



CHOSEN
MATE
LOLA GLASS



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By Lola Glass



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To my best friend, my favorite comedian, my favorite therapist, my favorite house-cleaner, and my favorite foot-warmer: my husband.



1

A knock at the door distracted me from my cooking jam-session with Parker and Taylor.

“I’ve got it.” Taylor grinned, her face flushed from our terrible but enthusiastic dance moves. Her long brown hair was wild around her light, slightly sun-tanned skin as she headed toward the front door.

Parker’s huge muscles worked overtime as he gave the person-sized pot of instant mashed potatoes in front of him a big stir while I tried to make up for lost time whisking my own pot of gravy.

He was our pack’s cowboy, rocking one hell of a farmer’s tan. His honey-colored hair was typically hidden by a Stetson like the one currently on his head.

We were making Turkey and potatoes, but was it Thanksgiving?

No. No, it wasn’t.

But every day was damn Thanksgiving for those of us in the Rejected Pack—which we now called the Outcast Pack. A second chance at life after being shot down by our moon-goddess-chosen mates or otherwise booted from typical werewolf society?

Hell yeah. We’d celebrate that every chance we could get.

And we’d thank her, too. Because thanking the moon goddess sure as hell

didn't *hurt* anything.

"I've got the cinnamon rolls!" Cara called out from the front room.

"Did you seriously just knock?" I yelled after her.

"I don't live here, Shadow!" she yelled back.

Shadow was the name of the wolf I shared my body with, but she'd let me borrow it years ago to replace my own. Only two people in the pack knew my real name.

"Pack is family, dammit!" I shouted. "Next time you knock, I'm making you clean the bathroom."

Cara and her chosen mate, Knox, strolled into the kitchen looking way too freaking happy. Her orange ponytail swished around her back as they came in, her pale skin contrasting his tan beautifully as they held hands.

Did they have to be so damn adorable?

"I can't believe you let her knock," I scowled at Knox. He was one of the two pack members who knew my real name, and was practically a brother to me.

"We never know who's naked in here. Might as well be safe." Knox shrugged.

It was a valid point. A bunch of werewolves living in a hotel-sized house together didn't equal a whole lot of clothing—particularly since most of our pack was rejected men hoping to talk one of our very few females into choosing them as a mate.

Why they thought nudity was the way to do that, I wasn't sure. When you've seen one penis, you've pretty much seen them all; it wasn't like we would choose mates based on dick size or shape.

"No knocking," I warned Knox and Cara.

They exchanged glances that somehow made me want to hug them and strangle them at the same time.

“Your gravy’s burning, Shadow,” Parker called, in his sexy southern rumble.

“Shit. Quit knocking,” I repeated, hauling ass back to the stove. No amount of stirring was going to save the gravy, but a few burned bits never hurt anyone.

Unless we were talking burned lady and dude bits. That would freakin’ hurt.

Taylor was almost back to the kitchen and I was whisking like hell when someone else knocked.

“Dammit!” I lifted my whisk to the sky. “Who keeps knocking at my door?!”

“I’ve got it,” Cara told Taylor. “Take that thing from Shadow before she hurts someone,” she muttered at Knox and Taylor as she passed them.

“I heard that,” I called after Cara.

She flipped me off over my shoulder, and I grinned.

Damn, I loved her.

Taylor snagged my whisk and tried to save the gravy. It wasn’t going to happen, but I’d let her try.

“I need to taste test those,” I told Knox, bustling over to the pan of gorgeous-looking cinnamon rolls he was setting on the counter.

“I already did.” He smirked.

“I bet you did.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

His smirk widened to a grin.

“Lucky bastard,” I mumbled, reaching for a roll on the corner of the pan.

“Shadow!” Cara called from the doorway. “Do we have anyone here named Beth?”

My fingers went still an inch from the cinnamon roll.

The blood drained from my face.

It had been a long time since I heard that name.

Too long.

“What did you say the last name was?” Cara asked the person at the door. “Beth Bashlor?” she lifted her voice again as she turned to look at me.

The front door was a good distance from the kitchen, but not far enough. The soft white walls, deep gray tile, colorful abstract art, and other werewolves between me and the door were invisible as I took a step to put myself in Cara’s line of sight.

My gaze landed on the person standing at the front door of the refuge I built, the home I’d created.

Dante.

The man who had rejected me, broken me, left me alone in the cold.

The reason I’d lived in my car, then in the forest, and then in a homeless shelter.

The reason I went by my wolf’s name, instead of my own.

“Want me to kill him?” Knox asked in a low voice.

I barely heard him.

The back door opened a few feet off to my right, and Ryker came strolling

into the refuge. Unlike the man in the doorway, he was my best friend, closest companion, and the only person who knew most of my life's story. He was tall and lean, his muscles tapering down to a V at his waist that would make any girl drool. Bright caramel-colored eyes were framed by light brown skin that met an artful mess of black hair on top of his head.

“Cara-girl, why don't you take Dante out for a walk around the outside of the refuge?” Ryker asked smoothly, walking straight to my side.

He'd probably heard my inner-freak-out. The man was way too in-tune to my thoughts.

The moon goddess, AKA, the creator of all werewolves and assigner of fated mates, blessed those whose mates rejected them. Those rejection gifts were abilities that were meant to fill the hole within us that our mates left when they refused us.

In reality, they didn't fill a damn thing, but they could be useful.

My rejection gift helped me find other rejected wolves. Ryker's let him read people's thoughts, which was why he'd probably heard me panicking from outside the house.

“Dante?” Cara did a double-take, looking between me and the guy in the doorway.

The guy who was staring at me.

“I'm going to need you to kiss me, Knox,” I whispered. “Pretend I'm your woman.”

He shot me a look. “No.”

Right. Cara.

Shit.

I looked at Parker; the second closest option for a fake chosen mate. Rejected wolves could choose who they mated with, so it wasn't crazy to

think I'd have picked a mate after somewhere around eight years away from Dante.

Parker looked confused, and my attention caught on Ryker.

He was the obvious choice. My best friend, my only family, the person I trusted implicitly, the love of my life...

But we'd tried to go there, and agreed not to go back.

Ryker's voice grew louder. "Knox, I'm sure Dante would love to see the refuge."

Knox stalked toward the door. "Don't eat all the damn cinnamon rolls, Shadow. We'll get rid of the roach."

Well, one of us wasn't beating around the bush.

"I'm not leaving without talking to Beth." The voice at the door said.

Goddess, I hated him.

"*Speak with him,*" my wolf whispered.

She wasn't going to take no for an answer. I knew her; we were close. As close as a wolf and human could be. If she requested to talk to him, we had to talk to him. We were two souls sharing one body; we owed it to each other to work as one.

"*He's only going to hurt us more,*" I said to her quietly.

"*I want to talk to him regardless.*" Her voice was firm. "*We're strong enough to take the pain. We have our pack.*"

We did have our pack. The Outcast Pack, which I sort of led. The leading part had never been my intention, but it was a role I'd kind of fallen into.

But that didn't mean I wanted to take more pain.

“Hasn’t he hurt us enough?” I asked her.

“The goddess chose him for us for a reason, even if he doesn’t choose to love us. We must figure out that reason,” Shadow murmured.

A slow breath trickled out of me. *“Alright.”*

I jogged over to Knox, Cara, and Dante in the doorway. I was barefoot and wearing only shorts and a long-sleeve shirt, even though it was September and a little cold in Payne, Colorado, the mountain town where we’d built our pack’s home.

“I’ll talk to him,” I told Knox.

I didn’t look backward, not wanting to see Ryker’s face. He wanted to kill Dante even more than I did.

In a brotherly way, of course. There was nothing romantic between us, even if I wanted there to be. My wolf and Ryker worked together to make sure of that.

Ryker quickly joined the other four of us. Dante’s eyes swept Ryker head to toe. I knew what he was seeing: 6 feet and 3 damned gorgeous inches of sex appeal.

“It’s fine, Ryker. Shadow wants to talk to him,” I told my best friend, sure he’d heard my inner communication with my wolf. He always did.

“Is her wolf’s name Shadow, then?” someone whispered behind me.

Someone else confirmed it; probably Knox, since he was the only other one besides Ryker who knew my real identity.

“I’ll stay with you,” Ryker said firmly.

“No.” My voice grew sharper. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“How about a friend?” Cara slipped her arm through mine.

Gratitude flooded me, and I shot her a look that I hoped portray it.

Honestly, I was just trying not to look at Dante.

“I’ll talk to my fated mate alone, thanks.” Dante didn’t even bother pretending to be chill.

I looked at him, finally. Tall, light-skinned, and muscular, with dark hair that fell to his shoulders in a mess of glorious waves.

Dammit, he was still gorgeous.

“Ex-fated-mate, thanks,” I mimicked his tone and words. “And I’m going to bring Cara for our little talk, because I sure as hell don’t trust you.”

“I’m your mate; I couldn’t hurt you.”

Cara scoffed. “That’s bullshit. You’re not her mate, and even if you were, mates are just as violent as anyone else. You get us together, or you walk away from our refuge right now.”

Cara wasn’t someone you wanted to bring mate violence up with. She’d escaped a fated mate who’d been physically and mentally abusive. Luckily, after she escaped him, she’d mated with Knox, who treated her like a damn angel.

I loved her too much to envy her more than a little bit.

“Fine.” Dante’s jaw was clenched, but he dipped his head in a nod. “Come on.” He gestured us outside the refuge.

Cara held my arm firmly, but not tightly, as we followed him out. It was a bit cold, but not freezing. My bare feet kept us to the porch, but it wasn’t like we’d escape Dante even if we weren’t stuck to the porch.

I felt eyes on us, and glanced back to see both Knox and Ryker watching us warily.

“This is far enough,” I told Dante.

Cara stopped immediately, and my ex-fated-mate halted with a scowl.

“Do you know how long I’ve been looking for you, Beth?” he asked. His expression was tight and frustrated.

“No. Why don’t you tell me?” I drawled, trying to annoy him.

He took a steady breath in, pinching his nose as he forced himself to calm down.

“You look like you’re halfway to rabid,” Cara remarked. “If you shift, I can calm your wolf.”

He shot her an annoyed look; probably because he’d wanted to talk to me alone.

“She’s a wolf tamer. All rejected wolves have gifts; that’s Cara’s,” I explained shortly, not wanting to seem excited to talk to him.

When werewolves went rabid, the wolf took control and shut out their human, so violence often followed. It was a mental state for us, not a disease.

“I’m not rabid, I’m desperate,” he said. “I’ve regretted rejecting you every single minute we’ve been apart. My life has been hell without you, and—”

Oh, that was rich.

Too rich for me to let him get away with.

“Your life has been hell? Do you know where I went after you rejected me, Dick?” Shots were going to be fired, and I was a thousand percent okay with it.

I continued, “I lived out of my car, in the middle of the damn forest, for *months* before I met Ryker. Alone, except for my wolf. I had no one, and nothing. Rejects aren’t welcomed by any packs, so I didn’t even have enough money to eat human food until the shadows of my gift dragged me to Ryker.”

My hands flung out in front of me, because I was so freaking pissed that we were even having that conversation. “I don't even go by my own *name* anymore because I despise you and where and how you left me all those years ago. Your rich-boy, privileged, *rejecter* version of hell is nothing compared to the utter desolation in my life after you rejected me.”

Was I done?

No, I wasn't.

“I had to leave the only pack I'd ever known. Right after burying my father, the only family I'd ever had. I dropped out of high school, too. So if you came here hoping I'd feel bad for you, you'd be better off crying to that tree over there.” I gestured toward a tree off to the side of the refuge.

Cara said nothing. I'd forgotten she existed during my rant, TBH.

My light-greenish-gray-eyed gaze remained locked with Dante's deep brown orbs.

“I was also forced to drop out of school,” Dante said.

Apparently, the ass was sticking to his guns.

They were smaller than mine, though—and I didn't give a shit about them.

“Boo-hoo,” I said dryly.

“You know my parents were close with the alpha—they had me kicked out when I told them I'd rejected you. They told me to come back when I'd found you and convinced you to be with me; that I wasn't welcome until then.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Good for them.”

Turning on my heels, I tugged Cara toward the house.

She went immediately; she was a damn good friend.

Dante caught my arm after I'd made it a few steps. He spun me away from Cara and into his arms. Before I knew what was happening, his teeth were sinking into my shoulder.



2

Horror flooded me.

Horror, and pain.

A mate claim.

Dante was claiming me—marking me, as a sign that he was mine. The first step in the mating process.

Mate claims didn't hurt when you welcomed the bite, but I didn't welcome his, so it felt like someone was sinking their damn teeth into my skin and muscles.

I swung my fist toward his face. My knuckles collided with his cheek, and more pain followed the shitty punch.

"I withdraw my rejection," Dante said, his eyes having shifted to the black orbs of his wolf's.

Something in me felt like it fell into place—something I'd been missing.

I refused to accept that was in any part because of Dante.

"Get the hell out of my refuge," I yelled, shoving at his chest. "I don't accept your withdrawal, and I am *not* your mate. Get off my property before I call the cops."

Ryker and Knox were both crossing the porch, looking like they were ready for a fight. A veritable mob of other male werewolves followed, just as ready as Ryker and Knox.

I had accidentally become sort of a leader, after all.

“I’ll leave for now,” Dante agreed. “But I’ll be back in the morning. You’re my mate, Beth, whether you like it or not. And you’re going to accept me.”

He vaulted over the porch railing and walked away from the refuge.

A few of my werewolves tried to go after him, but the others held them back. We tried to avoid violence as much as possible in the Outcast Pack, given that many of our members struggled to control the animals within themselves and violence would urge the animals out.

“Let me see your shoulder,” Ryker snarled, reaching for me.

“Come back here and I’ll slit your throat!” I shouted after Dante. “I will never accept you!”

I wouldn’t kill him; my wolf wouldn’t let me. But I wasn’t going to run and hide, either. Dante had rejected me, and I’d picked up my life’s pieces and shoved them back together in a broken lump that had somehow become a sanctuary for other broken werewolves. He wasn’t going to take that away from me too.

Ryker’s fingers landed on my shirt, and I pushed him away. “I’m fine. I need to go wash up.”

I didn’t want to be touched again—not by anyone.

Especially not by Ryker, who had insisted he was my *brother* when I’d wanted him to be my mate for years.

“Want me to come?” Cara asked.

I appreciated the gesture, but knew I needed to be on my own. “Not this

time, Cara-girl.”

I strode past what seemed like all three hundred and fifty members of our pack before I reached the ground-floor room I’d claimed as my own.

Not for the first time, I’d wished I picked somewhere more hidden. Ryker had offered me one of the cottages we were building to make space for more people when he’d moved into one, but I’d turned him down. I’d wanted to be close to everyone, so I could help them.

Now I wondered if there would be any helping myself.

Shutting the door to the room I shared with Taylor, Alaska, and the rabid wolf we called Spirit, I closed my eyes and let out a long breath. My shoulder ached, but it would heal in a day or two, and Dante’s claim mark would disappear with it.

I hoped.

I couldn’t stand it if I had his mark on my shoulder any longer than that.

Wrestling my shirt off, I cursed up a storm as the fabric tugged on the bite Dante had left on my skin. Since he’d bitten me while I wore clothing, there was probably fabric in the wounds—fabric I’d need to dig out myself.

Walking into the bathroom, I grabbed my eyebrow tweezers off the countertop and leaned my shoulder toward the mirror. My neck cramped as I tried to see the wound while poking around near it with my tweezers.

Every poke made my eyes sting more, and I had yet to even discover if there was any fabric in the tooth marks at all.

The door to the bedroom opened and closed. I knew there was only one person who would dare intrude on me when I wanted to be alone.

Ryker’s tall frame filled the entirety of the doorway, but he leaned up against it anyway. He didn’t say anything for a moment, watching me poke at my shoulder and swear until my eyes were watering so badly that I couldn’t

even see the damn injury at all.

I wiped at my eyes with the back of my hand, standing in front of my best friend in shorts and a black lace bra. My curves were poppin' no matter what I wore, so I didn't bother trying to hide them.

Some people thought being short meant being small, but they were wrong. For me, it just meant there was more of me, in a smaller amount of space.

If I was a couple inches taller, maybe I would've been skinny. As short as I was, I considered myself built *sturdy* instead.

"Give me the tweezers." He held his hand out.

"I can do it myself," I said fiercely.

"Of course you can." He didn't bat an eyelash at the statement. He knew I was as independent as I could be. I'd always tried to stand on my own, to do things myself.

I kept poking around for a minute before giving up and handing them over. My forearm wiped over my eyes again as I tried to dry my tears.

Ryker stepped up behind me, the expression on his face unreadable.

He lifted the tweezers to my shoulder, his long, slim fingers carefully pulling at my skin as he checked for fabric. He reached into his pocket, pulling his hand out with his phone in it, and turned on the flashlight.

He held the tweezers in his mouth, avoiding the bloody side of them, while he checked for fabric. The phone traded places with the tweezers, and he carefully extracted three small pieces of fabric from the various cuts.

My fingers gripped the countertop, my lips mouthing curse words I'd never have dared say back when I'd been a part of my old pack.

When had I started thinking about that pack again?

Dante was going to really screw me up. Maybe for good, this time.

“That bastard can’t screw you up permanently,” Ryker said as he pulled out a fourth—and hopefully last—piece of fabric. “Particularly because I’m going to kill him the next time he shows up on our property. I’m going to need you to act as a witness at my trial, and pretend he instigated it.”

“Done.” I didn’t hesitate. “But he doesn’t look that easy to kill anymore.”

Ryker’s voice remained neutral. “You’re attracted to him.”

“He’s my ex-fated-mate. Of course I’m attracted to him.”

I had learned to monitor my thoughts carefully since meeting Ryker, and Shadow helped me with it. She’d speak to me loudly when I thought about being attracted to Ryker, or anything else I wanted to keep from him. When she spoke, if he was listening to my mind, he only heard her.

“I never felt a shred of attraction toward Susie, so your logic is flawed.” He changed the subject. “Do you want to start going by your name again?”

“Seems like I should probably give my wolf her name back,” I said glumly. I’d started to go by hers when I decided I needed a fresh start. It had been Ryker’s idea, and my wolf had agreed with it. But now, I’d had my fresh start. I’d built a pack, and had a family.

But becoming Beth Bashlor again came with consequences I didn’t want to face.

Namely, Dante.

But also, the pack I’d come from. The people I’d left behind.

I didn’t miss them, and I didn’t want anything to do with them. But there was a chance they might want something to do with me when they learned about all the money I had and the size of the refuge Ryker and I had built. We definitely hadn’t done it alone, but the idea had been ours and the place wouldn’t have existed without us.

“*Keep my name as long as you need,*” my wolf said calmly.

I thanked her, but knew I needed to move on anyway.

“She doesn’t want you hurting,” Ryker said.

“I know.”

And I did. My wolf loved me, and I loved her. She was the one being who had always been on my side, no matter what. We didn’t agree on everything, but we were companions in every aspect of our lives.

“I’ll try to get used to the idea of going back to my name.”

Beth.

It just didn’t feel like me anymore.

My full name was Elizabeth, but before my mom died, she’d told my dad that I was to be called Beth. He’d called me “Bethie” as long as he was alive, and absolutely nothing else.

Even though I’d had eight years to learn to live without him, I missed him so much my chest still physically hurt.

“He’d be proud of our refuge,” Shadow murmured.

“I like to think so.”

“There are other nicknames for Elizabeth,” Ryker reminded me. “Eliza. Liz. Bettie.”

I snorted. “Bettie? You think I’m a Bettie?”

He smirked. “Come on, it’s cute. Bettie Bashlor. It’s got a nice ring to it.”

“Call me Bettie and I’m calling you Ry-Ry.”

He made a face. “I’ll pass.”

“Same.”

Bettie was a cute name, but not for me. I was so used to being Shadow that I wasn't sure I could find another nickname I liked.

“I'm not feeling up for Thanksgiving tonight. Can you let everyone know I'm not going to be there?” I checked. I'd been helping with the cooking, but there were tons of people who could do that. We had two female pack members who ran the meal calendar and assigned people to help with it; they'd take care of things. I was sure they'd already found someone to cover for me.

“Sure. You know my cabin's always open if you want privacy, too,” Ryker nodded.

He could tell I wanted to be alone.

“Thanks. Might take you up on that.”

He'd been offering for months, ever since it had finished being built. But going over to stay the night at his place felt like an invasion of privacy, or something only a girlfriend would do. And much to my disappointment, we weren't together like that.

Ryker read the thoughts out of my mind—but not the feeling of disappointment. “You're overthinking it. You want to be alone, use the cabin.”

I nodded.

He knew me too well.

“I'd say just well enough.”

His mind-reading helped with that.

He slipped out of the room, closing the door behind himself.

I grabbed a sweatshirt out of the closet, throwing my hair up in a messy

bun to get the waist-length straw-colored strands out of my eyes and off my neck. Grabbing a pair of shoes, I walked to the window.



3

The window was the reason I'd chosen a ground-floor room. I liked the easy escape route it gave me. The girls I shared the room with agreed with me on that; we were constantly sneaking out the window to go running together in our wolf forms without the guys knowing we were gone.

Inevitably, every time we ran as a chick pack, some male wolf stumbled into us and howled, ratting out our location.

Then, it was a game of avoiding the men.

They wanted us to choose mates, and we didn't want to. The only one who claimed she *wanted* to pick a mate was Alaska, but she'd been part of the pack for almost a year and still had yet to so much as go on a date with anyone.

Taylor had vowed never to take a mate, and me... well, I was in love with Ryker, who *wasn't* in love with me.

And to add to the drama, my wolf couldn't stomach being with anyone other than our fated mate, who I wasn't touching with a ten-foot pole.

So, that left me with exactly zero options as far as men went.

I stayed in human form as I jogged to Ryker's cottage. Honestly, I was a bit worried Shadow would chase Dante down if I let her take control.

She was worried about that too. Although she'd wanted to talk to him, she

didn't want to *be* with him.

Especially while my shoulder was still throbbing and bleeding after he claimed me while I was unwilling.

But the pull of a fated mate was much stronger on a wolf than it was on a human. It was instinctual for them, while it was mostly cultural and physical for us.

Their instincts told them that their fated mate was their best chance at survival and the only one they should spend their life mated to. Those instincts drove them to do irrational things, like chase after mates they knew they shouldn't be with.

I made it to Ryker's cabin in about twenty minutes. It was a couple miles from the refuge, and wasn't near any of the other houses. He liked to be away from everyone, so he could have space for his own thoughts. I knew being a mind reader had become a bit overwhelming for him when our pack started growing rapidly; moving to the cabin had become necessary for his sanity.

His doors were locked, as I knew they'd be. He was careful about that. Given that the pack he'd grown up with had been obliterated by a witch while he was only a few minutes away from them, I understood completely.

My fingers dug the key out of the hole beside the flower-bush. He'd made me memorize where that hole was, along with two others, to make sure I could get into his place if there was ever an emergency.

I unlocked the front door and stepped inside, locking it behind me like I knew he'd expect me to do. At the refuge, we never locked the doors, but the cabin wasn't the refuge—it was Ryker's personal den.

I slid out of my shoes and left them by the door before padding into the house, turning lights on as I went. My stomach growled; I had left before dinner.

Checking Ryker's fridge, I found a whole lot of nothing. The man was a black hole when it came to food, so he almost always ate at the refuge.

I went through his cupboards until I found a bag of microwave popcorn, and started it popping while I looked for the cupboard with cups. Grabbing a glass, I filled it in the sink and forced some of the water down my throat.

I tried to process what had happened.

Dante had come back for me, and was trying to convince me to be his mate.

It was unreal...

Unreal, and unwelcomed.

Yet it had happened anyway, and I wasn't sure what there was to do now. I'd never heard of someone taking back a rejection; I hadn't known that was a thing at all. Granted, I could see a reason for it... but didn't want it for my own life.

I was happy with the life I had. I'd *built* the life I had. And I never would've thought to build it if I hadn't been rejected, so in a way, I was grateful that Dick had rejected me.

Padding over to the couch, I slipped up onto the cushions and wrestled Ryker's weighted blanket over my legs. He had three or four of the things; he said they helped with his anxiety, helped him to sleep better. He'd struggled with the mental illness since losing his pack as a kid.

If the blankets helped, I was all for it. To me, they just felt heavy. Not unpleasantly heavy, but not pleasantly heavy either.

I got comfortable beneath the weight of the blanket, closing my eyes and trying not to think about Dante.

I didn't want to be with him.

He'd rejected me for being different from the pack, for being weird and not fitting in. Even if he claimed that he'd changed, I wouldn't ever be able to trust him.

And I didn't *want* to be able to trust him.

I wanted my wolf to figure out a way to move on, so I could be with someone else.

"I'm sorry," she murmured to me.

It was far from her first apology. There was one point, pretty quick after Ryker and I found each other, where we'd tried to mate.

We'd gotten really damn close to making us permanent, but at the last minute, my wolf flipped out. I ended up sobbing, and Ryker held me as I cried and apologized.

Thus, my boobs were slippery with tears. They were what got the experience dubbed, "Slippery Boob Incident" in mine and Ryker's history together.

"I know. I don't blame you," I said gently.

She knew I understood why she felt the way she did, and that I respected it. Even if we both wished she could move on.

I snuggled up with the weighted blanket and closed my eyes, trying to figure out what I was going to do about everything. The thinking only led to more stress, and more questions I couldn't answer.

The main one was?

What was I going to do if Dante really wouldn't leave?

I fell asleep on the couch, forgetting about my microwave popcorn while I lay curled up under the big, warm weighted blanket. Whenever Ryker got home, I didn't hear the door open.

I felt my body being moved, but smelled Ryker's usual yummy scent. My eyes remained closed as he set me on the bed, dragging a different weighted blanket over me.

The couch in the other room made a noise as he got comfortable on it, and I fell back asleep.

Ryker was already gone when I got up the next morning. I opened the fridge, hoping to find some food that miraculously appeared overnight.

My eyebrows lifted when I saw two plates loaded with an assload of food from our Not-Thanksgiving meal.

There was a sticky note on the saran wrap, and in Ryker's messy scrawl, I read, "Bettie".

I snorted, feeling my wolf's amusement as I grabbed the first plate out of the fridge and stuck it in the microwave.

A few minutes later, I was eating potatoes when my phone rang. Looking around the room, I tried to figure out where Ryker had put it. He must've brought it with him; I hadn't had it with me the night before.

My eyes caught on the phone charger in the kitchen, and I stood up long enough to unplug my phone and answer.

"Hello?" I checked.

"We've got a problem," Taylor warned. "Lover-Boy is back."

Shit.

My eyes closed tightly.

"Just try to get rid of him." I paused. "Is Ryker there?"

"Yeah, he's keeping an eye on Lover-Boy. I'm hoping they fight."

"You've got to stop calling him that." I massaged my temple with my fingers, covering the food and putting it back in the fridge while I held the phone between my shoulder and ear.

“Did you see him? He looks like a Lover-Boy. That long hair, those deep brown eyes... Damn.” I heard a growl from somewhere near her. “I’m allowed to look, Dom,” she called out to the growler. “Anyway, Shadow, er, Beth, I’ve been trying to get rid of him but he won’t leave.”

“Thanks for trying, Tay. No need to point out his physical features—I think I saw them when he was *biting my shoulder*.”

“Well, I had to put it out there.” I could hear the grin in Taylor’s voice.

“Did you, though?” I shut the fridge, striding to the door and slipping my feet back into the shoes. “*Don’t* let him in our room.”

There was a moment of silence.

I groaned. “Taylor.”

“He’s your mate, and he wants you back. Plus, he’s beautiful. Cut me some slack.”

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” I grumbled.

Another growl on the other end of the line had me shaking my head. Taylor was going to have to confront hers and Dom’s obvious feelings for each other eventually.

“Oh, I know. See you soon.”



4

I trudged back to the refuge, my emotions a damn rollercoaster. My shoulder was still tender where Dante had bitten me, and I needed to find a way to dig back into my hatred for him even though all I was feeling was tired.

And maybe a little sad.

That might've been my wolf, though. Sometimes it was hard to tell our emotions apart.

Werewolves in animal form lazily roamed the space between Ryker's cabin and the refuge. I patted a couple of them as I passed, greeting them all by name.

Ryker and I were gradually starting to charge the long-term people rent, though it was a low and affordable amount. Our goal was to get them used to paying bills and back on their feet so they could get their asses into the real world again. Our pack was always open and permanent, but the refuge existed to help people who needed it and currently housed far too many bodies who *didn't* need it.

Stepping in through the front door, I looked around for the problem-wolf but didn't find him.

A couple of guys were playing video games on one of the sprawling sectionals, and Ryker was leaned up against the kitchen island, glaring at my bedroom door.

The women who did most of our cooking, Esther and Hailey, were already hard at work. They had music playing, and were chatting like always.

Esther was in her thirties, with enough curves to make even the most withdrawn men drool. Hailey was in her late twenties, and much quieter and more serious. She was dating one of the guys in the pack, and I hoped they'd make their relationship permanent soon. They were good together.

Though I'd started the refuge, Esther and Hailey were the ones who kept everyone alive.

They shared a room with three other women in the pack; the older generation females, they called themselves. They were all in their late twenties or older, while the ladies in my room were all under twenty-five. I was the oldest of us, at twenty-four.

Together, the nine of us made up the entirety of the Outcast Pack's women.

I hoped that if we could get a few more cottages built, and convince a few more of the wolves to get jobs and apartments of their own, we could have another room or two so everyone wasn't quite so squished.

Before facing the devil in my bedroom, I went over to Ryker. "Thanks for the food."

My stomach chose that moment to rumble.

"He's affecting your appetite now?" Ryker glanced at me before he took an angry step toward the door to my room. I used a hand on his chest to hold him to his perch against the kitchen counter.

"My wolf doesn't want him dead."

Honestly, I didn't either. I could talk big, but I wasn't a killer. I was pretty sure mate murder would bog me down with more baggage than I could handle.

Ryker scowled and tugged my shirt's neckline to the side. He got a

glimpse at the wound on my shoulder before I smacked his hand away.

“It’s not good for the crazies in here to see you losing your shit. Try to find your zen.” I pressed my palms together, feigning zen. “I’ll deal with Dante.”

Ryker caught my wrist before I stepped away. I turned to shoot him an inquisitive look.

“It’s alright if you want to try with him. You know that, don’t you?” His voice was low enough that no one else heard.

My wolf perked up a little at the thought.

“Once a dick, always a dick.” I tugged my wrist away from Ryker.

My wolf spoke, urging me toward Dante to hide my thoughts from Ryker.

Mainly, the thought that it fucking hurt to hear him push me toward another guy. Especially a bastard like my fated mate.

I strode into my room, stopping just in the doorway and folding my arms. Dante had made himself at home on my mattress, going so far as to leave his shirt and shoes on the floor beside it and pull my comforter halfway up his chest.

“That’s not my bed,” I lied.

“Smells like it is,” he remarked.

Damn mate connection.

Damn ex-fated-mate.

“If you accept my withdrawal of the rejection, we’ll be fated mates once again. The bond will be amended, and we can start over,” he said.

“Start over?” My voice raised as I spoke. “You want me to forget the way you told me I was worthless and that both you and the pack would be better off without me?”

“Ideally, yes.”

I laughed bitterly. “Unbelievable. You know what? Keep the bed. There are dozens of unmated men who I’d rather sleep with than you.”

I strode out of the room, jaw clenched. Ryker’s forehead was wrinkled when I exited, his frustration replaced with concern.

Dante’s footsteps were quiet as he followed me, but far too loud not to hear.

“Beth,” he protested.

The use of my old name only further aggravated me. I wanted to get back at him—I wanted to make him hurt like I had. And I knew it was ridiculous, I knew it was cruel, but I didn’t care.

I reached the couch where all the single guys were sitting and plopped down on Parker’s lap. My legs straddled his hips, my hands wrapped around his face, and I captured his lips with mine.

His hands found my hips, but he didn’t really return the kiss. He was too surprised, and anyway, I was positive he knew I was just trying to stick it to my ex-fated-mate.

Dante’s hands wrapped around my waist, and he plucked me off the other man like I was a damn pillow.

My fists clenched, ready to swing at Dante’s face again. This time, I’d punch him properly.

One of Ryker’s hands caught my wrist before I could throw the punch. The other hand wrapped around my waist. He eased me away from both men.

“Let go of my female,” Dante warned.

“She’s not yours, and you’re just as aware of that as the rest of us,” Ryker growled.

My body went still as the room suddenly went dark.

The people around me vanished, until I was staring at a room of shadows.

Usually, the pull of the shadows was gentle. I could ignore it, and keep doing my thing for a couple weeks or at least a couple days.

This time, they dragged me under with so much force that I couldn't even fight it.

I felt pressure on my waist as my wolf fought against the shadows' pull. When they took over, they always forced her to shift and run toward the other rejected wolf they wanted us to find.

Hands were on my face; Ryker would be checking to see how much of my eyes had shifted.

My wolf lost the fight, and the shadows possessed both of us.

She struggled against the grip on our middle. There was faint shouting around her—she couldn't understand the words.

The longer she was trapped, the harder she fought those who held her back.

Finally, a weight pressed down on her back. A set of arms wrapped gently around her neck; someone riding my wolf like she was a horse.

Her paws hit the ground, and the shadows took over.

We ran.

I could see nothing through her eyes, though I could feel that we were moving. Numbness spread through me, and my thoughts went silent.

My rejection gift had never taken control of me so quickly or so suddenly, but I couldn't even think straight enough to wonder what was happening to me.

I knew the shadows would take me to another rejected wolf, but that was all I knew.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed before the shadows gathered in one location. When they gathered, I knew what was coming.

My wolf had reached the other reject the shadows were leading me to. Only when we crashed into the other reject, would the shadows accept that they'd led me where I needed to go.

As my wolf collided with the one she'd been led to, the shadows retreated quickly. My wolf withdrew, giving me control of our body.

I hit the ground and rolled uncontrollably until gravity worked in my favor.

Cara got up, off the dirt. We were in the forest, and she looked exhausted.

Had she been the weight on my wolf's back while I was running?

She must've been.

It wouldn't be the first time. She'd usually ride my horse-sized wolf to find the rabids when the shadows possessed me, because she was the only one who could control the rabid wolves.

She held her hands in front of her as she made her way toward the wolf we'd crashed into. That wolf looked understandably suspicious.

"We're not here to hurt you," Cara promised the other wolf. "We're rejects, like you. Part of the Outcast Pack. We're here to help."

I heard branches snapping behind me, and spun around.

The rejected wolf got spooked. Cara swore, throwing her arms and legs over the wolf's back and clinging to him as he took off into the forest.

A flash of calico fur flew past me; Knox's wolf, following his mate.

I collapsed to the dirt, not having the energy to fight whoever had spooked the wolves.

“Shadow?” Ryker demanded, jogging up to me and kneeling beside me. He was naked, so I kept my eyes on the dirt to avoid any thoughts I couldn’t let him read.

“I’m fine,” I mumbled.

My mouth felt like cotton, and my stomach felt like it was eating itself.

“What the hell was that? We’ve been running for days,” another voice snarled.

Dante.

My eyes shut.

I just couldn’t win.



5

Ryker and Dante argued as Ryker explained my gift to my ex-fated-mate. Considering none of us had any amount of clothing, it was quite the situation.

Two naked guys—one who wanted me, one who I wanted. And me. In the nude.

This was why I always tried to make people wear clothes at the refuge.

To avoid awkwardly naked parties.

“I need food and water,” I told the guys, when I was tired of laying on my tits in the dirt. “Shadow’s going to hunt. Dante, stay here in case Cara and Knox come back,” I said.

Dante opened his mouth to argue, but I shifted forms and my wolf slipped into the forest.

Letting her control our body gave me a break from overthinking and worrying and other shitty human things I didn’t want to think about.

She found a stream, and drank some water before hunting down a poor little rabbit. Then, she went back to the river and drank some more.

Ryker’s wolf remained close by, but didn’t interrupt her. He did drink some water, and hunt a squirrel of his own.

When Shadow went back to the place we’d left Dante, he was in wolf

form. She had never run with his wolf, and found herself curious about him.

His fur was mostly dark gray with a few black and light gray spots, and like his human, he was *big*.

“Do you have a name?” Shadow asked the wolf.

“I don’t. You are to name me, mate.” The wolf’s voice was gentler than the man’s had ever been.

Shadow lifted her chin. *“Though the goddess bound us together, we are not mates.”*

“Then you have a name already?” Dante’s wolf asked.

“I do. I’m called Shadow, like the darkness that draws me to the light of other wolves like me. My friend gave me the name.” She gestured toward Ryker’s wolf. Like Dante’s, Ryker’s wolf didn’t have a name.

“It’s admirable, as are you,” Dante’s wolf said steadily. *“I’ve kept my human loyal to you, female. And the moment you left him after he rejected you, I ripped control from him and tried to find you. Your scent trail had already gone cold.”*

My mind spun with the thought.

Was that true?

I’d packed my shit and gotten in my car after Dante rejected me; driving away would make my scent trail end. But I had boxed up everything in my dad’s house first, not that there was much.

“Your human’s words ruined my human’s life. I appreciate your words, but they cannot make up for so many years of suffering.” Shadow slipped away from the other wolf. *“I must check on my friend. Watch for the others, and howl if they return.”*

Dante’s wolf agreed, though he didn’t seem to want to.

Shadow walked back into the forest, and found Ryker's wolf between the other wolf and the river. Ryker's wolf was much franker about his emotions than Ryker had ever been, though he could read thoughts just as well as his human.

The wolf remained where he was, eyeing Shadow. Like me and my wolf, Ryker and his had a peaceful relationship in which they typically worked together smoothly, without too many problems.

The main difference between them, was that Ryker's wolf would say what he was thinking, while Ryker himself rarely did.

"Are you alright?" he checked, sidling up to Shadow and sniffing her. His nose remained away from her neck and butt, sticking to the "safe" areas.

"Fine." Shadow bobbed her head.

"That's never happened before," Ryker's wolf said.

She shook her head. *"It was strange. The shadows were stronger; I couldn't fight them at all."*

Ryker's wolf's head turned in the direction of Dante's wolf.

"You think it has something to do with him?" Shadow asked.

"I think it never happened before he bit you," Ryker's wolf growled.

Dante's wolf trotted over, as if he'd realized he was missing out on an important conversation. *"Is your gift always so sudden?"* he asked Shadow.

"No. I usually have some control over it." She studied him, trying to decide whether or not he'd affected her gift.

"But you're not rejected anymore; the moon goddess should have removed your gift."

Shadow scoffed. *"I haven't accepted your human's un-rejection, so it's not complete."*

“But possibly complete enough to affect your gift,” Ryker’s wolf said. Suddenly, he snarled at Dante’s wolf. *“You’re the reason she’s got the gift in the first place. You’ve hurt her more than anyone else could.”*

Shadow’s head jerked to the side as she heard a familiar howl. *“They must’ve stopped running.”* She took off in the direction of the howl.

Thank the goddess that conversation was over.

Our wolves approached Cara, Knox’s wolf Ko, and the rabid male. Cara’s fingers were buried in both the rabid’s fur and Ko’s.

“We’re all good,” Cara told the group of us. “This guy’s ready to head back...” She looked around the forest. “Wherever *back* is right now.”

We would have to rent a van from the nearest town and drive back with the newly-found rabid, but that was nothing new.

Mine, Dante’s, and Ryker’s arguments were paused while we all made our way to the nearest town. Towns were loud, noisy, and smelly—so, not hard for a wolf to find.

Cara had Knox’s wallet in her pocket. Luckily, they’d thought about needing money before letting my wolf go to the shadows.

Before we left the town we’d found, Cara, Ko, and the new rabid went inside the store to buy cheap clothes for the rest of us, while we waited in the back of the van. None of our wolves spoke; I guess they were as much at a loss for words as us humans were.

Ryker and I hated Dante. Dante probably didn’t like Ryker, but he was also determined to convince me to mate with him. All of that added up to make a weird dynamic between the three of us, and I wasn’t a fan.

Cara came back and handed out clothes, and the three of us shifted back to human so we’d all fit better in the rental van.

I took the passenger seat so I wouldn’t have to sit next to Dante, since

Ryker was driving.

Dante sat in the middle seat just behind us, leaving the back of the van to Cara, Knox, and the rabid wolf. He leaned forward, his head so close to mine that he may as well have been sitting between us.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well what?” Ryker asked.

His voice was smooth, and he wore his typical calm façade that gave away none of his emotions. He’d been acting weird, lately... talking less, joking less, and seeming less Ryker-like.

“Well, what do you do next? After you’ve found another rejected wolf?” Dante looked at me. “Do you take them back to their pack? Try to find their mate?”

I scowled. “We take them back to the refuge and help them recover from the mental and emotional hell their mate put them through by rejecting them.”

“I’m sure they’d be better-off if you helped them get back to their mates,” Dante argued.

“If we wanted them dead, that’s exactly where we’d take them,” Ryker said evenly. “The mates who are shitty enough to reject the one fated with them don’t deserve that fate.”

“People make mistakes,” Dante countered.

“Every werewolf grows up knowing that they have a fated mate out there. Their perfect match. If someone rejects that perfect match, it’s not a mistake. It’s a choice. And one that they deserve to struggle with, afterward.” I folded my arms, staring out the window.

“That’s not fair.” Dante wasn’t giving up. “Rejection goes two ways. A person has to accept their mate’s rejection before either of them will have closure—it’s not up to one person.”

“If you don’t accept their rejection, you’ll feel like your heart’s splitting in two. Like there’s a knife cutting into your chest. It drives you insane. Not accepting isn’t an option,” Ryker interrupted.

I stared at him.

He’d never told me he hadn’t accepted Susie’s rejection right away, but I knew him well enough to know when he was speaking from experience.

What else did I not know about my best friend?

“If that was true, I’m sure Beth would be in pain right now because she hasn’t accepted my withdrawal.”

“You can force someone to walk away from you, but you can’t force them to forgive you.” I shook my head. “The goddess’s magic would never make me accept you, and I’m sure as hell not going to do it on my own.”

“You’ll change your mind,” Dante said firmly. “I’ve been fighting for you for years, Beth. I’m—”

“*Don’t* call me Beth,” I shot him a glare. “You’re only here because you followed my wolf through the forest; you don’t get to make decisions for me. We’re not friends, and we’re not mates. Shut up, or leave.”

My mind spun, and my wolf spoke sympathy to me as I closed my eyes, settling into my seat and trying to get comfortable. I was exhausted, but my heart pounded painfully in my chest as I struggled to wrap my mind around Dante’s presence.

“Is that what you really want?” Dante asked.

“Yes. Yes. For the love of the goddess, yes, that is what I want.”

“Then I’ll stop talking, but I’m not leaving. Not until you’ve accepted my apology, and our fated-mate status is mended. Not until you wear my mark on your shoulder, and I wear yours on mine.”

My lips twisted in a snarl. “Over my dead body.”

Ryker’s hand landed on my knee. “Breathe, Bettie.”

A snort interrupted my fury. “Shut it, Ry-Ry.”

“Are you going to throw me out of the van if I don’t?”

The bastard knew exactly what he was doing, easing the tension and chilling me out. I wasn’t exactly a calm person, but Ryker knew how to get me there.

“Probably.”

“I look forward to it.” Ryker lifted his hand from my knee.

I wished he’d left it there.

Shadow sensed my thoughts and said something to me—I didn’t even really hear what, and she knew it. Sprouting random thoughts was her jam, because it prevented Ryker from knowing how much I wanted him.

