



**SPIRIT
WOLF**
LOLA GLASS



Spirit Wolf

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To the people who love unconditionally

Especially the ones who love me that way.





1

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?” Taylor checked.

“I’m sure.” I heaved a sigh.

I avoided visiting my grandma as much as possible, for two reasons:

Because her trailer reminded me of the shitty day my fated mate walked in and ruined my life, and because she was absolutely insane.

“You do realize that talking to her requires getting your ass out of this rental car and walking those sexy buff thighs of yours up to the door?” my best friend pulled me out of my thoughts again.

“Shut up,” I grumbled.

She laughed. “Come on, Lex. You flew us all the way to Wisconsin, the least you can do is actually go talk to the person we’re here to see.”

I sighed again. We’d made a fun trip out of it, seeing a few sights and hitting up a local spa before making our way to my

grandma's house, but now it was the moment of reckoning, and I had absolutely no desire to reckon.

My ghostly wolf snorted from the back seat, jumping out of the car and trotting up to the door.

“Dammit.” I unclicked the buckle and hurried after Spirit, the ghost wolf. I'd been born a werewolf whose animal could split apart from me in a ghostlike form, but over the past year and a half, Spirit and I had started losing the ability to merge again after separating. She'd been stuck outside our physical body for about a month by the time I finally decided to talk to my grandma.

My grandma stepped outside a moment after Spirit entered, and her eyes focused on me.

Goddess, they were clouded.

My gift was nothing compared to hers. My grandma saw visions of the future, and the visions drove her to insanity.

The cloudier her eyes got, the less sense she made when she spoke. And her eyes were now so clouded that I could barely make out the differences between her pupils and the rest of her eyes—which used to be a light blue.

“Alexandra,” she murmured.

I didn't bother reminding her that I went by Lex, a nickname she'd given me when I was a toddler.

“Hey, Grandma.” I gave her a tight smile.

“There’s darkness around you. Your soul’s shrinking. Your feet are being chewed by rats. Your eyes hold oceans.”

“I know, Grandma. Let’s get inside, okay?”

I felt shitty for not living with her, taking care of her, but the pack she lived in had someone check on her once a day to make sure she was eating. There were a few other gifted wolves in the pack, so they understood why she was the way she was.

And after the time she’d tried to murder me with a butcher’s knife when I was fifteen, I knew it wasn’t really safe for anyone to live with her.

“The quilt burns. The sky spins. The clock ticks and ticks and ticks and ticks...”

I took her hand carefully. Touch sometimes set her off, but if I didn’t pull her inside, she wouldn’t follow me. She stayed where she was put, for the most part, unless something crazy happened like a ghost wolf running into her house.

The trailer was a blast from the past. It smelled old, but the oak laminate floors weren’t dirty, and the off-white paint wasn’t spotty. There were only a few dishes in the sink, and I was certain there would be food in the cupboards when I walked into the small kitchen.

Setting her down on the couch, I listened to her nonsensical rambling in attempt to find any information that could seem real. Despite her insanity, I knew she did see the truth from time to time. And she had always known what was going to happen; she had a journal somewhere that held the visions she’d had of me when we were both younger. It wasn’t until I was around twelve that her sanity really started to go.

Filling a glass of water, I carried it to her and handed it over. She accepted it, drinking the full glass before she set it down on the table beside the couch.

I didn't bother scolding her for not taking care of herself; all that ever did was piss her off, which made her violent.

"You saw my wolf, Grandma. She's stuck in her spirit form. Do you know how I can get her back?"

"Sharp teeth. Furry wolf." She blinked at the ceiling. "Dripping flowers. Stone ice cream."

"Sharp teeth... you think someone needs to bite me?" I checked.

Usually, the top of the list of her mumblings were the most trustworthy. The more she spoke, the more random her words got.

"Dead mate. Wolf tree. Sky, clouded with bloody guts."

I nodded, as if that made more sense than anything I'd ever heard. "My mate died. Is that the reason my wolf and I can't remain in the same body anymore?"

"Male boat. Rough sky, rough ocean."

Hmm, yeah, I got nothing from that one.

"So someone needs to bite me, because my mate died. If they bite me, I'll be able to have Spirit back?"

“Brief moment. Ticking bomb, moving for everyone and no one and the wind.”

“If someone bites me, I’ll have her back for a minute.” I nodded again.

It probably seemed insane to trust her, but when it came to things I could actually understand, she had never once been wrong. She’d even predicted my mate coming to take me; I just hadn’t believed her.

This time, I’d listen.

“How do I get her to stay permanently?”

“Soft moan. Bodies are blessings, like water on dew.”

My body stilled.

Soft moan? She couldn’t mean....

“You think I have to take a mate to stay alive?” I asked.

“Television words,” she murmured. “Screen of darkness, life of fog, broken faces and arms and nails.”

Stepping up to the TV on her wall, I felt around the back. My grandma never hid things in plain sight; she always thought someone was after her, after all. But words meant writing, and writing meant the journal she kept that had actual visions she’d seen before everything had gotten to be too much for her mind.

She kept mumbling behind me. I listened for anything useful while I felt around.

My fingers caught on a crumpled piece of paper taped haphazardly to the back of the television. I carefully pulled it off.

It took a few minutes to get the balled paper open, as I struggled to pull the tape off, but I got it. Smoothing the paper, my eyes landed on a page from her vision book.

Lex is divided in two. Wolf and human, separate. Taking a mate will save her.

That was it.

Frustration and panic warred in my chest. I couldn't take a mate—I *wouldn't* take a mate

Folding the paper, I shoved it in the pocket of my skinny jeans and walked back to my grandma. I sat back down beside her. "How much time do I have?"

She peered into my eyes without speaking for a long moment before saying, "Three months."

Three months?

Shit.

There had been so much certainty in her eyes, I couldn't argue. When my grandma knew something, she knew it. Without question.

“There’s got to be another way, Grandma. I can’t take a mate.”

“Shrinking spirit,” she mumbled, looking away from me. There was sadness in her eyes—she felt bad for me, even if she no longer knew how to express it.

Letting out a slow breath, I walked to the kitchen.

Going through my grandma’s pantry—stocked to the brim with easy-to-cook dry foods—I pulled out a few boxes of Rice-a-Roni. That had been her favorite for a long time, though for my grandma, her “favorite” food was pretty much anything she would eat without constant force or threats.

And threatening my grandma led to me being nearly killed, either by a knife or her claws.

After washing her biggest soup pot, I set it on the stove and started the Rice-a-Roni. I glanced back at her multiple times, finding her on the couch. I’d tried to put her in a few different nursing homes, since she couldn’t really take care of herself, but she’d nearly killed a few other residents with her claws each time, and ended up back in her damn trailer.

She did cook for herself when she got hungry enough, and the pack did drop off meals filled with veggies, so she wasn’t underfed or dying. Just... not entirely healthy.

I made her a bowl of Rice-a-Roni and set it on the edge of the counter. I was sure she’d throw things at me if I brought it to her—probably silverware; I’d seen a stack of it on the table beside her. I’d tell her the food was in the kitchen when I left.

Dumping the rest of the pot into a few different Tupperware bowls, I set them all in the half-empty fridge.

After washing all of the dishes in the sink, I dried and put them away, and then started cleaning up.

I was bending down to grab a pillow off the floor when the first fork slammed into me. I'd been tense and waiting for it, so I didn't scream or panic or anything.

"Don't touch my stuff," Grandma growled at me.

A butter knife whacked me in the ass.

Ow.

"Alright, I'm going." I stood up, raising my hands.

A spoon came flying toward my eye, and I ducked out of the way just in time to avoid it.

It was time to say goodbye. "Your lunch is on the kitchen counter, and there are leftovers in the fridge. Thanks for your help, Grandma. I love you."

"Get out!" She threw a steak knife, and I barely dodged that one.

I hurried out, ignoring her shouts and screeches behind me.



2

“That bad, huh?” Taylor asked as I collapsed into her car’s passenger seat. The door slammed behind me.

Spirit followed me out, jumping *through* the back door and into the back seat.

Our minds and bodies were supposed to be stuck together. I was supposed to be a werewolf. But we had separated further every time we shifted, and now, we were this.

Broken.

“Worse.” I shook my head. “Let’s go. I need a slurpie.”

“A slushy, you mean.”

I made a face. “Parker says you have to call them slurpies.”

“Parker’s a hick, and he talks like one,” she shot back.

I rolled my eyes. “Just because he has an accent doesn’t make him a hick.”

“He grew up on a farm, Lex. A literal farm. In the south. Add that to his cowboy hat and accent, and you’ve got a recipe for a hick.” She pulled the car away from my grandma’s house, and drove past the other trailers without a second glance. “So what’s the verdict?”

“She thinks I have to take a mate in the next three months, or I’ll die.”

“Daaaamn.” Taylor grimaced. Her brown waves swayed as her gaze bounced from me to the road. “Who are you going to sleep with, then?”

I focused outside the window, watching the familiar landscape pass us by without really seeing it. “I’m going to die.”

“Like hell you are,” she snapped.

I shook my head. “Even if I trusted anyone enough to let them touch me, I’d have to take pills to calm myself enough to do it, and then it would feel like rape again. And given that I already have enough of those shitty memories trapped in every nerve of my body, I’m not mating with anyone. I’d rather die.”

Taylor’s eyes flashed angrily. “Bullshit.”

“Not everyone loves sex, Tay. Not everyone even *likes* sex. And that’s okay; I’ve accepted who I am and what I don’t enjoy.”

“Bullshit! Anyone who doesn’t like sex just hasn’t figured out what works for them.” Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel. “Even if you never like it, you can’t just let yourself die, Lex. That’s... bullshit, okay? You’ve got a good thing going

with Parker; you could just have friend-sex once, and you'd both stay alive and peachy. Maybe you could enjoy it, or—"

"No, Taylor." My words came out sharper than I intended. I took a slow breath in, and blew it out through my teeth. "I can't. *I won't*. And no one gets to make that decision but me."

"Then make the damned decision!"

"No. I won't argue with you about this; it's my choice." I turned the radio up.

Taylor drove us the rest of the way to the airport with her fists clenched on the steering wheel, and neither of us spoke again.

We made our way out of the airport, Taylor still pissed off and me still just trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I only had three months to live.

Parker and Dominic waited outside the airport, leaned up against Parker's ancient truck when we got there. "How'd it go?" Parker asked, his yummy accent only made yummier with the slight grin he wore. He held the passenger door open for me.

"Fine." I didn't force a smile as I climbed into the passenger seat; Parker wasn't an asshole who expected women to smile just because we were women.

"Not fine," Taylor snarled, walking into her mate's open arms and hugging Dominic with all the ferocity she felt toward me and my decision. "Lex is dying, and she's not going to do a damned thing about it."

Parker and Dom looked at me.

I shut the door behind myself, shutting them out. It was my decision, whether they agreed with it or not.

There was commotion outside as Dominic and Parker threw our bags into the bed of Parker's truck.

My eyes closed, and I took another slow breath in, letting it out even more slowly.

The doors opened and closed, and Taylor wasn't ranting anymore.

"There's no other way?" Dominic asked me.

I knew he was talking to me, because Taylor didn't answer.

"Not unless you know how to bring my fated mate back from the dead. Even if you could, I'd probably just kill that bastard."

Parker turned the music on in the truck, and I shot him a grateful look. His smile from earlier was gone, but he tipped his head toward me anyway, the brim of his Stetson dipping with his head.

I knew he'd ask me for more details, but he'd wait until Taylor and Dominic weren't with us.

Glancing behind me, I saw Spirit sprawled out in the bed of the truck, her head lifted toward the sky as if she could feel the wind in her fur. She wasn't rabid, or wild. Just... lost. But she remained beside me constantly, so I hadn't literally lost her yet.

I did miss her presence in my mind, though. Going from sharing my body with a fireball of a wolf to having it all to myself was really, really lonely.

The drive through Payne and then out all the way to the Refuge was forty-five long, tense minutes. Taylor still practically radiated steam, while Dominic clearly favored pity, and Parker's expression was neutral.

I liked his neutrality when shit hit the fan; the way he held his tongue and his temper made me feel safe.

When we finally got back to the refuge, Taylor and Dominic shifted to their wolves and ran toward their house. I went around the truck to grab my bag, but Parker grabbed it before I could lower the tailgate or climb up into the damn thing to pull the bag out.

"Thanks." I gave him a ghost of a smile, and we headed inside together.

We waved at the others as we walked to the stairs, and then up to the second floor. My room was tucked at the very end of the building, with Alaska's space on one side and Parker's across the hall. It had taken me a long time to become okay-enough with men to even sleep in a building with them, and I was proud of the progress I'd made.

He waited in the hallway while I rolled my suitcase into my room. "Can we talk?" he asked.

I left my suitcase, following him across the hall to his room. He had a bed in one corner, and a three-seater couch on another. It was old, made out of peeling maroon leather, but the cushions were worn in the most comfortable way and the furniture smelled like him.

I took my usual seat on the couch, and he took his on the furthest cushion from me while I lifted my knees to my chest and brushed my hair behind my ears.

Parker grabbed the blanket hanging off the back of the couch and tossed it to me. It may as well have been *my* blanket. Though I rarely got cold, I liked the comfortable weight of the fabric over my legs. It made me feel calmer.

“She was worse than I was expecting. I’ve never seen her eyes that clouded; I don’t know how much longer she has,” I admitted. “I guess my fated mate dying is what triggered the distance between me and Spirit.” I gestured to my wolf, already snoring silently on Parker’s bed.

“And now the only way to save yourself is by taking a mate?”

“Yep.” I bobbed my head, pulling the blanket up to my chin and scrunching my body into a smaller amount of space.

“Daaaamn.” He drew the word out long and slow, and somehow, the curse made me feel better. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” I tilted my head back to rest on the couch.

There was a brief moment of silence.

I knew what Parker was going to say before he even said it.

“You know I’d be honored to be your mate, Lex.”

“I know.”

I did.

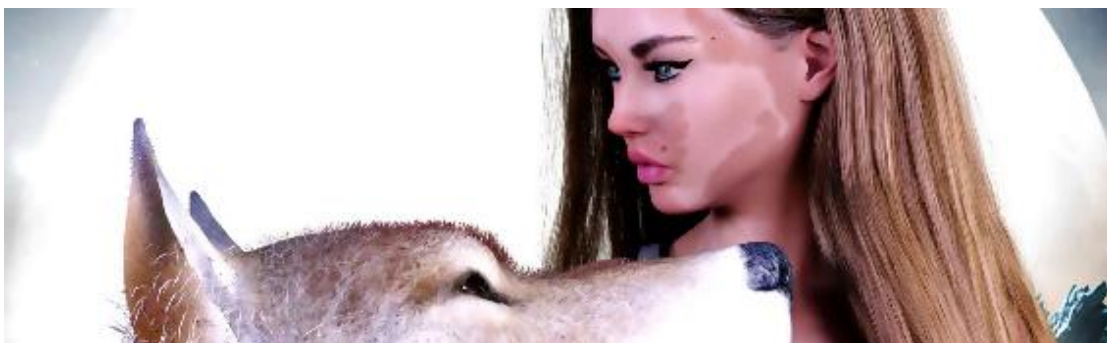
Since the day Parker carried me out of the forest after my ex-fated-mate lost his life, he had been there for me. Knocking at my door with ice cream after a long day, going hiking with me every weekend and sometimes during the week too when I was feeling stifled by my memories.

It had taken a long time for me to be comfortable enough around him to sit on his couch, with just a few feet between our bodies, but I'd gotten over it and gotten better. Stronger.

“And you know I could never do that to you,” I said.

His grimace told me he did. “To save your life, I'd do anything.”

“I know you would. But that's the one thing I could never ask you to do.” Standing up, I slipped out of the room. He caught the door before I could open it and held it for me while I crossed the hall.



3

With the door closed securely behind me and Spirit back in Parker's room, probably trying to snuggle with the cowboy despite her ghostly state, I closed my eyes tightly.

I was dying.

I sank to the floor, my back to the door as I stared out at the room in front of me.

Moonlight streamed in through the windows I'd left open, light gray curtains blowing around the soft-white walls in a light summer breeze. The smell of peace, of home, sang to some part of my wild soul that I couldn't name.

Tears flooded my eyes, but didn't fall.

I was dying.

I wasn't growing weaker, or getting sick; my body simply required two souls to function. A human's, and a wolf's. With Spirit stuck outside my body, eventually my lack of a wolf would just put me to sleep... permanently.

And not just eventually; I had an expiration date, according to my grandmother.

Three months, on the dot.

Three months to enjoy life.

Three months to experience everything I'd wanted to experience.

Three months to go, and explore, and see new things.

Three months until I ceased to exist.

The world would continue to spin without me. Everyone else would live on, but I would leave. I'd join the Moon Goddess in her forest.

Maybe.

No one had ever told me where a werewolf without a wolf went when she died.

Human heaven, maybe?

Or maybe human hell?

Heaven sounded preferable, assuming it existed. But I'd rather be with the goddess, in her forest, with my wolf and the family I'd lost along the way.

My eyes stung at the memories of my parents. I couldn't see them in my mind, but I had a happy, warm feeling when I thought about them. They had loved me a lot, I knew, and the

only reason they weren't with me was because of the hunters who had come searching for gifted wolves. My mother had been a healer, and she had refused to keep her gift for herself. It had cost her the air in her lungs and the life in her body, and when my grandma had saved me, she taught me how to hide. How to blend.

That was before grandma had lost her mind to her visions, of course.

My vitiligo had helped with hiding. The slow-growing patches of depigmented skin made most people avert their eyes when they saw me. There was something about differences that scared people, for some reason. And while they often remembered me, they never recalled what I looked like other than my skin. That had hurt, as a kid, but now I understood.

The weak saw differences as something to attack or avoid; the strong saw beyond those differences and into the possibilities. I liked the people who asked me about my skin, the ones who knew I was normal despite my differences from them.

I ignored those who looked at me like I had some kind of a plague.

A tear slipped down my cheek.

I wouldn't have to worry about the judgmental people anymore. Since I was dying and all.

My chest clenched painfully.

Dying.

I'd survived months in a cage, surrounded by other women in the pack my ex-fated-mate had forced me into, and rape on top of that. I'd survived living in the forest alone for months on end. I'd even survived being trapped within my wolf for two years.

Yet my damned gift was going to kill me, the same way my mother's had killed her. The same way my grandma's was killing her, too.

The dark thoughts and feelings were easy to spiral into. I knew that better than most people. Rather than pushing them away, which had never worked for me, I tried to let the facts sink in.

I had three months to live.

Not just to survive, or exist; to *live*.

And I wanted to live the hell out of every damn minute of those three months.

I didn't know where I was going when I died. I didn't know how many times I'd have to remind my friends that I was a grown woman with the right to choose sanity over survival. I didn't even know what it would feel like to look out at the world knowing that I'd never see it again.

But I knew that I was going to love every damn minute I had left.

On my feet in an instant, I strode over to my nightstand and grabbed an empty journal I'd once planned to start writing in. I ripped out a few pages, and at the top of the first one, wrote, LIVE LIST.

I didn't like the term bucket list; I didn't know where it had come from, or why a bucket would hold your dreams when paper or technology or your mind were perfectly capable of it.

Live List sounded much more exciting, because I wanted to *live* fully before I died.

I wrote a number 1, and then stared down at the paper.

What did I want to do before I died?

Suddenly, the list felt heavy and important.

Swallowing roughly, I wrote, "visit mom & dad's grave".

It wasn't your typical Caribbean bucket-list cruise, but it was something I wanted to do before I died.

What else did I want to do?

My hair brushed my thigh as I moved, and it occurred to me that I'd never had short or medium-length hair.

What if it made me feel like a different person?

I added both of those to the list, though obviously I'd have to start with medium-length.

I was no beginner when it came to salons and getting pampered, considering I was an esthetician, but I loved those

things, so I added a few of my favorite types of massages and facials to the list.

What else did I want to do?

My mind went to Disneyland.

I'd wanted to go as a kid, but my grandma and I were constantly poor and she was worried we'd get caught by people hunting for gifted wolves. We'd never gone, and the desire had faded.

But... how could I die without going to Disneyland?

I wrote it on the list, and then pulled up a web page about California on my phone. My eyes brightened when I saw information about the Redwood Forest, and the wildness inside me decided I couldn't leave life without visiting something so incredible.

It went on the list.

I lost myself to the internet, and was up all night adding and removing things from my list as I decided what really mattered to me. I wanted to live, but I knew I couldn't do everything in only three months.

When the sun rose and I glanced at the clock, a grin split my lips.

It was time to start living.

I got dressed in my most comfortable leggings and a simple top, stepping into my shoes and grabbing my purse as I hurried out of the refuge. I had shit to do; there wasn't time for sitting around.

The windows stayed open as I flew down the road toward Payne. I could drive the route in my sleep after working in the spa as long as I had, but I usually left the windows up so my hair didn't get all wild before work.

Now, I didn't give a shit about my hair.

I stopped in at work to let my boss know I was quitting. She was pissed, as I expected, but softened slightly when I told her how much time I had left. She still wanted me to keep working for my last two weeks, but I turned her down.

Maybe I was a bitch for doing it, but no way in hell was I wasting two of my last weeks working forty hours. I had enough money saved to *live* for three months, and didn't plan on going out with any dollars sitting unused in my bank account. I'd buy dessert, I'd eat three cookies instead of two, I'd do whatever the hell I wanted.

I was living, now.

Slipping out of the spa, I strode down Payne's main street. I stopped at Cake Me Home and bought a cupcake. Not from Cara, because she wasn't there, but from Knox. The pity in his eyes made me want to flip him the bird, so I flipped it on my way out.

I didn't want or need pity. I'd built my own bed, and now I was laying in it.

Walking into a salon a few shops down from Cake Me Home, I greeted the receptionist with a smile and a second cupcake. If I was going to live, I might as well spread the life a bit.

While I waited for a stylist to have an opening, I didn't read a magazine or pull up an article on my phone. I sat on a bench outside the shop and enjoyed breathing in the mountain air I loved so much. The sun warmed my skin, calming that wildness within me that I couldn't seem to name.

When the stylist was ready for me, I followed her in and sat down in front of a mirror. At one time, my depigmented patches would've caught me off-guard or made me cringe.

Now, I loved them because they were mine. Because they were me.

And I was *alive*.

"What are we doing today?" the stylist asked me, her fingers sliding down my long strands. "You have gorgeous hair. Is it natural?"

"It's natural, but I want it gone," I said.

The woman's eyebrows skyrocketed.

"Here; I want it to my chin," I explained, lifting my hand to show her the length.

"Why don't we start with mid-back?" she asked, probably not looking forward to possibly having a weepy or pissed client after a major hair change. My hair fell all the way to my elbows, golden brown and insanely thick.

Once, some bitch in esthetician school had remarked that my hair was a consolation prize for the patches on my skin. Spirit had wanted to rip her throat out, but I ignored her. There were bigger problems than high-school bullies who had never grown up, and I'd been worried that if I threw a punch, I'd get kicked out of school.

Now, I wished I'd just punched her and been done with it.

"I only have three months to live," I told the hair-stylist bluntly. "With all due respect, I don't have time for arguing about it. Just cut off my hair or I'll find someone else who will."

I expected pity to fill her eyes, but instead, they brightened.

She asked me about my illness as she washed my hair—not my vitiligo, but whatever illness she suspected was going to end my life. I considered lying to her, but decided not to bother, and explained my wolfish conundrum.

A grin blossomed on my face when she started cutting. My head grew lighter and lighter as the thick, heavy strands began to fall to the floor.

We chatted about everything under the sun while she worked on my hair. I'd never talked so freely with someone I didn't know.

I wasn't just Lex anymore; I was Dying Lex. Dying Lex had nothing to fear any longer because she knew exactly what day death himself was coming for her.

When the woman finished drying and styling my hair, I had to sit there and just gawk at it for a few minutes. I looked so

different. So much older, but also spunkier and edgier.

Shaking my head, I felt the strands bounce and spin around me, and I laughed.

It felt so *free*.

I was officially falling in love with Dying Lex.

After I gave the stylist a hug and a big tip, I slipped out the door. I'd planned out a road-trip all the way to Disneyland, and was leaving that night, after I packed all my stuff. Slipping out at night would buy me time to decide how to say goodbye to everyone.

I planned on going back to the Refuge for at least a day or two before I died, so it wasn't like I was leaving permanently.

Yet.

With a smile on my face and my hair bouncing around like mad, I headed back down the street toward my car—after buying another cupcake, of course, because why not?



4

I drove a loop around the refuge's parking lot, my forehead wrinkling as I looked for a spot. I'd never seen our lot so full before; usually there were five or six dozen spots.

Was someone throwing a party or something?

I gave up and parked in the dirt off to the side of the lot, patting a tree in apology for driving over its roots as I headed down the worn dirt trail that led up to the Refuge.

A line of men wrapped around the building, and I stopped abruptly a few yards away when I saw them.

Worry curled in my chest. It was far from a new feeling, but still caught me by surprise. I'd been slowly adjusting to having men near me—though never touching me—but a big group of them was a lot.

Someone came around the building, pushing through the group of men and making their way toward me. My heart sped up and beat like a jackhammer until I realized it was Parker, and then relief had my shoulders relaxing.

“What's going on?” I asked him as he approached.

He grimaced. “The other ladies have decided they’re not ready to let you go.”

“Bitches.”

His lips lifted in a grin. “Bitches who love you.”

“Love’s overrated.”

He chuckled and slipped his hands into his pockets. “I like your hair.”

“Really?” I fluffed it, a bit self-consciously. “I like it too, but I know most men prefer long hair.”

He scoffed. “If a man’s attraction to you depends on the length of your hair, what does his love depend on?”

I blinked. “Good point.” Stepping past him, I adjusted the purse that hung over my shoulder.

“I got you something,” he said, changing the subject as he fell into pace beside me.

My chest clenched as I approached the group of men, but I knew Parker would help me move anyone who tried to touch me.

“A present?” I glanced over at him, surprised. “Why?”

“Because I’d like you to consider mating with me.”

I never stumbled, but at those words, I tripped over my own damn feet. His hand caught my arm, gently steadying me.

His grip wasn't tight, and he didn't take advantage of the situation to slide his fingers over more of my skin or anything. He just caught me the way he'd catch anyone, and when I was steady, he let go.

Surprisingly enough, it didn't feel bad. It just felt... normal. Like a friend was helping me keep my balance.

Which was exactly what had happened, I just hadn't expected to feel so calm when any man touched me.

"You know why I won't take a mate, Cowboy." I stepped further away from him as we continued walking, putting space between us despite the not-unpleasantness of his touch.

"I do, and I respect your reasons. I'd just ask you to consider mine, too."

I stopped walking and took in a slow breath. Parker stopped too, his expression still the same. The man was more patient than anyone I'd ever met. I'd never seen him lose his temper, or even really get irritated.

"If you were anyone else, I would break your arm for this," I warned.

His lips tilted upward. "Good to know."

I held my hand out for the gift, which I now noticed him holding. It was rectangular and about the size of my hand, wrapped in sleek black paper, with a white satin bow.

“This looks expensive.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

His lips curved further. “I’m a big spender.”

“Liar.” He was a money saver, through and through. His biggest purchase since I’d known him was a twenty-year-old truck that looked like it had literally driven its way into hell and back over those twenty years.

“Want me to clear the crowd?” He gestured toward the line of men.

I nodded back. I could clear it myself, but I didn’t want to. With Parker, it would be a simple matter of knocking a few shoulders out of the way and he’d get me through without much hassle. “Thanks.”

“Any time.” He gave me the grin I thought of as his Cowboy grin, because it paired so perfectly with the Stetson over his dirty blond hair and the boots on his feet.

He led me through the crowd, not making a big deal about it. He moved people for me all the time; it was one of the reasons I’d started to trust him in the first place. He knew how I felt about being touched by people—mostly men—and tried to make life easier for me by moving them out of my way.

There were a lot of eyes on us as we slipped through the crowd and into the Refuge. The inside was just as hectic as the outside.

I found the other girls gathered in the Refuge’s massive kitchen, with a giant whiteboard propped up on an easel to one side of them and a massive stack of papers on the other. Taylor

and Alaska seemed to be asking the men questions, while Shadow rocked her sleeping baby a few feet behind them and Cara wrote something on the giant whiteboard.

They dismissed the guy they were talking to when I approached, their eyes flicking between me and Parker. Everyone always asked about us, and I always assured them we were just friends—the same way I always would.

My chest ached a bit when I realized how short my *always* would be.

Getting away, heading to California, would distract me from that, as well as checking a few boxes off my Live List.

“What are you doing?” I asked them, putting a hand on my hip.

“I like your hair,” Cara offered.

The cute ginger was trying to soften me up.

“Mate interviews.” Taylor’s eyes flashed in challenge. My best friend didn’t give a shit about being soft. “We’re finding the nicest, gentlest men so you know all of your best options.”

My eyes narrowed. “I told you I’m not taking a mate, Tay.”

“And I told you I won’t sit back and watch you die.”

“I let you self-destruct before Dom convinced you otherwise,” I growled back at her.

“Self-destruction is much different than letting yourself *die*, Lex. You can reverse self-destruction. You can’t reverse death. And we both know you’re aware of that.”

I scowled. “Interview as many men as you want; I’m not mating with any of them.”

Turning on my heels, I strode toward the stairs. Parker walked beside me, his presence as steady and calming as usual. Goddess, he made the Refuge manageable sometimes.

