



LYCAN'S MATE
Denied

LYCAN'S MATE BOOK 2

A.R. MCKINNON

Lycan's Mate: Lycan's Mate Denied

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EPILOGUE

Lycan's Mate: Book 2
LYCAN'S MATE DENIED

A.R. McKinnon

Dedication

For Reba for more reasons than I could ever list here ... Pinch*

Acknowledgment

This one was a long time coming.

To all my readers who have been waiting for me to revisit the Lycan packs this one is for you. Thank you for continuing to support my dreams.

CHAPTER ONE

Ostara 2016

Kelly watched the pack celebration, fighting the sweeping sense of sadness that wrapped around her. She watched Sara hand her son to one of his Fathers and effortlessly shift forms. It was the effortless part that caused a pang of envy. Shifting wasn't as easy for Kelly as it had once been, and she was a naturally born lycan. Until recently Sara had been a full-blooded human, her conversion to one of their species was practically unheard of, and still caused a buzz within the pack.

Kelly caught the scent of the reason for her sadness. Ryan. Alpha of the Coldridge pack, and her mate. He walked among them, his power rolling off him in waves. She watched the unmated females devour him with their hungry looks. Jealousy and anger simmered in her belly, as he ate up the attention, they shamelessly lavished upon him.

He was an extremely attractive man; his dark hair curled in waves, though he tried to keep the curls tamed by keeping his hair short. He had a strong jawline and wide sensual mouth that set butterflies loose in her belly when he smiled. She had fantasized about kissing that mouth on several occasions, not that she'd admit that out loud.

She'd only ever seen one person with eyes like his. They were steel gray with glints that looked like sterling silver running in their depths. Flecks of charcoal black swirled there too, melting into the black pupil. Only Ryan's twin brother had the same eyes. Although Jace's were warm and more inviting than Ryan's were. *Could be because he didn't reject you the way Ryan did.* That mental reminder helped push back the desire that watching him had begun to stir to life. Kelly would be mortified if the pack smelled her lust for the alpha. She refused to fawn over him, falling all over herself in a bid for his attention the way that other women of the pack did.

She moved away from the crowd blending into the shadows as Ryan addressed the pack welcoming the spring and offering thanks for the new birth and renewal that would strengthen them in the coming year. She didn't have the energy to socialize with anyone in the pack.

The women often sought her out, making Kelly wonder if it was her link to Ryan that they sensed, especially given that many of them were older than she was. That was the unique thing about shifters. Power was more respected than age, and power, or lack of it, was difficult to hide from other lycans.

Feeling like an outsider and unable to hide her pain, Kelly turned and left the clearing, instead of shifting with the pack and going for the group run and hunt.

Present Day

Kelly pulled herself out of the memories of that Ostara celebration. They still hurt but had been muted by the passage of time.

This year's celebration was similar if more subdued than the one she'd been remembering. Sara's baby, Adian, had been born that year and he'd been a true representation of everything they had been celebrating. His birth had brought joy to the pack, but he was the last baby born that year.

Since then, many women of the pack had suffered miscarriages, and even a few stillbirths, making it feel as though the Goddess they paid tribute to had abandoned the pack. Kelly knew it weighed heavily on Ryan.

He was the reason she had devoted her education and work to finding an answer for their growing fertility problems.

Even after all this time his rejection still stung, yet she felt compelled to try to ease his burden. She needed a purpose, something to help her maintain some semblance of sanity when the pain of his refusal became too great, and the jealousy too bitter. It was naive, but she clung to the idea of helping him that way, since he didn't seem to want her any other way.

She lifted a hand to wipe away the single tear that escaped and rolled down her cheek. Her hand shook.

What had started as fine tremor years ago had developed into

something more difficult to hide. Kelly clutched at her wrist, squeezing tight as she waited for the twitching to stop.

It was her proximity to Ryan. Her hormones refused to accept the fact that her mate didn't want her. Even her mind still struggled with it some days. Her wolf gave a low whine. Kelly pushed her feelings deeper, trying to ignore the searing pain that burned in her belly.

RYAN DRANK FROM the blessing cup before handing it to Byron, his beta, scanning the group gathered in the clearing again. The pack had a lot to be thankful for this full moon. Their feud with the Yellow Claw pack had died out since the Yellow Claw's had a change in their leadership. The new Alpha, Julian, seemed to be a calmer, even-keeled leader. With his progressive views he appeared to be helping the rest of the Yellow Claw pack work with the other lycan groups in their community, but it was a decades-long fight and Ryan knew change wouldn't come instantly. The council was monitoring the situation carefully and he could only hope that the tentative peace that he and Julian were aiming for would last.

It helped that the Elders council they now had was more balanced and delivered fairer rulings across the board where the previous members had formed side alliances and voted according to those backroom deals, rather than doing what was best for the packs. That antiquated bullshit had stopped

since his brother won his seat on the council.

Jace wasn't technically an elder, but he'd proved he was powerful enough to hold a seat with them. Since that time, they were shifting how they were doing things, with the elders taking more of a back seat advisory role in most matters. They still oversaw the challenges for dominance and pack ranking and they upheld the rules of the lycan community, but they were less involved in the day-to-day decision making, giving each pack more autonomy.

The shakeup in power had a very positive impact for Ryan. It allowed his brother to come home and Ryan was more grateful than he could express. Jace challenging for a spot on the council had taken the two of them out of direct competition with each other for the spot of pack alpha. If Jace hadn't won the seat, he would have been forced to stay away from the pack, to fight for the alpha position, or to accept a lower status so that Ryan could keep his leadership.

He looked around the clearing again. At first glance, nothing seemed wrong within the pack, but he couldn't shake off the feeling that clung to him like a second skin. It made his wolf pace like a caged animal inside him and left the human side of him feeling drained and wary.

He left Byron to oversee the rest of the celebration, unable to face the pack for a moment longer. He was itching to fight or fuck. Fighting wouldn't

do at an occasion like this. It was supposed to be a celebration filled with joy. And fucking? Well, he was tired of having female after female thrown at his feet in the hopes that they would make a strong political match among the packs. Each time he considered a new woman for his mate, his wolf asserted his dominance and rejected them.

At first, Ryan thought it was because he missed Hayley, but now he wasn't certain. The scent of the woman he'd lived with, and thought he'd mated now irritated his wolf. Ryan cleaned out his home trying to appease the wolf but now the house just seemed empty, and his wolf wasn't any happier.

He needed to get laid. It had been years since Hayley left him and although many thought he was getting more than his fair share of women now that she was gone, it couldn't be farther from the truth. The packs were periodically sending their eligible women to test their compatibility, but the truth was he'd barely touched a woman since Kelly had left. It made having the high sex drive of a lycan a pain in the ass and left him in a perpetually bad mood.

Running his hands through his hair, Ryan cursed the heavy mantle he wore as the Alpha to the oldest and largest pack in North America. He wished that things could be different, that he wasn't solely responsible for this pack. The job of Alpha didn't work like that though. He was responsible. The

success or failure of the pack rested solely on his shoulders.

Needing to relieve the tension coursing through him he stripped off his clothing and took himself in hand in a punishing grip trying to find a measure of peace.

CHAPTER TWO

Once home she curled up in bed, pulling the comforter around her shoulders. She hated the big pack gatherings, though that hadn't always been the case. Growing up she'd loved them. They were like big parties once the ceremony and tradition of why they were gathering had been dealt with and was out of the way.

Everyone brought food and drinks with them, like a big potluck block party, and the festivities carried on long into the night. Kelly enjoyed the energy of the group, but that had changed when Ryan and Hayley came as a couple. The two had behaved like the alpha pair, but Hayley wasn't Ryan's mate and therefore she wasn't the alpha. Kelly was his mate and as the years went by the gatherings served as a reminder of Ryan's refusal of her and their bond. Kelly wasn't sure what was worse, Ryan's actions, or the rejection of the pack that had followed.

The lycan community was built on power and instinct and although they were also human, it was difficult for a lycan to ignore their nature. As if they sensed Ryan's denial of her on a subconscious level, the pack lost trust in her and began pulling away from her until she was nothing more than background noise in the group, easily overlooked and forgotten. Their

reaction made her cold and bitter. Now she spent as little time with them as she could, without causing issues for her parents who were still immersed in pack life and the politics that went along with it.

They were the only ones who didn't treat her that differently, but even they seemed to sense something was wrong. Kelly suspected it was their family bond that kept them from following through on the urge to distance themselves from her as most of the others had.

Kelly brushed away the single tear that slid down her cheek as she squeezed her eyes shut.

Her sadness lingered when she woke the next morning, but it wasn't as consuming as it had been the day before. Kelly pushed it away from her thoughts, choosing to focus on the day ahead instead of wallowing in her melancholy mood. It was a hard task to achieve while she battled with the lethargy that seemed to be a constant companion.

All she wanted to do was shut herself away from the rest of the world and sleep, but she refused to give in to that urge. She pulled herself out of bed and brewed a pot of coffee. While she was waiting for that to finish, she began pouring over her research into the declining birth rates in the pack.

Kelly wanted to compare the birth rates in the Coldridge Pack to the

rates in the other packs, as well as their decline but she didn't have access to their records. It made it nearly impossible to spot trends or narrow down a timeframe for when the decline had begun.

Gaining access to the records would mean requesting permission for them from Ryan and she felt too raw from the day before to do that yet. She could ask Jace. The council would have records from the other packs. If she went through Jace she wouldn't have to see Ryan at all. That felt like the coward's way out though, and Kelly wasn't a coward.

Sometimes she wished that Ryan would man up and send her away since he didn't seem to want her but that was self-preservation, not cowardice.

She made a notation about wanting to check the rates among the other packs so that she wouldn't forget and continued reading. She'd been at it for over an hour and her eyes were starting to burn and water as she poured over the fine print. Needing a break, she stood and stretched, cringing when her muscles ached and popped.

Kelly sighed, it had been so long since she felt healthy and well that she could barely remember what it was like. Her stomach rumbled, deciding that she'd done enough research for the morning and that it was time to eat. She grabbed her coat and headed to Crossings. It was one of the only restaurants in their small town. With a population of just over fifteen hundred

people, it was hard to go anywhere in Fortsford and not see someone you knew.

The fact that the pack made up about three percent of the town's population didn't help either. Kelly pulled her scarf tighter around her neck seeking shelter from the cold wind. They might have had their Ostara celebration welcoming spring the night before, but winter still had a firm foothold in the area and wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

Normally Lycans didn't feel the cold the way humans did, but Kelly shivered as the wind picked up. She was thankful that Crossings wasn't far from her house, because by the time she'd made the ten-minute walk she felt frozen.

She grabbed a table in the corner, knowing that sitting there she'd blend into her surroundings better. She ordered a soup to help her warm-up and a BLT then settled into the booth to wait.

"All the leaders are sending candidates. Apparently, since things didn't work out with Hayley it's open season on Ryan." The conversation from the table behind hers caught Kelly's attention and was like a hot lance through her heart. Unable to tune out the rest of the conversation as the two women behind her laughed Kelly threw down money for her meal and rushed out of the restaurant.

Ignoring the cold Kelly made her way to the lake. It was her favorite

place in their community. The majestic blue-green water never failed to soothe her during times of stress. This early in the season the water was still frozen and not even the serene atmosphere could bring her any solace.

It had been horrible watching him date Hayley and she wasn't sure that she could watch the parade of women the other packs would send through the Coldridge territory. She couldn't stand the thought that he might date one of them seriously.

He would have to send her away then. Even he wouldn't be that cruel. Would he?

RYAN TRIED TO summon the excitement he believed he should feel at the prospect of finding his mate. It was an old tradition for the packs to send their most powerful eligible women to unmated alphas and his brother had warned him of the council's plans, but he wasn't excited.

Just the thought of the whole process made him angry. He wouldn't find his mate this way. He wasn't sure how he knew he wouldn't, but he was sure that it would be a futile and painful effort.

Lycans were a highly sexualized race often ruled by their baser instincts and desires, but the prospect of a meat market of women wanting to bed him made his wolf even more forlorn for his mate.

“Jace call it off. Tell the council I'll find my mate on my terms. I

don't need them to play matchmaker.”

“What can it hurt? You've been moping around and closed off since Hayley mated. If you retreat into yourself any further I'm not sure you'll be fit to lead the pack. We need you strong mentally and physically brother.”

Ryan wouldn't tell him, but he was more closed off since Jace mated with Sara not since Hayley mated. It was just too difficult to share such a close bond with his twin brother now that he was able to sense his joy since finding both of his mates. Ryan hated to admit it but he was jealous of Jace for finding what Ryan wanted so badly for himself.

Jace was a rarity within their pack having mated in a triad with both a man and woman. Ryan hadn't heard of someone being able to have multiple mates, but their trio seemed to work and Jace was happier than Ryan could remember ever seeing him before.

“I'm serious Jace, tell them to call it off. I don't need a bunch of strange women fawning all over me. It's bad enough that our women behave that way when they don't think I realize it. React the wrong way to a stranger and it could cause a war with the packs and things are just starting to calm down between us and the Yellow Claw pack. We don't need to go looking for trouble.”

Ryan ended their call his anger rising as he realized that he hadn't gotten through to his brother at all. The council would send potential mates

whether he liked it or not. He just hoped that he could keep his wolf in check enough to keep the peace.

CHAPTER THREE

“You need to get out more. Have some fun.” Her mother eyed her with a critical gaze. “You’ve lost weight are you eating enough?” she looked pointedly at the mess of papers spread over the kitchen table. When she moved forward to start cleaning up the stacks Kelly held out a restraining hand.

“Don’t. You’ll mess up my system,” she cautioned.

“Your system is chaos. You need to be taking better care of yourself Kelly. You’re not a child anymore, and your father and I can’t be there to watch you every moment.”

Kelly felt her ire rise. Her mother meant well, but the last thing Kelly wanted or needed was a lecture. “You’re right Mom I am an adult; I have been for a while now and I don’t need you to tell me how to run my life.” She tried to keep the anger out of her tone but judging from her mother’s stern look it came through anyway.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to snap at you,” Kelly sighed. “I’m just tired. I’ve been busy.” She waved a hand in the direction of the table at the piles of research and notes.

“You work too hard honey. I’m worried about you. I’m sure if you

spoke to Ryan He'd -"

"He needs an answer, Mom." Kelly cut her mom off not wanting to hear how Ryan would accommodate her if she would just tell him what she needed.

"Yes, but I'm sure he doesn't expect you to find one single-handed. He does have other people working on it. You never liked science and all this research growing up." Her mother waved a hand towards the jumble of research. "You wanted to be an artist. What happened to that creativity?"

Kelly felt a pang of longing. She had loved painting and drawing as a teen and even into her twenties but lately, she didn't find joy in it. She couldn't explain that to her mother though. Ellen Redding would never understand that part of her daughter had been changed when she was only fifteen and that it was far too late to do anything about it now.

Kelly pushed her bangs off her forehead trying to hold in her irritation "This is more important." She pressed her lips together until they formed a tight line sealing in anything else that she would have said.

"Nothing is more important than your happiness, Kelly. I swear sometimes I think you believe Ryan is a monster. He's alpha honey and part of that role means caring for his pack members." She nodded not trusting her voice while her mother put away the last of the groceries that she'd brought over.

Kelly wanted to cry long after her mother had left. Ryan wasn't a monster. He was a good alpha he had been since he'd taken over for his dad. He ruled fairly and except for the declining birth rates the pack had prospered under this leadership. He just wasn't a good alpha to her.

Kelly Age 15

A few of her older friends had tried to tell her what the heat was like. Even with their warnings, she wasn't prepared for the searing arousal that ripped through her, making her want to rub against anything that she could find. She hadn't been prepared for the onslaught of desire and sudden awareness of the opposite sex in a way that she hadn't experienced before.

Unaware of the effect that her pheromones would have on available males of the pack, Kelly wandered towards the ritual clearing, drawn there by a rich masculine scent. She paused at the edge of the familiar grove her heart beating heavily.

"Looks like the nursery let out early," her cousin Carl sneered. She ignored him; his jibe didn't bother her. They'd never gotten along, and he'd always been immature for his age, but Ryan's reaction cut her to the core. His nostrils flared as if breathing in her scent, then his gaze turned cold as his eyes narrowed.

"Where's your babysitter?" Carl asked, laughing as if he'd told the funniest joke, while looking to Ryan for approval hero-worship shining in his

gaze.

Her hormones surged, making anger crest inside of her like a tidal wave. Her wolf clamored to be released so that she could exact retribution on her cousin. Her need to be seen as strong and confident in front of Ryan was suddenly paramount.

“Get out of here!” Ryan spat the words at her his teeth clenched tight.

It made her pause as the rich scent coming from him intensified. He was an alpha. Currently training to lead their pack since his father’s accident the month before, an illegal trap on their land had snapped his ankle and even with their advanced healing abilities, he would never be as strong as he once was. He had chosen to step down, his powers were shifting to Ryan his eldest son.

“Leave!” Ryan’s shout reverberated in the air around her and she shrank back in fear. “Now!” Kelly didn’t wait for him to tell her again, instead she turned and ran as quickly as her legs could carry her.

By the time she reached home, her chest was heaving with the exertion and the heat was riding her hard. Kelly ran up to her room and slammed the door before throwing herself across the bed and sobbing into her pillow.

Kelly pulled herself out of the painful memories. She was twenty-seven now. No longer the naive kid she’d been over a decade before. The

memory was a harsh reminder that her heat cycle would be coming again soon.

She dreaded the four times a year she went into heat. The other months she had a regular menstrual cycle like any human woman would, but four times a year her Lycan physiology demanded that she try to breed.

Thankfully their species had developed heat suppression drugs which were now regularly taken until the age of at least eighteen by most Lycan females. Kelly shuddered thinking about what it would have been like for females before the suppression drugs were created.

The drugs were only meant to be taken for a few years until the female had reached sexual maturity. Usually by then she'd found a mate, or at the very least a partner to ride out her heat cycles with. It was rare that mates were found so young, and most Lycans didn't wait to find their mate before their first sexual experience.

Kelly hadn't realized it at the time, but the reason Ryan had smelled so good to her that day was that they were mates. Her wolf had known it instantly and she'd been paying for it ever since.

CHAPTER FOUR

The first of his potential mates was due to arrive today; her name was Dawnecia, and she was the eldest daughter of the beta for the Sourwind pack. Ryan scoffed at the thought. The oldest daughter what a joke. At eighteen she was a baby. Hell, he was twice her age! What could they possibly have in common?

Every instinct he possessed screamed at him to send her away, but he couldn't risk offending her father or the alpha of her pack. So, with a sense of foreboding, he sent his beta to pick her up.

“You'd better be wearing a cup when you meet this chick Rye.”

Byron sent the message through their mental connection, along with an impression of the woman. Ryan groaned and drummed his fingers on the tabletop at Crossings. He had arranged to meet her here rather than in private, but now with the curious stares he was receiving he was wondering if it was a good idea. He leashed his power more tightly so that it wasn't felt by those around him.

The bell over the door chimed. Byron walked in with Dawnecia in tow. She was attractive he wouldn't deny that, but she wasn't his mate, and he didn't need time alone with her to figure that out.

She was tall and sleek. All dressed in black she flung her power out around her announcing to everyone that she was a badass. It was loud and rubbed several of the Lycans she passed the wrong way. It was even irritating to Ryan, and he was a full-fledged alpha comfortable with his power and status.

He stood when they approached the table and offered Dawnecia his hand in greeting. She took it and Ryan used that opportunity to push her power back.

When her eyes flared with an intensified interest, he realized that the display might have been a bad idea. She took a seat across from him and the waitress brought them menus.

“You might consider toning down the theatrics.” He cautioned, knowing that he sounded more like a parental figure than a potential lover.

“Theatrics?” the word rolled off her tongue with a slightly gruff cadence and she arched a brow in question.

“Fortsford isn’t just our home.” He warned and was pleased when she pulled back a bit. There were very few humans who were privy to their existence and although the town was small, and the pack was friendly with the locals Ryan didn’t want their secrets spilled everywhere.

She lowered her gaze slightly, deferring to him. It satisfied his wolf, but he was still leery of the desire that she barely held in check.

“I think you know we aren’t well matched.” He said it politely, but his tone was still firm.

“You can’t know for sure just from a public meeting. I think we should test our compatibility the old-fashioned way.” She suggested in a throaty, almost sexual purr – if wolves could be accused of such a thing. As she said it, she slid her fingers up his forearm in a move designed to be enticing.

Before he could pull back or say anything there was a blade sticking in the tabletop less than an inch from Dawnecia’s hand. Shocked, Ryan turned at the low menacing growl.

“Kelly, what the hell?” He was glad he’d selected a booth in the back and that the restaurant was nearly empty. No one seemed to have noticed Kelly’s outburst. “Byron, get her out of here!” He issued the harsh command trying to keep the two women from coming to blows as he felt Dawnecia’s anger flare.

Byron grabbed Kelly by the upper arms essentially wrapping her in a bear hug from behind to pull her away from the booth. She cringed and hissed as if his touch was painful. Ryan bit back on the growl that rumbled in his throat, nearly ordering the other man to let her go, but when Dawnecia moved as if to stand and challenge Kelly he yelled again.

“Now, Byron! Get her out of here now!” Judging by the way she was

behaving Ryan expected that Byron would have to physically remove Kelly from the restaurant. He was surprised when she cast him a sad pain-filled look before it was quickly masked, she shrugged off Byron's hold before she turned and left.

His wolf protested, and Ryan had to exert control over that part of him that warned he'd backed the wrong woman. His wolf wanted to follow Kelly out of the building. He watched her leave through the big plate glass window. She huddled in on herself when the wind battered her but he forced himself to stay to make sure that Dawnecia was alright.

"What kind of pack are you running here?" she growled, and Ryan could see the gleam of Dawnecia's wolf in her eyes straining at the surface of her flesh insistent upon freedom.

"You will maintain control here." He practically barked the order at her, using his influence as an alpha he pushed at her, forcing her to swallow the energy that would bring her wolf forward, preventing her from being able to change.

"I demand that bitch is punished."

"You demand? Let's not forget you're in my territory. You don't get to make demands. I decide who is punished."

She stared back at him like an insolent child, and Ryan was glad they weren't mates because Dawnecia had a lot of growing up to do.

KELLY MOVED TO the lake, once again seeking solace. Her body felt heavy and weak. Pain and sorrow overwhelmed her system. The cold wind chilled the tears she had shed so that they crystalized on her cheeks.

The way that Ryan had scolded her had sent pain searing deep into her soul, wounding her in a way she hadn't even realized was possible. He'd dismissed her into Byron's care, allowing the other man to put his hands on her while he tended to that woman.

It was stupid of her to challenge the other woman, but Kelly had overheard her suggest that she and Ryan test their mating compatibility and fury had blinded her.

She hadn't meant to attack the other woman, but she hadn't been able to fight her instincts to defend her claim as Ryan's mate. Kelly had moved the blade, so the knife lodged in the table and not flesh, but seeing the woman's hands on Ryan, knowing that he was still there with her consoling her made Kelly wish she hadn't changed her aim.

What was the point though? Ryan looked right through her. It was as if he didn't see her. He refused to acknowledge her as more than a minor member of his pack and it was tearing at her insides.

