



*the Alpha*  
**and his Ace**

ANA J. PHOENIX

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE ALPHA AND HIS ACE

**By Ana J. Phoenix**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# THE ALPHA AND HIS ACE

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## Photo Description

A young man and a wolf appear close together. The young man is dark-haired; the wolf has pure white fur and amber eyes. The young man is holding the wolf close to himself in an almost possessive manner. They seem like they belong together.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I am an Alpha werewolf who has been looking for his mate. Until I find him (yes, I am gay, my pack is pretty much open to sexuality), I am allowed to have fun with other guys. I'm known as a player but that's okay because once I find my mate, my wolf and I will be truly monogamous.*

*Then I find him. My mate (You can decide how we meet—make it meet-cute type). But then my mate says that he is an asexual. What the hell? What does he mean, asexual? Does he mean that I cannot have sex with him ever? That he will never enjoy sex with me? How can I make him fall in love with me then?*

*But my wolf and I are determined to romance my mate; even if I have to join AVEN forum (which I thought at first as forum for AVIAN shifters) and talk around to couples with asexual lovers for tips. Because I will have my HEA with him, right, dear author?*

*Thank you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ami*

PS: No D/s or BDSM, no “baby” as endearment please!! (and keep the endearment on the minimum, I dislike excessive endearment), and no sex before halfway (remember, the mate is an asexual!!), and I prefer a kind of humorous type of story about a werewolf who wants to woo his asexual mate.

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** shifters, humorous, soulmates/bonded, asexual, hand jobs

**Word Count:** 18,573

*Acknowledgements*

Quotes in Chapter Three taken with permission from [AVEN \(The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network\)](#).

Additional thanks go out to my betas, Lisa J and Tala, for their help, and Ami, for the fun prompt. Rock on, girls. Also to the editors and mods on the event team for volunteering their time and effort. You guys are amazing.

# **THE ALPHA AND HIS ACE**

**By Ana J. Phoenix**



## Chapter One

“You’re going to the club again?”

“Yeah.” I turned to face my mother, who stood in the doorway to my room as I put on my favorite cologne. Humans had a weak sense of smell, but this stuff helped.

“That’s the third time this week.”

I nodded. No point in denying the truth. “Gotta have fun while I can, right?”

She shook her head at me. “Brandon...”

“It’s fine, Mom.” I really didn’t need to hear her tell me how she wished I’d found my mate already. I knew when she did it, it was only because she was worried about me. Unlike some of the guys in my pack who thought it was hilarious I was past twenty-five and couldn’t seem to find my partner. Of course, they never said that when I was around to hear it. They didn’t have the guts. But word traveled. A good leader needed a good mate at his side. Common knowledge.

“You’re smokin’,” my mom said, as if she could read my thoughts and wanted to redirect them. But she was right. I grinned at myself in the mirror. Maybe I couldn’t find my mate, but I’d never had trouble finding lays. Mom patted my shoulder. “Now go out there and cause some trouble.” My mom. Always there to get me ready for battle.

“I’ll find him, Mom.”

“You’ll find him when you find him, darling. You can’t force fate.”

“You never know until you try.” With those words, I threw on a light jacket and headed out into the summer night.

\*\*\*\*

A few hours later, things weren’t looking good. I’d spent enough time at every gay club or hangout in the city to know my mate wasn’t at any of them. As a last resort, I started visiting the regular bars too. Who knew? Maybe my mate was closeted. Maybe he thought he was straight. Not a problem. A few minutes in bed with me would prove him wrong.

Provided I found him.

There were two bars in my vicinity. The Crow's Bar and The Last Straw. The former sounded too much like a meeting place for filthy avian shifters, so I grasped at The Last Straw. Sounded fitting enough.

Problem was, once I entered straight-people places, people thought *I* was straight. Case in point, I'd spent barely five minutes sipping on a cheap beer before a girl in a low-cut red dress approached me. Swaying her hips in a way that I guessed was supposed to be sexy, but really made her look as if she was going to fall flat on her face at any second.

When she stumbled in front of me, I stood and reached out to steady her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm Ruby."

Not what I'd asked, but okay. I could answer the other question for myself; her scent gave her away. She'd had too much to drink to be fine.

"You on your own?" I glanced around the bar to see if anyone was looking for her, but it didn't seem so.

She giggled and grabbed my shirt. "I'm not alone now, Bright Eyes."

I should have brushed her off; she wasn't my problem just because she'd come on to me. But I knew once I let her go, she'd hang on to the next guy—who might just be enough of a scumbag to take advantage of her. "Do you live far from here?" I asked.

"You wanna come home with me?"

"Yeah, sure." I was ready to call it a night anyway. Might as well take her to her house before I went home to mine.

She gave me a smile, and led me out of the bar. As it turned out, she lived in an apartment building only two blocks away. After she'd unlocked the front door, she led me up the stairs. I wasn't interested in banging her, so I could have turned around now, but she was still so unsteady on her feet. I worried she'd topple over before she made it all the way up the stairs.

On the second floor, she pulled out another key and opened another door. This was it, then. My job here was done. I was about to leave when she dragged me in with her.

"Come on, come on." She closed the door behind us. And then she dashed down the hallway into another room, where she dropped down on her knees—presumably to hug a toilet bowl.

“You okay in there?”

“Fine,” she insisted, before she made a retching sound.

“I think we have different definitions of *fine*.” I followed her into the small bathroom and knelt on the tiled floor beside her. Having a great sense of smell was not a bonus in this situation, but I tried not to look too disgusted as I held her black hair back when she heaved again.

The smell of whatever Ruby was throwing up wasn’t the only thing I sensed, though. There was another, sweeter scent clinging to everything in this house. I could tell that a cat lived here, that Ruby had burned her dinner a few hours ago, and also that she liked flowery fabric softener, but I had no idea where this other smell was coming from. It was intensifying, too.

“Glass of water?”

I startled at the strange voice—and let Ruby’s hair drop into the toilet bowl. Shit. I’d been so deep in my head, I hadn’t heard anyone approach. Apparently, Ruby hadn’t either. She still looked out of it as I scrambled to get her hair out of the toilet.

I turned to the stranger—a roommate?—to take the offered glass of water.

And then I lost my shit completely. The glass slid through my fingers and crashed on the tiles. The sound was enough to set Ruby into motion—she shrieked and straightened—but I was still staring at the stranger before me. The source of that alluring scent.

“Are you high?” the guy asked me, eyebrows raised. “Ruby, are you doing drugs again?” There was a warmth to his tone that told me he was more amused than annoyed, though his tousled dark hair indicated he’d been asleep before we came. He was obviously used to his roommate’s antics.

“No drugs.” Ruby went to the sink to wash her face while I was still sitting on the floor. I should probably get up. Yeah, I could do that. I managed to stand and get my brain working again, but...

“Do I have something on my nose?” the roommate asked.

Yeah, I was still staring. I’d never found myself attracted to a guy clad in blue pajamas with stars and planets on them, but there was a first time for everything. “Sorry,” I said, then shook myself out of it. “I’m Brandon.”

He shot me a strange look. Understandable. I couldn’t have been more obvious about mentally undressing him if I’d had drool running down my chin.

“I’m Aidan,” he said, eventually. “Nice to meet you.” No way he meant that. He looked from me to Ruby. “If the two of you are going to have sex later, can you keep it down? I was trying to sleep.”

With that, he left, before I had a chance to redeem the bad first impression I’d made. Fucking fantastic. I’d come across like a complete idiot. Worse yet, I’d come across like a complete idiot who was banging his roommate. “Shit,” I muttered under my breath.

“You can’t be quiet?” Ruby asked, finishing up at the sink.

“I’m not going to have sex with you.” Not even if I’d been straight. After all I’d just... Fuck. I’d just found my mate, hadn’t I?

*Fate: Zero.*

*Brandon: One.*

I’d have to touch him to be absolutely sure, but my wolf was practically running circles inside of me and it was hard to form a clear thought that didn’t have the name *Aidan* in it. I wanted to follow him into his bedroom and bury my nose in his hair.

But that probably wouldn’t make me look like less of a nut-job.

Curse humans and their shoddy senses and social rules.

“Why’d you come here if we’re not gonna fuck?” Ruby asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I shook my head. “Sorry. I should go.” If I stayed here any longer, a wooden door wouldn’t keep me from my mate and I’d do things I might regret in the morning.

“I saw the way you stared at my roommate,” Ruby said. “Don’t tell me you’re playing for the other team.” She pouted, as if that happened far too often.

“Sorry,” I said again, because why hide it?

“Seriously, don’t even bother.” She turned to the mirror above the sink, apparently done with me.

Taking a deep breath, I made myself leave, vowing to come back better prepared. I’d screwed up that whole first impressions thing, but that wasn’t going to stop me from being with my mate.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

I didn't sleep that night. I ran through the woods in my wolf form. I tended to the vegetable patch outside our house once the sun rose. I stayed busy. And as soon as the sky was blue and clear above me, I packed a few things and went back into the city.

I itched to shift into my wolf form and sprint down the streets, but that would have caused too much of a commotion. Humans were so easily scared, and as the alpha of my pack, I had to act responsibly. I had to pretend to be normal, no matter how crazy my wolf was going inside of me.

My nerves flared as I reached my mate's apartment and the entrance of the building was unlocked. Finally, today I would claim him. Hopefully.

*Calm down, Bran. You got this.*

I rang the doorbell.

When it opened, Aidan stood before me in the same pajamas he'd worn the night before.

"Brandon?"

He remembered my name!

He probably also remembered how much of an idiot I'd been.

Time to rectify his impression. I held up the paper bag of stuff I'd brought with me. "I got something to help your friend. I can make a Bloody Mary from this. Damn good hangover cure."

"Ruby gets drunk all the time," Aidan said. "She'll be fine."

"I also brought some veggies to apologize for breaking your glass."

Aidan raised an eyebrow at me, but stepped aside to let me in. Score! I walked past him into the kitchen before he could stop me. I put my bag on the table and spread the items out in front of me. Tomato juice, vodka, Worcestershire, tabasco... and some freshly picked tomatoes from my garden as extras. I grabbed one and offered it to Aidan, who stood in the doorway to the kitchen, eyeing me skeptically. "It's homegrown," I said.

