



Love is Trash in Hallow's Cove (Hallow's Cove)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: After a string of awful relationships and cheating exes, Hayley is fed up with dating. Her solution? Swear off dating humans and look for a monster mate in Hallow's Cove.

When she moves to the quaint town inhabited by more monsters than humans, she quickly realizes that finding her match isn't as simple as she'd hoped. Let down by dead end dates and awkward flirting attempts with the locals, Hayley resigns herself to the fact that she might not be destined for love.

Turns out her fated romance is closer than she thinks, when raccoon shifter Jake stumbles upon a pair of her torn unmentionables. It's love at first sniff as he realizes from her scent that Hayley is his mate.

The only problem? She's a sweet, charming human who'd never want a dumpster-diving weirdo like him. Will Jake be able to show Hayley the treasure that lies beneath his trash-loving exterior?

This is a cozy, sweet and steamy monster romance novella that takes place in the small town of Hallows Cove, a shared world in a multi-author series. Love is Trash features a dumpster fire raccoon shifter MMC, a hopeless romantic human FMC, underwear theft, and unconventional dates.

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Chapter one

Hayley

I want to fuck a monster.

Well, really, I want to date a monster. Then fall in love and have babies and live happily ever after with them. It's all I've dreamed about since I heard about Hallow's Cove—the adorable coastal mountain town that's home to many monsters.

At this point, I'd settle for getting laid. Or even a quick kiss. Maybe a brush of a tail against my thigh. A heated glance. Anything to reassure me I'm on the right path.

The clink of glasses draws my eye down the bar to where the bartender is chatting with a trim fifty-something man who came in a few minutes ago. He's not really my type, but I still give him a surreptitious scan. His eyes are a preternatural gold behind his glasses and his forearms are pretty damn hairy, so I'm betting he's some kind of shifter.

For a second, I imagine what it would feel like for those ropey, furred arms to wrap around me and press my body to his, and there's a flicker of interest inside me—until he shifts and his collar tugs down enough for me to see the clear outline of a mating bite.

Damn. I slump down a bit on my stool with a sigh and down the watery remains of the cocktail I've been nursing for the last hour.

The striking gorgon bartender notices me looking her way, her hair snakes turning to eye me before she does, and a slight frown settles on her lips. I immediately straighten up, smiling brightly at her as she approaches.

I've tried chatting Harley up in the handful of times I've come to her bar, but she only gives me gruff, monosyllabic answers. But maybe tonight's the night that will change!

Sure, she didn't seem to be a huge fan of me pointing out the mere letter difference in our names when we first met, and yeah, her snakes scare me a little, but she's so pretty and I'm running out of options.

It's dead in here right now, so she really doesn't have any excuse to not talk to me tonight. If I can just get a conversation going, I bet I'll find a way to charm her, snakes and all.

She steps in front of me and my cheeks heat a little as I watch her full lips part before she speaks. God, she's gorgeous. So much prettier than my ex, Sandy. I bet Harley wouldn't cheat on me with my boss and get me fired for no reason and turn all my friends against me and —

Harley clears her throat, and I startle.

“Refill?”

“Oh! Sure!” I smile at her, propping my elbow on the bar and resting my chin on my hand while leaning forward a bit to better show off how nice my tits look in this dress. She doesn't look down, but she's probably being polite and not staring at a customer's boobs. Though, it's a little disappointing that none of her hair snakes sneak a peek either. They fascinate me. Do they each have unique personalities? Do they get tangled? Do they bite?

Harley nods and turns to make my drink, and I realize my opportunity is slipping away.

“Wait!”

All of her snakes snap to look up in my direction, which is more than a little intimidating. Harley cocks a brow at me in confusion, and I try to give her my best cute, doe-eyed look.

“Do you have any recommendations for a different drink? I love trying new things, and I’m sure you get tired of making the same boring margaritas and martinis all the time.”

She shrugs and her snakes relax against her shoulders. “It’s my job.”

That was three words. Two more than usual! You’re doing it, Hayley, keep going!

“And you’re great at it,” I say, leaning forward even more.

This time her eyes do drop to my boobs and one of her snakes makes a small hiss.

Yes! Success. I think ?

“Uh, thanks. I don’t know how to tell you this—”

My heart flutters. Oh wow, is this where she confesses that she’s been watching me since the first time I came to the bar, and she can’t hold back any longer from confessing her blazing attraction to me? I don’t know if gorgons have mate bonds, but damn, being Harley’s mate would be amazing. I can just tell she’d be a great partner from how well she takes care of her patrons and her snakes. So much more caring than stupid Sandy.

“You can tell me anything,” I murmur, looking up at her through my lashes.

“You’re getting wet,” she deadpans.

My eyes widen at her blunt assessment. “How can you tell?” I squeak.

Her brows pinch together, and she points at my chest. “You’re leaning in a puddle of something.”

“Oh!” I look down to see that indeed I have a huge wet spot on my boob, and quickly grab a napkin to blot at it. “Thanks,” I laugh, but when I look back up, Harley has moved back over to the man at the other end of the bar.

Dammit. So much for that. She didn’t even finish making me another drink before she ran away.

It’s for the best. I doubt I’m going to catch the eye of a cute monster looking like I spilled a drink on myself.

With a resigned sigh, I dig out a few bills from my wallet, leaving an overgenerous tip despite the somewhat lackluster service. I wave goodbye to Harley as I slide off the bar stool I’ve made my home away from home for the past couple of weeks, cringing internally when she doesn’t look over at me .

The wind whips through my hair as I step out onto the street, and I wrap my arms around myself with a shiver. It’s spring, but the cool air coming in from over the cove makes the nights a lot brisker than they were back in Stonebridge. Like an idiot, I forsook bringing a jacket because I didn’t have one that matched my dress, so I have to hurry the handful of blocks back toward the bodega before I freeze my tits off.

The streets of downtown Hallow’s Cove are pretty quiet in the later hours of the

evening, so at least I don't have to keep up my perky, carefree demeanor as I curse and scurry home. I rush past the bookstore with a pang of jealousy as I think about Maisie, the woman who matched up with the bookstore's vampire owner. I've chatted with her a few times around town and she seems really cool. But, I'm cool, too! If she can find her monster match, then why am I having such a hard time?

The lights are on at Gargoyle's Horde, and I pray that no one inside looks up as I pass. My list of eligible monsters is rapidly dwindling, and I can't stomach the thought of making yet another terrible impression tonight. Also, that's where I found out that the cute satyr who I'd been on a few dates with wasn't twenty-four like he told me, but nineteen and fresh out of high school.

I shudder again, this time not from the cold.

This would all be so much easier if people in Hallow's Cove used dating apps, but with the lack of cell signal here, it's not an option. Besides, a lot of monsters don't need that kind of help. They meet the person they're meant to be with and just know .

That's what happened with Aunt Betsy. My chronically single aunt ended up finding the love of her life when she visited Hallow's Cove a year ago. According to her, her eyes met with a beautiful naga across Main Street, and everything else melted away. She knew right away that she was meant to be with this monster. Love at first sight, or sniff, or however it works, is a real thing for some monsters.

God, it's so romantic. Seeing how deeply Betsy fell and how happy she is now made all the silly hopes I had for falling in love as a kid seem not so ridiculous. She's the reason I'm here in Hallow's Cove, currently freezing my ass off after yet another night of fruitlessly looking for my match.

Aunt Betsy offered me a job working at the bodega she runs with her wife, Ssthress, while they're off on an extended honeymoon. When she asked, I saw it as a sign.

What better way to move on from a string of dead end relationships and cheating exes than with someone completely different? Someone who respects the bond between partners. Someone who won't scoff at my desire to build a life together. A partner to do all the domestic shit that I'm supposed to not like because it isn't edgy or cool, but that I want so badly I cry myself to sleep wishing for it.

Moving to Hallow's Cove was supposed to help with the pain of my ex cheating on me. I lost everything when Sandy fucked Jason—my girlfriend of over a year, my job since that dick was my manager at the boutique I worked at, and our small circle of friends who all took Sandy's side even though she's the one who cheated.

Monsters seemed like the answer to my relationship troubles, but I'm starting to think that the problem is me. Maybe I'm not mate material. This fresh start is getting more stale with each passing day. I can't give up hope yet, but damn, it's pretty hard to not wonder what the hell I'm doing that's such a turnoff.

The lights are still on in the bodega, and Eddie, one of the teen wolf shifter triplets that works for my aunts, is dutifully stocking the shelves. Two of the three shifters are practically identical, but Eddie has a small notch in his half-shifted lupine ear, making it easy to tell him apart from his brother. We exchange a friendly wave as I head past him, since I know he's not one for small talk, and head into the back of the shop and up the staircase to the apartment on the second floor.

Even with my aunts being away for almost a month, the scent of patchouli hits me when I unlock the door. I'm grateful that they're letting me stay at their place rent-free while I figure out my life, but their apartment is like a hippie fever dream. I've done my best to tidy up the chaotic melange of incense holders, macrame throws, and crystals, in an attempt to make the place a little more appealing for a potential suitor, but I swear the scent is baked into every fiber of the place.

I head into the bedroom and strip out of my dress, tossing it into the hamper even

though it should be dry cleaned. Who cares? There's no dry-cleaner in Hallow's Cove, and it's not like anyone is looking my way, even in my sexiest dress.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the large mirror across from the bed and frown. I've gotten used to the weird placement, though I didn't need the knowledge that Aunt Betsy and her new wife like to watch themselves in bed. That's nothing compared to the stash of weird sex toys I stumbled upon during a cleaning spree.

My reflection stares back at me as I shake the memory of the double-ended wriggling tentacle from my mind. I don't get it. I'm hot! My curves were a source of bullying as a kid, but I love them. There's no reason why a cute monster wouldn't see me and be smitten. Yet, here I am, alone once again, staring at myself in my lucky panties instead of having some hottie from the bar peeling them off with their teeth.

Yes, I know it's ridiculous to think a pair of underwear is lucky, but I've worn these every time I met someone special. I saw them in the drawer when I was getting dressed for my outing to the bar tonight, and something inside me told me it was time to break them out.

Ugh, maybe that's why tonight hurts more than usual. I'm so hopeless that even my lucky panties can't help me.

I bend over to dig out a pair of sweatpants from the dresser, and as I'm standing up, I notice something out of the corner of my eye. I move closer to the mirror, turning to the side to get a better look.

There's a huge hole in the pink lace around the waistband of my underwear. I touch the spot in horror, tears pricking my eyes. It's way too big for me to fix. A few heavy tears roll down my cheeks as I tug the torn panties off and throw them on the bed with a frustrated huff.

Dammit, I shouldn't cry over a pair of panties, but they're special. I can't help but see their ruined state as a harbinger of doom for my already shitty love life.

Shoving on my sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt, I grab the panties and storm back downstairs. I almost collide with Eddie in my hurry, and he cocks his head inquisitively at me as he ties off the trash bag in his hands.

"I'll take that out. You can go home," I say, shoving the balled up panties into my pocket, and grabbing the trash bag from his hands.

"Oh. Okay. Thanks," Eddie says, confusion still clear as he takes in my runny mascara. "Are you okay?" he asks tentatively, and it takes all my willpower not to confess all my fears and frustrations to this poor teen who doesn't want or need to know that information about his temporary manager.

"I'm fine!" I say, voice too cheery as I force a smile on my face. "Have a good night, Eddie!" I head out the door into the alley before he can say anything else or see the fresh tears that are welling in my eyes.

The dim alleyway between our building and the shop next door is thankfully empty. I heave the trash bag into the shared dumpster, then fish out the cursed panties from my pocket.

"Thanks for nothing," I mutter, throwing them on top of the pile. Their vibrant pink stands out atop the pile of black trash bags, a sad metaphor for my love life. I may look pretty, but that hasn't kept me from being discarded like trash.

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Chapter two

Jake

I love Hallow's Cove late at night. The bustle of Main Street during the day fades into something much more calm. It's the perfect time to do a little dumpster diving.

It never ceases to amaze me how many perfectly good things people in this town throw away. "Broken" electronics that can easily be fixed. Brand new clothes with the tiniest mark on them that comes right out when you use the right stain removal techniques. Hell, one time there was an entire birthday cake still sealed in its plastic clamshell. Sure, the horn on the unicorn decoration looked like a dick, but it was delicious.

I should probably be angry about how wasteful the citizens and visitors to Hallow's Cove are, but I'm reaping the benefits, so it'd be a little hypocritical to care.

I'm getting started late on my dumpster rounds tonight since Gabe's game ran a little longer than usual. I've tried asking the stubborn gargoyle to change our D&D night to anything other than the night before trash pickup day, but I'm "not coming consistently enough to warrant changing the meeting time."

The whole reason I skip game night a lot is because of said meeting time, but I can't tell the group that. I don't tell anyone about my nocturnal secret because dumpster diving is illegal, and I don't know if I can trust even my closest friends to not narc on me.

As I leave the warm glow of the gaming store, I slink into the shadows when I'm sure the coast is clear. Ducking behind the dumpster next to the shop, I shrug off my backpack and strip out of my clothes. Gabe would be pissed if he knew I was getting naked outside his shop, but it feels silly to walk back to my place just to drop off my stuff. I'll circle back here when I'm done with my reconnaissance.

The wind tonight is bracing, but I only feel it for a moment before I shift into my raccoon form. Like a lot of other shifters, my raccoon side—who I've named Beans—is almost a separate entity living in my head alongside my regular thoughts. But unlike some other shifters I've talked to, our thoughts are often exactly the same.

We agree on pretty much everything. We both love digging through trash, we both love to eat, and we both are tenacious when motivated. Sure, Beans tries to eat some things that aren't advisable for my constitution, but whatever. Aside from some occasional digestive issues, I can rely on that side of myself without worrying he'll mess things up .

Or at least, I thought I could.

Things tonight start out fine. I make my circuit of each shop's dumpster and trash cans. Beans accidentally topples over the bin outside the cafe, and we have to flee before eating any of the muffins we found in there.

Come back for them.

Beans's thoughts are rarely strong enough to be an internal voice separate from my own, but he cares so much about these muffins that he needs to make his wishes known. I soothe his frustration by mentally agreeing that I'll get them later. They did smell delicious.

We get to the dumpster between my shop and the bodega next door, and that's when

things go sideways. Usually, I don't bother checking that one out in raccoon form since it's so close to home, but Beans makes a beeline for the dumpster.

Smells good. So good. Need. Need it.

I can't help agreeing with my raccoon. Something out here smells incredible. Like nothing I've ever scented.

I climb up the side of the dumpster, letting Beans's nose lead the way. Before I can even scan what's inside, Beans leans in and grabs something pink, holding it between his paws in triumph. When he brings it up to his face, it's like I'm struck by lightning.

Yes. Perfect. Mine.

The all-encompassing thought startles me back into my hybrid form, and I tumble off the edge of the dumpster onto the hard pavement below, a flash of pain accompanying the shock of what's flooding my mind .

The pink fabric drapes over my face as I lie there prone, and my cock surges to life. I inhale greedily for a long moment, the fabric impossibly soft against my skin and the heavenly scent and sense of rightness overwhelming any sense of self-preservation.

A light in the apartment above the bodega flicks on, and finally my brain comes on board enough for me to scramble out of sight behind my shop.

Dumpster diving is bad enough, but being caught outside my neighbor's window completely naked with a hard cock is grounds for arrest.

In my hurry, I trip over the stack of crates I have by the back door, making an ungodly racket as I do, but I punch in the code and get inside, slamming the heavy door shut behind me.

Shit. What the hell was that?

I look down at my hand, only to realize with a distressing jolt that I left whatever caused the frenzy back in the alley.

Beans claws at my mind, desperate to go back for it despite the commotion we caused. For the first time in my life, he's so insistent that he forces the shift. I'm barely present in myself as I turn back to my raccoon form and he takes over.

Need it. Mine.

I dart back into the alley on all fours, weaving past the jumbled mess of crates and heading toward the pink beacon next to the dumpster. The side door to the bodega opens up and light spills out into the alley, but Beans doesn't care.

"What the heck is going on out here?" a warm, feminine voice mutters. I don't have time to look at the source as Beans grabs the pink fabric and makes a break for it before whoever is speaking can stop him. He scurries across Main Street, fabric in his mouth.

"Hey! Come back here!" the woman shouts feebly after him, but he doesn't care now that he has his prize. At least he's not dumb enough to lead her directly back to our place.

We make it back to the game shop and after a brief internal struggle, I manage to take control again. I shift back to my hybrid form, panting from the exertion.

"What the fuck, Beans?" I mutter. He doesn't reply in my mind, far too fixated on what we've retrieved.

I look down at his prize, opening up my fist to find a pair of lacy pink panties balled

up in my grip. My dick leaks at the sight, and while Beans is usually silent when I'm aroused, he's chanting " mine " over and over in the back of my head.

It's a good thing the woman from the bodega didn't follow us, because how the fuck am I supposed to explain that I stole what I presume is her underwear? Sure, it was in the trash and therefore fair game, but I don't think that'll matter. People in town already think I'm a weirdo. I don't need to add panty stealing creep to that.

Against my better judgment, I bring the panties back up to my nose. My cock bucks, throbbing with need as the incredible musky scent washes over me again.

I tear the panties away from my nose and shove them inside my backpack, dressing quickly before anyone discovers me out here. There are a lot of shifters in Hallow's Cove, but public nudity is very much frowned upon for those of us who have genitals that aren't covered by fur or hidden inside our bodies when we're not aroused.

Despite the bracing wind, I'm still hard as a rock beneath my joggers. I pull my hood up over my ears as I head back home, sticking to the shadows between streetlights in case my neighbor is still outside. Thankfully, she seems to have given up on finding the critter that nabbed her underwear, so I make it back to my shop without incident, going in through the storefront rather than trying to negotiate the toppled boxes out back or risk going through the alley again.

As soon as I make it upstairs, and into my living area, Beans is running around in my mind, begging for another hit from the panties. I wish I didn't feel the same way, but I want to experience the thrill of their scent again, too.

Making sure the blinds are closed in my bedroom, I shuck my pants and retrieve the panties from my backpack. There's the faintest voice in the back of my head, not Beans, my raccoon side, but Jacob, the responsible, upstanding man who warns me when I'm about to do something stupid or wrong. Right now, he's whispering that I

shouldn't sniff the panties again. Telling me it's creepy and weird and wrong. That I should take them back out to the dumpster, or better yet, burn them so there's nothing left to tempt me.

Too bad regular Jake and Beans are far louder. With a pained groan, I bring the delicate fabric back up to my nose, letting out a shuddering sigh as the scent washes over me. Before I can think better of it, my tongue darts out to lap at the gusset and though it's faint, the taste is just as incredible as the scent. My cock begs for attention, the tip wet and ruddy against the softness of my stomach.

I've eaten pussy before. Sucked a few cocks, too. But nothing in the universe can compare to the primal taste and scent infused in these pretty pink panties. It's making my mind simultaneously fuzzy with lust and crystal clear with the knowledge that something is instinctually right and mine. It's that potent combination that has me fisting my cock with one hand, pumping it in rough strokes as I hold the fabric over my nose and mouth at the same time.

It doesn't take long before my orgasm approaches. Fuck, if I were at all in my right mind, it'd be embarrassing how little time it takes. There's no mind left though—only need as I stroke my throbbing cock and lap at the lacy fabric until I come, thick white ropes jetting out of my dick like a fountain as I shudder through my release.

With a feeble groan, I collapse down onto the bed beside me, my body weak and limp in the aftermath of my orgasm. It takes all my energy to tug my shirt off over my head and use it as a makeshift cum rag so I don't get jizz all over my clean comforter.

I lie there, stunned and more than a little confused by the events of the past hour. After a few minutes, my stomach rumbles, and Beans makes his presence known again after being silent while I had my frenzied jerk sesh.

Muffins .

I huff out a weak laugh. “No fucking way, dude. We’re not going back out there tonight. With my luck, you’ll find something else that’ll make you lose your mind.”

Beans grumbles, but doesn’t seem chastised at all. Instead he repeats his new favorite thing to say— mine —as I realize I’m still clutching the panties.

“I’m never going to be able to look my neighbor in the face now,” I mutter to myself, scrubbing my non-panty holding hand across my beard.

We haven’t even met yet. According to Brooks, my friend and local produce hookup, she took over running the bodega a few weeks ago while her aunts are out of town. I haven’t needed to stop in since I keep a stockpile of essentials at all times, and I’ve been busy with projects, so I didn’t think much of it.

Now, though?

How the fuck am I supposed to go get paper towels or some shit like that, knowing about my deranged behavior? What if I’m around her and Beans flips out again and tries to steal her panties right off her body? And what the fuck does it even mean that I’m feral for her scent?

There’s only one solution. I’ll have to avoid her until she leaves.

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Chapter three

Hayley

“I think we may have a raccoon problem.”

Freddie, by far the most chatty of his siblings, perks up as I approach, looking up from the gossip magazine he’s reading from his stool behind the checkout counter. “Hey Hayley! Did you see the article about how that pop star says she got abducted by aliens? She says that they probed her. Can you believe it?”

