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## **Chapter 1: Leland**

Animals have a shaky concept of time. They know dawn from dusk, but the hours in between are just chunks of surviving. Feed. Fight. Fuck.

I've been dealing with their utter unconcern for time for a long fucking time. Not that they'd know. Or care if they did, I assume. As much as I love animals, they can be fucking assholes.

When my work phone rings sometime after midnight, I'm only slightly annoyed. My bed companion—fuck, what was his name again? Aaron? Eric? Somewhere between the third shot of cheap tequila and the sixth, I forgot. Not that it matters, he has to go either way. Work demands my attention.

I fumble for my phone as I drag my waterlogged body out of bed, snatching it up just before it stops ringing. "Long Way Home. Leland Mary."

"Hi, uh—" The voice on the other end sounds young and unsure. "There's this dog? I think it's a dog. It might be a bear cub. It's not mine or anything! But it's hurt. Limped into the barn. Bleeding badly, I think. It might be feral? I don't know what to do. I don't want it to be shot but . . ." They trail off.

"Can you text the address to this number?" I ask, holding the phone between my ear and shoulder as I tie my boots.

"Yeah. One second."

A moment passes. My phone vibrates. I check the screen: Wolf Lake Run Road. Outside of town. Not more in the middle of nowhere than I currently am, but some of the roads out there aren't even paved.

It's times like this that I miss New York City.

I sigh. "Stay out of the barn. I'll be there as soon as I can, Mr. . . ."

"Darrin. And okay. Sorry to call so late."

Not Darrin's fault, not really. It can't be helped. I'd rather be woken in the dead of night every night for the rest of my life than have some poor, helpless animal shot just because they're hurt and scared.

Though, if it is a bear cub I'll have to call game control, and whatever happens will be out of my control. I'm not equipped to handle large animals, even if they won't maul me to death.

Thank you Maxton.

Demon Magic for the win.

"No problem. See you soon, Darrin." I end the call and tuck my phone in my pocket before yanking on my shirt. My companion is already awake, rubbing the sleep from his eyes when I turn around. "So, no morning blow job?"

"Afraid not. Work calls."

He rolls out of bed, a whole lot steadier on his feet than I feel, and dresses. I make coffee, pour each of us a to-go cup, and walk him to his car after shoving my wallet and keys in my pocket. His taillights disappear into the night.

It takes a solid thirty minutes to get to the address Darrin supplied. The old farmhouse is lit up as bright as the crack of dawn when I rumble down the driveway, seeming to hit every pothole on the way. They rattle my bones and do nothing for the headache brewing just behind my eyes.

You'd think at my age, I'd know better.

Darrin, I assume, descends the stairs and meets me in front of my truck. He looks nothing like he sounded on the phone. Older. A fucklot more confident than the shaky voice that called. A 12 gauge is casually propped over his shoulder and I shiver despite the warm night air.

Fucking guns.

I've never liked them. Out here, I get they're necessary to protect yourself and livestock from predators but shit, they give me the creeps.

"Leland Mary?" he asks.

It's not the same voice.

Maybe he has a kid who called. Some people do that. Have their kids call because they'd prefer to just shoot the animal, but won't because the kid begged and pleaded.

I nod and offer him my hand. "Darrin?"

"It's back here." He tips his head.

"Let me grab my equipment," I say, rounding to the back of my truck with Darrin hot on my heels.

It's enclosed, retrofitted to handle most of the animals I encounter out in the wilds of upstate New York. Nothing truly dangerous. Mostly stray dogs. Sometimes, animals that are caught and released—raccoons, possums, and coyotes.

"You said the animal is hurt?" I ask over my shoulder as I yank on my work gloves before grabbing everything else I need.

"Think so," Darrin says.

"Alright. Lead the way."

He turns and I trail after him, around the house and towards a dark barn. As we approach, floodlights flare bright. I blink until the sudden glare fades to a more tolerable level.

