naming him as such because I was unsure where his true loyalties lay. My indecision was titling the pack off-kilter, and I needed to come to a decision soon, but...

"Chief Gleason just called. One of his officers hauled in about six juveniles half an hour ago. All of them are sleeping off their drunkenness in a cell as we speak. Thought I should let you know that Sharon is one of the kids he picked up." I said the last bit straight to West before giving Logan my attention again. "I'm on my way to the station to pick them up right now if you want to join me."

"I'll go pick up Sharon myself—" West started to say, his tone belligerent, but was cut off by Logan raising his hand.

"Don't sweat it, cuz. I'll help Adrian round up the troublemakers. You stay here. I'll catch up with you later."

"I expected your cousin to put up more of a fight," I commented some minutes later as we cruised down to the police station. Logan cranked the window down and hung his hand out, aiming a rueful smile my way.

"Why do you think I stopped him from coming along? I love my cousin, but he can be a real idiot and short-sighted sometimes. I'm sorry for all the stuff he's been saying and doing lately. I've tried to talk to him about it, but he's as thick-headed as

they come.”

“I don’t care about what West thinks. You on the other hand... I gotta know, Logan, do you also think that I stole your birthright from you?”

“What would you do if I said yes?” His voice was dangerously quiet, a blade in the dark. The two of us stared each other down before I forced my attention back to the road and consciously relaxed my grip on the steering wheel.

In as calm a tone as I could manage, I answered him. “Then you’d need to challenge me for Alpha rights, but we both know how that duel would end, and I don’t want to be responsible for claiming the life of Rod and Beth’s only son.”

Logan’s laughter was unexpected. “Man, you can be one scary SOB sometimes. And to answer your question, no, I’ve never harbored any illusions about ever taking over from my father. The moon goddess chose you, Adrian, and quite frankly, I’m glad for that because I don’t want the weight of having a hundred wolves looking up to me. We’re cool, you and I.”

I released a breath that had been lodged in my chest. I debated bringing up the Beta issue, but this wasn’t the time or place for that.

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I was back at Jumpin' Beans again, despite telling myself that I would get my lunch from The Eat or somewhere else. I could only imagine the wisecracks Carter and Talia would hit me with if they knew I'd ended up here again.

We were done with the pitch, and we'd done a pretty darn good job, if I do say so myself. Better than good, even. I could tell that the rest of the Council had been impressed. The only reason they were making us jump through so many hoops was pure politics.

I'd squeezed myself into a suit instead of my normal flannel shirt, jeans, and work boots and I couldn't wait to get out of it. I didn't end up going for a run the night before, but there was going to be a full moon, which meant that I would be running with the pack. We did so every month as a sort of pack bonding exercise and just to feel closer to the goddess, who, according to legend, gave us the gift of shifting. We were strongest during a full moon cycle and often needed to relieve the excess energy coursing through our veins. It was about the pack and the bonds we had with each other and nature.

Rolling my shoulders back and taking a breath to calm the wolf, I stepped into the coffee shop, taking in everything in one glance. Olivia was not behind the counter today, but her scent lingered in the air, faint and overshadowed by the smoky aroma of coffee and freshly baked pastries, but I managed to pick it out of the myriad odors floating about the shop. My wolf lunged, grabbing for her wildly feminine and sweet scent—jasmine and something citrusy and springtime. The beast rolled around in her fresh scent and salivated, urging me to get a taste. Phantom claws pricked at the tips of my fingers, a sense of lost control I rarely ever experienced.

Soon enough it was my turn at the counter. “Hey there, Mr. C. What will it be today?” Wendy gave me a bright smile, bordering on the edge of being flirtatious. Her brown hair was pulled back in a messy bun and she wore her Jumpin’ Beans uniform—a green and gold T-shirt with the cafe’s logo and a beige apron over it with her nametag clipped to the collar.

“I’ll stick with the usual drink orders, but why don’t you recommend something to go along with that coffee?” I asked, my gaze floating past her and zeroing in on the set of doors that led to the kitchen. There was a small rectangular window just above the door handle, but I could barely see into the kitchen. Would I be giving away too much if I asked Wendy about the whereabouts of her boss?

“Liv’s special pie for today is steak and kidney, but she also made cherry pie if that’s more to your taste. And then, of course, we have the usual.” She made a sweeping gesture to encompass the array of pastries and sandwiches encased in the glass counter in front of her and on the shelves behind her.

“I’ll take a slice of both pies and, just so I feel like I’m not being a pig, why don’t we toss in a country ham sandwich?”

“Coming right up,” she answered, ringing me up. “Will you be eating in or is it takeout?”

Again, my eyes flickered to those kitchen doors. A single glance, that’s all I needed. And, yes, I am well aware that I sounded like a creepy stalker. But what else was a guy to do? Olivia was like a magnet, drawing me into her orbit without having to lift so much as a finger.

“Is Olivia in?”

Wendy’s eyebrows knit in a frown, a speculative expression coming over her. “She’s

in the office, talking to one of our suppliers. Did you want to speak with her?”

Did I? What would we even talk about? Doubt began to creep in, and before I realized what I was doing, I was shaking my head and asking Wendy to make the order to-go.

Chicken! Carter’s exasperated voice rang in my ear as I walked out of the coffee shop, takeout bag in hand and my coffee already half drained. I walked past The Book Coven on the way to my truck parked across the street only to double back because of the stupid idea that my brother put in my head that did not sound so stupid anymore. Hesitating at the front door, I peeked in and saw that Beverley was busy with a customer and a few more people were milling around the aisles.

What are you doing, Adrian? This is stupid. What can Beverly do that I can’t? I groaned to myself, trekking back to my car. I mean, it wasn’t like she used love potions because that would be... Whatever it was, it wouldn’t be love, but compulsion. There was no joy or pleasure to be had in taking a partner against their will. But then again, I thought, pausing in the act of placing the takeout bag in the passenger seat, Beverley’s success rate was at a hundred percent. All the couples she’d fixed up were happy as clams and no one had tried to run the elderly witch out of town.

I’m going in for a consultation, that’s all. What could it hurt?

An elderly couple walking on the sidewalk eyed me curiously, their fluffy white Pomeranian yapping loudly at me in a challenge. Growling from deep in my chest, I let it know which one of us was the predator and smirked as it shut its trap and dragged its owners away.

“Adrian, I had a feeling you’d be stopping by soon.” Beverley’s smile was as eerie as it was enchanting, and her choice of words sent shivers down my spine.

“What? How?” I leaned in closer and whispered because I wasn’t sure that all the customers in the shop were long-time locals. “Are you clairvoyant?”

Her laughter tinkled like the wind chimes she had mounted above her door, eyes sparkling with youthful amusement. “Oh, you sweet boy. I was just pulling your leg. I saw you dawdling in front of the store. Now, what can this old woman help you with? Something tells me it’s not a good read you’ve come lookin’ after?” She fluffed out her cherry blossom pink hair, a knowing glint in her eye that made me think she might be clairvoyant after all.

Swallowing down the lump lodged in my throat, I told her what she probably already knew. “I think I’ve found my mate, and I don’t know how to...woo her, I guess.”

Her wrist bangles jingled when she clasped her hands together, a girlish smile stretching across her face. “Why, I do believe you’ve come to the right place. When it comes to matters of the heart, you can’t depend on anyone better. I even have an inkling of who the lucky lady might be. Let’s get to talking, shall we?”

CHAPTER 5

“That was, like, the longest day ever. Should I be worried that I can’t feel my feet under me?” Wendy groaned as she flipped the Open sign to Closed and flipped the lock on the front doors.

“I thought Mrs. McGinty was never going to leave,” Peter agreed quietly, scooping up the empty coffee cups strewn about the tables and placing them in a wicker basket. “Do you think you’ll be able to get her order in time?” he asked me.

Mrs. McGinty was planning a sweet sixteen birthday for her twins, a boy and a girl, which meant two different cakes. Her son’s was easy enough to bake; she requested a three-tier Justice League cake with Batman, Superman, and The Flash taking up a tier

each. But her daughter's... Well, let's just say I would be trolling through Pinterest for some ideas. I had no idea what a Harry Styles cake was supposed to look like.

“She’s forking out a fortune for those cakes and other baked treats, so yeah, I’ll have to pull some late nights, but I’ll get it done in time,” I answered absently, restocking the cash drawer for the next day and placing the rest of the day’s profits in a bank deposit bag for the morning.

“In that case...” Peter’s voice was barely above a whisper. I had to stop what I was doing to look him in the face. Thanks to his shyness, I was becoming proficient at lip-reading. This time, however, he was staring down into the wicker basket, arranging the mugs in neat stacks and placing them upside down. “I was thinking...that is, if you don’t mind having someone like me around...do you think I could assist you with baking the cakes?”

I blinked, wondering if I’d heard right.

“What my brother really wants to ask is if you’d teach him how to bake—preferably starting out with something more elementary and not a complicated order like this one,” Wendy piped up from behind her brother, a cheeky smile on her face. In a rare show of irritation, Peter scowled at his older sister, his eyes flashing like blue twin flames.

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“I meant what I said, Wendy. I’ve been practicing at home and I want to assist Olivia with the order.”

“I had no idea you were interested in baking, Peter.” I smiled at him, feeling oddly pleased about the idea of having a student under my wings. “I don’t have a problem with teaching you. I could use an extra set of hands around the kitchen.”

Which reminded me that I had a dozen or so CVs and applications flooding my inbox. I was yet to go through any of them, but I hoped that by the end of the next day, I would have some interviews set up for Saturday. We opened at noon on weekends, so I wanted to knock them out before then and get the Halloween decorations set up.

After Peter and Wendy finished washing up and bagging up the leftover sandwiches and a couple of cupcakes for their siblings, they left for the day. I planned on doing the same after one last walkthrough and setting the security alarm, but a knock at the front door caught my attention.

A flare of annoyance zipped through me when I saw Beverley waving from outside and gesturing for me to open up.

“I was so close,” I grumbled, shuffling toward the door. Fingers crossed that she’d keep her visit short and sweet, I opened the door for her.

“Hey, Bev, I was on my way out. Was there something you needed?” My left eye twitched as she brushed past me in a flurry of voluminous fabric and pink hair, leaving a spicy and sweet scent of perfume in her wake.

“I apologize for inconveniencing you this late, dear, but I am entertaining my great-granddaughters tonight and it just occurred to me that my cookie jar has been gathering cobwebs for the past week. Please tell me you have some treats leftover. If I don’t bring anything to bribe those little rascallions with they’ll run circles around me all evening. My only hope is to hop them up on enough sugar to put them in a sugar coma by eight-thirty.” She laughed, a twinkling sound like bells chiming. Fondness made her demeanor less intimidating, more soft, and, I daresay, more youthful. Despite my initial annoyance, I found myself smiling back and empathizing with her plight. I used to babysit Sean’s brother’s children, both of them boys, who were now eleven and nine, and they used to be little nightmares. I turned my back for a second and the entire house looked like a war zone.

“I have some fudge brownies and pumpkin whoopie pie cookies leftover. Will that do?” I rounded the counter and grabbed a packaging box. Beverly nodded and asked for a baker’s dozen of each.

My movements were stiff as I moved because I could feel Beverley’s curious gaze hot on my face. Clearing my throat, I peered up at her. “Was there something else?”

“As a matter of fact,” she started, fiddling with the huge opal of her pendant necklace, “I was wondering how to bring this up without offending or upsetting you in some way.”

I stood up straighter, my eyebrows raised at the cautious tone she was using. Alarm bells started to ring at the back of my mind, but I ignored them and the touch of uneasiness slithering in my gut. “What are you talking about? Why would I be upset with you?”

“Because I found your mate,” she stated, the words going off like a sonic boom in my mind and leaving my ears ringing. I was well aware of Beverley’s side gig as a matchmaker. I’d heard the stories and seen the couples she’d hooked up. But I never

imagined she approach me.

Closing the lids of the pastry boxes, I slid them across the counter. “They’re on the house. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really must be getting home.”

“Olivia, please hear me out,” Beverley pleaded, grabbing my hand before I could get away. “I am not an idiot, sweetheart. I can tell that you’re still nursing a wounded heart after what your ex-husband did to you and that you’ve erected walls as tall as Everest around your heart, but you need to know that Sean was not the one for you. He was not the other half of your soul. But I am telling you that I have found the one you were truly meant to be with. If you’d just spend some time with him—”

“I am not interested, Beverley. I have no room in my heart or my life for a man right now. So, please take these and leave.” I thrust the paper bag into her hands and reached for my bag under the cash register.

Beverley let out a weary sigh. “I thought you might react this way. But as a self-proclaimed warrior for love, I refuse to stand by and watch you wallow for a lost love, especially for a man who does not deserve your tears. Granted—” She cut me off when I opened my mouth to speak even though I had no idea what I was going to say. “—the love between you and Sean might have been real in the beginning, but this is where you are now. You are a wonderful young woman, Olivia, and there are plenty of men out there who would give an arm and a leg for the chance to have you. There is one in particular I know for a fact would rather claw out his own heart before harming a single hair on that pretty little head of yours.”

“I hear you, Beverley, and I appreciate you going out of your way to tell me this. But whether this man is really my mate or not, it doesn’t matter. Maybe if you’d found him a few months or weeks earlier, I would have been inclined to slake my curiosity and have you arrange one of your famous blind dates. But as of now...” I trailed off, looking away from her earnest and piercing gaze.

“I understand, child. I am not forcing people into starting something when they’re clearly not in the mindset for it. However, allow me to tell you one thing. You are not a coward, Olivia Michaels. Those walls around your heart will crumble to ash sooner rather than later, and when they do, I pray that you step out into the light with your head held high and your heart full once more because you were not made for a lifetime of running from love when you have so much in you to give. Have a goodnight, dear. Best be going before Piper calls me in tears asking where I am.” She gave me a finger wave and glided toward the door.

Against my better judgment, I called out, “Beverley, wait! Won't you at least tell me who he is, my soulmate?” Now that my curiosity was aroused, I didn’t think I would be able to rest peacefully until I knew the identity of this supposed “other half” of mine.

Beverley’s smile was enigmatic as she looked every bit the witch she was. “It’s called a blind date for a reason, darling. Until you’re ready to take the next step and meet him, my lips are sealed.” She mimicked turning the lock at the corner of her mouth and tossing away the key.

She pushed the door open, pausing halfway, and turned back once more. “If you’ll allow this old woman one more bit of unsolicited advice. I’ve seen you mooning over the home improvement magazines in the bookstore. Step one in bringing those walls down. Whatever improvement you want to make to your house, go ahead and do it. What are you waiting for? We have an excellent construction crew a few blocks down from here. Get your butt down to Cooper Construction and get a quote or something.” And with that, she was gone, leaving me as stupefied and confused as ever.

CHAPTER 6

I was looking forward to a peaceful night at home, but Angie and Eden had a

different idea. They were already waiting in my living room, sharing a bottle of my favorite wine between them—I would forever regret giving Angie my spare set of house keys—and all glammed up.

“What’s all this?” I asked, eyeing them dubiously. They’d both gone all out with their makeup and hair and were dressed for a night out.

“The Scarlet Season is hosting a fundraising-slash-wine tasting event for the new pediatric wing at the hospital tonight. I thought we should make it a girl’s night out and attend. We’re meeting my mom and Aunt Josie there in a bit, just as soon as you’re done changing,” Eden informed me, finishing her glass of wine. Her blonde hair glittered like spun gold under my living room lamp and she was dressed in a floor-length blush pink Grecian style gown.

“Guys,” I groaned, tossing my bag and keys on the table that stood just by the front door and toed off my sneakers. “I’ve been on my feet all day. I don’t feel like squeezing myself into a dress and heels and dealing with more people. Besides, it looks like you already have your own wine tasting event going on here.” I grabbed the wine bottle from the table and took a hefty sip, loving the rich taste of it as it washed down the taste of I don’t know how many espresso shots. But as much as I loved the taste, I needed something stronger.

“Oh, come on, don’t be such a party pooper, Liv. Eden went to all the trouble of scoring us tickets for tonight. We don’t want to let them go to waste,” Angie cajoled. Judging from the slight glaze in her eyes and faint flush of her cheeks, she was already deep in her cups.

“It’s a Thursday, Ange. Do you really want to show up at work hungover tomorrow morning? And can’t you just pawn off my ticket on Paul or someone?” I plopped myself on a free seat and started massaging one of my feet.

“Paul’s covering for a friend at the firehouse, so he’ll be working all night. I for one don’t want to spend the entire night alone channel surfing and inhaling a box of pizza by myself like a loser,” she replied.

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“And I’m actually working. There’ll be some VIPs at this shindig and my editor wants me to write a puff piece about it. God, what has my life been reduced to?” Eden piped up, her heart-shaped face pulling in a disgusted scowl. “I miss the days when I did real journalism—nothing against the Mystic Cove Tribune, but this ain’t it, chief. If I have to write one more article like this, I’ll seriously lose my mind. Anyway, you made the mistake of thinking you have a choice in this matter, Liv. You’re coming with us and that’s final.”

I begged, argued, threatened, and even tried to bribe my sister and cousin, but fifteen minutes later, I was riding shotgun in Eden’s sedan as we drove into the heart of Mystic Cove. My feet were crying for mercy, but I’d shoved them into heeled gladiator sandals and wore a knee-length canary yellow dress. I couldn’t be bothered to do anything fancy with my hair and let it hang down my back and shoulders in its natural loose waves.

I don’t know what possessed me to tell Angie and Eden about what Beverley had told me except for the fact that I could not stop thinking about it and needed to share it with someone before my heart and head both exploded.

“So, Beverley came into the shop after closing today.” The words were barely out of my mouth when Angie let out a sharp gasp in the backseat and the car swerved into the next lane from Eden yanking too forcefully on the steering wheel. Her eyes were wide as saucers as she gaped at me. Beverley Barnes was practically a local celebrity in our neck of the woods. Of course, her matchmaking prowess would be the first thing their minds raced to.

“Shut the front door! Who is the lucky guy?” Angie thumped a hand on the headrest

of my seat, nearly yanking strands of my hair with her white-tipped acrylic nails.

“Watch it,” I hissed, gathering up my thick locks and draping them over my shoulder and glaring at my sister before staring out the window. Resting my chin on my hand, I watched the passing scenery as the quiet suburban neighborhood with the manicured lawns and warm glow coming from living room windows gave way to the thick brush of forest that seemed to blanket most of the neighborhoods and half the town. Within a few minutes we would break through the crush of thick, gigantic trees and would be welcomed into the town proper by sparkling streetlights.

The Halloween fervor was starting to make itself known. Paper ghosts were stung between the streetlamps and piles of jack-o-lanterns sat on street corners.

“I don’t know who he is, just that she claims to have found my one true love.” I ignored the slight twinge of arrhythmia happening in my chest. The entire drive home, I’d been wracking my brain, going through a mental catalog of the single men in Mystic Cove and failed to picture any of them as my one true love. But there was nothing to suggest that he might be from around here. Our town was a tourist haven. Even though we hadn’t hit the peak of the winter tourist season yet, we had some stragglers from the summer. Or maybe the dude was breezing through town on business, like Dustin.

Crap! What if it was Dustin? No way. I’d rather wind up a bitter old woman than throw my hat in that ring again. After his entitled display at Jumpin’ Beans and the ostentatious bouquet of “apology” roses, you couldn’t pay me enough to touch him with a ten-foot pole.

“Why not? She can’t just dump something that huge on you and not tell you who the man of your dreams is. Should we swing by her cottage and wheedle the truth out of her?” Eden asked. Even after all that brouhaha of her needing to write an article about the wine tasting event if she wanted to keep her job, I knew that she would turn the

car around and head for Beverley's cottage in a second if I asked her to.

I shot both girls a quelling stare. "There's no need for any of that. She won't tell me who he is because I shut her down. I feel like none of you were listening when I told you I am on a dating break."

There was another round of protests and griping, Angie and Eden speaking over each other. "Nothing you say is going to change my mind. Besides, if fate intends for me to be with this person, then we'll find our way to each other eventually. Right now, I'm focusing on me, myself, and I." I let out a grunt of finality.

"Why do the two have to be mutually exclusive? You can go on this journey of self-discovery or whatever and fall in love at the same time. We're not saying you should run down the aisle with this guy. You can still take your time getting to know him and learn who he is as a person."

"Exactly." Eden picked up Angie's thread seamlessly, as if the two of them had been having a silent conversation without me. "There's no need to dismiss Beverley's revelations out of hand. You deserve to be happy, Liv. And if you can look me dead in the eye and tell me that you couldn't give a crap about meeting your mate, if you can tell me that riding solo is what you really, really want, then Angie and I will back off. But if there's an inkling—no matter how small—in your heart that wants to grab onto this chance, then do it."

The brilliant jewel that was The Scarlet Season came into view and saved me from answering. I could feel the girl's concerned gazes on me as we walked into the hotel's grand ballroom.

"Aren't these things usually hosted outside at vineyards?" I chirped with false cheer as I took in the ruby red ballroom. I assumed the bold color was what gave the hotel its name, but don't quote me on that. The walls were a rich, lush red with gold

trimmings, and everything about it exuded sensuality.

“Oh, Mom’s over there. What is she doing at the mayor’s table?” Angie scowled at the unusual pairing as mom laughed at something Hank Granger—our esteemed mayor—was saying.

Mom was the only one out of place at that table, and I don’t mean that in a bad way. But she was a charge nurse a year or two away from retiring, not as high profile as the mayor, the police chief, or Catherine Hawthorne, who was the head witch (or whatever they were called) of the Mystic Cove Coven. There were two men and a woman I didn’t recognize, most likely the guests of honor, and they all looked as expensive as all get out.

“Now that you mention it, she has been looking twitterpated recently. I stopped by the hospital during her evening shift last week to drop off those eclairs she loves so much, and there was this huge bouquet of orchids at the nurses’ station. I had to pry it out of one of the younger nurses, but word is Mom’s got an admirer,” I said, my lips twitching as I kept from laughing at my older sister’s horrified look.