I did see it because I’m subscribed to a bunch of UFO newsletters, but Freddie’s tone makes it clear he thinks the whole thing is ridiculous, so I shake my head. I don’t want to get a reputation as the weird human that believes in aliens. Even though they’re for sure real and the pop star’s story has been corroborated with multiple witnesses and similar experiences from other abductees. “I didn’t. Did you hear what I said?”

Freddie shakes his head and sets the magazine down to focus fully on me. “No, sorry. What’s the issue, boss?”

“Raccoons. I saw one digging through our dumpster last night. It made a mess of the crates out there, too.”

The teen smiles like I’ve told him a joke and not reported a potential pest situation. “Yeah, that happens sometimes.”

I frown at his response. “Should we, like, report it to animal control or something? What if it’s rabid?”

“Nah, there’s no need. If it’s really bugging you, you could go talk to Jake.”

Bettie, the third of the wolf shifter triplets, rounds the corner from where she was directing Mrs. Franco to snack cakes. “Yeah, if there’s a problem with raccoons, Jake is your guy.”

“Oh okay, great!” I say cheerily, happy that there’s apparently a town raccoon expert. I really didn’t like the prospect of calling animal control. The furball was pretty adorable in the brief moments I saw it, if I ignore the fact that it was running off with my panties. Still have no clue what that was about, but it’s more than a little embarrassing to think that my underwear was stinky enough to attract a wild animal. “Uh, who is Jake, and where can I find him?”

“You haven’t met Jake yet?” Freddie asks, cocking his head. His sister’s head tilts in an identical way and suddenly I’m thinking about how damn cute they must’ve been as little kids. My ovaries would explode if I had a trio of adorable shifter babies looking at me like that.

“No? Should I have?” I ask, shaking away the image.

“He runs Trash to Treasure,” Bettie clarifies .

“Oh!” Now I understand why they’re suggesting I talk to him. If I have a raccoon problem, then so does he, since we share a dumpster. “I haven’t had a chance to check it out yet. Or introduce myself. Crap, I should probably go introduce myself. Will he be upset that I haven’t?”

Bettie shakes her head, patting me on my shoulder. “He won’t care. Jake is nice!

Weird, but nice.”

“Weird how?” I’m not sure what these nineteen-year-olds’ definition of weird is and don’t want to sound too out of touch by venturing a guess.

Freddie snorts. “Uh, it’s kinda hard to describe. Better to go in and see for yourself.”

I grimace slightly at the thought of meeting someone who is a “see for yourself” level of weird. I have my quirks, which I try to keep to myself, but this sounds like he’s over there telling everyone who comes into the shop that the government controls the weather.

Freddie drops his magazine, brows raising at my reaction. “But he’s totally harmless!”

“Yeah, he’s cool,” Bettie adds.

“Really weird, but cool. Sounds kinda like me,” I say with a self-deprecating laugh.

The siblings tilt their head again, but this time to the other side.

“Which part of that is confusing you? Please say it’s the weird part... You know what? I don’t need to know,” I say, waving a hand at the teens dismissively before they can reply and crush me. “If you’re good here, I’m going to go talk to this guy. The last thing I need is my aunts coming back to a raccoon infestation after they trusted me to take care of this place.”

The wolf shifters laugh like I said something funny, but I don’t want to ask and seem even less cool by not getting the joke.

I head out the front of the bodega, waving to the cute human woman, Gwen, as she’s

opening up the game shop across the street. I keep wanting to go over and talk to her for longer than a passing hello, but I chicken out every time because I'm worried I don't have enough nerdy knowledge to keep up with someone who runs a gaming shop.

Right now, talking to Gwen sounds a lot less scary than going into the weird dude's thrift shop, but I resist the urge to stall, making a beeline for the entrance to Trash to Treasure.

The front of the shop has a large display window, and every week there's a new, strange tableau that probably should've already clued me in to the eccentricity of its owner. This week's display has a headless mannequin in a hot pink and orange jumpsuit lying on the floor next to an old rocking horse like it was bucked off the side, and another mannequin in a flowing black dress and hooded cloak looming over them like a grim reaper. All while a disco ball rotates above, scattering shimmering light across the bizarre scene.

I step in through the frosted glass door, and a bell rattles as it shuts behind me, announcing my arrival. It's a good thing, because this place is so packed that I doubt anyone could see me enter if they're toward the back of the shop.

I stand next to the door, frozen in place as I take in the chaotic array of clothing racks, furniture, knickknacks, and more. There's barely room to move through the cramped aisles, if you can even call the spaces between the overstuffed racks and shelves that. I hug my arms to my sides, careful not to knock into anything with my hips as I press further into the store.

"Hello?" I call out, not really expecting a reply.

A moment later, a well-dressed human woman with cropped dark hair peeks from behind a huge stack of what looks like old magazines and comic books. I think her

name is Sydney, and she's mated to that hot satyr farmer, but she's intimidatingly pretty so I haven't worked up the nerve to introduce myself when I've seen her in passing.

"Are you looking for Jake?" she asks.

Seeing the possibility of making a potential new friend flash before my eyes, I smile broadly. "Hi! Uh, yeah, I am. You're Sydney, right? I'm Hayley! I'm new in town. It's so cool to meet you. There aren't many humans in Hallow's Cove, so I've noticed you around. I'm not like, watching you or anything, just uh, saw you..." I laugh nervously as I trail off, wishing I'd stopped talking after saying my name.

She nods, though I catch a slight flicker of her placid expression at my bubbly, weird demeanor. Crap, I'm coming on way too strong. This is why I'm bad at making friends. I have no chill .

"Hi, yeah, I'm Sydney. Nice to meet you, Hayley. Jake's in the back."

"Oh okay. Thanks!" I stand there with an awkward smile for a beat too long, and when she goes back to perusing the comics, I know I missed the window of opportunity for chatting more.

Flustered, I move to the other side of the store, where an elderly woman with fox ears and a long silver braid is examining a stack of side tables. I pretend to look at the selection of novelty t-shirts, but when a few minutes pass and there's no sign of the man in question, I clear my throat to get the older fox woman's attention. "Hi! Sorry to bother you, but do you know if Jake will come out at some point?"

She shrugs, not bothering to look up from the table she has her eye on. "Not sure. If you find something and don't want to wait for him to pay, you can put the money over by the register." She gestures absently with a hand over to the cluttered jewelry

counter with an old-fashioned cash register sitting atop it and a sign that says “Pay here. Don’t steal.”

“Huh. Okay, thanks.”

Another five minutes or so pass as I wander around the labyrinthine shop, marveling at the selection and at how much he’s crammed into a shop not much larger than the bodega. It should feel claustrophobic, but once I get over the sheer volume of stuff, I can see there is a method to the madness. An unusual one, but it’s there. Formal dresses and suits are by the glassware and dining tables. Luggage is next to the shoes and jackets .

I’m looking through the collection of vintage bodice ripper novels next to the sleepwear when someone clears their throat behind me. I startle and drop the book with the pirate king and a busty wench on the cover with a curse.

I bend down to grab it, only for the stranger to do the same, and our foreheads collide in a painful smack.

“Shit, sorry!” I pull back, clutching at my smarting forehead.

“Whoops, my bad,” he says, shaking his head as he grabs the book, then turns to look up at me from his kneeling position.

Damn, he’s cute .

The man on the floor takes up most of the aisle with the bulk of his thick body. He pushes a strand of his dark brown, shaggy hair off of his forehead, a hint of a flush peeking up from beneath his thick beard, burnishing his beige skin.

I only have a moment to drink in his bright, lopsided smile before it drops as he takes

me in and his expression morphs into a look of horror.

I snap out of my reverie. “What? Am I bleeding?” I ask, voice panicked as I swipe at my forehead and look at my fingers.

The man shakes his head and a hint of his smile returns, this time seeming apologetic. “Sorry, you just, uh, startled me.”

He stands, and now that he’s upright, I realize how tall he is. Tall and broad beneath his boxy Hawaiian shirt that’s unbuttoned down far enough that a hint of his gray-brown chest hair peeks out. There’s something about him that gives me monster vibes, despite him looking completely human. Maybe he’s a shifter.

I snap my gaze up to his face before he catches me blatantly checking him out. There’s a slightly gold sheen to his eyes, confirming my guess.

“You’re the one who snuck up on me,” I say with a soft laugh, rubbing my forehead.

He lets out a slightly strangled laugh, like he’s forcing it. “Sorry about that.”

He stares down into my eyes for a long moment, neither one of us saying anything. My heartbeat speeds up as he reaches out towards me and for a second, I think he’s going to grab me and pull me into a kiss.

Is this it? Am I having my fated mates moment? I am pretty attracted to this guy...

I close my eyes and embrace the butterflies bursting in my stomach as I await the kiss that will change my life.

No kiss comes. My eyes flutter open and I realize he’s placing the book back on the shelf behind me. A furious blush spreads across my cheeks as he gives me a quizzical

look.

“Don’t worry, I don’t bite,” he says, sounding like he’s seriously worried I’m scared of him and that’s why I shut my eyes.

“Oh, I’m not worried! You can bite me if you want,” I blurt.

His thick brows shoot up and I shake my head and smile like I didn’t say something super weird and inappropriate.

I clear my throat. “Are you uh, Jake? ”

“Yep. And you’re... Betsy’s niece?” His eyes narrow like he’s trying to search my face for any resemblance to my aunt. “You have her nose,” he concludes after a moment.

“Uh, yeah. I’m Hayley.” I reach my hand out to him with a smile. “Nice to meet you, Jake. Sorry it took me so long to come introduce myself.”

He takes my hand and gives it a quick shake before releasing it and wiping his palm on his pants.

Ouch, okay. Maybe not my mate.

“It’s, uh, nice...” Jake fades off, breathing in deeply for a moment, and letting out a small sound of discomfort.

Shit, do I smell bad? I took a shower last night, but maybe I forgot to put on deodorant. I wrap my arms around myself, fighting off the urge to flee.

“So, um, I’m here because I wanted to ask you about something,” I say, trying to get

this back on track before I spontaneously combust from embarrassment.

“I didn’t do it,” he says immediately.

“Uh, what?”

He crosses his arms over his chest, sputtering at my confusion. “N-nothing!”

What the hell is this conversation? I’m so lost.

“If you’re not able to talk right now, I can come back later,” I offer.

Jake shakes his head. “No, no, it’s fine. Don’t come back later.”

Yikes, he doesn’t have to sound so adamant about not seeing me again. “There was a raccoon digging out in our shared dumpster last night. Freddie and Bettie said to talk to you about it, so here I am, talking to you.”

His eyes go wide. “A raccoon? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m sure. I saw it run off with my...” I flush, realizing I probably shouldn’t tell my neighbor who clearly dislikes me for god knows what reason, that a raccoon stole my lucky panties. “With some trash.”

“Uhh, okay,” Jake says with a shrug. “Raccoons do that sometimes. Was it something valuable?”

“N-no! Nothing... It doesn’t really matter what it was. It also knocked over some crates. I guess I wanted to let you know, in case you thought we should do something about it.”

Jake's eyes narrow. "What would we do about it? It's not hurting anything. Clearly, whatever it was digging around for wasn't wanted anymore—it was trash. Which is fair game." He clears his throat. "For a raccoon, that is."

I'm starting to understand why the triplets said this guy is weird. He sounds like he's deeply concerned about raccoon rummaging rights.

I nod. "Sure, but I don't want my aunts to come home to a raccoon infestation in their dumpster because I did nothing about it."

"That won't happen," Jake says dismissively.

"How can you be certain?" I'm getting frustrated with this dude. He might not like the way I look or smell, but he doesn't have to be rude.

He pinches his brow and lets out a heavy sigh. "I... I can talk to them."

"To the raccoon?" My brow furrows. Is that something that shifters can do? I know better than to ask and sound like a super ignorant human .

His eyes fly open and he looks alarmed, like I caught him saying something he shouldn't. Oh damn, is talking to animals some kind of secret shifter power they're not supposed to talk about?

"I meant it metaphorically!" He lets out a forced laugh and a smile finally returns to his face. "I'll deal with it. The raccoon won't bother you again."

I'm thoroughly confused by this entire interaction, so I decide it's better to just go with it. "Oh. Okay. Well, thanks!"

"Of course. I'm here for anything you need." Jake's eyes lock onto mine, gleaming

gold for an intense moment that makes me feel off balance. I reach out to grab the bookshelf to steady myself and accidentally knock a few books over.

“Crap! Sorry!” I say, scrambling to pick it up. At least this time, he doesn’t try to help.

“You can have them, if you want,” he says, gesturing to the worn books in my hand.

“I don’t...” I trail off as I start to decline, realizing that this weird man offering to give me some old romance novels is probably the best possible outcome of this conversation. I don’t want to offend him by not taking them. “Sure, thanks!”

He nods, holding my gaze for a quick moment. “Okay, bye,” he says, and hurries away, back through the racks of clothes and out of sight.

I stare in his direction for a dazed moment, trying to make sense of what happened, then glance down at the books. That was bizarre, but at least now I have something to read to keep me entertained at night, since I’m apparently repulsive to attractive monsters like Jake.

I head out the front door, replaying our conversation to try to figure out what I did that made Jake so uncomfortable. Maybe he’s always like that. God, I hope that’s what it is, because I don’t know if my ego can handle it otherwise.

I’m thinking about his horrified look when he saw me, and not where I’m going, when I collide with something solid, my books tumbling to the ground for the third time today.

“Whoa!” Strong hands grab my arms to steady me.

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry!” I exclaim to the poor person I walked into. “I didn’t see...”

My words fall away when I look at their face. A horned person with dusky red skin grins down at me with sharp teeth.

“And here I thought stumbling into a pretty woman was an unrealistic meet cute,” the demon says, voice teasing and warm as they scoop up the books I dropped with their tail.

“P-pretty?” I ask, stunned that someone finally seems interested in me.

“Sorry, I meant stunning,” they say, giving me a devilish smile.

I’m sure my cheeks are turning the same color as their skin as they pass my books back. “You’re not so bad yourself,” I say with a flustered smile.

“I’ll take it.” The demon takes a small step back and blatantly gives me a once over. It’s a little forward for my taste, but maybe that’s just a cultural difference. “What’s your name, beautiful?” they ask when their gaze returns to my face.

“Hayley.” I grin at their flirtation. Finally, something is happening! I don’t feel the crazy butterflies or connection, but I don’t think demons have fated mates, so that’s okay. “A pleasure to meet you, Hayley. I’m Tryzx.” They extend a hand and this handshake goes a lot better than the one with Jake, though the scrape of their long nails against my wrist as they draw their hand back makes me shiver a bit. “This may sound super forward, but would you like to grab some coffee with me? I was headed down to the cafe to meet a friend, but they had to cancel. You walking into me feels far too much like fate to not at least ask.”

My heart leaps. Is this what I’ve been waiting for? A life filled with this hot stranger and a bunch of horned babies flashes before my eyes before I can stop my ridiculous fantasizing.

“Sure,” I say, turning away from the thrift shop. “Who am I to deny fate?”

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Chapter four

Jake

Shit. This is bad.

I pace around the back room as Beans paces in my mind, begging me to go find her.

Hayley .

When my eyes met hers, the panty frenzy finally made sense. This gorgeous, sweet, perfect woman is my mate.

“I’m so fucked,” I groan to myself, sinking down onto the couch I’ve been reupholstering for Brooks, after his pet duck made a mess on it the other day. Our conversation replays in my mind on repeat, and I wince at how much of an asshole I was. Though, to be fair, I’m amazed I could say anything to her when every molecule in my body was screaming at me that Hayley is mine.

It’s not just internal screaming. Beans wants me to go and scream outside the bodega until she hears my mating call. It takes all my willpower to stop from shifting, reminding myself and my inner raccoon that she wouldn’t understand that and we’d end up with a restraining order.

A painful ten minutes pass before I can’t stand it any longer. I need to find her. Explain that she’s my mate and do my best to make up for my terrible first impression. If that doesn’t work... then maybe we’ll try the screaming.

“Store’s closed,” I shout as I step out of the stockroom. “Take what you want and get out.”

Fortunately, only Mrs. Ghrielle is shopping right now, and she knows my moods, so she drops some cash on the counter and hoists a lamp onto her hip before heading out. I follow behind, not bothering to turn off the lights before I lock the door.

Only the faintest trace of Hayley remains outside the shop, and I’m tempted to shift to my raccoon form so I can pick up her trail more easily. Then I remember she doesn’t know I’m the raccoon who stole her underwear, and if I want to make a semi-decent second impression, I need to keep that a secret. Definitely not something to bring up before a third date.

Beans yells at me that we don’t need dates, we just need to find her and she’ll fall into our arms because she’s fated to be mine. If only that were the truth—it was clear from interacting with Hayley that she didn’t have the same all-consuming need to touch and taste and...

Shit, I need to stop thinking about that before I get hard in the middle of Main Street. We have a bunch of tourists here for the weekend, and I know the mayor will be on my ass if I scare them away with my massive boner. I’m already in trouble for selling moonshine at the last farmer’s market without the proper permits. Why the hell do I need a permit, anyway? Just another sign of the government trying to control our every move until every trace of individuality is scrubbed away and we become mindless worker drones, giving our labor to our oligarchs with a smile.

I make a mental note to start another batch of moonshine soon. Fuck permits and fuck the man. I bet Hayley would like my moonshine. She doesn’t look very conformist, with her pastel hair and flowery jacket. I wish I’d come up with an excuse to get her to open it and show off what she had on underneath. She looks so soft and lush and...

“Dammit, no, stop thinking about her body!” I mutter to myself, and a tourist gives me a wary look and a wide berth as they pass me on the sidewalk.

With no leads on where my mate might be, I head over to the bodega and peer inside through the large glass window. When I don’t see her, I head inside and do a quick lap around the small store. Two of the three Greer triplets are there, Freddie talking to a rabbit shifter at the checkout counter and Bettie stocking shelves.

“Is Hayley here?” I ask, my voice far too loud and strained than what would be considered normal for a casual question.

Bettie turns over her shoulder, one of her wolfy ears perking up, and the warm brown skin of her forehead wrinkling as she assesses me. “Oh, hey, Jake.”

“Hey. Is Hayley here?” I ask again, attempting to seem more casual this time by leaning against the shelf of chips, but my elbow slips and I end up knocking a bunch of the bags onto the floor. “Shit, sorry,” I mutter, scooping them back up quickly and shoving them back on the shelf.

“Are you okay?” Bettie asks, and I want to shout at her that, no, I’m not okay, and she needs to stop asking questions and tell me where Hayley is before I lose my mind and Beans goes on a rampage until he locates her.

“Yeah,” I say, swallowing heavily. “Totally fine. Just forgot to tell Hayley something when she came over to discuss a problem with, uh, with—”

“A raccoon,” Bettie finishes for me, her lips twisting into a wry smile. “Did you tell her it was you? Why were you out there, anyway? Did you find anything good?”

“Shhh! No, I didn’t tell her!” I snap, panic lancing through me at the thought of Hayley overhearing this talkative teen.

My loud voice draws the attention of Freddie, who sidles over from behind the counter, crossing his arms with an identical smile to his sister's. "Why didn't you tell her? She's not scared of monsters, dude."

"I didn't tell her because it won't happen again," I huff, then go up on my toes to look over the shelves and make sure no one else is around to listen in. "She doesn't need to know, so please be cool and don't tell her," I say in a harsh whisper.

"No worries, we won't say anything," Freddie says with a slightly perplexed smile. For once, my eccentricities are working in my favor because he's not questioning why I wouldn't want to tell Hayley I'm a raccoon shifter .

"Speak for yourself," Bettie says, her golden eyes narrowing at me. "I'll keep your secret, but in exchange, I need you to bring me the trash from the Fullsteads' house for the next month."

"Done," I reply, without even considering why she'd want their trash. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that Hayley won't be creeped out by me before I have a chance to make her mine.

Freddie grimaces. "Eww, why do you need that? Is it because you have a crush on Armand?"

Bettie glares at her brother. "That's none of your business."

Before the pair can start to argue about Bettie's unusual request, I clear my throat. "Is Hayley here?"

Third time asking is a charm because I finally get my answer. "Nope. She hasn't been back since she went over to talk to you. She's probably on a date or something."

My heart stops at Bettie's words. "A date?"

"Yeah. She goes on them all the time," Bettie says, unaware that her words are tearing me apart. I grab one of the chip bags and rip it open, shoving a handful into my mouth to keep from verbally freaking out at this new information.

Freddie frowns at me. "You need to pay for those."

I fish a random bill out of my wallet and hand it over, hands shaking slightly.

"That's too much," Freddie says as he takes the bill and sighs. "I'll get you some change."

As he moves away, I weigh my options. I can flee this conversation and race around the streets of downtown Hallow's Cove until I find Hayley. Beans likes that idea, but Jacob wants more info before we go into full panic mode.

I swallow the chips in my mouth and try to give Bettie a friendly look. "So, uh, she dates a lot?"

"Oh yeah," she replies, chuckling softly. "She's on a mission to get some monster action. Has been ever since she arrived. We're taking bets on who she ends up hooking up with and how many people she gets through before she leaves."

