

Bonded
Beyond Lies

FIGHTING FATE

EMBER DAVIS

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Bonded Beyond Lies (Fighting Fate Series) by Ember Davis

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Contains explicit love scenes and adult language. The suggested reading audience is 18 years or older.

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For my readers who are willing to go on any adventure with
me.

I hope you like this one!

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TRIGGER WARNING

This story has dark themes and there are depictions of abuse—both physically and psychologically. You'll still find an insta-love story that is spicy and isn't necessarily simple, but with darker themes and situations. There are descriptions and depictions of violence within this paranormal romance.

There is no cheating (not really, trust me!) and a guaranteed HEA, however, if you don't like darker themes, then this book may not be for you.



PROLOGUE

SERENITY – AGE TEN

I look up at the back of the packhouse from where I'm playing with some of the other kids on the playground. This is my favorite place to play, especially when I can talk Mom or Dad into pushing me on the swings because I can't get as high when I'm all by myself. I love the feeling of flying and what better place to feel that than on the swings?

Todd, the Alpha's son who is a year older than me and the same age as my brother, Samuel, is over on the monkey bars getting frustrated because he gets almost all the way across, but then loses his grip. As I've been twirling back and forth on the swing I'm sitting on, I've watched him try it repeatedly. He doesn't seem to want to give up, but every time he falls, his face gets redder. His frustration and embarrassment are becoming suffocating.

All the other kids have moved away from him, not wanting to be on the other end of his anger when he blows up. I've seen him do it before and it is kind of scary. Even though none of us have shifted into our wolves, which won't happen until we're 13, Todd's alpha aura can get out of control when he's mad.

I asked my mom, the pack's Beta female, about it one time and she patted my hand gently before telling me, "Alphas need to learn how to control their emotions, even when they're young and haven't been blessed with their wolves yet. He has a lot of power inside of him."

I nodded and wanted to ask her why all the other kids were afraid of him when he was mad or frustrated, but it didn't seem to bother me in the same way. I knew, logically, I should be afraid and not approach him, but it wasn't real fear.

Not the kind of fear I felt last summer when we were at a pack picnic and a group of four rogues came out of the tree line, snarling and itching for a fight. That was the first time I

felt fear because I knew I wouldn't be able to defend myself against them. Thankfully, those four rogues didn't stand a chance against the Alpha and the rest of the high-ranking members and warriors who were at the picnic. Still, that feeling of fear, true fear, is one I don't think I'll ever forget.

Todd doesn't scare me, but I can read the faces of the other kids. It's clear they're fighting against the need to submit to him. He doesn't even realize the aura he's giving off right now. All because he's being stubborn about some stupid monkey bars.

When I can't take it anymore and I can see the kids around us about to fall to their knees and bare their necks in submission, I huff as I stand up. I slowly make my way over to where Todd is glaring at the monkey bars like they ate the last cookie in the cookie jar. I feel eyes on me, but when I glance back at the packhouse, I don't see anyone watching me and shake off the feeling.

"Todd," I say softly, "how about we go inside and get something to drink? It's awfully hot out here and I'm thirsty."

Todd's eyes remain hard when he looks at me, the same glare he was giving the playground equipment moments ago now leveled on me, but I don't flinch away from him. He nods curtly before we walk side-by-side toward the back door of the packhouse. I can almost feel the breath of relief the kids on the playground let out as we walk away.

With my family being the Beta family and Todd's being the Alpha family, we've grown up together and are good friends, but Sam takes the spot as Todd's best friend. Todd's sister, Kathy, who is my age and my best friend, said she wasn't interested in coming out to play today.

I'm not surprised, she loves soaking up the attention of anyone and everyone. With visitors from the Blood Rising pack here today, it's prime time for her preening. I've never been one to want the spotlight, which is one of the reasons we're such good friends—we balance each other out.

Todd seems to calm down as we both drink some lemonade one of the Omegas who works in the kitchen made earlier

today. I'm glad because getting that mad at some monkey bars is kind of pointless. He'll be able to make it across eventually. He was already so close.

"Do you want to come back outside?" Todd's question doesn't surprise me, nor does the look of determination on his face. "I'm going to get all the way across this time."

"I think I'm going to read for a little while and cool off," I tell him with a smile and start to giggle a little when he's out the back door from the kitchen almost before I finish speaking.

I put both of our glasses in the industrial dishwasher, not wanting to make more of a mess for the Omegas to clean up. They have enough work to do, and I try to always clean up after myself. With a book in my hands, I get comfortable on the window seat in one of the large lounge rooms available for anyone in the pack to use.

I feel eyes on me again as I'm reading and look up to find a young man staring at me from across the room. His eyes are a deep, dark green, the same color as the trees in the forest surrounding the pack's territory. I've never seen him before, but that doesn't mean much. He's probably here with the visiting Alpha from Blood Rising and I don't see the reason to get involved in pack politics. Still, I can't seem to tear my eyes away from his.

At least not until a throat clearing has me looking over to see Dad and Mom along with another man who could be the green-eyed guy's older twin. He must be the Alpha considering the power rolling off him. Oddly, I'm not intimidated by it, just like I've never been intimidated by my Alpha's aura. Or Todd's. Strange.

"Serenity," there's a hint of worry in Dad's voice which has me wondering what is going on, "say hello to Alpha Nathan and his son, Tristan, who will be taking over as Alpha of the Blood Rising Pack soon."

I give them both a smile, my gaze lingering on Tristan for a moment. "Hello," I chirp. "It's a pleasure to meet you both."

Both men give me small smiles, but there is a warmth in Tristan's eyes which causes my heart to flip. Before I can analyze it too deeply, Alpha Nathan turns to my father and gives him a nod. "Thank you. We should be on our way now."

Then they're gone and a hollow feeling in my chest has me wondering what in the world just happened. I shake it off and get back to reading my book. It's a good one, all about a young girl who finds herself after discovering most of her life was a lie.

I'm so engrossed in my book that the next time I look up, I'm surprised to find Alpha Thomas, Luna Lori, Mom, and Dad standing close to me and whispering furiously. Pain is etched on Mom's face, but when she notices me looking, she hides it behind a stoic mask, one I've never seen on her before.

The whole thing has me narrowing my eyes as my gut twists painfully. I don't know what has happened, but I have a bad feeling about it.

Alpha Thomas and Luna Lori glide from the room with an uncompromising air about them. They reek of superiority. I guess they've earned it since they are ranked highest in our pack. Still, it doesn't sit right with me, not when I've always felt their warmth and love before.

Dad marches up to me, his mouth curled into a sneer, and I find myself recoiling. "What was with the look you gave Tristan? I didn't raise my daughter to be a whore," he shouts the insult at me, and I'm stunned.

My mind is spinning, trying to understand what the man in front of me, who barely holds a resemblance to the dad I've known and loved for as long as I can remember, is saying. I start shaking my head and my mouth opens to tell him he's wrong, or to say anything to him about the accusation he's hurled at me.

I don't get the chance to say anything before the sound of his hand against my cheek fills the room, painful stinging on my skin registering a moment later.

Dad just slapped me.

Tears well up in my eyes as I look up at the man in front of me. I think I see regret in his eyes, but it's replaced by fury and hatred far too quickly for me to be sure. Then he's gone, pulling Mom behind him as he marches out of the room.

I don't understand what just happened, but I know it's not good. I have a dreadful feeling that this is only the beginning.



CHAPTER 1

SERENITY

Being able to spend the day avoiding most of my packmates is a miracle. My pack hates me. They've made my life a living hell for almost eight years.

I used to find solace at school, but since graduating a few months ago, I can't hide there anymore. It's not like I was entirely safe there, but it was better. Now, I feel like I'm always looking over my shoulder and trying to avoid being alone with anyone. When I'm caught alone by certain people, it always ends up with me in pain.

I'm so tired of feeling pain. I'm so tired of not knowing when the next beating is coming or when I'll be yelled at or made to feel like trash.

I'm just so tired.

I turn 18 in two days and I'm trying so hard to keep my head down until then. The only thing I've looked forward to for years is turning 18 because then I'll be able to find my mate. It's been the only source of hope for me for so long, but my gut twists about finding my mate as well. If he's in this pack, then I don't know if he'll accept me.

Everything got fucked up years ago and I can't tell you why. It makes no sense to me.

One day I woke up, eight years old, with loving parents and a brother who would protect me from anything and everything. Then it was just gone. All the safety and security in my life. All the love I never once doubted. It was there and then... gone.

I used to have friends. I used to have a family I could rely on to be there for me. But it was like one day a switch flipped and everyone turned on me. I've tried, for years, to figure out what changed, but I have no idea. Maybe I've locked some memory away to protect myself, but I don't think so.

There was a time when I was looking forward to growing up because I wanted to help my pack thrive. I wanted to be a part of making us grow and prosper in whatever way I could. I started training at eight with my father, the Beta of my pack, Waning Moon. I never cared about what position I held in the pack, I just wanted to find a way to help it.

My brother, Samuel, was always going to be the next Beta since he's older than me and best friends with the next Alpha, Todd. I never aspired for a position of power in the pack. Being a warrior and doing my best to help was good enough for me and I thought it was a future to be proud of.

Now, I can only hope my mate isn't here in Waning Moon and I'll be able to escape the hell that has been inflicted on me for the last eight years.

My father used to dote on me and praise me while training me. Now, he refuses to even look at me and my training stopped when everyone in my life changed. My loving brother no longer looks at me with soft eyes. He sneers at me and laughs when others hurt me. My best friend, Kathy, the Alpha's daughter, was like a sister to me. She's become someone who torments me for her own enjoyment.

The fact that Kathy and Samuel mated as of two weeks ago when Kathy turned 18 and they found out they were fated, has made me more fearful. The two of them working together sounds like one of my worst nightmares. The pain they would be able to inflict would be magnified to proportions I don't want to think about.

I wish it was only physical pain, but it's not. It's the loss that cuts me deeply. The loss of what we once were. The loss of the bonds of friendship and family between us. The loss of the life I was supposed to have.

As I sneak in the backdoor of the packhouse, the hair on my arms stands up. Something is wrong. Something is going on and as much as I fear finding out what it is, I know I can't run. They've probably already caught my scent and running would only cause them to chase me. I'm too weak to win against them—they've made sure of it.

There is only one way I can go and that's forward. I step into the large pack kitchen from the back door and try and brace for whatever awaits me.

"Well, look who it is," Todd's voice is deep and dark like a nightmare skittering across your skin, one you can't wake up from. "Have you been hiding from us?"

I know it's a rhetorical question and tilt my head down so I'm looking at the floor instead of looking at anyone in the kitchen. Looking into their eyes only pisses them off. I learned my lesson on eye contact already.

Todd grips my shoulders with a punishing hold. I know it'll leave bruises behind; he relishes his ability to leave his mark of pain behind on my body. Tears sting the back of my eyes, but it's not from pain. It's from the loss of the friendship which existed between us.

There was a time when I hoped Todd was my mate. I was the only one who could calm him down or help him to see reason and I thought it was a sign from the Moon Goddess. I don't have the same feelings now. I no longer pray to the full moon to entwine our souls together and make us two halves of a whole.

Being tied to Todd for the rest of my life would shatter me. He would never accept me as his mate and he would use the bond, something which is supposed to be beautiful and magical, like a noose around my neck.

Then there's the shame of how many she-wolves he's been with in the pack. I feel bad for whoever Todd's mate is and can only hope it's not me. He's fucked so many of the younger generation of females by using his charm to lure them into his clutches. I would feel bad for them, but they were willing participants in being swept up in his lopsided smile, disarming dimples, and sparkling eyes.

Hell, I'm not sure how Kathy was able to accept my brother considering he was just as bad at seducing the females of the pack. I guess the mate bond is a magical thing if she's able to forget all about the years of him screwing around with others.

Or, maybe, it doesn't matter now because he'll be faithful to his mate.

He doesn't have to be, but it's rare for a wolf to cheat on the bond. Not only will their mate feel excruciating pain when the bond is betrayed, but mates are tied together by their souls. That kind of connection doesn't really allow for anything else.

It doesn't matter why. It's not my problem and I refuse to make it my problem.

The pain that blooms on my cheek from the force of Todd slapping me, causing me to fall to the kitchen floor, has my eyes snapping up to meet his gaze. The way he's looking at me has my stomach cramping. He's full of glee because he's hurt me.

"I asked you a fucking question, Serenity," he spits out my name like it's a curse and it sends a shiver down my spine.

I cup my face and feel the way my cheek is swelling slightly. I won't get my wolf until I turn 18 and the abuse that I've endured over the last eight years has ensured that my body is weaker than most which causes me to heal slowly. I hope my wolf won't be negatively affected by my weakened state, but I've learned that hope is hard won in my life.

I swallow hard and, not wanting to speak too loudly because that is another lesson I've learned, I whisper, "I wasn't avoiding you, Alpha."

Todd isn't the Alpha yet, but I remember the lessons he's beat into me. I'm no longer allowed to use his name or anyone's name. I lower my eyes again, unsure whether I can get up yet or not. I hate being on the floor when he stands above me. Laughter coming from Kathy and Samuel twists my heart in my chest and I can't help but look over at the two of them.

I want to scream and ask what the fuck I did to them to make them hate me so much, but I know I can't. I won't. It'll only end in more pain.

Samuel notices me looking at him and glares at me. He doesn't say anything, but he's not the only one who notices.

Kathy does as well and her low growl at my disobedience fills the kitchen.

“You need to learn your place, mutt,” she snarls the words. “You aren’t worthy of even looking at us.”

Todd scoffs, “Of course she’s not. She’s not even worthy of licking the ground we walk on.”

“Maybe she needs to be reminded of exactly how low she is,” Kathy taunts, riling up her brother who doesn’t need any help in that department as it is.

Todd chuckles, the sound making my body tense to prepare for what is to come. Even though I know how vicious he can be, I’m not ready for his foot to slam into my ribcage. I hear the snap of at least one of my ribs as a scream rips from me.

I try and stay silent when they beat me, not wanting to give them the satisfaction, but his kick felt like it had all his strength behind it. I whimper as I try and curl up into a ball and protect myself, but it’s not enough.

I feel every kick.

I feel every punch.

I feel every scratch, which tells me Kathy has gotten in on the fun. Yeah, so much fucking fun.

I feel every breath I take because my lungs are fighting me every step of the way.

I feel every tear I’m unable to hold back.

My mind blanks and I can almost feel the wind in my hair as I run through a forest I’ve never seen in real life, a place which only exists in my mind. I created this forest years ago because it was the only place where I could escape the pain. It never lasts and I’m always pulled back to reality.

Which is exactly what happens when I hear Alpha Thomas bark, “What is going on here?”

The first time I heard him ask that when he found me getting a beating, I thought he was going to come to my

rescue. I learned quickly it would never happen. I whimper in pain and brace myself for more disappointment.

The Alpha is supposed to protect everyone in the pack, but that courtesy hasn't extended to me in so long and I've given up hope for that changing. I peek up and find Alpha Thomas isn't the only adult who has stepped into the kitchen. Did they come to investigate my screams of pain?

When I meet my mom's eyes, the regret swimming there disappears before I can really latch onto it. It always does. What I don't understand is why it's there at all.

She hasn't protected me in eight years. She sat back and allowed Dad to treat me worse than dirt. She's never intervened when someone has hurt me. She might not hurt me physically, but the scars on my heart left from her inactivity are deep.

"We're just having a little fun with the mutt," Todd's voice is calm and even as if what he's saying is completely normal.

Because it is.

I glance at Dad who is looking at me with so much anger I have to look away. Luna Lori and Alpha Thomas are looking down at me with neutral expressions. I know none of them are my savior.

I push up into a sitting position, wincing in pain, but swallowing down the sounds I wish I could make. It's a struggle to stand, but I manage. Barely.

Alpha Thomas looks practically fucking giddy at how difficult it is for me to get up. His indifference at my treatment and his happiness at my pain is like another slice against my heart. Normally I'm able to steel myself against it, but my heart is already raw and vulnerable because of the way my parents have discarded me and the looks on their faces.

I can't do this anymore. I'm weak and the longer I stay, the weaker I will become.

"Go get yourself cleaned up, Serenity," Alpha Thomas infuses his voice with his alpha command.

I don't even nod, I just turn and shuffle out of the kitchen, every step pure fucking agony. It's going to take some time for me to heal from my wounds and I can't even go to the pack hospital to get help. They aren't allowed to help me. I'm on my own and the weight of that settles around my shoulders.

Maybe when I turn 18 something will change. At the very least I'll have my wolf and I won't be so alone. I can only hope she's not ashamed of the human she's been given. I could use all the help I can get right now.



CHAPTER 2

SERENITY

My eyes open and it takes me a moment to realize what woke me up. It's not the sun's rays coming through the small window in my attic room, the one I was shoved into eight years ago without a second thought, because the sun is barely up. I can feel the chill of the early morning since this is the one place in the entire house that is not insulated.

I'm almost surprised my parents haven't kicked me out of their home, the Beta's home. I've thought, more than once over the years, that they were on the verge of forcing me to go live in the packhouse. I was sure of it from the anger on their faces as they yelled at me, as they shamed me for some perceived slight that I was never able to anticipate, but always felt the brunt of.

I'm not sure why they haven't kicked me out. Part of me is grateful because at least I have a place where I can escape the rest of the pack. I'll take being lonely over being an easy target any day of the week. I avoid the packhouse as much as possible and if I were forced to live there, I have no idea what horrors would be inflicted upon me.

I'm already treated like dirt, but to have nowhere else to go? It would be torture. And those who revel in disgracing me would be able to find me whenever they wanted. It's depressing to be grateful for having a place to stay even though it's far too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer, but here I am.

Thinking about all the things I don't have doesn't answer my question about what woke me up. The realization is slow as I take stock of myself. I feel restless, like something is crawling under my skin and begging to be let out. I gasp softly, not wanting to wake up anyone else in the house. Considering our enhanced hearing, it wouldn't take much.

The only good thing is that I can't wake up Samuel because he's been staying on the Beta floor of the packhouse since he mated with Kathy. It's where our family would have stayed if my parents hadn't decided to move to this house after I was born.

I swallow hard as I catalogue the changes that I'm feeling in myself. My wolf is awake and with me. I'm 18 and now everything is going to change. I'll be able to shift, and I can find my mate.

"Our mate will love us," the sweet voice of my wolf in my head has me startling and causes me to almost fall out of bed. She chuckles in my head. *"It's good to meet you too, my human. I'm here for you now."*

"It won't be easy," I whisper. *"No one likes us in this pack."*

"Mate will love us," she assures me.

I'm not sure I have the heart to tell her my gut is telling me it won't be as simple as she wants it to be. Maybe it's because she hasn't experienced all the hell my pack has put me through. I won't be the one to kill her hope. I have no doubt that the people in this pack will do that for her given enough time.

"I don't know why you were injured, my human," she whispers in my mind, uncertainty coloring her words, *"but I have healed you."*

I nod even though it means nothing to her, and she can't see me. I'm grateful that gaining my wolf has given me the ability to heal faster. Still, I wonder if people will only put more effort into hurting me now. The thought is chilling and from the way my wolf freezes in my mind, I'm not the only one who thinks so.

She will learn soon enough.

"Serenity!" My father's voice booms from downstairs, and I jump up from bed.

I hate how much fear goes through me from hearing his voice. It can't be good if he's calling for me this early. Not fucking good at all.

By the time I make it downstairs, still in my pajamas, my father is pissed and it's clear from the look on his face. I'm not sure why considering I couldn't have moved any faster than I did. I try not to huff and puff in front of him, not wanting to show him any weakness.

I haven't been allowed to train in so long, and my body is paying the price. I've tried to keep up with it, but it's not easy to do. Not when I've spent so much time avoiding the pain the pack likes to inflict on me. I also don't have the skill to train myself to the level I should be at.

I've always wondered if they stopped training me because they wanted to keep me weak. It makes sense but feels like a lash against my soul. Wolves thrive on strength, power, and bravery. The weakest within the pack are protected. Except me.

I can't remember the last time someone protected me.

"Yes, Beta?" I keep my eyes lowered as I stand in front of my father, but I haven't been able to call him as such for years. I can only refer to him as Beta and it shreds a little bit more of me every time.

I can feel the confusion coming from my wolf. Yeah, I can't explain it. I wouldn't even be able to tell her where it all went wrong or why. She paces inside of me, uneasy at the cold way my father is looking at me, the hatred in his eyes, the formality he's erected between us while we have no idea why.

"One of the packhouse omegas is sick. You will go there and fill in for them today," his voice is cold and detached. It makes me wonder if he ever loved me or if the fleeting memories I have of the time before everything changed are a lie that I've told myself. "You will keep your head down and work hard." He sneers, "Do not embarrass me at the packhouse."

I swallow down the vitriol threatening to come from my lips. I want to rebuke his words and tell him that he is the embarrassment, him and the rest of this pack who has abused and traumatized me for eight years. I want to scream and hit

his chest with my fists and tell him how much he has perverted the idea of being a father.

I don't.

I simply nod and whisper, "Yes, Beta."

I don't look up as I turn and leave, even though his eyes bore into me. I don't want to see the hatred there. I can't bear to see the disdain. Maybe it's getting my wolf today, something that should be celebrated, but the wounds on my soul feel fresher. Raw. Opened. Bleeding.

I'm almost at the packhouse when I realize he didn't wish me a happy birthday. I wasn't expecting it, but, somehow, it still stings.

Another rejection. Another slash. Another wound.

I hurry through the backdoor of the packhouse, barely able to hear my instructions for the day over the buzzing in my ears. I feel shattered and dull. The worst part is my wolf experiencing it for the first time. Poor thing, she had hope. I could feel it bursting through me, and it will die a slow, painful death now.

She should have gotten a better female as her human. Maybe then she could have avoided the pain which has been the hallmark of my life for years.

"Don't say that. We are one. We are the same. I would never choose another human over you. We are entwined and I am right where I'm supposed to be." She growls her words in my head, *"You will see. We are strong and when you need my help, I will be there. In your mind. At your back. I will never abandon you. We will fight."*

I sigh because I don't know if I have any fight left in me. When I was ten, I tried to fight against the change in everyone around me. I fought and scratched and tried to stand against it. It didn't work. I even pleaded, but it was difficult to lower myself to begging for the love and security I should have been freely given.

I push away those thoughts to focus on the task at hand. The consequences aren't anything I want to experience if I

don't complete what I've been assigned.

Everything is going fine with my duties, and I've worked my way through the bottom floor of the packhouse while dreading the thought of heading up to the Alpha floor to clean. Nothing good comes from me interacting with anyone of rank in this pack. So much fucking pain.

Even though my wolf healed me, I can still feel the phantom pains of Todd's beating. I shudder and try to find solace in putting off going to the Beta floor for a few more minutes. My heart clenches in my chest at the memory of Samuel being my protector and Kathy being my friend.

So long ago. So fucking long ago.

When I step onto the Alpha floor, I take a deep breath and freeze. The scent of cinnamon and fresh rain washes over me. It's comforting, but also puts me on edge. I don't understand either reaction at first.