The night is silent around us. Even the insects seem to be holding their breath, waiting, watching, as we stop outside the doors. Darrin pulls a key from his pocket and holds it out. I accept as he takes several steps back, pulling the gun from his shoulder.

"Light's just inside the door. On the left."

My fingers tighten around the key. "I got it from here. Why don't you wait inside the house?"

Darrin huffs but turns away. I wait until he disappears around the side of the house before pulling off my gloves and working the key into the lock. It opens easily and I free the deadbolt from the latch, hooking it into the other side for safe keeping along with the still-inserted key.

I ease the door open. The inside of the barn is dark and silent.

"It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you," I whisper, keeping my voice low and soothing. Not that the animal can understand me, but hopefully I sound non-threatening enough to keep them from panicking and hurting themselves. Just because animals don't attack me anymore doesn't mean they don't lose their shit from time to time.

"I'm going to turn the light on," I whisper into the dark space as I fumble at the wall for the light. It turns on with a flip, the dim bulb hardly enough to see by. A weak growl echoes from the back of the barn—one of the stalls. "Easy. Easy. My name is Leland. I'm here to help."

My heart is pounding—*don't let it be a bear cub, don't let it be a fucking bear cub* —with every step I take towards the back. I check each stall as I pass, finding them empty, until—

"Fuck me," I whisper.

It's not a bear cub. And damn sure not a dog. We have gray wolves up here but this . . . this isn't a gray wolf.

For one, it's midnight black. If not for the white patch on its chest, shining in the dim light, I'd never have seen it huddled in the dark corner, teeth bared, eyes bright. And two, it's fucking massive.

"Easy," I whisper after taking a slow breath. It's hurt and scared—and shit, maybe feral—but not a danger to me. Not for the first time, I'm grateful for the deal I made with Maxton. "I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe."

Each step that takes me closer to the wild wolf is done carefully, like a tightrope walker. Thank fuck it stopped growling. It watches me, ears laid flat, teeth sharp and deadly, until I sink to my knees beside it.

If not for the deal I made with my demonic best friend, I'd be running the other fucking way.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I repeat as I hold my hand out slowly, hovering in front of the beast of a wolf's nose. It inhales sharply, a whine echoing around us. "I know. Bad night, right? It's only up from here, I promise."

The wolf's head flops into the hay, eyes never leaving my face as I slide my fingers over their head. Thus far, they don't seem feral. Just hurt. Shit. Maybe someone was keeping them as a pet. People are fucking assholes. "I need to see where and how bad you're hurt," I explain as I shuffle closer, running my hand down their back and side as I look them over. It's a male, age impossible to know. An adult, at the very least.

They stiffen when I come to their hind leg, body jerking as I feel blood under my fingers. "Just the leg? That's not bad. You're going to be okay. A little food and rest is all you need, I bet."

There is no way I can carry this massive beast to my truck though. Shit. Even getting him from here to the barn door will be damn near impossible without help. I can't leave him here.

I scratch behind his ear and lean down so we're eye level. "I'm going to get my truck but I'll be right back."

He clearly isn't going anywhere.

I stand, turn to head toward the doors, hear a whine and when I look back the wolf is pushing to his feet, leaning heavily on his front paws.

#### **Chapter 2: Ansel**

No. No. Everything hurts but he can't leave me. Not *him*. He's . . . I can hardly believe it but believe it I do. Every part of me recognizes him.

This man—Leland, he said his name was—is my mate.

I can't risk him leaving and not coming back. The asshole with the gun *will* shoot me. The only reason he didn't is because his teenage son stepped in his way before he could pull the trigger.

"Shit. Shit." Leland steps towards me, hands extended in front of him as if he's scared I might attack. The last thing I want to do is hurt him. "Don't get up."

I take a careful step forward, resting most of my weight on my front legs. The pain isn't bad—not really. And nothing I won't recover from once I can shift and eat. If not for the gun-toting shit who locked me in after he and his son headed me here, I would've already shifted, started the healing process.