We stopped in the hallway between our rooms.

“I can’t take this,” I told Parker, trying to hand the gift back.

“Too late.” He flashed me a smile before disappearing into his room. The door clicked behind him.

I shook my head, stepping into my room and closing my door too.

Slipping the ribbon and wrapping paper off carefully, I exposed the thick white box inside. On top of the box, a few sheets of paper had been folded together and stuck on with a bit of tape.

I unfolded the paper.

My eyes skimmed a story about a woman who had been sexually abused, and came to regain her power and appreciation of her body with the help of sex toys.

My cheeks were warm by the time I finished the article, and my eyes a bit watery. Parker hadn't asked for the details and I hadn't shared them, but he knew more about what I'd been through than anyone else alive.

I set the papers down and picked up the box, pretty sure I had an idea what I'd find when I opened it. Lifting the lid, I pulled the top off and stared down at a bright pink vibrator. It didn't look like a penis, or like skin, and definitely didn't remind me of a man.

Which, I was fairly certain, was the reason he'd picked it.

A thick notecard fell out of the lid, and I picked it up. In his messy scrawl, I read:

Because dying isn't the only option.

My chest clenched.

I knew what he was trying to say. It was something I'd considered before, too. Hell, it was something I'd *tried* before. I'd read plenty of articles like the one he printed off for me. Masturbating was supposed to help me take control of my body. I'd tried it, but I'd never managed to get my body to relax enough to actually orgasm. Which I knew wasn't supposed to be the goal, but without an orgasm, it just left me feeling frustrated and broken.

I flipped the card over and read,

First reason you should mate with me

My eyes shut again.

Goddess.

His card was a challenge. Accept my trauma and move past it, and then choose survival. Or refuse, and die.

I'd already chosen the second, though I could admit I would prefer the first. I would've loved to figure out a way to work through everything. I'd gone to the counselors, I'd relived it the way they thought I needed to, I'd tried to force myself to get used to being touched by other people, but none of it had worked.

And I was still stuck in the shitty, painful past.

I put the lid back on the gift and crossed the hall. Knocking on the door, I stepped back and waited. Parker opened it a moment later, and the movement was slow enough that I knew he was making an effort not to spook me.

"Back already?" he asked, his lips lifting in a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

He was... nervous?

"I've tried this before." I tried to hand him back the box, but he didn't move to take it. "I can't masturbate, okay? I've done the relaxation shit, and the counseling, and the journaling, and the breathing techniques, and my trauma is still here. It's not budging. Nothing makes me feel safe." As soon as the last sentence was out, I knew it was a lie.

"Nothing?" he lifted an eyebrow.

Shit.

I paused a beat. “Sometimes *you* make me feel safe. *Sometimes.*”

That one earned me a Cowboy Grin. “What if I was in your room with you? Not watchin’ or creepin’, but in your room while you were in the bathroom? Would that help you relax?”

My body flushed. “No. What if you heard something?”

“Then I’d be really damn lucky, wouldn’t I?” His Cowboy Grin was still in place.

I shook my head and once again tried to hand him back the gift. “I don’t want this.”

“Might as well keep it in case you change your mind, though.”

I shook my head again. “I’m leaving. Going on a road trip. I quit my job today, cut my hair. I’m going to live, while I can.”

The grin faded. “Alone?”

I jerked my head in a nod.

“Well if ya’ change your mind about going alone, let me know. I make a damn good road trippin’ buddy.” He stayed where he was, though his words made the conversation seem over.

“Okay.” I tried one last time to give him back the box.

He shook his head at me, grinning broadly as he stepped back into his room. “I’d be happy to help relax ya’ or talk ya’ into the mood, but I’m not takin’ it back unless you’ve replaced it with one you like better.”

I huffed at him. I knew he’d slept his way around the human women in his small town as a teenager; his family had been their own pack and his parents never warned him that his fated mate would care if he’d been with other women. If he thought he could talk me into the mood, he probably could. “Stubborn bastard.”

“I’ve got to be, to be friends with you.” He winked at me, then shut the door behind himself as he disappeared into his room.

The word “friends” didn’t sit right with me. It didn’t encompass the way I trusted him, or the fact that I wasn’t even offended or all that surprised that he’d given me a *vibrator* as a gift.

But what other word was there for what we had?



5

I skimmed my Live List as I packed everything I thought I might need. Clothes, shoes, toiletries... I'd live out of my car and hotel rooms, and didn't want to buy doubles of things I'd never be able to use up before I died. No one would want to go through my shit when I was gone, anyway.

While I packed, I considered his proposal. Not the vibrator one—but his offer to come with me on my trip was tempting.

I'd feel safer if he was with me. Though I could protect myself, it often came down to strength and size in a werewolf fight. And with Spirit wandering around in her ghostly wolf form, I had a major disadvantage.

Plus, everything would be more fun if Parker was there. I'd enjoy myself no matter what, but we complemented each other well.

The more I thought about it, the less I wanted to be alone on the trip. What was the fun in eating churros and staring at the Disney princess castle all alone?

With my bags packed, I crossed the hall and knocked on Parker's door again.

"Are you still up for the road trip?" I checked when he opened it.

A grin split his lips. "Sure am." He opened the door wide, and I stepped inside his room as he eased my duffel bags out of my hands, setting them on the floor for me.

Always the gentleman.

Spirit was still draped across his bed, making herself as comfortable as she could get without a body that could physically *get comfortable*.

I sat down in my typical seat on the couch while he headed to his closet and grabbed an old duffel bag. He set it on the bed and went back and forth, packing it up.

"So where are we headed?" he asked.

"Disneyland."

His eyebrows lifted. "I'm impressed, Lexy. Never took you as an amusement park kinda gal."

"I've never been to one before," I admitted.

"Well then why aren't we hitting Disney World?"

"Because there are things I want to see in California." I shrugged. "And you know how I feel about the humidity in Florida." My nose wrinkled at the memories of the horrible wet heat of a southern summer. My grandma and I had lived in Alabama for a few months when I was twelve, while Parker was from Tennessee.

Grandma and I had moved around a lot before she grew too unstable to keep moving, but she'd seen her sanity slipping and managed to find the Wisconsin pack she loved.

He grinned. "If you went back, I'm sure you'd realize it's not as bad as you remember."

He disappeared into the closet, and my mind went back to the gift... and the note that had come with it.

Because dying isn't the only option.

"You're not going to pester me about mating with you, are you?" I checked.

"Why? Are you gonna leave me here if I am?" he teased.

"No," I lied.

He chuckled. "I know better than to try to push that cute stubborn ass of yours to do anything. When the time comes, I know you'll make whatever decision is best for you."

That made me feel better, though I doubted he would really never bring it up again.

"If you annoy me, I'll ditch you at a hotel somewhere," I warned.

He gave me a Cowboy Grin. "I wouldn't expect anything less."

Parker carried all of our stuff down the stairs. I'd given up on fighting against his gentlemanliness only a few weeks after meeting him. Carrying shit and opening doors made him feel good, and it made me feel kind of important, too.

Luckily, my friends seemed to have dispersed. They had taken their whiteboard and papers with them. I hoped they'd tossed the paper and cleaned the board, but doubted they had. The Outcast Pack was a family, and family didn't let family choose death when there was another choice.

Unless your family was my grandma. But she had helped more than she probably even realized by giving me an expiration date.

He loaded up my car, and we hit the road.

For the first chunk of the drive, Parker had me read him everything on my Live List. He debated about a few of them, and came up with a few more ideas that I couldn't resist adding. The list was getting long—maybe too long for my three months—but I figured it was better to have too much living planned than not enough.

Spirit watched us from the back seat of my car, seeming unamused.

I sketched out a basic plan for our next few days, and when that was done, turned up the music (country, because Parker was driving and got to pick) and watched the world pass outside my window. Even in the darkness of night, our planet was beautiful.

The car's movement and noise relaxed me, and I fell asleep with my head against a pillow, against the window.

I woke up when we stopped for gas. “I can take over,” I told Parker, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

“Nah. I live for late-night drives,” he drawled.

“You go to sleep at 10 most nights.”

He flashed me the Cowboy Grin. “To save up for late-night drives.”

I laughed softly. “Liar.”

“Gentleman,” he countered.

He really was.

I noticed the energy drinks in the cup holders; he was planning for a long night.

“What if I want to drive?” I asked.

“Then you’re the liar.”

I yawned. “Fine. I’ll sleep a bit more, but the next time I wake up, we’re trading.”

“Deal.” He reached for my hand, but caught himself and smoothly changed the radio station instead. It was the same thing he did every time we were together, again and again. Parker was someone who liked physical contact, a lot. I was positive it was his top love language, and often wished I was someone else because of that. If I wasn’t me, with my shitty past

and enough lingering terror to kill any number of small animals, I could make him happy just by touching his hand or arm.

And maybe he could do the same for me.

But I was me, and that was that. And I did love myself, despite the shit I'd been through.

I'd survived, and that was what mattered.

A little voice whispered to me that I was choosing not to survive now as I fell back asleep.

I took over for Parker as the sun started to rise. As soon as our wheels were turning with me in the driver's seat, he crashed. He snored like a chainsaw in the passenger seat, snuggled up with the pillow and blanket I'd been using earlier.

The world passed by us, and though I'd been on that exact highway before, I appreciated the view for the first time in my life.

I wasn't running or hiding anymore.

I was living.

I knew Spirit would've snarled back that choosing to die wasn't living, but she wasn't in my mind anymore. I almost missed the argument we would've had.

Parker's snoring quieted when the sun was fully over our heads, the sky cloudless and blue. A soft groan came from him, and my head jerked to the side as I looked at him.

He was in the same position he'd been in before, and didn't seem to be moving or anything.

I looked back at the road, telling myself I'd imagined the noise. My sense of smell wasn't as good as it used to be thanks to Spirit's departure from my body, so I couldn't sniff around to see if he was aroused or anything.

A few minutes later, there was another groan, and he moved a bit. My gaze flew to him again, and my eyes caught on the gap between his sweats and the blanket.

Holy shit.

His pants were tented—very tented.

I forced my attention back to the road. Men had erections when they slept—that was a fact I knew though I'd never spent a night with one. It probably wasn't connected to his groan at all.

Another groan came a few minutes later, softer, followed by a word.

“Lexy.”

It was just a mumble, barely audible. He could've been saying “sexy”.

But something told me he wasn't.

Something caught in my throat. It wasn't fear; Parker was sleeping, and the man was such a gentleman that I was sure he'd probably apologize if he knew he was groaning my name in his sleep.

The groans and slight movements continued. I found my body heating with every sound and movement. He wasn't making a move on me; he was dreaming about me.

A sex dream.

My experiences and feelings about sex were entirely fucked up, but for some reason, sitting beside him while he had a sex dream about me... it turned me on.

I hadn't been turned on in years. Literal years.

It was uncomfortable, but also sort of relieving. I hadn't thought I'd ever feel that way again. I'd assumed my body was dead to all sexual feelings.

But Parker's noises turned me on.

He eventually stopped moving, and the snoring resumed. He definitely hadn't orgasmed—I would've seen or heard or maybe smelled. Afterward, he probably wouldn't even *remember* that he'd had a sex dream about me.

But I would.

I definitely, definitely would.

Parker woke up around lunch time, and the smell of both of our arousal must've been long gone because he acted like himself. And he was a gentleman, but I was pretty damn sure he would've asked why I was horny while I was driving after I'd made such a point of telling him his gift would be useless.

We bought fast-food for lunch and traded places, then traded work stories we'd probably already shared before. I didn't care if I'd heard his stories though; I loved listening to him talk.

We checked into our hotel in the early-evening. Our rooms were separate, but next-door to each other. I almost told him we should just get a room with two beds, but held my tongue.

I didn't want to lead him on.

We dropped our stuff in our rooms, then went out to eat food I'd never tried before, so I could check it off my list. I learned that I didn't like sushi, that night, and then we split up and went to our own rooms.

We hit Disneyland both of the next two days, and spent every hour the park was open soaking it all in. It was wild and packed full of people, but the assload of churros and pineapple ice cream and kettle corn we ate made up for it. Spirit followed us everywhere, sitting on people when she wanted to and never going more than a few feet from our side.

We hit the road again the morning after that, and I couldn't help it; I liked Parker even more after the fun we'd had together.



6

We drove to a few more places the third day, taking touristy photos and laughing while we did. Spirit followed us around everywhere, and we ignored the gaping eyes. Between my vitiligo and my wolf, we were practically a circus.

By the time we stopped at a new hotel that third night, I was feeling all sorts of brave.

“Do you want to share a hotel room?” I checked, staring casually at my phone despite my racing heart. “It would save a few bucks to get a room with two beds instead of two rooms with one.”

He glanced over at me, wearing his Cowboy Grin. It had barely budged all day, stuck on his face and proclaiming to me and every other woman who stared at him that he was really damn happy to be out on this trip with me. “You’d be comfortable with that?”

“I think so.”

“Then I’d love to. I can always shift to wolf form if you change your mind, too.”

A smile parted my lips. “Thanks.”

“Course.”

He reached for my hand, and then hit the button to skip the song on the radio instead. He'd been skipping a lot of songs that day.

We reached the hotel, and I checked us in while he grabbed the bags. Butterflies fluttered in my lower belly.

I'd never done the romance thing before. I didn't read romance books, or watch romantic movies. I'd avoided all of it because I knew I could never get serious with anyone, and wanted to avoid the pain.

But... what if I liked romance?

What if there really was an alternative to dying?

Did that change things?

I decided not to jump in and assume it did. The thing in the car on the way to the amusement park could've been a fluke. He'd been asleep; maybe I wouldn't be able to feel anything when he was awake.

But what if I did?

What if I wanted him?

Goddess, that was a lot of what-ifs and a lot to think about.

My phone rang as Parker set our bags on our beds. I groaned when I saw Taylor's face on the screen. As much as I loved my

best friend, I was annoyed that she was trying to save me. If I wanted to be saved, I'd save myself.

Parker chuckled when he saw her face on the screen too, and his head dipped toward me. My body tensed in anticipation of the kiss coming for my forehead, but he jerked away, remembering who we were.

“I'm gonna take a shower. Let me know if I need to battle your friend for ya'.”

I laughed. “Dom would kill you.”

He grinned back. “At least I'd die for a worthy cause.”

He slipped into the shower as I lifted the phone to my ear. Though the words hadn't been targeted, I felt them in the worst way.

I wasn't dying for a worthy cause. I wasn't dying for *any* cause.

I was dying because I was mentally scarred and very afraid.

“How's California?” Taylor asked, not bothering with a greeting.

“Should I bother asking how you know where I am?”

“I put a tracker in your phone, duh. I could find you without it, though.”

“Of course you could.” I sat on the edge of the bed, one arm wrapping around my middle. “Did you give up on your mate interviews yet?”

“Nope. Just finished the second round. We should have a top-ten by the end of the month.”

“The end of the month?” My eyebrows lifted. “That’s weeks away.”

“When you inevitably realize you’re not ready to die, we want you to have a list of the best mate options. Any of the bastards would be lucky to have you, of course. The most desperate ones got the boot in round one, too, so you don’t get some clingy asshole.”

“I’m pretty sure all werewolf men are clingy assholes once they’ve mated.”

Taylor cackled. “You’re not completely wrong.”

My lips curved upward.

“Should we put the cowboy on the list? He’d be an automatic top-ten if you want him. He’s definitely not the gentlest, but the man’s sexy as sin if you’ve got a thing for farmers—and clearly, you do.”

My face flushed.

I glanced over my shoulder, checking to make sure the door was shut. “One second, Tay.” I walked over, and knocked twice. “Parker?”

“Mmhmm?”

“I’m going outside to talk to Taylor for a minute. I’ll be back soon.”

“Be safe,” he called back.

Not a clingy asshole. Just... sweet.

“Are you sharing a room with him? What the hell is happening?” Taylor demanded. “Has the world ended?”

I grabbed a keycard off the desk as I stepped past it, then left the room and closed the door behind myself. “He had a sex dream about me,” I whispered, striding away from the door.

There was a long pause. “He told you that? How did that come up in a conversation?” Her voice lowered as she mimicked Parker, accent and all. “Hey, Lex. Last night I was feeling sooo horny and just pictured you naked while I—“

“Stop,” I hissed, covering my eyes with my hand. “Goddess, Tay. Stop.”

“Well you can’t just leave me hanging and expect me not to make up my own version of what happened.”

“We were in the car. I was driving, and he... groaned a bunch.” I pressed my hand tighter to my eyes. “He said my name.”

Taylor was quiet a beat. “You should’ve woken him up if he was making you uncomfortable, Lex. He would want to know

that.” She was getting angry—and getting the story wrong.

“No, Tay, he wasn’t—I—shit, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but it turned me on.”

She was quiet for another long moment. “How are we feeling about this?” she finally asked.

“Confused. I’ve been avoiding it for days, but I’m pretty comfortable with him. I think I should probably tell him what I heard; it feels like an invasion of privacy not to. So we’re sharing a room. Not a bed.”

Taylor whistled. “Look at you, growing up.”

My face flushed. “Shut up.”

“Parker’s been with a lot of girls, Lex. He’d probably be the perfect guide to reclaiming your sexuality. And then when we give you the top ten list, you can compare them all to him when you decide which to mate with.”

My eyes squeezed shut. “We were having a serious conversation, Taylor.”

“What’s more serious than your life, Alexandra?”

I groaned. “I’m going to go now.”

“Keep me posted. I love you, girl.”

“I hate that I love you too,” I grumbled back.

She was laughing when she hung up.

I stared down at my phone. The screensaver was a stylized picture of the mountains; my happy place.

After heaving a sigh, I slipped my phone in the back pocket of my jeans and stepped back inside the room.

I froze in the doorway, my eyes landing on Parker's bare back. He had a towel around his waist, and the hair on top of his head was spiked up wildly. It was cut too short around the sides to stick up, but I figured it would be just as crazy as the rest if it was longer.

My eyes trailed over the thick muscles in his arms and back.

Damn, he was strong.

That should've intimidated me. It should've made me feel nervous, or threatened.

I couldn't take my eyes off him, but not for any negative reason. I couldn't look away because he was hot.

He turned to face me a bit, and my eyes dipped to his abs.

Hot. Damn.

"Sorry. I thought you'd be longer," he apologized, throwing the bag's strap over his shoulder. He strode back to the bathroom, and my eyes landed on his barely-hidden ass as he walked away from me.

Whoa.

My heart was beating fast; my body was warm.

I liked Parker.

As... more than a friend.

Shit.

I went over to my bag. I needed to tell him what I'd heard when he was asleep, but I could take a shower and process my changing emotions first.

After digging out a pair of soft leggings and a big t-shirt, I headed to the bathroom. Parker stepped out, drying his wild hair, as I approached.

"Sorry," he apologized again, wearing a grimace. "Didn't mean to make ya' uncomfortable."

"You didn't make me uncomfortable," I said honestly. "You caught me off-guard, but not in a bad way. You're... sexy." There was just no other word that fit as well.

His whole body seemed to relax, and his eyes lit up with his Cowboy Grin. "Flattery will get you everywhere with me, Lexy."

I flashed him a smile. "Good."

Stepping past him, I let my arm brush his, as a little test. Usually, I went into panic mode when my skin touched a man's. He inhaled as I passed, but my heartbeat didn't pick up any further, and no fear rattled me.

I shut the door behind me, my mind reeling as I stepped into the shower. It smelled like Parker, and the scent was enough to make me warm.

What the hell was happening to me?

My mind churned as I washed myself three times, and then four, just to buy myself a little more time to think. I went over everything that had happened in the car, and then at all of the tourist spots we'd visited, and then in the hotel room. I was overthinking everything, but I always preferred overthinking to underthinking.

Underthinking was what got people like me killed.

By the time I got out of the shower, I was thoroughly confused but also really, really hopeful.

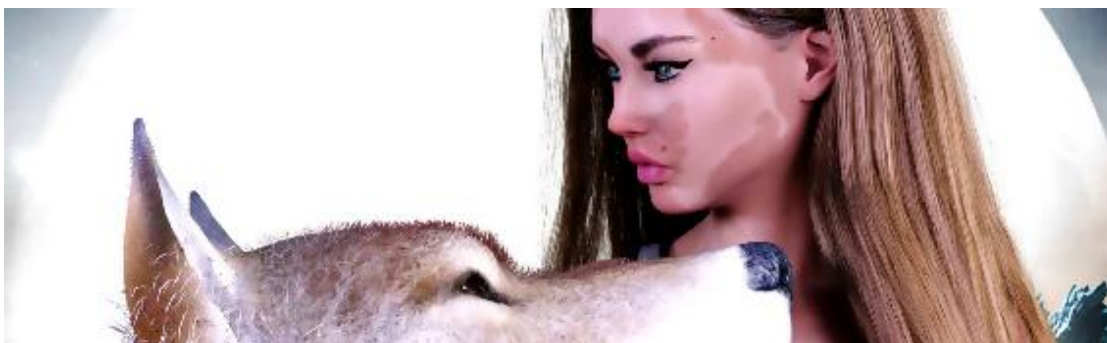
Maybe my three-months of living could be more.

Maybe I could have a full life.

Maybe I could find harmony with my body and soul, and tether Spirit back to me.

Maybe I could have a mate. One I actually liked. One who liked me, too.

Goddess, the possibilities were endless.



7

I braided my hair back after I was dressed, then padded out of the bathroom. Parker was sprawled across his bed, his eyes almost entirely closed as the TV played in front of him.

He gave me a bit of a smile as I stepped out.

My heart pounded rapidly, but I crossed the room. Stepping past my bed, into the aisle between both of ours, I slipped onto the bed with him. My legs remained on top of the blankets, and I hugged the edge of the mattress, but I was there.

He seemed awake, then. Must've realized I wanted to talk.

My sudden willingness to sit on a bed with him probably gave that away.

I bit my lip. "Hey."

"Hello," he said in his yummy drawl.

Goddess, I loved his voice.

"I have to admit something," I said, turning my eyes to the TV so I didn't have to maintain contact.

He sat up a bit straighter, and shut off the screen.

Dammit.

Tilting my head a little, I looked him in the eyes. He was so damned gorgeous. “When I was driving, on the way to California, you had a sex dream.”

His body went stiff.

“I’m pretty sure it was about me,” I continued.

“Fuck, Lexy. I didn’t—”

“Give me a minute.” I stared at him pointedly. “I would’ve woken you up if it made me uncomfortable. But it didn’t make me uncomfortable; it... turned me on.”

His body didn’t relax, but his expression did change a bit. I couldn’t read it well, though.

“I didn’t tell you because I’ve been trying to figure out what that means for me. If it means anything for me at all. I didn’t think I could even get horny anymore. What I said about the vibrator was the truth, too. I can’t even get myself going. But you were groaning, and Parker... it was hot.”

I stared at him, waiting for his response.

It took a minute, but slowly, a face-splitting grin appeared. “And here I thought you were immune to my southern charm.”

“You and me both.” I turned away from him. “Sorry about... listening in. I should’ve woken you up, I was just shocked.”

“Any dreams I have are yours to listen to, Lexy. I told you, I want to mate with you. Not because you’re dying, but because you’re you, and I’m me, and I’d like to spend the rest of my life with you.”

My eyes widened a bit, still focused on the blank TV. “You definitely didn’t tell me any of that before.”

“I had time, back then.”

The words he didn’t say hung heavily in the air.

Now, he didn’t have time.

I didn’t have time.

“So what do we do?” I asked softly.

“Take things slow, like we’ve been doing. We’ve got just under three months for you to decide whether or not you want me, and to get you adjusted to the idea of makin’ love with someone.”

Something caught in my throat. Making love with *someone*.

He didn’t even care if it was him. Well, he probably cared, but he would rather I mate with someone else than die because I refused.

“We haven’t been taking things slow; we’ve been becoming friends,” I pointed out, because my mind was scrambling still.

“Mates are meant to be friends. Look at Taylor and Dominic, or Shadow and Ryker. They fell in love *because* they were friends, and now they’re even closer than they were before.”

Well, yeah.

I’d just never considered myself ending up in that position. With a best friend who was my mate.

“So you only befriended me because you wanted to mate with me?” I asked, defenses rising.

He chuckled. “No. I didn’t know you or try to get myself alone with you; Dominic forced us together because you didn’t trust anyone. That day in the forest, you picked me as the one you trusted. And I’m damn glad you did, but I still don’t know why. We were a few weeks into our friendship before I realized I wanted to be with you.”

I believed him, and nodded. “But what are we supposed to do next?” I gestured between us.

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know.” My face flushed at the memory of him, groaning my name. “Maybe you could tell me about your dream sometime, and I could... you know.” I bit my lip.

His expression grew wicked. “Touch yourself? Test out my gift?”

“Listen,” I corrected.

It was a lie. He was right about the gift thing.

He grinned, clearly not believing me. “Just say when.”

I wasn’t exactly ready, though. I needed time to really wrap my mind around what was changing. I was going to try with Parker... not just sex, but other stuff. Soft, mindless touches. Hugs. Kisses.

“This is so awkward,” I groaned, collapsing on the bed on my back.

“Only ‘cause you’ve never done it before. Give yourself a little experience and you’ll be dirty-talkin’ with the best of ‘em.”

I scoffed. “Are you making fun of me?”

He laughed. “No, Lexy. It’ll feel less taboo once you’ve experienced it.”

I didn’t believe him.

But, after a little more talking, we both grew quiet until we fell asleep together, on opposite sides of the bed.

I woke up still hugging my side of the mattress. Parker was sprawled out on most of the bed, but our bodies didn’t touch. Even in his sleep, he knew how I felt about that.

We packed our stuff back up and headed out, ready for a day's worth of living. We were spending the day hiking in the Redwood National Park, and I was more excited about it than I'd been about the amusement park.

After paying the fee online and parking in front of the trail we wanted to hike, we slipped out of the car. Spirit had been running beside us, outside, through the ride.

As we stepped out among the trees that towered over our heads, spreading as far as we could see, a fierce feeling of rightness settled over me. It was the same feeling I got when I was outside in Payne; the wild part of me that belonged outside, in the fresh air.

Maybe it was my wolfy side... or maybe it was just me.

People had hurt me, life had hurt me but the forest? The trees? Nature? It had always protected me and made me feel safe.

When I looked at Parker while tightening the straps on my backpack, I found his wolf's eyes staring back at me. Parker's wolf was called Sidestep, and he was fairly reserved as far as wolves went. He didn't push me any more than the man did, and he had always respected my boundaries. My discomfort with men extended to their wolves too, but to a lesser extent. Their furry counterparts had less of a problem with my desire not to be touched, though they did sniff me and Spirit a lot.

Of course, Spirit hadn't been nearly as afraid of men as I was. My trauma was mine, and she processed our nightmarish experiences differently than I did.

"You can spend the day in wolf form," I told Parker and Sidestep.

His eyes shifted back. “Are ya’ sure?”

“Positive.” I flashed him a small smile. “I probably would too, if I could.”

The look in his eyes changed. Not to one of pity, but one of sadness.

I turned as he stripped out of his clothes, and when Sidestep trotted up to my side, headed down the trail. The wolf was gigantic and multiple shades of gray, and I had the inclination to touch his fur for some reason.

I didn’t, though.

We started down the trail, my tennis shoes crunching the dirt while his paws were nearly silent.

I knew it had to be taking a lot of willpower for him to remain at my slow, human side while there was so much incredible forest to explore, so I sent him off with Spirit after a bit. He moved to lick my face before leaving, but stopped himself at the last second and bounded off into the trees.

I wanted my mind to stay quiet, soaking in the peace and beauty of the forest, but it didn’t.

My thoughts churned around me, and Parker, and *us*.

Parker was always having to stop himself from touching me. Maybe if we were going to try to move forward, even slowly, the first step was to tell him to quit stopping himself. Touching would be necessary to a relationship, obviously.

Even if I did have feelings for him, I wasn't going to mate with him just to save myself. If he picked me, he wasn't going to be some poor self-sacrificing sap who mated with the broken girl who hated being touched.

If I mated with him, it would be because we made each other mutually happy. Because I was the woman he wanted, and because I cared about him enough to move past my shitty history.

If I wasn't okay with him touching me frequently, the way he would naturally touch his mate, I wouldn't let him bind his future to mine. It was as simple as that.

I let myself wonder what it would feel like, if his fingers brushed my arms or legs every time he reached for the radio.

When he'd caught me outside the Refuge, it hadn't been uncomfortable. It hadn't scared me, or made my body tense.

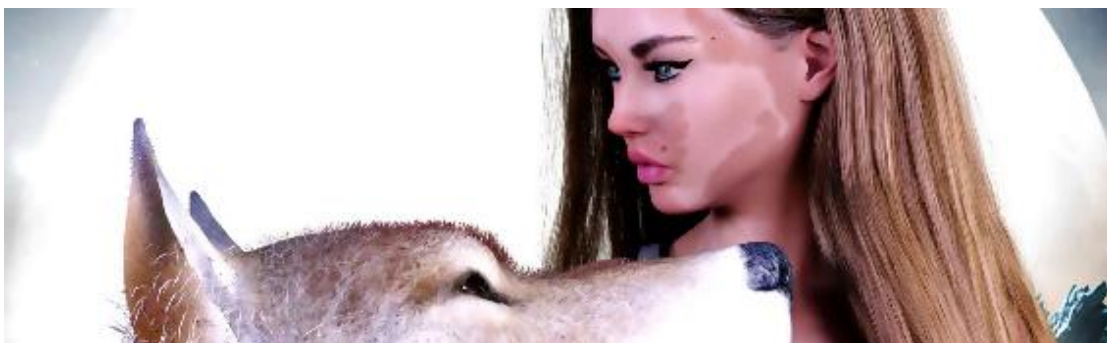
And when I'd thought he was going to kiss my head in the hotel room, I hadn't dreaded it. I'd gone still, but not with fear. With anticipation.

