

## Date Night

"You're looking very pleased with yourself," said Ellie.

Her sister-in-law, Violet blushed, and Ellie snickered.

Ellie was mated to Hank, and his older brother, Greyson had mated with Violet quite recently. Ellie, Hank, and Greyson were all wolf shifters, belonging to the same wolf shifter pack, while Violet was a witch, a new addition who had moved there to be near her daughter, Rosalee, who mated with their alpha. Violet had grown up in the area, leaving when she was barely eighteen, but none of them really knew her before she moved back. Her mother had hated the wolf pack; back in the day, Violet had been sent to a different school to them - away from any wolfy influences.

But Violet was back, and happy in her new-found love with Greyson. Ellie was pleased. Her brother-in-law had been lonely since his mate died over twenty years ago, and she was glad to see him so happy.

Ellie poured Violet another cup of tea. It was a rare treat for Ellie to find time to brew a whole pot of tea. Neither her mate nor her four boys could be entreated to the ritual of brewing tea, while Ellie's daughter-in-law barely had the time to sleep – she had two children under three and another on the way. But Violet always had time for tea, and occasionally even read the tea leaves.

Ellie let out a theatrical sigh. "Okay, what did Mr. Perfect do for you this time?"

Violet shook her head, protesting it was nothing, even as the delighted smile grew even more.

"Come on, tell me," she laughed. "I finished reading my latest romance, and I need something to keep me going."

Violet looked up as there was a loud crash from outside, followed by some swearing. Greyson and Hank were figuring out that maybe a plumber was needed for the new house. Ellie's oldest son, Mal, and his mate, Terri, were building their new home right next door to Ellie and Hank, much to Ellie's pleasure. It was almost finished, there were just a few hiccups, which occurred when the men building the house were too stubborn to bring in outside help.

"Maybe we should..." started Violet, worry marring her brow.

"They'll be fine," dismissed Ellie.

She'd been with Hank for more than thirty years; if there was one thing she knew, it was that he was darn hardy. He'd have to be considering all the crazy things he used to do. Well, he still did some of them – much to her and her inner wolf's chagrin.

"Tell me about his romantic gesture."

Violet tried not to smile too much. "I'm sure I'm making it out to be more than it was. But, this morning while I was in bed..."

Ellie smirked, wondering where it was going. Greyson, much like Hank, was not shy about sex. Violet, on the other hand, was a little more reserved and rebuked him for divulging details of their love life.

“It’s nothing like that!” grumbled Violet on seeing her expression.

Ellie shrugged. She wasn’t shy about sex either, and wouldn’t mind hearing about it. She shared details with Violet about her sexual escapades with Hank, at least until Violet begged her to stop.

“But, he brought me breakfast in bed, and gave me this.”

She pulled a box out of her purse and opened it.

“Oh, my word! I’m blind! I’m blind!” protested Ellie on seeing the beautiful diamond ring.

Violet giggled in delight and fingered the ring. “He had it custom made, and in the center of it, there are petals from a violet flower.”

Ellie oohed and ahed as she took it out of the box and pored over the beautiful item. The engraving said, ‘Violet & Greyson Forever.’

“It’s lovely, does this mean...”

Violet nodded and took a deep breath. “We’re getting married. He proposed. I mean, there’s no need – we are mated after all. But he said he wanted to follow human traditions as well, and for everyone to know that I was his and he’s mine and that we would be together forever.”

“Oh, congratulations!” cried Ellie, flinging her arms around Violet.

When they pulled back, Violet laughed on seeing that Ellie was wearing it on her finger and looking at it critically.

“That Greyson, all these years, I had no idea he was so romantic,” she said, admiring the way the diamond glittered in the sunlight.

“I’m sure Hank is too,” said Violet.

Ellie snorted. “I love him to bits, but he is not romantic. I’m not sure he even was when we first met.”

They had been a bit young for that when they were teenagers, and their dates involved making out in cars in secret because Ellie’s father didn’t approve of the leering, self-confident young man trying to mate his daughter. Then they were newly mated and struggling to pay for their house and to send Ellie to college. Her father had not approved of her mating and refused them any financial help, but she wanted it, so Hank supported her. Then they had kids, and all their time was taken with supporting and looking after their increasing family. There was never really a romantic, wooing portion of their life. Her wolf huffed and Ellie soothed her – not that she was disappointed about that.

“You two are always all over each other,” said Violet with a mild blush.

Ellie waved a dismissive hand as her wolf growled lustily. “Oh yes, we have sex all the time – he’s as inexhaustible as when we were teenagers when it comes to that. Even more so since Greyson bought him a copy of the kama sutra a few years back.”

Though she was glad they were no longer restricted to having sex in his mom’s station wagon - there wasn’t enough room in the car for all the positions he wished to try, or au natural in the woods – squirrels are total perverts.