Not until my wolf yips, "*Mate!*"

The dread which has been my constant companion for years curls in my gut and threatens to take me down to my knees. I might be weak, by their making, but I won't fall to my knees for anyone in this pack. I won't give them the advantage or the satisfaction. I can't.

I straighten my spine and step farther down the hallway, planning on going to the Alpha's home office to clean first. It's a better place to start than the bedrooms. You never know what is going to greet you in the bedrooms; I learned that lesson the hard way.

My wolf is pushing at me to find the source of the scent, to find her mate, but I already have a sinking suspicion of who it belongs to, and I know pain is the only thing that will greet me if I seek out his scent. Today was supposed to be a celebration. It isn't. It's my worst fear come to life and given wings to soar.

Before I can make it all the way down the hallway, a door on my left opens harshly, bringing more of the cinnamon-rain scent. I keep my eyes to the floor as another scent, this one wholly female, mixes with that of my mate.

“What’s that ugly mutt doing on your floor, baby?” The female’s voice coos, but it sounds like nails on a chalkboard to me.

I glance up and my heart stalls in my chest as my wolf whimpers. Todd is standing there, naked, and not even a little bit ashamed of it, while a she-wolf wraps herself around him from behind. When I lock eyes with Todd, I want to look away, but I can’t.

My wolf whimpers, “*Mate? What is that female doing with him?*” Her voice is filled with growled anguish that breaks my heart, “*What is going on?*”

I wish I could comfort her, but I can’t. I’m not as confused as she is, not by a long shot, but I’m not equipped to deal with this situation.

Todd’s eyes are filled with malice as he stares at me. He sneers and I know the words about to come from his lips are going to hit me like a wrecking ball. “You will never be Luna of this pack, you worthless piece of shit.”

I suck in a sharp breath as does the female who is currently clinging to my mate. My mate. The knowledge that he didn’t wait, like I did, hurts, even though I want nothing to do with the male standing in front of me.

My wolf thrashes inside of my head because we know what is coming next. I feel it on the horizon, like an approaching storm. It’s going to roll through and leave devastation in its wake. My wolf is whimpering and pleading with me to put a stop to this. To stop him. To beg and plead.

I straighten my spine because there is no way I’m going to beg Todd for anything. He doesn’t deserve it, not after the way he’s treated me for years. We were friends. He turned on me. He betrayed me and our bond.

He’s not worthy of me or my wolf, but he was still destined for me and that hurts. He will be the Alpha, and my wolf was always destined to be the Luna. Now, who knows what will happen to me.

Pain radiates through my body as I try and ready myself for what comes next.

“I, Todd Harrison, soon to be Alpha of the Waning Moon Pack, reject you, Serenity Barlow, as my mate and future Luna,” his voice is cold and detached as he speaks the words that sends shards of glass through my soul.

Words that can never be taken back. There’s a reason that rejections are frowned upon. No, it’s more than that—they aren’t done. It doesn’t happen. Why do I get to be special in this regard?

The Moon Goddess only gives us one mate. Our souls are made for each other.

As his words hit me, each one landing against my soul with more force than his fists and feet have ever used, fiery pain shoots through my body. I can feel the tethers of our mate bond start to sheer away, snapping and twisting, fighting and failing.

I gasp and fall to the floor, hating the position I’m in. I hate it and yet, I can’t do a damn thing about it.

My eyes start to fall closed, the pain of the rejection searing through me and making it hard to breathe. I just need a little rest. Just a moment.

My wolf howls in my mind and it has me blinking my eyes open.

“I, Serenity Barlow, accept your rejection, Todd Harrison,” I whisper the words and Todd grunts in pain as he falls to his own knees.

When our eyes meet again, the anguish I see there gives me a sense of sick satisfaction I know I shouldn’t be feeling. It twists something up inside of me. What I don’t see there is regret, just his own pain. As if the years of abuse I’ve endured at his hands didn’t already show me who this male in front of me is.

I struggle to my feet, every cell in my body protesting with every movement. I can hear my mate...my former mate... calling after me as I stumble down the stairs, everything I was

supposed to do today flying out the window. When I finally make it outside, I look at the trees and do the only thing I can do—I run.



CHAPTER 3

SERENITY

It's been two days since the rejection and I'm a little surprised my family, and, yes, I use that term very loosely, has allowed me to wallow in the hole of depression, anguish, and pain I've dug for myself. I haven't left my room and I've surrounded myself in blankets and horrified desolation.

I hate that the sheared bond, which feels like a weeping wound on my soul, has thrown me into this mental state. The last person I would ever want to be paired with is Todd. Yet he is my mate.

Was. He *was* my mate.

No more.

He's no longer my mate. He made damn sure of it by rejecting me the moment he found me. He didn't even have the decency to do it in private. He did it in front of one of his many conquests.

I almost wish all I felt was shame and embarrassment at not being wanted. It would be better than this festering hole in the middle of my chest that I'm sure is getting larger with every passing minute. Mates are supposed to be sacred. We only get one. The Moon Goddess pairs us using her grace and discretion. We are created for each other and paired, finding each other when we need to find each other, completing each other in a way no one else will ever be able to.

Todd ripped that from me in a single moment and I don't even know why. Not really. I know I'm considered to be at the bottom of the pack, but it's a lie. I am the Beta's daughter. I should be near the top of the hierarchy.

I was.

But then everything changed, and the reason why is something I have never been able to find out. I never did

anything to deserve the treatment I've had to endure. I've never done anything to hurt anyone or put the pack at risk.

I was just a child.

Fuck, maybe I still am a child.

The tears soaking the pillow underneath my head prove I'm still just a scared pup. My wolf whimpers in my head, but I can feel her strength even through her pain.

"We are strong, my human," she murmurs the words, a growl of determination lining them and lending me more of her power, of her assuredness. *"Maybe this is not the pack for us, and we need to find another way."*

The thought of leaving Waning Moon shouldn't make me sad considering the number of horrible memories I have here. Still, it's my birth pack and wolves are wired to be loyal to their pack. Even when there are those within the pack who don't deserve that loyalty. I know it's an instinct, but my wolf is even more bound by instinct than I am and if she's suggesting leaving it's something I really need to consider.

"Where would we go?"

"I don't know, but we can't stay here and fester in the pain," she coaxes me.

"I don't want to run like a scared little pup. I want to be stronger than that. I want to stand up and fight," I insist.

"They don't fight for you, Serenity. They are not worthy of you fighting for them," she points out gently and it breaks my heart.

"I know," I whisper brokenly.

I hate that there is part of me still clinging to the hope that Todd will change his mind. The rejection can't be taken back, not really—the words will always hang between us and the bond we had, the one the Moon Goddess placed between us, will always be broken. However, we could forge a new bond.

If we mated and he marked me, we would be bonded. I don't know if it would be the same as it would have been if he had accepted me. I never thought to ask that kind of question

in school when we learned about mates. They glossed over rejection because it doesn't happen. Except to me, apparently.

Someone pounding on the door at the bottom of the rickety stairs up to the attic has me flinching in my blanket cocoon before I stumble to my feet, shedding the layers quickly and scurrying down the stairs. When I swing the door open, I see regret and pain flash in my mother's eyes, and it makes me wonder why it's there. Then I notice that my father is standing next to her, and my eyes drop to the floor.

I've already experienced enough pain. I don't need anymore.

Last night I thought I was going to die from the pain, and it only proved there is still a small tendril of the bond connecting me to Todd. He was with a she-wolf last night. As if I needed a reminder that I don't matter to him. That I'm his mate and he threw me away.

The pain of the rejection took me to my knees, but the pain last night felt like being burned alive from the inside out. No one ever talks about the pain when someone betrays a mate bond because it doesn't happen. Except to me, apparently.

Even though we aren't marked, the bond has been recognized between us, even though it was rejected. That means our souls are connected. I was hopeful I wouldn't feel it if Todd chose to take a she-wolf to his bed because of the rejection. That hope was stupid.

It still feels like my organs are bruised. The pain, the fire, the pressure—it lasted for a long time. Probably not as long as it felt like it did, but even when he was done, and I could tell the moment his dick was no longer buried inside someone who isn't his mate, the pain continued to reverberate through me. It stole my breath; it stole the vestiges of any love that the bond planted inside my heart. It washed away those happy memories from childhood, the ones I was trying to cling to.

Before everything changed and Todd became my biggest bully and tormentor, I was one of the few people who could get through to him and calm him down when he was angry. I always justified his actions as part of his Alpha nature, not

wanting to see him as the cruel male he is. I see it differently now, but that's a product of what he's put me through.

Now I see him as the cruel and sinister wolf he is. He delights in my pain. Hell, I'm sure he knew how much pain I was in last night and was enjoying it. It probably made him giddy.

My father clears his throat and I cower in front of him, loathing how I got lost in my head instead of focusing on the other threat right in front of me. Never forget the threat you're facing.

"I can feel the guilt and the shame coming from them," my wolf whispers to me.

I shake off my wolf's words because I don't understand them. I know they're ashamed of me, they've made that clear over the last eight years. I don't care where their guilt comes from. Not anymore.

"Beta," I whisper, my voice barely making it past my dry throat.

My mother shoves a bottle of water into my hands, and I start to drink from it, a fleeting thought about hoping it's not poisoned passing through my mind. If it is, then...it is. I can't fight the rushing torment of my life anymore.

"The Alpha wants to see you in his office," my father bites out.

I nod woodenly and move through the house when they make way for me. I barely register them following behind me, lost in wondering what the Alpha could want from me and the deep desire to not see Todd in the packhouse.

Luck is not on my side, which is not surprising, because when I knock on the Alpha's door, I can already smell Todd on the other side along with Luna Lori. I keep my eyes downcast when I step into the lavishly decorated office after being given permission to enter. I try and keep the shock at my parents following me inside to myself.

The pup in me wants to believe they care. Hell, even my wolf is taking solace in them being here. I'm not naïve enough

to believe their presence has anything to do with caring for me. Not anymore. I learned that lesson a long time ago.

“Serenity, thank you for coming,” Alpha Thomas’ voice is neutral, but I can hear the hint of frustration there. “Please have a seat,” there’s just enough of an Alpha command there to have me moving quickly and sitting in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

Luna Lori is perched on her mate’s lap and Todd is glaring at me from the other chair next to me. I ignore him. My parents take a seat on the couch in the room, leaving me in the middle of whatever is going on.

“It’s our understanding that you are our son’s mate,” Alpha Thomas says it as more of a statement than a question.

I don’t look him in the eyes and try to keep my voice level, “Yes.”

I can feel the gaze of everyone in the room on me. I wasn’t much to look at before two days ago when I was rejected, at least that’s what I’ve been told for so long, but I have no doubt that I look worse now. When I glance up at Luna Lori, there’s a gleam of satisfied victory in her eyes. It makes me want to cower away from her, but I hold firm, my wolf giving me some of her strength.

“An Alpha and Luna should never take joy in the pain of someone in their pack,” my wolf spits in disgust.

“They have never raised a hand to me or said anything derogatory to me, but they haven’t stopped anyone who does,” I admit softly, hoping it doesn’t send her into a rage.

“We are very disappointed to find out that our son has rejected you, Serenity,” Luna Lori’s voice is soft and sweet.

Too sweet.

My eyes snap up to meet hers and there’s a sincerity there which doesn’t make any sense. She is truly upset about Todd rejecting me. What the fuck is going on here?

“We have always taught Todd the importance of having your true mate at your side,” she explains, her voice filled with

chastisement directed at her son.

“There is no way I could mate *her*,” Todd sneers the last word like a curse.

My mind is reeling at the disappointment rolling off the Alpha and Luna. Todd’s annoyance is nothing new, but the way they’re looking at their son with censure is something I haven’t seen in years. Not since before everything changed.

“You shouldn’t be so cavalier about throwing away your fated mate,” the Alpha’s words are weighted, but there’s a hint of a lie I can’t quite place and don’t understand.

I shift uncomfortably in my chair, unsure of what I should do with myself and unsure of what I should do with my hands. I can’t bring myself to look at my parents and see the disappointment, again, directed at me. I’ve felt enough of that to last me a lifetime.

“I won’t be taking back my rejection,” Todd growls the words, assured in the decision he has already made.

It has anger boiling inside of me.

“*Like we’d take him back*,” my wolf scoffs and I agree with the sentiment.

“A rejection can’t be taken back, the words are binding,” as much as I want to shout, I keep my voice low and steady.

“But marking you would cause a bond to form again,” Alpha Thomas points out, the words hard.

I feel the color drain from my face at the thought of Todd marking me. I think I would rather die than be subjected to a lifetime with Todd as my mate. Maybe, one day, I’ll thank him for what he did because I can’t think of anyone less worthy of being my mate. My wolf chuffs in agreement in my mind.

I keep my mouth shut, but I don’t need to say anything because Todd is up and out of his chair, fury coming off him in waves. “I will never allow this mutt to be Luna of Waning Moon,” he spits the words, making them cutting and vicious.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard the sentiment behind them. My heart sinks because I’m sure it won’t be the last either.

Before anyone can say another word or the conversation can continue, Todd storms out of the Alpha's office. The rage coming off him follows, but splashes against my skin, reminding me that I mean nothing to him. My mate. I don't look up, but when I'm dismissed, I scurry away, not worried whether my parents are following me or not.

Todd's rejection feels like a weight around my shoulders, but what makes me bleed is the fact that my parents didn't say a damn word in my defense. How did my life become like this? Why do they want me to be weak when I could be the strongest she-wolf in the pack? It's my destiny to be the Luna, not that I would want to be at Todd's side. Yet they've done nothing but beat me down for years.

I didn't know my heart could shatter into smaller pieces, but it can.



CHAPTER 4

SERENITY

It's been a few days since the meeting with the Alpha and I've done everything I can to avoid everyone in the pack. When I'm unable to avoid them, I'm a little surprised at the looks of pity which have been thrown at me. I'm not at all surprised by the hate-filled looks; those are normal for me.

How fucking sad is that? A pack is supposed to be a family, a place where everyone is protected and has a place. I haven't felt at home in Waning Moon in far too long. I've been isolated and it's chipped away at me. We are pack animals and derive strength from the bonds connecting us.

Being an outsider to the pack is dangerous. Wolves can go feral without the love and safety of the pack surrounding them.

Not that I think anyone is worried about me going feral. I would almost think that was the goal everyone had when the abuse started—to weaken me, to make it so that I had no other choice but to run. However, that makes no sense if the Moon Goddess deemed me worthy of being the next Luna of the pack.

My head hurts with how much I've been thinking about everything. Not just the rejection, but the last eight years. I've been showing my wolf what I've endured, hoping she could help me find a reason that everything changed.

All I've done is make my wolf depressed, but I can also feel her strength.

I sigh as I walk through the woods toward our special place, a place where no one else goes even though it's one of the most beautiful glades in our territory. I've always found peace here, especially when the moon is shining down on us, but right now the sun is warming our skin as fall cools the air around us.

Last night was rough. Todd decided to take another she-wolf to bed. He decided to mind-link me while he was doing it, as if the phantom pain from our ruined bond wasn't bad enough.

"You'll never be the one writhing underneath me," Todd taunted me through the mind-link, his voice breathless with pleasure.

The only good thing was that the burning from him betraying our bond wasn't as strong as it was the first time. The whole thing still fucked with my head though. It got to both me and my wolf. At first, my wolf whimpered in my head with the knowledge that she would never have her mate.

I wasn't sad about not having Todd as a mate. Not having Todd as a mate is a goddess-send. He would be a horrible mate, just like he'll be a horrible Alpha.

Still, last night he kept the mind-link with me open the entire time he was fucking the other girl. It was cruel and it hardened my heart to him in a way that can't be undone. He derived pleasure from making me feel unloved and unwanted. It was sick and twisted.

I hate him.

The hatred that burns inside of me for our mate is not something I can stop. Even my wolf is on board with it, no longer feeling sadness over losing him. She stopped her whining as Todd told us how good she felt, how tight she was, how she was superior to us.

My wolf is no longer pining for the mate she lost. I'm almost afraid that she'll try and rip his throat out if we see him any time soon. That would probably be a disaster since he's much stronger than us.

"You forget, my human, he will be weaker without his goddess-given mate at his side," my wolf snickers in my head, pulling me back to the present where I'm sitting in the middle of the clearing while soaking up the sun.

"I'm sorry that you have to endure being without your mate because of me." I furiously wipe the tears from my face,

refusing to shed another tear for that bastard Todd, or anyone else in this fucking pack. *“He never gave you a chance and it’s all my fault.”*

“No,” she insists, *“it’s Todd’s fault. He is a weak male, and he was never deserving of our bond. He will find that he weakens more and more overtime, but we will get stronger. We will survive this because we are survivors. The memories you have shown me about your life in this pack,”* she spits the word as if it’s vile, which, in this case, it is, *“prove to me how strong you are. You have endured so much, my human, and I am proud to be your wolf.”*

I allow humbled gratefulness to well up inside of me knowing my wolf can feel it. She’ll understand what it means and where it comes from. She has been the only friend I’ve had in so damn long. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to tell her just how much that means to me.

“Aww,” my wolf teases me, *“I love you too, my human.”*

I take a deep breath and take in the smell of the forest surrounding us. This is our home and yet we’ve felt so disconnected from it for so long. What does that mean? It makes my wolf just as uneasy as it makes me. It’s like trying to put on clothes that don’t fit—it’s just wrong and uncomfortable.

“It’s time,” my wolf prompts me softly.

“Time for what?”

I swear I can feel my wolf roll her eyes at my question. Sassy wolf. Not like I would have it any other way.

“Time to shift.”

I gasp as my mind starts to whirl at the possibility of shifting for the first time. I’ve heard about how painful it is, but I can’t imagine it’ll be worse than the pain we’ve already endured. The thought of running free, of having the wind in our fur as we run, has excitement welling up inside of me.

“We weren’t ready before,” my wolf informs me. *“We’re ready now. We’re strong enough and the pain of the rejection*

has receded to the point that we can shift now. Are you ready?"

"Yes," I exclaim out loud without realizing it at first while my wolf chuffs in my head.

I stand up quickly and take a deep breath to try and relax. I don't need to anticipate the pain. I just want to look forward to the freedom. I also take a big sniff of the air, making sure that no one else is around to witness this.

Normally, when wolves have their first shift, their family is there to help and support them. I never imagined that would be the way it would go for me. The dream of having my family surrounding me and celebrating me died a long time ago.

I strip quickly, dropping my clothes in the middle of the clearing because no one is likely to come across them.

As I shake out my arms, I feel something come over me, an awareness, a readiness. My wolf surges forward in my mind and I allow my own psyche to relax. I don't fight my wolf; I trust her implicitly.

Just like it should be.

I am lucky to have the wolf I do. She is the only support I want and need for this.

"I'm lucky to have you too," she coos. "Relax. It will hurt, but you know that."

I let my muscles go lax and before my next heartbeat it feels like my bones are being broken and twisted, the sound of shattering filling the empty clearing. I drop to my knees, the pain of the shift taking me down. My body twists in agony, the pain firing through every cell of my body.

I breathe through it, knowing the pain, this time, will be worth it. It feels like it lasts forever, but I know it doesn't.

My eyes are squeezed shut, but I can feel everything. The way my fur erupts from my skin. The way my jaw elongates. The way my claws burst from my fingers.

It goes on and on, my wolf gently supporting me as I endure. I swallow down my wails of agony; it'll be worth it in

the end.

I'll be on paws. I'll be free.

My breathing is hard and labored, but I keep drawing oxygen into my lungs. Every breath is difficult, but I don't stop. I let go, submitting to the will of the goddess in giving me the ability to shift.

I was weak. Too weak. Being rejected took something from me. Now, with the emergence of my wolf, I'm gaining more than I lost.

When the shift is done, the pain disappears. I peek my eyes open and take in the world around me. Everything is sharper. I can smell everything in the forest surrounding my little clearing. I can hear small animals scurrying in the underbrush. My eyesight is better as I take in a leaf drifting down from a tree on the farthest side of the clearing.

I look down at my paws to take in my white fur. I'm not surprised because my mom's wolf has white fur. It almost makes me a little sad that I have her coloring. I guess it makes sense. Dad's wolf is brown, and Samuel is the same as him. Maybe it's a gender thing or maybe genetics are just strange.

"It doesn't matter, my human. We are beautiful," my wolf reassures me, pride filling her voice.

I nod my large wolf head and look into the dark spaces of the forest with longing. I tentatively ask, *"Can we run?"*

My wolf lets out a yip and we start to walk. It's a strange sensation at first—walking on four legs instead of two. I try not to think about it too much and allow my wolf's instincts to take over. Before we get halfway to the tree line, I'm no longer wobbling.

The moment I break through the line of trees, I'm jogging and then running. The wind ruffling my fur feels better than I thought it would. It feels amazing.

I get lost in the joy of running through the forest and connecting with my wolf. I can feel her own joy as well.

We are truly free in this moment. No one can take it away from us.

“Maybe we need to leave the pack,” I whisper the truth I’ve been too afraid to voice for far too long.

My wolf growls softly in approval. I know I can’t stay here but leaving fills me with fear as well. There are a lot of unknowns beyond the pack’s borders. It might be the greatest adventure of my life, or it could get me killed.

Rogues are out there, and they are dangerous, feral creatures without the tether of the pack bond. I’ve always felt bad about the way packs treat rogues considering assumptions are made about them without investigating why a wolf is a rogue.

Was it their choice? Were they kicked out? Were they abused and went rogue to escape the pain?

The last possibility is what has always made me feel the worst. No one who seeks a better life should be treated worse than a criminal, which is exactly how packs treat rogues. I have no doubt there are bad rogues, just like there are bad pack wolves.

Who gets to decide which is which anyway?

I make my way back to the clearing and huff as I lay down next to my clothes while resting in my wolf’s body. Running through the forest was better than I imagined. Feeling the strength of my wolf gives me hope for a better future.

“We need to get a little stronger, my human,” my wolf growls softly. *“Then we’ll leave and find a way to make a better life. We’ll figure it out together.”*

“Together,” I murmur before I shift back into my human skin, the pain a dull ache this time.

I get dressed and start to head away from my clearing, my sanctuary. I don’t know what awaits me when I get back to the pain part of the pack lands, but I know I’ll deal with it. I’m not alone anymore. I have my wolf and she is my strength.

We’ll deal with what comes next. Together.



CHAPTER 5

SERENITY

Staring up at the packhouse, all I can feel is dread. It's been one week since I turned 18 and found my mate. I've avoided everyone and everything that causes me pain as much as I can, but now I've been thrust right back into the thick of things. When I was awoken this morning by my father yelling at me, I knew my time was up.

I hate it.

I hate this place.

I hate my pack members who have found joy in belittling me and hurting me over the years.

This is supposed to be my home, my pack. It's been far too long since I've been more than an afterthought to these people. I wish I knew what changed and why everyone turned their back on me. I have a feeling I'll never know.

"It's okay. It's their loss," my wolf tries to comfort me as she lends me some of her strength.

I know she's right which has me straightening my shoulders and heading inside the packhouse. I'm surprised it's as quiet as it is inside. It's normal for people to mill around while grabbing food or hanging out with each other in some of the common rooms. I used to, but that was before.