Maybe I wanted him to touch me.

I decided to open the floodgates when he was back in human form. Not entirely—I'd still set boundaries. But I could adjust to letting him touch my arms and face.

With that decided, my mind finally relaxed and I was able to focus on the beauty of the forest around me.

Goddess, the world was beautiful.



8

We returned to our car after the sun set, and Parker shifted back to his human form. He navigated us through the dark forest, and country music played softly as we drove with the windows down and the wind blowing through the car.

When the dirt road became asphalt and our tires met the highway, our windows rolled up and the car quieted.

It wasn't awkward, just peaceful.

Much of the time we'd spent together over the year or so we'd been friends had been outdoors. We both enjoyed the quiet of nature as much as we enjoyed teasing each other during a good conversation, and I loved that about us.

Parker reached for my knee—where I knew he most often nearly touched me—and then jerked up to the radio.

“Hey, Cowboy?” I asked, nerves fluttering in my stomach. I hadn't changed my mind or questioned my decision on the touching front, but I was still nervous to say the words out loud.

“Mmhmm?” He glanced over at me, his lips quirking upward in a tiny smile.

“You don’t have to pretend not to want to touch me anymore. If you want to touch my arms or face, that’s okay. I’ll tell you if it makes me uncomfortable. And you can touch my knees too, as long as you don’t move any higher. I know touch is important to you—it’s important to most werewolves, but especially you.”

There was a beat of silence. “Thank you,” he said finally, his voice husky. “I didn’t know that you’d noticed.”

My lips tilted upward in a smile. “You skip your favorite songs sometimes.”

He chuckled. “You’re worth it.”

The words made something inside me well up. He really was the best man I’d ever met.

We parked in front of a little diner, and slipped inside to grab food. It had good reviews, and supposedly their pie was the best in the US.

Considering how many pie shops boasted “best in the country,” I didn’t think that was really a trustworthy rating.

We talked about the forest as we ate. I told him about the people I’d chatted with on the hike, and he told me about the things he and Spirit had seen off the path. I was a little jealous of my wolf, and the time she’d gotten to spend with his. And I really, really missed her.

We tried each other’s food, and Parker’s fingers didn’t brush mine even though I’d given him permission. The lack of touch disappointed me, and made me think.

When we headed back to the car, I decided he was probably waiting for me to give him permission more than just vocally, but physically too.

I gathered my courage and caught his hand in mine.

Holding hands was still a thing, right?

He was so surprised, he tripped and nearly fell on his face.

I laughed, and his fingers slipped between mine as he shot me a grin. “Making fun of my misfortune, Lexy?”

“I would never,” I teased back.

He opened my door for me, and we both greeted Spirit as she peeked up at us. He let go of my hand, and surprisingly, I missed the contact immediately.

Spirit went back to sleep as I sat down, and didn’t move when my door closed or Parker’s opened.

He turned the car on and pulled out of the parking lot. When we’d settled back onto the highway with my phone navigating us toward our next destination, his hand gently took mine again.

That time, I was the one who slid my fingers between his. Our hands sat awkwardly on the center console for a few minutes, before I leaned a bit and set our interwoven hands on his thigh. And I found that I didn’t mind the contact... at all.

Maybe I even liked it.

We talked about the refuge for a few minutes before turning the music up and relaxing. My body was tired after a full day of walking, and I fell asleep against the window after a bit, my hand still tangled with Parker's.

I'd never imagined I could feel comfortable enough with a man to fall asleep touching him, but the feel of his hand in mine somehow only made me feel safer.

"Lexy." The soft rumble of his yummy accent pulled me from sleep as I felt the car stop moving.

I forced my eyes open, feeling the soft pressure of his hand on mine still.

My eyes were cracked as I watched him stretch his other arm over his torso to use that one to put the car in park so he didn't have to let go of my hand.

My lips tilted upward.

Maybe he liked holding my hand as much as I liked holding his.

"We're at the hotel." His fingers squeezed mine gently. "I could carry you in if you want, but I don't think we're there yet."

My smile faded. "Not yet."

"We've got time." He lifted our intertwined hands to his mouth and kissed the backs of my fingers. I didn't expect to like the gesture, but something about it made me feel loved.

He reluctantly released my hand, and I waited for him to come around and open my door, like I knew he'd want me to. It opened a moment later, and he offered a hand to help me out.

My lips lifted in a sleepy smile. "Is this going to become a thing? The hand-holding?"

"I sure hope so." He gave me a crooked grin as I set my fingers in his, and he helped me out of the car.

I hoped so too.

We got checked in and found our room, then took our turns showering and changing. When I stepped out of the bathroom, I met Parker on his bed again. I sat just as far as I had the night before, but this time, held my hand out for his when I was situated.

Our fingers intertwined, and I bit my lip before voicing the question I'd been asking myself in the shower.

"Does it bother you how slow we're taking this?" I tilted my head toward our hands. "I know you said it doesn't, but this is like, step 1. And you've been with a lot of girls, so this probably feels silly."

He shook his head. "No, to everythin' you said. This isn't step one; step one is meeting, if you want to start assigning shit step numbers. It doesn't bother me that we're taking it slow; slow is what you need. And Lexy, there's a big difference between foolin' around with a girl at sixteen-years-old and pursuin' a woman I want to mate with, who also happens to be my best friend and has been through a hell of a lot. I'd rather hold your hand than have my dick stroked by some other chick, so that should tell you something."

My body was a bit flushed by the time he finished talking. “You’re too good with words.”

He chuckled, lifting our hands to his lips and kissing my knuckles. “You probably don’t want me to tell you that you’re the first girl whose hand I’ve held, then.”

My eyebrows lifted. “What?”

“I knew I had a mate out there somewhere, I just didn’t know she expected me to be a virgin.” He kissed my fingers again. “I was careful not to develop feelings for the girls I fucked. It was for fun while I waited for my mate, but I wasn’t willin’ to risk the woman the goddess made for me because I fell in love too quick. I never slept with the same girl twice, never held their hands, never stayed the night or anythin’. Last night was the first time I ever shared a bed with a woman.”

He nodded to the bed.

My lips parted. “But we didn’t even cuddle.”

He grinned. “I’ll take whatever you give me, and be damn glad I’ve got it.”

I shook my head at him. “You could do a lot better than me, Cowboy. I’m sure if you went back to your hometown, you could charm a cute human girl into mating with you in half a minute.”

His grin widened. “Of course I could. But she wouldn’t be you—and if you think she’d be better than you, you’re absolutely bonkers.”

“What do I really have to offer you?” I countered. “I’m afraid of men, haunted by my memories, and have no future.”

“You know how to give massages,” he pointed out, still grinning. I scowled, and he laughed. “You know your worth doesn’t come from that shit, Lex. You’re gorgeous, and sarcastic, and fun. Plus, you can kick a man’s ass from here to Pennsylvania. Most importantly, you’re easy to talk to, and you make me happy. Why would I bother lookin’ for a cute human girl who only sees my body when I’ve already got a fuckin’ sexy werewolf woman who sees my soul?”

Well, damn.

When he put it like that...

I kind of wanted to kiss him.

Which was big, because I’d never wanted to kiss anyone. When I was a teenager, I’d been struggling just to stay alive in my Grandma’s house. As an adult, I’d been too scarred.

“Kiss me,” I blurted.

He lifted our fingers back to his lips and kissed the back of my hand.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” I countered.

“I know. But I’m not kissin ya’ until ya’ve had a few days to be sure that’s what ya’ want.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “When you handed me the vibrator, you seemed willing to kiss me.”

“When I handed you the vibrator, I offered to *talk* you to an orgasm,” he countered. “That offer still stands, but I’m not gonna touch you until you’re a-hundred-and-twenty percent sure that’s what you want. And you can’t get to one-twenty in a couple a’ minutes.”

I huffed. “Stubborn bastard.”

“Most would call me smart,” he countered, flashing me another grin. “Too smart to lose the woman I want because of impatience.”

“You really don’t *want* to kiss me?”

All humor left his expression, and his hand tightened around mine. “Lexy, I’d sell one of my nuts to taste you. It’s not a matter of want. It’s a matter of me doing what I have to for my best friend’s safety and sanity.”

“Only one of them?” I feigned offense.

He winked. “We might need the other one at some point.”

My face flushed. “We’re not talking about that.”

“Not yet,” he agreed, kissing the backs of my fingers again. “But eventually.”

“I only have three months, I reminded him, suddenly growing sadder.

“You only have three months to adjust to the idea of bein’ with me,” he corrected. “But it’ll be more than enough.” He kissed my hand again, holding my skin to his lips.

“How are you so sure?” I asked, suddenly feeling a lot more vulnerable. I still hadn’t managed to reclaim my sexuality, whatever the hell that meant. I was still nervous around the random men I saw whenever we went anywhere, too, and it had been years since anyone had hurt me.

“Because you survived hell, and a woman who survives hell won’t let herself wither when there’s a perfectly attractive alternative beside her.” He winked at me, and I rolled my eyes.

“Confident, huh?”

“In you? Very confident.” He lowered our hands to his chest and held them there. The thud of his heart against my skin made my shoulders relax a bit.

He flipped off the light, and darkness settled over us. I eased myself to my side, and he collapsed to the bed on his back. Our hands remained locked together, resting on his chest.

“Thanks for coming with me,” I murmured to Parker, as my eyes grew heavy. “I wouldn’t have as much fun doing this alone.”

“Don’t thank me. I’d have followed you if you hadn’t invited me.”

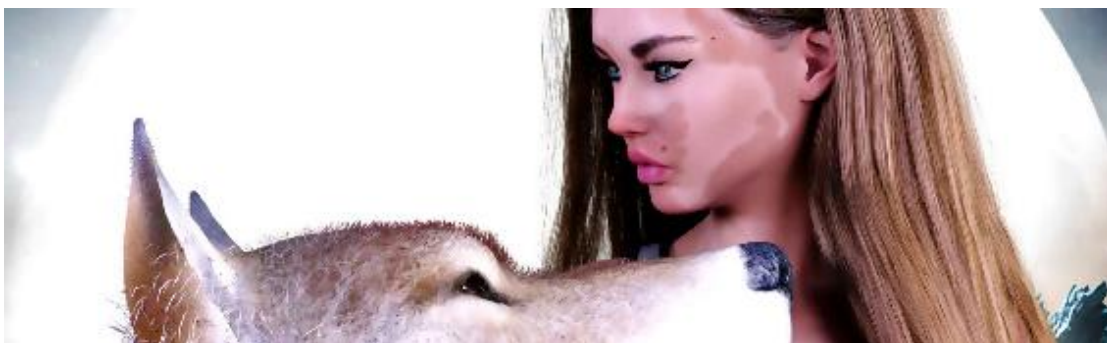
I laughed softly. “Yeah, right.”

He chuckled, rumbling his chest below our hands. “That’s the truth. I’d have weaseled my way into this trip one way or another.”

Another soft laugh slipped from me as I closed my eyes the rest of the way.

I wasn’t sure whether or not I believed him, but I knew he cared about me. And I knew that he was my friend. Taylor and the other girls were helping me in their own way, and maybe this was Parker’s way of doing the same.

“I wanted this long before there was a time limit, Lexy. I’m not lettin’ you go without a fight.” His grip was firm on my hand as I drifted off to sleep. Unconsciousness took me, and the words, “I love you too much for that,” floated into my mind too late for me to consider them anything but a dream.



9

We spent the next few days hiking and tourist-ing in northern California and southern Oregon. We ended up asleep in the same bed every night, but the only bits of our bodies that touched were our hands.

By the time we'd been holding hands constantly for a week, I was getting impatient.

I wanted more.

Parker was being infuriatingly laid-back about the pace of our relationship; he didn't push me, or ask me for more, or even instigate further touching after I gave him permission.

I knew why he was doing it. He wanted me to be sure about him when we moved forward; to be sure about myself. But I wasn't sure I'd ever get there.

I did want to, though.

As much as I hated it, the first step was to figure out my damn body.

Parker always showered before me; it was just the pattern we'd started during the trip. He showered, and then I showered, and then I went to his bed and we fell asleep holding hands and

talking. Sometimes we only exchanged a few words, sometimes we chatted for hours.

So I tucked Parker's present into the pile of clothes I was going to change into, nerves making my abdomen clench. I read a few of the articles from other survivors again while I waited for Parker to finish, reminding myself that my experiences weren't all that different from theirs.

And that I wanted that confidence, that control. I'd learned to protect myself, and take care of myself, and survive, but I'd never learned how to make my body feel good.

But I would.

Parker slipped past me, his fingers grazing my hand as he did. My body flushed further as I stepped into the bathroom after him. The whole room was flooded with the heady smell of his manly shower gel, and it warmed me immediately.

I turned on some music, needing the noise so Parker wouldn't know exactly what I was doing. He'd probably guess or figure it out, but that layer of sound would make me feel less self-conscious about it.

Filling the tub, I sat on the edge and soaked my feet as I tried not to panic. When I'd been attacked, it had been in the forest, so I clearly wasn't in a similar location. But even just a brush of my fingers over my core reminded me of the cruel hands and bodies that had hurt me.

I shuddered and slipped into the water. My mind tried to conjure an image of Parker's hands between my thighs, but it defaulted to those of the other men.

I couldn't do this.

Scrambling out of the tub, I hurried to the door, dripping water like a fiend. My hand latched onto the doorknob, my heart pounding furiously and my eyes shutting of their own accord.

"Breathe, Lex," I whispered.

I wasn't in the forest anymore. I wasn't being held captive, or being attacked.

I was in a bathroom, with a man who cared a lot about me in the other room.

If I was going to move past what had happened, maybe I needed different mental images.

Better ones.

Was I really going to do this?

Fuck it, I was.

I cracked the door open. "Parker?"

"Mmhmm?" he answered from his bed.

"Could you... come here?"

There were footsteps on the ground, and I almost changed my mind. Then he came into view, and my shoulders relaxed.

“I want to move on,” I whispered. “I want to figure out my body. But every time I try, I just see the people who hurt me. Can you help me?”

The look in his eyes was full of emotions I didn't understand. “Of course, Lexy. Come out here.” He tilted his head toward the room.

I bit my lip. “I was going to do it in here so I could forget easily in case it doesn't work.”

His eyes softened. “It's going to work.”

I sighed. “Then fine, I'll come out. Just give me a second.”

I shut the door and grabbed my big t-shirt off the counter. Tugging it over my head, I let it settle to the middle of my thighs. After a moment of hesitation, I grabbed the vibrator and padded out to the main room.

Parker was sprawled out on my bed. My eyes fell to his sweats, and my face warmed at the sight of his bulge. When I'd been attacked, I obviously hadn't checked out the fuckers who attacked me or anything... and I found myself curious as to what Parker looked like naked. Nudity was part of life as a werewolf, but I'd never been close with any of the packs I'd lived in until the Outcast Pack, and since I'd been there, Parker and the girls had helped me avoid most men. Obviously I knew theoretically, but I'd never seen Parker naked.

And I wanted to.

I sat down on the other side from him, the way I usually did when we slept on his bed. His eyes tracked my movement, and my body flushed.

“Does it make you uncomfortable when I stare at you?” he asked me, peeling his eyes off my bare legs and meeting my gaze again.

“No. I like that you’re attracted to me,” I admitted.

He smiled. It wasn’t his Cowboy Grin, or a forced expression. It was a real, genuine smile.

I pulled the blankets back, tucking my legs beneath them, and scooted a bit closer to him. Not all the way over, but halfway.

He stayed where he was, but rolled to his side and stared at me. “I don’t want to hurt you in any way, Lex, so I’m gonna need you to tell me things straight.” His words were soft, and far from forceful. “If somethin’ brings up shit, you tell me. If somethin’ makes you uncomfortable, you say that. We’ve got to be open.”

I rolled to my side so I could face him directly, too. “Okay.” I bit my lip. “Can I tell you what I’ve been thinking?”

“Any fuckin’ time.”

My lips tilted upward. “I’ve never had any sort of positive sexual experience. Even just putting my hands between my thighs reminds me of what happened.” I shuddered a bit. His hand caught mine, and held it firmly. “I want an experience that’s nothing like my past. If it’s too much, or too weird, then obviously I want you to say no, but—”

“Say the words, Lexy.” His voice had an edge of a growl to it, though the words were still soft.

“I want to watch you masturbate.”

His body grew still, his hand squeezing mine. “Daaamn.”

I grimaced. “I’m sorry. I thought it might be too weird, I just —”

“No. *No*, it’s not weird. At all. If you asked if I wanted to watch you get yourself off, my answer would be a fast *hell fuckin’ yes*. I just wasn’t expecting it. Are you sure?”

My body flushed, and I nodded.

“Do you want me to talk while I do it? Or you want me quiet, so you can think?”

I hadn’t thought about it. “I want you to talk. Just... don’t say anything about my body. I want to orgasm once without thinking about it, just so I can figure out how it works.”

His eyes seemed to darken. “That’s really damn hot, Lex.”

I flushed further.

“You want me naked, or dressed?”

Whew, was the heater on?

“Naked, if you’re okay with—oh.” His shirt was on the floor before I finished speaking.

He drew the blankets back as he stood up, sliding out of his pants. He watched my reaction carefully as he stripped to his boxer-briefs, and I couldn't decide which part of him to focus on.

Goddess, he was gorgeous.

“You good?” he asked, waiting for me to say the words again.

I nodded. “During the attack, they... I didn't look at their bodies. Just their faces.”

The admission made me a little sick as their eyes flashed in my mind, and I shuddered.

He stripped off his underwear, and his body filled my mind.

Holy shit.

He was built like a tractor, wide and strong, and every line of every muscle on his body was defined. My eyes lingered on his erection, and... shit.

He was huge, and hard.

“How do you keep that thing hidden?” I blurted, before I could think about it.

He gave me his Cowboy Grin and winked. “It's tough around you, but otherwise behaves.”

My lips parted in a grin of my own.

Spirit went to go sleep in the bathroom, leaving us alone together.

I watched him as he got himself situated back on the bed. His hand wrapped around his dick, and my mouth went dry as he pumped slowly down his length.

“If you ever want to touch me, the answer is always yes,” he said in a low voice as he slowly worked his hand over himself.

I felt moisture pooling between my legs as I watched his breathing pick up, the pace of his hand’s movement growing faster too.

A wave of bravery hit me, and I tossed the blanket off my legs.

My fingers slipped between my thighs, and my breath caught even though my eyes were locked to Parker’s eyes and hand and cock.

“Fuck, Lexy, I’m close,” he growled, the words barely sounding human anymore. “Want me to slow down?”

“Yeah,” I breathed, my heartbeat picking up as my body responded to his. “Tell me what you’re picturing.”

“I’m not picturing anything. Watching you watch me and play with yourself is a hell of a lot better than any fantasy I could dream up,” he growled.

His hand paused, and mine did too.

“Keep going. I’ve got to stop a second,” he growled back at me.

Shit.

Holy shit.

“Tuck that vibrator between your thighs,” he growled. “Just replace your fingers with it.”

My spare hand caught the vibrator, and I was shaking a bit. Not because I was nervous—because I was close, like him.

“Let the pleasure take you, Lex. You’re safe here, with me.”

“And you want to watch me come?” I panted, as the vibration met my sensitive skin.

“Hell yeah, I want to watch you come.”

I reached for his hand as the first wave hit me, the pleasure making me gasp. He caught my fingers and pumped himself harder, and came with a snarl as our hands remained locked. My body clenched and unclenched as the orgasm wrung me out, and I was sucking in air when it ended.

“Holy fuck,” I panted. Parker’s thumb was stroking the side of my hand.

“No kidding,” he murmured. “How was it?”

“Good.” My wide eyes met his relaxed ones. “Really good.”

He chuckled. “Surprised?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I didn’t think I’d like watching you jack off so much.”

His dick, mostly relaxed at that point, throbbed visibly and my throat caught.

Shit, he was sexy.

“You feel a little more comfortable now?” He asked. I thought he was teasing at first, but he looked serious.

“I think so.” I shrugged, rolling to my back. My fingers felt a bit gross and my t-shirt barely covered my lady bits, but I found that I didn’t really care. My body was more relaxed than it had been, and that felt nice.

“Thanks for sharin’ that with me,” he said, his voice low again. “It means a lot that you trust me so much.”

“I’m glad. You mean a lot to me too,” I admitted, brushing hair out of my eyes. “I should probably go shower now.”

“Let me clean up first.” He caught my hand again and pressed his lips to my fingers before striding out of the room.

My eyes followed his ass out, and though I’d just gotten off, I felt desire curling inside me again.

Hot damn, he was attractive.

The way he'd touched himself... I swallowed roughly.

Yeah, I wouldn't be forgetting that for a long time.

I slipped off the bed, taking the vibrator with me. It was time to figure out how to do that to myself—to figure out how to get my mind to focus on me, and on Parker, instead of on the hell I'd survived in my past.

And now that I knew how good it could feel, I wanted it. Badly.

It took some time, but I got myself off in the bathtub, and came out of the bathroom with a grin on my face. In a fresh top and leggings, I strode out to Parker's bed, and found the man watching TV with sleepy eyes. He'd waited for me—the sweet guy.

“I did it,” I whispered to him, feeling a bit ridiculous for my excitement and biting my lip.

He gave me his smile again—the genuine one—and grabbed my hand. “I'm proud of you, Lexy.”

The words made me feel so damn good.

I didn't want to lay there and hold his hand anymore, though—I wanted more. More of him.

I scooted across the bed and pulled his arm behind my shoulder as I snuggled up against his side. He didn't hesitate, burying his nose in my hair and inhaling my scent before

kissing my head. “You’re fuckin’ gorgeous. You know that, right?”

“Mmhmm.” I mimicked his favorite sound, and earned a chuckle. A deep, throaty one that made my body feel happy.

“You stay here too long and I’ll fall asleep snuggled up with your cute soft skin,” he warned, though his voice was light.

“What if I want that?” I countered.

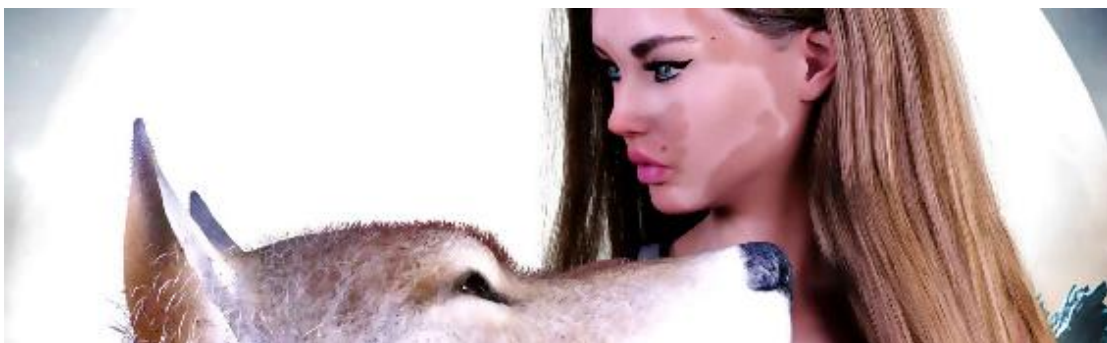
“Then I’d call myself really damn lucky.”

I smirked. “Hey, Lucky.”

He laughed again, and pulled me closer. One of his hands stroked my hair as we slowly migrated downward into a laying position. His other hand slowly moved up and down my arm. I wasn’t sure if he was touching me for him or for me, but I liked it.

I really, really liked it.

We fell asleep like that, and I slept better than I had in ages.



10

The next few weeks passed quickly. We saw pretty sights during the day, driving around between places we wanted to visit. At night, I showered alone, getting to know my body. It wasn't always easy to get past the memories my mind and body held, but I reminded myself again and again that it was worth it.

Parker and I cuddled at night, touching each other freely but not intimately. True to his word, he wasn't in a rush.

I stepped out of the bathroom after my shower one night, ready to take things further. I was going to kiss Parker.

It was happening, and I was psyched, and—

“What happened to Grams?” he growled into the phone. I halted just outside the bathroom door. “Dammit. I've been tellin' her she needed to join them for years, Hudson. They've got Ava?”

Parker had been raised by his grandma for much of his childhood, like I had. It was something we'd bonded over.

I knew Hudson was his younger brother, and Ava was one of his three little sisters. Hudson was twenty, and refused to go searching for his mate for some reason Parker didn't understand. Ava was his oldest younger sister, at eighteen, and she'd been arguing with their grandma about registering with the nearest

Alpha so that men would stop by their farm to check if they were her fated mate. Their grandma hated the nearest pack though, because they had refused to help with the farm when Parker's parents, her son and daughter in law, had died.

“Okay, just don't let her do anythin' stupid. Lock her in the damn house if you've got to. I'll get there as fast as I can. Don't go after the pack, and don't let Grams talk to any of them.”

He hung up the phone and turned to me, his expression dark.

I crossed the room. “What happened?”

He pulled me into his arms, hugging me fiercely.

“Ava found her mate in Wolf River and wants to move in with him. Grams is threatenin' to attack the pack—which is fuckin' ridiculous, 'cause we all know she doesn't stand a chance. Ava's a pissed-off mess, Hudson's freakin' out, and Emma and Jenny are tryin' to move out to be with Ava.”

Shit.

“I'm sorry, Lexy. I've got to back out of our adventure. I'll get Taylor to meet up with you—I know she's drivin' you crazy, but my family needs me.”

“Of course they do. You don't need to call Taylor, I... can I go with you?”

He pulled away so he could look me in the eyes. “You hate the South.”

The words, “yeah, but I love you,” were on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t say them.

“I want to see your family’s farm before I die,” I said instead. “And meet your siblings.”

His lips lifted slowly in a half-grin. “Careful, or I might think you’re crushin’ on me.”

I laughed. “Come on Cowboy, let’s go to Tennessee.”

His fingers grabbed mine as he scooped up our bags, and we headed out.

The drive was twenty-seven hours, so we wanted to fly, but the airline wanted to charge a fortune to let us bring Spirit along because they assumed she was an actual werewolf. If someone wanted to fly in wolf form, that was usually fine, but the price was outrageous.

So, we drove.

I offered to drop him off at the airport and drive myself, but he shot that down in half a second. We took turns sleeping and driving, though he mostly insisted on driving, and didn’t say much.

I expected him to be exhausted when we finally pulled up to the house in front of the massive dairy farm his family ran, but he was opening my door almost the moment we were in park. He caught my hand and hauled ass up to the building. It was a two-story farmhouse, not too big but not too small, and I couldn’t help but compare it to the trailer I’d grown up in.

The green grass in the yard was mowed, the paint looked fresh, and hell, even the rocking chair on the porch looked like it was made for a country queen.

I loved my grandmother for keeping me safe for so long, but my home hadn't been nearly as well-taken-care of... and I hadn't either.

Parker didn't bother knocking, just walked right in like he still lived in the farmhouse. My nose twitched when I smelled cooking food—was that potatoes? And meat?

Yum.

Even with my human nose, it smelled delicious.

“Grams, why are you cookin’ steak?” Parker asked, stopping us in the doorway and giving his grandma an extremely unamused expression.

I wasn't sure why he was complaining about steak. What werewolf didn't love steak? I knew he did; we'd eaten together plenty of times.

“Does a grandma need a reason to cook her grandbabies steak?” she growled back, sounding very much un-grandmotherly. Her gaze clung to me.

“We both know you only make steak when you're contemplating murder. You can't kill Ava's fated mate,” Parker tugged me further into the kitchen.

“Well they ain't mated yet, so as far as I can see, it's still huntin' season.”

I couldn't help it; I snorted.

"Introduce me to your lady friend," his grandma commanded.

Parker sighed. "Lex, this is Grams. Grams, this is Alexandra LaRen."

"Fancy name," Grams remarked. "What's wrong with your face?"

My lips parted in a smile. I liked it when people asked outright; it was much worse when they stared without mentioning it.

"Goddess, Grams," Parker growled at the woman, tugging me closer and draping his arm over my shoulder so he could hold me to his side. "At least *try* to be polite."

I nearly laughed. "I have vitiligo," I explained quickly. "It's a skin condition, and it's not contagious; I just can't get rid of it. I've had it since I was a kid."

She nodded, taking that in stride and turning back to the stove. "You know you've got a ghost wolf behind you."

"I know."

"You gonna mate with my grandson, or lead him on another few years first?" she checked.

My face flushed at that.

“Where the fuck’s Hudson and the girls?” Parker growled again, interrupting the conversation.

“The girls took off in your daddy’s old truck. Hud’s tracking ‘em down to drag their asses back here.”

Parker swore. “What did you do this time?”

“Nothin’.” The old woman didn’t turn around, which led me to believe she’d definitely done *something*.

He turned to me, apology in his eyes. “I’ve gotta track down my little sisters in wolf form.”

“Go play hero, Cowboy,” I teased.