Violet blushed even more and Ellie, who wasn’t an unkind person, quickly changed the subject.

“How come you’re not wearing the ring?” She slipped it off her fingers and handed it back.

“We still need to tell Rosalee, and I want her to hear it from me, so please don’t tell anyone.”

“Well, I can be the soul of discretion, but big mouth...”

The big mouth in question, otherwise known as her mate, Hank, erupted through the door, a grin splitting his handsome face.

“Congratulations!” he boomed in his usual enthusiastic, good-natured way.

He swept Violet into a hug, and to save him from Greyson jealously mauling him, Ellie hugged Greyson and kissed his cheek, before quickly dragging Hank away from Violet and snuggling into his arms to keep him occupied.

“This is wonderful news,” rumbled Hank, who could generally be relied upon to be optimistic and happy about everything. “Hey, best man, right here.” He pointed a thumb at his chest.

“I dread to think what your toast might be,” grumbled Greyson, slipping an arm around Violet.

“I got a million stories,” boasted Hank.

“He does,” agreed Ellie with a roll of her eyes.

“Really?” murmured Violet, raising an eyebrow.

“We should go and tell Rosalee,” said Greyson, who looked a little nervous at the prospect of what his younger brother might say.

“Yes, quickly, before Hank gets hold of a phone,” said Ellie.

They laughed and left, and Hank twirled Ellie in his arms before planting a whopper of a kiss on her lips.

“I’m pleased for them too,” she laughed as he put her down.

Hank canted his head. “You ever feel like getting hitched?”

“To you, or someone else?” she teased.

“Someone else, really? And give up all this?”

He gestured up and down his tall, muscled body, and yes, she did have to agree that she would be mad to give all that up.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, but right now, frankly, darling, you smell terrible.”

Hank gave himself an unconcerned sniff. “Yeah, had a bit of trouble with the water supply.”

“I’m going to call a plumber.”

“We can manage,” he protested.

Ellie shook her head. He’d been saying that for weeks. She knew Terri and Mal were very patient and grateful for all the help with their new home, but she was sure they were ready to move into their own space. Currently, both their boys were sleeping in their room with them, but it wouldn’t be too long until their third child arrived, and really they didn’t want five in one bedroom.

“Maybe I’ll find a plumber to marry,” she teased, “one who sweeps me off my feet – and I’ll get a bit of romance in my life.” Hank huffed. “Now go on and shower, and no, I don’t have time to join you.”

She swatted his butt and laughed at the disappointed look on his face. She’d make it up to him later. Rawr.

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Hank tapped his fingers on the kitchen table, and his inner wolf huffed impatient irritation.

The living room was off-limits as their second son, Darryl and his girlfriend, Gwen were in there watching a documentary for school – though, obviously they were making out. They would have been if it were Hank as well, he used to lure Ellie over his house when he was a teen with proclamations of ‘doing homework,’ really he just wanted to get inside her shirt. He still did he thought with a growling leer as he looked at his pretty mate, quietly reading a book and sipping a cup of tea.

The dining room was also in use; Gwen’s twin sister Britt was tutoring Craig in English, though Hank gathered that Craig had hoped for the much the same outcome to the night as Darryl. But given that Britt brought her bunny shifter friend, Missy, with her, the outcome seemed unlikely.

Eric was in the basement, working out – trying to swell his already bulging muscles. All Tanner males tended to be big, but Eric was getting to be enormous and was currently the undisputed star of the wrestling team. Mostly because his opponents came down with a mystery illness the moment they saw him.

The upstairs floor was also off-limits. Their grandkids were sleeping, and the slightest noise would wake them – the baby wolf shifters had bat-like hearing. Terri and Mal were out shopping for more items for their new house.

So that left the kitchen, but given how full the house was, he doubted Ellie wanted to test how sturdy the kitchen table was for lovemaking. Though, he already knew it was from the last time they had the house to themselves. However, it could probably do with another test.

But, while his lusty side wanted his mate – as it always did, every second of the day – something niggled at him, making his wolf a little restless.

“What did you mean earlier?” he asked suddenly.

Ellie looked up from her book. Another of those awful bodice rippers she got from the library. He tried to hide them from her - he saw them as competition to his mate’s attention and didn’t like anything other than him swelling her lust. But she found them – she said he was far too predictable to hide anything from her.

She pursed her pretty pink lips, and his wolf melted a little – it didn’t take much to make him forget his bad mood where she was concerned. “Earlier?”

Hank cleared his throat, trying to dispel lustful thoughts. “Yeah, about you know, the plumber.”

“Yes, absolutely, I already called one.”

“No, I mean, about you,” he grumbled.

Ellie snorted. “About me wanting to marry a plumber?”

