



# Caelon

**Author:** *Liza Bee*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She didn't see the signs. But he's been leaving breadcrumbs all along.

Selene

I always wondered why none of the guys in the pack ever felt... right. Why I'd rather spend my afternoons in the valley with a black wolf who never shifts, never speaks—just stays. They say your mate will feel like home, but what if home is a shadow you can't name? A month before my birthday, everything shifts. The dreams start—of a masked figure and hands that know me. Then the gifts appear. And during Solstice, a mystery wolf steps into the firelight and makes me wonder... what if I've never really been alone?

Caelon

I've loved her quietly, from a distance I forced between us. She was too young. I was too broken. But now, the time has come. I've left her pieces of myself—gifts, moments, the truth hidden in math and stars. She doesn't know it yet, but she's always known me. My wolf does. My heart does. And Fate? She's never wavered. All that's left is for Selene to see what's been standing beside her all along—and decide if I'm still worth choosing.

Rocky Mountain Pack is a cozy shifter romance with spice. The series is full of cozy warm feelings and a meddling grandmother. Each book features a new couple and is interconnected to the other books in the series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 81

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

## Prologue

### Caelon

#### June 15th Sunday Morning Pack Breakfast

The crisp smell of bacon with the sugary smell of maple syrup fill the air around me as I walk into the massive kitchen in the Pack House. Nova, our pack Luna, has started a tradition where every Sunday morning we are supposed to come to the Pack House for breakfast. Something most of us begrudgingly attend. Pack members are huddled together in small clusters throughout the space as laughter and chatter ring out.

Slipping into the alcove of the bay window, I watch as people mingle. It's a habit of mine to sit back and observe. Years of feeling like an outsider has been ingrained into me, starting as early as a young pup when my wolf didn't quite look like everyone else's to when I was in grade school excelling in Math. It doesn't help when your brother is the big guy on the football field and everyone expects the same from you.

The warmth of the morning sun warms my back as I stand with my arms crossed over my chest. My ears perk when I hear her laugh. Through all the people talking and laughing, I can still pinpoint her in the crowd.

Selene.

My eyes whip to where she is standing, finding her surrounded by a group of pups her age all staring at her with varying ranges of emotions. Some are outright gawking

at her while others are trying to hide their lust for her beauty. Her long brown hair is piled on top of her head in some sort of nest. It's one of my least favorite of her hair styles, preferring when she braids it down her back. Her bright yellow sundress is clinging to her curves as it flows to the ground. The pastel pink on her toenails peek out from beneath the ruffle. Shaking my head, a secret smile sneaks across my face. Of course she isn't wearing shoes.

Her eyes are alight as she animatedly shows the group of young men her photos. They're only showing interest because of her beauty, not because of her talent. A low, rumbling growl starts at the base of my throat as one of the guys leans closer to her. I have no right to react to them being near her, as if she's mine. She glances down to her camera to switch the photo showing in the tiny LED screen, missing the boys egging each other on.

When she glances back up with a bright smile in place, you can almost see the slight tremor in the curve of her full bottom lip. Maybe my little Leni isn't as naive as I thought she was. Why does she keep subjecting herself to these guys and their lack of concern for her?

The boys walk off without a backwards glance, leaving her standing there with her smile falling. She doesn't know that I see her. I see how much she wants to be accepted, wanted, and loved by boys like them.

My chest aches with longing to grab her hand and run away with her. Take her somewhere where she doesn't have to pretend, because I love her exactly how she is. I can't though. She wouldn't want someone like me. Someone who doesn't feel emotions like others.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

I don't have to look over to know who it is. Only one voice has that ethereal, all-

knowing lilt to it.

Gail. The pack grandmother. The pack's most notorious meddler. Also, my greatest weakness.

Unlike the rest of the pack—probably the town, although I have never ventured outside of Jasper to know—Gail has always made me feel seen. No matter where I seem to hide, she always finds me. It's creepy and endearing at the same time.

I'll play along like she doesn't know everything. "Who?"

She humphs before cutting her eyes to me. "You know exactly who I speak of, Caelon," she says as her head slowly turns in the direction of my obsession.

"Y-yes," I stutter out.

"Good. I'm glad you agree. A little birdie told me that she wants to open a photography business. I can imagine someone like you would be a great help with that, wouldn't you agree?" She taps my shoulder, giving me a knowing look.

"I don't...Gail." My anxiety is rising, from what she's asking of me. "I don't know anything about running a photography business." My hand swipes through my hair, pulling it slightly to give my brain something to focus on. "It's not like she would want the help of someone like me, regardless. Look at her." My hand shakes as I point my finger towards her. I fucking hate my social anxiety. "She's...she's beautiful."

The words stutter out of me. Fuck. Why can't I be normal like my brother? Attempting to hide my shaking hands, I slide them behind my back and pop the rubber band around my wrist. A coping technique I learned after a late night rabbit hole search on social anxiety.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Her eyes are cloudy, almost as though she is going blind. What is happening? “You are exactly the someone she needs. Shall I intervene to push her in your path?”

I shake my head subtly. I know everyone says that Gail is always right, but I know my Leni, she doesn’t need someone like me. No matter how much I want her, she won’t ever look at someone like me. Regardless, she is underage. I might only be twenty-two, but we shouldn’t even be having this conversation.

“Now instead of hiding over here in the alcove, why don’t you, I don’t know, talk to the girl?” The old meddling bat just winks at me before heading to the buffet table to grab food.

The last thing I want is Gail sticking her nose into my business. She doesn’t know it, but I watched her meddle in Silas and Warrick’s lives. Popping in and out, dropping hints, and always seeming to be in the right place at the right time. Oftentimes, I would just shake my head, because how could they not see what she was up to? It’s so easy to see, but now that it’s my turn—I’m not sure I like it.

Drifting toward me like the pull of the tide, Selene’s scent calls to me. Sea salt, sharp and clean, like an ocean after a storm. Hints of jasmine and ylang ylang, lush and heady, wrap around me like a sensual caress. As she comes closer, inching toward me as I continue to bathe in her scent, the warm notes of sandalwood and musk fill my nostrils. There is always this note of something, a piece I can’t quite put my finger on, something wholly her. Soft and wild. Comfort and danger. Almost like moonlight with teeth.

My wolf stirs under his skin, calling for me to move closer to her. To pull her into our arms. This is wrong, so very wrong. We can’t do this. She is only seventeen.

Gritting my teeth, I take a few steps back, stepping out of the cloud of her scent.

Hoping that the space will give me some kind of reprieve from the longing I have for her.

I watch as her soft smile plays across her face, her camera dangling around her neck, as she fills her plate with food. How easily she smiles, as if there isn't a care in the world for her. My lips quirk when I see her pick up the honeydew melon, like she does every week. Followed by the only drink she ever grabs, apple juice. I'm glad she isn't one of the coffee girls with some overly complicated coffee order for me to remember—I would though, just for her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Almost as though she can feel me watching her, her eyes flick up to mine.

My heart starts pounding. She never sees me. She never looks directly at me.

She lifts her hand to wave, but I turn away before she can say anything.

Pushing my way around the clusters of people, I make my way to the door leading outside. I just need air. She can't know how much I'm obsessed with her. Or the longing I have for her to see me.

She's already my obsession, my Leni. She always has been.

And I have no idea how to tell her that.

Looking over my shoulder to make sure I'm not being followed, I make my way over to the tree line behind the Pack House. The thick trunks of the spruce trees offer plenty of shadows to stand in and observe. Unlike my brother, I find peace in the quiet. The chaos of groups of people, everyone clamoring for attention, speaking over each other in some weird dance to outwit another, holds no appeal to me.

But she dreams of it, I can see it in the way her face lights up, the subtle shift of her weight when someone acknowledges her. The way she never breaks eye contact, hoping that they will stay engaged with her. She thrives in the chaos, something I can't relate to.

I watch through the large, double-paned windows as she makes her rounds waving goodbye to everyone. Making sure she says something to each person before she

pushes the back door open.

What she doesn't know is that I also know the relief that washes over her every time that she breaks free of the chaos. Like someone who's begging for air, finally breaking the surface in a loud gasp.

Her face arcs to the sky as her head drops back, as her hands clench and unclench at her sides. That's right, let out those nerves from being in the crowd. We both know it's all for show, the pretty, bright, cheery smile that you plaster on in hopes nobody will see that you have social anxiety, just like me.

Her eyes move behind her eyelids as the sun glows across her face. Alighting her hair in a golden glow, she continues to stand there in its warm embrace. She shakes her hands out as her entire body heaves with the rush of air she pushes out. Her head tips back down as she glances from side to side. Seems my little Leni doesn't want to be seen either.

With her camera gripped in her hands, she takes off into town. I know exactly where she is going. To Flash Me Studio, where she has been developing all her photos.

She doesn't know that I'm following her, or that I'm the wolf she takes photos of.

## Chapter 1

Selene

June 15th - It's our little secret

The alarm on my phone rings out as my eyes pop open. After quickly fumbling to silence the sound, I always hold my breath for a few moments listening for any movements in the house. The bright glare of my screen shows it's 5:30 A.M., giving



me just enough time to dress and sneak out of the house. My parents won't be up for another two hours, thankfully.

Slipping a soft pair of black leggings up my legs, I pull on a loose-fitting band tee before tying my long brown hair into a braid. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I snatch my polaroid camera off my desk, throwing the strap over my head.

My feet step as quietly as possible across the hardwood floors of the hallway leading away from my room. My parents' room is only two doors down, with a bathroom separating our rooms. It's not my dad that I have to worry about waking up, we joke all the time that he could sleep through a tornado hitting us and be none the wiser. My mom, on the other hand, could hear a pin drop in the living room on the other side of the house and spring awake. I don't even get how she can sleep at all without waking to every single sound.

I shift my feet from side to side, avoiding the boards that always give the loudest groan when you step on them. The hallway is lined with family photos throughout the years. My mother has always taken candid shots of the three of us, claiming she prefers the natural state of everyone versus those posed photos with fake smiles. She isn't wrong, I love seeing the natural smiles on our faces as the memory is captured. I pause when I come to a photo of me and my mom—it's the day she took me to a pottery class in hopes that we could figure out my creative outlet. Sadly, pottery just wasn't it, but it's still one of my favorite moments.

The living room is lighting up with the first rays of the sun when I step into the open space. The kitchen to my left is still covered in the shadows of night as I sneak in to grab a bottle of water from the fridge. Tip toeing around the island in the kitchen, I grab my jacket from the coat rack before flipping the lock on the door. I always hold my breath as I ease it open, part of me believing that my mom is going to just pop around the corner like those creepy jack in the boxes. She wouldn't be opposed to me going out to shoot photos, but she would have an issue with where I'm going since it's

off the pack lands. Not that it's against the rules for me to be out this early, I just don't want people to know that I'm heading off pack lands. Let a girl live without questions! There isn't much risk of harmor anything, but Silas still isn't sure the Ghost River Pack will continue to keep things peaceful between us. My eyes roll hard at the thought. They weren't even much of a threat to begin with. Everything is either gossip or fan fiction in my opinion.

A quick glance over my shoulder confirms she didn't in fact do that and I'm clear to rush out of the house. The thick layer of fog laying across the dirt path in front of my house gives off this eerie sensation of being in a horror film. I can just make out Caelon's home that sits dark across the street, it seems even he sleeps past sunrise. We seem to always be outside at the same time at night, often never saying anything to each other as we both drink our drinks and read our books. I don't know much about my quiet neighbor other than he is our pack financial guy. Other than that, he shys away whenever I try to talk to him.

The wood steps groan underneath my feet as I walk down them. The small front yard each of us is given is framed in with a white picket fence that's only waist high for most people. It's more about the aesthetic and less about what it keeps in or out. The creaky old gate opens as I push it, walking onto the wide dirt path separating the row of cabins I live on from the row of cabins that Caelon lives on.

Years of people walking these paths have crushed down the dirt into almost a road. The only time it sucks is right after it rains and the dirt turns into a thick mud that holds onto the water, as if it will never see another drop again.

The fog is so thick that I can't see more than a few steps ahead of me as I take the left turn down the main path towards Nova and Silas's house, also known as the Pack House. The log cabin that is known for being our main house, feels more like a mansion and it serves as our meeting hall, with office spaces for the leaders of the pack. While Silas and Nova's home is in the back, even visiting packs have rooms

they can stay in when they're there.

The dirt path that runs beside the Pack House is littered with leaves from the aspen trees towering high above me on each side. The bright green leaves are barely visible through the thick layer of fog beginning to lift as the sun's rays peak over the horizon. I have to hurry if I want to make it to the creek for a sunrise session. I briskly walk down the dirt path scanning both sides in hopes that I don't run into anyone.

Recently while out in the wild flower field deep behind the pack lands, I happened to find a creek running off from the mountains. The crystal-clear water that flowed down it offered such a pretty reflection of the wild flowers blowing in the wind. As I was snapping photos of the flowers, the distinct sound of movement came from behind me. Knowing that the only possible explanation was a wild animal, I pretended not to hear it or react to it in hopes that the animal would continue to come closer. I shifted lower until my stomach was pressed firmly against the cold, damp soil with my elbows propping up my camera. Hopefully, being closer to the ground and the grass covering most of my body, the animal would come even closer, granting me the perfect opportunity to snap photos of him. My breaths were slow and shallow, barely a whisper coming from me.

Through the lens viewer I watched as the most beautiful dusty-gray wolf walked into the frame. Casually strolling as if a human wasn't only a few feet away. Gosh, it was a dream come true. I've dreamed of moments where I catch wildlife in their own environment, ambling along without a care in the world. He stood so beautifully amongst the flowers, his fur rippling in the breeze, as he drank water from the creek. I laid there quietly snapping photos as he continued to gracefully move. Several times I could have sworn that he even posed for me.

I chuckle to myself as I think back to the first time I found my wolf. I've taken to calling him Shadow because his fur reminds me of shadows moving across light. I'm not sure why he seems to always show up when I am in the meadow, but I'll never

complain about the unsolicited time I have to take as many photos as I want. When I breach through the tree line into the field, I scan the surroundings to see if I spot Shadow, since I've never actually seen the direction he comes from. Noticing that it's only myself here, I make my way to my spot along the creek.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

I made it just in time today, the sun has just begun to crest over the mountains, lighting the valley in a warm, amber glow. Flowers begin to open as the rays of light wash over them. My spot along the creek is empty as usual with the only sign of life being my body's indent into the grass. You can easily see where I lay each day to watch the world come alive.

I stop abruptly in my tracks. Wait? Is that a wolf print next to my spot?

He never comes over to me when I'm here, so that can only mean that he has already been here. My head whips from side to side trying to place where he could be. He has to be here somewhere. This track is way too fresh to have been yesterday's.

My enhanced hearing offers nothing more than the wind rustling leaves, some birds ruffling feathers in the trees behind me, and the gentle rolling of the water over the river rocks. Lifting my nose to the air, I check to see if there are any new smells, maybe a different wolf, but nothing seems out of the norm. He must have come by earlier today and I missed him. Damn, I was hoping to grab some shots of him in the fog. It would have been fire. With no wolf in sight, I shrug my shoulders as I move down to my usual spot.

After several minutes of adjusting myself and taking a few test shots, I settle in for my hour of peace, with nothing but me and my camera. Glancing through the viewfinder, I catch the dope reflection of the sun's rays peeking over the mountain as I snap the photo. The whirl and hum of the camera as it spits out the polaroid seems to scream across the peaceful field. Shuttering and hoping I didn't scare off any wild life, I grab the photo from the front of the camera to shake it out.

Something slithers along my elbow as I'm shaking out the photo. What the fuck was that? I jerk my elbow back hoping it's not a spider. If it's a spider, I'm out. "Oh shit, it's a worm. How cool," I whisper as I scoot back to snap a photo of it while my heart rate chills out. This damn camera is going to scare away any possible wildlife. Next time I need to bring my film camera. Why didn't I think of that today!

It's going to be dope if my parents go through with their promise to get me a DSLR camera for my birthday. It'll def help me become a wildlife photographer if my camera isn't practically screaming at the animal that I snapped a photo. Placing the image down with the first, I pull up my camera again.

I'm mid-snap of my fourth photo when I hear him coming. Took him long enough today, I almost thought he wouldn't show up. He looks like he is covered in glitter as the light gray parts of his coat reflect the light. I let out a little snort as I duck my head. His eyebrow quirks as his ear flicks back and forth.

"Hey Shadow. I was starting to think you weren't going to show up today being all late and shit." My third visit was when I realized he didn't mind if I talked to him, sometimes I felt as though he was far more than a normal wolf and most likely a wolf from my wolf pack. Not that I've been around a lot of normal wolves, but I can't imagine they would sit here listening to a teenage girl ramble on about their life. Which has led me to trying to catch others in their shifted forms to see if I could figure it out, but much to my dismay, I can't.

He snorts as he shakes his head, as if he is already tired of my sassy behavior. He walks over to his usual spot directly across from me. Sitting down on his haunches, he gives me this bored expression.

"I've been sittin here thirty minutes this morning." My eyes squint. "Did you get lost or sumtin? Does my little wolfie need me to put markers out for you?"

I can almost see the indignation crossing his wolf features. His head tilts to the side as his eyebrow raises in question.

“Yeah, yeah. Alright, today is supposed to be a bit foggy, as you can see.” He humphs like I’m an idiot. “Do you think you can walk towards me with the sun behind you?”

He doesn’t move, continuing to stare at me with the same expression.

“What? I’m going for a dark and mysterious wolf coming towards me.”

He snorts again as he shakes his head before standing to walk off in the direction I pointed. Another reason I’m pretty sure this is a shifter, but maybe he isn’t from our pack? I know there are other packs around here, but surely he isn’t an enemy. I don’t think.

He walks for a few short minutes before turning around and giving me the look like, is this far enough?

“Perfect,” I shout with my hands cupped around my mouth.

His head drops down almost like he can’t believe he is doing this before he starts walking towards me. Quickly grabbing my camera, I snap the photos as quickly as the polaroid will let me. I pull the photos rapidly from the camera before dropping them in the pile below me. I don’t have time to wait between shots, I can only hope these turn out like I hope.

I drop the camera down allowing the strap to hold it as I pick up the five photos I was able to capture before he made it over to me. He never crosses the creek, as if it’s guarding him from me.

“Oh! This one is perfect,” I squeal before flipping it around to show him.

His head quirks to the side as he examines it. I’m not even sure if he is looking at it, but it looks like he is, even from across the distance. Shit, he shows more interest in my photos than any of my friends do. At least, it feels like he does.

My alarm chimes. Fuck! I gotta go! If I’m not in my room before my mom’s feet hit the ground, surely she’ll know I’ve snuck out. I don’t even want to think what dad will say if he finds out I not only snuck out, but that I wasn’t even on pack lands. I’ve got fifty minutes to make it back to the house before my parents leave for the Sunday morning pack breakfast that our Luna, Nova, has started as a new weekly tradition.

“Shit, I gotta go, Shadow. Thanks again for letting me take pictures of you today! See you next time,” I say as I scramble to my feet, dusting off my leggings.

He continues to sit there even as I walk away and just before I walk into the shadows of the tree line, I see him nod his head once before leaving himself. Almost like he watched to make sure I made it safely. Weird.

After rushing back home, I stopped by to put my shoes on because gosh forbid a lady walks into town without shoes. I’m pretty sure my dad would actually blow a gasket. Thank the goddess he doesn’t know that every single morning I walk to the woods barefoot. It’s called grounding DAD. Look it up, Boomer.

My window is still open, exactly how I left it earlier, when I come around the back of the house. Thankfully, my mom should be in the kitchen at the front of the house by now, having her morning coffee. The woman lives on coffee.

The branches crack underneath my feet as I push up into my window. Hoping that nobody heard it, I slip in. A quick glance in my full length mirror shows just a few twigs and leaves clinging to my leggings. Nothing a little brushing off won’t fix. My



braid is still perfectly intact, thank the hairspray gods for that.

I can hear my parents mingling in the kitchen down the hallway. Without another glance back, I make my way to them. We should be leaving for breakfast soon.

Fifteen minutes later, barely making it to the Pack House on time, my parents leave me to mingle with the other geriatric members of the pack.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

A group of guys that I go to high school with make their way over to me and it takes my whole entire soul not to gag at the intentions written all over their faces. I'm nothing more than a pretty wolf to them, but I'll play along like I believe they want to know more about me. Fuck it, better than standing here by myself.

"Hey Snap, got any new pics to show us?" Jared, the taller, more broadly built guy from their trio, asks as he throws his arm around my shoulder. I can't help but roll my eyes at the nickname that practically everyone in town calls me, even my own dad. I know that I always have a camera in my hands, but come on. It's cute though, so I don't mind too much.

I really can't stand being touched, especially by sweaty boys who think they're hotter than they really are. It always causes my muscles to lock up and the breath to stall in my lungs. I've never understood why these boys cause me to react this way, but something about the mere thought of them coming near me—gross.

"Yeah, Snap, I've beendyinggggto see what new photos you have this week." Oliver chuckles as he playfully taps Nathan's chest. Oliver is more of the sleek, athletic build. His muscular build was perfectly chiseled and fit for the cover of a magazine.

Nathan, being the quieter of the trio, does nothing more than nod as he swipes his dirty blond ringlet curls out of his eyes. His tall, slender build always makes him look like he is all legs and arms.

As I'm flipping through my photos, pretending these boys even give a shit about them, I feel eyes on me. But not the ones I'm already aware of. No, this feels like someone is watching me. Observing me like I do the animals in the wild.

The boys give some lame excuse of having to do something before they move on without another word. Thank the Goddess, because I'm starving. The feeling of eyes on me follows me as I move through the crowd to the buffet table.

The sensation feels more like a caress as if someone is lovingly watching me. I've never felt as seen as I do right now. Like breathing in a storm, the sweet smell of cedar surrounds me as if I'm standing in the forest right now. The damp forest floor, the earthy tones of wet moss, the faint smell of campfire smoke pulls me closer, almost guiding me somewhere.

My eyes flick up in time to catch Gail walking away from none other than Caelon. He's looking right at me, his lip quirked slightly. His face is shadowed, only offering me the smallest hint of what he could be thinking, his piercing hazel eyes are all I see. As if he's nothing more than smoke, he disappears, leaving me wondering if I just imagined the whole thing.

Mom agreed to thirty minutes before I could dip, something I count down the seconds to. I can't help but suck in a lungful of fresh air the second my feet hit the ground outside the back of the Pack House. I stand there, basking in the morning sun, as I let the wind carry away my anxiety. I've never liked large crowds, preferring to the open world and less people around. The more people, the higher my anxiety gets. Which is why Mom only requires a minimal amount of attendance.

It's about a ten minute walk from the Pack House to Flash Me Studio, where I need to drop off my rolls of film from the last pack run. Silas was really cool about letting me go in my human form so I could snap photos of the pack as they ran, played, and wrestled together. I can't wait to see how they turn out. One thing about my rangefinder camera is that you can't see the shot until the film is developed. After Warrick pushed me to take my photography seriously, I purchased a used camera from the studio as a beginner camera. The lovely owner, Lourie Snapley, walked me through how to use the camera, load the film, and promised to develop them in her

personal dark room anytime I needed. As an ex-photojournalist, she loves teaching new people how to use the old cameras.

I find Lourie standing behind her countertop display case cleaning another TLR camera as I walk in. She smiles brightly at me as I come closer.

“Good morning my favorite new photographer. Got sum film for me to develop today?” she says cheerily as she sets down the camera she’s working on.

“Yep! Filled this one with some of the Silvery Lupines that have bloomed around the base of the mountains. They are too gorgeous not to fill a roll of film with.”

“Glad to ‘ear it.” She holds out her hand for me to deposit the roll of film. “I ‘hould have em done by the weekend the ‘atest.”

“Thank ya Lourie! Are you planning any trips back to see your family in Georgia? How long has it been?”

"Well, darlin', I do plan on goin' back for Christmas again this year. Gotta see my sister and all her grandbabies, you know."

I head back out in search of some caffeine and sugary baked goods. Thankfully, Flick the Bean is only two doors down from the photography store. My mouth is salivating for one of the owner’s new juice selections. Hazel has been experimenting with different juice combinations to provide us non-coffee drinkers with a selection and our caffeine kick. You can select between green tea, black tea, or guarana extract as your choice for natural caffeines. So I’m always happy to play the guinea pig for her.

With my Orange You Glad juice and banana nut muffin from Crust Issues Bakery, I’m heading down the sidewalk back towards pack land. I’ve got a few assignments I need to finish for my English class that are due Friday that I should probably be

working on before class tomorrow morning. The nice part of Sunday mornings in Jasper is the sidewalks are full of people as they mingle about. You have your gossip mills that huddle together as they spread the latest juicy secret. There are the old dudes that talk about what things were like back in their day while shaking their canes at us kids. Then you have the kids that are either huddled inside the coffee shop, the bakery, or the ice cream shop if you can even find them in town. Needless to say, you are 100% guaranteed to run into someone on Sundays.

Keeping my head down, I weave through the crowds along the sidewalk hoping with everything to make it without being stopped. I'm just passing *Find Me Between the Pages* when I hear my name called out.

"Selene!" Of all the people to stop me in town, why does it have to be Aspen? I'd settle for Betty Winters, the town gossip over this woman.

Sighing, I turn around to find none other than Aspen pushing open the door to her bookstore. Her beautiful long brown curls flow easily in the wind. Does she also have to be so freaking beautiful? Her light cream-colored blouse is tucked into her tweed pants in the most sophisticated, put together look. Damn it, I look like I rolled out of bed and found this outfit crumpled on my floor.

We haven't talked since the whole Warrick situation. It's still sick that she thought I would sleep with someone else's mate. I get it, I do. But, damn she didn't even let me explain. I know from the outside looking in, she saw us close together looking at photos, smiling at each other. I know that he had done some shitty things in their past, but she just assumed I would sleep with a mated wolf, especially Warrick of all people.

"Yeah," I say with a sigh. Doing everything in my power to not roll my eyes.

"I was hoping to talk with you. I know we haven't exactly had a moment to do so and

I wanted to apologize for assuming what I did. That had nothing to do with you and I'm sorry you were caught in the crossfire. I was hoping we could chat about putting some of your photos up in my library? Maybe have you take some of our wolves to showcase here?" Aspen asks nervously.

"Uh...Thank you for apologizing. I would love to have some of my photos displayed somewhere. But...I don't really have any printed. Definitely not in a size that can hang on the wall. I just handed off some film to Lourie from the last pack run, if you want to look through those when she finishes them?"

"That's okay," Aspen says calmly as she shifts her weight to her right foot while her left foot props the door open. "I would love to see them when you get them back. Warrick and I are leaving for Ireland next week, but if you can stop by before then it would be great."

"Yeah, I'll do that. Well...I've got assignments to work on for my English teacher. So, Imma head out."

"Yeah, sure. Have a great day Selene," Aspen says with a slight wave before closing the door.

My eyebrows furrow as I turn to walk the rest of the way back towards the pack lands. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as if someone is watching me, chills running down my back. The feeling intensifies as I reach the other sidewalk towards You're Bacon Me Crazy, almost as if I moved closer to them. Looking around I don't see anyone staring at me.Odd.

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My feet stop moving as the sensation becomes too hard to ignore. I've only felt like this when I was walking through the woods, but never thought much of it since there are all kinds of creatures moving through the woods that it's more of a question of what is n't looking at me. But standing in the middle of the pack lands leaves me wondering who could be staring at me?

Spinning in a slow circle, I scan around me. There is Betty with Carol, someone who rivals even Gail when it comes to meddling, chatting outside of Scoop, There It Is. Betty only looks at me when our eyes connect, giving me a small wave. It almost feels like the sensation is cooling the further I turn. What the hell? Following my instincts, I turn back to the diner. As if some bell dings in my head, I know they are in there. My eyes squint trying to discern who it is. All I can see through the painted glass doors is the outline of a man as he steps out of the way. Who is that?

Rushing forward, I shove open the door, hoping to catch who that was. My head whips from side to side, only finding people mingling as they eat their breakfasts. Nobody really stands out and the sensation has gone cold. Weird.

A gush of air rushes out of me as the disappointment takes over. I was hoping to figure out who the person watching me was. All I can think now is, I'm cooked.

## Chapter 2

Caelon

June 15th Mid Afternoon

She felt me.

I saw it, the minute that her senses caught up to her and like a string being pulled, she turned and looked right at me. As if she knew, her eyes were drawn to exactly where I was standing. If not for the painted windows, she would have seen me standing right there watching her.

She was drawn to me, like I've been to her. Almost as though something was beckoning us closer. I can't get her out of my mind, no matter how hard I try. My wolf, Calix, whimpers inside me, demanding me to walk towards her even as I turn my back on her. She's coming towards us, I can't let her see me standing here.

I'm not ready for her to know. She can't.

The booth creaks as I shuffle into it. I've got to act fast, praying to the Goddess that she doesn't catch me. The menu flips open as I prop it in front of me, blocking my face from the view of the entrance. I can sense it. The second she steps through the door. Why does it feel like there is a string between our souls? I can almost feel her scanning the room, looking for the one who was watching her.

She heaves out a sigh before I hear the front door open and swing closed again. I drop the menu down onto the linoleum tabletop of the booth. The metal wrapping around the edge of the table bites into my skin as I lean forward to watch out the window. There she is, storming by with a cloudy expression on her face. I know Leni, you want to know, but it's too soon.

Her birthday is a little over a month away. July 17th can't get here any sooner. Not so I can make any sort of claim on her, but because when we find out who her mate is, then I can finally let go of this obsession. Hopefully.

But it doesn't help me now as I watch her until she disappears into the tree line. The



urge to rush out the door, follow behind her, and watch her is so strong, I can feel my muscles jumping in my legs trying to push me out of the booth. It's broad daylight and I've got a budget I need to go over for Silas. I do have to go into the office, which is in the direction she is heading, though.

Mind made up, I slip out of the booth and head out of the diner. I'll just slip around back, clinging to the shadows as if they can hide the things I'm up to. Calix is pushing against my skin, I can feel him clawing as he tries to take over. I can't let it happen.

The canopy from the tall pines surrounding the pack lands offer me just enough shadows to move without anyone seeing me. Slipping between the trees, I follow her scent as I watch her moving a few paces ahead of me. Her casual pace along with her soft smile let me know that she has no idea that I'm following her. Exactly how I want it. She passes the four cabins lining the main path before turning in the direction of her home.

Of the five cabins that were open when I turned 18, I chose the one across the street from her parents. I've always been drawn to Selene. Even when we were pups growing up three cabins down from each other. With both our backyards facing each other, I would spend my summer days watching her make daisy chains in the backyard as she talked to the ladybugs. She never once caught me watching her, something I have never stopped doing.

Something I should stop doing now that I'm 22 and she is 17, but I can't seem to stop. I can't seem to break myself free of her, it's as if there is already a bond tying us together. Some unexplainable pull.

I know she loves rainy days and sitting on the porch watching it fall. I know that she prefers honey dew melon over cantaloupe. That she prefers to be barefoot running through the forest with her hair whipping in the wind over being cooped up inside.

Like a flower, she needs the freedom to grow, bathe in the sun, and enjoy the rain.

As she rounds the corner, I step onto the path heading in the direction of my office inside the Pack House. That paperwork Silas requested has been sitting on my desk for a few days now, although it will only take me a few minutes to crunch the numbers. Math has always been my strong suit, pushing me well beyond the typical areas that most people struggle with. I can stare at a group of numbers and give you the answer without so much as picking up my pencil.

I picked the office at the end of the hallway, farthest from everyone, but close enough to pop into Silas's office if he calls for me. Something he rarely does because he trusts that I'll do my job without his hovering. Gail's office is right next to mine, after Nova took the Luna office when she accepted Silas's bond becoming our new Luna. Gail's position now is a glorified one that we really gave her as a sign of respect for her after she stepped down from being the stand in Luna while Silas looked for his mate. She is now the Head Healer handling the business of all our healers, mid wives, and doctors.

I'm just passing her office, hoping to make it without an interruption, when I hear my name.

"Caelon." Of course she saw me, of course I can't quietly make it to my office.

"Yes, Gail." My voice wavers as I push her door fully open.

"I was hoping to catch you before you sat down in front of that computer of yours. Losing hours of your time staring at a bunch of digital numbers as though they hold all the answers to your life's dilemmas."

My brows draw together. What is she going on about? Of course math holds the answers to my questions. It's quite literally the only thing that makes sense in life. If I

plug in the numbers to any equation, they will have an answer. Unlike human emotions where if I say this and move my hand a certain way, I have no idea how the person will react. Each reaction will be different based on how the person perceives it.

“I can see by the look on your face that you are literally arguing with me inside that intelligent mind of yours. There’s no need to argue. I just got off the phone with Lou from Flash Me Studio. Seems our little Selene has found a new muse. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about a certain gray wolf showing up each time she takes photos in the meadow?” Her eyes twinkle. She knows. My heart starts racing, my mind running over every single time that I’ve gone out to see Selene. There’s no possible way for her to know.

How does she know though? I’ve been careful to make sure there was nobody around when I followed Selene. Only transforming into my wolf when I was deep in the woods far from the normal areas our wolves travel.

My eyes squint as I examine Gail further. Her fingers intertwine atop her desk as she holds eye contact with me. Almost like she is daring me to figure it out.

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“I...I don’t know what you’re talking...talking about.”

A bemused smile lights her face. She knows I’m lying. “Sure you don’t. Did you talk to her like you said you would?”

“No,” I say as I pop the rubber band on my wrist. Always soothing even when it inflicts pain.

“Do you need my help?”

I shove off her door frame I’m leaning on, my temper flaring. I might not have anything else from my father, but I sure did get his temper. Swallowing down the anger, knowing Gail means well, I give a slight shake of my head. “No, I’ll handle it.”

Before she can say anything more, I walk into my office shutting the door behind me. At least here, in this space, I can control everything that happens. There’s nothing to consider, no obsession to focus on, nothing beyond the blank screen of my computer, and the numbers that never fail me.

### Chapter 3

Selene

Monday, June 16 - This isn’t what dreams are made of

The silhouette of a man hovers just over me. Just out of my reach. I’m determined to

unmask him, to figure out who was watching me. I reach out, my fingers falling through the smoke that once was him. Only for him to reappear at the foot of my bed, but each time I get closer, he dissipates and reappears further away from me. Always close enough for me to see him, but far enough I can never catch him.

My alarm rings out startling me awake.

A heavy sigh rushes out of my lungs as I throw my comforter off. The scent of wild musk sat heavy on the air. Almost as if the man from my dream was actually standing over me. My heart rate picks up as I glance around my room. Surely, nobody is dumb enough to sneak onto pack land and break into my room. Rubbing my eyes vigorously, I shake off the lingering images from my dream. This is so weird.

My laptop still sits open with the stack of papers for my English assignment resting on it. Fuck. I didn't manage to finish that assignment before I passed out last night. Means that between classes, photography, and my pack tasks, I'll have to squeeze it in somewhere. It's going to be a rough week, that's for sure.

My closet door is open slightly, something I was sure that I closed last night. I tiptoed towards the door, my breath sawing out of me. There better not be a damn man with a Michael Myers knife in my closet. I'm not afraid to throw a shoe and scream for my dad.