He wouldn’t hear me wishing he was touching me, because if he was tuned into my mind, my wolf spoke louder than my thoughts.

“Cara-girl?” Ryker called to our friend in the back.

“Hmm?” Cara sounded half-asleep when she answered.

I envied her ability to nap, since my world was going to shit.

“If Shadow throws me out of the van, will you send one of the guys with a map?”

“Duh,” Cara’s sleepy voice answer, tinged with amusement.

“Praise the goddess,” Ryker shot me a smirk. “I’ll survive. Throw away.”

I shook my head at him and turned the radio up, trying to pretend Dante

wasn't with us. He'd been the bad guy in my story for years. The reason I was alone, the reason I hadn't graduated high school, the reason I couldn't even visit my dad's grave...

Accepting that he had been looking for me ever since would require acknowledging that he hadn't tried to ruin my life when he rejected me.

That all the shit that followed me being rejected was my own damn fault.

"Try to get some sleep," Ryker suggested.

I nodded.

Thinking wasn't getting me anywhere good, anyway.

Leaning my head against the window, I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. My thoughts continued to spin, and sleep eluded me.



6

We drove through the night, and got home the next day. Ryker hadn't let anyone else drive, and I was fairly certain the only reason we hadn't stopped to sleep was because he wanted to save me from arguing with Dante about not sharing a motel room.

I went straight to my room while Cara and Knox headed back to their place with the new rabid wolf, and Ryker headed home. Dante left to go somewhere; I didn't ask where.

The moment I pulled my bed's comforter up to my chin, I caught a whiff of his scent.

The blankets went flying, and I swore.

Loudly.

"Dammit, Dante," I snarled at the air.

His scent was on my mattress, on my blankets.

And on second thought, I was confident that was why he'd gotten in my bed in the first place.

He wanted me to smell like him, even if I didn't realize it.

Cursing his name, I stormed out of the house. Rather than jogging to Ryker's, I climbed in my car and peeled out of the driveway so I could get

there faster. Parking in front of his place a few minutes later, I stomped up the sidewalk and banged on the door.

Ryker pulled it open a minute later, shirtless and sleepy and so damn sexy I wanted to jump his bones then and there.

Shadow spoke up before Ryker could read those thoughts, telling me something about the forest.

She was the damned best wingwoman a girl could have.

“My bed reeks of that bastard. I need your couch.” I pushed past him, ignoring the heat in my lower belly as my chest brushed his.

“You can have the bed,” Ryker said, gesturing me toward the single bedroom in the cottage.

I’d have argued, but I knew it was an argument I’d lose. His mom had hammered it into him that he needed to treat women with respect. If we were ever together and there was only one bed, Ryker always took the couch or floor.

Unless I convinced him to share with me, but that hadn’t happened much since the Slippery Boob Incident.

“Thanks.” I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and hugged him fiercely.

“Goddess, you reek,” he muttered into my hair.

“I hate you for reminding me,” I mumbled into his shoulder.

“Shower, so you don’t get his stink all over my bed.” He released me, his fingers tucking a few wild strands of my hair back into my messy bun.

“Fine.” I made a face at him.

I was filthy anyway; a shower wouldn’t hurt.

If he'd had his cottage a few years earlier, before our pack had gotten huge, my shower gel and shampoo would've been in his bathroom already. We'd been closer, then. When it was only us and Knox, we were more of a family.

Now, we had our separate lives, but we also had a pack.

I shut the door but didn't bother locking it. Ryker would never walk in on me; the man would sooner pee outside than intrude while I was naked. He saw me as a sister, after all.

I washed quickly, scrubbing myself with the delicious smell of Ryker's usual products. He had conditioner, for his luxurious locks—and yes, I say that with sarcasm.

Even though his hair was really damn luxurious.

With my hair shampooed and conditioned too, I stepped out of the shower and dried off with Ryker's towel.

If there had been a chance that he could come to love me as more than a friend, then showering with his stuff, using his towel, I would've been on cloud nine. But since there wasn't, I was basically just hurting myself more by surrounding myself in his scent.

I wasn't new to emotional pain, though.

In fact, I was kind of a pro.

Losing your mom as a small child and then losing your dad as a teenager, followed by losing your fated mate and then home and pack, would do that to you.

All I'd ever known before Ryker was loss.

Maybe that was why I was so damn in love with him.

And why I knew that inevitably, I'd lose him too.

He was snoring on the couch when I got dressed in the shorts and t-shirt of his that he'd left out for me. I slipped into his bed, tugging the blankets up to my chin and inhaling.

My heart ached when his scent engulfed me.

But when I closed my eyes, sleep quickly took control.

My eyes cracked open halfway through the night when I heard a groan.

“No, Shadow,” Ryker’s voice begged from the other room. The door between him and I was still open, like I’d left it. “Please, no.”

It took a moment for my sleepy brain to work through what was happening.

Nightmares?

Ryker was having nightmares?

The last time he'd had nightmares was years ago; he'd been sleeping fine for almost four years since then.

What had triggered his nightmares?

I slipped out of bed. Back when he'd had nightmares before, we'd stopped them by sleeping together. Not sexually—just beside each other. That had been before the Slippery Boob Incident, though. Before we realized our feelings for each other could never go anywhere.

Before Ryker decided I was like a sister to him.

His pleading grew worse, and when he cried out in pain, I couldn't take it anymore.

I padded over to the couch, lowering my body to Ryker's. There wasn't space to sleep beside him, so on top of him would have to do.

Hopefully he wouldn't be grossed out or anything.

"I'm right here," I whispered to Ryker. "I'm here, okay? You're fine. We're fine."

His arms wrapped around me, locking me against his chest. He held me so tightly, I could barely breathe.

I fucking loved it.

My heart was doing that thing again—the thing where it hurt, because I wanted Ryker so badly.

Not just physically; permanently. I wanted him to be mine, forever. My mate.

Ryker stopped speaking, his body relaxing. When he started snoring again, I knew he was through the worst of the nightmares, at least for the time being.

The weighted blanket settled against my back, the pressure of it pressing me against Ryker in the best damn way.

Closing my eyes, I let sleep take me as I fell asleep in the arms of the man who'd never be my mate.

And I dreamed of a world where he was mine.

Ryker was still snoring when I woke up. It took me a moment to realize where I was, and then I snuggled up against Ryker in an attempt to enjoy every moment with him that I could.

I knew my time was running short when he started changing positions, and slipped out of his arms.

My eyes squeezed shut at the sight of him.

Asleep on the couch, under his weighted blanket.

So damn gorgeous, and strong, and *fragile*.

He was everything.

Goddess, why did life have to be so damned unfair?

My eyes stung as I slid back into his room, putting the borrowed clothes in the dirty hamper and dressing back in my poisonous-smelling ones. I made his bed, because he was a neat-freak and would do it himself if I didn't.

Even if I did, there was a decent chance he'd remake it, just so it looked better.

Having a clean house helped with his anxiety, so we'd always kept our place ultra clean up until the pack exploded in size. It was a losing battle, now that the refuge housed so many wolves.

Before leaving, I grabbed a notebook out of his kitchen junk drawer and wrote a quick note.

Thanks for the bed. You should've told me about your nightmares; I could've moved in to help. You know sleeping together is the only thing that really helps, and—

I stopped myself there.

Sleeping together is the only thing that helps?

Yeah, that sounded a bit suggestive.

Scribbling the words out, I ripped out the page and tossed it in the trash.

Flipping to a new page, I wrote,

YOU STILL SNORE.

-BETTIE

I shook my head at my own damn nickname, then slipped out the front door. Grabbing the spare key, I locked it behind me so Ryker wouldn't be worried when he woke up.

The drive back was short, and luckily, Dante didn't seem to be at the refuge. It was morning; I wasn't sure what time I'd gone to bed, or how many meals I'd slept through.

I accepted a plate from Esther with a smile, a hug, and a thank-you, before dropping into a chair in the kitchen.

Taylor came strolling out of our bedroom, rubbing her eyes as she sat down beside me.

"You missed a real party last night," she mumbled.

"Oh yeah? Were you getting it on with Dominic?" I lifted an eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes. "No. Wyatt bought an assload of alcohol with his first real paycheck, and we all got drunk. It was great."

I was sure not *all* of the werewolves had gotten drunk, but I could guess the thirty or so wolves that had been in on the "real party".

"Sounds like fun," I said.

It was a lie. I'd never wanted to drink. It took so much alcohol to make a werewolf drunk that it was disgusting, and who wanted to puke up two bottles' worth of foul liquids for an hour of a buzz?

The only time I'd even considered going to a human bar was to meet human men. But that was before my wolf realized she wasn't emotionally ready to mate with anyone but our fated-mate.

Neither of us were sure she'd ever be emotionally ready, but we had to be

okay with that anyway.

Sometimes, I wished I could go back in time. To before the refuge was full, before the pack was big.

Before Ryker decided to stop trying to be with me.

“So you and Ryker had a thing, huh?” Taylor asked, like she’d read my damn mind.

“Who did you hear that from?” I frowned.

“Dante stayed for the party. He crashed with Wyatt and Kaleb and all those guys.” She gestured over her shoulder. Those guys were on the second floor. “Lover-boy was asking about you and Ryker, and someone was saying that they overheard you say you guys used to date.”

My eyebrows shot into my forehead. “Who was saying that?”

No one knew about mine and Ryker’s past.

No one.

Even Knox didn’t even know the full extent of it, and he knew both of us better than anyone else in the pack.

Taylor’s forehead wrinkled, like she was trying to remember. She finally shook her head. “I don’t know.”

We must’ve had another mind reader in the pack. Or someone with a similar gift, because Ryker wouldn’t be telling people. We’d agreed it wasn’t something we would ever confide to anyone but our future mates, after we’d exchanged claim marks with them.

Because at one point, we’d known we were in love.

We’d marked each other.

Goddess, the memories...

His hands on my hips.

My fingers in his hair.

Our lips, locked, while our bare bodies pressed together.

Those damned memories would kill me, if I wasn't careful.

"I need you to find out who it was. They can see inside minds or something, and they might not realize it if they're spilling that like it's well-known information." I shoveled food into my mouth, trying to ignore the way my body was flushing and heating.

"So you were together." Taylor looked confused.

"It was a long time ago." I stood, shoving hair away from my neck.

I needed to get out of the refuge until I got those memories back into the mental safe I'd wrestled them into years ago.

"I'm in the mood for a cupcake. Want to stop at the bakery with me?" I checked.

Cara and Knox worked at Cake Me Home, a bakery run by a human mated to one of the guys in our pack. They were always a good distraction, and I sure as hell needed one.

"I guess..." Taylor was probably experiencing whiplash.

She could join the crowd.

I finished off my plate, washed it, and stuck it in our industrial-sized dishwasher before we headed out.

Spirit, the name we called the rabid wolf who followed Taylor around, trotted out with us. A wolf went rabid when they experienced some kind of trauma; often, being rejected made them rabid. Most rabid wolves shifted back after a couple of days with Cara, our resident Wolf Tamer, but Spirit

was proof that not all of them were subject to her charm. She hadn't shifted back yet, and she'd been in the pack for over a year.

Spirit climbed into the back seat of my car, and Taylor took the passenger seat.

I pulled away from the refuge, luckily without running into Dante or Ryker.



7

“So, what am I supposed to call you now?” Taylor checked.

“I haven’t decided.” I made a face. “My name doesn’t fit, my wolf’s name doesn’t fit... I’ve got nothing.”

“Well, that escalated quickly.”

I laughed. “I meant I’ve got nothing as far as ideas. My full name is Elizabeth, and there are a heap of nicknames, but none of them really fit, you know?”

Taylor nodded slowly. “Alright. I’ll throw nicknames at you, and you tell me if you like any of them. Liz?”

I shook my head.

“Eliza?”

Nope.

“Liza?”

Uh-uh.

“Beth?”

I made a face. I hadn’t been Beth in a long time.

“Hold on, I’m going to pull up a list online. We’ll try them all out.”

I grimaced. I appreciated her effort, but was feeling pretty down about the whole thing.

Well, I was feeling pretty down about life in general at that moment.

She continued listing off possible nicknames, and I continued shooting them down.

We parked in front of the bakery, and went inside. Taylor was still firing off options while we sat at one of the tables in the front area, waiting for the other customers to clear out so we could talk to Cara.

When the customers cleared, Cara came out to our table with a whole plate of cupcakes and cookies.

“You’re a saint,” Taylor said, shoving nearly an entire peanut butter cookie in her mouth.

Cara waved her hand at the compliment, sitting down at the table with us. “What are we talking about?”

“Thi’ one nee’s a ‘ew ‘ame,” Taylor spoke around her cookie.

“Oh, we’re trying to come up with a name for you?” Cara looked at me, and I nodded.

Cara scratched Spirit’s head, considering it. “Your full name is Elizabeth, right?”

“Yep.” I grabbed one of the double chocolate cupcakes, peeling the wrapper and biting into it.

At least I still had one good thing in my life.

Chocolate would never abandon me or decide we should just be friends.

“What about ‘El’?”

“I already tried that,” Taylor said, swallowing her mouthful of cookie.

“Not the fancy version of the name with two l’s and two e’s. Just E-L. It sounds the same, but *feels* different.”

Taylor’s face scrunched up. “Bullshit.”

I thought about it. “I actually kind of like it. It does feel different.”

Taylor snorted. “You’re both high.”

“High on sugar, maybe.” Cara teased.

“I’ll think about it. So far, it’s the best one,” I told them.

“So how have things been with the new rabid?” I asked Cara, changing the subject away from me and my life’s issues.

“He’s great. We’ll bring him over to the refuge tonight and get him adjusted there, but I think I’ll be able to get him to shift back in a few days.”

We continued to talk about rabid wolves and bakery stuff for a bit, and it was a nice break from my problems.

We were talking about possible tattoos when my vision suddenly went dark.

My body stilled, the shadows consuming me and my wolf both.

What the hell was going on?

I’d never in my life been drawn to two rejected wolves within days of each other—and the shadows had never been so all-consuming.

I heard people talking to me, though I couldn’t make out their words.

The pull of the shadows stole my breath, and forced my wolf to surface.

I tried to speak to her, tried to urge her to fight the pull, but she was just as helpless as I was.

She shoved her way through the door, and sprinted through the streets of Payne.

The world knew about werewolves, so there wasn't mass hysteria when my wolf passed people. But a horse-sized wolf still drew attention, and surprise from the crowds as Shadow pushed past them.

I felt presences behind me, and knew at least one of the other girls was following me. But usually, I had some idea of where the shadows would take us beforehand, and this time, I was clueless.

Diving into the forest that skirted Payne, my wolf ran past ski lifts and tore through slopes as if they weren't even there.

She ran, and ran, and ran.

My thoughts grew hazy and disconnected, and time began to blur.

I was somewhat aware of her stopping for food and water at some point, but then the haze returned.

Suddenly, the shadows grew focused as I neared the werewolf they'd been dragging me to.

My mind cleared. I was confused and pissed and exhausted...

And a little scared.

I had no idea where I was. And for the first time since I was eighteen, I was hunting a new reject all alone.

I despised being alone.

No, I wasn't necessarily an extrovert. I liked my space. But feeling alone

in the world was something entirely different.

Something I hated.

My wolf leaped through the air, and I braced myself for the collision that would follow.

She crashed into the other wolf, and we smashed to the dirt floor in a tangle of fur and claws.

I shifted to my human form immediately, knowing I'd have to pull a Cara-like movement and throw myself over the damned wolf's back or something.

The wolf lunged away from me, and I was too slow to grab onto him or her.

And too out of it to even *tell* if it was a him or her.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm a reject, like you. My rejection gift brings me to others like us." Words poured from my mouth.

I was exhausted, and shaken. And so dirty that I was sure I looked like a damned monster. But I had to try.

"We have a place we belong—a refuge. Where lots of rejected wolves are gathered. It's a safe place. No one will hurt you there. If you just stay with me, we can—"

The wolf took off.

I launched toward him or her, planning to pull some wolf-riding shit.

My body crashed hard to the dirt, knocking the breath out of me. I gasped and wheezed, clutching at my chest as I tried to force air to move in and out of my lungs.

Shit.

Dammit.

I was alone—so damn alone.

In the middle of the freaking forest, who knew where. Probably on the American continent, at least, because I didn't think my wolf had boarded a plane or boat or anything.

But she'd been running for *days*. There was no telling where she'd gotten us.

“*Are you okay?*” I asked my wolf.

“*Weary,*” she murmured back. “*So tired.*”

I knew the feeling.

A bone-deep exhaustion had settled in, along with an old hopelessness that I'd escaped years ago. I couldn't hear or smell any people anywhere nearby; I'd have to shift for that. But my wolf was even more out of it than I was.

“The shadows really fucked us over this time,” I muttered aloud.

My wolf agreed. “*No kidding.*”

“*We need to find somewhere safe to sleep tonight,*” I told her. I'd slept in the woods plenty of times; I wasn't afraid of living like a wolf for a couple of days. But the problem was, I didn't know how long we'd need to sleep before feeling better. At least twelve hours; probably more like twenty-four, or thirty-six.

And being dead to the world like that could be dangerous in a forest I didn't know, with predators I might not be prepared to face.

“*I'll find us a town,*” Shadow whispered. “*Then, we'll sleep.*”

She took over, and I embraced the quiet peace of letting my wolf deal with our shit.

She hunted a few rabbits, drinking from a stream as she searched for signs

of life. A city or town would've been great.

After a while, we agreed that even a hunting cabin with a creepy serial killer in it would be amazing.

But we found none of them. Not a city, or a town. Not even a damned serial killer.

Just more trees, and more dirt.

"I don't think we're going to find a town," Shadow said wearily. *"I'll find us somewhere to sleep."*

We ended up in a bushy crevice. Although werewolves were at the top of the food chain, a pack of normal wolves could probably take us down. Or a really pissed grizzly bear.

If there were even grizzlies in wherever the hell the shadows had taken us.

But the bushy rock crevice was comfortable enough, and we felt safe there. That was a hell of a lot better than nothing.



8

Shadow and I were both disoriented when we woke up. We looked around for the refuge, panicking when we saw bushes and rocks and trees. It took a moment to remember that we were in the middle of nowhere.

And alone.

We weren't sure how long we'd slept, but it felt like we'd been out for ages.

After listening for danger, Shadow maneuvered out of our safe crevice. She padded back to the stream, lowering her head to the water and drinking.

We were feeling a bit better after sleeping. A bit more... stable.

Though the realization that our gift could rip control of us at any second and take us anywhere in the world was really damn terrifying.

Shadow hunted for food, and then resumed her search for life. We needed a phone, to contact the refuge. And a shower, to clean the shit out of my hair before it formed a permanent rat's nest and I had to shave it off.

I wasn't one of those people who cried when they got their hair cut, but I would miss my hair if I lost it all.

Shadow had been searching for most of the day when we stumbled into a town.

And I mean that literally. She was just running through the forest, and then her foot caught and she looked around and realized she'd tripped on a damn concrete stair.

Her head swung around, assessing the situation.

There had been no signs of the town. No change in smell, no noise. Human towns were loud and smelly. Hell, werewolf towns were too.

But this one was silent.

We were in what looked like some kind of a neighborhood, without fences, and with plants crawling over every one of the buildings.

A werewolf neighborhood, then; we never built fences.

But where there should've been life and vibrancy, there was only heavy quiet.

Shadow stepped up to one of the buildings, sniffing it. Upon looking closer, I saw what we hadn't noticed at first.

The buildings were overgrown with plants of all kinds, to the point where there were actual holes in the structures.

If the lack of smell and noise hadn't been enough evidence, the overgrown plants confirmed that the place was abandoned.

"I don't like this," Shadow murmured to me.

"I don't either," I admitted. *"Let's go."*

I wasn't someone who explored shit for the hell of it, and there was something really unnerving about the broken, abandoned neighborhood. I didn't want anything to do with that.

Shadow continued in the direction she'd been moving. We passed more buildings, a few that looked like they had been stores, but silently continued until we were past the abandoned town.

An hour later, we finally found a populated city.

As we approached a hotel on the edge of town, it occurred to me that I had no money.

And that I looked like an absolute wreck... and had no clothes.

But I couldn't exactly get myself fixed up without a hotel room, could I?

Shadow shifted to me just before we stepped into the hotel. I was fully aware that I was bare-ass naked, but didn't care.

"I need a room," I told the guy at the desk.

He looked somewhere between scared and revolted.

"Card?" he held a hand out.

"I don't have any money with me, but—"

He gestured for the security guards.

"Please." Panic rose within me. "Just let me use your phone. My friend can pay over phone—we have money. I just—"

"Wild wolves should remain in the wilderness," the front desk guy said firmly.

The security dudes tried to grab me, but I ducked away from their hands. "I can show myself out."

They followed me to the door, where I shifted and let Shadow take over once again.

"*What now?*" Shadow asked softly.

"*We try another hotel.*" Dread curled inside my belly.

This was too much like when I'd been trying to find a new pack, after being rejected.

No one had wanted a reject.

No one had wanted *me*.

"*We have Ryker,*" Shadow reminded me. "*We have a pack. We aren't alone.*"

"*I know. It's just...memories.*"

She mourned with me for a moment, walking down the streets of the town. We got many curious gazes, but no one tried to interact with us.

We stopped at another hotel, and got shot down again.

I shifted back to wolf form, and a middle-aged man jogged up to Shadow's side. She eyed him suspiciously.

We weren't the trusting type.

"I heard about your problem," he said. "You'll have a hard time finding someone sympathetic here. Our town's witches ran out the werewolves over a decade ago, and unless you're related to someone in town, they're not going to help you."

I wondered if he was talking about the ruined city.

Why had the witches scared off the werewolves?

There were a lot more of us than them; witches were only born female, and didn't have fated mates as far as I knew, so it was difficult for them to reproduce.

"If you give me your friend's number, I'll call him for you. I'm not aware of any hotels that would house a werewolf, but maybe he could send a car or something."

Or something.

I was pretty sure Ryker would fly a damned private jet if it meant getting to me faster. We were all the family each other had, and he'd been hella protective ever since we'd met.

“Here.” The man stopped walking and pulled his coat off. “We can go behind a building, and you can cover up with this.”

Shadow narrowed her eyes at him. We were naturally suspicious, and couldn't imagine why this guy wanted to help us.

But then again, what was the other option? Keep wandering around hopelessly and pray to the goddess that one of the hotels let me in? In a town run by witches who apparently hated werewolves, no less?

Knowing that Ryker's family had been massacred by witches didn't exactly make me excited to meet some myself.

Shadow finally nodded and led the guy behind a building. We were in a small parking lot, and there were a few old-looking cars around.

Should the guy attack me, I did know a bit of self-defense. Ryker and I had taken a class together when I was twenty, after I'd had a scare with an asshole in one of the packs we were visiting.

Since then, he and I practiced together once a week or so. Though, our sessions had gotten less frequent as the pack grew and there was more and more shit to do to keep it running.

The man set the coat down on the ground and turned around to give me space and privacy while I shifted. I appreciated the gesture, though it didn't make me trust him any more. Often, the most dangerous men were skilled at hiding the red flags in their personalities.

I grabbed the coat and slipped it over my shoulders. It was a charcoal-colored sports coat. I buttoned the buttons over my lower belly, shivering at the chill in the air on my bare skin.

The buttons were very few and very low, barely covering my nether-regions. I held the top part closed with my fingers, managing to hold my damned boobs inside the thing.

Did anyone actually like having boobs?

Because I sure as hell didn't.

They were a pain in the ass, and I'd never understood the draw. But then again, I guess that was because I was into tall dudes with big dicks.

Fine, *one* tall dude with a big dick.

My hair was tangled with dirt and leaves, falling around my face in a supreme level of unattractiveness that I hoped scared the middle-aged guy into keeping his hands to himself.

"Alright," I swallowed hard, my fingers clenching tighter on the coat covering me.

Goddess, I hated being helpless.

He turned around, and luckily there wasn't any pervy glint in his eyes. Only kindness.

He handed me his phone, and I typed Ryker's number with shaky fingers before lifting the device to my ear.

He answered on the first ring.

"Hello?" his voice was tense.

Something within me unfurled, relaxed.

"It's me."

"Thank the goddess. Where are you? Are you hurt?"

Someone on Ryker's side was saying something to him, but he ignored them.

"I'm fine." I glanced at the guy who'd loaned me his coat. "Where are we?"

"Canada." His lips curled upward.

My eyebrows lifted. "Canada?"

"Who are you with?" Ryker growled.

He was from Canada; maybe he knew where I was.

I ignored my best friend's question, not wanting to be rude to the nice guy who was letting me borrow his phone. "What's the name of this city?" I checked.

"Oldenwood."

"I'm in Oldenwood, Canada. Where are you?"

Ryker's voice went dead quiet for a moment.

"Ryker?" I prodded.

"Get out of Oldenwood, Shadow. Now. Go east, as fast as you fucking can. We'll meet you in Willoughsbie, where the trees turn blue."

"I don't understand. Why do I need to—" I cut myself off at the memory of the abandoned town.

The *werewolf* town.

What if it had been Ryker's?

"Run, now." Ryker's snarl was more animal than man.

"Alright. See you soon," I whispered, hanging up.

The man waited pleasantly for me to give back his phone. He didn't seem like a murderer; no one in the town did. They hadn't been welcoming, but it was far from the first time I hadn't been welcomed.

"I've got to go. Thanks for your help." I slipped out of the jacket as I shifted forms.

"Keep it." The man picked the sports coat up off the ground and held it out to me. "Wherever you're going, you may need it."

Shadow's teeth closed carefully on the fabric, and then she sprinted into the forest.

If Ryker thought we needed to go east, we'd go east.



9

Ryker's words about the blue trees didn't make a shred of sense until I approached Willoughsbie a few hours later. There was a tree with blueish-green pine needles among all the other dark greens.

Shadow turned, making her way toward the blue-ish green one.

When she trotted past it, she noticed another, and followed that one.

It became a bit of a game, until she found a whole patch of the bluish green trees on the edge of the town.

That had to be what Ryker was talking about.

But why the hell did he know there was a patch of blue trees there? Even if the abandoned town had been Ryker's, why did he know anything about trees in Willoughsbie?

Goddess, what else didn't I know about the man who was my whole damn world?

Shadow stopped behind a few trees, and gave me the reins. After shifting forms, I slid my arms into the sports coat the man had given me. Any clothing a werewolf wore while shifting would just up and vanish, never to be seen again thanks to some piece of the moon goddess's magic.

It sucked losing our clothes so frequently. I hoped the moon goddess was somehow donating them, at least.

Gripping the suit coat closed between my boobs, I made my way into the town. There was no gate or anything; just trees, and then buildings.

The first building in front of me?

The Blue Tree Inn.

“Maybe you’re not crazy after all, Ry-Ry,” I muttered.

There were a few other people milling around a bit down the cracked asphalt street, but they didn’t seem to notice me.

Hoping my not-crazy friend had thought to call ahead—or better yet, beaten me to the inn—I stepped inside.

The place was small but cozy, with a fire crackling in the hearth even though it was the middle of the day and wasn’t insanelly cold outside. A friendly-looking woman greeted me from the front desk.

I was cold, but instead of going over to the flames to thaw, I stepped up to the desk. “Hi. Do you have a reservation for a Ryker Jimenez?”

“Let me check.” She smiled brightly.

Her eyes scanned the screen, and then she frowned. “Hmm, not seeing it.”

Shit.

Worry crept up my spine.

“He would’ve called earlier today, and booked a few rooms.” There had been people with him... “Probably three or four of them?”

“Is there another name he would’ve used?” she checked.

She couldn’t just give me the answer, I knew.

“Cara Flynn. Er, Cara Redding. Knox Redding. Taylor Keller. Alaska

Solesbee. Parker Schrade. Dominic Appel. Dante Giles.” I threw that last one out there, even though I doubted Ryker would make a reservation under Dante’s name. The others were all the people I could imagine Ryker traveling with, so there was a chance one of them could have called.

“I don’t have reservations for any of those names,” the woman apologized.

My eyes squeezed shut.

Guess I was wrong about the blue tree thing, and Ryker’s ingeniousness.

“You forgot your own name,” Shadow murmured.

Oh, shit.

Right.

My eyes opened. “What about Elizabeth Bashlor?”

The woman’s eyes brightened, and relief flooded through me. “There we go. Do you want all four of your room keys, or do you want me to keep the other three here until the rest of your party arrives?”

“You can hold on to them.” I gave her a tentative smile.

She gave me my room key and directions to the room, and I slipped down the hallway. The Blue Tree Inn wasn’t large or fancy, but it felt like a damned mansion after the last couple days.

Inserting the key—which was an actual key, not a keycard—into the door, I turned the knob and stepped inside. The room was simple: a queen-sized bed with an antique-looking bedspread, a bathroom with a shower/tub combo, and two decorative chairs placed between the bed and a window that looked out on the blue trees.

Since I doubted there was anyone to peep on me in the forest, I left the curtains open while I slipped into the bathroom. The sports coat was my only bit of clothing, and I had no idea when Ryker and the others would arrive, so I took the coat to the bathroom and shoved it in the sink.

I vigorously scrubbed the fabric with the room's small complimentary bar of soap. After living in my car and the forest for a few months back before I met Ryker, I was a professional at sink-washing clothes.

They never came out looking all that great, but they stopped reeking and were free of dirt afterward. And when you're living outside, that's all that really matters.

I took the coat into the shower with me to rinse all the soap off. When it was clean enough, I wrung it out and hung it off the bathroom doorknob.

The small bottles of shampoo and body soap weren't nearly enough given the state of my skin and hair, but I'd water them down to make an attempt at getting all the way clean.

My skin came first, since I could throw my hair up in a bun if it was still dirty after the shower.

I managed to get myself mostly clean, though my long, honey-blond hair felt like shit without conditioner to smooth it out. I ended up throwing it up in a bun even though I'd gotten it clean. Since I didn't have a hair-tie, I had to wrestle with it a bit. The gross, unconditioned state of it helped it maintain its shape though.

A yawn stretched my face. It had been a long day. Hell—a long week. I felt sure it had been somewhere around a week since I'd blacked out in the bakery. Shadow had been running for days, and then we'd slept at least another day or so. And then there was all the running around, looking for civilization...

I was exhausted, mentally and emotionally. And the rabid werewolf the shadows had led me to was still wandering around the forest somewhere, probably a danger to society or nature.

Not knowing when the shadows might next take hold of me was utterly terrifying, too. Ryker was on his way, but I had no idea how far he still was.

I figured I might as well sleep while I had a bed and a roof over my head. There was no telling when I'd get another chance, if the shadows took hold again soon.

I slid between the sheets on the bed. The cool fabric against my legs gave me goosebumps.

Rolling over to lay on my side, I grabbed a spare pillow and cradled it to my chest.

I wasn't alone.

Ryker was on his way.

I still had a pack, a family.

The words repeated in my mind as my eyes closed, and sleep took me.



10

I woke to a sharp knock on the door.

My eyes opened, and terror gripped me.

What if it was...

I blinked, my mind leaving whatever shitty dream I'd been having.

There was no one after me; I was safe.

"It's Ryker," Shadow murmured.

The knock sounded again, louder.

I grabbed my sports coat off the doorknob, slipping it over my shoulders before hurrying to the door.

"I swear I'll rip this fucking thing off the hinges if I don't see your face in three seconds, Bettie," Ryker snarled, as I unlocked the door.

Holding my coat shut at the center of my chest with one hand, I flung the door open with the other.

The breath rushed out of me as Ryker crushed me to his chest. His grip was so tight I wondered if I'd bruise, but would've happily taken it if it meant having him at my side again.

“Goddess,” Ryker breathed.

That was all he said. I wasn’t sure if it was a good or bad, “goddess,” but I didn’t care.

“Let go of my mate,” a masculine voice snapped behind Ryker.

Dante?

My eyes opened, and I went up on my tiptoes so I could see over Ryker’s shoulder.

Sure enough, my ass-hat of an ex-fated-mate stood in the hallway.

“They’re family,” Cara shot him a warning glare.

She didn’t seem to like him. She liked most people, so that was saying something.

“Ex-fated-mate,” I corrected Dante, then glared up at Ryker. His eyes were still closed, his hands holding me tightly to him. “You brought *him*?”

“He didn’t give me a choice,” Ryker muttered. “And I wasn’t wasting twenty minutes to kill him and dispose of the body.”

He didn’t show any sign of releasing me, so I eased away from him. I could’ve kept hugging him all day, but there were other people watching—and I was pretty damn close to naked.

“Who’s in there with you?” Dante snarled, stepping past Ryker and I and into my room.

He walked to the closet, flinging the doors open.

“Who are you fucking?” he demanded.

“What are you talking about?” I glared at him.

“Get the hell out of her room.” Taylor stepped inside too, pointing to the

hallway.

“You’re half-naked in here, wearing another guy’s suit coat,” Dante growled, stalking into the bathroom.

“Some dude gave me his coat, because he was nice. Not because we were *fucking*,” I snarled back. “This has been a hellish week, so get out.” I joined Taylor, pointing to the door.

He sat on the edge of the bed instead, glaring at me. “Then let me smell you.”

My fists clenched.

Ryker let go of me, striding over to Dante. He yanked Dick up off the bed, and shoved him toward the door.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I glared at him as Ryker removed him from my room.

“Here.” Ryker tossed him a room key. “Try again tomorrow.”

Dante started to argue, but when his eyes met mine, he closed his mouth.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” he growled at me.

I flipped him off, and he muttered under his breath as he headed to his room.

“You could’ve just pushed him out of the car on the freeway,” I muttered to Ryker.

“Too messy.” He shrugged.

I embraced the other girls, and then Knox.

They explained that they’d tried to follow Shadow in their wolf forms, but had fallen behind. Knox picked them up—he’d tried to follow their trail from the bakery, in his truck, after he realized we were gone. Ryker was a ways

behind him, but they all saw that my wolf was going north and had tried to go the same way.

They hadn't found me, obviously; the forests were too massive, and the roads didn't go through the trees like my wolf had. Even taking turns in wolf form, they hadn't caught my scent anywhere.

But they'd made it, and that was what counted.

They came into my room, and Ryker gave me his sweatshirt to replace the sports coat. I slipped into the bathroom to swap the clothing, and lifted the fabric to my nose to breathe in Ryker's scent.

Shadow said something random to me. I could always tell when she was speaking just to keep Ryker out of my thoughts, and was decent at tuning her out a bit. She liked that she could do that for me, and I sure as hell did too.

Why did he have to smell so damn good?

Why did he have to smell like home and a delicious meal and everything I'd ever wanted all at once?

Goddess, I was hopeless.

I should try to give Dante a chance—as my fated mate, maybe he was someone who could actually help me move on from Ryker, like he'd moved on from me.

But even thinking that, I knew I couldn't.

Being with Dante in any way would feel like being disloyal to Ryker, and I was loyal to a damn fault. I loved Ryker, and that wasn't going to change just because he thought of me as a sister. I wanted him to be happy, even if it wasn't with me.

Plus, Dante was a dick. The way he'd sniffed the room, checking for another guy? Maybe some girls were into that, but not me. I liked trust in my relationships.

And I knew eventually I'd probably have to have a real conversation with the guy to get him to leave since he'd decided to stick to me like freakin' glue, but I'd put that off until I figured out what the hell was going on with my rejection gift.

Pushing away thoughts of Ryker's scent and my messed-up but also nonexistent love life, I rejoined the others in my room.

The group consisted of Cara, Taylor, and Spirit, who had all been at the bakery with me, along with Ryker and Knox. They were all my closest friends, though Ryker and I were notably closer to each other than we were to the others.

He and I were all each other had for too long not to be close.

I walked over to the bed and tucked my legs between the sheets, and Spirit and Taylor sat beside me. Ryker sat on the other side, while Cara and Knox took the chairs beside the window.

They all listened closely while I explained everything that had happened, including giving them details about the abandoned town I'd seen. I didn't push Ryker for answers, but I saw the darkness in his caramel-colored eyes.

Everyone kept glancing at him, but no one wanted to broach the subject.

Knox cleared his throat. "We should get to our rooms. It's been a long couple of days."

The others murmured their agreements, and they all trickled out.

Except Ryker.

"You're rooming with me?" I lifted an eyebrow at him. We'd shared a room hundreds of times, but none in the past year unless you counted our couch-snuggle before the shadows possessed me.

"Nope. I'm the lucky bastard who gets to cuddle up with your ex." He leaned against the doorway; he'd gotten up to make it look like he was leaving me to sleep, too.

I snorted. “Better you than me.”

A ghost of a smile tugged at his lips before vanishing. “What did the town look like?”

“Like the forest had decided to consume it.” I watched him. “That was your hometown.”

His eyes darkened. “It was called Lupos. Latin for wolf pack. We were the oldest pack in Canada, and the biggest. The witches built Oldenwood a few years after my ancestors finished construction, so it was too late for us to move. We didn’t get along with them.”

Based on what had happened to the werewolves, I was going to call that an understatement.

“We were happy there. Things were good. I know you always remember the past better than it was, but I swear, it was perfect.”

There was honesty in his voice. He’d never told me so much about his past. He’d told me stories about his childhood, crazy things he’d done with his siblings before they were killed. But never the actual details. I’d assumed he’d kept them to himself for the same reason I’d kept the details of my dad’s death and the private funeral I’d held for him to myself.

Because they were sacred to me.

And when you gave away the most sacred parts of yourself, you couldn’t get them back. Holding on to them was a method of protecting yourself, and one even Ryker and I hadn’t gotten past.

We trusted each other fully, and we were family.

But we weren’t mates, and that was like a band of plastic wrap between our souls. Small and seemingly-meaningless, but keeping us apart nonetheless.

“The coven got a new leader around my tenth birthday. The fighting

between them and us got worse. My parents brought us here, and made us memorize the place. Willoughsbie, where the trees are blue.” His eyes were focused on the window, but I didn’t think he was seeing anything. “I smelled something weird a few months after my fifteenth birthday. The scent of magic; big magic. I ditched school, running toward Oldenwood to try to figure out what the witches were up to. I thought I’d be a hero for figuring out their plan. I was nearly there when the magic went off. It saturated the air—made me cough and sneeze. Felt like my throat was closing up.”

His eyes closed, and I knew he was reliving the day. “I tried to get back into Lupos, but there was some kind of magical barrier. The witches were trying to protect the wildlife from their magic.” He laughed bitterly. “When I couldn’t get in, I ran here. The first few days, I waited. It took a week for me to accept that they weren’t coming. When I went back to Lupos, it was a graveyard. The largest pack in Canada, turned to ash where they’d been standing. Men, women, children...the witches didn’t give a shit.”

He swallowed roughly. “I stayed there for another week before someone from the pack south of us finally came to check on us. They found me. Alone.”

My eyes stung. I’d known he joined a pack in Washington after his was killed, and I’d known they’d been killed by witches, but I had never known the details.

“So I’m sorry I lost it when I heard you were in Oldenwood, I just...” He let out a slow breath, his eyes meeting mine. Piercing into me. “I can’t lose another person to those witches.”

“Don’t apologize.” I crossed the room, wrapping my arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. He held me to his chest like a lifeline.

We stayed in place for a while. I didn’t know how long, but it felt long.

And it felt right.

I needed Ryker, and he needed me.

My wolf murmured something while another piece of my damn fragile soul cracked.

Why couldn't he just love me?

“Can you stay with me tonight?” I whispered into his neck.

He swallowed. Roughly.

“I’m afraid the shadows will take hold of me and I’ll be alone again,” I admitted.

“I still snore,” he murmured into my hair.

“That’s not news to me.”

His arms loosened from around me, and I knew our hug was over. It sucked, but such was my life.

“My wolf will guard you,” he said quietly. “If Dante charges in, assuming we’re together...”

“Bite his face off.”

Ryker snorted. “Good call.”

“I know.” I gave him a bit of a smile, sliding back under the sheets on my bed. “Thanks, Ry-Ry.”

“You’re welcome, Bettie.”

We exchanged tired grins before Ryker shut the lights off.

I heard his zipper unzipping, and Shadow spoke to me while I forced myself not to imagine him naked.

Because damn, he looked good naked.

I failed at not imagining him, and my body grew flushed. Shadow kept

chattering about something—a bird she'd seen while we were looking for civilization.

I didn't know if the bird was real, but my wolf was a damned saint.

Ryker's wolf jumped up and plopped down on the bed. He spread his weight, to avoid breaking the mattress, and his belly stretched over my feet. He knew they were always cold.

"Thanks," I whispered to the wolf, rubbing his head. He leaned into my touch, then plopped his head down only a foot or so away from mine.

We fell asleep together, and though it wasn't the same as cuddling Ryker on his couch, it was still nice just to have him there.



11

We had an awkward breakfast the next morning. Without Ryker and Taylor cracking jokes to keep things light, everyone was pretty quiet.

After breakfast, we set out to find the rabid wolf the shadows had led me to.

We drove a bit—they had two vehicles, so it wasn't a problem to fit everyone. I ended up sitting in the middle seat of Ryker's truck's single bench seat, smashed between him and Dante.

Every time I scooted closer to Ryker, Dante scooted closer to me.

I kind of wanted to rip my hair out...and kind of wanted to climb onto Ryker's lap.

Shadow kept *that* thought from Ryker, luckily.

"She's not enjoying it as much as you," Ryker told Dante.

We both turned our heads to look at him. My best friend, ever the sarcastic jokester. But he wasn't joking this time.

"What?" Dante's eyes were already narrowing at Ryker.

"Unlike you, *Bettie* here doesn't enjoy the way your leg is pressing into hers. You're wrong; this isn't a step forward for you two. If you ever step forward with her, you'll know."

My eyebrows lifted.

He wasn't going to bring up the Slippery Boob Incident, was he?

“How would you know that? You're her *brother*.”

Damn, I'd started to despise that word.

“Our relationship didn't always resemble a sibling one,” Ryker remarked.

Goddess, he was going to bring up the SBI.

“*You swore to take that to your grave,*” I thought at Ryker.

His gaze met mine for a moment, before he focused back on the dirt road in front of us.

“Just trying to help you out.” He feigned cheerfulness, and I saw through it completely.

He was tired, and worried. Maybe even scared. His anxiety was probably through the roof, which meant his damned brain was probably telling him I was going to fall in love with Dante and leave him forever or something. He'd told me how his anxiety worked; mostly, it revolved around loss.

“*You're not going to lose me, especially not to that bastard,*” I thought loudly. “*But if you think it will get rid of him, you can tell him.*”

Ryker's lips curved up in a dangerous smile.

The man could be a weapon of manipulation when he wanted to be. He hadn't tried that on me for years, because I could see right through him. But most other people didn't see past the nonchalant jokester façade he wore.

“What was your relationship, then?” Dante accused, his gaze swinging between us both.

“We were lovers,” Ryker said dramatically. “Using each other for our

bodies, anywhere, any time. Of course, Elizabeth always made it clear to me that we were nothing more than physical. She used me for my scrumptious body, as I used her for those *delicious* curves.”

My lips twitched, a grin threatening to break through. He was full of shit. We’d become best friends, and then morphed into more. And the only time we’d tried to have sex was the Slippery Boob Incident.

And he’d never in his damned life called me “Elizabeth”.

Dante’s face flamed. “You stole Beth’s virginity?”

“There was no stealing involved,” Ryker drawled.

I nearly cackled.

We were terrible, but Dante so deserved it.

“I’m going to kill you,” Dante growled.

“You shouldn’t warn someone before attacking them. Every werewolf with any merit knows that,” Ryker said lightly.

That pushed Dante over the edge.