He stepped up to me, and I held my breath as he took the tomato and our fingers brushed. The small touch zinged through my nerves and to the core of

my being. I almost shifted right then and there, my wolf was so eager to get his paws on Aidan. As if he was someone I'd loved, someone I'd *missed*, for a long time and being this close without touching was more than I could stand.

I forced myself to take a step back.

Seemingly oblivious to my thoughts, Aidan bit into the tomato and some of the juice ran down his chin and... Dear God, I wanted to wipe his chin for him.

Instead I said, "Careful not to get tomato stains on your pajamas."

Aidan wiped the juice off his skin with the back of his hand. Then he looked at his pajamas. "My little sister gave these to me."

"They're... cute."

He grinned. "You think they're ridiculous."

Well, I did want him to take them off, but not for that reason. "I think the color suits you." Went well with his cool blue eyes. I made myself look at the table before I started staring again.

Something smelled like cat. When I turned to Aidan again, a black feline was streaking around his legs. He leaned down to pet the little bastard. I felt my wolf growling possessively within me.

"You like cats?" Aidan asked.

"No. Yes. No." Smooth. This wasn't how I was going to convince Aidan that I wasn't an idiot.

"It's Ruby's cat," Aidan said, graciously ignoring my moment of stupidity. "She likes me, though I'm really more of a dog person myself."

*More of a dog person.*

Aidan shot me a questioning look and I realized that I was smiling at him like a lunatic. So much for improving his impression of me. I made myself turn away and finish mixing the drink before I could cause more damage. Aidan kept watching me, but I pretended like I didn't notice, and like it didn't unnerve me a little.

We were both quiet until I was done.

"Looks good," Aidan said then.

"Yeah, this should work."

"Ruby's still asleep."

I turned to face Aidan. “You didn’t think to tell me before?”

He smiled. “I was curious what you were gonna do.” As he spoke, the cat rubbed her head on his legs. I had to keep myself from glaring at her. *Get off him. He’s a dog person.*

Aidan continued, “So you still want to get in her pants?”

I opened my mouth to say that I’d really only wanted to help last night, but what came out was, “There’s only one set of pants around here that I want to get into, and they have stars and planets on them.”

For a moment, Aidan didn’t say anything, just looked at me. I felt my heart beating harder. What was he thinking? What was he seeing when he looked at me?

“No one gets into my pants,” Aidan said.

“No one?” Well, at least he wasn’t dating anyone else.

Aidan walked to the fridge and got out a bottle of lemonade. I watched him take a sip. He seemed like he didn’t quite know what to say to me. Finally, he put his drink aside. “I’m flattered, and you’re handsome, but…” He motioned between us. “This would never work.”

“I’m sure it will.” *Come on. You think I’m handsome. What’s the problem?*

“Trust me,” he said. “It won’t.”

“I promise I’m not normally this much of an idiot.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Aidan sighed, like this was a conversation he’d had too often. “Just trust me. This isn’t a good idea.”

“Are you straight?” There had to be a reason for his refusal.

“I’m not straight,” Aidan said. “I don’t want sex. Not with anyone.” He shrugged, as if it was no big deal.

“No sex?” Had I heard that right?

“No sex.” The corner of his mouth tugged up, as if my disbelief amused him.

“Are you a virgin?”

Both of Aidan’s eyebrows shot up. *Mouth, meet foot.* He was right; I was out of line. “I don’t usually share such intimate details with strangers,” he said.

“I’m sorry.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Only, I thought this would be easier.”

He leaned back against the counter, giving me a curious look. As if he was a scientist and I was a particularly interesting specimen. “You thought I would be easy?”

“Not exactly.” Maybe it was time to show him just how interesting a specimen I was. “This must seem crazy to you, but I’ve been looking for you for a long time.”

“You’re starting to sound like a stalker.”

“Not a stalker. A wolf.”

Silence. Then, “Excuse me?”

I could read the confusion on his face, as if he was trying to decide whether I was joking or delusional. Actions would serve me better than words here, so I gave him my best grin—and shifted. It always felt good, felt natural, to let my wolf take over. Even more so this time, because my mate was finally going to see me as I really was. And I could take my mate in with my heightened senses, rather than the dull ones I had to make do with in my human form. For one moment, even as I was eager to see his expression, I closed my eyes and simply breathed.

There was no doubt about it now; he was my mate and my wolf knew it. My fur stood on end, just being close to him, holding myself back from pouncing. Damn it, but I had waited for this moment for so long.

When I opened my eyes, Aidan looked at me in utter disbelief. I would have smiled, but I didn’t want to show him my teeth just then. Might have freaked him out even more. I didn’t want him scared of me, so I approached slowly, and nudged his hand.

He didn’t move, and he didn’t back away. One point for him. I wondered if, on a deeper level, he knew it too. Knew that we belonged together.

I looked up at him and caught his eyes.

*Pet me. C’mon, run your hand through my pure white fur.*

Finally, he did. Cautiously at first, as if he still wasn’t convinced I wasn’t going to bite, then more confidently. If I’d been a cat, I’d have purred to let him know it was okay. More than okay.



“You’re beautiful,” he said, so low I almost didn’t catch it. That’s how I knew he meant it, and the compliment pleased me more than anything I’d heard from casual bed partners before.

Then a scream rang through the kitchen, shattering my ears and my thoughts. Apparently, Ruby was up. Still in her nightwear, she grabbed a kitchen chair and held it out in front of her like a shield.

Stupid me. I shouldn’t have shifted where other people could run into us. Nothing for it now. I turned back into my human form, but then I was naked on the floor. Ruby dropped the chair and kept staring at me.

“Yes, I’m a wolf,” I said. “Yes, I’m naked. Alternatively, you might have had too much to drink yesterday.” I gestured at the table. “There’s a hangover cure I made for you. Stick a strip of bacon in it and call it breakfast.”

Eyes still wide, Ruby grabbed the drink and downed it in one go. Then she turned around and left, muttering something that sounded like, “I need to lay off the drugs. Seriously, I need to lay off the drugs.”

I gathered my clothes off the floor—it was too bad those always came off with the shift—and put them back on. Aidan watched me do it with some interest, but there was no heat in his gaze. Could he really have meant what he’d said about not being interested in sex? Like, at all?

How was that even possible?

“I need a drink, too,” Aidan said, leaning against the kitchen counter.

“May be a bit early for that.”

“I just saw a man turn into a wolf and back. I don’t care what time it is.”

“Okay.” If he wanted a drink, he’d get a drink. At least it would give me something to do with my hands. Thankfully I’d brought a few more ingredients than I needed for just one drink. “You mind if I reuse this glass?”

“No. Have you always been able to do that?”

“Mix drinks or turn into a wolf?”

“The wolf thing.”

I grinned without looking at him, because then I’d just want to pounce on him again. “I was born like this, yes. There’s a whole pack of us living in this town.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” I handed him the drink, but I couldn’t do *that* without looking at him. I stopped myself from sighing. I wanted to be done with the explaining part and go on to the part where I’d feel his hands on me again. “You’re my mate,” I told him. No point in withholding that information.

“Your mate? What do you mean? I’m human.”

*For now.* I didn’t voice that thought, didn’t want to scare him off, but I was planning on making him one of us eventually. And he’d want it too. I’d hold him through the growing pains as he discovered the wolf that lay hidden inside of him and it would bring us closer together. Make him part of my family. There was only one little problem with that: turning him would require sex. But he had to be joking about not wanting that. Right?

“Every wolf has a mate,” I told him. All he needed to know right now. “You’re mine. Doesn’t matter that you’re human. That happens sometimes.”

“You’re wrong.”

“No, I’m not.”

He took a large sip of the Bloody Mary I’d made him. “I’m not anyone’s mate.”

“Yes, you are.” I put some force behind my words because it saddened me how convinced he sounded. So prepared to spend his whole life on his own. As a pack animal, I’d never considered such a thing.

He drank again, gripping the glass a little more tightly than necessary. “I’m asexual,” he said then.

I had no real idea what that meant, but by the look on his face, I could tell it was important to him. “You’re what?”

“Asexual.” He said it again, more slowly.

I raised my hands, as if in apology. “I still don’t know what that is.”

He downed the rest of his drink, then left the room. Had I upset him somehow? “Where are you going?”

No reply, but he came back a moment later, holding a piece of paper. “If you really want to know,” he said, “you can read all about it on AVEN.”

Aven? Avian? Did this have something to do with those weird bird shifters? If they’d had a hand in making Aidan unwilling to date me, I’d shoot them out of the sky.

Aidan gave me the piece of paper. It had a URL on it. “It’s a website,” he said. “It’ll explain things.”

“Um, okay.” I wasn’t a big reader, but if this website had information that would get me closer to my mate, I would read the hell out of it.

He ran a hand through his hair, looking like he wasn’t sure what to do with me, which was funny and sad at the same time because I knew exactly what I wanted to do with him. If he would only let me.

“I think you should leave now,” he said.

“Yeah, okay. I’m coming back, though.”

“Stalker.” But he said it with a soft smile. Maybe all wasn’t lost.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

When I got home, my mother was waiting for me outside, tending to the garden. She had problems with her back, and I always told her to let me handle it, but she never listened. She enjoyed working with her hands and close to nature. I could never get her out of the garden when the sun was shining like this.

“Bran!” She wiped some sweat off her brow as I came closer. “Were you out all night?”

*Pretty much.*

“I found my mate, Mom.”

“You did?” She wrapped me in one of those hugs that made you think she was more of a bear than a wolf. “There really is nothing that can stop you when you set your mind to a task, is there?” She smiled. “It’s about time too! Your dad and I got together when we were five years younger than you and you’ve just been seeing all these different guys—”

“Mom!”

“Oh, don’t think I don’t know what you’ve been up to,” she said, but she didn’t seem mad. “Your father would be so proud if he could see you now.”

Only because finding my mate would get me more respect from the rest of the pack. That had been in short supply recently.

“I’m going to make you proud, Mom. I promise.”

*Now please stop hugging me before the other guys see us.*

“I know you will, honey.” She stepped away as if she could read my thoughts. “I know, I’m going to make a roast! You should bring your mate. It’s going to be fantastic!” She sauntered off into the house.