“No about you wanting to marry someone romantic,” he snapped a little forcefully as his wolf surged forward.

His mate tinkled with sweet, arousing laughter. “Oh, darling, don’t be silly – as if I would ever want anyone but you.” She twinkled at him.

His wolf preened. Ellie had been his since she was fourteen and he was fifteen and would be until they were a hundred.

“I don’t care that you’re not romantic,” she murmured as she returned to her book.

His wolf snapped to attention. “Not romantic?” he spluttered.

Ellie looked up in mild amusement at his outburst.

“How am I not romantic?” How could she think that – he could barely go ten minutes without dragging her to bed! “We make love all the time!”

“Gross,” muttered Darryl as he walked through the kitchen and grabbed a pack of cookies.

“Don’t eat them all, dear, save some for Terri and Mal,” chided Ellie.

Darryl grinned as if it was a challenge. Hank glared at his son until he had the sense to flee.

Ellie smiled her sweet, tolerant smile – the one he had seen thousands of times over the years.

“Darling, that’s just sex, that’s not romance.”

“Just sex?” he spluttered as his wolf huffed at her dismissive attitude.

Ellie slapped her book down. “Fine, it’s amazing, wild, passionate sex – you’re a stallion between the sheets and out of them!”

Gwen snorted in laughter as she entered the kitchen and made her way over to the refrigerator.

“Don’t mind me,” she said with a giggle. Gwen had been dating Darryl off and on for a while – she had heard plenty already in this house. “Is this grape soda for everyone?”

Ellie smiled at her. “Of course, dear, help yourself – don’t let Darryl hog it all.”

“Thanks, I’ll let you get back to it.” She smirked and sauntered away.

“Well?” he demanded impatiently.

Ellie frowned. “Well, what? I think the question is, how are you romantic?”

“I brought you breakfast in bed this morning,” he argued.

“You tossed me a box of pop tarts while I was half-asleep, and made some lewd comment about how you’d worn me out from making love to me all night long.”

Eric sniggered as he passed through the kitchen in search of a bottle of water. “I wondered why there weren’t any pop tarts this morning.”

“Shouldn’t you be doing your homework?” snapped Hank grumpily.

Eric grinned. “Missy’s going to help me after I’m done working out.”

Ellie gave him a wry look. “That’s fine as long as she doesn’t do it for you.”

Given the looks Missy shot at Eric, she would too. Hank really had no clue what went through Eric’s head. He seemed utterly oblivious to her obvious adoration, but maybe he should talk to the bunny about not letting his son walk all over her. Or maybe get Ellie to do it, because Missy was, frankly, a frightened bunny whenever Hank was around. He had no idea why – she just seemed naturally cowed around parents. But his sweet Ellie could put anyone at ease. His wolf mewled for their perfect mate, then snapped as Eric snickered.

“And don’t get sweat all over the dining room chairs,” Ellie called after him as he left. “Now, where were we?”

“You were saying that I disappoint you,” he grouched.

Ellie burst into laughter, and his beast huffed.

“Oh, darling,” she cooed as she came around the table to sit on his lap.

This was much more like it, he thought as he slipped his arms around her.

“You don’t disappoint me, you’re just not romantic – nor am I, we’re not romantic people. There’s no shame in that.”

He considered the fact that when Ellie sent him to work with a packed lunch, the sandwiches were cut into heart shapes, or when he was showering, she would leave a note on the mirror telling him she loved him. She was a lot more romantic than him.

He tried to scramble to think of something loving he had done for her recently. But all he could think of was that last night he fell asleep while she was watching one of dreary period drama shows, and when she woke him, he said, ‘wanna do it’ and flung her over his shoulder, taking her to bed. He might have missed sweet and romantic by a smidge with that one.

Ellie patted his chest, and in spite of his annoyance, his lust kindled. Rawr.

“Wanna...”

“Don’t say it,” she teased.

“Say what?” he asked innocently.

“You were going to say, ‘wanna do it,’ and ask if I wanted to test out this table.”

She knew him so well.

“What’s wrong with screwing on the kitchen table?”

“Oh, umm,” Britt stammered, red-faced as she came into the kitchen. “Sorry, I just wanted a soda.”

Craig was behind her, and the expression on his face suggested they were the worst parents in the world.

“Go ahead, honey,” said Ellie.

Britt almost melted in embarrassment, but Craig growled, which earned him a warning growl in return from Hank, who was in no mood to pay attention to Craig’s perceived injustice. Craig let up growling, and chastised, hustled Britt away before his libidinous parents could further sully her delicate ears.

Ellie snuggled into his chest. “Who said I want romance anyway?”

“I see the way you are when my, grr, brother acts all romantic with Violet.”

He'd seen the wistful looks on her face; he had just been too oblivious to realize that he wasn't fulfilling the romantic side of her.