Instead of slowly pulling the door open, or you know maybe calling for my dad, I wrench it open. My breath is stuck in my lungs before I realize there is nothing there except my clothes all over the place, in complete disaster. The relief. Looks like I won't be starring in my own horror movie today.

Grabbing a shirt, leggings, and a pair of socks, I make sure I shut the door this time. Confirming that it is in fact...closed.

As I'm putting on my mascara, I can't help but replay what Aspen said yesterday. I shouldn't be mad at her, there are reasons she acted that way and they had nothing to do with me. It's a little weird that she sought me out for photos. I'm sure Warrick told her more about our conversation, and maybe, that's why? I guess I can give her some of my photos, it's not like I've got people knocking down my door for them anyways.

Speaking of photos, I grab the polaroids from yesterday, now that I've got time to look at them. The shots of Shadow turned out great! I still can't believe this wolf lets me basically pose him. I swipe to the next photo, one that is just of the stream as it comes down the mountain with the tree line on the right side. I'm about to move on to the next one when something catches my eye. Right in the corner of the woods, almost perfectly hidden by the shadows of the trees, is the same silhouette of a man. The same one I saw in the You're Bacon Me Crazy door. My eyes have to be playing me. There's no way that I captured him in a photo before I later saw him in that door. The photo shakes in my hand as I bring it closer to my face. I can't make out any details but honestly, I'm pretty sure that my mind is playing tricks on me.

Feeling as if I ran a marathon instead of sleeping, I trudge my way into class an hour later. Our high school is a jumbled mix of shifters and humans. You're more likely to bump into a shifter than a human, but our human friends know of our existence. Kind of hard to hide it in a town of 2000 with 80% of the population being supernatural. Between horny teenage boys and gossiping teenage girls, I'm sure the councils of each species would spend most of their time trying to cover up rumors more than anything else.

English is my first class of the day and it's of course on the other side of the building. There are huddles of teenagers lining the hallway. Their whispered words are almost as loud as if they were talking at a normal level. I don't think anything of it as I move along until I notice that each group turns to look at me as I pass. The fuck? Why are they all looking at me?

I rush into the bathroom, hoping I didn't like forget to cover a pimple or Goddess forbid I get my period today. A quick examination in the mirror and I'm no closer to understanding what they are gossiping about until...

My phone vibrates in my purse. Pulling it out there is a notification on the screen from Odessa, my soul match.

Bish, tell me you've made it to school.

Uh, yeah. I'm in the bathroom.

Does that mean you've heard?

Heard what?

Everyone is talking about Aspen stopping you yesterday. Why didn't you tell me?

Because...there isn't shit to tell.

Not according to the rumors bouncing down the hallway. All I've heard all day is how she confronted you outside her bookstore and how you looked like you would rather be anywhere other than there.

Yeah, well nobody likes being accused of shit they didn't do. Obviously after the big blow up in the diner, everyone spread some seriously salacious comments about me. You would think I had drawn a scarlett A on my chest with the way they acted.

## Page 7

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Girl, I know. Everyone is speculating about what she said to you. Was it even rude? Like are they accurate in the rumors spreading around today?

No, she asked me to put some of my photographs up in her bookstore, that's it. People need to drop it. Clearly Warrick and Aspen moved on, so why can't the rest of town?

Just give it time. Something will happen and they will all be focused on that instead of you.

The bell rings letting everyone know we have five minutes to make it to class. I slide my phone back into my purse. I don't have time for this.

Hours later the final bell of the day rings and I can't be any happier to leave this shit hole. I've heard all the whispered words I can handle for the day. There is only one place I want to be and it's deep within the woods.

When I cut across the parking lot, walking in front of You're Bacon Me Crazy, I sense someone is watching me. Just like before, it feels familiar, almost like a lover instead of an enemy. They aren't watching me to harm me, but to protect me. My body comes to a stop in the exact spot I did yesterday. Feeling a sense of deja vu, I scan my surroundings. Surely, I'll see them this time.

My eyes pan to the door of the diner right as Gail walks out with her signature soft smile and grandmother vibes all wrapped into a 5'2" weathered-skin, gray-haired older woman. If you don't like Gail, then there's an issue with you, not her.



“Just the little wolf I was hoping to catch today. Where are you rushing off to?” She ambles her way down the few steps as she slowly, but gracefully walks over to me. Maybe she is the one who was staring at me.

“I’ve got an English assignment to finish, so I was heading to the house to hopefully finish it before I have to do my training this afternoon.”

“Good, good. Can you come by my office when you get done? I’ve been meaning to discuss a project with you that your particular skill set would be perfect for. Plus, you never know who you are going to bump into.” Her eyes held a playful glint to them.

“Uh, yeah, I don’t see why not. You aren’t planning to bore me with some history lesson about the pack right? Or lecture me about the reasons I should wear shoes in the woods?”

Her bell-like laugh rings through the air. “Not at all dear. I’ll let you get back to your mission.” She turns to head back up the stairs before she stops at the top. “One more thing dear. Those that hunt aren’t always the ones that harm.” With her cryptic message she walks her chipper self back into the diner. Leaving me standing on the sidewalk unsure what to do with that.

Hustling back to my house, I round the corner to our street where I see Caelon’s house is dark like usual. Does the man ever come home? In the four years since he’s moved into the cabin across the street, I think I’ve only ever caught him a handful of times. Most of the time it’s when it’s storming and I’m sitting on my porch watching the rain fall. He’s always sitting on his too, drinking something in a coffee mug. He always holds his mug up as a cheers to me as I return the gesture with my peppermint hot cocoa.

My house is empty with my parents both off doing their pack duties. My mom is one of our pack’s best healers, so I’m sure she is either at our pack hospital or at the

training center teaching the next generation. After my dad retired from patrol, he picked up the hobby of working with leather. You can bet money that he will be in the leather shop crafting something, enjoying retirement to its fullest.

Two hours later, after erasing, typing, erasing, I've finally got some sort of outline to this stupid paper my English teacher wants. "Remember kids double space, size ten font, and it's supposed to be in blah, blah, blah," she tells us all the time.

Literally can't understand why I need to worry about this shit. I will never use it. I want to take the pictures, not write the article. The reminder alarm rings on my phone alerting me that it's time for me to head to the training center.

I've not really decided my role in the pack, something I've talked with Gail and now Nova about. If you base it off my parents, I'm either supposed to be a healer or patrol. While both appeal to my love of nature, I can't really say that either holds more appeal than that. Patrol is cool, if you like walking around the forest checking for enemies. You know, the ones I said we don't have? Plus, I don't have any interest in "fighting" which is what leads back to healer. My mom swears I'm a natural healer, but I say she just hopes that I'm like her and that's all that is.

I'm supposed to go each day to the training center to "test" out different roles until I find one that I like. We are three weeks into this process and I'm no closer to that answer. If I could just take the role of "pack photographer" that would be great. I'll take wedding photos if that means I don't have to fight, make potions, work with numbers (eww), keep up with the pack history (boring), and Goddess forbid teach some bratty kids. Like I said, the search isn't going well.

It's not that I'm incapable of doing any of the tasks, it's more that I can't imagine spending the rest of my life doing them. Honestly, I feel trapped when I think about doing them the rest of my life. Don't get me wrong, I know they are important to the health and growth of the pack, but I can't commit to them.

It's almost dark when I finish yet another unsuccessful afternoon at the training center, but I realize I've got enough time to run the roll of film down to Lou. I had a hard time focusing on the training when I couldn't get a certain shadowed figure out of my mind. I spent the entire time barely registering what the herbology teacher was saying to me when I felt eyes on me the entire time. Everywhere I moved, the sensation followed me. As if they never lost track of me, it moved through the training center with me. But, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure out who it was. Maybe talking with Lou will finally give me a break from the sensation and the thoughts plaguing me.

Lou is exactly where I thought she'd be. In her dark room with only the glowing red light beneath the door to indicate that she is here.

"Lourie!" The clang of metal against metal echoes from the room as she drops her film developing tools into the pan before she opens the door.

"Wildling! I was 'oping you would come in! I 'een a certain wolf is the centerpiece of 'ur photos." Her thick, ash-gray eyebrow raises in question.

I can feel my cheeks redden. My fingers twist around the long strands of my hair. I was hoping it would go unnoticed that Shadow was becoming the center of all my photos.

"Yeah, he's been showing up every time I'm at the creek. He's gorg isn't he?"

Lou nods her head as she brings over my envelope of developed photos. She flips open the flap as she fingers through the photos until she lands on the one she's looking for. I don't even realize I've leaned over the counter to see what she's doing until she flips the photo out as her eyes widen slightly with our nearness.

My throat clears as I lean back, straightening my shirt as if none of that happened.

The photo is of my Shadow perfectly posed as the wind blows his gray and white coat. His eyes are closed as if he is peacefully sitting there. Lou quirks her head looking between the photo and my face. “Ain’t ever seen a wolf sit for a photo. Especially close enough for a film camera. Do you know what wolf this is?”

My head shakes slowly as I flip through the rest of the photos. I didn’t even notice it but my polaroid photo wasn’t wrong. There’s a man standing in the woods in one of my photos. Clear as day I can see the tip of his sleeve. It’s not enough to figure out who it is, but at least I know I’m not crazy.

Before Lou can see it, I slip the photos back into the envelope and tuck it under my arm. She gives me a weird look before shrugging her shoulders.

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“You got ‘ny more for me?”

I pull my over-shoulder bag onto the counter, ruffling through the contents until I find the three film rolls rolling around in the bottom. Thank the Goddess for the tiny plastic containers for them, otherwise I would ruin more film than I develop. I deposit the three rolls into her hand before pulling my bag off the counter.

“Oh, I meant to ask.” I pull my lip into my mouth, considering if I really want to do this. “Do you happen to do larger prints? Like the kind for walls?”

“I ain’t ‘ver done it. But for ‘ou I’m ‘illing to learn.”

“Thanks! That would be great. I’m sure you heard through the grapevine that Aspen wants me to put some of my photos in Find Me Between the Pages. Which is cool, but I’ve obviously never had photos printed.”

Lou lays her weathered hand, veins protruding from the top, and sun marks dotting her skin on top of mine, squeezing gently. “It’s a ‘ood thing.”

“I know. Thanks again Lou. I better head back before it gets too late. School and all that, ya know?”

The sidewalks are almost empty on the walk back with only a few people exiting stores along the way. Looks like Aspen is still working since Find Me Between the Pages is glowing, illuminating the sidewalk and part of the road.

I can feel him watching me. At least, I assume it’s the same person who I keep seeing

in the shadows. His gaze is caressing my skin causing bumps to pop as I feel his gaze move. Shaking my head, I try to dislodge the thought. I shouldn't be thinking about him like a lover. This guy is watching me, following me, and clearly doesn't want me to know who he is.

"I know you're watching me. The question is—why won't you come closer?" I whisper into the wind. My eyes scanning each side of the road, hoping he heard me. I should be scared, should be worried that someone is watching me. But, something about the person feels loving, as if there is no malicious intent behind them stalking me. I've no reason to believe that other than a gut feeling. Call it intuition, but I know he is here for good reasons.

Caelon

She'll never figure it out.

With fifty-three wolves in our pack, there are fifty-two chances for her to guess it wrong.

And I've made sure there's nothing leading back to me. She's never seen me shift. Never seen my wolf at least in connection to me. And I've never been close enough for her to connect the scents to me.

I'll let her wonder. Watch her as the weight of my gaze caresses her skin without her knowing where it's coming from.

One day...one day soon she'll know.

But it won't be tonight.

Chapter 4

Selene

Tuesday June 17th - Secret Gifts

Another restless night of sleep chasing after my shadowed mystery man. His eyes...so familiar yet not. It's as though my subconscious wants me to figure it out, or it just loves to torture me. Either is possible really.

My hair is in some tangled mess atop my head, my sweats are hanging loosely off of me, and my hoodie is definitely a sign that I've just rolled out of bed. The window in my bedroom is cracked, I swear that it wasn't like that when I came in last night. A Silvery Lupine is sitting on my desk. Another flower, just like the one sitting on my porch last night when I came home.

My eyes move around my room, seeing if there's anything else out of place or new. Seeing nothing, I move to the window, slamming it closed and flipping the lock in place. Peeking outas if they might still be standing outside, waiting for me to see them. I swear I'm losing my mind between the dreams and the flowers.

I don't know whether or not I should bring this up to my parents? Someone clearly broke into my room last night, stood over the top of me without me knowing, and left a gift. Between my dreams, the feeling of eyes on me when I'm walking, and now gifts being left...I'm slightly freaking out here. I mean, whomever it is doesn't want to hurt me, I don't think. Is it the same person who's been following me? Did they hear what I said last night and wanted me to know they heard what I said?

Part of me almost doesn't want to say something to my parents because I don't know what they will do about it? Would they even believe me?

My mom's laughter rings out from the kitchen as she chats loudly with dad. It's going to be weird when this isn't part of my morning routine. I'll miss the days of hearing

my parents' jokes and jabs at each other as they get ready in the morning.

Swiping my bag, camera, and phone off my desk, I head down the hall to grab some breakfast before I'm late to school.

“Oh look what the cat dragged in, dear?” my mom jokes as I come around the corner.

My dad lets out a soft chuckle. “Now don't be giving my little princess such a hard time. She had a rough night ya know.”

I give both of them a questioning look as I glance between them. What are they talking about?



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

“She sure did. All that talking in her sleep, sounded like she was mad at whomever was in the dream with her.”

I didn’t know I was talking in my sleep. All I know is I’m exhausted, running late, and wishing I could just go back to bed. “I’m running late guys. Love you and all that, but I don’t have time for this.” I snatch an apple from the bowl in the middle of the kitchen island.

“Wait,” my mom calls out before I make it to the front door. “Do you want me to grab you a sleep tincture while I’m at work today?”

With a glance over my shoulder, I nod. “Yeah Mom, that would be great.”

The golden light of the sun is filtering through the canopy of leaves as Odessa and I walk down the path towards downtown. How easily I could take the way to my hidden gem. To roll in the flower fields, snapping photos of Shadow, while the white clouds moved across the clear blue sky. I would trade anything for that instead of being trapped inside the school all day.

Sora, my wolf, whines inside our shared mind space. She is pushing towards the direction we both seem to want to be. I can almost feel her claws raking down my insides like a signal which way she wants me to go.

“We can’t Sora. Mom and Dad will be pissed if I skip school. Plus there are too many people moving around for us to sneak off pack lands.”

She whimpers. Instead of responding, she fills our senses with longing. Her desire to

roll in the flowers is overwhelming. I have to stop myself from taking the steps, instead forcing myself to turn down the main path into town.

She pushes even harder causing me to stumble a couple of steps. “Stop Sora.”

“We don’t need school. Think of how peaceful it will be in the field. Plus, I think a certain wolf will be there.”

“He might be, but I’m not dealing with the backlash for skipping. Now, we are going to be late. So chill!”

I can sense her pouting as she steps back. Jeez, I wasn’t sure I was going to win there for a second. It does sound far better than school, but not the bitch sesh after my parents find out.

I barely make it into the school with time to spare. I’ve got enough time to swing by my lockers for my books and rush to class. Odessa is leaning against my locker typing on her phone as if she is writing a paragraph. She probably is.

“Shit girl, I love you and all but you look like you were hit with a tree this morning. Did you happen to pass a mirror on the way here today?” Her eyes scan me from head to toe as if I’m a new creature to explore.

“Yeah well, I slept like shit and honestly I’d rather be anywhere but here today. So, maybe love me a little more and not point it out.”

She reaches up pulling a leaf from my ponytail as she smooths my fly away with her other hand. “Alright, we’re going to talk about that later. Right now, we are late for Math and you know Mr. Arnold is a grumpy asshole if we’re late. As much as I love getting on his nerves, it’s not on my agenda for today.”

She loops her arm around mine and tugs me towards Math. It's going to be a long day, is it my free period yet?

Twenty minutes into class, I'm in the middle of doodling the eyes that have been haunting me each night when I realize the room is silent. Blinking my eyes as I lift my head, I notice that everyone's staring at me. Why?

Odessa coughs next to me as her eyes bulge, urging me to do something. What that is, I've got no idea. Mr. Arnold clears his throat from the front of the classroom.

"Ms. Calloway, do you plan to answer the question soon or should we wait for you to finish whatever it is you're working on?" His arms are crossed while his dress shoe taps the floor.

I turn back to Odessa praying to the Goddess that she will be able to help me here. I've got no idea what he even asked, let alone what the answer could be. She must see the plea in my eyes because her hand shoots up in the air.

"Yes, Ms. Hollowell?"

"The answer you were looking for is -2.85."

"Thank you Ms. Hollowell. Maybe you should have a talk with Ms. Calloway about paying attention during class, hmm?" Mr. Arnold gives me one more scathing look before he turns back to his white board moving along with whatever he was doing. I flip him off before looking back to Odessa.

She is staring at me with a hand over her mouth to keep her laugh from ringing out. "What has you so preoccupied," she whispers to me.

I shake my head subtly. "I'll tell you later."

With one last glance between me and the paper, she turns back to her own paperwork to continue the lesson. I look down at the pair of eyes that I didn't quite get in the drawing. I'd never claim to be an artist but I can almost feel them staring at me.

Everyone moves on with the class, while I continue to stare at those eyes.

Hours later, it's finally time for my free period. I'm going to head to Gail's office since I missed doing that yesterday. Hopefully, she's there and I didn't walk that whole way for nothing.

Her office is right next to Caelon's, something that brings a blush to my cheeks. I wonder if he's in there huddled over a stack of paper. He probably wouldn't have zoned out during Math class like I did. I bet he knew the answer before the teacher even finished asking the question. I know he loves math, not just because he is our numbers guy, but I noticed one night when he came out to his porch that he was carrying a book with a bunch of math symbols on it. Using my phone camera, I zoomed in on the cover and searched what it was on a major retailer. This man reads math books for fun. Couldn't be me.

## Page 10

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Before I knock on Gail's door, I lean over as if the closed door to his office might reveal something. All I can hear from his office is the rustling of papers, nothing that gives me an idea of what's really happening behind the door.

My knuckles rap on Gail's door right as she calls out for me to come in. I didn't even fully knock before she said something. Weird.

I push the door open slowly, peeking around it as if she might jump out at me. The smell of patchouli and mint wraps around me the second I step into her space. Almost like a memory holding you in a warm embrace. The cooler air of her office seems to almost gently move across my skin like a whisper of promised stories.

Her Olivine-colored walls give this soft moss green, earthy feel with wood frames capturing pressed herbs. Each surface of the space seems to hum with hidden secrets, knowledge way beyond our years, and just a hint of mischief, like something might jump out at you for a hearty laugh.

Gail is sitting behind a beautiful wooden desk with carvings of wolves running under a full moon with hands spread out on each side. It's a beautiful version of our Goddess watching over our wolves. An antique moon mirror hangs behind her, reflecting my face full of wonder.

Gail seems to wait for me to take in each piece of her space as if it's just as much why she invited me here as the reason she mentioned yesterday. She is such a timeless beauty, something I hope I look like when I'm her age, whatever age that is. Her long, silvery-white hair is braided over her shoulder flowing down past the desk. Tiny sprigs of lavender are woven into each part of the braid as if her healer side is

proudly displayed. The white soft material of her shirt hangs loosely over her chest, showing off a beautiful moonstone wrapped in golden wire.

Her eyes crinkle at the edges like someone who's lived a full life and has the stories to prove it. Her eyes scan over me in that knowing way that makes you feel almost naked in front of her. As if she isn't looking at your clothes but instead examining your soul.

“Selene, come sit down. We have much to discuss and I'm sure your free period doesn't allow for much idle chatting.” Her wrinkled hand sweeps across the desk as she indicates I sit down in front of her.

I scurry across the worn antique moon rug under my feet to the chair in front of her desk.

“I'll get down to the nit and gritty so you aren't late getting back to school. I know you've been struggling to find a place in the pack and while I don't have the final say so in the matter, I think I might have a solution.”

My eyebrows shoot up so high I'm sure they are in my hairline. This wasn't exactly what I was expecting when she asked to talk about a project. “Alright, I'm listening,” I say as I scoot the chair closer.

“I've been thinking about your photography and your dream to own a photography business. What if you start by selling photos of the wild flower field behind the pack land? What if your contribution is being the pack photographer and you take photos of the pack on the pack runs?” How does she know about the valley?

“Uh...” My words are stuck in my throat. I was sure I'd been careful to keep my secret.

“I can see your confusion on how I could possibly know about your secret spot. Don’t worry, nobody else knows.” My mouth opens and closes as I try to decide which of the hundreds of questions flitting through my mind to ask.

“You want to know how I would know? Did you think I wouldn’t recognize the lands surrounding ours? You aren’t the only rebel who snuck off to find peace in the wild.”

“I check every time and nobody is around. There’s no way that you’ve seen me go out there.”

“You’re right. I’ve never seen you go out there, but I have seen the photos that Lou printed for you. I knew exactly where you were in them. Now, can we move to the next part? The one where I said I think you should sell them? Or should we sit on the part where you want to know how I know?” Her eyebrow quirks.

“Fine, keep your secrets.” My arms cross over my chest. “I don’t see why I couldn’t sell the photos. Although, I’ve got zero idea how to do that or where to even start. Should we talk with Silas and Nova first?”

Her hand waves in front of her. “I’ll handle talking with those two. I’m sure they will agree with my idea anyways. For now, just continue to take those beautiful photos of the flowers and a certain gray wolf.”

My mouth drops open. Of course she knows about Shadow. I push the chair back to stand up.

“Oh, before you go, I have some tea for you. It’s my personal blend for clarity. I know you’ve had a lot on your mind lately, maybe a tea on your front porch will help clear up some of those questions for you.”

She pushes herself slowly out of her chair as she moves to her apothecary table in the

corner of her office. I watch as she opens different glass bottles, pulling a little from each one and placing the contents in a small cloth sack. After a few moments and what feels like ten ingredients later, she ambles over to me with her long flowing skirt swishing with each step. She stops in front of me holding the sack out for me to grab.

“Steep this little satchel in water for five minutes and add some of our local honey in it. You want to stir only with a wooden spoon to not change the elements of the tea. Sip it slowly and let the herbs take their time to work their way through. I’d recommend sitting on your front porch as you let the breeze carry away your concerns. Let me know if you need another tomorrow.” Her knobby, bent fingers reach up and gently tap me on my face. “Now, you better hurry or you’ll be late to another class today.”

My eyes squint as I glare at her. There’s no way she knows about that. How does she know so damn much? When I swing open her office door I find a wide-eyed Caelon standing on the other side. My mouth drops open slightly as I fully breathe in his scent for the first time, with nothing between us but a few steps. It’s the closest I’ve ever been to him in all these years. This close I can see the tiny freckles brushing over the tops of his cheeks and the tiny flecks of gold in his hazel eyes. Inhaling his scent, I feel as if we are standing in the woods together right after a storm. It’s calling to me as deeply as my hidden valley does.

Gail clears her throat behind us knocking both of us into action as Caelon whispers an “excuse me,” as he moves to pass me. I barely have enough time to shift my shoulder before it clashes against his, causing our hands to graze each other. The weirdest thing happens when our skin connects, it feels almost like static electricity when you touch someone. I suck in a breath, I’ve never experienced something like this before. Why did it happen with Caelon?

I turn to stare at him, confusion clouding my thoughts, as I stand in the doorway with him. We just stand there staring at each other as if we are both as confused by it as



the other is. Unlike me though, his face is neutral. What is he thinking?

Gail clears her throat, calling out Caelon's name giving me the opportunity to shake off these thoughts I'm having. I watch him walk into her office, not looking back even though I wish he would. When he doesn't, I turn and walk out of the Pack House and back to school. The entire walk back I replay the entire interaction over and over again several times. There's something I'm missing, some reason that I'm always drawn to him. Why is he the only guy that I even care to get to know? Surely, there's more to it?

Maybe I should ask Gail. She might seem like a meddlesome grandmother to most people but there's something more to it. More divine. She always knows things that nobody else knows, always pushing people towards each other that are destined together, and knowing more about you than you do yourself.

After finishing school, I decide to stop in town to see if Lou has developed any more of those photos. I need to take them by Find Me Between the Pages so Aspen can make her selections from yesterday's and today's photos.

The town is bustling with everyone pouring out of the schools into the shops. Sally's Scoop, There It Is has a line of people out the door as the kids from school mingle. Flick My Bean has an equally long line as all girls head there to spread their gossip and snap photos of their coffees for the internet. My head shakes as I watch them all taking photos and trying again.

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The benches lining the sidewalk are full of the older generations grumbling about how the kids are loud, obnoxious, and my favorite one, “ruining the town.” Old people are so funny. As if they weren’t young once, behaving just the same.

Lou’s shop is at the end of town right next to The Daily Sage, a cute little herb and crystal store that always smells like burning sage and a witch’s cottage with the hints of burning wood, herbs, and magic. Marlowe, the owner, is a Pine Marten shifter, who’s known for stealing baked goodies from Crust Issues, which is owned by Bea, aka Honey, a black bear shifter. The little creature loves Honey’s cinnamon rolls! Pine Martens, a part of the weasel family, are known for their love of sugary treats and stealing. Never, and I mean never, leave your sweet roll unattended around one of them. Honestly, she is too adorable in her tiny form to resist the urge to want to pick her up and cuddle her. I’m not sure when it started for her, but this battle between Marlowe and Bea has been a long time thing.

Speaking of Marlowe, the tiny Pine Marten is sprinting across the street with one of the famous cinnamon rolls clutched in its mouth right as I’m about to walk in front of The Daily Sage. Honey storms out of her bakery waving a rolling pin in the air. “Damnit Marlowe! Get back here with the cinnamon roll!”

The blur of brown and orange fur streaks across the sidewalk right in front of me and jumps through the doggy door disappearing from sight. I can’t help but laugh because that roll is long gone and Honey knows it too. She throws her arms up in the air before walking back into Crust Issues.

I push open the door to Flash Me Studio to find Lou peeking out her front window at the drama that unfolded.

She smirks when she looks at me. "Well, I reckon Marlowe helped herself to another cinnamon roll, didn't she?"

"Yeah, that pine marten is hella fast when she has stolen a sweet treat," I say with a giggle.

"I've got those photos for you. The ones you dropped off yesterdee." Lou walks behind the glass display case grabbing the envelope full of my next round of photos. "You've got some great shots in there. You takin' them to Aspen?"

"Yeah, that's the plan. Thought if I gave her both sets to look at, I'm sure she could pick something from the pile." Grabbing the envelope from her, I slipped it into my bag along with yesterday's. Hopefully Aspen finds something she loves. My fingers graze over the tea bag that Gail gave me earlier, reminding me that I've got to drink tea this evening.

"Looks like your wolf was the star of the show in just 'bout all them pictures." She gives me that knowing look.

My cheeks warm as the blush spreads across them. I'm not even sure why I'm so embarrassed. Is it from the dreams haunting me, the eyes following me, or that I love my Shadow time?

"Yeah, he's too beautiful not to take photos of." I shrug like it's normal.

"He's just beautiful as a sunrise, he is. You go on ahead now and have yourself a good day." Lou shoos me away with her hand as she turns to head to the back of the store.

Crossing the street, I see Honey is back inside her bakery chatting with customers. Sally is still busy handing out ice cream to the line of kids that has only shortened a

few people while I was inside. Citrine & Rose, our earthy-toned casual clothing store, has a few ladies mingling around inside as I pass by.

Thankfully Aspen is right in the front of Find Me Between the Pages, stocking one of her front tables when I open the door. She turns around with a beautiful smile on her face when I walk in. “Oh hey Selene! I was hoping you would take me up on the offer! Just in time too because we leave Friday!”

“Yeah, I wanted Lou to develop another couple rolls of film so you had a larger selection to choose from.” I fumble around in my bag until my fingers close around the two envelopes of photos.

I hold them out towards Aspen as she looks between my reached out hand and my face. “How have you been doing?”

I shrug my shoulders, not really feeling like opening up to her of all people. “I’m fine. Been taking photos, going to school, and spending my afternoons deciding my place in the pack.”

She stops flipping through the photos to glance up to me. “Gail said something about you wanting to do photography for the pack?”

“Yeah, she mentioned being a pack photographer and possibly selling my photos to the larger market.” I stare at my fingers twisting together.

“That would be really cool. I love these three photos,” she says as she holds them out for me to see.

She picked one of the sunrise peeking over the mountains, one of the pack runs, and one of Shadow.

“Do you know who that wolf is? I know he’s at least a shifter, but I’ve never seen him before.”

She looks closer as she slowly shakes her head. “I don’t. But, I also haven’t spent a lot of time with the other wolves. I don’t go on the pack runs or anything. Warrick would probably be better at answering than me.”

“It’s alright. I just wanted to see if you knew. I’ll get these to Lou to have them printed in a bigger size. Do you have a size in mind?”

We spend ten minutes going over the space that she wants to display the photos and what sizes she was thinking. I put the information down in my phone to give to Lou tomorrow. After saying our goodbyes, I head back to my house. It’s getting late and I’ve still got to work on the English assignment and drink this tea.

Later that night after working more on my English assignment, I followed the exact instructions that Gail gave me for this clarity tea. If my mom wasn’t a healer who loved tinctures, I probably would have thought she was crazy!

Pulling my feet underneath me on my white, wooden porch swing, I take the first tentative sip of it. It’s actually rather sweet and easy to swallow.

There is a soft breeze blowing across the porch, gently picking up my hair as I continue to sip my tea.

Those eyes that have haunted me all day, come to the front of my mind. Clearer than I’ve ever seen them. They are so familiar to me, but why?

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They are this crystalline blue with golden flecks in them. The more I sip the tea, the clearer the eyes are to me, but I don't have any more of his face. Nothing more than the two eyes blinking slowly at me.

A scuff of boots across the dirt path leading to my house draws my eyes to the sound. Caelon is walking home. One of the few times I've actually seen that happen. He looks right at me. His hazel eyes clear as a cloudless day as he smiles at me with a wave before turning to walk up his steps to his front door.

My tea sits in my hand forgotten as I watch him walk into his house. My eyes track him as his muscles bunch and ripple beneath his shirt. My heart rate picks up as he gives me one final glance, wishing he would turn around fully, walk across the road, and sit with me on the porch swing as we sipped tea together. I've never been drawn to any guy like I am right now. As if my world begins and ends with him. What is happening?

The tea is cool as I take my next sip, watching Caelon's house as lights flicker on inside. Sora whimpers as we watch for any sign that he will join us tonight. Those eyes appear again and this time, I think I focus on them as I sip the tea more. Why are you so familiar to me? What am I missing?

Sora whimpers again as she nudges me to look back at Caelon. Those blue eyes feel as if they are also probing me to figure out the secret. Like words stuck on my tongue, I know the answer is right there, but just out of reach.

The front door to Caelon's cabin creaks open again, as my heart rate spikes. Is he coming over? Both Sora and I watch in rapt attention, hanging on to the hope that he

will come. With a math book tucked under one arm and a mug in his hand, he walks to his porch swing to sit down. My excitement bursts like a balloon too close to heat, one thing that is clear for me right now? I have a crush on my neighbor, and I don't think he looks at me that way.

## Chapter 5

Caelon

Tuesday June 17th - If only people were as easy...

Numbers don't judge.

They don't ask me why I'm not like my brother.

They only ask for me to figure out the answer. I like that about them. They are easy, predictable, and always there when I need them.

They don't have emotions, changing based on how you feel. They don't smirk when they hear me walking up, or leave traces of sandalwood and musk behind when they pass by. They are just here, behaving.

Not like my wolf.

And definitely not like my heart.

I've been staring at the page of numbers for hours now, trying to get my brain to focus on the task at hand. It's not the numbers failing me today, it's me. I drag my pen down the column of numbers for the fourth time in the last ten minutes. With the Summer Solstice Festival coming in three days, I really want to make sure we don't blow our budget this year. Between food, lighting, staging, cleanup crews, and

security, there isn't a single dollar of wiggle room. Thankfully the mountain lions have stepped in to be security, relieving us of some of the burden, but not much.

The neat lines of numbers line my leather ledger, showing not a single penny out of place. All the money coming in from the various shifter businesses, donations from pack families, and our own leaders' contributions, is accounted for. In the last six months I've been able to pull us from being completely in the red, to being in the black, a term for breaking even on your expenses and incomes. We can never go back into the red, pushing us into a place where we are unable to continue to provide a safe space for wolves to exist without the pressures of the typical pack life. Other packs would attempt to come in and challenge Silas for his position as Alpha. Finances are a big part of an Alpha's strength as it shows his ability to care for his pack.

The stiff page cracks with a vibrating pop as I flip the page to the next set of numbers to review for the day. Silas laughs every time because he knows no matter what, I'll look over my ledger each day ensuring nothing has changed. My finger is about to run down the next line when the smell of a summer thunderstorm reaches me.

The ocean is calling me like a siren begging for the sailor to jump overboard.

She's here.

Her scent washes over me like a tidal wave before a hurricane. Drowning me in her sea salt and ylang ylang. Like a man swimming to the surface for air, I can feel myself moving towards her. My wolf surges forward causing the chair to scoot out from under us. Calix is pushing so hard I'm afraid I might lose control before I can stop him. He's trying to take over, push me to the back where I can't control the outcome.

A growl rips from me as Calix's anger bursts from us.



“Let me go to her.”

“We can’t.”

“She’s right there.”

“She’s not our mate and she hasn’t even had a chance to figure out who it is.”

“She’s OURS!”

“You can’t know that Calix. Plus she is only a teenager.”

“Mark my words Caelon, she will be our mate. You just wait and see.”

He stops pushing for us to walk out of the room, choosing instead to pace back and forth inside us.

## Page 13

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“Calix, I can’t even look at her for that long. She is too far out of our league.”

He only humphs before continuing to pace.

I can sense her, just beyond the wall. Her words float to me as I listen in to the conversation. Gail knew exactly what she was doing bringing her here. She might claim it’s about some project, but I know that isn’t the only reason.

Grasping the back of my desk chair, I scoot it back into its’ spot before plopping down into it. I can hear Gail tinkering with her glass vials which can only mean she is making a tincture, but for what?

Gail’s faint words filter through the door, “...before you go, I have some tea for you. It’s my personal blend for clarity. I know you’ve had a lot on your mind lately, maybe a tea on your front porch will help clear up some of those questions for you.”

What does she mean that Selene has had a lot on her mind lately? I’ll have to see about sitting on my porch this evening to see what she needs clarity about. I can hear them talking about her leaving. I can’t go without seeing her. She’s right there, I can almost feel her skin, even though I’ve never been close enough to touch it.

Pushing out of my chair, I try to gather my feet under me, but end up stumbling over them in my haste to get to the door. I’m halfway to my door when I hear Gail call out to me.

“Caelon, can you be a dear and come here? I need to go over this budget issue with you for the healers!” she calls through the wall, halting my steps. I don’t want to

exactly look like an idiot who rushed over there. We're going for a cool guy here. Straightening my spine, my chin lifts up as I brush down my wrinkled polo shirt. Shit. Selene is going to think the worst of me. Look at what I'm wearing. Don't girls like her care about stuff like that?

It's alright. It's cool. We got this.

Calix chuckles. "This is going to be great."

"Oh do shut up."

Clearing my throat, I call out to Gail. "Of course." As if I haven't been standing here freaking out over running into Selene.