I went after her. “It’s not that easy, Mom! I only just met him, and he doesn’t...”

“He doesn’t what, dear?” She looked at me briefly before rummaging through the shelves. “I’m going to have to run to the store. Where did you put the car keys, Bran?”

“There, on the shelf.” I pointed.

She grabbed them and slipped into her shoes. My mom was a whirlwind sometimes. My dad might have been the alpha, but she was the one who was really running this pack. “I’ll be back before you know it!” she said, and with that, she was out the door again. Looked like I had to tackle this problem on my own for now. As I should. I was a grown man after all.

I went to my room, booted up the laptop and rubbed my eyes while waiting for the browser to open. I could have gone for some coffee, but any break felt like it would take too long when I was so close to getting some answers. I pulled the piece of paper out of my pocket and typed the URL into the browser. The website loaded.

*An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.*

No sexual attraction. Never? To no one? I wondered. If Aidan was asexual, that meant he was never going to be attracted to me? How did you date someone under those circumstances?

I clicked *Learn More*, and *Relationship FAQ*. There was a lot of text, but some lines stood out to me.

*Asexuals do not experience sexual attraction, but some experience romantic attraction, which can be directed towards either or both sexes.*

*Some asexuals enjoy physical closeness, perhaps cuddling or stroking, with their partner.*

*Emotional and romantic attraction are separate from sexual attraction. For some people they go together, but they are not necessarily connected.*

*Asexuals feel love as strongly as anyone else does; it simply isn’t connected to sex.*

I kept on reading, clicking on other links. My eyes ached by the time I was done, but I hardly noticed. When I reached the bottom of a page, I scrolled back up and read it all again, as if I could find something else that way, something that would tell me how to get my mate to see me the way I saw him.

*Many asexuals consider success so unlikely that they prefer not to date sexuals at all.*

I collapsed on my bed. After staying up all night, I should have fallen into a coma for the next few hours, but there was no way I was going to sleep. I kept rubbing my eyes and my temples and thinking about what I'd read.

There were people out there, normal people, who genuinely didn't want sex—and my mate was one of them. Not because he was broken or traumatized or whatever. He just didn't need it. Okay.

I burrowed my head into my pillow.

The FAQ said some asexuals had sex with their partners simply to please them, but how could that be good?

Could I get by without sex?

I didn't know. I'd never tried it. In fact, it had always been easy for me to find someone to have fun with for a couple of hours. Some asexual/sexual couples had open relationships, but I didn't like the idea. I could feel my wolf growling at the thought of sleeping with someone else now that I'd found Aidan. No, if my mate was asexual, I was going to deal. We wouldn't be destined for each other if we couldn't make it work. I had to believe in that.

The more pressing question was how to make him believe that too.

Aidan had said he wasn't anyone's mate. Was that because he didn't want to date anyone, or because he felt he shouldn't? If it was the latter, I needed to show him that he was wrong, that we could make this work, that he could trust me.

Some asexuals felt romantic attraction. I didn't quite know what that meant, or how it was different from sexual attraction, but it seemed like romance was the only way I'd get through to Aidan.

I just didn't know where or how to start.

Clattering sounds came from the kitchen downstairs. My mom had returned from her shopping trip a while ago and was probably cooking now.

"Bran!" she called.

I went to join her in the kitchen, hoping she wouldn't see that I was about to fall asleep on my feet. I didn't need her to baby me. But she wasn't looking at me. She was standing at the counter, cutting meat with a giant knife. Even I knew to keep my distance when my mother was wielding a knife.

"When are you going to invite your mate over so I can see him?"

I crossed my arms in front of myself. “Not today, Mom.” No way was I exposing him to my mom so early. He’d never know what train had rolled over him. “I need to handle this carefully.”

“What do you mean?” She turned to me and gestured with the knife. A watery drop of blood ran down the tip.

“He’s not...” No, I wasn’t going to say he wasn’t normal. That wasn’t right. So I settled for, “He’s special.”

“Well, of course he is.” Mom was swinging the knife again. “He’s your mate!”

She’d never get it if I didn’t use plain words. “He doesn’t want sex.”

Mom shot me a confused look. “What do you mean?”

I closed my eyes for a brief moment and pinched the bridge of my nose. A few hours ago I’d been just as oblivious to the existence of asexuality as she was now. Was this what Aidan had to deal with on a daily basis? “He’s not sexually attracted to anyone. Including me.”

Mom eyed me skeptically. “Is he a virgin?”

“Doesn’t matter if he’s a virgin!” I was only getting irritated at her because she showed me how stupid I’d sounded when I’d asked Aidan the same thing. “Romance might work,” I said, because I didn’t want to discuss sex with my mom any longer. “I have to... I don’t know... Take him on a date or something.”

Mom furrowed her brows. “Have you ever been on a date, honey?”

“Maybe once or twice.”

“You know exchanging bodily fluids in a back alley doesn’t count.”

“Mom!”

She smiled. “Sorry. I’m sure you’ll do fine. You’re going to get that boy and you’re going to romance the hell out of him. He’ll never know what hit him.” Still swinging the knife, she looked a little scary while she said that, but she was right. I could do this.

First though, I needed a shower.

“I’m going to wash up,” I said.

“You do that.” She was humming softly as she went back to cooking, like I hadn’t just shared an intimate problem with her. “You’re good to lead the pack tonight, yes?”

I'd almost forgotten about the full moon. It was a tradition to run through the forest on nights of the full moon. Mark the territory, strengthen the bonds within the pack and all of that. "Sure I am," I said. I only had to sneak in an hour of sleep sometime between now and tonight.

"Excellent, darling. But maybe don't tell the asswolves about your mate yet."

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The asswolves, as my mom liked to call them, were Hayden and Jed. They were a year or two younger than me, and thought they were stronger too. At least, when they were together. Catch one of them alone and he was chicken shit, but not long after I started our run, both of them fell into step beside me. Staying just a few inches behind, as if they wanted to demonstrate that they could overtake me at any time. As if they were planning to dethrone me. I wasn't going to put up with this bullshit.

I stopped at a clearing and growled at them.

Jed shifted back, while Hayden remained in his black and gray wolf form. "Problem?" Jed asked. Of the two of them, it was always Jed who did all the talking while Hayden stood at his side as a silent stone pillar of support. It was fitting because Hayden was dumb as a rock too.

I shifted back as well, so I could talk. The rest of the pack, fifteen wolves, waited in the trees just outside the clearing, watching. Ready to judge the way I dealt with disrespect.

"Cut the crap," I told Jed, making my stance as firm as possible. I'd learned the body language from my dad, imitating him since I was old enough to walk. "Both of you. I'm not going to put up with you causing trouble."

"Scared we'll take your place?"

I bared my fangs at him. This close after transformation, they were still visible in my mouth. "Don't be ridiculous. I can take either one of you down."

Jed's facial expression was hard to make out in the moonlight, but I thought he grinned at me. "You can't take both of us."

"Alpha battles are one on one and you know it." He was only trying to rile me, and it almost worked. I wanted to shift back, pin him to the ground and sink my teeth into him to wipe that arrogant smile off his face.

"I also know that a good alpha should have a mate. Where's yours?"



*Stay calm, Brandon. Don't maim him. You've already had dinner.*

At least tonight I had news to shut him up. "I've found my mate." Fuck not telling them. Asexual or not, Aidan was my mate, and I had to introduce him to the pack sooner or later.

"Oh yeah?" Jed tried not to let his shock show, but his voice was thin. Served the asshole right. "Where is he then?"

"Don't worry about it. You're going to meet him soon enough." I stepped up to him. "And when that day comes and you don't show him the necessary respect, I'm going to tear your throat out." I stared him in the eyes. I wasn't going to hurt anyone, but he wouldn't see that in my gaze. Quite the opposite. "Clear?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Great." I shifted and started running again. All the wolves slowly fell into step behind me. Crisis averted. For now.

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The thought of sleep still tempted me the next morning, but I was too wired to shut my eyes for any length of time. There were things, important things, I had to get through Aidan's skull, and the sooner I did it the better.

I found my way to the apartment easily; the streets were already becoming familiar, and I imagined that I could catch Aidan's scent from the paths he must have walked so often. Now they were leading me to him.

When I rang the doorbell, Ruby opened it. Her eyes went wide when she saw me. She attempted to slam the door shut, but I got my foot in and—

"Ouch!"

Shit!

That hurt! My outburst must have been audible because now Aidan came to the door, too.

"What's going on?"

"It's that freak!" Ruby tried to shut the door again, but Aidan pulled it open, relieving the pressure on my foot.

"Thanks." I seized the opportunity to safely step inside, and I stopped myself from shifting into my wolf form and licking my paw. Sacrifices had to be made.

“He’s not dangerous,” Aidan said to Ruby.

Ruby threw her arms up. “Sure, if you wanna go cuddle with the wolf, be my guest! If he breaks anything, you’re paying!” With that, she stalked off and slammed the door to her room behind her. Which left Aidan and me standing in the narrow hallway.

Well, that was awkward.

“I promise I’m not going to break anything,” I said.

“That would be nice.” He looked around himself, as if he wasn’t sure what to do, then looked at me. “So you really came back.”

“I said I would.”

He shook his head like he couldn’t quite believe me, but he led me into the living room instead of throwing me out. Looked like persistence was going to work in my favor here.

The living room was small and full of stuff. Most of the space was occupied by a gigantic pink couch which looked like it would easily support two people lying next to each other. If you got rid of all the colorful throw pillows first.

“Ruby brought this with her,” Aidan explained as he sat down. “Most of the paintings are hers, too. She paints. The books are mine. And…” He pointed at the wall to the right of us. It was covered in photographs. “I took those.”

“You’re a photographer?” I eyed the pictures with some interest as I sat on the couch, which was hideous but comfortable. I wanted to lean back, but thought the cushions would swallow me whole.

Aidan shrugged. “I like pretty things.”

And they were. His photographs, they were more than pretty. Some of them showed people, but most of them captured the beauty of nature. One had been taken in the forest behind the city. I recognized the area. It was my forest. I shuddered at the thought that he’d been to my favorite spot, the clearing by the lake, and I never knew.

“They’re amazing.”