“And you think it’s the mayor?” she gasped.

“Why not? Wasn’t he taken in for a mild cardiac event last month? As the head nurse, he and Aunt Josie would have spent some time in each other’s company while he was hospitalized. Now, where is my mother?” Eden asked absently, searching the room for her mom.

“Jeez, I need a drink. Can you imagine having the mayor as our step-dad?” Angie gave a mock shudder and asked Eden if there were designated seating areas or if she could sit down anywhere.

An usher dressed up in a classic black and white uniform approached us and helped

us find the table Eden had snagged for us. The round tables were covered in cream table cloths with red damask skirts beneath. Soon after we sat down, we were served with platters of appetizers—a selection of cheeses, grapes, pickled onions, chutney, and a varied array of crackers. I was hungrier than I thought, having had potato salad and a smoothie for lunch ages ago.

While I chomped on the appetizers, Angie leaned in to whisper in my ear. “Is it too soon to get up and sample one of the wine stations, or do they bring them to us?”

Tables were stationed around the ballroom featuring different wines for sampling. I shrugged in response and asked her to bring me one.

“There’s the hospital director. Let me see if I can get my twenty questions in. Don’t have too much fun without me.” Eden winked, popping a green grape into her mouth. Angie left soon after, and my gaze flicked back to the mayor’s table. Mom hadn’t seen us and was still cozying up to the mayor and his friends.

There was a slight pinch of pain in my chest at seeing my mother looking at another man with the same soft look of adoration she used to give my father. But I was glad that she was moving on and finding happiness again. To say we’d all been devastated by Dad’s passing was an understatement. If he’d been sick prior to his death, then maybe we would have been prepared for his loss. But Jon Michaels had been healthy as an ox, a vivacious, larger-than-life, barrel of a man whose laughter could lighten up any room. Dad still had many years left in him until some drunk left him bleeding out on the side of the road after rear-ending his car so hard that it rolled over a couple of times before ramming into a tree.

Although Mayor Hank Granger was not the first man that came to mind—he and Dad couldn’t be more different if they tried—I would not begrudge her this. And now that I was thinking it over, it felt like the universe was sending me subliminal messages.

Angie got married to Paul, her third husband after two miserable and short-lived marriages, and was the happiest she could be. Mom had her sparkle back. She'd aged ten years after Dad's death, but she looked as radiant as a spring flower sitting beside Hank. Both my mother and Angie were welcoming their second and third chances at love with open arms. But then there was me...

"Oliva? What a surprise. I didn't expect to see you here, but I'm sure glad I came." Dustin's voice was an unwelcome intrusion into my thoughts. He was standing just off to my right. I had to tilt my head up to get a good look at him. Like every other man in the ballroom, he was all spiffed up in a three-piece suit and polished to sparkling perfection. I sat up straighter, wondering if he would cause a scene if I up and walked away from him without saying a word.

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As if he could read my thoughts, his smile tightened at the edges and he placed his half-filled glass of burgundy wine on the table, taking the seat next to mine. I guess we were doing this, then. Stifling a sigh, I surreptitiously inched my chair away from him and tried to look for my sister or Eden without making it too obvious. Angie was at one of the wine stations, chatting with some people, and Eden was interviewing the hospital's director as she'd intended.

"Dustin." I dipped my head in a nod and popped a grape into my mouth. What was I even supposed to say to him? This seemed like the wrong time and place to lay into him for his incessant calls, and I'd already told him that I wasn't interested. What more did he want from me?

"I sent you flowers to apologize for my outburst the other day. Did you get them?" he asked, his shoulders drooping when he realized that a greeting was all he was getting from me. God, I needed a drink!

"I did, but they were unnecessary. Let's just put the whole thing behind us, hmm?"

He did not take that the way I intended. He reminded me of a puppy the way his eyes lit up. I could almost picture his doggy ears perking up and a tail wagging in excitement.

"Yes, let's. I was afraid that you were still angry with me since you weren't taking my calls and all. So, are you here with anyone? Obviously, I'm here on behalf of BioGen Pharmaceuticals. But if you don't mind ditching, there is a restaurant downto—" He stopped, something dark and ugly flashing in his eyes as he looked over my shoulder. It was gone just as quickly, and I would have thought I'd imagined

it if I didn't catch the whiff of pine and cinnamon just as Adrian placed a glass of white wine in front of me and rested his massive hand on my shoulder.

“Sorry that took me a while, but I ran into Mrs. Hudson. It’s hard to get her to stop talking once she gets started.” Adrian winked at me before all traces of amusement vanished from his face and he glared daggers at Dustin. “We meet again.”

CHAPTER 7

Whatever Dustin’s reply was, it was lost in the din of white noise ringing in my ears as I ate up the magnificent sight of Adrian Copper in a suit. Dressed in charcoal black with a bronze vest and tie and a slate gray shirt, he looked like a modern god of war. His unruly copper curls had been combed back, the strands brushing the collar of his hair. He’d even trimmed his beard. He hadn’t shaved it completely off, but he looked less like a lumberjack and more like a man who should be dominating boardrooms instead of chopping down trees.

Urbane and sexy—a far cry from the denim jeans fraying at the knees and flannel shirts and work boots he usually wore. Both looks were worlds apart, but no less drool-inducing. I had to pinch myself out of a haze of desire when I felt my pulse pounding in my chest and my temperature kick up a few degrees.

Dustin was gone by the time I came back to myself and Adrian had taken his seat, a questioning expression on his face.

“Sorry, did you say something?” My voice came out breathy and husky, my throat parched. I grabbed the wine glass and took an unceremonious sip, skipping past all the etiquette of swirling the drink around and taking a whiff of its floral scents. Nevertheless, it was a good pinot grigio.

“I’m guessing I made the right choice then.” He gestured to the glass in my hand

when I raised my brows in silent question.

“I’m more of a chardonnay and pinot noir type of girl, but this tastes just as good. I would have never pegged you as the type of guy who likes these kinds of highbrow dog and pony shows,” I commented, licking the remnants of the wine off my lips. Adrian’s eyes followed the quick swipe of my tongue, his eyes going wolf bright and his throat bobbing up and down as he swallowed.

A thrill of pleasure went through me. For a brief moment, I had the crazy notion that Adrian was attracted to me, but sensible Oliva slapped those thoughts back into their box and padlocked them shut. He was my brother-in-law’s best friend. What’s more, Adrian had been somewhat of an older brother figure for me growing up. He probably still saw me the same way—the chatty, annoying kid who’d begged him for skateboarding lessons and always followed Angie around, trying to muscle her way into their friend group.

He cleared his throat and tugged at his collar before downing the contents of his crystal tumbler.

“That’s not wine,” I accused, my eyes narrowed.

His smirk was like a flash of lightning in the dark, unexpected and heart-stoppingly brilliant. “I asked for something stronger. A shot of scotch is the only thing that’s stopping me from ripping this monkey suit off and going home.”

A cascade of mental images flooded my mind at the picture he painted with his words. I for one would not mind getting a striptease right there and then, but then again, I wasn’t sure if I wanted every other woman in the room to get a look at the muscles hidden beneath his suit.

“I’m only here because of my position on the City Council, and because Cooper

Construction made a sizable donation toward the new pediatric wing. Talia reminded me that as the CEO, it would be remiss if I did not show my face for at least thirty minutes—her words exactly.” He checked his watch as if he were counting down the minutes.

I laughed at his sour expression, fingers itching to smooth out the wrinkles on his forehead. “Talia I can picture schmoozing the crowd. How are she and the baby doing?”

“Both mother and pup are healthy as horses. I’ve never seen a baby more spoiled than Roman. Talia and Max have pack mates coming and going from their home every other hour bearing gifts and unsolicited advice for the first-time parents.” He chuckled. The sound was smoky and low, but I felt it vibrate in my bones.

“She must be going out of her mind given how generally nosey everyone is in this town. I can only imagine how much worse it is in a tight-knit group like a wolf pack.”

Adrian grimaced, shifting in his chair—which was much too tiny for his huge frame. Was there a piece of furniture that did not make this man look like a giant playing with doll toys? He turned the chair so that it was not tucked into the table but facing me completely as I sat sideways. His legs were spread on either side of mine as if he were caging me in, and I think I was getting a little high off his scent.

“There is no such thing as privacy in a wolf pack. When I was fourteen, I kissed Maise Turner behind the bleachers with one of my pack mates acting a lookout. Next thing I knew, the pack elders were coming out of the woodwork giving me the birds and the wolves talk. The last thing I wanted to know at that age was how virile young wolves are.” He grimaced.

I laughed so hard that I snorted, drawing a few curious looks our way. But even as my shoulders shook from the laughter I was failing to stuff down, I sifted through my

memories for a Maisie Turner and could not come up with anything. That did not stop the acrid taste of jealousy from coating my tongue thinking about her being the recipient of Adrian's affection, first kiss, and who knew what other firsts.

Realizing how irrational I was being, I tried to shove the thoughts aside and turned the topic back to his sister and newborn nephew. "So, how's Talia dealing with all the intrusive visitors? You can let her know that there's always a slice of death by chocolate cake with her name on it at the cafe if she needs a pick me up."

"You might just regret making that offer. My sister is a fiend when it comes to chocolate. But to answer your question, the stubborn woman came back to work this week, a whole month before she was scheduled. We've set up a mini-nursery for Roman in her office and so far, so good." He grabbed a cookie off one of the platters and demolished it in two bites. Swallowing had always been such a mundane thing, nothing I ever paid attention to before this sudden awareness I felt for Adrian. Now that very mundane act felt like I was getting a striptease. What was wrong with me?

There was a lull in conversation, both of us taking in everything and lost to our own thoughts. "We're not being very social, are we?" Adrian knocked his knee into mine.

"I was dragged here against my will and would rather be curled up in bed with a good book. I didn't even bring my checkbook, so I'd much rather stay right here and get in as much rest as I can before my three a.m. wakeup call."

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He checked the time on his wristwatch. “I have fifteen minutes before I can leave. Want me to give you a ride back home?”

I opened my mouth to decline. I didn’t want him to go out of his way when his house was all the way across town from my place, but I ended up yawning instead. Now that I’d sat down, all the week’s exhaustion was weighing me down, and I didn’t think I would be getting up from my seat anytime soon.

“You weren’t kidding about the thirty-minute time limit, were you?” I managed a weak smile.

“Afraid not. I have a pack engagement I need to get to.”

Some minutes later, Angie and Mom finally joined us while Eden continued working the room. Since both of them knew Adrian pretty well, there was no awkwardness. The conversation flowed as freely as the wine Mom and Angie were knocking back.

I’d stuck to my one glass, and Adrian had not asked for more scotch after polishing off his.

Angie was trying to wheedle information out of our mother about her relationship with the mayor. In her tipsy state, she was completely unaware of Mom’s growing impatience with her. I decided to rescue my sister before she was sent off to the corner like a naughty little kid.

“I’ve finally decided to go ahead and get started on all those renovation projects I’ve been going on about,” I said with a raised voice, cutting Angie off before she stuffed

her foot deeper into her mouth.

Mom, Angie, and Adrian stared at me strangely because of my sudden outburst. Angie's blinks were sluggish, but my mother was nonplussed.

"Is that so?" Mom asked. "That's wonderful, darling. You've been talking about upgrading your kitchen forever. Are you going to take care of the renovations, Adrian?" she asked politely.

"This is the first I'm hearing of it, but I do hope that Olivia decides to go with our company. We're in the process of developing an in-house interior design crew. If you don't mind, you can act as our benchmark before we officially launch the department," he said, looking straight into my eyes. A warm flush crept up my neck. There were no words to describe the feeling of being the sole focus of Adrian's intense gaze. I could feel the phantom caress of it on my cheeks, and though my mind was screaming at me to stop making goo-goo eyes at the man, I couldn't look away.

"Liv?" Adrian arched a single ginger brow, amusement softening his harsh features. But his eyes... There were banked flames of—and this could have totally been my imagination—a man who felt more than a hint of desire for a woman. I remembered then, a little too late, that wolves possessed heightened senses. The burn in my cheeks raged into an inferno, my throat clogging up at the embarrassing realization that the whole time I was panting after Adrian in my head, his wolf probably scented it all along. His eyes went wide, the pitch black of his pupils growing large and leaving a ring of amber around them before he quickly shifted his gaze from me and tugged at his collar.

"Well, now." My mother chuckled, catching my attention. Her smile widened, her blue eyes speaking volumes. Unfortunately, I was not well versed in mom-eye speak. But the smug and knowing expression had the hairs on my arms standing on edge. Winking at me, she nabbed a whole wheat oatmeal cookie and took a huge bite.

“Why are both so red? Did I miss something?” Angie asked, her speech slightly slurred as she looked between Adrian and me. He cleared his throat and reached for the pitcher of water at the center of the table, his hand trembling and spilling water off the side of his glass.

“It’s just a little too warm in here.” He was very pointedly not looking at me when he answered my sister.

“So, sweetheart, will you take Adrian up on his offer?” Mom asked, turning her attention to Adrian before I could answer her. “Personally, I think you should work closely with her, Adrian, and make sure she doesn’t get carried away buying things she doesn’t need. I’m half afraid she’ll get a kitchen more suitable for a high-end bakery instead of something to suit her house.”

I made an inelegant noise at the back of my throat. “I’m not that bad. At any rate, I have better control when it comes to these sorts of things than Angie does,” I sputtered, crossing my arms in indignation. This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that those close to me would accuse me of going overboard with my purchases. It was one of the reasons I had to bring an accountant on board to manage Jumpin’ Beans’ finances as well as my personal account. Whoever thought of the concept of online shopping had clearly not taken shopping addicts like myself into consideration. With purchases only a click away, self-control went right out the window.

Angie rolled her eyes. “Oh please. Remember when you and Sean moved into—”

“Angela.” My mother clicked her tongue, but the damage had already been done. One mention of my ex-husband’s name and it was as if we’d all been doused in cold water. Even Adrian had gone preternaturally still beside me. My sister’s complexion was pale as a ghost, remorse pouring off her in waves. Three sets of eyes looked at me as if they expected me to break down right then and there.

What did it say about me that three years after my divorce my family still expected me to either turn into a blubbering mess or a steaming kettle of acrimony at the mere mention of his name? Was I really so pathetic that my mother and sister assumed I still clung to my pain and bitter feelings like the cliché scorned woman?

“Liv, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to bring that lying—” Angie started to apologize, her eyes clearer than they had been all night. I waved her apology away, the smile on my face genuine as I realized with a start that talking about Sean no longer made me feel like I wanted to drown in a pool of my own tears. Sure, the hurt and resentment were still there, but I could breathe through it and see past all the negative emotions.

“Relax, Ange. It’s not like he’s Voldemort or anything. You can say his name without the world crashing down on us. What my mother and sister are trying to say is that I like to play fast and loose with my purse strings, which is why I need a contractor I can trust. One who’ll reel me in instead of feed into my bad vices of spending money on things I won’t need.”

Adrian nodded and gave me a small smile. “In that case, I’m your man,” he promised.

The air stalled in my lungs, something intense and powerful zapping between us after his declaration. I thought I felt something yank at my heart, like a tether that had been pulled taut. The sensation was so real that I rubbed at my chest to alleviate the pressure only to notice that Adrian was mirroring my movements.

Pausing in the act of rubbing his chest, Adrian ran his fingers through his hair, messing up the slicked-back do. I wondered how his hair would feel between my fingers. Cool and smooth like silk, or as soft as feathers?

“Why don’t you stop by the office whenever you’re free and we hash everything out then?” he asked me, and I nodded my head. He checked his watch one more time, making me wonder what the pack was up to this late at night. While having wolves

roam about the town's forests was a normal everyday occurrence, very few outsiders were allowed to visit the pack circle, and we knew next to nothing about how the pack operated as a whole.

Most of the adult wolves had regular day jobs, but from what I'd gleaned through the years was that they had secondary—or primary, depending on what came first—roles within the pack. Several businesses owned by the werewolves in Mystic Cove contributed a percentage of their monthly profits toward the pack's finances. It was both one big family and a business.

"I'm heading out now. Do you still want me to give you a lift, or have you changed your mind?" he asked me, undoing the button on his suit jacket as he pushed away from his seat.

"No, I'm coming with you." I grabbed my purse from the empty seat next to mine and bid my mother and sister goodnight. Eden was nowhere in sight, so I asked them to tell her I was gone.

"You're leaving already? You haven't even been here a full hour yet." Angie pouted.

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“I wasn’t exaggerating when I told you guys that I’m dead on my feet. I gotta get in some Z’s if I plan on firing on all cylinders tomorrow.” Laughing at her crestfallen expression, I rounded the table and kissed Angie on the cheek, and then did the same with my mom. “Please make sure she doesn’t get too drunk. She has a bunch of sixteen-year-olds to deal with tomorrow and I doubt they’ll cut her any slack.”

“Meh, she’s old enough to face the consequences of her actions head-on,” Mom replied and surprised me by standing up and pulling me into a hug. My body immediately relaxed into her embrace, soaking in her scent.

I don’t know what magic she used, but every time I caught a whiff of her favorite lavender fabric softener and her Yardley Poise eau de parfum, I instantly reverted back to my four-year-old self. A time when there was nothing a hug from Mommy couldn’t fix.

“I don’t know what’s going on between you and Adrian, but I approve,” she whispered in my ear, giving me one last squeeze before backing off, a proud smile on her face. “Get home safe, you two,” she told Adrian and me as she dragged my sister off to mingle before I unglued my tongue and responded to her crazy claims.

“Shall we?” Adrian held out his hand for me. Did he hear what my mother had whispered to me? He didn’t look like he had, but maybe he just had a great poker face. I almost didn’t want to take his hand just to prove to my mother that she was imagining things, but that would be unnecessarily childish of me. And, really, who was I trying to fool? I was attracted to Adrian Cooper. The sooner I accepted that fact, the sooner I’d get over it and move on with my life.

Dating ban, Liv. Remember that, I told myself mentally.

CHAPTER 8

Adrian's truck smelled just like him. The interior was saturated with his scent. I could feel it sink into my skin and permeate my taste buds. There was also a hint of leather and mint mixed in with the pine and cinnamon, but every breath I took in reminded me just how close and intimate being stuck in a car with someone could be.

"Sorry about the mess," he apologized sheepishly as he tossed a bunch of files and papers into the backseat and stuffed a tape measure into the glove compartment.

"You think this is messy, wait till you see my car," I joked, hiding a yawn behind my palm. "God, I can't wait to sink into my bed. The way my bones and muscles are aching, I just know that this is going to be one of those nights I sleep like the dead."

"I feel you. All I want is to tuck myself in the back of a cave and sleep for the next month. You know, get away from everything for a little bit." He sighed, his voice, his entire demeanor, heavy with a resigned sort of exhaustion, like he no longer had the strength or the wherewithal to deal with whatever was eating him up inside.

"Is everything okay? I don't know if I'll be able to help with whatever's bothering you, but sometimes it helps just to have someone to unload on."

He glanced my way, his eyes flashing bright in the darkness of the car and as we cruised under a streetlight, looking as if they were afire from the inside. "How much time do you have? Because I have a list longer than the length of my arm," he told me with a wry twist of the lips.

"Why don't we see how much of that list we can tackle between here and my home." I flicked my earlobe to show that I was listening.

Adrian ran a hand over his beard, looking me over briefly before focusing on the road again. “I guess the issue pressing most on my mind is the fact that I don’t know how to find the balance between being the Alpha wolf, the CEO of a rapidly growing construction firm, and just being plain old Adrian—if he still exists. It feels like I’m being pulled in two separate directions in a twisted game of tug-of-war. If it’s not the company demanding my attention, it’s something to do with the pack. I barely have any time to breathe and collect my thoughts before a new problem arises. No respite whatsoever.”

“Hmm,” I played with the strands of my necklace.

“That’s a very non-communicative ‘hmm.’ Care to elaborate?” he teased.

“I’m thinking here, give me a sec. I want to give you something more solid than if you want some me-time between your CEO and Alpha duties, then carve it out for yourself. That just sounds callous and uncaring on my part.”

“But you do have a point. There’s nothing stopping me from switching my phone off on the weekends and taking my boat out for a little fishing,” he agreed.

“The only problem is that you’re too much of a worrywart. You take your responsibilities seriously, which means that you won’t just take off to the middle of the ocean without any line of communication just in case someone needs you. Am I right or am I right?”

His silence was telling. I tugged on my seatbelt so that I could turn my upper body and face him.

“Here’s a thought, instead of shouldering everything like you’re friggin’ Atlas, delegate. You have dozens of capable people around you, both in the pack and at work, who can help take the load off. If you insist on going all lone wolf on everyone,

you'll burn yourself out, Adrian."

"I have been told that I have issues with letting go of the reins on more than one occasion. But the thing is, the one time I trusted someone to hold my company's best interests at heart, we nearly went bankrupt." He flipped on the turn signal as we went off the main road and down the street that would lead to my neighborhood.

I was vaguely aware of the situation he was referring to. Cooper Construction's chief financial officer embezzled a ton of money from the company and swindled a couple of clients and made away with a fortune before being apprehended in Vegas. It was a miracle that Adrian and his siblings had managed to recover the company's reputation to the point that they were now competing with bigger firms based in the city.

"And believe me when I say I could use a sounding board with pack issues. By all rights, my Beta and my mate should be the two people taking up those roles," he continued, flicking me a fleeting glance when he said mate. The look was too quick to make out the emotion in his eyes, but the mention of a mate caused butterflies to dance in my stomach and my heart rate to pick up.

They said a wolf mated only once. That once they found their other half, there would never be anyone else. In some cases, when half of a mated pair passed away, the other followed soon after because mated pairs literally could not live without the other.

What was it like to love someone so deeply that your life literally became tethered to theirs? That you could feel their presence within you no matter the distance between, to know that for as long as you both lived, your partner would never betray you.

"Unfortunately—" The low purr of Adrian's voice cut into my semi-fantastical thoughts. "—I'm not sure if I can wholeheartedly trust the man who is supposed to be

my Beta.”