He reached over my head and grabbed Ryker by the throat. The truck swerved, and I shrieked as I grabbed the steering wheel in an attempt to keep us on the road.

My phone started to ring; Cara and Knox were behind us. They were probably wondering why the hell we were about to run ourselves off a mostly-flat dirt road.

“STOP!” I yelled at the guys, trying desperately hard to keep my hands steady as they grappled over me. I smacked Ryker’s thigh, then let go with one hand to shove my elbow into Dante’s windpipe.

Dante withdrew quickly, coughing and grabbing his throat as he sucked air in.

Ryker took the wheel, his expression tranquil, as if his lip wasn't bleeding and he hadn't just gotten in a damn car fight with my ex-fated-mate.

"What are you guys, twelve?" I snapped at the men. "You just got in a cat-fight. Grow up."

Neither of them commented.

I answered the phone, glaring between both the dicks who had nearly just ran us off the road and into a tree. "Hey, Cara." My voice was strained.

"Are you guys okay?" she checked.

"We're fine. Dingbat one and two just got in a pussy fight. And before you ask, no. It wasn't my pussy they were fighting over; it was their own."

"Gross," Cara said, though I heard Knox laughing.

Dante stiffened beside me; probably offended. Ryker's lips only twitched. He loved a good diss almost as much as he loved a good cinnamon roll.

Or any cinnamon roll, really. Even the grocery store ones that I thought tasted like cardboard.

"We're almost there," I told Cara. Shadow was at the surface, watching the scenery closely as she realized we were nearing the location where we'd ran into the other wolf.

"Okay. We'll keep following you. Try not to let the dingbats get us all killed," she teased. "Maybe stop talking about your pussy, too, for the sake of everyone's sanity."

I grinned. "Yes Ma'am."

We hung up, and I tucked my phone back into my sweatshirt pocket. Ryker had run into a store and bought me some leggings, but I'd opted to keep his sweatshirt even though the lack of a bra resulted in underboob sweat.

Again, did anyone actually like having boobs?

“There are plenty of women who enjoy having breasts, Elizabeth,” Ryker said playfully.

Dante glared out the window.

I was starting to feel a little bad for the guy.

I’d have to talk to him, soon. He had screwed up my life, but I didn’t want to be as big of a dick to him as he had been to me.

At least, not for *too long*.

“I don’t believe you. Between the underboob sweat, and the uncomfortable bouncing, and the obnoxious bra wires stabbing you every which way... I just don’t see it.” I shrugged.

“If we mated, you would,” Dante said. His tone had changed from angry/hurt to... sly?

What was he up to?

I shot him a raised eyebrow.

When I glanced back out the window, I noticed Ryker’s fingers tightening on the steering wheel.

“This bastard may have wanted your body,” he gestured to Ryker. “But someone who’s after your soul will want more than just sex. If we were mated, you’d know what it’s like to have your breasts touched by someone who wanted you for so much more than your body. When I touch your nipples, you’ll feel me touching your *soul*.”

I couldn’t help it.

The seductive words, coming from his damn lover-boy face and silky voice warmed my body.

Made me...feel things.

Horny things.

“I don’t think horny is a thing you can feel. It’s just a plain-old feeling,” Shadow remarked.

She wasn’t talking over my thoughts, which meant Ryker was hearing exactly how I felt about Dante’s words.

Shit on a freaking stick.

“Right there.” I pointed to the forest, beside the road. It wasn’t exactly where I’d seen the wolf, but the space did feel familiar. Shadow confirmed that a short walk would take us there, too.

Ryker slammed on the brakes, and our seatbelts jerked against our chests as we stopped suddenly.

Dante and I groaned in unison, rubbing our chests where the seatbelts had dug into us.

“Sorry.” Ryker’s voice was sharp.

“I should’ve given you more heads’-up,” I said lightly.

“Yeah, you should’ve,” he muttered, shoving the car door open and striding off toward the forest. “I’ll go south,” he called out, shifting and streaking off into the trees.

Dammit.

“Big brother doesn’t like to share?” Dante smirked at me, as we shut the doors to the truck. I grabbed Ryker’s keys off the hood and locked the vehicle, tucking the keys into my pocket.

“We’re definitely not siblings, no matter what you’ve heard.” I folded my arms over my chest and faced him. “What’s it going to take to get rid of you?”

The other car parked behind us, and everyone got out, putting our conversation on pause. We all divided up who was going in what direction, and separated. Dante and I lingered behind, to talk.

“So?” I watched him warily and waited for him to answer my question. I wanted to get rid of him, which meant I might have to play by one or two of his rules for a few minutes.

“Accept my withdrawal of the rejection, and give me a real chance to prove that I could be a good mate.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve been nothing but an asshole, thus far.”

“And you’ve been nothing but a bitch.”

My eyebrows shot upward.

The remark wasn’t entirely off-base. I had been trying to get rid of him, and I could admit that I hadn’t been the politest to him.

But I’d never had a guy insult me so outright before.

“What, are you going to pretend it’s not true? You barely look at me. I apologized, and you didn’t listen to a damn word I said. You ignore me constantly, while making googly eyes at your *brother* and making cruel remarks about me. Some of which I probably deserve, but at least I’m trying.”

“He’s *not* my brother,” I said sharply.

“Then why aren’t you together?” Dante countered. “I’d think if he had any feelings for you, he would’ve acted on them by now. Pining after him is a waste of time. And I saw the way my words affected you; you *are* still attracted to me. Accept my apology, give our relationship a real chance, and if you still want me to leave afterward, I’ll go. We’ll part as *friends*.”

I scowled. I did *not* want to be friends with Dante.

But he did have a point.

Ryker had no romantic feelings for me, and I had far too many for him. I was worried being with someone else would feel like I was betraying him, but I'd never actually tried it.

And if he was never going to be interested in me as anything more than a friend again, was there any reason to wait around for him? We could still be friends after we were both mated, though the dynamic would be different.

And maybe if by some miracle, I managed to like Dante, I wouldn't feel so shitty whenever Ryker made it clear he wasn't attracted to me.

"Fine." I gritted my teeth.

"That doesn't sound like you accepting my apology," Dante countered.

I corrected myself. "Fine, I'll *try* to accept your apology."

"You'll have to let me apologize again, then. Somewhere alone, just the two of us."

My face flushed. I wasn't sure if it was with anger, or embarrassment. I hadn't ever been on a date before, and that definitely sounded like a date. "Where?"

"Dinner, after we get back to the inn tonight. We can go someplace, or order in and eat in my room."

"Or *my* room," I shot back.

"Sure. I don't care where, as long as you're there and Ryker and his wolf aren't."

My face flushed hotter. "Fine. We'll do a restaurant if we're back early enough, and my room if we're not."

Dante gave me a small smile.

Goddess, he was pretty.

“Thank you, Beth.”

“It’s El,” I blurted.

Why had I said that?

I hadn’t even decided to start going by that name; why had I told him that?

Argh, he made me feel too many obnoxious things that I didn’t want to feel.

“I’m going by El now,” I clarified. “E-L. For Elizabeth.”

I was so freakin’ weird.

“It suits you.” He tugged his shirt over his head. I turned away, just so I wouldn’t drool all over myself. “I’ll take southeast,” he called out.

I heard paws on the dirt, and when I turned around, he was gone.

It wasn’t until Shadow was running us northwest that I realized why he’d chosen southeast.

Ryker had gone south.



12

We drove back to the inn late that evening, empty-handed. I would've felt disappointed, had I not been practically vibrating with stress.

Why had I agreed to a date with Dante?

Why had I thought that was a good idea?

“You didn't think it was a good idea. You're trying to get rid of him, and he won't leave until you give him a chance,” Shadow reminded me.

Right.

Damn ex-fated-mate.

Ryker's body was so damn stiff through the drive back that he could've been carved from a rock. He'd undoubtedly picked up on what I would be doing that night.

My first date.

Why was I so nervous?

“Because you want to feel loved, and dates make human women feel loved,” Shadow said simply.

“I guess,” I murmured. *“What if he tries to kiss me or something?”*

“Then you’ll either punch him or kiss him back, I’d imagine.”

She was right.

I was overthinking the whole thing, but I wasn’t sure how to stop.

It had been a long time since I kissed anyone. The last guy I kissed was Ryker—and obviously that hadn’t gone well, considering that Ryker said we’d be better as friends almost immediately following said kiss.

I wasn’t really considering kissing Dante, was I?

Goddess, I was losing my mind.

The drive was quiet and uncomfortable, but Shadow and I chatted back and forth. Not about my feelings for Ryker, of course. We could only talk about those when he was nowhere nearby, for the sake of my sanity and not getting my heart blown to smithereens. But pretty much everything else was game.

Ryker dropped us off at the hotel and then drove away.

I stared after him, my chest aching as he left.

“Probably just getting food,” Dante remarked. “I’ve already ordered ours.”

Without asking what I wanted, while I was sitting right next to him?

Annoying.

“*Maybe considerate,*” Shadow suggested

“If he knew me, maybe it would be considerate.”

But he didn’t, so he didn’t know what I liked to eat. He’d just gone ahead and chosen for me.

I followed him up to our room quietly. The woman at the front desk beamed at me when she saw me, and I gave her a soft smile back.

As annoyed and confused and nervous as I was, and despite what Dante thought, I wasn't a total bitch. I'd made it my life's goal to help people... but *people* didn't really include the guy who'd rejected me less than ten minutes after meeting me, while standing in a graveyard.

I opened the door to my room and gestured Dante inside. He headed to the bed, and I gestured pointedly to the chairs at the back of the room.

"You don't get in my bed without permission ever again," I growled.

He flashed me a smirk, but walked to the chair.

He probably liked that he'd gotten to me.

Bastard.

I sat in the chair across from his. If I wanted him gone, I was going to have to try to understand him. Forgive him.

Shit, I didn't want to do this.

"So." Dante leaned toward me, placing his hands on his knees.

I tucked my feet under my ass, where he wouldn't be able to reach them. "So."

"Will you listen to my story now?" he asked.

"Will you listen to mine?" I countered. "This goes both ways. I'm not the only one who was ignoring my ex-mate that day on the porch. You're the bastard who *bit me* without permission."

I tugged my sweatshirt to the side, showing him my fully-healed shoulder.

He grimaced. "I was on edge."

"Stop making excuses and lying to both of us."

His hand raked his hair back. It was long and luxurious, and I had half a

mind to ask what conditioner he used.

“Fine. I’d just spent nearly seven years searching for you; I expected you to be waiting for me. Sad. Broken. I wanted you to throw yourself into my arms and tell me how glad you were to see me; how grateful you were that I never stopped searching for you.”

I scoffed. “Hero complex, much?”

He ignored my sarcasm.

I knew to the same comment, Ryker would’ve responded with something along the lines of, “*Why yes, I do have a hero complex. Thanks for noticing. Would you like to touch it?*”

“Instead, I find you surrounded by single men. In a pack that you built. Inside a massive mansion which you *own*. I spent all that time searching, and you were just...”

“Surviving?” I suggested dryly.

“*Living*,” he corrected me. “Building relationships. Helping people. You put nearly seven years’ worth of effort and heart into that place and those people, and all of it would’ve gone to our pack had I not been so stupid when we met.”

“At least you finally admitted that you’re stupid.”

“El,” he said sharply.

I knew I was being called out for acting shitty when he was trying to bare his heart or whatever. But sarcasm was my natural reaction, after years of trying to protect myself from others’ opinions.

“I was jealous, alright? I missed so much of my life for that mistake, yet you just kept on living. And if I had been smarter back then, our pack and life would’ve been so much better because of us. Just thinking about how much better you’ll make our pack when we’re mated makes me—”

“Whoa, hold up there.” I sat up straighter, my chest pushing outward automatically.

That was all boobs were good for; sticking out to bring attention and shut people up.

“Us mating isn’t a ‘when’. It’s an ‘if by some miracle’. And if by some miracle we do become mates, I won’t be moving back to the pack I grew up in. As you so sweetly pointed out when you rejected me, I never belonged there. No one ever liked me, and they’re probably better off without me. I know I’m much better off without them. The Outcast Pack will always be my home, regardless of who I mate with. *If I ever mate with anyone.*”

Dante’s expression grew tighter. “Right. It was a slip of the lips.”

Slip of the lips, my ass.

He was assuming that if he won me over, I’d turn to putty and do whatever the hell he wanted.

That wasn’t happening.

“So you were jealous of me, that’s why you bit me without permission?” I lifted an eyebrow, not buying that load of horseshit either.

“No. I was flustered and I acted like an ass because I was jealous of you. I bit you because you were surrounded by men, and I wasn’t thinking straight, and I lost control of my wolf. He was desperate to right my wrong, and a bite was the only way to do that. The mate claim is required to cancel the rejection.”

Well, at least that *sounded* honest.

I hadn’t heard an apology for it, though.

“And before you ask, I’m not going to apologize for it. My wolf’s the one who did it; you can argue with him about it if you really want that apology.”

Aaand he was back to being a complete asshole.

“How sweet,” I drawled.

There was a knock on our door, and he got up to go grab the food. He handed the delivery person a tip, but being a good tipper and his looks were about all he had going for him in that moment.

He sat down and handed me a sub sandwich. Turkey and provolone—a basic choice. Not my favorite, but decent.

I unwrapped the sandwich, taking a big bite to avoid more conversation.

“So do you forgive me?” he asked, watching me eat.

I shrugged. “Not sure yet.”

His forehead furrowed.

I swallowed. “I’m not going to forgive you just because you said some decent things. If you’re really apologetic, it’ll show in your actions. So far, I haven’t seen it. So I’m not forgiving you yet.”

His eyebrows narrowed. “You’re obnoxious.”

Asshole.

I smirked. “Oh, I know.”

He shook his head. “Can’t you take anything seriously?”

I took everything seriously.

Everything.

But joking made it more bearable. Which he’d know, if he knew me at all.

I decided not to acknowledge the comment, because we were trying to find a way to coexist peacefully. Not kill each other.

Though the killing wasn't sounding bad, at all.

“So tell me about your life, since the rejection.”

The rejection.

What a way to say it that took all blame off his shoulders.

“I wouldn't have rejected you, you know.” I told him abruptly. “I was excited when I found out we were fated. Having a mate from my own pack seemed like a blessing. I thought the moon goddess had finally given me a way to bond with the people who bullied me, hated me, and pushed me out for so many years. Instead, you did the same thing everyone else did. But worse.”

I shook my head, swallowing a bite that felt like a stone in my throat.

The memories came rushing back in, and I felt like I was back there.

Out visiting my dad's grave.

Begging the moon goddess for someone—anyone—who could love me.

Anything to make my life more bearable.

It had started to rain while I walked back to my car—the one I'd inherited from my dad when he died less than two months earlier.

Someone jogged up to me, holding his coat over our heads. The water rolled down the coat without hitting me, but I was already soaked.

“Thank you,” I turned toward him, only to find him already staring at me in awe.

“Mate,” he whispered.

“Mate,” I whispered back.

The moment felt like a massive sign from the moon goddess. She was there, she heard me, I mattered to her.

“What’s your name?” I asked him, overflowing with eagerness.

I couldn’t wait for my new life to start.

We came from a decent-sized pack of about a thousand members. Not everyone knew everyone. Most guys left to go look for their mate right after high school, so a lot of the older guys didn’t know us younger girls.

“Dante Giles. What’s yours?”

I’d heard of Dante. Captain of the football team before he’d graduated a few years earlier, the alpha’s oldest son’s best friend.

Mating with someone like him would change my life so drastically.

“Beth Bashlor,” I said. I was proud of my family. My dad had raised me even after losing his mate when I was a baby, and he’d been the best damn father a girl could ask for. I knew it wasn’t easy for him, but he never made me feel like he felt anything but privileged to be my dad.

With him gone, my world was cold and dark.

Dante’s perfect, beautiful face creased. “Bashlor?”

“Yes,” I nodded, breathless.

I couldn’t believe the beautiful man in front of me was going to be mine, permanently.

“You’re the zombie girl,” he said.

My heart dropped into my stomach. “What?”

“Zombie” was the name some of the other girls had called me. I’d never been told what particular attribute of mine earned me the nickname, but they’d informed me of the many terrible qualities that could’ve helped me

earn it.

“The cheerleaders—they call you Zombie.”

Goosebumps broke out on my skin. Not the good kind.

“So? They’re teenage bullies. Total bitches. They don’t like me because I don’t need a padded bra and don’t pretend to worship them.”

“No one likes you, though,” he said.

I shuddered.

I knew that; I didn’t need him to tell me. Especially not right after finding out we were mates.

“So?”

“So, if I’m going to be alpha someday, I need a mate people will like.”

Horror blossomed in my chest. “You care more about power than about who the goddess matched you to?”

“Well obviously I don’t belong with a zombie girl who hates everyone.” He gestured to me.

Something inside me felt like it was shriveling.

“I don’t—I’m not—I’ve tried to make friends, they just—”

“Don’t make excuses for yourself. Clearly, the moon goddess made a mistake. You shouldn’t even be in this pack at all, Beth.”

My name sounded disgusting from his lips, in his gorgeous voice.

My eyes stung.

He slipped his coat back on, pulling the hood over his head and letting the rain pour over me again.

“I reject you as my mate,” he said.

“Just like that?” I asked, my voice choked with tears.

“Do you accept the rejection or not?” he seemed impatient to leave.

“I—I guess. Yeah, I guess I accept it.”

“The words are ‘I accept your rejection’.” His voice was neutral, though his eyes were angry.

“I accept your rejection.” I grew angrier too. “Go to hell, Dante Giles.”



13

I stood suddenly. “I can’t do this.”

“You can’t do what?” Dante frowned, his eyes sweeping up and down me. “Eat the sandwich? You’re doing fine.”

“This. Us.” I gestured between us. “You crushed my fucking heart in a matter of minutes. In front of my father’s grave, too. I’m not going to move past that, Dante. Even if I can, I don’t want to. I never want to be in that situation again. I’ll always be expecting you to flip back to the asshole who called me Zombie and told me I was a burden to the pack.”

He stood. “I was young and stupid. Listening to the wrong people. I’d had a fling with Juliet, the head cheerleader in your graduating class, and I trusted her too much. I’m sorry, okay?”

“You say that, but I don’t feel that.” I pressed my hand to my chest. The one not holding the sandwich.

“I’ll figure out a way to make you feel it, then.” He grabbed me by the waist.

His lips zoomed toward mine, and I had half a second to make a decision.

I slapped my palm over his mouth, shoving his face away with the hand that didn’t cradle my sandwich.

“What the hell?” he mumbled into my hand, pushing at my wrist.

“You can’t just kiss someone because they don’t agree with you, Dante. Goddess, were you raised by apes?” I stepped to the side of my chair, then dragged it a couple of feet further from his.

His eyebrows knitted together. “I was trying to show you that we could be good together.”

“There’s a hell of a lot more to a relationship than sex and kissing. Haven’t you ever heard of emotional intimacy? Trust? Love? At the end of the day if I had to choose, I’d want someone I can laugh with about my most ridiculous thoughts and stupid mistakes, not someone who can give me an orgasm.”

Although obviously, it would be best if the two went together.

My mind wanted to go straight to Ryker, and the past laughter and even orgasms we’d shared, but I held it back.

The Slippery Boob Incident was in the past.

I continued, “You said in the car that you wanted to touch my soul, yet here you are, trying to kiss me and convince me that you’re good for me. That’s not how love happens, okay? It’s slow. It’s soft. It creeps up on you until all the sudden you’re looking at someone and you’re realizing that if you lost them, you would lose some vital part of yourself that you could never get back. I want love, not lust. Not fate. Fuck fate; I’m glad you rejected me, because now I know that I get to choose my own mate, choose my own life.”

I was breathing hard—probably rambling too.

Okay, definitely rambling.

But the words came from my soul, so Dante could like them or get the hell out.

He stared at me like he was looking at something holy. Something beautiful, or special.

It made me insanely uncomfortable.

I wished it was Ryker I was having that conversation with.

“You’re right,” he finally said.

Ryker would’ve cracked a joke.

Or just grabbed me and kissed me, and then told me that if that was love, he’d fallen for me long ago and only fallen deeper in love with me as the years passed.

Most likely, he would’ve gone with the joke. But goddess, I wished there was something I could do to make him choose the second.

And something I could do to help Shadow be okay with it.

“Maybe if we tried again,” she suggested.

“He’s the one who didn’t want to try again,” I reminded her.

“He was younger. You were too. Maybe now, he would want to.”

I knew he wouldn’t, but Dante interrupted my conversation with my wolf.

“I’m going to do whatever it takes to win your love, El.”

Shit, I’d missed something.

And I felt really weird being called El.

Maybe that one needed to go in the name-trash too.

“Um, what?”

I’d been hoping he’d throw in the towel.

“I’ve been looking for you for almost seven years. You’re all I want, and all I have.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he didn't have me, but he just kept talking.

“We're going to figure out a way to make this work. I'll figure out how to make you love me, and we'll be mates. Like we were supposed to be.”

I closed my mouth.

Goddess, how had he gone from trying to surprise-kiss me to declaring his endless devotion?

What the hell was wrong with this guy?

“You said yourself that you were going to give us a real chance. I'm going to make it easy for you.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “What's your favorite color?”

I stared at him, long and hard.

The urge to lie and say “brown” was strong. I loved all vibrant colors, but yellow and teal the most. And that was because they made me feel happy.

I could tell him that... or I could lie, and keep my life private from him.

“I don't want to talk about me,” I finally said, not having the heart to lie or the guts to open up.

“Alright. Let's talk about me. My favorite color is green—deep green, like the forest at night. I've got two little sisters, and they're the only members of my family who've spoken to me since I rejected you. My favorite season is winter, because my wolf loves running in the snow. And I like to wear boots most of the time, so dirt doesn't get in my shoes.”

My eyebrows lifted at the list of random facts.

He continued listing random things while I ate my sandwich. His favorite type of music (jazz), his favorite phase of the moon (crescent), and many more.

I didn't think it was working, whatever he was trying to accomplish.

But when he left after thanking me for having dinner with him, I did hate him a little less.



14

Ryker

I jogged another lap around the asphalt running-track that circled the high school's football field. My wolf itched to run, to burn off stress and steam and whatever other shit I needed to get rid of, but I knew where he'd go the moment I set him free.

Shadow.

Or Elizabeth, I guess. I'd heard Cara calling her El—maybe she'd decided to go by that.

I didn't give a shit what I called her; she was mine.

My family.

My best friend.

The only person I trusted with my secrets.

The only thing she wasn't?

My mate.

Goddess, I wished I could change that.

Claim her.

Since she found me, I'd been there when she needed me, just as she'd been there when I needed her. We should've been mated for years, but her wolf had refused me.

She wanted Dante.

"We should rip his throat out and feast on his bones," my wolf gave a low snarl. I continued to jog, despite his fury.

He was violent, sometimes. I blamed it on our past. Too much death, not enough love.

"How does one feast on bones? I imagine they're not easily crunched."

"We would figure it out," my wolf growled back.

He needed a name. And a mate. Someone to play with, to burn off the shitload of violent energy he'd been accumulating for years. I kept hoping Shadow would tell me she wanted to try again, to give us a shot. But she wasn't attracted to me at all; being in her thoughts made that unpleasantly clear.

I was trapped in the damn brother-zone. Like the friend zone, but about a thousand times worse.

"You should just kiss her," my wolf grumbled. *"Ravage her. In front of her fated one, to show him that she's ours."*

I puffed air out as I pushed myself harder, forcing my body faster. *"She doesn't want me like that, and you know it."*

"Maybe she doesn't think it's an option."

Maybe she didn't.

Telling her would screw with things, though. And we'd already gotten further apart as the pack grew. I didn't want that conversation coming between us too.

I heard a car in the high school's parking lot. I'd wondered if someone was going to show up and kick me out, but since the gate was open and the stadium lights were on, I assumed visitors were welcome.

I rounded the turn of the track, and saw a swinging orange ponytail in the distance. I picked up on Cara's thoughts soon after, and ignored them for the most part.

Thoughts moved like water; they were constant. Mind reading was basically a game of sifting through the flowing water to find the rocks that jutted out above the river.

"He'll listen to me," Cara's wolf, Ginger, spoke to her.

"I'm not sure he should listen to either of us," Cara murmured back. *"We shouldn't even be here. I swore on our rejection gift not to tell him. Or her."*

"You should stop making ridiculous human promises," Ginger chastised her.

I slowed to a stop as Cara approached the track. Her thoughts had continued flowing, nothing serious enough for me to pick out without real focus. And that kind of focus usually ended up feeling like an invasion of privacy, so I avoided it.

"What are you hiding?" I asked Cara.

"No 'hey, Cara-girl, how's it hanging'?"

"Not tonight." I shoved a hand through my sweaty hair.

"What's wrong?" she sounded curious.

"Dante's decided to attempt to keep me out of his mind by picturing himself having sex. With Shadow. It's like having a front-row ticket to the world's worst porno; especially because he's a virgin. At least with you and Knox, I get real shit."

Cara blushed. “Sorry. Anyway...”

“What are you keeping from me? I’m not in the mood for games, Wolf Tamer.”

“I shouldn’t tell you this, okay? Being here makes me a terrible friend, but I just can’t not tell you. Not while he’s trying to win her over or whatever.” She swallowed. “Shadow—El—she’s in love with you. She hasn’t said it out loud, but the way she looks at you...it’s the same way I look at Knox, but sadder. She told me that you only like her as a brother, so her feelings don’t matter, when I asked her what she felt a few months ago. I’ve been trying to stay out of it... but you and I both know you don’t love her like a brother.”

I stared at Cara. My chest heaved, my mind churning. “Her wolf won’t accept anyone but her mate.”

“The Slippery Boob Incident was years ago. And for all you know, if you’d just tried again, her wolf would’ve been fine with it. Having sex for the first time can be intimidating; I imagine it’s a lot more so when you’re going to be having sex with the only person in the world you trust.”

She was right—she was fucking right.

“I told her I wasn’t willing to risk losing her over it.” My fists clenched. “I’m going to lose her anyway.”

“She doesn’t want Dante yet. If you tell her how you feel before she does, maybe she never will.”

“He’s her mate, Cara. She’s attracted to him; I heard it.” I shoved my fists into my pockets, my body so tense I couldn’t take it. “She’s going to choose him. It’s a losing fight.”

“Since when are you afraid of a losing fight?” She lifted an eyebrow. “And for the record, he lost his right to call her his fated mate the moment he rejected her. She hasn’t forgiven him yet; they’re not together.”

I let out a slow breath. “She could shoot me down. He’s got better hair than

me.”

He was better than me in many ways. Particularly in his mind. His was steady and sure; mine was a mess of sharp edges and broken fragments that could never be put back together.

Cara laughed. “Shadow doesn’t give a shit. If she’s comparing you, I’m sure you’re winning. He’s the asshole who rejected her; you’re the one who kept her alive.”

I nodded, but made no move to go. I needed more time to think about it.

Cara grabbed a handful of my shirt and stared me square in the eyes. “You held her while she cried for years, Ryker. *Years*. You helped her put her pieces back together and figure out what she wanted from life. Are you going to let some other guy walk in and sweep her off her feet like he’s the one who put in all that time and effort and love?”

I jerked my head in a no.

“Then get off this stupid track and go talk to her. Don’t screw around; tell her you’re in love with her. That you want to be with her.”

I nodded, striding toward my truck.

I’d tell her how I felt. What more did I have to lose?



15

Elizabeth

Despite the reduction in my hatred for Dante, I was glad when he left. He was exhausting to be around, even when he was just trying to tell me about himself.

There was a knock at the door a couple minutes after he slipped out. I figured he was back with dessert or something, ready to tell me more of his life's story.

But when I pulled it open, I found a sweaty, shirtless Ryker in in the doorway.

Hot damn.

Emphasis on the hot.

Shadow said something to me about the weather—hiding my attraction to my best friend.

“We need to talk,” Ryker said.

His gaze was intense, flitting around the room.

Looking for Dante, I guessed.

Ryker usually kept things light and breezy, or at least dry and sarcastic, so

I was a bit worried about the intensity in his gaze.

“He’s gone?”

“Back in his own room, luckily.” I looked him up and down. “Is everything okay?”

Damn, he was sexy.

And tense, and nervous.

What was he so worried about?

He stepped inside the room, my stomach clenching as he brushed past me.

I shut the door, turning to face him.

“What’s going on?”

“I’ve got to tell you something.” He let out a ragged breath, shoving a hand through his hair again. “Do you ever think about the Slippery Boob Incident?”

Only every freaking day.

“Why?” I asked, instead. My guard went up, and Shadow blocked my thoughts with a few words of her own.

“Because every time I look at myself in a mirror, I miss seeing your mark on my shoulder. Because...” He trailed off as he paced the room, chest rising and falling. “I’m terrified of screwing up our friendship, but I just...” He stopped himself once again.

“Ryker.” I grabbed him by the arms, shock rippling through me. “What are you trying to say?”

“I love you.” His eyes crashed into mine. “Not as a brother, Shadow. Elizabeth. El. Whatever the hell you want to be called, I love you and I think about the Incident all the fucking time because if it had gone differently, I

would've gotten to keep you forever. You're everything I've ever wanted in this screwed up world, and I've tried to ignore it and move on for your sake, but I can't just stand back and watch you fall for him without at least *trying*."

I stared at him. My lips parted, my eyes widening as I realized what that meant.

A clap of thunder nearby made us both turn toward the window.

There hadn't been a storm outside—where had the thunder come from?

Ryker sniffed the air, and his eyes widened. "Run." He pushed me toward the door. I stumbled, but caught my balance as he surged forward with me. "Shift. Run, toward Oldenwood, as fast as you can. I'll get everyone else."

"I'm not just going to—" I started to protest.

"There's magic in the air. RUN," he snarled.

I could read the fear in his eyes.

Though I didn't want to leave the rest of our group, I trusted Ryker. And he was terrified.

I sprinted down the stairs, throwing the doors open as I ran through the blue trees.

Stopping on the other side of the trees, I stared at the town. I hadn't seen or smelled anything different; what was Ryker talking about?

The rest of our group came running out toward me. When I saw that all of them were together, I gave control to my wolf.

She took off into the forest, running like our lives depended on it.

Ryker's wolf caught up to me, leading me and the rest of us deeper into the forest. An hour must've passed before he stopped running, his chest heaving as he inspected me for injuries.

His eyes swung around the other wolves, also checking each other for wounds. Dante's wolf came over to check me out afterward, and Shadow stepped away from his sniffer.

If Ryker was an option again, we sure as hell weren't going to flirt with Dante.

"What magic did you see?" Dante's wolf growled at Ryker's.

"I smelled the magic, but the scent is gone now," Ryker's wolf said. *"We'll check again as we approach the town."*

Dante's wolf grumbled something else, but Shadow was focused on Ryker's wolf.

We all ran back to the hotel. Ryker's wolf didn't smell anything else as we went, but we were all alert and on edge.

We pulled our clothes back on in the forest when we got back, and everyone went back to their rooms. No one seemed sure what to think, and I was among them.

Knox pulled me aside as everyone went to their rooms except us and Ryker. He went to the end of the hall, peering out the window and checking for threats.

"Are you sure he's alright?" Knox asked me in a low voice.

"Of course he's alright." My eyes narrowed at him.

"There's no sign of magic, Shad..." he trailed off, waiting for me to tell him what to call me.

"El." I brushed hair from my eyes. None of the names felt right, so I was just going to go with that. Maybe I just had to get used to it. *"Have you ever smelled magic?"*

Knox shook his head slowly.

“Well, I haven’t either. If Ryker says he smelled it, he did.”

“He hasn’t been himself, lately,” Knox reminded me. “Maybe...”

“Maybe nothing,” I growled.

“Can you just talk to him? Ask if he needs therapy, or something?”

“Did he ask if you needed therapy when you got out of the fighting rings and acted like a damn animal?” I folded my arms over my chest.

“No. But I had Cara; he doesn’t have anyone.”

“He has me.” My words were sharp. “Go back to your mate. I’ll tell you if I’m worried about him.”

Knox looked like he wanted to argue more, but the door to his room opened and Cara peeked out.

“It’s their business, Knox.” Her hand wrapped around her mate’s wrist and tugged. He reluctantly allowed her to pull him into their room. “You’ll tell us if you need anything?” Cara asked.

I nodded.

I’d only ask for help if it was absolutely necessary, but she didn’t need to know that.

“You should talk to him. Hear what he has to say,” she said quietly.

My eyes narrowed.

Did she somehow know what he’d been saying before he caught a whiff of magic?

She closed the door quickly.

Ryker strode up to my side. “I think we’re safe for now,” he told me.

He looked exhausted, and a bit...wild.

I mean, it was a good look for him. But it wasn't his usual look. He'd been acting different over the past year or so, gradually distancing himself from me and the rest of the pack.

And his nightmares were back...

Catching his wrist in my hand, I tugged him into my room. Luckily, we'd left it unlocked.

Ryker checked every inch of the place for threats while I sat on the edge of the bed and watched. He'd always been careful about locking the doors and stuff before the refuge was filled with other werewolves, but I'd never seen him check a room like that before.

He finally came to sit back down beside me, still only wearing his basketball shorts. Where he'd been sweaty earlier, he was now caked with dirt that looked to have been dried to his skin just about everywhere.

"Are you okay?" I asked him. Our legs hung off the bed, though our shoulders were a good foot apart.

He seemed caught off guard by the question. "I'm fine. Being back here just has me worrying about you."

I nodded. That seemed reasonable, given what had happened when he was last there. "You're sure you smelled magic?"

"I was in the middle of pouring my damn soul to you; that's about the only thing that could've stopped me."

My stomach clenched again. "Pouring out your soul?"

"Yes. Where was I?" He feigned thinking about it.

I smacked him with the back of my hand. "Ryker."

He turned to face me, lifting one of his knees up on the mattress.

I mirrored his position, meeting his gaze.

“I want you to be my mate,” he said, like it was simple. “I’ve been fighting my feelings for years, but with Dante here, I don’t have that option any more. Not that I wanted that option in the first place, I just...” He let out a breath and shoved his hair out of his eyes again. “I was scared. I still am scared. But I’m at the point where I’m almost as afraid of losing you to Dante as I am of losing you entirely, so here I am.” He gestured to himself.

“In the flesh,” I murmured.

It was an automatic response; the sarcasm defense.

Dante had been annoyed by it.

Ryker cracked a small grin. “Don’t forget blood. I’m full of that too.”

I snorted. “Your blood accompanies your flesh. It’s hardly worth a mention.”

“Or does my flesh accompany my blood?” he lifted an eyebrow, like he was asking some deep question.

“You’re serious about this?” I asked. “You’re not just saying this because you think he’s bad for me or something?”

“When have I ever joked about us?” he tilted his head, studying me.

I bit my lip.

Never.

In all our years of jokes and sarcasm, Ryker had never once made fun of our relationship. Pretty much anything else was fair game, but not us.

We were real.

“So what do we do next?” I asked.

“This is typically the part where you either shoot me down or profess your undying love as well,” Ryker said, with a crooked grin.

I could see the hesitation in the crinkles next to his eyes.

“I’m sure you already know how I feel about you. Shadow’s good at hiding my thoughts, but not *that* good.”

He frowned.

Really?

He didn’t know?

How could he not know?

“After the Slippery Boob Incident, I wanted to try again. I never stopped wanting to try again. You’re sexy, and fun, and I know you’ll always be there for me. But you didn’t want me, so Shadow helped me keep how much *I* wanted *you* a secret. Why do you think she talks about the weather so much?”

He blinked at me.

Just... blinked.

And then he finally said, “You thought I didn’t want you?”

“Of course. You said we’d be better off as friends, and I know that the incident was pretty damn horrific for you, and—”

“It wasn’t horrific, Sha—Goddess, you need to pick a name,” he interrupted himself.

“I thought you were calling me Bettie,” I countered.

“That’s for fun; this is important. Pick a name, or I’m just going to call you Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth works.” It didn’t fit, but neither did any of my other names.

Ryker’s gaze grew more intense again. “Alright, then. *Elizabeth*, the incident wasn’t horrific for me in *any way*. Your wolf refused me because I wasn’t her fated mate; I understood that. I still do. I know Dante pretty much forced you to accept his rejection. It wasn’t a decision you or Shadow made together, like it should have been. Since then, you’ve both been in sort of a state of transition, and you have to decide what you want before you’ll be with anyone physically.”

I stared at him.

Had he just put into words something that I had no words for?

“*He did,*” Shadow murmured.

“I did,” Ryker agreed. “I have an advantage, though.” He tapped his temple.

Shaking my head, I dragged my mind back to the Incident. I still remembered it as vividly as if it had just happened. The tight expression on Ryker’s face as he held me while I was crying. The words he’d said...

Goddess.

I pointed out, “You were upset. Frustrated.”

“Not at you. I was angry with the situation, because even then I knew you’d need closure. Dante was a dick, but he was young and stupid. If you hadn’t left immediately, I’m positive he would’ve shown up at your door eventually and begged for your forgiveness. You’re fucking gorgeous, and the goddess paired you.”

He continued, “The day of the incident was the best day of my life because I got to hold your bare body in mine, and bring you pleasure—even if only a small amount. It was also the worst day of my life, because it was the day I realized you’d have to fix things with Dante if I’d even get a sliver of a chance.”

My face flushed at the reminder of the orgasms he'd given me before we got around to trying out the actual sex part—and then deciding to be friends. “What are you trying to say, Ryker?”

“I want you, and you need to know that. I'll do anything you fucking want to prove it—I'm yours. But I know that you can't be mine until you've at least talked things through with Dante, so I have no idea where that leaves us.”

My eyes stung. “Dante was here, earlier. We had a...date. It was uncomfortable, but I'm sort of trying. I don't want him, though.”

“I know.” Ryker's hand lifted to cup my cheek, and he slowly dragged his thumb over a tear I hadn't felt escape.

“So what do we do?” I whispered. “I'm in love with you. You're in love with me. But we can't make things permanent until I deal with my ex-fated-mate. He wants to amend our relationship. If I do that, we'll be fated again. Or at least close to it. To choose you, I'd have to reject him.”

I didn't have to tell him how I felt about that. I hated rejection with the fiber of my being.

But goddess, I wanted Ryker.

“The ball's in your court, I'm afraid.” He slid across the bed, his hand remaining on my cheek as our knees met. He tilted his head down, and our foreheads met. Our breath mingled, but neither of us closed the rest of the distance. “This is your choice, Elizabeth. Your future. I won't tell you to choose me, or beg you to reject him. We both know that's not me, or us. You set the boundaries, you determine the pace, and I'll take whatever you give me.”

My eyes squeezed shut. “Goddess, why couldn't we just be fated for each other?”

“Because then we wouldn't be us. And the world needs us, just as we are

now.” He lifted his lips to my forehead, and kissed me gently there before drawing back to a sitting position. “Or at least it needs you, as you are now.”

I closed my eyes and let out a slow breath before opening them again. “I need time to figure things out, but I don’t want us to grow apart like we have been at the refuge. You’ve been acting weird.”

He dipped his head in a nod. “I found out Dante was looking for you. Did my best to keep him away, but a man determined to go after his mate isn’t easily put off.”

I scowled. “Ex-fated-mate.”

Ryker’s lips curved up slightly, but the small smile was a sad one. “For now.”

The words were like a weight on my chest.

“Can you just stay tonight and hold me?” I asked him. My voice grew quieter. “The way you used to, before?”

“That sounds heavenly.”

He and I crawled into bed, dirt and all. His arms wrapped around my front as his body engulfed my back.

My eyes remained closed as his breathing evened out and his body relaxed, but my mind still spun.

Ryker was in love with me.

He wanted to keep trying with me.

But I had to work things out with Dante somehow first.

When the hell had my life become a damned love triangle?



16

I slept fitfully, and woke up early to a short knock on the door.

Right.

The rabid wolf.

It had faded from my mind with everything I'd experienced and learned the night before, but it was the reason we were still in Willoughsbie at all.

"Beth?" The male voice at the door had my eyes flying open.

"I swear I'm going to kill him," Ryker murmured into my hair.

We both knew it was BS, but it was fun to pretend.

"El?" he called out louder, his voice tentative.

He was trying. Shit, I hated that he was trying.

Couldn't he just make it easy by being the dick I'd always expected him to be?

"It's time to go. I brought you breakfast."

"Just leave it outside," I called out, flying out of bed and stripping off Ryker's sweatshirt without a thought to the man in my bed. We'd never been awkward about our bodies; being a pack of two meant we often ended up

naked together in purely platonic situations.

At least, purely platonic on the outside. In my mind, they were really damn dirty.

I grabbed Ryker's shirt off the floor, where he must've left it the day before. None of us had spare clothes thanks to our sudden departure, but that sweatshirt was filthy. Ryker never minded me taking his clothes, so I knew he wouldn't care if I wore the shirt and he went without it.

And he was really damn nice to look at without a shirt on.

"We're leaving. Just open the door." He sounded irritated.

"I'll meet you at the car," I yelled.

If I opened the door, he'd see Ryker in my bed. Or at least see that we had slept in the same room. And he'd probably think the worst. I didn't care if he thought the worst, but I didn't want him to try to fight Ryker or some shit like that.

"You don't need to protect me, Bettie," Ryker drawled from the bed.

"Open this door or I'm breaking it down," Dante snarled.

Crossing the room, I ripped the door open.

Dante stood in the doorway, his glare meeting me before swiveling to the dirty, shirtless man in my bed. "What the fuck, Beth?"

"I'm in love with Ryker," I said. There was no point in hiding it. "We're in love. We tried to mate years ago and couldn't because my wolf still thinks you might be right for me."

"Because we're fucking fated mates." He glowered at me. "You're supposed to have saved yourself for me?"

"What are you going to do if I didn't?" I demanded, folding my arms over my very bouncy, unsupported chest. "Reject me again?"

Dante shoved me out of the way with an arm to my stomach, crossing the room to glare down at Ryker. “She’s my fated mate. Keep your fucking hands off her. Stay out of her bed, and out of my way.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Ryker beat me to the punch. “She may be fated to you, but she’s my whole damn world. And when she asks me to sleep with her, my answer will always be ‘where, when, and how?’.”

My heart warmed. My wolf even melted a bit at that.

Until Dante dropped the bags he was holding and launched himself at Ryker.

Ryker rolled off the bed before Dante crashed into him, and the men faced off.

I rushed to stand between them, holding my arms out in front of me toward Dante. “You rejected me. Ryker saved my life, in so many ways. You don’t get to be angry that he kept me alive, regardless of whether you like how he did it. Ryker and I are a packaged deal, and we have been since we were teenagers. That’s not going to change, no matter what happens in the future.”

Dante’s jaw clenched. “We were making progress.”

“I was getting closer to accepting your rejection withdrawal. That’s all.”

His body tensed. “Then by all means, fuck around with your side piece until you’re ready for the real deal.” He strode out of the room.

“Your side piece?” Ryker asked. He didn’t sound angry, he sounded... amused. “I’m not sure whether to feel offended or lucky.”

I snorted. “If you’re my side piece, I’d definitely go with lucky. Look at all this.” I gestured to my body. Ryker’s eyes raked my figure, and my body flushed when his gaze grew hotter.

“I always do.” He covered the distance between us, tilting his head to press his lips to my forehead again. I had a feeling it was to avoid kissing me on

the mouth. “We should go,” he said.

“Probably.” I stepped back, though I didn’t want to.

Until we got everything figured out, I couldn’t take things to the next level with Ryker.