Exposure is dangerous.

If humans know . . .

Shit. My mate is a human.

But he smells so fucking good. And I can tell he's kind. Everything about him radiates warmth and safety. I just want to curl up against him until my leg is healed.

I stop at his side, my legs weak, and bump into him. He stumbles but holds steady, sinking his fingers into the fur at my neck. I whine and lean into his side. His touch feels so good. If I was in a better state, I'd climb him like a tree, beg him to fuck me in the hay. Instead, I can barely stand.

Fucking bear.

Fucking Malik.

"I can't carry you," Leland whispers, his fingers finding the ticklish spot behind my ear. "But you shouldn't walk." He pulls away and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to chase his hand. He points at the ground. "Stay."

Ha. Did he just tell me to stay?

I tip my head to the side. He stares at me and sighs before taking a step back. I match him step for step. He walks slowly, stopping every couple of feet to squat in front of me. His hands are gentle, his voice soothing as he rubs my face, behind my ear, along my chest. An endless string of, "Good boy. You're doing so well, lovely. Just a little further, pretty puppy."

Eventually, after what feels like hours of slow progress but was probably only fifteen minutes, we round the house.

"Holy shit."

A gun cocks. A growl tears up my throat as I start to shuffle forward. I'm in no state to fight but—

"He's not feral—just hurt." Leland steps in front of me, arms spread wide. My heart clenches and I try to move around him but he moves with me, reaching back with one hand to fist the fur at my neck. "If I had to guess, he's most likely someone's pet."

Someone's *pet*! Like fuck!

"Get that thing off my property," the asshole from earlier snarls.

My chest vibrates but I'm held steady by Leland's hand in my fur. He bumps his leg against my shoulder, nudging me towards a truck that wasn't in the driveway before.

I follow his lead, keeping my gaze on the gun trained on us, gums pulled back, body tired and sore but ready.

The man's aim is steady and sure.

I won't let him hurt my mate.

Leland rounds the back of the truck and opens the tailgate. I peer into the dark enclosure. No way in hell am I getting in there. It looks fine, suitable for any stray or wild animal, but I'm neither and I'll be damned before I climb into a cage, even one my mate thinks is safe, willingly. I limp away, stopping at the passenger door.

Leland stares at me for a long moment before his gaze moves towards the man holding the gun. He shuts the tailgate, a little harder than necessary, but comes around and opens the passenger door.

It takes some maneuvering, pulling my body into the seat. Leland helps, his hands still gentle on my flank, voice still soft as he whispers, "Easy, pretty boy," and "Careful, sweet baby."

Once I'm situated the best I can be—panting for breath because holy shit, the wound on my leg is deep and painful—we stare at each other.

Leland shakes his head, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You look ridiculous."

I turn and settle into the seat.

The door shuts softly and Leland crosses in front of the truck, eyes on the asshole the whole time. He gets in and quickly turns the engine, backing us away to safety. I close my eyes.

It will be easy to get away and shift—heal. Then I'll find Leland again. I have his scent now; it won't be hard. What happens after that . . .

He's human. I'm not.

Not a lot of humans know about shifters. Those that do know because they're mated to a shifter, or familiar with the parahuman community altogether.

How will he take it? The truth of my nature. He likes animals, so that's a plus. But . . . will he like me as a man?

That feels like a problem for another day.

When I'm not hurt, and tired.

### **Chapter 3: Leland**

The wolf in my passenger seat is resting.

We're almost back to town, closer to my house than Long Way Home, when I hit Maxton's number, letting the call ring through Bluetooth.

"Do you have any fucking idea what time it is?" Max answers, words harsh but voice worried. It's not the first time I've called him in the middle of the night. Probably won't be the last. "You better be dying."

"Can you meet me at the shelter? Or . . . my house? I got a call about a hurt dog. It sure as shit isn't a dog. And—" I cut my gaze to the wolf sitting in my passenger seat. His eyes are closed but that doesn't mean he's asleep or can't understand me. "And I'm pretty sure . . ." Yeah. No. I'm not saying it out loud. "He's hurt. Can you or Beau . . . help?"