“Because you have trust issues in general or...” I left the question to hang and waited for his answer. Adrian’s jaw ticked and he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth. The leather of the steering wheel creaked as he squeezed his hands tight around it.

“There are some in the pack, a very small minority, mind you, who think that someone else should have taken over for Rod as Alpha even though it’s not like the pack members have a choice in the matter. Alphas are born, not chosen. And so are Betas,” he explained.

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“And your Beta thinks he should be the head honcho?”

Adrian shook his head. “No, he knows his place in the pack and is happy about it, but there are some who say he should have been Alpha instead of me. And because of that they’ve been acting like a bunch of spoiled brats, questioning my leadership and orders at every turn. If they keep being insubordinate, I’ll have no choice but to kick them out of the pack.

“What they’re doing, challenging me every chance they get, it’s starting to cause discord within the ranks. I can’t have anyone thinking that I am a weak Alpha, or that could mean serious trouble for us. We’ve managed to stave off other packs from encroaching into our territory for years, but if rumors start spreading about dissension within the pack, the wolves will literally come sniffing around. And not all packs are as peaceful and harmonious as ours—the bloodshed will not be contained to just us shifters.” His mouth and eyebrows were set in a grim line.

I so desperately wanted to say something worthwhile to him, or better yet knock whoever was trying to sabotage him upside the head, but we’d pulled into my driveway, the headlights of his car illuminating the outline of my Colonial-style, two-story home.

“Here we are,” he hummed in his deep voice, turning off the headlights and engulfing us in darkness since I’d forgotten to leave the porch lights on.

“So we are. Before I go, I just want to say, don’t feel guilty for making decisions for the good of your pack. You can go down the route of amicable discussions with your naysayers, but if they still refuse to fall in line and stop causing problems for

everyone, then you have all the right in the world to exile them from the pack. At the end of the day, they're adults who can handle the blowback of their childish tantrums. The fault lies entirely with them." I reached out across the console and covered his hand with mine.

Before I could snatch it away, he'd flipped our hands over and ran the rough pad of his thumb across my knuckles and laced our fingers together. Every brush of his thumb on my hand arrowed straight to my heart, and the intense concentration in his eyes as he stared at our intertwined hands was not helping.

I tried to snatch my hand away. Adrian's nostrils flared as he took a deep breath and a low growl filled the cab, telling me that he could already scent my arousal in the air.

"Olivia," he growled, staring me right in the eye, not bothering to mask the depth of his desire. I don't know who moved first, but one second I was buckled into my seat, and the next the constraining belt snapped loose and Adrian's lips were a hair's breadth away from mine. His warm breath brushed across my face, smelling faintly of scotch and mint gum. He was so close that I heard him swallow and saw the movement of his throat muscles as he did. I could pick out the individual flecks of brown and copper swimming in all that golden amber of his eyes.

A braver, more confident woman would have closed that small gap and claimed Adrian's mouth in a kiss. In fact, I had a sneaking suspicion that he was waiting for me to finish what he had initiated. But I was Olivia Louise Michaels, the biggest coward and idiot ever.

"Thank you for the ride, Adrian. I'll get back to you about the renovation plans as soon as possible," I whispered and gave him a soft peck on the forehead instead. "Goodnight."

"Sweet dreams, Liv," I heard him say when I practically ran out of the car. My hands

trembled when I tried to unlock the front door, dropping the house keys and missing the keyhole twice before finally pushing the door open and shutting it behind me. Slumping on the ground with the door at my back, I waited for my heart to stop its thunderous gallop and to hear Adrian drive away before dragging myself upstairs.

When the rumble of the engine didn't come, I crawled over to the front porch windows and peeked outside. The truck was still idling in the driveway. Actually, it was parked there, and Adrian was nowhere in sight.

“What the—” I rushed to the front door, thinking that something might have happened to him, and pulled the door open in time to catch a streak of a huge red wolf rush down the street at the end of the cul de sac and disappear into the woods beyond.

Later that night, I tasted the wind in my dreams, felt the ground beneath me as my paws pounded on the hard ground and then pushed off it in long powerful leaps. There were others running beside me, their joy at being out in the open and running wild under the brilliant silver light of the moon making my blood sing with the same. The world zipped past me as blurry streaks, my heart raced, and there was a euphoric burn in my muscles. Even though I was pushing myself to go harder and faster, I was barely out of breath. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled. Another joined in, and then another, and so on and so forth until the cacophony of howls joined together to create one harmonious tune that filled up my lungs and heart and poured out of me when I released one of my own to join the masses.

This is what Pack was all about. The bonds and camaraderie, the intangible magic that joined us all to each other. Pack was one. Pack was all. And yet my beast was not satisfied because it had found the other half of its soul, but it couldn't claim him yet.

We had to bide our time and wait. We had to be sneaky as cats and make her fall for us without realizing it until it was too late for her to run from us.

I woke from that strange dream sometime after one in the morning.

“What was that?”

I clutched my head, trying to grasp at the remnants of my dream, but it was slipping away so fast I could only remember bits and pieces of it. By the time I woke up again two hours later to get ready for work, the dream was nothing but jumbled flashes of memory tucked into the recesses of my subconscious memory, and Adrian’s car was gone from my driveway.

CHAPTER 9

I had outdone myself. Jumpin’ Beans looked like a different cafe altogether. The Alice in Wonderland decorations had finally come in and I’d spent all weekend setting everything up—with help from Peter, Wendy, my sister, and her husband. Creepy Jabberwocky, Mad Hatter, and Queen of Hearts motifs filled up the room, and jack-o-lanterns carved to resemble the Cheshire cat’s creepy smile were centerpieces on the tables. I’d switched out the usual table linens for checkered tablecloths, amongst other things, to give it a more fall feel.

Between setting everything up, interviewing potential chefs to take over during the lunchtime shifts, and my duties as manager and primary baker, I didn’t have time to think of anything else...of anyone else. I’d caught fleeting glances of Adrian when he came into the cafe, sometimes alone and other times with his crew or his brother, Carter, and I’d always made sure to retreat into the kitchen or my office when I saw him coming.

That stupid dream had plagued my nights ever since the charity benefit on Thursday

and the near kiss that followed. Adrian's amber eyes were the last thing I saw when my head hit the pillow at night, sometimes in wolf form, but mostly it was the man peering down at me, his massive body pinning me down and peppering kisses down my naked body.

The things Adrian and I did in those dreams left me empty and aching when the morning came. Four mornings in a row, I woke up with my sheets tangled around me and my body coated with sweat.

I was driving myself crazy! Of all the men to rouse my slumbering libido, it had to be Adrian. I didn't want to upend our friendship with...something more. How much longer could I avoid him without making it obvious that I really did want something more. His sister, Talia, had left a voice message on my home phone. Adrian must have told her that I would be coming in soon.

I began to wonder if these feelings would go away if I walked over next door and gave Beverley the go-ahead to set me up on her bloody blind date. If I met this supposed perfect man, I should—theoretically—be more attracted to him instead of Adrian, right? I should just go on the stupid date so I'd stop having horny dreams starring Adrian Cooper and the world would tilt back into its rightful place.

"Olivia!" Wendy yelled my name, her hand on my shoulder as she gave me a jarring shake. "Jeez, boss! I called your name like five times in a row and you were just staring at the same spot on the wall. I thought you were possessed or something." She backed away when I shrugged her hand off me.

Blinking owlishly at her, I tried to remember what I went into my office for in the first place and drew a blank. "Do you need me for something?" I asked Wendy, getting up from my seat, needing to move, to work off the excess energy nipping away at my body. My pulse was pounding an angry beat in my throat and my thoughts were scattered all over the place. The day had passed me by while I was all

up in my head and it was already almost midday.

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“The new girl wanted you to check out her menu one last time before she got started.”

“Her name is Lauren. Please stop calling her the new girl. It is disrespectful and she’s older than you,” I chastised Wendy, who’d taken one look at my new part-timer Lauren and decided she did not like her.

“She’s not that much older than me. And if she can’t take a little ribbing, maybe she should stick to her side of town. What’s a rich girl like her doing slumming with the rest of us mortals? It’s not like she’s hurting for the money,” she scoffed, crossing her arms and tapping her flip-flops on the floor.

I rolled my eyes at her lame argument. So that’s why Wendy hated the mere sight of Lauren Pemberley. Wendy’s family lived in a trailer park just on the outskirts of town near the border separating Mystic Cove and Beckford, whereas Lauren was essentially what passed for a socialite in Mystic Cove.

“Is this going to be a problem for you? I can’t have the two of you talking smack behind the other’s back and—God forbid—in front of the customers.” I put my hands on my hips. Wendy narrowed her eyes, the sunlight streaming through my office window reflecting off her nose stud and making it look like she had a mini rainbow sparking off the side of her nose.

“Why, what did Miss Thing say about me?” she asked, her voice fraught with suspicion.

“Wendy, that’s not the point. Look, I don’t care what the beef between you two is,

but this is the first and last warning I'm going to give you—keep it out of my shop. Jumpin' Beans is getting busier by the day, which means that I'm going to slowly start bringing in more employees and I need us to work as a cohesive unit. That means from eight in the morning to six-thirty in the evening, you and Lauren are the best of buddies, capiche?"

Her tongue poked at the inside of her cheek as she mirrored my stance. I raised my brows, waiting on her answer, and kept my expression stone faced.

"Yes, boss," she eventually replied. I followed her out to the kitchen. Without a second glance at Lauren, Wendy went back out into the shop, her back and shoulders stiff.

Lauren's gaze followed her out the door, only looking at me once they closed behind Wendy's retreating back. Although she was dressed casually in a pair of distressed jeans and a black Chanel T-shirt with an apron over it, Lauren did indeed stand out. She'd tied back her shoulder-length blonde hair and stuffed it under a hairnet, and I would bet everything I owned that the diamond studs in her ear were the real thing and not cubic zirconia like the ones dangling from my ears.

"So, this is the lunchtime menu for today. I wanted to get your approval before I got started." Lauren was pleasantly competent, one of the reasons I hired her over all the other candidates I'd interviewed over the weekend. I was already teaching Peter how to make some of our crowd's favorite pastries, and eventually I'd make him a permanent kitchen staff member and bring in one more baker and maybe one or two people for the wait staff. But I couldn't hire them all at once. I hoped to bring in the next baker before the end of the year, maybe sometime in December, right before Christmas.

I took the paper from her, reading over the small selection she'd drafted up. We'd both decided to start small and see how it went. If the customers didn't respond

positively—by which I mean profitably—then I’d just go back to serving coffee and baked goods.

“I was thinking we should just have two salad and soup options for today and sandwiches and smoothies for those who don’t feel like getting caffeine.”

“Smoothies? We don’t have any fruits in stock. Other than that, everything else seems okay.” I gave the menu back to her.

“Oh, that’s okay. I brought an assortment of fruits with me. We can make this a trial run.” She opened the fridge and brought out bowls of freshly cut fruit and half-frozen fruit. Apples, bananas, pineapples, kiwis, strawberries, blueberries, and I assumed paw-paw. Then she removed two giant tubs of yogurt, one low-fat plain yogurt and the other strawberry. “I was thinking we put these out front and the customer can choose what they want to go into the smoothie and we blend it for them. If you don’t mind, I’d love to use some of the leftover muesli and raisins from this morning.”

“I don’t see why not. We’ll have to use the coffee takeout cups for today. I’ll try and see if my supplier can rush over suitable smoothie ones by the end of the day.”

We ironed out a few more details and I helped Wendy at the counter during the lunch rush while Peter worked with Lauren in the kitchen. My heart leaped every time I heard the bell above the door chime, thinking Adrian had come in. I both wanted to see him and had my fingers crossed that he wouldn’t stop by today. When 2:30 came and went (he usually picked up his lunch between 1:00 and 2:30), I was left oddly bereft and twisted up over the complicated emotions leaving me in knots.

I’d just finished bagging up an order, one that I’d messed up beforehand, when Wendy approached me. “Boss, are you not feeling well? You’ve been out of it all day.” Wrinkles marred her forehead.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. I can feel a massive headache coming on. I think I’m going to take off early today. Can I trust you to handle closing?”

“Sure thing. Should I swing by your place with the keys or can I take them home?” I told her to keep them for the night, not wanting her and Peter to go out of their way when they only had their bicycles to transport them.

“I’ll use the spare key to open up in the morning. You know all the updated security codes, right? And make sure to leave this place spic and span so that we don’t have to deal with clean up first thing in the morning.”

With that, I grabbed my handbag and laptop case from the office and headed home. I walked past The Book Coven and kept my eyes straight ahead only to backtrack and storm into the store.

There was a line three people deep at the counter, so I passed the time browsing through the shelves nearest the counter, not really taking any interest in the stationery, pretty as it was. But there were also jars filled to the brim with assorted crystals. Whether they were purely decorative or if they had actual magical properties, I didn’t know. There was a huge, round, amber crystal sitting next to the jars. I reached for it without thinking, loving the way it felt against my fingers. It was a pale facsimile of Adrian’s eyes, but close enough that I felt a pang in my heart.

“Amber represents cleansing and renewal in crystal language,” Beverley spoke up right next to me. I didn’t hear her walk up to me and let out a sharp gasp, the stone slipping between my fingers. In a display of impressive reflexes, Beverley caught the crystal between her thumb and index finger and held it up to the light.

“A curious crystal, amber. Not quite a gemstone, but rather fossilized tree resin, carrying with it all the rich warmth of mother nature and an ancient energy we can’t even begin to comprehend. It is both a precious gem and an ancient wise tree rolled

up in one fiery crystal,” she drawled on mindlessly, turning the crystal this way and that. I was beginning to wonder where she was going with her little spiel.

“If you want, I can have Sophia fashion this into a pendant for you. She’s quite into jewelry making these days and is exceptionally skilled, my granddaughter.”

“That won’t be necessary.” I grabbed the amber crystal from her hand and placed it back on the shelf. Beverley followed the movement, an inscrutable expression on her face.

“I’ll go on the blind date. That is, if my perfect man is still open to going out with me,” I blurted in a rush before I completely lost my nerve. If there was someone out there for me, I didn’t want to waste my time mooning over another man when we were basically doomed to fail before we started anything.

“Oh! Well... May I ask why you changed your mind?” Beverley took my hand and led me to a seating area by the bay windows at the front of the store, not minding that she had customers milling about.

“Does it really matter why I changed my mind? You told me to reach out whenever I was ready to put myself out there, so here I am. What’s the next step? Will you finally tell me the mystery man’s name?”

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Beverley gave me a Cheshire cat smile and got up from her seat to grab her phone from behind the counter. “That would hardly count as a blind date now, would it? Tell me, would tonight be too soon for the first date?”

I choked on air. “To-tonight? What if he already has plans or something? I assumed we’d make it a weekend thing or something.” I smoothed my palms over my jeans. My stomach felt as if tiny creatures were tap dancing up a storm. Beverley tsked and gave me a you’re-not-serious stare. A customer walked up to pay for his books. Instead of waiting until we were alone again, she spoke over his shoulder.

“Wouldn’t want you to chicken out on me.” She shook her head. “I’m guessing you’d rather not have this date anywhere the two of you might be seen. You have the option of driving an hour into the city or over to Beckford. I can make reservations for you. All you have to do is show up. Or would you rather he pick you up from your place.”

“No thank you.” I shook my head. “No disrespect to your mad matchmaking skills, but I don’t want a stranger showing up at my place. What if he’s a weirdo or the date tanks? I can’t avoid him if he knows where I live.”

“Fair enough.” Beverley’s eyes sparkled with laughter. “So, the big city or Beckford, what’ll it be?” At the mention of Beckford, I flashed back to the disaster date with what’s his face and his horrible mother at the steakhouse. Still, it was a shorter round trip than if we drove an hour each way into the city.

“Beckford’s fine by me, just as long as the reservation is not for Joe’s Steakhouse.”

Three hours later, I was questioning my sanity as I stared at my face in the full-length mirror in the bathroom. It's not too late to bail out, I told my reflection. What was I thinking, going all the way to Beckford for a date with a total stranger? At least with online dating, I had little rapport with my date after chatting on the site. And I knew what they looked like and their names beforehand. I was going in completely blind on this one. All I knew about my date was that he would be wearing a red tie, according to Beverley. I tried to point out that any number of men could be wearing red ties when I walked into Hestia's, the Greek restaurant in Beckford we were dining at.

"Trust me, gingersnap, you couldn't miss him if you tried," Beverley had cackled through the phone when she called to confirm that everything was still on for tonight.

And so here I was. I'd had to dig deep into the closet for a sapphire blue sheath dress I hadn't worn in years and almost cried in relief when the zipper didn't get stuck. Lord knew I'd eaten my body weight in muffins, pies, and cookies since opening Jumpin' Beans. I supposed the spin and yoga classes Eden dragged me to did do some good. The dress had a sweetheart neckline, long off-the-shoulder lace sleeves, and shoulder straps. Smoothing my hands down my hips, I wondered if the dress was too much for a first date. Hestia's was not exactly a jeans and sneakers kind of place, but it wasn't a five-star restaurant either.

Come on, Liv, it's just a dress. No one wants to rock up to a date looking like a potato, I huffed to myself in frustration and stalked out of the bathroom to put my heels on and grab my purse. I did a quick walkthrough of the house to make sure that all the windows were secured. There had been a gang of raccoons terrorizing the neighborhood. If you dared to make the mistake of leaving your windows open, chances were that you'd come back home to find your house ransacked.

A wave of deja vu crept over me as I once again found myself bundled in my car and

psyching myself up to step into Hestia's. Although, if you wanted to get all technical about it, this wasn't really deja vu since I'd already been in this situation before. Aaaand there I went again, wasting time with unnecessary thoughts instead of grabbing life by the horns and doing what I'd set out to do.

I quickly glanced in the mirror to make sure my makeup was not smudged. The look of trepidation in my cornflower blue eyes and my stricken expression had me lightly slapping my cheeks and rolling back my shoulders. Try to at least look like you're happy to be here. It's a simple date, not an appointment with the gallows. You're allowed to leave if you feel uncomfortable.

Besides, I told myself as I walked into the restaurant, Beverley was batting a thousand with her matches so far. She wouldn't set me up with a loser of a human being or a psychotic serial killer. If I stopped being so pessimistic about this, I could be just as happy as all the other couples she'd matched up so far.

The first thing I noticed about Hestia's were the robust and spicy mouthwatering aromas blanketing the open space of the taverna. I'd gotten a whiff even before I'd stepped into the restaurant. Hestia's had a sea restaurant feel about it with its wide and airy space washed in calming hues of blue on white. Wall sconce lamps provided ambient lighting and floral creepers ripe with pink and white blooms twisted around the high lattice ceiling and flowed down the halls. Flower arrangements of anemones, bright yellow daffodils, and multi-colored hyacinths were in aquamarine ceramic vases placed strategically around the room.

A hostess in a pale blue blouse and dark pencil skirt walked up to me while I drank in the aesthetic view of the restaurant and asked me if I would be dining alone or whether I was here to meet someone.

I started to face her so that I could answer her when a shock of auburn hair in my peripheral caught my eye. If this were a movie, this would be the part where my smile

fell off in slow motion and the camera panned out for the big reveal. The hostess's voice faded away like much of the surroundings. The only person standing out in a screaming red tie was Adrian Cooper.

The smile on his face was hesitant as he got up from his seat and walked over to me. The synapses in my brain started firing, some of them getting fried in the process as I simultaneously enjoyed the sight of him in a suit and freaked out that he might actually be my blind date. Of all the men in the world, my perfect match was the man who haunted my thoughts during the day and visited my dreams while I slept. What were the odds?

My calf muscles twitched. A small part of me wanted to run away, but there was an overwhelmingly bigger part that felt a surge of relief that it was Adrian and not a total stranger who was my blind date for the night.

The corners of my lips quivered in a shaky smile to match his, the two of us having an awkward, bashful stare down of sorts in the middle of a restaurant with the hostess watching on in confusion.

"You're my blind date?" I breathed, suddenly unsure what to do with myself. Should I hold out my hand for a handshake? Cross my arms? Hide them behind my back? Let them hang limply by my side? Was I staring at his face for too long? Where else could I look when Adrian was taking up so much space?

Holding out his hand for me, Adrian asked, "Are you disappointed?"

The question was a quiet rumble, yet it was more distinct than the din of restaurant sounds from other patrons and the soft music playing from hidden speakers.

"No. No, I'm not." My shy smile stretched wider as I placed my hand in his, a small shiver working its way across my body at the gentle static shock that accompanied

the contact.

CHAPTER 11

“On a scale of one to ten, how awkward is this for you?” Adrian asked after helping me into my seat and pouring me a glass of the wine he’d ordered beforehand. I tried not to read too much into the fact that he’d gone with my favorite, but the hopeless romantic within me was giggling like mad.

“One being not so awkward and ten being extremely uncomfortable?” I asked, and he nodded in reply, tugging on his tie. I pretended to think about it, perversely enjoying the play of emotions flashing across his face from confidence to uncertainty.

“I’d say, maybe a five. On one hand, I’ve known you since I was a kid and thought of you as an older brother at one point in my life.” His smile fell at that. “But on the flip side, I’m glad it was you, Adrian,” I confessed quietly, casting my eyes down at the menu placed in front of me and flipping it open, blindly browsing through the meal selections. I was afraid that if he stared too long into my eyes, he would get a glimpse of the depth of my feelings for him.

Whoa! What? I was startled by the jarring thought that crossed my mind. The depth of my feelings for him? What? That made it sound as if I was head over heels for the man when I’m sure all I was really feeling was lust. Just the physical yearnings of a woman who’d been single a little too long.

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“How about you? Unlike me, you clearly knew that I was the woman Beverley planned to—” I stopped talking mid-sentence, my eyes going wide. Something clicked in my mind that had me looking at Adrian a little differently.

Beverley approached me about finding my perfect match in the coffee shop hours before I ran into Adrian at the Scarlet Season. Did she come to me first or...?