His lips tilted upward, and I decided not to wait any longer.

I went up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his.

His hands caught my hips, but the kiss was chaste and quick. He had to leave, and Grams was watching us like a damn hawk.

“Get them back quick,” I whispered, kissing his cheek before I lowered back to my feet and stepped away.

“I’ll take Spirit,” he said, his voice a bit growly as he strode away. “Don’t let Grams talk you into leavin’ the damn house.”

The door shut behind him, and I looked at Grams.

She was already looking at me.

“Parker’s not usually protective of the women he’s with,” she remarked, turning back to her potatoes. “Never seen him with the same girl twice, either, so don’t get used to this.”

I bit my lip. “We’re not... together like that. I’m dying; we’re just traveling a bit. We’ve never had sex or anything.”

I stumbled over the last words, taking a seat at the table.

“He wouldn’t look at you like that if that was true.”

“We have feelings for each other, but we really haven’t been intimate.” I shrugged. “Believe me or don’t.”

She made a noncommittal sound.

Grams wasn’t the doting grandmother I’d expected when I saw the pretty farmhouse and the mowed lawn. She was tough as a rock and about as happy as one too, it seemed.

“He’ll talk ya’ into bed, and then he’ll move on. It’s what he does. Did it with his fated mate, even,” she drawled.

My chest clenched.

What?

He’d never said anything about sleeping with his fated mate, or anything like that.

“I can tell by the change in your heartbeat that he didn’t tell you.”

“I... We...” I trailed off, and didn’t speak again.

I’d thought we told each other everything. I mean, he didn’t know all of the shitty details about what I’d been through, but he knew the entirety of the basic truth.

Had he not told me everything about what had happened between him and his fated mate?

I wasn’t going to overreact, because that was stupid and Grams seemed pretty determined to get a rise out of me and everyone else, but... shit.

“She’s blonde. Tall, curvy. Big tits, bigger blue eyes. He didn’t eat for three days after she rejected him—I thought he was gonna starve himself to death. Then he moved on.”

But... how had he ended up rabid?

I wasn’t going to ask Grams.

“So, where’s your mate?” I changed the subject, not willing to talk about Parker’s past or my own past.

“Died tryin’ a get revenge on the bastards in the Wolf River Pack after they refused to help us when Parker’s mama and daddy died. We’ve been payin’ them since we were teenagers for the right to their help, and the traitorous bastards refused.” She scoffed. “Then Parker goes and finds himself fated to their alpha’s daughter, and Ava to his best friend’s son. What the hell

kinda mess is that?” She shook her head hard. “World would be better off without those Wolf River bastards in it.”

She was... a lot.

Shit.

“Wanna help me kill ‘em?” she asked, shooting me a stare.

“No. Thanks for the offer, though.”

She grinned at me. “Can’t fight, can ya?”

“Actually, I can. I just don’t want to.” I lifted my shoulders. “There’s always more to the story.”

“What’s the more to your story?” Grams asked.

She didn’t even bat an eye about digging into deeply personal shit. And she seemed to like talking straight, so I’d talk to her straight.

“I was attacked by my fated mate and a few others. Raped. It was years ago, but now I’m going to die if I don’t choose a mate. And I can’t get the memory of the attack out of my head well-enough to sleep with anyone, no matter how good or gentle they are. So, I’m dying.”

Grams whistled. “Quite the story.”

“Quite the life.”

She focused back on the stove. “My grandbabies want to believe the Wolf River Pack is good, now. That when the leadership changed, it cleared out the bad trees. But those fuckers poisoned the roots. They’re rotten to the core, and I’m tellin’ ya, if Ava mates with that boy, she’s gonna regret it for the rest ‘a her life.” She turned her head toward me, her eyes blazing into mine.

“If you hate the pack so much, why not leave?” I asked.

“My family’s been on this land since I was a little girl. I walk away from this farm, I walk away from the legacy they left me and the rest of our line. I won’t be the one who takes my grandbabies from our ancestors, unless there’s no other choice.”

Damn. That was... an interesting way of thinking.

“If you believe in the Moon Goddess, you don’t believe that spirits remain on earth after their bodies die. We ascend to the sky, to be with her there in her home.”

“Look at your wolf, girl. You think all spirits leave?”

She had a point, but I didn’t really know what I believed.

She continued. “Who says the Moon Goddess’s people are in the sky? This is her world; her light brings our wolves to the surface here. She’s right here, with us, on our earth. We just can’t see her.”

Well, that was... a lot.

“What about fated mates?” I asked. “Do you think we end up with them?”

She snorted. “I think we end up with the mates we’ve chosen with our teeth and bodies. Who gives a shit about fate?”

I liked that. A lot.

“Does Parker’s fated mate still live in Wolf River?” I asked. Sometimes the town a wolf pack lived in was named after their pack, so I went ahead and guessed on that one.

“Yup. The brat comes to see if he’s home at least once a month or so, then rips up my roses on her way out when he’s not,” she growled.

Damn.

“She wants him, then.”

“She always wanted him; the feeling just wasn’t mutual.”

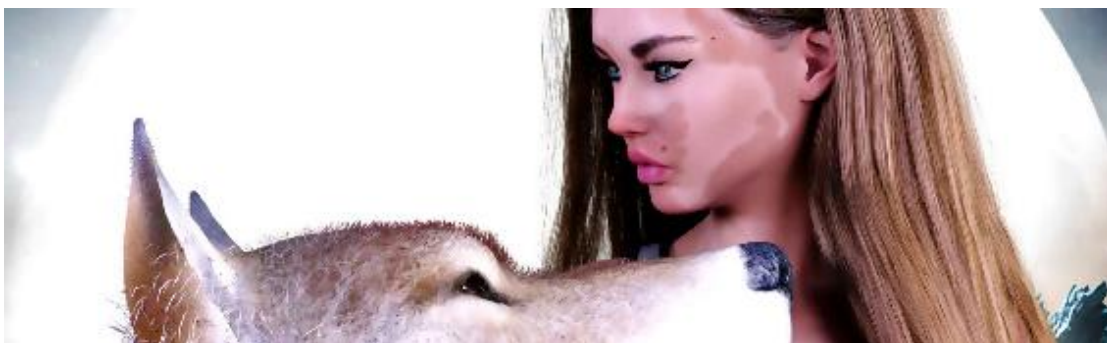
My mouth dried. He’d told me she didn’t want him because he’d slept with a bunch of other women; not because he wasn’t attracted to her.

“Course, they rutted like animals for a few weeks before he got her to reject him. Parker was too much of a gentleman to kick her to the curb. I’m sure when she catches a whiff of him being back in town, she’ll be over here flauntin’ her curves and un-rejectin’ him.”

My body clenched.

Not in fear; in anger.

Parker and I definitely had shit to talk about.



11

Grams and I “talked” for an hour before Parker came back. I say “talked”, because she did pretty much all of the talking while I tried not to get too worked up about what she was saying.

She was definitely trying to piss me off or scare me away, and it was kind of working.

Parker came strolling in with two girls who looked nothing like him on either side of him—though they all shared the same dark blond hair. One of the girls looked glum, and the other looked pissed.

Hudson trailed behind the three of them, and unlike their sisters, he was almost identical to his older brother.

Parker’s eyes landed on me as he walked inside.

My instinct was to punch him in his damned pretty face for lying to me, but I held myself back.

“Who’s the girl?” the angry sister asked.

“Kill the attitude, Jen,” Parker growled back. “That’s Lex; she’s my best friend.”

There was a moment of silence.

I almost wished he'd introduced me as the girl he wanted to mate with or something.

“Is she the reason you never came back?” Jen demanded. “Some bitch? You know Tabitha said you were goin’ to—”

“When the fuck did ya’ll start talkin’ to Tabitha?” The heat in his glare was more than I’d ever seen. “Grams?” He spun toward his grandma. “You let them hang out with her?”

“They ain’t little kids anymore, Parker. When they wanna do somethin’, it’s pretty damn hard to stop ‘em.” She glared back.

He was always so sweet and polite, but his politeness didn’t seem to work with his Grams and his siblings.

“She’s gonna be our sister when you go back to her.” Jen put a hand on her hip.

Emma was quiet beside her.

My feelings were just a damn rollercoaster.

Apparently Tabitha was Parker’s mate’s name... and apparently his sisters were good friends with her.

Maybe I needed to leave.

“I’m never goin’ back to her,” Parker snarled at the women. “All she’s doin’ is tryin’ to split us up again.”

Again?

Geez, there was a hell of a lot more to the story than I’d ever been told.

Well, more than the lie I’d been told.

My instincts told me to get the fuck out of the farmhouse and away from the lying bastard I thought was my best friend. But, I knew Parker deserved to at least give me his story. He’d had my back for a long time, and I needed to have his too.

“I’m gonna go get Ava back. Jen and Em, stay put. Hud, I need you with me to fight Tabby off. She’ll try to bite me. Grams?” Parker looked at his grandma.

“I’ll hold the house down,” she said dryly.

He sighed, shaking his head. His eyes met mine, and they got sad for a moment. He mouthed something that looked a lot like, “I’m sorry,” before stepping out.

Spirit followed him.

My heart sank a bit as I watched her leave with him.

“Why’s your wolf a ghost?” Jen asked, as soon as Parker was gone.

“It’s a long story.” I brushed hair out of my face.

Jen and Emma stared at me expectantly. Gram slammed two plates of steak and potatoes down on the table. “Eat,” she growled at the girls.

With groans of complaint, they shuffled over to the table and sat.

“If we’ve gotta eat, she’s gotta talk,” Jen declared.

“That ain’t how it works, and you know it.” Gram tugged on a strand of Jen’s hair before sweeping back into the kitchen.

My self-consciousness grew when she didn’t set a steak in front of me. I wasn’t very welcome, apparently.

Guess Tabitha was the one they all wanted Parker to be with. She was his fated mate, so I didn’t really blame them. Some of us just got the raw end of the fated-mate stick.

The girls dug into their food, staring at me pretty consistently.

“What happened to your face?” Emma asked after a few minutes, not unkindly.

“Depigmented patches.” I lifted my fingers to the skin. I couldn’t feel the differences in color, but I knew where the dividing lines were. I’d traced them in makeup a thousand times as a teenager, trying to hide my differences. “They’re from a skin condition called vitiligo.”

“Is it permanent?” Jen asked.

“Yep.” There was no point in lying about it.

“I think it’s pretty,” Emma remarked, after swallowing a bite. The girls didn’t talk with their mouths full; Grams was undoubtedly to thank for that.

“I do too.” I gave them a small smile. “Might as well like the faces we’ve got, right?”

Jenny and Emma exchanged glances that said I might be crazy, and a smile played on my lips. Maybe I was.

“You know Park’s gonna mate with Tabitha, right?” Jenny checked. “She’s gonna kill you if she finds out you’re with him.”

“She could try.” I lifted my shoulders.

I didn’t know if she’d beat me, or if Parker would mate with her. But I did know that he’d spent a month traipsing around the US with me, and had been trying to convince me to mate with him for most of that time. Which didn’t make me think he was barking up Tabitha’s tree.

But fated mates were extra attractive to each other; maybe he’d see her and the stars would align and the fireworks would force them together or something.

Goddess, I hoped not, but maybe.

I didn’t really know what was happening—or what would happen.

“What do you ladies like to do?” I asked them, changing the subject.

They looked suspicious, at first.

“Parker told me you’re both gymnasts. That you cheerlead for your school. We watched a video of your competition a few weeks ago,” I added.

Their eyes lit up. “Park talks about us?” Emma asked.

“Of course. You’re his little sisters; he loves you.”

“He left us,” Jen pointed out.

“Sometimes we’ve got to leave the place we come from to figure out where we belong.” I lifted my shoulders.

“Where’d you come from?” Jen asked.

I smiled at the wording. “A trailer park in Wisconsin.”

The girls’ eyes widened in horror. “A trailer? You lived in a trailer?”

“Trailers are perfectly respectable homes, girls,” Grams growled at them from the kitchen.

I was surprised she was leaving us to talk; she hadn’t stopped talking before they showed up.

“Oh, ours wasn’t respectable. My grandma and I were hiding, and we weren’t living well. She sees the future, and my wolf could separate from me, the way you saw her.” I gestured toward the door. “We were born gifted, and people wanted us dead because of it. I could’ve hidden in that trailer my whole life, and it would’ve saved me a damn lot of pain, but I never would’ve gotten to live.”

And I never would’ve gotten to meet Parker. Even if he was a lying asshole, I was damn glad I’d met him.

Maybe after Tennessee, we’d figure out how to keep being friends, and maybe... maybe I’d have to go back to the refuge and consider Taylor’s top ten list.

Because I really didn’t want to die.

And I was ready to fight to keep living.

I chatted with the girls for a few hours. When I prodded, they told me about their cheerleading—they were self-conscious wearing the outfits because Grams was all about covering up—but loved the athletics part. Then they told me about their friends.

When the truck finally pulled into the driveway, the girls took off to go find their sister. Gram caught my arm as I went to follow them. I didn’t flinch at her touch, though she’d surprised me.

“Thank you,” she said in a low voice. “Tabitha never asks about them. They needed to know that a real sister would ask.”

I blinked at her, and then nodded.

What the hell was going on with the family and Tabitha?

She let me go, and I headed outside.

When I saw the group in the driveway, I stopped in the doorway.

Jenny and Emma were hugging Ava, who was hugging them back but glaring at Parker and Hudson.

Hudson had his hands up and was blocking a tall, beautiful blonde from getting closer to Parker, while Parker dragged a guy with a black and blue face out of the back of the truck.

The beat-up guy threw a punch at Parker, but Parker obviously had at least a couple years and fifty pounds on the guy. Parker caught the punch and twisted the guy's arm to spin him around.

The blonde's hand wrapped around Parker's bicep, and Spirit snapped at her. She ignored my ghostly wolf, her claws tightening on Parker's arm.

My chest tightened painfully, and I tucked my hands in my pockets in an attempt to calm myself. It didn't work—why would it have worked? But I tried anyway.

“Get your fuckin' hand off me,” Parker snarled at the woman.

Hudson shoved his way between his older brother and the blonde, which did make me feel better. I trusted Parker... even if he had lied to me.

That was probably stupid, but I was forcing myself to give him a chance to explain.

Parker dragged the bruised guy up toward the door. I backed up and stepped out of the way, and Parker's eyes moved up and down my body. Checking me out, or checking for injuries, I didn't know. But probably the second.

"You okay?" he asked as he passed me.

"Mmhmm." That wasn't the time to demand answers.

"The pack's gonna come for him," Ava growled as she stalked inside the house.

"I hope they do," Parker growled back.

I didn't doubt his words. Parker was a gentle giant most of the time, but when he wanted to, he could kick serious ass. His rejection gift made him faster than most wolves, too, which helped with that.

No one knew about my rejection gift, because I kept the secret of that under lock and key. What no one knew, no one could use to trap me or take advantage of me again.

Parker dropped the bruised guy in a kitchen chair. "You got the rope, Hudson?"

"In the truck bed," Hudson called back, still maintaining his position in front of Tabitha, keeping her away from Parker.

“I’ve got it,” I told him, when his eyes flicked to his sisters and I knew he didn’t want to leave the bruised guy with the others.

Slipping outside, I went to the truck and hoisted myself up using the massive back tire on the thing. Among a few shovels and other tools were a few neatly-wound loops of rope.

I grabbed one and climbed back down, making it back into the house without a problem. Parker caught the rope when I tossed it, and gave me a grateful look as he unwound it like he’d done so a thousand times and started using it to tie the werewolf to the chair.

As I stepped back, a woman’s hand wrapped around my wrist.

It caught me by surprise, and I reacted.

Spinning, I ripped my hand from the person’s grip and threw a punch toward her face. Tabitha’s nose took the hit, and she stepped back, reeling.

“What the hell?” she yelled. “Parker, your pet attacked me.”

The words hurt more than I cared to admit.

“Don’t go grabbin people who don’t wanna be touched and no one will have to attack you,” he snarled back at the woman.

Whatever feelings had existed between them seemed to be gone, at least for him. That made me feel slightly better.



12

Parker stepped away from the chair he'd tied the guy to, and I slipped up to his side and held out a hand. "Can I have my keys?"

He glanced down at my hand, and then lifted his gaze to my eyes. There was worry there I hadn't seen before. "Don't run," he said in a low voice.

"I'll be back in an hour or two; I just need some air."

His expression relaxed a bit, and he pulled my keys out of his pocket, setting them in my hand. His palm cradled my cheek, and then his lips met mine softly before he stepped back. "Be careful."

I nodded.

Tabitha glared at me. She was muttering something, but I didn't listen. Whatever it was, I didn't want to know.

Spirit brushed her ghostly side up against mine as I passed, but she remained close to Parker. I guess she was going to make sure Tabitha didn't make a move on him, though she couldn't do a thing without a physical form.

I slipped into my car, pulling away and heading down the dirt road. My stomach rumbled, and my heart beat painfully. I wasn't used to talking to people when shit got tough, but I was working on it, so I picked up my phone and called Taylor. By some miracle, there was cell service all the way out there.

“Lex! It's been ages. You're supposed to call me every damn day with updates about you and the cowboy,” Taylor complained.

My lips tilted upward a little as I kept driving. “There aren't really any updates. I kissed him, but it wasn't really... intimate.”

“No tongue?”

“No tongue.”

She sighed dramatically. “Dammit. Cowboy needs to ball-up.”

I laughed. “That's not a saying.”

“It should be, though. Where are you guys today?”

My smile faded. “Tennessee.”

“Tenne...shit. What happened?”

“Family drama. His Grandma hates the nearest pack, but his siblings are sort of trying to join it. It's a long story.”

“Dude, I live for long stories.”

I launched into the details of everything that was happening, minus the shit where Grams hadn't offered me any food and Parker had lied and whatnot.

When the story finally ended, she said, "Wait, so you left Parker in there with his ex-fated-mate? What the hell?"

I pulled my car off to the side of the road, my eyes sweeping over miles and miles of farmland.

"He told me she rejected him because he slept around," I said, biting my lip. "Grams said they were fucking for months before she rejected him. She doesn't seem to like me much—none of them do. His sisters are buddies with the ex-mate, and now that I know he lied, or at least didn't tell the full truth, I'm not really sure what to do," I admitted. "I survived some heavy shit, but I've never done the relationship thing before, Tay. And I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do here. I want to leave, but I also want to stay, and I'm hurt, but my feelings about him haven't changed."

Taylor groaned. "Dammit, Cowboy. What the fuck?"

"Was that an answer to my problems?" I teased.

"No. That was me, cursing the bastard's name. I don't know what you should do. Dom lied to me for ages about not wanting more than friendship, but obviously our situation is different than yours. Did he lie, or just keep the full truth from you?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Well, I guess maybe you just need to stick around long enough to figure that out."

“But does it really matter whether he lied or didn’t say everything?”

“Girl, I’m far from a relationship expert. Would you have run if you knew the full story?”

“I don’t know. Probably? Maybe?” I threw my arm over my face and groaned. “Maybe I should just come home.”

“You should,” Taylor agreed. “After you get the whole story from him. Obviously you’re not about to jump in bed with him, but I’d say keep your distance until you know everything and have time to decide what you really want. I’ve got a list of ten bastards who haven’t lied to you and would probably make perfectly decent mates.”

“Your standards are low, Taylor. I don’t want a perfectly decent mate,” I growled.

“Dom and the rest of the girls vetted them too. By ‘perfectly decent,’ I mean, ‘fucking awesome’.”

“Well, that’s better I guess.” I sighed. “Mating with a liar would be a bad call, right?”

“Yes. Probably. But don’t go throwing Parker into that category before you’ve got a good reason to. Talk to him first.”

I nodded.

Throwing the car back into drive, I tapped a few buttons on my car’s GPS and had it take me into the nearest town. I needed food if I was going to think properly.

“Tell me about everyone at the refuge,” I said. “Distract me.”

Taylor launched into an hour-and-a-half-long summary about our friends’ lives while I drove to town, stopped at a drive-through, and then drove back to Parker’s family’s farm while talking, listening, and eating an assload of hamburgers.

When I finally stopped in front of the house, I found Parker pacing the porch, with Spirit asleep on the smooth wood a few feet to the side of him.

He stopped pacing when he saw me, his hands landing on the railing and gripping the wood tightly enough that his fingers turned white.

“I’m here, Tay,” I cut her off mid-rant about how freaking cute Shadow’s baby was. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Aw man, okay. Go get ‘em, wolf chick.”

I grinned. “I don’t even have a wolf right now.”

“You’ll get her back. Now, go kick your man’s ass.”

I grimaced. “Thanks, I think.”

She hung up, and I unplugged my phone from the car as I shut the vehicle off.

Slipping out, I tucked my hands in my pockets and made my way toward the porch.

Parker strode down the stairs, and I could see in his eyes that he was going to engulf me in one of his hugs. My willpower would melt when I got all cozy though, so I stopped and shook my head.

He stopped where he was, a few feet away from me. His eyes shifted to his wolf's, and there was a long pause before he got them shifted back and spoke. "I should've explained on the way here," he said, his voice rough. "I know that, and I'm sorry."

"You lied to me." The words held accusation, though not too much. I wasn't trying to attack him. "You said she rejected you for sleeping around."

"She did. It just took a while... and was more complicated than that." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Can we go for a walk? I don't want my sisters listening in."

I glanced at the front windows, and the curtains rustled as the girls took off.

I nodded, and he gestured toward a path that branched off their dirt driveway and led into their land.

We walked in silence for a bit, my hands in my pockets, and his clenched at his sides. His eyes shifted a few times; his wolf wanted to take over, and he was fighting him.

"When I met Tabitha, I was twenty. Someone from Wolf River came out and told me I was years-overdue to head out on a search for my mate. Grams hadn't told me that was a thing—I assumed the moon goddess just led your mate to you when you were ready." He scoffed. "She knew I'd leave, and didn't want me to go."

That didn't surprise me, after I'd met Grams.

“Tabitha was one of the first werewolf girls I met, and she was my fated mate. She smelled good, and looked good, but when she opened her mouth, I hated her. I tried not to—I swear, Lexy, I tried. But she insulted me with every other breath, and talked shit about other people with the breaths that weren't insultin' me. She used my past experience with other women to manipulate me into doin' whatever she wanted, and it worked for a while. Even the sex was shitty.”

He let out a slow breath, and his eyes shifted again before going back to human. “I thought there was somethin' wrong with me. Grams kept insistin' that I'd learn to love Tabitha. That relationships took time. I gave it time, and more time, but after a few months, I couldn't even remember who I'd been before her. I was so damned miserable. Sidestep—she called him Oscar, and he hated it—started taking over every time I tried to touch her, or she tried to touch me. She threatened to reject me if I couldn't get him under control—she'd been holdin' off on sealing the mating, refusin' to bite me so she could hold that over my head. I stopped tryin' to control Sidestep, and she rejected me.”

Shock rippled through me.

He continued, “I thought I'd be happier without her. I accepted the rejection without a damn complaint, and got the fuck away from her. But I wasn't happy. Grams kicked me out, and I just... gave up. Sidestep took over, and I was rabid until Cara got me to shift back after we escaped the fightin' ring. Since then, life's been better.”

“I came back here and made peace with my family, then headed back to Payne. I stayed away from women after the hell that was my relationship. I like protectin' the refuge, and the pack feels like a family. Then you and I started talkin' and

spendin' time together, and I realized maybe havin' a mate wouldn't be so bad—and then I started wantin' one, desperately. Not just anyone though—I wanted you. I still do.”

My mind scrambled as I tried to come up with what to say.

What to even think about that.

He hadn't given it the label, but his fated-mate had been abusive. She hurt him.

“Seeing Tabitha again hasn't changed your mind?” I asked, carefully.

“No. Hell no. All it's done is remind me how much I despise her.”

I made a face. “She's a bitch.”

Parker's lips tilted upward. “A raging bitch.”

I smiled sadly and caught his hand in mine. “Thanks for telling me. I just wish you'd trusted me sooner.”

He let out a slow breath. “I wasn't sure how. I didn't want you to think I was manipulatin' you by not tellin' you, and I was afraid you'd hate me for leavin' a perfectly good fated mate after yours was such a fucker. And I—“

“She wasn't a perfectly good fated mate, Parker.” I interrupted him, not okay with that label at all. “She was a raging bitch who emotionally abused you to the point that you went rabid after she left. I know you make it a point to respect

women, but that woman doesn't deserve your respect. I'm just glad you got away without making your bond permanent."

He stopped walking, and stared at me. Sidestep took over, and wolfy eyes burned into me. "Hug me, female?"

I couldn't help a soft laugh as I wrapped my arms around the cowboy. He held me tightly, but I didn't feel trapped. I felt loved.

When we parted, Parker's fingers laced through mine and we continued walking. Plants grew on either side of us, and my eyes followed the rows and rows of green sprouts.

"Do you miss this?" I asked him as we walked, gesturing to the plants around us.

"Nah. I miss my family sometimes, but the shitty memories make it hard to miss it."

I understood what he meant, perfectly.



13

“So are we gonna talk about you kissin’ me?” he asked as we continued walking.

My lips tilted upward, and I didn’t look over at him. “Are we gonna talk about you, kissin’ me?” I countered.

He chuckled. “You gave me permission with your mouth. Why wouldn’t I?”

That was a good question. “I was coming out of the bathroom to kiss you when you were on the phone. Seemed like a shame not to do it at all.” I lifted my shoulders.

His lips stretched in a grin. “Really?”

“Yes, really. You wanted me to take it slow, and I’m taking it slow, but any slower and we might stop moving.”

His grin widened. “I love you, Lexy.”

My eyes went wide, though I’d known for a while that I felt the same. “That’s not taking it slow, Cowboy.”

“Sure it is. We’ve been best friends for a year and datin’ on this trip for a month; that’s plenty of time.”

Well, he had a point.

Kind of.

His arms wrapped around me, and we stopped on the path again. If the stopping was for the sake of being engulfed in Parker's gigantic arms, I was more than happy with it. "I'm not expectin' you to say it back, but I wanted you to know."

"Sly bastard," I muttered.

His chuckle rumbled my chest. "Thanks for waitin' and givin' me a chance to explain. I was worried you'd be hurtin' and run off. Not that I'd blame you for that—I was just worried."

"You're a good man, Parker. I trust you. I was hurt, and I still wish you'd told me before we got here, but you deserved the benefit of the doubt. I'm glad I didn't run."

He sniffed my hair, then paused, and sniffed again. A growl rattled his chest. "Did you go to a drive-through?"

"I was hungry."

He pulled away, eyes blazing with his wolf. "Grams didn't feed you?"

"She doesn't seem to like me much," I admitted.

A soft snarl escaped him. He scooped me up off the ground, ignoring my protests, and jogged back in the direction we'd come from.

“Don’t cause more problems because of me,” I pleaded.

“You’re worth raisin’ a little hell, Lex,” he growled back. “Grams fucked with my life more than long enough. She doesn’t get to decide not to take care of my female while I’m fixin’ shit for her.”

“Am I your female?” I countered.

His eyes pierced mine for a moment before he focused back on where we were going. “In every way that counts, you are. And when you’re ready, in every way there is.”

“Flatterer,” I said, tilting my head against his rock-hard shoulder.

“Only when it’s deserved.”

He set me down on the porch, and his eyes leveled with mine. “I expect you to be treated like part of the family, Lexy. If that doesn’t happen and I’m not there to see it, I need you to tell me.”

My lips tilted upward. “Yes sir.” I tipped the brim of his hat down toward me, and he grinned.

His lips met mine, just a peck, before he strode back into the house.

I followed him in, hands slipping in my pockets.

Ava sat at the table beside her fated mate, their fingers locked together. He was still tied to a chair, but he didn't look like he was all that uncomfortable.

Tabitha sat on the couch, talking to Jenny and Emma, and Grams was in the kitchen again.

“Grams,” Parker growled.

She turned around, looking entirely unhappy to be there. “Mmhmm?”

The sound reminded me so much of Parker that it was ridiculous.

“Please make Lex a plate of food.”

I wasn't really hungry anymore, but I wouldn't dare say that. Telling her to make me food was an easier way to tell her he considered me part of the family than most other options.

“Is that an order?” She turned back and put a hand on her hip.

“No. But if you won't feed my woman, I'm gettin' back in my car and gettin' the hell out of here. You don't have to respect me, or my life choices, but you damn well better respect Lex.”

“Baby,” Tabitha protested. She tried to step up to him, her hands reaching for his skin, but I put myself between the two of them.

“He's not your baby,” I told her, wrapping my fingers around his bicep to make a statement. “He's mine.”

She glared hotly at me, and I glared back.

“He’s my fated mate,” she snarled.

“You lost the right to call him that when you rejected him.”

“And I’ll get it back when I take my rejection back.”

“Over my dead body,” I growled.

She lunged.

My elbow hit her throat, and I would’ve broken her nose if Parker hadn’t grabbed me by the waist and hauled me away from her.

“Get that girl out of my house,” Grams snarled.

For one shitty second, I thought she was talking about me.

Then Hudson carried Tabitha out toward the front door, and I relaxed a bit.

“You don’t need to protect me,” Parker warned, though there was a grin playing on his lips.

“Shut up.” I elbowed him in the abdomen—much more gently than I’d hit Tabitha.

He laughed as he followed me to the table, and I sat back down in the chair I’d occupied earlier while I was talking to

Jenny and Emma. He sat beside me, fingers catching mine and dragging my hand to rest on his thigh with his.