He almost smiled. I could see the tugging on his lips. I wanted him to smile. But then he said, “I don’t really know why you’re here again.” There was a large empty gap on the couch between us, and he didn’t look like he was going to bridge the distance anytime soon.

“You’re not going to get rid of me.” Maybe I should have worded that differently to sound less like a creepy stalker, but I was tired. “I mean, you’re not going to get rid of me by showing me a website.”

“You looked at it?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think?”

It was my turn to shrug. “I thought it was a lot of crap.”

Aidan’s demeanor shifted. He crossed his legs, creating more distance even if he wasn’t aware of it. At first I wasn’t sure whether I’d upset him by giving him an answer he hadn’t expected, but then I realized it was the opposite. I’d given him exactly the answer he’d expected. He was used to defending himself.

“I don’t care what you think,” he said.

Lies. If he didn’t care, he wouldn’t have asked. Hell, he wouldn’t have let me back in here. I didn’t know why, but he cared, and I didn’t want to screw that up. “You don’t understand,” I told him. “I thought it was a lot of crap that you refuse to date me on the basis of being asexual. This isn’t about sex.” The fact that I wanted to shift into my wolf form and lick him all over wasn’t relevant.

“You said I was your mate.” Still so defensive.

“That’s because you are. Whether I have sex with you or not doesn’t change that.”

“It doesn’t?” Aidan sounded skeptical. He didn’t trust me, not yet, and why should he? To him, we were strangers. But there had to be something about our connection that Aidan could sense, because he hadn’t thrown me out yet.

“I only get one mate, and that’s you, and nothing’s going to change that.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because that’s the way it is.” I’d never questioned it, never felt any need to. Why would I? I only had to close my eyes, inhale, catch his scent and listen to the way my wolf wanted to be all over him. And then I shut my eyes and did just that, breathed for a moment. It was easier than watching Aidan battle with himself over something that was so simple to me.

“So you’re saying you can date me without wanting to fuck me?”

Crude. He wanted to get a rise out of me, see what I was made of. I grinned, because it was a wolfish thing to do, challenging another to get to know them. But I ignored the question. If I wanted to slip past his defenses, I had to take his mind off sex. It was clear he was never going to relax as long as his thoughts kept circling around that.

So I said, “My dad died a couple of years ago.”

Aidan shot me a confused look. Good. That would give his mind something else to puzzle over. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head, because I hadn’t brought the topic up to get his sympathy. “My mom was broken up about it at first, but it didn’t take her long to get a grip. She completely took over the pack, like she was indestructible. I had no idea how she did it. So I asked her. Want to know what she told me?”

His brow furrowed slightly, Aidan had his sapphire eyes completely focused on me as he nodded.

“She said she was sad that Dad was gone, but that she’d see him again in the next life. She said we spend all our lives with our mates. That’s why we recognize their scent. We already know them. We remember.”

Aidan sat silent. I desperately wanted to know what was going through that beautiful head of his, but I had to let him process what I’d said. As I waited, I leaned back, and the cushions did almost swallow me whole, but it was so comfortable. It felt right to relax around my mate, even if he hadn’t accepted his status yet. One way or another, I was going to find a way to get into his pants without getting into his pants.

“You think you know me from a past life?” Aidan asked eventually. He’d uncrossed his legs. Letting his guard down?

“I think it’s a nice idea. It makes sense to me.” In all honesty though, it didn’t matter much to me where this sense of belonging came from. It mattered that it was there. That it was true.

Aidan fell silent again, seemingly pondering things. “I don’t know if I believe that,” he said then. “But I agree that it’s a nice idea.” He gave me a soft smile. It was the nicest smile I’d ever seen on anyone. It made me want to wrap my arms around him and hold him tight until he saw things the way I saw them—until he saw that I wasn’t going to let him go, and that I wasn’t going to let him down.

Sadly, that had to wait. For now, all I could do was smile back at him.

“Can you shift again?” he asked me.

“If your roommate isn’t going to freak out again.”

“Never mind her. I’ve seen it but I still can’t really believe you’re a wolf. I want to see it once more.”

“I’m going to get hair all over your couch.”

“I don’t mind.” He was still smiling. “It was actually kind of nice to hear Ruby call someone else a freak for once.”

“You’re not a freak.”

“I know.” But his tone of voice hinted at the things he didn’t say. That he knew he wasn’t a freak, but other people weren’t so sure. Fuck them. I vowed that if someone called him a freak in front of me, they weren’t going to do it a second time. Suppressing my anger for now, I focused on shifting into my wolf form. I’d never say no to letting him see my wolf.

The world shifted as I did. Some things came into sharper focus—smells, sounds—while others slipped out of it, like colors. The center of my attention, however, stayed the same. I curled up on the couch next to Aidan, looking at him as he eyed me curiously.

He reached a hand out tentatively, and I lowered my head in an attempt to make him understand that I wasn’t going to attack him if he touched me. I rested my head on my paws and closed my eyes as he stroked the fur next to my ear.

That was nice. I didn’t usually let people pet me like I was a domestic animal; I was the leader of a wolf pack after all, but this... I could get used to this. So I lay on the couch and let him pet me. Until... until I blinked my eyes open and noticed that the sky was darkening outside. I felt groggy, like I had trouble waking up. Shit. Somehow, I’d fallen asleep without planning to.

And as it seemed, so had Aidan. He was lying on the couch beside me, one arm slung across the fur on my back. Apparently animals didn’t warrant the same caution as people. I stretched my front paws to help me wake up, and, before I could think about it, I licked my mate’s cheek.

When I stayed in wolf form for too long, I started acting like one, giving control over to the animal side of me.

Aidan opened his eyes, but didn’t look like he’d taken offense at what I’d done, if it had even registered with him. “Morning,” he mumbled.

*Something like that.* It was already evening, really.

I tilted my head and waited for him to wake up and get off the couch. If I shifted back now, he'd have a naked man lying next to him, and I didn't think he'd be quite as comfortable with that.

He stood up and ran a hand through his sleep-tousled hair. I had to stop myself from wondering what his hair would look like after sex. I wasn't going to fuck him. Sex was overrated, right? I could jerk off in the shower, right?

"Okay," Aidan said, turning to me. "You get one date, stalker."

I wagged my tail before I could stop myself. Maybe it was only a date, but I was going to make it count.

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## Chapter Four

I didn't know how to do dates. There'd never been any reason for me to date guys. I'd always known that one day I would meet The One, and until that time came, why would I date other guys?

Didn't matter how many good reasons I had for not knowing how to do romance, the fact remained the same: I needed some advice. Of course, I couldn't just walk up to my mother and ask her how to romance my mate. That would have been embarrassing. No, I was a man, and I would handle my mate by myself. And maybe with the help of some of my mother's movies. She had a whole collection of flicks that I'd always deemed too girly to watch, but I was sure a fair number of them included dates that were designed to sweep someone off their feet.

In an attempt to glean knowledge from them, I stayed up half the night, watching one stupid movie after another until I fell asleep in front of the TV. When I woke up in the morning, I was half surprised not to be lying in a puddle of goo, as I was sure my brain had melted halfway through the third movie.

Did real-life people really appreciate being told that their eyes were the brightest, warmest stars in the known universe?

There was no way I was going to tell Aidan crap like that. No way.

Or that's what I thought until I stood in front of his door that evening, a bundle of colorful flowers in my hand, sweating like I hadn't even known was possible, feeling like a fool. What *was* I going to say?

*Stay calm. Act natural.*

I made myself ring the doorbell.

Aidan opened the door almost immediately. He'd known I was coming. But if he was nervous about this, he didn't look it. He greeted me with a smile and... whatever I was going to say left my mind. And left me staring at him like someone brain-dead. This was the first time I didn't see him in pajamas. He looked stunning in those, but he looked breathtaking in clothes that actually complemented him. The way those jeans hugged his hips...

"Nice to see you," he said, and I made myself look back up at his face.

"Very nice."

*Idiot.*

*The flowers. Give him the flowers.*

I handed them to him. He took one look before putting them down on a low table inside the apartment. “Allergic.”

*Shit.*

“It’s okay.” He stepped out of the apartment and drew the door shut behind him. “You couldn’t know. Where are we going?”

“Bernard’s.”

“Oh, really?” He seemed surprised, but surprised in a good way. So maybe I’d done one thing right. Which was a surprise to me because I’d chosen the restaurant blindly. The only food places I’d been to in the city were fast-food joints, and even without the movies I’d have known those weren’t appropriate. My favorite dish would always be whatever I hunted down myself in the forest, but I was going to save that for another day.

Another reason that I’d picked *Bernard’s* was that it was within walking distance, and close to a park. After dinner I’d walk him home through there and it would be totally romantic. Or something. Maybe.

“So what’s it like, being a wolf?” Aidan asked as we walked down the road toward the restaurant.

“I don’t know. What’s it like being human?” I grinned to let him know I was joking. “It has its ups and downs.”

“What are the ups?”

“I get to transform into a wolf.” I said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “No really, the ups are improved sense of smell and hearing.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “So what are the downs?”

“Improved sense of smell and hearing.”

He laughed. I smiled to myself. If I could make him laugh, maybe this dinner wouldn’t be a total disaster, despite the screw up with the flowers.

“Seriously,” I said. “Don’t ever sleep anywhere with a lot of people in one house when you can hear everything. I mean *everything!*”

It took a moment for him to get my meaning, then he grimaced. “Oh God.”

“Yeah. Great sense of smell isn’t always that good either.”



“I can imagine.” He glanced at me. “Now I’m going through my day trying to remember if I ate anything that smells disgusting.”

“You’re fine.” I closed the distance between us a little until we were almost holding hands. Almost. “Your smell is the best.”

That was weird to say, wasn’t it? Like a line from a really bad romance movie, but it didn’t seem to bother him. “Is that your expert opinion?” he asked.

“It is indeed. Honestly, if you’re thinking about using scented soaps or anything, stop it. Really, I…” I trailed off before I could tell him that I wanted to throw him on a bed, take off his clothes and bury my nose in his skin. Probably not appropriate conversation for a first date. So I tried to change the topic by saying, “You want to know what the very best thing about being a wolf really is?”

“Sure.”