I can hear Gail's bell-like laughter ring out through the wall. She knows what she's doing. She is far too cheerful, too knowing. I swear I hear her mutter something about, "Destiny is standing right here."

My hands grasp the cool metal of the brass doorknob, resting there as if I could just change my mind. Giving me one last moment to turn around instead of rushing out there.

Selene's scent moves closer, suffocating me in her musk. She has to be standing exactly where I am but only on the other side of the wall.

"Let her see us. Let her know."

"I'm nervous."

"Then let me out."

“Absolutely not.”

My hand twists the doorknob, throwing the door open giving me no other option than to embrace it.

The hallway stands empty with nobody venturing this far down. Move Caelon, she's not going to stay there forever. The door to Gail's office scrapes against the wood frame as Selene swings it open.

Pushing myself through my door frame, I turn to see a wide-eyed Selene blinking at me. Her plump bow lips are open in a tiny O as her eyes move down my body, taking in everything I am. This might be the first time she's ever really seen me.

Gail clears her throat from within her office, knocking me into action. I whisper an, “excuse me,” as I move to walk past Selene.

Her shoulder barely shifts in time to prevent ours from hitting, causing our hands to graze as I pass. A tiny spark of electricity runs up my arm at the contact. She sucks in her breath faintly, almost too quiet to hear. My hands clench to keep Calix from reaching out to grab her.

We stand in the doorway staring at each other as our breaths mingle. Neither of us moving. One heartbeat. Two. Long enough for me to feel it.

Gail clears her throat. “Caelon.”

That's all it takes for me to mumble an “I'm sorry” before walking the rest of the way into her office. It's taking everything in me to not turn around, to not show how much that affected me. Selene must have also snapped out of it only a few seconds later as the door clicks shut behind me. I know she felt it too—I saw it in her eyes.

My feet shuffle to the chair that Selene just left, her musk still lingers in the air, caressing my skin like the soft waves along the shore.

“I was hoping you had a minute to go over some things with me.”

I blink the haze from my eyes, shaking my head gently to focus back on the person in front of me. “For you? Always.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Her fingers steeple atop her desk next to a steaming mug that smells suspiciously like the clarity tea she just gave Selene. Piles of paperwork sit next to a leather-bound book with aged paper. I'm pretty sure that's where she holds all her healing recipes, at least I think it is.

"I wanted to let you know that I'll be putting in for a budget increase for the healers next quarter," she says as she thumbs through the loose paperwork sitting on her desk. "We are running low on several of our important herbs, some of which are costly and take time to get here. I don't want us going into the winter months unprepared. Moonwort takes months to grow and even longer to ship to us. You know the Johnson boy almost lost his leg because we ran out of supplies. If it wasn't for Marlowe having some in her personal stash, we might not have saved it."

I nod, pulling out my cell phone where my digital version of my ledger is easily accessible. Yes, I have these numbers in several places, never know when they will be needed. Scrolling through the excel spreadsheet, I see a few areas where I can make adjustments without needing to pull heavily from another area. When I took over the financial mess that Orion, the last Alpha left, I broke each part into sections: Schools, Training, Businesses, Alpha/Luna, Medical, and etc. Allotting each category a certain amount of money. If we don't use the funds for the month, they roll over to the next month, continuing to increase our wealth. Areas that I can easily pull from are training and businesses as they don't generally use their allotted money in a month. "I can shift some funds around to meet your needs. How much are you estimating?"

She holds out the sheet of paper she was searching for. It's not an Excel sheet, it's not even typed up. The scratches of an ink pen are covering the sheet. "I know it's not

fancy like your ledger, but I'm old and set in my ways. That's the rough outline of what I think we will need. I can have one of these young pups type that up into an Excel sheet if that would be more ideal."

I am cringing so hard internally, I can feel my stomach tying in knots as I attempt, and fail at reading what she wrote. I'm not sure I could even decipher this with a key code handed over by her. The rough loops and scrolls of her letters are almost ancient in their design. I can see the basics of the numbers at least, thank the Goddess for that.

"And," she says, dragging out the word. "I was hoping to talk to you about helping Selene with startup costs for her photography business."

My eyes immediately stop their scanning of the paper and lift to Gail who's sitting behind her desk with a mischievous smirk on her face.

Calix wakes back up from his slumber, suddenly really interested in the math he normally grumbles about.

"Say yes Cal. Now!"

"You sure she wants my help?" I ask as I drop the paper back on top of the desk between us.

"She hasn't asked for it, if that's what you're wondering," Gail replies, undeterred from her goal. "I know you've seen her work, Lou tells me all about your daily drop-ins for copies of her work. She's got the eye for it and you know it. All she needs is a little push to take that leap of faith. This town could use a gallery, or maybe a studio space? Somewhere to hone her craft? Don't you think so?"

She leans forward, resting her weight on her forearms. Her eyes are flicking between

mine, almost as if she is trying to read my thoughts. Reaching over, she brings her steaming mug of tea to her lips as she continues to watch me. My knee begins to bounce beneath the desk, I can almost feel her rooting around in my mind. I don't think I like the fact that I can't hide from her, so exposed.

She hums triumphantly, as if I've already agreed to her proposal. She's always ten steps ahead of us, knowing things that you know she wasn't told.

I rub the back of my damp neck, my nerves getting the better of me. I can feel the sheen of sweat covering my skin from being under her keen eye for too long already. "Let me run the numbers," I say carefully. "There might be room in the next rounds of business investments for the Third Quarter. Since it's already June, I'll have to be quick about it since our budget meeting is at the beginning of July."

Gail smiles like she has already won. "Atta boy. I knew you would see it."

Not sure what she means, I push myself up from the chair, wishing to run back to the safety of my office.

"If there's nothing else, I really need to get back to running the numbers for the Summer Solstice. Speaking of Selene, maybe you should ask her to take photos during it?"

She quirks an eyebrow at me, and I already know I'm not going to like the next words out of her mouth. "Maybe...but I think you should. Great opportunity for you to open up about the photography business. Maybe help her make some business cards?"

I shake my head in disappointment. I fucking knew it. "Yeah, I don't know about all that Gail. You know I'm not good with people."

She hums. "I don't think you'll have a problem with this one. Just take the leap of



faith Cal.”

With her final words pinging around my mind, I walk into my office. My office feels lifeless compared to Gail’s warm, earthy tones. Everything about mine is clean lines, nothing out of place, and creams with leather accents. My office smells of paper, ink, and long nights.

My desk is exactly how I left it, my computer still showing the screen with my Excel sheet. The little cursor is blinking in the empty block where I was in the middle of a calculation.

The numbers aren’t calling to me, the thing I’ve used to comfort me is quiet. There’s only one thing on my mind right now and she’s long gone.

Opening a clean spreadsheet, I know one set of numbers that are calling to me.

Selene Photography : Business Draft Proposal

It starts simple. Building the proposal sections and preparing the sheet for the numbers. It’s a process I’ve done many times before, familiar to me like the feel of my skin beneath my fingers. I start with the average equipment moving quickly to estimates for potential business spaces. There is a property downtown that has been standing empty since the last tenants closed shop. It would be a great space for a gallery. I don’t realize how deep into the numbers I’ve gone until I see the shadows across my desk as the sun moves behind the trees outside my window.

Fuck. If I want to make it to Flash Me Studio before Selene, I’ll have to leave right this second. Hitting ‘save’ on the spreadsheet I’m making for her, I log out and turn off my computer. Swiping my phone off the desk, I rush out of my office, turning right to walk out the side door instead of taking the time to walk out the front door.

The bell over Flash Me Studio gives a cheerful jingle, but I don't have time for lingering. She should be here any minute now. Lou lets out a laugh when she sees me rushing over to her counter. We've had an arrangement for weeks now, I get copies of Selene's photos, give extra cash for Lou's secrecy, and leave. The envelope feels lighter today compared to the others.

I look at Lou who only shrugs before going back to cleaning the lens of the camera sitting in pieces on the countertop.

"Yep, they're good. Seems like somebody's wolf is gettin' in on the action. Now, you ain't gonna tell me you don't know nothin' 'bout that, are ya?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

I only smirk at her before I walk back out of her studio.

I can smell Selene's scent on the wind, she's close. Ducking across the street, I walk behind Crust Issues to take the back way to avoid being seen. I've got one more stop to make before I head to my cabin, hopefully at the same time she's drinking her tea.

Her meadow, the one she sneaks away to each morning, sits vast and empty aside from the birds chirping from within the trees. A soft breeze moves the flowers and grass as it ripples across the valley. The quiet movement of the water across the river bed is a soothing balm across my soul. I can easily see why she loves this space, not for the wildness of it, but for the serenity it offers. It feels as though you're part of a different world, one only you've discovered. With no touch of the human hand, you almost feel as though you're the first one to step foot on the grass, to sniff the mountain breeze, and capture the mental image of it.

With over twenty different species of wildflower growing in the area, I let my soul guide me to the one that's calling out to me. I've got no idea what any of these are called, something I'm sure Selene could tell me. We both know she has a leatherjournal full of flower clippings, leaves, and feathers from her time in the woods.

There amongst the array of flowers are these tiny purple trumpet flowers. Their vibrant deep purple petals called to me. I don't think I've seen her collect these before, something new that she could write about. Bending down, I pinch the stem, breaking off a couple of them before wrapping them in the tissue I brought just for this. I'll drop these off on her front porch and watch as she learns more about them.

Her fascination with plants is almost equal to my fascination with numbers. Where I could sit and do math for hours, she can sit with an encyclopedia learning all about the flower she found.

I first realized it when she was only seven years old and she drug her mother's herbology book into the backyard one spring afternoon. I had been out back watching the clouds move across the sky, using math to predict the odds of certain clouds forming when I heard this little voice say, "I'll find you in this book," before she sat down Indian style with a book far too big for her little hands. Suddenly the clouds held no interest to me anymore, only this little girl with a curiosity just like mine. I spent the rest of the afternoon watching her as her face scrunched in confusion only to quickly widen with amazement. I knew there was no way she could read any of the words, but the look of wonderment on her face, now that's what I could understand.

My thumb brushes over the petals of this dainty purple flower as I smile at the memory of seven-year-old Selene. Every day after that she would drag that same book out into the backyard for hours, flipping through the pages and comparing the plants of her yard to those in the book. Over the years I watched it go from only knowing the pictures, to learning the words, to knowing the species of flowers.

One day I hope she'll tell me all about this purple flower and the rest of them in this valley. Carefully pocketing the flower, I check the time on my cell. 3:45 P.M. stares back up at me. I've got 15 minutes to make it to the other flower before dropping the first one off on her porch.

Rushing through the path lining the pack lands, I stop off to grab a Silvery Lupine before briskly walking down the path back towards our cabins. Before I come around the final corner leading to our front porches, I slow to a stop to check the time. It's 4:00 P.M. meaning she's just left from Lou's shop and should be heading this direction. I've got only seconds to drop this flower off and move back towards the Pack House and my office. I need her to think I'm just coming home from work, not

that I've been running all over town.

Glancing around to ensure nobody is looking, I sneak up to her front porch and take the three steps up. I'll put the flower on her porch swing. There's no way she won't see it there. I've just laid down the flower when I smell her scent. Fuck. She's close.

Jumping over the railing, I rush to her backyard. I'll have to cut across to the other road to avoid being seen by her. My heart is racing as I silently move across the grass between the houses. Praying to the Goddess that she doesn't look between the cabins to see me ducking away. The second my feet hit the dirt path on the opposite side, I let out a shuddering breath. That was too close for comfort.

Bracing my hands on my knees as I heave out a breath, I sneak a look over my shoulder down the gap between the cabins. She isn't standing there staring at me. I don't see her at all actually. Good, hopefully she went inside like nothing was amiss.

When my heart rate drops down to a normal level again, I walk down the main path leading to the Pack House. Now all I've got to do is walk home after work. I want to work some more on her business proposal before I call it a night.

It's almost dusk before I come up for air again. Her business proposal is coming along nicely. Granted I had to research quite a bit to determine exactly what all she would need. I've even called Silas about the open business property downtown to see about the cost of that. I didn't elaborate or anything, but he has connections being a member of the city council and all that.

I rub my eyes before checking the time. 8:30 P.M. I need to head home before she tucks in for the night. I don't know what time she is planning to drink the tea, I can only hope that I've not missed it.

The sky outside is awash with oranges giving it an almost creamsicle look as I walk

down the path towards our cabins. Willow's, a bartender at Pour Me Another, cabin is dark but Hazel's, the owner of Flick the Bean Coffee Shop, has the lights on letting me know at least one of them is home.

The bedroom light is on in Selene's parents', June and Rowan, room as I pass by their cabin. Selene's room is dark—did she go to bed already? As I come around the corner, disappointment already seeping in, I find Selene sitting on her porch swing with a mug in her hand.

Seems I didn't miss the tea drinking after all. I can feel her eyes on me as I walk down the path. The urge to look at her is too strong to resist. Glancing up I find her staring right at me. Eyes unblinking, almost as if I'm the white rabbit walking in front of the starving wolf. A smile breaks across my face as I lift my hand and wave at her. Oh fuck. I'm waving at her. I'm smiling at her. She isn't blinking. She doesn't lift her hand to wave back or even react to what I just did. Maybe I've gotten this all wrong.

Shoving my hand into my pocket, I turn to walk up my stairs. Just get into the house. What was I thinking smiling and waving at her like we're friends? Just because I can't get her out of my mind, doesn't mean that she feels or thinks the same way. Her bumping into me at Gail's office and now staring at me has everything jumbled in my mind. I don't know what to think of all of it.

I need my math book and my chamomile tea. She might be the one drinking clarity tea tonight, but I'm the one that's going to need a calming tea.

My favorite book, *The Golden Ratio*, sits on my small bookshelf in my living room. I've collected books on just about every mathematician throughout history along with a few scientists that have used math to make major discoveries in our world.

My home feels just like my office. Cold, sterile, and orderly. You almost wouldn't think someone lived here with the lack of personal touches. When I was given this

cabin, I arranged the furniture in a way that was clutter free and kept the flow of the house easy to use. I don't have any family photos along the walls or overdone decor. The most personal touch is my math books, the Leonardo Da Vinci human model, and my herbal tea collection. Some would find it odd that I don't have family photos, or even snap shots hanging on my fridge, but if I could disconnect myself any further from them, I would. I would prefer there is never any proof that I'm connected to that family.

My kettle sits exactly where I left it, sitting on the back burner of my stove top, ready for the next batch of tea. I prefer loose-leaf tea over the prepackaged dust particles they serve in stores. Often times I've let Gail mix up a new tea for me to try as it's something I enjoy drinking.

The glass bottles tink against each other as I pull down the one's I need for tonight's tea. Chamomile flowers for relaxation, lavender buds for soothing, lemon balm leaves for uplifting, and spearmint leaves for a bit of sweetness. Dropping the leaves into the metal pod, I clasp it closed before pouring the water into the kettle.

It doesn't take long for the water to boil. Turning the burner off, I let that steep for a few minutes while I pull down my mug and agave syrup. My wooden tea spoon sits balanced on the lip of the saucer plate. My mug is handmade from the pottery class we hold once a month in the Pack House as a fun project for the elders. I don't partake but I've been known to buy the pieces.

With my tea in hand, I grab my book and head out to the porch. Finding Selene still exactly where I last saw her, I can't help but smirk. Avoiding looking at her for fear of what I might see, I move to my own porch swing and sit down. The bitter sweet tea washes over my tongue as I take the first sip.

Later that evening as I pace back and forth in my bedroom, the restless energy between my wolf and I has prevented me from resting. He wants to go watch over her

as she sleeps and I want him to realize how creepy that is. Since I've refused what he's asked, we have spent the better part of three hours arguing.

“What if we just go check on her? She might be hurt.”

I grumble because even I know that's a sad excuse. “You know she's fine.”



## Page 16

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“Alright, what about that silly flower you picked up and didn’t give her?”

“I was going to give that to her tomorrow.”

“What about right now?”

“She’s sleeping. Something we should be doing.”

“What if we leave it as a surprise for her?”

“This is dumb Calix. Where would we leave it?”

“On her desk in her room.”

“We can’t...”But it’s too late. The idea has taken root. Just the thought of being able to see her. I’m too exhausted to fight him when he takes over. He shifts into our humanoid form, I’m assuming to carry the flower in a hand instead of a mouth.

I watch as he does something I could never do. Takes action.

He walks around the back of her house to where her window sits cracked open. Why is her window open? I watch as his large gray hand reaches over, quietly pushing it open.

“You know there’s no way my form is fitting through this window. It’s up to you to do this part Cal.”

“I can’t.”

“It’s either you go through or I shove this massive form through. Which do you think will wake her first?”

“Let’s just go home.”

“Alright, here I go...”He lifts himself up, hiking a leg as if he could actually fit.

“Stop!!! Fine. I’ll do it. Last thing we need is her waking up to your large ass falling through a window.”

The change happens fast and what was once a large gray hand is now my much smaller human hand holding the lip of the window.

Lifting myself up, I slide easily through the open window. Quietly stepping my foot down.

“I’m leaving the flower and that’s it. No funny business.”

“Don’t you want to see what she looks like while she is sleeping?”

“No, you weirdo. I want to get out of this room before she wakes up.”

“She’s right there Cal. Look at her.”

“No.”

“I bet she’s even more beautiful when she’s dreaming.”

She turns in her sleep, letting out a low whimper. “Who are you?”

We freeze. Did she wake up? She turns again as a low whine leaves her lips.

“Stop running from me and just tell me who you are,” she mumbles in her sleep.

“She’s dreaming,” Calix says in wonder.

“Yeah and I feel like I’m going to pass out.”

“Pussy.”

## Page 17

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“Whatever. We’re leaving.” I don’t give him a chance to argue with me as I pull myself back out the window and into the backyard.

“You have to admit, you had a tiny bit of fun doing that,” Calix prods.

“I did not.”

“Just a smidge of fun?”

“No.”

When I finally make it back into our bedroom, Calix finally calms down enough for us to lay down. I’m just about to fall asleep when...

“Calix, why do you think we are drawn to her?”

“You haven’t figured it out yet?”

“Figured out what yet?”

“For someone so smart, you really are missing the point. I guess you’ll know soon enough.” He moves all the way to the back of our shared mind space. Leaving me with more questions than answers.

## Chapter 6

Selene

Wednesday June 18th - Is it early bonding signs?

My alarm rings startling me awake after another restless night of sleep. My eyes blink open as I stare at my ceiling. Maybe I should ask my mom for a stronger sleep tonic because if I keep going at this rate, I'm going to fall asleep in the middle of class. Those crystalline blue eyes chased me through the woods again, haunting my every step. The woods felt familiar, almost like the ones that I walk through to my secret valley.

My phone vibrates with an incoming text. Flipping it over, Odessa's name pops up letting me know she'll be here in twenty minutes to walk with me to school. Throwing my comforter back, I slide my feet into my slippers. My English assignment is still sitting on my laptop where I left it. Maybe the stress of that assignment is why I'm feeling so unsettled.

My arms stretch over my head as I shift from side to side. The muscles in my legs are tight this morning, almost like I ran a marathon last night instead of sleeping. I grab my lotion and massage it into my calves hoping for a little relief. After a few minutes of massaging the tight muscles, I can finally move them around without feeling like a rubber band about to snap.

Checking the time on my phone, I realize I've got less than ten minutes before Odessa will be howling on my front porch about how long it's taking me. Literally! She will stand outside yelling about how she is always waiting on a woman. She can be a real drama queen sometimes. As if I haven't sat in her bedroom waiting an hour for her to finish her hair.

With no time to waste, I rush around my room throwing on the first outfit I find and running a brush through my long straight hair. I have to say one benefit is it's almost always ready to go for the day. A quick brushing and I'm able to go out. A few swipes of mascara to darken my eyelashes, a touch of lip gloss, a spritz of perfume

and bam, I'm ready for school.

Pulling the strap of my bag over my head, I open the flap to throw in the three rolls of film that I need to develop, my homework from yesterday along with the English assignment, and my favorite pen. I've just cracked my bedroom door open when I hear the first yell of Odessa from the front door. Shaking my head, I pull my bedroom door closed behind me. This girl.

Outside, I can hear her beginning to sing the lyrics of the Brad Paisley song, "Waiting on a Woman."

"I hope she takes her time, 'cause I don't mind. Waitin' on a woman"

She's completely unhinged and off-key.

I'm rushing past the kitchen where I find Mom and Dad laughing as they sip their morning coffees.

"Better hurry before she gets to the high-pitched part of that song," my mom jokes as I grab an apple and my juice. I smile and shake my head, remembering the time I was still asleep when Odessa showed up and she ended up singing the whole song. I'm pretty sure the entire neighborhood was ready to drag me out of bed in hopes she would stop singing.

"Oh, hey before I leave for school. Mom, can you bring home something stronger to help with sleep? I'm feeling majorly wiped."

She nods her head. "Of course sweetie. Are your nerves about graduation getting to you?"

"Yeah, sounds about right."

Odessa has moved on to the next part of the song and my eyes bulge. I gotta go, we are getting closer to the high-pitched part.

“He said the weddin’ took a year to plan,” she sings from the front porch.

I wave to both of my parents before dashing to the door. With her only living three cabins down from me, we usually walk to school together. It’s going to be weird after graduation when that’s not part of my morning routine anymore. As my soul match, Odessa and I’ve done practically everything together since we were young pups.

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We discovered makeup, boys, our favorite ice cream flavor, the boy bands we love, and have binge-watched every show together. With adulthood barking down the hall at us, I'm terrified that we won't have this much time together anymore. Odessa already has a place in the pack. She found that she loves baking and has taken up an internship with our baker to learn all the generational recipes, such as our honey cakes. At least one of us knows what we are doing next.

The front door swings open to Odessa mid-note as she belts it to the ceiling of our porch. Looking over to Mrs. Cranford's house, our next door neighbor, who is almost ancient at this point, I'm grateful to see she isn't outside this morning. Her mate passed away a few years back and ever since then her attitude has only gotten worse, especially when it comes to us teenagers. She can't stand Odes singing and will make passive-aggressive comments as we walk down the path to the road.

"Girl, you sing like you are Mariah Carey but you sound more like a dying cat."

She glares at me. "I'll have you know, I sing beautifully."

"Who lied to you?"

"Raiden," she grumbles as we turn to walk down the path to the road.

My arm loops through hers. "That's only because he is hoping that you will be his mate and he can finally taste that peach you're carrying around."

Her mouth drops open. "He said my voice could sing him to sleep each night and he would die a happy wolf."



I can't resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Yeah probably so he doesn't have to hear it anymore."

She swats my hand. "Anyways, we aren't here to chat about me or Raiden. You're supposed to tell me why you look like you knocked on Death's door last night and he rejected you."

Now it's my turn to drop my mouth open. This bish. "Alright, but if I tell you this then you can't tell anybody else. Not our parents, and especially not Raiden."

She makes a cross over her heart before pretending to shoot herself and sticking her tongue out like she died. See what I mean about drama queen. "I promise not to say anything. Like I would anyways." Her lip pops in a pout.

My head tilts to the side as I look at her out of the corner of my eye. We both know that she would totally tell Raiden. Normally, I wouldn't care as I don't normally have anything my parents don't know about. But, if ONE person finds out in this town, it will make it through the grapevine before I even walk in my home. Joys of a small town, there is only one thing they love more than sun tea, a very popular Summer Solstice drink, and that is gossip.

"So, you obviously know that I've been taking photos, but you haven't known where. Really that's been because I wanted it to stay as my secret, my hideaway from everyone."

Her hand comes to her chest in mock pain.

"Even from you. Love you, but I like my peace. Anyways, I've been going off pack land to this hidden gem in the mountains. For a while it's only been me. That is until one day a wolf showed up. At first I thought it could be a wild wolf."

“Girl, you know there aren't wild wolves around here. They stay away from the magic of this place.”

“Yeah well forgive me for thinking maybe I was far enough away that one might wander in. Anyways,” my eyes cut to her again. “As I was saying, it didn't take me long to figure out he def is one of us. But, for the life of me, I can't figure out who he is. He has to be from our pack, but I've never seen him before or photographed him during pack runs. I know we have a lot of wolves, but how have I never seen him before?”

“Maybe he doesn't want you to see him? Ever consider that?”

“Like he's made sure he isn't around me during pack runs?”

“Yeah, I mean it's not that hard given the almost sixty wolves shifting for the run. But he could make sure he either doesn't shift near you or waits till you're far enough away. Either is possible. Do you have any guesses on who you think it is?”

My eyes stray to Caelon's cabin as we walk by it. Odessa's eyes follow mine to the dark cabin. I know he's already left for work this morning. This is why I say that I rarely see him. He's gone before I leave every morning and still not home when I come back for the day. Either that or he sits in a dark house.

“You think it's Caelon?”

My eyes snap to hers as my head whips to the side. “What?”

“I asked who you thought it was and your eyes went to his cabin. I thought maybe that's who you thought it was.”

“So here's the thing. Gail gave me this clarity tea to drink and when I was sipping it

last night, Caelon came home. I couldn't break my eye contact with him and I watched him walk up his stairs and into his house. I'm talking as focused as we are when they bring out mozzarella sticks fresh out of the grease. You couldn't have gotten me to look away if you tried."

"Oh shit, that's serious then. Have you felt that way towards him before?"

"I mean not really. He's always been our neighbor from when he lived with his parents to moving across the street from us. I've never talked to him, so I can't say I've really thought about him as more than my neighbor."

"That's fair. So what's changed?"

"Well, on top of this wolf showing up when I go to my secret place, I've also been plagued with dreams about a pair of specific blue eyes on a shadowy male figure. No matter how hard I try I can't seem to catch him to figure out who it is. Then while sipping the tea last night, those eyes appeared as I was watching Caelon go into his house. It was almost like they were trying to tell me something. Something that should be so obvious."

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She squeals, “Oh this is juicy.”

“That’s not even the best part. He came back outside with a mug and a book. Girl, I think I’ve got a crush on my neighbor. He’s the only guy that’s ever drawn my attention, especially enough to make me want to sit on my front porch each night in hopes of seeing him again.”

Her hand comes up to cover her mouth. “My baby’s gone and grown up on me. Never thought I’d see the day. I figured you would be old, surrounded by cats, and a room full of all the plants you took pictures of.”

My eyebrow quirks. “Cats?”

“Okay maybe not cats because ew. I’m pretty sure that would be a sin against the Goddess if we owned domesticated cats. Maybe birds? No, can’t be birds either. Alright, fuck it, plants. Yeah, let’s go with plants.”

I shake my head as a smile spreads across my face. “I’d probably kill the plants too. I’m not my mom and grammy where I’ve got this green thumb to grow anything.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Either way, I didn’t see you having a crush on a guy. Especially not the older, hotter, math nerd neighbor.”

“It’s not that serious Odes.”

“But it is! He might be your mate and you won’t know it yet since, you know, your birthday is less than a month away.”

“There’s no way to know that. You know we don’t have any way to know before the bond snaps into place.”

She holds her finger up as if she knows something I don’t. “You clearly didn’t pay attention to our Lorekeepers during that portion of our training did you?”

We are just rounding the corner beside You’re Bacon Me Crazy along with all the other students heading into school from the different pack lands. It’s a long flow of kids of all varying ages. With all three schools this direction, you are sure to run into the entire youth portion of our town on your walk to school. Everyone’s feet are dragging as they march towards our prison for the day. We thankfully only have two weeks left before our two month break.

“I paid attention well enough,” I huff.

“Clearly not. The Lorekeepers told us that some mates will have early signs. Being drawn to a certain person. Thoughts of mating, babies, et cetera. But most importantly, vivid dreams with hints of what’s to come.”

My feet come to an abrupt stop as I twist Odessa around to face me. “What are you saying, Odes? All I know from my dreams is the blue eyes and the handful of words he’s spoken to me.”

She looks at me without an ounce of joking in her body. “I’m saying that it sounds like you’re experiencing early mating bond symptoms. Clearly those eyes are important and with the rest of him being shadowed means that fate doesn’t feel you are ready to know who that is.”

“But Caelon has hazel eyes, not blue?”

She smirks. “But, you’ve never seen his wolf’s eyes.”

Her words wash over me, leaving me replaying every moment since I met the wolf in the wildflower field. Could she be onto something? There's no way. My birthday is still 28 days away, surely the Goddess isn't showing me this early? Odes didn't really say how early though, did she. Just that it could be early.

I'm quiet on the rest of the walk to school and thoughts of what Odessa said plague me all day. Before I know it, the final bell for the day is ringing and I don't remember a single word spoken to me today. Not even sure how I successfully walked to each class.

Odessa finds me by my locker where she is leaning against hers scrolling on her phone. Her eyes light up when she sees me walking her way.

"Girl, you don't look any better than how I left you this morning. If anything, you look worse. What's happening?"

I sigh as I click my locker open. "I can't get what you said out of my head. It's literally consumed me today."

She chuckles. "Don't let it hold you down. We have lots to be thinking of and a possible mate bond a month down the road isn't it. Not when we have the Summer Solstice to plan for."

Her phone chimes right as she drops it to her side. "Shit, Howlr is feral right now. You've got to see this, Moony. They're already guessing who's getting Moonbound—and some of these trial ideas are unhinged."

She swipes open her phone showing the Howlr home screen with a flashing banner saying:

"Moonbinding Watch Begins!"

Howlr is the most popular app for paranormal creatures. It's a social media platform designed specifically for us where you have to provide proof of your species in order to be approved for an account. Some tech genius with a name I couldn't pronounce if you begged me, created a safe space for us to chat without having to conceal who we really are. Needless to say, the teens use it as a place to gossip.

“Mountain Lions are up next—who do you think is entering the trials this year? Drop those predictions below! We want drama, claws, and chaos! Let the games begin!”

The Moonbinding Ceremony the Mountain Lions have is arguably the most talked about commodity of every single year. Probably because they keep it completely secret from anyone outside their pride. To add to it, the ones who have said stuff about it, only have mentioned that everyone fights for a chance with their selected females. Needless to say, we love to speculate who we think is going to be selected.

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I lean in closer as our shoulders smoosh together so we can both see the screen as she scrolls down to the comment thread.

@wildshift says: 2h ago – Jasper “Calling it now Chase & the mystery girls from Denver” 143 howls | 27 Growls | 89 Clipped

@moondustmage says: 2h ago – Jasper “Chase better get mates that are good to him!” 298 howls | 68 Growls | 12 Clipped

@alphatease says: 1h ago – Jasper “I’m hoping one of them has to streak through town. I’d pay to see that.” 103 howls | 89 Growls | 0 Clipped

@howlsbeforebros says: 1h ago – Jasper “@alphatease I’m there with you man! Let’s place bets on it! I have 50 on the girls having to streak.” 103 howls | 89 Growls | 0 Clipped

@purrfectlywild says: 1h ago – Jasper “@alphatease @howlsbeforebros You guys are gross. If you aren’t going to offer real predictions then don’t chime in.” 290 howls | 101 Growls | 77 Clipped

We both look at each other before we burst out laughing. Howlr is always unhinged with a constant flow of threads. Between what we chat about locally all the way to what we chat about around the world. This app lets us meet other shifters around the world without having to leave Jasper. It can be fun, but I’ve also seen how nasty it can be too.

“The top trending hashtags is #Moonbinding2025, #MysteryMates, and



#GuesstheMate. With so many of us turning 18 this summer, there is an entire thread dedicated to people guessing each other's mates." She clicks on the hashtag opening a whole new thread full of comments. Some of them are as recent as seconds ago.

"Want to see who they are guessing is your mate?" She nudges me with her shoulder.

I shake my head. "Absolutely not. I would rather live in my bubble of ignorance a little longer. Thank you very much."

She shrugs her shoulders as she scrolls through the thread, probably looking for our names to see if anyone has mentioned us.

"I've got to run over to Flash Me Studio to drop off some rolls of film I've been meaning to have Lou develop. Are you coming with me or want to meet me there after I'm done?"

"I'll walk with you."

Kids are pouring out of the building as the rays of the sun warm all of our skins. There are so many conversations going on at once that it's hard to even think, let alone hear what anyone is saying. One thing is for sure, everyone is talking about the Guess the Mate Thread on Howlr. Seems I might be the only one not wanting to know what their guesses are.

Odessa is still scrolling through the threads as we walk down the path until she scoffs and throws her hand up. "There isn't even a single comment saying Raiden is my fated mate. Everyone is guessing it's going to be Kai and like, ew."

I can't help but giggle. "Kai is cute, what's wrong with that?"

She lets out a sigh. "There's nothing wrong with it. I just don't see how they came up

with that one. We don't even talk to each other or go in the same circles."

"I guess they see something that you don't. Who knows! It's just a stupid social media app full of people with nothing better to do."

We are just coming around the corner of Flick the Bean when she gasps and holds out her phone for me to take. There on the screen is something I can't even believe.

@thegraywolf says: 30s ago – Jasper "I think Selene's fated mate might just be the math nerd, Caelon. My money is on him." 178 howls | 16 Growls | 6 Clipped

I look from the screen to Odessa... "Who's thegraywolf?" We huddle together as I click the hyperlink to his profile. "Of course it's blank. Why wouldn't it be?!" There is only one post and it's the one we just read. There's no name, photo, or anything to go off of.

I hand the phone back to her as I walk off to the studio. Odes runs to catch up.

"Don't you want to know who that is?"

"How do you expect to figure it out?"

"I say we comment back to them. Maybe we can get some details out of them." She clicks back on his comment and hits the Growl button to open a box to write a comment back to him.

I grasp onto her wrist bringing her attention back to me. "I don't want to know. I said that earlier. It's weird, I get that. But honestly, nobody knows and maybe they guess right but it's just that, a guess."

She nods her head in understanding before clicking the button to turn off her screen.

“Alright, I’ll let it go this time. But, I’m going to watch for more comments. You know I love this part of the mating. The guessing and seeing who’s right. Plus, I can’t resist the comments coming in over the Moonbinding Ceremony. Imagine if we had to do something like that instead of just ‘oh hey here’s your mate’.”

As we finish walking to the studio, I can’t help but think about yesterday and brushing my hand against his outside of Gail’s office. Maybe that electric shock was more than just static electricity? What if it was another sign from the Goddess?

The bell above the door to Flash Me Studio chimes as we push the door open. Lou is walking out of her dark room with a couple photos stacked in her hands.

“Oh, hey now! Perfect timin’! You’re the one I wanted to see. Had a little somethin’ I wanted to ask ya, seein’ as how we got a pretty good mess o’ your work piled up.” She ambles over with a slight drag of her right leg. She says it’s from years of squatting to take photos. Her skin looks almost like leather from years of being outside taking photos under the blazing sun. I hope when I’m her age that my skin won’t look the same.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

“Well now, I know you got that big ol’ dream ‘bout startin’ up your own photography business, and hopin’ to snap pictures for National Geographic just like yours truly. So, what I was thinkin’ is, maybe you could take over my booth down at the Summer Solstice this year instead of me.”

My mouth is hanging open. I didn’t expect this when I came in today. I was thinking I was just dropping off more film. Not possibly running a booth in the festival!

“Listen here, sugar, ‘fore you get all worked up, you gotta know I think you’re somethin’ special, and I can just see you goin’ real far with this here photography! That festival? Why, that’d be just like your own little gallery! A chance for ever’body to see what you can do.”