Ava glared at me. “You shouldn’t get between fated mates.”

“That kind of logic gets men and women hurt, mistreated, and abused,” I said calmly. “And I live in a building full of people who can prove it. Being fated works out for some people, which is great. But believing that fated mates are always required to be together gives people too much power over the one they’re fated with. The person you mate with is meant to be a choice.”

“How does it give someone too much power?” Ava countered.

“It makes them feel entitled.” I gestured toward the front door. “Did you see Tabitha? She *rejected* Parker, yet she still feels like she *owns* him. Does that sound like love to you?”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Tabitha works with the Wolf River alpha, though.”

“My fated mate rejected me so he could force me to mate with his alpha. Not all alphas, or fated mates, are good. Power rarely makes people better, and often makes them shittier. And like it or not, being someone’s fated mate is a form of power over them.”

Grams set a plate down in front of me, a bit harder than she needed to. Parker growled, “Grams.”

“It’s okay,” I interrupted him, squeezing his hand a little. “Thank you,” I told Grams, and started eating. The steak and mashed potatoes were still warm, and tasted incredible.

She didn't reply. The old woman was pretty prickly, but that was alright. Her problems with me probably stemmed from her problems with Parker, and I didn't want to exacerbate them.

“So how did you two meet?” I asked Ava.

The question seemed to soften her. “Korbin was guarding the gate into Wolf River. I wasn't sure if I was going to go in and ask the Alpha to add me to the list of women for visiting men to stop by and meet.” She glanced over at Grams, then looked back at me with her expression a bit tighter. “He saw me sitting in the car and came over to make sure I was okay.”

Parker scoffed. “What guard in his right mind would—”

I cut him off with an elbow to his gut—this one, harder than the playful one earlier.

I shot him a warning look as Ava looked at him suspiciously.

“Keep going,” I urged.

“The moment our eyes met, I felt it. The fated mate bond. It was magical.” Her eyes grew a bit dreamy.

My lips quirked upward. I knew exactly what she was talking about, even though the magical feeling of my own fated mate bond had gone to hell in less than a minute.

“And what about you?” Parker looked at Korbin. “What's your version of the story?”

Dammit.

He was being a big brother—but after so much time away from his sister, she really didn't appreciate it.

“I felt drawn to her the moment I saw her in the car. The bond doesn't click in until your eyes meet, but I felt it before. I watched her sittin' in the car for twenty minutes, and when my replacement showed up, I went over to make sure she was alright. I knew I wouldn't be able to walk away before our eyes even met,” he admitted.

That was sweet, if you liked fated mate stories. Which I didn't. But that didn't make them less true, or romantic for the people involved.

“I asked her to come home with me, so we could get to know each other, and she agreed. We talked for hours before I introduced her to my alpha, and then he invited her to stay in the pack, and she accepted,” Korbin finished. “And then Hudson showed up, flippin' out and threatenin' to get Parker back here. Tabitha ditched her flavor of the week and refused to leave my damn house until Parker showed up and dragged us out of there.” He nodded toward Parker.

The guy seemed like he was being honest. Grams didn't like the pack, and Tabitha was obviously a bitch, but Korbin didn't seem like he'd be a terrible mate for Parker's sister.

Of course, appearances could be deceiving.

“Now can we *please* untie him?” Ava asked, glaring pointedly at Parker.

Parker reluctantly undid the rope attaching Korbin to the chair. I was sure the man could've gotten out if he really tried, so the fact that he'd remained there was a good sign in my eyes.

Seeing Parker about to open his mouth and piss his sister off again, I asked her, "Will you two stay here for a few days so your family can have a little time to get to know Korbin and learn to trust him a bit?"

Ava huffed, but nodded grudgingly. "Fine."

Everyone looked at Korbin.

"I'll ask a friend to cover my shifts," he agreed. "Shouldn't be a problem."

"Then it's about time to throw a mating celebration, don't you think?" I asked.

Parker grumbled under his breath, and I had to fight a grin.

"What's a mating celebration?" Jenny wondered, she and Emma taking their seats at the table.

Ava shot Grams a narrow-eyed look. "A big party to celebrate someone finding their fated mate. Usually the woman's family throws it, so I didn't think I'd get one."

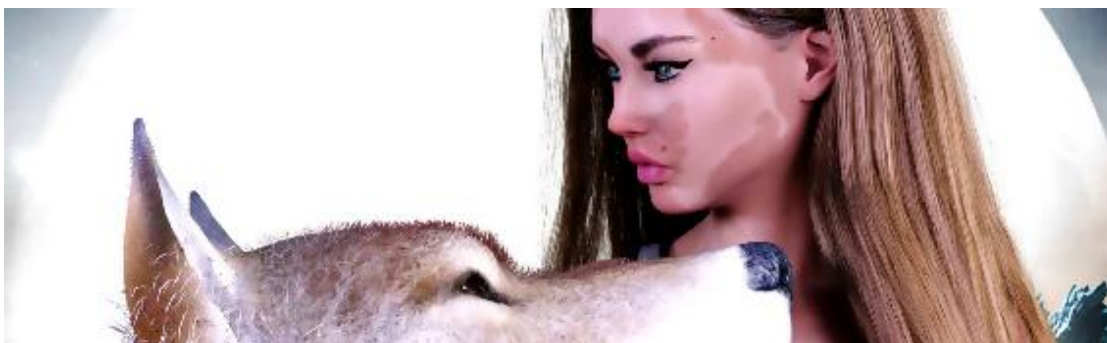
"Usually the man joins the woman's pack," Grams shot back.

"I'll throw the party," I said, flashing Ava a small smile between bites of food. "If you want one."

She eyed me suspiciously. “I guess that would be cool. Can we invite friends and family from Wolf River?”

Gram scoffed from the kitchen, but Parker spoke before she could. “It’ll be your party, Aves. If you want the Wolf River bastards there, we’ll invite them. I’ll clear out the blue barn and Lex’ll make it look nice.”

Her expression grew a bit lighter. “Thanks.”



14

Hudson headed out to check in with their employees before they headed out, while Parker and Ava led me and Korbin out to the blue barn. It was old and a bit rickety, but all it stored was a few ancient-looking broken vehicles.

The guys got started moving things out of there while Ava and I talked about colors and food for the party. I still had plenty of money saved up, and I was happy to pay for it all if Parker let me. I doubted he would, though. He'd probably hand me his credit card and a wad of cash when we headed into town to buy stuff for the party.

Parker dropped onto the hay bale beside me, scooping me up in his arms and setting me on his lap. I laughed, and Ava rolled her eyes at him. Her mate sat on the bale beside hers, and his arm went a bit cautiously around her waist.

They were cute. Honestly, I liked them together.

Some of the rejected wolves despised the whole concept of fated mates after what they'd gone through, but I wasn't among them. I just thought I'd been dealt a shitty hand, but that was just the way the world worked sometimes.

"I need this," Parker said, taking my phone. I shot him a playful dirty look, and he gave me his Cowboy Grin. He knew I couldn't resist him when he smiled like that.

“For what?”

“We need to paint.” He gestured to the barn.

The paint was far-past peeling, but Ava and I had been thinking we’d distract from that with cute decorations and string lights. “Just adding it to the list.”

He added a few other things—sand paper and tarps and stuff.

“Grams is going to be pissed if we change the barn up too much,” Ava warned.

“If she’s pissed at me for upping the value of her property, I’m happy to fight with her about it,” Parker drawled. “I’ve got plenty to say.”

“She’s been better, since you left,” Ava said, suddenly defensive of the old woman. “She misses you. I can tell. And I think she feels bad about guilting you into being with Tabitha for so long. She was just doing what she thought was right.”

His expression grew a bit dark, his arm dragging my back a little tighter to his chest. “What she thought was right for her, maybe.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” Ava shot back. “She’s not selfish. She’s raised us, and taken care of the farm as a single mother to five kids. That’s a lot for anyone, let alone a grandmother, and she did her best. She just didn’t want to lose you.”

I could tell Parker was getting a little angry, and I didn't blame him for it. From the sound of it, Grams had made many executive decisions for his life and withheld a shit-ton of information that he should've been told.

But I also understood where Ava was coming from; Grams seemed pretty bitter, but I didn't get the vibe that she didn't care. She cared a lot—the way she carried out those feelings was just different than most people.

I yawned, widely, hoping it would distract Parker.

Korbin seemed to catch on to what I was doing, and he yawned too. I had to fight back a grin.

“Whew, it's gettin' late. What do you say we turn in, Ava?” he asked.

“Yeah, I'm tired too,” I agreed.

Parker's eyes were narrowed at me, and I shot him a guilty smile. “The farmhouse only has four rooms, right? We could head to a hotel, so no one has to sleep on the couch.”

“Hudson'll be fine sleepin' in the livin' room,” Ava brushed it off.

“Nah, Lexy's right. We'll stay in town and come back in the morning.” He flashed a warning look at Korbin. “Hud's room is right next to Ava's. He'll be listenin'.”

Ava's face reddened, and she stood abruptly. “Parker!”

“Bein’ fated doesn’t mean you need to jump in bed right away, Ave,” he growled back. “Waitin’ a few weeks doesn’t hurt a damn thing.”

“That’s easy for you to say, when you fucked every woman in town before meeting Tabitha!” She flung her hand out toward us. “That’s why you want to stay in a hotel, isn’t it? So you can get down and dirty without any of us hearing? We know how you work, Parker. Everyone does.”

I didn’t have to look at Parker to know that the words had hurt him. I stood too. “That’s enough, Ava. If you can’t be civil, walk away.”

She opened her mouth, anger flaring again, but her mate stood in one fluid motion and tossed her over his shoulder. She yelled at him, swearing up a storm and tossing insults his way as he hauled her back to the house.

I grabbed Parker’s hand and met his gaze. His eyes were hard, his emotions not showing at all. “Come on,” I said, my voice soft.

He stood, but didn’t speak. I tucked myself under his arm, wrapping my own arm around his waist and snuggling up against him.

“I think we should buy some ice cream on the way to the hotel. Might as well celebrate surviving a day in the miserable humidity here,” I said lightly.

“Lex...” His voice rumbled low and gravelly as we walked back to my car. Spirit trailed behind us, a silent companion as always. “I’ve been to all the hotels in town more times than I’d like to admit.”

I'd figured as much. "So?"

"So I'm gonna feel like shit taking you there."

"Well, you shouldn't." I squeezed him. "I knew what I was getting myself into before I decided to call you mine."

"I know. Still feels shitty though."

"Are you going to have sex with me and then leave?" I checked.

He shot me a dark look. "Of course not."

"Then quit overthinking it."

We got in the car without stopping inside to say goodbye; Parker didn't want to see Ava again that night, I assumed.

Parker turned my music on as he pulled away from the house, and his hand didn't seek mine out. I set mine on his thigh anyway, and halfway to the town, his landed gently on top of mine.

"Stop," I told him, pointing to a dollar store up ahead of us and off to our right.

He parked, shooting me a confused look, and I flashed him a smile. "Wait here, okay?"

He bobbed his head once, and I slipped out.

Inside, I grabbed some balloons, streamers, and a “Congrats!” sign, along with some generic ice cream bars that I knew may or may not taste okay.

After I checked out, Parker met me at the door, tugging it open and taking the bags from me. “What’s all this?”

“It’s a surprise.” I flashed him a grin, snagging the bag with the ice cream. “Except this one.”

He set the bags in the back, and accepted the ice cream bar with a dramatic sigh when I handed it over. “You’re tryin’ to fatten me up, huh?”

“Mmhmm. How else am I supposed to keep the other girls from looking at all this?” I squeezed his bicep, and he flashed me a mini-grin.

“You were cute when you were defending me earlier.”

“I try.” I fluffed my hair, then opened my ice cream bar and took a bite. “Not as bad as I expected,” I remarked as he pulled away from the store, already eating his.

“You bought it expectin’ it to be bad?” he shot me an amused look.

“*Half* expecting it to be bad. You’ve got a fifty/fifty chance when it comes to dollar store shit.”

He chuckled. “I never saw you as a dollar store girl, Lexy.”

“Well you never saw me as a trailer-park girl, either. I’m just mysterious, I guess.”

“Not mysterious, just deep.” His fingers brushed over my thigh before he slipped his trash in the bag on my lap. He didn’t even seem to realize the touch had been intimate, though it made me a bit warm.

“Here.” I handed him more ice cream, and he laughed.

“You really do want me fatter.”

“I want you smiling, and ice cream makes you and everyone else happy,” I countered.

“Not people with lactose intolerance.”

“It probably makes them happy too; at least until they get sick. Now, eat your ice cream so I can watch you smile.”

He shot me another grin and dutifully ate the ice cream bar.

His fingers brushed my thigh again as he tossed the wrapper. My body clenched that time, when he did, but he was too focused on the road and the dessert to notice.



15

I left Parker grabbing the bags while I went in to get us a room. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable if he was self-conscious about being remembered, and checking in was pretty damn easy.

We met at the car, and I grabbed my dollar-store decorations from Parker even though he tried to stop me. Like always, he wanted to carry everything for me. He grumbled at me, but I saw the playfulness in his eyes and knew he wasn't really upset.

The door shut behind us, and as always, Parker grabbed clean clothes out of his bag and headed for the shower. I let him go, and the moment the water was gone, got to work.

It took a damn lot of tape and a bit of balancing on surfaces I probably shouldn't be balancing on, but I got the streamers and sign put up. I was working on the balloons when Parker stepped out, but the colorful orbs were already spread across every inch of the floor.

His eyes swept the room before landing on mine, soft and tentative. "Are you throwin' a party?"

"Yeah. It's a 'congrats, you survived your first day back in Tennessee' party, and we're the only ones invited. Woohoo!" I pumped my fist, and he laughed.

“Lexy.” His voice was warm and smooth as he came over to sit beside me, draping an arm over my shoulders. “You’re really damn sweet.”

“I know. It’s one of my best qualities, but I’m pretty good at keeping it hidden.” I flashed him a grin. “Here. Can you blow up the rest of these?” I handed him the bag, which only held three more balloons. “I’ll be right back.”

“Mmhmm.” He kissed my cheek, and then turned to catch my mouth.

I slipped away from him, grabbing one of my big sleep-t-shirts and ducking into the bathroom. I shucked my clothes and tugged the shirt on, then stared at myself in the mirror. Fluffing my hair a bit, I wiped old mascara off the skin beneath my eyes, and then put a tiny bit more deodorant on before slipping back out.

Parker’s eyes trailed over me, landing on my bare legs, and remained there until I was right in front of him. “Daaamn.”

“Thanks.” With a wink, I took the balloon he was holding and tied the end. I tossed it over my shoulder and then sat down on his lap. His sweats were soft against my inner thighs, and though his erection brushed my core, it didn’t make me uncomfortable or nervous. It made me feel good.

His hand landed on my hips. “Whatcha doin, Lexy?”

“Making memories.” I buried my fingers in his hair. It was longer than usual, but crazy soft even though it was still damp from his shower.

He growled. “I’m not lettin’ you die, woman.”

I laughed. “I know.” I kissed him, just a press of my lips to his. “The memories aren’t for me, though I’ll enjoy them too. They’re for you.”

I kissed him again, not really sure what I was doing. He didn’t kiss me back, or pull me closer. “Are you rejecting me, Cowboy?” I murmured when he still didn’t respond.

“Never,” he growled. “Fuck, no. Never, Lexy.” His eyes were fervent as they peered into mine. “I want you—I just don’t want to scare you.”

“You’re not scary.” I pressed my lips to his again, and this time, he reacted.

His tongue slid into my mouth, soft and slow and gentle, sweeping it against mine and exploring me. When my tongue slipped into his mouth, he gave me a groan that only made me want more.

The kiss went on a long while, slowly growing faster and hotter. His erection was steel against my core, and I rocked against him.

We both moaned at the feeling.

His hands left my hips, digging into my hair, and I knew it was to stop himself from rocking me faster or harder.

I didn’t know how I’d react to him moving me, but I had no problem doing it for us. My thighs started to burn as I took control, dragging myself against him slowly at first, and then faster.

His fingers kneaded my back, then my thighs, as he urged me to continue. It took a while, but pressure built inside me as our lips remained locked and our bodies ground against each other. When I finally shattered, I cried out into his mouth.

He snarled into mine, his body jerking hard as if my orgasm had given him the permission to lose control. He throbbed against me as I turned to jelly in his arms, my lips slowly withdrawing from his.

Our foreheads rested against one another, and my eyes closed as I panted. He breathed roughly too, and held me close but gently as he slowly dropped to his back on the bed. I snuggled up against him, biting my lip at the feel of a damp spot on his sweats against my inner thigh.

“Damn, Lexy,” he murmured.

My lower belly clenched at the words. “Are you happy?”

“Ridiculously happy.” His hand stroked my back gently. “I’ve never done that before—no one’s ever been hot enough to get me off without even touching me.”

My body warmed further, satisfaction curling inside me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” His lips met my forehead. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I admitted.

He swallowed roughly. “Goddess, I wondered what it would be like to hear you say that.”

“And?”

“And feeling your body in my arms while you did made it so damn much better.” He kissed my head again, and then my cheek. “I want to clean you up.”

“Is that something you do?” I bit my lip.

“It wasn’t. Sex was selfish for me, before. Now, I just want to make you feel good. If I get off afterward, great. But it’s about you.”

His words could’ve melted me.

Less than a minute later—hell, less than thirty seconds later—he kissed my head again.

“How many times are you going to kiss me?”

“As many as I can before you throat-punch me.”

I laughed into his neck. “Dick.”

“I do have one of those, yes. And it likes you.”

I laughed harder.

His arms tightened around me. “Let’s never leave here.”

“I promised Ava I’d throw her a party.”

He sighed. “She hates me, and I don’t even fuckin’ blame her. I was a bastard.” There was a long pause before he spoke again, but the way his voice hitched told me he wasn’t done. “I shouldn’t have left. Tabitha was right; I was too damn selfish for a mate.”

I lifted myself up on my arms and glared down at him. “Don’t let her affect you, Parker. She was wrong. Maybe you were selfish when you were sleeping around, but the women you slept with were using you as much as you were using them. And as soon as you met Tabitha, you were loyal. Have you even slept with anyone since she rejected you?”

“No.” His voice was gruff.

I’d thought so. “She’s wrong, okay? You’re the most thoughtful man I’ve ever met. You’re gentle, and sweet, and caring, and loyal. And she can jump off a fucking cliff for making you doubt that.” I dropped back to his chest and wrapped my body around his, arms and legs and all. Squeezing him tight, I held on with everything I had. “You said you’d clean me off. I want to be cleaned.”

He chuckled, his chest rumbling against my face. “You’re more stubborn than anyone gives you credit for.”

“You’ve discovered another one of my best traits.”

His arms tightened around me and he stood, holding me to his chest. He kicked balloons out of the way as he carried me into the bathroom. “Tell me how we’re going to cross some things off your list while we’re in Tennessee,” he said as he set me down on the bathroom counter, right beside the sink.

He grabbed a small hand towel and dipped it under the faucet, turning on the water and holding it under while he waited for it to warm.

My eyes caught on his sweats. They were light gray, and the big wet spot on them was much darker.

Pride swelled in me.

I hadn't expected to feel so proud, seeing the evidence of his release, but... damn.

I'd made him feel good. He hadn't been in control; I had.

And I loved it.

"I want you to teach me how to get you off," I said abruptly.

He blinked.

"With my hands, and with my mouth. I want to learn to make you orgasm."

The front of his pants tented, catching my eyes again.

"That's not on the list," he said, turning back to the sink.

"I'll add it."

He tested the water, and finally seemed satisfied with the temperature it was at.

“Is that a no?” I checked.

“No. *Fuck no*, it’s not a no. I’m trying to figure out how to answer without sounding like a bastard.”

“Stop trying, and just talk to me.”

He ran a hand over his hair, spiking it up wildly but seeming not to care about the mess. “Alright, fine.” His eyes met mine. “I’m happy to teach you to get me off, Lexy, but only when you’re ready to let me return the favor. I’ll feel like an absolute fucker if you blow me or rub me off and then slip away to the bathroom to use the vibrator.”

Oh.

Well, that... wasn’t entirely unreasonable.

I would probably feel crappy if he got me off but didn’t orgasm. If I wanted him to feel pleasure, it made sense that he’d want me to feel it too.

“Okay.” I nodded. “We’ll try.”

Shutting off the water, he wrung out the towel and then stepped over to me. His hand, warm and damp, landed on my leg, and he glanced up at me. “Is this okay?”

I dipped my head, and he slowly cleaned my thigh. His own pants were still clearly damp, but he didn’t seem to give a shit about it.

His fingers trailed up my leg after he tossed the rag into the sink, his touch soft on my bare skin. “You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, touching me so lightly my breath caught. His finger traced the border between one of my depigmented patches and my pigmented skin.

“You don’t mind the color difference?” I asked.

“I think it’s gorgeous.” He lowered his lips to my thigh, pressing them to the border before slowly sliding his tongue over the line there. My breathing picked up as he followed the outline of the patch up to the hem of my simple black underwear, and then back down and around the uneven edges.

My fingers gripped the edge of the counter, and he lifted them to his hair. I felt a bit bad for tugging on it, but the way his chest rumbled told me he liked it.

His tongue finally left the edge of the patch, and he pressed his lips to the border again. “Most people’s skin just looks like skin. Yours looks like art.”

My heart pounded rapidly in my chest. “Why are you licking my leg?”

“Because it’s as close as I can get to licking the parts of you I really want to taste.”

My face flushed. “You really want to do that?”

“You can’t mention a blowjob and think my mind won’t go to eating you out, Lexy. It doesn’t work that way.” His teeth skimmed over my skin, and I hurried to push his face off my leg. “Shit. Sorry.” He straightened, his gaze completely apologetic.

“No, don’t be. I liked it. But if you bite me, I think Spirit will be pulled back inside me or something, and I don’t know how long we’ll have to solidify our mate bond,” I said quickly. “I just don’t want to accidentally do that. When we become mates, I want to know for sure that we can be together the way I want. I don’t want to trap you with me if I can never really have sex with you.”

He scoffed, taking my face in his hands. “I’d want you even if all we ever do is hand stuff, Lex. Even if we never did *anything*. Sex is just sex; after it’s over, all that really matters is friendship.”

“There are thousands of failed marriages that prove that wrong,” I countered. “And unhappily-mated couples.”

“If their happiness revolves around their sex life, they’re missing out on a hell of a lot of fun.” He kissed my thigh again. “Let’s get back to our party.”

I grinned. “You like the party?”

“I love it.” He scooped me up off the counter. “I’ve just got to change first.”

I laughed at the mischievous grin he shot me, kissing him on the mouth. He opened for me, and my tongue met his.



16

We spent most of the night talking and making out like teenagers, but slowed down as the “party” came to an end. We were both too worked-up after all the kissing to really sleep, so Parker taught me how to give him a hand-job while he made the vibrator he’d gifted me work its magic.

The next morning, our alarm went off way too early, finding us half-naked and snuggled up in bed together. Stumbling out of bed, we took turns in the shower really quick so we wouldn’t smell like sex and then headed back out to the farm.

We expected drama when we got there, but surprisingly enough, found everyone eating pancakes peacefully.

Grams got up and pulled two warm plates out of the oven, setting them both in front of the single empty chair at the table. Parker tugged me over to it, and I sat on his knee after he took the chair.

Country music played quietly from a speaker somewhere, and it made the mood comfortable while the siblings chatted. Parker and I didn’t say much, but it wasn’t too uncomfortable. I could tell Parker felt like an outsider in his family, but I was sure it would just take some time to get over that.

After breakfast, we all headed back into the nearest city—in the opposite direction and an hour further than the closest town

—to hit the stores. We took Parker’s parents’ old truck, and I sat in the front with Parker while Ava and Korbin sat in the back.

I asked Ava how school was going—her sisters had mentioned that she was taking online college classes while helping at the farm. She liked it alright, but didn’t know what she wanted to get a degree in. She had only taken a few classes, so she wasn’t in a hurry to decide.

The guys dropped me and Ava off at the party store with Parker’s credit card, as expected. He even went so far as to take mine out of my wallet so I couldn’t pull a fast one on him, and he flashed me his Cowboy Grin when I rolled my eyes at him for doing it.

Ava and I walked around the store, grabbing the stuff we’d decided we would need.

“So, what do you do?” she asked me after we finished debating whether we wanted the burlap or the white burlap ribbon.

“I’m an esthetician.”

The word drew up a blank; I’d expected it to. There were a lot of people who didn’t know what the word meant. And when I’d looked it up, the town Parker and I were staying in had two motels but zero spas. The closest thing they had to a spa was a hair salon that offered manicures.

I explained that I only did facials and certain types of face treatments, though other estheticians learned how to do lash extensions, massage therapy, and plenty of other things. I just liked to keep it simple, and I found giving facials relaxing.

She had never even been to a spa, so I promised to book us both a few treatments in the coming days.

“So you actually get naked for a massage?” Ava asked, a bit horrified.

I grinned. “If you want. You can leave your underwear on, if you’d rather, but they’ll always keep you plenty covered. And you can always tell them not to go past your middle-thigh if you’re not comfortable—I always do that, for personal reasons. And they’ll always respect you.”

“What personal reasons?” she wrinkled her nose.

Yikes.

“I was attacked, a few years ago. Raped.”

That was the simplified version of the story, but I wasn’t about to spill every detail from my past with Parker’s little sister who didn’t like me or her brother very much.

“What?” Her voice lifted an octave.

“Spirit, my wolf, used to be able to attach and reattach from me at will. It made me a high commodity in some circles. I was held captive and hurt because of that,” I said carefully.

Keeping my trauma quiet didn’t help anything, but lingering on the specifics only hurt me more, so I kept it simple.

“Goddess, Lex. I’m so sorry.” Ava looked sick. It was a common response, and didn’t surprise me. “Does Parker

know?”

“Of course. He helped me get away from them, the second time they caught me.” I studied some fake flowers, struggling to get my emotions back under control. “You’re wrong about him, you know. He slept with a lot of women, but your Grams hadn’t told him that werewolf culture insists unmated wolves stay virgins. And Tabitha used that to manipulate him for a long time before she rejected him. He hasn’t been with anyone since her—she changed a lot about him with her cruelty.”

All of the blood drained from Ava’s face. “No,” she whispered.

I turned to look at her.

“I didn’t know,” she said, her breath catching. “I swear, I didn’t know. She said he rejected her—that he cheated on her, but she’s decided to forgive him. She wants him back.”

That didn’t sound good.

The horror in her eyes looked worse.

“What did you do, Ava?”

“She wanted to know where we were going. She’s going to use you to force Parker to take her back.”

Shit.

I abandoned our shopping cart, hurrying to the back of the store. There was probably an emergency exit; there was always

an emergency exit.

While I looked, I called Parker.

“Hey, Lexy.” His playful growl would’ve usually made me smile.

Not this time.

“Ava told Tabitha where we are. She’s going to try to use me to force you to take her back. If they get me, don’t do it. Just call the refuge—get backup—and get me out. I can survive a couple days, okay? It’s not worth losing your freedom, or mating yourself to her. Just call the refuge and get backup,” I repeated, flinging the emergency exit door open.

An alarm sounded.

“Shift, Lex, just—*fuck, you can’t shift,*” he snarled.

“I can shift,” Ava said, running beside me. “I’ll run us back to the farm. We can deal with Tabitha afterward. After we’re home. Then we’ll be safe, and—”

A big white SUV pulled up in front of us, cutting us off.

“If they take me, call the refuge,” I repeated to Parker, before hanging up the phone and shoving it in the pocket of my jeans.

Spirit was off with Parker—since we’d left on vacation, she was always off with Parker. It was just me, and Ava, and whoever Parker’s bitchy mate had sent after us.

A pair of large men got out of the car as Ava shifted. She lunged between me and them, snapping her teeth toward the men.

One of them shifted, tackling her to the ground, while the other grabbed me.

I threw my elbow into his throat, then kneed him in the groin. Pulling my knife out of my bag, I stabbed it into his leg.

He dropped to the ground, and I ripped my knife out of his thigh.

I'd told myself after my first and second escapes that I wasn't going to get taken again. The Wolf River Pack probably wasn't as bad as the one that had taken me last time, but I wasn't willing to risk it. If I had to kill one, or two, or six people to keep myself out of a cage, I'd do it.

Three more guys came out of the van, and all three went for me.

With three huge men trying to take me down, I didn't have time for kindness. I slammed my knee into one of the men's groin, using the distraction to spin and stab my knife up into a second's heart. He staggered backward, clutching at his chest, and taking my weapon with him.

I reached into my bag for my pepper spray, but was too slow.

One of the men punched me in the face, and holy fuck, that hurt. The other one grabbed me, throwing me in the SUV before I could recover.

The vehicle was peeling out of the parking lot seconds later, and I lunged for the window. My hand caught on the doorhandle, but it was locked—and didn't unlock when I tried that.

My nose met the window, desperation clutching me as we flew down the road, away from Ava. She was lying in a pool of blood on the ground, still in her wolf form.

Goddess, I hoped she'd survive.

The man I'd stabbed was on the ground too, my knife in his chest. I didn't think there was any way he'd died that quickly, but they'd abandoned him just like that.

“Stab that fucking bitch,” one of my attackers snarled. The one whose leg my knife had sliced into, if the gaping wound on his thigh was anything to judge by.