My brain short circuits as I try to parse the overload of information. I don't know which part to focus on. Or which part is worse—that my mate is actively seeking to have sex with as many monsters as possible, or that she's leaving .

I cram more chips into my mouth and almost choke as I try to swallow them without chewing enough. Once my coughing fit has subsided, I frown at Bettie. "How many is she up to? When is she leaving? Is she like a monster fetishist or something?"

“Why? Do you want to place a bet?” Bettie laughs, oblivious to my internal turmoil.

“No!” I snap. “You shouldn’t take bets on your boss’s sex life!”

Bettie’s thick brows shoot up to her hairline and her ears pull back. “Whoa, calm down. It was a joke.”

“Don’t joke about stuff like that,” I huff, shaking my head at her. I head toward the exit, too agitated to stay and listen to teen gossip about Hayley’s love life. I yank the door open and turn back over my shoulder. “And if you want that trash, don’t tell her I talked to you!”

“Don’t you want your change?” Freddie calls out to me.

“No! Keep it.” I shout back and storm out of the bodega, shoving my half-eaten bag of chips into my pocket and spilling a few on the sidewalk in the process.

For once, Beans is too agitated to urge me to pick them up and not waste food. No, he’s currently scrabbling around in my mind, making me even more agitated.

What do I do?

Some monsters are totally cool with polyamory and share their mates with multiple partners. Until this moment, I assumed that I’d be cool with that, too. I’ve never tried being with more than one partner, but to be fair, I haven’t really tried many committed relationships at all. Most people don’t stick around once they realize my quirks aren’t a joke.

When I think about Hayley with other people, though, I want to scream. She’s mine . She’s my mate, not anyone else’s. She’s the most precious treasure I’ve ever stumbled upon, and I’m too greedy to share her.

Logical Jacob knows that this practical stranger is absolutely not mine, and will definitely never be mine if I don't find a way to stop freaking out. But that's far easier said than done.

I need to burn off all of this energy and cool off. If I do something reckless now, I know I'll fuck things up. So instead of heading back into my shop, I decide to go for a power walk around town. Maybe grab some of those muffins that Beans wanted so badly.

That feels like a great solution, because by the time I get to the cafe, my frantic energy has waned and Beans is now at least alternating between yelling at me to find Hayley and salivating over getting to eat muffins.

I make it a foot in the door before that calm evaporates. Even with the coffee aroma infusing the air, I catch Hayley's scent now that I'm attuned to it. I step inside, anxiously scanning the space for her, and when I see her sitting alone at a table, my heart leaps.

Was Bettie wrong about her being on a date? I can't believe I let her gossip get to me. Of course my mate wouldn't be dating around. Everything is fine. I just need to take a breath and figure out what to say to her now that I've found her.

I force myself to get in line rather than making a frenzied beeline toward my mate. Her soft scent tortures me even at a distance, and I'm glad for the chips crammed in my pocket because they're hiding my boner as I order two muffins.

One for me and one for Hayley. A peace offering. A reason to go over and talk to her.

My palms sweat as I carry the two plates toward her table in the corner. She looks up and smiles in my direction, and a warm, fuzzy sense of rightness washes over me.

God, is there anything better than her smile?

A lanky demon steps past me, a drink in each hand, and sets one down in front of her with a cocky smile. “A honey oat milk latte for a lovely lady,” they say, winking at her .

Hayley flushes but accepts the drink, and the demon sits down across from her.

I startle at the sound of something shattering, and realize the sound came from me dropping the plates in my hands. Ceramic shards and muffin bits scatter around my feet and I let out a pained yelp that has nothing to do with the lost muffins.

Hayley’s beautiful face twists in confusion as she looks toward the commotion, and I see her plush lips form my name in a question, but I can’t hear her voice over the panic ringing in my ears. I turn and bolt, almost knocking over a petite redheaded human as I run out of the cafe.

Fuck. Fuck. That was a disaster. She was on a date, and I made myself look even crazier than I normally do.

By the time I’ve run all the way back to my shop, reality sets in. I’ve found my mate, but she’s not interested in anything but casual fun, like Bettie said. And even if she were, I’ve ruined any chance of her wanting me in return by acting like a total psycho.

What was I thinking? I’m not mate material. I’m too odd for a beautiful, charming woman like Hayley. Of course she’s on a date with a hot demon, who I’m pretty sure is really rich, instead of a weird thrift shop owner and absolute dumpster fire of a person.

As soon as those self-deprecating thoughts rise, indignance follows in their wake.

I've never been ashamed of who I am. I like what I like and if that makes me weird, who the fuck cares? I'm happy with myself and I'm not going to beat myself up because a biological quirk picked the wrong mate for me .

This has to stop now before it gets worse. I never thought I'd find a mate and was perfectly fine with that. Just because I found one now, doesn't mean I need to do anything about it. We're not a good fit, and that's okay. Hayley will leave once her aunts return, so all I need to do is avoid her until then.

Luckily, I have a lot of experience sneaking around unnoticed. Everything will be fine.

Beans screams at me, in direct opposition to my measured thoughts.

"Sorry, buddy," I mutter. "It's for the best."

Chapter five

Hayley

“You’re joking. That’s like something out of an over the top romcom—the evil ex cheating on the best friend.” The demon beside me clutches their chest dramatically.

I shake my head and let out a wry laugh at Tryzx’s reaction. It still stings to think about, but getting my heart broken is at least amusing conversation fodder. “I know, I know. I swear it felt like I was being pranked, because the sight of them fucking in the dressing room when I was in the shop working felt so ridiculous.”

“What a pair of absolute assholes. I can put in a bad word with my great-uncle if you’d like.” Tryzx gives me a feral grin.

Over dinner—our first official date since they joked that our casual coffee hang out didn’t give them enough of a chance to impress me—they told me that their great-uncle is head of soul procurement in the demon realm. I honestly couldn’t tell if it was a joke or not, but didn’t want to be an uncultured human and ask.

I snort and wave them off. “Nah, they’re not worth it. Besides...” I give the attractive demon a shy smile, look up at them through my lashes. “It’s led me to a much better place.”

“Mmm, true,” they purr, stepping in closer. Close enough that I can feel the supernatural heat of their body soaking into mine, and smell their spicy cologne. A matching heat pools in my low belly as I wonder what it would feel like for them to

wrap all that heat around me.

“Would you like to come back to my place for dessert?” Tryzx asks, a flicker of desire in their dark gaze. “I’m still pretty hungry,” they add, the intensity vanishing as quickly as it came on.

I like them. They’re fun to talk to and it’s clear they find me attractive, which is a huge win considering my abysmal dating track record in Hallow’s Cove up to this point. If things keep going well, there could definitely be something between us. If I can stop feeling intimidated by their surges of intense energy that seem to come out of nowhere when we’re talking. I’m sure once we know each other better, the comfort will come.

We walk the handful of blocks back to their place, a cute duplex with a yard sign that says “Beware of Hell Hound”.

“Do you have a dog?” I ask as they unlock their front door, trying not to let my nerves show. Unless I’m even more clueless than I think I am, they’ve brought me back to their place to have sex. Or at least make out a bit .

Shit, I hope my breath smells okay. I knew I shouldn’t have had that garlic bread!

“You doing okay, beautiful?” they ask in a soft rasp, reaching out to take my hand and guide me inside.

“Oh, uh, yeah, totally! I was just thinking that I’m glad you’re not a vampire.” They cock their head in confusion. “Because of the garlic,” I add. Dammit, I really need to chill out and stop talking so much.

Tryzx chuckles and tugs me against their chest. Their head descends toward my throat and they inhale softly. “Mmm, I’m not a vampire, but I’m definitely ready to

feast on you.”

My breath hitches, both at their nearness and sudden nerves. Do demons eat human flesh? Why didn't I look into things more or ask them more questions?

“I probably don't taste very good,” I say with a strained laugh, that turns into a gasp when their tongue drags up my neck.

“Oh, I disagree,” they rasp in my ear, one hand dropping to cup my ass and the other threading through my hair. “I can't wait to taste your sweet pussy, beautiful. Are you wet for me?”

A weird half-laugh, half relieved exhale shudders out of me. They want to eat my pussy, not my flesh. Whew, okay.

Tryzx nips at my ear. “I want to hear you tell me you want this, Hayley.”

“I...”

I want to go for it and let this sexy demon eat me out, but little alarm bells are going off in my head at how fast things are moving. There's no shame in a hookup like this, but despite my bravado the other night at the bar, I'm not actually looking for meaningless sex.

Tryzx steps back when I don't give them an enthusiastic yes. “Shit, did I misread this?” they ask, giving me an apologetic smile that seems more genuine than their flirtier ones. “Sometimes when I haven't fed in a while I can't tell what is my arousal and what's someone else's.”

Their comment about feeding is weird, but I don't want to ruin my shot with them, so I brush past it. “N-no, I, uh, I think you're really attractive and am enjoying spending

time with you, but I don't know if I'm ready yet."

Their brow furrows. "Because of your ex?"

I shake my head. "No, not them. It's just, I think if I'm going to have sex, I want there to be more, uh, emotion behind it." I give them a hesitant smile. "A connection."

Tryzx's black eyes widen. "Oh! Damn, I'm sorry, Hayley. I thought you understood when I mentioned being hungry that I wanted to have sex so I could feed off your arousal."

My stomach sinks. "R-right. Of course. That makes sense." The laugh I let out sounds brittle.

Their face falls, the mask of their smooth, sexy persona slipping further. "You're such a lovely woman, and if I were looking for a relationship, you'd be an excellent choice. Truly. But I'm a young lust demon, and I won't be able to settle down for at least another century or so. "

A lust demon. That explains it. Dammit, I'm such an idiot. Their sincere tone is only making this situation worse, and to my horror, tears well in my eyes.

"Totally understand. Thanks again for dinner. I hope you find someone to, uh, feed from. Have a good night!" My words come out in a rush as I open the door and step out into the night air.

They seem to know better than to argue, giving me a gentle wave. "Goodnight, Hayley."

My mind replays my dinner date and subsequent embarrassment at misreading their

interest the entire walk back to the bodega. Now that I know what Tryzx was looking for, a lot of their comments and behavior that I chalked up to a cultural difference make more sense. By the time I'm climbing the stairs to my aunts' apartment, I've accepted my reality.

I'm not going to find anyone in Hallow's Cove. I'm not going to get any monster action, either.

I want it too much.

Aunt Betsy found love when she wasn't looking for it, and I'm beginning to think that's the key. She wasn't trying to be someone other than herself. She wasn't stuffed in her tightest dress and putting on a flirty persona meant to attract a partner. She was just living her life, existing as her authentic self, and that's when love found her.

God dammit. I hate it. I don't want to wait around for love until I'm almost sixty. Aunt Betsy is a badass and seemed happy on her own, but that's not the life I want. I want a family to share every up and down that life brings my way.

After giving a TED talk to myself in the shower about how I need to stop pushing so hard and focus on having fun while I'm here for the next four months, I get ready for bed even though it's only a little past nine.

Sleep doesn't come, though, despite feeling drained by emotions. There's a dull curl of arousal in my belly that hasn't fully gone away since my almost hookup with Tryzx. Must be an after effect of being touched by a lust demon.

I almost chastise myself for not embracing the moment and having wild sex with the demon, but I stop before I go too far down that mental path. I shouldn't be so down on myself five minutes after resigning to be authentic. I am who I am, and that person is someone who doesn't want casual sex.

Though, that doesn't mean that person isn't horny.

I shove off the covers and head to the closet, where I keep my mostly unpacked suitcase, digging around in the inner pocket for my vibrator. I couldn't bring myself to put it in my aunts' nightstand alongside where they keep the collection of toys they didn't bring with them on their trip. Once again, I wish they had a guest room I could stay in, because masturbating in the bed they sleep in is a little unappealing.

I almost change my mind, but it's been a few weeks since I touched myself and I need to get over that hangup since I'm not hooking up with anyone any time soon .

I slip back into bed, and tug my sleep shorts down off my hips and let my legs fall open. I close my eyes, pretending that I'm somewhere else as I switch on the wand to the lowest setting and it rumbles to life. I've used this toy so many times that I think I've conditioned myself to get more aroused from that sound alone, and I sigh as I bring it between my thighs.

I let my mind drift, trying to land on a mental scene that will get me off. I could watch porn, but often the scenarios I come up with in my head do a better job of turning me on than seeing some big dick ed beefcake plow into a woman while she pretends to moan.

At first, I imagine that I'm putting on a show for some dommy woman as she tells me I'm not allowed to come. It makes my pussy clench, but after a minute, I can tell it's not going to work. I need something different.

As if it was just waiting for an invitation, Jake's face flashes across my mind. My clit throbs and pleasure intensifies as I remember him looking up at me from the floor and that moment where he smiled at me. Then, when he said he'd do anything I needed. It's weird, because the guy clearly doesn't like me. If our interaction at his shop, and the bizarre moment where he threw his muffins on the floor while staring at

me weren't bad enough, I've caught him multiple times in the past week hiding from me when he notices me nearby.

God, he's so strange. But I guess so am I, because thinking about Jake is making me hot. Between imagining all of his bulk pressing me into the bed, and the gold flash of his eyes when he looked at me intensely, I'm on the verge of coming.

I wonder if he'd get so into things that he wouldn't be able to control himself. I wonder if he'd shift into his hybrid form—whatever that might be—and sink his teeth into me as his cock grew larger inside me until it became almost too much of a stretch to handle.

I turn my vibrator up to the higher setting, letting out a soft moan as I imagine it's his tongue between my thighs. Fuck, I'm really close. I'm going to come.

My body tenses for an amazing orgasm and...

The vibrator dies.

"No!" I groan, flicking the switch a few times in a feeble attempt to get it to turn back on.

Dammit!

I dig out the charger, but when I plug it in, the little flashing charging light doesn't come on. I move around the apartment, still pantsless, trying to find an outlet that will magically make it work. But after three attempts and a lot of cord wiggling, it's clear it's busted.

All my calm resignation from earlier vanishes, and I let out an angry shout, tossing the vibrator and charger on the couch. I tug on my shorts, then pick up the offending

objects and storm downstairs and back into the alley to throw away something that was supposed to make me feel good for the second time in a week.

“Fucking piece of shit,” I grumble as the wand and charger collide against the side of the dumpster as I hurl it inside. The loud clang makes me wince, and I hurry back inside before anyone comes out to ask what the hell I’m doing.

Feeling defeated, I go back upstairs and stare at the ceiling, replaying my shitty day in my head until I finally pass out.

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Chapter six

Jake

I curse as I fight to wriggle the outer casing off the busted tablet I scored a few weeks back. The glass screen has a large crack running down the center, but I can replace that and it'll be good as new. Whoever owned it should've sold it to an electronics store or at least brought it to a proper disposal location, but if I've learned anything over my years digging through trash, it's that many people are incredibly lazy. Especially tourists. It's easier for them to toss something in the garbage than put any effort into fixing it.

Their loss. Now I have a free tablet, and the satisfaction that I've turned something that others would call trash into something of value. A metaphor for my life, I suppose. People think I'm weird, but I know I'm a good person. I know my worth.

Which is helpful, because that means I haven't given in to the temptation of interacting with Hayley again. After years of running my under the table moonshine business and my habit of dumpster diving, I'm used to avoiding people when I need to. I've been able to avoid Hayley, with minimal screaming from Beans whenever we caught a glimpse of her.

A tingle of desire spreads through me as I think about her. Followed by frustration and disappointment.

I saw Hayley leave for a date earlier. She walked right past the shop, her pretty pastel hair pinned up to show off her neck, and her luscious curves wrapped in a silky blue

dress. My favorite color.

I almost caved when I saw her. I wanted to run out and haul her over my shoulder back into my shop, so she couldn't go on her date. Keep her there and prove to her she doesn't need anyone but me, and that having fun with a bunch of other people pales in comparison to being the center of a devoted shifter's universe.

That would've been abduction, though, so obviously I didn't go with that problematic plan. I also ruled out following her and watching her date like a stalker, mostly because that seemed torturous and would've ended in me busting in to interrupt and proclaim my need for her.

Fuck, this whole unrequited mate thing really sucks.

After my third attempt to slot in the new glass screen for the tablet, I give up for now and decide to take a snack break. Beans has given up on his fixation with muffins since that catastrophe at the cafe and moved on to craving cotton candy. It took me a while to figure out that it was because of the colors of Hayley's hair .

I tear off a chunk of the pastel swirled confection and let it dissolve on my tongue. It's so sweet, but I bet Hayley's mouth would be even sweeter. Or her pussy.

Dammit, this was supposed to help get my mind off of her. I shove the rest of the cotton candy in my mouth in frustration, fingers sticky and stomach slightly unhappy when I finish.

I need to find something more distracting. Maybe I'll go camping. Yeah, it's bad for business to close randomly in the middle of the week, but whatever. My customers know I keep odd hours. Gabe and the rest of the gaming group will probably be pissed that I'm flaking on another D&D session. But I haven't been out in nature in a while and Beans has a ton of restless energy, so running around in the woods, far

away from Hayley, might be just what we need.

Yeah, I'll go camping.

Decision made, I head into my bedroom to pack. Then freeze right as I'm about to switch on the lights. A surge of arousal slams into me, my cock hardening so fast it's painful.

Hayley left her curtains open. The lights are on in her bedroom, which is directly across the alley from mine, and she's in there.

On the bed.

Legs spread and her head thrown back against a stack of pillows, as she holds a large vibrator against her pussy.

Fuck me.

I move to the window, any thoughts of packing immediately gone, as I try to get a closer look. Her face twists, plush lips parted and cheeks pink as she chases her pleasure. She still has her top on, but I can see how hard her nipples are through the thin fabric. I wish she'd tug it down and play with them so I could see her perfect tits.

Pre-cum oozes from the tip of my cock, smearing against my briefs as I bring my eyes back down between her thick thighs.

There's a little thatch of dark brown curls peeking out from what the wand covers, and her soft lower belly looks like the perfect place for me to rest my forehead as I feast on her.

I palm my cock over my sweatpants at the thought. Then jolt as my conscience breaks

through my horny thoughts and tear my hand away from my dick.

What the fuck am I doing?

I slam my eyes shut and leave the bedroom, which was the wrong order of operations, because I smack my shoulder into the doorframe in my panic.

“Ouch, shit!” I curse, stumbling out into the living room as I clutch my shoulder. I shut the bedroom door behind me so I won’t be tempted to look inside and try to see Hayley again, then collapse on the couch with a pained groan.

This isn’t fair. I was trying to ignore her, and she was over there...

Fuck, I wonder what she looks like when she comes. Would it be so wrong to go back and watch? I mean, I’ve already seen her, and she left her curtains open, so maybe she wanted me to watch.

I’m back on my feet, hand on the doorknob, before I realize what I’m doing and curse again.

“No, don’t be a fucking creep, dude,” I grumble to myself, forehead thumping against the door as I slump into it.

Beans is putting up a fight, yelling at me to go over and give Hayley a hand. Show her how much better I’d be at making her come than any toy. I know if I stay here, I’ll lose that battle, so I forget the camping idea and grab my wallet and keys. I’ll just get in my car and drive. Far away. Doesn’t matter where. I have to leave before I do something I’ll regret for the rest of my life.

I throw on my jacket and head downstairs and out the back door to where I’ve parked my car behind the shop. A loud clanging and a muttered curse stop me in my tracks.

The sound came from the alley. Against my better judgment, which was never that great to begin with but is severely lacking lately, I peek around the building into the dark alley. I glimpse pastel hair and Hayley's pert ass in a pair of clingy sleep shorts before she steps back inside her building. Beans tugs me a few steps towards her, then freezes beside the dumpster when her scent hits us.

Not just the smell of her that I catch a hint of wherever she's been, but that rich, musky smell that permeated her panties. It's even stronger now, and it's coming from inside the dumpster. Did she throw away another pair of underwear?

I look inside and startle when I see the source.

It's her vibrator .

I blink down at the wand, struggling to process why she'd throw it away.

Is it... a sign?

Wait, did she actually want me to see her and then got frustrated, and put her vibrator out here when I didn't keep watching?

Does that mean she knows I'm the one who stole her panties?

Oh god, what if this is actually an elaborate trap to catch her panty thief in the act?

I stand there next to the dumpster for an embarrassingly long amount of time as my thoughts race. I need to get out of here in case she comes back, but I'm paralyzed by indecision.

Should I take it? Would it be wrong to take it?

It's not any different from the tablet, right? She took something and threw it away, and I found it. It looks like the charger is next to it, so maybe it would be a simple fix. I could take it inside and fix it for her and then...

And then what? Knock on her door and present her the vibrator I fished out of the trash like I've done something helpful and not something supremely weird.

The scent of her arousal clouds my mind and Beans makes the decision for me. I grab the vibrator and charger and race back inside my place, heart slamming in my chest as I wait for the police or someone to knock on the door and tell me they know what I've done.

A tense few minutes pass, but nothing happens.

I look down at the wand clutched in my hands, and bring it up to my mouth. It didn't touch anything gross in the dumpster and I've licked far more suspect things in my raccoon form.