I shake off my thoughts about before because they never do me any good. I head to the cleaning closet and grab what I need, knowing I'll be put on cleaning duty without anyone having to tell me. I should check-in, but I simply don't care enough to do it today. What would be the point anyway?

I head up to the offices to start there because there is no way in hell that I'm ever cleaning another room on the Alpha floor. Nope. No, thank you. I'm not going to punish myself in that way.

Since I know Dad is at home, I'm a little surprised to find Samuel sitting behind the desk in the Beta's office. I curse myself for not paying better attention. If I had been focusing, I would have smelled my brother on the other side of the door. I'm tempted to flee, but my wolf holds me in place and straightens my spine for me.

My brother seemed reluctant to turn on me all those years ago. At first. But once the change happened, it was as if he took it on with gusto. He seemed to take pride and satisfaction in my pain in a way that only Todd rivaled.

I never understood why, and it cut deeper because he's my big brother. He was supposed to be my protector. My family no matter what.

Yet here we are.

Samuel looks up from whatever he's working on and sneers at me. His voice drips with venom, "What are you doing here, mutt?"

"I've been tasked with cleaning today," I keep my voice soft and gentle even though everything in me wants to scream at him.

It wouldn't do me any good if I did. It would only enrage him, and I'm not going to risk it.

He scoffs but doesn't say anything else. I'm frozen for what feels like forever but is only seconds before I start to clean on the other side of the room. I force myself to focus on my task. The sooner I get this over with the sooner I can leave and go onto the next office. Hopefully, if the Moon Goddess is on my side, the Luna won't be in her office this morning.

I find myself zoning out, making quiet plans with my wolf about leaving and how to go about it when I'm pulled back to reality by my brother's cold voice, "I heard Todd was saddled with you as a mate, but he did the smart thing and rejected you."

I turn toward him slowly, keeping my face neutral instead of showing the deep hurt his words have caused. I never want

to show weakness and especially not to him. He'll exploit it, he's done it before.

"Todd was my goddess-given mate, and he did reject me," my voice sounds dull and bland, but Samuel's eyes still light up like he won something.

I guess when you're a bully every barb is a victory.

I study my brother and wonder where the sweet boy he used to be went. He was awful before and then when he mated with Kathy it got so much worse. An itchy feeling under my skin makes me want to run.

"You'd make a horrible Luna. We really dodged a bullet with Todd rejecting you," he snarls, and my heart skips a beat.

"Is that really what you think of me? My own brother?" With every word, my voice gets louder, I can't stop it as rage starts to fill every crack in my soul. "You were supposed to protect me," I accuse, my words lashing against his skin if the way he flinches is any indication. "When I've needed you the most, where have you been? My own brother hates me and treats me like garbage, and I have no idea why."

Hurt and shame flash across my brother's face. It sends a feeling of relief through me. I doubt we'll ever be close again, but it's good to know he's not without remorse.

"Because you are trash," Kathy spits the words as she walks into the room. She scowls at me and my heart sinks because whatever progress I made at getting through to Samuel is gone now. It wouldn't have changed anything anyway, I'm sure. "You're lower than that, really."

"Kathy," my voice is tired. I'm tired. I'm just so done with everything.

"That's Beta Female Kathy to you," she shrieks before stepping closer to me.

Before I can stop it from happening, she slaps me so hard that my head whips around and I taste a little blood in my mouth. It's not the first time she's hit me, but surprise rushes through me all the same. I think it's my wolf's surprise.

We've been avoiding anything and everything that has brought physical pain to us for a week, and she hasn't had the chance to witness, firsthand, how awful everyone can be. I take a deep breath, trying to hold my wolf back from shifting and tearing out Kathy's throat. It takes a considerable amount of focus because my wolf is snarling and growling in my head while clawing at my insides, begging me to give control over to her.

"You're nothing," Kathy spits.

I haven't calmed down and I'm not paying attention when the punches start. Kathy is the Alpha's daughter and she's been allowed to train when I haven't. She was always strong. It was something I admired in my friend, but now I loathe it because it's directed at me.

When she lands a punch to my gut, I double over and get a knee to my face which has me crashing to the floor. I gasp for air as I feel blood coating my face. I stare up at Kathy and the wicked smirk twisting her face. It's hard to believe I ever found her beautiful.

"Give me control and I'll rip her throat out," my wolf growls.

"Not fucking helping," I snarl back and try to push her a little farther back into my mind. *"If we attack her, who knows what they'll do to me then. I might be able to take Kathy down, but what about Samuel? He has a lot more training than I do and he's going to be the Beta soon."*

My wolf calms a little, but it's not by much. As Kathy continues to punch and kick me, I curl up into a ball and try to protect the weakest parts of myself. It's a move I've had to do with her before and, just like every other time, it seems she's not willing to stop beating me any time soon. Just as I take a breath, she kicks my ribs and I swear I hear something crack. My wolf growls in anger and the sound bubbles out of me as I try and keep her under control.

Kathy's beating falters for a moment, but when I don't shift or make any other sound, she kicks me again. I grunt out in pain and almost give up the fight with my wolf. Maybe the

punishment would be worth it. It would make the pain stop and isn't that exactly what I've wanted for years?

“What the hell is going on here?”

The Alpha's voice fills the office, and everyone freezes. Well, except for me because I'm trembling with how much effort it's taking to keep my wolf under control as I'm fighting to breathe. I swear I can hear my bones making a sound they should not be making as I uncurl my body. The ache which has been ever present in my life, the one I've been able to avoid for almost a week, is back.

It's not just the pain of the beating Kathy just gave me, it's so much deeper than that. It's something close to heartbreak. I'm reminded, yet again, that this is not my pack. These wolves are not my family.

I need to get the fuck out of here as soon as possible.

“Kathy,” the Alpha's voice is calm and level, but I can hear the threat underneath it, “what are you doing beating on Serenity?”

Kathy's mouth falls open and I gasp in a breath as I look up to see the Alpha staring at his daughter, the warning clear in his eyes. She starts to sputter, I'm sure to back pedal or something. Anything.

Alpha Thomas has never stepped in to stop the abuse before. He glances down at me, but his eyes are glacial. If he actually cared about me, I would see pity there. Right? Something other than calculating coldness?

When I look at Samuel, he's standing there with uncertainty on his face along with a heaping side of regret and remorse. For me? I might have believed it was real years ago, but I'm not sure anymore.

Kathy sounds unsure, “She needs to know her place?” When the Alpha doesn't say anything, her brain seems to start firing faster and words start tumbling out of her mouth, “She needs to know she's trash. She'll never be good enough to be the Luna of this pack. She's nothing. She deserves pain and to be tormented.”

Tears well up in my eyes. Not because of her words, I've heard them all before. It's just hard to believe it was ever different between us. The memories of when we were best friends are like fog in the early morning being burned off by the heat of the sun. It's there, but is it really? Is it tangible or something that will be erased without a trace?

We used to stay up past our bedtime when we had sleepovers and watch movies about princesses and princes. We used to talk about finding our mates and how we hoped they were both in Waning Moon because then we'd be able to have houses next to each other. We called each other sisters.

Now, looking at Kathy, I don't know the woman she's turned into.

It breaks my heart, but I can't let them see my weakness. I can't let them know how much those memories cut me because of how far away they are. Then they'll know what to use to break me.

I won't let that happen.

Alpha Thomas opens his mouth, but a loud growl comes from somewhere outside the packhouse. It's so loud that I feel the floor below me shake and a shiver races up and down my spine. My wolf is fully alert in my mind, her ears perked up and listening for another sound from whoever growled like that.

I'm surprised as hell when Alpha Thomas looks down at me and I see fear in his eyes. It doesn't make me feel brave though, it makes me scared. Who the hell could make our Alpha fearful?

This does not bode well for anyone, I'm sure of it.

"I like this jackass of an Alpha being afraid," my wolf huffs.

I stand up on shaky legs as Alpha Thomas, Kathy, and Samuel race out of the Beta office, barely giving me a second look. No one has made an announcement through the pack mind-link about an attack or anything. Would I even get included in the link? I really don't know.

Small black dots start to dance in my vision as I make it to the stairs of the packhouse and grip the banister to help me walk down. I've been left behind to fend for myself, but there's nothing new about that. My wolf chuffs in my head and I roll my eyes. This pack really is the fucking worst.

"Where is she? Where is my mate?" The angry shouting is coming from a very pissed off male downstairs and something about his voice, maybe the urgency in it, tugs at me. I move a little faster, wanting to see who the voice belongs to. He growls menacingly, "Why the fuck do I smell my mate's blood on you?"

I hobble down the last few steps and make my way into the entranceway of the packhouse. The sight which greets me has me freezing. There's a man standing there and he's seething with rage, his hand wrapped around Kathy's throat and lifting her into the air as if she weighs nothing.

To him, she probably does. He's the largest man I've ever seen. He must be at least 6'6" and considering I'm on the shorter side for a werewolf at 5'5, I know he'll tower over me. Todd is standing there along with Alpha Thomas, both of them a little over six feet tall and I almost snicker at how they look like little boys compared to this man. It's not just his height either—it's everything about him.

He's massive. His shoulders are broad and muscular. His hair is dark brown and longer on top than on the sides, so it falls across his forehead, making him look put together and messy at the same time. There's an air of dominance around him that I wish I could wrap around my shoulders like a blanket and snuggle into for the rest of my life.

The air in the room fills with tension, and I swear I can smell the ozone in the air. It's the same smell right before it rains. I've never welcomed a storm more than I do right now.

When his eyes meet mine, it's as if a bolt of lightning strikes me. His eyes are so green and...familiar. Something snaps inside of me, and I suck in a lungful of air, trying to make sense of everything going on. The black spots in my

vision grow and tremble, making it harder for me to see. Harder for me to understand.

I can feel myself falling just as I hear a crash right before warm arms the size of fucking tree trunks catch me. I take another deep breath; cedar and a hint of berries are all I can smell. I let go knowing I'm safe for the first time in far too long. Darkness takes me under, and I can only hope my green-eyed savior will be there when I wake up.

“Mate,” being growled against the crown of my head and rumbling through my body is the last thing I hear.



CHAPTER 6

TRISTAN

I look down at the gorgeous woman in my arms and my heart fucking breaks while it soars at the same time. She's been beaten and, considering I smelled my mate's blood on the bitch on the other side of the room, I have no doubt she has something to do with it. If my mate hadn't walked into the room, I'm pretty sure I would have strangled the woman.

They look like they're about the same age. Shouldn't they be friends?

It doesn't make any sense to me and it's clear that whatever happened to my Serenity wasn't something at training. Sparring can get out of control, especially when we're talking about wolves, but this is something else entirely. It's clear from the way she's injured that my mate didn't fight back.

I wish the fresh blood wasn't the only signs of abuse on my mate. She's underweight and looks fragile, like she's about to break. There are bruises on her arms like look like they're almost healed completely which, even with our wolves, can take a while. Then there's the scent of desperation and desolation coming from her. It almost completely masks her natural caramel and vanilla scent, the same scent I've been dreaming about for eight years.

When I looked across the room and into her gorgeous blue-grey eyes, I could see the pain there. It was like she reached into my chest, grabbed my heart, and squeezed. I wanted to fall to my knees, but I couldn't because she needed me to catch her as she passed out.

I stand up slowly, cradling my mate to my chest as my Beta, Mack, moves along the outside of the room until he's at my side. I'm tempted to hand my mate over to him to hold so I can have my hands free, but I can't force my body to actually do it. I've waited for this moment for far too fucking long.

The sparks traveling over my arms and chest as I hold her are distracting, but the rage I feel at the people in front of me is helping to keep me focused. Someone has been harming my mate and the sniveling, poor excuse for a she-wolf whose mate is helping her stand up as she rubs her neck is not the only one.

My voice is deadly calm and cold, “What the fuck has been going on in this pack? Why do I see evidence of abuse on my mate?”

Mack is stiff next to me, and I have no doubt that his eyes are just as cold and deadly as mine. He knows how long I’ve been waiting for this moment. He knows how much Serenity has meant to me and how hard it’s been to stop myself from coming back here to get her.

I had to wait.

I had no fucking choice.

She was only ten when I saw her the first time. I had just turned 18 and was getting ready to take over my pack, the Blood Rising Pack, from my father. I was yearning for my mate, wanting her to stand at my side as I transitioned into the position I was born to have, the one I had trained for my entire life.

Waning Moon was the last pack we visited. I was hoping to meet my mate along the way, but nothing could have prepared me for meeting her and finding out she was only ten. Part of me was devastated when I caught her scent and found myself staring at her across one of the rooms of the packhouse. She was engrossed in the book she was reading but must have felt my eyes on her because she looked up at me.

She might have only been ten, but there was so much intelligence and understanding in her eyes. I felt a piece of our bond snap into place, even though she wouldn’t be able to feel it. In that moment, I understood why I met her when I did and would need to wait for her.

Some might have cursed the Moon Goddess for putting them in the position I found myself in. I could have, but as my

heart grew as I looked at her, I felt a peace settle over me. A knowing.

I was being given a chance others were rarely given. I was shown my mate, one I would have to wait for, and with it I was given an opportunity. With the knowledge of where my mate was and that she was safe with her family, I could focus on making Blood Rising even more powerful, even safer. I could work to make sure my pack, the one she would stand at my side to help me lead, was worthy of her.

A lesser wolf would have lied and not told his father the small girl in the window seat was his mate. I did no such thing.

I mind-linked my father, *“The young brunette girl is my mate.”*

“Are you sure?” When I gave a small nod, not wanting to break my gaze with the girl, he sighed, *“What do you want to do?”*

“I’m going to wait for her. She’s worth it. The Goddess doesn’t make mistakes. I’ll wait for her and work my ass off to make sure that Blood Rising is worthy of her love and attention. When she turns 18, I’ll be back for her.”

I could feel my father’s pride for me, it rolled off him in waves. It felt like I had passed a test, but I also knew things would only get more difficult for me. I knew I wouldn’t be able to have any contact with her. The closer she came to maturity as she got older, the stronger the pull between us would become, but I would still be the only one to feel it until she turned 18. I wasn’t going to rob her of her childhood or all the experiences one should have in their teenage years.

I heard my father whispering with the girl’s parents. Later he told me they were informed of Serenity’s importance to me. They were surprised and worried that I would try and take her away. Considering Blood Rising has always been one of the strongest and largest packs in the country, I could have. But it would have been cruel to do and might make her resent me.

My father implored her parents to keep the identity of Serenity’s mate to themselves and to take care of her. They

were informed I would be back for her on her 18th birthday. I know I'm a week late right now, but it couldn't be helped.

In the last eight years, I have done what I set out to do. My territory is larger than it was, we've grown in both might and wealth. The pack is worthy of the precious female in my arms.

I never strayed. I never even looked at another she-wolf. I couldn't do it. Even if I had wanted to, my wolf would have revolted. He has been just as devoted and smitten as I am when it comes to our mate.

There have been many she-wolves who have tried to capture my attention. Before I met Serenity on that fateful day, I might have taken them up on their offers, but after? There was no fucking way I was going to betray our bond.

Mack has been at my side for the last eight years, helping me to make Blood Rising stronger and fiercer. Serenity is a beauty; the kind others will covet. I could only ensure she would be safe by making sure others fear me and don't doubt my abilities just because I've been leading without a Luna at my side. I ensured they knew I'm as formidable as my father.

Alpha Nathan, my father, ruled with a just heart and an iron fist when it came to those outside of Blood Rising. There are only a few people who know how much of a softie he is. On the list of those who get to see who he is behind the strength are his mate, my mother, Lucy, and my sister, Cora, who is also Mack's mate.

I was more than a little pissed when my best friend and Beta mated my sister, but I got over it quickly. Cora is two years younger than me. I couldn't pick a better person for her to be paired with. Mack adores her and treats her like a queen.

It was difficult to see them so happy for the last six years knowing I was waiting for Serenity. It made me cold, but I feel myself thawing the longer I hold my precious mate in my arms. As much as I want to be able to take down those who have wronged my mate, I know Mack will be just as vicious. He's fiercely loyal to Blood Rising and his Luna.

The front door bangs open and Beta Darwin and his mate Stacy, my mate's parents, rush into the packhouse. I'm growling from deep in my chest as their wide eyes meet mine. I see relief flash across their features as they go pale.

I would take satisfaction in that, but I can't. Not when my mate is laying in my arms limp and unconscious.

My voice holds deadly intent, "What have you done to my mate?"

"She can't be your mate. She's my mate and I rejected her a week ago," a voice comes from behind me, and I whirl around to see Todd, the next Alpha of Waning Moon, strutting down the stairs like he really has the balls to back it up.

He doesn't.

"What the fuck did you just say about my mate?" Fur is sprouting up and down my arms as my wolf battles for control. My fingers are tipped in my deadly claws, but I make sure to hold Serenity gently. I won't cause my beautiful mate pain. Not now, not ever. "You are not her mate. I've known Serenity is my mate for eight years." I swing my gaze back around to the Beta couple who look like they're on the verge of throwing up. "You were supposed to keep her safe for me," my voice holds an accusation and a warning.

Darwin nods solemnly but doesn't say anything. Alpha Thomas is glaring around the room, and I can see his mind whirling to try to come up with something. Anything. I know he won't. He can't.

"There's no way. You're lying," Todd accuses me, the wavering in his voice giving away his anxiety as the scent of his fear wafts toward me.

I narrow my eyes at him and snarl, "She has always been mine and only mine. I don't know what you think you felt, but it wasn't the mate bond. She's mine," I roar the words.

Serenity makes a cooing sound but doesn't open her eyes as she pats my chest. Her touch is the only thing keeping everyone in the room from having their blood splattered all

over the packhouse. I'm right on the edge and she's the only thing keeping me sane.

"She's nothing but a piece of trash," the woman who almost lost her life sneers and red coats my vision.

Mack takes a step forward, his voice oozing authority this little bitch could only hope to achieve, "You will watch your fucking tongue when speaking about the Luna of Blood Rising. She has more power unconscious and in my Alpha's arms than you could ever have on your back with your legs splayed open for the entire werewolf world."

The girl gasps and cowers behind her mate and soon to be Beta of Waning Moon, who must also be Serenity's brother. The young man is looking at my mate in my arms with relief coloring his features. I don't know what the fuck has happened in this pack in the last eight years or why Todd fuck-face Harrison thinks Serenity is his mate, but I need to get my Luna out of here.

Right fucking now.

"We need to move. She's not safe here," I link to Mack.

He looks back at me and gives me a small nod of understanding. We have spent our lives training and working together. No matter who stands in our way, we will be leaving, and Serenity will be coming with us.

Mack steps in front of me and we start to move toward the front door of the packhouse. I don't make it more than three steps before a hand grabs my shoulder and tries to spin me around. I turn and let out a menacing growl. It has Serenity curling into me, but she doesn't whimper.

She knows she's safe which has my chest puffing up with pride while I look down at the pissant who thought it was a good idea to put his hand on me. The same male who thinks he has some sort of claim on my mate.

"She's my mate," he growls, but it sounds weak and pathetic to my ears.

"No," Serenity mutters in her sleep, her fingers twisting into my shirt as she clings to me.

I look down at Todd and arch my eyebrow. My voice is a low rumble, “Do you want to challenge me, Todd? I can guarantee you that I’ll win. I’ve spent the last eight years waiting for my mate. I’ve been training, honing my skills and racking up victories.” I curl my lip up, flashing my teeth at him. “What have you done other than being spoiled?”

“He’s nothing to us,” my wolf grumbles. *“We have everything we need in our arms.”*

I couldn’t agree more. When Todd doesn’t say anything and takes a step back, I start moving again. I move with Mack to bypass everyone else in the room. The next Beta Female seems to have lost her ability to speak, which is for the best. The current Beta couple have tears in their eyes while their shoulders are slumped. Is it in defeat or relief?

It doesn’t matter. Serenity is mine now. They knew I would be back for her, and they didn’t protect her.

I’ll be dealing with that later, but right now I need to get Serenity back to Blood Rising and make sure she’s safe.

When I climb into the backseat of the SUV, cradling Serenity on my lap because I can’t seem to allow anything else, Mack slides into the front seat. He starts the car, and we start driving back home without a word.

“She’s perfect. I’ve missed her,” my wolf rumbles, sounding relieved, an emotion that flows through me as well.

I stare down at my beautiful mate and breathe in her scent, needing it to calm me. I growl, “They will pay for hurting you, my sweet mate.”

Mack growls as well, telling me he’ll be standing next to me as we make anyone suffer who caused our Luna pain. She’s a warrior. A survivor.

Now I’ll make sure she knows she’s also my Luna.



CHAPTER 7

SERENITY

My head is pounding as I start to wake up. That's not the only thing that hurts though. My entire body feels like it's been run through a meat grinder. It's not a new sensation, but I hate it all the same. What the fuck happened?

I take a deep breath and freeze, my body screaming in protest at how much it hurts, but I can't help it. I'm surrounded by the scent of cedar and berries. It makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside and has my wolf purring in my head. Yeah, purring like she's a fucking cheetah and not the wolf she is.

"Mate smells wonderful," she sighs dreamily.

"Mate?" I shout at her in my head, *"What do you mean 'mate'?"*

We had a mate. Todd. He rejected us a week ago. It might be longer now since I'm not sure how long I've been asleep. It feels like it's been a long time. Considering how my body is protesting every movement and how deep the ache is, I wouldn't be surprised if it's been longer than a few hours.

My wolf continues to purr, content to bask in the scent of our alleged mate. I don't understand it. Todd smelled like cinnamon and fresh rain. It wasn't a bad combination, but I much prefer the berry-cedar scent I'm engulfed in at the moment.

Flashes of memory come back to me, slow at first and then picking up speed. I remember going to the Beta office and finding Samuel there. Kathy came in, mad as usual, and started to beat me. The Alpha stopped her and wanted to know what was going on?

The fierce growl and yelling from downstairs rings through my head and has goosebumps covering my skin. I remember

that growl. I remember going downstairs and seeing the man responsible for it. I remember his deep green eyes.

Something started to snap and fall away inside of me the moment I saw his eyes.

He said something to me. He was defending me?

My memories start to get fuzzy right around that time. Did I pass out? I must have, Kathy's beating was pretty brutal, and I still wasn't fully recovered from Todd's rejection and continued psychological abuse. Ever since he mind-linked me while fucking some she-wolf, he had been doing it every single night. It was almost more than I could take.

The bed beneath me is soft and I want to burrow deeper into it and rub the berry-cedar scent into my pores. That would probably be the wrong thing to do considering I don't know the man who belongs to this amazing scent.

"I know you're awake, sweet mate," a man's gruff voice, the same one I remember hearing yesterday in the deepest parts of my mind, has me sitting up suddenly.

I let out a small yelp of pain at moving so quickly, but it can't be helped. I stare at the man sitting in the chair next to the bed. His shoulders are as broad as I remember them being. He's imposing, but there's something sweet and gentle in his eyes as he looks at me. It's not pity, thankfully, I would hate to be pitied by this man. I want something else, something deeper, from him, but I'm not sure how to articulate it.

Wait.

I croak softly, "Mate?"