“The night of the hospital charity thing at the hotel, did you already know that Beverley thought you and I were fated for each other?”

I knew his answer before he verbally confirmed my suspicions, but we were interrupted by a waiter before he could tell me.

“Ah, shoot! I haven’t decided what I want to order yet.” I cursed under my breath, going over the menu one more time. I felt a soft kick to my left shoe underneath the table, and when I looked up, Adrian was already staring at me, his complexion almost as fiery as his unruly curls.

“I can order for you, if you don’t mind?”

His gaze locked on mine before skating away to look at something over my shoulder and flicking back to my face again, staring at my mouth this time around.

The duality of Adrian Cooper was mind-boggling. He went from being this take-no-nonsense Alpha/CEO who could knock your teeth in to this bashful, teddy bear of a man.

I gave him leave to order whatever he thought looked good on the menu. He went with Greek salad and spinach pie for starters, followed by chicken gyros, prawn saganaki, and pita bread, and then moussaka for mains. “For dessert, we’ll go with the white chocolate piato and some coffee,” he told the waiter, handing off the menu.

I waited for the waiter to leave before voicing my doubts. Leaning across the table, I lowered my voice. “Wasn’t that a bit much? I feel full just from listening to your order.”

My hand went to my stomach and patted it as if I’d already eaten. Adrian’s smile could only be described as wolfish. “I have a pretty big appetite, so rest assured that I’m going to wipe the plates clean even if you pick at your food like a bird,” he replied, grimacing immediately afterward. “It occurs to me that I should not make myself out to be a pig when this is only our first date.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve been around you wolves long enough to know that you could eat this place out of existence. And don’t think I haven’t noticed that you skirted over answering my question,” I pointed out.

Adrian leaned back in his seat and scratched at his beard. He remained silent for a moment, a faraway look glazing his eyes over. “I did know that it was you, yes. And the only reason I didn’t say anything was because I knew you weren’t ready to step back into the ring again. Not to mention, you were accosted by that creep again. I didn’t want to bother you right after you were harassed.” He shrugged, the fluid movement accentuating the breadth of his shoulders and drawing his shirt tight across the broad expanse of his chest.

“So, this...whatever this thing is between us, you want it to happen? You’re not here just because of the ramblings of an old witch?” I asked, looking at him from beneath my lashes and brushing my finger down the stem of the wine glass.

“I’d hardly call it the ramblings of an old witch, but I do want this. Do you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what I want, Adrian, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to see where this goes...if it goes anywhere. All I ask is that we take it slow, take our time to learn about each other all over again. This time as lovers instead of friends.”

“Great, where do we start?” Adrian asked just as the first course of our meal arrived. My stomach chose that moment to growl. Despite my initial doubts over the copious amounts of food he ordered, I felt hungry enough to eat a horse.

“How about you start by telling me how your day went today and we’ll go from there?” I dug into my food with gusto and let his voice wash over me as he told me about the project he and his crew were working on at the moment. It was apparent from the way he talked about his job, the fervent timbre of his voice, the way he articulated himself, and the gleam in his eyes, that he enjoyed what he did.

To me, construction was an odious chore to be completed before the fun part, which was settling in and making a house a home, or an industrial building a quaint coffee shop.

The conversation went from how his day went to mine. I told him about my new hire and the rivalry brewing between her and Wendy, and then I somehow ended up telling him about my semester abroad, studying to be a pastry chef in Paris.

“I worked in the most adorable cafe right across the Seine. The customers were all so different and interesting. The city was unlike any other place I’ve ever been. I would have stayed there forever, but my boss/teacher soured the whole experience for me.” I chuckled, remembering the nightmare Olivier Tremblay had put me through.

“How so?” Adrian asked, his attention hanging on every word I said. I couldn’t remember the last time I was this open with a man on a date. Usually, I kept all the

personal talk to a minimum.

“He was a demon in the kitchen. Olivier gave new meaning to the phrase ‘work ethic.’ I didn’t mind putting in the long hours. I’d even say I thrived under all the pressure, but his rude attitude I could not deal with. The man was a sexist, chauvinistic pig who was more interested in getting into the pants of his female students, and if you rejected him, which I did, he made sure that every day in the cafe was a nightmare.

“And even if he weren’t a terror to work with, I still wouldn’t have stayed. I was newly engaged, had a wedding to plan, and Sean was just starting out at his new job. I had a whole other life waiting for me, even if it did all blow up in my face down the line.”

“But you don’t regret the paths that lead you here, thorny as they may be,” Adrian observed, his expression inscrutable. I wondered for a moment if he was perturbed that I’d brought up my ex-husband, but I didn’t think he was.

“I suppose not. I mean, I was a bit of a mess after the divorce. Looking back now, I see that my marriage to Sean was always going to end up in divorce. The man I married and the man who cheated on me were two different people. People grow and change, that’s a fact of life. But Sean and I... Our paths diverged somewhere along that period of growth and change. We became unrecognizable to the other. Or maybe the real Sean Carter finally showed his colors after a while.”

I went quiet before I divulged too much. I wasn’t embarrassed or ashamed of what happened, but I didn’t want to spend the whole date waxing poetic about my past. It was over. I’d slowly been approaching my breaking point with Sean. He wanted a pliable, subservient, suburban wife—one who did not lower herself to baking bread for a living. He wanted someone who’d pander to his ego, the glitz and glam that came with being a junior partner in a prestigious law firm.

All I wanted was a quaint life raising a family with the man I loved. I did not need the bells and whistles that came with Sean's paycheck. In fact, I'd tried to give back all the jewelry and expensive gifts he'd bought me over the years. But when he refused to take them, I sold them and used the money to lease the building for my coffee shop. In the end, I'd call that a win.

CHAPTER 12

We stayed at the restaurant for almost two hours after I steered the conversation away from my failed marriage. Between the food, drinks, and good company, I felt the exhaustion and anxieties of the day melt away into the ether. My cheeks hurt from smiling too much and the taste of our meal lingered on my tongue. It was almost nine o'clock and I was not as dead on my feet as I usually was.

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Adrian was walking me toward my car when I stopped mid-stride to look up at the clear sky. The stars were out in full force, winking down at us like diamonds on a midnight blue tapestry, shining brighter even than the waning full moon that hung from the sky. I squinted my eyes at the celestial sphere, trying to see if I could make out the bunny moon everyone was always talking about, but seeing only dark patches of craters.

“Olivia?” Adrian walked back to where I’d stopped once he realized that I wasn’t walking next to him anymore. A balmy, earthy breeze blew past, bringing with it his scent and lifting the coppery strands of his hair up to the air. I’d never wanted to run my fingers through someone’s hair more than I did right then.

“Is it true that werewolves involuntarily shift during a full moon?” I asked him, taking in the angular planes of his face. The hollows and dips of his sculpted cheekbones that cast shadows and highlights on his face. The strong, square jaw that was mostly hidden by his beard. The prominent brow bone and high nose bridge. I wanted to trace those contours with my fingers, to touch my lips to his and find out what he’d taste like. The moussaka we’d just had? Or maybe the chocolate piato? Would he taste of cinnamon like his scent? Or something earthier?

Goosebumps pebbled across my skin, my body shivering in the slightly chilly weather. One curse of living in a seaside town, when the wind blows in from the coast during the cooler months the temperatures drop.

“You’ve seen wolves around town where there hasn’t been a full moon before,” Adrian answered. “We can shift any time of the month from eighteen to twenty-four months after birth. The full moon, though, is when we are at our peak. Even a

vampire of Grayson's age would think twice before picking a fight with an adult wolf under a full moon," he explained, naming the oldest vampire who lived in Mystic Cove.

"Why the full moon?" I asked, not caring that we were standing in the middle of a fairly empty parking lot or that my teeth were chattering and the tip of my nose was starting to freeze.

"There are two stories among my kind that try to explain our existence," Adrian said, taking off his jacket and holding it out for me. A stronger woman would have declined. I mean, my car was right there. But I wanted to be engulfed in his scent and feel his warmth wrapped around me, so I held out my arms and threaded them through the sleeves of his jacket. "You're a tiny one, aren't you?" he teased, gathering the strands of my hair and untucking them from the confines of his jacket and arranging it around my shoulders. His fingers grazed my neck, barely even a touch, but I felt it all the way in my bones, in the fluttering of my heart, and in the frantic pulse throbbing in my throat.

I shot him a dirty glare, wrapped the coat around my frame, and buried my nose in it. "No, you're just a frigging giant. I'm starting to get a crick in my neck from looking up at you this long. What's the air like up there? I bet it's less polluted than the air we regular-sized plebeians breathe in on the daily."

He threw his head back and let out a deep, rumbling laugh. The sound was wild and carefree and oh so sexy. Adrian made a growly sound when he laughed that was hard to describe except to say it resonated from deep in his chest. Two women who'd just got out of their car and were headed to the restaurant paused to stare at him in appreciation.

"Oh mama. Now that's the type of man to knock you up with a single glance," one of the women said, her friend murmuring in agreement.

“Come on, I’ll tell you about the legends on the way to your car. We can’t have the best baker in Mystic Cove come down with a cold. Then where would we be without our daily dose of happiness?” He held out his hand for me. Instead of taking it, I snaked my arm through his and snuggled up close. Even with his coat wrapped around me, Adrian exuded warmth like my very own personal heater.

“I’m not ready for this night to end yet,” I confessed quietly, keeping my eyes downcast and my fingers digging into the corded muscles of his biceps. I waited for his answer. This night had gone better than I had expected it to, and I was scared that the magic spell would wear off once we made it back to Mystic Cove. The moment everyone smelled the proverbial blood in the water of a new Beverley Barnes-approved relationship, we would become the town spectacle. I wanted to keep this between the two of us for as long as I possibly could.

“Me neither. Fancy taking a walk and seeing what else Beckford has to offer by way of entertainment?”

“Why not?” I replied, my toes curling inside my heels, at least as much as they could in that cramped space. I could probably walk a couple of miles in them before my feet started aching, and I doubted Adrian minded me leaning into him for support. We crossed the street, walking past other eating establishments and stores and offices that were closed for the night.

“The first story that explains our existence says that we are cursed. More specifically, our forefathers were cursed, and that curse had passed down from parent to child through the generations,” Adrian started to tell me. The cadence of his voice was perfect for storytelling, low and smooth and quite mesmerizing.

“Someone piss a witch off?” I giggled, remembering all the unfortunate instances when someone in Mystic Cove messed with the wrong witch. Like when Riley Mathers put his foot in his mouth spouting off nonsense about the food one of the

witches had brought for a block party last year. He spent the entire event as a pig in a pen for the kids to play with.

“A faerie queen, actually.” Adrian chuckled. My jaw dropped open, eyes bugging out as I gaped at him.

“You’re joking with me. Faeries exist, as in pointy-eared and glittery wings? Tinkerbell-looking creatures? They exist?”

“They’re more vicious than what Disney would have you believe, and they are actually taller than the average human—or so I have been told. The story goes that some thousand, probably more, years ago, humans and the fair folk could traverse between worlds easily, and the relationship between the two races was fairly amicable. Since the fae were so long-lived, they had amassed a wealth of knowledge and tech that we humans did not possess at the time, and the fair ones did not mind relinquishing some of that knowledge to us lowly mortals.” We rounded a corner down the block. This street was not as lifeless, with bars on either side of the street.

Adrian stopped in front of a red-brick-faced, retro-style speakeasy bar. Warm air blasted out of the wide-open doors and Kings of Leon’s “Sex on Fire” was blaring out into the streets, mingling with cheers from patrons and muffled conversations. Adrian cocked his head, gesturing at the bar, the silent question brimming in his eyes. I nodded and we both stepped in, immediately snagging a table nearest to the exit when a group of guys vacated it.

I took a seat across of Adrian, draping the jacket over the back of the chair. “So, fairies and humans lived together in peace, but I’m guessing that it didn’t last long if the story ended up with someone getting cursed,” I prompted, picking up where he’d left off. Adrian caught the attention of a passing waitress.

“Evening, folks, what can I get ya?” she asked, chewing her gum obnoxiously loud

before blowing and popping it in our faces. Her platinum blonde hair was blown up in a beehive style and likely being held up with enough hair spray to punch a hole through the ozone layer. I guessed that she was an Amy Winehouse fan, given that she had the whole winged eyeliner thing going for her. Her neon pink bra peeked out from the skin-tight white shirt she wore.

Adrian and I exchanged bemused looks as I bit down on my lip to keep from bursting out laughing. “I’ll have a bottle of Heineken and the lady will have...” He raised his brows in question.

“A coke, please.” I’d already had two glasses of wine at Hestia’s and had a forty-minute drive back home ahead of me. Best not to take any chances.

“Where was I? The curse, right.” Adrian snapped his fingers. “Like you said, the fair folk and humans coexisted in peace for a number of years, traveling freely from this world into the land of Faerie. But then we humans did what we do best—we got greedy and jealous of the fae’s power and immortality and tried to steal it for ourselves. The stories say that humans found the one thing that could kill the godlike fae, and a number of the fair folk were slaughtered, angering the three fae queens. The queens then declared that all entrances into Faerie would forever be shut and recalled their people. Any humans found in Faerie after the gates were shut would be enslaved. And in retaliation for the genocide against their subjects, the clan leaders who led such atrocities were cursed to live their lives as half beast and half human so that we could also know the horrors of being hunted like prey.”

“Wow! That’s... Wow! I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that faeries exist somewhere out there.” I sounded a little star-struck, but who could blame me? The world Adrian lived in sounded so magical and fantastical. Deadly, too. But as an avid romance reader, I sometimes saw such things through rose-colored glasses.

And this is why you need to tread carefully, girl. You can’t see all the red flags

through rose-colored glasses, a voice that sounded suspiciously like my dad's chimed in my head.

"Yeah, I had the same look in my eyes when I first heard that story. But I believe it a hell of a lot more than the one that says some sap fell in love with a moon goddess and she blessed him with the power to shift into a wolf. Not only does that sound like a dumb reason as to why we are the way we are, but it completely ignores the existence of other shifters out there." He scoffed. Our drinks came and we sipped on them. I asked Adrian more questions, like what other shifters were out there—wolves, bears, predatory felines, eagles, hawks, snakes, and deer were ones he could confirm he'd seen with his own eyes.

"There have been rumors of sea shifters, and those with their heads in the clouds have thrown around suggestions like dragons and phoenix shifters—it's complete bunk, I assure you," he rushed to add when I went all sparkly-eyed, about to inundate him with a barrage of questions.

"Really, now? Faeries are a real thing, but the existence of dragons and phoenixes...phonexi? Whatever the plural is. Their existence is complete crock? Make it make sense, Mr. Cooper." I slumped back in my chair, arms crossed.

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“Oh, come on. Say dragons or giant birds of fire existed. How come there hasn’t been a single glimpse of one in all these years. We could ask the oldest witches and vampires that walk this earth. At least one of them will tell you they’ve had dealings with a fae. They could maybe even produce a fae artifact. But none of them will stand there and tell you there was a time when dragons or phoenixes ruled the skies. You wanna know why? Because they are figments of someone’s overactive imagination.”

“That’s where I think you’re wrong,” I huffed. I sat up straight and leaned across the table, chin cradled in one hand. “I believe that all myths and legends had to come from somewhere, based on something that did exist. I mean, one need only look at dinosaurs—they’re a step down from being dragons. And you said there are rumors of sea shifters, ipso facto colombo oreo, mermaids and Atlantis could totally exist!” I slapped my palm on the table and instantly regretted it.

“Did you just drop a Bones reference on me?” Adrian chortled. The overhead lights created the illusion of making his hair look like it was aflame. Mixed in with the coppery red strands were blond highlights I’d never noticed before, more so pronounced because of the halo effect from the lighting.

“I did, and you just earned brownie points for catching the reference.”

“Are you kidding me? I’ve re-watched all twelve seasons at least three times. Even thought of going down the forensic anthropologist path in my formative years,” Adrian told me with a rueful twist of his lips.

“Oh yeah? Why didn’t you?”

His right hand reached across to massage his opposite shoulder. "I can't stay away from the pack for long periods of time, and forensic anthropologists travel constantly, living out of their suitcases. I have responsibilities in Mystic Cove that I can never shirk off."

"Do you ever wish that it were someone else who became Alpha? Do you ever hate that you've been essentially tied down to this small town? At least until you retire like Rod did." It had never crossed my mind that maybe Adrian once dreamed of a completely different life than the one he was leading right now.

"No," he answered without hesitation, looking me dead in the eye. "I am right where I want to be."

My heart leaped into the air and did a backflip before settling back into its rightful place. There was a totally, very-not-subtle double meaning to that statement, and I liked it. I liked it a lot.

Before I could embarrass myself and blurt out something lame like, Me too, "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" by Whitney Houston came on.

"I'm no Fred Astaire, but I promise not to step on your toes if you take to the dance floor with me," Adrian said, completely catching me off guard when he stood up and held his hand out for me. I was giddy with nervous excitement when he led me out to the dancefloor, and contrary to what he said, the man had some moves. He was quite nimble and light on his feet for a man his size, our bodies fitting together like pieces of a puzzle. The top of my head came up to his chest, where I could easily hear his heart drum out a rhythm very similar to mine.

We danced to one more song after that before my feet started protesting. Adrian offered to carry me back to my car, but my heart could not handle being cuddled in his arms so soon. And so I hobbled back with my jelly knees and quivering ankles,

with a very protective and eagle-eyed wolf keeping watch for the second I looked like I was going to stumble.

“Would it be presumptuous of me to ask to see you again so soon after our very first date?” he asked me, leaning over the open door to my car after I settled in. I shook my head, my smile getting wider by the second and straining my cheeks.

“You could come over to my place after work tomorrow. I’ll make us dinner—or order some really good takeout, depending on how exhausted I am.”

“How about I bring the food? I don’t want you to put yourself out on my account. I’ll be out in the field all day, so I’ll come by your house around six,” he said more than asked. I nodded in answer, my gaze focused on his lips, or what I could make out of them, hidden as they were by his beard.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but can we keep this—” I waved a finger between the two of us. “—on the down-low for a while? It’s not that I’m ashamed of being seen with you or anything ridiculous like that. It’s just...you know what Mystic Cove is like. I’d like to have you all to myself, build a solid relationship without half the town watching us like we’re the starring feature at the movie theater or chiming in their two cents on our relationship before we’ve even gone out on a second date.” The words flowed out of me in an endless rush as I hurried to reassure him and clear up any misunderstandings when I saw his smile start to drop.

Adrian brushed a hand through his hair. “That’s a concern I understand quite well. Guess I’ll have to invest in a couple of caps and sunglasses. Don’t know what I’ll do about my car parked out in front of your house, though,” he joked.

Doing my best to suppress a smile, I started to pull my door closed only for Adrian to stop it with his hand wrapped around the top ledge. He leaned down so that we were nose to nose, his eyes and most of his face shrouded in shadow, but I could picture

the blazing flames simmering in his gaze.

“This is the part where I kiss you goodnight,” he growled, his warm breath wafting across my face.

My tongue darted out and swiped across my lips. Adrian breathed in deep, his gaze focused solely on my mouth. I can’t remember which one of us moved first, only that initial flutter of his lips against mine, so feather-soft it felt like a butterfly dancing against my skin. Just that simple brush on my skin woke the slumbering beast inside me. Desire was a ravenous beast, its jaws bared wide open and chomping at the bit to devour Adrian whole.

A moan escaped past my lips when he nibbled on my bottom lip and I started to get up from my seat, wanting to deepen the kiss, when Adrian pulled away after giving me one last soft peck.

A soft peck. Chaste. No hungry swipes of his tongue against mine or fingers digging into my scalp. None of the toe-curling kisses you read about in steamy novels, but it was no less breathtaking or earth-shattering. The only downside was that it lasted only five seconds before he pulled away, leaving me wanting and needing more. I made a sound of protest deep in my throat, my eyes heavy when I opened them to look up at him.

“Goodnight, Olivia.” He kissed my forehead, his smirk smug like he knew what was running through my mind. “I’ll follow behind you until you take the turn down to your neighborhood,” he told me, tucking my hair behind my ear before walking away as if he hadn’t just left me practically too weak in the knees to even push on the gas pedal.

CHAPTER 13

True to his word, Adrian's headlights were never far behind me until I made the turn down the street that would lead me home. My feet were two cinder blocks as I made my way up to the front door, heels in hand. It was only after I locked the door behind me that I realized I'd never given Adrian his coat back. I hugged it tighter across my body, breathing in his scent, reliving everything that had happened that day.

Who woulda thunk it? I went on a date to get over my underlying desire for Adrian only to wind up on a date with the man himself. He was my perfect man.

I paused midway up the stairs. Adrian Cooper was my perfect match, and by Beverley standards that meant he was my forever man. The butterflies in my stomach petrified, their wings morphing into jagged-edged razors, shredding my insides into ribbons. Now that all the euphoria was slowly wearing off, I was beginning to question if I was ready for this. The perfect match for wolves meant mating for life, and Adrian wasn't just any wolf. He was the wolf, the Alpha.

He was essentially a single dad with hundreds of children. If I committed to this, body and soul, that meant being a mother to all those other wolves who looked to him for guidance and leadership and... Well, I wasn't familiar with the inner workings of a wolf pack, but I could only assume that Adrian was the heart, soul, and brain of the pack. It would take an extraordinary woman of mettle to be confident enough to stand by his side, head held high. I was just a coffee shop owner—a very human, non-shifter, non-magical coffee shop owner.

"It was just one date, don't go borrowing trouble, Liv," I mumbled to myself. I sighed and trudged my way up to my room. I was tempted to take a second shower so that I could skip it in the morning, but I could not resist the siren call of my bed. I went into the bathroom to wash off my makeup and brush my teeth before changing into my PJs, humming "Enchanted" by Taylor Swift under my breath.

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My steps halted just as I walked into my bedroom and caught the curtains swaying in the breeze. Prickles of ice skittered down my spine as I stared numbly at the open window.