“I don’t...” I start to pace back and forth in front of Lou. “I don’t even think I have enough pictures to display. How do you even choose? This is a lot to think about. I just planned to drop off three more rolls and now you are asking about me running a booth.” Odes is following me with her eyes, not saying a single word. Just watching my mini breakdown. I cut my eyes to her and glare.

A smile grows across her face. “This is a great idea, Moony! I mean you could only do it during the day since people won’t be able to see the photos in the dark. Think about it. A few hours of displaying your amazing photos, rub some elbows with the elders of the community, and still have time to do some festival games that night with me.” She shrugs like it’s just that easy.

“You make it sound so easy,” I whine.

“It’s totally that easy.” She walks over and wraps her arm around my shoulder. “She’ll do it Ms. Snapley.”

Lou shoos her. “Just call me Lou, now. Ain’t no need for all that fancy stuff. Did I hear you say you got some rolls of film there for me?”

I reach into my bag and pull the three rolls out, handing them over to her. “Alright, well thank you again. This is more than I imagined.”

Lou just nods her head as she turns to head back into her dark room. Seeing this as the end of conversation that it is, I turn to walk back out.

“Oh my gosh! Look at the banners going up!” Odessa squeals as she points at the banners the workers are lifting over the road. It’s not only announcing the festival but the theme for the year.

Legacy of the Land.

“Oh this year's theme is perfect, especially with you sharing your photos of the pack and the lands around us! It’s almost like fate is stepping in, don’t you think?” Her elbow nudges into my side.

My eyes draw down to hers. “Yeah, could be.”

We cross the street in front of the workers hanging the banner, arm in arm, as we giggle watching Marlowe sneaking across the street in her pine marten form. We better get down the road before Bea comes storming out with her rolling pin again. We scurry past the bakery, heading towards the pack lands. We are just about to pass Citrine and Rose when Odessa yanks my arm back.

“Girl, we gotta get those.” She’s pointing to the two dresses displayed in the window.

“They are so perfect for us! We can wear them to the Bestiare! Our masks will look perfect with them!” She doesn’t even give me the chance to say a word before she’s pulling me into the shop. Not that I would’ve argued, those dresses are perfect. Bestaire is our annual masked dance during Summer Solstice, and this is the first year our parents are allowing us to attend.

Hours later, after I’ve finished my English assignment and submitted it to my teacher, I’m still feeling conflicted and today’s revelations aren’t helping. I’ve already taken the sleep tonic Mom gave me, but now I think I want to try the clarity tea again. Just one more time, maybe I’ll get more answers this time around.

My mom has always warned me about mixing tinctures, saying things like “you aren’t trained in how herbs react to each other, mixing them without knowledge is like playing a game of hide and seek while someone throws knives.” I always thought she was just being dramatic, a scare tactic for kids.

Deciding it’s worth the risk, I boil a kettle of water and pour myself another mug of water with the tincture Gail mixed. It’s my last shot without having to ask for more. The floral notes of the chamomile float into the air as I swirl my wooden spoon around and blend the agave into it.

The mixture has a deep earthy taste to it, almost like you licked the dirt after sprinkling sugar across it. Not an ideal taste, but I’m going for clarity not enjoyability.

Tipping the mug up and quickly drinking down the mixture, I plop the mug down in the sink and head back to bed. Hopefully, I’ll actually get a good night's sleep.

As my head hits the pillow, I feel the tinctures pulling me under, but I don’t feel asleep. I feel as though I walked through a mirror and I’m on the other side looking back. When I open my eyes, there’s a thick layer of fog clinging to the ground around

me. There is black as far as I can see with only a single light illuminating where I'm standing.

I feel him.

He's here.

The air charges with electricity as he moves closer to me. I reach my arm out and swirl it through the fog, hoping to dispel it. The air pops along my skin.

"Tsk, tsk Little Leni, you know you won't be able to see me. Don't you think it's time to give up, hmm?" his gravelly voice whispers down my back as bumps prickle along my skin.

I whirl around expecting to find him standing behind me, but of course he's gone again. "Who are you?" I plead into the darkness. "Show me your face."

The wind rushes towards me as I'm knocked backwards. I bolt upright in my bed, back in the real world, as his words whisper around me...

"You already know who I am."

Chapter 7

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Selene

Thursday, June 19th – Day before Summer Solstice

My eyes feel glued shut with how heavy they are. Rubbing my eyes with the back of my hand, I'm finally able to open them. My head swims as I sit up. I've never drank alcohol, but I can imagine this is probably what it feels like after drinking all night. My thoughts are jumbled and hard to focus on as I try to think back on last night. There's one thing that's clear as day, his words.

“You already know who I am.”

Reaching over to my nightstand, I flip open my dream journal as I pull my pencil pouch over onto my bed. Our Lorekeepers have preached for years that you should track your dreams to see the hidden meanings. I let out a snort. I pretty much know the meaning to my dreams. Someone is coming. It's got to be my fated mate which is why it's hidden from me, right?

Using black and gray I draw out the fog and darkness surrounding me. Even though I didn't see them last night, I draw those eyes almost from memory at this point. One day when I actually figure out who they belong to, I want to compare how accurate I've actually gotten with them.

After my drawing is finished, I check the time. Shit. Any second now Odes is going to be outside singing again. I really slept like the dead if I missed all my alarms and her text messages. Scrambling out of my bed, I throw on a pair of black leggings, a baggy t-shirt with some band's logo on it, and the first cleanish pair of white socks I



find crumbled on the floor.

I'm damn near tripping out my bedroom door when the beginning notes of today's song come from outside. I'm hopping down the hallway putting on my tennis shoe when my mom clears her throat from inside the kitchen.

"Good morning Moondrop!" she says cheerfully from beside Dad, who's mid sip of his coffee when his eyes flick up to my mess of a self falling through the kitchen.

I smile at my nickname, she's always called me that. Claims I was born on a full moon and it was like a drop of that moon filled my soul.

He chuckles. "Did someone oversleep this morning?"

I let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, I slept through my alarm and Odessa's morning text."

My mom sets her mug of coffee down on the kitchen island as she walks around to stand next to me. "I was hoping that you would have some time to make pottery with me today at The Muddy Paw, after school, of course."

Shoving the cinnamon roll sitting on the tray into my mouth, I nod my head. As I move towards the front door, Odessa is circling around to the chorus and I'm not ready to deal with Mrs. Cranford's commentary this morning over it.

With the beginnings of a migraine coming on, probably from my tincture mixing, I'm grateful Mrs. Cranford isn't on her front porch this morning because I really don't want to hear her high-pitched antics.

Swinging open the front door, I give Odes the death glare and she just laughs. "What? I thought that was my best one yet."

I roll my eyes as I push past her heading down the three steps of my porch. Caelon's cabin is empty again. Does he even sleep?

Two hours later during my second period class, my history teacher drones on and on about the history of this country and I've got zero interest in what he's saying. I'm doodling those eyes that haunt me when Odes clears her throat next to me. When I look over, she is pointing at her screen that has Howlr open.

"You should really check the app."

My eyebrows furrow. "Why?"

"Besides the Moonbinding ceremony drama?"

I nod my head.

"You're trending right now. Since your birthday is the closest, everyone is speculating who is your fated mate. That's not even the craziest part." She looks pointedly at my phone laying on my desk.

Sighing, I swipe open my phone and click the wolf and moon icon opening the Howlr app. It doesn't take long to see exactly what she's talking about. There are hundreds of comments on the #GuesstheMate thread all with my handle and all their wild theories. But that isn't what's standing out. No, what's shocking is the who.

@thegraywolf says: 3h ago – Jasper "I've heard that a secret admirer is leaving hints for @themoonsmistress to figure out who her mate is. Seems someone is trying to grab the attention of his mate." 289 howls | 125 Growls | 106 Clipped

As I scroll through all the different comments, I see all kinds of names thrown around. But that isn't what's blowing my mind. This @thegraywolf has almost

commented under every single comment mentioning my name.

My eyebrows scrunch in confusion as I look at Odes. “Who is this guy and why is he so concerned with what everyone is saying?”

She only shrugs her shoulders. “Beats me, but I’m currently reading all about the Moonbinding Ceremony. Click the hashtag for it! This shit is juicy.”

With one last glance at this guy blowing up this thread, I click the #Moonbinding2025 tab and see the top most Howled Post is:

“Mountain Lions Dropping Moonbinding Lists tomorrow??? Spill the Claws, who’s getting their triad bond for 2025? Let’s go, people drop those bids below!”  
#SummerSolstice #AlphaGames

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The first comment underneath it is about the Prime's second son, the notorious bad boy with an affliction known as playboy. Raven Blackwood has the broody, emotionally scarred, bad boy stick down to a perfect aesthetic. My eyes flick to the back of the classroom where he sits leaning back in his desk chair as if the idea of school is completely beneath him.

@gothiclioness says: 1h ago – Jasper “Anyone know if our King Playboy will finally throw his towel in and settle down? Signed- curious lioness” 1,564 howls | 1,023 Growls | 1,564 Clipped

Looking between my phone and Raven, I don't get the impression that he will be. If anything, he looks perfectly content in the life he's living. Oh well, that's pride business not pack business.

Closing my phone, I go back to doodling while Odes continues to scroll and my teacher drones on and on, oblivious to all of us ignoring him.

Lately, I'm more and more glad when the last bell chimes in the afternoon. The elation I feel at the freedom is unmatched. Scratch that, the only thing that tops it is the perfect shot during golden hour.

Mom texted me during her lunch break letting me know she booked us a spot at The Muddy Paw for 4 P.M. which gives me enough time to run home, drop off my stuff, and change into my clothes for pottery day. Even while wearing an apron, you are going to end up with clay somewhere on your clothes, if not the glaze.

Odes wraps her arm around mine as we walk out of the building. “What's on your

plans for the rest of the day?”

“I’m meeting Mom for a pottery class at four, then I’ve got to stop by Lou’s to discuss an idea for the booth, and then finally...a sleep tincture and prayers to the Goddess that I get more sleep.”

She nods her head and starts to talk about her plans when I feel eyes on me. It’s that same feeling as before. Glancing around, nobody is openly staring at me, but just off in the tree line there’s a man standing just within the shadows of the canopy. Close enough for me to see the outline, but far enough to keep details obscured. Just like the photo I have on my desk at home.

I’m just about to tap Odes to look when he steps further into the tree line, leaving no sign that he was even there to begin with. Was I imagining that?

Shaking my head to clear my confusion, I walk the rest of the way home with Odes chatting away all about what she’s been reading on Howlr. I stopped listening twenty minutes ago when she got on the topic of the Moonbinding Ceremony. Why everyone is so obsessed with it is beyond me. Cool, it’s a secret thing and everyone wants to know. Not enough of a thing to keep my attention.

We part ways when we make it in front of my house, Odes walking down the path towards her house.

After a quick change, I’m heading back out the door towards the pottery studio. Thankfully it’s right next to the Pawspital where my mom works. It doesn’t take more than ten minutes to walk to it and Mom is just walking up at the same time. Good timing.

She wraps her arm around my shoulder pulling me in close as she plants a kiss on my temple. “Ready to make another beautiful mug?”

I shrug. “Ready to make something. Not sure about the beautiful part.”

She scoffs as she pulls open the glass door leading inside The Muddy Paw. The front desk has a petite elder with gray and orange hair. Her teal scarf is wrapped around her neck over her flowing shirt. She might be older but her face still has this youthful wonder to it. I need her skincare routine for sure.

“Good afternoon Granny Fern, how are we holding up today?” My mom greets with the warm infliction of a healer checking on her patient. Who knows, she might be one of Mom’s patients.

“Feeling like a daisy blooming for the first time in spring. You ladies here for your weekly pottery session?” she asks as she flips open her appointment book, scanning her finger down today’s date.

“Ah, yes! I called earlier and spoke with Shari about fitting us in a little earlier. She said it wouldn’t be a big deal.” My mom slides her arm across the top of the front desk, leaning closer to Fern.

Granny Fern grumbles as she clicks some buttons on her computer while checking her appointment book. “Fine. But for future reference, Shari might own the place, but she doesn’t run the books. Can you please call me instead so I can make sure it’s noted for the day?”

Mom’s hand reaches across and taps gently on Granny Fern’s arm. “Of course dear. We can do that. What room are we in today?”

“Room Four in the back.” She hands over the key to the room, and Mom grasps it before turning to smile at me.

“Thank you Granny Fern. You are the grease that keeps this place running so

smooth.”

What I love about this place is there is one gigantic room full of pottery wheels for their classes or community gatherings. But there are individual rooms with two pottery wheels if you want to have more private time. There are several kilns for people to fire their projects. We should be able to get last week's projects today from the kiln room we left them in.

After settling on our stools and dropping fresh clay down onto the wheel, I push the pedal to begin spinning it. The low hum begins as it starts to spin.

My mom lets out a quiet hmm. “You’ve been quiet today, Moondrop.”

“Just have a lot on my mind.”

Her eyes are focused on the clay as she begins to create the cylinder. “About the festival or your place in the pack?”

“Both, really. Lou really sprung it on me. While I love it, I’m totally freaked I will mess it up. Then there’s the whole pending place in the pack business. How does someone decide what they are going to do for the rest of their life? I’m jelly of people who have it all figured out.”

She nods her head as she slows the wheel down, forming the walls of her bowl. “How’s the experimenting going?”

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I take my foot off the pedal slowly, letting it come to a full stop before I wipe my hands on my damp towel. “It’s not going. I’ve tried it all, Mom. None of it feels right. While I love flowers and know a ton about them, being a healer just doesn’t interest me. Sure, I love being outdoors but being a sentry or scout, yeah no thanks. I have zero desire to fight someone, let alonerun.”

She chuckles at that. Still nodding her head as her bowl becomes wider.

“I just don’t see where my place in the pack is. I’m afraid my birthday is going to come and Silas is going to ask me where I’m going within the pack. The horror of saying that I don’t know is really weighing on me.”

Mom’s wheel slows to a stop as she looks up at me. She reaches over and tucks a stray hair behind my ear. “Not everyone’s path is so obvious, sweetheart. Some are meant to heal, some to protect, while some...” she cups my cheek. “Some are meant to capture the beauty of the world, the moments in time that will soon be forgotten, to preserve our pack's history. Now that is a true gift.”

I look down at the mug forming beneath my fingers. “But is it enough?”

Her finger hooks under my chin, lifting my eyes to hers. Her gaze is steady as she says, “More than enough. Your perspective brings the light to others. Never doubt that.”

I nod, the weight of the anxiety lifting slightly. “Thanks, Mom.”

She smiles before leaning in to plant a kiss on my forehead. “Anytime, Moondrop.”



We work in companionable silence as I work more on my next mug and Mom works on her bowl. We chat a few times about school, boys, and what's next for me. I can feel the tension leaving my body the longer we sit here working on our pieces. That's why we love it. We both get lost in the craft and allow the stressors of life to fall from our bodies.

The mug begins to curve in a perfect pitch before I pinch it in the opposite direction creating the lip of the mug. After forming the lip, I dip my fingers in the water as I smooth out any imperfections before bringing the wheel to a stop. Using the flat spatula, I sweep it under the mug disconnecting it from the base.

With the modeling tool in hand, I start this tiling pattern that's been nagging at me since this morning when Mom mentioned coming today. It uses two different size tiles offsetting each other with one large square and one very small square. Using the tool, I lightly carve out the larger square, leaving the smaller piece as slightly taller than the piece I've pulled.

It takes the better part of an hour to finish the tiling pattern but it turned out exactly how I hoped it would! Using the crescent moon stamp Mom had crafted for me as my signature on my pottery, I stamp the bottom of the mug before walking it over to the stove to do the first rounds of bakes. Next week we'll have to come back for the glazing as the pottery needs several rounds of baking before it's ready for color!

When I walk back into the room, Mom is just finishing her piece and getting it ready for transportation. I start cleaning up our space by discarding our leftover clay back into the clay bucket for someone to use for their own project.

Mom walks back in right as I finish. "Ready to pick up our last pieces?" She pulls her apron off and hangs it back on the hook. I follow suit.

"Yeah," I say as I follow behind her.

The studio has a “Take One” spot by the front desk. It’s a place for us to set our projects that we don’t wish to take with us. The policy is you can take an item if you contribute an item to the pile. It’s so we don’t have someone claim all the pieces.

I always place my pieces in there without ever taking a piece. I don’t do pottery for my own collection, but as a way to unwind from life. So, I have no issue contributing each time.

We both walk into the kiln room where we left our last projects, finding them sitting on the shelf ready for us to claim them. My mug has a pretty purple hue covering the moon and stars I covered it in. I even added a glitter sheen as well to feel more like the night sky.

After collecting our pieces, we walk over to the “Take One” Spot to drop mine off. My mom gave up on trying to convince me to keep the projects, knowing it was a losing battle at this point.

After setting down my moon mug, I notice that last week’s piece is gone. Every time that I come over to place a new piece, my last one is never here.

“It’s gone again. Just like the last few times I’ve put mugs here.” I point to the shelf.

She only shrugs her shoulders. “Doesn’t surprise me, sweetheart. They are absolutely beautiful pieces. Anyone would be dumb not to snatch them up.”

Pfft. “You have to say that, you’re my mom.”

She walks up next to me, leaning in before saying, “I don’t have to lie to my child just because she’s my kid. I believe in being truthful and honest with you.”

With that she loops her arm through mine, as we nod to Granny Fern while heading

back out the door. I look over my shoulder one more time, noting exactly where I left my mug this time, I set it in the back seeing if hiding it would change it.

We are walking arm in arm down the sidewalk towards home when Mom asks, “What else do you have on your agenda for today?”

Pulling my phone out, I check the time. We ended up being in The Muddy Paw for an hour and a half, now making it 5:30 P.M. “I need to run down to Flash Me Studio to talk with Lou about an idea I have for tomorrow as well as get her advice on how to place the photos. Outside of that, I’ve got to come home for some much needed rest.”

Mom leans her head toward mine in a loving way. “I’ll run by the Healing Den to grab you a different tincture. See if this one will help you more.”

“Thanks Mom.” She gives me a quick hug before we go separate directions. Me, heading down the main path to downtown and her, turning to the hospital.

After hustling down to Lou’s shop, the bell chimes as I swing open the door. Lou’s eyes snap up to me with a bewildered look on her face.

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“Whoa there, what’s all the hurry? Somethin’ catchin’ fire ‘round here?”

I huff out a breath trying to slow my racing heart. “No, no fire. I didn’t want to wait too much longer and pottery time went a little longer today than I expected. I wanted to talk with you about an idea I have for the booth and I was hoping you would help me with developing it.”

“Oh, absolutely, honey! Lay it on me! I’m all ears and ready to pitch in.”

“Alright since the theme this year is Legend of the Land, I was thinking we could use my photos to tell a story. But, since I’ve never created a gallery, I was hoping you could help me set it up and select the photos.”

“Alright, I’m with ya. Let’s quit jawin’ and get this thing done.”

Two hours later, we have a concrete plan for tomorrow, the photos chosen, and I’m feeling far more confident about it.

“Thank you so much Lou for helping me! I’m feeling 100% better about tomorrow now that we have a plan.” I check the time on my phone, seeing more notifications from Howlr and Odes floating on my screen. I’m busy reading the text from Odes when Lou clears her throat.

“Fore you run off, somebody dropped off a little somethin’ for ya. Said I was supposed to give it to ya. And don’t you even ask, ‘cause your guess is as good as mine who it was. Just found a note waitin’ for me on the counter when I moseyed outta the dark room.”

She slides a pack of film for my polaroid and a bundle of twine. My mouth drops open when I grab the items. Finding a little note tape to each piece.

Flipping the note on the film, it says

S,

Use this film to take photos of your guests at your booth. Add to the legends of the land by capturing memories from the Summer Solstice.

-Your friend in the fog.

I quickly grab the twine and flip the note open for it.

S,

Bound by fate or a bit of twine. Tie together the memories you cherish with this twine.

-Until then

Glancing up to Lou, she simply shrugs her shoulders. With her being of literally no help at all, I slide my phone out of my back pocket to snap a photo of the items and their notes before sending them off to Odes.

She almost instantly texts back.

Odes: Did your wolf stalker break into the studio or is that the hottest support gift ever?

Moonly: Not. Helping.

Odes: Got to give it to whoever it is. This game is almost as exciting as the Moonbinding ceremony. Close but not quite as captivating.

Moonly: Don't give him any ideas!

Odes: You think he's hacking your phone?

Moonly: Eye roll emoji. Face palm emoji. I meant don't put it in the universe. He's already doing the most.

Pocketing my phone, I pull the items into my arms before waving. "See you tomorrow Lou!" I call over my shoulder as I head out.

As I'm walking down the sidewalk towards home, I can't help but sweep my eyes from side to side. Feeling as though he might jump out and claim me as I'm trying to make it home. The street is glowing with the warm string lights strung from pole to pole. Thankfully lighting more of the shadows than usual.

I can't tell if it's my nerves or if it's real, but I feel eyes on me again. There is almost a humor to the feeling. As if watching me is bringing them joy and laughter.

"You know, you could just show yourself and save me from the anxiety," I say in the direction I feel the eyes on me.

As if I can sense the intentions and feelings of the mystery person, I almost feel like they are shaking their head at me. Fucking weird.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Rushing the rest of the way home, I'm just coming up the walkway to my steps when I see another gift from my stalker. This time in the form of an intention stick.

Setting down the film and twine, I lift the stick up to examine it. Bound in a red tie is sage for clarity, lavender for calming, and rose petals for love. Anyone familiar with herbs and intentions knows that the red tie symbols protection and passion. Looking around the stick and the porch, I don't see a note this time. Disappointed that he didn't leave me another clue, I'll decide what I'm doing with it.

Two can play this game. Tomorrow I'll put the stick on my table in my booth. Maybe I'll be able to figure out who it is or at least draw them out.

I'm ready to find you mystery wolf.

### Chapter 8

Selene

Friday, June 20th – Summer Solstice

My mom pulls the wagon behind her full of the pieces to build the perfect storytelling booth. Between Marlowe, Gail, Lou, my mom, and my own personal collection we were able to pull together what I hope will be the best booth there.

With over twenty booths ranging from food to home goods, my booth is close to Lou's shop next to Beck's Hide & Soul Leather goods booth. I can't wait to see what items he has in his shop. As a bear shifter, he loves the quiet solitude of leather

making.

When we roll the cart in front of his booth, he is almost done putting his pieces out, which only makes me stress out more.

“Should we have come earlier?” I nervously ask my mom who looks around at the other booths along with me.

“No sweetie, we are fine. Even Bea is still in the middle of setting up! Don’t worry we will get done in time. Beck just likes to rise early, isn’t that right?” She raises her voice and nods to him as he glances up to her.

He only dips his head before going back to adjusting the shelf in the back corner of his booth.

“See, we are going to be fine. Look, even Granny Fern is here at the booth waiting for us.”

Sure enough standing right next to my booth chatting with Gail is none other than Granny Fern. They are both sipping to-go coffees as they animatedly move their hands. When we come to a stop in front of the booth, they turn to look at us with broad smiles on their faces.

Gail moves first, wrapping me in a hug before stepping back holding my shoulders. “Selene dear, I’m so proud of you for accepting Lou’s offer. I was hoping you would and now I get to brag to the elders all about your photos.” She cuts her eyes to Fern as if this was a debate between them.

I glance between the two trying to decipher what’s happening. Fern doesn’t give me long to ponder before she hip-checks Gail releasing me from her hold. Her face lights with a huge smile as she pulls me into a hug. Holding me for a few seconds before



releasing me, Fern smirks as she says, “I think I’ll be the one braggin’ since I knew our girl would definitely accept the offer. Clearly, she gets her eye for beauty from me.”

Someone clears their throat behind the two of them causing them to split apart and turn around. My grandmother Lala is standing there in her long, flowing cream sundress with sage leaves coming out a moss border along the bottom. Her long, silver hair flows over her shoulders in soft waves.

“I know neither of you hens are claiming anything when it comes to my little blossom? Surely you know that if anyone claims her eye for beauty, it would be me.” She saunters over and plants a kiss on my cheek.

“Don’t let these cacklin hens get in your way. We are here to offer our words of encouragement, hands if you need them, and of course to be your cheering squad!” Grammy pats my cheek gently with nothing but love in her eyes.

My mom walks around the cart to slide her arm around my shoulder, her head tilts slightly. “Why don’t you tell them your plan and we can help get everything put together, hmm?”

My hands clap together as I walk around the cart and into the booth. “Alright ladies, in honor of the theme for this year’s Summer Solstice, Lou and I came up with, what I think, is a pretty cool idea. We will use these photographs,” I hold up the stack of photos printed on thick paper and glued to a white-textured paper stock frame, shaking them from side to side. “Plus this twine,” holding up the twine that my mystery wolf left for me. “To weave a tale for the viewers to walk through. The idea will be that we won’t need words, notes, or any explanation. Let the photographs tell the story for us.”

Their faces brighten with excitement. They all speak at once, their words blending

together in a mess of sounds.

“See I told you she got it..”

“It comes from me..”

“This is going to be...”

I wolf-whistle to stop them or we’re going to be out of time. “Ladies, we have less than an hour now to have the booth set up. Can you, maybe, stop debating which of you is the reason I’m here and you know, maybe, help me?”

A round of “of courses” comes out of each of them as we begin putting all the pieces into place. I spend the next twenty minutes walking each of them through the setup, pointing to where I want certain pieces, and how the photos should be hung from the twine.

With the last piece in place, we all step back to look at our handy work. With the white canopy covering the stand, the three sides covered in a thick layer of the same material, you really feel as if you are stepping through time with how we set it up. My 10x12 rectangle stand has a sign hanging above the left side with an Enter Here to help guide the guests where to begin their journey. With the twine strung between each post, the photos hang from it by wooden claw clips, with a soft, sheer fabric weaved between them to give the feel of memory dust.

We put a long rectangular table in front between the two sides to act as a meet & greet section with extra copies for purchasing if guests choose to do so. There are two chairs, one for me and one for Mom behind the table, and our little money box nestled between the chairs.

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I do one last check to make sure everything is exactly how I envisioned it, before checking the cart to make sure nothing was left out. Leaning over the edge, I see the sage stick sitting at the bottom. My heart speeds up at the sight of it. In the haste of the day, I'd forgotten that I'd slid it in there this morning, determined to find my mystery wolf.

I look around to see if anyone is watching before I swoop down and grab it. I'll put it on the table right next to me, maybe I'll catch someone reacting to it, maybe inquiring about it? Surely, he'll see it and react, right?

I'm just placing it on the table when I hear a squeal to my right.

"Girl, yesssss! I knew it was going to be gorgeous, but I wasn't expecting it to be this stunning! For someone who only found out about this two days ago, you sure knocked this out of the park!" Odes comes running up and pulls me into a hug! "It's going to be the talk of the town, mark my words."

She pulls back, holding both my shoulders in her hands. "Speaking of, I've got a gift for you. Thorne, over there..." she hooks a thumb over her shoulder in the direction of his booth, "has some amazing leather stuff that we should look at together. But, that's not what I've got for you." She flips open the flap to her over-the-shoulder bag, pulling out a beautifully-bound journal. She pushes it towards me as I grasp it.

"I wanted to get you something in honor of your very first gallery, even if it's a mini one. I thought it would be cool if you set it out on the table for guests to write little notes in or sign it. Whichever you want them to do."

I run my thumb across the beautifully carved tree of life on the front cover. My eyes well up with tears, this is the sweetest thing anyone's done for me, outside of my parents. "It's...Odes you didn't..." The first tear falls from my lashes, splashing on the apple of my cheek as I blink my eyes quickly as my vision blurs.

"Oh man, don't cry. I wasn't expecting tears this early or I would have given it to you yesterday so your mascara didn't run!" Her thumb swipes the tears.

"It's beautiful Odes. I wasn't expecting a gift today, thank you." With one arm I pull her into a hug, smooshing the journal between us.

"Alright, no more tears. Today, we are celebrating our future National Geographic photographer who will always come back to take photos of our pups."

We both giggle as we turn back to the stand, arms crossed across each other's back as our heads lay against each other. I wouldn't be here without the support of her and my little group of cheerleaders. With a sigh, I lift my head to look over at those three crazy, yet amazing elders chatting away with my beautiful mother. I'm one lucky girl to have such an incredible group of people around me.

The alarm rings on my phone. The festival is opening.

"Alright, it's time guys!"

Fern and Grammy both walk over planting kisses on my cheeks and squeezing me into breathtaking hugs before they walk off arm in arm towards the booths.

Gail comes over, standing next to me as we watch them walk away. She clears her throat. "I think today is going to open many doors for you, some you were expecting, some you were hoping for, and one that you didn't know you needed."

Without another word, she gives me one of her signature smiles before she too walks away.

My mom walks up to the place Gail just left, chuckling when she looks at the expression on my face.

“Let me guess, Gail gave you another one of her utterly cryptic messages and walked off before you could ask anything?” She laughs as I slowly nod my head.

I look at my mom in confusion. “How did you know?”

“Because that is just Gail for you. Nobody knows how she knows, why she knows, or why she is always right, but what we do know is that when something big is coming in your life, Gail is going to be there meddling and pushing you in the direction you need to be.” Mom just shrugs her shoulders before turning to go sit down behind the table.

With one last glance in the direction Gail went, I turn to follow Mom to my seat. Flipping open the journal Odes gave me, I place a pen next to it.

Mom shifts her arm along the table, grasping my hand in hers. “You know when you finally told Dad and I about you wanting to do this photography thing, I never imagined this is where we would be shortly after. Don’t get me wrong, I always knew you would do something that involved nature, but I didn’t see photography as the thing. I’m so glad you finally told us so we could actually support you.” Her golden brown hair is glowing in the morning sun as her eyes glisten with tears.

Sheesh, seems we are all going to be tearing up today. “Awe Mom, you and Dad have always been a wonderful support system. Even when I told you guys that I wasn’t sure my place in the pack. Instead of demanding I take my place at the hospital, you let me figure it out. I couldn’t ask for better parents.”

Her hand releases mine as she gently taps the top of it. “You’re the best daughter a mom could ask for. Now, let’s dry our tears and get ready for your first guests. I see some heading this way.”

The festival comes alive with vibrant booths: Bea from Crust Issues offers pastries; other vendors display handcrafted candles, leather items, and vibrant clothing. Guests begin pouring in and out of my booth, each leaving a small note in the journal that I can’t wait to read later. I’ve already sold all my copies that I had on my table, and so many have asked my mom why we have been hiding this talent all along. Mom’s been fantastic with fielding these questions, almost as if she’s been doing it all her life. I guess years of dealing with pack member families when they want to know how their family member is doing, would give you lots of experience with dealing with awkward, hard questions.

Time is flying by, I’m just walking a guest through the booth as she tells me all about a tale of her own from our town, when the final bell chimes. Thankful that the vendor portion was only the first part of the day, my shoulders sag in relief. I don’t think I’ve stood on my feet this long in my entire life. The soles of my feet are sore and cramping, my lower back is on literal fire, and I’m pretty sure the only thing I’ve eaten today is one of the lemon and lavender pastries that Granny Fern left earlier today.

As the last guest files out of the booth, I plop down in my chair and heave out a loud sigh. “Thank the Goddess that it’s over. As much as I loved hearing everyone’s thoughts on my story, I’m exhausted and my feet are killing me. How do you do this every single day?” My arms fall to my sides as my head drops over the back of the chair, my legs sprawling out in front of me. My long, sunflower sundress thankfully keeping me modest and protecting my lady bits.

My mom chuckles as her hand taps my knee. “You get used to it. You had a wonderful turnout though! We sold every copy you brought and you even have

bidders on the copies you have hanging up! I have to say, not that I'm an expert or anything, that it's a success, wouldn't you agree?"

Without lifting my head, I look at my display from a different perspective. I don't know how I didn't notice until now, had to be because I was slammed busy, but my sage stick is tucked beside the photo of Shadow in my display. Nestled into the sheer fabric, the stick sits perfectly tucked next to the photo exactly where Shadow is looking. What the fu...

I scramble out of the chair, almost tripping over the skirt of my dress, startling my mom who was mid-sipping her sun tea, when I rush around the center pole to where the stick is. Pinching it between my fingers as if it's possessed and moved itself over there, I look between it and my mom.

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“Mom, please tell me you saw who moved this?” My heart rate picks up, could he have been right here and somehow I missed it? Buthow?

She walks over and examines the stick, as if she’s never seen one like it before. Her head shakes slowly from side to side. “Can’t say that I did, but whoever made that for you, made that with absolute love and care. Each of those ingredients perfectly blend what you’ve been needing lately. He, at least I hope it’s a he, no shame if it isn’t,” she chuckles when she looks up to my face, but clearly I’m not amused, “has really been observing you lately if he knows that these are the pieces you need in your life. I say you smudge it and embrace it.”

I twist it from side to side thinking through everyone that I remember seeing today, but there are far too many. Honestly, most of their faces blur together, except for when Gail and Caelon stopped by around half-way to see if we needed anything. Caelon barely made eye contact before he mumbled something about how pretty the booth was and dipping around us to walk through it while Gail and I chatted about how it was going.

Outside of that, I’ve got nothing. Not a single person stands out and I definitely don’t remember seeing someone move it. Shrugging my shoulders as I take my mom’s advice, I slip it into my bag so I can begin breaking down the booth.

We have an hour before the afternoon activities start. Between the Sunshine Potluck Picnic, Herbal Infusion Workshop, and the Sun-Kissed Baking Contest, we are going to be busy all the way up to the Evening Ritual which is our final event for the night and Summer Solstice.



Mom and I work in silence as we both disassemble the booth, making a separate pile for the photographs people were bidding on. I didn't even know that was happening until Mom mentioned that she had a sheet going with each person's bid on them. The one where the sun crests over the mountains is up to \$150 already, and several people have asked to be messaged if they aren't the winning bid. So, I'm sure that we will be dealing with that off and on the rest of the night. I'm blown away that it even had bids, let alone a bidding war. It's a stunning picture for sure, but I didn't think people would want it so bad to battle for it.

With the wagon loaded, we make our way back to the house. I want to change into some leggings and a loose shirt, but I know my mom will want me to stay in the sundress the rest of the day, at least until the Evening Ritual when Odes and I change into the dresses we purchased for Bestiare.

The wagon bumps along the dirt path leading up to the Pack House, as everyone chats about the morning vendor show. I even hear some talking about my booth and whispering about how they hope to see me do more of them.

With a fond smile on my face, I look to my mom who also has one on hers. I'm sure she heard them as well. "Seems that fate has shown you where your place in the pack is, wouldn't you agree?"

I nod my head as my eyes drop to the ground. It's a relief to think that my passion will be my place in the pack. Hopefully Silas and Nova will accept it and support it. I know that having a role in the pack is something every young pup thinks about. We dream of being a contributing member to the pack. It's a relief to realize that I know where mine is now. Doing something that not only I enjoy, but I'm passionate about. There are so many ways that I can contribute with photography. From helping the historians all the way to capturing major moments in our pack. I can even offer sessions to families to capture their big moments: births, weddings, birthdays, and all those times.

When we pull the wagon into our front yard, Dad comes running down the few steps to swoop in as our macho man. Even flexing his arm muscles with a wink at both of us. We just shake our heads as we wrap our arms around each other's backs. My head rests on my mom's shoulder as we follow behind him. Life seems to be falling into place for me, at least this aspect of it. Before we walk into our cabin, I glance over my mom's shoulder to Caelon's dark cabin. Why am I so drawn to him?