"Oh, poor baby, you're feeling all upset and grumbly, want me to kiss it better?" she teased, rubbing her hand over his chest

"I've got something you can kiss."

He grasped her hand and would have put it on a much more exciting part of his body, were it not for the 'eep' that interrupted him.

A five-foot-nothing bunny shifter stood in the doorway, and, in that moment, she looked like she wanted to be on the other side of the planet. "I was told I could get a soda."

"Oh, Missy, of course," said Ellie, pulling her hand away from his, "help yourself and please ignore my mate – most people do."

They were quiet as the shy bunny got a drink and scurried away. They didn't know Missy all that well and didn't want to risk scarring her for life. It was probably too late for their boys and the twins.

"This might be why we aren't romantic," she mused. "Too many interruptions."

"Humph."

Ellie looked up as she heard stirrings on the baby monitor.

"Hank, I don't need romance, we've been together far too long for me to care about that. Greyson and Violet are new to this, and I'm happy to live vicariously through them. In thirty years, they should be so lucky to be as happy as we are."

She kissed his temple and got up to tend to the grandkids. She turned back at the door and wriggled her delectable rear. His wolf growled instinctively – it was a rear he hadn't been able to stop drooling over for over thirty years.

"I'm very happy with the insatiable animal I mated, thank you very much, and I can't wait for you to ravish me senseless later."

"Eep!"

"Oh Missy, you're very quiet on your feet," said Ellie as she made her way upstairs.

That appeased him slightly. Though it bothered him that there might be something a little lacking about their life.

No, when he thought about it, he wasn't romantic. He'd never needed to be. When they were teens, he chased after her, and she made sure she didn't run so fast that he didn't catch her. They could barely get enough of one another – still couldn't, but back then, they were young, and horny, and had to hide



their lust from Ellie's dad who was sure Hank wasn't good enough for her. Hank quite agreed, but he wasn't about to allow his she-wolf to find another male to lust after her.

They had mated as soon as they could, and then they were always working, always saving money, always running after their various sons. They'd never really even gone out on real dates.

Hank slammed his fist on the table, making Missy – who had terrible timing – jump as she came into the kitchen to get a soda for Eric.

His wolf paid her no mind; he was too preoccupied with his decision. He would take his mate on a date.

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"What are you grinning for?" asked Ellie as she found Terri, standing outside of Ellie and Hank's bedroom, and grinning excitedly at her.

Ellie glanced down at Terri's bulging stomach. "Did you have an ultrasound? Is it a girl?"

The Tanners never seemed to produce daughters, only unruly sons, and she was convinced Terri was the one to break the 'curse.' Not that she wasn't thrilled with all her boys, but she was convinced that girls might have been a little less exciting to raise.

Terri smoothed a hand over her stomach. "No, well, yes, I did have an ultrasound – the baby's a boy – but that's not why I'm grinning."

Ellie chuckled. She should have guessed – another grandson! Her inner wolf howled in happiness. "Oh, Terri, a boy, I'm so..."

Terri waved a hand impatiently. "There's no time for that. We have to get you ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Your date!"

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"Shut it," growled Hank.

"We didn't say anything," protested Mal.

His four boys were watching him in a mixture of amusement and curiosity. Well, six boys, his sons, and grandsons were all watching him, and no wonder. Baby William sucked on a pacifier, but he stared at Hank with big brown eyes as Mal cradled him in one arm. They probably hadn't ever seen him looking clean and smart – he could usually only manage one or the other. The boys were all the same. But he was determined to make an effort for his mate.

He was clean-shaven, he had submitted to a haircut, found a tie, and was, for once, wearing an ironed shirt – which, admittedly, his brother Greyson ironed. Ellie used to force him into ironed clothing, but

given that everything became rumpled on him two minutes after he donned it, she gave it up as a lost cause about two months after they mated. He had even bought a bunch of roses for his mate. Hank tried to recall the last time he bought her flowers but came up blank. When he was a teen he gave her a few single flowers now and again, though, he had 'found' them in whatever garden he happened to tramp through to get to her house. But if his mate wanted romance, he would give her romance.

His beast chuffed in delight as he smelled her soft, magnolia scent. He'd know her anywhere just by that scent.

Slowly, Ellie thumped down the stairs, moving agonizingly slowly, and he realized why when a delicate foot came into view. She was wearing heels – she never wore heels, and he rather liked the way they made her legs look. She usually lived in jeans, but tonight she was wearing a dress that fell a few inches above her knees, revealing an expanse of curvy leg. And the dress – rawr. It was tight and black and highlighted all the lovely dips and curves of her perfect body. Her hair fell in soft curls around her face, and he was pleased that she hadn't bothered with much make-up, she never did, and he preferred to see her that way. Though, the red lipstick was certainly pretty – he liked that.

