

## Chapter 4

I startle at the sound of the door closing. "Did I wake you?"

I sit up with a yawn. "It's fine. What time is it?"

"Just after noon. I found two more traps and got the one you stepped in. Are you feeling alright?" He places his warm, but gentle hand to my forehead. I think it's a human thing, I know I've seen them do it on TV.

"I'm feeling better, thank you." I bite my lip then gingerly place my feet on the ground.

He holds my shoulders stopping me in place. "Whoa there. What are you doing?"

"I have to pee," I admit. I did just wake up after a traumatic hungover morning.

He scoops me up. "Let me help you. Stay off your leg as much as possible. Give it time to heal, alright?" I nod and let him carry me to the bathroom, even though I know it's already healing. He helps me to stand just in front of the toilet. "Call me when you're finished. I'll help you back out."

"Okay." I agree then he steps out. For being a cabin, the bathroom is actually pretty nice. It has a large stand-up shower and plenty of room on the counter. I finish up then use the counter to hobble to the sink to wash my hands. I open the door and call my mate's name. "Cody?" I like his name, it suits him. Well, it seems to. I like the way it feels to say. Goddess, I'm a dork, but I really don't care. He's my mate and I'll say his name as much as possible.

It only takes a moment before he's back to help me to the couch. He sets me down then sits on the coffee table across from me. "How old are you? You barely look old enough to be hanging out at a bar."

I giggle at his statement. "I'm 26. How old are you, and why are you here at the cabin if you're not a hunter?"

Cody's mouth drops open in shock. "You definitely don't look your age."

"I get that a lot."

"I'm 29." He takes a breath. "That's kind of a hard question. Let's just say I'm here for the fresh air and quiet."

"That works, I guess. Where is your daughter and how old is she?" I ask. I really want to know everything about him, but I also just like to hear his voice.

"Willow is 5. She's with her grandparents for the summer. They rarely get to see her. They were practically begging and it got to me, so I let her go. They're good people, but it's the first time I've been away from her."

I softly smile. "I'm like your Willow. My mom was killed when I was nine. It's just been me and my dad. He's everything to me." I'm surprised my dad hasn't checked in on me, but I'm sure he gets it. He did wish me good luck. "Your dad, is he a good guy?"

"The best."

"Maybe you should call him, let him know where you are." He pulls out a phone from his khaki cargo pants.

I push his hand back. "It's alright. He knows not to worry, I may not look it, but I'm pretty tough. He's trained me since I was young."

"Interesting. I'm a fighter too. I learned to fight in the military. I started fighting mixed martial arts after I was discharged."

Yes! Thank the Goddess my mate is tough. If he's good enough, he could possibly be Alpha material after all. A human Alpha? Hmm. I've never heard of it happening before, but that doesn't mean Cody couldn't be the first. "What are your styles?"

He shrugs his shoulder. "Taekwondo, Muay Thai, Krav Maga, grappling, and basic self-defense against weapons in hand-to-hand combat."

"Impressive. Have you ever fought a female?" I'm curious to see his skill level.

"Of course. There are female soldiers in the military. They have to learn to fight off an attacker just like the men." His eyes get a distant look in them.

"Will you spar with me? Once I'm healed of course."

I get hopeful, but he smirks and shakes his head. "I'm not sure that's a good idea." My hopefulness deflates instantly. "It's not that I doubt your skill, Tess. I just wouldn't be able to let go, I would hold back." "Because I'm female?" I accuse.

He softly chuckles with a smile on his face. "No, not at all. There's just... something about you. It could just be that your injury is my fault, but I feel protective of you."

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My cheeks get warm and I understand that it's our bond. Goddess, I wish I could just tell him that he's my mate, but he would never understand. "You don't even know me." I offhandedly comment.

He shrugs his shoulder. "There's time." We're silent for a moment and I can't stop staring at him. He clears his throat. "Are you hungry? I was planning on having sandwiches." "Sounds perfect. Thank you."

Cody nods then jumps up to busy himself in the kitchen. "Do you like mustard or mayo?"

"Both are fine," I answer as I watch him from my seat on the couch. His muscles flex deliciously with every move he makes. I'm not sure when,

but he managed to slip on a plain white t-shirt. It covers his chest and back, but his muscles are clearly outlined. He loads two plates with the sandwiches and chips, then brings them to the couch. I move my leg so he has room to sit down, but he doesn't sit beside me. Instead, he takes the armchair across from me, on the other side of the coffee table.

My sandwich is pretty deluxe with ham, turkey, cheese, lettuce, tomato, red onion, avocado, and pickles. I pull the top slice off and line the chips up to cover the entire square. Cody chuckles and I look up. "What? You can't have a sandwich without redneck lettuce."

He shakes his head. "Willow does the same thing, except she hates tomatoes, pickles, and onions. I've never heard the term redneck lettuce, though." I shrug my shoulder and dig in.