"Yes," my wolf purrs, *"isn't he yummy? He will protect us now. We're safe and no longer in that horrible pack."*

My wolf's words have me blinking rapidly at this man. My wolf is telling me this is my mate. She's telling me I'm no longer in Waning Moon. It's a relief I'm no longer there, but then I have to ask—where am I?

What the fuck is going on?

“How can you be my mate? There’s no such thing as second chance mates? I recognized Todd as my mate on my 18th birthday.” The man’s jaw clenches, and his hands make fists so tight that his knuckles turn white. It has part of me wanting to recoil, but there aren’t any warning alarms going on in my head telling me this man is a danger to me. He relaxes slowly and it has me doing the same. “I don’t understand,” I whisper.

“There are no second chance mates, Serenity.” When he says my name, a shiver runs along my body as if he’s caressing me with just the tips of his fingers. I realize I don’t even know his name and it makes my heart ache. “I knew you were my mate eight years ago.”

He stares intently into my eyes and the memories of a day, a certain day, one I’ve tried to ignore and not examine, tumble through my mind. It was the day everything changed. Everything.

It was a painful memory and I locked it away to avoid the pain. I had enough of that to go around as it was. I didn’t need to remember the moment when everything shifted because I had no explanation for it.

“Tristan,” I whisper, his name floating back to me like the scent of rain on the wind right before the clouds open up.

Tristan smiles at me and it lights up his entire face. He moves toward me and sits on the bed next to me. Even though he’s huge, I’m not scared of him. I was only scared of the wolves in my pack because they showed me that I should be. They proved I couldn’t trust them, but Tristan is different. He saved me. I think.

“You remember, little wolf?” His voice is gruff and strained, “I only got to see you for a few moments, not nearly long enough. I knew the moment I scented and saw you. You are my mate, but you were so young. My father spoke with your parents and told them to keep your importance to me a secret and protect you. Because of the power my pack holds, we were afraid someone would try and use you against me

while I couldn't be with you until you came of age. They knew I would come back for you on your 18th birthday.”

I feel a tear slip down over my cheek and he's quick to brush it away, the tingles from his touch make me gasp. They're so much stronger than I thought they would be. It takes my breath away and gives me something I've been lacking for so long—hope.

“Tristan,” his name is a choked sob on my lips.

With one swift movement, he gently pulls me against his chest and cradles me in his lap. The way his body surrounds me, as if protecting me from anything and everything which has or could harm me, has more tears falling. I haven't felt safe in so long.

My wolf is laying down in my mind, content with the feeling of being with our mate. Content. Safe. Loved.

So many things swirl around in my head. I don't understand how this is possible, but it is.

Even though I'm scared of the answer, it needs to be asked. I whisper, “How did I feel the bond with Todd?”

“I don't know, little wolf,” Tristan's voice is thick with emotion. “I have a feeling that your parents didn't or couldn't keep the secret of who you are to me. Power hungry people would love to take advantage of any weakness Blood Rising has. While you were growing up and before I could bring you here, you would be a weakness.”

“As much as I hate him and as much as I wished that it wasn't true, I did feel the connection. Even my wolf identified Todd as her mate,” my voice is filled with barely restrained rage because I hate the fact that I thought I was paired with him, even if it was a lie. Was it a lie? “How is that possible?”

I cling to Tristan as his hands run up and down my back, soothing me and lulling me into calming down. The tingles racing over my skin, little sparks of sunshine and contentment, help matters immensely. This is something I never had the chance to experience with Todd, thankfully. I don't want

anything to cheapen what is happening between us. I want this to be real so badly.

“I have a feeling witchcraft is involved,” Tristan’s voice contains violence, but I know it’s not directed at me.

I nod against his chest, it’s the only conclusion that makes sense. Witches and wolves don’t necessarily get along, but witches can be bought for a price. If Tristan is right and the point was to weaken him by using me, it makes sense.

“Everything changed that day, after you left,” my voice is muffled against his chest, but I know he’s heard me by the way his body stiffens. “I remember your eyes and feeling safe as you looked at me. I remember being introduced to you and Alpha Nathan. My parents spoke with Alpha Thomas and Luna Lori after you left. Then,” I suck in a breath, his berry-cedar scent helping to center me, “everything was different. I lost everything that day.”

He growls, the sound telling me that his wolf wants to know just as much as the man, “What happened, Serenity?”

“My f-f-,” I cut myself off and shake my head before I try again, “the Beta accused me of flirting with you.” Tristan scoffs and I have no doubt he’s thinking the same thing I am and was at the time—I was a ten. “He slapped me. It was the first time it happened, but then physical abuse became a normal part of my life. I was allowed to go to school. I was no longer allowed to train. I was treated like scum, like a servant. Nothing was the same. I was alone.”

“I’ll kill every one of them,” Tristan snarls, more wolf than man.

It should frighten me after everything I’ve endured. It doesn’t.

I snuggle deeper into his chest, part of me reveling in the bloodlust I can feel coursing through this male who vows to protect me. I can feel the truth in his words. If witchcraft was used and it was a means to an end to get to Tristan, so much of my past makes more sense than it ever did before.

That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.

Why didn't my parents fight for me? Why did they go along with everything? Who knew the truth?

Even though I try to stop them, the words slip past my lips, "If you knew I was your mate, why did you leave me behind? Why didn't you check on me?"

Tristan pulls back from me, just far enough to look down into my eyes. I can see the regret there, the burden of his past decisions weighing on his shoulders. He grips my chin so I can't look away, his green eyes imploring me to listen and give him a chance.

"I'm so sorry, my little mate. I'm so sorry," he sounds desperate. "I wanted you to have a childhood. I wanted you to enjoy your life and become the woman you were meant to be. Normally we would have only crossed paths when you were of age, for both our sakes."

"The Moon Goddess doesn't make mistakes," I murmur.

Tristan smiles at me, but it's sad and forlorn, full of yearning and his own pain. I realize the last eight years must not have been easy for him. He must have seen others, his friends and packmates, find their mates and happiness. He didn't have that.

Was he waiting? Did he sleep with the she-wolves in his pack because I was too young to even know he was my mate? It's not like I could really blame him for it if he did.

"I can practically see your mind teeming with questions, Serenity," there's a fondness in his voice, an adoration, which has me blushing slightly. "Leaving you at Waning Moon under the care of your parents was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Waiting for you," I arch an eyebrow and he gives me a knowing look, "and I did wait for you little mate, was painful and difficult."

My voice comes out like a squeak, "What? You waited for me? You mean you didn't, didn't..." I trail off, my face heating from the unspoken words that lay between us.

"I would never betray our bond. As difficult as it was to know where you were and not see you, I looked at it as an

opportunity to make Blood Rising worthy of you and your devotion,” there is pride in his voice that has my heart pounding in my chest.

When I was a young pup, I remember the stories we were told about the mate bond and how love blooms as the bond strengthens, making the connection between mates stronger than steel. I had been looking forward to that connection my entire life, hoping that it would be what saved me from the pain. What I experienced with Todd was so far from what I wanted and needed. But this is everything I was told to look forward to and more. Even though it’s not whole yet, I can feel the bond.

It glows, twists and bends, but it doesn’t break. I have a feeling that it never will.

I can only hope I’m right, but for the first time in so long, I don’t fear the hope in my heart. I’m embracing it.



CHAPTER 8

SERENITY

As Tristan holds me, I find myself looking at the past eight years through a new lens. I have no doubt that the Alpha wanted to know why Alpha Nathan was speaking to my parents. I have no doubt he only wanted power and to make Blood Rising weaker. They've been one of the strongest packs for a long time and Alpha Thomas has always been hungry for power.

Being used for someone's agenda has my stomach turning. I hate it. If witchcraft was used, it makes me wonder how much of the last eight years was real and how much was a lie. Does it even matter?

I cling to Tristan and let grief wash over me. It's so much to process, but the realization that I have something better, something more, to look forward to gives me a sense of peace I didn't know I was searching for. I need this future; I need this male.

"Thank you for coming for me," I whisper against Tristan's chest.

He tenses before he relaxes again, there is shame in his voice as his fingers run through my hair, "I'm sorry it took me a week to get to you."

I look up at him, feeling like there's more to the story. I don't blame him for not being there on the day of my birthday, but it does make me wonder what happened. "I'm not mad at you for not being there," I tell him firmly. "What happened? You don't strike me as the kind of male to not be where you say you're going to be when you say you're going to be there."

Tristan smiles at me, it's melancholy and wrenches at my heart. "There were some rogue attacks here and at Crew's pack." I must give him a confused look because he gently explains, "He's the Alpha of Golden Summit. We grew up together and have each other's back."

I nod slowly, pondering what it means. Would they go that far? It's almost too sinister for me to consider. Then again, if there's witchcraft in the mix here and the plan was for Todd to mark me, it would make sense that Alpha Thomas would do anything in his power to prevent Tristan from being at Waning Moon for my birthday.

"I can see your mind working through all the pieces." I look up into Tristan's eyes and the adoration there has my breath catching. "I have no doubt that Alpha Thomas is, somehow, behind the attacks. It would make sense."

"He seemed upset when I was called to his office a few days after Todd rejected me. Luna Lori was there as well and they, very clearly, expressed disappointment about the rejection," I muse.

Tristan nods and kisses my forehead. The sparks from that simple contact has my pussy fluttering. It's a totally new sensation. I've never really been attracted to anyone before, and it wasn't just because I was afraid of the males in my pack. None of them did anything for me.

It made it easy to wait for my mate. I was always about the fairy tale anyway. My mate would love me. We would fall in love in an instant. He would be my other half, the part that completes me. I wanted to make sure that I could give all of myself to him.

The fact that the rest of the pack treated me horribly made it easy.

I make a humming sound as Tristan's large hand moves up and down my back, soothing the ache in my body and making me feel like I can conquer the world, even while I'm covered in bruises. It's kind of strange and something I didn't even think about at the time, but when I found out Todd was my mate, I didn't feel some overwhelming attraction to him.

"Because he wasn't really our mate," my wolf pipes up.

Maybe it is that simple. Or maybe it's because I know that he's a horrible wolf and male. I feel sorry for whoever his true mate is. She's going to have a horrible time.

It's not my problem, not really. I push those thoughts aside.

“Come on, little wolf,” Tristan’s voice is deep and husky, “Let me feed you breakfast and then I have someone coming to see you to find out what has been done. If we’re right, then she’ll try to undo the spell. We also need to get you inducted into the pack.”

My eyes snap up to meet his gaze and I almost get lost in the deep green there. I used to love to spend hours looking up at the canopy of the forest, trying to find peace. It was difficult to do then but looking into Tristan’s eyes it’s easy.

My voice is tentative, “A witch?”

He nods slowly. “Yes. We have one in our pack.” I let out a small gasp. That’s not the norm, from what I understand. Tristan flashes a devastating smile, one that would make me weak in the knees if I wasn’t cradled in his lap. “She’s mated to one of the top warriors here. The Blood Rising Pack values the mate bond, and we would never turn away someone’s goddess-given mate.”

“She doesn’t make mistakes,” I sass, and he throws his head back and laughs.

It completely transforms his face and I become wet. Like embarrassingly wet. I’ve never seen a more attractive male. The knowledge that he is mine, all mine, settles deep in my soul.

I’m not sure if I deserve him, but I’m not going to turn my back on the gift the Moon Goddess has given me. I’ll cherish him and his pack. I’ll do my best to stand beside him as he continues to lead Blood Rising.

When he leads me into the bathroom, he kisses my forehead again and lets me know he’s going to find me some clothes along with the promise to take me shopping later. I don’t need much. I never have, even before everything changed in my life. I’ve always valued people over things, but it did me no good at Waning Moon.

The shower feels wonderful, and I take as long as I dare to allow the hot water to sluice over my skin. It feels like I’m

washing away so much more than just the events of yesterday. It feels like the last eight years swirl around my toes to be dragged down the drain.

They tried to change the course of my life, knowing it would be an affront to the Moon Goddess. They tried to break me in the process. I won't let them win. I will move forward and embrace this new life I've been granted.

"It was always our destiny, my human," my wolf hums gently. *"We were always meant to be with Tristan. I feel it. His wolf is powerful, and I can feel the love they have for us. They have been waiting for us. All we need to do is embrace what they are offering."*

"We need to put the past behind us," I murmur.

"After we allow Tristan to get some justice. Those in power at Waning Moon tried to mess up the plans of the goddess. Tristan will right those wrongs in our name. We have a very powerful male to worship us," the smug note in my wolf's voice has me giggling as I get out of the shower.

When I step into the bedroom, a towel wrapped around my body, I feel a little self-conscious because I know my bruises are on display. Tristan immediately stands up from where he's perched on the bed and pulls me against his chest. I'm a little disappointed to find him already dressed for the day, but I push it down.

I had been pressed against the bare skin of his torso earlier since he was only wearing a pair of light sweatpants. I can't let my mind linger on my mate's sexy chest too much. I'll devolve into a panting, horn-wolf.

Tristan chuckles like he can hear my thoughts and I let out a huff. He pulls me back to the bed where undergarments, with the tags still attached, along with a maxi dress are waiting for me. I arch my eyebrow while looking at the clothes. It shouldn't make jealousy flare inside of me. I know packs have a lot of extra clothes around. It's a requirement with all the shifting going on.

“Don’t worry, little mate,” there’s amusement coloring his words, “I went to my sister, Cora, for your outfit. She’s about your size.”

I blink up at him and smile shyly before reaching for the panties and bra. I remove the tags and let out a gasp when Tristan takes them gently from my hands. Before I can process what’s happening, he’s on his knees in front of me.

When he gently tugs at the towel wrapped around my body, I let it go, but I do so begrudgingly. The way his eyes become hard as he takes in the bruises and scars has me wanting to cover myself. He shouldn’t see me like this. Nudity is common in wolf packs, but that’s when you’re a normal member of the pack.

Tristan grips my wrists gently and pushes my arms back to my sides. I hadn’t even realized I had moved my hands to cover myself from his gaze. “Don’t, Serenity,” there’s a slight command in his voice, but I could easily ignore it, just like I’ve always been able to ignore an Alpha’s commands. “I want to see. I *need*,” there’s so much angst in that single word, it has tears stinging the backs of my eyes, “to see.”

I nod and Tristan starts to kiss all my bruises. It’s more comforting than sexual, but there’s something about having this powerful male, this Alpha, on his knees for me, that I can’t ignore. His hands are gentle as he helps me get dressed. I don’t think he leaves an inch of skin out of his loving perusal, and I have never felt more cherished.

When he stands, he pulls me against his chest and just holds me. It’s exactly what I need to quiet my racing heart and rioting mind. Without a word, he twines our fingers together and leads me out of his room. While we’re walking, I marvel at his packhouse.

It’s much bigger than the one in Waning Moon. The other surprising thing is that every wolf we pass gives me a bright smile, even the Omegas who are working. No one looks sad or mad. No one looks like they’ve been abused, and I make a point to look closely at the Omegas. I might have been at the bottom of the pack at Waning Moon, but the Omegas had it

almost as bad as me. They were treated horribly, and, in turn, they took out their frustrations on me.

As we get to the bottom floor, I whisper the question that has been running through my mind, “I can ignore any Alpha’s command. Is it because I’m mated to you?”

Tristan’s eyes light up as he looks down at me. “Yes, my sweet mate, it’s because you were born to be a Luna.” His eyebrows pull together. “Did they know you could ignore their commands?”

I shrug one shoulder as we enter the pack’s dining room. I’m taken aback by the number of wolves in the room at first. When I realize I haven’t answered and Tristan squeezes my hand I murmur, “I’m not sure. I never let on that I could ignore it. Even before,” I let my sentence trail off, but I have no doubt he can finish my thought.

He gives my hand another squeeze right before a petite dynamo of a she-wolf bowls into me, hugging me tightly. I’m momentarily stunned, especially when Tristan lets out a warning growl the female ignores completely. I look over the woman’s shoulder to find a male standing there, an indulgent smile on his face. He looks familiar, but I can’t place why at first.

“Serenity,” Tristan’s voice holds a note of censure, but I get the feeling it’s not directed at me, “this is my sister, Cora, and her mate and my Beta, Mack.” He leans down and whispers in my ear, “He was with me yesterday, but I’m not sure if you saw him or not.”

I nod and realize Cora isn’t going to let go anytime soon. I could fight it, but my wolf makes a sound of contentment and I realize just how starved I am of touch and affection. I wrap my arms around Cora and settle into the comfort she’s giving me.

“Thank you for letting me borrow some of your clothes,” I murmur softly.

Cora pulls back and the first thing I notice is that she has the same eyes as her brother, the same eyes I remember Alpha Nathan having now that I’m willing to remember that day.

Mack pulls her back to his side gently and kisses the top of her head just as Tristan does the same with me. Cora is practically bouncing on her toes. Her excitement is infectious.

“I’m so glad you’re finally here, Serenity,” she chirps. “You have no idea how much of a boring old fuddy duddy my brother had become while waiting for you.”

I tense, and I’m not the only one, Mack does as well. His face becomes a mask of surprise when Tristan throws his head back and laughs. Quiet fills the dining hall and every wolf seems to be looking our way, their own surprised faces mirroring Mack’s.

“She’s not wrong,” Tristan admits through a chuckle. “I had become almost unbearable to live with.”

Cora eggs him on, “Almost?”

Tristan smirks down at me and kisses my forehead, sending those sparks and tingles throughout my entire body. I’m in a daze as he guides me through the buffet style line and then to the head table. I hesitate when we step up to it, but my mate doesn’t.

He pulls out the chair to his left for me and I swear the entire dining hall holds their breath. When I sit down, the excitement that washes over me is palpable. I look around the room and find that there are a few she-wolves staring at me with jealousy written all over their faces.

I can’t really blame them, I’m sure they wanted a chance with Tristan. The way he’s looking at me though, as if I’m the only woman he can see, settles the last of my nerves. This male is my mate and I’m not letting him go. Too many lies have tried to get in our way already, what’s a few bitter she-wolves?



CHAPTER 9

TRISTAN

Between a few hateful looks from females and lustful looks from males, I'm almost desperate to pick up my mate and lock her away in my Alpha suite. It would be for her own protection, and the protection of those in my pack who are too stupid to understand self-preservation.

I've never made the existence of my mate a secret or my decision to wait for her. I never allowed any of the she-wolves in my pack to think I was interested in them. I am their Alpha and nothing more.

I understand the beautiful allure of Serenity, but possessiveness and a need to claim her are riding me hard. I know I need to take things slow, considering my mate's past and the pain she has had to endure because I wasn't there, but I also want to leave my mark on her pretty neck.

"Yes, we need to mark and mate her as soon as possible," my wolf growls in agreement as he looks at all the males eyeing my mate.

I've sat her in the Luna's chair, it should be obvious who she is to me. I have never allowed someone to sit in her chair.

When Serenity is almost done with her breakfast, I stop myself from insisting that she eats more. I'm sure they used food against her in her old pack. Those bastards will be lucky if I leave anyone alive after I get done with them.

I want her to be comfortable and breathing down her neck, even if not doing so goes against all my instincts, is probably not the way to go about it. She's gorgeous and I find myself getting lost in her eyes whenever she looks at me.

Pride swells in my chest with the easy way she's been talking with Cora and Mack. She seems at ease and there is an obvious graceful elegance about her. She'll be the most

amazing Luna this pack has ever seen, which is saying something because my mother was exceptional.

I haven't contributed much to the conversation, but I'm more than okay with it. I want and need Serenity to be comfortable here which includes being connected to the Beta couple as well as the rest of the pack. I'm content with listening to her voice and her laughter.

"When you go shopping, please let me come with you," Cora begs.

My mate's laughter fills the dining hall as she nods. Cora's squeal of delight brings a smile to my face. I had a feeling they would get along and I'm so happy that I'm right. I wish my mom and dad were here, but they're visiting my aunt right now in another pack. They'll be delighted to meet Serenity when they get back.

My father wanted me to have some space, knowing when Serenity's birthday was from the day I met her all those years ago. I'm grateful he talked Mom into the trip because she can be a little overwhelming, even though she means well. Knowing what my mate went through, I'm even happier it worked out this way.

When Serenity pushes her plate away, an Omega is there, swooping it up with a big smile on her face. "I hope you enjoyed breakfast, Luna," her voice is filled with sincerity.

"It was delicious, thank you. If you tell me where to go, I'd be happy to take my dirty plate into the kitchen," Serenity offers.

"It's my pleasure, Luna." The Omega is gone, practically floating from the brief interaction with my mate, before Serenity can respond.

That's the effect I know my Luna is going to have on the pack. We have been without our heart for far too long, but there was no way I was going to do anything other than wait for my gift from the goddess. I knew she would be worth it.

I stand up and offer Serenity my hand, which she accepts without hesitation. Her strength is something I admire about

her. She hasn't balked or shied away from me even though her past could dictate that is exactly what she should do.

"Mate loves us. She knows there is nothing to fear with us," my wolf sounds smug as hell.

I tug Serenity to my side and clear my throat. I notice most of the pack is still in the dining hall, even if they're done with their meal. I'm sure they've stayed for this moment. I can't disappoint them.

"I will be making a more formal announcement, but since you're all here, I see no reason to make you all suffer in your curiosity." Many of the pack members chuckle and others look surprised. I don't blame them; it's been a long time since I've made any kind of joke. It was hard to see the silver lining while waiting for my mate when all I had was the determination to make Blood Rising a pack to be proud of. "I have brought my mate, Serenity, home. Please welcome her into the pack and show her why I have so much pride in Blood Rising."

The wolves in the dining hall start to howl, their song filled with celebration. Serenity snuggles deeper into my side, but when I look down at her, she's not afraid. Her cheeks are flushed pink, and her smile is so wide and full of joy that it stuns me for a moment.

I can feel the pack and their appreciation for the she-wolf at my side. A sense of rightness, one I've been seeking for the last eight years, settles over me. I'm glad I waited for what the goddess granted me. It will make me stronger. It will make Blood Rising stronger.

There might be a few females I need to keep an eye on, especially since it seems like Serenity hasn't been allowed to train in a long time. I'll work with her and make sure she can defend herself. Challenges for position aren't common, but they are, technically, allowed. It would be stupid for a female to challenge my Luna. Not only would I kill the offending she-wolf, but there's no way I would ever betray my mate after waiting for her for so long, no matter the outcome of the challenge.

I hope no one is stupid enough to try something, but I also know people can be blinded by their quest for power and rank. Just look at what Alpha Thomas did to my sweet mate.

I shake my head and lean down to whisper in Serenity's ear, "I'll give you a quick tour of the packhouse and by then it'll be time for our meeting."

She smiles up at me and I can't help but kiss her soft, upturned lips. It's over far too quickly, but the first time I get a true taste of my mate, I don't want to do it in front of the entire pack. I need to take this slow, and I plan to, but she's just too delectable to stop myself completely.

Her blush turns redder and it's adorable as fuck. Her petite frame melts against my side as I walk her into the kitchen. She smiles with kindness at the Omegas working and asks them a few questions about how much they cook, their schedule, and the ordering process. I'm more than a little amazed at my precious mate.

All the Omegas are clearly smitten with Serenity by the time we walk out, my mate waving at them with enthusiasm. As I give her a quick tour, making sure she sees all the public areas of the packhouse including the game room, theater, library, and various sitting rooms, I watch her face. She's enthralled with the building, and I can only hope she feels at home here.