“We'll save the torture for Parker to watch if he refuses me,” Tabitha snapped back.

She was going to torture me to try to force Parker.

After possibly killing his sister in an attempt to take me.

Fuck that.

I ripped my pepper spray out and half-closed my eyes, spraying it at the men around me. The driver turned his head, and I sprayed his face too.

Tabitha turned her head too—and got her eyes full of pepper spray for it.

My eyes burned like hell, but I wasn't stopping until the damn car crashed and I got away from these fuckers.

The car was utter chaos. Someone was yelling; Tabitha was screaming. The car jerked to the side, then, and everything went further to hell.

Our car landed hard in a ditch, and my stupid, unseatbelted-self flew into the windshield. I slammed into the glass, and though it shattered around my back, I didn't go through it.

Tabitha was still screaming at the top of her lungs. I could barely crack my eyes open, because the pain was so bad—thank you, pepper spray—and the men were feeling around, trying to get the car's doors opened.

Forcing my eyes open the tiniest bit, I watched as Tabitha fell to her knees outside the car, still keening like a dying animal. She shifted forms, but couldn't move. Pepper spray's effects traveled forms—I'd researched, before buying it.

Turns out I wasn't the only one afraid of being attacked by a male werewolf.

My body throbbed like I'd been hit by a car—which I kind of had—but I managed to climb off the car's dash and ease my way out.

I stepped past Tabitha's wolf. She snarled, jerking her head side-to-side, but didn't open her eyes to find me.

A pained howl went up from one of the other men, and the others shifted too, joining in the howl.

The noise gave me the perfect chance to slip away.

Despite the crying of the wolves and the pain wracking my body, I took off at a run.

Okay, a jog. I hurt too badly to run.

But I jogged as fast as I could manage without going off balance and stumbling into the damn road, keeping my eyes open as little as I possibly could, back toward the city.



17

Parker

We flew around to the back of the party store. My wolf was snarling at me to shift, but I knew the car was faster—we needed the car.

I saw my sister's wolf on the ground, in a pool of blood, and slammed on the brakes.

Korbin and I were out of the truck before it even stopped all the way, my fingers finding Ava's throat to look for a pulse while he searched frantically for the injury.

Her pulse was weak, but there.

"It's bad. We need the hospital," Korbin snarled at me.

My eyes raked the lot for Lex, but she was gone. One of the Wolf River bastards looked dead on the floor—my girl had gotten him.

"Good," Sidestep snarled in my mind.

I smelled a car—I might be able to catch them, too, if I hurried.

But Ava...

“Go after your female. I’ll save mine,” Korbin barked. I jerked my head in a nod, and he was in the truck in an instant, cradling my sister to his chest. He peeled out of the lot as I shifted forms, taking off down the road.

The hospital was only a minute away; if Ava could survive, he’d keep her alive.

I didn’t run long before I found the car. It reeked of pepper spray, and Tabitha and a few other wolves were howling sadly.

Wusses.

“*She left,*” Sidestep said as he took off in the direction of her scent.

The smells of two other werewolves overlapped it—they were chasing her.

My wolf snarled, pushing us faster.

We didn’t have to go far.

We found Lex on the ground, and both wolves were sniffing around her. They looked like they’d just gotten there, thank the goddess.

One of them bared his teeth at her, and Sidestep saw red.

He lunged.

His teeth ripped through their throats one after another, before they had time to howl for help or turn and attack. He sniffed Lex, checking her for other scents, making sure she was okay. On the back of her head, he found blood, and lapped at it. There was some, but not a ton—a good sign.

She was alright, and I didn't want to leave her, but his mind went back to Ava. Back to Tabitha, and the others at the car.

His lips lifted in a snarl, and he took off back to the SUV that reeked of pepper spray and blood.

This wasn't the cages—the fights weren't for show, or for money.

These people had tried to kill our family, our female.

When he reached the crashed car, Sidestep didn't hesitate.

His teeth tore the rest of their bodies, not stopping with the one we'd been fated to, once.

Numb shock accompanied watching my wolf end the life of my ex-fated-mate, but I didn't try to stop him.

She had led a group that may have killed Ava—a group that tried to kill Lex, too. And that was war.

When the last of the Wolf River attackers was dead, Sidestep sprinted back to Lex. It had only been a minute, maybe two, but she was gone.

Terror clutched us both, but Sidestep caught her scent again and took off after her once more. She was still going the wrong way—away from the city, and the hospital—but without a wolf inside her, her sense of direction was off.

“Sidestep,” she breathed when she saw me, her eyes mostly-closed.

Had she pepper sprayed herself somehow?

“You’re all bloody,” she whispered, throwing her arms around my wolf and sagging against him. “What happened? Are you hurt? Shift, and talk to me.”

Her words were enough to convince my usually-stubborn wolf, and I staggered into her as I shifted.

We crashed to the ground together, but I dropped my shoulder so I’d take the brunt of the fall. The side of her head hit my chest, and her eyes closed as I cradled the back of her head. Though I felt blood, it still wasn’t pouring out of her, which was good.

I still needed to get her to the hospital, but without a vehicle, that was going to be difficult.

“Did you help Ava?” she demanded, though her voice was a bit slurred.

“Korbin took her to the hospital. They’ll do everythin’ they can. She still had a heartbeat.” My words tumbled together, coming out so fast I wasn’t sure she could understand them.

“Good. That’s good.” She started to nod off, and I squeezed her arm.

“You might have a concussion, Lexy. Keep your eyes open until a doctor can check you out.”

She wrestled them open, just a little.

“You pepper-sprayed them?” I prodded, easing us both up but clutching her to my chest, trying not to shake her too much.

“Yeah. Fuckers didn’t know what was happening.” Her lips lifted in a small but proud smile. “They didn’t get me.”

I wasn’t going to point out the men that had been sniffing around her when I found her. She could take the fucking win—she deserved it.

“Did you pepper-spray yourself, too?”

“No. But it was a small space, and a lot of pepper-spray.”

Her eyes started to close again.

I didn’t know if you needed to keep a person awake if they had a concussion, but in every movie I’d ever seen, you did. So I was keeping her the hell awake.

“What else happened?” I prodded, as I started jogging down the side of the road.

“They crashed in a ditch. I hit a windshield—fucking hurt. My poor ass.”

“You’re going to be fine,” I growled at her.

“Of course. I’m unkillable at this point,” she whispered, then laughed softly at herself. “Holy hell, I’m a survivor.”

“Damn straight you are.” I kissed her head, then her mouth, then grimaced at the bloody lip-marks I’d left where I’d kissed her.

She wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Who did Sidestep kill?”

“We’ll talk about it when you’re okay again, Lexy. I want you to focus on staying awake right now, alright? Keep those pretty eyes open and those sexy lips moving. Tell me more.”

“Ava sold me out, but tried to get between me and them when they showed up. She didn’t know Tabitha was so shitty to you—you should’ve told her.”

“I should’ve done a lot of things,” I agreed, still jogging down the side of the road, trying my damndest not to jostle Lex.

“You were here when it mattered. For me, and for them,” she murmured.

“Eyes. Open,” I snarled.

They squinted open the tiniest bit again. “Fine,” she mumbled. “You’re kind of a dick sometimes.”

I barked a laugh. “There’s not a chance in hell that you’re just realizing that. Why do you think your friends didn’t put me on your top-ten list?”

“Because they knew I was already considering you.” She laughed again, her voice still a little slurred. “I don’t know why they think I need someone gentle. I kick so much ass.”

I snorted. “You’re high on pain, Lex.”

“Jackass. You didn’t see my awesome moves. I killed that one guy who attacked me, and took another one down before the others dragged me away. And then with the pepper-spray... damn, I’m awesome.”

Even as she laughed again, her eyes were closing.

“I need those eyes open.” My gaze landed on the Wolf River Pack’s car.

They’d attacked my female; they could pick their damned car up after I got her to the hospital with it.

Striding toward the car, I said, “We’ll be there soon.”

“Mmhmm. I’m dizzy, like...” she trailed off.

“Like what?”

“Hmm?”

“Shit, Lexy, just stay awake. I need you to be okay, alright?”

“I dunno if I’ll heal like a werewolf, Parker. Grandma didn’t mention how an injury could hurt me—she was too busy throwing silverware.”

Throwing silverware?

She’d mentioned her grandma’s insanity, but never gone into detail about it. I’d definitely never heard anything about silverware-throwing.

“You’re losin’ it, baby. Just keep those eyes open.” I set her in the passenger seat, buckling her in before I jogged around to slide into the driver’s seat.

“Don’t call Taylor, ‘kay? She’ll freak out.”

Shit.

She was right; I needed to call Taylor. Taylor was pretty much all the family Lex had, since her grandma was crazy.

“Don’t call Grandma, either. She’ll just throw forks at you,” she added.

I snorted. “I don’t know where you’re gettin’ this silverware-throwing shit from, Lexy.”

“From life, duh,” she said, laughing again. The noise was even softer, that time.

I pulled back onto the road and flew toward the hospital. Driving with a shattered cracked windshield wasn’t easy, but I

could mostly see the road.

“Grandma tried to kill me once,” she said, her voice blurrier. “Don’t let her try again, ‘kay?”

“I’m not lettin’ anyone try again, Lexy. I’m not fuckin’ leavin’ your side again.”

“Mm’kay.”

“Eyes open,” I snarled.

“Can’t,” she mumbled.

“Come on, Lex,” I put a hand on her thigh and shook it gently. “I need you awake. We’re almost there.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Tell me about your grandma trying to kill you,” I demanded, fighting Sidestep’s urging me to shift and let him take care of her. How the hell he was going to do that while I was driving a car, I didn’t know.

“Big knife,” she said blearily. “Lucky she tried to smother me with a pillow before swinging it. I started sneaking her sleeping pills afterward.”

If that story was true, it was really damn concerning.

“We’re gonna talk about that when you’re not concussed, baby,” I warned.

“I like it when you call me baby. Makes me feel special,” she whispered.

“Then I’ll say it more, just keep your eyes open.”

“Mmhmm.”

I pulled up to the hospital, praising the moon goddess that Lex was still awake and alive and not bleeding too much.

I parked and hauled her into the ER. When they saw my face and Lex’s bloody hair, they rushed us into a room. People were in with us almost immediately.

I threw an explanation out about Spirit, trying to explain that Lex was a werewolf but might not be healing like one. I probably screwed it up, but they kept telling me to sit down, so I tried to remain on my ass.

I screwed that up too, though.

The doctor came in and checked her out. He decided she was probably fine—just had a bad concussion—but he wanted to keep her just to make sure she healed up as fast as a werewolf should.

I didn’t really trust doctors much, but nodded and tried to calm my spinning mind and snarling wolf long enough to figure out what I needed to do for Lex.



18

Lex

“Go ask about Ava,” I told Parker.

I loved him, but he was driving me crazy. Hospitals made him nervous—a fact I’d learned when Taylor had been in the hospital after we got away from my ex-fated-mate and his pack.

I was pretty sure hospitals made at least half of the world’s population nervous, but my head hurt and I was trying to sleep, and he was terrified I wouldn’t wake up.

It had taken a few hours in the hospital before I started feeling somewhat normal, but now that I was, I was ready to take a big ole’ nap.

“The doctor said I can sleep, Cowboy. Go check on your sister.”

“What if they come back for you?” he growled. He got up, paced the small room twice, and then sat back down. He’d done the same thing three dozen times, at least.

“Did you kill all of them?” I checked.

He shot me a look I couldn't read. "We'll talk about it when you're better."

"Did you kill *all* of them?" I growled.

His eyes shifted to his wolf's. "Every fucking one. They'll never touch you again," Sidestep growled back.

He shuddered, and his eyes shifted again.

"You have good ears, Parker. You'd hear me yell if one of them found me. But the odds of that happening are nearly nothing. They can't know that all of their people are dead yet; they'll probably be waiting for Tabitha's order to send more people, because it sounds like she probably runs the group a lot of the time."

He got up and paced again before sitting back down.

I changed tactics.

"Cowboy?" I held out my hand expectantly. He lurched to his feet, grabbing my palm and squeezing hard. "Thank you for getting me here. Thank you for making sure they checked me over, and got me water and stuff. Now, I need you to find out about your sister before we both lose our minds, so I can take a nap and hopefully get rid of this headache. And I'd really appreciate it if you would get me some more water on the way back."

Parker finally nodded. "You've gotta scream if anyone tries anything; even if one of the damn nurses scares you. I'll hear you, and I'll be back in an instant."

“I know. I will.” I lifted his hands to my lips, kissing the back of his palm.

He kissed my head. “I love you, okay?”

“I love you too.” I squeezed his hand before letting go of it.

The door closed behind him, and I finally shut my eyes. The nurses had tried to get him to leave, telling him I’d rest better if I was alone, but they hadn’t been willing to piss off a worked-up werewolf as big as him. I didn’t blame them. And I didn’t want him to leave; I just wanted him to calm down so I could sleep off the headache.

With the quiet and the mostly-dark room, my body finally started to relax. I couldn’t worry about Ava; they were doing everything they could for her.

I’d been dozing for a blissfully-long while when Parker slipped back into the room. His face was clean, he held a water bottle in his hands, and he seemed much calmer.

He came over to the edge of my bed. “Hey, Lexy. Baby.” He brushed hair out of my eyes.

“She’s okay?” I whispered.

“She’s in surgery, but they’re almost done and it’s gone really well. They think she’ll be perfectly fine in a week or so.”

That was a long time for a werewolf to heal, but at least she was going to be okay.

“Why are you so calm now?”

He smoothed a hand over my hair again. “One of the nurses cornered me in the hallway with a pack of wet wipes and a bottle of water. Told me she was going to lock me out of your room if I didn’t get my shit together.”

I smiled. “Badass.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. You still need to sleep?”

I made a face, but nodded once. “I’d like it if you sat with me, though.”

“Of course.” He waited while I tried to scoot over, then carefully lifted me instead. He had to lean on his side to fit on the bed with me, since he was so damned massive, but he didn’t complain as he contorted himself. I lowered the back of the bed so it was more reclined, and snuggled up with Parker.

“I’m sorry you had to kill Tabitha,” I whispered.

“I’m sorry I didn’t kill her before she hurt you.” He ran a hand slowly down my arm. “I don’t care what fate says, Lex. You’re the only woman I want to spend my future with. The goddess was wrong when she paired me with Tabitha.”

“Maybe she wasn’t wrong. Maybe you just had to be with her for a bit in order to make it to me.”

His chest rumbled softly. “I already said it, but I love you.”

“You can say it a hundred more times. I won’t complain,” I teased softly.

His hand continued trailing up and down my arm. “Sleep, baby. I’ll keep you safe.”

My eyes closed, and I drifted back off.

I slept until hushed whispers woke me. My eyes slowly cracked open, still aching a bit from the pepper spray. That stuff hurt so damn badly that I didn’t even want to imagine how it felt to actually have it sprayed directly in my eyes.

“Lex,” Taylor surged toward me, crossing the room and sitting on the bed beside me. Her arms wrapped around me, hugging me fiercely.

I blinked at the door, looking for Parker.

“Parker’s checking on Ava. He’ll be back any minute now,” Taylor said quickly. “I was talking to Dom outside, he’s communicating with the pack that attacked you guys. I’m gonna fuck up all their computer systems as soon as we get you out of this health-hole.”

I laughed softly, and Taylor grinned. “Get it? Like hellhole, but because it’s a hospital?” She nudged me with her shoulder.

“I get it,” I murmured. “How’s Ava?”

“She’s fine. Healing up better than she deserves to, for selling you out to Parker’s bitch of an ex-fated-mate.”

“Tay,” I warned.

“Fine. She’s doing fine.” She lifted her hands by her head. “I’m just saying—”

“Don’t, Panda,” Dom rumbled from the doorway. “We’re not here to cause more problems.”

Taylor shot him a glare that I knew she didn’t really feel. “Spoilsport.”

“She’s awake?” Parker’s rumble had me forcing my eyes open a bit more, so I could watch him come inside. He walked right up to me, catching my hand in his as he took his side of the tiny hospital bed back and draped his arm around me.

Taylor blinked at us. “Damn. I know you said you were together, but seeing it is something else entirely.”

“Didn’t expect me to touch a guy?” I teased, speaking softly so I wouldn’t agitate my lingering dull headache.

She grinned. “Nah, I just didn’t think you’d actually admit that you fell in love with this hick.”

Parker chuckled. “That makes two of us.”

“So do they think she’s healing at werewolf speed?” Taylor checked, her expression growing serious as she looked to Parker. My eyes closed to relieve the headache a bit.

“They won’t know until they check the wound on the back of her head again, but because it stopped bleedin’ so quickly, they

think so.”

Taylor nodded, looking a bit relieved.

“What did Wolf River say?” Parker asked Dom. His voice was low; he must’ve realized my head was still hurting.

“They’re pissed, but they’ve heard enough about us that they’re going to leave it alone as long as your family moves.”

Parker nodded.

“Moves? Your Grams won’t move. She said—“ I sniffed the air, catching a whiff of something. “Is that smoke? Were you smoking?”

His arm tightened around me. “No. Wolf River burned the farm down. Grams got everyone out, but she reeks. Must’ve gotten some ash on my shirt when we hugged.”

“What?” I demanded, then winced at the pressure in my skull. My palm lifted to my temple, and Parker moved it to press his lips there before setting it back.

“They sent a group out to burn it down while the others were attackin’ you. Grams got ‘em on camera, though, and is pretty damn gleeful about the fortune she’s gonna make when she takes ‘em to court for screwin’ her over and then burnin’ her farm down. Says she’s gonna retire and spend all her time takin’ care of my sisters until they’re old enough to move out.”

My eyebrows shot upward. “Where?”

“Colorado.”

A laugh slipped out of me when I looked back and saw his grimace.

“Not in Payne, though,” I countered.

“Nah. She knows someone in a pack a few hours south of us and already got permission to move. As soon as Ava’s out of here, they’re drivin’ away.”

“Damn.” I grimaced.

“Yeah. We’ll help ‘em get settled and then go see your grandma, if that’s alright with you.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Why would we do that?”

“Because she gave you three months, and she’s insane,” Taylor answered for him. “So she probably didn’t see you getting injured and thrown in a hospital, which is probably a strain on whatever magic is keeping you alive without your wolf all up in there.” She gestured to my body, and I glanced down at my hospital-gowned self.

The movement made her grin.

“We just need to make sure we’re aware of how much time we’ve got.” Parker’s hand swept up my arm. “I’m not willin’ to risk you.”

Aww.

“This is officially too adorable for me,” Taylor announced. “I need to go fuck with the Wolf Rivers’ computers a bit.” She saluted me, striding out toward Dom. He caught her hand as she joined him in the hallway, and I stared after them.

It hadn’t occurred to me before that I could have what they had. Before Parker wormed his way into my heart, I had never even considered it.

Now... I wanted it badly.

But my own version, with my Cowboy.

“How’s Ava really?” I murmured, turning to face Parker.

“Beatin’ herself up,” Parker admitted. She keeps tryin’ to get the nurses to let her out of bed so she can come see you and apologize, but between them and Korbin, she ain’t movin’ anywhere.”

I nodded.

“How are you feelin’ about Ava?” he countered.

I shrugged a bit. “At this point, I just kind of expect things not to work in my favor. I knew she didn’t like me, so I wasn’t surprised. I’m just glad we got away from them.”

“Me too.” His lips met my forehead. “I was scared out of my mind, Lexy. And I’m so fuckin’ pissed at Ava. I haven’t been in her room for more than a minute because I’m afraid I’ll lose it and yell at her, and then she’ll heal slower because she’ll be cryin’ and shit.”

I wrapped an arm around his neck and lowered his forehead to mine. “Maybe stay out of her room then?”

He laughed, rumbling both of our chests.

I asked, “What does Korbin think?”

“He’s never goin’ back to Wolf River. I think he’s not the worst Ava could do,” Parker grumbled. “He got her to the hospital in one piece so I could go after you.”

“I don’t think he’s a bad guy,” I nodded. “At least he’s ditching his pack.”

“I’d probably have to kill him if he didn’t. Ava already threatened to reject him if he even considers goin’ back. She’s not so against rejection now.”

I tilted my forehead against his and closed my eyes. My head still hurt something fierce.

“You need some more rest?” he asked, his voice so low I barely heard him.

“Unfortunately.” I sighed. “If the doctors aren’t going to do anything but look at me, can you get them to let me out of here?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He kissed my forehead. “I’ve got you, Lexy. Go back to sleep.”

He held me as I dozed off again.



19

A few hours later, we checked out of the hospital and into a hotel Parker had never been to before. Parker settled me into the room and held me while I napped, until Taylor and Dominic showed up a few hours later with all our stuff from the hotel.

At least our duffel bags hadn't been in the fire, though my car wasn't so lucky. Thank the goddess for insurance.

Parker and Dom left to go do some unsavory stuff they wouldn't give me details about, and I was so tired I didn't even complain about being ditched. Taylor followed me to the bathroom when I filled the tub, and sat down with her back to the wall while I soaked in the water. She typed away on her laptop, her forehead wrinkled.

“Don't screw Wolf River over completely,” I told her.

Not all of the wolves in the pack were terrible—Korbin was proof of that.

“Oh, I finished with that ages ago. I didn't take their money or anything; just messed up their systems enough to piss them off for a few weeks. Now I'm working.

“Boring government stuff still?”

“Yup. Eventually they’ll let me in on the cool spy shit. I just know it.”

I laughed, and then winced and regretted it.

“Head still killing you?” she checked.

“Yep.” I slipped deeper into the water. “What’s new with you and Dom?”

“We tried a new Mexican food place in Payne, and it was like magic in our mouths. Now, we’ve eaten there three dozen times in the last month. Don’t even ask how much money we’ve spent there; we agreed not to talk about it.”

I snorted, and she flashed me a grin.

“I babysat Shadow’s little monster last week, and cried for like six hours afterward. That sucked. Now Dom’s decided I’m not allowed to babysit for anyone, ever again, which we both know is bullshit but I’m playing along because he played so many hours of Halo with me during and after my tearfest that he got a C on a test.” She gave me a dry look. “A C. Can you imagine the horror?”

I laughed again—softly that time. “For Dominic, that probably *was* a horror.”

“He got the teacher to let him retake it.” She rolled her eyes, but her lips quirked upward. “Perfectionists. But I felt shitty anyway, so I bought him more Mexican food.”

“You guys are perfect together.” I sighed. “I’m still not even sure if I can have sex with Parker. All the emotions are there,

but it's the actual penis-in-vagina shit that I'm the most worried about. It's not like the assholes who attacked me were doing it with their fingers or a vibrator or anything." I rolled my eyes, because I still wasn't entirely comfortable talking about it.

"Don't roll your eyes about that, Lex. That's a legitimate fear, and it's valid. Maybe it'll suck at first. Maybe you'll have a panic attack, or six, or sixty. You just have to decide whether you're willing to push past that, and let him help you through the suffering. And since you're a fucking ninja, I'm pretty damn sure you'll decide to push through."

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm not a ninja, Tay?"

"Infinity. I'll never believe you."

"Bitch," I teased.

"At least I'm a cute bitch." She tossed her hair, and we exchanged grins.

"Your time will come. There are some babies out there who will need you, and when you meet them, all this shitty waiting will fade to the back of your memory. They're worth the wait." I held out a hand for her.

She took it, and squeezed it.

"Dammit, did you have to make my eyes watery?" She fanned her face with the hand that wasn't gripping mine in a death-hold.

"I did. It's in the best friend contract," I said seriously.

“I want a copy of this so-called contract.” She released my hand and dried hers off on the towel over her head.

“I’ll send it right over.”

She cracked a grin. “My body’s all tight after more than a month without visiting a spa. You’ve got my damn muscles addicted to massages.”

“I’m stiff too. I couldn’t talk Parker into going with me, no matter how many times I asked. He didn’t care if he had a lady or dude massage therapist—just said no to both.”

“Ha. His loss is my gain.”

I yawned.

Taylor’s expression grew sympathetic. “You should probably get out and sleep. If you’re feeling shittier when Parker gets back, he’s going to curse me out hick-style.”

I rolled my eyes again.

“On second thought, I kind of want to see him mad. I feel like that’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“For you, it’s not once-in-a-lifetime,” I teased. “I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to piss him off many times over the next eighty years.”

“You think I’m living past a hundred?” Taylor’s eyebrows shot upward. “That’s sweet, but I’m telling you right now that

I've consumed enough tacos in the past month alone to trap me at ninety, maximum. Probably eighty."

I laughed, then grabbed my head. "Stop making me laugh, dammit."

"No can do, ninja. It's against my principles to water myself down for any man or woman. Even you."

"Bullshit."

She grinned. "Fine, you caught me. I just like how easily you laugh, now. You didn't used to be so happy. Now even with a concussion, you're all smiley. It's cute. I dig it."

We talked until my fingers and toes were pruned. I had to add more water to the tub when the water got cold, but the warm soak felt nice on my sore muscles.

We cut off mid-conversation when the guys walked in.

"Lex?" Parker called out.

"We're in the tub together!" Taylor hollered back, flashing me a grin and tugging the shower curtain mostly closed.

The door flew open, and both men peered in through the doorway.

Taylor smirked. "Gotcha."

Dominic shook his head at her, though his lips lifted in a smirk of his own.

Parker's eyes were serious as they swept up and down my face. "You need to rest."

"I am resting. In the tub."

He lifted an eyebrow. "You've probably been laughing like hyenas since we've been gone."

Taylor and I exchanged grins. "Happiness is just as important as rest," Taylor offered.

"It's not." Parker stepped past Taylor, grabbing the towel off the rack.

She sighed dramatically as she got up. "Alright, ninja. Call me when you get bored of resting, and I'll come talk your ear off some more."

Dom and Taylor slipped out of the room, and I heard the door close behind them. "What time is it?" I asked Parker.

"Around nine PM." He lifted me out of the tub like I was a damned doll.

"I'm alright," I told him.

"Just let me take care of you? I feel like shit for being the reason you're hurting." He held the towel out for me.

I sighed, but let him wrap it around me. We'd never really been naked together—or at least *I'd* never really been naked

around *him*—but since I felt like shit, the nudity didn't really seem to matter. "You're not the reason I'm hurting. Tabitha is."

His expression grew tight. "And she attacked you because we were fated."

I could tell neither of us was going to win that argument, so I dropped it.

My head was still a bit tender, but the wound was mostly-healed, so I'd washed it carefully. He grabbed a towel for that, too, and helped me wrap all my hair up in a towel-turban.

Parker carefully lifted me up off the ground and carried me to the bed. He seemed worried, and I wasn't sure why. The hospital had discharged me, and the doctors were certain I'd be fine with a little more rest.

Setting me down on the edge of the bed, he opened my bag and started digging around.

"Could you just grab me a big t-shirt?" I asked. "I don't want anything else."

He nodded, pulling one out. I dropped my towel, and his eyes slowly slid over my body.

His jeans hid his reaction, but I saw appreciation in his eyes.

"Damn, Lexy."

"Help me?" I held my arms out of the shirt.

He eased it over my towel-turban, not handing it over yet. When my arms were through, he released his hold on the shirt and let it slide down my body.

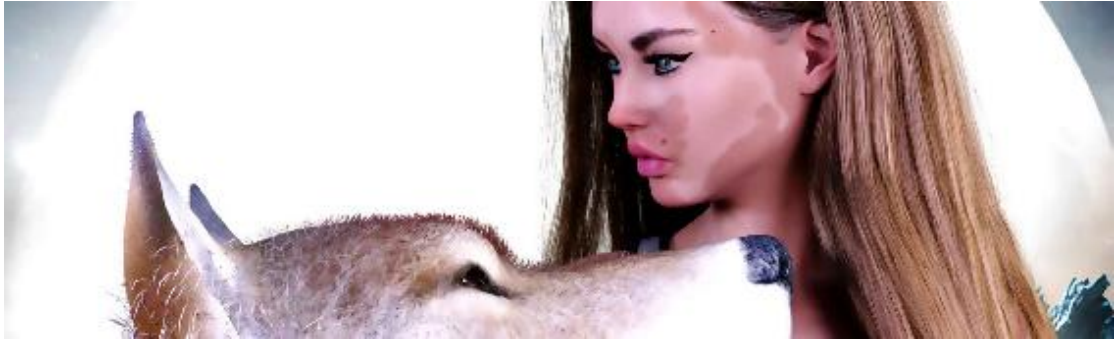
“What’s wrong?” I asked, catching his hand as he started to walk toward the bathroom.

“Nothin’.” He gave me a tight smile.

I didn’t let go of his hand. “Parker.”

He sighed. “Can I throw on some pajamas first?”

I released his hand and nodded. My head throbbed; my worry about Parker and the laughter Taylor and I had shared was not making my injuries any better.



20

I was tucked under the blankets, my eyelids getting really damn heavy, when he finally came back and slipped into bed with me. I knew it was still early, but neither of us were night owls and I was injured. And if I had to guess, he probably hadn't slept much the night before.

The lights were off, but he didn't scoot over to pull me into his arms.

"Did I do something to upset you?" I murmured.

"What? No, Lex. Fuck, no."

"Then why are you way over there?"

He sighed. "Dominic was telling me all the shit your friends have been doin' to find you the perfect mate. I don't want you to settle for me, when they've got this whole list of better options."

The words stunned me to silence.

Had what happened with the Wolf River bastards really messed with him that much?