Ignoring the cold bite in the air she pulled her clothes off and called her wolf forward. The image of her shifter side came to her mind's-eye sluggish, almost lethargic, her sides heaving as she took a deep breath. The

change moved through Kelly at a slow agonizing pace, her muscles popping and bones snapping as they shifted to assume the form of her lycan counterpart.

What should have taken only moments felt like it went on forever. When it was over she wanted to run, to have the scents of the night in her nose, but the change was too tiring and she was too sad.

She laid her head on her paws. In her wolf form, the feeling of rejection was more acute. It was harder to process as an animal than it was to understand when she was in human form. Even though the two were the same, the wolf didn't understand why their mate didn't want them.

Shutting her eyes, she let sleep claim and allowed the darkness that greeted her to wash away the feelings of sadness and hopelessness that plagued her while she was awake.

Kelly didn't go home that night, unable to be anywhere near town. If Ryan was going to sleep with that woman, she didn't want to be within a hundred miles of it happening.

She stayed by the lake for two days licking her preverbal wounds while trying to decide what to do about her future. The trouble was her wounds still felt raw and she didn't have any answers.

CHAPTER FIVE

“She hasn’t been home and she’s not returning our calls. Please Ryan, you have to do something.”

Ryan scowled as he listened to Kelly’s parents. “Could she be out with friends?” he glowered again. Kelly was too young and too irresponsible. The way she’d attacked a visiting pack member proved that. His wolf bristled at his harsh thoughts.

“Kelly is a good girl, Ryan. She doesn’t go out drinking and partying. She doesn’t do much of anything except work on trying to solve the breeding problems for you.” Ellen’s tone held a note of displeasure that was clearly directed at him, though Ryan wasn’t certain why. It wasn’t as though he forced Kelly to help them find the answers they needed.

“She should have been home.” Kelly’s mother said as if sensing his disdain.

Ryan bit back the urge to scowl again. It wasn’t her family’s fault that she’d been reckless and had stayed out all night, but it wasn’t just all night. Her parents claimed they hadn’t seen or heard from her for days now.

The thought that she hadn’t been reckless, that something could have happened to her made his stomach roil.

“I’ll go out and look for her.” It went against his better judgment; she was young and probably out having fun. He remembered what it was like to be young and without the responsibilities of leading the pack. He also recalled that when he had been young and without anything weighing him down, he hadn’t told his parents about his every move. It was possible that Kelly had just run off somewhere and wasn’t thinking about the impact her actions would have on her family.

“Thank you.” Ellen lowered her gaze as a sign of respect for his position. It was common but for some reason coming from her, the gesture felt wrong.

Ryan used all his senses to try tracking Kelly across the pack’s territory. He flung open the link he used for general pack communication shocked to realize that he had only the faintest link to her and tracing her down that connection was nearly impossible.

A hot surge of shame swept through him as he realized that he shared a stronger connection with wolves from neighboring packs than he did with a member of his own.

It didn’t stop him from mentally calling out to her using that fragile thread as a lifeline, but he was met with frustrating silence every time he called.

Only a change in the breeze let him know he was going the wrong

way. Shifting quickly, he pressed his nose to the ground carefully following the elusive scent that clung to the dirt and trees she'd touched. There wasn't much of a trail to follow. She'd done her best to avoid contact with her surrounding. When he found her, she was curled by the water asleep and shivering. Her long blond hair covered her back effectively hiding her from his view. He refused to let his gaze travel lower where the curve of her hip was visible.

Ryan allowed his human form to emerge again and then gathered up her clothes. It was odd that she would shift and remain by her clothing, and stranger still that she would phase back and not bother to dress. He let the shirt he was holding flutter over her before he spoke.

“Kelly, wake up!” His tone was harsher than he'd intended, but he'd wasted time tracking her when he had other business to attend to. Her show of aggression had caused a diplomatic rift with the Sourwind pack and if Dawnecia was the daughter of the alpha and not the beta then Ryan would be making a much larger show of restitution to the pack leader. It was lucky that Ryan knew Dawnecia's father Brett. He was a reasonable man and had been understanding that the incident was just an altercation between two individuals and not meant as an insult. He had still taken the money from Ryan though and when Darius had demanded a larger amount Ryan had paid that as well.

As busy as he was, it had never occurred to him to delegate the task of finding her to one of the pack members. It pissed him off that he'd been so consumed by her that he wasn't thinking clearly. "Kelly!" He squatted next to her, giving her shoulder a rough shake noticing for the first time that her skin was chilled.

Lycan's temperatures normally ran high, they were very resistant to the cold, and yet she was shivering. He shook her again this time showing the care he should have when he first touched her. She jerked awake as if he'd slapped her, her gaze wild and frightened darting to her surroundings before landing on his face and he watched what little color was in her complexion drain away.

"What are you doing out here? Your family has been worried sick!" He scolded.

The flush that had fled from her skin returned as she blushed.

"Could you turn around so I can put my clothes on?" The indignation in her tone irritated him and made him impatient. Normally lycans weren't sensitive about nudity. Shifting meant you were often taking off your clothes to do so or finding yourself without a new set once you changed back to human form.

"I would never look at you inappropriately."

"Oh, I know." she said, and Ryan was confused by the bitter anger in

her tone.

“Then why ask?” Ryan tried to ignore the bite in her voice.

“Ever heard of modesty? This isn’t like shifting you’ve woken me up from a dead sleep. I’m at a disadvantage here.”

Ryan opened his mouth to protest and then thought better of it. He didn’t want to see more of her than he had to anyway. He began to turn away as she hunched her shoulders trying to shrug into the shirt without revealing herself to him. What she exposed instead of her breasts had him growling. The rumble started deep in his chest and tickled the back of his throat until it burst from him.

“What the hell happened to you?”

HIS HARSH DEMAND made her cringe and Kelly scrambled for an answer that would appease him. Lycan’s were resilient creatures. She shouldn’t bruise like she had unless she’d been in one hell of a fight. Not knowing what to say, and not wanting to lie she ducked her head while pulling on her pants, no longer aware if he was still looking at her or not.

“I asked you a question.” His tone was hard and cold, holding the full weight of his status as alpha behind it. He’d made a demand and it was clear from his voice and body language that he expected her to obey.

“Nothing. It’s just a bruise.” She couldn’t stop the heavy sigh that she

exhaled.

“It’s not! Kelly, you shouldn’t be bruising like this. You shouldn’t be bruising at all.” His tone was softer this time, and she cringed, wildly searching for any excuse to end his line of questioning.

“It’s not your business.” She tried to ignore his hard stare that said she was his business. She couldn’t even dispute his claim as alpha of the pack she was his responsibility.

“Bullshit! It is my business I’m your alpha. This is my pack. Who fought with you? Was it Dawnecia?” he demanded, sniffing the air around her as if in an attempt to pick up her attacker’s scent. He appeared confused when the only scent in the air belonged to Kelly.

“I’m fine.” She pulled on her pants securing the button, still trying to avoid Ryan’s gaze. “I need to go before my parents worry more.”

Her body sagged with relief when he nodded. She picked up her coat and scrambled away from him as fast as her legs could carry her.

She was stiff and sore, her body aching from having slept outdoors in the cold. She shouldn’t be feeling the cold the way that she was, and it seemed to be getting worse each day. She should have been able to keep her wolf form while sleeping if she wished but lately, it took too much effort to shift and to maintain. The lack of control was something she’d never experienced before and it frightened her more than any of the other

symptoms she'd experienced.

Kelly couldn't tell anyone. It wasn't normal for a wolf to go through anything like this. That she was aware of, and if anyone knew she'd be sent to the doctor. Poked and prodded until she went insane, her parents would panic and she didn't want to worry them. Worse still, she'd be seen as a liability within the pack. Her status would be viewed even lower than it had already slipped, and she refused to show any more weakness.

Once home she collapsed on the couch, unable to move any further. She reached out to her mother using their mental link *"I'm at home mom. I just went for a long run and lost track of time. Going to sleep now, call you later."* She knew that her mom would question a two-day run but it was the best that she could come up with on the fly.

The message was short and choppy but she didn't have the energy to waste energy on a longer conversation when sleep was already sucking her under its spell.

She pulled the hand-knit blanket her grandmother made for her years ago from the back of the couch letting the weight of it land on her as her eyes drifted closed.

CHAPTER SIX

Kelly woke a few hours later, her whole body stiffening with the memory of how Ryan had treated her. She wondered what kind of trouble she'd be in for nearly stabbing a member of a visiting pack.

She groaned. If his anger was any indication, there was no way she'd get off without some sort of punishment. It would make her request for information on the other packs even harder now. Ryan might say no just to spite her. She let the thought go as soon as it entered her mind. Ryan was determined to find the cause of their issues, he wouldn't jeopardize that no matter how upset he was with her.

She hadn't been able to control her reaction to seeing the other woman touch him though. It was a sure sign that her heat cycle was coming. It was likely to be worse because there was competition for her mate. As if the searing pain as her body drove her to mate wasn't bad enough.

Kelly ground her teeth together until her jaw ached. Jonas the pack healer he had trained under their previous doctor and now handled most of

the pack's injuries and medical concerns. He hadn't told her anything she hadn't figured out on her own when she saw him.

She had held out as long as she could, but eventually, the heat won. The urge to mate rode her hard as lust rushed through her system hitting fast. Her breasts were heavy and swollen, her nipples peaked and tender. Her vagina was slick preparing her for a mate that didn't want her. She wept as it felt like someone was holding a blow torch to her organs.

“You need to find a mate, Kelly. We've talked about this.”

Yeah, they'd talked about it, but what Jonas didn't know was that the likelihood that she'd find a mate within the pack was about as plausible as humans accepting their kind if the truth about them ever became common knowledge. It wasn't going to happen.

“If you can't find a mate within the pack you need to speak to Ryan about reaching out to the other packs to see if there might be someone in one of them who you're interested in. I know you think it's an antiquated tradition but it isn't only done for the alpha. Lots of lycans choose to mate without waiting for their blood mate.”

Kelly wanted to scream at the archaic notion that she'd be shipped off to some stranger for breeding. She cursed their physiology but it's exactly what happened. Sure, it had been modernized she had the ultimate choice, she wouldn't be forced to breed with anyone but the fact was she was ready for a

mate.

“I can’t talk to him about that, Jonas.” Heat burned in her cheeks as she imagined how that conversation would go. She imagined he’d be so pleased to be rid of her that he’d shove her out of the door as fast as he could. The very thought of it made her want to die from shame.

“You’re going to have to talk to him soon. I’m convinced that the symptoms you’re experiencing are a result of these prolonged heat cycles and exposure to the medication we’ve used to keep them at bay. You’ve been on them longer than anyone in our pack. Longer than anyone on record. We don’t know if it’s safe.”

“You can’t tell him that! You can’t tell anyone that!” Her teeth did snap together now with such force that she was afraid she’d cracked them.

Jonas watched her, sympathy evident in his gaze. “I won’t tell him for now, but I feel the need to speak to the other pack physicians. We need to know if other unmated women are experiencing the same symptoms that you are exhibiting.”

Kelly wished the floor of his office would open up and swallow her. He wouldn’t find anything among the other packs. She was sure of it, because she was certain that no other lycan had been denied her mate.

She hid the worst of the bruising from Jonas, and what he did see he agreed to keep quiet about, at least for now. It was after all her medical

history, but she knew that if she let things persist he would eventually say something. He had a duty to the pack and loyalty to Ryan would drive him to reveal her secrets.

His instincts would demand that he do what was best for her and the pack, whether it would be considered a violation of privacy by human standards or not. They were shifters and they lived by a different code. It truly was survival of the fittest. Jonas wouldn't take the risk if there was a chance she was a danger to the pack.

She sighed, knowing that her time was running out. She would have to ask Ryan to send her to another pack to see if she was compatible with one of their members. How was she supposed to look him in the eye and ask him – her mate, to send her to someone else?

There was no doubt in her mind he was her mate. She'd known it from that first heat but he'd pushed her away, ruthlessly rejecting the tender wisps of a bond that had tried to form once her wolf had realized their mate was close.

He'd shut it down, squashed it so fast that her head had spun and he'd kept her at arm's length ever since. In the pack but always on the fringe not belonging to it. Then he'd dated Hayley, he'd believed them to be the perfect pair, and she'd died a little inside every time she watched them together.

She'd wanted to leave the pack then, she'd almost asked him to release

her, but the bond had with her family was too strong and she hadn't wanted to be separated from them.

RYAN COULDN'T STOP thinking about the bruises that had marred the soft flesh of her back, and he growled thinking about the beating she'd had to have taken to be marked as she was. Yet he hadn't smelled anyone else on her skin.

There was no blood, the area hadn't been disturbed. It simply didn't make sense to him. He wondered again if Dawnecia had attacked her, demanding payback for the insult she'd been dealt. He'd smoothed things over as best as he could, explaining that Kelly was young and not in control of her maturing emotions, but the explanation had sounded false even to his ears.

She was significantly older than Dawnecia, and when Alpha Delgado pointed out that fact and chuckled, reminding him that it was normally the males that fought not the females, Ryan had tacked on another thousand dollars he'd already agreed to pay in restitution to the Sourwind pack.

He scowled; it wasn't the money that bothered him. The Coldridge pack was well off and financially stable. What bothered him was that he normally didn't think about Kelly, so having her take up so much of his time and energy was grating on his nerves. He had too many responsibilities to be

consumed with thoughts about a girl who stayed out doing God knows what for days, fighting because she couldn't control her animal side as she matured.

Why would she do it though? His wolf whined at him, pacing as if Ryan's body was a cage.

It didn't like the picture the man was painting of the woman, and became increasingly restless. Ryan felt the discordant note resonate through him. His wolf wasn't happy. It was rare that his wolf and human sides were at odds, and he found it unsettling since he usually had much better control.

Shaking himself out of his introspection, Ryan vowed that he'd find whoever had hurt Kelly. If it wasn't Dawnecia then that meant that someone within his pack had issues that would need to be dealt with.

The lives of shifters were often prone to violence. It wasn't uncommon for man and beast to war for supremacy, fighting for dominance for positioning within the pack, but he'd never condone the kind of vicious treatment it would have taken to harm Kelly the way that she had been.

The women were fierce in their own right, holding their places, but they were often more cunning and as a result less physical than the men. Knowing that he had to do something, Ryan opened the mental link he shared with his brother.

He found himself sitting in Jace's kitchen drinking coffee while his

brother's mate Sara cut a slice of cake for him. Ryan felt his ears heat up when his brother grabbed Sara's hand and sucked the vanilla frosting from her thumb, it was a completely erotic gesture and he fought not to be affected by the sexual tension that was instantly created.

Ryan shifted uncomfortably in his chair while Sara melted against Jace and cleared his throat with unnecessary enthusiasm to remind them both that they weren't alone. The soft scent of Sara's embarrassment permeated the room, and her cheeks were stained pink as she pulled away and excused herself.

As one of the newest members of their pack she was still nervous around him and the power that his alpha exhibited. His brother on the other hand had no such qualms. Instead, he watched his mate leave the room, his gaze devouring her until she was out of sight.

Jace turned with a grin on his face and Ryan felt a stab of jealousy slice through him as he watched his brother's happiness.

"Sorry. Sometimes I still have trouble adjusting to mated life and to being back among the pack. It can still be unsettling at times and difficult to remember that others are around." His brother's facial expression turned serious, and he kicked out the chair across from him silently inviting Ryan to join him at the table. "What's up, bro?" Jace asked, his gaze searching Ryan's

Briefly, Ryan explained finding Kelly that morning and how bruised she'd been. He wasn't surprised when Jace was just as confused he'd been.

"We need to find whoever did this to her. I won't tolerate this type of thing happening in the pack. Challenges for positioning are supposed to be sanctioned and monitored." Ryan said, while fighting to keep his temper under control. The life of a lycan could be vicious since it was often difficult to maintain control of their more animalistic traits, but it was no excuse, and he wouldn't stand for this sort of aggression in his pack.

"I don't understand what anyone would gain from beating Kelly though, she doesn't hold much favor with the pack, most of the women who sought her advice in the past have stopped doing so. She's pretty isolated from anyone. There wouldn't be anything to gain. So to hurt her the way you're describing suggests that it was done maliciously."

His brother's tone was neutral but Ryan still felt the weight of the unspoken accusation. The women of the pack had respected her. They had sought her out and he knew it was his fault that they no longer did so. How they treated her was a direct result of his behavior towards her. He'd kept her at a distance for so long that the rest of the pack had started to distance themselves as well as if they found her lacking or didn't trust her.

Ryan bowed his head as shame swept through him. It was true that how he treated members of the pack governed how others did as well. He'd just

never stopped to consider the impact keeping his distance from Kelly would have on the others.

“I need to figure out who hurt her Jace.”

“How can I help?”

“I’m not close to her. She resists telling me anything, even though I’m her alpha, but she may tell you or Sara something.” Ryan hated the closeness that Jace had cultivated with Kelly even as Ryan pushed her away.

“Sending my mate on a recon mission?” Jace asked, humor heavily coloring his tone. When Ryan didn’t laugh with him his brother sobered again. “I’ll talk to Sara.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The monthly pack meeting was later that evening and everything in Kelly screamed at her to stay home. She didn't want to see Ryan and with her heat ramping up and the suppressant drugs not working to their full potential she knew being around a bunch of males would aggravate her wolf.

She groaned at the knock on her door, wanting to growl at whoever dared to disturb her. She debated not opening the door, but the persistent banging was almost worse than anything else she could imagine the person on the other side inflicting on her.

Kelly sniffed as she neared the door, trying to determine who was on the other side, and was shocked when she realized that she couldn't tell who was there. She couldn't smell them at all. It sent a shaft of fear piercing through her chest until it was hard to breathe.

"Kelly, are you ok?" She recognized Sara's voice as she spoke from the other side of the door. Kelly managed to turn the doorknob and let Sara in. The fear was beginning to dissipate but she knew if she could smell it her fear would be hanging thick in the air.

Sara kept looking at her, her expression searching. "I'm ok. I'm just not feeling very well." When Sara showed sympathy instead of concern Kelly

knew she still thought more like a human than a shifter. If she did, she'd be more concerned about why Kelly was ill than what she could do to help.

“Have you seen Jonas or the doctor?” Sara asked gently

Kelly nodded and made her way back over to the couch letting her body sink into the cushions. “I just need to get some sleep,” Kelly said in a way that was meant to get Sara to leave, but Sara smirked and came to sit next to her on the sofa.

“Jace sent me over here to check on you, I'm not supposed to say but I'm sure Ryan put him up to it.”

Kelly snorted before she could stop herself, and at Sara's raised eyebrow she spoke. “He wouldn't care enough to put his brother on my tail.” Kelly liked Sara. The pack hadn't been particularly welcoming to a human when she'd first mated with Jace. Not even warming when she'd saved a group of their young from a fire. It was appalling to Sara that members of her pack hadn't protected the children that they were blessed with, especially since the frequency of births seemed to be declining.

Sara hadn't let their treatment deter her though. She hadn't whined about their harsh treatment. She had an inner strength that was worthy of any alpha female. There were very few human mates, any records on them were closely guarded by the packs they had mated into.

Kelly suspected that it was Sara's core of strength that had allowed

her to shift, but without full access to the information kept quiet by the other packs she couldn't know for sure. Sara had a clear blind spot though, if she believed Ryan was as noble as she made him out to be. Obviously, her mates had been feeding her a line of BS about their alpha.

“He's your alpha Kelly, he cares.” Sara admonished gently.

“Sara, I know you mean well but you haven't been with the pack that long, and your view is skewed.” Sara had been human when she met Jace and her mating with him and Caleb had happened quickly. No one expected a human to mate with not one but two wolves. They'd all been shocked when she shifted during her pregnancy. It had been unheard of. The pack had spent the year after her turning trying to discover if it was a result of the pregnancy, if Sara had Lycan roots in her family, or if there was another cause they hadn't considered. Sara had been so busy with her new life as a mate that the enormity of being able to shift and what that might mean had faded into the background. But Kelly hadn't forgotten, and she was still quietly researching what had happened, since the nagging feeling that they needed answers wouldn't dissipate.

“What are you talking about?”

“You mated his brother. You bore a child for the pack when no other women have been able to do so. You were human and now you're a wolf. You've pretty much sewn up the prize for the best wolf of the pack for years

to come.” Kelly tried to keep the bitterness out of her tone. Her wolf ached for her mate though, and how warm and welcoming he’d been to his brother’s mate had been insulting. When he’d all but ignore his own and instead had chosen to warm his bed with other women.

“Things aren’t as rosy for me as you might think, Kelly,” Sara spoke softly but the pain of that one statement was evident.

“Sometimes being this now, being able to shift it feels unnatural.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

Sara shook her head, “No, I don’t want to worry the guys. We’ve all finally found a comfortable rhythm, and Jace has just stopped waking up in sweat worried that something or someone is going to try to harm me again. I don’t want to stir up trouble. Plus, we have been talking about trying to get pregnant again. They say there’s no pressure but I know Jace would like Caleb to be the biological father too.”

“Sara, you should tell them how you’re feeling if shifting feels wrong. They have a right to know, and it could be something that affects the pack. We don’t have the luxury of as much privacy as you are used to.”

Kelly felt like a hypocrite lecturing Sara for keeping secrets when she was keeping a huge one herself. Suddenly feeling shaky and weak she just wanted to lay down and forget about her problems.

“I don’t mean to be rude but I’m not feeling well I’d like to go back

to bed.”

“I don’t like to see you hurting Kelly. You were the only one who was kind to me when I first mated into the pack. I’d like to think that we’re friends.” Kelly nodded, and Sara kept talking. “I hope you’d let me help you – if you needed it.”

Kelly fell asleep again after Sara left. She woke several hours later feeling as if her skin was on fire. Knowing it wouldn’t be long before her heat was fully upon her Kelly popped a couple of the heat suppressant pills into her mouth and dry swallowed them, grimacing as they stuck in the back of her throat.

The pills kicked in quickly. They spread through her body like a cooling balm, taking the biting edge from the raging heat. She was thankful that they did, since she was unwilling to go see Ryan with her heat riding her so hard. The thought of him knowing how much his presence affected her when he couldn’t say the same made her temper burn hot and fierce.

She made a conscious effort to gain control, knowing that strong emotions would only encourage the heat to return full force and to spread through her faster.

Kelly bundled up, thankful that the cool weather they were still having allowed her to wear the extra clothing. It would help hide the last of the bruising that was still fading from her skin and the layers of clothing, combined with the heat suppressant would help mask her remaining scent as long as she didn't allow anyone to get too close to her.

She didn't have to go far to find Ryan. He was reviewing pack finance in the large living area of the pack meeting hall. He was always here when he wasn't way on business managing his tech firm. He was away less and less lately though, since his company practically ran itself. The man probably made money while he slept. Kelly snorted at the thought. She knew he worked hard for everything he'd achieved. It wasn't easy holding the pack and keeping a solid job outside of the pack. A sense of pride began unfurling in her belly sending warmth radiating through her. She stomped it down before it could grow and knocked on the heavy wooden door peeking her head around the opening as she did so.

RYAN DIDN'T WANT to be disturbed. He had limited time to get the books in order before something else was needed or someone wanted his attention. There was always something. A growl died in the back of his throat leaving a tickle behind that made him clear his throat before speaking.