"Is he a shifter?" Max asks.

The wolf stiffens in the passenger seat, dark eyes swinging towards me as he slowly sits up. I swallow and tighten my fingers on the wheel.

Oh shit. Holy shit.

"I—" My voice cracks. "I think so?"

Maxton huffs. "Tell him to shift a couple times and heal his damn self."

The call ends and I glare at nothing.

Since becoming a demon, my best friend can be somewhat of an asshole when it comes to the parahuman community. But . . . I guess if a shifter can heal themselves, Maxton has no reason to get out of bed? Use his limited supply of magic. Still, the help would've been fucking nice.

My phone vibrates and I glance down.

Maybe Jesus: I'll meet you at home.

"That was Max," I say into the heavy silence. "He uh . . . he's a demon. So is his husband. They're good people. If you need help or anything . . ."

The wolf, who very well might be a wolf shifter, says nothing. The silence is too fucking suffocating though. I can't breathe.

"If you're a shifter, it's okay." I take one hand off the wheel and reach out slowly. The wolf watches but doesn't attack or shy away. I run my hand over their head. "You're safe. I promise. No one is going to hurt you. Least of all me."

An all-consuming, sudden and intense desire to protect this shifter rises up as I meet the wolf's gaze. I tighten my fingers in their fur. "If you need to shift to heal, you should do it. I won't watch. Okay? But I don't want you to sit here in pain and bleeding."

A moment of nothing passes before the body under my hand shivers. I pull away and keep my gaze focused on the road.

"Ow."

The soft whisper pulls my attention.

I gape at the young man sitting in my front seat. He's naked, and covered in small wounds. Some of them look to be days, if not weeks old, but are probably fresh. The one on his thigh is the worst. He probes it with his fingers.

I snatch his hand, yanking it away from the wound. "Don't play with it."

His dark eyes lift to mine. "Watch the road."

I snap my gaze around and jerk into the right lane again before my gaze moves back to the shifter. His hand is warm but damp in mine.

Our gazes meet and my stomach clenches.

"Uh." Shit. What should I say? "Hi."

He ducks his head, hair as dark as his eyes spilling over and hiding his face. "Hi."

"What happened?" I ask, doing my best to keep my eyes on the road. But shit,

he's . . . he's beautiful. I've never had such a visceral reaction to anyone.

"It's stupid," he whispers.

How old is he?

"Tell me anyway," I coax, running my thumb over his knuckles.

He chews his bottom lip. "There's this black bear. Everyone knows not to fuck with him—feral shifter and all—but my brother . . ."

"Goaded into it? Or a dare?" My voice is sharper than intended.

He sighs, shoulders falling. "A little of both."

His brother sounds like an asshole.

"What's your name?" I ask as I slow to turn into my driveway. Max and Beau are already waiting, sitting on my steps, huddled together and whispering. They both look like they just tumbled out of bed.

"Ansel."

I smile as I fish in the back seat for a sweater—something, anything he can wear for the short trip from my truck to my front door. "It's nice to meet you, Ansel. I'm Leland."

His face flushes and he bows his head, hiding behind his hair again. I want to reach out, tip his head back, have better lighting to see just how far the flush travels.

"Thank you for this."

"It's not a problem," I assure him as I hold out the sweater. "Sorry I don't have anything better."

He takes it and pulls it over his head before pulling the neck over his mouth and nose. The driver side door is yanked open and I whip around to find Max. He shakes his head. "Only you."

What's that supposed to mean?

"This is Ansel," I reply.

Max's face softens. "My husband is a nurse. You want him to take a look?"

Ansel shakes his head. "I just need to eat and sleep. It's not bad. I just couldn't shift in the barn with the asshole with a gun."

Darrin. Yeah. No. I don't blame Ansel for hunkering down and waiting for help or a good time to get away.