Once we are inside we all gather around the kitchen island as Mom pours each of us a cold glass of Sun Tea. Generally made the day before, you harness the power of the sun by steeping dried rose buds, lemon balm, tea leaves, dried orange slices, and calendula by filling the jar with water and the herbs and setting in the sun for two to four hours depending on how strong you like your tea. It's been a tradition dating back to the first wolfpacks and passed down to each new generation through events like this.

I swear my mom makes the best and she has yet to tell me her secret. Claiming she'll only tell me when it's time for me to teach my own children. Damn secret keeper. Odes and I think it has something to do with the honey she uses, but she never confirms or denies it.

Dad claps his hands together, snapping both of us to attention. "Okay ladies, it's time for my favorite part of Summer Solstice, Summer Potluck Picnic. Have either of you decided which of the activities you're doing this year? I know you made a flower crown last year Snap, but are you going to venture into candle making or the Herbal Infusion workshop?"

I swirl my tea around my glass watching the ice spin. "Uh, I'm not really sure this year. I was kinda hoping to let fate guide my heart. Whatever calls to me while walking through, ya know?"

He nods his head looking to Mom. How about you sunkiss?

“I’m going to do the bouquet of fresh flowers and the sun water this year. I think the sunflowers will look beautiful here.” She leans over and taps the counter top.

“Good deal, alright, well after I stuff my face with a little of everything, I’m going to do the nature walk through the woods. Got to work off the food I’m eating.” He smacks his almost flat stomach as if he is 300 pounds and needs to watch what he eats. Years of being on patrol show on his body between his darker skin and his strong muscles, as if he hasn’t been retired for two years.

“That’s right my little Rebel, you walk off all those honey cakes that you sneak when you think I’m not looking.” My mom pats his stomach as she leans over, kissing his cheek.

Rolling my eyes, I go down the hallway as they banter back and forth. I want to bring the polaroid camera for this portion of the day. It would be a great time to capture some memories witheveryone celebrating the longest day of the year. My favorite is watching the young pups' eyes light up when they see all the sweets and honey infused items across the tables. The girls lining up to make flower crowns, the boys pretending to be scouts as they walk through nature, it’s all something I can’t wait to have my own pups for.

My dream is to have a big family with lots of pups running around and a house full of pattering paws, yipping fights, and love that seems intertwined within our walls. Let’s just hope whatever mate I get equally wants that. I don’t hate being an only child, but it can have its lonely moments when you’re sitting in a quiet room with no one to talk to.

“Time to go kiddo,” Dad yells down the hallway. Grabbing ahold of the strap of my polaroid camera and two packs of film, I throw my bag over my shoulder that will hold my film and the sleeve I put the photos in for safe keeping.

My hand brushes along the protection stick as I'm putting the stuff in my bag. Shit. I forgot it was in there again. Pulling it out, I place it on the nightstand right next to my dream journal. I'll try to remember to do that tonight when I get back from Bestiare.

"Come on," Dad says, hinting that he is about to come down the hall to grab me if I don't get a move on it.

Rushing out the door, I slam it shut as I run down the hallway. "Coming, sorry. I wanted to grab the polaroid and extra film. Hopefully, I can get some really good shots."

He nods his head as he wraps his arm around me. "I'm sure you will kiddo. But your old man is starving and Midge's stuffing is calling my name." He leans in closer as he whispers, "Don't tell Lala that I prefer Midge's stuffing to hers. I might end up with the worm in my Christmas hash if she catches wind of it."

We both giggle as we walk out the door, Mom following close behind us. We all walk arm in arm towards downtown. Everyfamily is funneling down the path as the entire town shows up to celebrate. Not just the wolves, but the other shifter packs as well. Even our human friends love to come. Although Bestiare is strictly for shifters due to the magic floating in the air and its effects on humans.

Everyone excitedly moves onto the main road where each of the centers are set up for the afternoon activities. There are picnic tables lining each of the sidewalks, with a long row of tables down the center for everyone to place their potluck dish. Hundreds of dishes are already there when my mom places her blueberry pie down near the desserts.

We grab our plates and pile them high with a little bit of everything. It's amazing to sample each family's take on dishes as well as a few new ones you've never tried. My dad has one plate literally full of only honey cakes hidden under his regular food dish

like mom wouldn't see it. My head shakes as he looks sheepishly at me. Got to hand it to him, the honey cakes are fire.

There's a thump thump thump on a microphone drawing everyone's attention to the stage set up between Scoop, There It Is and Citrine and Rose. Silas, our pack alpha, is standing in front of the mic as he waits for everyone to give him their attention.

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“Can I have everyone’s attention please?” He says.

The mumble of conversation dies down as the last of the people turn to face the stage.

“Welcome, everyone, to our annual Summer Solstice. Although it’s been a few years since we had as large of a celebration, I’m glad to see all your wonderful faces as we prepare for the longest days of the year! As you saw we chose Legends of the Land as our theme for this year. In honor of new traditions, new alphas, and new beginnings,” he places his arm around Nova’s shoulders, “we thought this would be the perfect time to celebrate our past. After you fill your bellies with all of this amazing food, please take the time to explore all the different activities we have set up. Many of our members of the community have taken the time to set up each station with fun things you can do to honor the sun, traditions, and new beginnings. Without further rambling from me, LET THE FEAST BEGIN,” he shouts into the mic as everyone cheers.

He might be new to this whole Alpha thing, but he is doing a great job at it. Everyone shuffles around the tables as they fill their plates. Dad signals for us to follow him as he walks us over to the table shadowed by the building behind him.

We all stuff our faces as we casually chat. It didn't take us long to finish our plates, Dad finally revealed his hidden honey cake plate to Mom, who only laughed about how she knew about it the whole time.

“Alright ladies,” Dad says as he picks up our empty plates to take to the trash. “It’s time to join the activities. Selene, do you want us to walk around with you as you decide or are you going at it alone?”

“I’m fine to go alone. I don’t want to hold you guys back from your activities. I want to sort of walk the area before I pick something. You guys go on ahead.”

“If you say so, Moondrop.”

They both smile and blow kisses to me before walking away.

Mom heads straight to the bouquet station that's covered in various bright flowers and greenery to fill around them. The crystal vases are stunning, refracting light and causing rainbows to pop along any flat surface around them. Bloom, the rabbit shifter, scrunches her little nose when someone says something funny. It’s the most rabbit-like reaction I’ve seen and I can’t help but smile at it.

The flower crown station is next with several girls from my school already around the booth halfway through their crown’s already. They’re already chatting about who they think will ask them to dance tonight and the latest trending thing on Howlr. I snap a photo of two of the girls who just placed their crowns on their heads and looked at each other with pure excitement over it.

Each station I pass has something I can’t miss the opportunity to capture. From the elders bickering over which herb means what to the pups running between people’s legs with lemon popsicles dangling dangerously in their hands. It’s times like this that I’m in love with this town and can’t imagine a single reason why I’d ever leave.

Gail wolf-whistles to me as I finish capturing one pup sticking his tongue out and the girl pup who ignored him. It was too stinkin cute to miss.

Turning around I find her waving me over to her herbal infusion class and of course, Granny Fern is there with her. As I get closer, she pats the empty chair right by her. Rolling my eyes, I pull the strap of my camera off and place it down on the table before taking the seat.

“I hear that you weren’t sure which activity you wanted to do today and were hoping fate would step in?” I can’t help but shake my head at her while a soft chuckle leaves me. Of course she heard, no idea how but you know, here we are.

“You would be correct as always.”

Gail nudges Fern. “You hear that! At least she knows I’m always right.” She leans over cupping her mouth with her hand. “Maybe next time say it a little louder so her old ass can hear it.” She lifts back up quickly as I cover my mouth to keep from bursting out laughing.

“I heard that! The only old ass that’s here is you, you old bag.” Fern’s eyes cut to Gail in a very non-aggressive glare.

I can’t stop myself this time, the laughter is pouring out of me as these two standoff with their hands on their hips. Honestly, it’s like looking in a mirror and that pushes me into a full belly laugh. They both turn in slow motion towards me.

“Ope.” I try to stifle the laugh but it wins as I slap my hand on the table before leaning back. The tears are welling in the corner of my eyes.

They both continue to stare at me as I try and fail to get the laughter under control. Sucking in a breath, I hold my hand up between us. “Alright, alright. I’m sorry, but you two are nearly twins and I just can’t when you start picking at each other.”

Fern shifts in front of Gail. “We weren’t picking at each other. Don’t listen to this bag of bones, we aren’t even friends.”

Gail shoves Fern’s shoulder playfully. “Now, surely you aren’t lying on one of our biggest, longest days. One that you are sure to spend the entire time with me.”



Fern fans her hand in front of Gail. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” She rolls her eyes as she moves on to helping the lady who’s been patiently waiting on the other side of the booth.

Gail lays her hand down on the table in front of me as she leans all her weight onto it. “Here’s the deal, pup. I know exactly what you should do today over all the other activities. I’m not being biased, although it would look that way, but this would be the perfect activity for you.” She slides an empty jar across the table to me, with a brass lid screwed on top.

My eyes flick between her and the jar.

“It’s called an intentions jar. For Summer Solstice you are making one with the intention of gaining success. What that success is for you to decide.” She slides a piece of paper towards me with a pen. “You write down the things you would like to be successful with in the coming season. That doesn’t mean just money, but can be successful in your business pursuits or maybe successful in finding your mate. The intention is for you, and you alone. Once you are done, fold the piece of paper and place it inside the jar. You’ll then fill your jar with the remaining items.

“Citrine for confidence, balance, and wealth.” She places the orange and white crystal shard down beside my jar.

She holds up a deep red incense in front of me. “Dragon’s blood protects against negative energy.” She places it down next to the crystal.

A smooth reddish orange and yellow gem is next. “Carnelian is for passion, creativity, and motivation.” It joins the others down by my jar.

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Next, she holds up a small yellow flower. “Calendula is for prosperity, money, and protection.”

She holds up a stick of cinnamon. “This attracts abundance, power, success, and prosperity.”

She holds up a tiny vile of honey, no bigger than the tip of my finger. “Honey is known for bringing happiness, love, healing, and passion.”

I look at each of the items that she has placed in a circle around my jar.

“Each item will help guide you spiritually towards the intention you write on the paper. Whatever your soul offers first when you consider the question, is the exact one I would go with. It’s what you truly desire.”

“Alright, I think I got it. Are there any words or things I need to say before I seal the jar shut?”

She nods her head. “I’m ready to accept my gifts from our Goddess.’ Now, I’m going to let you get to it. If you need anything let me know.” She gives me a warm smile before walking away to help the newest person who walked up to her booth.

I hold the pen above the paper, waiting for my heart, maybe my soul I don’t know, just for someone to tell me what to write. For the first time in days, my brain is blank. I’ve spent all week having my thoughts racing or stuck on one thing, more like one wolf.

Like a ghost called forward, my mind is filled with his words.

“You already know who I am.”

Without another moment wasted, I scribe the one thing that I hope to be successful with this season.

Find the one who haunts my dreams and claim him as mine.

I fold the sheet of paper in half, placing it against the wall of the jar. Following Gail’s instructions, I put each piece into the jar acknowledging their role and sending prayers to the Goddess for their success.

Sealing the jar closed, I whisper the words against the lip of the jar. “I’m ready to accept my gifts from our Goddess.”

Fern sees that my jar is sealed with all my elements, her face lighting with a heartwarming smile.

“Good job Snap! So proud of you. Now take this orange candle and burn it atop the lid. Completing the spell and sealing the jar. You will burn the candle until the wax pours just over the lip, sealing it shut.”

“Why an orange candle,” I ask as I take the candle from her.

“Ah, I see the old bag actually taught something this time around. Alright, orange combines two of the best colors for intention jars, especially for Summer Solstice. Yellow, which is known for bringing forward mental agility while the red is known for its action-oriented powers. When combined together you have the mental agility to be action-oriented.”

Nodding my head, I place the candle atop the jar, and light the wic.

I watch in rapt attention as the flame flickers and moves. Once it's melted enough to seal the jar, I blow out the flame completing the ritual.

Gail comes over with her signature smile. "Perfect Selene. I knew you could do it! If you're ready, I would say you should take that home and get ready for the evening festivities."

"Thank you ladies, I'm glad I came over here." I push my chair back, collecting my jar and my camera before heading towards the house.

## Chapter 9

Selene

Friday, June 20th - Bestiare

The house is quiet when I walk in with my jar and camera. It seems both my parents haven't made it back from the afternoon festivities yet. I'm just about to walk to my room when I hear a knock at the door. When I swing the door open, Odes is standing there with her arms full of her dress, hair tools, and makeup.

"Thought since this is our last Bestiare before we hopefully find our mates, that we could get dressed together and do hair and makeup. I think we should go all out this year, maybe attract some hot mates?"

I humph because she knows as well as I do that our mates are decided by fate, not by anything that we do or don't do. But, I'll play along for the sake of it.

She brushes past me with her arms loaded down with curling irons, bags of all sorts,

and her dress bag dragging along the floor behind her. I can't help but shake my head at her. Goddess save me for what she's about to put me through.

Without needing any sort of directions, Odes walks herself through the house towards my bedroom. She glances over her shoulder to make sure I'm following behind her. "I figured we could work on your hair before we move to make-up. We got to be quick since they only give us three hours between the afternoon activities and the beginning of the evening ritual."

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She nudges my bedroom door open with her hip, before hooking her dress bag over the top of the door, leaving it wide open. The bags all tumble down on top of my comforter as she turns around, eyes gleaming with excitement, and her hands clenched together in front of her chest. Goddess, hear my plea.

She walks over, running her fingers through my hair, my eyes following her as she moves around me. Chills run down my spine as she walks around shifting my hair from side to side. I love when someone plays with my hair, even though it's rarely happened outside of when Odes has gotten a wild hair up her ass to do some new style on me.

"I'm thinking we should do a fishtail braid with fresh flowers. Since the mask is going to cover the crown and sides of your head, we will focus most of the details in the back." She walks back to the bed and pulls small, blush pink roses and baby's breath out of one of her bags. Her eyes glance behind her as she says, "If you could just, you know, sit down in your desk chair, I'll get started."

Following her instructions, I pull out my desk chair and plop down into it. This is completely her wheelhouse and not mine. As long as my hair is brushed, my pits don't smell, and my clothes are clean, I'm heading out the door. Not knocking the ones that spend time doing all the extra things, but this girl is content with not doing it.

The rustling of items moving around is the only sound in the room until she walks over and sets the items in front of me. Thankfully, it's pretty simple stuff. Shouldn't take her long to fix my hair.

After thirty minutes of weaving, spritzing, coughing, laughing, and gossiping, she

finally finishes my hair. Holding a mirror up behind me so I can see my reflection in my full length mirror, I have to admit, my hair is gorgeous. The flowers are tucked along the braid creating an almost river-like effect flowing down my hair.

“Odes, it’s beautiful. You outdid yourself tonight. What are you doing with yours?” I say as I turn around to look at her.

“I’m doing a half fishtail braid with a flower bushel at the back of my head. I love my naturally curly hair, you know that, and I hate to take away from it for updo’s.”

“Totally. Alright well while you work on that, I’m going to do some clean girl makeup and tinted lip oil.”

We spend the next hour working on make-up and finishing looks before we are ready for our gowns. Each helping each other into them. My dress’s sheer sleeves, with beading to look like constellations, hang loosely from my arms, while my light blue bodice ombres down into a light pink skirt. There are stars, moons, and rhinestones to give it a slight sparkle. When we saw this one in the shop window, we both agreed it was the perfect dress for me.

Odes looks stunning in her sage green dress. The bone corset bodice hugs her perfectly with dainty flowers and light green leaves along it. With off the shoulder cuffed sleeves, her arms are covered in a sheer fabric that poofs at her wrist. As she twirls in the mirror, her skirt twirls showing off all the flowers and leaves. The color, fit, and design are all so her.

Checking the time on my phone, we have thirty minutes to walk down to the Ancient Ash Tree for the evening ritual. Meaning, we got to go because it will take every bit of that to get there. The Ancient Ash Tree isn’t on any packs’ land but instead in a protected space considered mutual ground, like downtown is. Nestled between our wolf pack lands and the mountain lion pack lands, it’s a pretty long walk from my

parents' house.

“We gotta go,” I say as I swipe one last layer of the tinted lip oil on.

We won't be taking phones, purses, or anything we have to keep up with for the night. It's always recommended by the elders to leave personal items at home as the magic of Bestiare will cause even the strongest-willed individuals to lose track of time.

Her lips pop together as she finishes her final check. Snatching our masks, she comes over, looping her arm through mine, as we walk through the house together. We are both buzzing with excitement, it's almost a tangible energy you can feel zipping through the air.

The streets are filled with beautiful gowns, braided hair, and masks of all different colors, shades, and adornments. Our masks only have two requirements, one is they have to have a wolf face, representing our species. The other is, the mask must cover all identifying features. Essentially covering a large portion of your face and the side of your head, eliminating being selected by a dancer because they know who you are.

When we reach the bottom steps, Odes hands over my mask while sliding hers over her face. Her wolf mask is a deep gold with dark brown. The pearlescent teeth twinkle in the evening light. Long strings hang down on each side with golden eagle feathers and amber crystals adorning them.

For my mask we went with white and silver like the stars. My strings are covered with dream catchers and dove feathers, tying together the outfit in a full dreamscape.

The ground is cool beneath my feet, the dirt almost feeling damp with how cold it feels. It's one of the things that I love about Bestiare. We're supposed to be barefoot to ground ourselves with the earth. Absorbing its blessings as we dance in celebration



of its gifts.

With our arms hooked together, we take off to the Ancient Ash Tree with the flow of the crowd. Everyone's murmuring excitedly, keeping us company as we walk. Both of us are silent as the energy of the group wraps around us, building our excitement along with it.

When we come around the bend, the large pathway leading up to the tree is lined with glowing lanterns, sunflowers and roses busheled together between each lantern. The Ancient Ash Tree has long strings of lights hanging down from its towering branches with glass jars holding lit candles at the end of each strand. The base of the tree is surrounded by sunflowers, roses, citrus fruits, and golden crystals.

The ritual bonfire is piled high with wood off to the right side, far enough from the tree that it won't risk catching it on fire, but close enough that you won't have far to walk. The elders of our communities are all gathered together chatting as all of us funnel into the open space in front of the tree. As the area fills, the elders begin to move to their rightful places in front of us before whistling for everyone to quiet down.

The elders, Lorekeepers, Heartkeepers, and even the archivists have gathered around the leaders from the main packs of Jasper. You have ours in the middle, the mountain lions on the right side, and the black bears to the left. Silas is clearly the youngest leader in his late twenties, where the Prime of the Mountain Lions is in his fifties, at least. Meanwhile the Chief of the Cedarheart Clan looks like he is close to his sixties with his rugged features and dark gray beard. His massive arms cross over his chest as he stands proudly next to his beautiful Matron, as she leans against his arm, looking at him with adoration.

They all look between each other before both the Chief and Prime dip their heads to Silas. He bows his head in acknowledgment of their honor before stepping forward

with Nova by his side and clearing his throat. Everyone quiets down as Silas holds his hand up to those still feverishly whispering amongst themselves.

“Thank you everyone for joining us in the evening ritual finalizing our celebration of Summer Solstice. I won’t keep you for long as I know we are all looking forward to the story the elders will share with us this year. I will say it brings me tremendous joy to see so many new faces this year with the addition of many new children to each of our packs. This year has already been prosperous for each of us.” He clears his throat as he looks at Nova, who smiles at him as she gently rubs his arm. Their pups should be around here somewhere. He looks back to the crowd. “I hope that each of you participated in one or more of the afternoon activities. May the Goddesses bless you this season and each season to come.” He steps to the side guiding Nova with him.

Behind him walks a woman whose age you would never be able to guess. Her skin shows years of life, love, and knowledge. Her eyes are milky-white but they still flick around the crowd as if they don’t hinder her vision at all. Her hair is almost sheer from how white it is, as it falls long and thick over her shoulder towards her waist. It has an almost glitter look to it with the way the light is bouncing off of it. Her wooden cane is beautifully carved and clearly from the Black Bears with the intricate carvings. The crowd is so quiet in anticipation you could hear a pin drop. Even her footsteps are silent. The only sound is the whisper of her white gown as it flows across the dirt.

She comes to a stop directly in front of Silas, which is crazy if she is blind. She turns her head towards him and Nova before a broad smile breaks across her face. “Thank you, Young Wolf.” She passes him her cane.

Without another word, she turns back to the crowd as she raises her hands. “Children of our Goddesses, young and old, wise and fair, it’s time to share one of our legends. One that resonates with each of you, at least it should.”

She takes a slow step forward. Weaving her hands through the air, drawing all of our attention as smoke builds between them, “Long ago, before names were spoken and territories were drawn, there was only the land and the beasts who walked it.” Two wolves, bright blue apparitions glow between her hands. Running next to each other before being joined by bears, mountain lions, and tiny creatures.

“Each solstice, when the moon bathed the valley in silver and the air shimmered with old magic, the shapeshifters gathered in silence to honor the ties that bound them to the earth—and to each other.” The smoke shifted and grew as it moved above her head. Showing an Ancient Ash Tree just like ours with animals gathering below it.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

“They wore the faces of their beasts: feathered masks, furred visages, carved and painted with reverence. Beneath those masks, names didn’t matter. Rank didn’t matter. Only instinct.” The animals shifted into their human forms showing masks across their faces.

“It’s said that during the first Bestiare, two strangers met under the canopy of the oldest ash tree, their identities hidden, their souls bared. They danced until their hearts aligned, never speaking a word.” A male shadow and female shadow dance around each other, lost in each other’s orbit.

“But when the morning came, the male vanished—leaving behind only the scent of cedar and fire.” The smoke shifts showing the female waking and searching for the male. All our eyes glow with the image of the female wolf hunting for him. No one dares breathe, or speak a word. The smoke trees move and fade as she continues to walk along the path.

“The woman searched the lands for seasons, haunted by the memory of his touch and whispered words.” The smoke female walks around searching everywhere. You can almost sense the panic and sorrow coming from her as she floats in front of us. She might be nothing but a smoke version of herself, but you feel the connection to our long ago ancestor.

“When they finally found each other again, the mate bond snapped into place—forging our first mated pair. Something their beasts knew long before their minds did.” When the male smoke figure walks towards her this time, you can see the line drawing them together. Something we’ve always felt but could never see.

“Now, the legend says that if you dance long enough beneath the solstice moon...if you listen closely to the soul of the land, the words whispered in the breeze, the call of your blood...you’ll find the one fate made for you. But only when you leave your name and inhibitions behind.” The smoke dissipates above her head as she brings her hands back down to her sides.

“Before the leaders of each pack light the bonfire, we ask that all young children please leave the area. The magic that flows during the bonfire and dancing isn’t safe for young children. Those that choose to stay, be free of the chains that hold you back, let go of the human emotions, let your beast's desires drive you.”

With that, she bows before holding her hand out for her cane, as we all break into applause. The murmurs are growing in volume as the story sinks into each person, and you realize just how close you are to the dance, how close you are to the magic. Our leaders are swarmed as people pay their respects to them before they leave. While it’s not required, often the leaders won’t participate in this portion of the night. Leaving us to do as our beast sides demand.

The elders walk forward with torches for each leader and their spouse to use to light the bonfire. They move to each side, waiting for the last of the young ones to leave down the path before lowering their torch into the timbers. The fire quickly moves across the wood, before igniting into a large bonfire. The orange and yellows glow across the trees surrounding it as everyone’s faces light with the flames dancing in their eyes.

Like moths to a flame, we are all drawn to the fire, already feeling the pull of the magic. Odes squeezes my hand as we walk together towards the fire. Most people say they don’t remember what happens during the dance. Being so lost in the magic, they feel as though their memory is wiped by the time they wake the next day. Odessa and I have never attended one before. Like the elder said, children aren’t welcome. The only reason we are allowed to stay is because we are so close to turning 18 ourselves.

Several males begin beating the drums. The thump, thump, th-thump already beating into my soul. I can almost feel it vibrating through my body as the magic begins to swirl around the area. People are turning to each other as the music from the drums build slowly. When I look at Odes, I see the fire dancing in her eyes, the irises dilating, as her mouth falls open slightly.

“Can you feel it, Moony?”

“Yesss,” I whisper breathlessly.

As if a person was drawing a finger down my spine, tingles spread down my back, almost making me shiver, as the magic takes hold of me.

The beat of the drums is building. Thump, thump, th-thump, with each strike of the mallet across the stop of the hide, I can feel myself dropping my human side as Sora takes over. It makes sense, I think, before she pushes forward, why nobody remembers the next day.

With a gasp, my chest pushes out as my head drops back. Gasps move around the bonfire, barely heard above the thumps of the drums. Each person's beast takes over. When my head drops back down, Odes eyes are glowing with the amber of her wolf's eyes. She licks her lips slowly, almost savoring the moment.

“The magic is calling me, Selene,” Sora whispers huskily.

“I can feel it, but I want to remember.”

“It's going to be hard to remember to not push you back. I'll try, but no promises.”

“I'll take it.”

Odessa, more like Orla, runs her hand up my arm, slowly moving closer to me. The magic pulls her deeper in as I watch her with rapt attention.

“Dance with me,” Orla says with a slow sway of her hips.

The thumps of the drums are growing louder and faster as I watch her sway back and forth, already lost to the magic. Her arms lift to the air as she slowly moves her hips in a figure eight. I’m so lost in watching her move that I don’t even sense the person walking up behind me.

“Tell me little one, why aren’t you dancing like the others?” the gravelly voice from my dreams whispers next to my ear, causing me to jump and spin around.

A tall, lean man is standing there with an enormous, smokey gray wolf head on. A wolf that looks a lot like my Shadow. My heart races, between his voice and the sight of a wolf like Shadow. I know this has to be my mystery wolf.

My eyes move down his body, hoping I can find anything revealing about him, but Sora has other things in mind and none of them have to do with letting me figure out who it is.

She makes the first move, stepping forward and running her hands up his arms as he wraps them around our lower back. She grips his lightly-muscled shoulders, almost humming in appreciation. How she isn’t making any sounds is beyond me. This is the closest we’ve ever been to a guy who isn’t family.

“You’ve found me, now what are you going to do?” Sora practically purrs at him.

“I’ve got many things in mind, none of them appropriate for the current setting.” His gravelly voice rolls over our skin like a sinful caress.

She hmms, “Is that so?” She steps closer into his embrace. Our hips swaying in tandem with his, with only a breath between us.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

His left hand runs up our spine, lightly tracing the path as he goes. “It is,” he says before wrapping my braid around his hand and gently pulling my head back.

“So easily you bare your pretty little neck to me. It’s almost like you want me to put my mark right there. Is that what you want?” His finger traces over the spot he would bite me, if he could.

Our chest is rising and falling rapidly. I don’t know what’s happening or why we are giving in so easily. We aren’t some hussy. Taking over, pushing past the magic trying to hold me down, I yank our head down and glare at him.

“It won’t ever be that easy for you.” I shove out of his hold.

“What are you doing,” Sora hisses into our shared mind space.

“We won’t be bellying up for the first guy to show us attention. Magic or not.”

“This is why you aren’t supposed to be around. We know what we are doing.”

She shoves me back again before taking back over.

The man stands there watching us, almost like he knows the battle going on between Sora and I.

She moves back into his arms, but this time, he knows...he knows that Sora isn’t fully in control.

“Seems someone is still part of the party? Are they being a naughty wolf and sticking around?” he whispers into our ear.

I can’t help but shiver as his words wash over us.

Sora, trying to bring the tension back to where it was before, says, “Don’t worry about her. It’s our time right now. Dance with me.” She pulls his arm back around our waist.

We sway together as his hands roam over our body. His hand moves over our ass, moving down our thigh where he hesitates. Almost like he’s waiting for permission. Sora hikes our leg up as he grasps it behind the knee, moving even closer to us.

Lost in the magic, beating drums, and the swirling of our bodies around the fire, I completely lose track of time. I’ve been fighting to stay aware, not allowing the music to lull me to sleep as it’s meant to do. The sky is lighting with the first rays of the sun when he slows to a stop. How he is able to stop is beyond me.

“I’ve got to go,” he whispers in our ear.

“What,” we say breathlessly.

“I’m glad we had this night,” he says as he steps back from us.

“Where are...”

He keeps stepping back until the crowd of moving bodies around us moves in front of him. Snapping out of the shock, I push through the crowd, trying to find him. But like the shadows in my dreams, he disappeared.

I’m standing there, bodies moving around me, but I can’t move. He was here, the

man from my dreams, and like the shadow he is, I still don't know who he is.

## Chapter 10

Caelon

Friday, June 20th – Bestiare

The magic is already pulling me in...even before the beat of the drums. I've never felt this before, this need to let go. Calix is already pushing beneath my skin, as if our shadowy gray fur is seconds from covering my arms. Deep down, I can feel the vibrations from the earth, as if even she knows that something big is about to happen.

My bare feet crunch the leaves as we move through the woods. I've been keeping my distance as much as possible today, with Bestiare so close, I'm afraid I'll lose control if I'm near her. With each passing day, it's harder and harder to stay away from her. Even when I'm not paying attention, I always seem to find my way to her. Is it my obsession with her or something else drawing me to her?

"You already know what it is," Calix grumbles.

Ignoring him, I pace back and forth in front of the tree line. It's almost time for the elders' storytelling. I can't see her, but I know she's here. I can feel it, and maybe he's right. There is only one explanation for it, and it's not obsession.

My feet move silently across the grass as I step away from the tree line behind the Ancient Ash Tree. I need to find her. My chest is tight as I scan the crowd of masked men and women. Mask or not, I'll know the second I find her.

Like a string pulling me to her, I spot her. My heart races as I take in a shuddering breath. She's stunning with her white wolf mask with white feathers and dream

catchers. She's locked arm-in-arm with Odessa, her best friend and soul match. I move to the right of the crowd, hoping to see more of her, and I'm not disappointed.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

With a perfect break in the crowd, I can see all of her. Her beautiful dress hugging her waist before flowing to the ground to her dark brown hair tied back in a braid accented with flowers. Stepping into the crowd, ensuring I don't catch her attention, I step one row behind her. I want to observe her until I'm ready to reveal myself.

The back of her dress drops down to the bottom of her lower back, revealing the smooth rose-pink skin I've only dreamed of touching, kissing, and tasting. My mouth waters as I think of peeling it off of her. Unwrapping her like a present meant only for me.

Her petite shoulders gently move with her breathing, but even I can see the magic is beginning to work on her. It's in the subtle deepening of the pink hue of her skin, in the way her breaths are coming in and out a tad faster, and the bumps slowly popping along her back.

My eyes roam down that opening along her back, imagining tracing my fingers down her spine as her soft gasps fill the room around us. She shivers, almost like she felt it. Her head turns slowly to the side as I step into the crowd and out of her line of sight.

The elders walk forward along with each of the pack leaders, something I could care less about right now. I should be up there, along with Xavior but there is only one place I want to be right now, and it's not there. She's listening with rapt attention so she doesn't notice when I move right behind her. An arm's length behind her, I breathe in her scent. Her thunderstorm over an ocean scent has a spicy tinge to it tonight. That's new. Taking a deep breath in, I hold her scent in me. There's a floral musk that hasn't been there before. Seems her wolf is right under the surface too, ready to come out and play.

That's the thing about Bestiars that nobody remembers. Our wolf side takes over our human form and lets their instincts and desires control them. There won't be concerns for age, clothing, and those around you. Only whatever is drawing you towards the person of your choice.

Silas finishes a speech I didn't hear a word of. There is nothing that's going to break my focus on her, not even the responsibilities that I hold dear any other time. Maybe Calix is right, I've never thrown away my rules for anyone, especially a woman. No other woman has drawn me in like her. But, I can't have her. At least not yet, she's only seventeen. I can't have her, but fuck if I don't want to snatch her and make her mine right now.

My mate. My obsession. My reason for breathing.

Like a wave washing over me, something settles deep inside me. As though acknowledging it finally righted every wrong in my life.

"Fuck, about time you see what's been in front of you this whole time."

Doesn't change anything. She won't feel the same way yet. She might feel drawn to me, but she won't see it for what it is. Fuck. It might be worse knowing it, and not being able to do anything about it.

My fingers reach out, a hair's breadth between her skin and mine, wishing I could just touch her. What does her skin feel like? Is it as smooth as I've imagined? Will her skin pebble as I move my fingers along it?

With her breath hitch as I explore her body? Is her hair silk like it looks like? Will she love me running my fingers through it or gripping it?

My head shakes as I take a step back. The magic is pulling so hard, I've never had

thoughts this strong before. My logical side is trying to push against the beast side of me. I can feel the battle inside. The smart, respectable side trying to step back from her, put distance between us. To remember that she doesn't know what's happening or if she would even feel the same. But the beast side is determined, it knows what it wants,her.

Everyone starts clapping and I know what's next. I can already feel it building. The shaman, elders, and others are already weaving the magic into the air. My chest thumps as the drums slowly build the music. The second the area glows in hues of orange and yellow, I know what's coming. But, I want to see what she does. When her wolf takes over, will she let go or will she fight her?

The crowd moves to the fire and I let a few people come between us, only to ensure she doesn't see me before it's time. I'm not worried that Selene will see me, I've proven many times that I can move around her without her actually spotting me. It's her wolf I'm worried about. The one who will spot me, as I'm sure she will be looking for me.

Our wolves always know before our human sides figure it out. The elders will say it's because they have no inhibitions in their way like human emotions and age. Wolves live by the instincts that keep them alive.

The thump, thump, th-thump of the drums is rattling my soul as Calix steps forward.

"It's time Caelon."

"I'm not ready yet, Calix. She doesn't know."

"I won't do anything to scare her, but her wolf knows. I can feel her already. She's ready."

“Be gentle.”

I watch in rapt attention as her chest thrusts out and her head falls back. He’s right. It’s time. Her wolf is now running the show. Like a domino knocking over the next one, each person’s gasps ring out one by one around the bonfire as their wolves, lions, bears, and more take over. Each person is now in their beast’s control.

Calix pushes forward as I take a step back. I’m nervous about what he’ll do, but I have to hope that he won’t do anything rash.

He moves through the crowd, never taking his eyes off of her. Like a predator stalking his prey, he weaves around people without bumping into a single soul. People are moving to their desired partner, but there is only one person for us. Everyone else doesn’t exist to us, especially right now.

She doesn’t move, doesn’t dance. She’s only standing there while her friend dances in front of her. Why isn’t her friend moving on to find her own partner? When Selene doesn’t move, even with her friend’s prompting, we know exactly what’s happening. She hasn’t given full control to her wolf. They’re stuck.

A smirk breaks across our face, our elongated canines poking out as we move in for the kill. Sliding up right behind her, we lean in close to her ear, knowing the second Calix speaks she will recognize his voice.

“Tell me little one, why aren’t you dancing like the others?”

She spins around quickly, her hand across her chest as it rapidly rises and falls. We say nothing else as she looks over us. We designed the wolf mask to look exactly like our actual wolf form. We wanted her to recognize it, to wonder why. Her silver eyes begin wandering down our body before they snap to us. They are glowing like the moon high above us. Fitting with her name meaning moon.



