

## Witty Wolf Chapter 2 - Tips

Dalia Stevens looked at the view of the water and dabbed desaturated cerulean onto the canvas. The sky was dotted with clouds and the waves were a steely gray. She took a deep breath of the ocean wind and dropped her paintbrush into a jar of water. This painting was complete.

She would have another canvas to bring to the gallery. Tourist season was picking up, and her paintings would sell like hot cakes. Visitors to the islands loved landscapes, and she was more than happy to provide them. She loved painting the islands as much as she loved living here. It was really a dream come true for her.

She sat back on her folding chair and lifted her face to the sun. Everything had worked out for her since her aunt had left her the house. She'd been able to paint and live mortgage free. If only she hadn't been stupid enough to get into a relationship with Hank Baxter, cannery worker and all-around a.ssh0le.

She'd broken up with Hank two months ago, after the two worst years of her life. She'd almost quit painting near the end. She'd had to take a restraining order out against him just to get him out of her house.

She opened her eyes and looked back at her beautiful painting. She was so lucky she hadn't married the man. So lucky she'd finally woken up to the truth of what was happening to her.

It had all started innocently enough. Their whirlwind romance had knocked her socks off. Dalia was an ordinarily shy and reserved person who spent most of her time painting or reading books by the fire with her cat.

Hank had come into her life and shaken up her world. He said everything and done everything she'd ever dreamed of. It was like the pages of a romance novel had come alive.

Those first few months were surreal, like a fantasy. She'd felt like she was on drugs, and she never wanted to come down. He told her she was his soulmate and she had believed him. He'd moved in with her three months after met.

At first, it had been blissful. Making love entangled in sheets in the morning sunlight. Drinking coffee together on the back porch looking out at the view. He had inspired her heart, mind, and soul. She'd never painted so much.

But then the little slights had started. He suddenly began to put her down—just a little at first so she barely noticed. Towards the end, Dalia had almost completely lost herself.

One night, she'd pushed back against his barrage of criticism, and he slapped her. It had stung more than just her cheek. Her pride, her hope for the future. She told him to get out and never come back, but he had refused.

She'd had to go to the police and the courts to get him out of her home. It had pained her so deeply that she wasn't sure she would recover. It had only been three months since she'd kicked him out. The restraining order was up tomorrow.

She had wasted two years of her life with that man, believing that he would be her lifelong love. But it had all been a lie. She'd found out just last week that he'd been seeing several other women the entire time they'd been together. It just added insult to injury.

She took a deep breath and looked at her painting. "Good riddance," she said, trying to brush off the dark thoughts.

Now that her painting was dry, she packed up her supplies, folded up her chair and walked to her car. She threw everything in the back seat and started the trek back home.

She had a comfortable three-bedroom ranch house nestled in the hills above Selkie. It had been built in the 1950s, but her aunt had kept it well maintained. As her only living relative, she had left everything to Dalia, and it had been the greatest blessing of her life.

She pulled up in front of the house with brown shingle siding and pulled her art supplies out of the back of the car. Once inside, her orange cat Garfield meowed and rubbed her leg, begging for lasagna.

She giggled and scratched his chin. She deposited her art supplies and canvas in her studio and went to the kitchen to open a can of cat food.

Dalia's parents lived in Southern California where she'd gone to art school. They'd come to Alaska in the summertime to visit her aunt, and Dalia had always loved the slow-paced peaceful lifestyle of the island.

When she inherited the property, Dalia knew that it would be her forever home. She'd decorated and remodeled, putting in larger windows and new appliances in the kitchen.

She had a glorious view of the island from the hilltop—she could see all the way down to the ocean. She had an eclectic bohemian style, full of color and life and it made her happy every time she walked through her living room. It was full of bookshelves and macramé plant hangers and greenery.

She made herself a cup of tea in the kitchen and sat at the island with a warm cup between her hands. She knew she was still recovering from her relationship with Hank. She wasn't ready to start dating. But the hole that he'd left in her heart from all the lies and pain still felt as black and empty as it had on the last day of their relationship.