I could have sworn... No, I was a hundred percent sure that I'd closed all the windows before I left. Was that window open before I went into the bathroom and I'd just been too lost in my thoughts to notice? Could a raccoon forcefully pry open a second-floor window?

Ungluing myself from the spot, I walked over to the window—but not before I grabbed the baseball bat by the dressing table. It was a gag gift from my brother-in-law after he found out that I didn't keep a gun in the house.

My bedroom window looked out onto the street, but there was a huge tree blocking most of my view. I thought I saw a dark-clad figure dart across the street, but he disappeared past the house across from mine so quickly I didn't have time to react. I kept looking out the window, searching for any signs of movement. A dog barked in the distance, and my neighbor's car pulled into their garage, but that was about all the disturbance we got. The rest of the neighborhood was quiet, everyone having settled in for the night.

I started to pull the window closed when I noticed scratch marks on the window sill and that the latch on my window was mangled. I still couldn't figure out how whoever broke the latch did it, but this was undeniable proof that someone had been in my house.

Breathing hard, I looked around the room for signs of a robbery, but everything

seemed to be right where I left it.

I rushed back downstairs, checking the living room, the kitchen, the spare bedroom, and the living room for signs of a robbery or forced entry, but nothing was amiss. I did the same thing upstairs, but that did nothing to reassure me. Someone had been in my house, and they'd probably been in my room when I came in. What were they doing if they weren't there to rob me? My jewels, both real and fake, were left untouched, and so were the electronics. Was it necessary to call the cops when nothing had been stolen?

Halloween was only two weeks away. Maybe some teens were getting their tricks in early? For a second, I thought about calling Adrian and asking him to come over before putting a lid on that. Whoever had been in here was gone now and I doubted they were coming back. Chalking it up to a one-time missed opportunity on the robber's part, I grabbed my favorite blanket and pillow and the baseball bat and went to sleep in the bedroom downstairs. Just because I didn't call the cops didn't mean that I felt safe sleeping in my bedroom, not while the latch on my window was still broken. Not to mention that the thought of an intruder in my bedroom going through my things made my skin crawl. I felt violated.

~*~

Sometimes I wished I could chuck the responsibility of running a coffee shop onto someone else. I'd slept terribly, my eyes were dry and crusty, and no amount of caffeine was enough to jumpstart my brain. All the good vibes from my date with Adrian had vanished into the dark with the intruder, and in their place sat the twin terrors of anxiety and paranoia. I'd slept in snatches, waking up at the slightest sound. At one point, I got up to do another walkthrough when I thought I heard someone walking around upstairs. Baseball bat in one hand and a cleaver knife in the other, I'd crept around the house ensuring that all the doors and windows were locked.

And of course, just as I finally managed to crash into what was going to be a fitting sleep, my alarm went off. Thankfully, I didn't have to do much baking this morning. I was going to be in the shop instead of the kitchen all morning, but the entire day was a drag. I couldn't be sure if it was my imagination or not, but it seemed like every customer had something to say, both good and bad.

It was one of those never-ending days that went on and on forever and wore on my patience. Peter accidentally spilled a macchiato all over a customer's blouse and I blew up in front of him and all of the customers. Poor boy had tears in his eyes by the time I wound down from my tirade and now I felt like the scum of the Earth for reprimanding an employee. Although Peter was the one in the wrong, I ended up apologizing to him.

I'd almost forgotten that Adrian and I had plans together until I got a text from him twenty minutes before closing asking me what I felt like eating.

"Glad to see you're still capable of smiling. I was beginning to wonder if we pissed you off without realizing it," Wendy piped up from across the room, slinging a cloth over her shoulder and placing the chairs upside down on the tables so that Peter could sweep the floor without having to maneuver around them. Lauren was cleaning up in the kitchen and I was dealing with the cash register.

"What?" I murmured distractedly, typing off a reply to Adrian to meet me at my house and pocketing my phone before giving Wendy my full attention. She poked her cheek with her tongue, a thoughtful look on her face as she studied my expression.

"You've had a thunderous expression on your face all day. I almost didn't tell you that we need to order Brazilian coffee beans because I was afraid you'd chew my head off. That's the first smile I've seen on you all day," she said, wiping down the next table. I grabbed a cloth and surface cleaner spray and got to work as well.

“I wasn’t that bad, was I?” I grimaced. I actually thought I managed to keep my turbulent thoughts under wraps pretty well. Peter made a derisive snort and immediately ducked his head when I turned my glare on him.

“See?” Wendy screeched like she’d just been vindicated. “You’ve had that demoness glare pasted on your face all day. It’s a wonder you didn’t scare all of our customers away!” She sighed in exasperation. “What’s eating you, man problems again?”

“Why would you say that? What did you hear?” I snapped my head up to stare at her. Did someone see Adrian and me together? A lot of Mystic Cove residents often went into Beckford if they wanted a change of pace and couldn’t be bothered to drive all the way into the city for a fun time. A cunning smile spread across Wendy’s round face. She literally hopped up to the counter and slammed her hands on the top, leaning all the way across as if she wanted to jump over it.

“So, it is a new man. What’s his name and how serious are the two of you? Please tell me it’s not that freak who was in here the other day because I can’t see the two of you making it past a few weeks. He has a stick lodged so far up his butt you can probably see it down his throat if he opened his mouth wide enough. Not to mention he looks like he’s the kind of guy who thinks missionary is all there is to sex.”

“What?” Lauren asked, coming out of the kitchen. “Who’s having sex?”

“Okay, wow,” I said, throwing my hands up in defense. “I am not going to talk to you—any of you—about my sex life, capisce?” I pinned Wendy with a stern look. Not that she looked intimidated by it or showed any remorse.

“Yes, boss,” all three of them replied in unison before we finished cleaning up and went our separate ways for the night.

The sun was dipping over the horizon as I pulled my car into my driveway. I’d never

felt terrified of coming home ever before in my life, but sitting in the car and staring out at the silent colonial-style house—decked out in fake cobwebs, paper bats, and other Halloween decorations—I broke out in a cold sweat. My muscles tensed and locked up and I couldn't find the nerve to get out of the car and step into the house. Images of a masked intruder boiled up in my head the minute I put my hand on the door handle.

No matter how many times I repeated to myself that I was being ridiculous, I just couldn't get myself to move until three raps came on my window, scaring me half to death. My scream echoed around the car as I scrambled to... Actually, I don't know what I would have done if the person standing outside my car was someone unfriendly and not a laughing Adrian.

“Oh my God, Adrian, you scared the crap out of me!” I gasped, hand on my throat and trying to come down from the momentary dizziness that swept over me. Still smiling, he gestured for me to open the door. In my panicked state, I scrambled to extricate myself from the seatbelt and unlocked the door, pushing it open before Adrian could get away and accidentally hitting him with the door. Adrian let out a pained groan.

“Dang it! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to do that. Are you okay?” I jumped out of the car just as he stood up straight, rubbing a hand across his abs.

“Nothing to worry about, darling. I was more surprised by that than hurt. What were you doing zoned out in your car like that? I must have called your names three times before you even realized I was there.” His nostrils flared as he breathed in deep. “I can smell the fear on you, and you're pale as a sheet. What's got you so spooked?” He squeezed both my shoulders and left his hands there, leaning down to get a closer look at me.

I was too frazzled to hide the truth from him. Because I couldn't look him in the eye,

I stared down at my shoes, using the curtain of my hair as a shield from his perceptive gaze. “I was afraid of going inside my house alone because—” I paused to draw in a shaky breath. “—someone broke into the house last night. Specifically, my bedroom. I’m not sure if I came home before they had a chance to comb through the rest of the house or what—”

“Someone what?” he roared so loudly my eardrums were under threat of bursting. “Did you get hurt? Did the cops catch him?” He started to rattle off a bunch of questions, cradling my face between his hands and searching for...I don’t know what. Injuries, I guess.

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I covered his hands with mine, loving the feel of his calloused palms on my cheeks. “I’m fine. Whoever it was bolted while I was in the bathroom.” I did not tell him that the intruder was likely in the bedroom with me before I went to the bathroom, probably watching me change into my PJs. I shuddered involuntarily at the thought.

“I only caught a flash of a figure dressed in black who disappeared past the Smiths’ place across the street. And it doesn’t look like he stole anything, just broke the latch on my bedroom window and left me feeling unsafe in my own house!” I hissed, now feeling more angry than terrified. Both at myself for allowing these feelings to fester in me and at the person who broke into my house. Were they hoping that I kept money from the coffee shop at home with me?

“Just because nothing was stolen doesn’t mean you shouldn’t call the cops. How sure are you that he didn’t steal anything or, God forbid, leave something behind?”

“I... What do you mean leave something behind?” Bile crept up my throat at his implication. Surely he didn’t mean to say that the intruder left recording devices in my room. Was that too far-fetched? Though, I then remembered that an ex-boyfriend of a college friend had planted video cameras in her bedroom without her knowing and recorded them...uh...you know. After she broke up with him, he’d used the secretly recorded videos to blackmail her. It was a nightmare for my poor friend.

“Where are your keys?” Adrian asked in a demanding tone, holding his hand out toward me.

“My huh? Why do you want my keys?” I scratched at my eyebrow in confusion.

He let out an exasperated sigh, pinching his nose bridge. His eyes had gone wolf bright when he opened them. They were the same as they were in human form, just...brighter. That's the only way I could describe them. They had an inner luminescence to them, and I could feel a feral, alien intelligence peering out at me.

"His scent trail could still be fresh. I want to see if I can pick it out and trace it," he declared, wiggling his fingers as he waited for me to hand the keys over.

CHAPTER 14

I silently watched Adrian do his thing from the bedroom doorway. He took in everything with a detached look that gave away nothing of what he thought. Because I'd slept downstairs last night, my bed was made, thankfully. I had a habit of just getting up and getting ready for work without straightening it out when I felt extra sluggish in the morning.

I wondered what he thought of the room. My queen-sized bed took up most of the space, done up in a frilly, floral bedspread. Aside from the living room, my bedroom was the only other room in the house that I'd made an effort to make it feel homey and comfortable. I'd gone for cool pastel colors on the purple spectrum, my favorite color, and except for the pile of clean laundry in the hamper that needed to be folded, my room was mostly clean.

Adrian walked over to the window, staring at the scratch marks and broken latch for a while, even peering outside as if the intruder would materialize. I'd half expected him to sniff around my room like a dog searching for a scent trail instead of standing still and just...breathing. Surreptitiously breathing in through my nose, I wondered what scents he picked up on since his senses were like a thousand times better than mine. All I could pick up was my vanilla bean scented fabric softener mingling with my perfume and body lotion.

After staring out the window like he was in a trance, Adrian finally moved and walked over to my bed, his scowl deepening as he crouched down and brought one of my pillows to his nose. “Son of a bitch!” he cursed.

“What? What did you pick up?” Instead of answering me, Adrian shot to his feet and stalked to my chest of drawers. A sick feeling bloomed in the pit of my stomach when he pulled open the drawer I kept my underwear in. “Adrian, please tell me what’s going on?” My voice came out muffled because I was cupping a hand over my mouth.

“The scent trail is not as fresh as I would have hoped, but it looks like he sifted through your...your underwear drawer,” he forced out through clenched teeth. “Probably looked through your closet too and laid on your bed.”

All the blood drained from my brain and the room started spinning around me, I felt like someone had sucked the air out of my lungs. I grabbed onto the doorframe to keep from collapsing when I lost all the strength in my legs. Between one blink and the next, Adrian was in front of me, and the next thing I knew I was being cradled in his arms as he carried me downstairs. It all happened in a haze. He deposited me on the couch before heading into the kitchen and getting me a glass of mango juice.

“Breathe, baby, before you make yourself sick,” he urged softly, pushing the glass into my trembling hands. He kept murmuring words of comfort and wouldn’t let me put the glass down until I’d taken four sips.

“There was a pervert in my room, touching my...my freaking underwear and doing God knows what on my bed? Oh God! I didn’t even think to check if any of my underwear was missing. What if he made off with it like a psychotic sicko?” My eyes stung with the need to cry. I blinked furiously to keep them at bay, but that only made the situation worse. Adrian’s worried visage blurred in front of my eyes and I didn’t realize that I was already crying until he swiped a thumb across my cheek to wipe

away a stray tear. “How am I supposed to feel safe in my bedroom knowing that?” I shuddered.

“First, you’re going to pack an overnight bag and come over to my place. Then, we’ll call Chief Gleason and explain the situation to him. I can’t place the scent, but it is familiar. I’ll definitely remember it if I run into the loser again.”

I was already shaking my head before Adrian finished talking. “Adrian, no. I can’t impose on you like that. We’ve barely started dating. I can stay over at my sister’s place or even Eden’s—”

“No,” he cut me off, trailing his hand down my denim-clad legs and giving my calf muscles a squeeze. “I need to be sure that you’re safe and the only way we can do that is if you’re with me,” he insisted. I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off at the pass again. “Please don’t argue with me on this, Liv. I’m not asking you to move in with me, and this is not me trying to put the moves on you. It’s for peace of mind for both of us. Nothing against Paul and Angie, but no one would be foolish enough to break into a werewolf Alpha’s home. I’ve got plenty of bedrooms to spare and I already have takeout in the car. Besides, I’m guessing you want to keep the break-in private for now. No one is going to bat an eye at the police chief stopping by my home, but what excuse will you give if you go see Angie?”

I opened my mouth to argue and found that I had nothing to say. It was true that I would rather not worry my family over this, at least not until the police got a solid lead or something. And since I didn’t think I’d ever be able to sleep on my bed again—at least until after washing the bed linen or getting a new bed altogether—the idea of staying over at Adrian’s did put me at ease. I felt safe and protected with him, feelings I definitely needed to hold onto right now.

Fifteen minutes later, I buckled into the passenger side of his truck, my duffel back in the bag. My stomach growled when I got hit with the delicious aromas coming from

the back from two brown paper bags from my favorite Chinese restaurant.

“That looks like more than moo shu pork with chow mein noodles. What did you get?” I asked, looking over my seat and squinting my eyes as if I would suddenly get X-ray vision and see through the takeout bags.

“I got a little bit of everything—egg rolls, fried rice, sweet and sour chicken...”

“Man! I wish I could scarf down an entire menu and still come out looking like that.” I poked at his hard bicep. All wolf shifters had ridiculously toned bodies, but I had no doubt they all ate as much as Adrian did. His sister Talia had a serious sweet tooth and still had a body like Scarlet Johansson in *The Avengers* despite giving birth recently. It wasn’t fair! “Do you all have crazy-fast metabolism juju going on? Or maybe you have a secret gym just for wolves to teach you how to keep the paunch away despite eating like pigs?” I asked, patting my own little pouch.

Adrian laughed at the obvious envy in my tone. “Metabolism juju? I suppose you could call it that. We burn a lot more energy and run hotter than other beings,” he explained as we pulled away from my house. Twisting around in my seat to face him, I asked Adrian something I’d always wondered about.

“Are you and your wolf separate entities, like two minds in one body type of deal? Although I suppose it would be two minds and two bodies since you can shift into a full-blood wolf.” I muttered the last bit to myself.

“It’s nothing that complicated, nor is it that simple. I don’t think of my wolf as something other, or as a being separate from myself. He’s just a more...feral part of me, I guess. My thoughts are still my own even in wolf form, just more primal and instinctive—pure, cold animal logic as compared to the human part of me who sees things in black and white with all the shades of gray in between.”

I nodded as if I understood what he meant. I mean, I sort of got it to a point, but I was still confused. “What’s it like, being a shifter? Does it hurt when you shift?”

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“Not at all. It’s more of a slight, pleasant burn. Like when you stretch your muscles after a fitful night of sleep. The first couple of times you do it, it can be a bit disorienting, though. Our senses are heightened even in human form, but they’re only at about seventy-five percent. When we go wolf, they’re dialed up to a ninety or ninety-five percent. You have to learn to filter some of that input out before it drives you crazy.”

I could only imagine what that was like. As soon as the thought crossed my mind, I flashed back to the dream I’d had of running through the woods in wolf-form under a full moon. I was pretty sure that wasn’t me running, though. I got the eerie feeling that I had been looking through someone’s eyes, that I had hijacked their dream. I glanced at Adrian from the corner of my eye and wondered what he would say to that. In the end, I decided to keep my trap shut. That wasn’t a conversation I was ready to have yet.

CHAPTER 15

Adrian’s home was a sprawling, single-level ranch house that backed up to the woods. His house was located in pack territory. There were some places in the woods where non-shifters weren’t allowed to visit freely. The witches also had protected coven land we mortals had to be wary of. I kept glancing around the open yard and in the periphery of the woods, expecting to see a wolf stalking out of the thick brush of trees. But there was nothing.

“We don’t normally roam around freely in the daylight. It’s too risky with Mystic Cove becoming so popular with out-of-towners. Besides, not everyone is comfortable with wolves the size of a horse gallivanting about town, even if they are aware of the

sort of beings that call this town, these woods, home.”

I snapped my head in his direction, caught off guard by his statement. I wasn’t aware that there were Mystic Cove residents who did not like that we had wolves, vampires, and warlocks living amongst us. As far as I was concerned, this was the way things had always been, all the races coexisting side by side, ever since the witch trials sent many supernatural beings in search of a safe haven.

Shrugging, he lifted my bag and one of the takeout bags from the back seat. “Could you grab the last one, please?”

“Sure thing.” I hefted my handbag over my shoulder and grabbed the takeout bag, following him up to the front door.

“You leave your front door unlocked?” I asked him when he simply turned the doorknob. Adrian gave me a careless shrug in lieu of an answer and before I could probe him further, I heard a paw scratching on the cherry red hardwood floor, followed by excited barks. My heart stopped.

A furry creature barreled down the short hallway and leaped onto Adrian before he could place the bags down on the floor.

“You have a dog?” I said, standing back from the rather adorable—and hyperactive—golden retriever that was drowning Adrian with its saliva as it licked at its owners’ face with gleeful fervor. Quickly backing out of the house, I rooted through my bag for the allergy medication I always carried since everyone around me insisted on owning at least one fur baby.

“Olivia?” Adrian called out from inside the house. His copper-haired head peeked out from the door a second later, eyebrows crinkled in confusion. His adorable dog squeezed between his legs and the door frame, tongue lolling out of its mouth, and...

Was it smiling at me?

I knew I had made a grave mistake the moment our eyes met. I saw the light bulb go off in its dark eyes the second it marked me as its next target for a slobbery kiss. I hadn't even taken one step back in retreat when it squeezed its entire body out the door and started to leap toward me.

"Keep it away from me. I'm allergic!" I screeched, tripping over my feet and landing hard on my butt, probably bruising my tailbone. Eyes scrunched shut, I held out the takeout bag in front of me like a peace offering in hopes that the dog would go for it instead of my face.

"Jojo, down boy! Down, I said!" Adrian barked. There was a soft whimper and a thudding of paws on the floor. When I opened my eyes, the dog was seated next to Adrian, its "smile" somewhat subdued but still wagging its tail eagerly as it regarded my fallen form curiously.

"You okay? That looked like a hard fall." Adrian held out his hand to help me up.

I let out a pained groan as I got on my feet, leaving the paper bag on the floor. "I think my pride took a harder knock. Sorry for freaking out on you, but I didn't feel like spending the rest of the night sneezing my guts through my nose and looking like I'd just waded through a poison ivy bush. Lucky for me, I always carry this." I took out my box of Benadryl and waved it in the air.

Adrian watched me take the medication, a rueful look on his face as he scratched his beard.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"Nothing." He shook his head. "Actually, I was wondering if this means that you'd

be allergic to me in wolf form. You know, since I'm basically just a large, ferocious dog."

That stopped me short. "Has that ever happened before? I mean, have you ever met someone who was allergic to you before?"

Adrian cocked his head in a gesture eerily similar to Jojo's. My heart just about melted at the sight. I hated that I was allergic to dogs because most of them were adorable as heck—with the exception of Michelle Wentz's rat that she tried to pass off as a dog.

"This is my first time meeting someone who is allergic to dogs that I know of, so I wouldn't know." His answer was nonplussed and a little pouty.

"That would be a hell of a thing though, wouldn't it? It'd be curtains for our relationship if I were allergic to you and the rest of your family." I giggled, but apparently I was the only one who found the situation funny because Adrian's expression only darkened.

"I fail to see the humor in this, Olivia, because I am playing for keeps here." He crossed his arms, bunching up his arm muscles. My mouth went dry at his statement. Playing for keeps? We'd only just started dating. There was still a ways to go before we started bringing up words like playing for keeps or the big L.

"In any case, I've taken my medicine, which means I should be okay for now. Why don't you introduce me to your friend and then we can eat before my stomach starts gnawing on itself?" I pasted on an overly cheery smile and skated over what Adrian had just said. He noticed my avoidance tactic, his narrow-eyed look telling me that he saw right through me but was letting it go.

"Olivia, meet my best buddy Jojo. He's a rescue dog that I adopted a little over a year

ago when I got tired of rambling around the house by myself like a ghost. Hold your hand out for him so that he can get your scent,” he instructed, grabbing onto Jojo’s collar so that he wouldn’t pounce on me.

Getting down on my haunches, I slowly and deliberately stretched my hand out to Jojo’s snout, giggling when I was regarded with a velvety, wet lash of a tongue across my palm. “You’re the cutest thing ever, aren’t you, Jojo?” I cooed, scooting closer so that I could rub his fur. Adrian watched on silently as his dog and I heaped a whole lot of love on each other before leading me into his home.

I’d expected a bachelor pad with Spartan furniture and maybe a flat-screen TV that took up most of the wall space. I wasn’t wrong on that front, but his living room was cozier and warmer than I expected. I felt like wrapping myself in the patchwork throw blanket draped on the back of his super comfy couch and taking a nap on the rug in front of the fireplace.