Hayley's potent taste makes my taste buds sing the second my tongue makes contact with the rounded head of the wand, and I shudder, balls aching to unload at this small sample of her. If my mouth were bigger, I'd put the entire head of the vibrator in my mouth and suck on it like a lollipop until I get every last trace of my mate's essence.

I tug my cock out and stroke it, savoring Hayley's taste as I imagine that my tongue is on her hot little pussy and not this lifeless toy. She'd buck against my mouth and whine, oversensitive from the orgasms I'd already given her, but I'd be greedy for more of her arousal. I wouldn't stop until my beard was completely soaked with her and I could smell my mate on me for days afterwards.

I come so hard at the thought that my vision whites out for a second. I moan, stomach bunching as I keep stroking despite how sensitive I am, milking all my cum out until

my hand is coated with it.

The vibrator clatters from my hand down to the floor as my body sags, my fevered need for Hayley sated for the moment. I grimace at the mess I've made, tucking my cock back into my pants and scooping up the vibrator and charger before heading out of the stock room and back upstairs to my apartment so I can wash off.

With each step I take up the stairs, my stomach sinks further.

That was a mistake.

A big one .

Not only have I violated Hayley's privacy and stolen something from her again , but now my crazed jerkoff session has crumbled the shoddily erected barriers I've been using to keep her out of my mind.

She's my mate, and I can't ignore that. Not after I've seen her and tasted her.

I reluctantly set the vibrator and charger down on the workbench in my office, when really what I want to do is keep it close to me like some kind of perverted security blanket. It's bad enough that I'm keeping her panties inside my pillow case so I can get a faint hint of her smell as I fall asleep at night.

Ugh, what a mess.

I head into my bedroom, both sad and thankful that Hayley's window is dark. I shut my blinds just in case, then strip and go into the attached bathroom to shower off my shame.

As the hot water pelts my over-sensitized skin, I make a decision.

If I can't avoid Hayley, I have to figure out a way to convince her I'm better than any of her other romantic prospects. That I'm worth staying in Hallow's Cove for.

Fuck. For the first time since I was a kid getting bullied for digging through the trash instead of playing during recess, I'm worried my weirdness is too much. I don't want to be anyone but myself, but that person seems incompatible with who pretty, sweet, and decidedly not a weird trash gremlin, Hayley would want for her mate.

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Chapter seven

Hayley

“I think the raccoon is back,” I say, cheeks still warm as I return from the dumpster to toss my regular trash before pickup day tomorrow. There was a notable absence of my vibrator when I went out there. I didn’t dig through the trash or do anything gross like that, but I’m pretty sure it’s gone.

“Huh?” Freddie asks, looking up from his magazine, this time one about fishing.

“There was something missing from the dumpster. I threw it out last night and when I went out there, it was gone.”

He cocks his head at me. “That’s weird. What was it?”

My face grows hotter. I can’t exactly tell this nineteen-year-old boy that it was my busted vibrator. “Oh, uh, nothing. But it wasn’t in a trash bag, so it was easy to see that it was gone.”

“Huh,” Freddie says again, unhelpfully.

“Are raccoons drawn to, uh, specific types of smells?” I immediately regret asking since I can’t answer any follow-ups about what kind of smell I’m talking about. But this is the second time now that something has stolen an item that smells like my pussy.

“Not sure. You should ask Jake.”

“Why Jake?” The prospect of talking to my standoffish neighbor sounds even less appealing than usual after he was the surprising star in my sexual fantasies last night. I’m still on edge from my ruined orgasm, and a night filled with dreams about him running away from me while I beg him to fuck me.

A weird look crosses Freddie’s face and his golden eyes widen. “Oh, uh, just because he’s had to deal with them before, and it’s his dumpster too, so he’d want to know that there’s an issue.” Freddie coughs and looks back at his magazine.

“I think maybe I’ll look up online how to catch one. Or call animal control.”

“No!” Freddie protests, fumbling the magazine and dropping it. “Don’t call animal control. They’re mean. And bad. Jake will deal with it.”

I narrow my eyes at him, wondering why he’s acting so strange. Then it hits me—is animal control a bad topic to bring up with shifters because they might be mistaken for a wild animal when they’re fully shifted?

Crap, I wish there was some kind of guidebook for when you come to Hallow’s Cove that teaches you how to not accidentally offend its monster inhabitants. I’d go check in the bookstore, but the vampire that runs the place seems kinda mean.

“Oh, sorry, okay, I guess I’ll go do that.” I give Freddie a little wave and step out the front door right now like a dumbass instead of saying I’ll go talk to Jake later and then never actually go. Now I have to do it or Freddie might get suspicious about what the raccoon has been stealing.

I inhale deeply to steel myself for dealing with Jake, and close my eyes for a moment. Which is a mistake, because the image of him smiling at me pops into my mind

again. I open them and let out a startled yelp when I see Jake coming directly my way from the game shop across the street.

He freezes in alarm at my reaction, stopping halfway across the street. It feels like time slows again as I drink the sight of him in. Did he somehow get hotter than the last time I saw him? Because the way his pants hug his thick thighs and the streak of silver hair falling over one eye is doing things to me.

A car honks at him to get out of the road, breaking us both out of our stupor, and he scurries the rest of the way across the road with a sheepish wave to the driver.

I resist the urge to flee back inside the bodega and give Jake a strained smile and a wave. “H-hey!”

“Hi Hayley.” His low voice paired with the intense look he’s giving me makes me shiver.

“Hey!” I say again, like a moron, broadening my smile to mask my embarrassment. “You’re just the person I was looking for. ”

His thick brows raise and a hint of a smile stretches his full lips. “You were looking for me?”

“Y-yeah, I need you to help me with a problem.”

“Oh? What kind of problem?” His eyes drop for a moment, giving me a once over that makes my pussy clench.

“It’s, uh... it’s...” It’s between my thighs and needs something thick and hard to take care of it.

Jesus, get it together. Don't eye fuck the guy who hides whenever you show up.

His smile drops when I stand there and stare at him for a moment too long.

"Raccoon!" I blurt. "The raccoon is back. I thought you said you'd talk to it," I add with a weak laugh.

Jake's cheeks burnish a little. "I did?"

"Yeah, I didn't know if you meant it literally or not, since you're a shifter."

"Oh no, I can't talk to animals. Damn, that'd be really cool, though." He strokes a hand over his beard. "Or awful, depending on how their life is going and how intelligent they are. It'd also hinge on if I could turn that power on and off or if it'd be going on 24/7, because insects are pretty much everywhere, so I'd never get a moment of peace and probably lose my mind."

I blink at him as he laughs at his own thoughts.

He's really cute and funny when he's not acting like he'd rather be anywhere but talking to me.

"Sorry, what were we talking about?" he asks, his cheeks growing even darker .

"I read a book once where the bad guy could speak the language of ants and used that to command them. He took over an entire kingdom in the jungle using them. So there are pros and cons."

Jake's mouth falls open, clearly surprised by me engaging with his strange tangent. "Whoa, that sounds cool. But yeah, I, uh, I meant it metaphorically. I thought the raccoon would move on, but I guess it didn't." Jake winces like it's a personal failing

that the raccoon returned. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine!” I say quickly, not wanting to ruin how well this is going.

He shakes his head, lips down turning as he looks away and sucks in a shaky breath.

Oh god, is he going to cry?

“I’m sorry for how weird I acted when we met. And at the café. I’d, uh...” Jake rubs the back of his neck, still not meeting my gaze. “I was exposed to some fumes, and it messed with my head. It’s super embarrassing, and that’s why I’ve been... why I haven’t talked to you since.”

“Oh shit, no worries.” Tension bleeds out of me at his apology and explanation. It might be the people pleaser side of me who wants everyone to like me that’s happy, but the relief I feel knowing Jake doesn’t hate me is intense. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Much,” he says with another dazzling smile.

The urge to ask him if he wants to go get coffee rises in me. I surreptitiously scan his throat for a mating bite, realizing that I have no clue if he’s single. I don’t find one, and there’s no ring on his finger, either .

“Would you like to—” I begin, but Jake speaks at the same time.

“We can do a stakeout—”

My brow furrows, my question forgotten. “A stakeout?”

Jake nods. “Yeah. For the raccoon. We could get together tonight and watch the

dumpster to see if it comes back.”

“Uh...”

“I’ll bring dinner,” he offers, looking worried that I’ll decline. “What kind of food do you like?”

My weird, sexy neighbor inviting me to a raccoon stakeout/dinner date was not on my strange interactions bingo card. Butterflies fill my stomach as he waits for my answer.

“I like tacos?” It comes out like a question.

“Me too!” Jake says excitedly, and my damn horny brain interprets that as some kind of euphemism. “Okay, meet in the alley at sundown. I’ll bring the tacos and you bring the raccoon bait.”

“The what?” I sputter, thinking he means another pair of used panties. Not that he could know that’s what the raccoon stole.

“Something tasty to attract it. Something that smells really good.”

Am I imagining his voice growing thick as he speaks? Is it possible he knows?

No, there’s no way.

“O-oh. Right. Got it.”

“See you later, Hayley,” Jake says with one last smile, before heading off towards his shop, leaving me reeling .

Jake

Fuck, where the fuck do I get tacos? There's no restaurant nearby that serves them, and I sure as shit don't know how to cook them. I should've told Hayley we'd need to do something different, but I was so shocked by my own boldness to ask her to have dinner with me that my brain wasn't functioning properly.

Does she think this is a date? I don't know if I came off like a weirdo who likes to stare at a dumpster platonically with my neighbor, or if my romantic interest was clear. The former is honestly a lot more in my comfort zone, even though I definitely meant it as a date.

Shit, I can't have my first date with my mate be sitting by the trash and giving her unpalatable homemade tacos. I'm making a mess of things again. She gave me a chance and bought my lie about why I acted so strange when we first met, so I need to figure out something that will make the stakeout more romantic.

The problem is, I don't know what the hell she'd like. I know on an instinctual level that Hayley is amazing, and I'm stunned by how lovely she is, but I don't know anything about her. What do beautiful human women with cotton candy hair and adorable outfits and perfect smiles like? Other than tacos.

I need advice. I need the perspective of someone who doesn't think a raccoon stakeout is a normal date activity.

I watch out the front door of the shop, scanning the street to make sure that Hayley hasn't left the bodega again, then tug a hoodie on and put the hood up before heading outside and darting across the street to Gargoyle's Horde.

I wave to my gargoyle friend Gabe as I rush inside, though he won't wave back since he's stone during the day, then scan the busy shop for Gwen. I see a flash of her

brown hair and move to her side, almost knocking over a display of minifigures in my hurry.

“Whoa, Jake!” Gwen exclaims as she turns and finds me right behind her.

“Sorry for startling you, but I need to talk,” I pant, out of breath from running over here. Which is kinda sad given it’s diagonally across Main Street from my shop. Damn, I need to go for more runs.

I wonder if Hayley enjoys running. If not, we could figure out something else to do together. Like hiking in the woods. Or going to the ice rink. Or hell, get one of those dance aerobics videos and stay at home and exercise. She’d look so good in tight leggings and a sports bra. Fuck, maybe that’s a bad idea because I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off of her. Though, sex is a workout sometimes.

“Okay... Did you come over to tell me you’re missing D&D tonight?” Gwen prompts, making me realize I’ve been on a mental tangent for too long and she’s waiting for me to continue.

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not...” I swallow down my agitation and try to focus on why I’m here. I feel bad about not making it to our gaming session, but making a good impression on my mate is a lot more important right now. “You’re a human. What kind of things do you like?”

Gwen gives me an incredulous look. It’s the same one I get across the table when my wizard casts an unusual spell during a battle instead of something practical like a fire bolt. “Jake, you’ve known me for years. You know what I like.”

“On a date,” I clarify, and watch as the bemusement shifts to surprise, then excitement.

“Did you ask a human on a date?” Her eyes widen and her smile grows even broader. “It’s the cute girl that moved into the bodega! Betsy’s niece. Oh my gosh, you asked her out?”

“I’m the one who needs questions answered!” I huff, gesticulating in frustration and almost knocking over the minis again. Gwen winces at the near miss, and I step further away from them. “But yes, it’s Hayley. We’re going to have a dumpster stakeout and tacos. Except, I’m a terrible cook and no one in town sells them.”

Gwen’s brow furrows. “What’s a dumpster stakeout?”

“It’s a terrible idea for a date, that’s what it is. But when she mentioned the raccoon being back and wanting my help to keep it away from the dumpster, I panicked. I can’t mess this up, Gwen.” My words tumble out of me at an increasingly fast pace, and I reach out and take her hands into mine. “Please help me. I don’t want to fuck it up because I’m... because I’m me and she’s... perfect.”

“Oh, Jake,” Gwen says softly, squeezing my hands back. “If someone is the right person for you, they’ll like you because of your eccentricities, not in spite of them. Be yourself. Trying to start a relationship as anyone else will only end poorly. If Hayley thinks you’re too weird, then—”

I shake my head. Gwen’s sentiment is sweet, but not exactly helpful right now. “She’s my mate,” I blurt.

Gwen gasps, her brows shooting up to her hairline. “Oh! Oh wow, okay. That, uh, hmm... that’s trickier.” A beat passes as she processes the rest of what I said. “Wait, you were doing a stakeout for a raccoon?” Gwen pulls her hands back and crosses her arms over her chest. “She doesn’t know what you are?”

“I’ve already fucked it up too much! It’s hopeless. Sorry for bothering you, I’m going

to go cancel and then hide forever—”

I turn and take one step away, but Gwen grabs my arm and uses her surprisingly strong grip to hold me in place. “Nope. You’re not running away from this. You’re going to make this the best damn dumpster stakeout and dinner date ever.”

“I am?” I blink at her determined tone.

“Yes.” She leads me over to the checkout counter and starts scribbling on a sticky note. “Go get these things from the bodega and bring them back.”

My stomach flips at the mention of going into the bodega. “But what if she’s in there?”

“Then you say hello and tell her you’re getting supplies for tonight. She’ll be impressed that you’re going to the effort of cooking for her.”

My brow scrunches. “But I’m not! I told you, I’m a terrible cook. ”

Gwen pats my arm. “Breathe, Jake. I’ll help you make the tacos.”

“You will?” I ask, shocked by her offer. Gwen and I are friends, but I didn’t realize it was at the “cook tacos so their first date goes well” level.

“Yeah. It’s not every day you find your mate.” She gives me a slightly wistful smile that I don’t quite understand. “You’re a good guy, Jake. You deserve to be happy.”

“Thank you,” I say, tugging her into a quick hug so she doesn’t see the tears welling in my eyes at her kind words. With her help, I might just have a shot at things going well with Hayley tonight.

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Chapter eight

Hayley

Sunset takes forever to arrive. I spend most of the day in the stock room reorganizing, but it doesn't do much to calm my nerves about tonight.

I have what I think is a date with my hot, weird neighbor. I really should've clarified if it was a romantic or platonic thing, because not knowing is only making me more nervous.

I do my hair and makeup, but not too much, so I don't look like I'm trying too hard. Then spend an hour rummaging through my clothes to put together an outfit that will be appropriate for both a first date or a totally non-date hangout with a new friend. I settle eventually on a cute pair of jeans that make my ass look great and a cropped sweater that has a little heart cutout to give a hint of cleavage.

I know it's ridiculous, but wish I still had my lucky panties. They might not have been doing much for me, and sure they were torn, but I think they'd help me be less agitated. Instead, I'm wearing one of my least favorite thongs so that there's no visible panty line. Even though it's going to be dark and we'll be sitting most of the time. Just in case he looks at my ass.

God, I need to relax. If I act uptight and put too much pressure on this, I know I'll blow it. And despite the very strange way he behaved when we first met, there's something about Jake that I'm really into. Not just his looks, which made him appear in my sexy fantasy, but his... energy. Yeah, he's odd, but he's also really cute.

There's something inside me which tells me he's special.

I know I should probably ignore that something, since it's most likely only my romantic side wishing for what happened to Aunt Betsy. Something that says unequivocally "this is the person for you". Without that fated mates certainty that I was hoping to find with a monster when I came to Hallow's Cove, I'm terrified because I'll have to rely on my own judgment which has a terrible track record.

With that bleak thought rattling around in my mind, I head back downstairs as the sun dips below the horizon. I inhale shakily, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment to steel myself for whatever happens tonight, then open the side door out into the alley.

"Holy shit," I curse. It isn't under my breath. It's a loud exclamation that draws the attention of the man currently arranging throw pillows on a couch near the entrance of the alley from the street. The man who looks like a goddamn snack with his tight jeans and vintage leather jacket, lit by strands of fairy lights that criss-cross above his head between our buildings.

Oh shit, this is absolutely a date.

Jake looks up, eyes wide, when he sees me gawking at him. "H-Hayley! Hey." He looks back at the couch with a slight grimace, then runs a hand through his hair. "Sorry, I'm not done setting up. It took a little longer than I anticipated to put the lights up."

"This is..." I'm having a hard time putting into words how what he's set up makes me feel. It's magical. No one has ever put this much effort into a date for me. Maybe that's sad, but it's true. And now I'm wishing I'd used waterproof mascara because there's a strong urge to cry at the wave of emotion that crashes over me.

Jake's face falls as he misreads my reaction. "It's too much. Shit, you didn't think

this was a date. Of course you didn't." He shakes his head and scrubs a hand across his face. "Who would ask someone out via a raccoon stakeout?"

"I thought it was a date!" I blurt. Jake looks back up at me and I smile. "I was going to say that this is amazing. I didn't expect you to put so much effort in, but I love it."

His face lights up with a hopeful smile that makes my stomach flutter. "Yeah? You sure it's okay?"

"I mean... it's not the most practical setup for a stakeout, since the string lights and the couch might scare the raccoon off."

Jake laughs. "How do you know it doesn't like mood lighting and a cozy atmosphere?"

"True." My laugh is more of a breathy giggle that makes me cringe slightly at how ditzy it makes me sound. I clear my throat. I'm still standing next to the door, so I step closer to Jake and the couch.

As I get closer, I catch him inhaling deeply and pray that my deodorant and my shower made my scent alright for a shifter with a sensitive nose. His eyes flash gold momentarily, and my pulse spikes, but then that heated look is gone, and he's patting the couch for me to sit.

I lower myself onto the couch, flushing as I realize it's more of a loveseat and we're close enough that our legs touch when he sits down next to me. There's a long moment of silence.

Jake turns and looks at me, his tongue darting out to wet his lips before he speaks. "Are you hungry? I have the tacos if you're ready to eat. Or we can, uh, talk first if you want. Though they might get cold and it's probably not safe to let the food sit out

for too long. You know what, I'll go get them." He stands and walks off before I have a chance to answer his initial question and I watch him with a bemused smile.

He's nervous. Like, really nervous, not just regular first date jitters. He wants to impress me. The knot of tension in my stomach eases at the realization that he's as invested in this date as I am. When was the last time a date put in an effort to make me happy?

I'm not sure anyone ever has. Sure, they dressed up and flattered me so they could get me into bed, but they didn't transform a fucking alley into a romantic tableau .

I know I'm getting ahead of myself, but damn, that feeling inside me that Jake is special is screaming at me now. And when he returns with a goddamn platter of tacos which are clearly homemade and not from a fast-food joint like I expected when I made the request, I know I'm a goner.

He places the platter down on a tray table and passes me a cloth napkin. "Crap, I forgot to ask you what you'd like to drink. I have, uh, tap water, or... moonshine. Dammit, that's not a great selection, but I mostly drink water and don't have people over a lot to warrant having a better selection. But I can go to the store and buy you something else!"

Before I can stop myself, I reach out and touch Jake's arm, which silences him as his eyes go wide. "Take a breath," I say gently.

He nods and inhales, his wide eyes softening.

"I'll go get something from inside. After all, it'd be a little silly to have you go to the shop I run to get us drinks."

Jake chuckles weakly. "You're right. I'm sorry, Hayley. I'm not normally this weird.

Well, no, I am, but not in a nervous way. I just, uh, I really don't want to screw this up."

I squeeze his arm and smile back at him, chest swelling at his words. "I'm really fucking nervous, too. I've had bad luck on dates lately. Bad luck with dating in general, if I'm being honest."

Jake blinks down at me. "But you're perfect." He flushes as he realizes what he's said

A twin blush washes over my cheeks at his compliment, but I wave him off. "No, I'm not. You said you're weird, but a lot of the time I feel like I don't fit when I'm talking to people. Especially on dates. I know what I'm supposed to say, how I'm supposed to flirt, and I can go through the motions, but it's all pretend. Inside, I'm yelling at myself to seem normal, so I don't scare them away."

"Really?" Jake's eyes go wide. "How are you weird?" He sounds excited, rather than put off as he asks the question.

I chuckle. "That could fill a whole conversation. Why don't I go get some drinks, you take a moment to take some deep breaths, and then I'll tell you how much of a freak I am?"

"That sounds fucking amazing," he sighs, giving me a broad smile that makes the urge to kiss him rise even though that'd be super inappropriate to do right now.