Being a full-time painter was a dream come true, and she knew that her aunt's generosity had made her dream a reality. If she were back in LA, she'd be dealing with the big-city art scene, desperate to get attention in a vast ocean of other painters.

Here, she provided a welcome service and there was a hot market for everything that she did. Painting landscapes for tourists might sound like selling out to some artists, but it was work that she loved to the very depths of her soul.

Fate Island was her home, and she was enchanted by the views of the water, the harbor, the thick deep forests and the mist that clung to the mountains above the little town.

Every time she found a new picturesque scene she felt as if she'd unearthed a pot of gold. She was happiest among the evergreens with the sea winds blowing in her hair.

Garfield ate his Fancy Feast noisily and looked up at her with an appreciative grin. She loved her cat, and if she spent the rest of her life with him, she would be happy.

After being with Hank, solitude was a blessing. She'd been on Fate Islands for several years before she started dating him and had made only a handful of friends and had never been out on a single date. But now that she was getting older, and the dream of her perfect life with Hank had shattered into a million pieces, she wondered if she could be happy without that family, she believed she would soon have.

She picked up her phone and dialed Marsha Fredrickson, the owner of the Four Winds Gallery.

"Dalia, when are you going to bring the new canvases? I sold your last piece this morning."

"I finished a 16 x 11 today. I just have to varnish it, and it will be ready to go."

"Fabulous. Can you bring me five more just like it?"

"I'm just getting my painting moving again. You know how much the breakup took out of me."

"Speaking of the breakup," Marsha said, "Hank was in here yesterday afternoon. He was asking about you. Wanted to buy one of your paintings at a discount."

"Typical," Dalia said with a groan.

"The sheriff said that he is free to come into the establishment since it isn't actually your place of work."

"The restraining order is up in just a few more days. Then I'll have to deal with whatever nonsense he gets up to."

"Have you considered dating again?" Marsha asked.

"I think my picker is off. I should probably take a break from the dating market."

"You know what you should do," Martha said excitedly. "Join mate dot com. If you found a shifter for a mate, you'd know he'd treat you well."

Dalia had heard all the stories about shifters and their fated mates. She'd known several couples herself and they all seemed happy. It was hard for her to imagine that she could have something like that. It sounded too good to be true.

"I think I'm too jaded to believe and happily ever after anymore," Dalia said.

"Nonsense," Marsha said. "If anyone deserves a happily ever after, it's you."

Dalia got off the phone with her gallerist. She wrapped her hands around the warm mug and inhaled the spicy scent of tea. Did she even know how to love anymore? She shook her head and bit her lip, and then looked down at Garfield. He licked his paws with smug satisfaction.

"What do you think, Garfield? Should I join mate dot com?" Garfield ran his paw over his head and meowed. Dalia nodded.

"If you think I should do it, then I will," she said with a laugh.

She picked up her phone and downloaded the app. Several moments later she was answering the crazy questionnaire and entering information into her profile.

She held her breath as her matches loaded. She almost turned off the phone as the loading screen came to life.

At the top of the page was an 85% match—the man was a gorgeous lion shifter with long blonde hair and dark brown eyes. She scrolled past and 92% match, a panther shifter with ebony skin and sultry eyes that stared into her soul. She got goosebumps as she scrolled past the 97% match, and then at the very bottom of the page was the 100% match.

His screen name was Witty Wolf. He had a shock of curly blonde hair, tender blue eyes, and a hint of mischief in his smile. She felt herself go weak in the knees and was glad she was sitting on the kitchen bench

“Oh boy,” she said, placing her hand on her forehead.

She scrolled through the photographs in his profile. They showed him in multiple poses with a group of handsome men he tagged as his brothers. The shirtless picture nearly made her choke on her tongue.

Broad shoulders, rippling abs and defined pecs. He was gorgeous, and at the same time, he seemed really sweet.

She shook her head and turned off the phone. She was too broken to get involved with anyone right now. He deserved someone who was as fun as he was. Dalia’s idea of fun was curling up with a cup of tea, a good book and Garfield on a rainy afternoon.

But Witty Wolf’s fun-loving spirit tugged at her heart. Maybe he was exactly what she needed.