Pictures of his family adorned the mantle above the fireplace. One of his parents in fishing gear. One of Carter on his graduation day, Adrian and Talia on either side of him. Looking at them like this, the resemblance was uncanny, especially the wide-open and guileless smiles they wore. Carter and Talia’s hair was more strawberry blonde than auburn, but their features were pretty much the same. There were a couple more pictures of the whole family together, the latest addition being one of Talia, her husband, and their newborn son, and another one that just about turned my heart into a pulpy gooey mess. It was Adrian cradling a sleeping baby Roman in his arms, a tender look on his face as he smiled down at his nephew.

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“Let me just heat these up and then I can show you to your room and we’ll call Chief Gleason,” Adrian said from behind me. Jojo and I followed him into the kitchen. My jaw dropped open when I took it in and I’m pretty sure I drooled a little bit.

“Holly Nigella Lawson! This! This is what I want.” I ran a hand reverently over the gleaming granite countertop on the kitchen island before turning my appreciative eye on the cabinets.

“We never did get around to talking about the renovations you want done in your home. You game for throwing around some ideas now?” he asked, pinning me to the counter, his arms caging me in on either side.

“We could do that,” I hummed, but instead, I threw my arms over his shoulders and got up on the tiptoes of my ballet flats and did what I’d wanted to do since last night. Adrian arched a brow but leaned down anyway so that I could kiss him without getting a crick in my neck.

He tasted of everything wild and dangerous—earthy and sensual in a way that set my blood ablaze. This time around I made sure he got the message that I wanted more than a peck on the lips, pressing my mouth to his as if I wanted to permanently imprint myself on him. He let out a husky laugh when I bit down hard on his lower lip. Not hard enough to break skin, but enough to elicit a short, breathy gasp. Grabbing my chance, I sneaked my tongue into his mouth, hesitantly brushing it against his. Adrian liked it, if his moan and wrapping his arms tighter around my waist were any indication.

Without breaking the kiss, he picked me up and sat me on top of the counter. And just

like that, he took control of the kiss, tipping my head back to get better access. I threaded my fingers through the thick strands of his hair, wrapping my legs around his waist. Adrian's hands moved from my face and trailed down my body. He only hesitated for a second at the hem of my shirt before rubbing circles on the sliver of exposed skin with his thumbs. I let out a loud moan, digging my fingers into his scalp and pressing myself into him.

The need to breathe finally won out. Adrian rested his head in the crook of my neck, his warm breath fanning against my skin, making me shiver. I kept threading my fingers through his hair while trying to catch my breath and calm my racing heart. It didn't help that I could still feel his lips on mine and taste him.

"Either we need to start eating or go to the bedroom," he said. The look he gave me was enough to have me bursting into a ball of flames right there and then. I was this close to telling him to forget dinner and asking him to take me to his room, but it was too soon. I didn't want to make our relationship all about sex right from the get-go.

I just gave him an impish smile and shoved his shoulder playfully. "Step back so I can hop off, then." He only took a small step back, leaving hardly any space for me to hop off the counter without stepping on his feet and bumping into him. "Adrian!" I laughed.

"Don't worry, I have quick reflexes. I'll catch you if you stumble." He held his arms out as if I was jumping from a great distance.

"I don't think that's the problem here," I snickered but jumped down anyway—straight into his waiting arms. He immediately wrapped them around my waist and twirled us around so that I wouldn't bang my head on the counter ledge when he dipped me down and stole another kiss.

CHAPTER 16

“The Chief is a bit swamped at work, but he says he’ll stop by your place tomorrow morning to get a proper statement,” Adrian told me, coming from the kitchen and wiping his hands on his jeans. I was vegged out on the couch, my stomach close to bursting and idly running my fingers through Jojo’s fur. He’d perched his head on the sofa while Adrian and I were having dinner, begging for attention, so I was finally giving it to him.

“Do you think they’ll find anything? You didn’t find anything but a faint scent trail and nondescript footprints outside the house.”

“It doesn’t hurt to notify the police, and Gleason can get a uniform out to your neighborhood to question your neighbors. Maybe one of them saw something,” he said, taking a seat on the couch, placing my feet on his lap and massaging them. As if I wasn’t already feeling sleepy and falling deeper into his clutches, this sweet act just compounded it.

His shoulders shook with silent laughter when I snuggled deeper into the couch and hummed in contentment. “We still have a long night ahead of us. What do you feel like doing?”

“Honestly, I could lay here all night and not move a muscle. You have magic hands, Mr. Cooper.” I sighed in pleasure when he pressed on a pressure point that turned my muscles into jelly.

“How about we go for a walk instead? Talia’s place is not far from here, we could drop in on her and my favorite nephew,” he suggested.

I tensed up at that and used my elbows to push myself up. “I don’t know, Adrian. What will she think when you show up with me in tow? We agreed to keep this between us for a while.”

“Yes, we did, but I refuse to hide you from my family. They’ll smell you on me anyway—”

“They’ll what?” I yelled, startling Jojo, who had been starting to fall asleep. He stood to attention, eyes alert for any signs of danger. Adrian reassured him with a few words and the retriever went back to sleep.

“Relax, darling, it’s par for the course amongst shifters. Mates— I mean, romantic partners tend to leave scent markers on each other to indicate their involvement. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, and you don’t have to worry about word getting out. Talia knows how to keep her trap shut. She’ll keep this to herself if I ask her to.” He ran his knuckles down my cheeks.

“But how could I have left a scent marker or whatever on you when we literally got together just last night?” I sat up straighter, placing my feet on the floor.

Adrian rubbed a hand on the nape of his neck, color riding high on his cheeks. “It’s just the way of nature. But if you’re that against it, we could watch something on TV and chill for the rest of the night, I suppose,” he mumbled.

Then I felt guilty because he’d looked really excited about the prospect of going over to his sister’s place with me. I didn’t want Adrian to feel like he was my dirty little secret, only good for trysts after sunsets but never acknowledging him in front of the people who really matter. If he treated me like that, I would feel terrible and like an idiot for allowing him to make me feel that way. I imagined thoughts similar to these were swimming around his head too.

“You’re right, I’m making a mountain out of a molehill. Where are my shoes?”

I felt even more like crap at the beaming smile he gave me when I said that. Like Adrian, I was big on family, always popping by my sister’s or mom’s place

unannounced and they did the same with me. Eden, Angie, and I shared details of our lives we would never think to tell anyone else, and I knew that Adrian was just as close with his brother and sister. We were almost out the door when his phone rang.

“Logan, what’s up?” Adrian answered while I put on my shoes and cardigan. There was a short pause while he listened to what the man on the line said. Jojo trotted over to sit by my feet and we both watched on curiously as his relaxed demeanor became tense. I could only hear a muffled voice coming from the other side of the phone, but whatever Logan was saying, it wasn’t good news. Adrian’s mouth was pressed in a thin line, creases bracketing his mouth on either side.

“Where are they now?” he asked in a clipped voice, drumming his fingers in his thigh impatiently. He let out a curse at whatever Logan told him before taking a breath. “Grab whoever’s available and canvass the town. I’ll let the cops know that there are hostile shifters in town and then I’ll head over to Pam’s place. If we get done in time, I’ll join you in the search.” The men exchanged a couple more words before signing off.

“Adrian?” I asked cautiously.

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His breaths were heavy and ragged. He tipped his head back to stare up at the ceiling and said nothing for a few seconds. “We’ll have to put the visit to Talia’s on hold. That was Logan Holland. He called me to say that three of our pack members have been seriously injured by a trio of rogue wolves who are making a play for our territory.”

“Oh my God, are they all right? I mean, obviously not; you said they’re seriously injured. Will you be heading to the hospital? I can come with you,” I offered, not caring that we would be raising a lot of eyebrows if we showed up at the hospital together. I wanted to be there for him.

“They’re not at the hospital, but at Pam’s—the senior pack healer. She’ll heal some of the damage so that they’re not in critical condition when we do transport them to the hospital. But I need to be there and provide her with some of my power for healing,” He looked around the house as if looking for something. “On second thought, why don’t you head over to Talia’s place anyway. I don’t want you staying here alone in case the rogues get it in their heads to show up here. Or you can take my car and drive to your sister’s palace,” he offered.

“I’ll come with you. I’m not sure how much help I’ll be, but the more hands the better, right?” I walked toward him, taking his hands in mine and lacing our fingers together. “I want to be there for you, Adrian.”

“And what if someone asks what we’re doing together?” His eyes flickered between mine, searching for something.

“We’ll cross that road when we get there. Your packmates need you right now. Let’s

get going.”

CHAPTER 17

Pam’s house was a ten-minute drive from Adrian’s place. There were two more cars parked along her yard, and although I got a few curious and confused glances when I got out of the truck with Adrian, no one said a thing.

“They’re in the guest room with Pam. She’s already started healing West and told me to tell you to keep your power in reserve for now,” Carter told Adrian the moment we entered the kitchen door. “Hey, Olivia.” He gave me one of those manly nods of acknowledgment that guys do.

I expected him to ask me what I was doing there, but he pulled out a seat at the kitchen dining table, joining another man and woman I’d seen at Jumpin’ Beans before but wasn’t really acquainted with. I think their names were Rina and Tony, and judging by the militaristic way they held themselves and the almost feral glint in their eyes, they were also soldiers.

“So, they got West. I’m guessing Will was the other casualty. Those two are joined at the hip these days. Who was the third?” Adrian asked, pulling out a seat for me before taking the one next to it. Three sets of eyes followed the action and Carter bit back a smirk, but Tony and Rina looked more curious than anything else.

“Malcolm Jennings,” Rina answered in a hard voice, taking a sip of the black coffee in front of her. “All three bozos who’ve been stirring up conflict since your ascension to Alpha. But what were they doing hanging out with rogues in the first place?” The corners of her lips were turned down in a sneer.

“Rina!” Tony hissed in warning. My eyes shifted between the four wolves in the room, wondering about the bigger picture I was missing. Adrian already told me that

there were some amongst his pack who did not want him as leader, and I guessed the attack had something to do with that.

“No, the woman has a point,” Carter growled out, cracking his knuckles. “As predatory shifters, there are strict rules about going into another pack’s territory. Those three rogues should have cleared it with Adrian before stepping a foot into Mystic Cove. The fact that West and his cronies met them in some dingy dive bar does not paint them in a good light. You’ve been lenient with them long enough, Brother. But if West, Will, and Mal are the reason we have three dangerous wolves lurking about our territory, they must be exiled.”

“Or challenged to a duel to the death. Any one of us in this room can take them in a fair fight, use them to set an example for the rest of the pack and all other packs out there that unfounded insurgency of any kind shall not be tolerated,” Rina added.

“I agree with Rina,” a new voice added from the kitchen doorway. Logan strolled in, his mouth and eyebrows set in grim lines. Carter and Rina shot to their feet, aggression rolling off them in waves. The hairs on my arms stood on end when one of them growled low in their throat, the sound visceral and spine chilling, but Logan ignored them as one would a kitten playing at being a lion.

“Adrian.” He tipped his head in a shallow nod and did a double-take when he saw me at the table. Like the others, he did not say anything, but I saw his nostrils flare and his eyes go a fraction wider. As if he could shield me from Logan’s gaze, Adrian shifted, blocking my view of Logan. The latter took a seat at Adrian’s side, which left only the seats on either side of the head of the table vacant.

“What are you doing here, Logan? I thought I told you to lead the group searching for the rogues.” Adrian’s voice was gruff, as if he and his wolf were both speaking at once. Placing my hand on his knee under the tablecloth, I gave a gentle squeeze. My way of comforting him and reminding him to keep his cool. He’d been silent the

entire drive over, but the fury rolling off him concern for his packmates had been suffocating. Although, now knowing who it was lying injured somewhere in this house, I felt no pity for them, considering how they'd been acting toward Adrian lately.

“And I will be heading out soon, but two of the wolves being treated by Pam are my cousins—”

“And you came to defend them from the ‘incompetent’ Alpha, is that it?” Carter cut in, making air quotes around the word incompetent.

“That’s not it at all.” Logan held his hands up in surrender. “If anything, I agree with what Rina was saying. I love West and Will, but if they were colluding with outsiders, then that’s a step too far. Whether you challenge them to a duel or exile them, it’s up to Adrian, but something must be done. We don’t know what these other wolves are like. The fact that one of us invited the enemy into our territory where our women and children live, that is unforgivable.”

“Glad to hear we’re on the same side. At least now you’re acting like a proper Beta,” Carter mumbled. His statement seemed to catch Logan off guard. He blinked thrice, as if Adrian’s brother had spoken in a foreign language.

“Y-you don’t mind that Adrian wants to make me Beta and not you?” he asked Carter, whose mouth curled in a condescending smirk.

“Please! I hate dealing with people. Diplomacy and pack politics are not for me,” Carter scoffed, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way, get back out there Logan. I’ll join you guys as soon as I can.”

“I’ll just go check up on them before I leave.” Logan pushed up from his chair. Adrian stood up with him.

“I’ll go up with you, give Pam some help. You’ll be okay here?” he asked me.

“A-okay,” I replied lamely, touching the tip of my thumb to my index finger and holding the remaining three fingers up. Adrian let out a quiet huff and leaned down to kiss my forehead before walking out of the room.

In front of friggin’ everyone!

The only thing missing in the wake of his departure was the noise of crickets chirping in the distance. I slumped down low in my seat, too embarrassed to look any of Adrian’s packmates in the face. With that kiss, he’d pretty much just outed us.

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“So,” Carter piped up once the sounds of Adrian and Logan’s footsteps faded, “my brother finally grew a pair and made a move.” He snickered smugly.

My eyes snapped to his face, his knowing look making me squirm in my seat. “Pardon?” I croaked.

“I assume he finally asked you out. I was getting tired of watching him moon over you from a distance and his ‘woe is me, unrequited love sucks’ tirade. Is it too soon to welcome you to the family yet?”

I choked on air, my eyes tearing up. Welcome me to the family? Unrequited... What was Carter talking about?

“You’re going to scare the poor girl away before Adrian seals the deal, you idiot.” Tony slapped Carter upside the head.

“The scent layer is new yet, but I’d say things are going well,” Carter went on with a wink.

“Well, I for one think Adrian chose well. This means we’ll get to have those yummy treats of yours for free whenever there’s a pack event. I’m sorry we haven’t gotten to know each other, but I’ll be seeing you soon, Olivia.” Rita winked at me before saying her goodbyes. Tony followed after her, saying they were going to join in on the search, leaving me alone with Carter.

“What did you mean about unrequited love?” I asked him when I heard the front door close.

Carter paused with his coffee mug halfway to his mouth, his eyes flashing with panic. A pained look twisted his features into a grimace. “Jeez.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “He’s going to kill me. Look, Olivia, it looks like I went and said something I shouldn’t have. Can you just forget I said anything? If you’d keep my little slip from the big guy, I’d owe you one.”

“You know very well that I can’t. Do you mean to tell me that Adrian has been in love with me all this time?” Despite his silence, his eyes told me all that I needed to know. My mind went blank. How could I have missed it? “Since when?” I whispered, trying to recall our past interactions and the signs that I missed.

Carter stood up and dumped the contents of his coffee into the sink and rinsed it before leaning on the counter, one ankle crossed over the other and his arms crossed.

“I honestly can’t say. Months, maybe a year after you came back to Mystic Cove? Maybe he’s loved you all these years. Who’s to say?” He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “But what I can tell you is that when my brother loves, he does it with his entire being. Wholeheartedly. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for you if you asked him to, and despite his gruff and tough exterior, he’s a real teddy bear underneath all that beard and mean glare. A teddy bear with a really tender heart.” He pushed off the counter and started to walk out of the kitchen, squeezing my shoulder as he walked past. “So, please be gentle with him, Olivia.”

Adrian and Logan came back around fifteen minutes after Carter left, followed by a petite woman with the most luscious head of mousse brown curls I’d ever seen—Pamela. Something about her made me feel instantly at ease. Everything about her was soothing, like a balm to the soul, from her voice to her smile to her laughter.

She and the two men chatted for a short while until the ambulance came for the three injured wolves. Then Adrian insisted that he take me to Angie’s place because he did not want me to spend the night alone, but he also had to join the hunt for the rogue

wolves. I asked him to take me to my mom's place since I didn't want to answer a million questions from my sister.

Mom was surprised to see Adrian drop me off, but thankfully waited until he drove away before the interrogation began. I don't know why I thought she'd be less inquisitive than Angie.

"So, you and Adrian, huh? I thought there might be something going on when I saw the two of you at the hotel," she commented as we watched his truck disappear down the road.

"How? We weren't even dating then," I said, hugging her around the waist from behind and resting my chin on her shoulder, just because.

"It was the way you looked at each other. A mother can see these things. Your relationship might be new yet, but the feelings already run deep." She patted my hands before escaping my embrace and pushing me into the house.

"Should I be worried that I already feel so much for him when it's only been a few days? His brother told me Adrian has loved me for a long time. The feelings are still fresh on my side, and yet I already know he has the capacity to hurt me more than anyone else." I still couldn't bring myself to use the L-word even though it was getting clearer and clearer that that was what I felt for Adrian Cooper.

"He also has the capacity to make you happier than anyone ever has, my sweet girl. To love you the way you deserve. Stop being such a negative Nancy. When the love is true, it does not matter how long you've been together. Time has no bearing on love." She led me into the kitchen and removed a big tub of rum raisin ice cream and two spoons. Instead of scooping it into bowls, we were going to eat straight from the tub. "Now, tell Mama everything about your first date and don't leave out any details...unless you had sex. You can leave those bits out." She shuddered.

“Mom!” I groaned, taking a big enough bite of ice cream to give myself a headache to give me a little more time before I spilled my soul.

CHAPTER 18

Mom and I talked for a while, emptying half the ice cream carton. I even got her to spill what was going on between her and the mayor. She claimed that they were only good friends no matter how much I nagged her.

Worry for Adrian and his pack had me checking my phone for updates every few minutes. The urge to call or text him was strong, but I did not want to distract him during a crucial moment when he should have been hunting his foes.

Hunting.

The word alone made lead settle in my gut. There was no doubt in my mind that there would be bloody violence involved. I just hoped that Adrian and his men would be the ones to come out victorious. I tried staying up in case Adrian called or came back, but I eventually succumbed to sleep. Right as I was on the precipice of falling asleep, walking the fine line between consciousness and unconsciousness, I could have sworn I felt a push into my mind.

My fingers curled into the pillow and I moaned softly as I turned my face the other way and tried to wake up, but my eyes became heavier and heavier. The momentary panic subsided when I felt Adrian touch whatever was trying to worm its way into my head.

Sleep, Liv. I'll be fine.

The voice was whisper soft and warm. A light caress flowed down the tether connecting Adrian and me. It felt oddly like a tender kiss and I drifted off to sleep

with a smile on my face.

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The next morning, there was still no word from Adrian, and his phone went to voicemail when I called. I went through the entire morning shift with one eye on my phone, but I was soon distracted from my worry by the alarming number of wolves that came into the shop to “chat and catch up with me.” Though how you can catch up with someone you’ve never spoken to was beyond me. Never mind all the knowing looks I kept getting from both my staff and the regular patrons. I guessed the cat was out of the bag. If I was ever in any doubt, the two texts I got from Angie and Eden in our group chat blasting me for not telling them about my hunky wolf—as they called him—drove the point home. I must have worked the counter with my face as red as a tomato the whole morning.

At lunchtime, my phone finally rang. I jumped to answer it when Adrian’s name popped up on the screen, earning myself snickers from Wendy and an amused smile from Peter.

“Hey!” I winced at the high-pitched sound that escaped my lips. Clearing my throat, I tried again in a more subdued voice and decided to go into my office for some privacy. “Hey, I tried reaching you earlier. Everything go okay with...you know...?” I whispered into the phone.

“Hey yourself, sweetness. Yeah, we managed to get the mangy mutts.” He let out a shaky breath. “It wasn’t pretty. I just needed to hear your voice before heading into work, something to wash the darkness away.” He sounded exhausted and defeated.

“I can do you one better than just hearing my voice. Where are you right now?” I asked him.

“Home. I stopped by to freshen up before showing my face at the office. Why?” he asked.

“Why don’t you meet me at the park in half an hour, the benches by the duck pond. That way you can fill me in on what happened and see my face—two birds, one stone. I’ll stop by The Eat and get us some lunch. What do you say?”

“I’d say you twisted my arm, beautiful. See you soon.”

“See you soon. Love you.” I cut the call off before my brain caught up to what I’d just said. When it did, I let out an embarrassing squeal, crouching down and internally screaming at myself.

Surely he hadn’t heard that last part, right? I said it so fast, he probably missed it, right? Right? And people often signed off that way. There was no reason for him to read more than necessary into it. Right?

Ugh! Who was I kidding?

Rachel at The Eat was just as smug and overly intrusive as the rest of her pack. The way they were acting you’d think that Adrian and I had just announced an engagement or something.

“Fair warning, the Alpha’s home is basically a community center for the pack, so I hope you’re prepared for entertaining guests who are prone to show up unannounced. You’ll have to feed them—” She held up fingers as she ticked off a list. “—sometimes act as a counselor or a mediator, and if Adrian is not around, you’re basically the de facto leader.”

I felt the blood drain from my face at her words and snatched the takeout bag from her as I dug around for some cash in my purse, trying to play it off as if I was in a hurry instead of freaking out at what she was implying.

“I’m just his girlfriend, Rachel, and I have my own house, so all those things you’re talking about?” I slammed some loose bills on the counter. “They have nothing to do with me.”

“Mmm-hmm. A hundred bucks says I’ll be seeing you at the Circle for this year’s pre-Thanksgiving pack dinner, seated at the head of the table with our Alpha.” She slid the money closer to her, gave me a wink, and handed me the receipt. “Welcome to the pack, Olivia Michaels.” And with that, she moved to the next customer, giving me no choice but to walk away if I didn’t want to hold up the takeout queue.

As I was leaving, I spotted a familiar figure darting out of the restaurant ahead of me and disappearing before I could think of following him.