"Yes?" he asked, looking up from the ledger on his desk. His anger

faded when he saw Kelly standing in the doorway. “Did you need something, Kelly?” He didn’t intend for his voice to come out as gruff as it did. A good leader made time for his pack, and being a good leader was everything to him. It had been ever since he’d been forced to take over the pack early following his father’s accident, and seeing Kelly hurt brought how badly he’d let her down into sharp focus.

She cleared her throat; the sound was rough as if the very air she was breathing was being pulled from her lungs. He noticed that even though she entered the room she stayed close to the door keeping a healthy distance between them. *Was she afraid of him?* The thought made him ill. The last thing he wanted was to be the type of alpha whose respect came from others came through fear.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.” she cleared her throat again, her nerves getting the better of her.

“Whatever it is Kelly, just spit it out. I have other things I need to get done today.” He couldn’t keep the resigned tone out of his voice. He’d failed her and she was afraid of him. He could smell it coming off of her in thick waves even with the distance she’d put between them. He’d never meant to make her feel that way, but her presence was so unsettling that he preferred her at a distance.

“I’d like your permission to leave the pack.”

“I’m sorry?” He’d told her to spit it out and she’d take the suggestion so literally, that he wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly.

“I’m asking your permission, Alpha Wilde, to leave the pack.”

He arched a brow at her formal tone. No one in the pack had ever called him Alpha Wilde.

Ryan blinked twice, trying to bring her into focus. “No.” He looked down at the ledger in front of him waiting for her to leave, trying to ignore the wave of emotion her request caused.

“Why?” Desperation colored her voice.

“Because I said so. That’s why.” His gaze snapped back to hers and he turned the full force of his stare on her.

“That’s not good enough.”

“You have a responsibility to this pack.” He said, thinking of the schooling she’d recently completed. Studying science and the environment with a major in genetics, in the hopes that they could help find answers to their population decline.

“I haven’t forgotten. That’s part of the reason that I want to leave. The other packs have had experiences that ours haven’t and they need to be documented. Questions that we need answers to, but we’ll never get them unless we send someone to collect them. I can still help this pack and belong to another at the same time.”

Ryan sighed and set aside the book. “I’m your alpha you’ve asked and I’ve denied your request. This discussion is over.”

“It’s not. I’m twenty-seven. Long past the time when I should have taken a mate. There isn’t one who wants me in this pack. It’s time that I find one elsewhere.” She was choosing her words carefully. Ryan’s eyes narrowed at each explanation that she gave, and his stomach turned as she talked about leaving and finding a mate. He felt the rejection as keenly as he had when Hayley abandoned him leaving their pack. “No.”

He watched her jaw drop and knew he was being an asshole. He had little right to deny her request. What she’d said about investigating the other packs to get the answers they needed made sense, but he couldn’t stop the denial from exploding from his mouth, barely resisting the urge to spit at the bitter taste left on his lips the thought of her leaving caused.

“I’ll go to the council and petition to leave then.” Her eyes nearly shot sparks at him as she raised her head and stared him down boldly.

“I know your rank within the pack has slipped somewhat recently, but you are young you’ll understand in time that the ranks among the women tend to fluctuate especially in a large pack like ours.” He fiddled with the pen in his hand, his gaze fixing on the wall over her shoulder. He couldn’t drop his gaze because he was her alpha but he couldn’t maintain eye contact with her.

“You’re a moron!” she growled, gnashing her teeth at him before storming out of the room and slamming the heavy wooden door behind her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Brother, what have you done to have one small female wolf so angry with you?” Jace's amused tone came to him not long after Kelly had left.

“You will vote ‘no’ when she petitions to leave the pack. The council can not permit her to leave.” Ryan demanded, wanting to strangle his younger brother when laughter filled his mind on their shared channel for communication. *“I’m serious Jace, you owe me.”*

“Ryan, I can’t interfere like that if she wants to go you need to let her.”

“No, I can’t. Please do this for me. Please Jace, at least give me time to change her mind. If she still wants to go after that then I won’t try to stop her.”

Those male chauvinistic bastards, they’d voted six in favor three against and a decision like leaving the pack had to be unanimous. It had been two days since she’d taken her request to Ryan. They hadn’t even debated long enough to be fair. Who were they to decide if a female wolf should be allowed to mate or breed? Why were there no women on the council? Was their race so archaic that the men still felt it was their right to speak for the

females in the pack?

Part of her could understand, lycans weren't fully human, and their instincts often demanded things that their human counterparts balked at. They weren't solely animals though either, and it was long past time that the council considered that.

Desperate for an escape, she waited until dusk to shift into her wolf form. It took several tries, and she was ready to weep with frustration.

Come on damn it! Kelly pleaded with her wolf, and when that didn't work she put as much force into calling her as she could manage. Finally, she was standing on all fours on her back step. She ignored the muted scents that should have been vibrant around her and padded off into the forest.

She couldn't run. There wasn't a pack in existence that would allow her to join them without the permission of her alpha, to do so would be an insult to Ryan and would start a war. Leaving her family would tear her heart out. Heading towards the lake Kelly traveled carefully, her eyes not what they should have been. The night was like dark ink swallowing her when normally she'd be able to see as if it were the middle of the day.

She needed to seek medical advice. She had put it off long enough. Her symptoms were progressing rapidly and she knew she wouldn't be able to hide them for much longer.

Fear pumped into her bloodstream as she skirted around to the far side

of the lake, wandering further from home than she'd dared in a while. Not wanting to draw attention to herself she'd slipped into the woods as quietly as she could, but now that she was away from everyone she was less careful about the noise she was making.

The lake was her favorite place in their territory and she missed the normally calming effect it had on her. Now no matter where she went she just felt trapped. She struggled to shift back into her human form and retrieve the clothes she had stashed.

She stayed barefoot despite the cold weather, ignoring when her toes started to tingle. Yet another sign that her wolf physiology was failing her. She walked along the waterline letting her toes sink into the wet earth. She welcomed the feeling of the sand grains smoothing her rough calluses as they slid over her skin, though the sand was still cold. It wasn't too bad if she avoided the waterline.

"A desperate animal will chew off its limbs to escape when it feels caught in a trap." Kelly fought the urge to jump. She should have heard him coming, but she hadn't.

"As the trap, are you feeling remorseful?" Her tone was bitter and disrespectful but his treatment of her had made her cynical.

"I am still your alpha Kelly."

"Sorry." she conceded, as she dropped her gaze automatically, showing

him the deference that his tone and position demanded.

“As the alpha, it falls to me to ensure the wellbeing of the pack.” She bit back a sharp retort as he went on. “I’ve reconsidered your request to leave the pack.”

“You have?”

“Not permanently, I still believe your place is here in this pack, but if you feel this is something you need to do, and something that you feel can help solve our fertility crisis then I can respect that. So, I’ve overturned the ruling of the council.”

She wasn’t sure if it was remorse or relief that she felt surging through her. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced a smile before he could decipher her expression.

“You might not be so keen to leave once you find out where you’re going.” he warned.

Kelly eyed him warily but then decided that there wasn’t anywhere that he could send her that would be as bad as staying here, watching him galavant around with other women while refusing to claim her. She might have reconsidered that opinion if she’d realized that he was sending her to the pack they’d feuded with for decades.

The Yellow Claw pack. He’d sent her to find a mate among wolves who until recently had been their enemies. She was tempted to ask him if he

hated her, but in the end, it didn't matter because it gave her a measure of freedom. Her wolf wasn't seeing things in the same light. She was mourning their mate sending them away and she was bitter.

It was what you wanted, she reminded herself, as she pulled her luggage down from the closet. Ryan had negotiated with Julian for her to stay for a month. If she hadn't found a mate by then she was to come back and they would repeat the process with another pack.

"I can't believe he's making you leave. A whole month with those animals. Oh, my poor baby." Ellen folded a sweater and put it in Kelly's suitcase. She had insisted on helping her daughter pack for the trip as if she were still a small child.

"Mom, you're being dramatic. I'm the one who asked him to go."

"Kelly, you never asked him to send you to enemy territory."

"SHE IS A valued member of this pack." Ryan regarded the other Alpha closely. He didn't like the thought of sending Kelly to the other pack. He'd deliberately picked the Yellow Claws expecting that she would change her mind and refuse to go. When she hadn't done what he'd expected, Ryan seethed with silent rage. His wolf urged him to make her relent and stay where he knew she'd be safe.

“Then why let her leave?” Julian’s gaze seemed to bore into him as the other man studied Ryan’s reactions. Julian’s nostrils flared as he scented the air even in human form.

Ryan swirled the amber liquid in his glass, ignoring the tightness in his chest. “She longs for a mate.” He spoke the truth knowing that Julian would sense a lie and if he did there would never be true peace between their people.

“It’s true then, your pack only forms true pairings?” Julian’s question hung in the air while Ryan paced to the window. “We had heard the rumors but it seemed so unlikely that we assumed they were false.

“No, we don’t always wait for our blood-destined mates. Though some prefer it.” He rubbed the ache in his chest absently. “There is no one here for Kelly though despite the large size of my pack, and she’s grown impatient with waiting. She is past the age where most would take a mate even if it meant they were not blood mates.”

“Hmm, then I will gladly accept her into my pack even if it’s only temporarily.” Ryan froze, stilling the hand that was on his chest. Julian cast him a look Ryan couldn’t decipher. It was filled with amusement and perhaps pity, yet before Ryan could become offended it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Julian stuck out his hand and they shook on the deal. Both silently accepted that if harm should come to Kelly while in the Yellow Claw

territory the tentative peace between their packs would end in bloodshed.

CHAPTER NINE

KELLY LOOKED AROUND at the house she would live in for the next four weeks. It was smaller than her home but then she didn't expect that they would roll out the red carpet and offer her the best accommodations that they had. She jumped when there was a knock at the door.

She opened it a crack peeking around at the visitors. Julian stood there with another tall man, the bright afternoon sun glinted off the second man's blond curls turning them nearly golden.

"You're settling in ok?" Julian asked, clearing his throat slightly so she was forced to tear her attention away from the other man. Julian's style as alpha was very different from Ryan's. She could feel the difference the moment she met him. His energy was present in everything he did, seeming to spill over from him where Ryan only let his power flare as alpha when needed. Julian wore his power like a second skin.

"Yes, so far so good." She kept her tone respectful and her eyes lowered to show Julian she could abide by their pack structure and rules. She didn't know what Ryan had told the other man to get him to agree to her visit, and she couldn't stand the idea that he would think Ryan sent her away because she was trouble. News of her altercation with Dawnecia had no

doubt spread through the packs, a juicy bit of gossip that would arouse the curiosity of most. She tried to hold back the shame so that she would give Julian a decent impression of her.

“This is my Beta, Clay. He’ll help you get used to how we do things around here.”

He reached out to shake her hand and Kelly was surprised when it was only slightly uncomfortable. Contact with men other than Ryan had been increasingly difficult and often painful. Just nature using another of its resources to ensure she bonded with him and not another wolf.

It would make what she was attempting that much harder, but the alternative would be giving up and she wasn't ready for that yet.

“It’s nice to meet you, Kelly.” She was surprised that her wolf reacted the same way she did when around Jace. She noticed that aside from the lighter coloring of his hair, Clay shared a resemblance to Ryan and Jace. She would bet that there was a familial connection there somewhere.

“Why don’t you finish putting your things away, and then I’ll show you around.”

She nodded, accepting his offer and quickly tucking her suitcase into the bedroom.

“That was quick.” He chuckled. Clay had a warm inviting laugh that put her at ease instantly.

“It’s out of the way. I’ll do the actual unpacking later.”

The Yellow Claw pack wasn’t structured very differently from the Coldridge pack. They had a central area where the pack gathered for festivals, rituals and celebrations, though it was smaller than the one back home and there wasn’t a lake like the one in Coldridge territory. She would miss the calming effect the lake had on her while she was here but hoped that she would find peace and the need for calming wouldn’t be necessary.

The forest around the pack territory was just as large as the one back home and teeming with game. If she had been in peak form, she would have shifted and spent hours allowing her wolf to run in the woods chasing rabbits and deer. It had been a least six months since she’d felt well enough to do that though.

In the first few days of settling with the Yellow Claws, she met several of the pack members, and although she did meet both male and female members it was obvious that the pack had been told she was searching for a mate. The number of single men who came to greet her was shocking. They held a meal in her honor and the number of bachelors who made a point to stop by her chair would have been comical, if it hadn’t made her skin crawl as if it were being attacked by fire ants.

Even though they were all polite and charming her wolf wasn’t impressed by any of them and even as weak as she was, her inner animal was

growing restless.

Kelly was popping the heat suppressants as if they were candy, cringing when she realized that she was taking more than double the dose she was supposed to now, and still the heat was riding her.

She didn't seem to mind Clay though. When she was near him the heat was more manageable and that worried her.

Why should you be worried? You came here for a chance at another mate. Kelly tried to ignore the inner voice that urged her to see where a relationship with Clay could go.

Her wolf didn't like the idea that she would cast aside their mate so easily. It felt disloyal to her wolf and that widened the discord between them.

After those first few days though, Clay became like her shadow, and the other males in the pack seemed to get the unspoken message that she wasn't for them.

The fact was she spent so much time with Clay that the other members of his pack assumed that they had begun courting each other and were likely to mate. Instead of actively seeking a mate, Kelly used the time to collect the blood and tissue samples from the pack that she believed they needed to examine. She began looking over their records tracking their fertility issues looking for any correlation to the issues the Coldridge pack had experienced.

It had been difficult to get Julian to agree to give her access to the pack records but he'd finally relented when his mate had placed a hand on her belly, the scent of her pain filling the room.

“Do you really believe there is a connection somewhere and that you can solve it?”

“Perhaps not single-handed but I can't sit by while the women of our race experience such losses. I believe I can make a difference. ”

“You would put this effort in for others with no thought to yourself? You don't long for a child?” She wouldn't deny that she wanted a baby, Julian would see through a lie that bold, but it didn't seem likely to happen if she couldn't sort through her mating issues. He'd looked at her with such lingering sadness that she'd been forced to look away, afraid that he'd be able to see every secret her soul was desperate to hide.

After that Julian agreed to grant her access to all of their records and even offered her copies to take back to the Coldridge pack.

The thought of home sent a pang of longing through her that was getting harder to ignore.

“You confuse my wolf,” she admitted one day as she and Clay walked through the woods together. She'd been with the Yellow Claws for three weeks now. The full moon was approaching, and it would be time for her to

return to her pack soon.

The thought scared and saddened her. It was odd, but here among this pack who, up until recently had been considered her enemy, she'd been able to find a small measure of peace, and although her wolf didn't desire Clay in a passionate way she did feel contentment when they were together.

"How so?" he asked, his steel-blue eyes taking in every nuance of her demeanor

"She likes you," Kelly stated simply, not certain how to further explain. She could feel the heat creeping up her neck.

"So why should that confuse your wolf? You did come here to find a mate. Didn't you?" Kelly leaned forward letting her hair fall in a curtain around her. "No, don't do that, don't hide from me." Clay reached out and pushed the hair back from her face. His touch was gentle and comforting but it didn't cause her belly to flutter with excitement or send a flush of desire rushing to the surface of her skin. It wasn't the reaction that she should feel when her mate touched her. That realization made her sad and she frowned.

"I don't want you to think I'm hitting on you."

"I'm the only one you've let close to you while you've been here little wolf. I'd already assumed you'd chosen." The smile he flashed her was full of humor as he tried to lighten the mood and lessen her embarrassment. She tried not to blush at the nickname he'd given her soon after her arrival. She

couldn't deny the truth she was small compared to him, especially in his shifted state.

She sat down on a fallen log her fingers curling into the damp moss that covered the bark. She scuffed her toe in the dirt afraid to look at him.

“Would you mate with me then? Knowing we're not true mates would you still do it?” she held her breath, ignoring the wild thumping of her heart as she waited for his answer.

“My wolf likes yours to Kelly, and I think you're sweet. I wouldn't be opposed to mating with you.”

“What if you find her one day after you'd mated me? What then?” The pain that filled her voice had little to do with the thought that Clay would find his true mate and would leave her, and more to do with the thought of being rejected again.

She jumped when he cupped her chin bring his face within an inch of hers. They were so close she could feel the heat of his breath. He leaned in, and warm lips met hers. She hadn't kissed many people. Having realized Ryan was her mate at such a young age kissing boys had been an embarrassing and often painful experience. Clay's touch didn't cause her pain but there was no searing heat, or blistering desire either. Just a warm content need to snuggle into him.

“I think if we were to mate we would be happy, though it would be a

mating that lacked passion.”

His sad expression brought tears to her eyes. She forced herself not to blink afraid that if she did they would fall.

“I’m sorry I wish I could make her accept reality. Our mate doesn’t want us, and if we can’t learn to accept another we’ll likely die of loneliness,” she confessed, her voice barely carrying.

She looked away from the shock she saw on his face. Feeling the shame of her secret sweep through her.

“You have a mate and you know who your mate is?” She just swallowed thickly and gave the briefest nod at his question. “So why are you here? If you know who he is why not mate with him?” There was an undercurrent of hurt in his tone that she tried to ignore.

“I told you he doesn’t want me.” The pain of admitting that made her voice sharpen, then quiver.

“Ryan isn’t cruel. Go to your alpha make him -” his voice trailed off as Kelly vehemently shook her head. “Shit. It is your alpha.”

CHAPTER TEN

Kelly couldn't stand to watch the horror on his face turn to pity. She pushed up from the log and continued walking along the worn path that led back to the house she was staying in. He caught up to her easily, his hand on her elbow spun her around.

“Peace is still fragile between our packs. Your being here could start the war again. Did you not think of that before you sought asylum?” His words held genuine concern and frustration but no real anger. Kelly remembered then that he was the beta to his pack and his loyalty would be to the Yellow Claws and ensuring that she didn't bring danger to them.

“It won't start a war,” she said, tugging her arm from his grasp.

“It will if you successfully mate with one of our pack.” There was more anger in his statement now, and it made Kelly feel guilty for considering settling for a relationship with him. She hadn't meant to lead him on, and she didn't want him to feel like a second choice. She just couldn't stand being so isolated and alone anymore.

Hot tears burned in her eyes before sliding down her cheeks “Don't you get it? He doesn't want me. He knows why I'm here he knows I came looking for a mate and he allowed it anyway.” She curled in on herself,

feeling dejected. Ryan didn't want her and now she'd hurt Clay. It made her feel rotten.

“Then he's a goddamned fool.” His words came out harshly and he folded her into his arms hugging her to him. She cuddled into him accepting the comfort. He wasn't her mate, he never would be, but his affection was like balm on her wounds and for now, that was enough.

SHE'D BEEN GONE three weeks and his wolf was going insane at her absence. He paced like a caged animal. He was grouchy and snarled at anyone who came too close. Everyone had taken to giving him a wide berth.

The only reason that he hadn't fully lost control was the fact that he was keeping tabs on her, and she hadn't mated with anyone in the Yellow Claw pack.

He read Julian's email again and scowled. She may not have mated, but she was paying a lot of attention to Julian's beta. The other alpha gushed about how delightful she was, and how much his wolves enjoyed having her there; he noted how she'd make a wonderful addition to their ranks if she chose to mate Clay and remain with the Yellow Claw pack. He remarked that while she wasn't Clay's true mate the two did seem fond of each other. The closing line of the email had his lip curling and his wolf snarling.

“Isn't Clay related to you?” Byron inquired not realizing the stormy

emotions that his question stirred in Ryan. It was true the man was his second cousin, the idea that she'd mate with one of his relatives shouldn't bother him, but it did. It made him want to howl with rage.

“If you didn't want her to go that badly why did you overturn the ruling handed down by the council? I had to fight tooth and nail to be sure at least some of the others voted no with me.”

His brother's voice inside his head startled Ryan; he hadn't realized he'd let his emotions run so high that they were leaking down the bond he shared with his twin.

“It hurt too much to see her unhappy.” Ryan expected his brother to harass him about his response but all he felt from him was a wave of sympathy.

“She'll be home soon, brother.”

Ryan forced thoughts of her away and turned back to the task he was working on, he sighed, not sure if he could wait much longer for her to come home.

KELLY KNEW SHE would have to go back to her pack. Her wolf was getting restless and her symptoms were worsening at a rate that scared her. She couldn't shift here with the Yellow Claw pack. Her wolf wouldn't comply, and she didn't have the strength left to force her out.

“Clay, I think it’s time to go home,” she admitted. “Will you go with me?” She wasn’t sure why but the thought of having Clay with her when she saw Ryan again bolstered her courage and confidence.

“Are you sure? You still have a few days left, you can stay if you want. Julian won’t force you to shift.” She fought the urge to duck her head and blush. She hadn’t realized that she was so transparent. She hadn’t meant to reveal her deepest secrets to Clay but they’d bonded while she was here, and with that bond, they had formed a connection that made hiding things difficult.

“It’s time for me to go home. I miss the pack.” She left the fact that she missed Ryan unsaid, but she could see the sympathy in Clay’s eyes.

“Pack your things little wolf. Let’s get you home.”

BEING HOME WAS bitter-sweet. She knew Ryan would be on his way to see her as soon as he heard she was back, and with a town as small as theirs it wouldn’t take long.

“You need to tell him he’s your mate.” Kelly shook her head denying Clay’s suggestion. “Being without your mate is killing you little wolf. It’s in our physiology, without him you’ll die. Are you willing to die for your pride?”

“Lots of lycans don’t wait for their true mates. I don’t see any of them dying.”

“They’re different they haven’t met and been in close contact with their mate for their entire lives the way you have. Their wolves accept a mate who isn’t theirs by blood because they don’t know any different.”

Kelly clamped her jaw shut, unwilling to argue with him any further. She was saved from having to when there was a knock on her door. It was a loud heavy knock that demanded entrance. Kelly flung the door open, desperate to ignore Clay’s reasoning.

Ryan stood on the doorstep as if summoned by her discussion with Clay. His expression was a mix of relief and anger.

She gripped the door frame to keep herself upright “I’ve been back for five minutes. What could I have possibly done to make you angry?” she couldn’t keep the disappointed tone from her voice. Ryan had clearly shown up as her alpha determined to tear a strip off her for some perceived slight instead of being happy to see her and welcoming her home. She just didn’t have the energy to fight him. She tensed as she felt Clay at her back and caught the dark look that Ryan cast his way

“Cousin.” Clay greeted; the one word held just enough respect to be acceptable but not enough to hide the contempt.

RYAN IGNORED HIS cousin’s greeting, his focus solely on how close he was to Kelly. Ryan fought the urge to tear Clay away from her. He

inhaled, hoping to find some semblance of calm but only found rage when he realized that Kelly smelled like Clay. The other man's scent was all over her.

“Have you brought your newfound mate home to the pack then?” he barely kept the sneer out of his voice. He saw Kelly cringe but didn't care.

“No.” Her softly spoken denial did more to soothe him than anything else could have. “I didn't mate with anyone Ryan. I missed home.” He breathed in again carefully examining the scents around him.

She did smell like Clay but their scents weren't blended the way they would be if they had mated. This mingling was due to their proximity to one another and would go away as soon as Clay did.