I tell her about the Alpha suite being on the top floor and promise to give her a full tour of our domain later. The Beta and Gamma floor is below ours and then two floors for pack members, mostly the young, mateless wolves. The last place we go is the second floor which houses the offices for the leaders of the pack along with some conference rooms.

When we walk into my office, I try and look at it through her eyes. I haven't changed much since my father was Alpha. I always liked the space, but maybe it's too masculine? The sweet smile on her face makes me wonder what she's thinking.

"Your office is right next door, little wolf," my voice is husky, my wolf coming out to speak to her along with myself.

She turns from the pictures displayed on the wall with a surprised look on her face. “My office?”

I nod slowly. “The Luna’s office.” I point to a door. “That door connects our offices. You can change whatever you want. My Mom and Cora have been helping me with the Luna duties since I took over as Alpha and nothing has been changed in there since it was Mom’s.”

She twists her fingers together, her voice unsure, “She won’t mind?”

I scoff and close the distance between us, gripping the back of her neck and tilting her head up to look at me. It’s kind of amazing that even though she’s small she fits against me perfectly.

“No, she’ll be thrilled that you’re finally home.”

“Home,” she echoes, a dreamy smile spreads across her face which causes my wolf to growl in my head. Her eyes focus on me as she rips out my heart. “It’s been so long since I felt like I had a home, but I do feel like I’ve found it here. With you.”

Who knew this little wolf would be the proud owner of one Alpha’s heart with just a few words? Her blue-grey eyes are sparkling up at me and the sparks of our mate bond are covering my skin everywhere we’re touching. It’s too much for me to take.

I lean down and press my lips to hers. It’s a chaste kiss at first, one filled with promises and apologies, both of which she is due. When she parts her lips and her tongue slides across my bottom lip, I fucking break. My arms band around my little mate and I devour her mouth. My tongue explores every part of her.

She tastes just as good as she smells—caramel with hints of vanilla. It makes my gums ache with the need to mark her. My wolf purrs in agreement and I almost laugh at how my Serenity has turned him from vicious and blood thirsty into fluffy and cuddly.

“Only for our mate,” he growls. “Anyone who threatens her will have their throat ripped out. Starting with that pack,” he spits out the word as if it’s rogue’s blood, “who abused her. We’ll start our vengeance with them and then make sure no one else can touch her.”

I wholeheartedly agree with my wolf on this one and we don’t even know everything she endured.

A knock on my office door has Serenity letting out a small yelp and jumping away from me as if we just got caught doing something we shouldn’t. I can’t help but chuckle which earns me a glare from my sweet mate. I run my fingers through her hair, fixing it for her since I had buried my hands in it and made her look like she’d just been fucked.

No one else can see her like that. My wolf grunts his agreement. Good to know we’re on the same page.

“Don’t be embarrassed, little mate.” I grin at her, and her eyes seem to light up from the inside, the vanilla notes of her scent growing sweeter with her arousal. It does nothing to help how hard my cock is. Not that I’m complaining. “We’re mates. No one will judge us for getting closer.” I kiss her forehead and sigh as I breathe in her scent. “I want to mark and mate you, but I don’t want to push you to move too fast.”

“Tristan,” she sighs and melts into me as someone knocks on my door. Again.

I grab Serenity’s hand and lead her around the desk where I sit down before pulling her onto my lap. She looks surprised, but as I run my fingers up and down the exposed skin of her arm, she relaxes back into me. Fucking perfect.

“Come in,” my voice is gruff and resonates with my authority. Serenity shivers in my arms, but I know it has nothing to do with the weight of my command and that knowledge has my cock throbbing under her delectable ass.

When the door opens Mack and Cora are there with Miranda, the witch who has been mated to one of my warriors for a few years. She looks a little tired and I feel bad about

asking for her help considering she gave birth to a baby girl a month ago.

I nod toward the couch and Miranda is quick to take a seat, her eyes locked on Serenity. “Thank you for coming by today.” I give my mate a small squeeze. “Serenity, this is Miranda. She’s a witch and is mated to a warrior.”

Serenity’s smile is filled with kindness. “Hi, Miranda. It’s lovely to meet you.”

“Good morning, Luna,” Miranda responds which has my little mate blushing.

“Serenity, please.” Miranda nods and Serenity bites her lip before blurting, “I don’t mean to be rude, but you look tired. Is everything alright?”

Miranda laughs softly and nods. “I’m fine, Luna,” she shakes her head, “I mean Serenity. I had my first pup a month ago and it’s been quite the transition.” She runs her hand over her no longer pregnant belly. “Although, I have to say that I’m liking being able to hold our little one in my arms now. The back pain was overwhelming.”

“Oh my,” Serenity breathes out and glances at me, worry in her eyes, “you should be at home with your pup instead of here meeting with us.”

Miranda beams at my little Luna. “No, Serenity, I am exactly where I’m supposed to be.” Her eyes go unfocused, and she raises her hands slightly. “I can sense magic on you and it’s the kind of spell that should not be allowed to linger.” Her eyes turn hard and fill with anger. “It is a mate bond spell, which has been outlawed. Mate bonds are sacred and should never be messed with.”

“It’s true then,” I growl more to myself than the rest of the people in the room. I can feel my anger mounting with every breath I take. Serenity cups my face in her hands and the tingles that flow over my skin have me calming down. Not all the way, because those bastards will pay, but enough to focus. “Can you help?”

Miranda gives a short nod. “Most of the spell was already broken when you two saw each other and recognized your bond.” She stands and comes closer to my little mate. Her hands hover over Serenity as she chants some words I don’t understand, her eyes closed, and her eyebrows pulled together in concentration. When she takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, her eyes open. “It is done. You will no longer feel even the echo of the false bond placed on you and your wolf.”

“I’m free,” Serenity murmurs and turns toward me, tears shining in her eyes. When she turns back to Miranda, her voice rings with sincerity. “Thank you for your help. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

“It’s my pleasure, Luna,” Miranda bends her head slightly before winking at my mate.

When she walks out, Mack and Cora follow her, thankfully. I need a moment alone with my mate. She turns toward me, her blue-grey eyes shining with freedom she hasn’t experienced in years. It has shame filling me, but I push it aside. I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for my absence in those eight years, even though I had good reason to stay away.

“Mate,” her voice is rough with her wolf on the surface. “I can no longer feel the pieces of me that were shattered. They’re replaced with the glory of our bond.”

When I kiss her, Serenity turns on my lap, straddling me and making me groan. My hands gather her dress up to her waist, my fingertips brushing against her thighs and making her shiver in my arms. I might have told her I’d take things slow, and I will, but I need my mate to experience the pleasure only I can give her, that only exists between us because of our bond.

“The sparks,” she gasps. “They’re so much stronger now.”

“Let me make you come, little mate,” I growl the words against her lips before devouring her mouth.

I can’t get enough of her, and I know I never will. She nods and I shove the panties she’s wearing to the side, giving me

access to her dripping wet slit. I tease her pussy lips, barely touching her until she's moving her hips and seeking more friction.

Our mouths don't part as I take her wetness from her tight little hole up to her clit. I rub her there, teasing her, exploring her, loving her. She's writhing in my lap, and I have no doubt my pants will be wet with the evidence of her arousal when we're done.

"Good," my wolf snarls, *"then everyone will know we are hers."*

I grunt in agreement and work a finger inside my mate's tight pussy. When I break the kiss, we're panting and sucking in large gulps of air. I kiss and nip along her jaw and down her delicate neck. The way her vanilla-caramel scent surrounds us and fills my office has my cock leaking pre-cum.

I fuck my mate with my fingers, loving her whimpered pleas and begging moans. She's everything and I will worship her like the goddess she is for the rest of my life. When I nip at the spot where I'll mark her, it takes all my willpower not to plunge my teeth into her.

She splinters apart, sparks racing over my body the same way I know she's experiencing. Her pussy clamps down on my finger, her body rigid and fluid at the same time. When she slumps against my body, I gently pull free of her and plant kisses all over her face and neck.

I murmur words I'm barely aware of, basking in this moment with my mate. She's free of what the Waning Moon Pack tried to do to her. They tried to take her from me, and they will pay. Later. Right now, it's time to celebrate finally, fucking finally, having my mate right where she belongs and then inducting her into the pack that will always be her home.



CHAPTER 10

SERENITY

I've been at Blood Rising for a week, and I have never felt more at home in a pack and that includes the time in Waning Moon before everything changed. After I was made an official member of Blood Rising, the feeling of being at home in my pack has only grown.

There is something about this place that calls to me. Maybe it's because of my connection with Tristan. Maybe it's something else. It doesn't really matter either way.

I'm happy.

For the first time in so long, I'm happy.

I even had a good time going shopping with Cora. That woman can shop until she drops, rest a little bit, and then keep going. It would be inspiring, if it wasn't so exhausting.

Everyone has been welcoming toward me, even the females who were scowling at me when I first arrived. I've been wary of them the most, but I didn't give them enough credit. They love their pack and want their Alpha to be happy.

I was very surprised when one of the scowling women came up to me when I was in the food court in the mall with Cora. From the look on Cora's face, I wasn't the only one who was surprised. She looked like a fish out of water, and I had to stop myself from laughing at her.

"Good afternoon, Luna," the woman greeted me and even though I expected to hear derision in her tone and had steeled myself for it, it wasn't there. "My name is London."

"Hello, London," I tried to be cheerful, even through my wariness. From the way her shoulders slumped, I don't think I did a very good job. I cleared my throat and tried again, for the pack's sake, for Tristan's sake. "Would you like to join us?"

She smiled at me, a genuine smile that was nothing like the sucking lemons face she made when I entered the dining hall on my first morning at Blood Rising. It made me like her a little more, but it was hard to forget the hard-earned lessons from Waning Moon. I wasn't going to judge her, not yet, but I was trying to be ready for anything.

"Luna," she murmured softly after sitting, "I just wanted to apologize to you."

"What?" I shook my head, my eyebrows knitted together. "What do you need to apologize to me for?"

"I didn't like you," she admitted while grimacing which had Cora's eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. "I didn't want to like you even before you came here." She sighed as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders. It was almost comical; almost. "Some of the she-wolves in the pack, me included, didn't want to like you because Alpha Tristan is an attractive male. We've seen the way he has waited for you, always putting the pack first and never making your existence and his desire to wait for you a secret."

I felt a blush creep up my neck. I knew Tristan was waiting for me and told his pack about me, but it was different hearing about it from a pack member. My chest warmed with the knowledge that I wasn't some dirty little secret to him.

"We watched him change in the last eight years as he waited for you. He made Blood Rising stronger in many ways, but at the same time he became colder," she explained. I glanced at Cora who nodded solemnly, and it made my heart clench. "I think some of us," guilt flashed across her face, "didn't understand why he would keep waiting if he was so miserable. He was never a bad Alpha, quite the opposite, but it was difficult to connect with him."

"He might have thought that you were only trying to connect with him because you wanted him," I offered gently, not wanting to twist the knife she had already stabbed herself with or make her lose the courage it took her to speak to me in the first place.

London's eyes were filled with regret as she chuckled, but it wasn't a jovial sound. "He wouldn't have been wrong," she admitted softly as if she had to pry the words from her lips.

I could have gotten mad at her, but I knew it wouldn't gain me anything. The fact remains that no matter what the females in his pack tried to entice him with, he was loyal to me. He's earned my devotion to him, and to his pack, in return.

"The point I'm trying to make is that there were some of us who were mad when you showed up here." She gave me a sheepish smile and I tried to keep my face neutral instead of letting the hurt show. Her honesty didn't deserve my pain. "I've been talking to the females who had a problem with you being here and we all realized something."

I gently prompted her, my curiosity getting the better of me, "What did you realize?"

"You're good for him," she murmured, sincerity shining in her eyes. "You make him a better male and a better Alpha." I blinked at her a few times, deeply touched by her admission. "Alpha Tristan has been laughing." She lets out a laugh of her own and shakes her head. "Many of us couldn't remember the last time we saw him laugh. You bring a light to him and because of that we are thankful you're here. I'm sorry for the way I reacted to your arrival, and I know the other females feel the same way."

"London," I breathed out as I blinked back tears, "thank you so much for your apology. It's not necessary." When she opened her mouth, I'm sure to tell me it was, I cut her off, "It's not necessary because I can understand why you would feel a certain way about someone suddenly appearing in your pack. You're Blood Rising and you're loyal. I never held it against you or anyone else. I have to earn your trust and your respect."

London looked surprised, but I just smiled at her. Suddenly, she engulfed me in a hug, and I giggled at being taken by surprise. "You've more than earned it. We will follow you, Luna Serenity, because you deserve to stand next to Alpha Tristan. At his side and in his heart."

I squeezed her and then she let go of me. She hung out with Cora and me as we finished up our shopping and, I think, I made a new friend. When I told Tristan about the conversation later that night, while we were snuggled in bed, I could feel the pride for his pack radiating from him.

He just nuzzled the top of my head and sighed, “I knew they would accept you, my little mate. You’re the perfect Luna for Blood Rising.”

I couldn’t help but tease him, “Were you really that bad? Cold, distant, and aloof?” I scrunched my face up and tilted my head up so I could look at him. “You didn’t laugh?”

“What would I have to laugh about when I didn’t have my light with me? I needed to make sure we were strong enough to protect our Luna, our queen. I couldn’t misstep. I had to make us, and myself, worthy of you.”

I pretty much launched myself at him with those words, kissing him hard until we couldn’t breathe. Then I explored every muscled inch of his body with my hands. It was the boldest I had been in bed with him, but he deserved to be rewarded.

We haven’t mated or marked each other, and I know he’s been taking it slow because of me. I appreciate the gesture, but the man is driving me deeper into sexual frustration hell with every one of his heated glances and light caresses. Sure, he has found more than one way to make me come and scream his name, but there’s a deep yearning inside of me to solidify our mate bond.

“*You and me both,*” my wolf grunts, the frustration clear in her voice.

It’s not helping that Tristan is training right now. Without his shirt on. Sweaty. With his muscles bulging and pulling.

I trained with Tristan first thing this morning, before the rest of the warriors came to the training ground. He started training me a few days after I arrived here. I’m sure he thought I had no training, and, in some ways, that’s true. I tried to keep

up with what Dad had shown me, but I never learned anything new after he stopped training me.

I've started to pick things up quickly, but I'm more than okay with not being ready to join everyone else. It looks difficult as hell and I'm still trying to get healthy again after so many years of not having enough to eat and being abused. I'm feeling more like myself now.

Which is not helping matters when it comes to the whole being ready to mark and mate Tristan thing.

The pack's Gamma, Beckham, oversees training, but everyone attends. Except for the little pups and the elderly, of course. The pack is then put into smaller groups based on skill and age. It helps the teens channel their energy, especially those who are about to or have just shifted.

Watching the training, even though I haven't participated yet, has been eye opening. It's one of the reasons I stick around after my morning session with Tristan. Watching everyone fight and learn has taught me as well.

Then there's the added benefit of showing the pack that I'm here and want to be with them. The Luna is the heart of the pack and I want them to know they have mine. I want them to trust me and look to me as a leader. I can't do that if I were to hide away from them.

Since London pointed out to me that the she-wolves who appeared jealous at first, no longer felt that way, I've been keeping an eye out for anyone giving off a jealous vibe. I'm thrilled no one is anymore. Instead, people smile at me and say hello when they're on their way to training.

No one seems surprised I'm not out in the field with them either. I swear some of them are showing off for me, especially some of the teens.

"Drake," Tristan shouts out and my gaze snaps over to where two males are sparring with a little too much intensity.

I hold my breath, unsure what is going to happen next. They're probably having an issue controlling their wolves. It's a problem all teen shifters have, but it's worse for males. I'm

sure it has something to do with hormones, but I've always wondered if it's more like psychological misogyny than a medical reality. It doesn't matter because when a problem arises it still needs to be dealt with.

Drake growls at the young man he's sparring with, I think his name is Vince, not heeding Tristan's warning growl or his approach. Both Drake and Vince are close to my age, but neither are 18 yet nor have they met their mates.

My heart starts beating in my chest as my mate approaches the slightly out of control males. Drake swings, but his punch is wide and doesn't come close to hitting Vince. I can tell that Vince is on the edge of losing control of his wolf in the same way that Drake already has.

I stand up slowly, unsure if I can help. The sharp look Tristan sends me, as if he knows what I'm thinking, has me staying where I am, though I don't sit back down. I barely stop myself from gasping when Tristan grips both males by the back of their necks and holds them away from each other.

The muscles of my mate's arms strain with how hard the young males want to get to each other, but it's clear who is in control here. It should not be such a turn-on. What can I say? I'm a hussy for my mate.

"You and me both, my human," my wolf purrs and I roll my eyes. *"I don't think I can wait much longer to make our Alpha mate ours fully."*

My wolf might be a horn-wolf, but she's not wrong. Not at all.

"Enough," Tristan bellows, his Alpha command washing over everyone in the field. Most of them tilt their head in submission. Not me. His command has my nipples standing at attention, but I feel no compunction to submit to my mate. It's quite the perk. "You were told to stop sparring and take a moment to calm down." Tristan looks between the boys. "What is going on with you?"

Drake points an accusing finger at Vince. "He thinks my twin sister is his mate," he spits.

I wince and start to make my way closer to Tristan and the males. It's clear the young wolves are calming down and that my mate has them both very much in hand.

"I'd like to take my mate in hand," my wolf snickers.

I scrunch up my face and admonish my wolf, *"That wasn't necessary. It'll happen when it's supposed to happen."*

"Soon. Make sure it's soon," she insists, and I push her away as I find my spot next to my mate.

"You're not 18 yet, right?" I look between the two young males. "Neither of you are 18."

Drake sighs and shakes his head, some of the fight leaving him the moment I start talking to him. Tristan lets go of them and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me against his side. I melt against him immediately, his berry-cedar scent putting me at ease.

"No, Luna," Drake admits begrudgingly while Vince looks down at his feet and shakes his head.

"The Moon Goddess doesn't make mistakes," I remind them gently. "There's no reason to fight about it before you even know. If it does turn out that Vince is your sister's mate, Drake," I give the young male my most innocent look when he meets my gaze, "won't you be happy for them?"

Drake makes a disgusted face, but then all my words sink in and his shoulders slump. "I guess she could do worse," he mumbles.

"If Alpha Tristan can stand to see Beta Mack with his mate, I think you can deal with it," I tease him a little.

"Hey!" Mack's shout of indignation has those around us chuckling and the tension eases.

"My Luna is right. The Goddess doesn't make mistakes. Trust in her. I did," he boasts, and I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes, even though his words warm my heart.

Gamma Beckham calls the training back to order, but now that I'm wrapped up in Tristan's arms, I don't really want to go back to watching my mate. He must have the same thought as

I do because he leans down and whispers in my ear, “Want to get out of here?”

I bite my lip and look up at my handsome Alpha while batting my eyelashes. “Don’t you need to finish training?”

“I’m the Alpha, little wolf, I can do whatever I want and right now I want to show you something.”

I can’t help it—my eyes travel down my mate’s body, taking in the planes of muscle and the few tattoos decorating his skin. He lets out a low rumbling growl.

I can’t help but laugh when he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder. I guess he has something to show me.

The laughter of the rest of the pack members watching follows us as he stalks away from the training grounds and back to the pack house. He grumbles the entire way there about naughty little mates and how he’s tempted to spank my ass.

I’m sure he can smell how much the thought turns me on. It should embarrass me, but it doesn’t. I’m ready for my mate.



CHAPTER 11

TRISTAN

Even though I was tempted to ask my sweet little mate to shower with me, I didn't. From the hungry look in her eyes, I might have made the wrong choice there. I want to show her something important and I'm unable to wait any longer. It's not like Alpha's are known for their patience and mine has been shot completely over the last week.

I wanted Serenity to have time to heal and come to terms with her new life here in Blood Rising. She's done both of those things and the way the pack has opened their arms and hearts to my mate has made me even prouder of my pack than I was. Even the females who seemed put out by my mate's appearance have changed their tune.

It's gratifying to see, and I can only thank the Moon Goddess for bringing Serenity into my life. I'm a lucky wolf and I will never take it for granted.

After our shower, in separate showers in the Alpha suite, I lead my Serenity out of the packhouse. I showed her most of the territory the day after Miranda rid her of the last of the fake bond, but I made sure there was one place I didn't show her. I wasn't ready yet and I don't think she was either.

There's a lightness about her now. I've seen it grow every day she's been at Blood Rising. She might be young, but she is wise beyond her years, and I know she is going to be an amazing Luna.

My parents are set to be back in a few days, and they can't wait to meet her and get to know her. I'm looking forward to it as well because my little mate deserves all the love and family she can get. She deserves so much better than the family she had to endure for the last eight years. I have a feeling it wasn't entirely their fault, but that doesn't mean they didn't inflict pain on her.

“Mate is perfect,” my wolf purrs and I agree. *“When can we run with mate again?”*

Yesterday, for the first time since I brought Serenity here, we shifted and ran through the woods together. I wanted to make sure she had healed before I allowed my wolf near hers. He can be a brute when he’s not careful and our little mate is delicate.

At least that’s what I thought.

“Mate is fierce and strong,” my wolf huffs indignantly. He pouts slightly, *“I am not a brute.”*

I can only chuckle at him. Serenity’s wolf is not what I was expecting, and my wolf is right about her being fierce and strong. I was surprised at how large she is, but I shouldn’t have been. She is a born Luna, and her wolf reflects that. It’s only her human side that endured the years of abuse—physical, emotional, and mental. Her wolf is her protector, and I was impressed when I saw her for the first time yesterday.

She was able to keep up with me as I led us through the woods. I can’t wait until the next pack run to have her at my side with the rest of the pack running through the woods. It’s something we try to do once a month on the full moon, both to give thanks to the Moon Goddess, but also to strengthen the bond in the pack.

When our wolves were content and panting in our minds because they got to spend time together, even though my wolf wanted to complete the bond with his mate and I held him back, we shifted back into our human skin. Serenity had the most beautiful smile on her face and a blush of exhilaration on her cheeks. She took my breath away without even trying.

Once I slipped shorts on and she pulled a dress over her head, I pulled her against my chest and ran my fingers through her hair, reveling in the sparks of our bond. “Everyone will be impressed with your wolf when you run by my side at the next Moon Run, little mate,” my voice was boastful, and I wanted her to hear it.

“Moon Run?” The way her eyebrows pulled together in confusion was fucking adorable.

However, her question gave me pause. “Did Waning Moon,” I was barely able to get the name of that bastard pack out of my mouth, “not have a pack run under the full moon?”

Serenity shook her head slowly. “No, the only time the pack really got together was for big events revolving around the ranked members of the pack and pack meetings,” she rolled her eyes, making me smile at her sass, “which involved the Alpha barking orders at us most of the time.”

I scoffed in annoyance. “I knew there was something wrong with that pack. Of course, they would only bring the pack together when it suited them.” I was fuming on the inside and wondered just how many of the pack members were happy there. Did they even know what they were missing? I felt bad for anyone who was mated into the pack and had to adhere to self-centered leadership after coming from a well-run pack built on respect instead of only rank. “We all shift together and run under the full moon. Sometimes we hunt,” I told my little mate with a shrug.