“Dustin?” I muttered to myself. Seeing him just for that quick second rubbed me the wrong way. I could have sworn he said he would be around only for a few days. It had been two...going on three weeks since he showed up at Jumpin’ Beans. He’d stopped calling me incessantly, but was it possible that he was the one who broke into my home? Or was I looking for trouble where there was none?

The man was always coming to Mystic Cove on business. He could have left and come back again. I mean, he hadn’t even approached me in the restaurant even though I was sure he saw me. He surely had moved on.

I decided to walk toward the park instead of taking my car to burn some calories since I’d been skipping out on yoga and the gym a lot recently. Wouldn’t want my little pooch to turn into a full-blown muffin top. Especially not when I was dating a man who was built like a Greek statue and had washboard abs.

Spotting Adrian was easy. He stood head and shoulders above all the moms who'd brought their little ones to play on the swing sets and feed the ducks. Jealousy, understanding, and self-satisfaction warred within me when I noted the looks of admiration and appreciation other women were giving him.

Even dressed down as he was in worn jeans that hugged his butt and a long-sleeved Henley shirt that clung to the swells and dips of his muscle like a jealous lover, Adrian was as sexy as he was in a three-piece suit. A baseball cap sat snugly on his head, hiding his red curls from view except for the strands that kissed his jaw and the nape of his neck. He was in desperate need of a cut, but I quite liked his longish hair. I wondered if I could convince him to keep it that way.

He sensed me before I reached the spot where he was standing at the edge of the man-made lake built specifically for this park. Or maybe he smelled my scent; the wind was blowing from my direction to his.

His eyes were shadowed by the brim of his cap, hiding his expression, but I could tell from his strained smile that something was weighing on him heavily.

I placed our food on a stone picnic table under a sycamore tree about a foot and a half away from the pond and walked toward him. Adrian met me halfway and pulled me into a heated kiss before giving me a bone-crushing hug and burying his nose in my hair.

The antsy feelings that had been eating away at me all day subsided when I breathed his scent deep into my lungs. "I was worried about you." My voice was muffled as I spoke into his chest.

"There was no reason to. I'm Alpha," he said as if that was all the reassurance I needed. In a way, I guess it was. Adrian had said that there weren't many other wolves or shifters that could take him except other Alphas and maybe a rare few

Betas.

“Yes, you are, but just because you were not physically hurt doesn’t mean that you came out of this ordeal mentally and emotionally fine. Talk to me.” I ran my hands down his hard body and went up on my tiptoes to take off his cap and push the hair out of his eyes so that I could see his expression.

“You said you love me over the phone,” he blurted out of nowhere, a cheesy smirk on his face.

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My fingers halted in the middle of brushing through his hair and I retracted as if he'd burned me. Stalking back to the picnic table, I spoke to him over my shoulder. "If you don't want to talk about it, let's eat so that I can get back to my coffee shop," I snapped.

"Babe, come on!" Adrian laughed and jogged after me, picking me up and carrying me bridal style to the table. "Is it really so embarrassing to admit your feelings to me in person?" He peered down at my flushed face.

"Let me down, you overgrown puppy. People are staring." I tried to swat his chest but couldn't because of the way he was carrying me.

He sighed and sat me down on the bench. "I'll tell you what happened, but don't think this is getting you out of discussing what you said over the phone."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You must have misheard what I said." I turned my back to him and unpacked our lunch.

Adrian sat next to me, straddling the bench so that he was facing me, so I did the same. We stared at each other in silence—Adrian smiling like a fool, and me... Let's just say I wished there was a limit to how many times a person could blush in a day.

I'd gone with a simple order of cheese fries, steak burgers, and—just so I felt like I was eating healthy—a small of Greek salad and bottled waters. Adrian devoured his food as if he hadn't eaten in days, and I even gave him half of my burger since The Eat made them as big as my face and I was full after only a few bites.

“We killed them,” Adrian confessed quietly, his hands clasped between his thighs and gaze averted from me. I swallowed the water in my mouth, thankful I didn’t choke, and slowly tightened the cap on the bottle and put it back on the table.

What do I say to something like that? I asked myself.

“You might not understand it, and maybe you fear me a little now, but that’s the way of life. It’s shifter law. You break the laws or overstep your bounds and you’re put down. It’s brutal and violent, but at the end of the day, it saved us a whole lot more bloodshed than if we would have let them go,” he explained as if reading my thoughts.

Understanding dawned on me. “If you hadn’t done it, they would have hunted you and the senior members of your pack down so that they could take over. It was either you or them.”

He nodded and finally looked at me. “The law of the jungle. If we’d let them leave, they would have gone back to where they came from and brought back friends. This way, no one will think to challenge us again. We’ve made it clear that the Mystic Cove pack is not ripe for picking.”

“Who were they, the rogues? Did they tell you what they were doing with West and the others?” I asked. Adrian clasped his hands tight, his leg bouncing up and down. I placed my hand over his knee to stop the nervous bouncing, my breath catching in my throat when I saw the anger swimming in the amber depths of his eyes.

“One of them, the leader, was the son of a wolf Rod exiled twenty years ago. I was just a kid, but everyone knows the story. The man was caught stealing pack funds and distributing a drug designed specifically for our kind. It’s not easy for shifters to get high or drunk, but this drug could do it—with the side effect of making us go rabid. I’m told we lost a few of our juveniles at the time to the drug, and Rod was livid

when he found out.”

Needing to walk off his excess energy and anger, Adrian asked me to walk around the lake with him. A family of ducks was swimming from one side of the lake to the other, and a little boy was desperately trying to entice them by waving a slice of bread in the air and making random duck noises as his mom took a video on her phone.

“Apparently, after exile, the man struggled to find a pack for him and his family to join. His wife hadn’t been ordered to leave with him, but when you’re a mated pair, there are really no two ways about it. Wolves are pack creatures, but once word got out about why he was exiled, no pack worth its salt would take him in. I guess that took a toll on the family and things didn’t work out well. Twenty years later, his son came back to Mystic Cove for revenge.”

He took my hand and drew me closer to him when three children came barreling past us, kicking a soccer ball between them.

“What was West’s role in this?”

“West promised him a place in the pack if they helped him take me out and install Logan in my place. The really screwed-up part is I don’t even know what I did to make them hate me so much. They wanted someone of Rod’s bloodline to succeed him, but there is no way they’re coming back from this.” He took a shaky breath and squeezed his eyes shut. “I had to tell this to his mother this morning. Logan officially challenged West to a duel. Normally I would have done it, but...” He trailed off with a helpless shrug.

“They’re his cousins and they did something this despicable in his name. He wants to mete out punishment himself and show that he stands by you.” I didn’t know how I knew that, I just did.

“You’re starting to think like one of us.” He flashed me a pleased and surprised smile. “Mrs. West was devastated to hear it, but she understands pack law and assured me that she stands behind the pack. That means she stands behind me.”

He glanced up at the sky and I looked up at him, smiling when he finally glanced down at me, his eyes clear of darkness and the depths of his feelings for me written in big, bold letters. It stole my breath away. “You were right, talking about it taking a load off my chest, but now I really don’t want to go back to work today.”

I stepped close to him, leaving no space between our bodies. I’d said I didn’t want to rush things, but I ached for him. The need to be with him in the most intimate way possible was a growing hunger that would only be satiated by one thing and one thing only.

“Then let’s go home. I can think of a couple of ways we could pass the day.” I trailed my hands up his body.

Adrian gave me a blank stare for all of five seconds before understanding lit up his features. “Is that so?” he drawled, wrapping his hands down my waist. “It’s a good thing my car is parked not far from here.”

We gathered up our stuff, threw the food wrappers and bag into the garbage, and made our way out of the park, giggling and stealing kisses like a couple of teens. The smile on my face died when I saw Dustin jog across the street ahead of us. It looked like he was coming from the park too.

“Adrian!”

At my alarmed call, my boyfriend paused in the act of opening the car door. “What is it?”

I pointed at Dustin's retreating form as he disappeared around the corner of a hair salon. "Dustin Rathinger, the guy you rescued me from that one time. It could just be my imagination playing with me after the whole break-in incident, but I think he might be following me. I saw him at The Eat when I was picking up our food, and just now it looked like he left the park."

Adrian scowled and turned his nose up to the sky. "There's too many scents in the air to tell if his scent matches the residual I smelled at your house. Next time you spot him skulking about, call me, okay? If he's the one who was in your house that night, there's no telling what he'll do."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am

Adrian drove us back to his place while I called the coffee shop to ask Wendy to lock up for me. We'd barely stepped into his house, much to Jojo's excitement, when Adrian pounced on me, pinning me to the wall and devouring my mouth in a kiss, ignoring the excited yips from his golden retriever.

That afternoon, we christened his couch, making love in the living room before finally taking the show upstairs to his bedroom, where he proceeded to blow my mind three more times before we both passed out from exhaustion.

CHAPTER 19

"This is skimpier than I thought it would be," I said to Angie two weeks later, standing in front of the full-length mirror in my sister's bathroom and running a hand down the red mini dress I was wearing. "I look like a medieval call girl and not Red Riding Hood. This is not the costume I ordered, Angie!" I huffed, tugging the negligee dress thing down to at least cover my thighs, but that only exposed my boobs even more. It was a velvet and lace red dress with a faux leather corset belt and gloves, complete with a matching hooded cape. I'd completed the look with black lace thigh-high stockings, a garter belt, and lace-up, knee-high stiletto boots. Angie had curled my dark locks into big, fat, bouncy curls that gave my hair eye-catching volume. I didn't want to admit it, but I did look smoking hot. I just didn't want to show the goods in front of half the town at the Halloween bash being hosted at The Drinking Hole that night.

"No, it's even better. Your big bad wolf will not be able to keep his paws off you once he sees you in that." She cackled, adjusting the bow on her equally skimpy Alice in Wonderland costume—ironic since I was the one with the Alice in

Wonderland theme at my coffee shop.

“I still can’t believe that I’m tagging along as the fifth wheel on your double date,” Eden grouched from where she was adjusting her red wig for her Batwoman costume.

“Adrian’s brother will be there, so there won’t be any fifth wheeling. Even if the two of you don’t hit it off, there’ll be plenty of single men for you to pick from,” Angie replied, smoothing her hands down her dress.

“So, you do admit that you are trying to set me up with any single man you can get your hands on!” Eden glared at her. I tuned out their bickering and finished applying my makeup. Ten minutes later, Paul hollered from downstairs, telling us to get moving.

The Drinking Hole was packed when we got there. We could hear the music from a block away, and something told me the cops would be called before the night was out. The time for trick or treating was over and it was now the adults’ time to celebrate, as I’d heard one of my customers say earlier when she saw the fliers advertising tonight’s party.

“Adrian says he and Carter are already inside; they’ve nabbed us a table by the pool tables,” I yelled to be heard over the music.

Paul nodded and gave me a thumbs up to show that he’d heard me. “You girls go ahead. I’ll pick up drinks from the bar. What’ll you be having?” he asked. We each told him what drinks we wanted and walked to the back of the bar, evading grabby hands from both men and women on the dance floor. The playlist sounded like it came from the Hot 100 chart, an Ariana Grande song blaring from the speakers. There was supposed to be a live band, but I guessed they’d be playing later in the night.

Carter and Adrian had pushed two tables together. If it weren't for their imposing figures, some people would have complained about that, but they'd managed to hold on to both of them before we arrived. Carter was dressed in a modest Woody costume and was the first to see us since he was facing the entrance and notified Adrian of our arrival.

“Whoa mama!” I was not sure which one of us said that, but that was the collective reaction to Adrian's Spartan warrior costume—helmet and all. When he told me that he would be dressing as one, I'd looked up some costumes online and most of them were generic and ill-fitting, but this... It was easy to picture him out on the battlefield, slicing Athenians in half and spearing them with a javelin.

“Girl, have I told you lately that you struck gold with that one?” Angie muttered.

I saw Adrian's mouth quirk up in a smirk. How could he hear Angie with all this noise surrounding him?

“Hush your mouth, you. You've got a husband who is just as good-looking.” I jabbed her with my elbow. Paul was dressed as the Mad Hatter to match her.

“Oh gag! Can we keep the gushing to a minimum, please? I am here to get my drink on!” Eden gagged, pushing past Angie and me to claim a seat at the table, as far away from Carter as possible. I didn't have a chance to see their initial interaction, my attention claimed by the Spartan warrior whose hot gaze threatened to incinerate my tiny dress to ashes.

Angie let out a low whistle and stopped to whisper in my ear before heading to the table as well. “Tell me I picked the perfect dress for you without telling me I picked the perfect dress.”

“Shut it!” I shoved her away from me, barely holding back from laughing. Angie

cackled like a witch and said something to Adrian I couldn't hear over the music. He ducked his head down, a shy smile on his face, and nodded before meeting me at the edge of the dancefloor.

“What did my sister say to you?” I demanded without greeting him first.

“I don't see you all day and don't even get a simple hello? You wound me, Red,” he replied, pushing the hood back from my hair and claiming the greeting he wanted. A round of cheers and wolf whistles filled the room when Adrian kissed me.

“You happy now?” I asked archly, my lips twitching. Adrian's jaw ticked, possessiveness flashing in his eyes.

“Not even close, but considering it would be rude to drag you off to my place when you only just got here, it will have to do. Although...” His gaze swept down my body. “I have half a mind to look for a burlap sack and toss it over you. Wouldn't want to give any of these losers the wrong idea.” He glared at someone behind my back. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw two guys who looked like they were barely legal scurrying off.

“What, you don't like my costume? I could have sworn I heard it was a big hit amongst you wolves,” I teased, giving a little twirl, my hooded cape flaring out behind me.

“Dang, woman!” Adrian chuckled, grabbing my hand and leading me to our seats. Just in time too because Paul showed up with a tray filled with a round of shots and our drinks.

I tugged on Adrian's hand once we were seated and urged him to lower his head so that I could whisper in his ear. “I love your costume too. It gives a woman many ideas about wanting to be conquered.” I winked, trailing my hand up his leg.

Carter groaned across from us, throwing a dirty glare in our direction. “Please remember that there’s more than one wolf here as you whisper your sweet nothings to each other. I can hear everything you say to each other!”

Adrian gave his brother a growl, but we refrained from acting as if no one existed outside of our tiny bubble and kicked the night off with a round of shots.

An hour and three cocktails later, I hobbled off the dancefloor to rest my feet and get something that wasn’t booze in me. Adrian ordered us some nachos and came to sit with me while Angie and Paul talked with some friends of theirs at the bar. Eden and Carter were destroying their opponents at a round of pool and making some extra cash while they were at it.

“Getting old is not fun. There was a time when I could stay out on that floor for hours on end—in heels higher than these—and not get tired,” I whined, stretching my leg out so that Adrian could get a better look at said heels. He chuckled at my slurred complaint. Another sign that I was getting on in age, I was already feeling buzzed and the night was young.

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“If you’re old, then I must be ancient.” He tucked my hair behind my ear and wiped the sweat beading above my top lip with the pad of his thumb.

“Pfft!” I rested my head on his shoulder. The room was spinning around me, making my stomach roil. I needed those nachos, pronto! “Shifters are long-lived. You’re practically in your early twenties if we go by that logic.”

“And you don’t look a day over twenty-five yourself.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. I melted against him, intending to rest my eyes for a moment, when I felt him go tense, his fingers digging into my waist.

“He’s here again!”

“What, who?” I jolted awake when Adrian suddenly stood up and started to make his way around the table.

“Dustin Rathinger. At this point, he’s stalking you. It ends tonight,” he bit out through clenched teeth.

After that day at the park, we’d seen him in two other places where Adrian and I also happened to be at the same time—that we knew of. Both times, we couldn’t say anything. One was at The Eat, where he was obviously having a business lunch meeting, and the other was at a boutique owned by Beverly’s granddaughter. Adrian and I spent the day at the beachfront after spending the morning at the market, and we’d even confronted Dustin about him following me around at the time. He had yet another plausible excuse for why he was there, enjoying his weekend and shopping for souvenirs, as evidenced by the shopping bags in his possession.

Chief Gleason at the police station said his hands were tied since Dustin hadn't actually done anything wrong and we had no proof that he was the one who broke into my house, so there really wasn't anything we could do until he made his move—if there was a move to be made.

Tonight, he was skulking alone near the short hallway that led to the bathrooms, beer bottle in hand, watching the stage as the band set up. Amongst the sea of people decked out in their Halloween best, he stood out in a sky-blue, button-down shirt, ripped designer jeans, polished black Oxford shoes, and a baseball cap pulled low on his face. He stood out like a sore thumb with his sour expression. It was hard to tell if he'd been watching us beforehand, but I wouldn't rule that out. He looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. Anytime someone got too close, he shrunk away or sneered at them. The moment he saw Adrian's big body stalking toward him, he stood up straighter, as if getting ready for a fight.

"Babe, wait! Adrian!" I snapped, putting myself in front of him, hands stretched out to prevent him from getting closer, although he could have plowed me down if he really wanted to.

"Olivia, why are you getting in my way? This punk needs to stop chasing after you like a mongrel that's had its favorite toy taken away. It needs to stop, and someone needs to make him," he snarled.

"I agree with you, but I can't let you walk over there with murder in your eyes. Dustin is human, one who doesn't know the secrets of this town. Pack Law or any of our other special rules don't apply to him. If you hurt him, the cops will haul your butt to jail," I tried to reason with him, but the killer glint in his eye did not fade. "Adrian!" I punched him in the chest, though it probably did more harm to my fist than Adrian's rock-hard body.

"I don't want to spend the remainder of the night explaining to Gleason why you

punched the lights out of a dude who was just minding his business. Promise me you're only going to talk to him and that's it."

Adrian's jaw worked furiously, his nostrils flaring as he kept his eyes fixed over my head. Eventually, he closed his eyes and rolled his shoulders back, clenching and unclenching his hands. "Fine." He opened his eyes. Although he still looked like he wanted to shove Dustin halfway through the wall, the violence in his eyes was tempered. "Talking and nothing more. But you stay here. I don't want you anywhere near that freak."

I didn't want to be near him anyway, so I nodded and watched from afar as Adrian talked to him. I couldn't see his expression since he had his back to me. To my surprise, Dustin did not cower away from Adrian even though the latter stood a head and some inches taller than him.

Dustin's emotions were written plainly across his face as he replied to what Adrian said to him, nose in the air and a self-assured smirk in place. Adrian responded by placing his hand on Dustin's shoulder and whispering something in his ear, and the smirk melted right off. He shoved Adrian's off him and started to walk toward me. My heart kicked against my chest, thinking he would say something to me, but he simply brushed past and walked out of the bar.

"What did you say to him?" I asked when Adrian came back, his lips pursed and eyebrows furrowed.

"Just gave him a strongly worded warning. Let's get back to our table before your cousin inhales all our nachos."

The first week of November passed blessedly Dustin-free, although I couldn't be sure

if he was just laying low or his work had forced him to head out again. Adrian and I split time between my place and his, and I'd never felt more settled in my life. Like all the pieces were finally falling into place. I'd met even more of Adrian's packmates and been invited to a cookout at Pam's place, together with my mom and sister. It was as if we'd been adopted into this huge family. In spite of my initial misgivings, I found that I enjoyed having a dozen nosy aunts and all the little pups around that everyone treated as their own. It made me long for kids of my own, and if there was any shadow lurking over my relationship with Adrian—other than you-know-who—it was wondering if I could ever give him children of his own. I'd seen him with his baby nephew and all the young ones at the cookout. He was a natural—born to be a father. But could a shifter and mortal have a kid together? I wasn't sure, and I didn't want to ask, not just yet.

I was getting ahead of myself; we'd only been dating for a month. It didn't escape my notice, though, that everyone in his pack thought we were a done deal. I knew what that meant in wolf-speak, but it was something I tried not to think too much about because even though I longed for my forever person, being this close to having him was terrifying. Sometimes, I thought I would wake up and find out that it was all a dream.

“And that is that. We can finally say goodbye to this hellish day!” Lauren cried when I shut the doors to Jumpin' Beans and turned the open sign to closed. Today's workday had seemed longer than usual even though we closed a whole four hours earlier on Saturdays. It seemed as if the entire town was up and about this weekend. We'd been swarmed up to our eyeballs with customers—nary an empty table in sight since we opened. To make things worse, Wendy was down with food poisoning. Lauren, Peter, and I all had to work the counter and the kitchen at the same time during the day. I was now more determined than ever to bring in more staff. If the finances didn't allow for that, well... I supposed I could take a pay cut for the next

couple of months and live off of coffee and pastries alone.

“You can say that again,” I groaned, stretching my hands above my head and working out the tension in my head. “Pete, Lauren left some soup and salad for you to take your sister. We’re closed tomorrow, so make sure she rests up.”

“Thanks, Boss. She’ll appreciate it,” Peter answered, stepping behind the counter, his gaze darting to Lauren before looking elsewhere, the tips of his ears turning pink.

Well, now, I thought to myself. When did that happen?

“There are too many containers to carry safely on your bike. I can give you a ride home if you’d like,” Lauren offered sweetly. Peter’s face could have stopped traffic if he stepped outside from how red he was. He tried declining the offer, but Lauren wore him down. I waved at them from the side of the road as they drove away in her cute little mini cooper, laughing at Peter’s rigid posture.

The drive back to my place was uneventful, and I figured the rest of the night would be the same. Adrian was out of town on pack business and would be back Sunday evening at the latest. I’d planned on being a couch potato for the rest of the weekend before tackling the work week again on Monday. No cooking, no cleaning. At this point, even bathing seemed like an unnecessary chore.

I fell asleep mid-conversation on the phone with Adrian Saturday night, and even though I’d said I was going to be a couch potato, I spent a big portion of my Sunday morning doing laundry, tending to my flower beds, and mowing the backyard. I hated how empty and the quiet the house felt without Adrian or Jojo scurrying about. Adrian had left the lovable dog at his sister’s place before heading out of town, and I now sorely regretted not offering to babysit him for the weekend.