"Do you like soda?" I ask, trying to shake out of my besotted stupor.

Jake nods. "Yeah. I don't drink it much though because it makes Bea—" He cuts himself off as he clears his throat. "Uh, it makes me a little hyper. But I'll probably need the energy if we're going to be up late."

My cheeks heat even more at his words. They aren't flirtatious, but I can't not think about what we could get up to in the late hours of the night.

"Okay! I'll go, uh, get that." I stand and scurry back inside, heading for the coolers in the shop and sighing as a blast of cold air hits me when I open the glass door. I stand there for a moment, letting it cool off my overheated senses until Eddie appears by my side.

"Everything okay?" he asks, quirking a brow at me.

"Y-yeah. Trying to pick what I want." I grab two bottles and close the door quickly. Thankfully, Eddie is the least nosy of the triplets, so he doesn't ask any further questions.

When I return to the alley, my stomach does a little flip at the sight of Jake sitting there waiting for me. Tonight isn't going at all how I expected, but I'm going to embrace it. For the first time, I'm going to be unfiltered Hayley on a date.

Shower TED talk Hayley would be so proud of me.

Jake stands as I approach, brushing the front of his jeans and drawing my eyes directly to his crotch. I flush and quickly bring my gaze back up to his face, wishing I could go back and stand in front of the cooler again.

I pass him a bottle and he murmurs his thanks, then we both sit. It'd be weird to not face him, so I tuck my legs up under me and turn so my back is against the arm rest. I awkwardly fumble with my bottle of soda and shove it between my thighs to keep it from tipping over as he hands me a plate that already has four tacos portioned out onto it, along with dollops of salsa, guacamole, and sour cream.

"Thanks!" I say brightly, accepting the plate as warmth spreads inside me at his

thoughtfulness.

Jake follows suit, positioning himself on the couch to face me, and we both stare at each other for a long moment .

Unwilling to go back to us both feeling awkward as shit, I say the first thing that comes to mind. “I believe in aliens.”

A soft smile spreads Jake’s full lips, and he cocks a brow. “Yeah?”

“Yep. It feels absurd that the universe is so vast that there wouldn’t be alien life. Maybe they don’t want to come here to this backwater planet, but who knows?”

“Oh, they’ve come here,” Jake deadpans.

I narrow my eyes at him, assessing if he’s fucking with me or not. As much as I said I was weird, I’m worried that if I admit I agree and start babbling about all the accounts of alien sightings I’ve read about, he’ll change his mind. That he wants cute, fun weird, not “the truth is out there” weird.

“Are you serious?” I ask evenly.

He pauses and takes a moment to scan my face. I guess he finds what he’s looking for because he nods. “Yeah. Have you seen that documentary where the one guy kept getting his cows abducted and the minotaur who—”

“Said that he was taken and that the aliens looked really similar to him and were trying to find compatible creatures to repopulate their planet with?” I finish, then flush when I realize I’ve spoken over him—an absolute no-go on a first date.

“Yes! A lot of my friends think I’m ridiculous, but I wouldn’t be surprised if some of

the monsters that populate the Earth originated from some other planet, and they came here so long ago that we don't have any record of it."

"I mean, it's possible that humans are the invasive alien species," I say, pulse hammering at the thrill of having an earnest conversation about this.

Jake gives me a crooked smile. "If that's the case, I'm glad they invaded. Means I got to meet you."

Butterflies burst to life inside me at his words. They don't sound like a pickup line. No, they sound one hundred percent genuine. I almost don't know what to do with myself when faced with such sweetness, so I shove a taco into my mouth before I do something stupid like ask him to kiss me.

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Chapter nine

Jake

I try not to be a creep and stare at Hayley's mouth as she eats, but fuck, it's hard to keep my eyes off of her. I take a swig of my soda to calm down my overheated senses, but the bubbles go right up my nose and I break into a coughing fit.

Hayley reaches over in concern, and then she's touching my arm again. I shake my head to try to tell her I'm alright, and watch in slow motion as a dollop of guacamole falls from the taco in her other hand and lands with a soft splat right on the cutout over her cleavage. The cutout that I've been fighting with all my willpower not to look down at.

My dick presses against my jeans as I watch her pull back and start wiping at her tits with her napkin as she releases a flustered laugh.

"Wow, I'm really doing great at this whole first date thing," she says, shaking her head in self-deprecation .

"You are." I reply, and she snorts in disbelief. I let my eyes drop to the cutout again, and her eyebrows raise at my blatant glance at her tits. Her perfect tits I want to bury my face between. Beans likes the idea, though that's because he thinks they'd be a nice soft place to take a nap.

"Your aim is impressive. Few people can spill their food onto the one spot where it won't ruin their sweater," I explain, bringing my eyes back to her face and trying to

shift so the lump in my jeans isn't blatantly obvious.

Hayley lets out a peal of laughter that makes my heart sing.

This is going well. Really well. She likes my jokes. She's said she's excited to be here with me. She's... God, I thought she was perfect before, but now that we're talking, and she's showing me flashes of her true interests and personality, I'm really becoming obsessed.

"Thank you again for the tacos. They're delicious," Hayley says, after we eat in silence for a bit.

Gwen said I could take credit for them, but it doesn't seem like the right move, given how we're being open with each other. "I'll tell Gwen you liked them," I say with a slightly sheepish smile.

"Gwen?" Hayley thinks for a second. "The woman who works at the gaming store?"

"Yeah," I say, taking another bite.

Hayley's bright expression clouds and it takes me a moment to realize why.

She's jealous.

Beans lets out a delighted shout inside me at the thought that my mate is possessive of me. Hell, I do too. "She's my friend," I explain. "I was really worried about fucking tonight up, so I went and asked her for help since she's also a human. But there's, uh, nothing romantic between us. She's married."

Hayley chuckles softly. "Damn, I'm that obvious, aren't I?"

I laugh. "It's okay. I have to admit, I was a little jealous seeing you going out with that demon." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I wish I could take them back. It's weird for me to say I'm jealous on a first date.

I relax as Hayley gives me a shy smile. "Don't be. This is so much better than any date I've been on since coming here."

I should leave it at that. Take the win and ego boost. But I ask the question that's been bothering me since I spoke to the wolf shifter teens. The nagging one that makes me question if I should let myself be around Hayley if she's not looking for something serious.

"You've been on a lot of dates?"

Okay, maybe that's not the exact question I want to ask, but even I know it'd be bad to ask her, "Why are you going on so many dates and does that mean you're only interested in fun, casual stuff, and also, are you leaving at the end of the summer?"

Hayley sighs heavily, fluttering her bangs a bit. "Yeah."

I nod and wait, silently begging her to give me more than that.

She bites her lower lip, thinking as she casts her eyes down at her plate. "I'm going to say something, and I don't want you to freak out because I know it's ridiculous and I'm not expecting it from you at all."

She peers up at me with her big, wide brown eyes.

I nod. "Okay. You can tell me anything."

"I've been on so many dates since I moved to Hallow's Cove because I've been

trying to find a monster partner.” She winces. “I know that sounds gross and fetishy, but I promise that wasn’t why. I just...” She sighs and I wait, practically vibrating, wondering what she’s going to say and lit up by her saying she’s looking for a partner . “I’ve had terrible luck with dating. When my latest ex cheated on me, I felt hopeless. Then I thought of Aunt Betsy and what happened to her—finding a monster mate out of the blue—so I leapt at the chance to move here and have that happen to me.”

Holy shit. Oh my god. This couldn’t be more perfect. I can tell her she’s my mate and she’ll be excited, not freaked out. After all, that’s the whole reason she came here.

I open my mouth to confess, but Hayley shakes her head and continues. “I know it was ridiculous to think I could force something like that if I went out with enough monsters. And I truly don’t expect that now. I don’t even think I want it. Because as nice as the thought of not having to take any responsibility for my romantic relationship was, it wasn’t healthy for me to put that kind of pressure on things. If I’m going to find someone...” She gives me a soft smile. “I think I want it to be because we both chose it after getting to know each other. ”

The elation bursts, threatening to make me deflate like a balloon. I take a long drink from my soda bottle to stall for time as I try to come up with a reply that isn’t begging her to reconsider that stance and saying I’m hers.

“Sorry, that was way too much for a first date,” Hayley says, looking away.

I set the bottle to the side and shake my head. “No! I really appreciate your candor. I’m, uh, I’m also looking for a partner.”

“Oh. Whew, okay.” She lets out a small giggle. “Not that I—”

“We don’t have to put any expectations on this other than getting to know each

other,” I interrupt. The words are tough to get out, but I force myself to take them to heart. If this is what Hayley needs, then I’ll give it to her. I’ll give her whatever she needs to feel happy and safe. Even if it means not telling her she’s my mate right away.

She smiles and sets her plate down on the tray table. I mirror her actions, even though Beans wants me to finish what’s left on mine.

“I didn’t think this through properly,” Hayley says with a shy smile.

“Think what through?” I ask, confused by her words.

She gestures to the tacos, then between us, scooting a little closer to me on the couch. “This.”

My heartbeat speeds up as she scoots closer again, so her knees are touching mine. “Uh, I could... I think I have some gum in my pocket.” I reach my hand down to dig inside my jacket, but she reaches out and threads her fingers through mine, and leans in closer .

“I don’t mind if you don’t,” she says, lips quirking.

“Fuck no, I don’t mind,” I murmur.

She smiles one more time, then closes the distance between us and places her lips on mine.

All of my senses flare to life at her kiss, and I move on instinct, hauling her up onto my lap as she makes a small sound of surprise against my mouth. Her weight on my lap, her intoxicating scent threaded with arousal, and the taste of her lips—spicy tacos and all—is the most exquisite thing I’ve experienced in my life.

All too soon, she pulls back and looks at me with those gorgeous, wide eyes. Hayley looks stunned by the kiss, even though she's the one who initiated it.

"Wow," she murmurs.

"Yeah," I chuckle.

Her eyes soften and she starts to lean in again, but there's a rustling sound from the other end of the alley that makes her freeze and turn to look toward it.

"Oh my god! Do you think it's the raccoon?" she whispers.

"Maybe," I lie. I mean, I guess there's a chance it's a regular raccoon, but her raccoon is currently sitting here with the woman of his dreams in his lap.

"Shit, I didn't even remember to bring something to lure it here with."

I raise a brow at her. "What were you going to use?"

A wash of color floods her cheeks. "I, uh, I thought it might be attracted to the scent it liked before..."

"What scent was that?" I ask, voice rough. My dick presses insistently against the fly of my jeans and I'm thankful that she's shifted away slightly so I don't make her uncomfortable with my hard-on. Though I'm sure she felt it against her ass when we kissed.

"Shh... I'm going to go see..." She slides out of my lap and creeps toward the dumpster. I join her, just in case it's something dangerous, but when we look at the other side, there's nothing there.

Hayley's expression sinks. "Damn, guess I was hearing things."

I hate how disappointed she looks, especially knowing that her raccoon isn't going to show up. Before I can think better of it, I speak. "Oh, the night's still young. It might still show up. Let me take the dishes inside and put the extra food away, and then we'll go into serious stakeout mode." I add a wink, which maybe makes it weird instead of sexy, but I can't take it back.

"You sure? I know it's so silly to do this."

I step in closer and place a hand tentatively on her arm, not daring to let myself touch her anywhere else. "I'm the one who suggested the stakeout, remember? I want to be here with you, doing this."

Her eyelashes flutter and she nods. "Right. Okay."

I squeeze her arm and head back to gather up the dishes, leaving her on the couch as I head inside.

I really shouldn't do this. It'll be too suspicious if the raccoon just happens to show up while I'm gone.

I set the dishes down and start stripping anyway, and Beans lets me know how delighted he is by this plan.

"Calm down, dude. It's only going to be a quick raccoon sighting. We'll peek our head in so she sees us and then run away before she can do anything. Nothing more. We can't be gone any longer than that."

I shift to my raccoon form, then creep out the front door, since Hayley will hear the back door open if I go out that way, then round along the other side of my building

and dart through the bushes back there. When I get to the alley, I make sure to be loud as I brush against the bushes, and I hear Hayley gasp.

She sees me. Okay, time to go.

Beans doesn't let me go back home. No, the fucker moves further into the alley. I yell at him to stop and get the hell out of here, but he screams at me and keeps moving toward Hayley.

Her eyes go wide as saucers and she crouches down to get on his level. "Hey, there," she coos softly.

Beans moves closer, drawn by her scent now that we're close again. I try to fight him, but he's going to do whatever the fuck he wants and unless I want to shift back and expose myself to Hayley, I have to go with it.

"Oh my god," she whispers. "Of course you had to come when Jake isn't here. He's not going to believe me."

Beans moves even closer and Hayley holds out a tentative hand, which he nuzzles against.

She lets out a muffled squeal of delight. "Oh, look at you!" He gets closer, then buries his nose between her thighs and she squeaks, pushing his face away. "Hey, now, that's not polite." He cocks his head at her and I regain enough control to not let him do that again.

Hayley laughs and pets him again. "For a perverted little panty thief, you're pretty cute. "

Beans likes that. He presses up against her and sits on her lap, resting his head against

her breasts, and she laughs again.

“Okay, all is forgiven,” she says, her touch sending warm pleasure throughout my body. Beans practically melts against her. “Just don’t do it again.” She laughs and shakes her head. “I’m talking to you like you can understand me.”

Shit, if I stay any longer, she might realize I can. With a mental plea and a bribe to let Beans eat whatever he wants next time we go dumpster diving, I get him to pull away.

Hayley waves as I scurry back into the bushes. As soon as I’m out of sight, I shift back to my human form and race inside, cursing Beans’ recklessness. If I move fast enough, she won’t think there’d be any chance I was the raccoon sitting in her lap a moment ago, so I shove my clothes back on in record speed, only stopping for a second to catch my breath before heading back outside.

“Hayley, I think I heard something,” I say as I approach.

“It was the raccoon!” she exclaims. “I can’t believe you missed it. It was here, and it came over and... well, I think it likes me.”

“Whoa, really?”

She scoffs. “Is it so hard to believe that a raccoon would like me?”

“No, not at all. I’m disappointed I wasn’t here to see it.” I pretend to narrow my eyes at her. “Do you think he was trying to steal my date away? ”

“He didn’t have to try. If he’d stayed, I’d still be snuggling with him. Sorry,” Hayley says with a teasing laugh.

I pretend to look offended. “I’m not as fuzzy as a raccoon, but I’m nice to cuddle with, too.”

“Oh yeah?” Hayley gives me an assessing look that makes arousal flare to life inside me. “Well, I guess you’ll have to take me on some more dates so I can find out.”

Chapter ten

Hayley

After our successful dumpster dinner, Jake and I have gone on a series of unconventional dates. They've been the best goddamn dates of my life.

We spent an evening going through his thrift shop and picking out outfits to make the other person try on, which ended up with him spending the rest of our night in a sequined mini dress that made his thick thighs look unreasonably good, and me in a wizard costume three sizes too big, while we ate all our favorite snacks.

One afternoon, he took me out to a super creepy looking shed in the woods, but he made a point of telling his friends over at the game shop where we were going ahead of time so I wouldn't think it was a lure to murder me. Turns out it's where he keeps his still. He taught me how he makes moonshine, explaining that it was a tradition his grandpa taught him, and we spent so long out there talking about our families that it grew dark and we laid out under the stars, discussing what might be out there in the universe while we held hands.

I picked today's activity, and it's turning out to be the strangest and best one yet.

I gesture toward Jake, who is sitting next to me on the tan couch, as the man in the chair across from us peers at me over his glasses. "So then I told him very politely, if you put your dirty socks on the couch one more time instead of picking them up, I'll be really upset," I say with an exasperated sigh.

Jake shakes his head and scoffs. “No, you said you’d ‘murder me if you see my fucking socks on the motherfucking couch one more goddamn time.’”

I resist the urge to laugh at his colorful language, pinching my thigh hard and grimacing. “Well, if you’d stop putting them there and driving me crazy, I wouldn’t have had to yell at you,” I grumble back.

The marriage counselor across from us nods and looks down to scribble something in his notebook, and I use the opportunity to flash Jake a delighted grin. He smiles back, squeezing my thigh for a second before pulling it back and crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at me as the counselor looks back up.

“It seems like there’s a breakdown in communication that’s causing a lot of stress,” the bearded, bespectacled man across from us says with a placid look.

“You can say that,” Jake replies with a humorless laugh. “Last time she got mad at me, she put a bunch of creepy baby dolls in my office. One of them was holding a note that said ‘if you don’t take out the trash, we’re going to take you out.’”

His words startle a laugh out of me, which I try to cover with a loud scoff, and Jake’s dark brown eyes sparkle with amusement he can’t hide behind his fake glare.

“It got you to take the trash out, didn’t it, sweetheart?” I reply, my voice overly saccharine.

“Hmm,” the counselor says, pretending to consider the situation, but I caught how wide his eyes got when Jake mentioned the dolls. “Jake, how did that make you feel, when Hayley put the dolls in your office?”

Jake looks at me and hesitates. I can tell he’s fighting a smile, and I nudge him with my thigh. “Yeah, how did it make the big man baby feel? You gonna cry to him

about how awful your wife is? The woman who sold her virtue to get you out of your gambling debt? The woman who paid for all of your penis piercings even though I hate the way they look?! But no, I'm the monster because I put dolls in your office!"

Jake buries his face in his hands, his chest heaving. "Y-you know I h-had that incident in the doll factory as a kid."

I laugh, trying to make my amusement sound derisive, and shake my head.

The counselor looks between us, aghast and deeply confused. He doesn't even glance at the clock as he sets his pad of paper down. "Right, okay. I think we did some good work here today, but that's our time."

Jake sits up, wiping real tears away from his face, which is red from laughing so hard. I can barely look at him as I shake the therapist's hand, then stand and hold my hand up to Jake. "Come on, pookie, let's go get some ice cream."

Jake brightens and we casually walk out of the office hand in hand, both of us managing to make it all the way back inside Jake's car before bursting out into laughter.

"Holy shit, that was even better than I'd imagined," I say, more than a little shocked by what we just did.

Jake asked me if there was anything strange I'd ever wanted to do for a date, which is how we ended up in Dr. Harper's office, pretending to be a dysfunctional couple. If I'd told anyone I'd dated in the past about that idea, they would've looked at me like I was crazy, but Jake let out one of his deep, sexy laughs and asked if I wanted help booking the appointment.

He's amazing like that. It's exhilarating to have someone who not only understands

my strange sense of humor, but who embraces it and takes it to the next level with his own silliness. That he happens to be a big, sexy shifter with a wicked smile is an added bonus.

A wicked smile which is currently directed at me, making my clit throb in time with my pulse.

“That was epic. You were incredible. I almost lost it like five times. When you said the thing about paying off my gambling debts, I almost peed myself.”

“What about you and the dolls?” I ask, both of us laughing hard again.

Jake shakes his head and glances back toward the office building. “I’d feel bad for the guy, but the co-pay for the session was high enough that I doubt he cared. ”

I nod, appreciating that Jake thinks about how our fun would’ve impacted the counselor. “Yeah, same. I don’t think we need to go back for another session, so he’s safe from us.”

“Unless I leave the socks on the couch and forget to take out the trash,” Jake deadpans.

“Exactly, pookie,” I tease back. “Don’t make me break out the dolls again.”

Jake pretends to shudder, and I place a hand on the back of his neck and lean over the console toward him. Our lips meet and all the fun and excitement from our fake marriage counseling transforms into a thrumming desire.

God, he’s such a good kisser. Jake kisses me like I’m meant to be savored for hours. Like he’d be happy to kiss me forever, if I let him. Though, I’ve caught a glimpse of the massive bulge in his pants a few times, so I’m sure he’d also like to do more.

Neither one of us has pushed us past kissing yet. Not even any tit fondling or ass grabbing, as much as I'd be down for that. Hell, if he wanted to fuck me right here in this parking lot in broad daylight, I'd go with it. But something is holding Jake back, so I don't push. We'll get there eventually, and it's kind of fun not to rush into bed. I had to buy a new vibrator and have been using it twice a day, but it's fun.

Jake inhales deeply, and lets out a soft groan, his fingers tightening on my arm for a moment before he eases back, eyes gleaming gold and cheeks flushed .

“Well, wife , care to go get that ice cream? I don't come to Stonebridge often, but I've heard good things about a place over in Mulberry Plaza.”

My ovaries threaten to explode at him using the word “wife” for me, but I hide what it does to me with a laugh. “Sure. I'm always down to get ice cream with my infuriating fake husband.”

I have to put the word “fake” on there so I don't sound too eager about calling him my husband. I'm the one who told him I wanted things to evolve naturally, not rush into something. But as I stare at Jake's handsome profile as he pulls out of the parking lot, my panties wet and stomach fluttering, it's hard to keep my heart guarded.

I'm on my own tonight, since Jake is busy playing D&D with his friends. He offered to skip it and take me out, but he's apparently missed it a couple times recently, so I didn't want to be the source of frustrations with his gaming group.

Besides, I need a night without Jake to think.