Hank growled in delight as she tottered toward him.

"Hank, what is all this?" she laughed as she took in his appearance and the roses.

"Damn, Mom," said Darryl.

All the boys were looking at Ellie in surprise.

"Thank you, dear," she said, pleased.

"I second that, babe," rumbled Hank, giving her an appreciative leer.

Terri beamed as she walked down the stairs behind her. "Doesn't she look amazing?"

"She always looks amazing," corrected Hank.

"Hank," murmured Ellie in distinct pleasure.

He passed her the flowers, and she took them, giving them a huge sniff.

"Tonight we are going on a date, and you are going to be romanced," he declared.

Ellie frowned at him. "Hank, I don't need..."

"Nope, you deserve this, just enjoy yourself."

She smiled and sniffed the roses again. "Achoo!"

"Ellie?"

"I'm fine," she said dismissively, "let's get going."

“Achoo! Achoo!”

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*One hour and fifty minutes later*

“Okay, so now I know you’re allergic to roses,” he rumbled as he led her back to the car.

They figured it out on the way to the restaurant. The fact that she was struggling to breathe was their first clue. A desperate flight to the hospital and an injection later and she was okay, but just warned to stay away from all flowers – just in case.

“I know – I had no idea,” she said in amusement. “I guess I’ve never stuck my nose into a bunch before.”

She was none the worse for wear for her experience, and the hospital staff had been helpful. Though, he detected a hint of disapproval from the nurses over the fact that this was the first time he had ever bought her a whole bunch of flowers. But Ellie had just laughed and said it was lucky it was the first time.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked in concern as his wolf rumbled in worry.

“I’m positive, darling. The flowers were a lovely thought, and for those few seconds where I could still breathe properly, I really did enjoy them.”

She giggled and pressed a kiss to his lips.

He grinned as she wiped the lipstick off his lips. “Right, so onwards to the restaurant.”

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“Oh, Hank, let’s just go somewhere else,” entreated Ellie.

“I have a reservation,” rumbled Hank as he glared at the hostess.

“Which you are late for by an hour and a half,” sniffed the hostess.

Hank grumbled and growled, and so did his wolf, but the hostess would not be swayed.

“It doesn’t matter, Hank,” said Ellie soothingly.

Greyson had assured him it was a romantic restaurant – with candles and desserts for two to share – he had taken Violet there a few times. His brother was sure Ellie would love it, but it was not to be.

He led her back to the car and slammed the door just a little too firmly.

Ellie rubbed his leg. “Darling, it’s fine.”

He glanced down at her hand. “Yeah?”

His mind wandered back to all the fun they'd had in cars before. His carnal side raised its head, and Hank tamped it down. Nope, they were all about romance tonight – not a quick fumble in the car. Or even a long fumble in the car.

Hank sighed, ignoring his grouchy wolf. "Where could we go?"

Ellie rolled a shoulder. "Let's just go to Pizza Moon."

"That's not romantic."

The pack owned pizzeria was fine – they took the family there all the time, but not the romantic setting for a date. He did love the pizza, but the place was generally full of loud pups and generally enjoyed a couple of explosions a night courtesy of the tempestuous pizza chef, and their fellow pack mate, Hans.

"I'm sure we can make it romantic."

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Wolf whistles met Ellie as she entered the pizzeria. Hank growled, but Ellie grinned. She was no stranger to a wolf whistle, though usually she only garnered them from Hank whenever she bent over, or undressed, or licked her finger – he didn't need much to set his lusty side alight.

Her wolf whimpered for the disappointed look on his face.

"Come on, darling – date night, remember?" she said, trying to buck up her mate, who was starting to get a little downhearted. "You find a table; I want a word with Melanie."

Melanie was the witchy mate of the chef, Hans, and she managed the restaurant, as well as managing her mate's temper and all the free meals she had to give out in apology for his behavior. Ellie cornered Melanie and told her about her mate's desire to romance her, and Melanie grinned and managed to produce a tablecloth and candles. She even dimmed the lights. A few other patrons complained, but only until Hans snarled at them to shut it.

Ellie joined her mate and took his hands into hers; she beamed at him across the table.

"See, this is nice, right?"

"Yes," he admitted, mollified slightly.

Her eyes flickered over his shoulder, and she winced slightly.

"What's wrong?" he rumbled.

"Nothing's wrong," she replied truthfully.

"Gam Gam!"

Their eldest grandson, Seth launched himself into Hank's arms, and Terri and Mal appeared by the side of the table.

"Sorry, we didn't know you'd be here," said Mal.

"What happened to the restaurant?" asked Terri.

"We lost our reservation," said Ellie, as she smiled at Seth who was hugging Hank affectionately.

"Well, we won't interrupt your date," said Terri. "We'll stay away to give you some privacy."