Ryker crossed the room while I slipped into the bathroom to use the facilities. When I came back out, he wore a grimace and handed me a bag. I accepted it, pulling out a pair of sweats, a long-sleeved tee, a pair of simple underwear, and a sports bra. I knew at first glance that the bra and panties wouldn’t fit; wrong size. But the thought was there.

“Why do you look worried?” I took the clothes into the bathroom and changed quickly.

“He bought you clothes. I should’ve thought of that.” Ryker shoved a hand through his hair as I came back out, dressed in the shirt and sweats. I tossed him his shirt, and he caught it.

“You gave me clothes too,” I reminded him, as he tugged his shirt over his head. It was a pity to cover a body like that, but a pity I was unfortunately used to. “And yours were more special, because they belonged to you.”

Ryker gave me a critical look. “That sounds like something a mom tells her kid when he loses a competition. ‘It’s okay, you’re still more special than everyone else’,” he mimicked me.

I rolled my eyes. “You know gifts aren’t what makes me feel loved, so why are we arguing about this?”

“He’s better for you,” Ryker said, as we left the room and locked the door behind us.

I stopped him in the hallway. Pushed him toward the wall. He took two steps backward for me, letting me pin him to the wall.

“He told me to be serious yesterday. That my jokes were annoying. Does that sound like someone who’s better for me?”

Ryker's eyes narrowed. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"I'm going to kill him." He tried to move away, but I pushed him back to the wall. He let me, of course—I couldn't actually push him anywhere.

"Tell me you're better for me instead. Fight for yourself, Ryker."

His nostrils flared. "Your jokes make life bearable, Elizabeth. Many of my worst moments have been lifted by your sense of humor. If Dante thinks you need to be serious, I think his face needs to meet my fist."

"That's not fighting for yourself."

"It's not *not* fighting for myself."

Shaking my head, I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and went up on my tiptoes so my eyes were a bit closer to his. "Do you even know how to fight for yourself?"

"Why would I need to? You fight for us both." He brushed hair off my face.

The words touched me, and I couldn't help it.

My hands grabbed his head, and I pressed my lips to his.

He didn't hesitate a single damn second. His tongue plunged into my mouth, and the kiss became explosive.

His hands found my hips and he spun me. My back smashed into the wall, my legs wrapping around his hips as our mouths caught up after years apart.

My hands slid through his hair, over his muscles, along his neck.

Goddess, I could've kissed him forever.

Ryker's body suddenly went stiff, and he ripped his lips from mine. He rested his head against mine, his breath staggering. "Leave us the fuck alone," he said.

I frowned.

Who was he talking to?

"Step away from each other and I will," Dante growled back.

Ryker was still tense, like he'd been in the car the day before. He slowly released me, moving stiffly.

What the hell?

"What's going on?" I looked between the men.

"Nothing." Dante smirked at me, striding back out the door.

"Ryker," I warned.

"Don't worry about it." He shoved his hands in his pockets.

I suddenly felt unsure of everything that had just happened.

Did he regret kissing me?

Did he want us to go back to just being friends once again?

Shadow naturally sprouted comments about the weather, hiding my thoughts from Ryker.

"Weather again?" he eyed me. "What's Shadow trying to hide from me?"

"You're acting weird. Do you regret that?" I gestured to the wall behind us, starting on my way down the hall. Ryker kept pace with me.

"No. That was fucking incredible. Your ex-fated-mate has just taken it upon himself to screw with me in a way that's uniquely difficult to ignore."

Ryker opened the door for me, like he always did, so we could step out into the parking lot.

“What’s he doing?” My eyes searched the vehicles for Dante, and found him sitting in the middle seat of Ryker’s truck.

Dammit.

“Don’t worry your pretty little face about it.” He opened the passenger door for me, gesturing me inside. I’d be squished between Dante and the door—a far less pleasant seat than I’d had the day before.

The door shut, and I narrowed my eyes at Dante, who still looked pissed. “What are you thinking about?”

“Exactly what I’d like to do to you when we’re mated.” He smirked.

Sex?

He was thinking about having sex with me?

Oh hell.

“Bastard.” I glared at him as Ryker turned the truck on. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, without one of his trademark jokes. “Messing with my best friend is a sure way to get on my bad side.”

“I’ve been on your bad side since I rejected you, apparently,” Dante shot back.

Apparently?

How daft was this guy? And how full of himself, to think he could reject me and still somehow stay on my good side?

Ryker pulled the truck out of the parking lot. Cara, Knox, and the others followed us like they had the day before.

“You *rejected* me. Was that supposed to make me think highly of you?”

“I’ve been trying to take back that rejection for years, Beth. El. Whatever the hell you want to be called—I’ve been trying to make amends. Unlike you.”

“I have nothing to apologize for, which means I’ve got no desire—and no need—to make amends.”

He scoffed. “You won’t even let me take back my rejection.”

“That’s what you want, not what I want. Offer me something I actually care about, and maybe I’ll consider what you actually care about.”

Dante shot Ryker with a dark glare before looking back at me with the same expression. “You accept the rejection withdrawal and I’ll leave your fuck buddy here alone for a few days.”

I scowled. “That’s a shit deal, and you know it. Think of a better offer and try again later.”

I turned the radio on, cranking the volume up loud so I wouldn’t be tempted to keep arguing with Dante. I knew some people liked arguing and got a kick out of it or something, but I wasn’t one of them. I liked to joke, not fight.

The drive felt really damn long after that.



17

We ran all day, our wolves searching the forests in relative solitude. Though they preferred running as a pack, they liked to know that they were working together as a group.

After we met back at the vehicles empty handed, we stood around in the dark to discuss our lack of findings.

“We’ve got to get back to Payne,” Knox said as he brushed dirt off Cara’s shirt. “The bakery needs us. Do you think you can manage the old ‘track and trap’ method on your own?” he asked Ryker and I.

Cara and Knox worked for a bakery in town, mostly making fancy, expensive cakes. The ‘track and trap’ method was from our past, when the Outcast Pack had been called the Rejected Pack and the only way we’d found new members was through my wolf’s gift. We’d pretty much always had to track the werewolves down and trap them, because they were pretty much always rabid.

“Sure. It’ll be like old times.” I shot Ryker a grin. He matched it with one of his own, though it didn’t meet his eyes.

Was Dante still being a bastard?

“Do you mind if Spirit and I leave too?” Taylor checked. “I’ve got some work to do too.” I wasn’t sure exactly what her job was. She was great with computers and could pretty much hack into anything, but I knew she used it

for good. I wasn't sure what her rejection gift was either; a lot of the rejected wolves were still trying to figure theirs out. Sometimes the gifts weren't obvious.

"Go for it," I agreed. "Dante will go with you too."

He scoffed. "I'll be staying with you."

Dammit.

After a round of hugs, and a whispered promise from Taylor that she'd be happy to take Lover Boy off my hands if I requested it, they all got back in the van and left.

"Well, isn't this a cute group," I muttered, striding back to Ryker's truck. Dante beat me there, climbing into the middle seat without hesitating. The door shut behind him, and I looked at Ryker. "He's still being a dick?"

Ryker gave me a tight smile, not responding as he rigidly walked to the truck's passenger door and held it open for me. I climbed in, and after Ryker closed it, I scooted up against the door to put as much space between myself and Dante as possible.

It occurred to me as Ryker started down the dirt road, that two could play Dante's game. Ryker could always hear my thoughts over everyone else's at the refuge—he had told me as much. Our assumption was that he was more tuned into my thoughts because of the years we'd spent together.

If I thought loud enough, maybe I could *drown* Dante's dickish thoughts.

It wasn't a guarantee, but I'd try.

Closing my eyes, I rested my head against the window and thought back to the slippery boob incident.

"I don't want to do this anymore," I told Ryker, running a hand through my hair. It had been shorter, then, barely brushing my shoulders. "I'm tired of fighting this. Why are we ignoring our feelings for each other?"

We were in a cheap motel room; a small, smelly one with two queen beds instead of a king. Though we started the night in two beds, we always ended it in one. Mostly, because of Ryker's nightmares.

"Because we're all we've got," Ryker reminded me. "If we change our minds, it's going to screw up everything."

"I'm not going to change my mind. Are you?" I checked.

He shook his head slowly.

"Then let's do it," I said, my heart beginning to pound faster in my chest. "Let's be mates."

"I don't want you to feel rushed," Ryker reminded me. "We have plenty of time. It hasn't even been a year since you were rejected, and—"

"And I already know that I want you," I interrupted him.

He was already sitting on the bed, so I dropped onto his lap. Taking his face in my hands, I kissed him.

Our mouths collided. After a moment of awkward first-kiss-ness, his hands found my hips and dragged me closer to him as his tongue parted my lips and dove into my mouth.

It was explosive. Fire, and passion, and friendship, and fun.

Goddess, I'd never wanted it to end.

My fingers slid beneath his shirt, and I pulled my hot, swollen mouth from his long enough to draw his shirt over his head. He helped me get it off, and tossed it to the floor.

I could see the tentativeness in his eyes, and knew he wasn't going to take initiative when it came to stripping me. At least, not yet.

So I tugged my own top over my head, tossing it to the ground. I sat on his lap wearing only jeans and a black bra, and his caramel eyes grew hooded

when they landed on my chest.

“You’ve got perfect boobs, Beth,” he murmured.

I’d forgotten how he used to call me that, before.

Somehow, the name felt more like mine coming from his lips.

“Want to touch them?” I reached around to undo my bra.

His hands caught mine. “Not yet. First, I want to kiss you like this.”

He dragged my chest to his, and bare flesh met. We practically melted together as our lips found each other again. His fingers moved gently on my bare waist, sliding up my back and teasing my bra straps. The gentle pressure made me breathe harder as my lips told Ryker exactly how I felt about him.

The love was so intense, I thought I’d burst.

“Bite him,” Shadow whispered. “Let’s make sure he knows we’re his.”

I agreed instantly, pulling my lips from Ryker’s. He already knew why I was pulling away; he could read Shadow and I both.

My eyes shifted as my wolf surged to the surface without taking over completely. My teeth followed my eyes, and then Shadow sank her fangs into Ryker’s shoulder.

He groaned, the noise somewhere between tortured and blissful. His hands grew tighter on my waist, and his eyes shifted too.

After Shadow licked his already-healing wound clean, she withdrew and Ryker’s wolf bit down on my shoulder too.

I groaned at the flood of bliss that followed. It was like nothing I’d ever felt before. A sense of belonging soaked me to the core as my body melted further into Ryker’s.

We collapsed to the bed together, our legs hanging off the edge as his wolf licked my wound. I knew it would heal to look like a large crescent on both sides of my shoulder; most mated women wore their claim markings with pride and tried to show them off as much as possible.

Ryker brushed hair off my face, his lips finding mine again as the bliss began to slowly make its way out of our system. The moon goddess wanted her wolves mated, so it would never leave entirely. Being claimed came with a sense of security and belonging that would only get stronger when the bond was permanent.

Our kiss started slow and sweet, but then I rolled on top of Ryker as my mark finished healing.

My pelvis pressed into his, sandwiching his erection between us. He lifted my hips, adjusting my positioning on him as our mouths began to move faster again, the kiss growing deeper with every swipe of the tongue. I found myself grinding against him, using his erection to make myself feel good even through both of our jeans.

His fingers struggled with my bra for a moment. Then the bra slid down my shoulder, and Ryker pulled away long enough to get a good look at me as my tits spilled out of the falling bra.

“Fuck, you’re sexy,” He growled as he grabbed them both, squeezing. I groaned at the bliss of it. I’d never felt another person’s hands on me like that, and I freaking loved it.

His lips caught mine again, one of his hands pressing my ass as he pulled me harder against his erection. The other continued to play with my boob, squeezing and working it until he focused on the nipple. He pinched it, and I gasped.

“I want you to orgasm,” he growled again, pulling away to trail kisses down my neck. “Before we mate, before the rest of my clothes come off. I want to make you feel good.”

My entire body flushed.

“Okay.” I wasn’t turning him down on that; I wasn’t a fucking moron.

His fingers found the button on my jeans, and my lower belly clenched as he undid the button and unzipped them.

Rolling me to my back, he kneeled in front of me and dragged the pants down my legs. His lips followed them down, kissing my inner thighs, my knees, and my calves until he tossed them to the floor.

My breath came out in quick pants as I just stared at him, my fists clenched in the sheets while I sat there in my panties.

“I want to taste you, Beth,” his voice stroked me the way his fingers would—the way his tongue would.

“Then do it already.”

A dark grin stretched his cheeks. “Goddess, I love you.”

He yanked my panties down my legs, and they followed my jeans to wherever the hell he’d thrown them.

His gaze raked my core. The erection straining his zipper told me how he felt about the way I looked.

He slowly parted my legs, and my breathing grew shallower. Something about being bare before him, exposing myself to him like that, made me feel like I was on fire in the very best way.

His fingers parted my folds, and his tongue slid up my center.

I moaned at the same time he groaned.

He licked me again, and again. His fingers teased my opening. I panted as he worked me, moving as his tongue tasted me while his finger slipped inside me. I gasped as his finger filled me, and moaned again when he put a second one inside.

His teeth scraped my clit, and I shattered. Panting and moaning, my legs locked around his head as pleasure rushed through me.

“Holy hell,” I breathed as I caught my breath. Ryker was still touching me leisurely, with both his fingers and tongue. I wasn’t quite sure he wanted to stop.

I didn’t stop him, but I sat up. “Come here.” I grabbed his belt loops, dragging him upward.

“Spoilsport.” He nipped at my neck, letting me pull him upward. “How was that?”

“Freaking incredible,” I admitted.

And I wanted to make him feel that good, too.

I undid his button and zipper, and he helped me ease the jeans off him. He wasn’t wearing any underwear—something I liked a whole damn lot. Which he probably knew; he knew everything about me.

Shit, he was gorgeous.

“Not everything.” His tongue and teeth nibbled the sensitive skin beneath my ear, keeping me just as horny as I had been. My damn vagina was throbbing in a way I didn’t even know it could. “I don’t know what it feels like to be inside you.”

My core clenched. “Goddess, you’re a tease.”

I wrapped my fingers around his dick, and a puff of air hissed through his lips. “Holy fuck.”

“I want to taste you too,” I pushed at his chest, and he crashed to the mattress.

“Then do it already.” His words mimicked mine.

His fingers tangled in my hair as I slid down the bed and wrapped my lips

around his dick.

His groan of pleasure was a sound I wouldn't be forgetting, ever.

I held his base as I licked him, trying to gauge what he liked. But as far as I could tell, he liked everything.

The taste of salt met my tongue a moment before he snarled, thrusting as he met his release. I held on, my eyes glued to him as he came apart.

Holy hell, that was hot.

His breathing slowed, and he withdrew himself from my mouth. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I was going to pull out, I just lost control."

"Do I seem upset about it?" I countered, licking up the underside of his dick.

"No." He dragged me up his chest. "You're killing me."

"How?" I tilted my head, fighting the desire to feel him between my legs, to feel him pushing himself inside me.

My lady-bits throbbed at the thought.

He slid his hand back between my thighs. "That's a fucking incredible thought," he murmured.

No kidding.

"I want you inside me, Ryker. And I know you know, so stop teasing me." I pulled his fingers out of me, settling back on top of him like I'd been earlier. This time, there weren't any clothes separating us.

"I just wanted to taste you again." He lifted his fingers to his lips, and sucked.

I stared at him, my vagina throbbing again.

His lips curved in a deadly grin. "Goddess, you're perfect."

"Shut up." I positioned myself over his dick, so he was pressing against my opening. His eyes closed, his head tilting back as his muscles tensed.

"You're not making it easy to take this slow," his jaw clenched.

"Good." I lowered myself over him. I was wet and slippery, but he was huge. His dick parted my opening, and then I went rigid.

"He's not our fated," Shadow spoke suddenly, panic reverberating through our bond as she nearly ripped control away from me for the first time in our lives. "We're not meant to be."

Her fear had her momentarily surging forward to take control of my body. She rolled off the bed, scrambling toward the bathroom door and covering my tits and lady bits with her hands.

Ryker sat up immediately, all pleasure and intensity gone from his eyes. He held his hands out toward her, a sign of surrender, but didn't say anything.

What was there to say?

We knew we weren't fated; it was the thing that pulled us together, above everything else.

"Why does it matter that we're not fated?" I asked her. "Our mate rejected us."

"We only met him for a few minutes. Maybe he changed his mind. Maybe he wants us," she urged.

"He rejected us without even asking any questions. Even if he changed his mind, I don't want him," I pushed back.

"But he's still our fated mate," she whispered.

I could feel the guilt coming off her. Some people couldn't feel their wolves' emotions, but I wasn't one of them. She loved Ryker and his wolf too

—enough that she'd bitten him, claimed him. But she wasn't ready to mate with him.

“It's alright. We'll try again another day,” I murmured to her. “We'll figure it out and work through it.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispered back.

Ryker got out of bed, walking over to me. His arms engulfed my body, and he held me tightly. “It's not your fault. This doesn't change anything. We're still family,” he spoke into my hair. “I still love you. I'll just learn to see you as a sister.”

My heart felt like it was breaking. Tears began to flow down my face faster, sliding over the place our bare chests met.

Shadow spoke in return, hiding my feelings from him. “That would be best,” she whispered.



18

“What are you thinking about?” Dante asked, pulling me away from the shitty ending of the Slippery Boob Incident. His eyes were narrowed, his fists clenched.

I glanced at him, then at Ryker. Ryker’s body was still tense, but in a different way than it had been before. The bulge in his jeans was obvious, even from where I sat.

Though I wanted to taunt Dante, to hurt him, I decided against that. “Two can play that game,” I said. “Try to hurt Ryker with thoughts about you and I together, and I’ll distract him with thoughts about him and I together. We’re a team; we always have been.”

Dante’s jaw clenched. “Sometimes you can be a real bitch.”

My lips pressed together.

Being insulted by him was getting really old.

The truck swerved to the side of the highway road, and Ryker threw it in park.

He flung his door open. “Out,” he snarled at Dante, as he stalked around the truck, toward a forested area a few feet to our side.

Dante followed him, though he looked pissed about it.

I cracked my window, peering out at them both. I knew I should probably interrupt, but I wanted to see how it played out. And often at the refuge, breaking up fights only prolonged an inevitable battle. Usually, it was best just to let the guys beat the shit out of each other and move on.

But in this case, I wasn't sure I could move on.

Dante was back and he wanted me, but still didn't treat me well. He'd called me a bitch, and insulted me in various other ways. Not to mention, he'd bitten me without my permission.

He was pushy and rude and arrogant, but most importantly, selfish and inconsiderate.

"I don't want him," I told Shadow.

"I don't either," she admitted. *"We were fated before, but now we're just... wrong."*

"Maybe we should accept his rejection withdrawal just so he'll leave us alone."

Before she could respond, the shadows suddenly surged and ripped control away from us again.

I heard a door open, and then felt my body shifting as the shadows forced me into wolf form.

Our paws pounded the pavement and then dirt as we streaked across the road and disappeared into the forest silently.

This time, I could feel that our target wasn't so far—though he or she wasn't close, either.

We raced through the forest, knowing Ryker and Dante weren't trailing us. I hoped they could follow my scent to wherever I was going, but Shadow and I were moving fast and I didn't think they'd even noticed me leave.

I sent up a prayer to the goddess that they would find me, as my wolf

continued to run.



19

Ryker

“I don’t care who the fuck you are, you don’t talk to her like that,” I shoved the asshole, fury blazing through me. He’d called her a bitch—the woman who had saved and provided shelter for hundreds of lonely wolves.

The woman who was there for everyone in their time of need, who loved people she didn’t know at all, who cared so damn much about everything and everyone.

“She’s my mate,” he snarled, shoving me back.

His thoughts told me he knew otherwise. He was scared he would lose her. Not because he loved or, because he even wanted her. He was scared to lose her because he didn’t want to spend his life alone.

“A life alone is better than a life with the wrong person.” I stepped back, dodging him as he swung toward me.

“The goddess matched us.” He swung again, anger practically burning off him.

“She matched you seven years ago. Now, you’re nothing to each other but a nightmare from the past. Focus on finding a woman to love instead of hurting the one you already put through hell,” I snarled back.

My fist swung. He couldn’t think faster than I could read his thoughts, so it

landed. There was no dodging a mind-reader.

His head snapped back, and I took a few steps away. “Insult her again, and I’ll do a hell of a lot more than punch you.”

Stalking back to the truck, I readied myself for an apology. Elizabeth didn’t like it when I lost my temper with the other guys in the pack—she’d tell me to talk instead of punching. But sometimes punching just seemed to work better.

I didn’t see her inside.

My heart thudded in my chest when I found my door open, and no sign of Elizabeth or her clothes on the ground.

“The shadows,” my wolf snarled.

“What the fuck is going on with her gift?” I snarled back.

“She needs to accept that he withdrew his rejection. But I don’t think we can convince her to do it just because of her gift; she’s too damn stubborn.”

“Where is she?” Dante growled at me. His face was already black and blue. It would heal fast thanks to the moon goddess’s magic, but at least it would hurt like hell for a while first. He deserved that and worse after talking to my best friend like he had.

“The shadows have her.” I stripped out of my clothes, tossing them in the truck.

“What do we do?” he demanded.

“Follow, and hope for the best.”

My wolf took control, and charged after the faint scent of the female we loved more than anything.



20

Elizabeth

We finally approached the other wolf a few hours after the sun rose. Her scent was the same as it had been when I found her in the middle of nowhere last time; she was the same wolf I'd found and then lost.

The one we were looking for.

As always, we sprinted until we crashed into her, and both of us hit the ground hard. I shifted immediately as the shadows relinquished control, and this time, I didn't fuck around. I threw my legs over the wolf's back, wrapping my arms around her neck and holding on for dear life.

She bucked like a damn bull, snarling and whining and howling. I was a second away from getting thrown off her back when she finally switched tactics—and shifted.

We dropped like a rock again, both of us bare-assed, dirty, and sweaty.

“Who the hell are you?” the girl snarled at me. She staggered to her feet, straightening and clenching her fists as she glared at me. Her chest heaved, her pale skin shining with sweat. Her dark hair was a tangled mess that framed big, angry brown eyes.

“Elizabeth,” I said automatically, rising to my feet and holding my hands out in front of me. The name still sounded wrong, so I corrected myself. “Beth.”

I wasn't the same version of me as I'd been back then, but it was the name my mother had wanted me to have. And though it was still another damn name that didn't fit right, it was the one my mom gave me.

"Beth Bashlor. Like you, I was rejected."

"How do you know I was rejected?" she snapped.

"My rejection gift leads me to other rejected wolves." I gestured between us. "I started a refuge, for people like us. Outcasts."

"I'm not like you." She stepped backward once, and then twice. "You have no idea who I am, or what I am. Go back to your refuge."

She spun on her heels and stalked away, shifting forms as she went.

I followed her. My wolf took over, and trotted behind the other wolf as we moved through the forest.

"You shouldn't have to live here alone," Shadow told her. *"Come back with us. Join our pack. We're a family."*

"I have a pack," she shot back. *"Go home."*

But Shadow and I had agreed not to give up on rejected wolves years ago. I wasn't starting with this one.

She took off running when she realized I wasn't leaving. Sprinting through the trees after her, I sent up a prayer to the goddess to thank her that this wolf wasn't blessed with super speed upon being rejected. The ones with super speed were the worst—my friend Alaska included.

Shadow and I grew hungry and haggard as the sun set and we were still running, but perked up when we smelled cooking meat.

But cooking meat meant people.

Was she taking us back to her pack?

We ran right into what looked like a permanent campsite. A dozen large canvas tents were set up around a small clearing in the trees, a couple werewolves in both human and wolf form milling around.

They all stared when I followed the other wolf into the clearing, and both of us stopped in the center.

The other wolf shifted, glaring at Shadow and lifting her voice to everyone around us. “This chick won’t leave me alone. She claims to have found me using a rejection gift, but I think she’s one of the witches. Burn her.”

If I’d been in human form, my jaw would’ve dropped.

I shifted instantly, holding my hands out in front of me. “I’m not a witch, I swear. Magic has a scent, doesn’t it? Sniff me; I’m only a werewolf. Like you.”

Murmurs echoed across the group.

“Tie her up,” a woman commanded, exiting a tent across the campsite from me. “We’ll test her for magic.”

Who were these people?

I knew there were some types of supernatural creatures who lived nomadic lives, but the girl I’d found was definitely a rejected wolf. My gift had never led me to anyone who *wasn’t* a rejected wolf.

“Okay. I’m letting you tie me up, to show you that you can trust me,” I announced. “I’m just a werewolf.”

Another woman came out of another tent with a length of what looked like twine, and an article of clothing that resembled a sack more than anything else.

“Put this on,” she barked, handing it to me.

I slid the scratchy fabric over my head, glad I had something to cover

myself. Though I was comfortable being naked around Ryker, I really hated public nudity. Some things just didn't need to be visible all the time.

The fabric fell to the middle of my calves, and felt like it was made out of the same shit the lady was going to tie me up with.

Getting tied up by the rejected wolf I found was new, though. And kind of interesting, though I hoped it would end soon.

The lady led me to a tree and wrapped the twine around my wrists a dozen times before securing me to the tree. It wasn't tight enough to hurt, unless I tugged at it.

The woman who had given the command walked over to me with the rejected wolf I had followed. I tried to figure out what kind of supernatural being she was, but had no clue. She didn't seem like a werewolf, and I'd only ever really met other werewolves, since we tended to keep to ourselves and the humans.

Up close, I saw that she wore a red gemstone on a thin gold choker around her neck. I knew witches relied on gemstones to help control their magic, so I assumed she was a witch.

But the rejected wolf I'd followed had gotten dressed—and put on a gemstone necklace of her own. Witch gemstones were based on birth months, and hers was a yellowish-green color. I couldn't remember birth month gemstones off the top of my head, but it didn't really matter what month she was born in anyway.

Why was a werewolf wearing a witch's gem?

The woman stared at me. She wore a pair of leggings and a flowing top. I envied her clothing, considering the dress I wore was scratching my poor nipples raw. My tits were too big for the damn potato-sack dress.

The gem on her neck began to glow softly.

“What magic are you using on me?” I asked, anxiety growing within me.

The only magic I knew about was the kind the Oldenwood witches had used to massacre Ryker's pack.

"Truth magic," she said simply.

I didn't think it sounded simple, at all.

"What are you?" she asked.

My lips parted and I spoke without a chance to think it through. "A rejected werewolf."

"Who are you with?"

"My best friend that I'm in love with and the mate who's trying to un-reject me," the words spilled out again.

I hated the feeling that I'd lost control of my own mouth.

"Are they following you?" she asked.

"I don't know. I didn't hear them, but they can probably track my scent still."

"Lina," the woman said to the girl beside her. "Grab a few of the others and perform a scent-wiping spell."

Scent-wiping spell?

That didn't sound like something that would *increase* my odds of being found and kept alive. Although if Ryker could smell magic, maybe their spell would be a giveaway.

The rejected girl bobbed her head and walked away.

"What do you want from my daughter?" she asked.

I hadn't realized Lina—the rejected girl I followed—was even her daughter until she said so. "To bring her back to the refuge. We formed a

pack of outcasts, full of rejected wolves and broken people. I want to help people, so none of the rejects have to be alone like I was.”

The woman lifted an eyebrow.

“That can’t be the truth,” another woman said, walking up to us.

Were there any men at the campsite at all?

A glance around confirmed that there weren’t any, or at least that there weren’t any I could see.

“The truth-speaking spell works as well on werewolves as it does on humans. She believes what she’s saying is the truth,” the woman told the newcomer. She looked back at me. “Are both of the males following you full werewolves? Not half breeds, of any kind?”

“Half breeds?” I tilted my head. I’d never heard of a half breed.

“Answer the question.” The woman’s gem glowed brighter.

“They’re both full werewolves.” The words spilled out.

“We can give them their female after we make them forget we exist, then,” the second woman said.

“My gift keeps drawing me toward that girl,” I gestured with my head in the direction Lina had gone. This time, I was choosing to speak. “She’s rejected, like me. My gift is acting weird, like it’s possessing me or something. Are you sure she’s not longing for a pack? The moon goddess sent me here for a reason. And even if you make me forget, she’ll probably just send me back.”

The witches looked uneasy, exchanging glances I couldn’t read.

“Our wolves have their own pack,” she said vaguely.

There were hardly any people around the campsite; even if they were all wolves, that wasn’t much of a pack. Most wolves would yearn for more

company. I knew that well, because my wolf had yearned for a bigger pack for years while I was with Ryker and Knox searching for other wolves.

I heard a snarl, and Shadow pushed to the surface.

“*Ryker,*” she whispered.

The witch snapped her fingers at me, and my body went still. Shadow and I both tried to take control, but were stuck. The feeling was horrendous. “Her males have found her already. We’ll have to wipe all of their minds.”

I tried to argue or yell, but still couldn’t move.

Ryker howled, and a chill went up my spine.

“He smells like pack,” I heard someone yell.

“Get him to shift,” another woman shouted.

The longest few moments of my life ensued while the witch who’d bound me jogged out to see what was going on. The other remained with me, glaring daggers at me. “You should never have come here,” she said.

“Bring my female,” a familiar voice snarled. “Prove she’s alright.”

My heart thudded heavily in my chest.

The rejected wolf I’d followed there walked over.

Lina.

Her fingers shifted to claws, and she sliced through the twine holding me to the trees. I would’ve tried that trick, but I was pretty sure the twine would’ve cut my damn wrists off in the process.

She grabbed the twine and murmured a word.

The spell holding me still vanished, and I muttered a thank you to the moon goddess.

“Come on.” She led me toward the clearing between the tents.



21

I found Ryker standing in the clearing in a sack-dress that matched mine. Dante was beside him, but I barely glanced at Dante.

Surging forward, Ryker threw his arms around me and hugged me fiercely.

“Ow. Careful,” I winced, as my arms strained. I looked around the area, and found witches staring and whispering.

“Who else survived the attack?” The witch who’d trapped me demanded. She clutched her throat like it was her lifeline. “All of the werewolves in Lupos were supposed to be dead.”

“I’m the only one,” Ryker snarled. He shifted his fingers, claws slicing through the twine on my wrists. I rubbed them as it fell to the dirt, trying to work the feeling back into them. He tugged me against his back with one hand, holding me to him to protect me as he held the other out between him and the wolves. “Since when do witches leave their coven?”

“Since our coven murdered our mates in your pack,” the main witch snarled back. She tugged her shirt to the side, showing a claim mark.

A permanent one, I’d imagine, if she said her mate was dead. Claim marks became permanent after the mating was sealed through sex, and remained even after death.

Ryker’s arm pulled me tighter to his back. “What are you talking about?”

My pack despised the witches.”

“You couldn’t have been more than a child during the massacre, but that’s not true. A number of us discovered we were fated to be together—wolves and witches, paired by the moon goddess. We thought it was her way of forcing us to find peace. But when the coven discovered it, they trapped us, and massacred our mates.” She paused. “When we escaped, we vowed never to go back. But we already had kids we’d been hiding; we hadn’t known it was possible to have kids with the wolves.”

I tried to look over Ryker’s shoulder to see them, but couldn’t see a damned thing because he was so freaking tall.

Another witch added, “They’ve been hunting us ever since.”

“Goddess,” I murmured.

Hunted by your own pack? It sounded like hell.

“How many of the half breeds do you have?” Ryker looked around the group, scanning the area for possible werewolves.

“We call ourselves werewitches,” one of the girls said. “There are six of us.”

I heard whispering—her friends and family, probably telling her to shut up because they didn’t trust us. I didn’t blame them, since we didn’t trust them either.

But I’d be damned before I left a bunch of werewolves living out of tents in the forest when I could offer them a safer place to go.

“Come to the refuge with us. It’s in Colorado, far enough from Oldenwood that the other witches shouldn’t be able to follow you,” I said, having to tilt my head back just to speak out loud instead of into Ryker’s shoulder.

“We can’t leave the forest. They’ve spelled it to hold us here. We have enough space to hide from them, and nothing else,” one of the witches explained. “Willoughsbie is the only human town we can enter other than

Oldenwood, but they have spells. They monitor for werewolf life there, so we can only go in for human necessities that we can't access in the forest. Storms roll in suddenly when their charms sense us."

"Tampons, shampoo, and camping supplies," one of the others added.

"Are we wiping their minds or what?" One of the other witches interrupted.

"He's from Lupos; he's family," another said. "You look a bit like my mate. Are you a Jimenez?"

"I am," Ryker growled.

"Goddess, you're Ryker, aren't you?" the woman asked. "My mate was your cousin, Arthur."

Ryker's muscles tensed. I imagined he was trying to figure out if this whole thing was a trick, but it seemed too unreal to be a trick. Who would come up with something like that?

Luckily, it wasn't possible to hide the truth from a mind-reader. Especially when you didn't know he was a mind-reader, which they didn't.

"I remember you," Ryker said, the memories dawning on him. "Thea."

"Yes," the witch nodded. "Thea Jimenez."

"I'm going to take my fated mate and leave you to this mess," Dante growled the declaration. I grabbed Ryker's shirt-dress, holding tightly. I sure as hell wasn't leaving him.

"This is the mate who's trying to un-reject her," a witch mused.

"So Ryker is the best friend she's in love with," another added.

Damn them all for forcing my answers.

"Go with Dante," Ryker growled at me, releasing his arm from around my

waist. His eyes tracked over the other witches, watching for threats. “He’ll protect you while I help my pack.”

His pack?

WTH?

“Excuse me, *I* am your pack. And if you try to throw me away like yesterday’s garbage, I will stick to you like a whole damn jar of moldy peanut butter in your throat,” I glared at him. “We’re a team, Ryker.”

The verbal diarrhea was real when I got stressed.

“Not this time.” He pressed his lips to my forehead and looked at the witches. “Hide her memories of this place. We’ll take her and him both back to Willoughsbie, and I’ll leave her with a note.”

“What the hell?” I snarled. “Don’t even fucking—”

The magic struck me, and I lost consciousness.

Waking up in the hotel room, I looked around.

What had happened?

A glance at the old-fashioned clock on the nightstand told me it was the middle of the afternoon.

Why was I sleeping?

The last thing I remembered was Dante and Ryker arguing.

How had I gotten back to the hotel?

I heard a groan at my side, and turned.

“Dante?” My eyebrows shot into my forehead, and I scrambled off the bed. “What the hell are you doing in my room? There’s no way we...” I felt up

my body, like that would tell me if I'd somehow had sex with Dante and forgotten about it.

It didn't.

All I had on was Ryker's sweatshirt, but I distinctly remembered changing into his t-shirt. My fingers slid into the neckline of the sweatshirt, and checked my collarbone for a mate claim marking.

What if Dante and I had mated and I somehow forgot it?

I breathed easier when I felt my collarbone bare.

My nose twitched, and I caught a weird smell on the air. It smelled like... overly-sweet plants of some kind.

Dante groaned again, lifting himself to a sitting position. All he had on was a pair of sweats that I was 100% sure he hadn't had with him on our little trip to Canada.

He had a bit of a black eye, but it was mostly healed.

That had to be from his fight with Ryker. But it was way more healed than it should've been. I couldn't remember anything following their fight—couldn't even remember the *end* of their fight.

“What happened?” His voice was groggy as he sat up and looked around. He glanced down at his chest, then his pants. “What the hell? You put your fuck buddy's pants on me?”

“He's not my fuck buddy, and no. Those aren't Ryker's. I don't know whose they are.” Discomfort rose within me.

I tucked my hair behind my ears to give my hands something to do, then shoved them in the pocket of the massive sweatshirt.

A piece of paper brushed my knuckles.

I tugged it out, unfolding it. My eyes scanned the pages as I read.

Bettie,

I've got some shit to take care of. I'll meet you at the refuge when I can. Give Dante a chance.

-Ry

I stared down at the paper. All the blood drained out of my face, down my chest and stomach.

Ryker had abandoned me.

We didn't do that. We'd agreed not to. We'd both been abandoned too many times, by too many people.

We didn't abandon each other, yet he'd abandoned me. And told me to give Dante a chance.

What the hell had happened?

I wasn't oblivious; I knew it was probably something to do with his family. Probably magic, too, since he'd smelled it the other night.

But that didn't make it okay.

My whole damn chest ached with the pressure of the betrayal.

"What does yours say?" Dante asked me.

I looked up from the paper, fighting the angry tears that were trying to surface. "He's gone. Told me to wait at the refuge for him." My gaze landed on a paper in his hands.

I crossed the room, dropping to my ass on the bed and taking it from him.

Dick,

Respect Elizabeth, or I'll kill you when I get back.

-Your Worst Nightmare

I scowled. Usually, I would've snorted at the signature he'd used, but not this time.

This time, he'd hurt me.

And he'd done it consciously, made the choice to do it. He knew I'd feel abandoned, and ditched me anyway.

With Dante, of all people.

Standing up, I strode toward the door. I sure as fuck wasn't taking that lying down, just accepting that my best friend and hopefully future mate had decided he could ditch me. I'd kill him when I found him, but I *would* find him.

"Where are you going?" Dante asked, following me down the hall of the inn. It was a good thing we didn't have any of our belongings there, because we were shit at locking the doors and I'd officially lost the key.

"To find Ryker so I can kick his ass," I growled.

"He said to wait at the refuge. You don't even know where he is," Dante reasoned.

I despised his reason, so I flipped him off.

"I know where his pack used to be. He's probably there."

"Why would he voluntarily return to the place everyone he loved was murdered?" Dante countered, as I sat down in the driver's seat.

"I don't know, dammit." The bases of my fists slammed against the steering wheel as tears stung my eyes some more. "I don't know where he is, or why he went there. I don't even remember what happened last night, or today. *I don't know.*"

Dante nodded.

He shut my door, then walked around to the passenger seat and sat down in it. His door closed behind him.

His gaze remained straight ahead. "You're worried about him."

"Of course I'm worried about him. He's my family, and my best friend, and... everything to me." I used my shaky hands to wipe away tears that I couldn't stop from falling.

He nodded once. "The way I see it, we have two options. We can drive around for days or weeks, hoping we find him and probably not finding anything. Because if he left you, he probably didn't stay anywhere near you. Or, we can go back to the refuge and wait for him to come back. There's probably a good reason he left."

"I hate both of those options," I growled, still wiping away the damn tears that refused to stop falling.

"Then come up with one of your own," Dante shrugged. "I don't care what we do, as long as we're together."

I scowled. "I'm never going to fall in love with you."

"I'm starting to see that," he said calmly.

My heart clenched.

"I'll go ask the front desk lady if she saw him. If she didn't, we'll go back to the refuge."

Dante nodded.

I slipped out of the car, walking inside.

"Do you remember the guy who was here with me?" I asked her. "Tan, tall, with really good hair?" I gestured to the top of my head. "He tells really good jokes."

She frowned. “I’m sorry, I only remember seeing you alone. I can let you borrow my phone though, if you want.”

“Sure. That would be great, thanks.”

She handed me a cellphone, and I dialed Ryker’s number.

It went immediately to voicemail.

“Hey, Ry. I’m worried about you. I’m heading back to the refuge, so just... call me.”

I hung up and handed it over to her with a murmured “thank you,” and then I slowly made my way back to the truck.



22

Dante and I drove most of the way back to Payne in silence. I didn't trust him with pretty much anything, so I drove the whole way. When he tried to turn on the music, I shut it off.

I wasn't in the mood for singing, or listening to it. All I wanted to do, was cry.

Ryker had abandoned me.

I was alone, once again.

Sure, I had the Outcast Pack. And a refuge full of werewolves. But everyone there contributed, so it would function without me. Ryker was my best friend, and closest companion; losing him felt like losing a limb.

If that meant I was too dependent on him, I didn't even care because I loved him so damn much.

Throughout the drive, I drank energy drinks to stay awake, telling myself that if I got back to the refuge, maybe he'd be there waiting. Maybe he'd turn it into a big joke, or something. He'd never joked about abandoning me before, but there's a first time for everything, right?

I hoped so. Because I couldn't take losing him too.

My mom, my dad, my pack, then Ryker...

Goddess, it was all just too much.

I stopped to get gas, watching the sun rise a few hours from Payne and wiping at my eyes. They watered on and off. It drove me crazy, but I just couldn't seem to stop it.

"Are you okay?" an older woman asked me, stopping and putting a hand on my arm. I could tell she was a human by the frailness in her touch.

She glanced through the window in concern, seeing a sleeping Dante. "Do you need help getting away from someone?"

I gave her a soft smile and shook my head. "I lost my best friend," I explained.

Understanding and compassion flooded her gaze. She gently squeezed my arm. "The pain never goes away, but it does get easier to carry."

I nodded. Ryker wasn't my first loss, and he wasn't really dead. But as far as my real losses went, I knew exactly what she meant.

"Thank you for asking." I squeezed her arm gently too.

"Of course. I'll keep you in my prayers." She walked back to her car, and my heart swelled. It didn't matter that she wouldn't be praying to my goddess; who she worshipped didn't matter to me. The fact that she cared enough to reach out to whoever she believed in for *me* meant the world.

"*Not so alone,*" Shadow murmured, though I could feel her sadness almost as strongly as I could feel my own.

"*Do you think he'll come back for us?*" I asked her.

Goddess, I hoped he would.

"*I hope so,*" she admitted.

"*I'm going to have Taylor try to find him,*" I told her. "*I know there's probably magic involved, so it's a long-shot, but we'll try.*"

The gas finished filling, and I screwed the lid back on the tank.

Climbing back into the truck, I pulled back onto the road.

A few hours later, we parked in front of the refuge. Usually, people went out to see who was there when a new vehicle showed up. But it was the middle of the day, and the place looked like a ghost town.

My heart clenched.

I left Dante sleeping against the door, just so I didn't have to talk to him, and walked in.

Please let something horrible not have happened.

I found Taylor sitting on the couch with Spirit, eating popcorn with one hand while she typed on a laptop on her lap with the other.

She glanced up when I came in, and her eyes brightened. "You're back!" she set her laptop down and crossed the room, throwing her arms around me.

My damn eyes stung again as she hugged me tightly, and I returned the hug.

"Where's Ryker?" she checked, looking around.

"He left me." I swallowed hard, stepping past her and looking around. "Where is everyone?"

"Cara and I teamed up with the other women to whoop the guys' asses into shape. Alaska announced that she's going to start looking for a suitable mate soon, but that she's only interested in men with jobs. That took care of a good chunk of them. When the older generation ladies announced that they were going to stop feeding capable, stable werewolves without jobs, the rest scattered." She grinned.

I forced a smile, but it felt brittle. "That's great."

“A couple of them are already looking for apartments or houses. And they finished another dozen cottages while we were gone, so that’s cool,” she added.

“Wow.” A lot had changed.

A lot was going to keep changing.

And suddenly, I wasn’t so sure I liked this new version of my refuge. I longed to go back to the days when it was just me, Ryker, and Knox making scrambled eggs in the shithole we liked to pretend was a sanctuary.

“I’m tired,” I told her.

My words were quiet, but I didn’t have the energy to speak much louder. “Dante’s still in the truck; he’ll come in eventually. Just assign him to one of the extra beds. Don’t tell him where Ryker’s place is, please.”

Taylor nodded, her forehead wrinkling. “I’m sure Ryker’s going to come back.”

I swallowed. “I hope so.”

Turning, I walked back out the door I’d come in through.

I stripped out of his sweatshirt and shifted, letting Shadow carry us to Ryker’s place. It was the only sanctuary I had left; the only piece of home.

She gave me control, and I dug out a spare key before stepping inside. My gaze went to the couch, where we’d slept together before my gift went on the fritz and dragged me to Canada.

It just looked empty without him.