We've been dating for three weeks. Three of the wackiest, most wonderful weeks in my life. When I'm around him, there's a potent mix of bubbly new relationship excitement and an innate comfort that his presence evokes. Jake just feels right .

Yeah, he's weird as fuck, but he's the funniest, kindest man I've ever met. And not only that, but he looks at me like I matter. Like he cares about my opinions and is genuinely listening and interested when I tell him about myself. Like I'm not just a pretty girl to fool around with and then move on.

It's only been three weeks, but I'm falling for him. Hard.

I wish I had some friends to talk to so I could run things by someone who isn't besotted, but after my breakup, I lost everyone close to me. I've called Aunt Betsy a few times, but every time she had so many exciting updates to share about her honeymoon adventures that I didn't bring up Jake. My parents aren't an option because they already weren't thrilled with me moving to a town populated by monsters, so the thought of me dating one might give them a heart attack.

I'm all alone with my ever-increasing attraction to Jake, and I'm more than a little worried I'm going to mess things up. What if once we run out of silly date ideas, he realizes I don't have any substance? We've had serious, deep conversations, but sometimes it feels like Jake is holding part of himself back.

It could be nothing, but my mind can't let it go. There's something he's not telling me, and I'm worried that whatever it is will burst my bubble of happiness and I'll go back to being even lonelier than I was before I met him.

Feeling restless, I decide to do a deep-clean of my aunts' place and try to get rid of the incense smell once and for all. With music blasting in my earbuds and hands busy with a scrubber, I'm able to quiet my mind for a bit.

Hours and two full trash bags later, I'm heading out to the dumpster, sweaty but less stressed. It's hard to worry about the guy you're dating when you're trying not to pass out from bleach fumes.

It's late, but the lights are still off at Jake's place, which is good because I don't want him stumbling upon me out here looking like a hot mess. I toss the bags into the dumpster and turn around to head back inside, when I see a shape at the end of the alley.

A small, chunky, four-legged shape.

"It's you!" I whisper-shout in delight.

I thought maybe I'd hallucinated the close encounter with my panty bandit, but here he is again.

Crouching down, I make little noises of encouragement like you would with a cat, even though I have no idea if raccoons respond to that kind of thing.

It looks at me for a long moment, like it can't decide if it wants to bolt or come closer, eyes glittering in the dim glow of the string lights that are still up from the other night.

"Whatever you want to do is fine, buddy," I murmur. "I'd love to cuddle again if you don't sniff my crotch, but if you're nervous, you don't have to."

The raccoon scratches at its chest with its weird, dextrous fingers, and though I know it doesn't understand what I said, it still looks like it's considering.

"You're so freaking cute," I whisper, overwhelmed by the adorable creature.

Maybe that's what helps it decide. More likely, it smells the half-eaten candy bar in my jacket pocket. Either way, the raccoon moves closer and more glee rises in me .

I feel like a trashy version of a Disney princess with my ability to bond with this

raccoon, and honestly, it tracks. I'm a weird trash panda at heart, too.

"Hey, buddy," I say, giggling when it gets close enough for me to offer my hand out to it and it headbutts against it, snuffling like it's looking for food.

I shake my head and hold my other hand out for it to inspect. "Sorry, I don't have anything." I know I should probably be worried about this raccoon being rabid and biting or scratching me, but it's so cute and fluffy and sweet that I throw caution to the wind again.

It huffs almost derisively, and makes a beeline for my pocket, using its grabby little paws to dig inside and extract the candy bar before I can push it away. It takes the candy and moves back a few steps, staring at me with its cute little masked face, like it's worried I'm going to take the food back.

"I'm not sure if you're supposed to eat that, but I'm not going to stop you." I laugh as it shoves it into its mouth, spitting out the wrapper and letting it fall to the ground.

When my raccoon friend is done with its treat, I expect it to scurry away, but it approaches me again.

I shake my head. "Sorry, cutie, but now I really don't have anything."

The raccoon stares at me like it's assessing the truth of my words, little nose working as it sniffs the air. A moment later, it paws at my knees and I sit down on the asphalt so it can climb into my lap. Yeah, this alley isn't the cleanest, but I'm already all sweaty and gross and you don't give up the opportunity to snuggle with a raccoon .

I stroke a hand through its soft and surprisingly clean fur, marveling at this strange, wonderful situation. "If we're going to hang out like this, I should give you a name so I don't keep thinking of you as 'it' or 'that pervy raccoon'."

The raccoon in question doesn't react to my words other than to paw a little at the hem of my jacket.

"Hmm..." I continue to card my fingers through its fur, eyeing its adorably fluffy tail longingly but knowing most animals don't like having their tails touched. "I don't know if you're a boy or a girl, and I don't really want to check."

It huffs out a sigh like it agrees with that decision.

I smile down at the creature as I think. "You know, I always wanted a pet as a kid, but we moved too much for it to make sense. Not that you're my pet! But I had a whole list of name ideas, so maybe one of those will work."

The raccoon rolls over onto its back and stares up at me and I almost die from cuteness overload. It scratches at its chest again and seems to be waiting for me to keep talking.

"You don't look like a Princess Woofles... maybe, Marshmallow? No, that would work better for a big fluffy white animal. Oh! What about Bandit? Or is that too on the nose?"

The raccoon yawns, clearly disinterested in determining its name.

"Okay, you can be Bandit for now. I'll have to ask Jake and see if he has any better name ideas." As soon as I say my handsome neighbor's name, my chest squeezes and my eyes dart up toward his window, which is still dark .

Maybe by the time Bandit leaves and I get back inside to take a quick shower, Jake will be done with game night and I can bring him over some late night snacks.

Or maybe I could be a little less desperate.

Bandit must sense my mood shift, because it scrambles off my lap with no preamble and meanders away into the bushes behind my building. I give it a wave goodbye, wishing it would've stayed longer, but knowing the longer I sat out here with a raccoon in my lap, the more likely someone would see me and then I'd become known as the weird raccoon girl.

With a sigh, I head back inside to wash off the cleaning grime and raccoon fur, wishing that Jake had been around for tonight's magical moment.

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Chapter eleven

Jake

I really shouldn't have done that. Hayley is bound to catch on that I'm her new raccoon friend if I don't stop visiting her. But I saw her in the alley as I was heading back from my post-game night dumpster rounds, and couldn't stay away.

I can't even blame Beans this time. I wanted her to hold me and be close just as much as he did.

Dammit, I need to tell Hayley the truth. It might ruin things, but coming clean myself has got to be better than her figuring it out on her own, or worse, someone mentioning to her that the guy she's seeing is a raccoon shifter.

I've already gotten comments from friends asking why I've been spending all my time in my human form, rather than my hybrid one. I brushed it off as trying to make Hayley more comfortable as we get to know each other, but that lie will only hold for so long.

I wish I knew how she'd react. Hayley has been a delightful surprise. Her wit, humor, and quirks are far beyond anything I could've hoped for. But even a sweet, silly person like her probably won't take her neighbor stealing her used panties and broken vibrator as anything but a violation of her privacy. Maybe she'd be more accepting of the weirdness if I told her she's my mate, but I can't do that.

Hayley wants to fall in love, not have it thrust upon her.

Shit, that's two secrets I've been keeping. I've got to tell her the truth.

Not tonight, though. Not while her scent envelops me, infused into my skin and beard. I'm too needy. Too desperate for her.

My cock is heavy and hard against my thigh, and I need to take care of it before I can even attempt to make a plan for revealing the truth to Hayley. My mind's too lust fogged to think of anything but the desire my mate stokes inside me.

I lose my feeble internal battle to not go get Hayley's panties from the drawer they're stashed in. I also don't resist grabbing the vibrating wand I managed to repair. I'll let myself enjoy these stolen treasures one last time, knowing that when I tell Hayley the truth, they might be the only vestiges I'll have left of her if she freaks out and leaves.

I sit on the edge of my bed and stare out toward Hayley's window. The lights are on, but the curtains are closed, so I can't see her, and she can't see me in my hybrid form as I give my cock a lazy stroke. My dick is hard as a rock, the bone inside it that I get from being a raccoon shifter making it primed for fucking for long periods of time.

I take a deep inhale from her pretty pink panties, wishing the scent was stronger. Wishing I could get a fresh pair from my mate. Or even better, taste and smell her straight from the source.

I know she's turned on around me. I can scent her dripping pussy after we kiss and it's all I can do not to beg her to let me fuck her. I've almost come in my pants multiple times now, from the taste of her lips and the teasing hints of her desire in the air.

Would it turn Hayley on to know how much I want her? That she barely has to look at me and I'm ready to bust.

I lower the panties clutched in my fist and wrap them around my cock, groaning at the added sensation of the soft fabric dragging across my stiff flesh. They look small next to my cock, and for a moment I worry if my mate will be able to take me. I'm a big guy with a thick, long cock that's impressive even for a shifter.

I close my eyes and groan, pumping my dick at a leisurely pace to match the speed at which I'd ease inside Hayley. She'd be so wet from coming on my tongue multiple times that we'd make it work. I'd go so slowly, making sure she could feel every textured bump of my cock as I fed her an inch at a time.

Eventually, she'd beg me for more. She's my mate, so she's made to take me. Made for me to fill with my cum over and over until she's pregnant.

Fuck , I never thought I had a breeding kink, but now that's all I can think about. My slow pace is abandoned as I pump my cock at the thought of giving Hayley my load.

I know she wants kids. I'd give them to her whenever she wanted. I'd give her so much cum that it overflowed out of her puffy pussy, to be sure that she has everything she needs from me.

Already close to the edge at that filthy thought, I quickly flip the switch on the vibrator and bring the rounded head to rest lightly on my taint. My hips buck at the sensation that's almost too much stimulation, and I ease it up to my heavy balls with a hissed sound of pleasure.

I think of Hayley pressing the vibrator against her needy clit, holding it there as I pound into her from behind. All it takes is the thought of her ass jiggling with my thrusts and her pussy squeezing my cock as she comes apart around me, and I'm shouting a curse as I come. Cum splatters in thick ropes across my belly and down onto my hand and the torn pink panties.

I come for what feels like years, making a total mess of myself. It's so good. The only thing better would've been Hayley watching me. No, Hayley, sitting on my face while I did this. Yeah, that would've made it perfect.

I switch off the vibrator so it stops buzzing against where I discarded it by my thigh when it became too much to handle. Once I'm cleaned off, I reluctantly place both it and the panties in a trash bag and set it by the door to the stairs to throw out tomorrow .

There's a pang of guilt as I look at the bag and think about what I've done with its contents. I know the mate bond is driving me to do things I shouldn't. Telling me to protect my connection with Hayley at all costs. Beans is yelling that at me, too, very unhappy about my decision to get rid of his scavenged items.

But it's time to be responsible, adult Jacob, because that's who Hayley deserves. Not some trash pervert who lies to her so he can get snuggles by the dumpster.

Many hours later, I have a plan. Granted, it's not a great one, but at least it's something. It can't be any worse than the card I made that said "Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm a raccoon shifter that's been lying to you."

I don't expect Hayley to be fine with me deceiving her, but it would be amazing if I'm able to soften the revelation enough that she doesn't ask for a restraining order against me. Beans would have a full-blown meltdown if that happened—after snuggling with Hayley twice, he's beyond obsessed with her.

All sides of me are obsessed with her.

I thought about asking Brooks or Gwen for advice, but I really don't want to get another one of those looks where it's clear how ridiculous they think I am. I already know I'm strange. I don't need my friends to remind me of that.

Heart hammering in my chest as I head over to the bodega, I try to put a normal, non-panicked expression on my face as I step inside and the bell over the door rings. My attempt to look calm clearly doesn't work, because Bettie gives me a concerned look from behind the register.

"You okay, Jake?" she asks, brow pinching together.

"Yeah." I nod. "Just constipated."

The wolf shifter teen gives me a bemused look. "Uh, okay. Stool softeners are over there," she says, pointing toward a shelf.

Great, now I'm going to have to buy constipation meds. What if Hayley comes in when I'm mid-checkout? She won't accept my invitation to hang out tonight if it looks like I have plans to be on the toilet for most of the day.

I shake my head and approach Bettie, lowering my voice so only she can hear it. "I'm not actually constipated," I whisper.

"Huh?"

"I'm not really constipated," I say louder, just in time for Ms. Muldoon, my middle school math teacher, to stroll up beside me with a six-pack of beer in her talons.

"Prunes," the elderly birdwoman says, patting my shoulder with her wing. "That should fix you right up, Jacob."

My face heats, but I shake my head again. "I'm not constipated!"

Of course, the moment I choose to exclaim the state of my bowel is when Hayley emerges from the stock room. There's a strong urge to flee, but I make myself stay

put and give her a sheepish smile.

How is she so goddamn pretty? Today my gorgeous mate is wearing a simple pink dress that hugs her body, showing off the curve of her cute belly and the generous swell of her hips. It's casual enough for working in the bodega, but so damn sexy I'm fighting against popping a boner while standing next to my old teacher.

"H-hey, Hayley!" I clear my throat and clasp my hands in front of my interested dick.

"Hi Jake," she says, her cheeks burnishing slightly. Hopefully it's from seeing me unexpectedly and not from second-hand embarrassment about me shouting about constipation.

"I know you think you can eat garbage, Jacob, but you're not as young as you used to be. Older bodies require more care," Ms. Muldoon says, clearly not getting the message that we've moved on from discussing my digestive needs.

"Okay, sure, thanks," I say, nodding at the woman as I silently beg Bettie to ring up Ms. Muldoon's beer and scratch-off tickets so we can stop talking about this.

Hayley raises a brow at me, and I shrug like I have no idea how I ended up in this conversation.

When Ms. Muldoon finally tucks her six-pack under her wing and leaves—but not before recommending prunes again—Hayley approaches with an amused smirk.

"Old girlfriend?" she asks, looking over my shoulder out the front window to the graying birdwoman currently using a talon to reveal the numbers on her scratch-off ticket.

I snort. "Old math teacher. "

“And the equation of your love didn’t add up?” Hayley grins at me, her playful banter making me momentarily forget why I’m here in the first place.

“No, considering she’s thirty years older than me.”

“Really?” Hayley’s eyes go wide in mock surprise. “I thought given the gray streak in your hair, you had to be in your late-forties.”

Bettie cackles, and I pretend to glare at both of them, crossing my arms over my chest with a huff.

“I’ll have you know I’m a very youthful thirty-eight!”

“So youthful,” Bettie murmurs, making Hayley giggle.

“I’ve had gray hair for most of my life! It’s not because I’m old, it’s because I’m a—” I freeze, realizing what I was about to say. I clear my throat, panic rising. “Fine, I’m old.”

Hayley squeezes my arm, looking up at me through her thick dark lashes as her eyes sparkle with amusement. “Good thing I like older guys.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, raising a brow and moving a touch closer to her. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-five,” she replies, giggling again.

I want to capture that intoxicating sound with my lips.

“Gross, go make out somewhere else,” Bettie says, breaking the moment.

We both take a small step back, and Hayley smiles, a little more shy now that she's paying attention to our unimpressed audience.

"So, if you aren't here for prunes, what made you stop by?" she asks.

I shift in place, trying not to fidget too much and give away my nerves. "I wanted to invite you over tonight." Bettie makes a grossed out sound and I roll my eyes at her. "If you're busy, maybe tomorrow night?"

My beautiful mate beams at me. "I'm free tonight. I'd love to come over."

"Wonderful!" A moment passes as we grin at each other. "I have something I'd like to share with you," I add, trying to sound casual even though I'm terrified.

Hayley's brow furrows, her smile dimming. "What kind of thing?"

Shit, I'm already messing this up.

"Uh, it's a show and tell kind of situation. One that's easier to do when we have some time to be alone."

"Ugh, is that what you call showing her your dick?" Bettie interjects, grimacing at the thought.

"N-no!" I sputter. "It's... I... please come over tonight and I'll explain."

"Okay..." Hayley's eyes search my face and my skin itches with my guilt and discomfort.

"Great! Gotta get back to the shop. We're having a two for one sale and I left everything unattended. See you later!"

I wave over my shoulder as I hurry outside, leaving a perplexed Hayley behind.

Fuck, this is going to be rough. If I can barely keep it together now, tonight is bound to be a disaster.

Chapter twelve

Hayley

My palms are sweaty as I approach the back entrance to Trash to Treasure. The night is quieter than usual, lending to the ominous feeling in the air.

I'm so fucking nervous.

What is Jake going to tell me? He gave me no hint of what it was, leaving me to concoct theories that got wilder and more upsetting as the day went on.

We haven't explicitly said we're exclusive, so he can't really be cheating on me. But what if he has a secret spouse? What if that secret spouse is dead in his basement and he's invited me over to show me and make me his next victim?

I know it won't be that bad, but that doesn't keep the anxiety away. My gut was right to tell me that Jake was keeping something from me. The problem is, my heart hasn't been listening to it. No, it's fully invested in this man I don't really know, and now I'm scared it's about to be crushed.

I wipe my palms on my skirt, suck in a shaky breath, and knock on the door.

Jake opens it a moment later, clearly waiting by the door for me to arrive. Still, he sounds a little out of breath when he greets me. "Hayley! You're here. Hi!"

"Hey." I step inside the back room where he keeps his unsorted stock as Jake holds

the door open for me.

We usually kiss or at least hug when we greet each other on a date, but tonight there's an awkward hesitation and nothing happens.

I hate it.

I've spent so much time in my life being polite and going along with things my partners did that made me uncomfortable. I thought things were different with Jake. I need things to be different with Jake.

I clear my throat. "Jake, I've been freaking out all day about what you're going to tell me. I can't handle any preamble where we ask about each other's day or other small talk. Please, just get it over with."

He blinks at me, probably surprised by my sharp tone, but nods. "Absolutely. Can we go upstairs where there's a better place for you to sit while we talk, or do you want to do it here?"

I don't know what I want. If he's telling me he doesn't want to date anymore, I want to be as close as possible to the nearest exit. But this room is a mess and if it's a conversation where I'm going to cry and have a long, drawn out discussion, I don't want to do that surrounded by old furniture and bags of clothes.

"Are you breaking up with me?" I ask, voice wavering a little.

Jake's eyes go as wide as saucers and he grabs my hands. "No! No, absolutely not. You're amazing, Hayley. I want to be with you."

The earnestness in his voice takes my breath away. "O-okay." I let out a somewhat relieved exhale. "Then we can talk upstairs."

Jake gives me a hesitant smile, reaching his hand out to lead me, and I take it. Despite me being here for some dramatic revelation, his touch anchors me. His grip is strong and warm and comforting. Yeah, his palm is also pretty damn sweaty, but I can't judge that with how slick mine is, too.

I surreptitiously survey the tidy apartment when we enter. It seems similar in layout to my aunts' place, but that's where the similarities stop.

Jake's place is shockingly cozy. It's a mishmash of vintage furniture and decor, all tied together with a rich green, cream, and gold color scheme. It shouldn't work. The disparate styles should be chaotic. Instead, it's a bit weird, but wonderful.

Just like him.

Jake, please don't have a dark secret that ruins things, because I'm so into you, it's absurd, I beg mentally as he gestures for me to sit on the plush, dark green velvet sofa.

He stays standing, his long legs eating up the space as he paces back and forth across the textured rug, running a hand through his hair.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asks, turning to me with slightly frantic eyes.

"I'm fine," I say, shaking my head.

A beat passes and the tension rises as I wait for him to speak.

"Did you kill someone?" I blurt, unable to stand the silence any longer.

Jake stops his pacing and turns to look at me, aghast. "What? No!"

“Then what is it? Why are you so worried? What could it possibly be? Are you married? Are you on the run from the law? Can you only get it up if someone makes dolphin sounds? Can you not get it—” My voice gets louder and louder as I speak, unable to contain my agitation, until he finally cuts me off.

“I’m your mate!” Jake exclaims.

I freeze, and he goes still at my reaction, his body practically vibrating as he waits to see what I do. Jake looks so tortured that it takes me a moment to process what he said.

When I do, a roiling storm of elation and confusion crashes over me. “You’re my what ?”

Jake falls to his knees in front of me, reaching out to touch my thigh with a pleading, desperate expression. “I’m so sorry, Hayley. I know you wanted things to develop naturally and were worried about finding love that wasn’t compelled. I wanted to give you time to get to know me before I said anything, and I’m not telling you this to pressure you. I just couldn’t keep lying to my mate.”

“Your mate,” I say, tasting the words in my mouth like they’re an entirely foreign concept. Like I didn’t spend my first few weeks in Hallow’s Cove begging the universe to send a monster mate my way.

I dreamed about it, but the reality is vastly different. It’s so much more potent. So much more right .

This sexy, strange shifter kneeling at my feet like I have the power to destroy his world is my mate.

A bubble of laughter escapes me, and I clap a hand over my mouth, but more

laughter rises.

Jake's worried expression morphs to a pained one. "It's not a joke, Hayley. If you don't want me like that, you can tell me to leave you alone, but you don't have to laugh at me."

I reach out and cup his cheek, thumb stroking through his thick beard. God, he's so handsome, even when he's upset. I can't believe he's mine. "I'm not laughing at you, Jake. I'm overwhelmed."