He continued, “Obviously my life’s pretty fucked up. My own sister nearly got you both killed, and my wolf just fuckin’ murdered my fated mate. Everythin’s a mess.”

He paused, just for a moment, then said, “I think you should go back to your grandma’s trailer with Taylor while I get my family settled, so you can get some space from me while you figure out how much time you’ve got. I think you’re settlin, and that’s the last thing a woman as fuckin’ perfect as you should be doin’.”

I stared up at the ceiling, at a loss for words. “You want me to leave?”

“No. I don’t want you to leave; I want you to be happy. And all I’ve managed to do is screw things up for you.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.” I glared at the ceiling. “If you want space from me, fine. Take your space and walk away. But don’t blame that on me. I’ve been nothing but loving and understanding, and I don’t want space.” He didn’t answer right away, so I spoke again. “Just take tonight to think about it. Things will look different when you’ve slept a little.”

There was a drawn-out silence. “Alright.”

The emotions in my chest didn’t settle, but I didn’t leave the bed. That would’ve felt like quitting, and I wasn’t a quitter.

Eventually, I managed to fall asleep. Without Parker’s hand in mine or his arms around me, it was a shitty night.

I already felt crappy when I woke up. Finding a note in place of the man I wanted to be holding me made me feel shittier.

The note told me that sleep hadn't changed anything, and that Taylor would take me back to my grandma's trailer. But the bed didn't smell like him, so I doubted he'd even stayed long enough to fall asleep.

I crumpled the paper and tossed it in the trash bin, stomping to my suitcase. Ripping my sexiest clothes out, I got dressed in skinny jeans and a tight tank top that flaunted all my curves. My feet slid into my sandals—the sexiest shoes I had with me, since I was on vacation.

My hair had dried in weird waves thanks to the towel-turban I forgot to take off before falling asleep, so I pulled a hair-tie out of my bag and threw all of my usually-straight hair up in a ponytail on top of my head.

I'd seen the way Parker's eyes tracked my ponytail when I wore my hair up.

Throwing on a little mascara, I ignored my slight headache and drank an assload of water in hopes that would fix it, then headed out.

Taylor's room was down the hall; I'd find out from her where Parker had gone, and I'd go kick his ass for trying to ditch me with a damned note. More than a year of friendship and a month of something much more wasn't a thing he could throw away with a piece of paper.

He could change his mind about me if he wanted. I wasn't so full of myself as to think that wasn't possible. But considering everything that had just happened, I didn't think it was what he wanted. I was pretty sure he was just feeling a lot of shit and needed a hug or twenty and a nice chunk of time to come to terms with everything.

Dominic opened the door just before I knocked. I could see Taylor snoring on the bed behind him; that girl could sleep through a tornado if we let her.

I put a hand on my hip. "Where's Parker?"

"He left with his family, headed to Colorado."

I scowled. "Bastard. I need your keys." I held my hand out, and Dominic lifted an eyebrow.

"You've got a concussion."

"Do I look like I give a shit about my concussion, Dominic? My hopefully-future-mate just ditched me, injured, in a hotel in Tennessee. And I don't even like the South."

His lips quirked upward. "I'll drive you after him."

I blinked. "Just like that?"

He shrugged. "Taylor would offer if she wasn't asleep."

Yeah, that was probably true.

"Awesome. You wake her up, I'll grab my stuff?"

His eyes narrowed. "You know she's going to hit me."

"She can't hit worth a damn. It won't hurt." I flashed him a grin. "You picked her, big guy. Anti-morning-person and all."

He chuckled as I slipped out, back to my own room.

I put everything in my bag in a few minutes, and headed back down the hall. When I reached their room again, a groggy Taylor was leaned up against Dom, her eyes barely cracked open.

“This is your fault,” she croaked at me.

“This is Parker’s fault. Blame him,” I corrected her.

“I’m going to shave his head for this.”

I shrugged. “He probably wouldn’t care. He’d just wear his hat more often.”

She scowled. “Damn hick.”

We all got in Taylor and Dom’s rental car, and at Taylor’s insistence, I draped myself over the back seat and promptly fell asleep.

“Lex, it’s reckoning time,” Taylor whispered, poking me in the arm. “We tracked Parker’s phone to this hotel, and I talked the front desk into giving me his room number.”

She’d woken me up long enough to force me to shove food down my throat, but other than that, I slept most of the day. My headache was pretty much gone, then, which was nice.

“Mm’kay. Reckoning.” I pushed some escaped hair out of my eyes, then rubbed said eyes. Mascara flaked off onto my fingers,

and I glanced down at them. “Shoot.”

“You look like you just had a roll in the hay with someone. This is perfect.” Taylor gestured toward all of me.

I grimaced, but wasn’t about to go clean up just to argue with my cowboy.

As I approached the door, I blew a few random strands of hair out of my eyes. Forcing myself to be brave, my fingers rapped on the thin wood, and Grams opened it almost instantly.

Small rooms and all.

“Where’s Parker?” I asked, not beating around the bush.

“In the shower.” She opened the door, making room for me to step inside. “The bathroom door doesn’t lock, so you can go on in.”

I saw Grams’ stuff on one bed, and Jenny and Emma on their phones with headphones in on the second bed. Parker’s shoes were by the couch.

“Thank you.” I slipped past her, walking right into the bathroom.

“I told you I’ll be out in a minute, Jen,” Parker growled as the door closed behind me.

“Take your time. I’ll guard the door,” I drawled, slipping up on the counter to sit on it. Parker ripped the shower curtain to

the side, staring at me. Water drizzled down his chiseled abdomen, but his lower half remained covered by the curtain.

“What the hell, Lexy?”

I scoffed. “That’s what I get, after you chose the damn couch over me? ‘What the hell’? You can’t even spew some lie about how gorgeous I look or how much you missed me today, or invite me into the shower with you while knowing I’ll turn you down?”

He ran a hand over his face. “Lex...”

“I get that you’re hurting, Parker. You feel like shit. So do I. I got hurt, and it was partly because of you. You want to let that soak in, fine. I can give you space, or talk, or pretend it didn’t happen if that’s what you want. But that doesn’t mean you get to run away from me like a damn coward, pretending not to care. If your feelings for me changed, at least have the balls to say that to my face.”

His eyes closed. “I just think...”

I got off the counter, practically steaming, I was so pissed.

“Stop thinking, Parker.”

His eyes opened, and his wolf stared back at me. “My human feels guilty. Distract him, female.”

His eyes shifted back, and Parker had to put a hand on the wall to hold himself up.

Damn.

Parker's expression told me he had tried to stop Sidestep from taking over and failed—not a good sign, since the man and wolf were typically mostly on the same page.

“I don't need a distraction,” he told me, though his voice was rough.

“Then what do you need?”

“I don't know.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “I just keep seeing her die. Her throat, in Sidestep's teeth... What if he does that to you, eventually? What if we mate, but our feelings change, and he gets violent again and I—” he huffed out a breath. “Fuck. Maybe I do need a distraction.

That was all the confirmation I needed.

Grabbing the hem of my tank top, I ripped it over my head and tossed it to the ground. My bra followed it.

He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it when I kicked off my sandals and stripped out of my pants and underwear.

Ripping my wild hair out of its ponytail, I shook it out with my fingers and stormed into the hotel's bathtub/shower, yanking the shower curtain back into place.

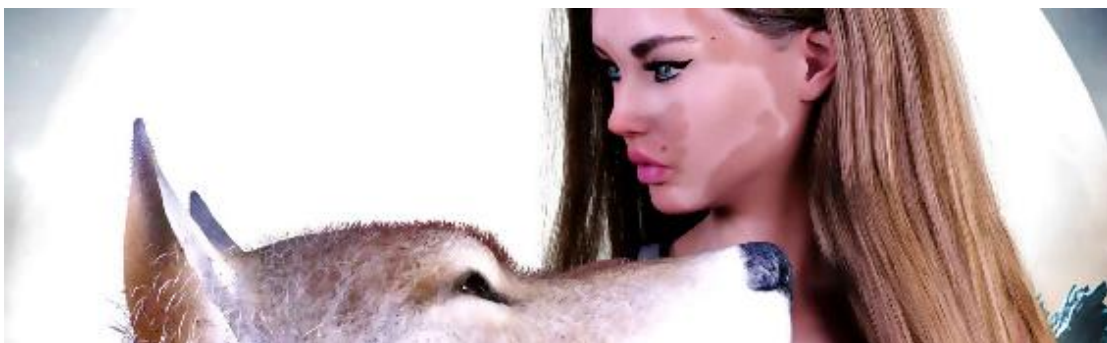
I stepped up to Parker, glaring at the man. “Stop thinking. Have your feelings for me changed?”

His fingers skidded slowly up my arm, and he admitted, “No.”

“Then stop running away from me and tell me what you want, Parker.”

His hand brushed up the side of my neck and over my face. “You,” he murmured. His hands cupped my cheeks. “I want you. But I don’t want you hurting, Lexy. Never because of me.”

“Everyone hurts the people they love sometimes. It’s part of living. And you weren’t the one who hurt me, so shut up and kiss me.”



21

His lips engulfed mine.

It wasn't soft or sweet—it was hot and desperate. His hands cupped my face, then my hips, then my arms, then my back. Then they found my thighs, and my ass.

I pulled him closer, kissing him with everything I had. He was mine, and I was his, and we were ours. Together.

The kiss grew hotter and more demanding, his tongue devastating my mouth in the most delicious ways as we kissed, and kissed, and kissed.

I wrapped a leg around his hip, and he grabbed the other one. His hands lifted me higher, and then he was stepping out of the shower, pressing me against the wall.

Our lips moved too fast, too hot, for me to think about or feel anything but Parker. He was everything, in that moment.

The tip of his erection teased my opening, and my eyes flew open wide. His bore into them. “Look at me, baby. This is me. You feel me, and I’ll never fucking hurt you.”

“I know,” I breathed, my hand dipping to his cock.

Negative feelings started to rise, so I kissed him again to remind myself where I was and who I was with.

His hands were on my ass, my thighs, my core, as he pushed further inside me.

I arched my hips, moving him deeper, and got a groan for it.

“Tell me you’re good, Lexy. Tell me if this is good.”

“It’s good.” I arched more, moving my hips. He was moving so slow, but we weren’t going slow any more—we were going fast. “But your family—”

“We’ll be quiet.” His lips were on mine again, then, swallowing my gasps and feeding me his growls as he slowly moved in and out, stretching me. He was so slick—or maybe I was so slick—it felt so damn good.

When he was fully-sheathed inside me, I shuddered over him.

“Fuck,” he groaned into my lips.

It reminded me of the attack for a moment—the word was a trigger.

I stared at Parker’s face to combat the memories. At the lines of pleasure, and the way his expression morphed and changed as I moved.

His hands gripped my ass, just gently enough not to hurt. He moved in and out, and the movement was so smooth, felt so

good, that my body and mind decided this moment we were sharing was nothing like the cruel, painful attack we'd experienced.

And then, it was only me and him.

Parker's body, and mine.

He thrust in and out, his fingers on my clit as he moved.

I was gasping into his mouth, shattering over his erection, so fast I could barely believe it.

He followed me over the edge, his kiss punishing my lips as he held back his snarl, losing it inside me.

He groaned against my throat. "That was so fucking good. We should've gotten our own room."

"You shouldn't have left me," I growled back fiercely. "I'm still pissed about that."

"I know." He carried me back into the shower and slowly eased out of me. I missed the warm pressure of his silky heat immediately.

"You gonna clean me off?" I teased him, my voice barely above a whisper. My face flushed as I realized how loud we'd been—how much his sisters and grandma must've heard. "Oh shit, Parker. Your family."

His lips cracked in a grin. "They left before I pulled you out of the shower."

“Thank the goddess.” I dropped my head to his shoulder. “When do you think they’ll be back?”

“Grams announced loudly that they’re getting their own room, so not until morning, I’d imagine.” He swept hair off my forehead. “How’s your headache?”

“Mostly gone. I’m definitely healing like a werewolf still.”

He caught my lips again, and his erection brushed my abdomen. “Good.”

I smiled against his mouth. “You’re already ready?”

“You’re naked and in my arms, Lexy, and the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. Yeah, I’m already ready,” he growled playfully. “But this time, I’m gonna drag it out for you.”

“What does that mean?”

He hauled me out of the shower, kicking the faucet with his foot on the way out to turn the water off.

“That means I want you sprawled out in front of me, watchin’ me eat you out.” He set me on the bed. His lips and tongue trailed down my neck, over my breasts, stopping on my nipples.

Holy hell. My whole body flushed when he sucked one into his mouth. “You don’t—shit.” The last word was a moan as his teeth skidded over the sensitive skin there. I arched up against him and found his thigh between my legs, waiting for me.

I rocked against his leg while he devoured my breasts, one at a time. When he finally moved further down my body, I was already panting.

He spread my legs wide, and stared up at me with hooded eyes. "I've never done this before, so you tell me if I'm doin' it wrong."

I opened my mouth to tell him there was no way he could do it wrong, but then his tongue flicked my clit.

All thinking stopped as my body arched.

He seemed to like that reaction, and licked me again.

I moaned, my hips jerking upward of their own accord.

He slowly got to know me with his tongue, tasting and flicking and exploring.

When he dipped a finger inside me, his tongue still on my clit, I lost it.

This orgasm was much more intense than the first, and I cried out as I bucked against his hand and mouth. He held me and licked me while the pleasure slowly abated, his hands constantly stroking my skin like he couldn't get enough.

"You liked that?" His lips brushed my core as he spoke.

Something about the way he looked at me from between my legs just made me moan. "You know I did."

“I want you to say it.” He climbed back up my body, settling the heavy silk of his erection against my core. I moved beneath him, a little too sensitive but not enough to want to stop.

“Say what?” I teased, a heavy breath escaping me.

“Tell me how you felt with my tongue on your body.”

“I loved seeing your face between my thighs. Watching you stare at me, up close. The way your chest rumbled when you tasted me, and the way you ravaged me like you’d never get enough.” I tangled my hand in his hair. “And now I want you to lose it inside me, like you did before.”

“Damn, woman,” he growled, finding my entrance again. “You make it impossible to say no.”

He thrust shallowly, and I moaned at the silky slide of him. I was soaked, and he was slick, and there was no pain or discomfort. Only hot pleasure.

He thrust the rest of the way into me in one motion, making us both moan.

Rolling on the bed, he settled me over him. Thrill raced down my spine.

“Show me what you like, Lexy.” His fingers slipped over my clit. I arched, and he hit that spot inside me perfectly.

It took a few rolls of my hips to figure out the right angle, how to put him where I wanted him, but when I got it, it was absolute bliss.

We detonated together, him snarling while I cried out, our pleasure only increasing each other's as our bodies pulsed.

I lowered myself back to his chest, struggling to take in more air.

“Goddess, Cowboy,” I breathed. “That was other-worldly.”

He gave me a massive, satisfied grin. “Hell yeah, it was. You got me off twice in twenty minutes, woman. New record.”

I flashed him a devious smile. “You still feel pretty hard. Want to try for more?”

His eyes widened playfully. “I've created a monster.”

I laughed. “Fine, then I'll get off of you.”

His hand trapped my body to his, though the touch was more than light enough to break through if I'd wanted.

“Uh-uh. I was jokin', Lexy. I'm not stoppin' until you tell me to keep my hands, mouth, and dick to myself. You make the rules here, baby.”

My grin widened. “Then I want your tongue again”

His eyes gleamed wickedly. “I hoped you'd say that.”

He had me flipped over and was devouring my nipples again in less than a second.



22

We headed out the next morning, running on next-to-no sleep and a hell of a lot of love.

Taylor and Dominic headed back to Payne after she declared that her job was done, with a devilish grin and a wink.

The only vehicles Parker's family had left were two old trucks, so I squished in the middle seat of one of them, stuffed between Parker and Emma. She slept most of the trip, while Jenny and Hudson filled the small back bench. Grams, Ava, and Korbin were stuffed in the single front row in the other truck.

We drove until a little after lunch time, finding the other pack his family was joining after an hour on a dirt road.

There was no gate or guards, just a Welcome to Windy Hill sign.

I liked the simplicity, though I had no desire to move packs.

A welcoming committee waited at the alpha's house when we got there. Grams' old friend threw her arms around the old woman, engulfing her in a massive hug. She gave her condolences for Grams' farm, and Grams' expression was more relaxed than I'd ever seen her back in Tennessee.

When the greetings were done, someone led Ava and her mate to an apartment they could stay in until they got jobs, while the rest of us headed to the house the rest of the family would be living in.

A huge group of people accompanied a moving truck filled with a bunch of old furniture that had been donated to help them survive until Parker's family could buy their own. We spent most of the afternoon getting things moved in and organized.

New people stopped by with groceries and more apologies for the family before dinnertime came around, and much to my surprise, Grams accepted it all with gratitude.

Ava apologized before dinner, hugging me tightly. I forgave her, and then things were awkward again.

Parker and I stayed the night to make sure they didn't need us anymore, sleeping in Hudson's new bed at his assistance, and Korbin gave me and Parker a ride to a rental car place in the morning.

We drove toward Wisconsin. Parker was quieter than he'd been before everything that happened with his family and Tabitha, but I understood. A lot of things had happened and changed, and he needed time to deal with that, the way anyone would.

When we stopped at the hotel that night, he looked absolutely exhausted.

He didn't even walk to the shower—just walking to the bed and collapsing, with me in his arms.

“Want to talk?” I asked him, lifting myself up on his chest with my forearms. I wanted to talk, but I knew he’d probably need time to sort through his emotions.

“I don’t know. Everythin’s just crazy.” His fingers stroked down the length of my hair, his other hand settled gently on my back. “I’m worried about you, and I don’t know how my siblings will settle into the new pack. Part of me thinks I owe it to them to stay until everythin’s the way it should be, but in the same breath, I need to take care of you.”

I frowned down at him. “I don’t need a babysitter, Parker. If you want to go back to your family, I can take myself back to Wisconsin.”

“I can’t let you go alone, Lexy. And I don’t want to—I want to stick with you. I just feel responsible for my family too, and I don’t know how to deal with that. I already fucked up with them too many times.” He shut his eyes and shook his head. “I don’t know how to be a brother, or a mate. I’m shitty at all of this.”

“You’re only one person. You can’t do everything, Cowboy. Your family is with a good pack, and they’re going to be okay. If you don’t believe that, then you need to leave me and I’ll go back to Wisconsin alone.”

He groaned, shoving a hand through his hair. “I don’t think Sidestep’ll let me watch you leave. He’s not really workin’ with me right now.”

I studied him.

My body was draped over his, his hand mindlessly tracing shapes over my hip.

“We’ll stay until you’re ready, then. I probably still have both months left.”

“I can’t let you risk your life like that, baby. We’ve gotta get to Wisconsin, I just—” His body shuddered, and his eyes grew wild. They shifted back and forth a few times, before settling back on human. “Shit. He’s tryin’ to go rabid.”

“Why?” I asked, though I was fairly sure I knew.

“I keep relivin’ Tabitha’s death. Can’t get my mind to slow. He wants it to stop.” His arms wrapped tighter around me. “Can you distract me again?”

His body shuddered, and though I couldn’t see his eyes, I thought they were probably flickering again.

“Sidestep,” I said.

“Yes, female?” Parker’s chest rumbled.

“Be kind to Parker, please. I love him.”

“His uncertainty risks your safety,” the wolf growled back through the man’s lips. “If you try to distract him, I’ll take over to prevent his foolishness.”

Shit.

Usually, Sidestep was pretty laid-back. Both the man and wolf must’ve been really affected by what had happened.

“I’m fine, Lexy. Don’t worry about me,” Parker suddenly said, his voice rough.

“When Taylor went rabid, it helped her process her emotions. She said she needed the break,” I told him softly. “Do you need that?”

“No. I don’t—” he growled. “Dammit, I don’t know.”

I didn’t want the wolf to take control, but I cared more about his mental health than about what I wanted. “It’s okay if you do, Parker. Cara can help you shift back when you’ve had a little time, if time is what you need.”

“I don’t—” a shudder ripped through him again, and then I rolled to the side as he shifted forms, his body growing and getting furry.

One look in the calm of Sidestep’s eyes told me that the man I loved had checked out.

The wolf had taken over.

How was I supposed to help my best friend while he was rabid?

I’d have to get him back to Cara, like I’d told him. But the man was the one struggling to accept what had happened, so I didn’t know how much time he’d want or need, or whether or not Cara’s gift would tame him the way it usually calmed the rabid wolves.

My arms wrapped around Sidestep’s furry body now that he’d shifted. I held him for a few hours, trying to get some sleep. But

when two AM came around, I was still wide awake.

“This is pointless,” I mumbled to the wolf in my arms, and Spirit, off to the side of the room. “Let’s go.”

Standing up, I grabbed both of our bags. When I opened the door, Sidestep slipped out first, Spirit beside him. I followed them, at a loss for words and not sure what I was supposed to be feeling.

Lost?

Scared?

Hopeless?

All the feelings warred within me, a storm of emotions.

I pulled up in front of Cara and Knox’s house as the sun rose, and led my wolves up to the front door. My fist rapped on the wood, and I prayed they hadn’t left for the bakery yet.

Knox pulled the door open, shirtless and with his hair tousled.

I ached to see Parker that way again.

His eyes dipped to the wolves flanking me, lingering on Sidestep. “Shit.”

“Is Cara here?” I gripped my keys like a lifeline.

His head bobbed, and he opened the door wider. “Carrot,” he called out.

She slipped out of a bedroom, her eyes going wide when she saw me and my wolves. “What happened?”

“He killed his fated mate. She was a bitch, and she tried to kill me, but now...” I felt my eyes starting to water.

Shit, I was a mess.

“How long do you have?” she asked gently, taking my hand and prying the keys out of it. Her arms engulfed me, and I heard Knox take the keyring.

I swallowed roughly. “I don’t know. A little less than two months, if my injuries didn’t change anything.”

“Is the car a rental?” Her voice was still soft as she changed the subject.

“Yeah. We can return it in Payne, but my car burned up. Parker’s truck should still be at the refuge, but—”

“I’ll take care of it.” Knox’s hand patted my head.

Strangely enough, I didn’t flinch away from his touch.

My eyes just stung more.

The door shut, and I heard a car start outside.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Don’t apologize, Lex. You guys are family.”

My eyes flooded further with the words. “Thanks.”

“Have you told anyone?” she asked, finally letting go of me and leading me into a room with a bunch of oversized dog beds. It was empty, but I knew they had rabid wolves staying with them often.

“No. It only happened a few hours ago.” I swiped my hands over my eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Sidestep’s a no-nonsense wolf,” Cara said, scratching his head. His tail wagged as he leaned toward her. “But Parker’s a sweet guy. When he’s had a bit of time and distance from everything, Sidestep will back off and let him take over again.”

I wasn’t sure if that was true.

I bit my lip. “Cara...” I brushed hair out of my eyes. “Don’t tell anyone this, but his fated mate was emotionally abusive. And she had her pack burn his family’s farm down—I’m sure everyone probably knows that. But his family’s a wreck, and he feels responsible for them, and I...” I wiped away a few more tears. “I’m still dying.”

Cara wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me tight. “We’ll give it a few days before worrying about that. For now, you should get some sleep. I think it would be good for Sidestep if you sleep by him.” She pulled away and gestured to the cushy, oversized dog beds.

I nodded. I'd slept in much, much worse places. "Okay. I will."

"Now, I'm going to go start on a cake in my kitchen, but if you need anything at all, you let me know." Her hand landed on her hip, her gaze serious.

I nodded and repeated, "I will."

Lowering myself to the beds, I wrapped my arm around Sidestep's neck when he snuggled up against me. My eyes closed, and I sent a prayer up to the moon goddess, asking her to give me my Cowboy back.



23

The need to pee woke me up, and I slipped away from Sidestep. He gave me a sleepy growl, and I scratched him on the head before stepping into the bathroom. He was on the ground, guarding the door when I stepped back out.

Talking in the kitchen caught my attention and drew me away.

I found Taylor sitting on the couch, typing away at her laptop. Cara was working on her cake, and Shadow was sitting on the floor with her tiny monster running around clumsily in wolf form. At the stove, Alaska was cooking something that smelled suspiciously like eggs and bacon.

I kneeled beside Shadow's adorable little wolf, rubbing his soft little head as he raced by. "You're so big now, Jordan," I murmured.

Everyone's attention turned to me.

"What the hell, Lex? Your man goes rabid and you don't even call me?" Taylor glared at me from the couch.

"I didn't call anyone," I admitted. "It was the middle of the night, and I didn't know what else to do but bring him here."

Shadow nodded her approval. "It was a good call."

“But really shitty timing.” Taylor sighed, leaning her head back. “We’ve got to go back to Wisconsin.”

“Knowing how long I have won’t change anything,” I said, my gaze moving back to Parker. “I won’t mate with anyone but him.”

“You die and he’s never shifting back,” Alaska warned from the kitchen. “If you lose your life because he went rabid, his wolf won’t move on.”

Cara shot her a dirty look. “That’s not necessarily true. We have plenty of men who shift back after losing their mate, it’s just—”

Alaska cut her off. “Losing your mate and causing their death are two very different things. In my old pack, a man who was the reason his mate died would have his balls cut off, then his penis, followed by his toes, then his fingers, then his nose. Then he’d be thrown in a pit, and left to the wild animals for the shame of his failure.”

Everyone stared at her with various disturbed expressions. She shrugged and turned back to the food on the stove. “Can you get out some plates?”

Cara grabbed a stack of paper plates from the cupboard, and Alaska started dishing food up.

“How long was I asleep?” I checked.

“Only about four hours. It’s 10 AM,” Cara called from the kitchen.

A knock at the door distracted all of us from the conversation. “I’ve got it,” I said, wanting an escape from the eyes of the women. There was too much pity in them, and I didn’t want anyone’s pity.

I pulled it open, and my gaze landed on a tall, dark-skinned man.

“Bash.” I had to tilt my head back a little to meet his eyes. He was taller than Parker by two or three inches, but Parker was thicker than him.

My chest ached.

“Hey, Lex.” He grinned.

I didn’t step back; I wasn’t afraid of him. Honestly, he was one of the guys I trusted the most.

“What are you doing?” I asked Taylor over my shoulder, opening the door wider for Bash at the same time I spun around to narrow my eyes at my best friend.

“Nothing.” She gave me an innocent look. “Bash! What a surprise to see you.”

“Bullshit,” I growled at her.

Sidestep eyed Bash suspiciously.

“Is this supposed to be a date?” I asked Bash.

He scratched his head, looking to Taylor and Shadow. “No?”

Taylor groaned and put a hand over her eyes. “You could at least try to lie convincingly.

“I appreciate you coming here, Bash, but I’m in love with Parker. You’re welcome to stay and eat, but this isn’t a date.”

“It was worth a try.” Shadow shrugged.

“You and the hick haven’t even been dating that long,” Taylor pointed out. “Are you really willing to die for him?”

“Coming from you?” My voice raised an octave, my glare heated. “You’re mated to the man you’ve been sleeping with for years, Taylor, and you expect me to choose someone other than my best friend? And you,” I turned my glare to Shadow. “You and Ryker have been best friends for what, eight or nine years yourselves? Yet you expect me to just sleep with some random guy to save my own life?” I lifted my glare to Cara. “And don’t get me started on you, Wolf Tamer.”

She lifted her hands. “Hey, I didn’t know Knox until we were thrown into the fighting ring together.”

“Yeah, but you dated for like a year before you finally sealed the deal,” I snapped.

She grimaced.

“All you damn hypocrites can burn your possible mate list, okay? I already picked the man I want; I’m not going to cheat on him by sleeping with someone else. If loyalty kills me, at least I’ll go out with a clear conscience.”

“Tell ‘em, Lex.” Bash stuck his hand out for a high-five, and I slapped my palm to it.

“How did you win the competition for gentlest mate, anyway?” I lifted an eyebrow at the man. He was a lot of things, but gentle? No.

He flashed me a wide grin. “Most of their tests were reaction-based, and I don’t lose my temper.”

I looked at Taylor, who sighed dramatically. “So the method wasn’t perfect.”

“We did have fun with it, though,” Bash grinned. “It was a blast trying to predict when one of us would get shot with Taylor or Alaska’s paintball guns.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Seriously?” I looked at Taylor.

Her grin matched Bash’s. “Hey, we had to make it fun or people would’ve dropped like flies.”

“I just wanted to shoot them,” Alaska shrugged.

“Your hits hurt the worst,” Bash agreed.

Her expression grew proud.

She served up the food, explaining that she’d been cooking some mornings at the diner she worked at. She liked working with food more than waitressing, but the pay for cooking wasn’t

as good as the tips she got as a waitress, so she was doing half and half.

We ate and chatted, and Bash might as well have been one of the girls. I fed Sidestep some of my food on the sly, but after we were all done eating, Alaska dropped a bowl of ground beef and vegetables in front of my wolfy Cowboy.

Alaska headed to the diner for a lunch shift pretty soon after we finished breakfast, but the other girls stayed most of the day. Cara built and frosted a cake that looked like a piece of artwork, Shadow took care of her little monster, and Taylor worked from the couch.

I dozed on and off, trying not to panic about Sidestep not shifting back to Parker.

As the sun set, the other ladies headed out. Cara came over and sat beside me, scratching Sidestep's head where it rested on my lap. I wished I could shift and go run with him, so Spirit could cheer him up and distract us both.