He could hear the longing in her voice and it made something ache inside of him. “She's home safe now. You can go.” He addressed Clay but never took his gaze from Kelly.

It was then that he noticed how pale and frail she looked. She had lost weight in the time that she'd been gone, and all his anger and jealousy faded away. He reached out to cup her cheek but let his hand fall away when she cringed.

“You look tired Kelly you should get some rest.” He turned and the soft snick of the door was like a gunshot as it closed behind him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHE HAD BEEN home for two days when she realized that she'd come home to the Coldridge pack to die. Clay was right, being without her mate was killing her. She struggled to the end of the week but her body didn't have much left and her soul didn't have any fight. Her wolf had given up.

She would make one more trip to the lake tonight, but she knew in her heart it would be her last after tonight she wouldn't have the energy to venture from home. Even getting out of bed since she'd been back had become a struggle.

She was grateful that Clay had decided to extend his stay even though each day he threatened to go to Ryan and force him to mate her. He'd even begged Kelly to allow them to mate if only to save her life but her wolf wouldn't allow it.

Hot searing pain went through her, making her catch her breath she swiveled her head around, surprised to see the shaft of an arrow protruding from her side. Fearful that another would strike her, Kelly slunk down in the grass as low as she could.

WHAT THE HELL was she doing? Ryan had come to her house to talk to her, and if he was honest, to apologize for being an ass when she'd told him she wanted to leave and for how he'd treated her the day she'd got back. He got there just as she was slipping into the wooded area around her home. *Where the hell was she going? Where was Clay?* His cousin was still hanging around and was normally glued to Kelly's side any time he'd seen her since her return.

She was slow, her movements sluggish. For that reason alone he would have followed her. They needed to talk though, and for that, she'd be more comfortable if she wasn't naked. So he grabbed her discarded clothing from the porch and took off after her.

He smelt the danger before he saw the arrow. He watched as it sunk into Kelly, nearly going blind with rage as he smelled her blood. The coppery tang of it spilled out into the night air, enraging him each time he took a breath.

“What the fuck!” he shouted as the stranger prepared another arrow. Ryan came crashing out of the bushes and was on the man before he could get a second shot off. “You're not supposed to be hunting here.” The words were torn from him, barely human as Ryan struggled to control his raging desire to rip out the man's throat.

Kelly whined and Ryan reached for her mentally. *You're going to be ok.* When she didn't answer he stole a glance at her, the pain in her eyes hitting him square in the chest like it was his own. He sent a quick message to his brother knowing that he might need Jace's medical knowledge, but he also warned him about the stranger.

“Damn wolves keep getting too close to my property! I have a right to protect myself. I know you folks in town think they need to be coddled like they're damn pets but I can't have them thinking my home is a food source when things are scarce.”

“Are you crazy? Get out of here before I call the police! You aren't supposed to be hunting wolves. They are protected here.” It took everything within Ryan not to lunge at the guy as he hesitated.

“Look at it! That one is sick and scrawny. I probably did their population a favor. Let me finish it off. It could have rabies.”

As Ryan glared at the other man, a rumble of a growl slipped past his lips. As if sensing danger he backed away slowly before finally turning to run. His instincts demanded that he chase after the retreating hunter and eliminate him as a threat, but needed to stay with Kelly to get her help.

As soon as Ryan was certain he was gone, he crouched by Kelly; her eyes were glazed with pain and blood was pooling around her. It was a lot of blood, enough that it was alarming and he conveyed that to his brother.

“What do I do here? Do I pull the arrow out?” He was afraid to touch the shaft, unwilling to cause Kelly more pain.

“Where is it?”

Ryan gave the location of the arrow to his brother trying to be as accurate and detailed as possible.

“No! don’t pull it out, the head could cause more damage. Your safest bet is to break the fletching off and push the shaft through to the other side.”

“Are you sure?”

“When she shifts it should heal any damage.”

“Should?” Ryan didn’t like the sound of his brother’s voice. The odds didn’t sound promising.

“What do you want from me, Ryan? Quit busting my balls, I don’t have any guarantees with a wound like this.”

Shutting out his brother Ryan leaned towards Kelly pausing when she bared her teeth and snarled at him. He shifted in the grass next to her keeping his tone low and soothing as he reached out for the arrow in her side.

“I know it hurts.” He said while wrapping his hands around the body of the arrow. Kelly whipped her head around and snapped her teeth at him, her upper lip curling.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I’m trying to help.” Moving quickly, he snapped the end of the arrow and pushed it through her side. Thankful that

the projectile had clipped her and would make missing vital organs easier.

He worked quickly ignoring the bile that rose in his throat at the feeling of the arrow slicing through her flesh. He blocked out her whimper as he forced it out.

“It’s out.” He relayed the information to his brother, his brief sense of relief coloring his tone.

“Okay, now when she shifts it’ll heal”

She watched him from where she lay with sad eyes, and although she was in animal form Ryan swore he could see tears and complex human emotion in her gaze.

“Shift Kelly. It will heal the wound.” He was getting nervous about the amount of blood coming faster from the wound. It was gathering around her to stain the grass where she lay.

Panic nearly blinded him as she blinked at him before closing her eyes as if resigned to her fate.

“Change damn it, now!” Ryan could practically feel her slipping away. Refusing to let that happen he did the only thing he could think of. He placed his hands over the wound in her side burying them in the soft sable fur to touch the skin beneath.

“You are not giving up, understand? You can’t leave me. I won’t let you.” He called on the power he used to change, but instead of using it to

transform himself, he visualized it flowing into Kelly.

He shoved the energy into her. It was like a bright blue electric wave that arched between them. Kelly's form shifted under his hands and as it did a single word exploded in his mind.

MATE!

Ryan pulled his hands back, shocked as that one word reverberated through him. *No!* There was no way it was possible. He would have known.

Stripping off his coat and shirt, he dressed Kelly in them even though he'd brought her clothes with him. He couldn't explain the sudden need, but he had to have her wrapped in his scent. He carried her from the woods, bypassing her house and heading straight for his.

She was so weak. He could feel each of her ribs and she weighed no more than a child would in his arms. How the hell had he not seen that something was wrong with her? How had he been so blind? The man who had shot the arrow was right, she did look sickly even in her human form. Her hair was dull, her skin tone so pale it was nearly translucent, its paper-thin texture so fragile he was worried that touching her too roughly would cause it to tear.

His wolf seemed to stare at him from within his gaze full of pity that the man had been too stupid to see their mate had been under their nose for years and he'd ignored her. *you didn't just ignore her you sent her away.*

Ryan laid her in his bed instantly, grateful that he'd cleaned out any trace of Hayley after their breakup.

Oh, God Hayley. The thought of the other woman and how he'd behaved with her in front of Kelly made his blood heat with shame.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She was floating on a cloud, it was the softest most luxurious thing she'd ever felt. She sighed as she sank deeper into the fluff, never wanting to leave. The scent she was surrounded with was familiar and comforting. She snuggled into it, letting her concerns float away.

Kelly woke sometime later, uncertain how long she'd slept. She kept her eyes shut, afraid to open them. She'd never been in Ryan's home but she knew without seeing that's exactly where she was.

She felt a cool hand on her brow and flinched at the touch, her eyes popping open with the contact. Kelly found herself blinking up into Ryan's gaze. She swallowed grimacing when her throat felt like sandpaper. She tried again and let out a whimper of discomfort.

"Here, drink some water." He held the glass for her and although the thought to stubbornly refuse was her first instinct, the need for water had her accepting quicker than she liked.

"Thanks." It was all she could manage while struggling to lean on her elbows so that she could drink. Suddenly he was behind her supporting her weight and helping her hold the glass. When she'd had enough she pushed the cup away ignoring Ryan's frown. "Why am I here?"

“You need your rest.”

“No, I mean here. Why am I here?” She gestured weakly to the room around her “My house was closer.” she said, settling back into the pillows, her side aching with protest.

“It may have been closer but there’s no way that I was going to leave you alone.”

“Like you’ve never done that before.” She muttered, she knew he’d heard every word as if she’d yelled at him, but she couldn’t hold the words in. He was looking at her like he’d never seen her before and she felt different than she had when she’d walked into the woods.

His eyes softened while he continued to gaze at her. She squirmed under the intense scrutiny, wincing as pain lanced through her side with the movement. It seemed to bring him out of his thoughts and back to the moment.

He shook his head then blinked, “Get some rest. I’ll see if I can get Jonas here soon.”

HE SAT IN a chair in his bedroom watching over her as she slept, still in awe of his discovery. Was what he’d felt when he laid his hands on her and pushed his power into her to bring the change to heal her real? It

couldn't be, could it? He would have known, would have felt some kind of connection between them.

Ryan, 24

"You'll be the youngest Alpha the packs have ever seen." The excitement in Carl's tone was unmistakable and it pissed him off.

"Yeah never mind the fact that my dad may never walk again." Ryan couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice. Carl was full of himself, running his mouth about things he had no business talking about.

"Your dad will be fine," Carl said casually, shrugging off Ryan's concern. They were walking from the training area when the most alluring scent caught the wind teasing his nose.

"Looks like the nursery let out early," Carl sneered. Ryan's nostrils flared as he drew her scent into him memorizing every nuance. He narrowed his eyes hardening his features. Forcing himself to ignore the rich aroma wafting from her and the feelings the scent stirred in him. She was just a kid.

Practically a baby compared to him and he didn't have time for frivolous things now that he was training to be pack alpha.

"Where's your babysitter?" Carl asked, laughing while he cast a look at Ryan searching for his approval. Ryan assumed this was how it would be from now on, pack members always vying for his attention and cringed.

"Get out of here!" Ryan spat the words at her his teeth clenched tight.

As he tried not to breathe in the scent of her.

“Leave!” He shouted when she hesitated, he felt his control slipping and if she stayed even a moment longer he feared what he’d do. It felt wrong that she would provoke such a strong attraction in him at such a young age.

He was jerked out of his reminiscing when she whimpered in her sleep. The pain-soaked sound tore through him. She was dreaming, that much was obvious but given how she was thrashing around he doubted it was a pleasant dream.

“Ryan, please.” She twisted and writhed on the bed.

“I’m here Kelly. I’ve got you.” Ryan stroked his hand across her brow. It was hot and feverish. He kept his hand there for a moment hoping that the cool contrast of their skin would help but it seemed to make her more agitated. He left the room to avoid disturbing her further and waited for the doctor, tempted to call him a second time.

When Jonas arrived shortly after Ryan’s call he received a tongue lashing like he hadn’t had since he was a pup.

“You may be alpha but you can’t just assume because she shifted that she’s fine. This wasn’t a splinter you plucked out of her finger. She was shot with an arrow for crying out loud.”

“I know Doc, believe me, I know.” A shudder worked its way through

him as he remembered the sight of her laying on the ground in pain and bleeding to death.

“It’s no better than using the internet to self-diagnose.” the doctor grumbled. It took everything Ryan had not to snap at the man.

“Kelly.” The doctor called her name, “Can you open your eyes for me?”

HER EYELIDS FELT fused shut. She tried to open them, but all she wanted to do was curl up in a ball and go to sleep. The bed was so comfortable and being surrounded by his scent made her wolf happy. It pissed the human side of her off, but she was too tired to battle with her instincts. It had another side effect though. Her heat was burning through her far more intensely than the suppression drugs should have allowed. Even as hurt as she was, she could still feel the need to mate and it was getting harder to ignore.

Jonas called for her again and Kelly finally opened her eyes, her gaze colliding with first the doctor’s and then Ryan’s, making her want to squeeze her eyes shut again.

“I hear you’ve had quite an exciting evening. Let’s see how that side of yours is doing.” The doctor moved towards her and Kelly clutched the blanket like a shield in front of her.

“Not unless he leaves.”

“Ryan I’m going to need you to step into the other room.” The doctor’s tone was dismissive and he didn’t bother to glance at Ryan.

“I’m your alpha. This is my house.”

“And she’s my patient. She’s asked you to leave, and I do need to examine her.” This time the doctor’s gaze did leave his patient to clash with Ryan’s.

Kelly ignored the hurt and bewildered expression that crossed his face. Once he was gone she let the blanket fall away and allowed Jonas to lift the shirt she wore.

“This should be healing better.” he poked at the pink skin. Shifting should have healed the wound and erased any trace of it instead, it looked like she’d scar. “Kelly, I need you, to be honest with me. I’ve been treating you for years now and I know you’ve held things back from me, but we’re at a tipping point here. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the truth.”

Kelly felt tears burn in her eyes. “The heat suppression drugs aren’t working anymore. You’ve had me on the maximum dose for a while now, but recently I’ve had to double the amount I’ve been taking just to get through my cycles, and each time it gets harder.”

Jona’s eyes widened his shock at her words obvious. “Kelly that’s incredibly dangerous you could be doing irreparable damage to your body.

Especially with the way your health has been declining. You must let me do further testing. I need to understand what's going on with your physiology."

"It doesn't matter. Right now, I just want to go home."

RYAN GROWLED ON the other side of the door. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop but with lycan hearing it was inevitable. He'd have heard her anywhere in the house. He bit back a second growl. She wanted to leave. He'd just found her, and now she wanted to leave him.

You didn't just find her she's been under your nose for years and you ignored her. He ignored the reminder from his annoying, nagging conscience. He watched as Jonas emerged from his room.

"She'd like to leave, but I know you heard that." Jonas's tone was weary as if expecting a fight from his Alpha.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Every instinct he had was telling him to go get her and bring her back to his bed and keep her with him where she belonged. He was fighting those instincts. She had been so pale and exhausted when Jonas helped her home that Ryan hadn't wanted to make her ordeal harder, but now laying in his bed where she'd been inhaling her scent was making his wolf crazy.

Insanity was the only way he could justify climbing through one of her windows later that night. He growled softly when Clay opened her bedroom door. Man and wolf hated that the other man still lingered around their mate, but as quickly as he'd poked his head in her ducked out again making Ryan realize that Clay wasn't a threat and was only following his instincts to take care of her.

As soon as Ryan was alone in the room with her his wolf calmed. When she whimpered any semblance of quiet control he'd managed to build evaporated.

"Ryan!" she called out for him in her sleep, and his patience snapped. He hadn't meant to disturb her. Keeping away from her was nearly impossible though. He didn't know what he was doing. His behavior was so far out of line, but he couldn't seem to reign himself in. He'd been out of his

bed and halfway to her house before his intentions had registered.

She was his mate and that awareness had roused the animal within him. His wolf refused to be subdued. He demanded to be close to their mate, to comfort her and protect her if she needed them.

“Kelly, wake up,” he whispered gently, afraid of startling her. When she stretched slowly, blinking her eyes open, her gaze was filled with lust, but as the remnants of sleep left her the lust faded and she schooled her features into a neutral look. It was as if she’d wiped her expression clean leaving a blank slate instead. He hated it.

“What are you doing here?” Sleep made her voice rough and he imagined it was a similar timber to how she would sound if she’d spent the night crying out her pleasure. He gave himself a mental shake as fear and anger crept into her tone.

“I was worried about you.”

“So, you broke into my house?” She stared at him, and Ryan felt a flush rising his neck to stain his cheeks, but he nodded not wanting to lie to her.

“You’re crazy.”

“Yeah, probably.” He admitted it readily knowing that since realizing she was his mate he’d gone more than a little crazy. “Can I stay? Can we talk?”

She sighed heavily, then reached for the bedside lamp casting a soft glow in the room where before there had been deep shadows.

“I should say no.”

She looked as if she wanted to say no. “I’ll go if you want me to. I didn’t mean to scare you, I just needed to know you were alright.”

SHE WASN’T SCARED. Not really, his sudden appearance had startled her, and the idea that he wanted to be around her now when he’d avoided her before was unsettling. She wasn’t afraid though, she was aroused. She didn’t know if she could control herself if he stayed, but if she was honest she didn’t want him to leave. Still, she had to make one last effort to save herself.

“I don’t feel well.”

“No, I imagine you feel hot, needy, achy. You’re in heat Kelly. You need a mate and if the way you were moaning and crying for me in your sleep is any indication you know I’m yours.”

“God, you’re an ass!” she snarled at him, unable to control the angry reaction.

“I’m just being honest. Why lie about it?”

“You are not my mate!” she spat the heated denial. Shaking her head to emphasize her point.

“I am, and you know I am.”

“Stop saying that!” She clutched the sheets ready to launch herself from the bed and claw at his eyes.

“I felt it when I helped you shift.”

“When you *forced* me to shift you mean.” She shuddered as if she could still feel an echo of his power as he used it to bring her animal forward and close the wound in her side. He had saved her life, she should be grateful, but all she could think of was how it had felt to be merged with him.

His jaw dropped open, “Forced you! Is that what you think?”

“Well, what would you call it?”

“Oh, I don’t know, saving your life?” His anger rolled off him in waves and seemed to crash into her bringing with them a sense of shame that she couldn’t shake.

As if he could read her mind he asked. “Why wouldn’t you shift and save yourself?” The question brought tears to her eyes and she swallowed to keep them from clogging her throat.

“I’m tired, Ryan. I wish you’d just left me there.”

“Left you? You would have died!”

She watched as her meaning slowly dawned on him. Hurt and anger wared across his face.

“No!” The denial burst from him as if his vehemence would change

how she felt. “You’d rather die than be mated to me?” His hurt was so strong it was tangible.

Her wolf howled in denial at his question and Kelly shifted on the bed suddenly uncomfortable. “Sometimes it’s just too late.”

“I refuse to believe that. It isn’t too late.” He moved before she could figure out what he intended. He was a breath away from kissing her, and although he didn’t restrain her she lacked the strength or desire to pull away if he had.

“I think you want me to kiss you just about as badly as I’m dying to taste you.” He’d barely finished speaking the words before his lips brushed hers. Who moved first she couldn’t say but as the soft velvet-like texture of his mouth grazed hers, she only knew she wanted more.

She opened on a groan and his tongue swept forward, claiming shamelessly. She licked his lower lip in return, tasting salt in his kiss before he nipped at her tugging on her lip.

The kiss was like a balm over an open wound that she hadn’t realized was festering, and she sank into the embrace, desperate for more. She molded herself to him, the bedsheets tangling between them, she let out a grunt of frustration as she tried to push them aside. He gave them a hard jerk and they were gone.

Her lungs were burning for air, and just as she was about to protest he

kissed his way over her chin to the column of her throat nibbling at the soft skin there. She exposed it for him readily, both woman and wolf recognizing him as their dominant, but when her back hit the softness of the mattress it was like ice water hitting her heated flesh.

“Wait! Stop.”

He froze, instantly pulling back to put space between them. His breathing was loud and harsh in the silence of the room.

“I can’t do this.” Her heart was thundering against her rib cage while shame weighed on her pride.

He stared down at her while trying to make sense of what she’d said, she wanted to cry that she’d made a mistake and urge him to keep going but she couldn’t.

Ryan shifted further away from her, and she realized then that he cupped her naked breast under her pajama top. The thin cotton had surrendered easily under his questing hands.

“I’M SORRY, I shouldn’t have kissed you.” At his words, her face fell and Ryan wondered what he’d done wrong. He only meant that he shouldn’t have pressured her not that he hadn’t wanted to kiss her, and to be honest he wasn’t certain who’d initiated the kiss only that he’d been the first one to come closer to her.

“It’s fine. It’s just not our time.” She seemed so sad that Ryan wanted to pull her back into his arms and comfort her, but he wouldn’t unless she asked him to.

“It is our time. I know it, but I’ll give you time to come to terms with it.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek “Sweet dreams, Kelly, we’ll talk more in the morning.”

Ryan licked the copper tang of her blood from his lips. He’d nicked her throat. He tried to reason that he hadn’t done it on purpose but he remembered how his brother had accidentally initiated his bond with Sara, and he wondered if it was possible that subconsciously he wanted to begin a bond with Kelly and hadn’t been able to wait. Already he felt closer to her than he ever had before but then scolded himself for his foolishness. *Of course, you feel closer to her, idiot. You’ve spent more time with her in the last few hours than you have in the last twelve years.*

He’d never examined why he’d kept his distance from her in the past but he suspected it was because he’d been attracted to her. At fifteen to his twenty-four she’d been far too young for him and he’d run from that attraction to her. As fast, and far as he could afraid that he was some kind of pervert.

Ryan glanced at the clock on the wall. It was early but his father

would be awake soon so instead of going back to bed Ryan pulled on his shoes and coat and walked the two blocks to his childhood home.

“I swear if you worry any louder you’re going to wake your mother.” His father's deep voice pulled him out of his thoughts and Ryan realized that while he’d been sitting on the porch swing staring into nothingness and trying to figure out how to fix how badly he’d made a mess of things with Kelly the sky had lightened around him.

“Coffee?” His dad asked holding out a cup of steaming black coffee. The rich aroma soaked into Ryan’s pores as he inhaled deeply.

“Ah, when coffee touches your soul.” He pushed against the wooden deck and the swing rocked gently back and forth.

“You going to tell me what has you out here at the crack of dawn brooding like you always did when you were a pup? Or are you going to make me guess?”

They were silent for a long while as Philip waited for his son to speak, Ryan quietly tried to order his thoughts.

“I fucked up. Bad, and I don’t know how to fix it.” He blurted the words out in a rush. Relieved when his confession was out there, though he knew the hard part was just beginning. Now he’d have to tell his father what he’d done.

“Just spit it out. It only gets more bitter the longer you hold it in.”

Ryan quickly told his dad about Kelly, and about how he'd treated her since she was fifteen, not stopping until the entire tale was out.

“Well son, it seems you've got your work cut out for you, but I wouldn't say you've fucked up entirely. Could be she realized you were her mate back then and feels like you rejected her. You need to remember that she's a strong wolf in her own right.”

“So how do I fix it?”

“You need to delegate some of the pack duties to your beta and enforcers so that you can spend time with Kelly. You need to woo her Ryan, make her feel special.”

The thought of showering her with attention and pampering her so that she would see he could be a good mate filled him with anticipation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kelly wasn't sure why Jonas had called her to see him. She became even more nervous when she realized Ryan was also in his office.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, still hanging on to the door handle in a death grip ready to bolt if Ryan so much as breathed wrong.

"The same thing you are, I suspect."

She was still hovering by the door when Jonas entered the room. She eyed both men wearily as she followed them into the office. As soon as the door closed the tension rose sharply.

"What is he doing here?" The words slipped out before she could stop them.

"Relax Kelly, it's going to be okay." Jonas tried to reassure her. "I don't want to see you continuing to struggle."

"It's not your place to talk to him about any of this! I don't want him here." Her anger and desperation warred for control within her.

"I'm your mate! I have every right to be here." She didn't deny his claim in front of Jonas but she hated that every time he made the statement her wolf nodded her agreement.

"I brought you here to discuss Kelly's need to leave the pack and try

another pairing with one of the other neighboring packs since things didn't work with the Yellow Claws, but given your revelation, I don't imagine that's going to happen."

"Hell no! If Kelly needs a mate she got one."

Kelly groaned. His tone was arrogant and it pissed her off, "Why now?" she couldn't keep the hurt out of her voice.

"Since there's no reason to stay Jonas, we'll leave. This is best worked out between us anyway," Ryan said, looking her way. It was on the tip of her tongue to deny him. Her wolf wanted to follow him anywhere but the human side of her couldn't get past her hurt pride. "Do you want to have this conversation in front of the doctor?" he asked as if sensing her impending refusal.