She slowly moves towards us and we know already who won the battle, and it wasn't Selene.

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Her hands run up my arms moving to my shoulders as her body shifts closer to mine. This is the closest I've ever been to a woman outside of family. How is Calix so calm, like it's the most normal thing in the world? I'm panicking and I'm not the one in control right now.

His hands wrap around her lower waist, pulling her closer to us. This close I can see something I've never seen before. Her glowing silver eyes have tiny flecks of black, like the craters of the moon wrapped in a black ring around her iris, and you have two mini moons staring at you. As if someone plucked them from the sky and duplicated them into her eyes.

"You've found me, now what are you going to do?" she practically purrs the words.

Does that mean her wolf knows who we are to them?

"I've got many things in mind, none of them appropriate for the current setting," Calix says in a husky tone. Oh boy, maybe he isn't as unaffected as I thought.

She humms, "Is that so?", moving even closer to us. Her floral musk is all I can smell now, it's so her. Like the ocean, I'm pulled into her.

Calix runs our hand up her spine and I sigh in relief. It's as soft as I imagined it would be. I can feel her shiver, the pull of breath she tried to hide, and how she's standing perfectly still. Her skin, smooth, soft, scented with wildflowers and moonlight...I could touch her for days and not get enough of it. For someone who's never touched a woman, I'm craving to worship at her altar.

“It is,” Calix says. Her braid sliding across the palm of our hand like melted chocolate. I wrap my hand around it, slow and reverent, like I’m claiming her before I’ve even marked her. Gently tugging the braid, she bares her pretty little neck to me. Both Calix and I struggle with the urge to bite her. How beautiful our claim would be right there along her flushed skin, clear for everyone to see.

“So easily you bare your pretty little neck to me. It’s almost like you want me to put my mark right there. Is that what you want?” My finger traces along the exact spot I would do it, as if I could right now.

We can sense the turmoil buzzing around her. I know it’s because of Selene, but the wolves are fighting to stay in control, especially hers.

“It won’t ever be that easy for you,” she says as she shoves out of our arms. There she is.

We smirk as we watch the beast battle the human for control. She doesn’t know it yet, but we know what she is feeling. We also know which one is going to win. We see it the second she wins too.

Her wolf moves towards us and back into our arms. We can’t help but chuckle knowing exactly who won.

“Seems someone is still part of the party? Are they being a naughty wolf and sticking around?” we whisper into her ear. Her body shivers as my words wash over her.

“Don’t worry about her. It’s our time right now. Dance with me.” Trying to take control of the situation, she pulls my arm back around her waist.

Alright, Little Leni, I’ll bite. With my free hand I reach into my pocket for the piece I’ll be leaving with her. Her next clue, if you must. Let’s see if she figures this one

out. The glass is cold against my fingers despite the fire blazing beside us and between us.

I need to distract her while I slip this into the pocket of her dress. She is almost lost in the sea of the magic, but not quite enough yet. Shifting my hand around her waist, I travel over the globe of her ass to the back of her thigh and wait. If she is right on the edge of the magic, this will push her over. She has to submit fully to the magic. Waiting for her to make a move, I send a whisper to the Goddess that she gives in.

Like a prayer answered, she hikes her leg up, and I know I've won. She's mine for the night, exactly how I hoped. My hand travels down her thick thigh, loving the feel of her body beneath my hand. The skirt of her dress being the only thing between me and the silken skin. When my hand hooks behind her knee, I yank her flush against us.

Oh fuck, this wasn't a good idea. I can feel every soft inch of her fitting perfectly against me. Like two pieces of the puzzle finally clicking together, we sigh in relief. How badly I wish we could go back to my cabin, explore each other, and learn what we both like. Using the distraction, we slip the item into her pocket. Watching her face for any reaction to what we did, seeing nothing, we move back to rocking our hips to the beat.

We spend hours dancing to the beat of the music, swinging around the fire, with the magic pouring into our souls. For the first time in years, we feel settled in a way that not even math has given me.

Leaning close to her ear, while she's lost to the music, I lift the mask, giving myself one small feel of her face against mine. With a deep inhale of her unfiltered scent, my canines drop, ready to sink into her skin, finally claiming her.

When we see the first rays of light peeking over the horizon behind her, it's time to

go. As much as we love the feeling of her against my body, we aren't quite ready for the questions. We might know that she is our mate, but she won't. At least not until her birthday July 17th. 27 more days.Fuck.

Shaking my head to clear those thoughts, I whisper, "I've got to go." Slipping our mask back in place, we step back from her. Our chest aching, pushing us to go back into her arms.

Her eyes blink rapidly as she comes slowly out of the magic. Our words finally sink in.

"What," she says breathlessly.

"I'm glad we had this night," we say as we move further away from her. Our body is fighting us with each step. Like our soul being ripped in half as we push ourselves to keep moving back.

We barely hear her say, "Where are..." before she is swallowed by the crowd, exactly as we hoped.

Moving quickly, even through the heartache and pain, we do everything we can to make it to the wooded area without her seeing us.

The light of dawn is washing over the area, and like how the light chases away the dark, I'm chasing after the feelings of the night. Staying within the shadows, praying to the Goddess for more time with her.

Like a whisper in the wind, I almost hear someone say, "Not much longer young one."

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A whimper falls from my lips as my knees hit the ground. I didn't even realize that I ran to our field. The place where she watches me, talks to me, and makes me the center of her world.

My hands rest on top of my thighs with the palms facing the sky. My head falls back as I close my eyes while the sun I've been running from finally catches me. I feel it the minute Calix lets go and I feel incomplete again. But now...now I know why.

### Chapter 11

Selene

Saturday, June 21st – Who is he?

My eyes crack open, squinting as the sun blasts into them. What time is it? Reaching around my bed, I attempt and fail to find my cell phone. I know I didn't set an alarm, thank the Goddess, because I would probably throw my phone if it rang right now. Between the pounding migraine and the magical hangover, I feel like I danced with Death last night and failed to keep up.

Lifting my sore body out of my casket, I mean bed, I rub my eyes trying to remember anything from last night. It's all a blur of flames, fabric, and drum beats.

Except, I remember him.

My hands slam down onto the comforter as my head whips from side to side. I've got to find my cell phone. Searching all over my bed, under my blankets and pillow, it's

clearly not here. Panic sets in until I remember that I didn't bring it with me and I left it on the nightstand, which is exactly where it's sitting.

When I tap the screen bringing it to life, I see that I'm not the only one with questions. Odes has already called me three times and sent a dozen messages. Fuck, why can't I even remember coming home last night. It's so hazy.

Clicking her contact, the phone rings only one time before she's answering.

"Girl, you gave me a heart attack. You just disappeared last night and I searched everywhere for you. If it wasn't for your parents telling me you were alive and in bed, I might have started a whole ass search party last night." She is damn near screaming in my ear.

I wince, holding my hand against my temple. "Shhhh, you're killing me here. I feel like I might have been hit with a fallen tree between the sore body and this migraine. Is this what a magical hangover feels like, because if so, I don't want to do it again."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't feel like shit this morning?"

"Uh, no?"

"Oh, good. It's just me then. I was going to call you this morning anyways. I need to talk to you about last night. Wanna come over?"

She hums into the phone. "Yeah, like telling me all about the mystery guy you danced with all night before disappearing?"

"That would be the one."

“On my way.” She doesn’t even wait before hanging up the phone.

My phone drops onto my comforter as I rub my face. Those eyes, crystalline blue and staring at me, appear behind my closed eyes. The same eyes I saw through the wolf mask. His gravelly voice that’s been haunting my dreams is the same one that whispered in my ear last night. I know it’s him and now I know he’s part of our pack. How have I never seen him before?

It doesn’t take long for Odes’ voice to travel through the house as she greets Mom and Dad in the kitchen. Their muffled words travel down the hallway to my room. I don’t even bother trying to determine what they are saying, just plopping back down onto my four fluffy pillows instead.

I’m staring at the ceiling when my door cracks open and she shuffles in before closing it behind her. She’s quiet as she walks over to my bed and plops down on it.

“How’s my sly, not so shy, bestie doing today? Regretting our last night's decisions, hmm?”

My head barely lifts off the pillow as I cut my eyes to her. “I regret nothing.” Then my head slams down again, the migraine aching even more from the movement. My hands cup both sides of my forehead as I shield my eyes from the blaring sun coming through my bedroom window.

“Odes, why do I feel like shit and you’re fine? I think I want to start there before we dive into who that was.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I got nothing. Do you even remember coming home?”

Wincing, I shake my head.



“Weird. I remember the sun rising and the elders coming back to pour water over the bonfire. Then I searched for you before coming home. What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Him.”

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“Do we know who this ‘him’ is? I mean besides the fact that we have masks, it’s not hard to figure out who everyone is, right?”

Sighing, I continue to rub my temples. Trying and failing to conjure more details from last night. It’s as though my brain is intentionally blocking what happened, or someone is. The same someone who clearly isn’t going to speak up this morning. Internally, I’m glaring at her and she knows it.

“That’s the problem. I don’t know who it is. What I do know? That is the same wolf that’s been haunting my dreams.”

She crawls up the bed until she is hovering over me. “What do you mean by haunting your dreams? You’ve been holding out on me?”

I cover my face with my hands, my cheeks warming with embarrassment. “Yeah. It’s weird, you know? I’ve been having dreams about a shadowed figure with these piercing crystalline blue eyes and no matter how hard I chase after him, I can’t catch him. Then gifts started showing up, all with meanings and reasons. Like clues to figure out who it is.”

“What have you done with said items?”

My hand plops down as I point to my desk on the opposite wall. Scattered on top of it are my two cameras, film rolls, polaroids, and every single piece he’s left me up to this point. She pushes off the bed and walks over to my desk. Picking up the twine and rolling it between her fingers.

“Isn’t this the twine from the booth?”

I nod my head as I push to sit up in bed. The comforter falls to my lap as I watch her examine each item.

“He left the twine and a box of film for my polaroid camera on the counter of Flash Me Studio with a note to Lou to give them to me. The twine had a note tied to it.” I point to where it’s sitting on the desk.

She looks between my finger and where I’m pointing. Picking up the piece of paper and reading the words written on it.

“Alright, it’s creepy and hella cool at the same time. So clearly this guy knows you well enough to know the things that you need and when you’ll need them?” she murmurs while reading the note that was left with the film. “What else did he leave?”

We go over each item as she gives her thoughts on them and I share my own. She is holding the sage stick between her fingers, twisting it around when she looks up to me.

“Do you think that he’s your mate by chance? Like maybe he knows and he’s waiting for you to find out? Can that be the reason for all the mystery? Surely, at least hopefully, it’s not some weirdo? What did he say last night when he found you at the party?”

I duck my head, too embarrassed to say out loud what I thought about last night. She scrambles over to the bed, plopping down in front of me.

“Oh, did someone have some naughty thoughts last night? Because if so, now I have to know. You’ve never even found a single guy attractive, let alone, someone you had thoughts about. Spill the tea.”

“Listen, nothing happened. There’s nothing to tell.”

“Liar,” she squeals as she throws one of my teddy bears at me.

“Fine...but don’t laugh.”

She makes the crossing motion over her heart, before pretending to zip her lips.

“When he walked up, I was watching you dance. I didn’t even hear him, Odes, until he whispered in my ear ‘Tell me little one, why aren’t you dancing like the others?’ I knew right then that he was the man from my dreams. That voice has been haunting me every night. I could easily find it with my eyes closed. When I turned around—” I throw the comforter back, padding over to my desk to find the photo of Shadow. Holding it up in the air between us, I point to his face. “I found a guy wearing a mask that looked exactly like my wolf from the valley. Coincidence? Maybe. Could they know I talked to this wolf and wanted to show that they know me?” I pace the floor by the end of my bed as she follows me with her eyes.

“Or...or is it the wolf from the valley?” she quietly says as if she can hear the thought running through my mind.

“Or it’s the wolf from the valley and he’s been following me.”

“Okay, but what else happened because you were with him all night, right?”

I nod my head as I continue to pace. “Yeah, well I didn’t fully let Sora take over. I don’t know why but I was determined to see what Bestiare was all about. I might have messed it up. Sora was baring her neck to him, and I sort of refused to belly up that easily. I mean come on hussy, one man shows her attention and she is rolling over?”

Odessa snorts. “Can’t be having that now, can we?”

“No, we danced for hours, lost in the magic until all of a sudden he stepped back. Claiming he had to go. Then he just left, as in like the shadows of my dreams, he was gone. I don’t really remember anything from that. I definitely don’t remember coming home, going to bed, nothing. The next thing I remember is waking this morning feeling like I danced with Death and lost.”

She hmms as she scratches her head. “Did he leave you something this time?”

I stop abruptly and turn to her. “I don’t think so. Wouldn’t I have seen it?”

Her shoulders shrug. “You don’t even remember coming home so it would have been easy to have missed something. Wait...” She launches off the bed, searching for something.

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She finds my dress in a heap on the floor and I wince. Could have at least hung that up, it's too beautiful to be on the floor. She pulls the dress up into the air in front of her, running her hands down both sides, like something might pop out.

Rushing over to my bed, she throws it down on the bed and one side falls faster than the other.

“Bingo,” she whispers as she quickly searches that side of it.

Her eyes light up when she finds whatever it is. A leather thong is pulled from the right pocket of my dress and I don't ever remember something going into that pocket. When did he have time to do that?

She flips it over and there is a compass on the other side. She rushes over to me.

“There's something written on the back,” she whispers in excitement.

Grabbing it from between her fingers, my hands tremble as I bring it closer to me. There's a stunning antique compass on the front, the spindle moving as I shift it around. Fumbling to flip it over, I read the words engraved on the back of the leather.

You know where to find me.

The infinity symbol is engraved above the words with the maker's stamp on the bottom.

I recognize the symbol...a bear in front of mountains.

The same bear that was next to me yesterday...Thorne.

My eyes widen as I look up at Odessa. Her face is scrunched in confusion.

“I know who made this,” I whisper. Thorne, the black bear shifter next to me during the vendor show. I know this is his maker stamp, surely he would know who bought it right?

## Chapter 12

Selene

Sunday, June 22nd – Sunday Pack Breakfast

Another Sunday, another pack breakfast. Another day of people pretending to be interested in my photography. And by people, I mean stupid boys. If I can say there is one more reason to look forward to my 18th birthday, it would be finally, hopefully, finding my mate so I no longer have to be subjected to this.

That feeling of being watched moves down my exposed back, almost like they are running their finger down as they move. I suck in a breath when the shiver rocks my body. Slowly, I glance to the right, hoping to look as though I’m only looking at the guy next to me, not that I’m looking for the person watching me.

The stupid boy in front of me lights up, like he is winning, but in reality I don’t even remember his name or what he’s said the whole time he’s been standing here. People are mingling everywhere, none of them standing out as the one staring.

It’s almost like I can feel the person smirking, even though that’s not possible, right?

Shifting my feet, I face forward, pretending to now engage with the dirty blond haired

one in front of me, Jack...Jason...I don't know. They aren't the ones I want to talk to...nor are they the ones who danced with me at Bestiare.

My shoulders drop when my eyes flick behind the blond, still not seeing anyone staring at me. A feeling of amusement rushes through me. Mother fucker. Pushing air past my lips, I blow out a raspberry, my frustration growing.

Either these three guys are dumber than a box of rocks or they really aren't interested in my thoughts. I've not said a word this entire time, yet they chat away as if I have.

I roll my head to the left, my hair shifting around my shoulder as I cross my arms over my chest. Is it time to eat yet?

As if I brought them out, Nova and Silas walk in with the twins. Each hanging off one of the parents with their matching aqua blue eyes and dark ringlet curls.

Knowing it's time to eat, everyone shifts through the room to grab plates and move to the buffet. Walking behind one of the elders, the sweet smell of cedar fills me, closing my eyes. I feel as though I'm standing in the forest after a summer rainstorm when the smell fades as quickly as it came. My eyes open, glancing all around trying to find the one I've smelled before.

I know it's him...the one who's been following me. Haunting my every thought. Who danced with me until the first light of day. The one who leaves all the presents for me to find. Yet, every time I search for him, it's like I've conjured this all up in my mind.

Like the smoke coming from a fire, I follow where the scent goes, and come to the back door of the hall. Odd. Did he go outside?

Pushing open the door, I poke my head out. Surely he didn't get that far. The scent



was strong enough for me to follow, he had to be right here. Not seeing anyone in the backyard, I step fully outside. The idea of food is long gone as I wander to find the mystery wolf.

The urge to go to my hidden valley is strong. I want to see Shadow and tell him all about the mystery wolf wearing a mask that looked like him. Sounds far better than spending any more time with hopeless boys.

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I glance over my shoulder one last time through the floor-to-ceiling windows along the back of the Pack House. Nobody is even paying attention to me leaving, fine by me, I would rather be out there anyways. Taking off down the path leading to the back of our pack lands, the sun dapples through the canopy of the trees, and a soft breeze blows through.

It's a beautiful summer day, one that shouldn't be spent inside anyways. The trickle of the river sounds in the distance and I feel my spirits lifting the closer I get to it. Out here, I don't have to worry about people liking me, pretending to be interested in what I have to say, or which boy is going to talk without listening.

Out here it's me, the wild flowers standing tall and proud, the deep green grass swaying in the wind, the crystal-clear water moving over the river rocks, the mountains standing guard, and the fluffy white clouds hugging the bright blue sky.

Here there isn't stress or questions about my place in the world. I can just exist in the peace of it all.

As if he too was drawn to our space today, Shadow is already sitting along the river bank, but this time he's on my side. Curious about his change of sides, I slowly walk up to where he's sitting. The fur above his paws wet from crossing the river, he sits, watching the fish swim down the stream.

His head turns when I come up next to him, his ears dropping when he sees my face. As if he knows without me saying anything that something's weighing on me.

Dropping my bag down on the grass, I practically collapse down onto it. Huffing

when my tailbone hits the ground and I shuffle my feet underneath my legs. Shadow's head quirks to the side as if to say "That bad huh."

"Yeah, it's that bad Shadow," I say as I lean back on my arms and close my eyes. The warm sun caresses my face like a mother caring for her child.

Something cold and damp touches my thigh causing me to pop my eyes open and look. Shadow's paw sits softly on my thigh as he watches me.

"Fine, I'll tell you." I close my eyes back, not wanting to say this while looking at him. It's almost like confessing feelings to a lover, but that can't be right. I don't even know who Shadow is in human form. "As I'm sure you're aware, Bestiare was Friday." I don't wait for any sort of confirmation. I've already figured out he's a wolf in our pack.

"A man came up to me. Which no real shock there. Kinda the point, right? What's shocking though? He was wearing a mask that looked a lot like you." Peeking my eyes open, I see if Shadow makes any sort of movement in recognition of what I'm saying. He only shifts to fully face me, fully invested.

Closing my eyes, I continue. "First thought? It was you. That I finally figured out who you were. That one is still there, in the back of my mind. Like you know who I am, but I still don't know who you are. But then the masked man talked, and it was the voice that's been haunting my dreams every night. The one that never reveals their face to me. I guess that's fitting since the first time I see the voice in the flesh, it's still masked to me. I feel like I'm going crazy, Shadow. Between the dreams, the gifts, and now Bestiare, I just want to know who they are and why I'm so drawn to them. Now I'm even more confused. Are you the masked man from last night that sounds like the man from my dreams or are you someone completely different?" The only sounds around us are the water moving, our shared breathing, and some birds in the distance.

Shadow moves, coming to my side, allowing me to lean on his shoulder and touch him for the first time. His gray fur is soft underneath my cheek, his warmth seeping into my soul, relaxing a piece of me. Like this is the most right thing to happen to me lately.

“Odessa claims that it’s early mating signs. As if all this means that they are our fated mate and the Goddess is just leading me there early. I’m not sure about that one, but it seems to fit, I guess. You know the craziest part?” I slide my head up, looking at his side profile. His ear twitches down, letting me know he’s listening. “I’ve never even been attracted to other males. I mean sure I’m a teenage girl. Who doesn’t think Timothée Chalamet is hot? I mean, maybe not you, but then again, who knows? Maybe you’re one of those guys comfortable enough with your masculinity to agree with me that he’s hot.”

Shadow lets out a huff and I can’t quite tell if it’s in humor or exasperation. I let out a soft laugh just imagining what he’s thinking right now.

“Anyways, I’ve been consumed by this man and I don’t understand why it’s different. Then the night of Bestiare, wrapped in his arms as we swayed to the beat of the drums, I almost let myself believe that maybe Odes was right. Maybe this feels like this because he is my fated mate. I didn’t even get a chance to ask who he was, though. Like the mystery he is, he disappeared before the sun finished rising in the sky. Leaving me with nothing. Well, not nothing exactly.”

Reaching into my bag, I pull out the compass. Holding it between us, the arrow points directly to Shadow as I hold it up for him to see.

“He left this in my pocket.” Flipping it over so he can see the back, I traced the engraved words with my thumb. “‘You know where to find me’.” I’m lost in the curve of the words when Shadow nudges me with his muzzle.

“Sorry, anyways, I plan to chat with Thorne today. Because if I know at least one thing, it’s that he’s the one who created it. Surely, he has to know who commissioned it, don’t you think?”

Shadow tilts his head giving that adorably confused look that animals have when they don’t understand something.

“Someone asked Thorne, the black bear leather worker, to make this. This wasn’t something the mystery wolf picked up and just deposited. It has thoughts, feelings, and meaning behind it. Kind of like this little infinity symbol above the words. He wanted me to figure out who he is. But I only have one guess, and it can’t be right.”

Shadow taps my wrist with his paw, as if he is trying to help me figure it out. I let out a sigh, wishing they would just tell me who they are. He pulls my arm with his paw. Wrapping my arm around him, I hug him.

“Thanks Shadow for listening to me. I’m sure there are a million other things you would rather do than listen to teenage angst.” His head hooks around my back, holding me the only way he can.

Leaning back, I look up into the sky, seeing the sun has moved into the afternoon hours of the day.

“Ugh, I got to get back. Between testing, finals, and graduation preparations, this week is going to be non-stop. Plus, I want to stop by Thorne’s leather shop and see if he can tell me who it was...thanks again Shadow.”

Standing up, I brush off the dirt and leaves from my leggings before grabbing my bag and throwing the strap over my head. “See you next time Shadow. Probably won’t be until after graduation.” Waving, I walk off in the direction of the bears’ territory. Thankfully Thorne’s shop is right on the edge and I can sneak in there.

Twenty minutes of hiking across our territory, I find the bears' territory nestled up against the mountains. They love the rocks, dense forest, and being further away from the hustle of our small town. The structures are all made of rocks and thick wood, making for some of the most stunning homes. Although, like everyone else's territories, we aren't allowed on their lands. I've just seen some while hiking through to find more of the wildlife I adore.

The smoke stack above Thorne's shop has a steady stream of smoke coming out of it, letting me know he's working in there. Glancing around to make sure nobody is looking, I sneak around the wall of his shop. When I get to the front where the path leads to the left and the right, I make sure there's nobody to catch me.

Quickly running up the two steps of the wooden porch, I throw the door open, and slide in. Praying to the Goddess that I wasn't caught.

A low rumble of a growl comes from behind me. Like two boulders grinding against each other. "What are you doing in my shop?"

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Swinging around, my heart beating hard in my chest, I throw my hands across the door as I stare at the 6'5", burly black bear shifter known as Thorne. His deep black hair hangs just below his ears. Arms that are the size of tree logs are crossed in front of him smattered in thick, coarse black hair. His bushy eyebrows are furrowed together as he watches me.

"Oh, hey there Thorne. How did you know I was here?"

He breathes out hard through his nose. Almost like steam releasing from a kettle. "You don't think I can smell your kind poking their nose around places they aren't supposed to be?"

I act like I'm sniffing my armpits. "I didn't think I smelled today, although it's been a few days since I showered. Probably should do that..." I trail off as I move around the small room, picking up scattered projects thrown on each surface.

The ground thumps and almost bounces as he storms over to where I'm holding up some sort of leather thing that I couldn't figure out if I tried. He snatches it from my hand before slamming it down on the table.

"You know you're not supposed to be here, wolf."

"Easy there big guy...I'm just here to ask a question. Then you can go back to," I pick up some other project, dangling it between my fingers, "whatever it is you're doing."

He snatches the weird thing from my hands before glaring at me. "Get on with it

then,” he says through gritted teeth.

Dipping my hand back into my bag, I pull out the compass and dangle it between us. “Someone asked you to make this and I want to know who.”

He snorts before turning around, storming off to his work table.

Smirking, I follow behind him. I’ll get my answer. He’s shuffling through a box when he produces two more that look exactly the same as the one I’m holding. My shoulders drop.

“As you can see, I make a bunch of them. Someone must have bought it from the vendor spotlight of Summer Solstice.” He shrugs his shoulders before dropping them back down into the box.

All my hope deflates when I realize this is a deadend. His tent had just as many people walking through it as mine did. There’s no way he would be able to pinpoint who bought this one.

Wait.

I flip over my compass holding it up between us flat in my hand. “What about this? Does it ring a bell? Surely you don’t carve all that into every one of them?”

His massive hand reaches over and picks up the compass, bringing it closer to his face. There’s almost a twinkle in his eye, like he does recognize it. But it disappears before I can say anything.

He plops it back down into my waiting palm. “I don’t carve messages into my leather. Pretty designs, sure. But not any messages. Sorry pup. Now, find yourself back on the other side of our territory, where you belong.”



He turns back to his chisel and slab of leather without a backwards glance. He knows I'll leave, already risking enough being here. Not that our little town or packs will really do anything, but I don't want to spend the rest of my night being lectured about why we respect each other's pack lands and blah blah blah.

Holding the flap of my bag open, I slide the compass back into it while I look around at all the pieces strewn about. He sure could use someone to organize this mess.

Sneaking back out the front door, I slip down the side of the shop and back onto the common areas of the lands. Each pack having gaps between the lands so other shifters can move around without needing permission every single time.

I'm back to square one in my search to figure out who's my mystery wolf, but I'll have to put it on the bottom of the list. It's finals week and I don't want to be in school a minute longer than I need to.

## Chapter 13

Selene

Saturday, June 28th - Graduation Day

My simple black dress hugs my curves as I shift from side to side in my full length mirror. I can't believe this day is finally here. When you are growing up, graduation always feels like it's forever away, until you are there and then it's where did all the years go? Your nerves are shot from stressing over finals, turning everything in, making sure you have your outfit, and all the unknowns swirling around in your head.

For most, this is the final step before adulthood. For me it's my second to last step, but the questions and fears are all still there. No more school means no more tests, but it also means entering the workforce. Being an adult wolf in the pack, instead of one

of the pups. It's a whole new way of life, one that I'm terrified to step into.

After a final exam in all my classes, and turning in the last of my school books, I'm glad this week is over. At least for the sake of the amount of stress I've been under. I've not been back to the valley since Sunday. Barely having enough time to sleep, let alone spend hours in the wildflowers with Shadow.

Then there's the dreams that are more intense than ever, not sure if it's from the stress or what. But, I'll be glad to sleep well tonight and maybe all day tomorrow.

Knuckles lightly rap against my door before it slowly swings open. Mom peeks her head around the door searching for me.

"Over here Mom."

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Her eyes light up when she sees the dress I'm wearing. It was her graduation dress and thankfully after a few alterations, I'm able to wear it as well.

"Oh my," she whispers when her hands cup her cheeks as her eyes glisten with tears. "You look absolutely beautiful, Moondrop."

Dad clears his throat as he comes into the room. "Your mother and I have a gift for you." He walks over with a velvet black box in his hands.

My fingers tremble as I open the box. Inside are two beautiful bracelets with ring chains. One with the Celtic moon and the other with the Celtic star. Their pearlescent hue almost gives them a moonlight appearance.

I suck in a gasp, my hand covers my mouth as the tears start to fall. "You guys, they are gorgeous."

Mom reaches over, grabbing the box from me before pulling out the moon bracelet and slipping it onto my wrist, hooking the ring to my middle finger. She does the same to the other wrist with the star bracelet.

She cups my cheek in her hand, her own eyes damp with tears. "We are so proud of you, Moondrop. It's a big accomplishment to graduate from high school. We look forward to seeing what you will do with your adult years."

Her arms wrap around me as we hug each other. Dad comes over, holding back his own tears, as he wraps his arms around both of us. "My two beautiful girls. I'm proud to say that I am in the room with two of the most amazing women I've ever had the

pleasure of knowing.”

I bask in their love for a few seconds before Mom pulls back, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Okay, okay. We can’t ruin our makeup before we even make it to the graduation. Plus, if we want a good spot, we will need to leave shortly.”

We all chuckle before wiping our own eyes. Dad wraps his arm around my shoulders as I slide mine across his lower back, leaning my head on his shoulder as we walk down the hallway to the front of the cabin.

Mom gasps when she swings the front door open, blocking whatever it is from our sight. Dad calls out to her, “What is it?”

She bends down and picks something up before turning around to face us. In her arms is the largest bouquet of Silvery Lupines I’ve ever seen in my life. Wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine, there is a card tucked into the flowers.

Mom rushes over to me. “These have to be for you, but who’s it from?”

I shrug my shoulders, taking the envelope from her. The thick cardstock of the envelope bulges toward the bottom as if a card isn’t the only thing in here. A perfect circle imprinted on the inside.

Flipping the tab back, a simple, textured, white card sits inside with a golden chain in front of it. My fingers squeeze the edge of the envelope as I turn it over into my waiting palm. Out slides a long golden chain with a pendant dangling from it. Setting the envelope down on the counter, I flip the pendent over. It’s a depiction of Selene, the Moon Goddess. She’s holding the sliver of the moon while the stars twinkle behind her. My mouth hangs open as I set it down next to the envelope before picking it back up.

Pulling the card out, black ink scratched across the surface it says:

S,

May today be everything you've hoped and dreamed it would be. Hopefully the Goddess you are named after will watch over you as you walk into the next phase of your life. Congratulations on your achievement.

The one who always watches

Mom and Dad lean over my shoulders reading the note. "The one who watches," Mom whispers slowly, almost questioning the words as she reads them.

"Huh." Dad steps back, confusion written all over his face. "What does that mean? Someone's been watching you?"

My cheeks burn with embarrassment. I've not told anyone besides Odes, and even then I just recently did so. Partly because half the time I thought I was imagining it, and the other times I didn't think it was a big deal. All his gifts have been harmless and thoughtful.

"It's nothing really. Someone's been leaving me really thoughtful gifts on the front porch. I think I have a secret admirer or something."

Mom pulls my shoulder back, spinning me around to face her. The storm cloud of anger that rarely appears is already brewing in her eyes. "What do you mean by 'gifts'? This has happened multiple times and you didn't think to mention it?" She is practically growling the last words.

Dad walks over pulling Mom into the crook of his arm, his hand running slowly up and down her back. She blows out a breath, closing her eyes. He leans into her. "I

think it's safe to say that someone is in love with our daughter, and he's clearly a very thoughtful person. Why don't we have this talk later though, hmm? We have a graduation to attend."

"Fine." She sighs before cutting her eyes at me. "Put those beautiful flowers in water before we go. Can't have them wilting while we are gone."

With a simple nod, I turn just as a tentative smile cracks across my face. Leave it to Dad to calm her down and for her to worry about them wilting. You can't fault the herbalist for wanting to care for flowers.

The football stadium is packed with waiting families and friends as we all sit in our caps and gowns. The warm June evening is still stifling, especially with our layers of clothing on. We all are fanning ourselves with our paper programs, wishing we could be done already.

The attendants signal for our row to stand up. We rise and file out to the steps of the stage. Our principal calls each name slowly, allowing every person a chance to shake her hand, grab the diploma, and snap a photo with her before calling the next name.

"Selene Calloway."

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Stepping across the stage, I can't help but feel like everything is about to change. Mrs. Briggs has a warm smile on her face as she holds out her right hand for me to shake, while her left holds my diploma out across her right arm.

Gripping her right hand firmly in mine, I shake it once while grabbing my diploma.

"Congratulations," Mrs. Briggs says.

"Thank you." I nod my head before walking across the stage.

I can sense my mystery wolf. Somewhere in the sea of people surrounding the stadium. I know he's out there. Watching as he always does. What is he waiting for?

My eyes scan the crowds, living in this single moment, that final breath before adulthood, when I look over and see Caelon standing right along the fence surrounding the field. Smiling and clapping his hands. I'm not sure what about him is drawing my attention or why in a crowd of every member of our town, I single him out.

### Chapter 14

Caelon

Thursday, July 3rd - Budget Meeting

Normally, I love budget meetings and hearing how beautifully the numbers are flowing. But this budget meeting, I'm frantic and racked with nerves. Not because the

numbers aren't good, but because for once, I'm the one proposing a business idea. A business that will be a surprise for my mate. Someone who doesn't even know she's my mate yet.

Layer after layer of reason to be worried. Is she even going to like this? Would she name it this? How would she want it designed? Sleek and clean? Boho and earthy? Chaotic and cluttered? Am I going to select the photos that she would? What if she hates it?

My fingers rub both of my temples trying to stop the migraine I can feel brewing with all the thoughts racing through my mind. My business proposal sits perfectly printed and detailed in a folder for each leader. It's not really needed, but I wanted to make sure each person felt included. Everyone will be there, except Warrick who's still in Ireland after everything that happened with Aspen. I believe Silas said he's going to attend via Facetime from their meeting room there.

Checking my watch, I know I have exactly four and half minutes to walk into our meeting room. Three minutes to walk there, one minute to settle into my seat, and thirty seconds to wait for everyone else to file in. Grabbing my proposal, ledger, my favorite pen, and my tea, I head off to the meeting room.

Exactly four and half minutes later, exactly as I calculated, everyone else files into the room. Silas has dark bags hanging under his eyes, and if that look of lost nights of sleep is what children equals, I'm not sure I want to participate. His extra large coffee is steaming as he takes a gulp.

Gail sips her herbal tea and smiles at him fondly. As if everything is how it should be for him. "Those pups running you ragged, hmm?"

He takes another gulp of his coffee before audibly sighing in relief. "You could say that again. Between them throwing pillows back and forth, to crawling everywhere,



I'm ready for a six week nap. I never knew it would be this hard."

She only hums, taking another sip of her tea.

Xavior sits stoic next to me, drinking his black coffee that is dark enough to be oil at this point. Gross. I don't even like coffee to begin with, but add in the zero flavor of it, and I'd rather just drink water at that point.

"I'm sure some of the elders would be more than willing to take them for a bit so you and Nova can rest," Xavior adds.

Silas only shoos it away. "Nova wants to be part of every second of their lives, something she said her parents weren't able to do. It'll be fine. Anyways, we aren't here to chat about my baby wrangling, instead let's talk about all the fun activities of budgets." His mock enthusiasm dripped from every word.

We spend the next hour going over line by line the budget for the next quarter. Silas approving each portion of it, including Gail's request for more herbs for the Pawspital. Something she thanked him for several times.

"If there's nothing else, I think we are safe to call the meeting?" Silas slaps his hands down on the table top softly, scooting back as if to stand up.

Gail clears her throat. "I think Caelon has something else he would like to propose for the next quarter, don't you Cal?" She looks over to me, giving me an encouraging nod.