"I'll manage things at Long Way Home for a few days," Max says, stepping back. "If you need anything, let me know." "Thanks," I tell him before my gaze skips to Ansel. He peers at me, head tipped slightly to the side. "You can stay with me tonight, if you need to." I can take him home tomorrow.

He nods. "If you really don't mind."

"I don't," I assure him. "You're more than welcome." I step out of my truck.

Beau waves. Max flips me off. They disappear.

Ansel is just opening the passenger door when I reach it. I step forward, helping him down. He could probably do it himself but he's hurt, and I need to help him, make him feel better. He's not complaining as I hold him against my side, help him up the steps, and pause to unlock my door. He leans into me with a tired sigh as we cross the threshold.

"I'll make you something to eat. Do you want to shift again? Shower?" His hand drops to his thigh. My sweater hangs almost to his knees. It's kinda cute, how it swallows him whole. "All the above?"

"Thank you," he whispers.

I keep my arm around him and lead him towards the bathroom. Once I show him where everything is and get him a change of clothes, I leave him to shift and shower in peace, even though no part of me wants to be separated from him.

#### **Chapter 4: Ansel**

The shower feels amazing on my tired body. The last shift helped heal the wound on my thigh, but it took the last of my energy too. Not that I had a lot left. I used most of it in a stupid fight for my life—a fight I never should've been in—then fleeing an angry feral bear shifter.

When the water runs cold, I step out and dry off. Leland was kind enough to leave me a pair of sweatpants and a shirt. The pants don't fit—too big in every way—so I don't even bother with them, just pull the shirt over my head and follow my nose out of the bathroom.

Leland is in the kitchen, just pulling a plate from the microwave. It's piled high with chicken and vegetables, far more than any human would eat. So maybe he knows shifters need a lot of fucking calories after a day like I've had?

He stutters to a stop, plate in hand as his gaze moves over me. I hold still for his inspection. His eyes are bright and he swallows when he looks up. The scent of his desire perfumes the air and I strain not to cross the distance and take his mouth with mine. It's too late and I'm too tired for anything more than a hot meal.

"Chicken okay?" he asks.

"Yeah. Anything is good," I say as I approach the kitchen island. He sets the plate down in front of one of the chairs. "Thank you, again. Really."

How young and stupid I must seem to him.

I got into a fight I knew I couldn't win, with a *bear*, because my brother wouldn't shut the hell up about it. Instead of running home, hurt and bloody, to face the teasing, I went the other way and was eventually cornered by an idiot with a gun.

"Honestly, you don't have to keep thanking me. I'm happy to help." Leland's hand is warm on my back for half a second as I pick up my fork. My cock twitches and I squeeze my eyes closed. Now is the worst possible time to get a boner. "Do you want me to braid your hair out of the way?"

I glance at him, and then down. My hair is still damp, clinging to my arms, dripping on my bare thighs. Usually, I do keep it pinned back, but I lost my hair tie hours ago. And it would've been rude to search for a blow drier or use his brush without asking.

"My older sister showed me how when I was little," he says as a flush climbs up his cheeks. "I can . . ." He trails off and clears his throat as he looks away. "Never mind. I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. Just . . . You . . ."

I snag his wrist as he goes to step away, pulling him towards me again. Our gazes meet. His is soft and warm, but uncertain.

He feels it too, this connection between us, but he has no frame of reference.

"Would you? Braid my hair?"

Leland swallows. "Let me get a brush."

I'm slow to release him, and he lingers for a moment longer when I do, before turning and slipping out of the kitchen. He comes back with a hairbrush only a moment later.

I sit straight and focus on my plate as Leland carefully drags the brush through my hair, working out the tangles. His fingers are quick and clever, and my food is gone by the time he finishes with the braid.

Instead of stepping back, he lays his hands on my shoulders. I relax into his hold with a tired sigh. Food helped, but I still need sleep.