Once she was back in his house, the sense that it was right settled into her and she gave up fighting. She needed him to survive. Without him, she'd wither away and die, but allowing him to mate her didn't mean she had to love him. She could make sure this was just a temporary fix to save her.

"So, what now?"

"I don't know Kelly, this is all new to me too."

"We don't even know each other how can we possibly mate?" Kelly paced across his living room, her nervousness making her fidget.

“We’ll have time to get to know each other. Right now, we have to focus on you getting well and strong again.” Kelly opened her mouth to argue but Ryan stopped her. “I felt how run down you are Kelly. I’ve held you and know how thin and ill you’ve become. You can’t go on like this.” Ryan put his hand on her shoulder stopping her pacing.

Kelly swallowed her pride closed the distance between them. “You’re my mate? Then prove it.” She issued the challenge, her lycan needed Ryan to step up.

He shook his head. “No baby, I kissed you last time. You want me then you gotta come and take what you want.”

RYAN CHALLENGED HER right back. He was an alpha and she needed to be an alpha in attitude too. He needed someone who would be his partner not only inside their bedroom but outside too. He watched her carefully, trying to judge how she was dealing with his demand.

A blush covered her cheeks and then she leaned into him bringing her body flush against his and kissed him. It was a tentative caress, but she’d made the first move and it was all that mattered. His lips parted under hers as he encouraged her to explore. He growled in the back of his throat when her

tongue stroked his and the kiss deepened.

She tasted of sweet heat and innocence, and it was that flavor that had him panting with nerves when she pulled back. Lycans were a very passionate, sexual race, and although when they mated, they were monogamous it didn't mean they were chaste, she tasted of purity he'd not been expecting. Even their first kiss hadn't prepared him for his response to her.

“I could kiss you for the rest of forever.”

“I've never done this before.” Her shy admission was like liquid fire through his blood. He pulled her closer, aligning their bodies so he could rub against her while trying to hide his shock. He pressed closer, an animalistic need to have his scent on her driving him.

“It's okay we'll figure it out together.” It was all new to him as well because while he'd been with other women before, none of them were Kelly.

Kelly was his blood mate. The woman who was a perfect complement to him, and the one he'd spend the rest of his life with. His wolf could feel it, and the need to bite her and consummate the pairing was strong. Their mating would forge a bond between them that would deepen over time.

Ryan kissed her again, this time taking control. His hand gripped the back of her neck as he fused their mouths, and when he lifted her weight against him, she wrapped her long legs around his waist. He walked them

from his living room down the short hall and into his bedroom, all while he continued to kiss her.

When he pulled away they were both panting, desperate for breath. He set her on her feet next to the bed, tugging his shirt over his head before kissing her again.

“Don’t be nervous,” he said softly next to her ear, before feathering kisses across her jaw and down her throat. She seemed to melt at his touch, held in place only by the nails she dug into the muscles of his forearms.

He kept her on her feet, remembering the way she’d tensed up when her back had hit the bed the last time they kissed, and worry hit him that they were moving too fast.

He’d said they would have time to get to know each other, and it was true, but if this was her first time then perhaps he should slow down. He wanted to make it a memorable experience for her and not just a quick tumble between the sheets.

When he tried to pull back to slow down her hands came to his sides clutching at his hips denying him the space, he’d tried to create between them.

“I’m not nervous.” He smelled the lie of her words and it made him tread carefully.

“You are, but so am I. Just for slightly different reasons.” She finally

allowed him to move back. He put his hands at the hem of her shirt and when she gave a small nod he pulled it up raising it over her head and casting it aside. It floated to the floor at their feet, forgotten as he stared at the flesh he'd revealed.

“You're beautiful.” The bruising had finally faded from her skin, leaving soft smooth perfection behind, and he reveled in it running his lips and tongue over her flesh until he pulled a moan from her throat.

She was still too thin and felt fragile in his arms but her beauty was obvious and it spurred him on.

Her hands fell to the band of his jeans but he refused to remove them yet, wanting to prolong their time together as much as he could. If he took his pants off now, he wasn't sure he could be as gentle as she needed him to be, and he wanted to give her the attention she deserved.

Instead, he reached for her jeans, his fingers making quick work of the button and zipper, the waist gapped where she'd lost a bit too much weight but they were snug on her hips. She lowered her hands to his where they rested at her waist and they both pushed the pants down her legs. She stepped out of them as he held her steady.

His mate stood before him in only her bra and underwear and she was stunning. Ryan didn't know how he could have ignored her for as long as he had, when now he couldn't tear his gaze away from her.

HE WAS STARING. The urge to cover herself grew as he continued to look at her without moving. Only the tick in his jaw reassured her that he hadn't turned to stone. She was about to say something when he finally moved slowly shaking his head as if waking from a dream.

He moved his hands from her waist to the catch on her bra his intent clear, hesitating only slightly giving her time to stop him if she wanted, but she wouldn't stop him. She'd known he was to be hers since she was fifteen and now years later she would finally have him. Even if it was only for a short time and she couldn't allow herself to love him. Wouldn't allow herself to mate with him fully to protect her wounded heart, at least she'd finally know what having a piece of him felt like.

He lowered the straps of her bra and it soon joined the rest of her clothing on the floor. She raised her arm, shielding her breasts from him. It was an automatic reaction that she did without thinking as a feeling of vulnerability swept through her.

"No, don't." She was sure he'd meant it as an order, the alpha in him coming out naturally, but the pleading in his gaze was what had her lowering her arms again. He wanted to look at her, and it made her stomach quiver with emotion that she quickly clamped down on. "You're beautiful." He said again, and although she didn't feel very beautiful with the way her health had

been deteriorating, he left her no room to argue with his assessment.

When her knees shook, she sat down on the bed behind her, no longer able to keep standing. Her breath caught when he dropped to his knees in front of her, and hooking his thumbs in panties tugged them off. She had to raise so they slid off her butt and then she was bare before him.

He didn't give her the chance to become nervous, instead, he lowered his mouth to her, pressing a gentle kiss to her navel before inhaling the scent of her. He urged her back with his hands and she sank back propped up on her elbows while his mouth traveled over her.

A groan escaped at the first touch of his tongue against her sex. The sight of his dark head between her thighs was too much to handle and she squeezed her eyes shut, letting her upper body fall back against the mattress. He nudged her legs further apart while he licked her gently at first, and then with more vigor as she threaded her fingers through the strands of his hair giving it a firm tug.

He growled against her and nipped at her inner thigh before sliding a finger into her while he continued to feast on her flesh.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Christ, she was tight. The reminder that she'd never done this made Ryan more determined as he slowly added a second finger stretching her carefully as he drove her closer to orgasm. He could feel the tightening of her leg muscles where his body rested against hers, and the muscles jumping in her belly as he lead her from one sensation to the next.

Her hands had fallen from his hair to his shoulders where she raked her nails across his taunt skin. The sharp sting further excited him and his wolf. He pulled her clitoris into his mouth with gentle suction, letting the edge of his teeth graze her as he did. The combination had her bucking against him as she broke apart, her harsh cries echoing in the room around them.

He gave her a minute to bask in the afterglow of the pleasure that had crashed over her and then urged her further up on the bed. As she lay there, her long dark hair spilling across his pillow he felt his heart soften.

“You have to use a condom, and no biting.”

Her words cooled his lust slightly and he pulled back a bit so he could read her expression. The condom he didn't mind, they needed time together

before they considered starting a family but not biting her would be hard. He knew they were meant to be blood bonded and already the desire to bite her was strong. *Give her time you don't need to bite her the first time you make love.* He was grateful for the moment of sanity and that thought brought with it, and he wasn't sure if it was his wolf or his conscience.

“Okay.” he agreed, “Don't move.” He rose from where he'd knelt on the bed and disappeared into the bathroom returning with a strip of condoms.

He watched her eyes widen as she looked at the long line of protection dangling from his fingertips and a deep blush colored her flesh.

“Never hurts to be prepared,” he said grinning, hoping to lighten the sudden flash of fear he sensed from her. She chuckled but it was forced. “I don't expect to use them all right now.” He tried to reassure her. “I just didn't want to take the time to tear one off.”

He dropped them on the bed beside her and any thought she had of the number of them fled as he finally unbuttoned his pants, letting the well-worn jeans fall to the floor. She swallowed thickly as his erection was revealed. He either didn't wear underwear or had removed them when he got rid of the last of his clothing.

Ryan stretched out on the bed next to her, slowly running his hands over her body, wanting to remember the feel of her under them. He wanted to make her first time, their first time together special. Ryan kissed her again,

pushing aside any thoughts of their future together and focusing on the moment they had now.

He cupped her breast in his hand thumbing the pink nipple to a taunt peak when he pinched that flesh between his thumb and index finger she shuddered and let out a sigh of pleasure. So he did it again before lowering his head to bestow a kiss on the tip of her breast before teasing it with his teeth giving it a firm tug.

“Ah!” Her exclamation came out in a hiss and she arched into his caress.

“Like that?” he asked, wanting to know everything she liked. When she nodded, he did it again this time sliding his hand back between her legs to tease her there as well.

She parted her legs further, granting him unfettered access and he took it happily sliding between her thighs. He ripped off a condom from the forgotten strip and tore the packaging open. Once he’d sheathed himself he paused to look at her.

“Ready?”

“Yes, I think so.” She was still nervous, he could see it in her gaze and where another male may have just claimed her, he wanted her with him every step of the way. He dragged the head of his erection over her heated damp flesh. She moaned and he pressed forward entering her an inch at a

time.

He felt the resistance of her body as he tore through untried flesh, claiming her as he surged ahead. Ryan watched carefully for any sign of discomfort but she showed none and he breathed a sigh of relief as he seated himself within her.

SHE WAS FULL. There was no other way to describe what she was feeling. Ryan wasn't lacking in the size department and while it hadn't hurt when he'd taken her virginity she did feel invaded, uncertain where he stopped and she began.

Kelly was grateful when he remained still inside her, allowing her body time to adjust to his presence and the sensations thundering through her. Before long though she wanted him to move and couldn't keep from shifting her weight under him.

He groaned and twitched inside her when she moved. The feeling was so foreign she clenched down on him. When he pulled back nearly leaving her body completely Kelly couldn't explain the sudden empty feeling that settled in her heart, but he was back, claiming her body again and filling the space within her heart again and again until she tipped back over the edge into a blinding climax that left her shaking.

“Mate”, the word kept floating through his mind as he watched her sleep. Already she seemed different, stronger, and more full of life. Ryan knew the mating had given her the new strength he could sense. Being a mate meant you shared your soul with your other half and being bonded mates only made that connection more solid.

It had taken every ounce of willpower he had not to bite her while they made love, but she had asked him not to and he would respect her wishes even if it killed him. The lack of blood bonding made his wolf restless. He’d gotten a tiny peek into her inner thoughts when he’d nipped her during their first kiss but it obviously hadn’t been enough to initiate a true bonding between them.

It gave him the ability to sense things from her more easily though, and although it made him feel like a bit of a voyeur, he was happy for the glimpse into her thoughts when her guard was down. It was easier when she slept.

The snippets he was able to catch of her dream made his heart heavy with regret, as he realized she’d known they were mates the first time she went into heat. She’d known and had been excited by the idea and he’d crushed her when he’d pushed her away.

“I didn’t know baby. I swear, I didn’t know.” He whispered the words to her sleeping form, but guilt ate at him because on some level he had to

have known. It was just so strange that there was such a gap in their ages and it had made him uncomfortable. He didn't care now though. The eight years separating their ages didn't mean a damn thing to him anymore. They shouldn't have mattered then, but he'd been young and impulsive. He knew better now and he wasn't about to let her get away from him.

ALREADY, KELLY COULD feel the strength of the alpha mending what had previously been broken inside of her. *Not the alpha, your mate.* She ignored the annoying voice in her head and gathering her resolve she slowly climbed out of the bed.

As soon as her feet hit the floor he grumbled.

"You'd better be on your way to the bathroom and not thinking about sneaking out of my bed." They'd slept for a bit and her bladder was full. The need to go to the bathroom was suddenly urgent. Her stomach let out an embarrassing rumble and the need for food was now also pressing.

"Go. I'll find us something to eat." He said, getting out of bed, seemingly unconcerned by his nakedness while Kelly sat on the edge of the bed staring at his ass as he left the room.

"Arrogant man," she muttered under her breath, not caring that he would hear her. It was in the forefront of her mind to slip out while he was in the other room but she knew he'd just come to find her if she did.

So instead she used the bathroom, washed her hands, and then went searching for him. He was in the kitchen making them food. It was a sight she could get used to. He'd slipped into boxers while she'd been in the bathroom but his chest was still bare, and the muscles of his back had her itching to run her hands over them.

She stopped herself before she moved forward and did exactly what her body was screaming she should do. He wasn't really her mate and the less she touched him the better. She'd done what she needed to do to get strong but she didn't need the warm and gooey feelings that were trying to take hold inside of her. He hadn't wanted her and was only pitying her now.

“Are you feeling stronger?”

His question was like a knife through her heart confirming his motives for mating her. She bit down on her lip until the tang of blood coated her mouth.

His head whipped around from the stove his nostrils flaring with the scent of her blood. She ignored the flare of heat that sparked in his gaze and licked her blood from the wound. He tracked the movement of her tongue before turning back to the food.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” she snapped at him angrily, for what she perceived as his phony concern. Her stomach grumbled again as he slid a plate of steak in

front of her.

“Do you want some wine? I can open a bottle.”

She grunted, too busy salivating over the steak to answer him. She didn't care for the wine and barely noticed the baked potato and vegetables sharing the plate with the lovely piece of meat begging to be eaten.

Kelly hadn't had much of an appetite recently, but now it seemed that was changing and she knew that was also a result of his power. The idea that he'd had such a profound effect on her so quickly scared the shit out of her, but she ignored the fear and sliced into the meat.

She closed her eyes, groaning in ecstasy as the steak she'd slid into her mouth melted like butter. When she opened her eyes again to take a second bite he was staring at her.

“What?” she asked, breaking the tension in the room.

“One day I hope I put that look on your face.”

She knew he was flirting but the stupid butterflies in her stomach didn't care instead they fluttered away without a care in the world violently flapping their wings while she tried to ignore them.

“Jonas is coming by after we eat. He called while you were in the washroom. He has a theory about why you've been ill.”

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment as she realized that he may have spilled her secrets to Ryan regardless of her wishes. Suddenly the food

that only moments before had been delicious was now like sawdust in her mouth.

She tried not to pace as they waited for Jonas to arrive, but she felt like a caged animal, her heart trying to burst through the wall of her chest as her anxiety climbed higher. Her mind was spinning with all the things Jonas could have told Ryan and she jumped out of her skin when the doorbell rang. Kelly knew both men could smell her fear the air was so thick with it they had to be practically choking on it.

“Kelly, it’s good to see you. You look much better than when I saw you last.” Jonas said while coming in and making himself comfortable. Kelly wondered at his home life. As the pack doctor, he didn’t get a lot of time to himself and though Jace had medical training, he rarely used that training unless in an emergency.

“You don’t sound surprised to see that I’m doing better,” she said, taking a seat across from him. Kelly was amazed at how quickly she was becoming comfortable with Ryan’s home. She could almost imagine the place as it would appear when they celebrated Yule. They’d curl up together in front of the fire and watch the snowfall. Maybe in a couple of years if they were lucky there’d be a toddler playing at their feet or one on the way.

It was the touch of her hand on her belly that brought her out of her thoughts. Shaking her head, she focused her attention back on Jonas and

Ryan who were both looking at her with an odd expression.

“Sorry, you were saying?”

“I’ve been doing some research since you were in my office, and it’s very rare Lycan’s find their mates as early as you did.”

“Okay, but why should that matter?” Kelly asked.

“It makes perfect sense after mating if the couple chooses not to be together for some reason, they can separate. There’s a level of withdrawal and discomfort depending on how long the couple has been mated.”

“That’s not the case here though,” Ryan said interrupting Jonas.

“Well no, you hadn’t physically mated but I think the symptoms you’ve experienced Kelly, are a result of your wolf sensing her mate knowing Ryan was close and being denied. You’ve been going through the effects of mate withdrawal for years.” The room was silent as both Kelly and Ryan digested what the doctor had told them.

“That can’t be it. I would have shown signs as well.”

“Haven’t you?” Jonas eyed him skeptically but Ryan just shook his head.

“I think you have but at a different rate. You didn’t realize that you were mates. I think this gave you an advantage, being the alpha probably helped as well, but recently you’ve been restless, and irritable. Perhaps sensing how your mate was suffering?”

RYAN FELT LIKE he was going to puke. Jonas explained what he believed her body and mind had been going through for the last twelve years, and all while he'd had no clue. It was rare that mates separated, but it did happen and he'd seen the results. At least normally when someone went through the mating withdrawal it was quick. The way Jonas described things Kelly had been in agony for years.

“It’s like your body has been fighting off an illness for over a decade. Understandably, you’ve been worn down in the process.”

Ryan looked to where Kelly was digesting the information Jonas had given them and his heart nearly broke seeing how shell-shocked she appeared to be.

“So, what do we do?” he asked, taking control of the conversation; giving Kelly time to process the information they’d been given.

“You mate.”

Ryan stifled a laugh. Jonas made it seem so simple sure just mate with her that would fix everything. She had seemed stronger after they’d been together though, so he couldn’t completely disregard everything the doctor said. He just wasn’t sure how he was going to convince Kelly to mate when she practically hated him.

Neither of them said anything for a long time after Jonas left, and

Ryan could catch snippets of her strongest emotions as they swirled within her. Confusion and anger warred for top billing and Ryan wanted to do something to make her feel better.

SHE FELT LIKE her world was falling apart. The news Jonas had dropped on them weighed heavily on her heart and she wasn't sure how to deal with the revelations.

“Come shopping with me.” They were finishing the dishes when Ryan invited her. She knew he was trying to distract her and thought about declining his invitation but the truth was she wanted to be with him. It was dangerous to spend too much time with him.

He'd never shown any interest in her before, and the likelihood that he was only willing to mate with her out of pity or to ease his own guilt was high, but she wanted to feel like his mate. Even if it was only for a little while.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“We should have just shopped online,” she said as they walked through the doors. As they’d pulled into the parking lot her apprehension had shot through the roof. Even though the place would close in a couple of hours it was still packed.

She hated the crowds, the feeling of too many people pressing in on her, but when Ryan wrapped his arm around her shoulder shielding her from the jostling crowds she felt safe and allowed herself to imagine how she would feel if she truly mated with him.

“You haven’t been out in weeks, come on it will be fun.” Ryan grabbed her hand, guiding her through the busy shopping center.

“I don’t like shopping.” She pushed the lie past her lips hating the stab of painful regret that shot through her. Mates weren’t supposed to be able to lie to each other, that she could force the lie out just solidified what she already suspected.

SHE WAS LYING to him, he knew it, felt it in his bones, and rubbed at the ache it left in his chest. *You have to give her time. Show her she can trust you.* Logically he realized this was true, but right now he just wanted

their mating to be easy. Part of him wanted to call her out on the fib but he held back and instead wrapped her hand in his leading them from one store to the next

“Ryan!” The sound of his name being called had him whipping his head in that direction. When he realized who called his name his smile froze in place as he felt Kelly tense next to him. She pulled her hand from his but stood stiffly at his side. He wanted to reassure her that everything was going to be alright but he could almost see the walls she was erecting around herself.

“Hayley.”

“Oh, my gosh it’s great to see you.” She came in for a hug, and a small growl escaped Kelly. He side-stepped Hayley, avoiding her embrace and ignoring the look of hurt and confusion that clouded her gaze. Then Hayley noticed Kelly, and the smile that spread across her face was filled with knowledge that was decidedly feminine and competitive. She stepped away, including Kelly in their conversation.

“Hi Kelly, you look well. It’s been a while.” It had been nearly five years since she left the pack and she hadn’t been back to be in contact with any of her family or old friends. Though he supposed that Kelly and Hayley had never been on friendly terms. Kelly had always been polite but she’d kept her distance from both of them, and if the remnants of feeling that

rolling off Kelly were any indication she was despising every second of them standing here talking.

She stood her ground though with a quiet strength that radiated from her, and at the moment, he could see the alpha coming through her. She was his queen, and how he'd ever thought otherwise was unfathomable.

“Hey Hayley, you look good.” She nodded towards Hayley’s midriff and it was then that he noticed her stomach was gently rounded in the early stages of pregnancy.

Ryan stared in surprise, shocked that he hadn’t noticed when he’d first seen her. She was pregnant, and it gave the alpha within him hope that her new pack wasn’t having the same problems theirs was. He might be able to figure out what was going on if he could work with their alpha.

They talked for a few more minutes before parting ways but Ryan noticed that Kelly’s demeanor had changed.

“Kel, it isn’t what you’re thinking.”

“You aren’t inside my head, you have no idea what I’m thinking Ryan.”

“It didn’t mean anything. I wish you’d give us a chance,” he said, as she moved away from him looking at a display of snowmen.

“Do you want to finish shopping or are you done?” she asked, ignoring his personal question.

Ryan blew out his breath trying to keep his cool. It wouldn't do to lose his temper with her. He needed to show her what kind of man he was, and what kind of mate he could be. When they were back in his truck Ryan broached the subject of Hayley again.

"I'm sorry."

"Hmm?" She kept her gaze glued to the scenery as they drove home. Her head whipped around when he pulled onto the shoulder of the road and stopped the car.

"I can't control that we ran into her, but I am sorry. I know if a guy came up to you trying to touch you it would drive me crazy. Hell, it drives me insane every time Clay is within sniffing distance of you."

"It's fine, can we go now?" Her tone was dismissive.

"Come on Kelly, talk to me. You're angry. I can understand why you're jeal-"

"Don't you dare tell me I'm jealous! I watched you for years with her. Years, Ryan! While you paraded her around like your mate as if she was meant to run the pack with you, to be your partner. Didn't you ever wonder why most of the women came to me for advice? Why they talked to me when they were years older than I was? Didn't you find it strange or were you just too busy getting your dick wet to care?"

"I didn't know! How was I supposed to know? Huh? I was young and

stupid Kelly, I didn't know any better." As soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew he'd said the wrong thing. Her jaw fell open and the hurt that flashed hot in her gaze confirmed that it was the wrong thing to say.

"Young and stupid? I'm not much older now than you were then Ryan! What's that make me?" He froze, not knowing what to say, and not wanting to dig a deeper hole for himself. She stared at him, still expecting an answer.

"You know what? Get Fucked! I'll walk home." She flung the door open and before Ryan could stop her she made a beeline for the trees that lined the road.

"Damn it Kelly come back here!" Ryan slammed his hand down on the steering wheel, cursing again when it cracked under his show of violence. Ryan let his head fall forward to rest against the wheel as he contemplated going after her. They were still pretty far from home and walking home would take her hours compared to the drive.

Locking the truck he stashed the keys in a magnetic box under the front wheel well, and then moved around to the side closest to the line of trees; removing his clothing and placing them in the bed of the truck before letting the change come over him, then he followed her into the trees.