Empty, and sad.

I dropped the sweatshirt by the door and trudged to the bathroom. Working on autopilot, I scrubbed dirt from my body, then my hair, then my body

again, then my hair again. Washing once wasn't enough when you spent days in the dirt without a shower.

After I dried off, I put some of Ryker's clothes on. Years ago, we'd both kept spares of each other's clothes. We just hadn't needed to recently. I wished we had.

I headed for the bed, exhausted physically and emotionally.

But on my way to his room, I stopped.

Where had I left my phone?

I couldn't remember. But I'd told Ryker to call me in my message. What if he did call me, but I couldn't answer because I didn't have a phone?

What if he was already trying to call me?

I hurried out to the driveway, then swore. I'd left my car... at the bakery? I couldn't remember. But Ryker's truck was back at the refuge.

Staying in my human form, I jogged barefoot back to the refuge. I needed the fresh air anyway. My wet, tangled hair soaked the back of Ryker's shirt and smacked the backs of my arms, my tits bounced painfully, and I swore every time I stepped on a rock.

But I kept going, and made it back.

I'd left Ryker's keys in his truck's cupholder. He wasn't as paranoid about his truck as he was about his house, for obvious reasons, so he typically left them there too.

Luckily, Dante had already gone inside. I slipped into the driver's seat again and pulled out of the circular driveway, waving at someone as they pulled in.

My ass ached after so long in that damn seat, but I was too hopeful to care.

Maybe Ryker had already done whatever shit he thought he needed to.

Maybe he regretted ditching me with Dante. Maybe he was on his way back, or calling to apologize, or calling to say he missed me.

The thoughts ran through my mind as I drove.

Pulling up in front of the phone store, I quickly bought whatever they had on hand; a fancier phone than I needed, but I didn't care. They connected it to my old phone number, and I called Ryker's number as I walked out of the store.

It went right to voicemail.

That couldn't be right.

I called again, and again.

Every damn time, it went straight to voicemail.

I left him message after message. Yelling. Begging. Swearing. Apologizing.

When it told me his message box was full, I dropped my phone on the passenger seat and sobbed. My head met the steering wheel, my whole body shaking with the pain of abandonment.

I don't know how long I sat there. The sun was going down when a knock on the window made me turn my head. I knew I looked like a wreck, and didn't give a shit.

Dante stood outside.

I made no move to roll the window down, so he pulled the door open.

"Scoot over," he said gruffly.

My head throbbed too much to say no. I slid across the seat, lifting my knees to my chest and closing my eyes against the pain in my head.

I hated crying.

I hated *feeling*.

Why couldn't my rejection gift be something along the lines of not feeling anything? Of not caring so damn much about everything and everyone?

"Just go back to the refuge," I mumbled into my knees. "I don't need you acting like a dick on top of everything else."

He ignored me, pulling the truck away from the phone store. "You know he's going to come back for you. That bastard doesn't have anyone or anything else. Even if he did, any moron can see that he's crazy about you."

My head snapped upward. "What?"

"I've spent more time than I ever wanted to with that guy." Dante lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "He's not so bad, if you can get over the mind-reading. He was out of his mind when we couldn't find you; he legitimately had us driving up and down random highways in hopes that we'd stumble upon you by some miracle. I never worried like that, because I never cared like that." He paused. "No offense."

I snorted. "Everyone knows you only say that when you've already offended someone."

"Eh. It's a little too late for us anyway." He stared at the road. "The only reason a guy like that would leave you is if he thought he was protecting you. And if he thinks he's protecting you, he's going to eventually deal with whatever he thinks he's protecting you from, and come back for you."

"He said he wouldn't leave me." My arms tightened around my knees. "He swore. So many times."

"I don't know what happened, but things change. If he could only choose to protect you or keep his promise, I imagine he'd choose the first."

"I hate that he chose that. I'm so freaking pissed at him. I've never been this angry at him; he's in so fucking much trouble," I hissed. My cheeks were still wet with tears, so that made my anger seem a little ridiculous.

“Then when he’s back, you can fight and fuck until you’ve forgotten how pissed you are.” He shrugged.

“Since when are you on board with me and Ryker as a couple?”

“Since I stood on the sidewalk and watched you cry, swear, and punch your steering wheel for an hour. Your face was already so red, I knew I’d only seen a fraction of it. And if you really love him that much, there’s not a damn thing I can do to convince you otherwise.”

I bit my cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Okay, I’m not. But I do hope you can find a way to be happy without me. And I don’t want you dead anymore, like I used to before you showed up here.”

“Well, that’s something,” he chuckled.

“My friend Alaska is single. She’s been looking for a mate for a year or so, but she’s got a really strong personality. Most guys can’t take her insults, but you’ve got thick skin. Maybe you should ask her out,” I said.

“Maybe I will.” We were both quiet for a minute before he asked, “Do you mind if I stick around here for a while? I don’t really have anywhere else to go.”

“The refuge is for everyone. Even you. But apparently now, if you don’t get a job, Hailey and Esther won’t feed you.”

“Good to know.”

Dante drove me back to Ryker’s house, parking in the driveway. We talked a little on the way, but not much. We weren’t friends, but we were becoming acquaintances.

And that was progress I could get behind.



23

I changed into clean clothes, washed my face, and then ate the leftover Not-Thanksgiving food that was still in the fridge. It was old, but not moldy. With my stomach full, my head aching thanks to the cry session, and my heart heavy, I trudged back to Ryker's bedroom and slipped into his bed.

My eyes closed, and I slept.

It was noon the next day when I got back up, and I only got up because I was starving. Not feeling like facing anyone at the refuge, I ordered some food and added an exorbitant tip to convince a delivery driver that I was worth their time even though I was a good long way out of their normal route. An hour and a half later, they dropped off a few days' worth of Chinese food, and I collapsed on the couch with the box of food.

I filled my body with calories, then fell asleep again.

The next morning, I woke up to a knock at the door and a concerned group of friends waiting on Ryker's porch. I let them in, knowing Ryker didn't care about having people in his space. He only liked the space so he could get a break from everyone's thoughts, not so it could be private or his own or whatever.

"You have Chinese food?" Taylor looked around the cottage, smelling it on the air.

"Yes. *I* have Chinese food. Order your own." I lifted my chin, and she

sighed dramatically.

“Fine, fine.”

“So, do you want to talk?” Cara checked.

“No. I just want to eat my Chinese food on this couch until I die.” I walked back to the couch, though my Chinese food was still in the fridge.

“That’s dark,” Alaska remarked, following me to the couch and dropping down beside me.

“Well that’s where I’m at right now. Call me ‘Dark Beth,’ and buy me some black eyeshadow.”

“Don’t forget the lipstick,” Taylor added, plopping down beside Alaska.

Cara and Spirit sat on the ground, Cara’s fingers tangled in the wolf’s fur. “So what happened?” she asked.

“Ryker left me a bullshit note saying he had shit to do and that we’d meet up eventually. I lost time—like someone erased my memories, or blocked them. I’m assuming it must’ve been a witch. Maybe she tortured me or something, and he wanted me to forget? I don’t know; I’m clueless. But he’s gone, and here I am.”

The words, “*in the flesh*,” practically echoed in my mind.

My chest hurt again all the sudden.

“Well if he says he’s coming back, then he’s coming back,” Cara said like it was simple. “That’s a good thing.”

“For most people. For us, it’s not. He swore he’d never ditch me. That we were a team. He said it again, and again, and again. We both did. When I see him again, I’m going to kick his ass for leaving me,” I grumbled.

“And kiss his mouth for coming back?” Taylor suggested. “Or maybe his dick?”

I sputtered a laugh, and Cara grinned while Alaska made a face. “You’re all so crass.”

“Coming from the girl who grew up in the damn forest,” Taylor teased. Alaska had been born in a pack that lived like wolves rather than humans, so adjusting to our way of life had been strange for her.

“At least I have dignity,” she remarked.

We all busted up laughing, but she barely smiled. There was a lot more to Alaska than any of us knew, since she rarely ever shared bits and pieces of her life with us. But in the Outcast Pack, it didn’t matter if you were different or odd or quiet or even a bit of an asshole. You were family, because we all knew what it felt like to be an outcast.

“Why don’t we do something to get our minds off the drama?” Taylor suggested, wearing a sly grin.

“Why do you ask that with such a devilish look on your face?” Cara countered.

“Because I have the perfect idea.” Her grin widened. “We’re going clubbing, like humans.”

“Are you even twenty-one?” I asked her.

“Yup. Alaska’s the only one underage, but I bought her a fake ID.”

“Which suggests you’ve been planning this for a while,” Alaska eyed Taylor. “What do humans do at these clubs?”

“Oh honey, you don’t want to know.” I patted her on the knee. “Just let it be a surprise.”

“To go clubbing, we need cute dresses,” Taylor continued. “Which means shopping!”

She seemed so pumped about it that I didn’t have the heart to tell her how

much I didn't want to go either clubbing or shopping.

So instead, I let them drag me out to the van they'd driven over. Spirit was with us, of course. She was one of the girls, even if she hadn't yet shifted back to human form. She'd get there when she was ready.

Taylor drove, and eventually parked us in front of a dress store. "No worrying about prices. These ones are on me," she declared, climbing out. She'd clearly been planning this for a while.

Of course, I wouldn't take her money. Money wasn't an issue for me or Ryker, given the tremendous amount of life insurance money he'd inherited upon the death of his pack. I'd been reluctant to take his money back when we first found each other, but when I saw the numbers in his account and started helping him with investments, I'd gotten used to it. His money had become our money, and we trusted each other completely when it came to managing it.

"*He'd better come back,*" I said to Shadow as we all followed Taylor into the store.

"*He will,*" she murmured.

Taking note of each other's sizes, we walked around the fancy store as a group. Taylor was particular about what we would be allowed to wear—it had to be short, sparkly, and sexy. The three S's of clubbing, according to she who had never been to a club.

But given Payne's wealthy crowd, I was pretty sure her S's would help us fit in at a human club there.

After a bit of shopping, we marched to the dressing room. Taylor declared that we could only choose one dress at a time, and chose Cara to try hers on first.

Cara came out in a glittery black dress, her long orange hair falling to her waist. She cocked an eye at Taylor, who grinned. "I look like Halloween," she complained.

“Sexy Halloween,” I offered.

She shot me a playful glare.

“Yeah, it’s not for you. Maybe try the green one,” Taylor suggested.

The next two hours, we all tried on more dresses than I’d ever hoped to see in my whole damn life. I ended up with a strappy black number, Taylor with a smoky gray dress with a high-neckline that fit her like a second skin.

She’d been working on getting a tattoo sleeve down her right arm, and it was a fucking masterpiece of blacks, oranges, and reds that we all oohed and ahhed over when the entire thing was showing in her dress. She said it needed one last finishing touch, and then it would be done.

I liked tattoos, but had never been attached to the idea of one in particular enough to have it put on my body permanently. I’d always thought maybe in the future, but hadn’t felt the pull to do it.

Cara ended up with a dark green dress that brought out her eyes, and Alaska ended up with a glittering red slip that reminded me of blood—in a sexy way, though.

Just before we headed to the register, Taylor leaned against the wall of the dressing room. “Hey, Spirit. Are you sure you don’t want to shift to your human form?” her voice was casual, but I caught the calculating look in her eyes. The wolf had been watching us closely; her human probably wanted to join the girls’ day.

“We’re not inviting any of the guys, you know,” Cara pointed out. “So it’s just going to be us and some humans. Good, safe fun.”

Taylor sealed the deal with an, “And if you come, your human can try on a bunch of glittery dresses before we go.”

Spirit blinked, and shifted.

Suddenly, a woman replaced the wolf. She was laying on the floor, golden

brown hair sprawled around her shoulders, arms, and head. My eyes caught on light spots and patches of skin contrasting the natural deep tan on her back, ass, legs, and arms.

“I have vitiligo,” she mumbled into the floor. “I know you’re all looking at it. It’s the first thing people see when they look at me.”

She peeled her face off the ground, peering around at the group of us. The light skin on her face contrasted beautifully with the creamy brown of her skin. “Clothes, Taylor.” She held a hand out.

Taylor was practically giddy as she pulled a pair of folded clothes out of her bag. Spirit must’ve seen her packing the bag.

“I started to wonder if you’d ever convince my wolf to let go,” she admitted, slipping into the clothes.

“You weren’t rabid, then?” Cara asked, curious.

“Oh, I was. Or she was, I guess. For a few months, at least. Then, she was just really damn stubborn—and having too much fun being waited on hand and foot by all the desperate unmated men. We’ve been arguing for months.” She stepped back out, sliding hair out from her tank top. “Phew, it’s been a while.” She stretched her arms and legs, testing out her muscles.

“I knew it had to be something like that,” Taylor wore a shit-eating grin. “I could see it in your wolf’s eyes sometimes. But she seems to care about how she looks a lot, so I figured she wouldn’t be able to resist you wearing a sparkly dress.”

The new human smiled. “Yeah, she’s very excited.” She held out a hand to Taylor. “I’m Alexandra LaRen. I go by Lex.”

Taylor ignored her hand and pulled her in for a massive hug. The rest of us joined in, because why the hell not?

“Alright, let’s find our Lexy-girl a dress,” Taylor announced.



24

We got dressed and ready at Cara and Knox's place, because they had the biggest bathroom and zero unmated men. When Knox got home, Cara disappeared for a few minutes and came back looking blissfully happy.

I was happy for her, even if I was sad for me too.

"So, morally, I have to ask if you planned this so you can hook up with some random human," Cara told Taylor.

Taylor grinned. "*Morally*, I understand. You and I have different standards." She winked at Cara, who winked back. "But no, I don't plan on getting freaky with a human tonight. Dom and I have an... agreement."

I eyed her. I'd heard her say something about it once or twice, but I tried to ignore shit like that so I didn't give myself an aneurism trying to keep the refuge drama-free or micromanage anyone.

"What does that mean?" Alaska frowned.

"You know, a friends-with-benefits thing. We're sex friends." She shrugged. "Friends, who have sex. No strings attached, no dates, no expectations. Our agreement stands until either of us shows interest in anyone else, and then it'll end. Dominic doesn't like to share, so while we're sex buddies, there's no drama allowed."

My eyes shot into my forehead.

Yeah, I could never do the no-strings-attached thing. That was just...not me. I was constantly looking for strings, attaching myself to things and people, trying to build myself a place and a home and a family and loads of other shit I wished I didn't need.

"I get it." Cara shrugged. "I couldn't do it, but I get it. Sex is really damn fun."

"Exactly. And since I'm, you know, infertile, it keeps things simple. I'll never have to break anyone's heart by being unable to grow us a family." She shrugged. "In an ideal world, maybe I could consider taking a mate. But this world is far from ideal, and I've made the best of it. And Dom is *really* good in bed."

She changed the subject, asking about Knox and Cara's cake business. We chatted about jobs for a while, but I remained mostly quiet. My job managing our investments was boring to explain, and everyone knew what I did at the refuge in my free-time. I was like the Refuge Cop, trying to keep the peace and prevent war and punish the assholes with chores and shit.

Without Ryker, my life looked...really hollow.

Maybe I needed a hobby other than tracking down rejected wolves involuntarily.

We all climbed into the car, and bought dinner on the way to the club. As we parked, Lex spoke up. "I should tell you, people always look at me strangely. They'll ask if my vitiligo is contagious, and many other things. Don't get annoyed; the curiosity is normal. If they ask you, just send them to me or tell them what it is and that it's not contagious."

We all nodded and voiced our agreement. She seemed really chill about it. She'd explained while we were getting ready that she'd had it since she was little, and that it had spread and would continue to spread since there wasn't a human treatment that worked for werewolves.

I'd never met a werewolf with that condition, but she had assured us it

wasn't deadly. She said she had struggled with people staring at first until she decided that she thought her depigmented patches were beautiful.

I thought it was really damn cool the way she just straight-up told us not to be angry when people stared at her; mostly because I was one who would fight a jerk for her if needed.

I wasn't sure I had the kind of confidence she did, and admired the hell out of her for it.

Taylor led us to the front of the line outside the club. She gave the bouncers her name, and they let us through. The rest of us exchanged lifted-eyebrow expressions.

"I'm a hacker, remember?" she called over her shoulder. "And even I can't only use my power for good. The dark side is just too seductive."

We all laughed.

Most people headed for the bar, but not us. Since booze wouldn't get us drunk unless consumed in copious amounts, we wouldn't bother.

Instead, we went straight for the dance floor.

I wasn't much of a dancer, unless you counted kitchen dance parties. But I'd never been in a room so flooded with music and life, either.

Taylor dragged us into the center of the dance floor, and we started to move with the music.

We were bad—really, horribly bad. None of us could dance worth a damn. But we had asses to shake and tits to bounce, so we shook and bounced and had a blast doing it.

Alaska and Taylor kept the guys away while we danced, hollering that we weren't interested any time someone came over to try their hand.

The night I'd been dreading became one of the best nights of my life as we just let loose and laughed and had fun together. We sparkled, and sexed up

the room (according to Taylor), and it felt good.

Having friends other than Ryker, enjoying myself with them... it was nice.

Really, really nice.

But I still missed him. And hated that he'd left me. And wanted him back.

It was long past midnight when Cara slipped from the group and strode toward a guy weaving through the crowds. Knox pushed women away from him, his eyes on the orange-haired beauty he called his. Her claim mark was on display in the thin-strapped dress she wore, just as she'd wanted it to be.

I envied her hard for that marking, even though I was really freaking happy for her too.

Knox caught her in his arms, lifting her and kissing her.

The sight made me so jealous I had to turn my head.

Lex put her lips just in front of my ear so we could talk.

"My wolf heard you and Ryker talking the other night," she said, loudly because of the pounding music. "Why aren't you mated yet?"

"It's complicated," I yelled back, giving her a tight smile. "Maybe some day!"

Goddess, why hadn't I pushed him to try again after the Slippery Boob Incident?

Why had I been so damn afraid to be with him for so many freaking years?

Why had I been so worried that he wasn't attracted to me, that he didn't want me as anything more than a friend?

Love is a choice; you choose to stay with the person you love, even when they're not lovable. And Ryker and I always chose each other. Always.

We'd been mated all but physically for years, and now our relationship was crumbling because I hadn't pushed him—or myself—to make it permanent.

Why had I been so stupid?

Cara and Knox started dancing together, laughing about some cute shit I would probably be even more jealous about. I glanced over when another familiar face joined them, and then another.

Parker, Dante, Wyatt, and Dominic.

They all wore massive grins, taking in our outfits and makeup and ridiculously high heels...

And our smiles.

"Hey, beautiful," Dante yelled over the noise of the music. "Let's dance." He held a hand out to Alaska.

She glanced over at me, and I gave her a thumbs up. She reluctantly took Dante's hand. "Don't touch my boobs or ass," she warned.

He laughed an agreement, dragging her away from our group, further into the crowd of dancers.

Dom swept a laughing Taylor off to the side of the group, pulling her in close.

"Come on, Cowboy," I called out to Parker, holding out a hand. "Show me how to swing dance."

He took my hand with a grin. "Are you gonna kiss me again if I do?"

"Probably not," I teased.

"Then I'll admit I don't know how to swing dance."

He spun me around the room though; the guy had definitely taken some

kind of classes. I got him to confess that he'd taken ballroom dance for years—and in fact did know a bit of swing, but didn't much like it.

He knew I didn't have feelings for him, and I knew he didn't have feelings for me. That made it relaxed and fun and lighthearted, the way I wanted it.

We passed Wyatt and Lex dancing together without touching. He looked a bit star-struck by her, and she looked a bit uncomfortable. The navy-blue dress she had on was a stunner, so I didn't blame him one bit.

Parker and I returned to them after a few minutes, rejoining Lex and Wyatt before things got awkward for them. Parker offered a hand to Lex, and she shook her head and turned him down.

“Werewolf guys expect too much,” she yelled by way of explanation. Her fingers caught mine, and she gestured me toward the bathroom.

I walked with her, both of us still breathing quick as we walked.

The bathroom was large and mostly empty, other than a couple of women touching up their makeup.

“I need to get out of here,” she admitted to me. I noticed her hands shaking as she smoothed them down the front of her dress in an attempt to calm them. “My wolf's trying to take over again. Werewolf men are...” she shook her head firmly. “I can't. I'm sure Taylor meant well when she asked them to come, but I just can't,” she repeated.

“That's totally fine. I'm exhausted and ready for bed anyway,” I gave her a quick smile. “Let's go grab the keys from Taylor. She can drive home with the guys.”

She nodded, rubbing her hand with her arm. “I'm just going to wait in here, if that's okay.”

“Of course.” I gave her a quick hug. “We all understand, so don't worry.”

She nodded again, squeezing me tightly for a moment before letting go. Other than talking about her vitiligo, she hadn't told us anything really about

her life or what had made her go rabid. We didn't know why she'd been rejected, or who her mate was.

Obviously, that wasn't important. We were there for all rejects and outcasts. But I worried someone had really hurt her, and wanted to know who it was and what they'd done.

Mostly so I could hurt them back.

Or at least *think about* hurting them back.

"*You're all talk,*" Shadow teased me as I slipped out of the bathroom.

"*Yeah, yeah,*" I grumbled.

"Is she okay?" Parker asked, falling into step beside me. "Did I do something to offend her? I was just trying to be polite."

"You didn't do anything wrong, she just has some trauma to work through. Stay clear of her for a while—have all of the guys stay clear of her for a while. Spirit was jumpy around all of you for months; Lex is even more jumpy."

Parker's forehead knitted together, but he nodded. "Why did you leave her in the bathroom though?"

"She's ready to go home. I just need Taylor's keys." My eyes scanned the crowd, looking for Taylor.

"We brought a van too. Knox has the keys; I'll grab them for you."

I grabbed his arm and shook my head. "Werewolf men scare her. Her wolf's trying to take over. The van probably smells like you; we need the one we came in."

He nodded. "I'll grab Taylor's."

Jogging into the crowd, he pushed his way through what few people didn't automatically move for him.

Ever the gentleman, that one.

He came back with the keys. After thanking him, I headed back to the bathroom.

He followed me. “Can I at least walk you out to the van?” he asked. “I don’t want you two outside on your own.”

“She’ll feel safer alone than with your protection.” I gave him a small smile. “But I appreciate the offer. Next time.”

He nodded, stopping where he was and letting me go.



25

I retrieved Lex from the bathroom, and we walked out of the club together. A few guys tried to talk to us, but we politely turned them down.

We made it to the car without getting mauled or hit on again, sitting down on the front seat and buckling up. “Sorry about that,” Lex apologized. “I thought I was ready, it was just a little too much, too soon.”

“Like I said, I get it.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “Are you going to be okay staying at the refuge?”

She grimaced. “I’ve been trying to think of other options.”

“Knox and Cara have a spare room that I’m sure she’d loan out in a heartbeat, but they’re still in the newly-mated phase so I’m sure there’s a shit-ton of sex going down there.” I made a face, and Lex mirrored it. “But you can stay at Ryker’s with me, if you want. He’s only got one bed but I don’t mind sharing, and there’s a comfortable couch too.”

I didn’t say that it was only comfortable because Ryker bought it knowing that I’d end up sleeping over at some point and that he’d be the gentleman who insisted on taking the couch.

“That would be great.” She squeezed my hand. “Thanks, Beth.”

“You’re welcome.”

Hearing her call me by my name made me feel good about settling on it

once again... but also weird. It wasn't just the name that I'd left behind; it was the emotions I'd had in that pack. The loneliness, the hurt, the longing.

I was different now, at least, for the most part.

When we got back to Ryker's, I turned on some quiet music while Lex and I took our makeup off and changed. She turned down my offer of Ryker's clothes for sleeping in, but that didn't surprise me given her reaction to the male werewolves at the club.

She gave me a quick smile and a quiet "thank you" before going to the couch, wrapping herself in Ryker's weighted blanket.

I rifled through Ryker's closet, sniffing the articles of clean clothing in an attempt to find one that smelled like him instead of like laundry detergent. Though I was exhausted, I was still kind of feeling the energy from the club.

I grabbed a sweatshirt, pulling it out of the closet. It didn't smell much like him, but it was one I remembered him wearing dozens of times. My hands slipped into the pockets, and stopped when they met some kind of a cube.

My forehead wrinkled, and I pulled it out.

My eyes widened when I saw what it was.

A small red ring box.

I temporarily stopped breathing.

"Open it," Shadow urged.

I was terrified to.

What if it was meant for someone other than me?

"When has Ryker ever been interested in someone other than us?" Shadow reasoned.

Well, that was a good point.

Ryker and I had talked about rings before. Not seriously, as in, ‘I want you to buy me a ring’. But he knew I liked the human tradition of marking your person with a sparkly object on their finger. Most werewolves didn’t bother, but my dad had always worn a ring and I found it really romantic.

Being a werewolf made plenty of things difficult. Birth control. Clothes as a whole. Piercings. But for the most part, some types of metals stayed where they were put on or in our bodies when we shifted, even though the moon goddess’s magic did who-knew-what with our clothes. That was the reason pretty much every werewolf woman had a copper IUD; they were our only option other than condoms, and condoms prevented mating just as much as they prevented pregnancy.

“*Open it,*” Shadow urged again.

“*What if he bought it for me?*” I asked. “*What if he wants it to be a secret?*” I stopped. “*What if it’s just earrings?*”

“*Open the damn thing or I will,*” she growled at me.

My lips twitched, moving toward a grin. I liked it when she got feisty. “*Fine, fine.*”

I carefully opened the box.

My eyes landed on a ring that looked like the sun. A round diamond sat at the center, with small, slim rectangular ones positioned around it, nestled in with some other small rounds and squares.

I gaped.

It was freaking gorgeous.

“*Put it on,*” Shadow demanded.

She didn’t have to tell me twice.

I gingerly pulled the ring out of the box. The metal was gold, and made the diamonds look even brighter.

Carefully, I slipped it onto my left ring finger.

It fit perfectly, which meant he had either measured some of my other jewelry or sneakily measured my damn finger.

My eyes stung.

I was crying way too much lately.

“That bastard,” I whispered aloud, wiping at my eyes with the hand I wasn’t staring at. “I didn’t even think he was attracted to me.”

But he was more than attracted to me—he wanted to mate with me.

I wondered how old the ring was, when he’d bought it. Maybe it was from back when we’d nearly mated... I didn’t know.

But at some point, he’d bought me a ring. And that made me feel a lot of freaking emotions.

“*Keep it on,*” Shadow decided.

I shook my head. “*If I’m wearing his ring, it’s going to be because he gave it to me. Not because I found it in his closet.*”

She sighed, but understood.

I slipped the ring off, turning it so I could see it from every angle before parting with it.

So damn gorgeous.

My eyes caught on lettering inside the ring’s band. I had to squint to read it, and lift it right in front of my eyes.

April 5th.

I frowned, thinking back to April.

What had happened in April?

April...

My mind went back to the first day we met.

The shadows had been tugging at me for weeks, but I didn't understand what they meant. It was the first time they'd pulled me anywhere, and I didn't know a damn thing about rejection gifts.

They finally took over, and my wolf sprinted us through the forest.

We ran uncontrollably for days, only stopping for food and water when we were on the verge of passing out. Sprinting through a city, there was nothing we could do about the shocked gasps as the shadows dragged us.

My wolf ran up a set of stairs in an apartment building, and braced herself as the shadows drew her toward a door. She broke through the damn thing, and it crashed to the ground.

The door crashing didn't stop her, though. She kept going, sprinting through the spacious apartment and into the bathroom, then straight into the walk-in shower. She slammed into a surprised Ryker, and then the shadows vanished as quickly as they'd appeared.

With the shadows gone, my human form fell with Ryker's to the floor of the shower. He maneuvered us so his back was the one that smashed to the ground, and I only felt the impact in my knees.

"Well, this is unexpected." He gave me a crooked grin. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" I countered as I stared down at him for a long moment.

Something twitched against my hip, and I rocketed to my feet. "Something possessed me. I'm fucking possessed. This...darkness, these shadow things, they just took me over and forced my wolf here." I grabbed a towel off a hook

and quickly wrapped it around myself.

“Well, I’m not complaining.” He leaned up against the wall of the shower’s opening, not at all concerned that he was naked.

Naked, and turned on.

“Goddess, put a towel on.” I threw it at him and he chuckled. But he did wrap it around his waist.

“Where’s your mate?” I looked around the room. A guy that gorgeous had to be mated.

He tapped his shoulder—bare, right. I should’ve realized that meant he didn’t have a mate. “In some other guy’s bed, I expect. She rejected me.”

My eyes opened wide. “Seriously? I’ve never met another rejected wolf before.”

“That makes two of us.” His gaze swept up and down my figure.

“How do you know I’m rejected?” My defenses rose, and the fist that wasn’t holding my towel around my tits clenched.

“Rejected wolves are given gifts by the moon goddess. Mine is mind reading.” He tapped his temple. “Yours has something to with being possessed, I’d say, Shadow.”

“It’s Beth.” I looked around his bathroom, suddenly aware that I was alone with a guy I didn’t know. “I should go.”

“Go where?” Shadow murmured.

My stomach clenched.

I’d been living in a women’s shelter, after months of surviving in the forest in wolf form. All I had left was my car, but I had no idea how to get back to it. And the shelter had likely already given away my bed.

I'd been applying for jobs for the three weeks I'd been at the shelter, but interviews made me nervous and my self-esteem was critically low, so I hadn't gotten one yet. My money was nonexistent, and my car only started once a week or so.

I had nothing, and no one.

"Look, I've got money and more space than I need. Why don't you take the spare room, and I can help you find a job?" Ryker's expression lost the entertainment in it.

"I don't need help," I defended myself, tightening my towel around my body.

"Oh, I know. But I'm terribly lonely. My wolf's desperate to belong to a pack again, and even if it's just the two of us, it'd be better than nothing."

I swallowed hard.

I didn't trust him, and it would be completely moronic to move in with a stranger.

But what other choice did I have?

"Does the spare room door lock?" I checked.

Goddess, I had to be insane.

"It does. Not that a lock would stop a werewolf."

Well, that was a good point.

"It would still make me feel better."

"Understandable." He gave me a soft grin. "Let me grab you some of my clothes." He disappeared into his closet, and came back with a pile of fabric.

"Thanks." I bit my lip, and he showed me to the spare bedroom.

The memory made my whole body warm. The moon goddess had looked out for me through my gift—through the shadows that led me to Ryker. I would forever be grateful for that.

I knew it had been early April when I crashed into Ryker, so I was sure the 5th was the right date.

But the fact that he remembered the date, when I didn't even know it...

Damn, he loved me.

I slipped the ring back into the box, then closed it and carefully set it down so I could take off the sweatshirt.

Putting the ring back in the pocket where I'd found it, I hung the sweatshirt in the closet exactly the way I'd left it. If Ryker gave me the sun ring, I wanted it to be on his terms.

Making my way back to his bed in one of his t-shirts, I slipped under the blankets. He hadn't been there in a while, so I sighed when I didn't smell him on them.

"I'll be able to smell him," Shadow reminded me.

No questions asked, I stripped out of the clothes I'd just put on.

Shadow shifted. Though Ryker's scent was stale to her, it was definitely still there.

She wormed her way between the sheets, and inhaled the intoxicating scent of our best friend. We fell asleep quickly, surrounded by the one person who always made us feel important.

Important, and loved.



26

I woke up halfway through the night to the shadows seizing control of me again. I barely managed to get the patio door open before they forced me to shift, and Shadow took over.

It was the same drill as last time; we ran for days, the shadows only driving us to eat when the choice was to eat or pass out.

This time, I knew where it was taking me.

Canada.

To the wolf girl we'd been searching for there.

But things got weird when I found her. It was the typical crash-and-roll meeting, but then I looked around.

At...tents.

Big canvas tents, surrounding a small clearing.

And they looked *familiar*.

"Have I been here before?" I asked the other wolf, who was growling at me.

The wolf tilted her head back and howled, and soon enough the clearing was flooded with women.

Women, and one man.

My lips parted as the memories came rushing back.

My face flushed a furious red, and I shoved at the women who were dragging a dress made of tit-scratching fabric over my head. “Damn you, Ryker!” I yelled, stalking toward him.

He stood on the edge of the group, his expression unreadable even to me.

“You knew my gift was fucked up, and sent me away anyway? With Dante? You fucking asshole. I should take back my vow to be your best friend, and withdraw all our fucking money from our bank account, and—”

He shut me up by crushing his lips to mine.

And well, it was effective.

I pushed his face away when I realized what he was doing and why he was doing it, shoving his chest. He stepped back, though his eyes raked my body, which was half-clothed in one of the potato-sack-dresses I’d worn last time I was there.

“Don’t kiss me. I mated with Dante after you fucking *abandoned* me,” I lied.

“Your shoulder’s bare, but nice try.” He tapped a finger on my bare shoulder, then tugged the hem of the sack dress down my tits. I winced as it scratched them, but smacked his hands away and pulled it into place myself.

“You’re dead to me.” I flipped him the bird, turning and stomping away.

His hand caught my wrist and he spun me back to his chest. Taking my face in his hands, he kissed me again. Slower, softer, and sweeter.

I couldn’t not kiss him back. I just...couldn’t.

“I missed you,” he said simply, as he pulled away. Slipping his fingers in

mine, he tugged me toward the group of witches. Some watched us with envy, others with sad smiles. "I've got a lot to tell you."

"If you've decided to leave my pack for good, I'll stab you in the damn back like you did to me," I growled.

He chuckled. "I'm not leaving our pack. They're going to join it." He gestured to the witches.

I frowned.

Witches couldn't join packs. I mean, yes, packs were just a social construct. But physically and socially, witches weren't werewolves. Other than the werewitches, of course.

"We think we figured out a way to take down the spell that traps us in the forest," one of the witches explained. "But we'll need your help to do it."

"Why?" I looked at her, tugging my fingers out of Ryker's. He held them tighter, not letting me go.

"You're a full werewolf, and not related to anyone they hate," another witch said. "If you bring them something they want more than they want us, they might make a deal with you."

"Might?" I lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, there's no guarantee. But if they don't agree, we can use the object to take the shield down anyway."

I guess that sounded alright. "What is it, and where?" I looked between the witches and Ryker.

"An extremely large alexandrite. They're like batteries for a witch's magic, but can only power one to two spells before dying, depending on size." she explained.

"What is that, some kind of gemstone?" I looked at the witches, knowing gems and jewels were important to them.

“Yes. A rare and expensive one,” she agreed. “Particularly at the size we’ll need.”

“But what are these murderous witches going to do with a witch battery, if we give it to them?” I countered. “They massacred an entire pack.”

“We think they’re going to have to purify the forest.”

I didn’t buy it. “What do they need to purify the forest for?”

“Werewolf spirits,” Ryker’s gaze pierced into me.

He finally let go of my hand, so I folded my arms over my chest. “Assuming we trust you,”

“We do,” Ryker interrupted me.

I shot him a look that hopefully told him exactly how insane he sounded. “*Assuming* we do, who’s to say that they won’t come after my refuge? That they won’t do to us what they did to Ryker’s pack?”

“It was our pack too,” one of the witches argued. “There’s no guarantee that they won’t turn on your refuge, but—”

“But nothing.” I interrupted her. “The refuge is full of people who’ve been through too much shit to suffer because I handed someone a nuclear bomb. Look, I’m totally on board with bringing you guys to the refuge. A werewolf pack with witches in it would be pretty weird, but we don’t give a damn about being weird. As long as you don’t hurt any other werewolves, you’re welcome in the Outcast Pack.”

I continued, “But you need to think of another way to deal with the witches before that happens, because I don’t know you well enough to buy you a battery that could get me and my family evaporated by some magical bitches because of you.”

“I guess that’s fair,” one of the witches murmured.

I added, “I don’t mean to state the obvious here, but have you tried just talking to them? It’s been more than ten years; they might regret what they did to the pack. When I was in Oldenwood, no one attacked me.”

The witches exchanged scowls. “They’re murderers.”

“But they’re still your coven.” I shrugged, then yawned. “I need to sleep. It’s been a long couple of days of running.” I ditched the group of women, striding into the trees in the direction I knew Willoughsbie was.

Ryker stayed back for a minute, but caught up to me before I shifted forms to run there.

“Elizabeth, wait,” he called out.

“Why? So you can abandon me again? I fucking *cried* for you, Ryker. And it’s Beth, again. I’m going by Beth.”

I didn’t look at him, continuing my walk into the forest.

“*Beth*,” he caught my wrist again, but didn’t stop me. Just slid his fingers between mine and walked beside me with those long-ass legs of his. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I shouldn’t have asked the witches to wipe your memories, and I’m sorry. Everything was overwhelming, and I just couldn’t lose another person to magic.”

He made it really hard to keep being angry at him, and he freaking knew it.

“In my defense, I figured the shadows would bring you back here. I just needed to buy myself a couple of days to figure out which side I was on,” he added.

“A couple days of emotional distress for me, jackass.” I tugged my fingers out of his, clenching them in fists. He stopped, and let me walk ahead.

“We can’t go back to the inn,” he called out.

I ignored him.

He jogged up to me. He must've gone shopping for clothes, because he wore a pair of jeans and a jacket I'd never seen before and I knew every item in his closet and dresser.

Yeah, we spent too much time together.

"The coven is watching Willoughsbie. They already know we were there, so it's not safe to go back," he told me, still jogging beside me though he moved as slow as I did. "The storm spell I smelled was alerting them to werewolf presence, but the witches think they could tell that we were full werewolves and that was why they didn't attack.

"I'm not convinced we're any safer here," I shot back. Ryker wasn't thinking clearly. We were dealing with family shit, and there was a reason people relied on experts to help them through things with their families.

"I remember a few of them from when I was a kid. They're family; I trust them. We're safe."

"If that was true, you wouldn't have let them spell my mind. And you would've bought their magic battery yourself without waiting for me." I paused. "And for the record, those memories could probably have been implanted by them and their magical jewelry."

"I'd hear them thinking about doing it if that was the case," he argued. "And even if I missed it, I'd hear when they wondered about how the spell worked and shit like that."

"Ryker, just take a second to think about this from an outside perspective, okay? You're asking me to give a certifiable magic battery to the people who massacred your pack. Have you met them? Do you even know that this little group you've joined is the good guys in the situation?"

"No, but I can see into these women's minds," he argued. "They miss their families, and want to be free to live their lives."

"That's great, but is their freedom worth hundreds of other lives?"

He growled, raking a hand through his hair. “Stop being logical, dammit.”

“I think we should go back to Oldenwood before we do anything else here,” I continued. “When these witches met me, their first instinct was to tie me to a damn tree and use their magic to forcibly question me, so I’m not sold on them being automatically in the right.”

“We’re *not* going to Oldenwood,” Ryker snarled.

He was biased, though.

“Of course I’m fucking *biased*. They massacred everyone I knew and loved,” he snarled again.

“I know, and I’m not telling you not to be biased. You *should* be biased. But what do you want me to do here?” I checked. “This witch camp isn’t safe. They proved they can mess with my mind without a damned care, so I’m not going to be able to sleep here. Yet, my gift keeps dragging me to the wolf-witch chick. And you can’t see anything that’s happening from a neutral perspective, which makes the whole damn thing dangerous because you’re usually the level-headed one of us.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. Letting out a long, slow breath, he stepped to the side of me and leaned his back up against a tree. “I’m sorry I got you into this.”

“You should be sorry you abandoned me,” I growled back.

“I remember apologizing for that already.”

“Well, I’d like to hear it again.” I put a hand on my hip.

“If I apologize again, are you going to make at least fifty percent of an effort to listen?”

“No. Forty-nine percent is my max.”

His lips twitched. “I’ll take it.” He held out a hand, and I reluctantly gave him mine. Tugging me toward him, he lifted my hand to rest on his neck.

“That’s better.”

I rolled my eyes... but it was better.

“Now this one.” He took my other hand, lifting it to the other side of his neck so my fingertips met. Since he was so damn tall, the movement dragged my body up flush against his. “Beth,” he said.

My name still sounded wrong, even from his lips.

I needed to pick a different one, I just didn’t know what to choose.

“I’m massively, tremendously sorry that I asked the witches to wipe your memories. Though in my defense I knew it would be temporary.”

I pinched his neck, and his lips lifted in a deadly grin. “A *real* apology, asshole.”

“I shouldn’t have left you with Dante. It was a mistake, and if I could take it back, I would. You’re beautiful, and brilliant, and you always see things from a perspective I can’t. I needed you here with me, and I still do. I always will.” He paused. “How was that?”

I shrugged, making our chests brush in the best way. “Better.”

“Still not pleased, huh?” His fingers slid over my scalp, gently tugging the knots in my hair. “What do you want from me, Bettie?”

“Everything.” I went up on my tiptoes, pressing my lips to his. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and my body warmed as our lips and tongues moved together.

He pulled away after a minute. “I need to get you to a shower, and a bed.”

“I thought we were staying here.” I lifted an eyebrow toward him.

“We were, up until you said you won’t be able to sleep here.” He pressed his lips to mine, once more. “How long was Shadow running?”

“Two days or so. It’s harder to gauge the time than it used to be.” I gazed into his caramel eyes. “I can’t believe we’re standing in a forest, kissing. Like a *couple*. I mean, I always hoped, but it’s...”

“Perfect?” Ryker lifted an eyebrow. “Right? Lovely?”

“Surreal,” I corrected him. “And I’m still worried you’re going to change your mind again and decide we’re better off as friends, so it doesn’t feel quite perfect.”

“You think I’m going to change my mind about being attracted to you?” He seemed to have a hard time believing that.

“Yeah. You did once before.”

“Going back to being just friends with you was one of the hardest fucking things I’ve ever done. Do you know how many cold showers I’ve taken? How many times I’ve tossed and turned in a bed that smells like you? How many times I’ve relived that night we almost mated, imagining where we’d be if it had ended differently?” He let go of me, stepping back and starting to pace. It was something he did to quell his anxiety when it started to rise, I knew.

“Back then, we were all each other had. I decided I’d rather have you as a friend than not at all. Now, we’ve got the pack. Friends, family. It would be hell to lose each other, but we’d survive it. We’re older, stronger, more stable. I’ve had so many years to wonder what if, and I’m tired of it.”

He continued, spewing thoughts. I loved it when he ranted, particularly because I’d never seen or heard him rant to anyone but *me*. “I just want us to be together without me sleeping on the damn couch and you stepping away before I kiss the hell out of you. I don’t want to have to pretend not to be attracted to you, or act like I don’t want to slit the throats of the other assholes when they’re checking you out or imagining fucking you, or imagining you as their fucking *mate*. I want to make you orgasm when you’re stressed and let you distract me with your body when I’m stressed, and I want us to be a hell of a lot more than friends.”

I stared at him, long and hard.

We'd spent so much time not kissing, not sleeping together, not *mated*, because we were both too oblivious to see that we wanted each other.

So much lost time.

I was feeling a hell of a lot of emotions about that lost time, and they were forcing their way out. I could either laugh them out or cry them out...and I'd done too much crying in the past week anyway.

So I let the emotions bubble to the surface, and laughed.

Ryker gave me a reluctant grin.

I laughed harder, and harder, until my eyes were watering and there was pain beneath my ribs because I'd been laughing so damn hard.

"We have spent years thinking the same things." I wiped at my eyes with the back of my hands, then realized they were shaking. I needed to eat, and sleep. "Goddess, we were oblivious."

Stumbling toward him, I planted my hands on his chest. "Did you know I have your closet memorized? I legitimately know every item of clothing you own. I check you out so often that you should probably get a restraining order."