Serenity made a humming sound and mused, “I’m sure it makes your bond as a pack stronger and helps to blow off some steam. I bet people need it considering how tough your training is,” she teased me.

I barked out a laugh before pressing a kiss to my mate’s forehead. “I think you got my number, my brilliant mate.”

I wasn’t the least bit surprised that she understood the significance of our runs. It was just more proof that she is perfect for me and my pack. Our pack.

With my mate’s hand in mine, I lead her toward a path we haven’t taken before. I can practically feel her excitement through our bond, even though we haven’t completed it yet. I hope she’s ready or will be ready soon. It’s becoming more and more difficult for me to hold off on marking her. My wolf growls his agreement, and I can’t help but smile.

Serenity glances up at me with her large, innocent blue-grey eyes, “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” I remind her. When she huffs in annoyance, I can’t help but throw my head back and laugh at how cute she is. “Don’t worry, it’s not far,” I assure her.

Just being this close to her, finally, is enough for me. As we walk for a few minutes, my worry and anxiety grow. I hope she likes it. I’m not sure what I’ll do if she doesn’t. This is something I’ve been working on for so long.

As I start leading her to a large house, Serenity’s eyes light up as she takes it in. It makes some of my worries melt away. I don’t stop until we’re standing at the bottom of the porch steps.

“This is your surprise, my little mate,” my words are growled with my wolf on the surface.

Serenity glances up at me before looking at the house, confusion written across her face. “A house? Who lives here?”

“We do.” She gasps and turns toward me, tears welling up in her beautiful eyes. I pull her against my chest and bury my face in the crook of her neck, taking in her vanilla-caramel scent and letting it wash over me. “I’ve been building this place for the last eight years. I finished it a few weeks before your birthday. I planned to bring you here directly, but with everything I learned about your time in Waning Moon, I didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

Her delicate fingers run gently through my hair, making sparks cascade over my body. “You built this house? For us?”

“For you,” I mumble against her skin. “I wanted you to have a home and for us to have a place all our own. The packhouse can be loud and sometimes crowded. I wanted to give you a sanctuary.”

Serenity lets out a squeal of excitement before she pulls away from me and races up the stairs. She doesn’t wait for me, and I can’t help but chuckle at her enthusiasm. This is exactly the reaction I was hoping for. My heart feels lighter and any doubt or worry I had are gone completely.

I'm right behind my mate and watch with amusement as she explores every room. The soft smiles on her lips and the excitement in her eyes make the long wait I had to endure for this moment worth it. She makes all of it worth it.

When I follow her into the primary bedroom, which is already set up with a king-size bed and some furniture, she turns toward me and the smile on her face has me rocking back on my heels. "You built this? For me? For us? A home," she finishes with a whisper.

I hold up my hands. "I had some help, but most of the work was done with these hands."

I don't get any warning as she launches herself at me. Her legs wrap around my waist and I'm instantly hard as steel for my mate. It makes my head spin. I've been pushing away desire for so long, there was part of me that was worried it wouldn't come back.

I should have known better because now, with Serenity in my arms, all I can think about is burying my cock inside of her. The pack could probably function without us for a few days. There is so much about our connection I want to explore with my sweet, innocent mate.

Her bruises are gone now, and she has a healthy glow about her. I regret not knowing what was going on with her in Waning Moon, and I'm sure I always will, but I can't let it impact our future.

"Tristan," Serenity breathes, her lips hovering over mine, "this is perfect."

A little thread of worry seeps into my tone, "You like it?"

"I love it. I have no idea how you did it, but you took my dream house right out of my mind and built it for me. I'm so proud of you and so impressed with what you've built. Not just this house, but the entire pack. You are an amazing man and Alpha. I'm so glad I get to call you mine."

I growl as my lips crash down against hers. She meets my ferocity with her own and I find myself stepping toward the

bed. Everything in me is screaming to throw her down and fuck her until neither of us can move anymore.

But I don't want to rush her. I can't do that to my sweet mate.

"I love you so much, my little mate," I whisper against her lips, and she gasps.

When I pull back a little, her blue-grey eyes are staring at me in wonder. "You love me?"

"Of course. I've loved you since the moment I saw you curled up reading your book. Back then it was a soft love, gentle and sweet. Now that I've met you as the woman you've become, it's so much more. I'm glad I waited; I knew it would be worth it."

"I love you, my Alpha, my mate," her voice is husky and thick with emotion.

I can see how much she loves me in her eyes. It's more than the mate bond. It's more than the pull between our souls.

We are written on each other's hearts, and we always will be.

I kiss her again, needing to taste her. I don't know if I'll be able to stop if we keep going, but I can't help myself. Being in our home, in our room, is making it hard to concentrate on anything other than marking and mating my female.

"Tristan," she moans against my lips, "I'm ready. I want you to mate me. I want you to mark me."

I jerk back from her in surprise and stare into her eyes, looking for any sign that she spoke without thinking while being swept up in the pleasurable spell the sparks of our bond create. She stares back, her eyes intense and focused.

"There will be no going back, Serenity. You'll be mine for the rest of our lives," my voice is firm as I lay it out for her.

"And you'll be mine," she purrs. "I don't want to go back. My future is here with you, my Alpha."

“I wouldn’t have let you go, no matter what, my Luna,” I promise before I fuse our mouths together again.



CHAPTER 12

SERENITY

Tristan puts me down next to the bed and I gasp as his claws make quick work of my clothing, ripping them from my body with gentle precision. I'm not afraid of him nicking my skin, I know he will never hurt me. It's one of the many things I love about him.

He is so commanding, and yet he's soft with me. He loves his pack fiercely, but I know his loyalty to me comes first. He is everything I have ever wanted in a mate, and I thank the Moon Goddess every day that he waited for me and that he came for me.

I don't want to think about what could have happened if he had decided the mate bond wasn't worth it. I push the thought away because it doesn't matter, it isn't what happened. He put me first in so many ways in the last eight years and it only proves to me the loyalty and the depth of love my mate is capable of.

I kick off my shoes and stand before my mate naked and ready. I want him. I want our bond to be complete.

Tristan's dark green eyes grow even darker as he stares at me and undresses. His movements are jerky and barely restrained. I can feel his growing need as he looks at me.

With every inch of my mate's perfect body exposed to me, my wolf growls in appreciation. "*Our mate is a sexy male. We are blessed,*" she growls.

I agree with her and lick my lips as his cock springs free, already leaking pre-cum. Before he can stop me, I drop to my knees and wrap my fingers around the base of his shaft. The growling growl he lets out holds his wolf just as much as it does the man. I can't help but smile at the sound as my pussy gets wetter and the scent of my arousal fills the bedroom. Our bedroom.

I drag the flat of my tongue up the underside of his cock before swiping it across the head. His taste bursts across my tongue and I groan as my wolf growls in my head. The hussy is practically prancing around in my mind with her tail held up high and a suggestive wiggle to her hips. The horn-wolf.

I swirl my tongue around the crown of his cock and hope I'm doing something right. When Tristan's fingers dive into my hair and he holds me with a grip that tells me he never wants to let go, satisfaction blooms in my chest. I part my lips and take him into my mouth, needing to taste more of him.

His berry-cedar scent invades my senses and I start to bob my head up and down his length, slowly. My jaw starts to ache almost immediately, but can anything less be expected when we're talking about my very large mate?

His fingers tighten in my hair, and he growls, "Your pretty little mouth feels so good on my cock, little mate."

I swear it feels like I'm glowing as he praises me. I double my efforts, wanting him to feel good, wanting him to be able to feel how much he means to me all the way to his toes. I squeeze the base of his cock and start to pump his length in time with my mouth. My instincts are in control now and from the way my Alpha mate is growling and grunting above me, it's the right choice.

I get hints of his taste every time I reach the head of his cock and I devour it greedily. I want more. I want it all. When I fondle his balls with my free hand, giving a gentle squeeze, he lets out a little shout. If my mouth wasn't full, my lips would be curling in a wicked smile, I just know it.

Suddenly, Tristan pulls his cock from my mouth and grips underneath my arms, pulling me up until I'm flush against his chest with my feet dangling off the floor. His strength always surprises me a little, not because it's not clear when you look at him, but because he's always so gentle with me.

"As much as I want to come down your pretty throat, Serenity, I need to be inside of you," his voice sounds feral, and it only makes me wetter.

With a flick of his arms, he tosses me onto the bed, and I let out a yelp of surprise. The wild look in his eyes, the deep green glowing as he looks at me, has me rubbing my thighs together. I need him. Now.

“Please, mate,” I beg him, and he grins at me, it’s filled with teeth and filthy promises.

I spread my legs so he can see how wet I am and before I can take a breath, he practically dives between my thighs. I can feel the stubble on his jaw against my inner thighs and I’m pretty sure his tongue feels a little rough as it slides up my slit, collecting my arousal for his enjoyment.

He growls against my dripping pussy and my body shudders at the sensation. I can already feel pleasure coming toward me like a tsunami on the horizon. I know when it crashes into me, I’m going to be forever changed.

Tristan devours me. His voice is muffled, “You’re the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted little mate.” He growls, his wolf right there with him, “My Serenity.”

My stomach clenches as white spots dance in front of my vision. Am I holding my breath? I probably shouldn’t do that. I try and breathe, but it’s labored, and I find myself panting. Or is that my wolf? Honestly, it’s hard to tell at this point.

The sparkling tingles I feel whenever we touch are threatening to drown me. What a fucking way to go.

As I grip Tristan’s hair, I grind my hips against his mouth, moaning, “Yes, my Alpha, right there. Fuck,” I gasp as my vision whites, my body goes stiff, and the wave hits me.

My orgasm pitches and rolls, it consumes and destroys. I shiver against the bed, Tristan’s firm grip on my hips the only thing grounding me. I need it, and him, desperately.

When he crawls up my body and settles his weight over me, my eyes pop open. When did I even close my eyes?

Tristan smirks, “I think it was while I was giving you an orgasm that had you seeing stars.”

I blink up at him, my brain still melty and not at all back online. Huh. I must have said that out loud.

My mate kisses my lips softly and whispers, “You did.”

Oh shit. Okay. “You broke me,” I croak.

His hearty laugh blankets me and I find myself smiling at my gorgeous, strong, proud, worthy mate. My gift from the goddess. I wrap my arm around his neck and tug, bringing him down to me so I can kiss him, needing the connection, needing him.

I feel his cock slide through my pussy lips, and he growls in approval. “So wet, my little mate,” his words are lisped, and I feel one of his sharp canines nip at my chin before he kisses along my jaw and down my neck. “Can’t wait to mark you, mate,” he growls.

I arch my back, pressing my tits against his chest and the smattering of hair there has my nipples begging for more. When he nudges my entrance with the head of his cock, my legs fall open.

“I want you inside me, Tristan. I need it. I ache for you. Please,” I keened.

His jaw clenches as he starts to push inside of me. I had his dick in my mouth, I know how big he is and yet it feels so much bigger as he starts to fill me. Is that normal?

My fingers start to shift, my claws digging into his shoulders as he slides deeper and deeper inside of me. The way he pauses at my virginity, has me meeting his gaze. I can see the love he has for me, it’s right there in his green depths.

“You’re mine. Mine to love. Mine to protect. Mine,” he grits out the words, his upper lip stretching across his canines and making him look monstrous. I don’t mind one bit. “I give myself to you, my mind, my body, my soul, my heart. It’s always been you and it will always be you.”

“I love you, Tristan. I will always love you. I’ll stand by your side and be the Luna your pack deserves. I’ll be loyal to you and be your light when things seem too dark to bear. You’ll be my shelter when I need safety. I’m yours and you’re

mine,” my words are breathy, but they come from the deepest part of me.

Our eyes stay locked together, reflecting our love as they glow, our wolves peeking out. When Tristan punches his hips forward, I gasp, but it’s in pleasure. I’m ready for my mate. I’m ready for everything.

He slams his mouth down onto mine, holding still inside of me and giving me a moment to adjust. When I can’t take it anymore, I wiggle my hips and the growl he lets out has the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

This is my mate.

This is my Alpha.

Tristan’s movements are slow at first. I can feel the moment he lets go and gives himself over to his instincts, to his wolf. I meet his thrusts as best I can, wrapping my legs around his hips and submitting to my mate.

That pleasurable wave starts to build, coming closer and closer to shore. I know it’ll be even more intense this time. I welcome it. I want it.

“Please,” I gasp. “Tristan, harder. I need you.”

He grunts, his teeth grinding together as he buries his face in the crook of my neck, his hips moving faster and harder. The smacking of our skin gets louder along with my wailing moans and his animalistic groans.

It’s a beautiful song, one I never knew would be a favorite of mine. I’m in awe of this man. He waited for me, putting me first ahead of himself. That was enough to have me falling in love with him, but then he saved me. He came for me. He supports me.

As the peak of our pleasure rises underneath us, my wolf takes over and strikes. My mouth partially transforms, and my teeth sink deep into the place where my mate’s neck and shoulder meet. He howls out his joy and his pleasure right before he marks me in the same place.

A snapping tethering sensation happens deep in my chest, and I swear a shimmering gold thread wraps around us as our bond strengthens and completes. Our bond. My mate.

A burning sensation rushes through me from where Tristan has marked me as I come hard. The only thing keeping me from thrashing on the bed is the weight and power of my mate. My pussy squeezes Tristan's cock, milking him as jets of his warm cum fill me.

I keep my teeth embedded in Tristan's skin until the feeling of pleasure starts to fade. Only then do I slowly retract my teeth and clean my mark. I feel him doing the same to me and shudder at the sensation of his tongue dragging along the fresh evidence of our bond.

When he rolls, he takes me with him. I'm splayed out across his chest, his cock still inside of me, keeping his cum right where it belongs. We haven't talked about pups, but it's common to get pregnant from the first mating when marking is involved. I'm not at all opposed to having Tristan's pup and it has nothing to do with securing the next heir for the Blood Rising Pack.

I want a family with this male. I want it all. Things I haven't allowed myself to dream about or desire in so long.

Tristan's large hand runs up and down my back, settling me as the sparks dance across my skin. "What are you thinking about, little wolf?"

"Pups," I whisper against his chest even though I'm sure he can feel my emotions through our new bond.

"I can't wait to see you round with our pups, Serenity. It will be my greatest honor to give you pups. To give you a family," his voice is gentle, as if he knows exactly why I was thinking about pups. Maybe he does.

"I'm looking forward to it. Before," I swallow hard and shake my head, "I did have a good childhood, you know? Before."

He runs his fingers through my hair and my agitation and sadness at how everything changed melts away. I more than

welcome it. I want to leave the past where it belongs, but it's difficult.

Tristan clears his throat and shifts a little underneath me. I can feel a hint of anxiety through our bond, and it must be coming from him because his touch has made a puddle of goo atop his chest. "I didn't want to rush you and I never would, but I'm so glad that our bond is complete." He pauses and I don't push him, it's clear he has more to say, even though he doesn't necessarily want to. "In a month there is an Alpha meeting. This year Alpha Crew is hosting it at Golden Summit."

I tense, but Tristan's hands never stop touching me and I relax back against his chest. "I guess it'll be a good time for everyone to meet the new Luna of Blood Rising."

Tristan kisses the top of my head and purrs, his wolf present in his voice, "Perfect little mate."

I close my eyes and drift, content in my bond, content with my mate. I'm not looking forward to seeing the leadership of Waning Moon, but I won't let them scare me anymore. They are my past, but this powerful male beneath me and Blood Rising is my future.



CHAPTER 13

TRISTAN

I feel settled in a way that I wasn't before, even after bringing Serenity back to my territory. It's more than having my mark on her neck and being able to feel her through our bond too. It's being in our house, the one I built with her in mind, the one I used to keep myself going forward by focusing on because I could see her making it into a home.

We moved into the house a week ago, the day after we completed our bond. It took a few days for Serenity to order furniture and for it to arrive, but I'm in awe of how my mate has transformed the house I built into *our* sanctuary. I knew when it was finished that I didn't want to fill it with anything, I wanted her to be able to put her stamp on it.

And she has. I can feel her in every room. Even the empty ones like the extra bedrooms. They'll make the perfect rooms for our pups, and I hope to start filling them as soon as possible. I hope to know if my mate is pregnant before the Alpha meeting, it's one of the reasons I make sure to smell my precious mate every morning. I'll be able to scent her first, it's one of the perks of being the Alpha.

My Mom, along with Cora, were indispensable in helping Serenity get the house set-up just how she wants it. I was right in thinking my parents would fall in love with my little Luna. I'm almost a little jealous of how much they like Serenity; and the feeling is mutual.

When my border patrol mind-linked me to let me know that my parents had crossed onto pack land, I linked Serenity and asked her to meet me in front of the packhouse. She was breathless when she got to me, and it wasn't only because she was moving quickly from our house. I could feel her nerves through the bond and quickly wrapped my arms around her to pull her flush against my chest.

“Don’t worry, little mate,” I whispered against the shell of her ear. “My parents are going to love you.”

“What if they don’t? What if they’re disappointed? You waited so long for me and now I’m here, what if I’m not what they’re expecting at all?” By the end of her blurted questions, she was on the edge of hysterical.

It was adorable, but I had a feeling she wouldn’t appreciate it if I started to laugh. Mack and Cora were barely keeping it together behind us. I glared at them, but it didn’t help matters.

I wrapped my hand around my little mate’s throat and gave a small squeeze. She snapped her eyes up to meet my gaze, the blue-grey depths boring into me. I could practically hear her begging me to take control, to take over, to make her put her trust in me. There was no way I was going to let her down.

“The pack already loves you, Serenity,” I pointed out, my voice gentle and smooth. “Even those who didn’t want to like you are ready and willing to lay their life down for you. Everyone who meets you adores you because you’re genuine, kind, smart, thoughtful, and so damn strong that it inspires everyone you come across.” I could see the wheels in her head turning, but I shook my head and gave her neck another squeeze. “They don’t count. They had an agenda and never allowed themselves to really see you. No one here will make that same mistake. I know my parents will love you because you’re good for me, love me and because I love you more than I even thought I could.”

Serenity melted into me, and I ran my hands up and down her back, reveling in the sparks of our touch. When she heard a car approaching, she jerked away from me. I barked out a laugh as she shot me a sheepish smile and slipped her hand in mine.

It was enough.

Dad barely had the car stopped before Mom was bounding toward Serenity and engulfing her in a hug. My mate gave the cutest little squeak as Mom gave her something she had been sorely missing—the love of a mother. It only took Serenity a

second before she melted into it, accepting it from the depths of her soul.

Dad got out of the car, his voice filled with fear and a little annoyance, “Damn it, Emma. I warned you that you had to wait until I had the car in park before you could get out.” Mom let go of Serenity enough to wave him off and he growled in response. “You know you’ll be punished for that. I love it when I turn your ass red.”

“Dad,” Cora and I shouted at the same time while Mack and Serenity giggled.

Dad strutted up to us with a big smile on his face as Mom blushed and tried to ignore him. He huffed, “Oh please, like you wouldn’t do the same.”

I looked at Serenity. “Well, that’s true,” I admitted as I smirked at my mate, loving the way she started to blush just like Mom.

That was that. Mom and Dad love my mate and are proud of having her with us. They’re looking forward to her officially being the Luna of Blood Rising, even though the Luna ceremony is more of a formality than anything else. Everyone already recognizes her as the Luna and treats her as such.

She has stepped into the Luna role slowly, with her head held high. She’s taken on a lot more than I thought she would so soon, but I’m not complaining.

We’re sitting on the back patio of our home, her head resting against my shoulder and our bodies snuggled together. The light of the moon is shining down on us, almost full but not quite. We’ll be leading our first pack run together in a few days and I can already taste the pack’s excitement in the air. They can’t wait to run under the moon’s grace behind their Alpha and Luna.

I stand up abruptly and my little mate looks up at me with wide eyes, her voice filled with worry, “What’s wrong? Did someone mind-link you?”

I shake my head and scoop her up in my arms before striding inside and then straight up the stairs to our bedroom. “Nothing’s wrong, my sweet little mate. I need you,” my voice is strained.

My cock throbs when I get a look at the mischievous smile pulling at my mate’s sweet lips. I lean down and nip her bottom lip, her sweet gasp washing over me. I barely get us into our room before I maneuver Serenity so I’m pressing her against the wall.

I love my mate in her dresses because it gives me easy access. I think she’s figured it out and it’s one of the reasons she continues to wear them. Smart woman.

When I hike her skirt up around her waist, I expect to feel the lace of her panties, but instead my finger glides over her slick pussy lips. I growl, the sound coming from my wolf and rumbling from deep in my chest.

“Naughty little mate,” I growl, my wolf right there with me. “No panties?”

Serenity giggles, her eyes filled with mirth and joy. “What would the point be? You’ve ripped more pairs off my body than I can count,” she pouts a little and tries to look serious, like she’s berating me, but the smile she’s trying to hide ruins the whole thing.

“I’ll buy you a million pairs of little panties just so I can rip them from your body,” I grunt.

She smirks at me while reaching down and pushing my sweats over my hips until my cock springs free. “Why waste the time?” She bites her lip as she looks up at me, my cock sliding between her soaked skin, my wolf growling about our mate being brilliant in my head. He’s not fucking wrong. “Fuck me, my Alpha. I need you to fill me up.”

I groan and tip my head back, staring at the ceiling as I take a few deep breaths in the hope of finding a semblance of control. Considering all I can smell is her vanilla-caramel scent, sweet with her dripping arousal, it doesn’t help. Not even a little bit.

When I look down at her, her blue-grey eyes are darker, and her nails dig into my shoulders in warning. I move my hips and plunge inside my mate in one thrust, both of us growling out our pleasure. My fingers flex and dig into my female's flesh, using my body to pin her immobile against the wall.

She gives herself over to me, moans spilling from her lips as I fuck her relentlessly. Since we completed the mating process, we've been exploring each other, and I am mated to a fucking vixen. Every time I touch her, I experience a bone deep satisfaction that I will crave every day for the rest of my life.

I kiss her hard, feeling her body spiraling toward the edge as my balls draw up tight. My wolf pushes me, reminding me I need to fill her with my cum and breed her.

"Gonna fill you with my cum, fill you with my pup," I grit out through my teeth.

She arches in my hold, her fingers sliding through my hair and tugging. The bite of pain makes me fuck her harder.

"That's right, little wolf, you're going to come all over my cock, aren't you?"

"Fuck," she moans, "Tristan. Love you, my Alpha. Need your cum dripping from me."

I groan, hearing her talk about my cum always pushes me right to the edge and she knows it. I jackhammer into my little mate, not even a little bit worried about her being able to handle it. I know she can.

"Want your pup," she pants. She growls, her wolf coming out to play, "Breed me, mate."

I lose any tenuous hold I had on my control. My hand wraps around Serenity's throat and I give a squeeze as my hips hammer into her. I know she's close, I can feel it in the way her pussy flutters around my length and through the bond. Our pleasure magnifies, wrapping around our bond and echoing back.

There's nothing quite like it.

“Take it all, little mate,” I grunt as I tilt her head and sink my teeth into her mark while pushing in as deep as I can go as I come.