Mal nodded and tried to extricate Seth from Hank. "Come on, little man, let's leave Gran and Gramps alone."

Seth pouted and tried to bury his head in Hank's shoulder, leaving a sticky substance over his shirt. Mal grimaced and tried to pull him away, and Seth burst into loud, protesting sobs. Then William joined him in brotherly solidarity. The boys were crying in spite of their parents' desperate attempts to hush and soothe them.

Melanie came running over and, due to the darkness of the restaurant, ran smack dab into a pack mate called Warwick. She tumbled to the floor, letting out an 'ouch' as she landed.

Then Hans howled and stormed over and, in spite of actually liking Warwick – they were friends from their army days – he hurled him away and pulled Melanie into his arms. Warwick sprawled into Britt who was waitressing and currently carrying a tray of drinks, all of which landed on Ellie, soaking her with a mixture of diet cola, lemonade, and ice tea.

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"Right, you are not to come in here under pain of death!" snapped Hank at his youngest three sons before slamming the door.

They had a takeout pizza from the pizzeria, and Ellie had slipped into a new dress, not quite as tight or short or pretty, but Hank effusively told her she looked lovely. Hank was warning the kids to stay out of the dining room.

"I found some candles," said Ellie holding them up. "This one is root beer float, and this one is peach cobbler scent."

She usually got candles from her sister for Christmas. Her sister didn't know what to buy her. She believed that Ellie didn't have anything anyway, so why get her anything useful?

Ellie lit them, and he dimmed the lights. They resumed their meal, once again with clasped hands and staring into one another's eyes.

"This is nice," she said encouragingly.

"It's just our dining room," he huffed.

"It's always nice when it's just the two of us."

Her wolf virtually purred in agreement. She adored her boys, but she had a lot of fond memories of all those years where it was just the two of them, virtually living on top of one another in a tiny little cabin. The first years of their mating were wonderful, and she was starting to consider that maybe she was wrong about their life not being romantic.

"It doesn't have to be spectacular or expensive to be romantic," she murmured.

"Good job, really," he chuckled.

Ellie rubbed her thumb over the back of his hand. They never struggled for money now, but they had a lot of big mouths to feed, and were always trying to save money for their boys' futures. They'd already given Mal money for his house and would give money to their others too, whether it was for a house or college, or whatever they wanted to do with it. She half-hoped Darryl spent the money on a new car – the ancient car he drove worried her.

"Do you remember when you first asked me on a date?" she asked.

Hank grinned at the memory. "Yeah, you squeaked."

"I was surprised," she admitted. Not to mention delighted and thrilled.

They had grown up in the same pack, but until high school, they were just pups who barely had a nodding acquaintance. Ellie's father was very much of the opinion that his daughters were far too good to play with the Tanner boys, and it was only when they started growing up that they noticed one another. All the girls noticed Hank and Greyson Tanner.

Immediately when she started high school, she noticed Hank around more at pack runs and meetings. Noticed he was paying her family more attention than ever before. Not to mention how much she ran into him at school.

"I was convinced you wanted my sister."

Her sister was a year older – Hank's age – and had been prettier, and more popular than Ellie. Most males looked at her sister, then looked at Ellie, and then looked back at her sister, Ellie wholly forgotten.

Hank snorted. "I never wanted your sister."

She could believe that considering the hostile relationship they currently maintained. Her sister, like their father, was very dismissive of Hank.

"I couldn't believe the football star was interested in nerdy me."

"You were not a nerd," he said loyally.

"I volunteered at the library in my free time, I tutored people in English and history, and I hardly ever had my nose out of a book - I was definitely nerdy."

"You were perfect – still are," he purred.

"I think my sister had a crush on you."

Her sister was just a bit too miffed when Ellie and Hank started dating, and the way she acted around him now just a bit too sour. Her wolf was just a little smug about the fact that Hank wanted her.

"Humph. Doesn't matter, I wanted her hotter sister."

"Only you thought I was the hot one."

"You were – still are."

He kissed her hand.

"I always wondered... After we started dating..."

"Yes?"

"Did you scare away all the boys I was tutoring?"

She had tutored about seven different boys who were in middle school.

"Yes," he admitted unabashed.

"Hank!" she chided.

Hank grunted. "I didn't want you to spend time alone with other males, so I might have scared them a little into finding a new tutor."

"You're incorrigible," she said without any heat.

She had her suspicions at the time but never brought it up. She was besotted with Hank, and the envy of half the school for being the object of his affection - she didn't want to do anything to push him away. Besides, after they started dating, Hank took up nearly all her free time anyway, when she wasn't at the library. Though, he used to turn up there too.

Ellie laughed. "I just remembered how you used to turn up at the library and help me stack the shelves."

"Couldn't have my she-wolf left alone," he said proudly.