“It’s when I’m shifted,” I said. “I mean, when I’m in my wolf form and the full moon is out and I can feel the wind in my fur and I just run.”

“Run?”

“Through the forest behind the city.”

“I didn’t know there were wolves there.”

“There’s us.”

“You run together?”

“It’s the best thing.” So long as the asswolves weren’t trying to undermine my authority.

“It sounds really nice,” Aidan said. His voice had something wistful to it that made me stop and turn to him. He stopped too, a questioning look on his face.

“You’ll experience it,” I told him. “One day, you’ll be part of my pack, and you’ll experience it.” I was serious, no joking now, and I hoped he could see that. Maybe he could, because he didn’t just brush me off.

Instead he asked, “How do you mean?”

I couldn’t tell whether he liked the idea or not, but I hoped it was the former. “Since you’re my mate, one day you’re going to be a wolf too.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” The moment didn’t seem right to tell him what exactly turning him would entail. I didn’t want to talk about sex tonight. Not at all.

He seemed to sense that I didn’t want to say any more about it, and moved on. “Haven’t even decided that you’re going to get a second date yet.” His tone was playful.

“I don’t need a second date. I’m going to win you over in one.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, really.” I smiled, feeling my confidence return. We’d almost reached the restaurant, and so far, things weren’t going horribly.

My luck changed somewhat when we entered the place and I was asked for a reservation. I didn’t have one.

How did you need a reservation to eat somewhere?

That was ridiculous.

But my telling the waiter that didn’t make him change his mind.

Bastard.

We didn’t spend five minutes at Bernard’s before we were out on the streets again. Wonderful. I had no idea what to do now.

“You really didn’t know, did you?” Aidan asked, standing with his hands in his pockets. The wind had picked up and I could tell the night was going to be cold.

“What?”

“That you need reservations for places like this.” He shook his head. “Am I your first date?”

I licked my lips. Would it make me seem less desirable if I admitted that? In the movies I’d watched, none of the women had wanted to date players, but in the end, they fell for them anyway. “I never really had to do the date thing,” I said eventually.

“Yeah.” His gaze traveled over me. “I can see how.”

I allowed myself a small smile. “So you can still see that I’m handsome?” Damn it, I hadn’t wanted to bring the asexuality thing up tonight.

“I’m a photographer; I’m not blind.”

He had said that he liked pretty things. Did that go for handsome things, too? I wanted him to like me, but to achieve that, I had to pull my head out of my ass. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply—”

He waved me off. “It’s okay. It may be hard for you to understand, but I can appreciate someone’s beauty without feeling the need to touch them or anything. It’s a little like looking at a well done painting. Some people are walking works of art.”

“Have you never...” I trailed off because the point of this evening was not to ask him all sorts of personal questions about his sexuality. I had to stop that. But he was right, and this whole thing *was* hard to understand for me. Luckily, he was patient. Maybe he’d expected me to have some trouble with the concept of asexuality. Maybe he was used to that.

“Have I never what?” he asked. He took his hands out of his pockets and let them hang loosely by his sides, his body language saying he wanted me to ask my questions and get it over with.

“Have you never had a wet dream? Have you never wanted to touch someone?”

“I don’t remember most of my dreams and... I don’t mind cuddling?”

“Cuddling?” He looked like he was serious. Okay. “I can do cuddling.”

He shot me a grin. “I’m really not going to get rid of you, huh?”

“Nope.”

“All right, then.” He turned around. “Come on.”

“Where are you going?”

“Since you don’t have a plan, we’re going back to my place. I can fix us something to eat.”

I did have a plan! It just hadn’t worked out. “Wait,” I said. “Let’s go through the park.”

“That’s a detour.”

“But a romantic one!” I couldn’t stop my mouth from moving before the words were out. Somehow I didn’t seem to have full control of what I was saying tonight. “I mean... it’s nice.”

He hesitated for a moment, then said, “Okay. Let’s go through the park.”

“Great.” We fell into step side by side again, still not quite touching but almost. He’d worried about how he smelled earlier. He’d been right to. This close, his scent was nearly driving me insane, but not for the reasons he’d insinuated. And I had to guess that it was because I liked smelling him so much that I completely missed what else hung in the air. Rain.

The first fat drops hit us about five minutes after we’d entered the park. So much for my romantic walk in the moonlight. “Fuck,” I cursed as it rained down on us. I didn’t like being crude, but man, it was like the universe was acting out a vendetta against me tonight. I was trying my hardest to get my asexual mate to like me despite not being attracted to me. Why couldn’t I get one rainless night to do so?

“It’s okay,” Aidan said again. “Come on, let’s run.”

Maybe there was one good thing about the rain, because Aidan grabbed my hand as he said that. For a moment I was too stupefied to move, but then he tugged, and I ran.

That’s what I got for saying I wanted to run with my mate.

Curse you, Karma.

Thankfully, Aidan was fast. I wondered what kind of sports he was into, because he had no trouble keeping up with me. We reached his apartment building in almost no time at all. Still, we were both drenched, and despite the water dripping from my hair and the uncomfortable cold, I couldn’t help but stare at the way his clothes clung to his body as he fiddled with the key to unlock the door.

“Man, I’m really wanting something hot now.”

I stopped myself from saying, “You’re something hot,” just in time.

We went up into the apartment and Aidan vanished into his room for a minute as I stood dripping all over the floor in the hallway. Part of me was tempted to shift into my wolf form and shake the rain out of my fur. That probably wouldn’t be welcomed. When Aidan came back, he’d changed into dry clothes. He held a towel and another bundle of fabric out to me.

“You should probably change too. You’ll catch a cold.”

I took the towel first and rubbed my hair with it.

“Ruby’s out,” Aidan said. “So it doesn’t matter where you change.”

I could only look at him for several seconds. Then I stared at the bundle of clothes in his hands.

“They should fit you,” he said.

So not the problem.

The coin seemed to drop for him. “Oh. I’m not saying I want you to change in front of me, but hey, I’ve seen you naked.”

*And you didn’t particularly care. Point taken.*

“I don’t think I want to change my clothes.”

“You’re dripping.”

“I’ll dry.”

He sighed. “Is this because I—”

“No.” But it was. And I had to move past this. So he wasn’t sexually attracted to me. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever. Big deal. I grabbed the clothes from him. “I’ll just be in the bathroom for a moment.”

“Okay.” I could feel his eyes on my back as I moved down the hall, but he didn’t say anything else, and neither did I. The clothes did fit me. They were a little tight, but for one night, I could manage. What was harder to handle than the clothes’ size was their smell. Everything in this apartment had Aidan’s scent on it, but on his clothes, it was especially strong.

I rubbed my nose as if that would make it go away.

My wolf whined within me.

It wanted to touch and lick and wrap itself around Aidan. So did I. But if I wanted any chance of that happening in the future I had to get my shit together and save this date from ending as a total disaster.

When I left the bathroom, Aidan stood in the kitchen, in front of the oven. “Frozen pizza okay with you?”

“Very romantic.”

Aidan shrugged. “It’s all I got.” Maybe he wasn’t the most romantic person either.

Then how was I supposed to get him?

“We can eat in the living room,” he said. “Just don’t fall asleep on the couch again before dinner’s ready. I’m starving.” That seemed to be all he wanted to say on the subject of food, so I let it drop. I did still feel that I needed to do something romantic, though. It was all I could think about as I sat next to him on the couch, shoving slices of greasy pizza into my mouth.

“You have the brightest, prettiest eyes of anyone in the universe.”

Aidan stared at me.

I wanted to stare at myself, too. Had I really just said that?

“What?” Aidan asked.

I put the pizza down. “Shit. I can’t do this.”

“Do what?” His appetite didn’t seem lessened. He picked up the piece I’d discarded.

“This.” I waved my hands to symbolize everything. “Romance. This is a train wreck.”

“It’s okay.”

“You keep saying that, but it’s not.” I’d wanted this to be perfect, and this was definitely not that.

“It is okay,” he insisted. “So we didn’t eat in a fancy restaurant, so what? You need to relax.” He ate the last of the pizza like he really wasn’t bothered.

“You don’t know how important this is to me.”

“How important what is to you? That we have some kind of perfect date?”

Had he read my mind?

“You’re my mate, Aidan, and it’s really, really hard for me to...” I trailed off because I didn’t want to tell him that it was hard for me not to touch him, to watch him eat pizza like he didn’t have a care in the world while I was trying my hardest to suppress my most basic instincts, while I didn’t know if I even mattered to him at all.

Maybe he could tell some of what I was thinking, because he said, “I know I’m not exactly the easiest person to date.”

Before I could figure out how to respond, he moved closer. I swallowed, holding back from reaching out and grabbing him and pulling him into my arms, because I didn’t want easy. I wanted him.

He stopped a mere inch away from me. “You know what’ll make it even harder?”

“What?”

“If you keep acting like I’ll break if you touch me.”

It was practically an invitation, wasn’t it? I stared into his eyes. He stared back, unmoving. “You know what I said earlier about your eyes? Yeah, I’m not taking it back.”

He laughed, and then he leaned forward to kiss me. I felt like maybe I should pull back and tell him he didn’t have to do that, but there was only so much self-restraint I could exert over the course of one evening. No way was I stopping him now. Our lips lingered on each other’s for long seconds and I felt my whole body light up with a warmth I hadn’t felt before. I wanted, needed him closer. And so I pulled him in my lap and kissed him harder. Finally, I felt like something was going right. This felt right. Touching him, kissing him, feeling the solid heat of his body on top of mine. The rush was almost enough to make me dizzy. It was certainly enough to make me hard.

Aidan’s tongue swept over my lower lip and I groaned as I felt my cock pulse against the fabric of my pants. I wasn’t going to fuck Aidan. I knew I wasn’t going to fuck Aidan, but that didn’t stop the hormones from racing through my body. And it didn’t stop my wolf from wanting more.

I didn’t know how long I could keep myself from doing something stupid like pushing Aidan into the cushions and...

No, I couldn’t think about that.

As gently as I could, I grabbed his shoulders and moved him off me. Breaking the connection almost felt like losing a part of me.

“Brandon?”

“I think I should go.” I needed to hide somewhere until I could think clearly again. “I’ll bring your clothes back.” I got up from the couch as I talked and went into the hallway, where I put on my shoes. He stood in the doorway to the living room, eyeing me skeptically.