His gaze hones in on mine, searching me for more. "A bad overwhelmed?"

I shake my head. "No."

A hopeful smile stretches his lips, and he rises so his face is level with mine. "A good overwhelmed?"

A tear slides down my cheek and I nod. "Y-yeah. I was kinda full of shit when I said I didn't want a fated mate. But after not finding one, it was easier to not feel like there was something wrong with me if I pretended I didn't want that sort of thing." I smile sheepishly, stroking Jake's cheek again. "Plus, I didn't want to scare you away."

He laughs and shakes his head gently. "I was trying not to scare you away."

Affection swells inside me, and I lean in, ready to kiss Jake and drown myself in the feeling of my mate's mouth on mine. Ready to finally embrace the magic I feel when I'm with him, knowing it's real.

Jake pulls back at the last second, wincing. "Fuck, I want to kiss you so bad, but that's not everything."

“It isn’t?” I ask feebly.

“No,” Jake sighs. “It has to do with being your mate. And how I realized you were mine. I, uh, I’ve never told you what I am. I was worried if you knew, you’d think I was a total freak.”

“I mean, you are kinda a freak, but I like that about you,” I joke, trying to break the tension.

He huffs in amusement. “Yeah, but this is something even I wouldn’t normally do. I couldn’t control Beans.”

My face twists in confusion, thinking maybe I misheard him. “Beans?”

He nods. “Yeah. Give me a moment to go into the other room and I’ll introduce you to him.”

Maybe Jake is more unhinged than I realized. “Uh, what?”

“I promise it’ll make more sense if I show you.”

I watch as he stands and hurries away into another room, dumbfounded.

What is going on? “This is weird, even for you,” I call out to him, struggling with the urge to get up and leave in case he comes back covered in baked beans or with a can of beans he thinks is sentient. Though, I could probably make the latter work—Jake’s hot enough that I could pretend to talk to the can to keep him happy.

There’s a lot of rustling and I start to worry that the naked and covered in beans theory is correct, when something emerges from around the corner. A short, fat, furry something.

“Oh my god, Bandit, is that you?” I gasp as the raccoon moves closer. Did Jake catch him and is keeping him as a pet? I don’t know why he couldn’t have just told me that.

Why would he hide my raccoon?

When the truth hits me, I gasp again. Partially at the new information, and partially for how oblivious I’ve been.

“You’re Jake,” I say as the raccoon climbs up on the couch next to me and butts its head against my hand to ask for pets.

I stroke a hand through his fur, way too soft and clean for a wild animal, and look into his very intelligent, soulful eyes. “I’m a dumbass,” I murmur, then let out a weak laugh as the raccoon makes an irritated chuff like it doesn’t agree with my assessment.

I sit there petting Bandit, or I guess Beans, or Jake, or whatever the hell I’m supposed to call this raccoon, as my mind races. He doesn’t climb in my lap, but his warm, soft body presses close against my thigh and he starts to purr .

Who knew that raccoons purr? Holy shit, this is surreal .

“Can I, uh, can I talk to Jake?” I ask, needing answers.

The raccoon jumps back down off the couch and goes to the other side of the chair, and a moment later, Jake rises from behind it. Well, Jake, but not how I’m used to him. This Jake has the cutest furry ears poking out of his hair and a big, fluffy raccoon tail.

The raccoon hybrid Jake flushes and gives me a sheepish smile.

“You’re a raccoon shifter?” I ask, which is silly since he clearly is. “I didn’t even know that kind of monster existed.”

“We do,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

“So it was you the whole time? Why didn’t you tell—” My face flames at the memory of the first night I saw the raccoon as it raced away with my panties. “Oh god, you stole my panties. And my vibrator!”

Jake winces. “Yes, and no. Beans stole them. That’s what I call my raccoon side. We’re the same and yet... different. When I’m in my full raccoon form, he’s in the driver’s seat and I’m more like a passenger. And vice versa when I’m in my human or hybrid forms.”

“I...” I’ve heard of other shifters having an inner voice from their animal side, but his is named Beans?

“Does Beans make a habit of stealing things that smell like pussy?” I ask bluntly.

“No! Well, yes, but only yours,” Jake says with a startled half smile.

“Oh god.” My face flames in embarrassment.

Jake shakes his head and holds his hands up. “Not because it’s pussy... I like that, but...” He scrubs a hand across his face, his fluffy tail whipping in and out of sight from behind the chair he’s using to obscure his nudity. “Beans could tell on an instinctual level from the scent in those panties you threw away that you’re my mate. He’s not like, turned on by the scent, or something weird like that. It just let him know you’re mine.”

I stare at adorable raccoon hybrid Jake, trying to figure how all this new information

makes me feel. I know I should be more horrified, but as the shock wears off, it's more hilarious than anything else. And so very Jake to be a weird little raccoon digging through trash when he's shifted.

"I'm sorry, Hayley. I shouldn't have lied to you. I was so worried about making a good impression on you and not ruining my chances with my mate that I didn't want you to know I was the one who took the panties. And the vibrator. If it helps, I threw them away. Eventually."

"Eventually?"

His cheeks above his beard turn beet red. "Y-yeah. I, uh..." Jake clears his throat. "It was torture having things with your scent on them. I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't resist."

"Are you saying my scent turned you on?" I ask, sounding breathless as my clit throbs at the mental image of Jake sniffing my panties and jerking off. It should be offputting, but it's fucking hot, knowing that he was doing it because he was so infatuated with me.

With his mate .

"God, yes. You're the best thing I've ever smelled, but it's beyond that," Jake sighs. "Every inch of me wants you. Not only because of your scent, but because of your wit and wacky sense of humor. Your kindness. Your romantic, hopeful side. Your sexy as fuck body. It's all of you."

Desire washes over me at his proclamation. Hearing how much he wants me is making me soak my panties.

I bite my lip and Jake groans. "I swear I've had a permanent hardon since we started

dating.”

I let my eyes drag down his chest to where the chair blocks him from view, then back up to his face. “Show me?”

His far too adorable raccoon ears flick at my question, and the flush on his face spreads down his neck. “Are you sure? I dropped a lot of stuff on you all at once.”

“Your dick isn’t going to scare me off, Jake. Besides, I think it’s only fair for me to get a peek after you stole my panties and vibrator.”

“Technically, they were in the trash so it wasn’t theft—Shit, what am I doing arguing with my mate when she asks to see my cock?”

I laugh at his flustered state. “Good question.”

He gives me a nervous smile and shifts to step out from behind the chair, but I hold my hands up to stop him. “Wait! You don’t have to show me if it makes you uncomfortable. I know we’re mates, but if you’re not ready to do more than kiss—”

I cut myself off mid-sentence as Jake steps fully into view. I struggle to keep my eyes on his face instead of immediately looking down, but I’m only human and I asked to see, so I lose the battle after a few seconds.

I absently appreciate Jake’s thick chest and padded stomach sprinkled with a mix of gray and black hair, but it’s hard to think about how sexy his big body is when I see what he’s been packing. “Wow! That’s…”

I say a silent prayer for my pussy, because how exactly am I meant to fit that monster inside me? The tip is flushed a deep red and leaking pre-cum already, as Jake takes it in hand and gives it a lazy stroke.

Jesus, even his balls are enormous. I've never been a girl to pay much attention to testicles, but his are so full and heavy-looking I can't ignore them.

My breath whooshes out of me when I realize the shaft isn't smooth like a human dick, but lined with small ridges, and my mouth falls open, at a loss for words as I continue to stare at the behemoth cock.

"Is that, uh, like a raccoon shifter thing or a Jake thing?" I ask, unable to tear my eyes away as I blurt the question.

"What do you mean?" Jake asks hoarsely.

"It's as big as my forearm!" I exclaim, the words coming out louder than I intended. That's an exaggeration, but not by much.

"Oh... yeah, it is kinda big. I think shifters are larger than humans in general, but mine is, uh, above average." The hesitancy and nerves in his voice let me finally look back up at his face, and I realize I've made him worried.

"Crap, sorry, I was surprised." I give Jake an apologetic smile, then glance down at his cock again. My pussy clenches at the sight, and more wetness floods between my thighs. I close the distance between us and place a hand on his bare chest. "I like it, Jake."

I watch his throat work with a heavy swallow. "Are you sure?"

I nod, trailing my hand down his chest through the thick hair there, then further down his soft stomach to rest just above his cock, heart racing at the thought of taking him in hand.

Jake groans softly in anticipation. "Hayley..." My name from his lips sounds

tortured.

I smile up at him, wrapping my fingers around his stiff dick. “I won’t be able to walk for a few days, but the thought of knowing that the soreness is from my mate’s monster cock is hot.”

Chapter thirteen

Jake

Don't you dare fucking come on your mate's stomach the second she touches you. Don't do it.

Fuck, Hayley's hand on me feels too good, and she hasn't even moved it. I need to get it together before I embarrass myself.

She rises up on her toes and I dip down to meet her halfway as our mouths join. I let her take the lead, because if I set the pace, I'll be too sloppy and desperate. The kiss is slow, her lips parting for our tongues to tangle together in a sensual, unhurried caress. She's taking her time and exploring me, the hand not on my dick tangling in my hair to keep me close.

It's the best goddamn kiss of my life because Hayley knows the truth and she's kissing me anyway. She accepts that I'm her mate and my strange actions didn't scare her away .

I gently remove her hand from my dick, knowing if I let her stroke it right now, I'm going to come.

She pulls back from the kiss, with heavy-lidded eyes. "Why did you move my hand? I want to touch you," she murmurs.

"I want you to touch me, too, baby, but I don't want to make a mess of your pretty

dress,” I admit, sliding a hand beneath the hem to stroke her bare thigh.

Her dark eyelashes flutter at my touch. “Then I’ll take it off.”

“We can stop if you want some time to process,” I offer, even though I think I might die if I don’t get to see her naked and taste her ambrosial arousal directly from the source. “I don’t want to do anything you’ll regret.”

Hayley smiles softly and steps back. “You’re being really sweet, Jake, and I appreciate that, but you don’t need to ask me again.” She grabs the hem of her dress and lifts it up over her head, tossing it aside onto the couch. “I want you. I want my mate.”

If I thought it was hard not to come before, hearing Hayley call me her mate while she bares her gorgeous body to me is even worse.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” I groan, gaze raking over her plush body, trying to map out every dip and swell. Her full breasts are pressed together in a lacy white bra, and I can see a hint of her rosy pink nipples underneath. She doesn’t make me wait long to get a better look, unhooking the bra and pushing it off her shoulders.

“You’re going to kill me, Hayley,” I croak, reaching out to cup her breast. The little shaky exhale she releases has me bending down to take her nipple between my lips, and I’m rewarded with a louder sigh of pleasure.

I could spend an entire lifetime worshiping her tits, but she pulls me up after a few moments and kisses me, this time with more force and need.

Pleasure sizzles at the base of my spine, and I pull back with a gasp. “I’m going to come if you keep kissing me like that.”

Rather than look upset by my statement, her gaze grows more heated. “Then come.” Her lips smash against mine and she kisses me like it’s a challenge now.

I gasp, sinking my fingers into her ass to keep myself from fisting my cock. “Not before you,” I pant against her lips.

She eases off, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Why? Is it like a one and done kind of thing for you or...?” Hayley hooks her fingers under the waistband of her tiny thong and slides it down, baring herself to me completely now, and making it hard for me to remember that she asked me a question.

After everything that’s happened, I want to scoop her panties up and press the soft, damp fabric to my nose. Maybe she’ll let me keep them if I ask nicely.

“I... No, it’s not. I have a bone in my dick that lets me stay hard for as long as needed.” It’s a little more complicated than that, but now isn’t really the time to be discussing the nuances of raccoon shifter physiology.

Hayley’s eyes go wide and her eyes drop to my cock. “Really? ”

“Yeah,” I rasp. “Now stop staring at me like that and sit on my face before I lose it.”

A deeper pink washes over her cheeks, but her lips twist into a wicked grin. “Only if I get to taste your cum at the same time.”

I grab her and lift her up, her words unleashing something feral and desperate inside of me. She squeals in delight as I carry her to my bedroom and set her down on the bed.

I lie on my back and am pleasantly surprised when she doesn’t act shy or hesitant about moving astride me and presenting me her glistening pussy as she looks down at

my cock.

She giggles as I hook my arms under her thighs and pull her back to my face, then moans as I bury my tongue into her wet pussy.

A low, primal groan rumbles out of me as I finally taste my mate in earnest. It's perfect. Fuck, I want to drown in her. I'll eat her cunt for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and still be starved for more.

"F-fuck, Jake," Hayley gasps as my tongue flicks her sweet little clit.

"This is where I'm going to live from now on," I rumble between licks and sucks. "Between these thick thighs, eating this perfect pussy."

"Oh god," she moans, and I know I can't hold out any longer.

"If you want my cum, put your mouth on me, baby. I can't stop it now that I've tasted you. "

I'm too tall for her to get more than the tip in her mouth at this angle, and too greedy for her cunt to let her move further down my body. That doesn't matter though, because the second her pillowy lips wrap around the head of my dick, I erupt.

Hayley hums, trying her best to drink me down as ropes of cum flood her mouth and drip down the sides of my dick.

It's heaven. I want it to last forever. "Fuck, oh fuck, yes, take my cum. It's all for you, baby. I'll give you as much as you want."

She pulls off with a wet pop, and lets out a surprised giggle as my cock lets out a final spurt of cum against her chin, but I don't bask in it. I need my mate coming on my

tongue. It's embarrassing that I came first, so I need to make up for it. Multiple times, if she'll let me.

I eat her out with abandon, until she's grinding her cunt against my face, her blunted nails digging into my stomach as she holds herself steady.

I hope she leaves marks. Would it be too weird to get them tattooed on there permanently if she does?

Oh fuck, will she let me bite her? Many shifters solidify their mate bonds with a bite, and the thought of Hayley wearing my mark on her skin makes me crazed.

Hayley moans as I suck on her clit so I can resist the urge to bite her thigh. "Shit, that's so good. I'm going to come," she moans through gasping breaths.

I keep going, and her thighs tense as she goes over the edge, crying out my name as her orgasm overtakes her. My heart swells with pride at making my mate come, and I slow the strokes of my tongue to not overstimulate her, but don't let her move off my face.

"Jake, please fuck me." Hayley's voice is almost a whine, but I can't tear myself away from her pussy. She sighs and lets me give her more despite her request, and I work her back up to the edge with firm, slow circles of my tongue around her clit. We both moan as she comes again, more wetness coating my face as she does.

Hayley pulls against my grip on her thighs as she comes down from her second orgasm and this time I let her go. I wish there was a way to have my cock inside her at the same time I was eating her pussy.

"Need a break?" I ask, as Hayley moves off of me to lie on her side on the bed. My cock is still hard and throbbing, but that doesn't matter. All that matters is what my

mate needs.

Hayley rolls her eyes at my question as I sit up. She moves so she's flat on her back and spreads her legs wide. "Do I look like I need a break?"

My mind goes blank as I move over her body and stare down at her pussy. It takes me a moment to reply. "No, you don't," I say hoarsely. "You look like you need to be fucked full of my cum."

Her breath hitches. "Jesus, Jake."

"Too much?" I ask, brow furrowing.

"No." Her tongue darts out to wet her lips and I lean forward and kiss her, groaning as my cock brushes against her wetness. When our lips part, I stay close, holding myself up on one arm. She pushes my hair out of my face and smiles. "I just keep getting surprised by the dirty things you say."

I chuckle and bring my lips to her neck. "It's hard not to tell you those things when every cell in my body is telling me I need to fuck my mate."

"Oh yeah?" she asks breathily.

"Mmmm, yes."

Hayley sucks in a sharp breath as I let my teeth graze against her throat. I won't bite her now, but I have a feeling she knows about mating bites.

"Jake," she murmurs, my name sounding like a prayer.

I trail kisses down her body, paying special attention to her breasts and the soft curve

of her belly right below her belly button. Every inch of her body is perfect. I want to trace the pale, faded stretch marks that line her hips and stomach with my tongue. I want to kiss every freckle and birthmark.

She's squirming underneath me and parting her thighs wider, so I'll have to save that for another time. I bring my mouth between her thighs, using my hands to spread her open wider as I lick her from her entrance to her clit. She whines as I pull back, but I grin down at her. "I can't help it that I want to see my cum dripping out of your pretty pussy. That I want to breed you, baby."

Her eyes widen and her breath quickens. In the back of my mind, I know I should probably tone it down, but my instincts are riding me hard.

"I... I want that, too," Hayley murmurs. "I'm on birth control, so it won't actually happen, but... yeah. I want that."

The surge of arousal at her shy agreement makes my heart pound so loudly the sound is deafening in my ears. I need to be inside her like I need air.

I take my stiff cock in hand and line it up with her entrance, loving the sight of her beneath me, her pastel hair fanned across my pillow and her wetness already dripping onto my sheets.

"You want my cock? You want me to fill you up, baby?" I rasp as I tease her by pressing the tip in and then pulling back.

"Jake, please... I need it," she begs, tilting her hips like she's trying to get more of me inside her.

I groan and press my hips forward, her cunt like a vise around me. She's soaked, but it's a stretch. I watch her face for any signs of discomfort, sweating as I hold myself

back from thrusting into her, waiting for her to open for me.

“That’s it. Fuck, Hayley, you’re doing so well,” I murmur as I thumb her clit and sink in another inch.

“God, it’s so much, I… fuck .” I feel her pussy clench around me as she curses.

“I know, baby,” I rasp. It’s a good thing I came already, because I would’ve shot my load before I even got a quarter of the way inside her hot, wet pussy.

Her eyelashes flutter as I work her clit, and she gasps as an unexpected orgasm rolls over her.

“That’s it. Take what you need from me, gorgeous,” I groan, coaxing her through her orgasm as her channel clenches down on my dick. I start to ease my hips back, but Hayley locks her ankles behind my hips and shakes her head.

“More. Deeper,” she commands.

“Are you sure?” There’s still about half my cock left and I don’t want to hurt her.

“Yes,” she moans. “We’re mates. We’re meant to fit together.”

As I push deeper and more of her tight heat envelops my cock, I agree with every fiber of my being.

Hayley and I fit together perfectly in every sense. Nothing has ever felt more right.

Chapter fourteen

Hayley

Being speared on my raccoon shifter mate's absurdly big monster cock wasn't what I expected from tonight, but I have zero complaints as Jake rocks deeper inside me. He watches me with wide, awe-filled eyes, brow damp with sweat from the exertion of holding himself back.

"Oh, fuck, Jake," I moan as he gives me what I asked for, going deeper inside me than I ever thought possible. I've never been a vocal person during sex, but then again, it's never felt like this. Every cell in my body is vibrating with desire and need for my mate.

I understand now what Aunt Betsy said about knowing. Maybe it didn't happen the instant I met Jake, but it's here now, bright and insistent in my mind as Jake presses his lips to mine and works his way inside me with gentle but insistent pumps of his hips. There's no confusion or voice in my head worrying about what will happen when he's had his fill of me or when I become too needy.

Looking at Jake, I know in my soul that he'll never get enough and he'll move mountains to give me what I need. It's such a foreign, overwhelming sensation that I want to laugh or cry to relieve some of the intensity of it.

"God, you're taking me. Fuck, look at you baby, I'm almost all the way inside," Jake groans, running a possessive hand down my stomach to rest above where he's filling me.

“Must be magic, because I think I should’ve been tapped out an inch or two ago,” I say with a mixture of a laugh and a gasp as he finally bottoms out inside me with a grunt.

“Probably,” he replies with his own weak chuckle. “Is it okay?” Jake asks softly, brow furrowing slightly.

“Yes, it’s amazing,” I sigh. There’s more pressure and fullness than I’ve ever experienced in my life, and there’s a burn from how much he’s stretched me, but the pleasure of having him inside me far outweighs the discomfort.

We stay like this for a moment, Jake letting more of his weight rest on me now that our bodies are flush. He holds my gaze, and I can see in his eyes that the connection is as intense for him as it is for me.

“You’re incredible, Hayley,” he whispers reverently.

“So are you,” I murmur, unable to stop the tears from welling in my eyes. “Sorry if I cry a little...this is just so much.”

“Oh thank god, I was worried about seeming like a freak if I cried,” Jake says with a chuckle, and I realize his eyes are shining, too .

“I mean, you are a bit of a freak, but not because of that,” I tease.

We both laugh and he lets out a low groan as the movement makes me tighten around him. His hand presses between our bodies to find my clit and he circles it, having already discovered what makes me unravel.

Another orgasm builds, which is wild because I’ve already come three times and I usually struggle to have even one orgasm with a partner.

“Give it to me, Hayley,” Jake rasps, watching my face as it twists with the building pleasure. “I want your sweet pussy coming all over my cock before I give you my cum.”

The mind-bending fullness of Jake’s cock inside me paired with his touch on my clit and his filthy words have me obeying him. My pussy clenches around him as he holds himself still inside me and works me through my orgasm, tears spilling down my cheeks at the intensity.

“Shit, can I move, baby?” he rumbles, sounding close to the edge.