"STUPID FREAKING IDIOT!" Kelly grumbled while she picked her

way through the tree line into the deeper woods. “And, of course, she has to look all beautiful and glowing!” The way he’d stared at Hayley’s stomach with such wonder and reverence had made her stomach turn. How could he not understand how much seeing them together hurt her?

She brushed away the tear that fell as she remembered Hayley’s reaction to her mate, and was startled when a warm weight bumped against her legs.

“I should have known you’d follow me.” She said the words out loud because he’d never taken the time to form much of a mental bond with her. “Can’t you just leave me alone?”

“*No, you’re mine.*” The thought entered her mind, the effort clumsily following a newly forged path.

“Get out of my head Ryan. I don’t want you there.” He bumped her thigh again and she glanced down at him the last of her tears falling into the fur at the back of his neck.

“I hate that you’re hurting,” he said, after allowing himself to shift back into his human form

“It’s not supposed to be this hard. Mating should come naturally.” It seemed surreal to be bickering with him in the trees on the side of the road, but he went on, unconcerned with his nudity or the cold air blowing around them.

“Says who?” he asked gently.

“No one, I guess but honestly did you think it would be hard? Your brother knew Sara was meant to be his the minute he laid eyes on her even though she was human, and she knew Caleb was hers too.” Ryan gave her a bittersweet smile.

“They still struggled. We need to focus on you getting well right now and becoming strong. It may not have been intentional but I felt how weak and depleted you are when I helped you heal. No matter what else happens that can’t be allowed to continue.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to argue with him, but as if sensing her denial, he held up his hand to stop her. “Just wait, it isn’t about being your alpha. It isn’t about me, or what I want. It’s about making you strong so that you can make the best choice for yourself.”

What he promised was so appealing. Her wolf longed to be strong again, and she so badly wanted what he was offering. She needed her mate and was tired of denying herself.

RYAN COULD SMELL her. The heat of arousal was beginning to waft from her like a beacon calling to him. He reached for her, then remembered where they were. “Not here.” Her eyes were glassy as she came towards him and he wondered if she heard him. “I won’t take you by the side

of the road, damn it.” Ryan kept his hands to himself, determined to get them back to a more private setting before touching her.

There was a gleam in her eye he’d never seen before as she rubbed her body against his as if scent marking him. “I’ll just have to take you, then won’t I?” She surprised him by dropping to her knees in the soft earth at his feet. Lycans were comfortable with their nudity, but seeing Kelly kneeling in front of him made him acutely aware that he was naked.

Heat sizzled up his spine when she curled her tongue around the head of his cock, licking the underside with a quick flickering motion that had his hands sinking into the mass of her hair as she slowly enveloped him, taking him to the back of her throat.

She had complete control of him at that moment, even though she was in the submissive position at his feet; he didn’t care he was putty in her hands. He shuddered when she swallowed around this length and the muscles of her throat squeezed him tight before relaxing again.

“God Kelly, I’m not going to last if you do that again.” He was embarrassed to admit that he was nearly ready to tip over the edge now, his control hanging by a thread. He nearly wept when she pulled back, allowing him to slip from between her lips before planning a kiss on the crown of his dick.

“Well we can’t have that, can we?” she asked, wiping away the string

of saliva that clung to her mouth when she released him.

Kelly stood, and then began removing her pants. Once she'd stripped from the waist down she tugged on his arm, encouraging him to lay on the ground next to her. As soon his back hit the earth she was on him, straddling his hips and rocking her pussy against his erection.

Ryan had enough sense left and gripped her waist before she joined their bodies. "Kelly, stop I don't have protection with me. I left my clothes and wallet with the truck when I came after you. So, unless you have something then you need to stop."

"I don't care." She pushed against him trying to take what she wanted. Ryan held her firmly.

"No, you need to stop and think. If this is really what you want I'll give it to you God knows I want to, but I need you to be sure." He'd never taken another woman bare, it shocked him to realize that even with Hayley he'd always used a condom. If they'd truly been mates he would have wanted that connection with her. With their lycan physiology, there wasn't a risk of disease, and taking her without a condom would help strengthen their bond but there was a chance that she would conceive. Kelly was holding back. Ryan knew she wasn't ready. He would protect her. Even if it was from herself.

"I don't care. I need you now, please."

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, now. Please, now! Just don’t bite.”

“I won’t. No biting I promise. Not until you’re sure you want it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kelly reached between them and placed his erection at her entrance, meeting his eyes, locking their gazes together as she sank on him. The warmth of his body seeped into her, heating her where she'd been cold before. Once they were intimately joined she went still, simply absorbing the feeling before starting to rock her body against his.

“That’s it, baby. Take what you need.” Ryan’s hands cupped her hips and his encouragement was all it took to spur her into action she sped up her movements, the feeling of him naked inside her driving them both towards completion. Collapsing over him as her climax tore through her.

She buried her head in the crook of his neck, the urge to bite him pounding through her blood even though she’d made him promise not to bite her. She licked the skin at the base of his throat loving the beat of his pulse against her tongue.

“Come on, let’s get home before someone comes asking about my truck on the side of the road.”

“SHE’S HOLDING BACK. Physically she’s stronger but it’s like she doesn’t want to mate. The physical bonding grows stronger each time we’re

together but she won't let me in emotionally." Ryan confessed to his brother.

After their encounter in the woods, Ryan had driven them home and Kelly insisted on going back to her place. Since then he'd not seen her in three days. Rationally he knew it had only been three days, but her absence was driving him crazy.

"Ryan she's had twelve years to build up the walls that protect her heart. You aren't going to get past those in just a few days."

"What if I can't get past it? What if she never lets me in?" Ryan could voice his real fear with his twin. Jace already knew the truth that was in his heart.

"You have one thing going for you at least. She is your mate. She wants to be with you." They were sitting in Ryan's yard in front of a blazing fire, and Ryan stared into the flames as if searching for answers.

"I don't know what to do. I hurt her and I never even realized it. I don't know how she'll ever get over it."

"She might not."

His brother's brutal honesty slammed into his chest, making it hard to breathe, and Ryan doubled over in his chair. He felt Jace's hand on his shoulder and squeezed his eyes shut.

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to make it worse, but you can't hide from this. I hurt Caleb when I left the pack. I knew what we were becoming to

each other but I left anyway, and when he came to find me he found a human woman in my bed.” Jace was quiet for a while his hand still on Ryan’s shoulder as Ryan waited for him to continue.

“It had taken seconds to want her, a chemical reaction so elemental I couldn’t ignore it. Seconds to feel for her what it had taken months to build with Caleb. I know how deeply I hurt him. He never hid it from me, and for a long time after we mated, I felt such shame because I did love him. Before I ever left the pack, I loved him.”

“You’re fine now though. Happy, mated with a family.”

“Things could have gone another way. We had to learn to fit together as three people. In the beginning, I felt awful for wanting them both I felt disloyal to each of them, now I couldn’t imagine being mated to just one of them. We were never meant to be mated pairs we were always supposed to be three.”

KELLY WAS BAKING cookies, the smell of the shortbread and sugar cookie dough had her mouth-watering as she used the cookie cutters to make uniform shapes. She realized that her senses were sharpening again and wondered if she chose not to stay mated to Ryan if they would dull again. Her wolf protested the thought that they would leave him with a swift sharp pain at the idea

Setting aside the cookies to cool she turned her attention to her research. There was a steady decline in the number of children born from mate pairings, barely perceptible at first the phenomena had only become noticeable within the last few years.

It seemed that younger wolves who'd only recently begun shifting had greater success having a child when they mated early. It would be tempting to think like humans it was easier to get pregnant earlier in life, but Kelly wasn't certain that was the answer. It shouldn't matter with lycans, since their physiology ensured they aged slower, and were fertile far longer than humans normally were.

Sara had been able to get pregnant right away, and she hadn't even been trying. It made Kelly wonder if there was something about being lycan that now made it more difficult to conceive. The power to shift was tied to the moon, but it was also grounded in nature through the earth and though their kind sought out the cleanest most untouched areas. It was getting more difficult to find such places, so the problem might have been environmental as well.

She would have to run her theory past Jonas to see what he thought. Testing the idea would be nearly impossible now that Sara was a lycan, but Jace had said theirs wasn't the only pack to have a member mated to a human. It was kept under wraps since humans weren't supposed to know

about their kind, but the council might make an exception and allow the human mates from other packs to be studied if it would mean that they could find a cure for everyone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

She was eager to talk to Jace about her ideas. Figuring he'd be the best person to approach since he'd mated a human and was on the council. As a member, he'd have access to the names of the mates and which packs they were in. It wouldn't be easy to convince him. Ryan would have to agree as well, and it would be unlikely that they'd send her off to investigate but the thought that they might send someone had excitement humming through her blood.

She made her way over to Jace's house smiling at several people she passed along the way. She noticed right away that where they'd let her blend into the background only days before now she was suddenly visible again.

It felt good to be reclaiming her position in the pack, but it also made her realize how intricately tied she was to Ryan through what little of the mating she'd allowed to this point. If she chose not to remain his mate would she also lose her friends and status within the pack again? She didn't think she could go through that again. It was too much to consider and made her sad. Kelly kept her head high, refusing to let anyone see her turmoil.

Caleb opened the door when she knocked and the warm scent of contentment that he emitted made Kelly smile. She wondered if all blood

mates smelled that way.

“Hey Kelly, come on in.” He stepped aside “The guys are out back or I can take your coat if you’d rather sit inside?”

“Inside I think. I’m still feeling the cold more than I’d like while healing up from my injury.” She hated to admit to him. Wolves were always on guard for anything that could make them appear weaker. Even to members of their pack.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better. Jace and Ryan need to do something about that family. I’ve always hated how close they settled to the pack and now they’re shooting at us? It’s certainly made some of us feel unsafe.” Caleb took her coat from her when she shrugged out of it, hanging it in the hall closet.

“I hadn’t realized I’d caused such a stir.” She could feel a blush beginning to heat the back of her neck.

“That’s because I’ve been busy trying to get you well.” Her head whipped around at the growl behind Caleb and her heart somersaulted at the sight of Ryan leaning against the door jam.

The heat of Caleb’s hand where it rested on her shoulder when he’d taken her coat was now nearly unbearable under the weight of her mate’s gaze.

He looked pointedly at the contact, jealousy briefly flaring in his eyes

before he stepped forward claiming her mouth in a searing kiss that screamed of possession. As she melted into the embrace she heard Caleb chuckle.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go find one of my mates.” Ryan didn’t release her lips as Caleb left them alone, and soon she was clinging to him, her lungs aching from lack of oxygen.

“God, you make me crazy for you.” He breathed the words against her lips as he pulled back. The words seemed torn from him and they made Kelly smile, even as a sense of melancholy settled in her chest.

She didn’t make him crazy. He hadn’t wanted her before the mating. It was only now that his wolf felt a biological need for her that he wanted her at all. The thought had tears stinging her eyes. Ryan nipped at her lower lip as she pulled away. She wet her lip with the tip of her tongue soothing the slight sting.

RYAN LET HER escape their embrace, wishing that she would allow the walls she’d built around her heart to soften. She headed into the house and he followed her, feeling a bit like a lost puppy as he trailed behind her.

“Are you going to stay for lunch?” His brother asked glancing up from where he was holding Caleb. A stab of longing went through him as he watched the two together. Ryan caught Kelly’s eye, desperate for that connection with her.

“Yes.”

“No.”

They both answered at the same time and even though he wasn't surprised that she'd said no he wanted her to stay. He wanted her to see the relationship that Jace had developed with his mates and maybe realize that even though they'd had their challenges, they shared a deep love for one another.

“You must have wanted something. Let's talk about it over lunch.”

KELLY COULD FEEL everyone's eyes on her as she explained her theory.

“There aren't that many packs that have human members,” Ryan said.

“It isn't something that's common knowledge,” Jace commented.

“Poking around is going to make the packs nervous.”

“I think I'm on to something.”

“Things have just settled down within the packs,” Ryan said thoughtfully. He seemed unwilling to consider her idea and it stung. Anger rose to the forefront of her emotions, eclipsing the pain.

“You sent me away to help figure out this crisis and find a way to fight this problem, but now that I have a theory you're just going to brush it aside?” She pushed away from the table. “Excuse me.”

She tried to leave without too much fanfare, not wanting to insult Jace or his mates, but if she stayed she'd likely punch Ryan in the throat.

"Kelly, come on, don't go," Jace called after her. Not trusting her voice to respond she remained silent and had reached the front hall before Ryan caught up with her.

"I never said we wouldn't look into it, Kelly."

"Don't feel like you have to do me any favors." She shoved her arms into her jacket, anxious to leave before she revealed how she was feeling.

"Kelly I'm alpha of the biggest lycan pack in North America. I have over forty people to think about. I can't focus solely on my mate."

"Of course, not. I don't know why I would expect anything different. Tell ya what, let's just focus on me getting healthy, and then you can go back to ignoring me, or better yet you can send me away again to find another mate in another pack."

HER WORDS RIPPED into him. "I'm just fated to say the wrong things to you." Ryan watched her leave, and his wolf howled angrily at the man for letting their mate walk away from them again. It wouldn't do any good to remind her that he hadn't realized that he was her mate and she wouldn't care that she'd been the one to ask to leave. He hadn't *sent* her anywhere.

“You okay?” his brother asked, putting a hand on his shoulder in a show of support as he pulled him away from the door and back to the table.

“She hates me.”

“She doesn’t. She’s just hurting.” Sara chimed in. “She’s not thinking like a wolf. She’s thinking like a wounded woman.”

“It’s worth considering her idea. We’ll have to contact Julian. Three of the human mates belong to the Yellow Claw pack.” Ryan could hear the anger in his brother's voice, his fury that the Yellow Claws had taken his mate was still strong even though their two packs had formed a truce.

“Pull the council together. I’ll contact Julian and Claude, he also has a human member among his pack if the initial discussion goes well we’ll invite them to visit our pack.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The meeting was set. Julian and Claude were set to arrive in a couple of days, and Julian had even agreed to bring one of the mated pairs with him. The addition of strange wolves in their territory would have tensions riding high, but after Kelly had brought the idea to them he'd had Jonas look into her findings. Her argument was strong. She had a sharp mind, making connections to things that even Jonas with all his training and medical expertise around mating and genetics had never considered before. He was anxious to begin studying the couples and expanding on Kelly's initial hypothesis.

Everything was falling into place, in every area except his personal life. He hadn't seen Kelly for nearly a week since their confrontation, but through the stronger connection they'd begun establishing, he could feel her begin to weaken again. He wanted her to come to him, to acknowledge that she needed him, but it seemed she would allow her pride to rule her common sense. He reached out to her using the mental path that had been strengthening each time he used it. It was reinforced each time they were together and Ryan relished each strand that tied them tighter together.

"Let me come to you." She was silent for a long time before finally

providing an answer using the bond.

Her tentative “Ok” made him nearly whoop with joy. The path to his mate was finally clearer to him. He’d hurt her. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t meant to do it. If groveling was what it would take to win her heart he would do it. His wolf nodded his agreement. Despite being an alpha, he wanted to do whatever it took to secure their mate.

KELLY FELT HER stomach flutter in anticipation. Her wolf wanted to see their mate and if she was honest she wanted to see him too. She might not want to be but, she was softening to him. She didn’t bother fussing over her appearance for him. Her wolf was already feeling woozy like she had in the early days of her symptoms making themselves known.

She expected him to start something physical as soon as he walked through the door, but all he did was gather her body against his. Holding her close, he kissed her forehead before leading her to her couch. They cuddled up together with a big bowl of popcorn watching movies.

Ryan had his hand tangled in her hair at the base of her neck in an undeniably possessive gesture. It should have made her wolf crazy, but instead, it just felt right, safe.

“I’m sorry we fought,” he whispered against her temple, kissing her again. He told her about Julian and Claude coming.

“Really? You think I might be right?” She couldn’t keep the excitement out of her tone.

“I think it’s a good possibility,” he said. She sighed, her entire body relaxing into his hold. “It’s going to drive my wolf insane having strange unknown males in my territory around you when our bond is only partially formed.” She stiffened and knew he could feel the rigidity in her posture.

“I’m not ready.” It came out with a quiver, and she hated how it made her feel weak. Ryan tugged gently on her hair until her head fell back and their eyes met.

“I’m not pressuring you. I just want you to know how I feel. I don’t want there to be secrets between us again. Understand?”

She nodded and after a moment of searching her gaze, he joined their lips. The kiss was soft, almost reverent, and as it went on in length Kelly felt as if something clicked into place between them.

“The bond.”

“Yes. You know it’s hard to fight when it’s something you actually want.”

“You want to mate?”

“More than anything.”

“You’re not just suggesting we mate because I am sick?” Kelly voiced her deepest fear.

“Yes, I want back the strong vibrant woman who I knew when we were growing up, but Kelly, you are my mate and I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything else.”

As if sensing her disbelief, Ryan caught her chin in his hand forcing her to look at him. “More than anything Kel, even being alpha of this pack can’t hold a candle to how much I want you.”

She melted at his declaration and lost another piece of herself to him.

RYAN COULD FEEL the tentative whisps of her emotions reaching out to him. He could feel the bond between them begging to be cemented, and knew that once she finally allowed them to fully mate, theirs would be one of the strongest connections he’d ever seen between a mated pair.

“Kelly, you’re feeling dizzy let me help you.” He whispered the words against her ear as he let his lips brush the curve of her jaw. She tilted her head exposing her neck to him, and the part of him that was alpha wanted to crow with joy. He wanted to sink his teeth into her and drink deeply, taking part of her into him so that she could never deny him again. He couldn’t though. He’d promised her he wouldn’t bite her until she wanted him to, and he had to respect that but the way that she arched her neck for him made him think that she might be more ready than even she realized.

“Are you able to shift yet?” he asked, between trailing kisses down

her neck and watching her shudder at his touch. He felt the heat of her blush before he pulled his mouth away from her flesh.

“No.”

“Will you let me try to help you again?” Ryan asked. He could feel her wolf wanting out, and his wolf was going crazy he was so desperate to spend time with their mate. He couldn’t hold back his grin when she finally agreed.

“Come on, let’s go outside.” Ryan urged her up from the couch and towards the door. The walk to the lake was short. “We won’t stay long, I don’t want you getting cold.” Without any fanfare, he stripped out of his clothing, leaving them on the shore away from the water.

With the warmer weather, they’d begun having, the lake was thawing and there was only the lightest dusting of snow cover in patches on the ground. Once she’d removed her clothing, Ryan couldn’t resist taking in her appearance. Partly because he couldn’t believe that she was his, and partly to assess her healing progress.

She was still far too thin, but she had filled out some, and that at least mildly appeased his wolf. He tried to reassure himself she was healing, growing stronger but the fact that she still couldn’t shift was alarming.

The other pack leaders would be arriving soon, and he needed her strong, healed, and with him so that they could present a united front to the

other packs. He sighed, hating the politics that ruled the shifter society. Everyone always jockeying for power, looking to exploit any weakness they could find.

He pushed thoughts of the pack aside, focusing on his mate and what she needed from him at that moment. “Try to shift,” he instructed and watched her struggle to do what should have been the most basic thing.

After a few minutes sweat beaded on her forehead and he realized that she wasn’t going to be able to make the change on her own. She let out a frustrated grunt and looked close to tears.

“She wants to come but it’s like she’s blocked or something.”

“Here let me help. The ground is cold, sit on the pile of our clothing and I’ll see if I can coax her forward.” Ryan could see she was leery of allowing him to call her wolf again. “It won’t be like last time. I promise I’ll be gentle.” When she nodded and sank onto the pile of their discarded clothing Ryan reached for her.

She still had the pink scar where she’d been wounded, and he wondered if it would ever heal. He laid his hands over her shoulders careful to keep his touch light. He called up the power he normally would to shift and let it flow between them, this time teasing her with it instead of shoving it into her in a desperate attempt to save her life.

This time the energy that flowed from him was more of a tingle as the

power mingled between them. Ryan let his mental shield drop slowly, afraid that if he was too quick he'd scare her but anxious to let her in.

His wolf brushed against hers in a tentative caress and he could feel a bit of his control slip when she responded.

“That’s right baby, come out for me.” He used their mental path to communicate and was filled with joy as she responded, her wolf emerging slowly. Ryan kept his hands on her even after she'd completed the shift, stroking the soft fur that now covered her spine.

“You are so gorgeous.” he praised, his voice a whisper as he stroked his fingers through the soft waves of fur, giving her one last pet before he allowed himself to shift.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When his shields came down Kelly felt Ryan's genuine shock that he was her mate. *Is it possible he hadn't known?* The question swirled around in her brain tormenting her as they padded through the wooded area around the lake together. The scents of the night should have been enough to distract her wolf but the revelation that Ryan might have been telling the truth kept nagging at her.

If that was the case it would mean that they had been apart for no reason. The thought that she had suffered in silence without her mate for over a decade. All the while he'd been right there. Embarrassment and shame swept through her in a hot wave that made her stumble.

Ryan was there, his wolf protecting her as he helped bolster her so that she could regain her balance.

"*You ok?*" His question was clear, evidence that the connection between them grew stronger every time they used it. His tone was gentle. It made her want to weep.

Human emotion overwhelmed her wolf, and the form of the lycan slipped from her mind. One moment she was the wolf and the next she held her human form.

Kelly took off into the thick trees, unable to stand being close to Ryan. She felt the echo of his confusion in her mind. She slammed the door to that connection. It reverberated between them.

“Kelly, damn it!” His tone as he shouted was gruff. The sound of his footfalls though muted by the ground assured her that he chased her down in his human form.

It didn't matter. He could outpace her in either form and she couldn't hide from him. He was her alpha, his wolf was strong and he would be able to sniff her out no matter where she tried to run.

Knowing that she would be defeated didn't slow her down though. She maintained the punishing pace she'd set until a sharp stabbing pain in her side stopped her in her tracks. She clutched at the spot where the arrow had torn through her. It felt like someone had poured acid on her.

Ryan quickly caught up to her. His touch was tender, though she could feel the violence in him. It was so strong that he shook with it.

“I would never hurt you.” He responded to the thought, making her realize that the door she'd closed had cracked back open. They were mates, their minds and hearts attuned to each other like magnets. They were supposed to be linked, it was only a supreme effort that kept them apart.

Her shoulders slumped and the tears that she'd tried to hold at bay fell free. Ryan wrapped his arms around her.

“You’re breaking my heart.”

Kelly laid her head on his shoulder, aligning their bodies as he stroked through her hair. The steady beat of his heart was comforting but it made her sad knowing how much time they had lost.

“Talk to me, baby.”

RYAN COAXED WHILE continuing to run his fingers through her hair. Every now and then the callous on his palm would snag the soft strands, providing a stark reminder of their differences. She was soft and delicate and triggered every protective instinct that he had.

He didn’t like the idea of having her around all of the other pack leaders. Though they had struck a tentative peace, he didn’t trust the others. It could have been his paranoia, but he couldn’t shake the sense of impending danger, but they needed answers to the fertility issues that were spreading through each of the nine packs. Though it seemed, at least for the moment, that the progression was to varying degrees in each pack.

That alone was enough to suggest that whatever was going on wasn’t natural. Combined with Kelly’s research and speculations he knew that they needed the help of the other packs. He just didn’t want them anywhere near her while he tried to convince them to provide that help.