“It’s still raining out,” he said.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t care that you got a hard-on.”

*Maybe not, but you'd mind if I tried doing something with it. I'm not going to be that person.* "I'll call you," I said, cringing, even as the words left my mouth, but I didn't know what else to say. I left before Aidan could form a response.

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Wonderful. Just freaking wonderful. I was still cursing myself by the time I got home. We'd only been kissing and I'd almost lost it. How was I going to manage a relationship? By simply never touching him again? That wasn't an option. Neither could I spend my life storming off every time my mate touched me.

But what kind of mate would I be if I made him have sex with me when he didn't really want it?

Shrugging off the clothes Aidan had lent me, I went to my room and booted the laptop. This wasn't something I could figure out by myself. The website Aidan had told me about was still in my browser's history. I clicked it. The FAQ loaded again, but this time I made my way to the community forums. Scrolling through them, I noticed one area called "*For Sexual Partners, Friends and Allies.*" Bingo. Nice to know there were other people in my situation.

I thought about opening a thread to ask for advice, but was torn on what to call it. "How do I explain to my inner wolf that my mate does not want sex even when he's kissing me?" I'd probably have to leave out the wolf part. And asking advice from strangers on the Internet about how to handle my mate felt... Well, not like something any respectable alpha would do. I could just hear the asswolves laughing behind my back if they ever found out.

I must have done *something* right to get him to kiss me. But what? I didn't know. I only knew that the feeling of his lips on mine was unlike anything I'd experienced before or was likely to experience again with someone else. I didn't want someone else. I only wanted to figure out how to make this work with Aidan. I clicked through several threads on the forums.

Apparently some of the "mixed couples" out there made compromises. Like having sex once a month or once a week or whatever worked for them. Not all asexuals, it seemed, thought that sex was disgusting, although there were those, too. Some threads even talked about how to get yourself used to the idea of touching your partner's genitals. I wondered if Aidan was sex-repulsed. Maybe



not. At least, he hadn't seemed repulsed by my hard-on. Not all asexuals—aces, as they liked to call themselves—were the same.

Maybe Aidan liked kissing. Some aces did.

What else did he like?

I should have asked him instead of fleeing the scene with my tail between my legs.

Shit. He had to be thinking the worst of me right now.

Tomorrow, I had to meet with him and fix this.

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## Chapter Five

I made my way back to Aidan's apartment the next day, apologies churning through my head as I rang the doorbell. This time, however, it wasn't Aidan who answered the door. It was Ruby, who didn't seem too pleased to see me.

"Oh, it's you," she greeted me.

"Waiting for someone?"

"Nah." She was chewing bubblegum in between talking. Strawberry bubblegum. The scent was coming off her, almost overlaying what I could catch of Aidan's scent coming from inside. "Aidan's not around."

I knew it even before she said it. The smell of artificial strawberries couldn't have distracted me if he had been. "Do you know where he is?" I asked.

"You're a bit of a stalker, huh?"

"I'm not a stalker." Just... persistent? God, I really was sounding like a stalker. "I have no bad intentions, okay? I only want to apologize."

"Yeah..." She looked at me thoughtfully. "I'll tell you if you tell me how you can turn into a wolf."

"My mom had sex with a radioactive canine."

"Really?"

I blinked. How could she even consider for a second that... Not important here. "Tell me where Aidan is, please."

"He's teaching a fencing class at the gym on Second Street."

Fencing? Unexpected, but cool.

Ruby went on as I turned away from her. "I don't think he wants to see you right now."

So they'd been discussing that failure of a date. Great. "I know," I said. "That's why I need to apologize."

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I got to the gym only a few minutes before the class was over and people started coming out of the building. I waited on the opposite side of the quiet

road until my mate exited the gym. He was dressed more casually today than he had been yesterday, but I didn't think I'd ever get enough of seeing him in any way, shape, or form. I approached him and he froze when his eyes landed on me. He frowned.

“Are you really stalking me now?”

Dear Lord... “Ruby told me where I could find you.”

“I see.” He looked like he was going to have a word with his roommate when he got home.

“I came to apologize. I'm sorry for yesterday.”

His expression turned hard. “What exactly are you sorry for?”

“Running off.”

He relaxed a little. “Good.” Had he thought I was going to apologize for getting an erection? Yeah, even I knew that'd be stupid.

“I also want to apologize for the botched date,” I continued.

“I don't care about that. The weather, the food, I could deal with that. You know what sucks, though? When your date runs away after you kiss him.”

I cringed. Yeah, I'd screwed that up.

“I gave you a chance because I thought you might be different,” he said.

“I am!”

Aidan eyed me intently, waiting for me to continue.

“I'm a wolf.”

“So what?”

“So I...” I stopped for a moment to think. How to explain this to regular humans? To someone who'd never experienced it? “So I have this animal side in me. My wolf. And sometimes, it takes over. When you kissed me, it felt like I was going to lose control of it, and I freaked.” Not my proudest moment.

Aidan frowned, apparently thinking about my words. “What would have happened if you'd stayed?”

“I don't know.” I ran a hand through my hair, feeling uncomfortably warm in the midday sun and under my mate's scrutinizing gaze. “I would have kept kissing you. I might have pushed you down and...”

“If I’d said stop?”

“What?”

“Would you... or would your wolf have continued if I’d told you to stop?”

The question caught me off-balance. “No.” I shook my head. “No, it...” *It loves you. It would never hurt you. It would never make me hurt you.* “God, I’m an idiot.”

Aidan kept his stern expression for a few seconds longer, then smiled at me. “You act like you’re all confident but you’re really adorable when you get flustered like that.”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d always been the cool type, the player, but Aidan disarmed me and scrambled my brain. Without even trying. Being an alpha, I’d always assumed my mate would be more subservient. It didn’t seem Aidan was down with that plan. Just as well. After being in charge of my pack all day, I didn’t want to come home to another person who expected me to take control.

“So this wolf thing is really important to you, huh?” Aidan asked.

“It’s who I am. I’m an alpha wolf.”

He nodded slowly. “I believe you. I’ve seen you shift. It’s only... still hard to wrap my head around.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t. I mean, I don’t understand everything.”

“You will. Eventually.” I’d help him every step of the way.

“You said I was your—your mate?”

“Yes.”

“Even if you are a wolf, how do I know there’s any truth to the mate thing, rather than being something you only believe in? Like, some sort of religion.”

I licked my lips. He was questioning things I’d never questioned before, and I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Seriously, do you pray to an almighty wolf-god?”

“I don’t. We don’t pray. It’s...” I shrugged helplessly. How did you explain innate knowledge to someone who didn’t have it? “It’s instincts.”

He didn't seem impressed. I scratched my neck, trying hard to come up with a way to make him see. Could I risk introducing my family to him? Hell, sooner or later I'd have to. "You should come have dinner with me and my mom."

"Don't you think it's a bit early to meet the parents?"

"She was human once."

That seemed to make him reconsider. "Okay," he said slowly. "I don't know how you make me want to do this, but okay." He raked a hand through his hair, then looked at the gym, then back at me, like he was questioning his life's choices.

I stepped a little closer to him, invading his personal space, but he didn't back away. The deep blue pools of his eyes were focused entirely on me now. "Because you're my mate. And I'm yours." *Your mate. Your whatever-you-need-me-to-be.*

He tilted his head. "Look at that. Your confidence is back."

"You don't like it?"

"No, I do." He shook his head at himself. "It's stupid, but I do. I'm still not sold on your story, though," he said, but his gaze flickered from my eyes to my lips and I knew what he wanted.

"Really?" I asked. "Not sold at all?" Even with his dulled human senses, he had to sense something in the air between us. I raised my hand and let it rest on his chest, felt his heart beat fast under my fingertips.

"Maybe a little."

I kissed him. Gently, slowly, deeply. I kissed him for a long time.

He didn't tell me to stop.

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## Chapter Six

“My mate’s coming over for dinner tomorrow,” I told my mom that evening as I got home.

“Wonderful,” she said, shutting off the TV. She’d been watching the news. “What does he like to eat?”

Aside from frozen pizza? “I don’t—”

“I’ll just cook up a nice selection then. We should invite the rest of the pack, too. Don’t you think? Maybe not Mary. She’s been grumpy lately, but—”

“I told him it was just you and me.”

She waved with the remote. “Nonsense, dear. What do you think? That a few more people around will kill him? It’ll make it less awkward for him to meet me if it’s a group thing.”

Maybe she had a point. And I knew I could never change her mind.

Still, I felt the need to warn Aidan of this new development when he came over to our house the next day. I waited for him outside. He was on time, coming up the dirt road on a motorbike. The blue metal of the machine gleamed in the sun. It was beautiful. And it had a beautiful person riding on it. I smiled as I watched Aidan park and take off his helmet.

“Hey,” I said. “I didn’t know you had a bike.”

“Yeah, I’ve had her for a while.” He approached me. “Remind me why I’m doing this?”

“It’ll be fine.” I took his hand and led him inside the house.

“Smells nice,” he said as we passed the kitchen.

“You’ll love my mom’s food.” But it wasn’t time for dinner yet, so we went up the stairs into my room. I closed the door behind us. “We’re having some more guests,” I told him then.

“More guests?”

I grimaced. “My mom invited almost the entire pack. I’ll understand if you want to leave.”

“Oh. No. It’s fine.” He set his helmet down on my desk. “How many members does your pack have?”

“Around twenty, counting the little ones.”

“And they’re all wolves?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” Aidan tilted his head. “And they all listen to you?”

“Mostly.”

“Fascinating.” Aidan scratched his chin although he had no stubble to speak of. “Am I going to be like first lady to your people?”

What? “You’re not a lady.”

I must have made a stupid face, because he laughed. “I guess not. I’m just wondering where I’d go in the hierarchy if I was your mate.”

“You are my mate.”

He raised his hands, as if in surrender. “Okay, okay. If I am your mate.”

“They wouldn’t have to listen to you the way they listen to me. But no one would dare lay a hand on you.” Not if they didn’t want an impression of my teeth in their neck.

“Mmm...” Aidan turned to my shelf as he processed the words. I sat on my bed, watching as he looked through my possessions.