Warrick shifts side to side on the phone screen, trying to see what everyone is looking at as I stand up to give each of them their copy of the business proposal.

"What is it," Warrick's voice cracks over the phone's speakers.

“This,” I say as I hold one up for him to see the front cover, “is the proposal for a gallery in the old store next to Citrine and Rose. My mate just happens to be Selene.”

His eyes widened in shock.

“Before any of you get excited, she doesn’t know yet. Obviously, since she hasn’t come of age yet, it’s completely one-sided. It’s only getting stronger the closer we get to her birthday.”

The room is quiet except for Gail who is beaming, as if she’s known all along. I squint my eyes at her. How would she have known? She only winks at me.

Xavior leans forward placing his forearms on the tabletop. “How much longer do you have?”

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“Seventeen days.”

He curtly nods his head. “And how long does your business proposal allot for you to complete the project?”

“If we approve it today, I can have it done by July 31st which is the proposed ribbon cutting.”

Silas clears his throat. “Is this going to be your grand gesture Caelon?”

I nod my head.

Warrick shouts through the phone, “I vote yessss! Get her, boy! You got this!”

Aspen sleepily whispers, “Warrick quit acting like a barbarian.”

He ducks his head, before we hear a door click open and shut as he steps into the hallway.

“Whoops! Forgot she was taking a nap. My bad. Anyway! I vote yes to your proposal Cal.”

Silas shakes his head as he smiles. “What about you, Xavier?”

“I’m all for it.”

“Gail?”

“Well, it was my idea to begin with, so yes of course.”

Silas claps his hands together. “There you have it Cal, we approve your proposal.”

Each of them stand up and clap me on the shoulder as they walk out of the meeting room. Leaving only Gail and I in the office as even Warrick left with Silas, since it was his phone and all.

Gail smiles at me. “What name did you pick?”

“The Howlery.”

She nods. “It’s fitting and perfect.” She pushes her chair back to stand.

“Gail,” I whisper.

“If you think about it really hard, Caelon, deep down you know the answer to that question.”

My eyes bulge as I look up at her.

“How did you know what I was going to ask?”

“I’m not ready to tell you guys. But, what I will say is, you’ve always known and if you consider it for a moment, there’s only one explanation that answers all those questions. Wouldn’t you agree?” Her eyes flash their milky white before she winks.

Walking out of the office, leaving me in complete shock. I was right.

Chapter 15

Selene

Thursday, July 17th - 18th Birthday

My eyes peel open on the most important day of my life, well at least up to this point. It's my birthday, that final step into adulthood. My heart rate picks up thinking of all the possibilities of today. The potential of finding my mate, of losing Shadow, choosing my place in the pack, and possibly moving out?

So many thoughts racing through my mind, but there is only one place that I want to be right now, and only one wolf I want to be with. No matter what today brings, I will know that he was mine for the short time.

Throwing the blankets off of me, my feet touch the floor as I shift out of the bed. My body aches as muscles that have never been sore in their life strain with the movement, but I wouldn't trade it for the world. Between the squatting, hiking, and standing on my feet for long hours...my body isn't quite sure what we were doing, and it's confused.

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After graduation I've spent every waking second I can on my craft. Bea hired me to take some professional photos of her baked goods for her new website. Marlowe had me create some beautiful backdrops for her stands inside the store. As well as a few others around town hiring me for odds and ends projects that will only expand my portfolio. It's been a busy, rewarding, and exhausting month so far, but today, today is hopefully going to only add to it!

Throwing on my black leggings and favorite band tee, I slip out the door to grab a juice before heading to my secret valley. Well, it's not much of a secret anymore, Mom and Dad definitely interrogated me after graduation about everything. Thankfully, they waited until the next day, but that was as long as Mom was willing to wait.

After telling them all about the mystery wolf, I confessed to sneaking off the pack lands into the valley and I even told them about Shadow. Now though, I can go without having to go at the crack of dawn. So, at least there's that. Although, it took a great deal to calm Mom down about the secret gifts and all the hidden meanings. For whatever reason, Dad has been rather chill about it. Claiming that it will all make sense soon, he's sure of it. I'm glad he's confident about that, because even I'm not sure about that.

The sun is already high in the sky when I walk out the front door, the warm breeze blowing through the trees, welcoming me outside. I can't help but check Caelon's cabin, it's almost a habit now. Ever since I saw him standing along the fence at graduation, I've watched his house. Not in a stalker kind of way, but in a hope I see you kind of way. Yet, no matter what time I look, what time I sit on the porch, or what time I come home, he's never there. Not that I can see anyway.

Just like every morning before, his cabin stands dark as if nobody even lives there. Looking exactly like it did yesterday, and every day before it. My phone buzzes in my bag. Pulling out the device, I see a text from my mom.

Mom: Happy Birthday Moondrop! May your dream of being a Nat Geo Photographer come true! Be sure to wish extra hard today!

Rolling my eyes, I text her back.

Me: Mom, you know that's not how it works! I'm not 5 anymore! lol. Thank you for the bday wishes though.

Mom: It is too how it works! Have you sent in any of your photographs? Surely once someone sees them they would want you.

Me: Again, not how it works. You can submit it but it's not an instant thing. But no I haven't

Mom: You should do that! Anyways, I won't bother you much longer! Dad and I will see you tonight for your big party! Love you!

Me: Love you too.

I slide my cell phone back into my bag. I've got one thing, or one place I should say, on my mind and it's not the dinner later tonight. I can't wait to tell Shadow it's my birthday.

Taking the path beside the Pack House, the butterflies erupt in my stomach. Today's different. I can feel it.

The closer I walk towards the valley, the more I can feel the anticipation building.

Almost like I'm being tugged in that direction. Is this the mate pull they talk about?

I pick up the pace, almost jogging in the direction I'm being pulled. My heart feels like it might actually burst from my chest. The butterflies feel like they are competing to win the race. My feet pound against the ground as I run towards the valley. He's there. I can feel it.

Breaking through the tree line my feet skid to a stop when I find Shadow sitting by the water. As if he has been waiting for me to get here. Looking around the valley, trying to find what drew me here, I don't see anyone else but us.

My face scrunches in confusion, my heart beating against my ribcage as I stare at him. It's got to be him. What else would explain it?

When I look back towards the tree line, it feels like the air is colder, as if fate is guiding me back to the wolf still calmly sitting in front of me.

My breath is heaving out of me as I slowly walk towards him.

"Sh...Shadow?"

Right before my eyes, the wolf transforms into none other than Caelon. A very naked Caelon standing before me. He blinks open his eyes as his body vibrates. Our eyes lock and everything clicks into place. The bond humming between us as we both suck in a breath. All this time he's been right here, my quiet neighbor. I never would have put this together, never did up to this point. I can't believe it. All the things I've told him, confessed to him, all while believing he was just a wolf from our pack. Instead, he was my mate. Did he know? Has he always known? Is that why he's been around so much?

Does that mean that he's also the man that's been haunting my dreams? As if in



answer his eyes flash that crystalline blue.

“It’s you.”

## Chapter 16

Caelon

Thursday, July 17th – Our Mate

I can feel her coming...at least I hope it’s her. It has to be. She’s our mate and there’s no one else for us. Rushing through the woods earlier, I couldn’t outrun the elation that today is finally the day. I barely slept, tossing and turning all night long.

Now sitting here by our creek, eagerly awaiting her arrival, I can’t help the nagging thought that she will be disappointed when she sees who it is. I was never enough for my parents, never perfect enough, strong enough, or even “normal” enough. Maybe Selene will see me and wish I was my brother instead. She’s never been around him enough, but with his popularity, football status, and then being the only wolf to be signed to a professional football team, every single girl swoons over him. Never once seeing me beside him, even going so far as to push me out of the way to get closer to him.

Out of fear of her rejection, I quickly shift into my wolf form. At least I know she loves this version of me, even if she doesn’t know it’s me.

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The crunch of fallen leaves comes right before she bursts into the opening. Her eyes are wild as she scans the surroundings. Her long, dark hair flicks around as her head shifts. She's in her trademark black leggings and band tee.

It warms my heart to know if anything, she wanted to see "Shadow" one more time. Calix huffs at her nickname for him, even though we know he loves it. He preens anytime the word rolls off her tongue. Something he may let her keep calling him even after she realizes who we are. Well, that's if she accepts us, that is.

When her eyes land on me I have one single second of glee before her face crumbles in confusion. Why is she looking at me like that? Isn't she feeling the pull like I am?

My chest constricts as she slowly steps closer to me. Mine. Mine. Mine. Calix is practically chanting in our shared headspace. Meanwhile, I feel like I can't breathe. She isn't saying anything. Why isn't she?

"Sh...Shadow?"

I won't wait any longer. The excitement of her proximity, wanting to finally claim her, rushes over me as I shift back into my human form. I blink open my eyes as the confirmation I've been waiting for finally happens. Mate.

I see it in her eyes. The widening of them, sucking in a breath, and the quick flash of her mini moon wolf eyes, tells me she knows it too.

"It's you."

I nod my head.

“How long have you known?”

A sheepish look crosses my face. “Since Bestiare. Well, confirmed during our dance together then. I felt so drawn to you, but I worried that I wouldn’t be your mate.”

“Is that why you’ve never said anything or come near me before now?”

I scratch the back of my head. “You were the first girl to grab my attention, the first one to make me look a second time, and it scared me.”

She takes a step closer to me, her fingers twisting together as she thinks about what I said.

“You’re the only guy that I’ve ever been attracted to. I’ve been wondering for weeks now why I’ve felt so drawn to you. But, I was so confused. Between what I was feeling for Shadow,” she gestures toward where I was just sitting, “to my conflicted feelings during Bestiare with the masked stranger. Then there was you, the one who I’ve only ever sat across the street from as we both sip our teas.”

I nod my head, not breaking eye contact. She slides her barefoot slowly across the ground taking another step closer. I suck in a breath.

“All this time, they’ve been the same person. How long have you watched me? Dreamed of me?” Her other foot slides across the ground, bringing her within arms reach.

I could reach out and pull her into my arms. But, I don’t. My fingers twitch at my sides, my muscles tensing to keep myself from jumping. I might be more than ready to claim her, but this is all new to her. There’s still this thought, like a fly, buzzing at

the back of my mind that she is going to reject me.

She hesitates and I realize she's waiting for me to answer her. "A...a long time now. I tried...tried to," I gulp, the words sticking in my throat. What is she going to think when I admit this? "I tried to ignore the urge to watch you. I thought I was obsessed with you and that you would turn of age only to find your true mate. I kept my distance, hoping that it would go away."

She takes the last step till she is standing directly in front of me.

"And how did that work out?"

"I...it got worse. The more I tried to ignore it, the harder it became."

"Um, hmm," she mumbles as her hand reaches out slowly towards my own.

Like waves crashing to the shore, the second our skin connects everything that is her sucks me in. From her plump lower lip pinched between her teeth, to her blown pupils so wide the hazel of her eyes is almost non-existent. The gasp as our feelings mingle into one, no way to determine whose is whose.

Just like every time before, my dick hardens at the thought of her. But, now with her so close, every single molecule of me is excited. It's not just him, it's my entire being.

My muscles are clenched, doing everything I can to hold still. We are both new to this, not just that we are mates, but being intimate with each other. All I can think about with her salty musk filling my nostrils is how bad I want to taste every single part of her. To finally run my hands across her soft skin as Caelon and not her masked man.

“Leni...” I whisper as my skin buzzes and tingles with every single touch of her finger tips.

My eyes are enraptured by her movements. Slowly trailing her fingers up my skin. Moving an inch closer as she goes, until she reaches my neck and trails her finger down the side of my neck causing my entire body to shiver. I don't even think she knows what she is doing to me or just how much I'm turned on right now.

With one shift of her body, she's almost flush with mine. Not even enough space between us to move a hand, but just enough for my hardened dick to sit. My head dips as her hands move down at a snail's pace as she runs her fingertips barely across my skin. The bumps build across my pecs as she moves.

“Leni,” I whine.

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Her eyes snap up to mine, full of curiosity and lust. She blinks slowly, almost as if she isn't fully the one in control.

“You’re literally killing me right now.”

My eyes flick down to my painfully hard dick back to her eyes. She gasps when her eyes fall to where I looked before they darken when they reach mine again. She slowly licks her lips.

“Mine,” she growls before closing the remaining space between us. Her pillow soft lips smash against mine.

We fumble against each other, equally struggling to understand what to do and fight against our animal instincts. Her hands come around the back of my head pulling me even closer to her. Our bodies fuse together as my arms wrap around her back.

She jumps up, wrapping her legs around my waist, the warmth of her core pressing against my dick and I can't help but whimper.

Breaking free, she leans back slightly. “Now, be a good boy and lay me down in our field of wildflowers.”

“Yes ma'am.”

Chapter 17

Selene

Thursday, July 17th — For the first time

Softly, almost tenderly, he lowers himself to the ground. His eyes are locked on mine and I can clearly see the adoration in them. He looks at me like I'm the answer to every question he's ever had, all his unsolved theories are solved when in my arms.

Leaning forward, his arm braces against the ground beneath us as he lowers me down. The cool damp soil feels amazing against my heated skin. The petals of the dewy flowers kiss along my body as we shift until he is fully pressed against me while I lay across the ground. There isn't a single doubt in my mind that he wants this, I can feel every single delicious inch of him pressed against my core.

He shifts forward, grinding into me, and I can't help the moan that slips between my lips. His eyebrow quirks as he does it again eliciting another moan from me.

"You going to keep teasing me or you going to be a good boy and lick me?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"How much you like these leggings," he mumbles against my flesh as he moves down, kissing as he goes.

He lifts the hem of my t-shirt, exposing my stomach to the cool air. Shifting down to where his chest lays between my spread legs, an arm hooked on each side.

"I'm not really partial..."

I don't even finish my sentence before he tears a hole down the center of them, pulling and ripping until they fall open. Lifting up on my elbows, I stare down at a

smirking Caelon between my legs. As if he's always wanted to do something like that.

“Good, because I don't plan to wait.”

A quick pull, followed by the rip of fabric, and there goes my thong. I was partial to those, though.

He looks at my pussy like his prayers have been answered and he'll never have to worry again.

“I've waited a long time for this,” he whispers in reverence before slowly leaning down and giving my pussy a languid lick from bottom to top. My back arches off the ground.

He hums against my skin, “It's everything I dreamed of and more.”

Without another word, he licks again. Testing the waters, learning what we both like from it. His attention to detail is top notch, not that I would expect anything different from him.

When he sucks my clit into his mouth, applying just the right amount of pressure, I can't help but reach down and grip the back of his head. Thrusting against his mouth, chasing the feeling that is rising low in my belly.

“Yesssss, Cal, right there.”

His arms snake around my thighs, gripping me before flipping us to where I'm now sitting on his face. My mouth drops open as I look down between my thighs to see his beautiful hazel eyes staring right at me.



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With a pop, he releases my clit. The tip of his tongue flicks it as we stare at each other.

“Leni, I want you to sit on my face and drown me in your juices. Think you can do that for me?” His left eyebrow quirks in challenge.

“Yes...”

His hand moves from around my thigh, disappearing beneath me before I feel the first stroke of it against my pussy. My hips jerk at the feeling, nobody has ever been down there before, nobody has touched my skin except me. His fingers swirl along my lips, feeling the skin, and gathering the juices that are already pouring out of me.

As though he has all the time in the world, he keeps swirling and dipping them into me. Seems that teasing is still on the table, noted. On one of the dips, he thrusts his finger deep into me, my back arching at the sudden feeling before he quickly pulls it back out of me.

That’s it, I’m only one more second away from taking away his options. Looking down at him, I find him smirking against my thigh. Little shit. Like a math problem he is trying to solve, he is testing out theories and seeing which one gives the result he’s looking for. I glare down at him causing him to chuckle.

“What’s the matter little Leni? Someone frustrated,” he asks mockingly, the light notes of humor floating between us.

A low growl comes from me. “You know exactly what you are doing to me. Do I

need to take matters into my own hands or should I pay in kind?"

He nips the inside of my thigh causing me to jump.

"No need to be sassy. We have all the time in the world. I'm just learning what my mate likes. Don't you want me to know?" He flattens his tongue and licks the place he nipped, moving back to where I want him, where I need him.

"Caeelllllooon," I whine before he thrusts two fingers into me as he sucks my clit back into his mouth.

He times his thrusts with the pulsing of his sucks and it takes me mere seconds to feel the tingle of an orgasm coming. My skin feels like a million needles are poking me as I rapidly move towards the crest.

"Right there. Goddess, don't stop."

He hums against my clit adding a vibration that rocks my world as I scream his name into the open field for every creature to hear. The orgasm crashes over me as I fall forward panting. My fingers gripping the grass to ground myself. In all the times I've done this to myself, there is no comparison to him doing it to me.

He continues to lick, nip, and suck, capturing every single drop of my cum in his mouth before he slides out from under me.

I'm still panting, trying to come back down to earth when he pulls me up flush against his front. His hard dick pressing between my ass cheeks.

"That wasn't so bad now was it?" he murmurs against my ear before nipping it.

His hands slowly move down my stomach before hooking around the hem of my shirt

and dragging it up over me. Never did I imagine that I would be in my field of wildflowers in nothing but my black sports bra with Caelon undressing me.

His fingers hook under the band of my bra as he whispers, “I can’t wait to take my time exploring every single inch of your skin, every erogenous zone that makes you come, and explore every single fantasy you have.”

The fabric whispers across my skin as he pulls it over my head, the cool breeze tightening my nipples even further. They are nothing more than hard pebbles as my C-cup breasts fall down out of the bra.

I suck in a breath as the feeling of being completely exposed washes over me. He throws the clothing off to the side as my arms fall down behind his head. With his hands roaming my bare skin and lips peppering kisses against my shoulder and neck, I feel like a goddess being worshiped.

“Cal...”

“Hmm,” he mumbles against my neck.

“I want our first time to be here in our field, where we met and spent hours together already. It feels more like home to us than any house will.”

Twisting around in his arms, I run my fingers along his beard, the thick strands grazing against my skin. His eyes are flicking back and forth across my face, calculating every single thing that I’m doing. My hands lower down his chest as I explore each hard plane of his body.

A very large, hardened dick stands at attention. His knot is already swollen at the base, ready for me even if I’m not sure I’m ready for it.

We obviously have sex ed classes in our public school and then there's breed specific classes for teaching us what we need to know about breeding with our mates. It's one thing to read about it and a whole nother thing to experience it. Looking at his dick and that knot, I'm quite terrified of how that will feel and where that thing is going. Will it even fit?

Alright, it's way bigger than I thought. Fuck. It's already leaking pre-cum with thick veins running down each side. The deep pink tip looks ready to be touched, licked, anything to relieve itself. I want to lick it though. Like he did for me.

I reach up hesitantly. Unsure what the hell I'm doing or if I'm even going to do it right. I wrap my small hand around it, feeling the silky skin against mine. It's a weird contradiction between the softness of the skin and the hardness beneath it. Moving my hand slowly up it, exploring the feel of it against my heated flesh. Hearing him hiss through his teeth as I squeeze it. I reach the tip and squeeze the soft, squishy tip against my palm.

"Fuck, this is torture."

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I glance up at him. Cal is glancing between my hand and my face. His pupils are blown wide open and his chest is rapidly rising and falling.

Without looking away from him, I lean forward and take my first lick of his salty precum. Watching as he shakes and clenches his hands, like he just wants to take over and stop the torture. But, I think he deserves to experience what he just put me through as he explored.

When my mouth wraps around the head of his dick, I swirl my tongue and explore the taste of him. My hand moves down the shaft as saliva pools around my mouth, lubing the way down. I bump into his knot, wanting to know what it feels like, I wrap my hand around it and squeeze gently. Cal hisses as his hands come down on my shoulders.

“Fuck, don’t do that again unless you want this to end sooner rather than later.”

Smirking around his dick, I suck harder and squeeze a little more at the same time. Just to see what will happen. He lurches forward, hitting the back of my throat, causing me to cough. He pulls out of my mouth quickly, apologizing profusely.

“I’m so sorry Leni!” He sits down in front of me, holding my face as I sputter.

“I’m...” I try as another cough happens. “I’m fine. Just wasn’t prepared for that.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, well I wasn’t prepared either. This is my first time ever having someone touch me, let alone do all this.”

I can't help but chuckle with him. Nothing like two virgins bumbling our way through this.

"Alright, we'll take that a bit slower this time. Maybe we save the deep throating for another day." I giggle.

"Yeah I can agree with that for sure."

Lifting up, I bring our lips together once more. Hoping to bring us back to the moment. With a little more ease than the first time we kissed, our lips move together as he lowers me back down to the ground. Settling between my legs, I feel him pressing against my soaking wet entrance.

"Leni..." he says breathily as he applies a little more pressure. "This is going to hurt. I don't know how much or for how long, but I'll follow your lead here."

I nod my head, holding my breath. It burns slightly as he pushes the tip in. He sucks in a breath as his eyes scan my face. His arms shake as he holds himself still.

"Leni, talk to me." My eyes flick up to his seeing the worry etched in his.

"I'm fine. It's fine." My voice shakes as I answer him.

"Okay...okay...I can do this one of two ways. I can either move slowly and we take our time..."

"What's the other option?"

"I rip the bandaid off so to speak." He tilts his head slightly forward with a quirk of his eyebrow.

I watch as his toned arms ripple as he holds himself back from moving. The struggle to keep his animal side in check just to give me the choice of how this goes.

I nod my head. “Do it.”

“You sure?”

Sucking in a breath, I nod my head once. He doesn’t waste another second before he slams forward, ripping through my hymen and stopping when he’s all the way in. A scream rips through me as the pain washes over me and my nails elongate into claws, sinking into his shoulders. My ears ring as he peppers kisses across my skin. Whispering sweet nothings, praising me, and waiting for the pain to go away. Thankful for my wolf’s healing abilities, it doesn’t take but seconds for the pain to move on, leaving only the new feeling of fullness behind.

Droplets of blood drip down from where I sank my claws in, and now it’s my turn to apologize. Quickly pulling them back, I lap at the spots as I apologize over and over again.

“It’s alright. You don’t have to apologize.”

“Yes, I do. Look what I did.”

He chuckles. “We’re wolves remember? It likely won’t be the last time you do something like that.” He nuzzles his nose behind my ear, planting tender kisses along my neck. “Besides, I think I quite like the feral side of you coming out because of something I did.”

He pulls back out of me as I wince at the foreign feeling before he rocks back into me rhythmically.

With each rock forward, the feeling turns from being foreign to one of enjoyment. Before long, I can already feel it moving towards the ultimate goal. He leans back. Hooking my left leg over his elbow before leaning forward again. The new angle feels even better than before.

Reaching down between us, I want to know what will happen if I stimulate my clit as he rocks in and out of me. He watches as my hand skims across my stomach, not slowing down his movements. My fingers graze just barely over my swollen clit before he sucks in a breath.



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My eyes snap back up to his as he stares at where my hand is. “Do that again Leni, you’re squeezing the shit out of me.”

Gathering some of our juices on my fingertips, I circle my clit as he lets out a string of curses as he picks up the pace. I can feel my orgasm building again, but this time I’m terrified. It doesn’t feel like any orgasm I’ve had before. This one feels like the pull of a wave as the hurricane builds, pulling everything back before it slams into the land.

Applying more pressure, I circle faster as he pounds harder into me. His body vibrates above me as his own orgasm builds.

“Leni, I’m almost there,” he pants, struggling to say the words.

I circle faster, racing to the finish line with him.

“Come with me,” he says right as he leans back and roars towards the sky. The warmth of his cum splashing against my walls as it pushes me over the edge right along with him. He drops down on top of me as both of us pant through our releases. My body hums as the waves continue to wash over me.

He lifts himself up to look down at me. “That,” he licks his lips, swallowing to wet his mouth, “was amazing.”

“Why...why didn’t you knot me?” I ask hesitantly, not sure I want the answer. My insecurity shows, as I try to act like it doesn’t bother me. Everyone knows that knotting is for mates and part of our time together.

“I didn’t knot you for two reasons. One, it’s our first time and I don’t want to hurt you. Two, you do have a birthday dinner and party to get to later. I want to knot you when I know we have time to spend hours together doing nothing but exploring each other.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

He leans down and kisses the tip of my nose. “Trust me, I want to knot you and spend the rest of the day rolling around in this field. But, I know how important it is to you to celebrate with Odessa and your parents.”

I swat his shoulder. “You sure know a lot about me for someone who hasn’t spoken a word to me.”

He winks as he pulls out of me slowly. Reaching down he grabs his discarded clothes and pulls his boxers and jeans back on before he reaches for his discarded shirt. Bunching it up, he wipes all our combined releases up. Taking time to clean every part that he can before tucking it into his back pocket.

I look down to my bare legs and then at the shreds of my black leggings. “Um, looks like I’ll be streaking back to the house,” I say with a giggle.

His nostrils flare as a low growl comes from him. “I think you don’t want anyone to lose their eyes on your birthday.”

I can’t help but laugh. “What would you like me to do, you shredded both my leggings and underwear?”

He stands up abruptly, unbuttons his pants, allowing them to fall to the ground before he steps out of them.

“For someone who said we didn’t knot because we didn’t have time, you sure seem to be going the opposite direction.” My eyes flick to his already hard dick again, wondering why he is stripping.

“Funny.” He bends down and grabs his pants before holding them out to me. “You need pants and at least my boxers look like shorts. Put these on.”

He hands me the jeans before walking to my discarded bra and band shirt, picking them up to bring them back to me. Pulling on his jeans, they fit pretty well except at the waist where my hips don’t allow for me to button them. He holds out the bra as I take it from him, slipping it over my head and grabbing my shirt. Thankfully, my shirt is baggy and hangs over the open part of the jeans.

He holds his elbow out for me to take as we walk back out of our field. I peek around my arm, looking back at the grass and flowers that are flattened from our time together. I’ll forever cherish this moment.

“I’m going to walk you to your door and let you get ready for dinner. What time is it?” he asks as he looks down adoringly at me.

“Uh, the dinner is at six, I think.”

He looks at his watch. “Alright, that gives you several hours. I’m going to shower and get ready for dinner. I do have to run by the office to do some work in the meantime. Is it alright that I come to dinner with you tonight? Or is that too soon?”

I lean my head against his shoulder. “Not too soon at all. I would love to have you. Will you be going to the party too?”

“If you would like me to be there, then of course I’ll be there.”

“I would love to have you there.”

“Done.”

We reach the forest line as I look back one last time. To think when I came this morning it was to tell Shadow it was my birthday, but now I not only have Shadow, I also have my mate.

Chapter 18

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Selene

Thursday, July 17th - The dinner

Caelon does exactly what he said, dropping me off at my front door before turning to walk across the street to his own home. When I push open the front door, Mom's coffee mug stops halfway to her mouth as she looks between me and the hallway towards our bedrooms.

"Well good morning, Moondrop, and happy birthday! I wasn't expecting to see you coming in the house versus coming out of your room." She laughs as she sets her coffee mug down on the kitchen island.

"Yeah, I wanted to go see Shadow today in case it was our last chance to see each other."

I walk towards them, hoping I don't have to elaborate much beyond that and maybe they won't ask about the clothing.

Dad's eyebrows wrinkle as he scans my body, seeing the jeans that I clearly have never worn before. Mom follows his line of sight before her eyes flick back to mine. I already can see the questions brewing and I might as well take care of them before they ask.

"Clearly, you can see I'm not wearing my clothes." I sigh as I sit down at one of the bar stools opposite of where they are standing. "Shadow, aka Caelon, is my mate. Seems that he's known all along, but he wanted to wait for me to find out when I

came of age.”

“Awe, so this whole time he has been spending time with you as his wolf, bonding with you and patiently waiting for you. That’s so sweet,” Mom gushes.

Dad still looks skeptical as he glances between us. “Are you happy with it?”

“What do you mean Dad? Of course I’m happy with it. I just wish I would have known as long as he’s known. That’s it. I know that we wouldn’t have been mated before now, but he’s known for years. It feels like he’s further into the bond that I am even though I know that’s not fair to say.”

Mom walks around the island and wraps her arms around me. The warmth of her embrace along with her scent eases the turmoil inside me. Don’t get me wrong, I understand his hesitation, but I still can’t help but feel like I would have rather known.

She kisses the top of my head as she lays her head down on top of mine. “I’m sure he had his reasons and it’s okay to be upset that you didn’t know. All I can say is it’s best to communicate with your partner about those feelings. Just because you are fated to each other doesn’t mean this relationship won’t be work like any other type of relationship. In order to have a long, healthy, loving mateship, you first have to learn to communicate with each other. Don’t leave things unsaid for fear of how they will react. You are doing both of yourselves a disservice if you keep the feelings bottled up instead of taking the time to deal with the issue when it arises.”

Dad smiles warmly at the both of us before he joins us on my other side, wrapping his arms around both of us. “I have two of the most beautiful and intelligent women in my life. I just can’t believe that not only is my baby an adult today but she also found her mate. Can’t say I’m overjoyed about it.”

I lean back, looking into his eyes. His eyelashes are damp from the tears that are falling down his cheeks.

“Awe Dad,” I sniffle as my own eyes sting with tears.

“My baby has grown up and now I will have to watch you leave the nest as you go off to make your own way in life. I’m not ready.”

The tears are falling in earnest at his heartfelt words. I never considered how hard it would be for my parents to accept me leaving, I’ve only considered how terrified I was about it.

We are all a mess as we cry together, letting the emotions, thoughts, and feelings go. Dad’s the first one to clear his throat, wiping harshly at his eyes trying to stop the tears.

“Alright, that’s enough of the sadness. We have a birthday to celebrate today and I’m sure a certain young lady would love to tell her soul match all about what happened this morning. Plus, I believe a certain mother has a cake to bake?” He looks at Mom silently reminding her that we are losing time.

She wipes away her tears, sniffing as she tries to clear away her feelings. “You’re right.” She claps her hands together before shaking out her hands. “We have lots to do today. Will Caelon be joining us for dinner?”

“Yeah, if that’s alright. He said he would love to spend time with you guys.”

“Certainly, we would love to get to know the man who will be taking our baby from us.”

Dad plants a kiss on the top of my head before he gently taps my shoulder. “Go talk

with Odessa. I'm sure she will be here soon anyways. Goddess knows that girl is glued to your hip."

Pushing the stool back, I slide to my feet before heading off to my bedroom. They're right, I would love to tell Odes, but first I would love to shower off the damp soil and other things that are all over me. Running into my room, I pull my phone off the nightstand and shoot off a text to her asking for her to come over while I shower. She sends back a quick thumbs up emoji before I turn the screen off and drop it back onto the night stand.

After a long, luxurious shower, I wrap my hair in a towel before heading back into my bedroom. Odes is sitting on my bed with her feet crossed underneath her, scrolling on her phone when I walk in. When she looks up, she squeals and jumps off the bed coming to wrap her arms around me.

"I hear that not only are we celebrating your birthday, but that you found your mate!" She practically busts my eardrums with the sounds coming from her.

I glare over my shoulder towards where my mother surely is in the kitchen baking.

"Don't do that!" She swats my shoulder.

"What?"



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“Don’t be mad that she told me you found your mate. She didn’t tell me who or how. So spill the tea! I want to know everything! Was I right? Is it Caelon?”

“Yes, it’s him.”

She squeals, dancing around in a circle while jumping up and down. I hold my hands up in front of me, not sure what to do with that.

“I knew it! I freaking knew it! How did you find out? Was it magical? Melt in a puddle? Steamy? Did you feel the pull?”

“Damn, one question at a time.” I laugh as I walk over to my bed and plop down on top of it with a sigh.

“I wanted to see Shadow one last time because I was worried I might find my mate and never get to see him again. But, as I was walking that way, I felt the pull. It was pulling me right to our not so secret anymore field. I practically ran, Odes.”

“Oh emmm gee,” she gushes as she rushes over to the bed, plopping down next to me.

“I came into the clearing and there was Shadow sitting in our normal spot. I was so confused at first because I knew that the mate bond was pulling me there, but it was Shadow and not a person. That is until they transformed into Caelon. Odes, the second our eyes met, it clicked. Everything made sense, I felt as though the lost piece of me was found. It was everything that I would have dreamed of when it came to finding my mate.”

She sighs as she props her hands up under her head, watching me as I recount the story. We spend the next thirty minutes going over everything else that happened all the way up to the point of coming home.

“Damn, possessive Caelon is kinda hot. Who knew the quiet math nerd had a possessive streak about him.” She fans herself.

I swat her with one of my stuffed animals before she busts out laughing. She calms down before she rolls back onto her side facing me.

“What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing,” I say as I pick at the fuzz on my teddy bear.

She reaches over and rubs my arm. “Something,” she says quietly.

“Why didn’t he tell me before now?”

“Oh sweetie, I’m sure he had his reasons. One probably being that you were underage. I’m sure he will tell you if you ask him.”

“Yeah.” I sigh as I roll over looking at the ceiling.

Odessa sits up and pats my thigh. “Come on, let’s get all dolled up for dinner and the party! It’s your big day, so no more moping about questions that we can’t answer right now anyways.”

She bounds off the bed, running out of the room and into the bathroom to gather supplies. Goddess save me from whatever she’s about to do. I love her more than anything, but she knows I love my hair and make up done about as much as I love a stubbed toe.

We spend hours getting ready, between laughing, singing our favorite songs like we are the main acts, to actually doing the hair and makeup, so it takes us the rest of the day to get ready. Not that I mind that part. It was everything I didn't know I needed. Time with Odes always seems to make the world shine a little brighter. Something about being with your best friend, aka your soul match, really does seem to reset the world for you.

Mom calls from the kitchen, letting us know that dinner is ready, although we've been dying in the bedroom for the last twenty minutes smelling the herbs coming down the hall.

Arm in arm, Odes and I make our way down the hallway towards the kitchen right as there's a knock at the door. Dad seemingly puffs out his chest before making his way towards the door. We all giggle and shake our heads watching him.

"I'll get the door," he says in a far deeper voice than he normally talks with.

He sucks in a deep breath, pushing his chest even further out as he swings open the front door. Caelon, bless his heart, is standing there with a beautiful bouquet of deep red roses with large, bright yellow sunflowers bound together with brown paper and twine. His hair is gelled back and he looks like he freshly shaved his face. His sage green collared shirt, free of wrinkles, hangs just above his leather belt and dark, khaki pants.

Dad continues to stand there, staring at Caelon. Caelon smiles at him before holding his hand out for a handshake.

"It's nice to officially meet you, Mr. Calloway. I hope you don't mind me dropping in uninvited to Selene's birthday dinner." His hand hovers between them, waiting for my dad to shake it.

Dad looks down at his hand and back up to Cal's face. "What are your intentions with my daughter?"

Squealing, I run over to save Cal from my dad. Scooting around him, I glare at him over my shoulder. "That's enough Dad." I shake my head before taking the flowers from Cal.

"What? He's here to steal my baby girl from me, the least he can do is answer a few questions."

I playfully smack my dad on the shoulder before Cal leans in and kisses my cheek.

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“Happy Birthday Leni,” he whispers into my ear as we move into the house towards the dining room table.

Mom comes around the kitchen island with the same vase from the last time Cal left flowers, already full with water. She places it in the center of the dining room table before grabbing the flowers from my hands.