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Come late afternoon, I called Adrian again to get an ETA, and he said he'd be getting to my place around eight or nine in the evening, so I ordered myself some pizza and hot wings and cued up the Lord of the Rings trilogy, but it was more for background noise than anything. If I wasn't texting back and forth with Adrian, then I was just mindlessly scrolling through Instagram or Pinterest.

The doorbell rang fifteen minutes into the movie and I jumped off the couch, thinking that my dinner had arrived. It rang three more times in quick succession while I dug out money from my purse.

"Keep your pants on, will ya? I'm coming!" I yelled, bumping my big toe on the corner of the coffee table. "Oh, mother of... Ugh!" I cursed, hobbling to the front door. The first thing I saw when I opened it were the two pizza boxes with a bag of hot wings on top. Before I could react, the delivery guy had pushed his way into the living room, tossing my food on the floor and kicking the door shut behind him.

"Hey, what the heck—" I froze, my heart plummeting all the way to my stomach when I saw Dustin, gun in hand. He looked worse for wear. Instead of his usual clean-cut appearance, he looked rumpled and disheveled, like he hadn't slept or bathed in days.

"Don't scream, Livy. I can explain."

My fight or flight response kicked in and I tried to run. If I could get to my phone and barricade myself in my bedroom, I could call for help and—

I felt a sharp pain at the base of my skull just as my fingers grazed the cellphone and

everything went dark.

CHAPTER 20

ADRIAN

My head felt like someone had gone to town using it as a drum set. I forced my eyes open, wincing at the throbbing pain at the base of my skull and struggling to sit up until I discovered that my hands and legs were tied together and that I'd been tossed onto the couch. My mouth had been taped shut as well.

The shadows in the room had moved, the sunlight no longer pouring through the east-facing window, so a significant amount of time had passed, at least a couple of hours. The movie was still playing on the TV, but I couldn't tell if it was still *The Fellowship of the Ring* or *The Two Towers*. I laid there on the couch, staring blankly at the screen, my brain scrambling to make sense of what was going on and trying to amass the strength to haul myself up.

Someone was whistling in the kitchen, accompanied by the sound of water rushing from the faucet, and then silence. I listened to the footsteps, each one of them like an arrow to my heart, as he got closer. My phone, which had been on the coffee table before I passed out, was missing.

What was Dustin planning to do with me now? Hold me hostage? Kidnap me? Had he been biding his time, waiting for a moment when Adrian couldn't come to me? Or was this a crime of opportunity? My heartbeat was a jackhammer in my chest. And to make things worse, I needed to pee—desperately.

"You're awake!" Dustin cried in relief when he came into view. Rushing to my side, he placed a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin on the coffee table and helped me sit up, ignoring the glare I gave him. "I was starting to get worried when all that time

passed and you didn't stir. You have to believe me when I say I didn't mean to strike you that hard." He brushed my hair out of my face, a sickening look of adoration in his eyes. I scoffed and rolled my eyes, wanting to slap away his hand. He smelled like stale beer and cigarette smoke and a bit of cologne. This close, I could see the thin bluish-green lines of his veins under the purple bags under his eyes. There was a hot pink lipstick stain on the collar of his shirt and a hickey on the side of his neck. He obviously had no problem landing a chick, so why couldn't he just leave me alone?

"Don't look at me like that." Dustin tsked, moving from a crouch to kneeling in front of me. "I don't want to hurt you, Olivia. I'm here to save you. I've been trying to find a way to warn you, but you're always with that monster," he sneered. "I just came to talk, to make you see reason, I swear."

"With a gun?" I tried to ask, but it all came out as muffled gibberish.

"Oh right, the gag! I'm going to take this off so that you can take some pain medication for the headache that's undoubtedly plaguing you. I want you and I to have a conversation like two reasonable adults."

I nodded my head vigorously, making more inaudible sounds around the gag in my mouth. If Dustin wanted to run his mouth, then I'd let him and bide my time until he let his guard down and I could escape. All this time, I'd been doing my darndest not to stare at the front door or the windows. The curtains were pulled closed so no one could see into the living room from the street. But I just needed to get free, then I would—

"Olivia!" Dustin yelled in my ear, snapping his fingers in front of my face. His thin lips were pulled back in a snarl, a crazed glint in his eyes. "You're not paying attention! How do you expect me to trust you when you keep tuning me out?" he hissed. I bowed my head in apology, making myself as meek as possible.

Dustin clicked his tongue. “I’ll say this once more, and if you cross me, whatever happens is on you. I’m going to take the gag off. If you scream, I will hurt you. We both don’t want that because it hurts me so much to cause you pain, but I need to know that you’ll listen to what I have to say.”

I nodded, and then Dustin ripped the tape off my mouth.

“What do you want, Dustin? Tying me up and holding me hostage? Are you insane?” I whisper-yelled, wincing when my headache flared up. Dustin rushed to give me the aspirin and water, I gladly took a pill and waited for his answer.

“I’m sorry, Olivia. I really did come to speak with you, but I panicked when you started to run away from me.”

“Maybe I would have believed you if you hadn’t brought that with you.” I nodded at the gun tucked into his waistband.

“Oh, this?” He took the gun out, pointing it in my direction. I shrunk away from him, pressing my back into the couch. “This was for protection against that monster. Look, I know he has you wrapped around his finger, but you have no idea who you’re sleeping with, Olivia. Adrian Cooper is a monster—I saw him with my own two eyes.” Dustin had gone pale, the fear in his eyes palpable. My mouth went dry at his statement.

“What do you mean by that?” I croaked.

“Promise me you’ll keep an open mind because what I’m about to tell you will sound crazy. I saw him kill those...” He paused to take a breath. “I don’t know what he told you, but Adrian Cooper is a beast, some kind of monstrous wolfman out of legend, and he killed some people. I saw it, you have to believe me!”

Was he talking about the rogues who'd come to Mystic Cove? How could he have seen what had happened that night?

"I know, it sounds crazy. But I was there at Gordon's dive bar when they led those men out. Adrian and two others, they led three men out of that bar and into the woods and they all..." He stopped, sucking in shallow breaths. "They transformed into...into wolves!"

I couldn't suppress a groan. Of all the people to discover Adrian's secret. My brain was still sluggish, but I remembered that I had a part to play in the town's whole song and dance, so I laughed. "Did you hit your head? Or maybe drink one too many Jager bombs?"

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“I know what I saw!” he roared, pushing me down on the couch and looming over me. “Your boyfriend transformed into an ugly, reddish-brown beast. And the man he killed? He was a monster too. The two of them tore through the forest, pinning each other down until your sweetheart tore his throat out.” He wrapped his hand around my throat to emphasize his point. I tried to knee him in the groin and failed miserably.

“Get off me!” I grunted, thrashing around and trying to kick at him.

“You may refuse to see it, but I am going to save you. Once you see what kind of man—if he can be called that—Adrian Cooper really is, you’ll thank me.”

He hauled me up and removed the bindings from my hands. “Here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to call him over here without letting him know what’s happening. And then you’ll see... You’ll see...”

Dustin held my phone out to me. When I reached for it, he pulled it back. “Remember, no funny business or my finger might just slip and pull the trigger,” Dustin threatened, aiming the gun at my head. I could have pointed out that shooting me in the head would defeat his purpose of protecting me from Adrian, but I quite loved my head and decided against testing his supposed love for me.

“I get it,” I said, holding my hand out, palm up.

He reluctantly placed my phone on my hand and demanded I call Adrian on loudspeaker. I brought up Adrian’s contact on my phone and stared at it, wondering how to warn him that he’d be walking into a trap.

“Go ahead, call him. Remember to put him on loudspeaker,” Dustin urged.

My hands trembled as the phone rang. Part of me wished he wouldn’t pick up, and I almost cried when he did answer after three rings.

“Hey, darling. I’m twenty minutes away from town. But I want to go home and shower and change. I should be by your place in about an hour,” he said before I got the chance to say anything. Dustin rolled his eyes but gestured for me to talk to him.

Think, Olivia, think! How do I hint at what’s going on here without tipping Dustin off? “Hey, glad to hear that. Don’t forget to pick up some air freshener.”

Adrian gave a little snorting laugh. “What?”

“See! I knew you’d forget,” I said, trying to keep my tone light and teasing. “Remember, there was a weird smell in the house? It’s back. I need you to do something about it.”

Adrian was quiet for so long, I was afraid Dustin was going to get suspicious. Or worse, that Adrian was going to ask me for some kind of confirmation that Dustin was with me.

Thankfully, my man was smarter than that.

“Dang it, I did forget,” he said with a chuckle. “Do you like something flowery like lavender or citrus like lemon?”

“Surprise me,” I said. “But be quick about it. I miss you.”

Dustin groaned and mouthed that I needed to hang up. With Adrian’s enhanced hearing, I hoped he’d heard the groan and would know for sure I wasn’t alone.

“I miss you too, darling,” he said.

With a sigh I ended the call and tossed the phone aside. “Happy now?” I asked, crossing my arms and sticking my hip out in obvious annoyance.

“I could have done without the sweet talk,” he said moodily.

I rolled my eyes. “I had to keep it realistic, right?”

He sighed, accepting my excuse. “Fine. Now we sit and wait.”

CHAPTER 21

ADRIAN

Adrian

I pulled along Olivia’s street, my headlights off, and stopped far enough away that Dustin wouldn’t hear the truck’s engine. I had originally told Oliva that I would be there in an hour, but after what she said about the weird smell, I knew she was in trouble. I gunned it and made it to her place in fifteen minutes. Her house was the only one along the street with the front lights off. I’d never been so terrified before, and it wasn’t my life that was in danger. If anything happened to Olivia...

“Relax, man,” Logan said reassuringly. “Between all of us, that twerp isn’t coming out alive. Heck, you could have come alone and ripped him to shreds.” He was in the passenger seat, having ridden up to visit the Greendale wolf pack with me as my second, my Beta. After getting that call from Olivia, he’d been the one to stop me from rushing up to her house, guns blazing. If it were up to me, I would have kicked through that door and Dustin Rathinger’s blood would be staining my teeth by now. My mouth watered at the thought. But Logan convinced me to bring in the pack, just

to be safe. They had all run over to Olivia's as soon as I called them. The pack members I was able to get ahold of on such short notice, including my brother, were hanging out in the neighborhood, waiting for my signal. Some of the pack were still in their human forms, sitting on porches or in cars, acting like totally normal neighbors. Other pack members were in wolf form, stalking the area so stealthily that only another wolf would know they were there. They were hiding in shadows, in bushes, completely invisible to the human eye. At best, they would only be acting as witnesses in case law enforcement tried to kick up a fuss. At worse... Well, there might not be anything left for law enforcement to find. Olivia and I were not technically bonded yet, but the mating bond was there—nascent but strong. And now that I was tapping into it, I could feel her fear. But more than that, her anger and courage were burning hot. The pack already recognized her as mine, as the other half of the Alpha pair, and would gladly lay down their lives for her.

Over the last few days, I was beginning to see a glimmer of understanding in Olivia's eyes about who she was to me, and I'd been planning to talk to her about it once I got back from this trip. The bond was wide open on my side. The wolf and I were only waiting for her to completely accept us.

"I know, I just didn't want her to see this side of me...at least until this was a done deal." There was no way Dustin was coming out alive. He'd forfeited his normal human rights by holding one of us hostage. If he harmed a single head on Olivia's hair, the only thing waiting for him was death.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am

“It is all but a done deal. We can all smell the bond on you. She’s your woman, Adrian. True mates accept each other wholly. The beast and the man. Now let’s go get her out of there.”

We got out of the truck, not fully latching the doors back closed to keep from making any noises. Logan waited near the truck. I slipped to the house across from Olivia’s, where Carter was waiting for me in his wolf form.

“She’s in the living room,” Carter told me.

“You’re sure?” I said. The blinds were all pulled, so I couldn’t see anything inside.

Carter let out a huff. “Dustin’s an idiot. I walked around the house and he had no idea. I could hear them talking in the living room even with the windows and curtains closed.”

“Yeah, but he’s a dangerous idiot,” I growled. “I assume he has a weapon? I’m sure even Olivia could have taken him down if he was unarmed.”

“I heard Olivia say something like, was he really going to use that gun,” Carter said.

I muttered a curse. “We will have to be careful, then. If we try to just rush him, the gun could go off and hit Olivia.”

“What’s the plan, then?”

Inside, my wolf was raging, tearing at my insides to get out. I had to do something or

risked losing control altogether.

“I don’t have one,” I growled. “Improvise.”

Carter’s ears laid back on his head. “That’s a bad idea, Boss.”

“There’s no other choice,” I said and jogged across the street before Carter could stop me. I heard Carter whine and then pad over to the truck to confer with Logan. Whatever happened, I at least took comfort in knowing my pack had my back.

I stepped silently up the front steps and paused outside her front door, expanding my senses to hear two faint heartbeats coming from inside the house. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door as if nothing was wrong.

“Who is it?” I heard Dustin stage-whisper at Oliva. “It’s too early to be Adrian.”

“No one else would be here this late without calling,” she replied.

Dustin grunted. “Fine, tell him to come in. Sit here.”

It baffled me that Dustin really thought he was being sneaky. Even without my wolf senses, everything seemed off.

“It’s open,” Olivia called out loudly.

I slowly pushed the door open. The house was dim, only light from one lamp coming from the living room. When I stepped into the room, I tried to act surprised when I saw the gleaming metal of a gun pointed at Olivia’s head. She was sitting in a chair, facing me, her eyes wide in fear, but not for herself. She was afraid for me. I then registered that Dustin was standing behind her, but his gaze was fixed on me, burning with the hatred of a thousand suns.

“Make your way here slowly,” Dustin ordered, aiming the gun at me. I walked slowly into the room, my hands raised and all my focus on Olivia. It’s okay. Everything will be okay, I told her mentally. We shifters aren’t telepathic, but sometimes very strong emotions can be felt through mate and familial bonds. Olivia let out a small gasp, but then she gave an almost imperceptible nod, and I knew she could feel my calming energy.

“I’m so glad you could finally join us, Adrian. Now Olivia can see for herself what a monster you really are!” Dustin said, his voice growing louder, a maniacal gleam in his eyes.

“Dustin, you don’t have to do this,” I said in a placating voice, judging the distance between us. The coward had placed Olivia as a shield between the two of us and her legs were bound. I calculated that if I got a little closer, I could move at my top speed and take him before he got a shot off.

“Liv, you okay, darling?” I asked, making my way closer so that I could leap over the couch toward Dustin without hurting her.

“Could be better. Dustin here’s been telling some interesting tales. He thinks he saw you turn into a wolf monster and kill some people. Crazy, right?” She huffed out a nervous laugh.

He must have somehow seen the whole deal with the rogues, as if I needed any more incentive to off him.

I let out a shocked laugh. “What? Dude, you cannot be serious.”

“I know what I saw!” Dustin said, stepping toward me, his hand shaking slightly in rage. I had to be careful. The guy was at the end of his rope and could do anything.

“Look, man, Mystic Cove is a weird town. Just last week, I saw a duck—a duck—going totally ape on another duck! Who knew they were such vicious little birds?”

Yeah, yeah, it was a lame example, even if it was true. Stupid ducks. But I had to keep Dustin focused on me. He took another step closer and I saw Olivia quietly trying to loosen the bonds around her feet.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am

“Ducks? Who cares about ducks? I saw you! You shifted into a wolf and ripped those other wolves to shreds, you and that brother of yours.”

“Oh, now Carter is a wolf-man too?” I said Carter’s name exceptionally loud, hoping he would take the hint. “Should I call him over here so you can accuse him to his face?”

“What are you—”

Glass sprayed through the living room with a deafening crash! A large black wolf bounded through the window behind Dustin, who crouched to protect his face from the flying shards. Olivia dove from the chair and hit the floor near the couch, her hands over her head.

Dustin screamed as he turned and saw Carter’s wolf. He raised his gun as Carter pounced, knocking him to the ground. The gun went off, the sound ricocheting around the room, a deafening sonic boom to those of us with wolf-like hearing. Carter let out a whine and collapsed.

“I’ll kill you!” I screamed at Dustin. He shot my brother! I couldn’t suppress the wolf any longer. I felt the pleasure-pain of the shift go through me, my bones breaking and re-knitting themselves as I shifted into my wolf. I could feel my teeth and claws elongate as my animal chomped at the bit to tear his guts out.

“Don’t!” Olivia screamed, but she might as well have been talking to a brick wall. All I saw was red.

Dustin screamed at the sight of my shift. Or at the sight of my huge red wolf lunging toward him. Another shot went off. I felt the pressure of it slamming into my shoulder, but the adrenaline didn't let me feel the pain. Dustin scrambled away, pulling the chair Olivia had been sitting in between us, his complexion as pale as a blank piece of paper.

The front door burst open, and two more wolves bounded into the room—Rina and Logan. Dustin screamed again, but before any of us could get to him, Olivia popped up from around the couch and took out Dustin's knees with a baseball bat, the gun flying out of his hand. He rolled over onto his back and Logan jumped on top, his massive weight pinning Dustin to the ground.

“Going somewhere, punk?” Logan's wolf asked.

The fact that a werewolf was talking to him must have been the last straw for Dustin's psyche. His eyes rolled back in his head as he passed out.

Logan let out a curse. “What a disappointment. I really wanted a reason to rip his throat out.”

Rina shifted back to her human form and ran over to Carter.

“Is he...” I was too afraid to finish the sentence.

She let out a relieved sigh as Carter whined and licked her hand. “He'll be fine. We just need to get Pam over here.”

Logan shifted back into his human form and pulled his cell phone from his pocket to call the healer.

Olivia, her legs still bound, was panting, taking in the whole scene. I padded closer to

her, but still kept a few feet away. This was her first time seeing my wolf, and I wasn't sure what was going through her mind. I could still only sense fear coming off of her. But if it was only a lingering fear of what Dustin had just put her through or fear of me, I couldn't be sure.

Our eyes met and we stared at each other for a long moment. Then she held her hand out, beckoning me forward. I bounded over to her and she took my furry neck in her hands and put her forehead against mine.

"Thank the goddess you are all right!" she exclaimed.

I shifted back into my human form, keeping our foreheads together. When I was fully changed, I held her hands in mine. I reached down and used my wolf strength to break the bindings at her ankles.

"You're bleeding!" she exclaimed.

I looked down and saw blood trailing down my shirt. I let out a grunt. "It's just a flesh wound." Actually, it had been more than a flesh wound. It had gone clear through my shoulder. But since I had been in wolf-form, it had already started healing.

"What about you?" I asked her, running my hands down her arms, caressing her face again. "Did Dustin do anything to you?" I ran a hand down her hair and felt a knot at the base of her skull. "Did he hit you?"

"It's nothing." She waved the injury off, but I knew she was going to have a massive headache if she didn't already. "Adrian, when I heard that gun go off...I thought I might lose you." Her voice broke off in a choked sob.

"Never," I said, caressing her face again. "You're stuck with me for life. Where you

go, I go,” I vowed and pulled her into a kiss. And just like that, I felt the bond finally snap into place. It was like a rubber band that had been stretched too thin being returned to its normal state. All of Olivia’s emotions flooded into me, stealing my breath away. Her fears, dreams, and her love for me, for a split second, I experienced them all before the veil fell again and her thoughts remained hers. She gasped into my mouth, feeling the same thing that I was, and I used the chance to deepen the kiss, not caring that her stalker was lying unconscious on the floor or that my wolves were waiting outside.

“What was that?” she asked after pulling away from the kiss, running her hands down my body as if to reassure herself that I wasn’t going anywhere.

“That was the mating bond cementing between us.” I threaded my fingers through her hair. “You and I are irrevocably intertwined with one another. I was going to talk to you about it when I came back, but nature beat us to it. Still, I want to give you the choice and ask you properly.

“Olivia Michaels, will you be my Alpha female and walk this arduous path of life with me. I have never loved another as I love you, and I would give life and limb to keep that beautiful smile from ever vanishing. I’ll even stomach as much Hawaiian pizza as you ask me to.

“I know that I come carrying a lot of extra baggage—” There was a chorus of disgruntled growls from outside, making us both laugh. “Fine, they’re not baggage, they’re family. But the point is, I can’t picture leading the pack with any other woman by my side. I love you, Oliva, my mate, my everything.”

“I love you too,” she said without hesitation. “And there’s no place else that I’d rather be than here with you. I swear to make you and the pack proud as your Alpha female,” she declared through her tears and the bond pulsed with a warm surge of love as a chorus of happy howls filled the evening air outside.

EPILOGUE

ADRIAN

Three hours later, I watched her sleeping in my arms, Jojo snoring at the foot of the bed. Dustin was lying in a cell somewhere after Oliva begged us to call the cops instead of meting out pack justice. And I guess she was right since he wasn't subject to pack law. He was going to face charges for assault and would be dealing with the world's worst hangover for the next few days, after which one of the witches would tamper with his memory so he would forget ever having seen any of us in our wolf forms.

So, this was what happily ever after looked like, huh? Well, not quite. Most wolves chose not to get married under human laws since a mating bond was something deeper, something more than a marriage and not as easily broken, but I knew Olivia would want to abide by her human customs as well. Our mating was new yet, and I planned on giving her time to adjust to her new life as the partner of an Alpha before springing wedding talk on her. For now, in lieu of a wedding ring, I was satisfied with the huge amber pendant lying on her chest.

I'd been holding onto it since a week after our first date, a gift from Beverley's granddaughter, Sophia. Apparently, her grandmother had commissioned the piece in my name. Seeing the expression on Olivia's face when I gave it to her was totally worth the wait.

"What are you smirking for?" Sleepy blue eyes blinked at me, Olivia's lips deliciously kiss-swollen and her complexion still carrying the flush from lovemaking.

“Nothing,” I said, holding her just a little tighter and kissing her foreheads. “Just basking in the knowledge that the most beautiful woman in Mystic Cove is my mate.”

“I’m far from the most beautiful woman in town, but all I need is to be the most beautiful in your eyes. I can’t wait to spend forever with you.” She rolled me over and straddled me, a wicked smile on her face.

“Darling, we’ve already started.”

THE END