“See anything you like?”

“These movies. I love these.” He ran his finger through the dust that had accumulated on my collection of X-Files DVDs. I hadn’t watched those since my father passed away. But now I wanted to pop them in and spend the evening cuddled up with Aidan on the couch.

“They’re my favorites.”

Aidan grinned like a little kid. “Movie night after dinner?”

“Sure.” If he still wanted to be with me after meeting the pack, he could have whatever he wanted. “Listen, Aidan, there’s some wolves in my pack who...” I paused, trying to figure out how to word this right. “They might have some issues with you. They’re assholes.”

“I can deal with assholes.”

“I’m sure you can.”

I was probably worried for no reason.

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For the first half hour or so, things were going smoothly. Aidan hit it off with my mother immediately. They bonded over laughing about how worried I was. I realized then that they were the same kind of person. Strong, independent, not taking shit from anyone. Mom approved of him. I could tell by the way she shoveled the food onto his plate before he could help himself to it.

To her, he was already part of the family. The long lost son she'd finally found. For a while, it seemed as if nothing was going to go wrong. People were chatting amicably, sitting around two tables in our backyard. I was seated between my mom and Aidan, like a buffer. An unnecessary buffer, as I now knew.

It was never my mom I should have worried about.

It wasn't even the asswolves who started the conversation that turned things from good to bad.

Nope, it was six-year-old Caitlin who sat across from me, sucked her lip in through her teeth like she was thinking really hard, and went, "Are you two doing what Mommy and Daddy are doing?"

I exchanged glances with Aidan, who seemed just as lost as me.

Caitlin, sweet little girl that she was, elaborated. "I went into their room last night and they were hugging real tight and—" At this point her mother, sitting to her right and red in the face, clasped a hand over her mouth.

"We were doing mate things, darling. You do not discuss mate things while people are eating. Come on, let's get you some dessert."

Caitlin's eyes lit up at the mention of dessert, and she went with her mother willingly.

I peered at Aidan, but he was digging into his food again, seemingly not bothered by the little girl's question. He lightly nudged me with his foot under the table, as if he had to reassure me that things were fine.

But it didn't stop there.

The asswolves down the table jumped at the opportunity to whittle away at my authority again. "Little Caitlin asked a good question," Jed said. "When's he going to run with us?"

Aidan shot me a questioning look. Apparently, he wanted to know, too. I really should have told him earlier what turning him would involve. Sure as hell would have been better than doing it with an audience.



“Problem, Brandon?” Jed asked at my silence. “Don’t tell me he won’t let you—”

“That is none of your business.” I might as well have said, *yes, he isn’t letting me screw him.*

“What’s going on?” Aidan asked, visibly confused now.

Jed addressed him. I know I said I wasn’t going to tear his throat out, but I was reconsidering it at that moment. “Your mate,” Jed said, pointing at me, “just doesn’t know how to tell us he’s not getting any.”

Aidan put his knife and fork down and looked Jed straight in the eyes. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

But the only thing that Jed heard was that I really wasn’t getting any. He laughed. “Look at that, our great leader fails to screw his mate.”

“He’s not failing to do anything. He’s respecting my boundaries.” Aidan’s eyes had turned to slits.

“Enough,” I said. Of course, no one listened. And why would they? Jed was right. I wasn’t making for a great leader right now. My face was flushed. I could feel it.

“You gonna turn him eventually, right?” Hayden asked. I felt everyone’s eyes on me. Aidan’s too. By now, he must have figured out the correlation between turning and sex. He wasn’t stupid. I felt like I was being asked to choose between my pack and my mate. It wasn’t fair. I wanted to turn Aidan, I really did. I wanted to run with him and share all those things with him that he could not understand without being a wolf. On the other hand, I’d be a horrible partner to do that to him without his consent. A horrible mate, or a horrible alpha who couldn’t turn his mate.

Aidan stood from the table. “I’m not having this conversation here.” He shot a glance at Jed. “You think you’re so manly because you’re getting laid, but in reality, you’re just scared your dick will shrivel up and die if you don’t use it to fuck someone. Newsflash: it doesn’t happen. Your manliness isn’t defined by how often you have intercourse.”

Jed stared at him, his mouth hanging slightly open. I could tell he was trying to come up with a response, but wasn’t prepared for this kind of conversation. “I’m sure you’d sound better if my dick was inside you,” he said then.

In a flash, I was up on my feet, shifted, on the other side of the table, and at Jed’s throat. Disrespecting me was one thing, but he was not going to talk to

Aidan that way. Jed swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed. The smell of fear came off him. He knew he'd crossed a line.

I growled.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

I backed off, and looked at Aidan. Or rather, I looked at the empty seat he'd left behind. He hadn't stuck around to see me attack Jed. Probably didn't care. Shit. I bolted around to the front of the house where I found him ready to mount his bike. I shifted back.

"Don't let those asswolves chase you away."

He lifted the visor of his helmet. "It's not them. I wear pajamas with stars and planets on them. Do you think I care what people think of me?"

It was the sex thing then. "I'm sorry. I should have told you before." But I hadn't wanted to scare him away.

"You should have."

"And I should have said something when—"

He cut me off. "You said enough by not saying anything. You're scared what your pack will think of you if you don't fuck me. Like it's any of their business." He paused to take a breath in what seemed like a vain attempt to calm down before he continued. "And you were scared what I would think of you if you'd told me sex was necessary for this wolf thing to work. As if I would run in panic at the very mention of it. You know, that's what pisses me off most about this. I can see you try so hard to meet my needs, but you won't even begin to trust me to meet yours. How is that fair?"

I opened my mouth but the words, whatever I was going to say, got stuck in my throat. He looked honestly hurt, and I didn't know what to say to make it better. "You don't have to—"

"Cut it," he said. "You don't get it. Can you even imagine how hard it is to date someone, especially someone you think you might like, knowing from the outset you can't make them happy the way a normal partner could?"

How had I made him think that he couldn't make me happy? "I'm sorry."

He shook his head.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

“It’s not about what I want you to do.” He sat on his bike. “You need to think about what you want—what you need from me. Then come tell me and be fucking honest this time.” With that, he pulled his visor down and started the machine. He was gone before I had any idea what to say to him. The smell of exhaust lingered in the air for a long time.

I didn’t rejoin the party after that. Wasn’t in the mood. Instead, I retreated up to my room, where only an hour before, I’d been making plans for a movie night. So much for that. For a second, I contemplated turning on my laptop and loading that website again, but no, that wouldn’t get me anywhere. This wasn’t a problem that could be solved by looking at other people’s relationships. This was between my mate and me. And what I wanted. Aidan was right. All this time, I’d been so focused on being what he wanted and so afraid to let him see what I wanted... I hadn’t been entirely honest. I’d wanted things to be perfect so much that I’d screwed it up. My gaze landed on the DVDs Aidan had wanted to watch. The DVDs I’d always watched with my dad.

I wondered what he would have done in my place.

Wanting, suddenly, to talk to him, I went down the stairs again and grabbed the car keys.

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The cemetery lay quiet in the light of the retreating sun. I hadn’t come here in a while, and I thought, maybe I wouldn’t remember the path to my father’s resting place, but my feet led me there almost without thinking. “Hey, Dad,” I said, kneeling by the grave site. Fresh, pink flowers lay on top of it. Maybe my mom or someone else from the pack had been here recently. My dad had been well respected and loved by all, as far as I could remember. He’d been the man I aspired to be, whose footprints I wanted to step in.

He’d left such large footprints.

“Just wanted to let you know I’ve found my mate,” I said softly, even though there was no one else around to hear me. I didn’t even think my dad could hear me, not really. If what Mom said was true, he would have moved on to the next life by now. Or maybe he hadn’t. Maybe he was chilling somewhere in the afterlife, waiting for her so they could be reincarnated together. I liked that thought.

“My mate’s a bit different from other mates, you know,” I went on, because even if there was no one listening, it was good to get it out. “He doesn’t want

sex, and I told him I could handle that, but now I'm not so sure. I'm not sure he even wants me to handle that." I rubbed the back of my neck. It was weird to say all this out loud. I had never talked about sex with my dad, hadn't been old enough when he'd died. "I told him he's my mate, doesn't matter if we have sex or not. That's true, right? Even if I don't turn him? I want to, though..."

In the silence that followed my words, I tried to imagine what my dad would have replied if he was still alive. Maybe something like: *Don't worry about it, son. Things will turn out okay.*

He'd never been a big worrier. Everything I struggled with now had seemed to come naturally to him. It was a bit unfair. "I'm sorry, Dad. I know I'm not really living up to your legacy, and I know if I don't turn him..." I paused, suddenly unsure if I wanted to turn Aidan because I needed my mate to be a wolf, or because I was worried about what the other wolves would think of me if I didn't.

I had to decide which was more important. And maybe I'd have to live with not being the perfect alpha I'd tried to be since Dad left us.

And maybe I couldn't be the perfect mate either.

Aidan wanted me to tell him what I needed. He wanted me to be honest. And honestly? This whole relationship without sex thing? I wasn't sure that I could do that. Love was more than sex, yes, but for me, the physical stuff was strongly tied to it. We had to reach some kind of compromise. It didn't need to be full-on intercourse, but I did need some form of intimacy, some form of release, or someday I'd just screw him against a wall. That wouldn't be fair to either of us.

I stood and brushed myself off. There were a few things I had to set right.

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## Chapter Seven

Before I went to see Aidan and make my apologies the next day, I stopped by a bakery and bought chocolate cake. Maybe the flowers hadn't worked, but cake appreciation was a big thing on AVEN. Apparently, because asexuals preferred cake over sex. According to them, if you thought sex was better than cake, you just hadn't met the right cake yet. Maybe this would be the right cake for me. If Aidan let me eat it with him...

I rang his doorbell and waited approximately twenty seconds before he opened. I knew because every one of those seconds felt like my heart was going to explode in my chest.

Aidan didn't offer a greeting, but he stepped aside to let me in.

"I brought cake." I held it out to him, and saw a crack in his stern expression as he took it.

"That's... thank you."

I followed him into the kitchen. He placed the cake on a table and turned to me, guarded again. "You came to talk?"

"I've done some thinking."