“Jake, please, please ,” I babble, even as the sensation makes me see stars.

I cry out when he eases his hips back and I lose some of the stretch of him, but he soothes me with his teeth against my throat. I might not be a shifter, but damn if having his teeth against me doesn’t unlock something inside me.

“Will you bite me?” I gasp and Jake lets out a pained groan, easing back a bit.

“Shit, Hayley, you can’t say things like that right now. I’m already way too close to blowing my load. ”

Threat of premature ejaculation never sounded so sexy. “Why? Does it turn you on to think about biting me? Because it turns me on.”

He groans again and thrusts. “You’re evil.”

My laugh turns into a shuddering moan as Jake starts fucking me in earnest, sitting up to grab my ankles and place my feet up by his shoulders. He stares down at where we’re joined, and I wish I could see what he does. “How does it look?” I ask.

“Amazing. Your perfect little cunt is taking my cock so well.” The slick sound of my wetness and slap of his heavy balls against my ass as he pounds into me is as obscene as his dirty talk, ramping my arousal up even higher. The texture of his cock rubbing inside me is unreal, and at this angle, he’s so deep that I see stars with each of his thrusts.

“I’m... god, I’m going to come again.” I’m half-delirious now, a vessel of pleasure and desire. If sex is always like this with Jake, I’m going to be in trouble. I’ll never get anything done because I’ll be too busy begging my mate to fuck me.

“Yeah? Do it, baby. Choke my cock and squeeze out all my cum.”

“F-fuck, yes .” I come at the thought of Jake filling me up. I never had a breeding kink, but now that I have my monster mate between my thighs, a lot of things have changed.

“That’s it, Hayley. Yes, fuck, such a good mate. Gonna make you so full of my cum that you’ll be dripping for days.” Jake’s thrusts become erratic as he falls over the edge with me and he does what he promised, his hot cum splashing inside me as his dick throbs and spurts for what seems like ages, until it’s dripping down my thighs and out onto the bed.

I’m panting as I come down from my orgasm, and Jake looks wrecked, gasping for breath as he shudders through the tail end of his release. He lowers my feet from his shoulders and leans forward to kiss me, the slow and tender sweep of his tongue against mine making my chest ache with affection.

“Mine,” he murmurs. “Can’t believe you’re here and you’re mine.”

“Me either,” I say honestly. “But I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Jake smiles against my lips, then sits back up, looking as dazed as I feel. When he pulls out, a gush of fluids rushes out of me.

“You weren’t kidding,” I say weakly, propping myself up a bit to look down between my thighs at the utter mess he’s made.

He gives me a lopsided grin, bringing two fingers down to gather up some of the cum on my thigh and press it back inside me. My breath hitches and desire coils in my belly, despite how sated I was a moment ago.

I lick my lips at the sight of his cock, still stiff even after coming.

Jake catches on to my interest, and his eyes go dark. His fluffy tail strokes my calf. “Hmm, I think you could use a bit more. Need to make sure I’ve properly bred my mate. ”

“Well... if you think you need to... to be sure...” I spread my thighs again as he teases my dripping pussy, already swollen from taking him but eager for more.

“I do,” he rasps, lining himself up with my entrance. “And I’ll always be a good mate and give you what you need.”

Many hours and orgasms later, Jake and I have showered and moved to his couch to cuddle and have snacks. His giant, fluffy tail is draped across my thigh and I stroke it idly, loving how soft it feels against my skin. He lets out a contented sigh that turns into a rumbling purr for a second.

“Are you purring?” I ask, surprised and amused by the sweet sound from this big man.

He clears his throat, cheeks going pink. “Yeah. Sorry if that’s weird. You make me

feel so damn happy and comfortable.”

I lean in and kiss his cheek. “I like it. I’m really happy, too, so I’d purr if I could.”

He laughs and squeezes my hip. “Thank you for giving me a chance, Hayley. I know I’m not... I’m not what most people would think of as a dream partner. But I promise you I’ll be the best mate.”

“Oh, stop it,” I scoff. “You’re a total catch.”

Jake laughs, but it sounds more disbelieving than anything else. “Yeah, the freak who always says something weird and who spends his free time digging through trash is a catch.” His tone is light, but it’s clear people have criticized him about that before.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Jake, as my mate, I need you to listen to me now.”

His brows raise a little at my firm tone, but he nods.

“I know what it’s like to hear people say you’re too much, or too odd, and make yourself smaller to try to fit what they want you to be. It’s a constant struggle, and I love that you haven’t changed who you are to make people more comfortable. It makes me feel safe to be myself with you.”

“You are safe with me,” he says, and I believe him with every fiber of my being.

“Then you’re perfect.” I kiss him softly and he starts to purr again when I pull back, this time not stopping himself from making the sound.

After a minute, he gives me a crooked grin. “Would it be too soon to confess my love for you and ask you to move in with me?”

I snort, even though the thought sends a thrill through me. “Maybe a little.”

He sighs. “Damn, okay. Well, let me know when it’s okay. Because I’m all in, Hayley, but I don’t want to push you. You teased me about me biting you and I said, uh, a lot of things about... breeding. But that doesn’t mean that I expect either of those things right away. Or for a long time, if that’s what it takes for you to feel ready.”

I squeeze his hand, heart swelling at how sweet and considerate he is. I get the sense it’s killing his shifter instincts to say those things, but he’s earnest about giving me as much time as I need.

“I said it was a little soon, but I didn’t say ‘no’.”

Jake blinks at me, his mouth falling open in surprise. “You... Which part are you ready for?”

“The moving in part. I’m not attached to staying in my aunts’ place, and you’re literally right next door, so it wouldn’t impact my ability to run the bodega while they’re gone.”

“So... you think you’ll stay here when they come back?” I know Jake is trying to sound relaxed, but the sudden tension in his body gives away how nervous he is asking me this.

“Yes. I don’t want to leave. I came here to find something better, and what I found goes far beyond those hopes. I found you. So you’re stuck with me.”

Jake releases a relieved exhale. “Thank fuck. I really didn’t want to have to tie you up and keep you here.”

I laugh, but I don't mind the thought of him tying me up.

"What about the rest?" Jake asks, swallowing heavily.

I take a moment to consider, doing my best to push aside the bubble of elation at being with Jake and deciding to move in with him. "I don't want to have kids yet."

He nods. "Yeah, me either." He sounds a little relieved, which is reassuring. "I mean, my instincts really want me to get you pregnant, but they, uh, seemed satisfied earlier even when I knew it couldn't actually happen. "

"Is that something you've always been into with partners?" I ask hesitantly. I'm not sure I'll like it if he tells me he's always had a breeding kink, but I can't help asking.

Jake chuckles and shakes his head. "Not at all. I've never come inside someone before. It's like a switch flipped in my brain, and suddenly I'm obsessed with giving you my cum."

"It probably did, since I'm your mate," I say with a giggle. "I've never been into it before, either. But it's really hot when it's with you."

"I'm glad, baby." Jake's voice is a little hoarse and his hand squeezes my thigh.

"Don't say it like that." I chuckle weakly and shove against his shoulder. "If we fuck again right now, I think I truly might die from too much dick."

"We don't need to involve my dick," he says, tongue darting out to wet his lips.

"You're a menace," I say, squirming a little at the thought of his mouth on me again. "When I agreed to move in with you, I didn't think you were serious about wanting to eat me out 24/7."

“I’d never joke about that perfect pussy. I’m addicted to it. Have been since I got your panties.”

I flush at the reminder of how this all started. “Pervert. Next thing you’ll be saying is you want to steal my panties from tonight.”

“I won’t steal them, baby. But I sure as fuck want them if you’ll let me keep them. I’ll need something to keep me from coming over every fifteen minutes while you’re working to get a taste. ”

My clit throbs at the idea. “Okay.”

Jake’s fluffy ears perk up. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. If you need it, I’ll give it to you. After all, you’re my mate. It’s not a one-sided thing. I want to make you happy, too.”

Jake’s purr rumbles back to life. “You do. I’ve never been happier.”

“Same,” I whisper. It’s more than a little terrifying to be so certain so fast, but I’m going to embrace it. After all, that’s the whole reason I came to Hallow’s Cove. Yeah, I wanted a monster mate, but at the core of things, what I really wanted was to be happy. And here, with this sweet, strange raccoon shifter, for maybe the first time in my life, I can confidently say I am.

I kiss Jake, pressing all my joy and hopes for our future into his lips. He meets me eagerly in return and when our lips part, I feel him smile against my mouth.

“There is one thing that would make me even happier...” he says, humor and heat blended together in his tone.

I laugh and spread my thighs. “Alright, if you insist. I won’t keep you from your new favorite thing.”

Jake eagerly moves to kneel between my legs, knocking over a bag of chips in the process as his tail smacks into it in his hurry. As he shoves my skirt up, he gives me a blissful smile. “I’m so lucky to have you,” he says, eyes locking with mine before he swipes his tongue against my pussy. He smiles again, squeezing my thighs. “And not just because of this, even though, fuck , it’s perfect. Everything about you is my new favorite thing.”

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Jake

One year later

“Sorry, sorry, I know I’m late— shit , ouch!” I almost drop the overstuffed bags in my hands as I slam my thigh into the edge of a couch that wasn’t there by the back door when I left earlier this morning. “Baby, why is this couch over here in front of the door?” I shout.

“Sorry!” Hayley calls back from somewhere inside the shop. A few seconds later, she appears in the back room, her slightly faded pastel hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun.

My stomach does a little flip like it always does when I see her after being away for more than five minutes, and I give her a quick once over. She’s in a ratty pair of sweats that show off a sliver of her midriff. They’re old and worn out enough that I bet she wouldn’t be too mad at me if I tear them off.

“Sorry, I was rearranging some of the clothing racks to accommodate the new items we got in and forgot to move it back.”

“No worries,” I say, setting the giant bags down on the couch and moving over to pull my mate into my arms.

She giggles as I press my lips to her bare throat and suck in a deep inhale to fill my lungs with her perfect scent. “Someone’s happy to see me.”

“Mmm, you know I’m always happy to see you.” I resist the urge to press her closer and show her just how happy I am. In the year we’ve been together, I’ve learned to control my urges. Somewhat. I can’t help it that I have the sexiest mate in the world.

Hayley smiles as we part, placing a quick kiss on my lips. “How did things go over at Gwen’s place? Is she holding up alright?”

Hayley’s questions pull me out of my horny thoughts. “She’s about as good as can be expected. Preston was always an asshole, but dying on her and leaving a mess behind really takes the cake.”

“Jake!” She smacks my shoulder lightly. “Please tell me you didn’t say that to her. He was her husband.”

“I didn’t. At least I didn’t say any more than what I’d said to her in the past.” Hayley looks mildly horrified, but I shrug. “What? The guy was a total piece of shit. He was awful for Gwen. Now that he’s gone, maybe she’ll finally have a chance to be happy.”

Hayley nods, relaxing a little. “I hope so. Did you ask her what she’d like me to bring over tomorrow for dinner?”

“Yeah.” I smile, love for my mate swelling in my chest. Hayley has gotten to know Gwen since she moved in, and while they’re not close friends yet, Hayley still wants to be there for her. That’s one of the things I’ve learned about my mate—she’s incredibly generous. She’s also very stubborn about her generosity. “Gwen said she doesn’t want you to worry about it, but I told her you’d show up anyway, so she needed to pick something. She went with pasta.”

Hayley chuckles and nods. “Thank you, honey. You’re an amazing friend. And an even more amazing mate,” she adds, squeezing my hip.

“I do what I can,” I say, flushing a little at her praise. It still takes me by surprise sometimes how earnest Hayley is with her appreciation and love for me. “I know we need to get ready for your plans, but show me the new display real quick?”

My mate’s eyes light up at my interest in what she’s done. Just like I’m a little taken aback by her liking my quirky ass, she always seems surprised when I want to know what she’s working on. But Hayley is so creative, I can’t help but take an interest.

She takes my hand and leads me out into the shop, flicking on the overhead lights. What was once more than a bit chaotic is much more charming now that Hayley’s taken over how we display things in the shop. My system of sorting is still in place, but everything is bright and not as cramped, with signs to help make my unconventional organizational system more comprehensible to customers.

That’s the thing about Hayley. She’s weird like me, but she’s able to make that quiriness seem charming. And somehow that magical quality has rubbed off onto me by association because people give me a lot fewer confused looks when I say something strange.

With Hayley by my side, I’m better all around. She softens out my roughest edges and gives me someone to dote on and cherish.

Against all odds, according to my mate, I make her better, too. Which sounds impossible because she was perfect to begin with, but it is true that she’s embraced her more eclectic interests since moving in. She’d always wanted to get into blacksmithing, so we found someone for her to take lessons with. I took her on a ghost hunting tour for her birthday when she said she’d always wanted to try one.

Anything new or different she wants to try, and I’m right there by her side, happily watching her grow more and more brilliant as she lets herself be her authentic, uninhibited self.

My eyes widen when I see the display she's put together. Over the past few months, Hayley connected with a local tailor to bring her design ideas to life and take some of our thrifted items and turn them into new pieces we can sell in the shop. Seeing them now, arranged in an artful tableau, puts new meaning to the name Trash to Treasure. She's taken ugly, discarded things and found a way to make them special.

"Baby, this is amazing!" I say, circling around the mannequin in the dress made from old Hawaiian shirts. "Please tell me you have one of these for yourself. You'd look fucking hot in it."

She laughs, clearly pleased by my praise. "Thanks, I'm glad you like it."

"It's awesome. You're so creative and, fuck..." I swallow down a lump in my throat as emotion threatens to overtake me. "I just love you so much."

Emotion shines in her eyes as she pulls me into an embrace. "I love you too. So, so much"

My dick perks up with her softness pressed so close. "Okay, I gotta stop hugging you or I'm going to want to ravish you right here and I don't want to mess up all your hard work."

She snorts and pulls back. "Thanks for being so considerate."

"We should probably go get ready," I say, glancing toward the stairs to our apartment.

"About that..." Hayley gives me a hesitant smile. "I think we should skip it."

"Huh?" She asked me to go somewhere as a surprise today for an early anniversary celebration, and I've spent the past week trying to guess what we're doing, but she's

refused to tell me. It's been a whole thing between us. "Why? Did something happen?"

"Not really, no. I just think we could spend our time doing something better." Hayley moves over to the stairs and gestures for me to follow .

Confused and intrigued, I follow her, staring at her thick ass the whole way up, which does nothing to help with my hard dick.

She leads me to the couch and I sit down next to her, waiting for her to explain what's going on.

"I'd planned on us going to see that counselor again," she says, suddenly.

"Oh my god, you didn't!" I say with a startled laugh. "I can't believe they were willing to book another appointment with us." I grin with glee at the idea and the memory of one of our first dates. "That's so romantic."

"Hah, yeah, I thought so, too. But, I, uh, came up with another idea that doesn't involve terrorizing that poor man again."

"Eh, he charges enough to be able to handle a little weirdness," I say with a shrug. "But if you think you have a better idea, then I trust your judgment."

Hayley looks at me with an odd intensity, and my stomach clenches with sudden nerves. Shit, what if this is a bad thing? What if she's decided she doesn't want to be with me anymore? It seems like she's been happy with me, and she tells me that all the time, and the sex is fucking bonkers, but—

"I want you to bite me," she blurts.

For a moment I think I've misheard her. "You want what?"

She grabs the hem of her sweatshirt and tears it off over her head, revealing that she's not wearing anything underneath. "I'm ready. I want your bite. I want you to claim me. If you're not ready, that's okay, but Jake, I've been ready. I'm so ready I talked to my doctor about removing my birth control implant so we can try to have kids."

My heart stops as her words wash over me. I open and close my mouth a few times, only managing to get out an incoherent sound. Beans claws at my mind, urging me to lunge forward and officially claim our mate now before she changes her mind.

"Breathe, Jake," she says with a laugh, knowing me well enough to not take my silence as not agreeing with her.

"Yes. God, yes," I say when I finally can get words out.

She laughs as I haul her over my shoulder and carry her to the bedroom, depositing her on the bed. On a mission, I yank her sweatpants down and bring my mouth to her hot, wet pussy, groaning at the taste.

Her hand tangles in my hair, hooking behind one of my ears as she gasps in surprise. "That's not biting me," she protests, but it doesn't take long before she's gripping me tighter and rocking against my mouth as she chases her pleasure.

As soon as she comes, I tear off my clothes. "Where do you want it?" I ask, voice rough with the need pounding through my blood.

Once I bite her, she's mine.

Forever.

I'll always have that tether to her. It's like a wedding ring, but so much more.

"My shoulder," she sighs, sounding just as desperate as she moves to her hands and knees and points at the tender juncture where her neck meets her shoulder. There's a little birthmark there that I like to nip and suck at when I'm fucking her in this position, and apparently, she likes it, too.

I slick my cock with as much of her wetness as I can, then sheathe myself inside her in one slow thrust. She's able to take me better now that we've been doing this for a year, but it's always a tight fit.

We both curse, and I know I won't last long. "I'm going to bite you, and as soon as you take the implant out, I'm going to breed you over and over until our house is filled with kids," I growl, a little delirious from the pleasure and excitement of what's to come.

"Yes," she gasps, pushing her hips back to meet my thrusts. "Give it to me. I don't want to wait any longer."

I don't make her beg. I've been wanting this for too long to prolong it. I lean forward, draping myself over her back as I pump inside her and bite down right on that perfect spot.

Hayley keens, her pussy clenching around me as she comes, and I groan as I unload inside her while keeping my teeth sunk into her flesh.

Mine. Mine .

The copper taste of her blood mixed with the flavor of her pussy is amazing, and I lap at the bite when I ease off, knowing instinctively that it will help close up the wound without removing the mark.

Hayley shudders at the feeling of my tongue swiping across my fresh bite. “It feels good,” she whispers, sounding dazed by the reality of my bite finally on her skin. “Feels right. ”

I pull out and guide her onto her back so I can look into her eyes. The emotion and love I find there takes my breath away.

“Your turn,” I croak.

Hayley’s brow furrows. “What?”

“You’ve got to bite me, too, baby. Otherwise, how am I supposed to know I’m yours?”

She lets out a disbelieving scoff. “I’m a human! It won’t do anything special.”

I shake my head, already having given far too much thought to this. “I want your mark on me, mate. I don’t give a shit about anything other than the world knowing who I belong to.”

For a moment, I worry she’ll say no, but Hayley’s concern turns to a toothy grin. “Okay. But I’m doing it somewhere really obvious. Like right above where your collar hits on all your shirts. I want everyone to see it.”

I smile back at her, pleased by her possessive side. “No arguments here. Mark me, mate.”

As she pulls me close and brings her blunt teeth to the spot in question, a tear of joy spills down my cheek. And when her teeth break my skin, all I can think is how perfect this is and how lucky I am to be hers.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:31 am

My fingers absently card through the soft fur on Bean's stomach as I tap the screen of my e-reader to go to the next page. His back paw kicks a little and his loud snore fades out for a moment, making me worry I've accidentally woken him up. I freeze, holding my breath until the snoring starts up again.

I smile down at the chunky critter in my lap, fondness swelling within me. In order to keep my mate's inner raccoon placated, we've set up a weekly night where Jake lets Beans have a dedicated hour of time with me. Mostly that time consists of snuggling and Beans begging for treats, but because Jake's been so busy with apartment renovations, my sweet mate fell asleep tonight as soon as he got comfortable in my lap.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:31 am

Fuck, I love the way Hayley's ass jiggles with my hips collide with hers. Love the way my fingers sink into her thighs and her tits and belly bounce as I slam inside her from behind. I'm the luckiest bastard in the world to get this view. She's so perfect.

It's been hours of fucking. Or maybe days. It's all blending together in a fog of lust and need to fill my mate with as much of my cum as possible.

A few months later

“Enough! I can’t take any more,” I gasp through tears of laughter as Beans does a weird little dance that I’ve seen Jake do sometimes when he’s happy about something. It’s so cute in his raccoon form that I’ve started laughing and can’t stop, which is making me worry I might pee my pants.

He ceases with a little chuff, and a moment later, Jake shifts back to his hybrid form, a huge grin across his face. “Feeling any better?” he asks, slipping on the pair of joggers he’d discarded on the floor right before Beans’s impromptu performance.

I wipe the moisture from cheeks, smiling back at him. “Much. You should do that at the town talent show.”

He snorts and wraps a hand around my waist, pulling me closer. “Nah, that dance is just for you.”

“Wow, I feel so special.” I giggle and melt into his hug, loving the way his soft bulk feels against me.

“You are. Though, now that I’m thinking about it, I’ll show it to a select few other than you,” he murmurs, sliding a hand between us to rest on my low belly.

I’m barely showing, and we haven’t told anyone yet, but soon it’ll be hard to hide the fact that I’m pregnant. After all, he managed to put not one baby in me, but three. I’m having triplets. Guess all that daydreaming about how cute the wolf shifter triplets would’ve been as babies has come back to bite me in the ass.

I smile against his shoulder, love and nerves surging inside me. “I think they’ll like that.” How could they not? Jake is going to be the best, most ridiculous dad in the universe, and I can’t wait.