My little mate screams my name as she comes in my arms. I swear her pussy sucks up my cum and I find myself smiling against her skin after I release my teeth and lick the bite clean. With our bodies plastered together, I can feel how hard her heart is pounding in her chest. I know mine is doing the same.

I pull her away from the wall as soon as I know my legs will hold me while moving. The satisfied, dreamy smile on my Serenity’s face makes me want to tilt my head up to the moon and howl. From the way she giggles, I have no doubt she can feel my smug pride through our bond.

After I get her settled into bed, her eyes fluttering closed, I make sure to clean her up. I slide into bed and pull my mate against my chest, loving the gentle weight of her. The way she snuggles into me, her breathing going soft and steady, is something I will never take for granted.

I waited too long for moments like these not to soak them up and enjoy them for all they are worth. Everything has been going well, but I also know what looms. I have a sinking feeling those Waning Moon fucks are going to try something at the Alpha meeting.

They have no idea the packs I have at my back, but they will. The number of packs who look down on them, especially now, will become apparent very quickly.

The fact that Todd has been given the Alpha title, which I heard through the pack gossip mill, is only going to make them look weaker than they already did. Part of me can’t wait. I’ll just always worry about my little mate.

Serenity’s training has been going very well and she’s started training with the pack which has made their respect for her grow even more. I’m going to make sure she’s ready, that she feels strong, but I’ll also make sure that no one touches her.

I'll rip off anyone's head who tries to harm her with a smile on my face and a song in my heart. She deserves nothing less.



CHAPTER 14

SERENITY

I feel nauseous and I'm not sure if it's nerves or because I'm pregnant. I should be glowing and feeling excited, which I am, don't get me wrong, but right now I feel like I could throw up on everyone here at the reception to kick off the Alpha meeting. The only thing keeping me standing and even remotely coherent is the grip I have on Tristan.

He *is* definitely glowing. The smug male.

Last week, on a random Tuesday, he took a deep inhale of my scent and started howling. At first, it startled me half to death. When he started babbling about being proud of his 'little swimmers', everything became very clear.

I smacked his shoulder which had his head whipping around, a look of worry on his face. His hands hovered over me like he was afraid even the slightest touch would have me breaking like glass. It was endearing and annoying, but mostly endearing.

"Are you okay? What do you need? Are you hungry? Sick? Pregnant she-wolves get sick right? Morning sickness, I think it's called," he mused.

I stared at him blankly until he got himself under control and then spoke very slowly, my eyebrow arched, "So, I take it from your rambling that I'm pregnant?"

He shouted, "Yes! You're pregnant, my little wolf. We're going to have a pup."

Tristan looked beyond thrilled, so as much as I wanted to mess with him about his delivery of the news, I couldn't do it. I could feel the excitement and the joy coming from him. After talking about it, we decided to tell the immediate family and pack hierarchy but wait until the Luna ceremony to announce it to the pack.

That is, of course, if Tristan can keep it to himself.

His parents and Cora are ecstatic that I'm pregnant. I'll admit, I was a little worried about their reaction because of how young I am. It might be common in packs for females to get pregnant young, but the fact that he was waiting for me for eight years is a factor in how people view us. It's not usually in a negative light, but I've learned to be cautious.

I must not have done a very good job of hiding my worry about their reaction because Emma hugged me tight, one of those great mom hugs, and assured me, "We are thrilled to know we're going to have grandpups. You've made our son so happy and we're so glad you're in our family. We couldn't be prouder or more excited about what comes next for you," she pulled back a little and winked at me, "Luna."

Did I start to bawl? Yes. Did I blame the pregnancy hormones? Of course, but I don't think anyone believed me.

Tristan's fingers flex against my hip where his hand has been since we walked out of the room that we're staying in on the Alpha floor of Golden Summit's packhouse. Everyone at the pack has been very welcoming and I've been a little surprised with how kind the majority of the Alpha, Luna, and Beta couples I've met so far have been. Of course, the drama has not arrived yet and I'm waiting for it, both annoyed that I can't get it out of the way and dreading it.

I feel so much stronger now than I did before and it hasn't been all that long since I left Waning Moon. Love and acceptance do wonders it seems. I was starved of those basic things for so long and now it's something I can count on. I wrap my fingers around my mate's hand where it rests, not to tug it away, but to squeeze and show Tristan how much he means to me.

"Crew," my mate growls when the Alpha of Golden Summit approaches us.

He's the total All-American, golden boy. Every stereotype of the man whose life always goes his way? That's Crew. I can't say he can't back up his success though. Golden Summit is one of the top packs in the country, right alongside Blood Rising.

There's also something else underneath Crew's affable exterior—a cunning and a fierceness required in a good Alpha. It's there if people bother to look. I have a feeling he counts on them not looking deep enough and enjoys surprising people with it when it suits him.

He hasn't found his Luna yet. I don't want to jump to conclusions without knowing, but he doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who decided to wait for their mate. I give Tristan's hand another squeeze, the tingles of our bond dancing over our skin.

“That's a rude way to greet one of your oldest friends, Tris,” Crew pouts and I bite my lip to stop myself from giggling.

“I know you're coming over here to give me shit for something. And I have no doubt you're going to try and flirt with my Luna to piss me off,” my mate grumbles, but I can hear the love he has for his friend in his voice.

Crew looks at me and winks, a huge smile spreading across his face. “Now that you mention it, I really can't believe you would settle for this bruiser when you could upgrade, sweetness,” his voice is a caress, but it does nothing for me.

I shake my head and sass him, “Let me guess, an upgrade like you?”

Crew laughs. “So, you agree, I *would* be an upgrade.” He slaps Tristan on the back and ribs him, “See? It wasn't even that hard.”

Tristan growls and I snuggle into his side, not wanting him to think for a moment that I would ever consider not being with him. Tristan kisses my temple and takes in a deep breath of my scent. I love that I can calm him.

His green eyes are sharp with warning when he looks back at his friend. “You really shouldn't mess with me. You know how long I waited for her.” Crew gives his friend an understanding look before flashing me a genuine smile. Tristan lowers his voice, “Since my sweet little Serenity is

carrying my pup, I really might rip your head off. Friend or no friend.”

I sigh and shake my head at my mate. He sends me an apologetic wave down our bond, but it’s almost overwhelmed by the feeling of pride from my mate because I’m already pregnant with his pup. Damn adorable teddy-wolf Alpha mate.

Crew is grinning from ear to ear, the excitement for his friend clear to see. “Congratulations. I’m sure your parents are thrilled.”

I knew Crew was already made aware of the details around my life in Waning Moon. Tristan told me he was briefed since the meeting was in his territory and there might be a conflict. Okay, might is putting it mildly. I can only hope I can get the blood out of my clothes when Tristan kills anyone who gets too close to me. If it’s someone from Waning Moon? All the better in my mate’s eyes.

“We haven’t said anything to the pack and we’re not making an announcement here yet,” I give my mate a pointed look, but he’s adorably unbothered considering the smug smile he shoots me. Male pride is alive and well in him. “But thank you.”

“No problem. Your secret is safe with me,” Crew promises.

“How’s Tilly doing away at college?” Tristan’s question of his friend makes me smile. I’ve heard a lot about Tilly and Crew, it feels like I already know them both. “How many guards disguised as students do you have on her now?”

Crew barks out a laugh that has some of the Alphas who are close by looking our way. They look stunned by the smile on Tristan’s face, but I’m not. I hope no one thinks he’s gone soft just because I’m at his side now.

They would be wrong, but I have no doubt my mate will prove it if need be.

What gets blood stains out?

I glance down at my dress. I really like this one too. It’ll be such a shame.

“A few,” Crew starts to respond, but then the mood in the room shifts and his posture changes from relaxed to ready to defend.

He’s not the only one. Tristan looks like he’s ready to shift and rip someone’s throat out.

When I look toward the entrance of the hall, I instantly know why. There stands Alpha Thomas, Luna Lori, the Beta couple—both generations are here today, folks—along with Todd who has a she-wolf on his arm who is dressed like she’s ready for the club. She’s gorgeous, but a few inches on her skirt wouldn’t hurt.

“I love drama,” Crew sounds almost delighted as he speaks out of the side of his mouth.

When Todd sees me, he starts to almost drag his... companion in our direction. The rest of the Waning Moon wolves follow in his wake. I have to fight myself not to roll my eyes.

“Well,” Todd sneers when he’s close enough to me, “seems like my former mate is still deluded into believing she’s worthy of being a Luna.”

Something is different about Todd. As I stare at him, my mate’s menacing growls surrounding me and making me smile, it takes a moment for me to pinpoint what it is. He’s the Alpha now and the woman on his arm smells a little like him. Her mark is also very prominent on her neck. I get it, mine is the same and I have no problem showing it off.

Showing off Todd’s mark? I wouldn’t, but to each their own.

“She’s not your former mate,” Tristan grits out through his teeth.

“Since you walked up, I’ve been trying to place who you all are,” Crew’s jovial mask is in place as he speaks, his tone giving an air of I don’t give a fuck. Somehow, I know he really means ‘don’t fuck with me’; it’s entertaining as hell.

Apparently, subtext is not Todd’s strong suit because he puffs his chest up like he’s someone important. “I’m the Alpha

of Waning Moon.”

“Oh,” Crew chirps and waves his hand like Todd is an annoying house fly.

Not far off.

“And this is my Luna, Nia,” Todd’s voice is slimy and filled with expectation. It’s like he’s expecting me to break down or something.

It’s completely ridiculous.

I glance at both Beta couples, and it paints quite a picture. My parents are looking at me with longing. I can clearly see the regret in Samuel’s eyes. Kathy, though, looks just as cruel as she did before. I’m pretty sure she’d try and attack me if we weren’t surrounded by the strongest wolves from across the country.

Hell, she still might. After she changed, it always felt like she embraced being cruel to me. I’m not sure whether it’s true or not, but it wouldn’t surprise me.

“Nia,” Crew says like he just discovered a goldmine in his territory. “I thought you looked familiar.”

The way Crew is looking over the body of the new Luna of Waning Moon is lascivious and hints at them knowing each other. Intimately. I take a sip of my juice and try not to giggle at the entertaining display, especially because Todd is looking more and more pissed by the second.

The rest of the Waning Moon hierarchy look either horrified or bored.

Todd grits out through his teeth, “How do you know Alpa Crew, mate?”

“Um,” Nia’s eyes are huge and it’s clear she doesn’t want to answer, “I met him when he came to my dad’s pack to speak about an alliance, I believe.”

From the smirk on Crew’s face, I’m sure there is more to the story, but I don’t really care. I would hope finding his Luna would have mellowed Todd out, but from the hateful glares he keeps throwing at me that’s not the case.

“Spending time with you was the best part of visiting the Night Walker Pack,” Crew coos. “Do you remember our time together?”

Nia’s face goes scarlet, but she tries to keep herself composed. I hope I don’t have to stand here long because I’m about to lose it and laugh so hard that I’ll have tears streaming down my face.

“So, since you found your *Luna*,” Tristan sneers the word making it obvious what he thinks about the she-wolf in question, “you got handed the title?”

“You’re one to talk,” Todd snipes and my mate does a damn good job at keeping his emotions in check by only shrugging one shoulder casually.

Yeah, right. There is nothing casual about my mate right now. He’s biding his time until he can rip Todd’s throat out. I’m tempted to let him.

But, damn, blood stains.



CHAPTER 15

TRISTAN

The only thing stopping me from lunging at Todd and ripping his head from his body is my mate's touch. Even though I'm filled with red-hot rage at the fucking audacity of the leaders, and I use that term very loosely, in front of me, I'm in awe at the strength of my mate. She never ceases to amaze me.

She has her head held high as confidence pours off her even though we're standing in front of people who made her life hell for a long time. I can only hope that being with me and being shown the true love of a pack has helped her heal from the wounds they inflicted. I can feel her love for me through our bond along with her confidence in my ability to protect her.

It makes me want to spill their blood even more.

"Oh," Nia snaps her fingers as she looks over my mate as if she just realized something, but I have a feeling it's all fake. Just like everything else about the she-wolf who could only hope to be half the Luna my Serenity is without even trying. "You're the piece of trash who used to be in my pack," her voice is sickly sweet, but the smirk on her face shows her true self—it's smarmy and filled with malice.

Serenity laughs, the sound throaty and lyrical at the same time. It makes my cock harden in my slacks even though now is not the time to get turned on by my little mate. I just can't seem to help myself when I'm around her. Can anyone really blame me?

Serenity makes a tsking sound in admonishment. "You're really trying to pretend, Nia," she deliberately doesn't reference the Luna title, "that they didn't give you as much information as they could about me?" She shakes her head like she's speaking to an errant toddler. "I highly doubt that. You're a horrible actress." She leans closer and motions toward Todd,

“Are you even his real mate? Haven’t you heard? You can’t trust people who hire witches to fuck with fate.”

Gasps surround us and they aren’t just coming from the leadership of Waning Moon. I glance around, making sure Serenity is tucked into my side closely before I do. I hadn’t noticed, but many of the other leaders have gravitated closer to us. Is it because they love gossip or because Serenity has already charmed them? I guess it doesn’t really matter which one, but I have a feeling this isn’t going to end well for Waning Moon.

Mentally I’m rubbing my hands together with glee while my wolf licks his chops, waiting for the inevitable conclusion. He’s hoping it ends with the taste of blood.

I hear the murmurs of the crowd around us and can’t help but grin.

Did she say witches?

Who would hire a witch?

Fuck with fate?

Is she saying that they hired someone to mess with a mate bond?

How could they?

Mate bonds are sacred. That’s against everything we stand for.

I’ve never relished being the center of attention more than I have in this moment. Serenity stands tall, well, as tall as she can get, with a regal and indulgent smile on her face. She’s enjoying watching the way Alpha Thomas and Luna Lori are squirming. The older Beta couple won’t look at my little mate and poor little Todd looks confused.

“What are you talking about?” Todd is fuming, his voice taking on a level of irritation an Alpha shouldn’t show when others can judge his weakness, “You were my mate and I rejected you because you’re not worthy of being a Luna. You’re nothing.”

Serenity giggles and looks up at me, merriment in her eyes and a smile on her face that makes it look like she's glowing. She's gorgeous and knowing she's carrying my pup makes the bond between us even stronger. I'm livid at these wolves who thought they could take her from me, but she is exactly the female she is supposed to be, and her lived experiences are part of that.

Crew chuckles and mutters, "I fucking love a good show."

Serenity's eyes harden when she looks back at Todd and her voice is ice cold, "You should ask your parents what they did. The goddess doesn't make mistakes and there's no such thing as second-chance mates."

Todd sputters, but Alpha Thomas steps forward, weakness and a hint of desperation rolling off him. "You're speaking nonsense. You're just ashamed that you were rejected by your mate and now you'll spread your legs for anyone who will have you." He scoffs and motions toward Crew. "You probably fucked him too. Are you trying to get as many Alphas between your legs as you can? You little whore," he accuses, venom lacing his words.

I move so fast I barely register that I've done it, but then my hand is wrapped around Thomas' neck where my claws dig into his skin, blood oozing from the punctures. I start to squeeze as he tries to free himself from my grip. Did he forget that an Alpha with his true Luna at his side is stronger and more determined than they were before?

"You're a weak excuse for an Alpha. This is your only warning, Thomas," I snarl his name, showing my displeasure. "You will not speak to my Luna again. You will not say anything disparaging about her. You will put your tail between your legs and run along because you do not want the might of the Blood Rising pack and our allies to come knocking on your door for what you have done."

Thomas' eyes scan over the other Alphas. I don't have to turn around to know they're pissed, not only on my behalf but on Serenity's as well. Everyone who meets my little mate

knows she has a pure soul, one forged in fire and betrayal, and is stronger than she even realizes.

I throw Thomas down and he scrambles to get up. Lori is there trying to comfort her mate, but he shrugs her off and storms away. I don't take my eyes off him, knowing Mack and Cora will have Serenity's back, until he's gone. I'm only a little surprised when the younger Beta female stalks away behind them, having not said a word even though I could see the vitriol on the tip of her tongue.

"We're so sorry, Serenity," the older Beta female's voice drips with pain and regret. I close the distance to my mate and wrap an arm around her waist, needing to touch her. "You have no idea how much we wish things had been different."

I look into Beta Darwin's eyes and grunt, "Why?"

He looks down, shame twisting his features. "They knew something happened the day you visited. I don't know whether they heard part of the conversation with Alpha Nathan or saw the way you looked at her, but they knew. I was commanded to tell them what transpired. I didn't know anything about a witch, but I suspected when I found out Todd recognized Serenity as his mate and rejected her. I don't know what the plan was, but I had no choice but to go along with treating our daughter horribly."

Serenity sighs as if she's releasing the weight of the world from her shoulders. In a flash she has her parents wrapped up in her arms as she murmurs, "I understand. You couldn't have fought that kind of command. I wish it had been different, but it wasn't. You can't change the past."

Stacy sobs against her daughter's shoulder and Darwin looks defeated as he tries to comfort his mate and his daughter. It would be touching if there weren't so much water under the bridge there. I don't know if my little mate will be able to forgive her parents completely, but I can feel her relief that it didn't really have anything to do with her.

My guilt is overwhelming. If I had kept my mouth shut about her being my mate would things have been different for her? If I had just waited in silence without her parents ever

knowing, then Alpha Thomas wouldn't have been able to command them for the truth. I'm the cause of my mate's pain and it guts me.

Serenity gives her parents a squeeze and then takes a step back. She turns toward me, her eyes blazing as she looks at me. *"You are not the cause of anything, my handsome Alpha,"* she assures me through our mind-link. *"Alpha Thomas made his choices. He involved his son and his pack without thinking of the consequences. That is on them, not you, not me, not even my parents. I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive them, but that's a question for tomorrow."*

I smile at my mate and kiss her lips softly and quickly, needing the connection between us.

"It doesn't matter what happened, it's clear you're still trash," Nia sneers.

Serenity turns toward the irate she-wolf who probably doesn't like the attention being on anyone but her. My little mate moves quickly, her claws coming out as she slashes across Nia's neck. It's not deep enough to kill her, but it certainly proves a point.

"If you were worth my time, you'd be dead right now," my mate's voice is calm and steady, "but you aren't. Run along."

Todd's eyes are blazing with hatred as he collects Nia and ushers her away with Serenity's parents reluctantly following. Some of the leadership around us are chuckling softly while others are laughing outright. I can only beam down at my Luna with pride.

I pick her up and cradle her against my chest, not bothering to say goodnight or goodbye to anyone. We'll be having meetings together over the next few days and I'm sure the events of tonight, including the revelations about how far Waning Moon was willing to go for power, will be discussed at length. If they leave here with any alliances intact, I'll be surprised.

When we make it up to our room, I kick the door closed behind us and make sure it's locked before I stalk to the bed. I

lay my mate down gently, wanting her to know how precious she is to me. I never want her to doubt my love and devotion.

She cups my face in her hands and the sparks between us take my breath away. I undress her slowly, watching her react to my touch. The sweeter vanilla notes of her arousal swirl around us and make my cock start to leak. So many emotions are rioting inside of me—fierce devotion, protectiveness, passion, and love.

“You are my everything, my Luna,” my voice is husky with a hint of my wolf coming through. “You were amazing tonight. Everyone who met you for the first time was entranced by you. You have no idea the power you hold. It’s sexy as hell.”

Serenity smiles up at me, a sweet tilt of her lips that has me needing to taste them. When I press my lips against hers, I intend for it to be brief, but we get caught up in each other, our tongues exploring and twining, until we can’t breathe.

Only when I have her naked underneath me do I stand up next to the bed. Her blue-grey eyes watch me as I undress quickly because the need to feel her skin against mine and those addicting sparks is overwhelming. When I crawl over her body, her legs open invitingly, and her hips cradle me perfectly.

“You’re my home, Tristan,” she murmurs. “I love you.”

I slide inside my mate’s dripping pussy slowly. As much as I want to fuck her hard and fast, I also want to show her how much she means to me by taking it slow, savoring her, and drawing out every second we’re connected. We get lost in each other, her hips coming up to meet my languid strokes, as our hands caress and tease and touch.

When I’m inside my mate I lose track of time. It has no meaning. How could it when I’m caught in a moment of pure bliss and contentment?

As we come together, our names are whispered prayers on our lips. Praise to the Moon Goddess soars from our souls. She brought us together, even though there were obstacles, and we

will never forget that through our connection we have found her blessing.



CHAPTER 16

SERENITY

The full moon is shining down on us as peace settles around the Blood Rising Pack. This is my second full moon in the pack and a special night for another reason. Tonight, I officially became the Luna of my pack. A pack that took me in when I thought I would always be an outcast and has shown me more love and respect than I could have ever dreamed of.

I am one lucky female and as I look up at the moon, whose grace gives us our power, I'm reminded of just how far I've come. It wasn't long ago that I didn't know what life had in store for me. I was afraid and pain was a constant companion. I was always looking over my shoulder and waiting for the next incident that would make me feel like I was less than.

It feels like so long ago now, but it really wasn't. Time has flown since leaving Waning Moon and I have amassed so many happy memories in such a short time. I know my life will be filled with many more and I can't wait to experience it all.

I run a hand over my baby bump, the cheering of Blood Rising echoing around me as I look out over the crowd. There are only smiling faces, my pack members reflecting my joy back at me.

I vow to not take it for granted and to always strive to be the Luna this pack deserves, and they deserve nothing but the best. Tristan is practically bursting with pride and happiness as we stand in front of his pack, his hand wrapped around my waist and resting on my hip. He's probably dying to touch my small bump but is holding himself back.

He has become the most devoted mate and sweetest male. He whispers to our pup every night, telling them about the pack, about how much they're already loved, and how much my mate loves me. If I hadn't already fallen in love with my Alpha, that would have done it for me.

“Blood Rising,” Tristan’s voice booms across the clearing where my Luna ceremony was performed under the light of the full moon. The pack howls at the moon in response and I can’t help but smile. “Thank you for coming to celebrate and welcome our new Luna, my mate Serenity.” More howls ring out and my wolf howls in my mind in chorus with her pack. “I have one more announcement before we start the Moon Run.”

I swear the entire pack takes a collective breath as my heart pounds in my chest.

Everything has been quiet since coming back from the Alpha meeting. It was eye opening to be on that side of things and start to learn about how alliances are made between packs and the tenuous connections between some packs while others are stronger. It was clear that Crew and Tristan are looked upon as being at the top of the hierarchy amongst the packs.

Waning Moon lost a lot of respect throughout the meeting and the opening reception was not the only time they made themselves look weak and incompetent. I decided, considering how things were looking for them, I’m not interested in revenge for what they did to me. It took some convincing to get my mate on the same page, but I can be very persuasive.

It’s amazing what sucking my mate’s cock and waiting until he’s a panting mess can do.

“Luna Serenity is carrying our first pup,” Tristan’s voice is filled with pride as he announces the happy news.

The pack goes wild, their howls blending into a sweet sound that has my heart warming and racing at the same time. The feeling of being right where I’m supposed to be settles over me. Tristan’s large hand cups my small bump as he turns me slightly and makes what I was hiding in my flowy dress very obvious.