"Something is happening here, right?" Leland whispers, his breath warm on my neck. "I'm not . . . I'm not imagining that, am I?"

I shake my head and look over my shoulder. Leland is right there, close enough to kiss if I only lean forward, but he's confused, and I'm tired. Too tired to talk about this tonight.

"Can we talk about it in the morning?" I ask.

"Shit. Of course. You must be tired. Come on. You can have my bed. Just . . . let me change the sheets." He backs away, slipping out of the kitchen. I follow after cleaning my plate, locking the front door, and shutting off the lights, letting his scent lead me.

In the bedroom, I can smell the scent of another man, here recently. Just hours ago. But there's no sign of Leland having a romantic partner. Maybe just a quick fuck. I can't fault him for that.

"Almost done," he says, tossing the dirty sheets into a hamper before grabbing clean ones. I step forward and help him make the bed. We stand on either side, facing one another, when he's finished. "If you need anything, I'll be in the living room."

I shake my head and pull the blankets back. "Stay."

"Stay?" he repeats.

"Here. With me." I hold the blanket up. Leland hesitates, eyes glued to me tucked into his bed, before slowly starting to undress. He turns off the bedroom light and slips between the blankets in nothing but his boxers. I shuffle closer until our knees press together.

In the soft moonlight coming in through the window, I search his face. I'm exhausted, could probably stand to sleep for a week, but only if this man is sleeping next to me. His heat sinks into me, relaxing my body.

"Do you know what a fated mate is?" I whisper.

Leland nods, his voice just as soft. "Max—the guy from earlier—and his husband are fated mates."

I find his hand under the blankets and lace my fingers with his. "I think you're mine."

## **Chapter 5: Leland**

A warm body is pressed flush against me. Bright sunlight streams through the window. I shift and the weight on top of me groans, pressing closer. My heart skips a beat as the events of last night slam into me with all the force of a wrecking ball.

How I could forget, for even a second, everything that happened is beyond me. I tossed for hours turning it all over in my head while Ansel slept, right up until he cuddled against me and I passed out.

I'm just shy of thirty-five years old, growing older by the day but planning on living forever as a demon with my best friend. And my fated mate, if he's to be believed —and I'm pretty sure he is because why would Ansel lie—is a wolf shifter. What does that mean for us?

"Your heart is racing." Ansel's voice is sleep rough.

When I look down, his face is flushed with sleep, eyes still hazy.

He really is fucking beautiful.

I curl my fingers around the edge of his braid. He wiggles closer, pressing his hard cock into my thigh.

"How old are you Ansel?"

Young. Way younger than me.

"Nineteen."

I blow out a sharp breath. Nineteen. Shit.

He pops his chin on my chest as his gaze narrows. "Before you climb on your morally high horse—don't. If you reject me, I won't forgive you easily. And this thing between us, now that you know, is only going to get more intense. You can skip the groveling and kiss me now. Later, I won't have any mercy on you."

I laugh, sudden, sharp and short.

Skip the groveling and kiss him now.

Is it that simple? Shit. Maybe it is.

My best friend and his husband are demons. One day, I will be too, because I made a deal with said best friend that makes me a glorified Disney Princess until I die. Animals fucking love me. When they don't, they're at least not dangerous. And my fated mate, who I know fuck all about, is a wolf shifter.

"This thing between us. It's a forever kind of thing. Right?" I ask.

Like what Max and Beau have.

Ansel nods. "Yeah. You're my person and I'm yours."

I blow out a breath and cup the back of his head, pulling him up.

Ansel's smile is blinding. I slot my mouth over his and accept that whatever the future brings, I'll endure it with this young man. My own fated mate.

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## **About the Author**



In 2021, Odessa Hywell, a MM romance author decided because she is married to a twin it was best NOT to publish her books featuring twincest and other questionable themes under her married name as her husband would not approve.

-His loss, honestly.-

If you know who Odessa Hywell is, don't be a snitch. Like Benjamin Franklin said, *"Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead."* 

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