"You thought that males were lurking in the stacks ready to pounce on me and whisk me away from my boyfriend?"

"Yes I did," he grumbled. "Plus, I liked spending all my time with you – still do."

“Oh, Hank.”

Her heart fluttered. Why did she ever think her amazing wolf wasn't romantic?

Ellie leaned forward to kiss him but flinched at the sudden rock music that blared through the house.

“Damnit, boys!” roared Hank. “I'll shut them up.”

He leaned forward for a kiss, and she brushed her lips over his, and then, snapping out of her daze, realized he had bent over the candles, and his tie was on fire.

“Hank! You're on fire!” she exclaimed. “Fire!”

Darryl burst into the dining room with a fire extinguisher and blasted his father. They had several extinguishers in their house – always a must with their rowdy boys.

\*

Hank grumbled at their surroundings. Ellie fished through the freezer as Hank wiped some foam out of his ear.

“Okay, lasagna, it is!” she exclaimed, producing a store-bought frozen meal.

The pizza was destroyed, and they would have to clean their dining room, but that was a job for tomorrow. So now it was time for something else.

The romance of the evening was quickly evaporating as far as Hank was concerned, though, strangely, Ellie just seemed to be enjoying herself more and more.

She popped the lasagna in the microwave and beamed at him

“How's your chest?” she asked as she made her way over and slipped onto his lap.

He was fine – his tie took the brunt of the fire, and it was only for a couple of moments, though there was no need to admit that.

“Might need a little attention,” he said as his wolf wagged his tail excitedly.

Ellie smirked and pulled the shirt over his head and kissed his chest. He considered grabbing her and running upstairs to bed, but he was still attempting to romance her, not that she seemed to need or want it. She never had.

“When did you first...” he started and stopped, considering how best to continue.

“First, what?”



“Decide you wanted to be with me,” he finished delicately. A lot more lewd options had suggested themselves, but he toned it down in deference to the romantic atmosphere he was still trying to cultivate.

“My first day of high school.”

His eyebrows shot up his head, and his wolf preened. “Really?”

He’d always assumed that he had grown on her when they started seeing one another. Of course, he thought she’d been flattered by his attention, but he didn’t realize she had wanted him as much as he wanted her at first glance.

“Umm hmmm, you were strolling down the corridor with your arm slung over your girlfriend’s shoulder. What was her name?” she asked, furrowing her brow. There was no jealousy in her tone, just curiosity.

“Can’t remember,” he admitted honestly.

The girl was a small footnote in their overall life. He started dating her at the tail end of his freshman year – when people began to perceive him as some kind of football star. Before that, she hadn’t paid him any mind. He’d liked her attention - which was only given as long as he was winning the games, but that didn’t seem important when he noticed a certain little she-wolf.

“You were laughing, and joking, and you were just so...” she paused and pursed her pink lips. The last trace of her lipstick was now on Hank’s chest.

“Yes?” he prompted as his wolf wagged his tail eagerly.

“Carefree,” she finally decided on. “Most of the wolves our age were just dark balls of hormones and aggression. But you were different. You were so... happy, and you made everyone else around you happy too.” She beamed. “Of course I knew you – we were pack mates, but until that moment, I’d never thought of you as anything other than that annoying Tanner boy who once filled the mayor’s pool with Jello.”

Hank burst into laughter, and even his wolf managed a grunt of pleasure. “Yeah, that was funny.” He chose lime and heard the pool was green for weeks.

“My dad always told me to stay away from you – he didn’t approve of you.”

Still didn’t – he lived in Florida, and for years had sent Christmas cards to Ellie, Mal, Darryl, Eric, and Craig only. Now, he had even started to include Terri and the grandkids, but he refused to add Hank’s name. He refused to acknowledge his favorite daughter had mated Hank, and would only refer to Hank as ‘that damn wolf’ when talking to Ellie. Hank didn’t mind; he didn’t bear the old boy a grudge over it – why would he? The male had tried to keep Ellie away from him - it had virtually been a battle between the two of them, but Hank had prevailed in the end. He wasn’t surprised the old boy was still sore over it. Plus, he also believed Ellie was far too good for him.

“But, that was when I finally noticed you, and I wished I could have been that girl.” She sounded almost wistful.

“You are now,” he murmured and kissed her neck.

“I certainly am.”

“Is it as good as you thought it would be?”

Her father had tried to arrange a mating with an affluent pack up north – just as he did for Ellie’s sister, who was, while not obscenely wealthy, extremely comfortable and liked to flaunt the fact in Ellie’s face as often as possible. But Ellie would have none of it.

“Better, darling,” she said with feeling.

His wolf roared in happiness.

The microwave beeped, and she kissed his chest again before getting up to see to the lasagna. She looked back at Hank as they heard a crash.