He gave a low chuckle. "Then you'd have to get one against me too, because I'm the same way. Haven't you noticed me buying you low-cut tops the last few birthdays and Christmases?"

"I thought you just didn't realize how low-cut they were," I protested.

His grin grew wolfish. "I'm not blind."

"Apparently not. I—" I cut myself off with a massive yawn. My stomach growled, as I yawned.

"Double whammy, there." He poked me in the belly, and I grabbed his

hand to stop him from tickling me. “Your body is warning me to quit hitting on you and take care of you, and I’m inclined to listen. Let me tell the witches we’re leaving, and then we’ll head to another town on the other side of the forest.”

I nodded, and off we went.



27

By the time we made it to the other town, I was dead on my feet—or Shadow was dead on her paws, I guess. Ryker’s wolf had carried his clothes and wallet while Shadow had carried my scratchy dress, so we weren’t in the nude.

After checking in to a hotel room—one with a single king size bed, this time—Ryker scooped me up and carried me over the threshold of the hotel room.

I didn’t even complain, leaning my head against his chest.

He set me on my feet and stripped my scratchy dress off me in the bathroom, then propelled me into the shower and slid the curtain into place. “You have two minutes,” he warned.

“What are you, the shower police?” I called back, grabbing the small, stinky bar of soap when he held it through the curtain.

“That’s my exact job title, yes,” Ryker confirmed. “Shower Police. I walk around all day making sure no one takes too long of a shower, for water conservation purposes. And to prevent them from passing out and hitting their heads, of course. I see a lot of nudity, but it’s usually one of the upsides of my career.”

I snorted. “Moron.”

“No, the title is *Shower Police*. With an S, not an M.”

A laugh slipped out of me as I continued to scrub.

“I’m serious about the passing out. I saw you nearly run into the hotel’s front door, Elizabeth. One minute left.”

I scrubbed faster. “I need two minutes just to get this dirt out of my hair. Add time to the clock.”

“I guess I should clarify; you have one minute until I get in there and clean you up myself.”

My eyes widened, and my scrubbing slowed.

Was that supposed to make me scrub faster? Because if so, it wasn’t working.

“Ooh, I’m feeling dizzy,” I lied, tossing the soap to the ground and slapping a palm to the shower wall.

He stepped in, already naked, and grabbed me by the waist. “You know I can read your mind, Bettie.” He pulled me to his chest, squishing my soft curves against his rough muscles.

“Funny that you mention that after years of not realizing I was thinking dirty thoughts about you,” I countered.

“Dirty thoughts? I like where this is going.” He tugged me tighter to him, his erection pressing into my lower belly while my tits smashed his chest.

“Do you? I can’t tell,” I taunted. “You’re feeling a little *small*.”

“I assure you, there’s nothing small about any part of me. But you remember that, don’t you?” His lips curved up in a wicked grin when my thoughts went right back to the night we nearly mated.

“I’m having a hard time recalling it,” I breathed.

“So many lies tonight, Bettie.” Ryker’s tongue flicked my nose, and I stuck my tongue out at him.

He licked that too.

I laughed. “I love you.”

“I know.” His grin turned boyish. “Let’s finish washing your hair so I can get you to bed.”

“Is that a proposition?” I wiggled my hips, teasing the rock against my lower belly.

“Not this time, unfortunately. Tonight, you need to sleep.” He kissed my lips softly. “Have you accepted Dante’s rejection withdrawal yet?”

I made a face. “You can’t bring him up while we’re naked in the shower together, Ry. And no, I haven’t. He was nice to me for a couple of hours, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to keep at it. For all I know, he’ll change his mind and surprise me with another damn claim bite.”

Ryker growled. “You’re right. Let’s not talk about him while we’re naked in the shower.”

“Agreed.” I grabbed the small bottle of shampoo and worked it through my hair. Ryker’s fingers stroked lazily over my hips, waist, and back as I scrubbed and then washed it out. His touch was both relaxing and a turn-on at the same time, somehow.

He shut the water off when I was finished, and reached out of the shower to grab a towel. Rather than wrapping it around himself, he slipped it behind me and wrapped me up in it.

The motion made my throat swell a bit.

It was a small gesture—but something he wouldn’t have done when we were *just friends*, because we’d never showered together.

I liked feeling like I got more of him than I’d had before—even though

he'd already been mine then, in a different way.

He grabbed his own towel. "I was yours then, too. I just hid it better. Why do you think I never dated anyone?"

"I thought you just hated the idea of tying yourself permanently to someone whose thoughts you could read." I shrugged. "I'd be annoyed if I were you."

He chuckled. "I'm used to that. I never hit on any of the women because I already knew which one I wanted, and she wasn't interested." He slid his hand into mine and helped me out of the hotel's shower/tub.

"She was interested, you just didn't realize it," I pointed out.

"Talking about yourself in the third person now?"

"When it suits me." I shrugged. Needing to get my hair up off my back so I could sleep without getting soaked and cold, I slipped the towel off and bent in half. My wet hair slapped the ground, and I engulfed it in the towel to keep it from dripping everywhere.

Leaving it wrapped up, I straightened to find Ryker's eyes burning into my body. "Nice tent." I batted at his towel with the back of my hand, but he caught me before I made contact.

"Careful what you start, Bettie," he warned, a wicked glint in his eyes. "If you declare open season, you'll never get me off your tits."

I snorted. "Classy."

"Very," he agreed.

"Fine." I tugged my hand away, then batted his erection again just to prove I could.

Open season sounded incredible.

The backs of his fingers skidded over my nipple, and my whole damn body

clenched.

“I did warn you.” He dropped a kiss on my forehead. “I’ll be back with food. Get some rest, Beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“Yes, you’re beautiful. You don’t seem to like any of the other nicknames I’ve been using, but I don’t see how you could protest this one. And since you’re questioning the compliment, I obviously haven’t said it enough. So get used to it.”

He kissed my lips, then tossed his towel into the bathroom and scooped up his clothes.

I watched him get dressed, not moving from where I stood.

He flashed me a knowing grin and grabbed our hotel’s keycard off the nightstand. “Try to get some sleep. I’ll be back soon.” He disappeared out the door, and it both shut and locked with a clicking noise.

Tired enough to take his advice, I shut the lights off and slipped into bed. I didn’t bother with clothes, mostly because I wanted to see Ryker’s reaction when he realized I was naked in the bed we were supposed to share.

Leaving my hair up in the towel, I got cozy and closed my eyes. Though I had been keyed up, exhaustion worked with the comfort of the bed and knocked me right out.

I woke up when someone opened the door to the room, closing my eyes when the intruder whispered, “It’s me.”

I heard his footsteps on the floor before the bed dipped a bit as he slid in and scooted over to me. “I come bearing food,” he murmured, brushing a few escaped little strands of hair up toward my towel. I was asleep on my side, the comforter pulled to my chin.

“Not hungry,” I mumbled.

My stomach growled its disagreement.

Ryker opened up a wrapped burger that smelled like heaven, and my stomach growled again.

“Come on,” he sang, setting it down in front of my face. I opened my eyes, and peered blearily out at the burger.

It even *looked* delicious.

“I’m too comfortable,” I finally said, closing my eyes again.

“Come on, Beautiful. Eat the food and we can snuggle.”

Snuggling did sound good.

Really, really good.

He slipped under the blankets and spooned me from behind. His hand met my hip, and stilled. “Are you naked?”

“No,” I lied.

His fingers slid over my lower belly, warming me in a different way, before sliding up to my tits. He pinched a nipple gently between his fingers, and I inhaled sharply.

“Yes,” I corrected myself.

“Goddess, you’re sexy,” he muttered, grabbing the burger and dragging it closer. “Bite this before I give in to my instincts and bite *you*.”

“I never said I was opposed to that,” I reminded him, as he played with my nipples with his one free hand.

“You never said you weren’t opposed to it, either.”

“What if I said I wanted that?” I checked. “To wear your bite?”

“Then I’d bite you before you had time to change your mind.” His teeth scraped over my shoulder, making me shiver. “I’d love to make things more permanent. When people look at you, I want them to know that you’re mine. That we belong to each other. That if I catch them imagining you naked, I’ve got every right to punch them for it.”

“That’s touching,” I drawled.

“Well, I do like touching you,” he drawled back, pinching my nipple again.

“Don’t make me horny. I need to sleep more.” I smacked his hand halfheartedly.

“Fine.” He stopped teasing my nipple, instead just cupping my boob. It actually felt pretty nice. “Eat your burger,” he repeated.

I obeyed.

Ryker fell asleep while I was still eating, his fingers remaining wrapped possessively around my tit. Yawning, I closed my eyes and fell back asleep too.



28

We headed back to the witches late the next afternoon, planning to camp out in the forest the next few nights. We would save a bit of time doing that, and we were cool with it now that we'd had a chance to get cleaned up and catch up on sleep.

We'd spent a damn lot of time living in the forest while hunting for the rabid wolves the shadows had dragged me to, so we knew it wouldn't be a big deal.

It occurred to me, as we were putting our clothes back on just outside the witches' campsite (I'd claimed Ryker's shirt as my own, since the sack dress was so scratchy), that to the rejected werewitch, Ryker would seem like the perfect possible mate. They were from the same pack originally, and both were rejected.

When he didn't comment on the thought, my suspicion grew.

"Did she hit on you?" I spun to face him, putting a hand on my hip.

"Pleading the fifth." Ryker tried to slip away from me, but I grabbed his arm and dragged him back.

"Talk. Now."

"Lina may have slipped into my bed the other night. Naked," he admitted. "I told her I was in love with my best friend, of course, and sent her on her

way.”

“Ryker,” I growled, knowing he was withholding information.

“I also assured her that the refuge was full of willing men who would be thrilled to find her in their beds.”

I grabbed him by the neck of his shirt and glared at him. “The full story.”

He sighed. “She attempted to spell me into biting and fucking her. It worked up until my wolf tasted her blood, and then realized she wasn’t you. He’ll never forget the way you taste.” Ryker ran his fingertips up the backs of my thighs. “I dropped her on her ass in the dirt, told her I was in love with you, and threatened her not to use magic on me again unless she wanted the full force of our mostly-male pack at her doorstep.”

“But her shoulder?”

“Bitten,” he admitted. “She wanted the mark, so it’s still there.”

Rage blazed to life within me. “I’m going to fucking kill her.”

I let go of Ryker, storming toward the witches’ camp.

He caught me, grabbing me by the waist and holding me in his arms bride-and-groom style. “Her mark will go away when I bite you.”

“You haven’t even *tried* to do that. You’re connected to her. And since I *know* you sleep naked when I’m not there, I’m sure her naked bits were all up in your naked bits.” The visual made me and Shadow snarl together, “She has more claim on you than I do right now.”

“She has *no* claim on me, Beautiful. And the only reason I haven’t bitten you is because you’re pissed at me, and I don’t want to take that step while you’re pissed.”

“Bullshit.” I struggled to get out of his arms, but he held me tight. “You magic me away so you can bite another chick, and then you make up some BS about it being my fault? Yeah, right. Go fuck a cactus.”

Ryker turned and began carrying me away from the witches' camp, still wrestling my fighting body.

"You're a damned menace," he grumbled, starting to jog when I nearly got free. "And if I fucked a cactus, we both know you'd be the one pulling needles out of my dick."

"You deserve the pain," I growled back.

Finally getting free, I managed to land on my bare feet.

A glance at Ryker told me he'd let me go.

Damn him.

His fingers found the hem of my shirt—well, his shirt that I was wearing—and tugged it over my head. He tossed it over a low-hanging branch to keep it out of the dirt, and his hands cupped my face. "I'm going to bite you now," he warned.

"Only because I found out about fucking *Lina*," I snarled back.

"No," his wolf's eyes replaced his for a burning moment. "Female, I have been yours since I tasted your blood on my tongue the first time. There is no other for me but you." He crushed our bodies together, pinning me to a tree before his fangs sank into my shoulder.

I moaned at the bliss that accompanied the bite, my body going limp as the wolf in Ryker's body withdrew and licked the rapidly-healing wound.

"My human fears losing you, but I see the truth," the wolf murmured to me. "You have been mine as long as I've been yours."

"Longer," I breathed, the back of my head smacking into the tree. Ryker's body held my weight, and his hands found my hips when his wolf finally withdrew.

Our hearts pounded together, pressed up against one another.

When I finally opened my eyes, I found Ryker staring at me with that intense expression I'd only recently discovered meant he loved me.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" I lifted an eyebrow.

"No. Definitely fucking not. I just want to hear you say that I made you feel good." His voice edged on a growl.

"You made me feel good." I raked my fingers through his hair. The bliss faded from me, leaving me with a feeling of security that I'd been lacking before.

"Only good?"

"Fishing for compliments again?" I teased.

"Only from you. I get to pluck everyone else's compliments out of their heads." He pressed his lips to my temple.

"If you want a real compliment, you're going to have to earn it," I folded my arms.

"I'm listening."

I focused my mind on a mental image of Ryker's face between my thighs in that motel room all those years ago.

Goddess, I could still remember the way his mouth felt on my core.

His eyes darkened. "Grab the tree." He dropped to his knees in front of me. My arms wrapped around the back of the tree as he spread my legs a bit, parting my folds with his thumbs.

He blew a slow breath of air on me, and my breathing grew shallow. "If I knew you wanted this, we never would've left the hotel," he growled, before his tongue slowly licked up my center.

“If I knew you wanted to do it, I would’ve sat on your face before we could—oh *shit*,” I swore as his finger followed his tongue up my clit.

My legs started to shake as he slowly picked up speed, and my breathing grew shallow and fast.

He was torturing me in the best possible fucking way, and *by the goddess*, I hoped he never stopped.

When he slipped two fingers inside me, not even bothering to start with just one, I shattered.

He held up my jelly-legs, his tongue slowing and growing gentle as I rode out the orgasm on his fingers. When he finally, *unfortunately*, withdrew them, he stood and slipped the finger in his mouth.

Watching that made me horny all over again.

He leaned his lips to my ear. “It might be kind of sexy if our first time together is in the forest.”

Goosebumps went up my spine. “Hell yes, it would.”

“But the witches are expecting us, so it’s going to have to wait until tonight.” He kissed the tip of my nose, and then my forehead. “Thanks for letting me get you off.”

“Any time,” I breathed.

“After dinner?”

It was already late afternoon, so dinner was pretty damn soon. “Really?” I lifted my eyebrows.

His lips brushed my ear again. “You taste really damn good. And now I want you to sit on my face.”

I laughed. “I guess I’d survive that.”

“Barely,” he agreed.

Grabbing his shirt off the branch, he tugged it over my head and helped me get dressed, like I was a toddler.

I didn’t even care.

His fingers slipped between mine, and we headed back toward the witches. The breeze didn’t feel entirely pleasant on my bare, damp nether-region, but it wasn’t terrible either. We should’ve bought me some clothes while we were in town, but it had slipped our minds.

“I’ll ask the witches,” he remarked, responding to my thoughts. That was the usual for us, though.

“Not Lina,” I warned.

I wasn’t wearing anything that smelled like the chick who tried to force him to mate with her. Honestly, I wanted to beat the shit out of her. If they had gotten any further, I would’ve.

“Did she bite you?” I asked him.

“Wow, that’s a pretty tree.” He gestured to an average, boring tree off to the side of us.

“She did?”

“We’re running late,” he tapped his wrist, where no watch had ever actually sat. We hadn’t even given the witches a time we’d be there, so that was BS.

I was going to kill him.

“Yes, she bit me. But as you can see, it already healed because I didn’t want the bite. So you’ve got nothing to worry about.

“Nothing to worry about? That bitch saw us together. She knew I was in

love with you, and that you were in love with me, and then tried to force you to sleep with her,” I snarled. “That’s attempted rape, Ryker. Why are you not pissed about this?”

“I am pissed about it. I already threatened to leave the witches alone here if they try any more magic on me. One of them had me eat a plant that protects me from their magic, so I’m trying to let it go. They’re what remains of my pack, and I feel responsible for getting them out of this forest so they’re safe to live normal lives.”

I huffed, letting go of his hand. I was getting really damn worked up. “What would you do if one of them used a spell to try to bite and fuck *me*?”

His nostrils flared. “They would die.”

“Exactly; that’s not okay. And if you don’t want to watch me kick the werewitch’s ass for doing it, don’t watch.”

Ryker took my hand again, and walked beside me in silence.

I was *steaming*.

If someone tried what that witch had at my refuge, whether male or female, they would be thrown out on their ass in an instant and I’d flip them off as they walked away.

I stormed into the witches’ camp, tugging my hand out of Ryker’s. Lina, AKA the rejected wolf I’d been led to a handful of times, stood just outside one of the white tents, talking to another of the werewitch chicks.

Striding up to the werewitches, I didn’t stop to breathe or think. I stepped between the women, and slammed my palm upward. Lina’s nose crunched and she snarl-screamed, stepping backward clumsily.

“You tried to *rape* my best friend,” I snarled. “You’re lucky I’m not a murderer, or I’d slit your fucking throat.”

Blood poured from her nose, but she glared at me heatedly. “The spell wouldn’t have worked if he wasn’t willing.”

Her words sank into me, and I spun to look back at Ryker as my defenses went up again.

Was that the truth?

His eyes were apologetic.

No wonder he hadn't freely volunteered the information.

We were going to be having words.

Loud, angry, *hurt* words. It was that or retreating somewhere to cry, and I was so damn tired of crying.

“If he was really willing, you wouldn't have needed a spell at all,” I snapped. “If you want to join my pack and move into my refuge, you've really fucked up your chances. In the Outcast Pack, we respect each other.”

The witch's face grew red. “I didn't do anything wrong,” she insisted. “My magic's a part of me.”

“And my anger is a part of me, but you don't see me murdering everyone who pisses me off. Your invitation to the refuge is officially rescinded. Prove you can use your magic responsibly and respectably, and maybe I'll consider letting you in again.”

The witch beside her gaped. “That's the only place we have to go.”

“You're still welcome. She isn't.” I pointed to Lina. “Use your damn plant magic all you want, but don't fucking think about using your magic against *any* of my werewolves.”

I stepped away from her, looking for the leader of the group, and walking to her. “Have you thought of a way to take the other witches down?” I demanded.

She looked almost as worried as the other witch outside had. “Please, forgive my daughter. The only interaction she's had with a man was her fated

mate, and he treated her poorly.”

“Being treated poorly isn’t an excuse for what she did. If she wants to be forgiven, she’ll prove herself worthy of it.” I folded my arms. “Do you have another way or not? I’m not giving a magic battery to either of you.”

She shook her head. “We’re trying, though.”

They needed to put their big-girl panties on and go talk to their damn ex-coven. I knew it, Ryker knew it, and they probably knew it too. But it looked like I was the only one who actually would do it.

“*Shadow?*” I mentally nudged my wolf.

“*Mmhmm.*” She was lazy and content with the peace of having a claim mark on my shoulder.

“*Say something about the weather.*”

She spewed something random, and I mentally whispered to her, “*We’re going to have to go meet the witches in Oldenwood on our own. We’ll leave tonight, after Ryker goes to sleep.*”

I felt more than heard her agreement, as she continued rambling. She would keep our thoughts from Ryker, so he wouldn’t stop us from going to the witches.

Shadow stopped trying to hide my thoughts when they focused on Ryker.

Why hadn’t he just bought them one of the gemstone-batteries, if he believed in them so strongly?

Ryker strolled up to my side, draping his arm over my shoulders.

“We’ll think of something,” Ryker promised the witch. “Let’s just keep going through those grimoires.”

The witch nodded. Grimoires were their names for spell-books; books with gemstones embedded in their covers to ensure their magic stayed strong and

kept others outside their coven out.

If they were letting him flip through their grimoires, they considered him part of their coven.

Not good for me, or my pack.

“Do you have any clothes Beth can borrow?” Ryker asked the witches, his voice a pleasant neutral.

I wanted to strangle him for that pleasant neutral, but as we’d both pointed out, he was biased.

“Of course. Lina,” she raised her voice.

“Beth’s a bit larger-chested than Lina. Cyntia, perhaps?” he pressed.

At least he took my warning about the werewitch’s clothing to heart.

“Sure. Cyntia!” she called out. “Grab Beth a set of clothing, please.”

The girl called back an agreement.

“We’ll go with her,” Ryker told the witch.

Probably wise.



29

Ryker made small talk with Cyntia while she pulled clothes out of a trunk at the end of a twin bed. It was in a tent of about six twin-sized beds, and I was kind of surprised that they had real mattresses given their temporary-camp setup.

“You could change in here, but there’s more privacy in Ryker’s tent,” Cyntia told me.

“Ryker’s tent?” I tilted my head, eyeing him suspiciously.

“He’s the only male. It wouldn’t be right if any of us shared a tent with him.” Cyntia shrugged, slipping out of the tent. “Let me know if you need another set,” she called over her shoulder as she left.

“You didn’t tell me you had a tent, Ry.”

“I did tell you I had a bed, though,” he offered.

“This is becoming a pattern,” I warned, as he led me to the far edge of the camping area. There was no one else nearby; all of the witches out hunting for food or looking through their grimoires or something. “And not a pattern that leads to us having a good relationship.”

He grimaced. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“So you keep saying.”

“Alright. Get dressed, and I’ll tell you everything that’s happened since they erased your memories.”

Finally.



30

My head spun as I tried to process everything Ryker had experienced while we were apart. It was... a lot. Magic, mayhem, a witch-hunt through the forest...

The coven had narrowed down the witch pack's camp site and were combing the forest for them. The witch pack was trying to move to a new site, but the coven's trackers were too close for them to move anywhere unnoticed.

And that meant they were in a kill or be killed situation. They'd already taken out a few witches from the coven, but they felt shitty for taking out their ex-sisters.

Everything Ryker said only confirmed my surety about my plan to sneak away from him and go talk to the coven. They hadn't been trying to kill any of the werewitches, from what he had said, which I thought was a good sign.

Shadow, of course, hid my plan from Ryker with strategically-thrown thoughts about random shit.

He eyed me suspiciously every time she did it, but didn't ask why while we were in the witches' camp. I didn't think he'd told them about his mind-reading yet, so bringing it up wouldn't be smart for him.

I figured he probably expected I was thinking less-than-nice thoughts about him, and would let him believe that until I got back from visiting the

coven.

He flipped through grimoires with the other witches while I taught a younger werewitch how to do the nose-breaking move I'd pulled on Lina. My self-defense classes and practice with Ryker had finally proved useful after all.

The witches wouldn't let me near their grimoires, so I ate an assload of the venison stew they'd made for dinner and stared at the fire while Ryker sat beside me, scanning the pages.

When he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, we made our way to the tent. I told him I felt comfortable staying in the tent—which wasn't a lie, because I did feel comfortable staying for as long as I was going to stay.

AKA, not long.

The witch pack considered Ryker family, so he was safe there.

Me, on the other hand... to them, I was still kind of the enemy.

I slipped through the tent's door flap after Ryker was solidly asleep. My borrowed faded-black leggings and plain gray sweater weren't quite enough to keep me warm, but I'd be shifting anyway.

The dirt was ice cold on my feet as I padded into the forest, trying not to make too much noise. My arms wrapped around my stomach as I weaved around trees, stepping over rocks and brush.

When I was far enough from the witches' campsite, I stripped and shifted. Carrying my clothes in her teeth wasn't Shadow's favorite thing in the world, but she understood the need for it.

She remembered which direction to go to find Oldenwood, and ran.

It was a few hours by paw, but Shadow made it there without a problem. I shifted back to human on the edge of town, pulling clothes on before striding through the trees to head in and start looking for the coven.

I wasn't sure if the town was all witches or if there were humans mixed in, so I just sort of wandered for the first ten or fifteen minutes. Despite it being one or two AM, the place was really *alive*. There were plenty of people on the streets, and music played from instruments held by men and women sitting on benches. With the stars and moon shining above us and music filling the air, it was really damn beautiful.

After a bit of a walk, my gaze collided with a set of eyes I recognized.

The man who'd given me his suit jacket when I was naked, and let me use his phone.

He smiled when he saw me, and waved. I made my way over to him, finding myself smiling too.

"Well, I didn't think I'd ever see you again," he teased.

"I didn't think I'd ever come back here again," I admitted, wrapping my arms around my middle in an attempt to protect myself from the cold.

"What brings you back?" he checked.

"I'm looking for a witch. Well, a group of them. Do you know where I can find them?"

"Of course. Come with me." He held out an arm.

I didn't trust him, obviously, but I did believe him. Taking the arm he offered, I walked beside him. Many eyes followed us as we walked down the street. Some were surprised and curious, others were angry or judgmental.

I ignored all of them, and the man did too.

"There are a lot of women in the town," I noticed. The ratio was ten women to one man, at best.

"Yes. Witches are always born female, and they haven't been blessed with fated mates by the earth mother," the man agreed. "Not many of them find

love matches. Having a new female in town, witch or werewolf, only increases the competition,” he explained.

Oh. “Well, I’m taken.” My fingers slipped under the neck of my sweatshirt, brushing over the smooth skin that I knew had already healed into a perfect crescent scar on both the front and back of my shoulder. “Are you married to a witch, then?” I asked. I’d noticed he wore a wedding band, with a gemstone on it like those the witches always used.

“Yes. My wife has been running the coven for the last few years. Gaining control was quite the task, as the last leaders were vicious and cruel, but she leads now and the town is better for it.”

I nodded, as if that wasn’t news to me.

Or confirming my suspicions.

“My rejection gift leads me to other werewolves, and it brought me to one in the forest. Do you know of a wolf pack near here?”

His eyes brightened. “Part of our coven broke away under the previous leadership. Not full werewolves, like you, but were-witches. My wife has been trying to invite them back for years, but they constantly elude us. Maybe you can lead us to that wolf?”

“I didn’t smell anything strange about it that pointed to it not being a full werewolf, but I might be able to find it again,” I agreed, careful not to specify gender.

As nice as the man seemed, I didn’t want to give him information in case the coven was still against werewolves and actually trying to kill the witch pack.

The man asked about my mate while we walked back. I decided not to mention that we weren’t fully-mated, giving him fun stories and vague details that would be useless against me and Ryker as we walked. He chuckled at my stories, and when he shared some of his own, I laughed too.

We finally reached a large house. It was painted green, and tall. Five stories tall, but not crazy wide, so it looked a bit unstable.

“No need to knock,” the man said cheerfully, opening the front door. “Lina,” he called out.

My eyebrows lifted. “Lina?”

“My wife’s name,” he nodded.

Well, that couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Coming!” a feminine voice sang.

The man—whose name I still didn’t know—gestured me toward a couch up against the wall. I sat down, looking around the house to figure out what kind of people I was dealing with.

A gray-haired woman with sun-tanned skin came swishing down the stairs, thick bohemian skirts floating and brushing around her feet and the wooden steps.

She landed on the wood, glancing from her husband to me and frowning. “Who’s this?”

“The female werewolf I gave my coat to. She’s been looking for witches,” he explained.

I tensed, ready for her to attack.

“Have you met the wolves in the forest, then?” she stepped toward me, suddenly urgent. “Have you seen them? Please tell me, is Sevana alive?”

I wasn’t sure who Sevana was, but since the older witch was named Lina, I could imagine the younger Lina’s mother had named her daughter after her own mother.

“I don’t know. They didn’t mention any recent deaths, though.” *That didn’t sound like giving too much away, right?*

She dropped to the couch across from me, her eyes filling with unshed tears. “We’ve been trying to find them for years. My daughter, Sevana, was injured when she and the others escaped. Her daughter’s name is Lina, after mine.”

Well, that confirmed my suspicion pretty thoroughly.

I still wasn’t going to spill everything, but I didn’t think these Oldenwood witches were against the witch pack as much as the rest of them seemed to.

“They’re hiding from you. They think you’re hunting them.” I watched her expression closely. Spending a lot of time with Ryker had helped me figure out most of the tells when someone was lying; he almost always knew if someone was bullshitting or telling the truth.

“We are. Not to kill them, though. We need them to rejoin our coven, to help us take down the barrier preventing us from leaving,” Lina the elder explained.

“What do you mean?” I tilted my head. From what the witch pack had said, it was only trapping their little group inside the walls.

“The last head witch was cruel and abused her power. She destroyed an entire *pack* of werewolves, using power she’d stolen from us. When myself and others removed her from her place as head of the coven, it made her angry and we were forced to kill her. She used the last of her magic to put up a forcefield that would trap us in our city. Trapping the ex-coven-members wasn’t the purpose, but she would’ve considered it a happy accident.”

It could’ve been a load of BS, but I was inclined to believe her. I wasn’t someone who assumed the best of everyone, but she seemed genuine. And the story made sense, as far as explaining why the witch pack couldn’t leave the forest but Ryker could. If the spell had been targeted at the witches, it wouldn’t affect Ryker, but would still work on the werewitches.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” I countered. “The other witches tell the story differently.”

“I’m sure they do,” she agreed. “They lived it differently, and lost their mates. But we can’t take down the wall holding us to Oldenwood without them. One of the women in their group is descended from our old head witch; she’s the only one who will be able to coax her mother’s power out of the forcefield, with the help of the rest of us.”

“I’ll talk to them,” I said vaguely. I wasn’t making any promises, even if I did think they were right.

“Can you give something to my daughter for me?” Older Lina asked, standing quickly.

I nodded.

Might as well.

Striding over to a console table near the door, she opened the drawer and pulled out a thick, elegant envelope.

“I’ll get a baggie for it, dear,” the man said, kissing his wife on the head before disappearing into the kitchen.

“You married a human?” I asked her, curious how that had happened.

Her lips pulled up in a wide smile. “I did. His family is from Willoughsbie, and when we saw each other, it was love at first sight. There are many lonely witches here, but I’m lucky enough not to be one of them.”

Well, that was adorable.

“Assuming your coven ends up trustworthy, and doesn’t try to kill us, maybe some of my wolves can come visit. I run a pack of outcasts,” I explained quickly. “It’s mostly men, and they’re desperate for mates.”

The woman’s eyes lit up again, then grew watery. “Dear, that would mean the world to many of our younger women.”

“Then don’t betray me.” I shot her a quick grin, and she gave a small

laugh.

“Despite what the other witches have likely been saying, witches and werewolves typically get along. Our magic is grounded in the earth to the goddess beneath, while yours is connected to the moon and the goddess above. We both respect nature, and care little for human wealth.”

“You live in a four-story house,” I pointed out.

But I lived in a monstrous refuge, at least ten times as big as her house. So, I knew the remark was a bit hypocritical. I just wanted to hear her response.

“This isn’t my house; it’s the coven’s. My husband and I have only one room, and take care of the space with many others.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug as her husband came back with a large Ziploc bag. Carefully, she tucked the envelope into the bag and zipped it. “Thank you for visiting. What did you say your name was?”

I opened my mouth to say “Beth,” but that wasn’t what came out. “Shadow.”

The woman lifted an eyebrow. “Shadow?” Her gaze swept my figure. “It suits you,” she finally said.

My chest warmed.

It did.

“*Perhaps I’m the one who should choose a new name,*” my wolf said, amused.

“*Sorry, I didn’t mean to steal yours,*” I apologized.

“*It’s alright. Ryker first used it as a nickname for you; you’re welcome to take it back.*”

I liked the sound of that.

“*Maybe I will.*”

“He’ll choose a new name for me,” my wolf decided. “A human one, since you have a wolf’s.”

A smile parted my lips as I said goodbye and left Older Lina’s house.

“Bettie, maybe?” I teased.

“No. Bettie doesn’t suit either of us. It’s a cute name, and we’re far too fierce to be cute.”

I grinned.

That, I could agree with.



31

We ran for a few more hours, stopping a few dozen miles from the witch pack's camp. In case the witches had put a tracking spell on us, we needed to call Ryker to us so he could show us the plant that would protect us from magic.

After carefully setting our clothes and the bagged envelope on a dry rock, my wolf lifted her muzzle to the sky and let out a piercing howl. It was full of emotion—one that would stir other wolves and make them want to sing to the moon with her.

Another howl answered, off in the direction we knew the witch pack was. It was from a female wolf though.

A third wolf joined in, and that one's howl felt like a knife to the chest

He was *pissed*.

"*Shit*," I muttered to my wolf.

"*It's alright*," she murmured. "*He'll forgive us*."

"*His wolf is much less laid-back than he is, though*."

"*I'll deal with the wolf*," she said smugly.

I saw a visual thought of her jumping on him, biting into his shoulder to mark him.

That would probably distract him, but I didn't know if it would lead him to forgive us.

Ryker's wolf howled again, much closer. Still just as angry, but this time, demanding. He wanted to hear us again, to know our location.

My wolf howled back, telling him where we were once again.

We waited a bit more.

Ryker's third howl was close—only minutes away.

We started growing excited to see him; my wolf was desperate to mark his shoulder.

But before we did, our vision went dark.

"The shadows," my wolf whined.

Their power over us was growing stronger, and more mind-numbing.

I couldn't see where we were running, as we sprinted away. But the place we were being tugged wasn't the witch pack—it was much further than that.

"Goddess, don't let it be across an ocean," I pleaded.

I probably wouldn't survive tracking a European reject in Europe alone, particularly if I had to swim to get there. I was a shitty swimmer, and my wolf was so damn heavy that she pretty much just sank right to the bottom of every body of water.

As we ran, my mind remained alert for an hour, maybe two, before everything faded away to darkness.



32

Ryker

My wolf found Beth's clothes and a Ziploc bag that smelled like her, but she was gone.

We searched the area for signs of her, but it was like she had vanished. Her scent stopped at her things, and didn't move. There was no smell of magic near her, though a glance at the envelope told me she'd gone and talked to the damned witches like I'd asked her not to.

"It must be her gift," my wolf snarled. "It's gone rabid."

I wanted to believe it was the witches, but if they were involved, we would smell them or their magic. I'd been told that there was no way to choose which scents to conceal, so since I could still smell Beth's, no one had intervened.

My wolf continued snarling. *"She needs to accept Dante's rejection-withdrawal, or he needs to reject her again."* I was damn glad the wolf was in control because I had no fucking idea what to do in that moment.

"We need to call our pack. Taylor can search the web for her, and our pack can spread out," he continued.

"Spread out where? We have no idea where she's headed."

"No, but someone must know about a rabid wolf somewhere on the fucking

planet,” my wolf snarled back.

“Easy. I’m just as worried about her as you are,” I growled.

“If that was true, you wouldn’t have kept things from her. Or sent her away,” he shot back.

The beast was pissed, and I didn’t blame him.

I’d fucked up.

“Maybe the witches can track her,” I said, throwing out my only idea.

“I don’t even know if she’s her right now,” the wolf snapped. *“We need to get people searching for rabid wolves, so we can find our female. If she’s lost her scent, she’s lost control to the shadows entirely. There’s no telling what will happen to her.”*

“Alright, we’ll call the pack and then ask the witches,” I agreed, fighting panic.

If Beth was hurt because she hadn’t trusted me to stomach going to Oldenwood with her...

“We’ll find her,” the wolf snarled at me.

He wouldn’t accept anything less, and neither would I.

We’d find our girl.

We’d get her to forgive her damned fated mate so her gift would stop wreaking havoc on her.

We’d make her ours, permanently.

And then we’d deal with the witches who had fucked with us.

My wolf grabbed her clothes and bag in his mouth, and sprinted toward the nearest town.



33

Shadow

I woke up with my face in the dirt.

My hair was wrapped around my head, my eyes practically glued shut with whatever weird shit came out of those fuckers when they were mistreated for too long.

My body ached, everywhere.

Not my vagina though, which meant I probably hadn't had sex. That was a relief, considering I was still technically a virgin and couldn't remember a damn thing.

I peeled my naked body off the dirt, unwinding hair from my head and spitting nastiness out of my mouth.

Don't eat sand, kids.

I rubbed my eyes with the backs of my hands—also gritty, which I assumed meant dirt had somehow dried to my skin.

Reaching out to my wolf, I searched for her but found her still unconscious.

Whatever the shadows had done to us, it freaking sucked.

Forcing my lashes apart, I looked around.

I was smashed up against some kind of a bush, in a forest I didn't recognize. I knew plants by areas of the US fairly well, so if I was still in my home country, I was fairly sure I could figure out where I was if I was given a bit of time.

My gaze skidded across the area, searching for other signs of life.

In a gap between two trees, was an unfamiliar male wolf. He sat with his belly to the dirt, his furry paws relaxed on the ground as he stared at me.

I wrapped my arms around my chest. "Who are you?" I asked. "Where is this? What happened?"

The questions came out quickly. I knew he probably wouldn't have answers, but I asked anyway because I was desperate and terrified.

The shadows had taken me over hundreds of times before, but I'd never lost all sense of time and space like that.

The wolf didn't answer, of course.

He was probably rabid.

I tried to shift so my wolf could talk to him, but for some reason, I couldn't reach her. I could feel her still there inside me, but couldn't speak to her. She felt like she might be unconscious or something, so I hoped she would wake up in a bit.

"Do you know where the nearest town is?" I asked the possibly-rabid wolf.

He didn't respond.

"People, I need people. *Humans*," I clarified, growing panicked.

The wolf still didn't give any sign of hearing what I was saying.

"Breathe, Shadow," I chided myself. "Goddess, it's good to have that name

back. Just breathe, and remember that everything's going to be okay. Eventually, we'll find civilization. And a phone. And some sign as to where the fuck we are."

I started through the forest. I didn't hear running water, so that didn't give me anything to head toward. I also had no compass, no clothing, and the biggest thing—no wolf.

The sun was high above me, giving me no assistance in determining which direction was which. My dad had taught me how to make sure I was going in one direction when stranded in the forest, though, so at least I had that.

I focused on a tree a ways ahead of me, then walked to that, then picked another one, and on and on.

My stomach began to growl, and the sun began to set, but my wolf was still unconscious.

The other werewolf trailed behind me, seeming somewhat interested in where I was going. But not interested enough to help me get there, of course.

He had to be the rabid wolf the shadows had dragged me to, right?

I tried to gauge where I was based on the plants I saw, but there weren't many I recognized well enough to say for sure. I thought one of the bushes looked like one that I knew grew somewhere in South America, but since I'd never seen it in person, it was hard to say. Some of the plants definitely weren't from the USA, though.

When it grew too dark to see anything, I stopped walking. I wanted to build a fire, but common sense won out. If I happened to be somewhere dangerous, I couldn't risk anyone finding me.

I found a small rock outcropping and tucked myself underneath it. If a human was alone in the wilderness, she'd need to worry about predators, but I had the werewolf following me. And only a starving animal would challenge a werewolf.

The werewolf would happily eat the starving animal after taking out the threat, too.

So at least there was that.

I'd never seen a rabid werewolf act so civilly unless he was under the effect of Cara's wolf taming ability, though, so I wasn't sure if he was rabid or not. Maybe he just didn't want to shift.

Maybe he was enjoying the damn view of my bare ass losing a fight with the forest.

Wherever I was, the weather was much warmer than it had been in Canada. I thanked the goddess for that, because I wasn't sure I'd make it through a night in the nude in Canada without my wolf warming me.

Tucked under my little rock shelter, I tried to sleep. I was exhausted enough that I should've been able to do it. But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get my body to relax.

I was in the middle of nowhere.

I had no wolf to help me.

No protection except the wolf who could legitimately attack me at any moment.

Goddess, it was terrifying.

My body hurt even more the next morning, but as soon as there was enough light to see the ground, I focused on a tree in the same direction I'd been heading, and walked that way.

My throat was insanely dry when I finally found a little stream. It looked clean, and luckily the moon goddess's magic would prevent me from getting any kind of illness from drinking it even if it wasn't.

I stayed there for a bit, sipping the water and trying to decide what to do next. I knew I could keep going straight in the direction I'd been headed.

Logically, I had to stumble upon some form of civilization eventually if I did that.

Or, I could follow the water. It sounded louder to my right, so it likely merged with another stream or a river. Having water nearby gave me a greater chance at surviving, for sure. And according to an episode of *Survivorchick* I'd seen once, lots of cities and towns were built near natural water supplies, to make life easier.

I was reasonably sure that if I didn't find anything down the river in one direction, I'd be able to make my way back up it to this exact spot so I could check the other direction.

Stacking a couple of big, flat-ish rocks on top of each other, I made myself a little river-marker so I'd know for sure when I made it back there.

I stayed to the side of the water, walking for a good portion of the day. Still not recognizing any plants, I was growing desperate as far as food went. And it wasn't like I knew how to hunt with my bare hands in my human form; my wolf was the animal, not me.

When I stopped for the night again, I curled up in a ball against a large rock. My eyes started to water, but I refused to cry. I was fine—and I was going to stay fine. I'd figure out why my wolf wasn't responsive, and she would find us some food, and we'd reach civilization.

Everything was so fine, it was awesome.

My mind went back to Ryker.

Had he realized what happened to me? Was he looking for me?

Goddess, I hoped so.

I glanced around, and realized I hadn't seen my stalker-wolf in a while.

That was just my luck; losing my protection on top of being trapped in the damn wilderness in my human form.

A hysterical laugh burst out of me as tears stung my eyes again.

“Goddess, this is a shitty situation to be in,” I said to the river, wiping my eyes with gritty, dirty hands. “Guess this is what I get for refusing to forgive Dante. If I get out of here alive, I’ll never hold a grudge against anyone again.” I paused. “Probably.”

And then I laughed at myself some more, and cried to myself some more.

The brush rustled behind me, and I grabbed the nearest stick off the ground, pointing it in the direction of the movement. It wasn’t much, but it was something. If some South American beast wanted to eat me, I’d at least put up a damned good fight.

Stalker-wolf slipped out of the bushes, and a relieved breath slipped out of me.

“Thank the goddess,” I muttered.

The wolf dropped a thick branch in front of me. Some kind of fruit was growing on it; it was pink, and looked like a mix between an apple and a tomato. I wasn’t sure what the fruit was, but it looked and smelled edible.

“You think I can eat these?” I asked the wolf.

He ignored me, stepping a few paces away and plopping down on the dirt near the river. The way his eyes tracked the water told me he was hungry for fish.

Well, eating it was worth a try. The wolf didn’t seem entirely rabid, so maybe he knew what he was doing. And it wasn’t like I’d make it much longer without food anyway.

Pulling one of the fruits off the branches, I sniffed it again. It didn’t have much of a smell, but the smell it did have was fresh and light. Using my fingers and teeth, I pried out a chunk of it to inspect the inside of the fruit before eating it.

The texture looked about the same as an apple, the fruit a bit lighter of a

color than the pink on the outside.

What I'd tasted when getting the piece out reminded me of an apple...and a strawberry. It wasn't exactly either of them, but maybe something in-between?

I didn't know, but the fact that it tasted like edible fruits made me feel better about eating it.

So, I took a few bites. My stomach felt full and bloated pretty quickly, so I tossed what remained of the fruit to the wolf. Just finishing up his second fish, he caught it mid-air and gobbled it down in one chomp of his teeth.

He went back to fishing, and I waited.

Though I knew I needed to eat more, and *wanted* to eat more, I had to take it slow.

Particularly in case it was poisonous, though considering how easily the wolf ate it, I doubted it was.

I dozed against the rock, never sleeping for more than a few minutes at a time. Still, it was better than nothing.

Throughout the night, I nibbled on my pink fruits, relieved to have no negative reaction to them. And when morning came around, I walked some more.



34

Ryker

“Any news?” I asked Taylor, speeding down another highway. I didn’t know where the fuck I was any more, or where the hell I was going, but I had to be doing something to look for her. She’d been gone two weeks, and I was at the point where I could either have a nervous fucking breakdown and go entirely rabid, or drive down random roads.

I’d gone with random roads thus far, but it wouldn’t be long until I went rabid.