The silence isn't uncomfortable, but I want to get to know him before I run out of a good reason to stick around. "I feel bad that I'm interrupting your solitude, but I am grateful for your hospitality."

"You're not interrupting anything, really. My life was chaotic and I needed peace. You're not an unwelcome change. Unexpected, but definitely not unwelcome." His lips tick up before he places a chip in his mouth. "I should actually drive you home, now that I think about it." My body slumps in disappointment. "I would feel better if you stayed, though. You were walking off your stress, want to talk about it?"

I smile up at him. "Well. My... tribe. My dad is the... chief, so I'm next in line to take over, but the elders are tired of waiting for me to find my... a husband. They want to force me into like an arranged kind of thing with one of their choices." Cody's jaw ticks, but he quickly relaxes. "So a bunch of old guys are forcing men that you probably don't even like down your throat."

My cheeks warm up thinking about Cody forcing himself down my throat... Whoa, that thought came out of nowhere. My eyes catch his and I'm sure he can guess where my mind went. He sits back in his seat and

crosses his ankle over his knee. He clears his throat and I shake the thought away. "Not really, but yeah. There are three guys: one I can't stand, one is saving himself for love, and The other is a really good friend. But I don't want to settle."

"You want a real, loving relationship." He insightfully replies and I nod. "I know what you mean. A real relationship, full of all the love you could ever imagine. That's what I had with Audrey. When she died, I thought my life was over, but I had Willow to care for. If not for her, I would probably be face down in a ditch somewhere."

My jaw begins to tremble at the thought of him in pain. I know if not for me, my dad would be the same way. Mating bonds hurt when they're broken, but he's human and has yet to understand the depth of real, true love. Cody crosses to me in one single step. He takes my face in his hand and forces my face up. "Don't cry, Tessalee." He softly says as he wipes my tears and sits beside me still holding my face. I didn't even know I was crying. "I'm positive you'll work it out. I know there's love waiting for you somewhere out there."

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My heart aches knowing that my mate has no idea what he is to me. My soulmate is right in front of me and has no clue. I look deep into his eyes, but there is seriously no recognition. Zero. None. He tucks a strand of hair over my ear then pulls me into the comfort of his warm chest. "It'll be alright. I get it, you need a break from life, just like I do. You can stay with me as long as you need."

I wipe my face and inhale his calming scent. My body begins to relax and I sniff away my tears. "I'm not usually a crier. I'm so sorry to be such a baby."

I feel a soft laugh in his chest. "You're not a baby. Sometimes life just has a way of kicking our asses. We can wallow in self-pity together."

I nod grateful to at least be with him. "You know my reason for running away, what's yours?" I ask, hopeful he'll tell me. I guess I'll have to win him over in order to actually mate him. He's nothing like any guy in my pack. I don't even know where to begin.

He takes in a deep breath then lets it out. "I miss Audrey, but I'm tired of feeling so lost. I have Willow, but she's just an innocent kid. I go out with my buddies, but the crowded bars and clubs do nothing. I fight to feel something. I feel so empty. I came out here to try to reset my focus, I guess." His chin rests on top of my head and I feel him slightly relax. His head moves so his cheek begins to rub across my hair. "You smell really good."

I laugh. "I need a shower. Some asshole made me spill my beer down my shirt last night, then I passed out in the dirt."

"Yeah, I can smell the beer and dirt, but under all that, I can still smell you." He pulls back to stand up and I reluctantly let him go. "I'll get you a change of clothes, you'll feel better after a shower. First, let me wrap your leg so you don't get that bandage wet." Cody takes our plates to the kitchen and comes back with saran wrap and duct tape. He wraps my bandage, then carries me to the bathroom and sets me on the counter. "Hang on a sec. I hope you don't mind wearing some of my clothes. I can throw yours in the wash."

"That's perfect. Thank you." Cody turns to leave, but I stop him. "Cody." He stops to face me. "Are you sure it's no trouble? I do kind of like the idea of not going home just yet."

Cody's lips tick up on one side. "I'm sure. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. I'll be right back." While he's gone, I untie my flannel then start unbuttoning it. I drop it on the floor just as Cody walks in and

hisses a breath. He quickly turns away. "I uh, have a t-shirt and some sweats."

Oh shit. I forgot humans are more sensitive to nudity. At least I'm still in a bra. "Cody, it's okay. I know you're not checking me out or anything."

He sort of tilts his head. "I would be lying if I said won't. You're uh, pretty attractive and I haven't been with a woman since Audrey."

I smile knowing he finds me attractive. "I trust you to not be inappropriate. If you could help me with my shorts, I'll take off the rest after you leave." I tell him. He kind of nods to himself then slowly turns around. He helps me out of my shorts then into the shower. Once the door is closed. I take off the rest of my clothes then lean against the shower wall to get the stink off.