“You really didn’t know, did you?” Her question brought him out of his

musings and he refocused on her.

“Know what?” The wind shifted. Ryan snuggled her more tightly against him worried about the temperature. He was warm and didn’t feel the cool air but with both of them standing naked in the woods he didn’t want to take a chance that Kelly would become ill.

“You didn’t realize we were mates. You didn’t push me away on purpose.” Her sad tone made him hold her tighter.

“No, I didn’t.” He pulled back so that he could look her in the eye. He hid nothing from her, his mental shielding down so that she could see his memory of that day. His worries about his father, his insecurity about taking over the rulership of the pack, and his frustration with her cousin. She’d been a momentary blip on his radar and he’d felt shame that he would even consider an attraction to her at that age.

He’d rejected the idea so thoroughly that he hadn’t let himself consider it when she’d reached a more appropriate age. He laid everything at her feet out in the open so that she could process it. Even the fragile beginnings of the love he was developing for her.

Ryan felt the moment she touched on that revelation. He sensed her fear, then cautious hope that he might love her. He realized then that she’d let him back into her mind, to share her thoughts and memories.

He was bombarded by her pain and confusion at his supposed

rejection. Her wolf had known instantly that they were mates, even if Kelly hadn't realized what it meant at the time. It had triggered a juvenile crush and when he'd ignored her, her bitterness had grown.

“I don't know how you survived this long.” The words were breathed in her hair. “I would have torn someone apart if they tried to lay claim to you.” He kissed her temple before encouraging her to walk back to their discarded clothing. “Hell, I almost did. When you showed the slightest acceptance of Clay I wanted to rip into him. Even now I hate that he's still in my territory.”

When they reached the pile of clothing, Ryan carefully helped her dress before pulling on his clothing. Once they were both dressed, he pulled her hand to his mouth pressing a kiss to her open palm. Before curling his hand around hers.

They walked hand in hand back to town, and he was pleased when she didn't question him when he bypassed her house in favor of his.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The clearing where they normally gathered was filled with tables so that the pack could dine together. There was a head table set up, much like you would expect to see at a wedding. This was where Ryan sat with Byron.

Since they weren't officially bonded yet there was no chair next to him where his mate would sit and while she understood the gesture and the optics, his choice to stand alone rather than with her at his side still stung.

The table also housed the Alphas of the eight other packs. Seating them had been a challenge. Kelly had watched him agonize over who should sit where, before finally helping him place them in order of their geographical region. It seemed the safest option since none of them could deny their proximity to the person next to them and usually, the packs had formed a tentative alliance with their closest neighbors. The only difference was that as Host, Ryan took the center seat. Julian from the Yellow Claw Pack was on his right, next to him was Darius from the Sourwind Pack, followed by Martin from the Blood Moon Pack. The final seat on the right side was occupied by Westin from The River Run Pack. The left side was comprised of Maverick from the Rogue Claw Pack, next to him was Gallen from The Night Mist Pack, Dembe from The Dark Spire Pack, and the final seat on the

left was held by Selene from the Rolling Hills Pack. She was the only female alpha and it was rumored she ruled with an iron fist and ruthless aggression to remain in leadership.

Kelly had once thought the notion incredibly sexist but seeing Selene in the flesh she had to admit that there might be a grain of truth in the whispers.

She didn't miss the cold angry look that Darius gave Ryan before he took his seat at the table and wondered how deep of a rift her incident with Dawnecia had caused.

Ryan refused to elaborate other than to say the other Alpha had been appeased, and that the altercation was the end of it. Kelly still felt shame over how she'd acted towards the other woman.

Ryan sent her a warm soothing wave of comfort until her feelings of embarrassment faded again. He gave no outward indication that he was worried about Darius's reaction and Kelly couldn't sense anything from their mental link.

"That's because I'm not concerned." There was laughter in his tone and Kelly swore that she could feel his hands on her a light teasing caress that was driving her mad. She squeezed her thighs together and fought her outward response to him. She watched enviously as he held a verbal conversation with the other alphas at the table all the while using his mental

link to tease her.

“I will get you back for this, you know!” She sent him the promise of retribution before refocusing her attention on the meal in front of her.

She was just finishing, when she felt Clay at her elbow. She knew it was him before she looked up. She was happy to see him and let it show in the warm inviting smile she gave him.

“Oh God, don’t look at me like that. Are you trying to get me killed? Ryan has only just stopped looking at me with murder in his gaze. Please don’t give him a reason to start again.”

As if on cue, Ryan sent her a low menacing growl, and judging by the way Clay winced he’d let it leak to the more common pathway he shared with the other man.

Kelly scowled but put some distance between herself where Clay had slid in next to her. That seemed to satisfy her mate’s jealousy, so she turned her attention back to Clay noticing the sad expression on his face for the first time.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Kelly asked, knowing his answer before he gave it. At his nod pain lanced through her chest. She swallowed the outcry that tried to pass her lips.

She knew she hadn’t hidden her reaction when Ryan’s gaze swung to hers. His dark brooding gaze cut through the crowd to zero in on her.

“*What’s wrong?*” He sent her the question but looked ready to rise from where he sat and come to her.

Kelly shook her head. A denial of Clay’s news, as well as to stop Ryan from pissing off a table full of visiting Alphas. She sent him reassurances that she was fine, before flashing him what she hoped was a convincingly warm and happy smile.

“Why?” She fought to keep the betrayal she felt out of her tone but knew she’d failed when Clay sighed.

“Kelly, you’re back with your pack. On your way to mating, and back to full health. You don’t need me here.”

“No, but I want you here,” she confessed, once again trying to fight the hurt threatening to rise inside of her.

“Jesus, Kelly. You are trying to get me killed aren’t you little wolf?” He shot a cautious glance at Ryan and looked as if he wanted to scoot away from her even if it meant falling off the bench.

“You were my only friend, Clay, after years of feeling like I didn’t fit in here. You were the only one who didn’t make me feel like I was a freak. You can’t blame me for not wanting you to leave.”

“It’s only hard because you’re making it that way. Forgive him, Kelly, let him be your mate. Be happy little wolf.”

Kelly bowed her head as his words hit their mark. The truth was she

didn't know how to forgive Ryan. As much as she might have wanted to she couldn't let go of the hurt that she felt.

"I knew. The moment I saw him I knew we were meant for each other. I don't understand why he didn't." She made the confession keeping her tone soft afraid to be overheard by Ryan or the other Alphas.

"YOU WOULD FURTHER insult our pack by denying Dawnicia and then not seating your chosen with us?"

"With all due respect Alpha Delgado the issue is more complex and is an internal matter for my pack to resolve. It has no bearing on my asking you here." Ryan sliced off a piece of the roast on his plate and popped it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully while he waited for the other Alpha to respond. The other man was silent, seeming to drop the argument for the time being, though his gaze never wavered from Ryan, and the remainder of the meal passed with tension thick in the air.

"He's going to be a problem later." The warning came from his brother. Ryan's gaze slid to his twin, knowing the other man watched his back even while he resided with the other council members.

"Why should we be concerned with the mating problems of other

packs?” Maverick posed the question once the alphas had retreated from the banquet. Ryan turned his full attention on the group comprised of each pack alpha as well as each respective council member.

“It should be a private matter to be dealt with internally. I’m sure most of us here can agree to that.” Dembe threw his support behind the other man, and Ryan wanted to scream.

He ran his hand through his hair trying to hold back his anger and frustration casting a look to his brother for intervention.

“Do not look to him to save you. It’s ridiculous that he was allowed to be a council member while you are alpha to this pack. It gives you an unfair advantage!” Darius seethed with anger, his brown eyes filled with an angry gleam as he hurled out the insult. He raked his fingers through his already disheveled hair until the caramel-colored strands stood on end. His anger was like a live wire leaking out with his turbulent emotions. Ryan could feel his resentment and it made him wonder if they would ever reach an agreement.

“Now Darius, Jace fought for his spot on the council. It was well earned and not once in two years has he shown any bias towards his brother or the Coldridge pack.” Julian spoke. Ryan cast the other man a smile offering silent thanks that he’d spoken up in support of the plan.

“I know it is difficult to freely share information among our groups but if you lost a child and your mate suffered that loss as mine has you might

feel differently.

Julian's pain was so thick it clogged the air in the room until they were almost choking on it, Ryan's compassion and respect for the other man increased two-fold as the others in the room finally seemed ready to listen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Clay has volunteered to begin the search for our pack. I can’t stand to see the pain in my mate’s eyes she longs for another child and it isn’t as easy as it was when she conceived previously.” Ryan watched as Julian held each alpha’s gaze in turn, recalling the slight woman he’d arrived with.

He had paid his respects to her as tradition dictated, but he’d been more focused on challenges that he faced by having all of the other alphas in his territory. It was incredibly dangerous and rarely done since their natural inclination was to fight each other for supremacy.

Julian’s mate had worn her sadness around her like a heavy cloak that she couldn’t shake off. It made Ryan wonder how recently the woman had lost their child.

A shudder ran through him at the thought of that sadness touching Kelly. So far, their mating hadn’t been an easy one and the idea that she could suffer more had guilt riding him hard.

Of course, they would have to solidify their union first, and there was still a chance that she wouldn’t want to remain with him once she was healthy. The thought made him want to howl with rage. It was a prospect that

he didn't want to consider.

It had taken an hour of arguing with the other lycans for them to even agree that they needed to investigate the issue and another forty-five for them to consent to Clay being the one to start collecting the details.

"I don't trust this." It was Darius who spoke again. His mistrust was evident, and it was clear that everyone in the room was beginning to get frustrated with his uncooperative nature.

"Let him start in our pack Darius. If you are uncertain of his intentions, then perhaps it would be best to monitor the process early." Edmund, the council member for the Sourwind pack spoke, focusing his wisened gaze on the younger alpha with a laser-like precision that made the other man stiffen, and dared him to speak against the council member.

Darius gave a slight nod, and Ryan had to bite down on showing any outward emotion knowing that if he did he might lose any progress they'd made.

He looked at the clock on the wall and fought the urge to reach out to Kelly, knowing that his attention should be on the meeting and the people in the room with him.

Despite his best intentions though, he couldn't resist the urge for long. He let their connection crack open and was bombarded by Kelly's feelings.

She was overwhelmed, emotional, and on the verge of tears. Feeling

that, Ryan no longer cared what was going on in the meeting with the alphas. He wanted them out of his territory and away from his pack.

“Kelly, what’s wrong?” He asked the question but she didn’t answer. He could feel her pull back trying to close their connection off again.

“Don’t!” he demanded harshly. *“Don’t close yourself off from me. What’s wrong?”* He shifted his attention to his brother wordlessly communicating his need to have the meeting wrapped up before turning his focus back to her.

“You need to focus on the meeting Ryan it’s more important than me. I’ll be alright. I just don’t feel well.”

Ryan fought the need to growl at her. *“Nothing is more important than you. We are almost done here, I’ll come to you.”* She wasn’t telling him the whole truth. He could sense that she felt weak and unwell but that wasn’t the end of it. She was emotionally distraught as well, and it set him on edge that someone would be so disrespectful to her.

“I’m sorry, there’s an urgent matter that I need to attend to.” He stood and was halfway to the door before he thought to thank the others or try to smooth his exit over at all. *“Thank you all for coming and for working together to resolve this crisis. Please enjoy the remainder of the evening and entertainment before you begin the journey back to your territories.”* He gave the room the customary slight nod before making a hasty retreat.

When he found her, it was in the large kitchen area that the pack used for big gatherings. Several of his pack were there but the visiting mates and other members who had come with the other packs were present as well.

At first glance, the room was filled with laughter, the mood much lighter than the meeting he'd just left. Kelly was off to the side, her complexion pale, her features pinched as if she were in pain.

Her demeanor reminded him of how she behaved with the pack in recent years, preferring to blend into the background rather than assert any dominance or make herself the center of attention.

Ryan suffered a pang of doubt while observing her. He was the alpha, and she needed to be able to stand confidently by his side. It wasn't a trait that could be taught. She either had it or she didn't, and if she didn't, he wasn't sure what that would mean for them.

Her head snapped up and her eyes filled with tears, assuring him that he'd mistakenly let that last thought slip through their link.

FUCK! He let the frustration and anger he felt at himself through. *"I didn't mean it like that."*

She looked away from him, stonewalling him with her silence. The others in the room stopped speaking as if they felt the tension change in the room.

"If you'll excuse me." It was the only explanation he offered the

others in the room before he strode to Kelly.

She wouldn't look at him, and once he got close he could feel her body trembling – with fear or anger or restrained tears he wasn't certain, but he wouldn't stand by and continue to allow her to hurt.

Ryan tilted her chin with his index finger, forcing her to meet his gaze so that she could see his sincerity. “I didn't mean it like that.” He whispered the words again as an apology to her hurt feelings before he claimed her mouth with his own.

His lips slanted over hers and his tongue teased the seam, seeking entrance. When she granted it he devoured her uncaring of their audience as he claimed her.

The scent of her arousal exploded in the air around them, but it was tainted with the flavor of her tears. Her fingers spread against his chest curling into the fabric of his sweater.

Done playing around, Ryan bent his knees and scooped her off the chair, finally breaking their kiss when she was securely in his arms. He carried her to the door, ignoring the shocked expression of the others around them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“You can put me down now.” They were outside and halfway to his house before she spoke. She could still feel the heat of her blush coloring her skin.

“No.”

Kelly sighed, annoyed by his tone and unwavering resolve, but she didn't struggle in his hold, afraid that if she did he might drop her. He didn't think she was alpha enough for him. He found her lacking. The knowledge made her sad and increased the turmoil she was already feeling.

She was about to demand to be put down again when he swung her over his shoulder making all the blood rush to her head. It wasn't the least bit romantic, and she was ready to scream before she realized he'd done it to remove his keys from his pocket.

Once he had the door open and they were both inside, he returned her to her previous position cradled against his chest as if she were precious to him.

He kicked the door shut with his booted heel. It banged closed with a loud thump that startled her making her jerk in his hold.

“Goddamn it, Ryan put me down.” She gave his shoulder a solid

wack with her fist, knowing it wouldn't hurt him but unable to restrain her anger towards him.

Would she ever be enough for him? The thought stalled as he tossed her down on the bed. She bounced once before settling into the soft mattress.

She glared up at him, unable to suppress her anger. "I'm not a sack of potatoes you can just throw around whenever you feel like it." She pushed up on her elbows intending to leave the bed.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"So you've said. Three times now. It doesn't change that you thought it..."

The rumble of displeasure started low and grew in volume and strength, a clear indication that he was frustrated and upset and losing his patience with her.

He came over her on the bed caging her in with his limbs so that she was trapped under him.

"Is this what life will be for me now? Me disappointing you? You controlling me with sex?"

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"Feels like it." She wiggled underneath him trying to put space between them, unable to miss the hard ridge of his erection when she squirmed against him.

“Then you haven’t been paying attention.” He bumped his crotch against her so that their bodies were more tightly aligned. It had the urge to fight draining out of her.

“You are my mate, Kelly.”

“Yeah but not because you want me to be. You find me lacking. You did when I was fifteen, and you do now.” She turned her face away from him, unable to maintain eye contact as she fell apart on the inside.

She felt tears burn in her eyes. She squeezed them shut not wanting to cry in front of him.

RYAN ROLLED TO his side, taking her with him so that she was no longer pinned by his weight. “Kelly, look at me.” He softened his tone when she scrunched her eyes more tightly closed as if wishing him away. “Please?”

His breath caught when she turned back to look at him. Her eyes held a golden light in them; they glowed like treasure sucking him in with an almost hypnotic quality.

“Our wolves, we are part of nature. Mates are a gift. Do you honestly think we could be so mismatched?” He kissed the tip of her nose, unable to resist the adorable slightly upturned slope and the smattering of freckles across its bridge.

She shook her head but didn’t speak. He captured her chin again

refusing to let her escape the intensity of his gaze.

“I love you.” He felt her tremble where he held her and knew she would deny his claim. He moved and pressed his finger against her lips to keep her silent.

“I. Love. You.” He said it again, pausing to emphasize each word; letting them sink into her brain.

She reached up, her grip on his wrist strong as she pulled him away so she could speak.

“Because you have to, not because you want to. It’s biology. Nature threw us together and you don’t think you should fight that selection, but deep down I’m not what you want.”

“All love is biological Kelly, it doesn’t mean that mine isn’t real. Why do you doubt my emotions when you accept the same thing in others?”

“It isn’t real. You didn’t feel it before.”

“I’m tired of you punishing me for something that happened twelve years ago.

No, I didn’t realize we were mates. I should have. I wish I did, but I didn’t, and I can’t go back and change that. I am sorry I hurt you I didn’t mean to, but I was a kid. My life had just changed.

My dad was hurt I was chosen to lead. I didn’t have a clue what I was doing, and you were fifteen. It felt wrong to want you. Hell, it *was* wrong to

want you so I pushed it aside. I ignored it, I fought against it until it was an empty gnawing ache that ate at me, but never doubt the desire was there.

You've decreed that I can't take your blood. I can't bind us together when it's the one thing that would put an end to your uncertainty, but the longing to do it is there and it's so strong that my teeth ache with the need to do it, and still, I won't do it because I can't bear the thought that you'll hate me more than you already do."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“I don’t hate you.” She whispered the words, forcing them past the lump in her throat. His confession was raw, and if she was honest she had to admit that she hadn’t taken the time to consider things from his perspective. She’d been too hurt by his rejection to realize or appreciate how much drama had been going on for him back then.

“I don’t hate you. I just don’t know how to let myself love you.”

“Can you try?” The question shook her to the core. Ryan, her big strong confident alpha, sounded so vulnerable that her heart ached. She’d held on to the hurt for so long that she didn’t know how to let it go, so she did the only thing she could think of.

She reached up and tugged aside the collar of her shirt and turned her neck.

“Bite me.” She lay next to him, feeling every bit the sacrificial lamb. Kelly could feel her heart pounding, making her pulse beat rapidly in her throat. She could feel his breath barely moving the tense line of stone-like muscles that were pressed against her as she waited for him to sink fangs into her flesh.

“Not like this.” He kissed the flesh she had exposed. Kelly swallowed

hard, trying to ignore the pain at yet another perceived rejection.

“Why?” She hated how small and lost her voice sounded, but couldn’t keep from voicing the question.

“It would hurt if I just bit you, and I don’t want you to agree to this just because you think that you should.”

His explanation made sense. She knew he was being logical but it still felt like rejection. She snarled, frustrated and angry. She’d finally made a decision and he would deny her?

She was his rightful mate and wouldn’t be denied any longer. It would kill her if he pushed her away but her instincts told her that if she didn’t try now she would lose him for good.

Moving quickly so that he couldn’t stop her, she swung her leg over his, shifting her weight so that he was pinned under her. Kelly ignored the growl that rose in his throat even as Ryan tried to stifle it.

It was an instinctive reaction to the submissive position she’d put him in. He could have taken control from her. She could feel his need to do so humming below the surface of his skin and was surprised when he didn’t become the aggressor and reverse their roles so that he had the advantage. Instead, he watched her, curiosity shining in his gaze.

Kelly knew he wouldn’t be able to fight his nature for long so she leaned forward and kissed him, fusing their lips while she rubbed her body

against his. A frustrated growl filled the room, and it took her a moment to realize the sound had escaped from her throat.

They were both wearing too many clothes, but that was easily fixed. She fisted the material of his shirt and gave it a sharp tug. Buttons scattered and the sound of fabric rending was loud.

Kelly gave an appreciative groan and let her hands explore the skin she'd exposed. There wasn't much give to his flesh as she caressed him.

There was a second loud ripping sound. Kelly gasped as he tore through the material of her blouse.

"You started it." He grinned and gave her a playful shrug while he pushed the torn material off her shoulders and down her arms.

She leaned forward and repeated the rubbing motion, this time pressing their skin together, unable to deny the urge to have his scent on her and to put hers on him.

Kelly pressed her mouth to the base of his throat then trailed her lips down his chest letting her tongue peek out to tease him. It was that action that broke whatever control Ryan had left.

"My turn," he said, as he lifted her and swept her under him. "See what you get when you play with fire, baby?" She couldn't keep her hips still as he reached between them to release the button holding them closed. The zipper lowered faster than she thought possible.

His hand sought and found her damp flesh and he slid a finger inside of her, and then a second. She arched against his onslaught, needing to be closer to him. She grew wetter, her body welcoming him as he thrust into her mimicking what would follow.

He pulled back making Kelly protest.”We have way too many clothes on.” Ryan said cutting off her objection to his stopping.

She hurried to remove the rest of her clothing when he put space between them so that she could do so. She got tangled in the torn shirt and had to wait for Ryan to finish undressing so that he could help work her free from the confining material. The delay did nothing to cool her need for him though, and as soon as the shirt was tossed aside she was on him again.

“Easy.” he cautioned, and his fierce hold on her loosened. Kelly didn’t want easy though and she didn’t want him to be gentle. Words weren’t working so she did the only thing she could think of to get her point across.

When he kissed her again she sank her teeth into his lower lip, tugging when he would have pulled away, then soothed the sting with her tongue. She lapped over the small wound and felt the shift in energy between them when she cleaned up the bit of blood she’d drawn.

HIS CONTROL SNAPPED. His world narrowed to the feeling of her tongue sliding over his lower lip and thoughts of holding back evaporated

with his good intentions.

Ryan shifted so that he was between her thighs. He pushed them wider to accommodate his large frame then he gave her exactly what she'd been angling for and slid his fingers back inside of her, zeroing in on her g-spot with his index and middle finger while keeping pressure on her clit with his thumb. When she tried to curl in on herself and her muscles tightened with her impending climax, he used her other hand to press against her lower belly holding her down and open for his ministrations.

“Come for me.” The harsh command was nearly an inhuman growl but it achieved his goal. Kelly threw her head back against the pillow while her body shook beneath him and before the tremors had stopped Ryan had her flipped onto her belly.

He urged her to her knees and spread them apart. She was breathtaking, and he could have looked at her all day. The sight of her sex, pink, swollen and glistening made his mouth water. His testicles drew up tight to his body and he knew he wouldn't last much longer.

Ryan aligned their bodies and drove into her with a quick snap of his hips. His fingers, on one hand, dug into her hips while the other rubbed circles around her clit.

She was going to come again. He could feel her body coiling tighter. He pinched the hard throbbing bud between his fingers giving one last thrust

as he emptied into her body. She exploded around him and as she did he struck.

His teeth elongated and sharpened, taking the shape of their lycan counterparts. The points pierced the flesh of her neck, the copper tang of her blood coated his tongue, and it spurred him to keep going and he drew on her neck deepening the love bite.

He was still hard despite having gained his release; the blood bond between them demanding to be complete. She must have felt it too because she twisted her neck to try to reach him.

Ryan released her, not wanting to tear where he'd bitten her. He allowed her space so that they could change position, and moved so that he sat with her in his lap, entering her again as he did so. This time their joining was gentle and helped Kelly rock her pelvis against his. He watched the passion flare in her gaze again, turning the golden hues molten.

When she was nearing her completion he angled his neck in offering to her. She bit down.