"I could ask him to shift back, if you want," she said. "I don't know if it will work or not, but with you here, Sidestep would probably listen."

"But?" I heard the catch in her voice.

"But I know what it's like to be responsible for your fated mate's death," she admitted, her voice softening. "Sometimes I still feel like a monster for killing him even though he was one too. I have to remind myself that he doesn't get to define me often. For Parker, being as nice a guy as he is..."

"You think it'll be worse for him."

“I don’t know.” She lifted her shoulders. “But he’s rabid now, which isn’t a sign of a healthy wolf/human relationship.”

No kidding.

“What do you think I should do?” I asked.

“Go talk to your grandma. Find out how long you have. Even if he’s struggling, if time’s running out, we could probably get him human long enough for the two of you to mate. You’d only be gone a few days, and by the time you’re back, maybe he’ll be ready and we won’t have to fight with him at all.”

I shook my head, frustration building. “I don’t want him to mate with me just because it’s that or let me die. If killing Tabitha changed his feelings for me, that’s okay. I’ll survive.”

At least, I’d survive for a little longer.

“I’m sure it didn’t change his feelings about you, Lex. It changed his feelings about *him*.”

I shook my head. “He only did it to protect me.”

“But he still did it. And that’s the part he has to accept.” She scratched Sidestep’s head. “If you decide to go, you can leave him here with me. I can talk him into staying. He seems pretty tame for a rabid, but it’s probably a better idea not to take him to Wisconsin.”

“I don’t think I can get Spirit to leave his side,” I admitted. “And leaving her for a few days sounds like a bad call.”

Goddess, I wanted my wolf back.

Spirit and I argued like crazy, but we were companions. Our minds were meant to be together, our bodies meant to stay connected.

I added, “Plus, I’m pretty sure he’d follow me if I left, even with your gift breathing down his back.”

Cara nodded. “I understand. It’s your call.”

Thanking her, I slipped out of the living room and back into the room of dog beds. The door opened when Knox got home, and I heard them both moving around in the kitchen.

My arms wrapped tightly around Sidestep, and I hugged him fiercely. My phone vibrated in my pocket, so I extricated my arm from the hug and pulled out the device. There was a text on the screen.

Tay: Me and Dom are outside with tacos. Bring your wolves, we’re going to Wisconsin.

Tears stung my eyes. My fingers shook as I texted back.

Me: Are you sure?

Tay: I will drag your ass out here if I have to. You’re not dying on my watch. You’ve got 5 minutes before I ninja my way into the window and abduct you.

I laughed softly.

Me: Omw

Tucking my phone back in my pocket, I stood up and slipped back out of the room to say goodbye to the couple who'd generously offered me their spare room.

"Thanks for the help, guys. Taylor and Dom are going with me to Wisconsin to help keep an eye on Sidestep." I patted the wolf's head.

"Okay." Cara crossed the room and threw her arms around me. "Get yourself back here in one piece."

I nodded.

Knox didn't hug me, but he offered a high-five, so I smacked my hand to his before heading out.



24

We ate tacos on the road. I sat in the back seat, and even with the row down, Sidestep barely fit. He seemed content to sleep with his head on my lap though, snoring away while the miles passed.

I tried to sleep, but was too worked up to do so. Taylor typed on her laptop, Dominic sipped at an energy drink while listening to a podcast about a war I'd never heard of, and I stared out the window.

Eventually, I managed to fall asleep.

Dominic drove through the night, and both he and Taylor were still awake when we parked in front of my grandma's trailer.

"Want backup?" Taylor asked me with a grin.

The words reminded me of the last time we'd been there. Before I'd accepted that I was in love with Parker, before everything had happened with his family.

"I'm okay." I scratched Sidestep's head. "Stay here, okay?" I told him.

He huffed air at me, jumping out of the car after me. I shook my head at him, but let him follow me to the door.

I went inside without knocking; knocking always irritated her. My Grandma was sitting on the couch, her lips moving while her eyes stared vacantly. It always hurt to see her like that, but years of effort had proved that leaving her to her own devices was best.

Walking to the couch, I sat down beside her. “Hi, Grandma.”

“Kites weep in the clouds,” she whispered.

“Mmhmm.” I turned to face her more completely. “Grandma, have you seen anything else about me? Do you know how much longer I have left to live?”

Her eyes caught on mine, and her fingers grabbed my face. My lips pouted outward as she squished my cheeks together, and I stayed still as she looked her fill at me.

“Pretty granddaughter,” she murmured.

At least she remembered who I was.

“I need to know how much time I have left,” I said, my lips still smashed together.

“Hours. Days. Years. Weeks. Months. Seconds.” She squeezed my face tighter. “Shrinking soul.”

That wasn't good.

Hours, or days... far from ideal.

Panic clutched me.

“Do you have any more paper for me?”

“Kites,” she muttered, letting go of my face. “Lambs, and kites. And bikes, and rice.”

I wanted to stay and clean up for her, but from the sound of it, I may not have time.

Hours or days.

Shit.

“I love you, Grandma.” I carefully eased myself off the couch. “I’ll be back to clean and cook for you after I’m mated, okay?”

“Soft skin. Promised hearts.”

“Yes. Soft skin and promised hearts.” I forced a smile, stepping slowly backward toward the door. Sidestep was eyeing her suspiciously.

I noticed her hand creeping toward a steak knife resting on the side table.

Apparently, it was time to go.

I dashed for the door, hearing a thunk as the knife met the wall. She must've thrown it pretty damn hard for it to land that loud.

I shut the door behind Sidestep, striding out toward the car. When I slid into the seat, my heart still pounded in my chest.

“Well?” Taylor grinned.

“She didn't say for sure. Hours, or days.”

“WHAT?”

I nodded.

“Fuck.” She looked at Sidestep. “Lex is dying, Cowboy. It's time to ball-up and claim your mate.”

Sidestep blinked at her.

“I'll try to talk him into his human form. Can you find us a hotel?” I asked, my heart pounding painfully in my chest.

“Of course,” Dom said, peeling away from the trailer and flying down the road. “Panda?”

“Pulling it up now.”

Now that I knew death was close... I really didn't want to die.

There were too many things I hadn't checked off my Live List, too many things I still wanted to see and do.

I really, really hoped I could get Sidestep to shift back.

“Turn right here,” Taylor barked at Dom.

He had to cross a few lanes ridiculously fast, but he wove between cars and managed to make a right turn.

Taylor rattled off instructions while Dom drove. I held on to Sidestep for dear life, mentally scrambling over everything that needed to happen to keep me in my body, in the land of the living.

Exchanging bites, in human and in wolf form.

Having sex.

Simple enough... assuming I could get Parker back in his skin.

If I couldn't, we may as well stop at an overlook so I could spend the last few hours of my life looking at a beautiful view.

Dominic parked in front of a hotel, and Taylor took off inside to get me a key while Dom opened my door and herded me and Sidestep out.

“The wolf will listen to reason if it comes from you,” Dom told me in a low voice. “I got Mercedes to shift back without much hassle when Taylor was rabid; I just told her I loved her, but that I needed her human.

I jerked my head in a nod.

Taylor jogged back out and shoved a keycard in my hand. “I know this isn’t ideal, but it’s your life, Lex. And you know better than I do that you really, really love Parker.”

I nodded again.

She propelled me toward the door of the motel room.

Nerves wracked me as I opened it, letting Sidestep in first. He checked the room while I shut the door behind us.

My eyes skimmed the space. The tan walls weren’t attractive, but they weren’t stained or dirty. The bed wasn’t pretty, but it looked clean.

And the wolf staring at me... he was what really mattered.

I’d already given him my heart and my body. How much more intense could it be to give him my soul?

I grabbed his gigantic head, and the wolf’s eyes peered into mine.

“Hey, Sidestep. I love snuggling with you, and having you here with me, and I’m really grateful that you protected me from the pack that was after me.”

He licked my face, and my lips parted in a small, sad smile. “I’m dying. The only way to save me is by taking a mate, so I need you to shift back so Parker and I can talk about mating with each other. I won’t push him to choose me—I’d never do that. But if he loves me as much as I think he does, I don’t think I’ll have to push him.”

Sidestep licked my face again.

“If we mate, Spirit will be back in my body. She’ll bite you—and you’ll bite her. It’ll be really sweet,” I said softly.

The wolf suddenly stumbled toward me, shifting to human.

Warm, bare skin collided with my face, and I caught Parker with my arms around his waist and a solid bit of wobbling.

“Lexy?” he growled, his voice rough with the wolf.

“Don’t shift back,” I said quickly. “You went rabid. I don’t have long to live—I have to choose a mate.”

Parker stared down at me, shock in his eyes as he struggled to wrap his mind around the words.

He took a few steps backward, dragging me to the bed with him before he sat down on his ass and stared at me, holding me between his thighs.

“Been a long time since I was rabid. It’s trippier this time,” he said, his voice still a bit distant.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I wanted to let you have more time to process; I wasn’t going to push you.” The words stumbled out of my mouth.

“No, I’m glad you pushed. I didn’t mean to lose control.” He shoved a hand through his hair.

I tugged my hair out of its ponytail and shook it out. “My grandma gave me a few hours to live, and I’m panicking a little. Do you still want to be my mate?”

He looked at me like I was insane. “Of course I do. You’re fuckin’ perfect. You sure you really wanna mate with *me*? Boots and warts and fur and all?”

I feigned disgust. “You never showed me your warts.”

“They’re inner-warts. They make my insides all lumpy.” He brushed my hand over his chest, and I reveled in the feel of his beating heart.

“I like lumpy insides. Almost as much as I like lumpy outsides.” I brushed my hip over his erection and got a beastly grin for it.

“I like the way you think, Lexy.”

“You’d better, if you’re going to trap yourself to me forever.” I slipped a finger in his mouth, sliding my thumb along the lengthening teeth. “You want to bite me.”

“More than you’d believe.”

“Prove it.” I caught his lips with mine.

His tongue plunged into my mouth, fearless. He walked me into the nearest wall while we kissed, his hands cradling my head and back so it didn’t hurt when we collided.

His erection ground into my abdomen, and I groaned as his hands caught my breasts.

“Damn, woman,” he growled into my mouth. “You’re even sexier than I remembered.”

“Better make some more memories, then,” I breathed back.



25

Parker scooped me up and carried me to the shower.

My head crashed into his bicep as he carried me. “What are you doing?”

“Makin’ this more romantic. We’ve got at least a few hours, right?”

“Yes, but—“

“Let me worry about your butt, Lexy.” He flashed me a grin.

“What about the bathroom is going to make this more romantic?” I countered.

“You took a bath with Taylor. It’s my turn.” He shrugged.

I laughed. “We didn’t take a bath together; she was joking. We just talked while I sat in the tub.”

“Well, you and I are takin’ a bath together.”

He turned on the water, then sat on the edge of the tub with me straddling him, our fronts pressed together. His fingers

slipped under the hem of my shirt, brushing my waist and hips. “Can I take this off?” He tugged on the fabric.

“Only if you take the rest of my clothes off too.” I flashed him a smirk. “I’m not taking a bath fully-dressed.”

He grinned. “I think I can handle that.”

My shirt went over my head, the fabric hitting the ground before his eyes raked over my chest. “Hot damn.”

“It’s not the first time you’ve seen my boobs, Parker.” I reached around to undo my bra. His fingers beat me to it.

“Doesn’t make me like ‘em any less.”

The bra landed on top of my shirt.

His hands cupped my chest, thumbs brushing my nipples. I arched into him, and earned a low growl. “None of that yet, baby.”

He closed the plug to start the tub filling up, standing up and carrying me to the bathroom counter. His fingers peeled my jeans off—goddess, I couldn’t even remember how long I’d been wearing them.

“I can’t wait to run with you in wolf form again,” I whispered. “I miss Spirit. It’ll be nice to have her back.”

“I can imagine.” His lips met mine as his fingers worked my panties down my thighs. “You’re so damn gorgeous,” he

murmured into my mouth. “I love you.” His lips trailed down my throat.

His body suddenly went still, and I tilted my head to look at his eyes.

“Sidestep,” I said, my voice teasing. “I was talking to Parker.”

“You’re mine, female.” His lips met my shoulder roughly, and then his teeth pierced my skin.

Bliss flooded me at the contact, but it was more than bliss.

“*Lex!*” Spirit cried out in my mind.

Then she took over my body, in what was 1000% Spirit-fashion.

Our fangs cut into Parker’s shoulder, and his chest rumbled as his arms engulfed me.

A calm feeling of rightness settled over me. Tears stung my eyes as a sense of security settled on my shoulders.

Parker loved me. He’d marked me, and I’d marked him.

He was going to be my mate—and I was going to be his.

The permanence of that hit me hard, and the tears grew thicker.

I was never going to be alone again.

Spirit, of course, was tired of being a ghost.

She stole control from me entirely, and we shifted. Parker set me on the ground before my body changed, and his fingers tangled in Spirit's fur as he grinned at my wolf.

"It's been a long time."

"*Too long,*" she agreed with a growl. He couldn't hear her, but she added, "*Shift so I can bite you.*"

I laughed at her directness, even tucked away in the peaceful place our souls met.

Goddess, I was glad to have her back.

Parker shut off the bathtub water. It was completely full, and our romantic soak would have to wait.

Opening the bathroom door, he followed Spirit out to the main room. It was small, especially for a set of oversized wolves, but Spirit didn't care. She'd chase her mate through the forest after our lives were safe and secure.

Parker shifted back to his wolf form after scratching Spirit's head one last time.

The wolves lunged for each other, their bodies colliding. They exchanged growls and mental words rapidly, rolling around the small floor space in the room. Their teeth bit into each other's shoulders at the same time, and then they snuggled for a bit.

It was adorable.

When they finally agreed to let us shift back, I found myself naked, on top of Parker.

He grinned up at me. It wasn't his Cowboy Grin, the one he gave everyone, but the happy one he only really gave me.

His hand cupped my cheek. "Hey, baby."

My lips split in a smile. "You still sure about this, Cowboy?"

"I'd bet my truck on it."

My eyebrows lifted playfully. "You love that thing."

"Exactly." His lips caught mine, his tongue softly sliding over mine.

The kiss grew hotter, and I aligned my pelvis with his. There would be time for more later—more foreplay, more tasting, more teasing, more fun.

For now, I just wanted to make him my mate.

Our bodies slowly melded while our lips and hands explored each other softly. There was no hurry, and no stress. Only the blissful peace of the bond between us sliding into place, taking hold in our chests.

Marking our souls.

“I love you,” I gasped, as my orgasm rocked me.

“I love you too,” he growled into my throat, his erection pulsing inside me.

He was my best friend, the first man I trusted to touch me, and now, my mate.

Forever.



26

“Come on,” I whispered, stumbling toward the door. My legs were weak, my body relaxed and sated. I wasn’t sure if it was possible to be high on a mate bond, but I swear I felt high. I’d never been so calm, or felt so at ease.

“What are you doin’?” His hand found my hip, stopping me before I got the door open. “You’re naked, baby, and those tits are mine. I’m not sharin’.”

I laughed. “I want to run. Spirit’s desperate to, and I miss being a wolf.”

He nuzzled the side of my neck with his face.

“Alright. I’m carryin’ ya, though.” He scooped me up, and more laughter escaped me as he squished my bare tits to his chest, covering my ass with his gigantic hands.

“Keycard—grab the keycard,” I all but shouted.

He caught the door just before it shut and locked, swearing under his breath about the hotel tryin’ to bust his balls.

I couldn’t help but keep laughing—I felt so damn alive with Spirit’s mind back inside mine. Her sarcastic voice and constant threats made everything better.

I'd been trying to live by checking shit off a list, but vacationing wasn't living. Being held in Parker's arms while he swore and Spirit snarled at me to get my ass into the forest already—that was living.

Spirit stole control from me before Parker even broke the tree line, and he shouted as my gigantic wolf burst through my skin.

We crashed to the ground, and he grinned up at my wolf. She licked his face, nuzzling his neck before taking off into the trees.

Sidestep was close behind us, and Spirit let her gift kick in. Not the spirit one we'd suffered for, but the one we cherished and held close, a secret meant to protect us.

But all the secrets had ever done was keep people away, and I was done pushing others away.

I wanted to live.

Wind whipped at our fur as we let that wildness within us out. Our feet carried us fast—as fast as so many of our brothers and sisters at the refuge. Super speed was the most common rejection gift, but that didn't make us love it any less.

We heard Sidestep between us, keeping up without a problem. Spirit felt the exhilaration in his words when he called out, *"You've been hiding from me, female."*

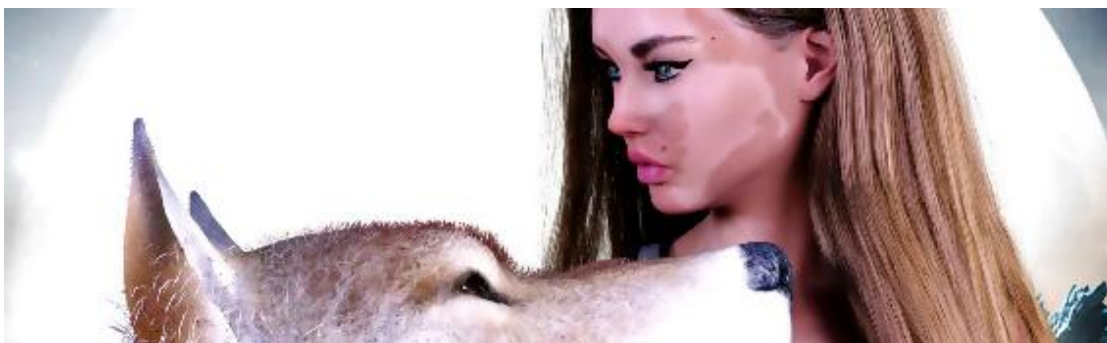
If Spirit had been human, she would've grinned.

Pride, excitement, happiness, and peace thrummed through us in thick tendrils that were as real as my wolf in her Spirit form.

We ran for hours and hours, and when she finally collapsed onto the soft, damp dirt of the forest's floor, Sidestep was there, snuggled beside her.

I knew, with certainty, that whatever pain my future held, it was worth it.

Because I was alive.



Epilogue

A year later

“Put the forks down,” Parker warned my grandma, holding both hands up in front of himself. “Or next time, they’re not gonna invite you to dinner.”

“Werewolves,” she growled. “Shining moon, rolling dust, ashy toilets.”

“The pack’s full of ashy-toilet werewolves,” my mate agreed, tossing an arm over my grandma’s shoulder.

“Don’t piss her off,” I warned him, biting back a grin.

“I’ll protect you from her silverware.” Parker winked at me.

He said it as a joke, but I knew it was true. He was the one who suggested we move her to our pack so we could keep an eye on her ourselves, but he’d done so after making it clear that he didn’t want me, or anyone else alone with her. She had tried to kill me, and ultimately, she wasn’t entirely sane.

But some of her old personality had started coming back since we’d moved her to the Outcast Pack. She had her own cabin—one Shadow had offered in exchange for getting my future-seeing grandma to move to the pack.

It was a useful gift, even if it screwed with her head.

Surprisingly enough, she was invited to everything. The single men loved sitting with her to hear her scathing, nonsensical insults and try to interpret what future she'd seen for whoever she was talking to. A few of them had found mates based on the things she'd said to them—and I saw the affection in her eyes when she was around them.

It had been hard at first, because I rarely saw that affection for myself even as a teenager, but I was still glad she was happy.

Parker and I led her out to his truck. I checked her pockets for silverware before letting her in; a hard spoon to the head once was plenty.

Shadow had called a pack meeting. I figured she was going to tell everyone she was expecting again—I'd seen her puking into a trash bin outside a few days earlier, and she'd brushed it off as food poisoning. I'd never heard of a werewolf getting food poisoning though; we could eat literal raw animals in our wolf forms without getting sick.

I lowered my hand to the soft curve of my stomach, biting back a smile. I'd gotten lucky enough to dodge morning sickness, and hadn't puked a single time. I thought maybe the moon goddess was proving she hadn't forgotten how much shit she'd put me through to get me where I needed to go.

My little wolf kicked at my belly, the movement still soft at twenty-three weeks.

I hadn't planned on getting pregnant so fast, but Parker and I had talked about it, and we wanted a baby. We had steady jobs,

and had moved into our own house on the pack's land, and we were happy.

Really, really happy.

So we went for it, and were anxiously awaiting our little girl's arrival.

I had an app on my phone that showed me how big her hand currently was, and it made my eyes sting every time I looked at it because of hormones.

At least, I blamed it on the hormones.

But also, because I'd never considered having a family of my own.

But since I had Parker, and the Outcast Pack, everything had changed.

When we pulled up in the packed driveway, I could see tables set up from where we were. It was a massive outdoor party, from the looks of it.

A few guys approached the car, greeting my grandma with grins. They led her out to a table, and as much as I loved her, I was glad they were going to be keeping an eye on her during the party. Being on-guard constantly around her was stressful.

Parker's arm wrapped around my waist, his hand resting on my little baby bump as we headed for the security team's table. Bash was in the process of taking over as head of the pack's security now that Dominic officially had a job as a college

professor, and Parker was Bash's right-hand man like he'd been Dom's.

My mate had no desire to lead, and I loved that about him, because it meant that me and our baby would always come first.

Dom was already at the table, his fingers flying across the phone and his lips turned downward.

My face fell when I saw the empty seat beside him.

"No Taylor?" I asked, as Parker and I took our own seats. He glanced up at me with a grimace, and shook his head.

"Not today."

I nodded.

My best friend—besides my mate—was having a rough time now that I was pregnant. I knew she wanted to be there for me, but for her mental health, she'd mostly been keeping her distance.

"Tell her I love her?"

"Sure." He gave me a small, tight smile.

We texted plenty, and talked on the phone, and even played Halo together pretty often, but something about seeing my belly just seemed to make Taylor cry. She'd remarked that if things were different, we could've been pregnant together—and then we'd stopped hanging out in person very much.

But I understood.

Even if I missed her.

The pack meeting started a few minutes later, and of course, Shadow announced her pregnancy. Everyone cheered, and then the dinner and party began.

Dominic slipped out immediately after the announcement, and tears sprung in my eyes as I leaned further into Parker's embrace.

"Need a distraction?" he murmured.

"We're at a party," I whispered back. "Sex is kinda off the table."

A few people shot us weird looks, and I bit back a grin.

Parker chuckled, giving me his Cowboy Grin. "I was offering gossip, Lexy."

"Alright, spill."

He leaned his head toward mine, and his lips brushed my ear. My body flushed.

Pregnancy made me so damn horny.

"Look at Bash," he said, so quietly I could barely hear.

My eyes found the new head of security, across the table from us.

“Now look who he’s lookin’ at.”

I followed his line of sight, and my gaze caught on an annoyed-looking Alaska, sitting beside a guy I didn’t recognize.

I looked back at Bash, and saw hard lines on his face.

Was that... it couldn’t be jealousy, could it? They were friends; everyone knew they were friends.

“Goddess,” I breathed.

Alaska didn’t do werewolf guys, though she’d been claiming for years that she was going to take a mate just so her pack would stop trying to kill her if they ever found her.

“Knox’s brother was her fated mate; he showed up to ask her to take him back this mornin’. She said no, and when he wouldn’t accept the answer, Bash nearly killed the guy. I’ve never even seen him lose his temper before.”

Shit.

I hadn’t either.

“I had to step in to save the bastard’s life. Didn’t want to be the reason Knox lost his asshole of a little brother,” Parker added.

“Damn. What did Alaska do?”

His fingers brushed my belly, and I leaned in closer. Not for any particular reason; I just liked being close to him.

“It turned her on.”

I choked on my own spit. “No.”

“Yup. She kissed him. They went off together, and he came back smelling like sex.”

“Taylor’s going to lose her shit,” I breathed.

I’d call her as soon as the party ended.

“Make sure she keeps it quiet.” He kissed my cheek.

“Of course.” I shot him a grin.

The baby kicked at his hand, only just hard enough for him to feel, and he cooed at her. “Hey, pretty girl. You like gossip too, huh?”

I laughed.

“Wanna dance, baby?” he stood, offering me a hand.

The first time he’d asked me to dance, we’d been in a club—and I was pretty sure I’d turned him down. Since then, we’d danced in the kitchen, in the forest, in the backyard, in the shower... both with music, and without.

“Always.” I took his hand, and he pulled me to the makeshift outdoor dance floor.

Sweeping me into his arms, he grinned down at me. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I got as close as I could to him, my belly pressing into him as we swayed in time to the music.

Life had thrown a lot of shit my way, but ultimately, it had led me to that moment.

And that moment was *everything*.



Epilogue 2

(Who says you can only have one epilogue?)

Three years after Epilogue 1

“Why did we ever decide to have another kid?” I asked Parker, hauling my massive one-year-old up to my hip.

“Because we were morons,” Parker grumbled, wiping pee off the floor with a wad of paper towels. A squirt bottle of disinfectant spray rested beside him. “Everyone tells you how cute babies are, but no one tells you you’ll be cleaning up your toddler’s sh—ampoo.” He blurted the word, replacing the curse he’d been about to say as our toddler skidded into view.

“Whose shampoo?” Lacie asked, putting her hands on her hips and tilting her head as she stared down at us. “I don’t like shampoo.”

“You don’t like anything’ right now,” Parker reminded her.

“I like candy.”

“Everyone likes candy,” I pointed out.

“Me too.” She gave us a toothy grin, and we couldn’t help it; we both grinned back.

Damn the adorable monster. I just wanted to snuggle her—even if potty training made me want to strangle myself.

“I peed, so now I get to pick a candy,” she informed Parker.

“That ain’t how this works.” He gestured to the floor. “You pee in the toilet to get the candy. Pee on the ground, and you get a new pair of underwear.”

Of course, she didn’t like that.

And when you’re three, and you don’t like something?

She screamed.

Her fists clenched, and she stomped her little feet a few times before shifting forms and lunging for Parker.

He tossed the paper towels on the ground and caught her easily.

“We don’t bite, Lacie. You know if you bite anyone, you go to time out,” he warned.

She lifted her muzzle and howled.

It was the saddest damn sound, and so mournful that I had to bite back a laugh.

Not being allowed to eat candy, or bite anyone, was the end of the world to the toddler. Then again, pretty much everything she didn't specifically ask for was the end of the world to her. Some things she *did* ask for ended the world, too.

Lachlan shoved his binky at my mouth, and the wet plastic parted my lips. Blech.

“Thanks for sharing, bud, but that’s all yours,” I told him, handing it back.

Of course, he just shoved it back toward my face again.

A knock at the door had me crossing the house, tickling Lachlan and smiling at him so he'd stop shoving his binky at my face. His little shriek-laugh made me grin.

I pulled it open, and found Taylor and Dominic on the doorstep, clutching each other's hands and arms so tightly I worried the damn things would fall off.

“Are you okay?” I looked between them.

“We’re having babies. Adopting babies. Three little girls—Irish triplets-ish. They’re three, two, and one. And they’re all werewolves.” Taylor blurted. “We just got the call—they’re bringing them in the morning. We need furniture, and clothes, and I don’t know what to buy.”

My lips parted.

“Can you come—”

“I’ve got the keys!” Parker yelled from the kitchen. “Target’s calling our names again!”

“Target has everything. Always.” I nodded. “Taylor... you’re going to be a mom.”

“I’m going to be a mom,” she repeated.

Her eyes glistened with tears.

I threw my arms around both Taylor and Dom, dragging Lachlan into the hug too. He screeched, and all three of us laughed.

Parker joined the group hug, then, and Lacie wrapped her arms around Taylor and Dom’s legs.

Apparently her tantrum was over.

“You need a lot more than furniture and clothes. We’d better get going,” I grinned. My face felt like it was going to split, I was so damned happy.

“Let’s buy candy,” Lacie said, as we all hurried out to the car.

“For the love of the goddess,” Parker muttered.

I just laughed.

For the love of the goddess... life was so damn good.



AFTERTHOUGHTS

I wasn't expecting Lex's book to be so... light.

That probably sounds weird, but it's true! I didn't know what exactly was going to happen in it, but I didn't see the soft, sweet romance that happened between her and Parker. I didn't expect the patience, or the kindness, or the happiness. Sometimes characters just take control of their own stories, and all of the author's plans just sort of fall apart.

But I'm glad they did.

I love Lex and Parker together.

I loved watching the slow transition of their relationship.

I loved watching them get to not just know each other, but understand each other more.

And I really, really loved the way their relationship was so focused on healing, and growing, and loving.

And I hope you loved it too!

All the love,

Lola Glass



PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW

Here it is. The awkward page at the end of the book where the author begs you to leave a review.

Believe me, I hate it more than you do.

But, this is me swallowing my pride and asking.

Whether you loved or hated this story, you made it this far, so please review! Your reviews play a MASSIVE role in determining whether others read my books, and ultimately, writing is a job for me—even if it's the best job ever—so I write what people are reading.

Regardless of whether you do or not, thank you so much for reading <3

-Lola



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Teller of stories. Wrangler of children. Buyer of Chinese food. Creator of art. Lover of life.

If that's too vague for you, Lola is a book lover with a **slight** werewolf obsession and a passion for love—real love. Not the flowers-and-chocolates kind of love, but the kind where two people build a relationship strong enough to last. That's the kind of relationship she loves to read about, and the kind she tries to portray in her books.

Even if they're about shifters :)