I was losing my fucking mind, and there was no chance it’d come back until my female was back in my arms. She wasn’t my mate yet, but goddess, you’d better believe she would be when I had her back.

If I had her back.

“Quit thinking the worst. I’m sure we’re going to find her having tea with the Queen of England or something. Beth’s one of the toughest chicks I know; she’s going to pop up one of these days running an entirely new pack of misfits.”

“Stop joking,” I snarled. “She’s fucking *gone*.”

Taylor was silent for a moment. “I’m trying to cope, okay? You’re not the only one who loves her.”

“I know. I know,” I snapped into the phone. It was a damn good thing my rejection gift wasn’t super strength, or I’d have broken every damn thing I owned.

“Maybe you should come back for a day or two. Ginger could calm you,” she suggested. Cara’s wolf had the same taming effect on humans as her human did on wolves.

“I don’t need taming, I need *Shadow*.”

“I know. But the best thing you can do for her right now is hold yourself together. When we find her, there’s a good chance she’ll need you whole and at your best.” Her voice had grown lower.

My wolf surged forward, desperate to take control, and my truck swerved over the empty road. Swearing, I wrestled him back and regained control of the vehicle.

“You need to stop suggesting shit that makes me want to kill people, Tay,” I snarled into the phone, nearly full-wolf. “She’s not being tortured, or hurt. She’s just... lost.”

“Maybe she’s lost in a land full of faeries and gumdrops,” Taylor drawled.

“When I lose my mind, you’re the first one I strangle,” I snapped, flying down the exit that would lead me to the highway I thought headed back toward Payne. “I’ll be back sometime in the next day or so. Warn Cara I’ll need Ginger. And for the love of the goddess, *stop* suggesting that she’s in pain.”

“Sir yes sir,” Taylor muttered. Her voice grew serious. “Drive safe, okay? Take care of yourself for her.”

“I will,” I grunted.

She was right; the odds of finding my best friend healthy and well were growing slimmer by the hour, and it had already been far too many hours.

“Please, protect her,” I begged the goddess, easing up on the gas pedal just

a bit.



35

Shadow

“And we were both up all night puking in the same damn toilet, but it was so fucking worth it, because I ate more tacos than he did. And he’s legitimately twice as big as me—seriously, I look like a chubby dwarf next to him and his gigantic muscles and sexy hair,” I rambled to my stalker-wolf.

If he had a name, he wasn’t telling me it. He still pretended I didn’t exist. But he also still kept following me.

The shadows hadn’t pulled at me since I’d been wandering through what I’d determined had to be South America, and if my count was right, I was nearing a week and a half. I didn’t know how many days I’d been running before that, in wolf form, but if I’d made it all the way to South America, I guessed at least four or five. It was probably a few more, though.

I didn’t know why the shadows had abandoned me, but I suspected it had something to do with the reason I couldn’t communicate with my wolf. I could feel her there, but it was like there was a wall between us. I imagined it felt something like the reverse of a wolf going rabid.

I missed my wolf even more than I missed Ryker, which was saying something. Because I missed him a *lot*.

“If you were human, you would be insanely impressed. Do you know how many people have eaten that many tacos in one sitting? It’s got to be less than twenty, because it was a fucking *lot* of tacos,” I continued.

Talking to the wolf kept me sane, even if he wasn't listening. Reliving some of my favorite memories was helping too.

But I really, really needed to find civilization, because I—

The wolf stopped. His ears flicked back, his head jerking to the side. He stared into the forest.

I ducked behind him. Not touching him, because I was pretty sure he might eat me if I tried, but definitely hiding behind him.

“If it's a snake, kill it fast. I bet they've got massive snakes here,” I babbled.

The wolf huffed at me, then started walking into the forest.

I glanced at my river—which I was still following—and then back at the wolf.

I could survive without that particular river, but I wasn't sure I'd survive without the wolf to scare off bears and tigers and shit. I didn't even know what wildlife they had in whatever part of South America I'd managed to find myself, but I imagined it was about as untamed as the crazy-ass forest I was in.

Hell, I didn't even know if it was a forest or a jungle; who the hell knew the difference between those two?

Maybe if I'd finished my last year of high school, I would've learned it. Then again, they liked to teach us useless shit like trigonometry and how to dissect a squid instead of teaching us about mental health and managing finances and *whether South America was made up of forests or fucking jungles*.

Yeah, I was losing my mind a bit.

I hurried after the wolf, barely dodging a rock that looked suspiciously like a plant. I'd learned that things that looked like other things were usually

trying to kill me, so I tried to stay away from them.

I struggled to keep up with him for a solid thirty minutes before I realized what he was leading me toward.

Glancing up through the thick trees, I saw thin tendrils of smoke rising up in the sky.

Fire.

And fire meant *people*.

“Yes! You clever, beautiful creature. If you were a person, I’d kiss you! Fuck Ryker, you’d be my damned mate just for saving my ass out here!” I crowed.

It was false—I wouldn’t have mated him, or gotten over Ryker. But in that moment, I was so thrilled and crazy I did consider it.

The wolf ignored me, continuing to lead me through the forest.

He stopped me before we reached the town, and poked me with his nose then gestured to the ground. “What, you want me to sit?” I asked, wrinkling my nose. “We just found civilization.” I threw my hand toward the city.

He poked my boob with his nose, and I glanced down.

“Oh. Right. Naked.” I nodded. “Don’t want to walk into a strange town naked. Good call. You come back with clothes. Fast, please?”

The wolf huffed at me, then trotted into the town. The buildings looked small where we were, but I could see some larger ones out in the distance and I prayed someone had a phone I could use.

Did South American cities have internet cafes or something, at least?

Goddess, I hoped so.

The wolf came back with one article of clothing—a silky black dress.

“You’re kidding,” I told him.

It looked tight, too. I didn’t have a bra, my hair was pretty much one big knot, and I hadn’t washed myself with anything more than splashes of water since I’d been in the forest because I was worried I’d get eaten by a piranha or some other damn mystery fish.

And he wanted me to wear a tight, silky dress.

He gave me a look that I swore was the wolf equivalent of one of my dad’s favorite phrases, “beggars can’t be choosers”. It was the most attention the wolf had ever shown me.

“You want to go back to the refuge with me?” I checked.

He didn’t respond.

If I was in South America... maybe he just didn’t understand me?

I knew all of six words in Spanish, and zero in Portuguese, so even if I was in an area that spoke one of those languages, I was hopeless.

“I need a phone,” I made my hand into a phone and lifted it to my ear.

He puffed air at me and gestured to the dress.

I tugged it over my head with a sigh. It was stretchy—which was better for getting it on, but worse for my bra-less chest.

After I pulled it into place, the wolf started walking into the city. He gestured for me to follow him with his head, so I hurried behind him.

It was intimidating, to say the least. Not knowing where I was, or how to communicate with the people around me—who I could now hear talking in a language whose name I didn’t even know. And to find my way home, I’d need to figure out a way out of there. Which would probably mean airports, or bus rides, or something.

All of which would be difficult to navigate with no money, no understanding of their language, and *no fucking idea where I was*.

I stuck close to the wolf, walking behind him just far enough not to touch him. Rabid wolves could be set off by little things, and I still wasn't sure how he'd react if I touched him, so I wasn't going to. Even though I was desperate for physical contact, starved of it in the forest. After years of having Ryker as a constant companion, I was unprepared to spend weeks alone with a possibly-rabid wolf, in the middle of a damn forest-or-jungle.

People watched me closely—probably laughing. If I were them, I'd laugh at me. I looked like an utter train wreck.

Or maybe a damned zombie.

Add a splash of dried blood to my face, and I'd definitely classify as the undead.

The wolf led me into a bustling building full of people. Many of them spoke on phones, but none of them were speaking in English.

The wolf nudged me toward the corner, where an open computer sat. I glanced around, looking for a price tag or something, but didn't see anything.

Okay, an email would work.

Maybe Taylor could track where I'd sent it from or something?

I shuffled through the crowd, my face flushing at the odd and disgusted looks I got from everyone around me. "Sorry, sorry," I murmured, though they couldn't understand me. It was just an instinct to apologize, I guess.

The screen was on, but when I tried to click around, it kept showing me a picture of what looked like a credit card or gift card.

Maybe prepaid cards operated the machines?

My eyes stung.

Someone next to me pointed to the screen and then to a card scanner at the bottom of the screen, saying something in another language.

Spanish? I was guessing it was Spanish.

“I’m sorry, I only know English,” I apologized, stepping away from the computer. I ran into the wolf, and he gave a low warning growl.

The shop went silent.

“You speak English?” someone asked, their words slow like they were struggling to string the words together.

“Yes, yes. English. I’m a werewolf, like him. Far from home. I need to call, or email, but I have no money.” I lifted my hand to my ear to mimic a phone, then rubbed my fingers together.

Was that the universal sign for money, or had I just seen it on TV? I couldn’t remember.

Someone put a card in my hand and steered me toward a set of phones I hadn’t seen in the corner. The crowd parted, and I nearly sobbed in relief.

Thank the goddess for kind strangers.

I slid the card, dialing Ryker’s number with shaky fingers.

“Who is this?” he snarled into the phone.

When he answered, I legitimately did start crying. “It’s Shadow. I’m not sure where I am—South America, maybe. I think the people speak Spanish.”

“Thank the fucking goddess. TAYLOR,” Ryker yelled at the top of his lungs. His words came out urgent, choppy. “I need you to track a call, now. Are you okay? What the hell happened? We’ve been looking all over the damn country, but I didn’t think you’d get all the fucking way to South America.”

“Argentina!” Taylor yelled somewhere near Ryker. “She’s in Argentina! A

few hours outside Buenos Aires! Booking flights now.”

“Talk to me, Beth. Tell me you’re alright,” Ryker growled, sounding a bit desperate.

“I’m fine. The shadows dragged me to the middle of the forest, or jungle, or…” I swallowed, shaking my head. “That’s not important. I’ve only been walking around trying to find civilization. Nothing bad happened to me. The rabid wolf the shadows led me to is only kind of rabid, he’s protecting me. I kind of promised to mate with him, but I don’t think he took it seriously. I’m not even sure he speaks English. But I’m okay.” I was rambling again, but Ryker was used to me rambling when I was stressed.

“Good. Goddess, it’s so good to hear your voice.” Ryker’s rumble made me squeeze my eyes shut.

“I’m using someone else’s card, so I need to get off the phone soon.”

“I got her a hotel room,” Taylor yelled. “I texted you the information.”

“Alright, Beautiful. You still there?” Ryker asked.

“Mmhmm.” I nodded.

“There’s a motel right by the building you’re in. Go outside and walk right, past three other businesses. I’m looking at a picture of it right now; the sign on top says Posada de Calidad. Say that back to me.”

“Posada de Calidad,” I said.

“One more time.”

“I’m not a damn toddler,” I mumbled.

“Good. Jokes are good. Now repeat the name.”

“Posada de Calidad,” I obeyed.

“It’s not fancy, but it’s better than sitting outside while you wait. Go there,

and give them my name. They've got a manager who speaks a little English —Taylor already talked to him, so he's expecting you. I'll figure out a way to get food delivered, okay? It looks like it's going to take us about twenty-six hours to get to you."

"Okay," I nodded again.

"If you're sure that rabid isn't violent, keep him in your room with you. I'm sure you'll be safe, but a little extra protection never hurts."

I nodded again. "Okay." I swallowed. "You don't have to worry about the food. I can figure it out. I'm fine, I just—"

"Elizabeth, shut your fucking beautiful mouth and go to the hotel. I'm sending food, and I'll be there soon. I love you, alright?"

"I love you too." I nodded a third, or fourth time. My whole damn body was shaking. "See you soon."

"Damn right you will. Go get some sleep while you wait."

"Okay. Love you," I repeated, hanging up the phone. I stepped away, and a woman held her hand out for the card. I gave her what I hoped look like a sincerely grateful smile. "Gracias. Gracias, gracias, gracias." I nodded toward her, wanting to hug her but knowing I looked like a zombie and she wouldn't want my random-ass jungle dirt and germs.

"De nada." She nodded, taking the card back and turning to go through the crowd.



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I slipped out of the building, finding the rabid wolf already waiting for me outside. I remembered the way he'd growled at me for touching him, and was careful to keep my distance.

Following Ryker's instructions, I found the motel right where he'd said—and the sign said Posada de Calidad, too.

The man at the desk greeted me with a friendly, "Hola, senorita," and a smile.

"Um, I'm booked under Ryker Jimenez?" I didn't plan on it coming out like a question, but it did.

"Ah, si. Yes, yes." He nodded emphatically, typing on his computer really quick before handing me a physical key and leading me down a hall. I wasn't used to being shown to my room, but he seemed friendly.

The wolf followed me to my room, and I held the door for him while I thanked the man.

Stepping into the room, I pulled the door shut and locked it. After giving it a few good pulls to determine it really was locked, I turned to look at the room. It was larger than I expected, with a single king-sized bed. It smelled clean, which felt like a miracle after the way I'd been living.

Tears welled in my eyes again.

Dammit, I was supposed to stop crying.

I was safe, now. Closed in a hotel room, with the door locked. Sure, I was alone, but I was good at being alone.

Okay, fine. I was absolutely *shit* at being alone. And not being able to talk to my wolf was absolutely terrifying. I didn't know how I'd get her back, or if I'd get her back.

But I couldn't think about that while I was alone in a room with a possibly-rabid wolf who probably wasn't trustworthy but was admittedly a better protection than the door between me and the rest of the world.

Still, I didn't really want to be alone with him.

What if he shifted? I wasn't in great self-protecting shape; my poor bare feet were so battered every damn step hurt, and I was pretty sure I left at least a couple specks of blood with every step I took from the many unhealed cuts in my skin.

But I was alive.

And that was what mattered.

Someone knocked on the door, and I peered out to see a young man holding food.

My eyes burned again.

I opened the door and accepted the food, repeating "gracias," and hoping it meant what I thought it meant. Because I was really damn thankful.

When I closed the door, the wolf was already curled up in the corner of the room, snoring, with his head on a pillow he appeared to have dragged off the bed.

I'd never seen a wolf rest only their head on a pillow, but I guess I could see the draw.

Slipping into the bathroom, I closed the door that separated it from the rest of the room and locked it too. Turning on the shower to warm the water, I set my food down on the counter and pulled it all out.

Ryker had ordered enough for at least ten people. *At least.*

Considering I'd been surviving on wild apple-tomato-strawberries, as I called them in my head, I wasn't even going to make a dent in the food.

I took a few bites, sipping at the sealed water bottle that had come with the food.

When I couldn't stomach any more, I closed the takeout containers and slipped into the shower. There was a bar of soap on the ledge of the tub, and no other shampoo or shower gel.

That was fine; soap was freaking incredible.

I tried to rub as much dirt off as I could with my bare hands before using the soap. The water ran brown for a long, long time, and the bar of soap was gone before I even managed to get all the dirt out of my hair. I needed some real shampoo—and maybe a haircut, to help me work through the insane knots I'd developed.

Not having a comb or a hair-tie or the willpower to do anything but walk beside a damn stream hadn't led me to take good care of my hair, that was for sure.

My arms ached from trying to clean and detangle the strands by the time I got out, so I gave up on my hair and decided just to leave it until I got back home and could pay some poor hair-stylist a small fortune to untangle it for me.

Wrapping a towel around my hair, then another one around my middle, I peered out into the room.

The wolf was still sleeping exactly where I'd left him, not having budged a damn inch.

I decided I wasn't comfortable sleeping in the same room with him while he could shift back any second—even if he hadn't done that while we were in the forest. So, I grabbed the other three pillows off the bed, as well as the comforter, and hauled them all into the bathroom.

After making myself a little nest, I had a few more bites of food and a little more water before locking the door and snuggling into the blankets.

Goddess, they were comfortable.

"I missed comfort," I whispered to the blankets, though they obviously couldn't respond.

I think I fell asleep in three seconds flat.

My eyes flew open when someone knocked on the door. It took me a solid thirty seconds before my brain kicked into gear and reminded me where I was: Argentina.

Locked in a bathroom, sleeping on the floor.

A growl in the other room had me bolting toward the door.

"Don't eat anyone," I yelled at the wolf.

"Open the damn door, Elizabeth," Ryker snarled through the wood, banging on it harder.

I ripped the door open and threw myself at him. He caught me, somehow managing to remain on his feet as he hugged me fiercely, stepping inside the room and kicking the door shut. He squeezed me so tight I could barely breathe, and I fucking loved it.

Those damn tears were back, but this time, I didn't fight them.

"I was so scared," Ryker murmured into my neck. "So fucking scared. Never do that again."

“I’ll try not to get possessed and dragged to another country by my rejection gift again,” I teased him through my tears, still holding him so tight he couldn’t have gotten free if he wanted to.

He didn’t seem to want to, luckily.

The door opened behind us, and Cara and Taylor slipped in behind Ryker.

“Share,” Taylor protested, holding her arms out for a hug.

“No,” Ryker growled, spinning around to glare at the girl.

“Group hug, then,” Cara declared, wrapping her arms around both me and Ryker.

“Why not?” Taylor joined in, and we were like a big, happy family.

It meant everything.

Everything.

“Thanks for coming to rescue me,” I sobbed into Ryker’s neck. “I thought I’d die alone in the forest-jungle.”

“What’s a forest-jungle?” Ryker asked.

He was trying to lighten the mood, and I loved it.

Loved *him*.

“The proper title for a forest that might actually be a jungle,” I sniffled.

Ryker snorted. “Proper title, my ass.”

“It’s just as proper as my name for the weird-ass fruit I’ve been eating. Apple-tomato-strawberries are okay, but they get old. *Really* old.”

“You need a lesson in proper names, honey.” Taylor patted my shoulder

sympathetically. “Unless the forest-jungle broke your brain.”

I unwrapped one of my legs from Ryker’s waist to kick her playfully... then put it back.

Yeah, I wasn’t letting go of him.

Not any time soon, at least.

“So this is our rabid wolf?” Cara asked, squatting down beside the wolf in the corner. “Hmm...”

“He doesn’t seem rabid, I know. I’m starting to think maybe he just doesn’t have a pack, and doesn’t speak English,” I spoke into Ryker’s neck again.

“Hey, bud.” She held her hand out toward him. He growled at her, and she drew it back.

“Don’t touch him. He doesn’t like to be touched,” I added quickly.

“I can see that.” Cara agreed. “I’m just going to sit right here, okay, bud?” she spoke to the wolf again.

He didn’t growl at her, so I thought it was going decently well.

“We have a few guys in the pack who speak Spanish, don’t we?” I mumbled into Ryker’s neck. “I know Roger does. And Talin, and Orville, and...Bash?”

“Bash’s outside,” Ryker confirmed. “I figured you’d be naked and made him wait out there.”

“I owe Ryker twenty bucks for your lack of clothing,” Taylor grumbled.

I peeled my face off his neck to narrow my eyes at him. “You bet on me being naked?”

“You were in the forest for weeks; where would you get clothes?” His lips

brushed my ear and his voice lowered. “And I know you sleep naked when you’re alone, just like I do.”

My face warmed at the memories of being in that hotel room together, when I told him I knew that about him.

“Don’t worry, we brought some of your stuff,” Cara promised. “We tried to pack it ourselves, but Ryker insisted he knew what you’d want to wear. And there was no arguing with him, in his state.”

I gave him a curious look.

His arms tightened around me. “My female vanished off the face of the fucking planet, out of my own damn arms. I’ve been losing my mind trying to find you.”

“Sorry,” I lowered my face back to his neck. “I didn’t exactly plan this.”

“I know, Beautiful. I’m not blaming you.”

Bash knocked on the door. “Can I come in yet?”

“No,” Ryker snarled. “I—”

I licked his neck, and he cut off mid-snarl. “Be nice to him. He flew to Argentina for me.”

Ryker grumbled, “He begged to come. All the damn Spanish-speakers drew straws to see who got to come rescue you. Everyone’s been raking the country for you for weeks.”

“I wish you guys hadn’t had to do that, but I’m really glad you did.” I used Ryker’s shirt to wipe my tears away, since he was already salty and wet because of me.

“Let’s get you dressed,” he said, his voice gruff.

He carried me into the bathroom, pausing in the doorway to take in my makeshift bed. “Do I want to know?” he asked me.

“The wolf could shift back at any time. I didn’t want to get attacked.” I shrugged, my shoulder brushing his chin with the movement.

“What’s this?” he pulled the dirty silky dress off the counter, kicking the door shut like he had earlier. He held it up with one finger, eyeing me.

“The wolf brought it for me when he realized I couldn’t walk into town naked.”

“Ah.” He tossed the fabric toward the trash, but I caught it.

“It has sentimental value now,” I said, tucking it in the side pocket of the backpack Ryker was still wearing. “I’ll wash it when we get back.”

“You’re not doing anything but sitting in bed, eating ice cream while I watch, for the next week,” he warned, setting me down on the counter on my ass.

I knew he wasn’t going to follow through with that because we still needed to deal with the witches, and Dante, and who knew what other shit. But I still appreciated the sentiment.

After he locked the door, he pulled his backpack off and unzipped it. I heard the door to the room open, and Bash went into the main room. I heard him speaking to the wolf in what was likely Spanish, but tuned it out when Ryker started handing me clothes.

My most comfortable bra came first—it was a non-padded thing that always showed my nipples, but was so comfortable I didn’t even give a shit. And it was black, because I always bought black underwear. I liked feeling sexy, and black lace made me feel sexy.

He handed me a pair of cheeky lace panties next—also my comfiest cut.

“How do you know which of my underwear is most comfortable?” I checked.

“If you stare at the same ass and tits in tight clothing often enough, you

learn to figure out what style underwear they're wearing by panty-lines and bra-lines alone." He flashed me a grin.

"I'm never wearing leggings again." I snatched the top out of his hands—it was big and warm and fluffy. My comfiest sweater. It wasn't very cold in Argentina, but it would be when we got back to Payne. And probably, back to Oldenwood and Willoughsbie.

"Liar. You can't resist the gentle pressure on your legs and all the available bendiness. Your words, not mine." He handed me the leggings.

Dammit; he was right, I had said that.

"None of the other assholes have learned to identify your panties and bras via nearly-invisible lines yet. It takes skill that only I have."

"It probably helps that you've seen me in pretty much all of my underwear at one point or another." I set the clothes down on my lap, reaching around my back and buckling the bra into place.

Usually, bras felt like boob-traps, but this time it felt like a massive relief to stop them from sagging over my upper-ribs after so long without a bra.

"Not all of it. I saw a few interesting things in the back of your drawer when I was in there." He lifted an eyebrow at me. "Who were you planning on wearing those for?"

"Dante," I lied.

He chuckled, kissing the tip of my nose. "Nice try, but he's already hooking up with Lina."

"Already? Damn, he moved on fast. It's only been what, two weeks?"

"Three weeks and two days," he corrected me.

"Longer than I realized. But still, that's not that long. Are you sure she didn't charm him?"

“Yep. He’s eating the same plant as the rest of us, to protect us from magic.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be offended he’d moved on so fast, or glad that I hadn’t jumped onboard the Dante train. I was leaning toward the second, though.

“He’s succeeded in proving himself to be the dick you always said he was.”

I snorted. “Duh. I’m always right.”

“Always,” he agreed, kissing me softly on the lips before drawing away to whisper, “Except when you thought I wasn’t attracted to you.”

“My fact-checker lied to me, so I have an excuse for that one.” I poked him in the chest.

“Fine, give me the blame.” He waved his hands toward his torso. “I’ll take it all.”

“Oh, I will.” I tugged my sweater over my head.

Blanket-sweater, how I missed you.

It fit a bit looser than it used to, but that was to be expected. I’d need to eat an assload of cake to make up for my three weeks of surviving on apple-tomato-strawberries, and I was 1000% okay with that.

I slipped into my panties, then tugged on my leggings and checked out my ass in the mirror, looking for panty-lines. I hated panty-lines. Legitimately, I was the person who tried on panties in the changing room (over a thong of course, I wasn’t a caveman), just to make sure they were thin enough *not* to give me panty-lines.

“I don’t see anything,” I said, frustrated.

“You have to stare really hard,” Ryker agreed. “It takes a trained eye.”

“Which you have?”

“Yes. Knowing what underwear you’ve got on makes me feel closer to your tits and vagina than I am, so I make a point of always knowing.”

“You were pretty damn close to all those bits in the forest before the shadows pulled me away,” I remarked, giving up on staring at my ass. Ryker had to be imagining the panty lines.

“Luckily for me, I was. Seeing your underwear is a unique kind of torture because I know exactly what it’s hiding.” He leaned forward, his lips brushing my ear. “And exactly how good it tastes.”

He gave my earlobe a gentle suck. “Goddess, I’m glad you’re okay.” His arms wrapped around me, the sexy moment seemingly forgotten.

“Not forgotten,” he corrected me. “Saved for later. When we’re actually alone, and when we don’t have a flight to catch.”

“When does it leave?” I checked.

“A few hours from now. I didn’t want to rush you.” He kissed my lips again, gently.

“How are the witches?” I asked.

“I sent a couple guys from the pack to watch over them. They text me updates every couple of hours. Nothing has really changed since you’ve gone missing, other than the Oldenwood witches pretty much drawing back completely.”

“You gave the letter to Lina’s mom?” I checked.

He frowned. “The one in the Ziploc bag?”

I nodded.

“It didn’t have a name on it, so I figured it was yours. It’s in my bag; I was being a good friend by not snooping.”

“Dammit.” I closed my eyes. “I was right about the Oldenwood coven. They broke free from the bitch who murdered your pack. She used them, and then cast the spell trapping all of the Oldenwood witches. *Including* your favorite new pack, not *targeted* at them.”

Ryker’s eyebrows furrowed. “That’s not possible.”

“I think it is. The older Lina seemed genuine; she’s your Lina’s grandmother.”

“That female is not *my* anything,” he corrected me. “And I have a hard time believing that anything good could come out of Oldenwood.”

“I know you do. But I’m telling you, I believe them. Was there any trace of magic, when your wolf found the place I was trying to meet up with you?” I checked.

He shook his head.

“That means they didn’t try to track me to get to the other witches. Why wouldn’t they, if they were as shitty as you think? They told me they need the witch descended from the evil bitch who made the barrier trapping all of them, so that the descendant can take down her mom’s spell and free everyone. They can’t even leave to find mates, Ryker. The town is full of single witches who were so lonely, they were jealous of me just for having a claim mark on my shoulder.”

Talking about it made my fingers lift to the scar, which I knew had faded a few days earlier. Since I hadn’t bitten Ryker back, the bite only had a little life to it.

“You’re probably remembering it wrong,” he argued.

I grabbed his face. Pressing my forehead to his, I closed my eyes and remembered my walk through Oldenwood. The friendly old man who’d greeted me, the music floating in the air, all of the women walking around without men beside them.

I recalled every moment of my chat with the older Lina, and the genuine tears in her eyes when I suggested bringing some of the men from my pack to meet her witches.

“Fuck.” Ryker mumbled, not drawing his forehead away from mine. “I don’t know how to deal with this shit.”

“Then let me take the lead. There’s no right way to do it; we’ve just got to make the best with what we’ve got,” I said. “We’ll have the groups of witches meet, get them to agree to a peace treaty or something. They may not like each other, but that doesn’t mean they need to kill each other.”

“I’m supposed to be making you sleep, not distracting you with politics,” Ryker growled, pressing his lips to mine in a hard kiss.

“Eh. This is better.” I kicked at him with one of my feet, and he grabbed my ankle. Turning and bending my leg, he positioned my foot in the light so he could see it up close.

“Holy shit, Elizabeth.”

“I’ve decided to go back to being Shadow,” I told him. “It fits me. And my wolf decided she wants you to give her a new name. Not Bettie, though.”

His lips curved up in a grin. “I can do that.”

“Of course you can.” I kissed him. “You’re alarmingly good at nicknames.”

“It’s a good skill to have,” he agreed. “Just think about our future children. They’ll have a plethora of nicknames to choose from.”

I blinked at him.

“Sorry, too soon to talk about possible kids?” he asked.

“No, I just... I never thought I’d hear you say that,” I admitted with a soft laugh. “Goddess, both of our characteristics in one kid? She’ll be a damned

tornado.”

“And we’ll be entirely obsessed.”

“So obsessed,” I nodded. “I don’t want to have her soon, though.” I eyed him, waiting for an argument.

“Goddess, no. I’ll need a solid three years just to get used to being able to kiss you whenever I want. And probably three more to really make it set in that I can take you into a bathroom and make love to you any time I want.”

“You mean any time *I* want.” I put a hand on my hip.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Why would you ever not want to fuck me?”

I laughed.

Valid point.

“If I ever say no, is it going to crush your self-esteem?”

He snorted. “Why would it? If you’re not in the mood, I can jack off and you’ll get horny just watching me, and then you’ll jump me yourself afterward. Two, for the price of one.”

“You know me too well,” I shook my head at him. “Everyone’s waiting for us.”

“They can wait a little longer.” He caught my face in his hands and captured my lips with his. My tongue slipped into his mouth, and he didn’t hesitate to let me in.

My fingers dove into his grown-out hair, his scruffy face tickling mine as our mouths practically merged. He tasted like everything I’d ever wanted—with a hint of peppermint.

I pulled away after a few minutes, breathing fast. “You’re so damn good at that.”

“I know.” He gave me a crooked grin and tapped the side of my head. “You already told me.”

I stuck my tongue out at him, and he licked it, which made me laugh. “Weirdo.”

“You like that too.” He pulled me to his chest. “We have to meet Dante in Canada right after we leave here, so you can accept his un-rejection to stop your gift from going insane,” he warned me. “Are you okay with that?”

“Yes. I need my wolf back,” I sighed.

“You *what?*”

It looked like everyone out in the room was just going to have to wait a few more minutes while I explained that too.



37

I slept on Ryker for most of all three of our plane rides, and our time sitting in airports during layovers. He fed me snacks every time I opened my eyes, and kissed some various part of my face every time I ate one. Cara, Taylor, and Bash all headed back to Payne while we got on our final plane headed to Canada, so I got to snuggle with Ryker without any peeping pack eyes on me.

It was really damn nice.

When we got there, we rented a car and flew down the highway. I slept some more, bundled in my blanket shirt and an extra blanket Ryker had insisted on buying me at the airport.

He claimed it was to protect himself from my forever-cold toes, but I knew that was BS. He just worried too much about me.

I wanted to make things permanent between us, to finally trade bites and have sex to solidify that bond, but talking to Dante and the witches had to come first. And if Ryker had any thoughts as far as the time and place when he wanted that to go down, he didn't mention it.

He didn't mention much of anything throughout our time traveling, really. But he kept a hand on some part of me at all times, like he was trying to make sure he didn't lose me again.

I understood that. Having his hands on me made me feel safer and more secure, too. I missed having his claim mark on my shoulder—and the feeling

of belonging that it had brought me as well.

He hadn't had that feeling, or any way to know whether or not I was still alive. I could imagine that being really damn terrifying.

We drove all the way to Willoughsbie, parking in front of the Blue Tree Inn. I woke up as we got there, and watched Ryker just sort of stare at the building. His one hand on the steering wheel remained there, his other one resting on my thigh. My legs were tucked up underneath me, my head resting against my airplane neck pillow and a bit of wadded blanket.

He stared at the inn for a few minutes without speaking. I didn't know what was on his mind, but I figured it had something to do with his family. And I knew that if he wanted to tell me, he would.

"Being here makes me feel closer to them," he said quietly. His fingers slowly stroked my thigh—not sensually, and more for his support than mine. "But at the same time, it makes them feel further than ever."

"They would be proud of you for helping the witch pack," I whispered.

"My parents would want me to help them find some measure of peace with the coven, despite my desire for revenge." His voice was hard, but sad. "I've been able to ignore the memories for a long time, but they're more raw, now. Nearly losing you..." He cleared his throat. "It fucked with me."

I put my hand on top of his. He didn't want me to apologize, like my natural tendency would be to do. It wasn't my fault that my gift had dragged me to another country any more than it was his fault the witches had murdered his pack.

"What can I do to help?" I murmured, lacing my fingers through his and lifting his hand to my mouth. I pressed my lips to his knuckles, to the back of his hand, to his wrist.

"Don't be annoyed when I act obnoxiously clingy." He grimaced. "And don't kiss Dante."

I nipped at the back of his hand. “I’ve never kissed Dante on *purpose*.”

His eyes flashed. “When?”

“He tried to kiss me during our date, before you told me how you felt about me. I threatened him for it, and didn’t kiss him back,” I clarified.

“Fuck him,” Ryker swore.

“I’d rather fuck *you*,” I held his knuckles to my lips again.

“That’s not what I... you already knew that.” He shot me a half-smirk. “You’re too clever for your own damn good.”

“Too clever for *your* good, you mean,” I teased him gently.

“Nah. Your cleverness works in my favor, Beautiful.” He tugged our intertwined hands away from my mouth, turning mine a bit so he could press his lips to my knuckles.

“Does it?” I feigned confusion, tapping my chin.

“It most certainly does.” He licked the back of my hand, making me laugh.

I unbuckled my seatbelt, easing myself over the center console in the little SUV we’d rented. Landing on his lap, I turned so I was straddling him, our chests meeting.

He still had to look down for our eyes to collide, and I still had to look up, but we didn’t care.

“Take this off,” I tugged at the hood of his sweatshirt. He’d already offered it to me three times, but I’d reminded him that I already had a sweater and a blanket, and he had the car’s heat blasting on me.

“You want me naked?” He lifted an eyebrow, dragging the clothing over his head and tossing it to the passenger seat.

“Not *entirely*.”

Not yet, at least.

“You planning on having your way with me in this rental car?” he drawled.

The hardness biting into my ass told me he had absolutely no problem with that if I did.

“What if I am?” I countered.

“Then I’m happy to oblige.” His lips met mine, feather-soft. “But this tells me that’s not your plan.” He tapped my temple.

“Then what am I planning?” I asked, trailing my hands over his abs and pecs, relishing in the feel of his skin.

“I’m not quite sure, to be honest. You’re too good at ignoring your own thoughts to the extent where I can’t pick them out of your mind.”

His hands slipped beneath the hem of my blanket-sweater, finding my hips and dragging me closer.

Leaning forward, I scraped my teeth over his neck. He shuddered, his arms tightening around me. “If my wolf wasn’t hiding, I would bite you,” I murmured.

“Goddess, you’re a tease.” His voice strained, his arms locking around my waist. “After we see Dante...”

“After we see him, and I accept his un-rejection, and we force the witches to hug and make up, I’m going to drag you away and have my way with you.”

“So many things have to happen between then and now,” he complained. “Are you sure you don’t just want me to get naked already?”

I laughed. “You don’t need to get naked. At least, not all the way.” I flashed him a grin, and focused on a memory of my lips wrapped around his dick that made his caramel eyes practically catch fire.

“Can that chair move back any further?” I asked, slipping down to my knees in front of it.

“Fuck,” he hissed, as I unbuttoned his jeans. His dick was already straining against the fabric of his underwear—worn only because of the long plane rides, I assumed, because he didn’t usually wear the damn things.

“Eventually, we will,” I breathed, untucking him from the boxer-briefs.

His eyes slammed shut when I wrapped my fingers around the thick length of him.

Goddess, I’d missed his dick.

“This will make it easier to see Dante looking at me,” I whispered, stroking my tongue up the underside of him.

The feel of his warm, heavy silk in my mouth was incredible.

The way his body reacted, the shuddering pleasure, was even better.

I made love to him with my mouth, all thoughts leaving my mind besides him and me and the future together that I’d always wanted.

The one we were finally going to get to have.

After he finished, he tried to get me to sit down so he could reciprocate, but I shot him down.

Mostly because if he started, I’d never want him to stop. And if we didn’t get the shit with Dante taken care of, there was every chance my gift might drag me somewhere else—maybe somewhere across an ocean, this time. And I wasn’t so sure I’d wake up from another blackout like the one I’d had, considering my wolf was still MIA.

That thought sobered Ryker right up, and he hauled me into his forest over his shoulder, never setting me down. I still couldn’t shift, not having access

to my wolf, so he ordered me to ride him (with a smirk, of course) before shifting.

I slipped over his wolf's back. I'd never ridden on a wolf before, and was unprepared for the rush of adrenaline that accompanied it. Feeling his powerful muscles move beneath my body, my arms locked around him. My face pressed to the soft heat of his furry shoulder as he ran, and it was incredible.

But also, very cold.

When we finally made it to the witch pack, my teeth were chattering uncontrollably. Ryker made me put his sweatshirt on, wearing only his jeans as he wrapped me in his arms and carried me to the witches' fire.

He exchanged words with one of the middle-aged women while I chattered too much to participate. He was asking where Dante was—and she was explaining that he'd run off in wolf form with Lina earlier.

Ryker swore a handful of times, his arms holding me like iron.

He gave the envelope he'd thought was mine to the witch who was Lina's mother—when she came to get it of course, since he kept warning me that there was no chance in hell he was going to let go of me.

I wondered if that had something to do with the blowjob I'd given him in the rental car.

He put his lips to my ear and assured me that it most definitely did, and I found myself smiling.

Ryker held me in a bundle of blankets, pacing the tent that had been his for a bit but had become Dante's and a few other guys' from my pack when they'd shown up to help the witches.

The other guys made themselves scarce, seeing how tense Ryker was. None of the ones I knew well from the refuge had come to Canada, and as shitty as it was, that was a relief to me. I didn't want *all* of our pack's wolves

to leave... just enough to make the place a bit more comfortable.

Around midnight, Ryker finally carried me back to the witches. We found them in a heated argument, the envelope and letter we'd brought them sitting on a table between the five women who seemed to make most of the witch pack's decisions together.

Ryker interrupted them. "Shadow hasn't been able to access her wolf in days. We need her fucking true mate here, now. I'm sure you have a way to communicate with your daughter when she goes missing, so *call her back here.*"

His demands would've pissed me off if I were them, but then again, he was the reason they had a dozen strong dudes helping them out around their camp.

They looked taken aback for a moment. "I'll do the spell," Lina's mother finally agreed. Closing her eyes, she lifted her hand to the gemstone at her neck.

It glowed for a minute, the glow only fading when she removed her hand from her neck. Her face was flushed, and she averted her eyes. "They're on their way."

Guess she'd interrupted something a bit heated.



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It was another twenty minutes before Dante and Lina showed up together, holding hands. Seeing them only confirmed to me that I didn't give a shit who Dante ended up with. The moon goddess had tried to pair us together, but we had been different people, then. Maybe if he hadn't rejected me, we could've made it work.

But now, too much time had passed. He was him, and I was me, and we could never go back to who we had been. And I didn't want to go back. I wanted to sit right where I was, in Ryker's arms, and stay. Permanently.

Lina slipped closer to Dante, holding his arm. His hand wrapped around hers, holding her to him.

Oddly enough, I was happy for him.

Maybe happy wasn't the right word.

Neutral? Yeah, I was neutral toward him.

And for me, neutral meant I wanted him to be happy—or at least, not sad. That was a big part of the reason I'd started the refuge in the first place; because I wanted to give outcasts and rejects like me and Ryker a place to belong and feel loved and happy and important.

A place where being uncool or unpopular was a good thing.

Life wasn't a popularity contest, despite what it sometimes felt like. At the

end of the day, the year, the life, what really matters is who we love. It doesn't matter if you're not the prettiest, or the skinniest, or the most hip; what matters is your heart. And what you choose to do with your heart.

For me, that was the refuge.

The Outcast Pack.

Maybe it was time I accept that I was the alpha, rather than just acting like it and insisting people think of me as their friend. Because yeah, I was friends with them, but I was also the bitch who made them get off their asses and clean the bathrooms, or go apply for jobs. If I wasn't that bitch, they'd do nothing with their lives and then look back with regret, and I didn't want that for them.

Dammit. Maybe everyone was right and I really was the damn den mother.

I'd go with alpha though, because it sounded better.

Since there were other witches around the fire, we joined them off to the side, near one of the tents. Far enough that I didn't think the others would hear us.

"What's going on?" Dante's gaze drifted between me and Ryker, no sign of jealousy or irritation in his eyes.

"I accept your rejection withdrawal," I said, then waited for a magical feeling or something.

Understanding dawned in his eyes. "Your gift is still out of control."

I bobbed my head, swallowing hard. "My wolf won't wake up. I need to mend whatever problem we created between us when I didn't accept you."

"You've got to bite me as a show of forgiveness," he explained. "That's why I bit you at your refuge; it's part of the process."

"But my wolf is asleep," I said, starting to panic. "I can't reach her."

“He can,” Ryker said. His voice was hard, his body tense.

“What do you mean?” I looked between the men.

“If I bite you, it’ll stir your wolf. You’re lucky I didn’t mate with Lina yet; it would destroy the bond between us and leave you with no access to your animal.”

Okay, yeah, panic was rising really damn fast.

“No,” Lina growled.

“If it saves Shadow’s wolf, yes,” Ryker snarled back.

“She’s at fault for not accepting the withdrawal,” Lina argued. “Exchanging bites will stir both of your wolves. What if you develop feelings for each other? No; he’s not doing it.” She stepped in front of Dante, holding her hands out on both sides of herself as if to block us.

“I didn’t know it would separate me from my wolf,” I argued. “I would’ve accepted it if I knew that was what was happening when my gift went on the fritz. I thought the moon goddess was just trying to nudge me toward him.”

The witch snapped, “Well, it’s not our fault you lack the basic intelligence to—”

“Enough,” Ryker cut her off.

Dante finally spoke up. “She’s right, Lina. I’m the one who rejected her in the first place; I should’ve warned her of the consequences of this too.”

Damn right, he should’ve.

At least he was taking responsibility for once.

Lina spun to face Dante. She said fiercely, “If you bite her, you lose me.”

His expression grew tight.

He was going to choose her; of course he was. I'd never done a damn nice thing to him, and obviously he was sleeping with her.

"Shadow and I will mate as soon as she's got her wolf back," Ryker butted into the conversation.

I hadn't expected him to come out with that offer, but I wasn't against it, either.

He continued speaking to Lina. "You're worried they'll form attachments to each other, but I won't let that happen. I'll bite her as soon as she's got her wolf back, and then we'll leave until we're mated. With their mate connection settled and then severed, Shadow will be less than nothing to him."

He shot me a piercing look; a reminder that *he* didn't feel that way about me.

I didn't need the reminder. I knew him too well for that.

Lina stepped away from both Ryker and Dante, her fists clenching at her sides.

Ryker's voice grew softer and silkier, and I knew he was about to use his mind-reading mojo to melt her will word by word. "He'll give you the family you want. If you're his, he'll devote his whole damn life to you. He followed Shadow across the world for the past seven years after meeting her for less than ten minutes—think how loyal he'll be to you after a month, or a year. When you're mated with a pup or two, this moment will be merely a small blip of closure so you can start together fresh, without ex-fated-mates lingering."

I watched emotions cross her face. "You'll bite her the second they part?" she asked Ryker.

"The *second*," he agreed.

"And you'll take her away from here until you're mated?" she added, her

voice starting to shake a bit.

His gaze flicked to mine for a tiny second while she spoke, and I knew he was double-checking that I was okay with what he'd proposed.

"I can't wait to be mated to you," I thought toward him.

"I will." He nodded again.

She still seemed to be struggling with the decision, though I could tell she was getting close to agreeing, *thank the goddess*.

"Take a minute to talk with Dante," Ryker suggested gently.

She nodded sharply. Her fingers clutched his arm, and he held them there as they headed back into the forest.