He nodded. I approached him, and he took a step back, but then the wall stopped him.

"You remember when I told you the best thing about being a wolf was running?" I asked him.

"Yeah." He gave me a curious look, maybe wondering where I was going with this, and why I was being this close.

"I've changed my mind," I said. "The best thing about being a wolf isn't the running, although that's pretty awesome, too."

"Oh?"

I looked at his lips as he spoke. I wanted to kiss him. But I wasn't done talking yet. "The best thing is knowing my mate when I see him," I said. If I were merely human, I might not have found Aidan, and that was a tragedy I didn't want to consider. "But know what's even better than that?"

Aidan raised an eyebrow at me.

“Being close to that mate.” I leaned in, almost brushing his lips, loving the way he didn’t lean away. He wanted this, too. Didn’t matter if he was asexual or not, he liked being close to me. I had to hold onto that. “Kissing him is also really good,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I closed the final bit of distance between us and demonstrated how good kissing was. He didn’t pull back. In fact, he opened his mouth to me, willingly. And that felt really good. I wasn’t nearly ready for it to be over when he broke away.

“But kissing’s not all you want,” he said.

“No, but—”

He shut me up by putting a finger over my lips. “No buts. What you want matters.”

I nodded. He was right, and I’d promised him honesty. “Kissing isn’t all I want. But that doesn’t mean you’re going to get rid of me.”

A soft smile played on Aidan’s lips, but it had something sad to it. “I never said I wanted to get rid of you. I’m sorry.” He moved, grabbing my shoulder gently to turn us around so I was the one with my back to the wall. I let him do it, wondering what he had in mind. “I shouldn’t have told you to go read that website,” he said then. I shot him a quizzical look. “Oh, it has good information. But it has no information on me. We aces aren’t all the same, you know. I should have let you know what I can and can’t do, instead of letting you search the Internet for it and coming to your own conclusion. It seemed easier that way because I didn’t think you were going to stick around.”

“I see.” He couldn’t have known how stubborn I would be. I grinned. Until he kissed me again. Hard on the lips. His hands were on my hips, his knee nudging between my legs, opening them. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Don’t worry.” His expression had something mischievous as he leaned in again, his lips finding mine. Not worrying, I closed my arms around his back and pulled him closer. His knee pressed to my groin and my body had an immediate reaction to that. God, but he smelled and tasted and felt so good in my arms. So right.

One of his hands moved from my hip to my crotch and... kneaded me through the fabric of my jeans. I breathed in through my nose as my cock swelled.

*Don't panic. He knows what he's doing. Let him do it.*

He seemed encouraged by my lack of protest, and fiddled with the buckle of my belt. I wished I wasn't wearing a belt. Finally, he got it open, along with my fly. I never stopped kissing him, afraid to break the moment. Maybe he felt the same way, because his lips were almost aggressive on mine as he reached into my pants and...

The feel of his hand around me was pure bliss.

I could feel my knees grow weak as he fondled me, almost exploratively before wrapping his fingers firmly around my length.

I broke the kiss. I needed air. "Aidan..."

"Shhh." He kissed my nose. And pumped my dick. My body heated up as he pressed me harder against the wall.

And here I'd thought I might have to wait for him to be brave enough to touch me. Hah.

He was right. He shouldn't have let me read that website.

Aidan withdrew his hand, and I bit back a whine.

He chuckled. "Not stopping," he said, spit into his hand, and reapplied it to me. "I'm not going to leave you hanging."

I almost moaned in relief when he stroked me from root to tip, up and down, and again. "Oh God, that feels so good." I know it was only a hand job, but knowing he only did this because he cared that much about me made it special. He wasn't touching me because he wanted me to reciprocate, or because he wanted to get off. He only wanted to make me happy. I could see it in his eyes. The way he looked at me. The way he kissed me. The way he gradually picked up the pace. When I let my head fall back, he kissed my throat. I could smell his shampoo mixed with the scent of him.

"It's okay to let go." He spoke the words against my skin.

I shut my eyes, bucked into his hand, and came.

Early, like a freaking teenager, but I didn't care.

And as it seemed, neither did Aidan. He kissed me again as I came down from the rush, smiled, and led me to the couch in the living room. He sat next to me and I pulled him into my lap, embraced him from behind and buried my nose in his neck. Breathed him in. "Thank you."

“Don’t thank me.”

I took his right hand. It was sticky, so I licked it clean. Pressed close to him, I could feel the shudder that went through him. No matter how casual he acted about it, it had taken some willpower for him to do what he’d just done for me.

“Complete honesty?” he asked.

“Please.”

“I like you. More than I should, probably, because I hardly know you, but yeah... I like seeing you happy. I like seeing you get off. I like being able to get you off.” He paused. Inhaled.

“But?” There was a but coming, he was screaming it with his body language.

“You’ll never get me off. Not like that. It’s physically possible, but...” He shook his head. “I don’t need it. I’ll never want that from you.”

I didn’t know exactly where the problem was, if this wasn’t something he wanted. I sure as hell wasn’t going to force an orgasm on him or whatever. And yet, this seemed important to him. Something that he needed to get off his chest. “That’s okay with me,” I said. I’d make him happy in other ways.

“Is it really?” he asked. “Because I’ve been with guys who said they were cool with my sexuality until they stuck their dick in me and realized theirs wasn’t the magic one that would save me.”

So he wasn’t a virgin. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. You don’t need saving.”

“It’s not the sex I can’t handle,” he continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “It’s agreeing to sex because I like someone and then getting these disappointed looks because I can’t get into it. It’s being treated like there’s something fundamentally wrong with me because I’m bad at pretending that another guy’s penis is the best thing that ever happened to me.”

I held him more tightly. Kissed his neck. “I’m never going to do that to you.” I hated to think that he had opened himself up to someone like that, how difficult it must have been for him, only to be rewarded with disdain. When all he’d wanted was to please some bastard. “I wish I’d found you sooner.”

He relaxed slightly. Laughed softly. “Me too, Bran.” He leaned back into me. “I just wanted you to know that if you really want to turn me, it’s... not impossible. I mean, in the future. If I’m really your mate or whatever.”



“Don’t worry about it.”

“It seemed like your pack—”

“Let them think what they want. They don’t get to dictate what we do with each other.”

“Okay.” He turned to look at me. “How do you feel about some cake?”

“Cake sounds perfect.”

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On the first night of the next full moon, I led my pack through the forest again. Running, like we did every month. Only this month, with one more participant. One human, riding on my back. Aidan held on tightly to my fur as I sped through the woods, well ahead of the rest of the pack. Although I could hear and smell the other wolves behind us, I liked to imagine there was only the two of us. When I’d pictured running with my mate in the past, I’d always thought he’d be running next to me, but this was nice too. Wouldn’t have traded it for anything in the world. Life was good. Somehow, leading the pack had become easier since I’d stopped worrying how they saw me. Maybe the asswolves could sense the change in my attitude and knew that picking on me wouldn’t get them anywhere.

Dating Aidan had become easier, too. Just last week I’d taken him out for a movie and dinner and it hadn’t sucked. Maybe one day I would turn him, but we would do it on our own time.

We were almost done for the night when I veered off course. I’d talked to my mom before, so the other wolves wouldn’t follow us. Tonight I wanted my personal run to end in a small clearing. The same one Aidan had photographed once.

“Stop here?” Aidan asked, looking around before he got off me. “This is nice. The running, that was really nice, too. I can see why you like it so much.” He sat in front of me, leaning against a tree. I licked his face. I couldn’t help it; I was always excited, and very much in touch with my animal side, after a run. Aidan laughed. I shifted back and kissed him, straddling his lap. He stilled, and pulled me closer. It didn’t seem to bother him that he had a naked guy pressing up to him. In fact, I could see his hand reaching for me.

I stopped him, taking his hand in mine.

“No,” I said. “I didn’t kiss you because I need to get off. I did it because I love having you with me tonight.” Sex had nothing to do with it whatsoever, and I didn’t want it to spoil the moment.

Aidan smiled at me. “It’s really beautiful out here.” He ran a hand through my hair. “Thanks.”

“Thanks for coming.” I sat next to him, one arm around his waist, keeping him close as he rested his head on my shoulder.

For a moment, all we did was look up at the stars in silence, and I felt that I didn’t need anything more than that. The stars, the forest, and him beside me.

“This is nice,” he said.

“Because it’s right. You’d feel it too, if you were a wolf.”

“I don’t need to be a wolf to feel it.”

I looked at him. “Do you believe me then? About the mate thing.”

He made a non-committal sound, but I could tell from his expression (trying too hard to be casual) that it was more of a yes than a no. I pulled him into my lap and kissed him deeply. Remembering that time he’d told me he wasn’t anyone’s mate. I hadn’t realized then how much he secretly wanted me to push through his defenses and prove him wrong. I held him close and he relaxed against me. Maybe he didn’t need sex, but his need for love was no different than mine. For a moment, he said nothing, then, “So if we’ve really lived before, like you mother says... do you think I...”

“Think you what?”

“Just wondering if I was asexual then too. If you have to put up with this in all your lives.”

“I don’t know. But I would.” Because this right here, this was the most intimate I’d ever been with anyone. And he wasn’t even naked.

“I realize this isn’t the perfect relationship you had in mind when you went looking for your mate.”

He was right about that. This relationship was unlike anything I’d imagined it would be when I’d been dreaming of finding my mate, but I was happy with it.

“Nothing’s ever perfect.” And it didn’t need to be.

“Yeah?” Aidan grabbed my hand and entwined our fingers, then lifted his head to look up at the sky, still leaning against me. “This moment kind of is.”

I laughed, but I didn’t say anything, because he was right. It kind of was.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Ana has been publishing m/m romance stories since July of last year (2014). Her interest in hot guy-on-guy action was first sparked by reading scandalous Japanese mangas. A dirty secret she couldn't resist. In a long bout of insanity—also known as her life—she decided to learn the language and escape to the land of sushi, sumo, and yaoi.*

*She's since moved back to Europe to be with the love of her life—delicious European chocolate.*

*Now she resides in the sunny part of Germany where she fills her days chasing her dreams and writing about men in complicated relationships. Her family believes she's writing "erotic manga stories." She's pleased they got the erotic part right, at least.*

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