Our new Alpha heir will be here soon.

Do you see how Alpha and Luna are glowing? I should have known she’s pregnant.

Alpha and Luna will be wonderful parents to their pup.

Tears well up in my eyes at the murmured response from the crowd that drift to me as they melt with the sound of my pack's excited howls.

I clear my throat and hold up my hand and it doesn't take long for my pack to quiet down. Their faces are expectant, open, and loving as they look at me. When a tear slips down my cheek, I wipe it away quickly, but I'm not worried about anyone viewing it as a weakness.

"I just wanted to take a moment before we lead the Moon Run to thank all of you. You have welcomed me into Blood Rising with open hearts and minds. You have shown me what the love of a pack truly means. I am so proud to be your Luna and I will always do my best to serve our great pack. We are powerful, but strength is not always about power. It is about welcoming those who you are wary of because it's the right thing to do. It is about admitting when you misjudged and making it right." A few she-wolves blush at my statement, but I'm not trying to call anyone out specifically and I hope they know that. "It is about leaning on each other when you are feeling weak and finding solace in the moments that make life worth living. That is where strength lies and the amount of strength I have seen in this pack since I've arrived takes my breath away. I stand not only by our Alpha, my mate," I look up at Tristan to see his green eyes glassy, "but I stand by all of you as well."

I brush another tear away as my wolves howl into the night. I join them a moment later and then Tristan's does as well. Our howls at the moon blend and surge, dip and cascade. I swear I can feel the Moon Goddess wrap her arms around me, around all of us, and give us her blessing.

Tristan opens his mouth to start the Moon Run, but before he can say anything, a pack mind-link comes through. "Eastern border has been breached. Not rogues. They're heading toward the clearing."

Everyone freezes and Tristan holds his hands up, confidence wafting off him as he commands, "Don't panic. Gather the children and start to move them toward the shelters along with the elderly. Work together. We will be fine. I have a

feeling I know who has dared to cross into our territory and they will be taught a lesson.”

Some of the elderly work with the mothers of the pack to get the kids together and move toward the underground shelters. The largest one is under the packhouse, but there is another one closer to the clearing. A few warriors circle them, protecting them as they look around, alert and waiting to fight for their pack.

I’m a little surprised Tristan doesn’t command me to go with them, but when I look at my mate, he simply smirks down at me. I gasp in surprise when he kisses me hard, his tongue invading my mouth and dominating me until I’m weak in the knees and clinging to his shoulders.

I huff and mind-link him, *“Is now really the time for this?”*

Tristan laughs as my wolf purrs, assuring me the time is always right for kissing our mate. The horn-wolf hussy.

“Blood Rising,” Todd’s voice rings out in the clearing causing me to whip my head around to face him, “I have come to expose your farce of a Luna as the whore she is.”

The wolves still gathered, all of them highly trained whether they’re warriors or not, start to growl in warning at the intruding presence. Todd can’t read the room, still, apparently, and smirks at the crowd. When Nia, the former Alpha couple, my parents, and my brother, and Kathy come slinking out of the tree line after Todd my heart sinks.

My parents are looking at me, sadness etched on their faces. Samuel has a similar expression on his face, but Kathy looks victorious. I feel bad for my brother because no one deserves to be mated to someone filled with poison.

I sigh and rest my body against Tristan’s much larger one. “Stupid male,” I mutter, “this is going to end with bloodshed.”

“Yes, little wolf,” Tristan’s voice is deep and gruff with his wolf, “it will.”

Stupid. They could have just stayed in Waning Moon and let it go. I should have known better. I’m sure they’re feeling

the repercussions of people not wanting to associate with their horrible pack.

“You’re interrupting the start of our Moon Run with your ridiculousness,” Tristan’s voice is strong and easily carries over the growls of my pack.

Alpha Thomas scoffs, I’m sure at the idea of the Moon Run but he doesn’t know what he’s missing out on. I feel sorry for him. I feel sorry for the whole lot of them.

Tristan kisses my temple, and something breaks in Todd. “She’s mine,” he roars and shifts into his wolf in a blink of an eye.

I feel hands tug me away from Tristan. I don’t need to look to know it’s Mack, but when I do, I’m a little surprised at the fierce determination on his face. He’s so light all the time and I sometimes forget he shouldn’t be underestimated.

I know he’ll keep me safe while my mate, my Alpha, deals with those who have dared to enter our territory without permission. I look down at the white dress I’m wearing and can only hope that they’re not too close to me when Tristan rips Todd’s head off.



TRISTAN

I shift into my wolf in less than a heartbeat. I'm being spurred on by the need to keep my mate safe along with the rage I feel for this stupid male. Does he really think coming onto my land and then charging at me would be a good idea? I was willing to spare him before, but not anymore.

He doesn't deserve to lead a pack. He brings shame to the title and his pack deserves better.

I leap and land right in front of Todd, cutting him off from getting closer to my Luna and my pup. The growl I let out shakes the ground at our feet causing the eyes of Todd's wolf to widen slightly. Knowing he's reconsidering his actions has me chuffing out a chuckle.

Too fucking late now.

It's clear he wants to slink away, but his pride won't let him. When he leaps at me, I move to the side and turn just in time for my mouth to clamp down on his throat. I slam him down on the ground, not loosening my grip on him.

He whimpers, but it means nothing to me. I look up at the group of interlopers on my land, none of them having moved from their spot at the edge of the clearing. They're looking at us with wide, fearful eyes.

I keep my eyes on them as my teeth pierce Todd's neck and I rip his throat out. Nia drops to her knees and screams, but I don't feel any sympathy for her. Didn't this male just try and declare my Serenity, my Luna, as his? They might be bonded, but he's not worth her tears or her pain.

I shift back into my human form, not giving a single fuck about my nudity, and grip Todd's fur. I drag his body to Serenity and drop it at her feet, presenting my kill to my mate. Serenity grins at me, a malicious thing which has my cock threatening to harden in front of everyone.

She runs her hands over my naked chest and purrs, "My Alpha, my mate."

I kiss her hard, unable to stop myself, Todd's blood soaking the ground beneath our feet and neither of us giving a single fuck about it. When I break from her lips, I growl, "This kill is in your name, my Luna."

I hear some struggling behind us and turn to find the rest of the group being detained by some warriors. Nia has tears streaming down her face and the former Alpha couple look distraught. The young Beta couple are not on the same page, the male looks resigned, and the female looks horrified. The former Beta couple look relieved.

I lead my Luna away from Todd's body and toward those stupid enough to cross our borders. I know our warriors will keep them under control because anything less could result in their Luna being harmed. They don't want that just as much as they don't want to face my wrath if it were to happen.

"My Luna," I coo, and she looks at me, biting her lip to stop herself from smiling, "they came to disparage you so it is your choice what their punishment will be."

Thomas roars and lunges in our direction. I'm faster. I slice his throat with my claw before anyone else even realizes what is happening. I knew he might be the only one who had a chance of breaking free of my warriors because of his former Alpha status. The warriors who were holding him bow their heads in submission. They know their training will be harder and have accepted it.

Lori screams and falls to her knees. She looks up at me and then Serenity with pleading eyes. My gorgeous, compassionate mate steps up to her and gives her the same death as her mate. It is quick and merciful.

Her eyes turn to Nia who raises her chin high. My mate doesn't hesitate, and Nia falls at our feet as well. Only the Beta couples are left, and I have a feeling this is going to be more difficult for my mate to endure. I wrap my arms around her and pull her back against my chest, my hand cradling her small bump and giving her comfort.

"You fucking cunt," Kathy snarls.

Before anyone can react, Samuel turns to her, his voice clear and decisive, “I, Samuel Barlow, Beta of the Waning Moon Pack, reject you, Kathy Harrison, Beta Female of the Waning Moon Pack.”

Kathy screams and clutches her chest as she falls to the ground. I can feel Serenity’s surprise through the bond, and I just hold her a little tighter, offering her comfort and protection as we watch to find out what is going to happen next.

Kathy croaks, “Why?”

“You poisoned me against my sister, my own blood. I can’t be mated to a woman like you a moment longer.” Samuel waves his hand around at the loss which surrounds them, his words dripping with venom, “Even now you want to blame Serenity when she did nothing wrong. We came onto their land. We invaded their home. All because Todd couldn’t let go of something that was never his. Look at this death. Look at it,” he screams.

Kathy looks around her, tears streaming down her face, and we can all see the moment her heart completely breaks. I let out a grunt when Samuel’s hand strikes and he rips Kathy’s throat out.

“Fucking hell,” Mack’s voice is filled with surprise, and I have to say that I agree.

Samuel turns toward us, his eyes filled with sadness and self-hate as he looks at his sister. His eyes flick down to where I’m cradling her baby bump and I see something like hope flicker in the depth of his gaze. “I’m so sorry, Serenity. It’s not enough. It never will be. I should have stood by you. I was never given an Alpha command to treat you a certain way. I simply went along with what others were doing because I wasn’t strong enough to do better.”

Serenity takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I told my pack earlier that strength comes in many forms. Admitting you were wrong and seeking forgiveness shows your strength, Samuel. I might not be ready to forgive you, but I harbor no ill will toward you.”

His shoulders slump as he falls to his knees. His parents follow and the three of them lift their chins, giving us access to their necks. Serenity gasps and looks at me over her shoulder, tears in her eyes. She shakes her head and I know that these will be the only survivors from the Waning Moon who return home tonight.

“Rise,” I bark out the order and the three of them slowly get to their feet, confusion written clearly on their faces. “Waning Moon can not be left without leadership.” I look at Samuel. “You are the Alpha now as the next in line. I have no need to lead your pack and I do not want to.”

Samuel swallows hard, his eyes glowing with intensity as he looks at my mate. His voice is gruff, “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Serenity whispers. “You have a chance to change the pack, to make it better. I have faith that you can do it.”

Samuel nods once and I watch as the weight of the responsibility of Waning Moon settles on his shoulders. “I’ll make you proud, Serenity,” he vows.

Stacy steps forward slightly, her voice hesitant. “I know it won’t happen overnight, but we would like the chance to repair our relationship.”

“I need some time,” Serenity whispers. Stacy nods in understanding. “But, maybe, one day, we can get there.”

“Thank you,” Stacy murmurs softly before she allows Darwin and Samuel to lead her away from the clearing.

They don’t ask about the bodies of their dead leaders.

I hope this can be a fresh start for Waning Moon. I’ll be there to help them if they prove to me that it is. But right now isn’t the time for that, right now it’s time to focus on what I have right here and now in my arms.

“Blood Rising,” I turn and address our pack, my arms still wrapped around my mate who won’t be able to shift for much longer with her pregnancy, “shift and run under the grace of the moon.”

My pack howls, the humans transforming into wolves. I follow and Serenity does as well. Then we run. Together as a pack with the mate I waited for, a mate I would have waited forever for, at my side.



EPILOGUE

MONTHS LATER

TRISTAN

I look down at my precious pup in my arms and a sense of awe and wonder fills me. He's so small, our male, our son, Adam. I look at Serenity and the feeling of awe grows.

My voice is rough with emotion, "You did so amazingly well, my Luna."

"Our pup is perfect," my wolf growls with affection and accomplishment. *"He will be a strong, powerful leader for Blood Rising. He will do great things."*

"I don't care whether he does great things or not. I want him to be happy," I tell my wolf and I swear he gives me a toothy grin in response.

Serenity smiles at me, a smile so big and full of joy that my breath hitches. "We did good. You had a little bit of a hand in making him."

"My part was easy, little mate," my tone is filled with heat as I wink at her and watch as she blushes a pretty shade of pink. "You did the rest, and I couldn't be prouder of you."

I lean over and kiss her forehead. I want to sweep her hair away from her face, but I'm afraid of holding Adam with only one hand right now. I'm so much bigger than him. What if I drop him? What if I hurt him accidentally?

Serenity must feel my anxiety through our bond because she rests her hand on my arm, the sparks between us reassuring me and calming me down. "You're an amazing male, Tristan. You are an Alpha worthy of the pack's respect. You love me with your entire soul. You will be an amazing father."

I close my eyes and let my mate's words wash over me. I soak them up and hope they always remain true.

The pack has settled while my Luna has been pregnant into something happier and more peaceful than it was before when I was waiting. I hadn't realized the toll waiting for my mate had on me and how it impacted the pack, but I can see it now. We have thrived in a way I couldn't have anticipated with our Luna home where she belongs.

I have thrived and I wasn't even aware it was possible.

I knew I would strive everyday to be a male worthy of being mated to my sweet Serenity, but I didn't know how big of a difference having her here with me would make. Sometimes I think about how I almost lost her, how our bond was almost stolen from me, and it makes me wish I could bring the Alphas of Waning Moon back from the dead to kill them again.

Then I look at Serenity and find peace. The almost didn't happen. We were bonded beyond the lies and nefarious plans of those who only wanted power and to cause destruction. Fate stepped in and made sure that I knew where my mate was when it didn't have to. That knowledge allowed me to find strength in waiting for her to be of age.

I am a better wolf, a better mate, a better Alpha, because of it. We are worthy of her, and she is our reward.

Blood Rising isn't the only pack that has settled. Waning Moon is doing much better and starting to find its footing under Samuel's leadership. He doesn't have a Luna at his side, but he is determined to do right by his pack.

He has people he can trust in leadership roles and has proven that the mistakes of his past will not find footing in his future or in the future of Waning Moon. It's made me proud to see and I've been happy to help him however I can.

Serenity hasn't fully forgiven Samuel or their parents, but she's trying, and they have started to slowly repair their relationship. No one is trying to rush her, and everyone understands that years of abuse can't be forgotten or ignored simply because it would be easier, no matter why the abuse occurred.

A knock on the door has me turning that way and I'm not the least bit surprised to see Mom's head pop into the room, a big smile on her face. She whispers, "Can we come in?"

I glance at Serenity whose lips are pulled up in an indulgent smile, even though she looks a little tired. She gives me a nod and it warms my heart. She has a family now; one she's embraced fully.

"Of course, Mom, come on in."

Mom, Dad, Cora, and Mack come rushing into the room with Samuel, Stacy, and Darwin close behind them. Serenity was the one who insisted I call them when she went into labor. She also made sure to tell me they were welcome to come and be here to meet our son.

If it means Adam is surrounded by even more love, then I won't complain. I'll keep my eye on Serenity's family, just in case, but their remorse and guilt are clear to anyone who cares to look.

I clear my throat and stand next to Serenity's bed, her hand resting on our son's head where he's safe in my arms. "I am happy to introduce the next Alpha of Blood Rising and our son, Adam Nathan Hart."

Our family's love is explosive as it fills the room and I swear I see tears in my dad's eyes. I walk straight over to my father, the man who showed me what it means to be an Alpha and a mate, who never wavered when I told him I was going to wait for Serenity. As I carefully place his grandpup in his arms, he swallows hard.

"He's perfect," my father breathes as Mom hovers, about a second away from snatching him away. Gently, of course.

I look back at my mate and grin. "*He is perfect, little wolf,*" I link her and the smile she gives me is pure magic under the moon.

"*I love you,*" she links back before her eyes turn toward our family, all of them surrounding Dad and cooing over our son.

Waiting for Serenity was the best decision I've ever made in my life. It led me to here and this is a moment to cherish.

**Want more Serenity and Tristan?
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

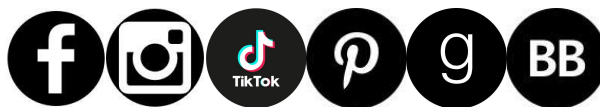


Ember Davis loves alpha heroes with a range of emotions, but a strong sense of how to take care of their women. She loves her heroines from all walks of life, just like her heroes, and she wants them to be real and relatable. Her heroines tend to be sassy, opinionated and smart.

Ember is a stay-at-home mom of two who recently refound her love of books and all things romance and is so glad that she did. She's always been creative but writing and creating stories that she would love to read satisfies dreams she had as a little girl. She loves butterflies, the color purple and enjoying time with her family.

Psst...it's totally a pen name, but everything above is 100% true.

If you enjoyed this book, or even if you didn't, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review and/or a star rating on Amazon! This is a whole new world for me so any feedback you're open to giving, I'd love to have.



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[Following His North Star \(Suburban Outcasts Book 4\)](#),
[All Bark, No Bite \(Love at First Bark Series\)*](#),
[Double Dog Dare \(Lassoed in Love Series\)*](#),
[Melinda's Manster \(Make A Manster Series\)*](#),
[Shipwrecked Curves \(Man of the Month Club Christmas in July\)*](#)

White Picket Fence Records:

[Girl Dad's a Rising Star \(Girl Dad Series\)*](#),
[When We Woke Up \(After I Do Series\)*](#),
[Their Songbird \(Raining Love Series\)*](#),
[Summer Muse \(Mountain Ridge Resort Series\)*](#),
[Getting Back His Rhythm \(Rock My World Series\)*](#),
[Mile High Rock Star \(Mile High Love Series\)*](#)

[Higgins Security Series:](#)

[Securing His Family \(Higgins Security Book 1\)](#),
[Claiming His Family \(Higgins Security Book 2\)](#),
[Earning His Family \(Higgins Security Book 3\)](#),
[Forever His Family \(Higgins Security Book 4\)](#),
[Built Dad Bod Tough \(Dad Bod Series - Men Built For Comfort\)*](#),
[Revealing His Family \(Higgins Security Book 5\)](#),
[Flames and Flowers**](#),
[Beads on a Bombshell \(World's Greatest Party Series\)*](#),
[Finding Luck Again \(Get Lucky Series\)*](#),
[After the Rain \(Man of the Month Club\)*](#),
[Securing His Heart \(Higgins Security Book 6\)](#)

[Rock & Crank \(Dirty Sinners Series\)*](#)
[Letters From Hometown USA \(Loving My Soldier Series\)*](#)
[Scarred Beginnings \(Heart of a Wounded Hero Series\)*](#)
[Another Notch on the Bartop \(Notchin' Boots Series\)*](#)
[Popping Her Hood \(Good With His Hands Series\)*](#)

[Sweetwater Valley Series:](#)

[Unexpected Love \(Sweetwater Valley Book 1\)](#)
[Measured Love \(Sweetwater Valley Book 2\)](#)
[Ask Me to Stay \(In Praise of Older Women\)*](#)
[Getting Back His Rhythm \(Rock My World Series\)*](#)
[Burning Love \(Cinnamon Roll Saviors Series\)*](#)
[Celebrated Love \(A Country Christmas Series\)*](#)

[Wanderlust Series:](#)

[Lost Lust \(Wanderlust Book 1\)](#)

[Ellie's Stranger Shoot Series:](#)

[Off Limits \(Stranger Shoot Book 1\)](#)
[First Look \(Stranger Shoot Book 2\)](#)
[Hate to Love You \(Stranger Shoot Book 3\)](#)
[Blast From the Past \(Stranger Shoot Book 4\)](#)
[Timeless Connection \(Stranger Shoot Book 5\)](#)
[Less Than Strangers \(Stranger Shoot Book 6\)](#)
[Series Collection \(Novellas 1-6\)](#)
[Bred Under Contract \(Baby Breeder Series\)*](#)

J&J Construction:

[Grating on the Boss \(The Boss Series\)*](#)

[Dad Bod Foreman \(Dad Bod 2.0: Large And In Charge\)*](#)

[Off Field Drama \(Class in Session Series\)*](#)

[Changing Grades \(Back In The Day Series\)*](#)

Denver Mustangs Series:

[Flag on the Play \(Gridiron Love Series\)*](#)

Sullivan Protection Series:

[Room Three: They Like to Bite \(Club Sin Series\)*](#)

[Bites in Paradise \(Temptation in Paradise Series\)*](#)

[The Way Her SEAL Cares \(Real Hot SEAL Series\)*](#)

[Never Going to Care \(Sullivan Protection Book 1\)](#)

[The Puck Stops Here \(New York Storm Hockey Series\)*](#)

[Fudge Around and Find Out \(Merry Fudgin' Christmas Series\)*](#)

[Tied Up in Tinsel \(XXXmas Series\)*](#)

[Two Pink Lines for Christmas \(The Naughty List Series\)*](#)

Vibrant Ink Series:

[His Wild Rebel \(May-December Romance Series\)*](#)

Broken Road, Texas Series:

[Broken Road Wishes \(Broken Road Texas Series\)](#)

[Dreams From Broken Road \(Everything's Bigger in Texas Series\)*](#)

Jasper Ridge Series:

[Mail Order Bride for the Scrooge \(Mistletoe Love Series\)*](#)

Screaming Woods:

[Knot Running From Fate \(Monster Between the Sheets Series\)*](#)

[Stalking From the Shadows \(Monster Between the Sheets: Season 2\)*](#)

[Monsters In The Woods](#)

Guidice Crime Family Series:

[Flames and Flowers**](#)

[Flowers and Moonlight \(Mardi Gras Menage Series\)*](#)

[Room Five: What You Can't See \(Club Sin: New Orleans Session 1\)*](#)

[Room Eight: Cinched Up Tight \(Club Sin: New Orleans Session 2\)*](#)

Devil's Saints Motorcycle Club:

New Orleans Chapter:

[Devil's Return \(Devil's Saints Motorcycle Club: New Orleans Chapter Book 1\)](#)

[New Tune, Old Vinyl \(Man of the Month Club '24 - Magnolia Ridge\)*](#)

Seattle Chapter:

[Biker \(KNK Matchmaking Agency Series\)*](#)

[Falling Feathers \(Dark and Twisted Tales Series\)*](#)

[Robbing From Mistletoe \(Mistletoe Creek Series\)*](#)

[Lennon \(Wicked Temptation Key Party Series\)*](#)

Agosti Crime Family Series:

[Where Roses Lay \(Criminal Desires Series\)*](#)

Room Six: Breathlessly Devoted to Them (Club Sin: Chicago Series, Session 1)*

Lilies and Lies (Endless Obsession Series)*

Plucking His Daisy (The Auction Series)*

The Taste of Temperance (Vices & Virtues Series)*

Room Four: Wrong Guys, Right Praise (Club Sin: Chicago Series, Session 2)*

Blossom in Shadows (Dark Reign Series)*

King of Pain and Petals (Short Kings Series)*

Possessing Her Petals (Dark Hearts Mafia Series)*

Vows & Vendettas Mafia Anthology

McCarthy Irish Mob Series:

Sweet Ruin (Sweet but Twisted Christmas)*

Orlov Bratva Series:

Snowed In With the Bratva Boss (Snowed In Series)*

Gilded Thorn (Dark Reign Series)*

Club Sin: Chicago Series:

Room Six: Breathlessly Devoted to Them (Club Sin: Chicago Series, Session 1)*

Room Four: Wrong Guys, Right Praise (Club Sin: Chicago Series, Session 2)*

Room Eighteen: My Pain, Their Pleasure (Club Sin: Chicago Series, Session 2)*

Chicago Collection

Other PNR Titles:

Bonded Beyond Lies (Fighting Fate Series)*

[Bonded Beyond Belief \(Mated to the Monster Series\)*](#)

*Book part of a multi-author series. May not be part of series it is listed under expressly but contains a character within that series.

**Companion to Beads on a Bombshell. May not be part of series it is listed under expressly but contains a character within that series.