The bond between them seemed to expand, then snap into place like a rubber band with either of them on each end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Kelly fell forward, trusting implicitly that Ryan would hold her weight. She could hear the thundering of his heart under her ear and knew that it matched her own.

The sweet tang of his blood still coated her tongue. She'd bitten him hard. He'd likely carry her mark, a scar for all to see for the rest of their lives together.

“Well, that will put a stop to the other women”. She yelped when Ryan's hand landed on her butt cheek.

“There won't be any other women!” Ryan growled, then soothed away the sting of his swat rubbing in circles meant to comfort her. “We're bonded now, Mate. I can hear your thoughts much clearer now.” He kissed her forehead, adjusting his hold on her so that they could snuggle under the blankets.

She realized then that neither of them was shielding from the other. She could read his thoughts and feelings as clearly as if they were her own.

Knowing how much he loved her healed any residual hurt that remained over their past. She breathed a sigh of relief as her wolf settled within her, finally content.

Her eyes snapped open, the room was dark. Kelly wasn't sure what had woken her. Ryan still lay under her, his breathing deep and even. Whatever had disturbed her sleep hadn't bothered him. She was about to close her eyes again but the feeling that something wasn't right wouldn't go away.

Instead of reaching for the light on the nightstand or speaking, she reached out to Ryan mentally letting him feel her nervousness as he shook off sleep.

"Something is wrong. Someone is here." She gave him the warning, realizing that there was an artificial smell permeating the room. It was as if someone had used something to cover their scent.

Ryan shifted so that he was no longer under her. *"Stay quiet,"* he warned, while he reached for a pair of his boxers. Kelly didn't have to be told, not wanting to face their enemy naked she dressed as well, pulling on his discarded T-shirt. It wasn't perfect but she was covered.

She let out a small gasp when cold metal touched the base of her throat.
Ryan!

RYAN WHIPPED HIS head around at Kelly's distressed tone. Rage and fear formed a cold knot in his belly at the sight of a lethal blade against the tender flesh of her neck.

It lay threateningly over the mating mark he'd given her and he knew

one wrong move would slit her throat.

“What do you want?” He couldn’t make out who their attackers were. They had come all in black, masks covered their faces and hunting spray covered their scents confusing his wolf.

The goon holding Kelly tightened his grip making her groan as he put pressure on her ribcage. The man yanked her further away from Ryan and tighter against his own body using her as a shield.

Kelly yelped, a hiss escaping her before the man’s grip on her tightened further and the sound of her labored breathing was loud in the otherwise silent room.

“You don’t need to hurt her. Deal with me; tell me what you want.” He growled as the blade knicked her. The scent of her blood reached him, assuring him that she’d been cut.

“*Are you ok?*”

“*I can’t breathe.*”

Her strained answer came to him. He was glad that she had answered but even more furious that she’d been hurt. *How the hell had they been able to sneak up on him like that?* He wondered.

“We were supposed to finish without waking them.” As the second assailant spoke from near the window, Ryan fought to hide his shock. He’d been so focused on Kelly and the man holding her that he’d missed the

second intruder.

“We need to get out of here. Do you really think Dar-”

“Shut up! Do you want to go back to the Alpha and tell him we failed?”

“We need to go. He could call out to others if he hasn’t done so already.”

Ryan felt stupid. He hadn’t even thought to use his mental link to call for help until the man had mentioned it. He opened his shields to reach for Jace.

“Don’t! I’ll kill her before you can get anyone here.” The harsh warning came from the one holding Kelly, and the scent of her blood became heavier.

“We’re taking her. You’re going to sit there and let us. You’ll get more instructions once we’re safe. Understand?”

“You aren’t taking her,” Ryan stated calmly.

“Then she’ll die here.”

“She’s the only thing keeping you alive right now.” Ryan knew that if they hurt her or killed her to get away there would be no controlling his rage. He’d go after them even if it wasn’t a good move tactically, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself.

“Let us leave and you’ll get your instructions. We won’t kill the

bitch.”

“Why did Darius send you? You’ve lost the element of surprise. Whatever plot you had here, whatever mission he gave you failed. Let her go and I swear I won’t hunt you down and kill you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ryan watched as the two considered his words. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Darius had sent them. He just wasn't sure what the other alpha had intended.

While they argued, Ryan cracked open the line he had to his brother. He did it slowly and carefully counting on their unique twin bond to shield his actions. It was true that most lycans could feel the telepathic communication among them but Ryan's bond with his brother had been formed in the womb; they touched each other's minds so often and so lightly that there was a chance their attackers wouldn't realize what he was doing.

"Jace, send help." He sent Jace the impression of danger and the knife at his mate's throat.

"We need to get out of here now." The one by the window moved as if to exit that way, but the one holding Kelly stood his ground.

"And go where? Back to our alpha? A hostage and a pissed-off alpha wasn't the plan. Do you think he won't hunt us down? Are you truly that stupid?"

Ryan made the promise again, not wanting them to feel painted into a corner.

“Just tell me why he sent you and put the knife down. You can tell him you came here but we weren’t home. Tell him you’ll try again. You don’t have to hurt my mate. Put the knife down.”

“She wasn’t even supposed to be your mate. You didn’t claim her before the other packs. If we’d known you’d mated I’d have never taken this assignment. It is a death sentence.”

The one by the window whined, and Ryan capitalized on it. He was the weaker of the two. So Ryan spoke to him while careful never to take his gaze off of the one holding Kelly.

“You were supposed to kill her? Kill both of us?”

“Shut up! We’re leaving now.” The one holding Kelly dragged her farther from the bed.

“Stop! You won’t get far with her. I’ll track you if you try to take her from me.” Fear clawed at Ryan’s belly, but he fought to remain rational. Jace had answered his call. He just needed to keep the two who had broken into his house talking while reinforcements arrived,

They hadn’t given any indication that they’d realized that Ryan had contacted anyone else. So he just needed to stall.

“I just let her go and tell me what Darius wants. Leave her out of it.” Ryan shifted strategy when he felt Kelly losing consciousness through their connection. The thug holding her had squeezed hard enough that her airflow

was restricted.

“She can’t breathe. Loosen your hold.” He made it an order putting the force of his alpha behind him. These two weren’t his; they hadn’t sworn loyalty to him, but they weren’t alphas. It gave him enough hope that if he was forceful enough their instincts would demand that they obey.

It was enough that the other man adjusted his grip, allowing Kelly to breathe easier.

“Thank you.” He let his genuine gratitude bleed into his tone.

“We’re leaving with her don’t do anything stupid and you might get her back.”

“He sent you on a suicide mission. You do realize that don’t you? You aren’t mated so you don’t know but there isn’t anywhere I won’t find you. You are trusting that spray you used to cover your scent, but it’s fading and I know that Darius sent you. You won’t be hard to find. Let her go. Leave here now, and it will be over. I won’t follow you. I won’t even mention you were here.”

“But you will retaliate. He’ll know we lied. He’ll know we failed and he’ll kill us.” The desperation that the other men were feeling was thick in the room. Tension coiled Ryan’s muscles tighter where he crouched at the edge of the bed.

He mentally calculated the time it would take to get to the other side

of the bed where Kelly was held. All of his instincts told him to yank her away from the danger to her. His wolf wanted to lunge at the man and neutralize the danger. The knife at her throat kept him immobile, and Ryan's promise of retribution helped him keep a shred of sanity.

The window broke, startling the intruders and assuring Ryan that help had arrived. With his attention diverted to the commotion, the man's grip on the blade went slack.

Ryan had been waiting for it, watching for it, and he pounced. He tore the man's arm away from his mate, twisting it so that Kelly was out of direct danger, and putting pressure on the bone. It gave under his assault with a sickening snap, and the knife fell to the floor as the other man howled in pain. He attacked again and a distinctive pop assured him that he'd separated the man's shoulder. He let go and watched as it hung loosely at his side.

"Don't kill him," Jace called out, only seconds before Ryan went for the killing blow.

He growled, blood lust riding him hard, demanding that he eliminate any threat to himself or his mate.

"He might have sent them here as cannon fodder. First, your rejection of Dawnecia, then if you kill two of his men he could be setting you up to look like you're challenging him."

His brother's words penetrated the haze of anger that still held him in

its grip, making him more animal than man. An attack like the one Jace described would mean the council could intervene. If they believed that he had a vendetta against Darius they could offer restitution as a way to keep the peace, similar to what he had done when he'd sent money to his pack for the way Kelly had attacked Dawnecia, and Darius could demand land for his pack or that Ryan step down as Alpha or both.

The more that Ryan thought about it, the more he realized that it was something that the other alpha would do. Ryan had held the largest lycan pack from the youngest age. It wasn't a feat that the others could claim, so it was unlikely that Darius would come at him head-on.

No, the other alpha wanted war. The only question was was anyone else in on it with him?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ryan was seething with anger, the red haze demanding that he eliminate any threat to his mate. The threat to his territory was secondary. He would defend it and his pack as necessary, but the idea that Kelly could be taken from him and harmed in some way took his rage to another level, sparking violence in him that he hadn't realized he was capable of.

It must have shown on his face because she watched him warily as he paced the length of the room. She reached out to him along the path of their bond, but Ryan had erected strong barriers against her probing, afraid to let her get too close. He worried that she might reject his savage nature, and with the bond between them still new and fragile he didn't want to risk putting any strain on the emerging relationship.

Blocking her from his thoughts had unwanted consequences though, Ryan could see the confusion and hurt in her eyes as she scrutinized him. He could tell she didn't understand why he'd shut her out.

"It has nothing to do with you." He rushed to reassure her while still keeping the barrier up around his emotions. *I just don't want you exposed to my anger until I have better control.*

His explanation did little to soothe the pain he could feel growing

inside her. She was fighting to keep it hidden from him throwing up her own blocks against him.

“I want to kill him,” Ryan confessed, letting her feel his shame. *“I don’t want you to see me like that.”* He partially lowered the barrier he’d created to shield her remembering how he’d chastised her for keeping him out.

The wave of love and acceptance that she sent to wrap around him was humbling. She wasn’t judging him. She wasn’t horrified that he would want to impose swift retribution on their enemies and neutralize any threat no matter how small.

“I don’t deserve you.”

“You might have wanted to figure that out before you laid claim to me. You’re stuck with me now.”

“His attack on me can’t go unanswered. It was a clear challenge.” He said out loud so that everyone in the room was included in the conversation.

Jace and Byron were present, but he’d also called more of the pack enforcers as well as another representative from the elder’s council. That way they couldn’t claim bias against his brother.

Ryan didn’t want to allow anyone to say that he’d done anything underhanded.

“It wasn’t a challenge,” Byron spat the words as if disgusted by the

very thought of what Darius had done. “He came at you in the dead of night. It was an assassination attempt!”

“We need to let cooler heads prevail,” Reymond spoke from his seat in the corner of the room.

“No, it needs to be now. Gather a team we’ll cross the border into their territory at dawn.” Ryan announced with the full weight of his power behind him. Only Jace was bold enough to oppose him.

“You need to send word ahead or it will mean war between our packs.”

Ryan crossed the room and pulled Kelly from the sofa where she’d perched on its arm. He angled her head so that the wound at her throat was visible to the others in the room.

Her blood had been cleaned away, bandages held the edges of the cut together, and dark bruising marred her flesh where cruel fingers had held her.

“Would you allow time to pass if this was Sara? These bastards came into my home and tried to take my mate from me. They are lucky they aren’t dead.”

“Send word ahead that we’re coming. Don’t give him any reason to accuse you of being the aggressor.”

“What if he kills whomever we send? He’s already proven he has no honor.” Ryan tried to reason with Jace, knowing that he didn’t trust Darius to obey the rules of their society, but he could see the other council member

agreed with his brother.

He threw up his hands in disgust, “Fine send word, but do it now. I want to be there tomorrow. No later.”

He stroked Kelly’s back, not sure which one of them he was trying to comfort.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Sourwind pack was South-East of the Coldridge territory on the other side of the lake. The pack was small compared to his, comprised of approximately fifteen men, women, and a few children.

The fertility issues seemed to plague the Sourwind pack almost as much as did the Coldridge pack. Ryan had wondered if there was a pattern to the decline since talking it over with Kelly and had hoped for the other packs cooperation.

That wouldn't happen now, but in his current mood, Ryan wasn't against taking the information by force if he needed to.

He gathered a small fighting force and they made their way onto the other packs lands. The terrain was similar to theirs and his enforcers slipped through the thicket of trees easily. They had parked in town and then traveled on foot to the area where the pack would gather. They came in human form since Ryan was uncertain if the town had had a human population. He didn't think so if Dawnecia's behavior was any indication, but he was cautious in case he was mistaken.

There was tension in the air as he approached the main pack house. Darius was waiting on the wrap-around porch his boots up on the railing as

though he didn't care that they were there. He didn't stand to greet Ryan as he would an alpha he considered his equal. Instead, he took a drag off the cigarette he was smoking then deliberately flicked it so that it sparked against Ryan's boot before landing on the ground.

It was an insult that left a bitter taste in Ryan's mouth, setting him on edge for how he would deal with Darius going forward.

"You don't even have the decency to stand and greet me as your equal?" Ryan called Darius out on his lack of etiquette. The other man gave him the once over and sneered as if he found Ryan lacking.

"If you were my equal I would, but since you aren't I'll stay where I am. It seems you aren't alpha enough to face me on your own anyhow." His gaze went to the six men at Ryan's back, a weary expression flitting in his eyes before it was quickly masked.

Ryan didn't take his eyes off his adversary, "They are here to make sure that you abide by our laws. They won't interfere."

Ryan climbed the steps up the porch, trusting the men he'd brought with him to watch his back. He hadn't been lying to Darius they weren't there to fight unless the other alpha gave orders to his pack to attack Ryan.

"I'm not going to fight you. You're beneath me."

"So much so that you sent men to attack me in the middle of the night?" Ryan couldn't keep the contempt out of his tone, all pretense of

respect and decorum was quickly forgotten. “Next time make sure they finish the job.”

Without further warning, he kicked Darius’s foot removing it from where it was resting on the railing. When the other man still refused to stand Ryan let the power of his wolf do the talking. He unleashed the power that made him an alpha until it crackled against his skin filling the air between them.

“Get up.” The words were barely human and they had an immediate effect on Darius. The other man lumbered to his feet, fighting the compulsion to do so with every part of his being.

“You came at me. You came at my mate, and I demand to know why.” Ryan grabbed the other man’s lapels. Bringing them eye to eye he dared the other man to lie to him.

“Go to hell.” Darius cursed, trying to jerk himself out of Ryan’s hold. His grip remained firm though and the scent of fear and frustration permeated the air.

A commotion behind him assured him that the other Alpha had finally called for reinforcements, but Ryan never shifted his focus, trusting the men with him to continue to watch his back and to handle anyone foolish enough to try to come to the aid of their alpha.

Ryan smelled it then, jealousy; the other man reeked of it. His entire

attack was based on it. Ryan was alpha at a younger age, and under his reign, the Coldridge pack had flourished. In Darius's eyes, Ryan had it all and his mating to Kelly was the last straw. It had broken something in him to believe Ryan had a perfect life. Ryan couldn't believe the stupidity of Darius's beliefs, and he shook him hard before letting him go.

“All this because you have an inferiority complex? Stay off my land and away from my pack. You are a wolf without honor.” Ryan turned, unwilling to fight someone so pathetic.

It was an error that he quickly realized when hot blinding pain struck his side. He looked down expecting to see claw marks and was shocked to see a knife wound instead. It was their custom to fight with tooth and claw not man-made weapons.

The wound was bleeding heavily and spots danced in front of his eyes. The urge to shift was undeniable. The calculating look on Darius's face assured Ryan that the other man would capitalize on any advantage Ryan shifting gave him, but Ryan was fast and he knew Darius would underestimate this ability to shift on the fly. He pressed his back against the porch rail to give himself as much space as possible, then let the change pour through his body.

He pushed energy into the wound in his side, forcing it to close quickly all while controlling which parts of his body shifted first. He swiped

out at Darius with newly formed claws, catching the man across his sternum making him growl. In response, Ryan returned the throaty rumble with one of his own flashing sharp fangs in a predatory warning. Darius used the time to shift form as well, and the fight was on between their beasts.

The confines of the porch weren't an ideal spot for a fight and the wood behind Ryan splintered under their weight as Darius charged him. The two of them fell into the yard below in a tangle of teeth and fur. Yips and growls filled the air as the two fought, and with his acute hearing, Ryan could tell the men in the clearing behind them fought now as well.

The fight between the two alphas wasn't a controlled fight for dominance or a ritualized fight arranged by the council. It was a brawl, both men sacrificing their bodies pushing themselves to the limit to get the upper hand on their opponent.

Darius struck out at Ryan, and a loud crunch accompanied the pain that exploded in his hip. Memories of his father's injury went through his head, making Ryan more vicious than before. He rolled using his weight. Ryan pinned Darius under him, his powerful jaws snapping at his throat.

"Yield!" He threw the command out through the common channel that all Lycans used to communicate giving Darius one final out, but true to his character Darius continued to fight dirty. He shifted back and yelled for a blade.

Ryan didn't know if any of Darius's men would respond. He didn't wait to find out. He lunged at the other man's throat his teeth tearing into his flesh easily. Ryan kept his hold shaking Darius ignoring the revulsion he experienced as blood poured from the mortal wound and Darius stopped struggling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Darius was dead. Shock that he'd taken another life left Ryan trembling. With his last breath, the fighting had stopped as if his pack realized their leader was gone, but Ryan remained in his shifted form long after members of the council had come and removed the body.

There wasn't much time to remain numb though. He had killed another alpha and decisions would need to be made about what happened to the Sourwind pack now. Ryan shifted back to his human form accepting the clothes his brother offered. Jace was covered in cuts and bruises but nothing that appeared to need medical attention.

"The others?"

"Everyone is fine. His pack didn't fight well if those were his best. How is your hip?"

"I'll live." Ryan shrugged off the concern knowing that he'd be favoring the leg for a while but thankful that there wasn't more permanent damage. Right now, his mental state was more of a concern than any physical injuries. The fight hadn't been an official challenge for leadership, but the loss of their alpha would throw the pack into chaos as they fought amongst each other.

He didn't want to expand his territory though nor did he want the responsibility of new pack members some of whom were bound to be resentful that he had killed their alpha. All he wanted was to go home where he could be with his mate.

As if summoned by his thoughts he felt her presence in his mind flooding him with warmth and acceptance. He couldn't hide the turbulent feelings he was experiencing at taking another life and he didn't try to.

“He would have killed you, Ryan, then he would have tried to take the pack if he could have fought off Jace. You didn't have a choice.”

It was true, and he knew that, but it didn't make him feel better about killing the other man. He let his connection with Kelly slip away, groaning as he stood and made his way into the house where the others were meeting.

He caught Brett's eye. There was sorrow there but no anger or resentment. It made the choice not to take control of the pack easier. He just wasn't sure if Brett would be powerful enough to step up and fill the void that Darius's death created.

“I don't want the pack.” He announced to the room when he was offered leadership by the council members present. “If there isn't anyone here who can assume leadership then I request that the council representative takes the role of alpha temporarily.”

The eyes in the room all fell on Brett making Ryan feel guilty that the

man was on the spot, but the man didn't disappoint. His voice came out clear and commanding as he said he would step into the role.

“Can we trust there will be peace between the two packs now?”

Arthur, one of the other council members asked. He wasn't the Sourwind representative but any of the council had the right to question any of the alphas

“I have no issues with Brett.” Ryan rushed to assure everyone, not wanting to return to how the council used to govern. “There will be peace.” He looked to Brett extending a hand to the man. They shook and Ryan spoke again. “The fight was never for control of the pack. Darius sent men to attack me and to take my mate.”

Brett nodded his acceptance of Ryan's explanation, and a tentative peace was struck between the two packs. Ryan left Byron and Jace to negotiate the terms of that peace with Brett, adding only one term to the conditions of the new treaty. The two packs would share information about their members and Clay would begin his investigation into the infertility issues in their territory.

When he got home Kelly was waiting for him, as he knew she would be. He searched her face for any signs of censure or disgust over what he'd done but found none.

“You are my mate after all that we've been through do you think that

what you did to protect us would make me feel any differently towards you?"

"Well, there is one more thing needed to solidify our bond." He felt her trepidation and couldn't suppress his amusement.

EPILOGUE

Three Weeks Later

Kelly wasn't sure that she could go through with it. She looked in the mirror trying to quell the shaking in her limbs. The gown she wore was so sheer she might as well have been naked. The white dress hugged her body like a second skin accentuating every curve rather than hiding anything.

The pack was already gathered in the clearing ready to toast the couple and witness their joining.

“For the life of me, I can't understand why you'd want anyone to watch us mate. It's private!”

“It's tradition, besides I won't allow them to see much once I mount you.”

His words sent a flare of heat scorching through her belly, and as wicked thoughts danced through her head she could almost forget that their family and friends would be there to see.

“Ok, let's get this over with.”

“If you'd rather not I can search the records to see if there is a loophole.”

Kelly was tempted to accept his offer, but she could feel his

disappointment. The ritual joining was a symbol that they were a unified couple. It signaled to the pack that she accepted his status as alpha and was strong enough to rule at his side.

“*No, I’m ready.*” She stepped out into the clearing and felt every pair of eyes on her as she approached but it was Ryan’s gaze that weighed the heaviest, his gasp was both audible as well as in her head where they were still linked in private communication.

She lowered her lashes showing him respect and a murmur of approval went through the pack.

Ryan reached for her, “I claim you as my mate. Blood of my blood. I pledge myself to you body and soul.” He tilted her chin up so that their gazes locked, then his hands exerted the smallest amount of pressure encouraging her to her knees.

He was hard and ready but the eyes on her made it hard to perform.

“*Don’t think of them think only of me. There is only us and I’m going to make you feel so good everyone here will be jealous.*” She knew he kept his tone intentionally cocky, daring her with his words and the expression on his face to be bold.

Kelly shut her eyes, pushing her thoughts of the others aside. She could feel their anticipation but to their credit, they were silent. Once she opened his pants they were completely forgotten.

She licked her lips before rubbing the crown of his cock over her lower lip making Ryan groan. At that moment she may have had the submissive position on her knees in front of him, but she felt powerful.

Ryan reached down and tweaked her nipples through the fabric of her dress, suddenly making the reason for the sheer fabric clear. She could feel his touch as if she were bare while still maintaining some semblance of modesty.

He stopped her before he climaxed, moving so that he could return her ministrations in kind. She fell to her hands and knees as he built her desire, fanning the flames to a roaring inferno.

“Submit.” The one-word command was loud enough for those around them to hear but still focused solely on her. Wordlessly she arched her back anxious to feel him inside her.

She gasped when instead she felt his tongue slide briefly through the cleft of her butt cheeks then she felt him there ready to enter her and she understood the expectation of those watching would be to submit to him in every way while maintaining the grace of a female alpha.

She bowed her back, pressing her upper body to the ground where they had celebrated every full moon together and she felt the power of the sacred place.

Kelly opened the common mental link that was shared among the

pack, lifting her head she pushed her hair off her shoulder and offered her blood to her mate as he claimed her body.

“You are my mate. I could never deny you.”

Thank you for reading Lycan's Mate Denied. We'll revisit the packs in Book 3 Lycan's Fated Mate.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review.