Ryker and I turned toward the fire, though we remained where we were. He bent forward a bit as his arms wrapped around me, his chin resting on my shoulder. Our bodies pressed together in a way that made me feel like I was home.

"What do you say we make this official tonight?" he murmured to me.

"Assuming you can talk my wolf into it," I gave him a sad smile.

"I'll convince her. I'm better with my gift now than I was back then." His lips met my cheek, his forehead tilting to rest against mine. "I'm not sure I'll need to, though. She seems pretty over the fated mate thing."

"She doesn't wonder about him anymore," I agreed. "He may have been trying to follow us for all those years, but you were there right beside us."

"Right behind you, actually. Staring at your ass every chance I got."

I laughed softly. "You're lucky you're so pretty, Ry. Otherwise I'd have to call you out for the stalker you totally are."

"You're lucky I'm so pretty," he teased, nipping at my ear with his teeth.

“Goddess, I can’t wait to see my mark on your shoulder.”

“Permanently,” I whispered, giving myself goosebumps.

Footsteps behind us had Ryker standing up straight, both of us turning toward the approaching couple. Though they seemed into each other and were obviously sleeping together, their relationship was still very new. And new relationships came with insecurities and struggles.

That was where Ryker and I had an advantage, I guess. We’d been best friends for so long that the only thing that would change between us when we mated was that we could finally have sex.

“Okay, we’re going to do it,” Lina told me, her face tight. “But everyone’s clothes stay on, and Ryker keeps an arm around you the whole time.”

What did she think I was going to do; grab his dick while he was biting me? I wasn’t a total freak.

“Deal,” I agreed.

We walked a bit further into the forest, away from the witches’ campsite so no one would see what we were doing.

“I’ll bite you first,” Dante said. “Hopefully, you’ll feel your wolf stirring immediately. When she’s fully aware, you’ll say, ‘I accept your rejection withdrawal,’ and then bite me.”

That didn’t sound difficult. Although his bite would hurt like hell again, because I still didn’t want his teeth in me.

“I’ll kiss every inch of you better tonight,” Ryker murmured into my ear, his arms wrapping securely around my middle.

My body flushed.

Goddess, that sounded good.

Lina and Dante’s hands remained locked as he stepped up to me. I pulled

my sweater down to expose my shoulder, not wanting my ex-fated-mate undressing me in any way.

Dante didn't waste time, biting me quickly and emotionlessly. He stepped away from me rapidly, as pain blossomed in my shoulder.

I bit back a string of pained curses as Ryker licked the wound with his human tongue.

Sure enough, my wolf began to wake up from the coma-like state the shadows had left her in.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"A whole lot of shit," I murmured back. *"But I need you to bite Dante, so the shadows can't take control of us again. I don't think we'll make it through that another time."*

She agreed whole-heartedly, though she was still dazed.

"I accept your rejection withdrawal," I told Dante.

That time, I felt the magic in the air. It was a loaded sentence; a statement of power.

My wolf's teeth lengthened in my mouth, and she bit Dante just as quickly as he'd bitten her.

He swore loudly, reeling back and grabbing his shoulder. "Fuck, did it hurt like that when I bit you last time?"

Ryker was carrying me deeper into the forest before I could answer. He broke into a jog, stopping near a stream in a small clearing with a bit of moonlight.

"Let me see," he growled, tilting my head. I winced but tilted for him. "Damn him," he swore when he saw my poor, ripped shoulder.

"Just pin me to the tree and bite me, like you did last time. The pain will

disappear when your teeth are inside me.”

His eyes burned into mine for a moment.

Only one moment, though.

Then my back met a tree, one of his hands trapping my wrists above my head while the other tilted my head further. He tugged my sweater down more to the side, tucking the neck of it beneath the wire lining the bottom of my bra.

And then he bit me.

I moaned at the feeling of bliss that instantly replaced the pain. The feeling of being important to someone, of belonging, was back fiercer and stronger and hotter and so much better.

I hadn't realized my refusal to forgive Dante was affecting me so much, but goddess, it was.

Ryker's tongue ravaged my shoulder while I panted, inhaling and exhaling rapidly through my mouth.

“My wolf wants to chase yours,” he murmured against my skin, his lips trailing down the bit of chest he'd exposed by pulling down my blanket-sweater.

“Mine wants to run too, after she bites you,” I breathed.

Ryker let go of me long enough to rip his shirt off. It fell in a patch of snow, but he didn't seem to give a shit.

His pants followed, and he stood in front of me in his underwear.

“Have your way with me.” He gestured to his chest.

I laughed, the sound becoming a growly chuff as my wolf surged to the surface.

She launched me toward Ryker. My legs wrapped around his hips, and he caught me easily as she slid her teeth into his shoulder.

The feral groan that followed had me reeling when my wolf retreated.

Ryker stumbled, catching himself and thus, me, on a tree. “Holy fucking hell,” he whispered roughly, as I licked his shoulder clean of the salty blood on his skin. It didn’t taste like blood; it tasted like *him*. “That was even better than I remembered.”

“We’re older. Surer about ourselves, and what we want,” I said. “Why wouldn’t that make it feel better?”

His eyes shifted. “Run, my Shadow. When I catch you, I’ll make you mine,” his wolf spoke through him.

I pressed a kiss to his mouth and then dropped my feet back to the ground. They landed in a patch of snow, but I was already shifting to wolf form.

My wolf tore through the trees, running hard enough to make up for the weeks she spent lost to the shadows that had given me my name.



39

Eventually, Ryker's wolf caught mine. They tumbled through the forest together, exchanging bites and licks and all sorts of other sweetness. They ran back toward Willoughsbie together as the sun rose, their bodies brushing with nearly every step they took.

I'd never felt my wolf so happy before.

Our wolves hadn't exchanged bites before we tried to have sex all those years ago, so I silently wondered if that was part of the reason she'd stopped me in the first place.

I'd never know for sure, because *she* didn't know for sure, so there was no point in wondering. But my mind went there anyway.

As they ran, my wolf contemplated names for Ryker's. I'd offered to name him multiple times over the years, but he had always insisted that he wasn't going to accept a name until he was mated to the woman suggesting it.

My mind went back to the way Ryker had talked about his parents' city. It had been heaven on earth to him; a strong, solid city full of people he loved.

"What if you called him Lupos?" As far as I knew, the city's name had been abandoned when its people were wiped out.

"I like it, but he might not," she said. *"It could be a reminder of his pain."*

"Not a reminder of his pain; a reminder of the people he loved, and the

place he came from. It's his heritage. The city lives on through him."

"I'll consider it," she agreed.

I wondered which of my many names Ryker would decide on for my wolf, but didn't give it too much thought. He'd think of the perfect thing to call her.

We reached Willoughsbie as breakfast was coming to a close. Our wolves had hunted together during the night though, so we weren't hungry.

Ryker shifted near our rental car, digging the key out of a hole he'd dug near the back left tire. I didn't know why he always felt the need to *bury* keys rather than just hiding them, but I'd stopped questioning that particular trait of his years ago.

He opened the back door and grabbed his bag off the back seat. Though it was his, it was packed full of just as much of my stuff as his.

Stepping into a pair of pants, he scratched my wolf's head as she trotted beside him toward the door.

The woman at the front desk gave us her signature big smile when we walked into the room. Some people really loved customer service jobs like that one, and I'd always thought they deserved to be paid extra if they could make you feel more comfortable like she did.

"Is your honeymoon suite open?" Ryker checked, his fingers finding my wolf's happy-place on the side of her neck. His scratches felt so good she nearly collapsed on the floor.

The woman eyed the wolf.

"She'll shift back when we've got privacy." He flashed the woman a charming smile. It irritated my wolf that the other woman got that smile instead of her. Ryker scratched her harder to make up for it.

That time, she actually *did* collapse.

I inwardly rolled my eyes at her, but was happy that she felt so good.

The woman's smile was back. "As long as she doesn't get in the bed in her wolf form. We've had issues de-shedding a few of our beds lately."

"I'll make sure of it," he promised.

I knew Ryker's wolf was probably at fault for the shedding problem. He'd slept in bed with me at the inn, and he was known for shedding like a fiend.

He finished getting us checked in, and got our key. Instead of heading up the stairs, he led my wolf down a hall and out a door. I'd never been to that side of the inn before, but outside, there were a handful of small cottages. Much smaller than Ryker's back in Payne, but cabins nonetheless.

"The honeymoon suite has its own jacuzzi bathtub," he told my wolf as we walked. "I looked it up while waiting for one of my flights."

Nice to know he'd expected to talk me into his bed that quickly.

He laughed. "I'm well aware of your willingness to kill for a jacuzzi tub, Beautiful. I would've booked the suite for you even if we weren't going to mate."

I believed him.

Mostly because it was true; jacuzzi bathtubs were my weakness. I'd paid way too much for hotel rooms on multiple occasions just for the sake of a jacuzzi tub.

I did bathe my money's worth out of it every time, though.

"I just hope you'll look away from the tub long enough to kiss me, at least," Ryker shot my wolf a grin, unlocking the door and holding it open for her. "Maybe if I can talk you into marrying me, I'll put one in my cottage's bathroom as a wedding gift."

My wolf licked his face, and he gave her one last scratch before withdrawing to give me control again. She was relieved to have time to think; she was feeling the effects of a long time's sleep.

I shifted, grabbing Ryker by the biceps to catch my balance. His hands slipped around my waist, and he dragged me to his chest. “If that was your way of proposing a human wedding to me, you’re going to have to do better,” I breathed.

“That was only a warning that you should prepare for one.” He kissed my nose, then my lips. “I know all about your obsession with the human version of mating. And I’m going to claim you in every damned way possible.”

“Is that a threat?” I teased.

“No, it’s a promise.” His tongue parted my lips, and our bodies pressed together as our mouths mingled. After a few minutes, he drew back. “Let’s get you in the tub. I don’t want you stressing about the tangles in your hair while we’re making love.” His finger tweaked my nipple, and I smacked his hand away.

“And you call me a tease,” I shot back, striding through the small cottage.

It was built like a studio apartment, but a bit modified. There was a monstrous bed in the center of the wall straight in front of the front door, with a patio door to the side of it. Blackout curtains were drawn over that, shutting out the world outside. Other than the bed, the only things the room boasted were a deep, two-person-sized jacuzzi tub that was open to the rest of the room, and a decent-sized actual bathroom with a small shower, a toilet, and a sink.

I’d choose that tub over a kitchen any day, though.

I turned on the water, testing it out and making sure it got to the right temperature before starting to fill the tub.

“I’m going to rinse off this dirt before getting in,” I called to Ryker, feeling his eyes on me as I crossed the room again. “You coming?”

“I don’t remember being invited,” he called back.

“*Come take a shower with me,*” I thought toward him.

He met me at the bathroom door, holding it for me as I slipped inside.

“We’ve got to be quick so I don’t overflow the tub...or let the water go cold,” I warned.

His lips twitched up toward a smile. “Goddess forbid the water go cold.”

“Exactly.” My fingers wrapped around his bicep, and I dragged him in after me. “So, how do you want to do this mating thing? Do we start with kissing, and let it escalate naturally?” I checked “Or should we just like, tackle each other?”

Ryker laughed. “Why don’t we just hang out until we’re feeling too horny to ignore it any longer?”

Well, that sounded like a better plan.

We showered off quickly, my body growing warmer with every brush of Ryker’s hand or skin against mine. When we were clean, I led him to the tub.

I slipped in, but he went back to his bag.

“Ryker,” I complained.

“I know you’re going to be pissed at your hair if you don’t get that shit brushed and put up,” he warned, coming back with a few travel-sized bottles of my favorite shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. He also had my razor tucked up against his palm—thank the goddess.

“You’re a saint.” I reached for the stuff as he slipped into the water with me, but he held it out of my reach.

“Uh-uh. You want your things, you’ve got to pay me for them?”

“Pay you for them?” I lifted an eyebrow, though my lady-bits were thinking they liked where this was going.

“Yup. A shoulder rub for the shampoo, a kiss for the conditioner...and I

know you're desperate to shave all of that," he swiveled his finger around my whole body. "So you'll have to think of something damn good in exchange."

"Is body wash considered more or less valuable than the other stuff?" I checked.

"More valuable than the conditioner, less than the razor."

"Okay..." I nodded.

Sliding behind him, the insides of my legs pressed into the outsides of his as I slipped my hands over his shoulders. My thumbs trailed over the tight muscles on his shoulder blades, and he shuddered.

"You like that?" I murmured.

"So fucking much," he growled back.

I worked his muscles with my fingers, loving the grunts and groans he rewarded me with as his body grew looser and more relaxed.

At least, more relaxed in *some* areas.

The more noises he made, the more I watched him react to the way I touched him, the more empowered I felt. I could make him feel good, in a way no one else ever had.

At least... not that I'd known of. I'd never directly asked him, but—

"No one's ever touched me like this," he growled to me, answering my inner question. "I've been in love with you since I was a teenager; I had no interest in dicking around with someone else."

Well, that settled my mind. He already knew that my wolf hadn't let me near another man, so he didn't even need to ask.

"What did you say I had to pay for the conditioner?" I feigned forgetfulness, slowly withdrawing my hands from his back.

“A kiss.”

He was probably regretting the cheap deal he'd made; I would've paid more for it.

“You undervalue your mouth, Beautiful.” He turned to face me, his caramel eyes reminding me of molten gold.

“Or you overvalue it.”

“Impossible.” He grabbed me by the thighs, dragging me up onto his lap. My core pressed against his erection, and I nearly groaned.

Grabbing his face, I plopped a kiss to his lips. No tongue, no fondling—just a simple kiss.

Pulling my head away before he could part my lips and devour my mouth, I flashed him a grin and held my hand out. “Shampoo and conditioner, please.”

He handed them over, his eyes gleaming with amusement. Ryker loved to play with me, verbally. We hadn't gotten to do much physical playing, but I was starting to think it might be even more fun than the verbal.

I started scrubbing my scalp with shampoo, ignoring the awful tangles as I tried to remove the rest of the dirt and oil. Ryker's long, slim fingers slipped into my hair, working the shampoo in for me.

I legitimately moaned because it felt so good.

“You like that?” he asked.

“Yes. Head massages might just be the way to my heart.”

He chuckled.

“In fact, they're so good, I'm willing to offer you one in exchange for my body wash.”

“Oh, really?” he drawled. “What makes you think a head massage is worth more to me than a kiss?”

“You’d be holding me up,” I explained, starting to rinse my hair in the water. “So you’d get to feel up my butt and my thighs while you’re being massaged. Plus, our chests would be pressed up together, so you’d get to feel all this jazz rubbing against you.” I gestured to my tits.

“Deal.”

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

I flashed him a smug smile as I began to douse my hair in conditioner. Sliding up onto the ledge of the tub, I started trying to tug my fingers through the conditioner-coated tangles. It hurt like hell, and wasn’t working well.

Ryker slipped out of the tub, and I watched his glorious body move as he went back to his bag. When he came back, he had a scrunchy and a wide-tooth comb.

“You’re legitimately incredible.” I tried to snag them from him, but he held them out of my reach.

“Uh-uh. You want these, you let me detangle your hair.”

I gave a dramatic sigh. “If you insist.”

“Oh, I do.”

He grabbed me gently by the hips, spinning me so I faced the bed. My boobs smooshed up against the edge of the tub as I leaned over it, my arms dangling onto the strip of tile around it.

Where I would’ve just ripped the comb through my hair and loosed an army of swear words to deal with the pain of it, he began to slowly work through the knots. Starting at the bottom, the comb slid down my back in smooth, repeated motions. His fingers helped it along, pressing gently into my back and following the comb down to my tailbone again and again.

The movement was rhythmic and relaxing, but his touch made me burn for more.

“You’re all set,” he finally said, placing the comb down on the ledge beside my arms. When he handed me the scrunchy, I twisted the smooth length of my conditioner-soaked strands into a bun at the very top of my head, and wrapped them up with the scrunchy to hold them there.

“Alright, help me up.” I reached for his neck.

He slid my body up his, and I had to bite back a moan at the silky pressure of his muscles on my skin.

My legs wrapped around his waist, and my eyes closed of their own volition when the length of his cock pressed up against my center again.

Grabbing another little bottle of conditioner, I squeezed some into my hands and warmed it up between my palms before sliding my fingers into his hair.

His dick throbbed against me as I started massaging his scalp. His fingers worked my ass and thighs, making their way toward my center but never touching it.

My body throbbed along with his, growing desperate for release. My hips began to move a bit as I tried to slide up against him, to use his hardness to my advantage. His hands locked around my hips, and he rocked me against his erection.

Our breathing picked up, and soon we were panting together. I shattered with a cry, my fingers digging into his scalp as I held on tightly. He groaned into my chest, biting down on my shoulder with human teeth that didn’t cut or hurt as he throbbed again harder, as he climaxed.

I dropped my head to rest on his as we both breathed raggedly, him into my chest and me, staring at the wall in shock.

“That was cool,” I finally said.

He barked out a laugh. “I rubbed you to orgasm without my dick even going inside you, Beautiful. I’d call that a hell of a lot more than cool.”

“Call it whatever you want, because I just bought my shower gel and razor with that massage,” I flashed him a grin.

He met it with his own lazy grin. “I feel too good to argue with you right now.”

“Good. Because I’ll win anyway.” I kissed him on the mouth. Honestly, I was still horny enough to keep going, but I figured he needed a bit of a break to recharge first.

He didn’t argue with my thoughts, which told me I was probably right.



40

I shaved every disgustingly hairy inch of my body. My arms grew as much hair as any manly man's would've, so I always kept them shaved too. Ryker leaned up against the tub, his arms draped around the outsides as he lazily watched me.

"I keep waiting for you to kick me out," he said, out of nowhere. "When I thought you loved me like a brother, you always kicked me out before flashing too much boob or before doing anything like this." He gestured to me, sitting on the edge of the tub and holding my leg up at an awkward angle so I could shave those nasty hairs off my big toes.

Yes, I was a hairy person. I liked to think it was a werewolf thing, but I knew it was just the genetic anti-lottery.

"You're good at making me orgasm; why would I kick you out?"

"We're still not mated." He shrugged. "Your wolf could deny me again."

"She's feeling pretty chill. She definitely approved of all the rubbing action, so I don't think she's going to have a problem with it. You could've shoved your dick in me during that and I would've probably thanked you."

Ryker's eyes grew hotter. "Good to know."

I washed off the last of my shower gel, then rinsed the conditioner out of my hair before climbing out of the tub. Ryker unplugged the drain while I

grabbed a towel, wrapping it around myself.

Reaching for a second one, I was going to wrap it around my hair. Ryker caught my hand before I could, stepping out of the tub and standing up beside me. “Leave it loose. It’s sexy.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “It’ll drip water everywhere. And probably smack you a bunch of times.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

I shrugged, wringing it out but leaving it down for him.

“I have one more thing you might like to pay me for,” he remarked, casually walking back to his bag.

“Oh really?” I folded my arms, cocking my hip to the side.

“Yes, really.” He reached into the bag, and pulled out a bar of my favorite chocolate.

I nearly drooled. “What do you want for it?”

“You, on your back on the bed. I want you to eat it, while I eat you.”

My body throbbed again. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“Liar.” He gave me a slow, sexy grin. “Get your ass on the bed, Shadow.”

I forced myself to walk slow—more like saunter, really.

When I reached the bed, I made a show of slowly, reluctantly, stripping off my towel and getting comfortable on my back, with my hair draped over the other side of the pillow.

Ryker kneeled in front of me, bending my legs at the knee and sliding them apart as he dragged his nose down the center of my body.

I inhaled sharply as his nose stopped, pressed up against my clit. “You

remember?” I asked, my voice strangled. I’d showed him where I wanted him, taught him where to lick me, the first time we’d been together.

“Of course I remember,” he growled. “I’d never fucking forget watching you come apart on my mouth.”

My body throbbed some more.

He blew gently on the hot, sensitive skin. My lower belly clenched. “Take a bite,” he murmured.

My fingers were clumsy with the wrapper, but I got it open. He waited for me, not moving a damned centimeter until I got a bite of chocolate in my mouth. The sugary sweet flavor met my tongue as his tongue met my core.

He didn’t start slow; I was already plenty aroused. No, he went straight to ravishing me.

The deliciousness in my mouth practically vanished as I panted and moaned and writhed and throbbed. My legs wrapped around his head, my fingers tangling in the sheets as I quickly went over the edge again.

Bliss relaxed my body, but Ryker wasn’t done.

He slid a finger inside me, and I gasped at the feel. I hadn’t put anything but tampons up in there since we nearly mated, and *goddess*, I’d forgotten how good that felt.

His teeth gently scraped my core while he fit another finger inside me, stretching me out.

Getting me ready for his dick.

That thought alone was enough to make me close to shattering again.

“Think you can take one more?” He asked, speaking against my core. My whole damn body clenched in need.

“*Hell* yes.” His dick was definitely larger than three of his fingers, so I

fucking *better* be able to fit it.

He slowly drew his fingers in and out of me a few times before adding a third. The world spun at the gentle stretching pressure of it.

“I want you inside me,” I moaned to Ryker.

“Come, and I’ll give it to you,” he growled.

He sucked my clit gently, and then harder as his fingers stretched and rubbed me from within.

I practically exploded. My body clenched and unclenched as I lost control. Thrill and bliss and other feelings I had no words for tore through me from my head to my toes. It went on longer than any other climax I’d ever had—and much more intense.

Best fucking orgasm of my life.

“Now,” I growled at Ryker.

He gave me a dark chuckle as he dragged himself up my body, trailing his erection over my knee and inner thigh until he settled between my legs.

His lips met mine, kissing me slowly. “You’re so fucking sexy,” he said in a low voice. “I want you to feel good too when I’m inside you.”

Every female in the werewolf world knew there was a decent chance that her first time having sex would suck—it was pretty much to be expected when you put two young virgins together. That was why mated women and guys put emphasis on oral sex and hand jobs before getting around to the penis-in-vagina stuff.

But usually, mating couples didn’t know each other. They were shit at communication, and awkward together. And they didn’t want each other with the same fierce longing that Ryker and I had wanted each other with for years.

“Watching your reactions makes me feel good,” I said honestly.

“I fucking love that,” he rumbled, lifting his pelvis and aligning his dick to my opening. “Tell me if it hurts.”

“Shut up and put it inside me already,” I growled back.

He pressed himself against my slit. A soft gasp parted my lips as he slowly put more pressure into it, the tip of him sliding into me. Though I’d just had his fingers in me, the feel of his dick was *unreal*.

His jaw clenched as he continued filling me, inch by inch, until he was fully sheathed. The feeling of fullness was absolutely *incredible*.

His jaw was still clenched tight though.

Was he not enjoying it?

“I’m trying not to get carried away,” he growled to me. “I really don’t want to hurt you. The way you feel is...Fuck.”

I laughed breathily. “The way I feel is fuck?”

“Tease,” he growled, his lips latching onto my nipple. I moaned, my vagina clenching as I arched into him.

He snarled, slamming into me twice before his whole body clenched. “Shit. Dammit. I need a break,” he panted. “I’m fucking weak.”

“I’ll make you practice a lot,” I gave him a wicked grin. Now that I knew what he liked, I could torture him. “Just sit back and let me make you feel good, like you made me feel good.”

His human teeth bit down on my shoulder, like he’d done in the tub. It was kind of kinky, and I loved it.

“Think less sexy thoughts,” he growled at me.

I ignored him, moving my hips just slightly.

He groaned.

I moved again, a bit more, and he groaned louder. His body tensed and untensed as he held himself up off me. My gaze locked on the place our bodies connected, and my whole being throbbed.

“Shadow,” he hissed.

“Stop holding back. Lose control, and you can play with me until you’re ready to go again,” I breathed.

I guess that was enough of an invitation.

He slammed himself in and out before snarling my name, pouring himself into me.

Rolling off of me, his lips wrapped around my nipple. “We’re doing that again,” he growled.

“Now we’re stuck together permanently, so you don’t get a choice anymore,” I teased him.

He growled again, playfully into my boob, looking up at me from my chest. “I’ll make you regret saying that,” he warned, his fingers sliding between my thighs.

“I’d like to see you try.”

He tried.

And tried, and tried, and tried.



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“We need to go back to the witches,” I told Ryker, though I made no move to get out of bed. We hadn’t put our clothes on in the forty-eight hours we’d been in the honeymoon suite—and hadn’t slept much, either.

Though we had ordered food eight times, and watched a few episodes of our favorite TV show.

“Screw the witches,” he rumbled.

“Why? I can screw you instead.”

He chuckled. “Your joke vocabulary is already getting dirtier. I approve.”

“Good.” I bit his nipple, and he poked my side. “Dammit, you know I’m ticklish,” I writhed, attempting to fight off his hand as he kept poking me, tickling me.

“Tell me I’m a sex god and I’ll stop,” he grinned, rolling me to my back and pinning me down to the mattress.

“Never,” I croaked, battling his ridiculously large muscles and limbs. “Damn you. Fine, you’re a sex god! Now release me!”

“Please,” he reminded me with a shit-eating grin.

“Please, you asshole.”

“That’s sex-god asshole to you, Beautiful.” He finally stopped, kissing my nose as I sucked air into my aching lungs.

When I’d stopped panting and was snuggled up against Ryker’s chest again, I said, “We really do need to go see the witches. Hopefully with that letter, they’ll decide to work their shit out themselves. But given their past, I doubt it.”

“The majority of them were leaning toward meeting with the others. The letter seemed genuine to all of them, but some still feel so betrayed that they never want to see the coven again.” His fingers stroked circles on my hip, feeling good rather than ticklish.

“How do you feel about it?” I asked him.

He was silent for a moment as he continued stroking my hip. “Not great. I don’t think I’ll ever feel great about anything that has to do with witches and their magic,” he finally admitted. “Especially those ones.”

Yeah, I got that. “I can deal with them on my own, if you want.”

He scoffed. “I thought I made it clear that I’m never leaving you alone again. Remember what happened when you snuck away from my bed in the witch pack?”

Yeah, I wouldn’t be forgetting my accidental jaunt to Argentina in my lifetime. Sticking together was definitely a good call.

“We could just go home. The witches used to be part of your pack, but you were just a kid; you don’t owe them anything.”

“They’re all that’s left of my people,” he said simply. “I can’t leave them trapped in a forest.”

“Then we’ll go back.”

He kissed me gently. “And then we should go on a real honeymoon. To Hawaii, or the Caribbean or something. Somewhere you can wear a bikini all day.”

I snorted. “That’s your only requirement?”

“Preferably a bikini that’s easy to remove.”

“Classy.” I stuck my tongue out at him, and he licked it.

We packed up our stuff soon after that, and headed back out to the rental car. It was late morning, so there was still plenty of time left in the day.

Ryker went through his typical key-digging drill after locking our stuff in the vehicle, and then we shifted.

Our wolves trotted into the forest; neither seemed to be in a hurry.

“I’d like to choose a name for you, if you’ll let me,” My wolf purred to Ryker’s.

“It would be an honor to carry a name given by you,” the wolf said solemnly.

He was much less of a jokester than Ryker. I’d often thought his wolf represented the serious side of Ryker that he often hid from everyone—including himself. And I knew they had a solid relationship, despite all they had lost and survived.

“Lupos,” my wolf spoke quietly, tentatively. She was much more cautious than I was. Like Ryker’s wolf did for him, I thought she embodied the tender, scarred bits of our souls for me. *“I’d like to call you after your birth pack. It lives on through you.”*

Ryker’s wolf slowed his steps. He seemed to be thinking; trying to decide how he felt about it. He finally said, *“It’s a name I’ll carry with pride.”*

The words were emotional. My wolf stopped walking, nuzzling up to his neck and brushing her side against his with a soft whine for support.

He nuzzled her back. *“I’d like to call you El.”*

It surprised her, and me too. I'd gone by that name for a few days—okay, maybe only a few hours—but it hadn't suited me.

It did suit her, though.

"I love it." She licked his face. *"El and Lupos."*

"We shall bleed our enemies and feast on their hearts," he growled playfully.

She gave a soft snort. *"You're adorable."*

"As are you, mate." He nipped at her ear, and she took off into the forest.

When we reached the witches' camp, it was empty. Our wolves tracked the women to a clearing a few miles away.

Much to our surprise, we walked right into a meeting.

A civilized, face-to-face meeting.

The heads of the witch pack were talking with the older Lina along with Dante and the younger Lina, while the werewitches and others exchanged tentative hugs with some coven witches. They all chattered nervously, trying to find similarities and make friends with people who they'd been raised to think hated them.

Dante glanced over and saw our wolves, then grabbed some clothes and jogged over. I saw the younger Lina eyeing us suspiciously, but she must've seen the marks on our shoulders.

"Shift," he said, handing us clothes. Our wolves grabbed them in their mouths, and both made their way behind big trees before shifting. We dressed quickly in the cursed sack-dresses before making our way back to the witches.

Dante waited for us on the edge of the group when we returned. "The

werewitches are going to stay in Oldenwood,” he told us, slipping his hands into his pockets. “I’m going to stay with them. All the other guys from your refuge want to stay too. The town needs new blood, and it’s a lot cheaper to live here than in Payne.”

That was likely a valid point.

He continued, “We’re forming a pack; I’m going to be the alpha of the Oldenwood Pack.”

It didn’t surprise me. He’d rejected me because he wanted to be alpha someday; that had always been something important to him. I hoped his thirst for power didn’t end up causing trouble between our two packs in the future, but we’d watch him closely.

Ryker nodded. “I’m sure a lot of the other guys will want to move here when they find out about all the single witch ladies looking for mates.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” Dante agreed. “I’m alright with them coming to stay with us without transferring packs; we can keep a log of it or something.”

He and Ryker both looked at me.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s your pack, alpha Shadow. What do you think about this?” Ryker gestured toward Dante, and the group of witches.

Alpha Shadow? Gross.

I’d stick with plain ole’ Shadow.

“I think my refuge is too full of people who are ready to transition back into the real world. And if this is a place where they can safely do that, then great.” I shrugged. “The refuge is meant to help people through tough times, not enable them to sit on their butts and eat potato chips all day. Although, we’re going to need a damn lot of that plant that prevents witches from using their magic on you.”

With that decided, we joined the coven for the rest of their peace-talk.

After a long day of negotiating, catching up, and making plans, the barrier holding the witches in the forest went down with the setting sun.

And just like that, they were free.

The next morning, Ryker and I returned our rental car at the airport we'd picked it up from and waited for our flight back to Colorado. We'd both been pretty quiet; not because it was awkward or anything, but because things were changing and we both liked time to think and process change.

"How do you feel about moving into my place with me when we get back?" Ryker asked, his arm draped over my shoulder while his fingers trailed up and down my bicep.

"How do you feel about moving into my room at the refuge with me?" I countered.

His lips tilted upward in a half-smile. "Getting caught by Taylor and Alaska while we're having sex sounds scandalous, and you know I like a good scandal."

I smirked. "Exactly." I snuggled against his side. "I thought us moving into your cottage together was a given. I didn't like living a couple of miles away from you while we were friends; I'm sure as hell not doing that now that we're mates."

"I thought so too, but wanted to make sure since you haven't been asking." His fingers started tracing circles on my arms. "I spent so many nights imagining what it would be like to come home to you, to go to sleep together with nothing separating us. No shitty pasts, no temperamental wolves, no thoughts I couldn't share for fear of scaring you away. Now that it's happened, I'm not sure what to daydream about anymore."

"How about you just quit daydreaming, and start living in the present?" I tugged his arm tighter around me.

“Sounds nice,” he admitted. “But first, I should probably do this.”

His hand slipped into his pocket, and he pulled out the little red box.

The little red box.

Kneeling on one knee in front of me, we ignored the gasps of other airport-goers. “Shadow Elizabeth Bashlor,” he raised his voice, kicking up the drama for our crowd. My lips twitched, a grin threatening to surface.

Shadow Elizabeth. He was such a dork.

“My love, my mate, the future mother of my children.”

I bit back a snort. Cheesy lines like that were things we made fun of, always. He grinned up at me, opening the ring box with a flourish.

“Will you marry me?”

My eyes landed on the sun ring. I saw his eyes narrow, out of the corner of my eye, but didn’t look away from the ring.

Shit, he knew I’d found it.

“Yes.” I flung my finger out toward him, kicking up the drama to avoid his accusing eyes.

He slipped the ring on my finger, aware of all the eyes and “aww”ing people around us. When I threw my arms around him, he hugged me tightly.

“When did you find it?” he growled playfully into my ear.

“After the witches erased my memories. Wasn’t expecting to find an engagement ring of all things in your sweatshirt’s pocket when I borrowed it,” I murmured back.

“Shit. I thought it was a brilliant hiding place.”

“Well, you thought wrong.” I leaned away, planting a kiss on his lips. “I love it, though,” I said, holding my hand up to the light so I could see it sparkle.

“Good.” He stood up, plopping back down on his ass and tugging me with him so I sat on his knee. “Because I love you.” He kissed the back of my neck, and then wrapped his arm around me.

In that moment, I admitted to myself something that I hadn’t had the guts to admit before.

I admitted that if the only way to be with Ryker was to reject Dante the way he’d rejected me, I would do it. I wouldn’t be terrible to him, the way he’d been terrible to me, but I *would* reject him.

I’d been so against the idea for so many years that I wondered if that admission meant I’d become too selfish, or irreparably broken.

But Ryker had never been openly against it the way I had. He’d never ranted, or raged, or cried. When I asked him about Susie, his ex-fated-mate, he’d always calmly explained that she wanted a different lifestyle than he did.

“Rejection is complicated,” he said, lifting my left hand to his lips so he could kiss my ring finger and the diamond shining on it. “It’s not inherently evil, like you tend to think. Most people don’t agree with me on that—hence all the rabid wolves—but the goddess can only *pair* us.”

He continued, “We have to choose to build a relationship with the one we’re fated to, or to walk away. Susie and I chose to walk away, and I’ve never regretted that, or hated her for it.” He pressed his lips to my throat. “It took me a couple weeks to get to the point where I believed that, but I’ve never looked back since then.”

He’d already told me that story before, of course. A dozen times, if not more. Never to shame me, but sometimes to try to give me perspective when I was being a hot mess.

“I’ve never seen it like that,” I admitted. “Now, I have no rejection gift.

For all intents and purposes, I'm not a rejected wolf anymore."

"No. Now, you're a werewolf with a chosen mate." He kissed my cheek. "A chosen mate who finds you beautiful, and cunning, and too clever for your own good."

"Sweet-talker," I remarked.

"Sweet-lips." He bent his head to kiss my mouth. "I'm glad your gift is gone. It was exhausting."

I laughed. "It was, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. But it led you to me, so I'll try to stick to the good memories of it."

Over the intercom, someone announced that our plane was starting to board.

We grabbed our stuff and headed toward the line.

Just one flight, and we'd be back to Payne. Back to our lives, and my refuge.

And stepping into the future we were going to build together.



Epilogue

Ryker

Shadow laughed at something Knox had said, spinning around the living room. We'd hauled all the furniture out of the massive downstairs living area, and at her command, we'd put up more decorations than I thought would fit hanging from the walls and ceilings.

She'd turned the place into a damned winter wonderland, and her curve-clinging white dress glittered like it was covered in snowflakes.

After a short ceremony, which we'd (unfortunately) invited alphas from all over the world to, the dancing had started. I'd had her all to myself for a bit, but then the daddy-daughter dance had started.

Knox was the closest thing either of us had to a dad, and he was *not* fatherly. But the damned DJ announced it, so he swept in and dragged my mate across the dance floor.

I'd warned the DJ not to do any kind of mother-son dance, but Cara was already eyeing me, planning to play the role of my mom.

We were an odd family, that was for sure. But we made it work.

I waited for my mate to finish her dance, standing off to the side and sipping some kind of fruity drink Esther and Hailey had spent days perfecting. It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad either.

My eyes flicked over the crowd, scanning for familiar faces. We had about three dozen alphas from other packs there at the refuge, meeting our pack. News about our group of misfits was spreading like a wildfire, and we were getting three or four new rabids—AKA pack members—a month. Our pack members far outnumbered the visiting alphas though, especially considering all the wolves, witches, and werewitches who had driven all the way from Oldenwood to come witness the wedding.

The thoughts around me were mostly happy and reserved, which made them easier to ignore.

At least, until Taylor's inner voice drifted sharply through my mind as the song came to an end.

"Should I tell her?" she wondered. "I should tell her. I'd be a bitch not to. She can keep a secret."

I tuned into her thoughts, listening more closely.

She seemed to be talking to Lex, the girl who had been the rabid wolf Spirit for a long time.

Shadow hugged Knox as the dance ended, and someone pulled her into a conversation. I kept myself tuned into her thoughts, like I always was, as I listened in to the girls' conversation.

"You're really worried about the ass that rejected you?" Taylor asked Lex.

"Yes. My wolf took over before I could accept his rejection, and you know that rejections left hanging can make people go insane," Lex urged.

I heard her fear, though. Behind the words.

She was afraid that if she didn't find him and kill him, he would find her first.

"I won't be able to choose another mate while our rejection hangs open, either," Lex added. "I've got to figure out a way to find him."

“I’ve got to tell her,” Taylor decided. Her wolf agreed.

She lowered her voice, barely above a whisper. “My rejection gift is tracking mates. The fated *or* rejected ones, and the permanently mated ones. When I touch someone, I see their mate’s location.”

Lex was shocked by the information, but I’d already known. I’d had her try to find Shadow by touching Dante when my female first vanished, but for whatever reason, she hadn’t seen anything. We’d theorized that it had something to do with the way those shadows had affected her.

“I can lead you to him, but he’s been moving a lot. Every time I touch you, he’s somewhere new. It’s like he’s running from something,” Taylor added.

“Or hunting for someone,” Lex thought, dread weighing down her mind. “We need to find him,” she told Taylor.

“Let’s do it,” Taylor agreed.

Shadow’s hand touched my arm, and my attention left the girls’ conversation. “Hey there.” She grinned up at me. “Get lost peeping in someone’s mind again?”

“Something like that.” I caught her face in my hand and kissed her. Luckily, she’d taken her lipstick off after we took pictures, because that shit didn’t taste anywhere near as good as my female.

“Come dance with me,” she said, tugging me out onto the dance floor that was now covered in werewolves dancing like they were at their senior prom. It was a madhouse, and not my cup of tea. But Shadow was soaking it up and loving it wholeheartedly, so I’d stick around and play along just to see that smile on her face.

“So, are any of the new alphas contemplating how to take over our pack?” she asked me, her voice still light and airy as we swayed around the dance floor. We’d taken classes together, but I liked holding her close and swaying a hell of a lot more than I liked trying to remember all the steps to the dances.

And since we'd already danced for nearly two hours, she didn't seem to care anymore, so I was sticking to the swaying.

"Nah. Most of them are too busy trying to come up with ways to convince us to send our healthy wolves back to their packs instead of the one in Oldenwood. The others are just eating a shitload of cake."

"Well, it is good cake." She grinned, going up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. We'd already done the thing where we smashed cake in each other's faces; I'd gotten some trapped between her tits, and called it a victory. We'd done the fancy dinner, and the toasts, too. "Thanks for playing along, Ry. I'm ready to go home whenever you are."

"I don't want you to miss out on your party." I gestured to the group around us, though I had a throbbing headache after listening to the thoughts of so damn many people all day and night.

It was Shadow's day, not mine. I'd gotten to marry her, which was all that mattered to me.

"It's almost over, and I can tell you have a headache. You only get spacey when your head hurts." She lifted her lips, and I lowered my head so she could whisper in my ear. "And I really can't wait for you to take this dress off me. I've got new underwear on underneath it."

Well, that made the decision easier.

Knowing her feet were aching thanks to the heels she had on, I swept her up off them and hauled her toward the door. Everyone yelled, hooted, and hollered after us, but Shadow hadn't planned a big send-off when her party ended. She wanted everyone to keep partying and eating after we left.

My dress shoes crunched on the gravel as I carried her to my truck. We could've just walked, but since the party wasn't ending until after midnight, I'd figured we'd want to drive.

I was right.

Shadow snuggled up against my side as we drove, her fingers unbuttoning my pants. “Goddess, seeing you in that outfit makes me so horny,” she complained, working my zipper down.

“Does it? Tell me more,” I teased her, pulling up in front of our place and parking the truck.

“Do you know what makes me even hornier?” She asked, draping her legs over my lap. She grabbed my left hand, holding it up between us. When she told me she liked how humans marked each other with wedding rings, I’d taken note of it. She wanted me marked with her ring, as much as she wanted to be marked with mine. “Seeing you in this.” She pointed to my ring. “My *husband*.”

I’d never take the damn thing off, since it meant as much to her as our claim marks meant to me.

“I think we’ve got to seal our marriage the same way we sealed our mating,” I said, feigning seriousness. “Better get to the part where we exchange bodily fluids.”

She snorted, grabbing me by the tie around my neck and using it to tug my lips to hers. “You’re my best friend, and the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You know that, right?”

“Of course.” I kissed her nose. “And you know you’re all those same things to me.” I didn’t ask, because it wasn’t a question. I could read her thoughts too well for that, and I showed her how much I loved her every day.

She was my whole damn world, and I was hers.

And that was exactly how we wanted it to be.

“Yep. So hurry up and carry me inside so we can get naked together.” She grinned at me again.

Ah, right. Her feet.

I was off my game when my headaches hit, but luckily I could usually

avoid them.

Stepping out of the truck, I swept her into my arms.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Ryker Jimenez,” I opened the door—having left it unlocked, for once. “Would you like a tour of your new bathtub?”

Her eyes lit up. “Hell yes! When did you have it installed?”

“While we were getting married.” I kissed her nose. “I think we’ll have to test it out together.”

“Definitely.” She gave me a wicked grin, her beautiful dirty mind conjuring images of exactly how she wanted to test out that bathtub.

And I was in for all of it, forever.

THE END



TAYLOR'S STORY
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AFTERTHOUGHTS

I've always loved standalone books. I feel like there's a special kind of satisfaction that comes from reading a really good standalone if it's done right. There's less drama separating the main characters because there are less pages to fit it in, and no unfortunate cliffhangers to piss anyone off.

Hopefully I've done this one right so that you feel the same way!

When I sat down to write this book, I planned it as a trilogy. I had an idea of the exact final scene that would wrap up the trilogy: another Not-Thanksgiving, but Dante would walk in with another girl on his arm and Shadow would be happy for him. They would be friends.

But when I started writing Shadow's book, I was less than a quarter in when I realized she would never be able to forgive Dante enough for the friendship I would need to build between them to make that trilogy work. Shadow holds grudges, for sure, but those memories of being rejected right after losing her dad, near his grave, even... they were the kind of memories that would always color her opinion of him. And Ryker was far too willing to fight for her to give her the space she'd need to fall into friendship with Dante like that.

And... he was a dick. If you've followed my books for long, you've

probably realized that I'm not one of the authors who makes the main lady end up with the guy who treats them like crap. I just don't find that kind of behavior sexy, or believable as far as romance goes.

So, Shadow and Ryker's story became a standalone. And I fell more in love with it as the pages filled and the moments passed by. As an author, some books hit harder and make you feel more than others, and this one just really, really struck home.

I can't wait to continue exploring the Outcast Pack in Taylor's book, *MATE TRACKER*, and hope you'll stick with me for that and the other two standalones I have planned in this world.

Thank you so much for reading!

All the love,

Lola Glass



BONUS EPILOGUE

Join my mailing list with this link to read a **bonus epilogue**. It's not a necessary part of the story, but if you want a glimpse at a cute moment in these character's future, just put your email address in.

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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 twenty-something 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 :)