He grumbled and got to his feet to see what was happening. But he didn’t have to go far. Craig and Eric stumbled into the kitchen, straight into Ellie, and the lasagna went all over her.

\*

Ellie sniffed and her inner wolf almost gagged. She considered she really ought to get some air fresheners down here. The basement contained weights and work out machines that the boys, and Hank, liked to use often, and as such, the smell of sweat was somewhat invasive. She got up and opened one of the small windows, hoping a little fresh air would improve the smell

“Damn pups,” snapped Hank as he came down the stairs, carrying a tray of cheese and crackers.

The boys had been practicing wrestling moves – Darryl had an upcoming match, and Craig had offered to help. Unfortunately, the practice got slightly away from them, which is why they were now upstairs cleaning the kitchen, and cleaning the dining room in punishment. Hank and Ellie decided to retreat to the basement, which at least had a table and chairs that Hank occasionally used when he wanted to play – or more accurately, lose – at poker. Ellie had given up on a dress and was in her pajamas.

“At least they’re not arguing,” she said mildly and started spreading some string cheese on a cracker.

The only cheese in their house came in a tube, and probably contained more plastic than real cheese. All the boys adored it; she virtually had to buy it in bulk.

“I told them to behave and not ruin our night,” he grumbled. “Maybe we should kick Darryl out of the living room.”

“Darling, he put you out when you were on fire, I think Darryl’s earned the TV for tonight. Besides, I’m having a lovely time.”

Hank beamed, but a second later he started growling.

“What’s...”

Her own wolf growled too as she heard and scented the intruder. She snapped her head to the window to see a damned skunk had got in and was snuffing around on top of their stacked washer and dryer.

Instinctively, Hank snarled and burst into his wolf. He howled at the skunk, and the skunk let out its spray, which unsurprisingly – given everything else that had happened that evening – landed on Ellie.

\*

Hank slipped into bed and curled himself around his mate. His wolf grumbled a little as he got used to the smell, but he wasn’t prepared to sleep apart. They hadn’t slept apart once since they mated. Ellie had once gone away to a teaching conference, but he just turned up at the hotel – much to her delight.

Two showers later, and she did smell a lot better – he had spent a lot of time in there soaping her up over and over, amongst other things, until they managed to get rid of most of the stench. But it would probably be a few days until the scent was gone entirely.

“Oh, honey, why don’t I sleep on the couch tonight?”

“No,” he purred. “Not letting you get away that easily.”

Ellie giggled and wriggled against him.

“I’m sorry that tonight was such a bust.”

“I had a lovely time. Well, except for skunk – I could have done without that, but everything else was wonderful.”

Hank humphed, not genuinely believing that – except for the skunk part, she was indeed telling the truth about that. “You wanted romance, and all you got was an allergic reaction, soda thrown on you, I was set on fire, lasagna thrown on you, and you got a blast of skunk juice. I’d say that was an epic fail.”

Ellie placed her hand over his heart. “When did you decide you wanted to be with me?”

Hank paused in mild surprise at the question, but then he chuckled. “First day of my sophomore year of high school.”

Ellie pulled back from his embrace to look into his face. “Are you serious?”

His lips curled in amusement at the frown on her face. “Don’t look so surprised.”

“But I...”

“First day of school. Naturally, I’d forgotten school was starting, so I slept in, and when I finally arrived, my girlfriend at the time was complaining at me because I was supposed to meet up with her or something. Anyway, I rolled in at ten, and I’m walking down the hallway, ignoring how pissed my girlfriend is, and there’s this little she-wolf looking at me. She’s got long brown hair, big brown eyes, and I realize she’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen, and she’s looking at me like I’m the most wonderful guy in the world. Me – not because I win a few stupid football games, she’s looking at me like I’m special just for being me. So, yeah, my wolf told me that she was mine and that’s when I knew.”

Ellie stared at him, speechless.

“So, later that day, I broke up with my girlfriend, and I tried to work up the nerve to ask her out, and a few weeks later, we were dating, and,” he laughed, “the rest is history.” His wolf growled in approval.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“What for?”

“I’m sorry I ever said you weren’t romantic. I was completely wrong; you are romantic.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said wryly.

“You are,” she insisted. “It doesn’t take sweeping gestures of jewelry or flowers to be romantic, you just are romantic, and I hope you know I appreciate that.”

“Well, I can think of a few ways you can show your appreciation,” he murmured.

Ellie laughed and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Goodness, I love you.”

“Yeah, you do. So how about making date night a regular thing?”

“I’m not sure my constitution can take this much excitement regularly. How about next week, we kick everyone out of the house and enjoy a date night at home, together, alone. Also, we’ll lock the windows in case of any furry visitors.”

“That sounds pretty romantic to me,” he chuckled.

“Me too.”

“Mine,” he growled.

“Always.”

The end