“These are beautiful Caelon, you did a great job picking these out for our little Moondrop.”

“Moondrop?” he asks, looking between my mom and I.

My cheeks warm with embarrassment. There’s only three people who knew that nickname, and now there’s a fourth.

I tuck a strand of my long, curled hair behind my ear, ducking my head down. “Yeah, Mom has called me that since I was born, claiming I was a gift from the Moon Goddess.”

Mom walks back in with a huge dish of lemon garlic shrimp pasta as Dad follows behind her with a stack of pasta bowls, forks, and napkins.

“That’s not the only reason.” She winks as she places the dish down on the tabletop. “When she blinked open her eyes, her wolf’s unique moon eyes were glowing up at me. I felt as though a tiny drop of the moon had fallen that night, and I was the blessed one to receive it. That’s why I named her Selene, after our Moon Goddess and because of her unique eyes, her nickname was given as well.”

Dad takes his seat at the head of the table as Mom makes her way down to her end. Odessa takes her normal spot on the right side of my dad and I take the seat to the left. Cal patiently waits to see where everyone's going before taking the seat next to me. We don't have a large table, just one that seats six comfortably.

Each of us serve ourselves some of the pasta before Mom blesses our meal and we dig in. We are all eating along and chatting before Mom directs a question to Caelon.

"Caleon, tell us about your family. Are you close with your parents? Don't you have a brother as well?" She swirls her fork in the pasta.

He wipes his mouth with the napkin. "I'm not at all close with my family. But, to answer your question, yes I do have a brother. He was in the same class as Silas and Warrick. Although, he did take on a scholarship to play for Fairview University before he was drafted. He now plays for some professional football team, and my parents couldn't be more proud."

My eyebrows scrunch as I look over at him. There is something there, an almost disdain towards his brother.

"Oh, well that's good for him. We are sure glad to have you with us and part of our family. I don't know if you've noticed, but we are quite close."

He nods his head. "I have Mrs. Calloway."

"Oh dear, you can call me June or Mom, whichever one you are okay with. No need for our son-in-law to call us by formal names." She reaches over and places her hand gently down on top of his forearm. His eyes follow the movement, as if he isn't sure how to feel about her touching him.

"Th-thank you. I look forward to getting to know you guys."

We spend the rest of the meal chatting with each other and Cal starts to loosen up the longer he spends time with us. He even banters with Odes, something I never would have imagined. Though, he sucks at the comebacks, but we die laughing regardless.

It's finally time for cake, and Odes clearly is up to something with that smirk on her face. She sets down the beautiful lavender and honey cake that Mom made and there are candles around the edge of the round cake, but right in the center is the tube with a wick sitting on top of it.

She lights all the candles, everyone begins singing Happy Birthday, and right before they finish the tube in the middle explodes as tiny confetti rains down on top of all of us. Odessa is dying laughing, holding her side. Mom and Dad are both chuckling. But, Cal? He is sitting there picking the pieces of confetti from his arms.

I can't help but laugh when I see all the confetti sitting on his hair that he hasn't noticed yet. Reaching over, I pull each of the pieces from his hair as he just glares at Odes. Who only laughs harder at the look on his face.

Mom cuts each of us a piece, handing them off as we each dig into the delicious cake she made.

"Oh no." Odes looks at her phone. "We have like ten minutes to make it to the campfire on the other side of the pack land."

She scoots back before scooping the last chunk of cake into her mouth and rushing into the kitchen. Cal and I watch as she rushes back and kisses both my parents on the cheeks before looking at me.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming." I sit back and look at Cal, who looks completely lost and confused. "It's the bonfire for those who just turned eighteen. Since Silas and Nova live in the Pack House now, we don't throw parties there anymore. It's moved to the

bonfire pit by the Ancient Ash Tree.”

He only nods his head before scooting his own chair back and walking his dish to the sink.

“What are you doing?” I ask him when he walks back into the dining room.

“Going with my mate of course. Wherever you go, I go.” He kisses my cheek before walking over to shake my dad’s hand and then kiss my mom on the cheek. “It was wonderful spending time with you two, I look forward to more nights like this.”

We are about to walk down the path towards the bonfire when Cal holds his elbow for me to slide my hand around. He leans in as Odessa walks in front of us, chatting with another person heading towards the bonfire.

“Should I grab my wolf mask? Would that make it better for you?”



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I flush with arousal remembering just what it felt like dancing with him. His nostrils flare as his eyes darken.

“Seems someone really likes that idea.”

Lifting my chin, I smirk. “I wouldn’t be against it. But, let’s maybe save masked fun for when it’s just you and I.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says with a wink as we make our way along with the crowds of people.

The fire is fully blazing by the time we walk up and people are already dancing. Someone has set up a table with a huge punch bowl and cups. There are solo cups every direction you look and based on the glazed looks in everyone’s eyes, there’s clearly alcohol involved.

Odessa already has a cup in her hand as she mingles with the other party-goers.

Cal looks down at me. “Would you like a drink or a dance?”

“Uh, I’m thinking drink first. I’m not normally a big dancer.”

“Hmm, so nothing like the woman who danced with me at Bestiary?” He traces his finger down my back as he leans in closer. “I’m interested to see how this side of you behaves tonight...” His fingers twine around my hair, gently pulling, just like he did before.

He winks as he heads over to the table to grab both of us a cup of the punch. The lean muscles along his back move beneath his shirt tapering off into his narrow waist. His khaki pants hug the round bubble of his butt. I can't wait to squeeze that ass.

As if he can sense me staring, he turns and winks over his shoulder before he comes back with the drinks.

"We could skip the bonfire and take him home to play all night long," Sora groans as we watch him walk toward us.

"I'm not against the idea. Maybe one tiny dance with us in control instead of you and Shadow?"

"You know his name isn't Shadow, right?"

"Doesn't matter, I'll be calling him Shadow."

"That's my girl. Sure I can't convince you to take him home instead?"

"Positive."

Cal hands me over my own solo cup before taking a sip of his. Without thinking about it or what it is, I throw back the entire cup. Sputtering as the liquid hits the back of my throat, I crush the cup in my hand before tossing it in the trash. He lowers his cup and gives me a questioning look.

"What?"

"You in a hurry or something?" He laughs as he takes another sip of his.

"Yeah, I kinda am. To be honest, I want to dance with you, but I also want to get

home and play with you. If you know what I mean.”

Now it’s his turn to sputter as he spits out his drink. Coughing and slamming his fist against his chest. “Goddess, warn me next time.”

Grabbing his cup, I throw it into the trash can before pulling him with me to where the others are all dancing with each other.

It doesn’t take us long to get caught up in the beat of the music, the sway of our hips, and the feel of each other. His hands roam all over my bare back where the dress falls open and all I can think about is how I wished we weren’t here. With the fear of the first time over, I’m ready to explore what else we can do together.

When his right palm slides across my ass cheek before hooking my knee and pulling me against him, I’m done with dancing and being in public. His hard dick rubs right against my aching pussy, and it seems I’m not the only one ready to go.

“Cal...”

“Yeah,” he asks breathily.

“Take me home.”

“I thought you’d never ask.

Chapter 19

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

Caelon

Thursday, July 17th - The After Party

Hand in hand we walk back to my cabin, somewhere that nobody has ever been in except for myself. My heart is racing. So many thoughts run through my mind when I think about what's coming next. Earlier was all instinct and desire. But now? Now, we have all the time in the world to explore each other.

The front door creaks as I push it open, flipping the light on and bathing the room in a warm glow. Everything is exactly how I left it this morning, but I can't help but look at it differently. What is she going to think of my home? Will she like it?

Turning around to face her as I push the front door shut, I don't have much to worry about. There's only one thing she is looking at. And it's not the things along my walls, the furniture in my living room, or what is on my shelves. No, it's me as if the world around us is nothing more than a blank space.

Her pupils are blown as her hand slowly travels up my arm, her wolf's eyes flashing the closer she moves towards me. Her arousal is thick in the air and I can only imagine how wet she is right now.

I walk slowly backwards, guiding her along as her hips sway. She licks her lips as her canines elongate. Pretty sure that her wolf is riding her really hard, which is fine with me.

My room illuminates with a flick of the switch. The king size bed sits on a hand-

carved wood frame with a deep forest green comforter laid across it. My wooden nightstands with a simple lamp sit on each side. Black and white photos of our territory are hung along the walls, photos she would recognize if she was looking anywhere else but me.

As soon as we are both in the room, she pushes me towards the bed. Deciding she is done waiting, she scratches at the hem of my shirt, her hands frantically moving. Her claws scratching my abs, drawing a sting and possibly blood.

My hands clasp around her tiny wrists, binding them together. Her eyes flick up to mine, rapidly shifting between her wolf's and her own.

“Slow down, Leni. We have all night and nothing but time.”

Her chest is rising and falling as her eyes look between her wrists and my hands. Letting go of her wrists, I hook my thumb under her chin as my fingers clasp around her head, tilting her chin up to me. Her soft, pillow lips are tender against mine as they dance together. My tongue licks across the seam of hers, begging for her to open for me. They spread open and I dive in, swirling my tongue with hers as I walk us back towards the bed. Letting gravity guide us, we fall down on top of the mattress.

She breaks the kiss when she gasps and sits up, straddling my lap and my quickly hardening dick. Using my elbows, I move us until we are in the center of the bed.

Sitting up, I kiss down her jaw. Planting tender kisses along her neck until I reach the base. Elongating my canines, I scrap them against her skin as she moans. Biting down as if I'm going to mark her, only to pull them back. It's my own form of torture, so close to marking, yet so far.

The flimsy strap of her dress snaps when I hook my finger around it and pull. She gasps as she looks between my finger and where the strap used to be. Without

hesitating, I reach over and snap the other side, the top of her dress falling to expose the top of her breasts.

My claw sharpens as I run it down the front of the dress, ripping it wide open. Exposing the beautifully rose, beige skin beneath it. Like unwrapping a Christmas present, I tear open the dress, pushing it out of my way to reveal what I really want.

Her mouth is wide open as she pants, watching me unwrap her. The black lace bra and panties quickly fall beneath my claws, leaving nothing but her dusty pink nipples hardened to a peak and bare skin for me to explore.

“Calll...” she whines.

“Shhhh.”

Leaning up, I capture one of her nipples in my mouth, sucking and rolling my tongue around it. Her back arches, pushing it further into my mouth as my hand roams up her back twisting around the long strands of her hair. I know she loves when I pull it, tugging to force her to my will. Her hips rock gently against me, already working herself into a frenzy before we’ve even really started.

Popping off her nipple, I reach down and pull my shirt over my head. Her eyes widen, taking in my own skin as her hands roam across it. She pushes the rest of the dress off the bed as she puts her knees between mine. Hooking her shaking fingers around my belt and pulling it free. She flicks open the button of my pants as I help her push them down. My dick springs up and slaps against my abs as I watch her eyes widen.

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to watching her reaction. Her face is so expressive, playing every thought she’s having without her needing to say it.

She licks her lips as she leans forward, her small hand wrapping around my dick. I hiss through my teeth, loving the feeling of her hand on it. It's just tight enough without squeezing too hard. She slowly moves her hand up and down, as if she's testing what I like. She lowers her mouth down, the flat of her tongue licking around the head. Her eyes watching me as I arch my back, my hands tightening on the comforter.

She wraps her mouth around the tip, lightly sucking before sucking harder.

“Fuck. Keep doing that and I won't last much longer.”

She twists her hand down, lowering her mouth as she goes and it's taking everything in me to lay here without thrusting up. It feels so good and all I want to do is fuck her mouth, chasing the feeling. She repeats it, moving up and down while twisting her hand. Each time she goes down she applies a little more pressure with her mouth and hand.

I can feel my orgasm building, I don't think I'll last. I'm about to say something when she pops off of me, a wide smile across her face, licking her lips like she just sucked on the best lollipop. She moves to straddle my hips again, this time there's nothing between us. No barrier between her pussy and my dick as she settles down on top of it. Her slick coating my dick as she slowly rocks along it, further coating it as she moans at the feeling.

She bends down bringing her lips back to mine as she continues to rock her hips. It's torture. She's so close, between the heat and the slick, I'm so close to losing control. To make it worse, she rolls all the way to the tip, letting it slip inside before rolling back down. Over and over she does this, until I'm a panting mess underneath her. My skin is tingling, my balls are drawn up, I'm on the edge of coming and we haven't even fucked yet.

The next time she slides the tip in, I don't hesitate, my will to sit still is long gone. Thrusting up, we both moan as her heat wraps around me. Her back arches as her head falls back. We sit for a second just absorbed in the feeling of satisfaction from just this alone. My already swelling knot sitting nestled against her opening. Just begging for me to thrust up a bit further, something I have every intention of doing this time.

Pulsing my hips, her eyes snap to mine as they practically glow. Oh, her wolf is more in control now.



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“Someone wants to play, hmm?” I ask as I pinch her nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

She rocks her hips before her hands slam onto my chest. Her claws digging into my pecs drawing beads of blood. I hiss through my teeth.

“Oh, I want to play,” she whispers seductively. “Now, why don’t you be a good boy and fuck me like you want to mark my soul with your seed.”

Fuck that’s hot and definitely her wolf and not her, but I’m here for it. Rolling us over, I hook both my hands behind her knees pushing them towards her shoulders. This angle is deep, her pussy practically sucking me in. Pulling me deeper with each thrust.

“Reach down and rub your clit Leni. You seemed to really like that earlier. I’m not going to last much longer at this rate.”

Swiping her fingers through our juices, she circles her clit before rubbing it in time with my thrusts. Her pussy grips harder and harder with each thrust. I know she’s as close as I am.

“Come with me,” I say through clenched teeth.

With one last thrust, we both explode. Ropes of cum pumping out of me as she clenches around me. Moaning, I shove hard, pushing my swollen knot into her. Locked together, she milks me for every single drop of cum I have.

Our chests heave as we stare at each other. My chest already healed from where she clawed me, only the dried blood remaining. She rolls her hips and I let out a string of curses.

“Fuck, don’t do that. Unless you want to go again, you have to wait for it to deflate.”

“Who said I didn’t want to go again?” she practically purrs before she rolls us again, putting her back on top.

“Be a good boy and hold on.”

She thrusts her hips and I’m instantly hard again.

## Chapter 20

Selene

Friday, July 18th – The Morning After

For the first time in weeks I woke without the looming nightmare chasing me awake or the cryptic words of the shadow figure ringing in my ears as I blink my eyes open. The slow rise and fall of Caelon’s chest accompanied with his warmth almost pulls me back under as I lay here basking in the comfort of his arms.

I lift my head up and stare at his sleeping face. Calm, serene, and without his normal wrinkles of confusion as he watches everyone interacting. I might not have spent as much time watching him as he spent watching me, but that doesn’t mean that I never saw him. Even if he did everything in his power to be unseen by everyone.

A strand of his hair has fallen down on his forehead, something I never would have imagined seeing on him. He’s always had the cleanest clothes, his hair slicked back,

and nothing out of place.

My fingers itch to mess his hair up more, to completely undo him, more than we did yesterday. Tentatively, as if the slightest movement might take this moment from me, I slide my hand up, watching his face to see if he reacts, and I hook the strand of hair around my finger. The soft, brown hair slides through my finger before he turns his head, sighing in his sleep. His eyes flick behind his eyelids as he dreams.

Leaning back, my eyes roam down his chest following the path that my finger lightly traces. Exploring the body of my mate without the interruptions of other activities. My cheeks warm at the thoughts of everything that we did yesterday. I never imagined in any dream of my mateship that it would have gone the way it did, but I love every second of how it played out. Even this quiet moment where I'm watching him sleep and exploring.

His skin pebbles as my fingers trace down his chest as he sighs and rolls over. Not wanting to wake him, I slip out of bed slowly. The cold, hardwood floor greet my feet as I move across it. I'm going to need slippers if I'm going to live here. There is no freaking way I'm going to pad around this house everyday with cold feet.

Grabbing my leggings, I slip them back on and quietly slip on my t-shirt before slipping into his closet to hopefully find a hoodie. Goddess, what temperature does he keep this house at, sixty? Thankfully, right at the back of his walk-in closet is a stash of dark hoodies, and pulling one off the hook, I slip it on over my head. Glancing around, I look for a dresser, or maybe somewhere he keeps socks. His dresser is right along the wall outside his closet door between the closet and bathroom. Not sure which drawer will have socks, I go with the top one. The first drawer was unsuccessful. The next drawer is heavy as I pull it towards me. What does he have in here?

My mouth drops open as I let out a gasp. Glancing behind me quickly, I make sure

that I didn't wake him. The drawer is full of all kinds of my things. From pictures I've taken and lost to my first piece of pottery I made and hated. I can't help my hands shaking as I reach down pulling out the misshaped piece of clay that my mom swore was amazing. My eyes glance between it and the man sleeping on the bed. How long has he known and not said anything?

Quietly, I slide the piece back into the drawer and push the drawer closed again. I'll have to ask him about it later. For once, I want to be the one sneaking around and learning about him without his knowledge. Thankfully, the next drawer has his socks. Rows of neatly bundled together white and black socks fill the drawer. I mean who literally stacks their socks into perfect rows like this? This man is going to freak when he realizes that I live off the floor and my laundry basket. Matching socks? Who has the time for that? If they are clean and without holes, then I'm golden.

With my feet covered in socks, I pad my way out of the bedroom. Slowly closing the door behind me, holding the door knob open until I can gently slide it back in place. His house practically mirrors my parents' home, with his bedroom being on the back left corner of the home and the bathroom separating the master from the extra bedroom. Of course when I look into the bathroom it's like nobody has ever used it, let alone that it's someone's bathroom. The extra bedroom is the same way. The bed is perfectly made, even with the comforter tucked in under the mattress. The basic furniture lines the room. With nothing personable about the space, I shut the door and move down the hallway. Taking my time because there are actual pictures on the walls here unlike the entire rest of the house. I stop at the first one and my hand flies to my mouth. These aren't just any pictures. These are my pictures. One's that I gave Lou to have developed. Some of these have never been seen by anyone else. I glance down the hallway to where he's sleeping. How does he have these?

They are all photos from our valley. The largest one, right dead center of the hallway, is my favorite picture of him. From when I asked him to slowly walk through the fog towards me. He knew all along and still played along with my crazy demands. My

finger traces along the back of his wolf reminiscing about that day. It's when I really started to question who he was and why I hadn't ever seen him before.

I continue walking down the hallway, assuming that everything else in the house will mirror my parents. Everything was such a blur last night when we rushed in. I didn't care about the things on the walls, where certain rooms were, and I definitely wasn't looking for his kitchen last night. But, in the light of the day, while he rests, I'm looking.

His kitchen is exactly how I imagined it would be. With gray washed cabinets, butcher block countertops, and open shelving with his dishes neatly displayed. There isn't a single dish in the sink, not a speck of dirt on the counter, and no leftover food sitting around. Everything is put away, giving this kitchen a very home magazine feel. Like everywhere else in this house, it lacks the feel of someone living here. As if he could sell it tomorrow and not need to move stuff out. Every dish has its place, all perfectly curated.

Except for one shelf.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:50 am*

With brows crinkled in confusion, I take tentative steps towards the only shelf with color. The only shelf that isn't perfect and in perfectly neat shapes. My eyes welled up with tears. There, in as neat of rows as he could get them, is every single mug I've made with my mom. The ones I left on the Take One shelf at Muddy Paws. He's been the one taking them all along. In a room full of perfect dishes, bowls, and mugs, he has an entire shelf dedicated to my lumpy, misshapen, chipped creations.

There in the center of the shelf, like a beacon to my eyes, sits the one that I just made. The odd shape standing out against the others. The handle feels odd in my hand, almost like I shouldn't touch it as I bring it down from the shelf. Slowly turning it over, stamped into the bottom is my crescent moon signature. My thumb grazes over the top of it feeling the outline along my finger.

My breath caught as the first tear fell.

He'd never said a single word. Not once. But he'd taken them. Not just the better looking ones as my skills increased, all of them. He didn't hide them away in the few cabinets with doors. No, he put them on display, giving them a shelf all their own. As if they were worth displaying. Like they were his favorites.

And in this perfect kitchen surrounded by order and symmetry, my imperfect mugs tell me everything I needed to know. Caelon was in love with me, not because of the mate bond, but because he saw me.

"I see you found my stash."

Gasping, I whip around to find him leaning against the refrigerator. A soft, easy smile

on his face with his arms crossed. His blue, plaid pajama pants hanging low on his hips, as his ankles cross showing his bare feet. His hair damp from a shower, the scent of his soap filling the room as his eyes locked with mine. Neither of us saying anything as we stare at each other.

“I see you found them already. I was wondering when you would.” His voice is quiet, almost bashful at being caught.

I looked down at the mug. The one with its strange shape that called to me. With a pattern I’d never even thought of until I was in the middle of making it.

“You kept them all,” I whispered.

“I did far more than that.” He pushed off the fridge, his steps deliberate as he came closer to me. “I waited for them. The days I knew you would be there with your mother. Patiently waiting until you left, hoping nobody would have seen your piece yet. Some days I was lucky and able to grab it before anyone else. Other days I had to barter with the elder who snatched it already.”

My finger swipes across the perfectly sized squares. The glaze highlighting the colors that I’d never been able to perfect before now. A piece I made on a whim in a pattern and shape I didn’t know the name of. I’d just...felt drawn to it.

But he knew what it was.

He stepped closer till his torso was in my line of sight as my fingers continued to trace the pattern along the side of the mug.

“That one is my favorite.”

I looked up at him, surprised.

“Why,” I asked, my voice catching.

His smile was quiet, reverent. “Because it’s math,” he said as he gently pulled the mug from my hand. Holding it up between us, he says, “Clean lines. Balance. The pattern loops in the exact ratio of a Fibonacci spiral.”

My brows furrow, breath stuttering. “I didn’t mean to...”

“I know,” he says.

His gaze drops back down to the mug in his hands. Something shifting in his expression...soft, unguarded. As if he is looking at something sacred. Not clay and glaze, but a relic. A message in his hands that only he could understand. His jaw flexed as if something had settled in him, his fingers gently caressing the pattern as if they were scripture.

It was worship. Silent, aching adornment.

Sucking in a trembling breath, the sting of tears are hot behind my eyes. This moment suddenly feels heavier...more than clay and art. It was proof. Of him. Of me. The thread that had been tugging between us all along.

I didn’t see the proverbial writing on the wall. All the small moments drawing me to him. Like a slideshow playing behind my eyes, the moments flashed. Meeting Shadow, Cal sitting on the porch at the same time as me, the mug, the gifts, every breadcrumb leading me forward, even my dreams that whispered of him in the dark.

“That’s why it means everything,” he whispered. “The shape, the symmetry...it’s a pattern. Something I’ve always been drawn to.” He turns and walks over to his bookshelf in his living room, scanning the titles on the shelf before pulling a worn hardback off the shelf. His long legs eat up the space as he rushes back to the kitchen,



setting both the mug and book down on the counter top between us. He flips to a page as if he has it memorized.

His fingers run along the sketch, spiraled and elegant, the lines forming a perfect, sacred geometry.

“The golden ratio,” the words left his lips like a confession, “it’s found in everything—from galaxies to pinecones to the bones of our hands. But it’s not just math...it’s the feeling. The balance. The pull.”

His gaze flicks to mine full of worship and adoration. “You made this without knowing. You shaped something perfect, balanced, and beautiful with your hands, Selene. You madethis.” His fingers trace up the curve of the mug again, with a tenderness that makes my chest ache. “It matched something I’d spent years chasing. Something I thought only lived in theory and the art of the world. But you—”

He swallows hard as his thumb brushes along the curve of my cheek. “You felt it too. Even if you didn’t know yet. Even if you didn’t understand what you were doing.”

My breath catches in my throat, a soft gasp that stings behind my eyes. The tears come anyways, thick and hot, welling until his face blurs in front of me. His eyes are soft and round, as they flick between mine, cataloging everything.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:51 am*

He lets out a shaky breath, his voice rough as he cups both my cheeks in his hands. His breath whispers across my face. “That’s why it means everything.”

I lean into his touch, my eyes falling shut as our foreheads meet. The air between us hums, thick with realization, with the weight of everything unsaid finally seeing the light of the day. His thumbs brush softly against my cheeks, catching the tears as they fall.

“You felt it too.” His voice trembles as if he’s also struggling to hold his emotions down. “Even if you didn’t know what it was.”

I nod, feeling as though a frog is stuck in my throat, as the sob sticks, not quite escaping as I try to swallow it back down. “I think I always did.”

His thumb hooks under my jaw, gently pushing my head back as my eyes blink open. His eyes flick back and forth as if they can’t miss a single thing that’s happening. “You are my own Golden Ratio.”

His lips brush mine. Not a kiss, not yet. Just a promise. A tether. That quiet moment where gravity shifts, the world falls away, and nothing exists but us.

Chapter 21

Caelon

Saturday, July 19th – Our Valley

The sun was low in the sky, casting a long, golden light across the field as we stepped into our valley.

Ours. The word humming through me, settling something deep down.

Selene moves in front of me, a woven blanket from one of our pack elders folded over her arm as her braid sways back and forth with each step.

The tall grass grazes against our legs as the wildflowers bend as if they are bowing to her. Not that she noticed, of course she didn't, she never noticed the world softening around her. But I do.

I always did.

She drops the blanket down in her usual spot, right along the creek amongst the wildflowers and grass. With a few practiced flicks of her wrist, the blanket is smoothed out. Every movement with such practiced ease and comfort. As if she belongs here. Like she belongs with me.

I set down the basket I packed earlier. Lopsided sandwiches, fresh strawberries, and a lumpy lemon loaf I wasn't proud of but had brought anyway. A very sad attempt at baking, but I know she will love the thought and time behind it, even if it tastes awful.

Kneeling on the blanket, she looks up at me. She smiles, not the one she gives the world, the practiced, held in place one. No, this is the one only for me. The one that lights up her face, crinkles the corners of her eyes, and brightens the world around us. Like a beam of sunlight looking directly at me. It hits me like it does every time: deep in my soul as if an arrow shot straight through me. As if that smile seeks to find every dark place within me and bring it to the light.

Her smile makes me believe that she could do it.

She lets out a content sigh as the sunlight dances across her cheeks, the breeze blowing the strands of hair around the side of her face. “This is perfect,” she says as she closes her eyes and drops her head back.

Sitting down beside her, I move just close enough that our legs are touching. The grass and flowers are high enough that we are cocooned in our own little world. The breeze moving around us like a whisper, rustling the flowers like it carried secrets we haven’t spoken aloud yet.

The valley stretched all around us. Untouched by anyone else, alive, and utterly still.

But not empty.

Not anymore, at least.

She exhales, long and fulfilled, her eyes flitting open to the wide blue sky. She watches the clouds drifting across the sky, I watch her. The glow of the sun traces along the slope of her nose, caught in the fine hairs framing her face. Her eyelashes dark around her eyes, casting shadows on her cheeks. She sits perfectly still, and for a moment it's like she’s holding her breath, and so do I.

Because she's here and she's mine. I’m still processing that it’s real. The person I’ve been chasing my whole life is here with me, because of me. Not for some wolf she thinks is beautiful, but for me.

Peace.

Quiet.

Contentment.

Her.

Selene drops her head back down, pulling her feet underneath her as she reaches into her bag. Rummaging around for a moment, she pulls out her SLR film camera. She flicks the lens cap off with practiced ease. “Smile,” she says, lifting it toward me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:51 am*

Rolling my eyes, I oblige. A small, lopsided grin that will surely make my dimple pop. The click of the shutter comes and a flash of her sparkling hazel eyes before she looks down at her camera. Silent as she contemplates something.

“You don’t have any family photos in your house.”

The words are quiet, soft, unassuming. A gentle observation from someone who cherishes photos. Almost as though she can’t imagine a world without them and why someone wouldn’t have them too.

I don’t answer right away. I’ve never talked to anyone about this. Breaking off a blade of grass, I fold it into perfect squares, watching as it bends to my will each time.

She doesn’t push me or attempt to fill the silence. Instead, she waits, letting the warm sun caress our skin and the breeze move between us. My tongue dances around my mouth as I consider how to shape the truth in a way that won’t ruin this perfect day.

“I...I didn’t want reminders,” I say finally, eyes looking out across the field. “Of what I didn’t have or I guess what I had and didn’t want, I should say.”

She doesn’t say anything, but even without looking, I can feel her entire attention on me. As if she is looking through her camera, twisting the lens to better focus the shot.

“My parents...” I swallow, trying to wet my mouth as I struggle with the words. “They...tolerated me, I guess that’s how you could describe it. They never knew what to do with me. I was always too much, too quiet, or too different, depending on

the day of the week. And my brother..." I huff out a bitter, resentful breath. "He made sure that I always knew I was the weird wolf and that nobody would ever love me, not even my mate."

I risk it and glance over at her. Her mouth is pinched. Not in sympathy, but in anger. She's listening with her entire being, tucking every piece away for a later date.

"It's easier now to not look back," I admit. "So, I never put anything up to remind me of them or the times I was forced to bear their treatment instead of love. When you finally started taking photos, I knew what I truly wanted on my walls."

Her hand reaches across, lacing her fingers with mine. It's as if we've done this a thousand times already. She's already learned to be a presence without overwhelming me.

"You have something to look forward to now," she says with a voice steadier than mine. "You are creating a new story."

I want to say thank you. I want to whisper all the words I've held inside. Instead, I lean over and press my lips to her knuckles.

The breeze picks up as if saying I hear you. I see you.

The silence stretches between us, but it's not uncomfortable. It's full. Full of her warmth beside me, of the breeze moving through the grass, of all the unspoken things I've kept buried inside finding a way out.

I never thought anyone would ask, never thought they would notice.

Never thought I would crave someone seeing me.

But Selene has this way of seeing me. Not just the version I present, not the quiet, calculating one the pack respects, or the one who blends into the background with practiced ease. She sees the pain, the questions, the parts of me I buried deep.

And somehow, she doesn't shy away.

A part of me wants to show it all to her, every broken piece, all the hollow smiles and hurtful words. But it doesn't feel like it matters anymore. Not here. Not with her hand wrapped around mine, the scent of wildflowers around us, and the quiet of the valley as our companion.

Maybe I was never meant to belong to them.

Maybe I was meant to always belong to someone else.

To her.

She gently tugs her fingers from mine, reaching for her camera again. That playful glint in her eyes returning. "Okay," she says with a soft grin. "Your turn."

I raise a brow. "My turn?"

"Your turn to look at me like I'm the only thing that matters and try to not blink." She grins. "I dare you."

A genuine laugh escapes me as I lean back on one arm as I stare right at her, taking her in through the lens of her own joy. She snaps photos, the camera's shutter rapidly clicking. I know I'll never get this moment back, but for the first time in my life I'm glad I'll have photos to look back on.

I know I'll never forget this day and neither will she.



The sun begins to dip just low enough to cast the field in a honey glow, lighting the edges of her hair like fire. Slowly, she lowers the camera, her eyes losing that playful glint that they had only moments ago. They soften into something more curious, cautious, and worried.

Her gaze drifts down to where my shirt has lifted. Just beneath my ribs, my jagged scar sits right above my right hip bone. The salt that was poured into it prevented my wolf abilities from properly healing it. The rough, uneven skin is a deeper shade of pink than the rest of my skin. I watch as her expression shifts as she reaches out, her fingers gently brushing along the ridged, uneven skin.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:51 am*

“What happened?” she asks, her voice soft. “Here.”

I don’t flinch, not with her. Not when I know she cares.

“An old lesson,” I say softly. “One forever etched into my skin.”

“What do you mean?” Her breath hitches as it dawns on her the extent of the lesson that would have caused a scar.

“My brother,” I say as my hand cups hers again. “thought pain would make me a better wolf.”

Her hand flies up to her mouth as she gasps. Her eyes were already shining with tears.

“I’ve always been different, quieter, more in my head. My father and brother would often point out how it made me weak and not fit to be a wolf. They would pull me into the woods, far enough away that nobody else would see. Both of them circling me, trying to provoke my wolf. Dad would have Asher shift and lurch at me. One night when Asher was furious that I still wouldn’t shift or protect myself, he swiped his paw at me catching my side before yanking it back. I thought that would have been the moment Dad would have stopped all of it. But, instead he let Asher pour salt into my wound.”

Her eyes are red and swollen as the tears stream down her cheeks.

“He stood over me and told me that I would forever wear the reminder of the time I failed to protect myself and failed to be the wolf I should be.”

As Asher and my father walked out of those woods, my father's last words were the worst. He told me that he hoped I never found my mate because I would never be enough for her or protect her like a mate should. I don't say this part to her. Not because I think she'll look at me differently, but because I still feel as if he's right.

Her hand trembles in mine as she quietly sobs behind her other one.

"It didn't make me stronger," I say. "It just taught me to hide better."

I glance down at our fingers intertwined as her thumb sweeps back and forth across my wrist.

"I think the first time I really saw you," I murmur, eyes watching a cloud move across the sky, "you were dancing around barefoot in your backyard. Your hair was a mess, arms out, as you spun your dress around. Laughter ringing out into the world, lighting up everything it touched."

She blinks, her breath hitching.

"Our yards back up to each other, remember? I was only a few doors down." My voice is soft, wistful. "I used to sit and watch you from my room. Not in a creepy way, more out of envy. I didn't have anything like that in my life. I wanted to be as carefree, alive, and happy as you were. To laugh without holding back, to be so unapologetically me."

I huff out a faint, almost bitter laugh. "I think I started falling for you the moment I watched you walk out with your mom's massive flower book when you were far too young to read the words. I've been falling every day since then, I just didn't know it."

I reach across, brushing away her tears, "This little ray of sunshine that always brightened my day, even when she didn't know it."

She doesn't speak. Can't. The weight of my words sinking into her like the light onto the water. The sun shifts, just a little, catching the glass of the compass I hooked to my pants. The flare ran across her face, drawing her eye down to it.

The compass.

Hooked to my belt loop, her fingers slowly move toward it. Almost like she's afraid to touch it. The leather-wrapped sides brushing against her skin as she unhooks it. Flipping it over in her hand, the engraved words are almost whispered as she mouths them. You know how to find me.

She lifts her eyes to mine. "This was you," she breathes.

My smile is tentative. "It's always been me."

I reach out, my fingers ghosting over the compass laying in her hand. It's as precious to me as she is. I flip it over as I whisper, "I knew I couldn't tell you who I was, at least not then. I knew you weren't ready for it." My throat is straining around the emotion. "But I wanted you to know it was real, that you weren't imagining me or the feelings you were having. I wanted you to know that there was a pull between us and you weren't alone in feeling it."

Selene's breath catches as her thumb rubs along the side of the leather.

"I chose a compass because...you were always my true north. I knew as long as I had you, I would never feel lost again. You would always guide me home. Because my home isn't a place, but a person."

I watch as she swallows hard, the wind tugging at her hair.

"The symbol..." I flip over the compass before tracing the infinity symbol with my

finger. “It’s math, sure, but it means farmore than that. Do you know why it’s used in love?” I quirk an eyebrow at her.

She shakes her head slowly, watching my finger trace along the symbol.

“It stands for endless. Unbreaking. Constant. For there is no beginning and no end. For eternity, your love shall exist.” My voice drops, raw words pulling from my soul. “You’ve always been a constant for me, even when you didn’t know it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:51 am*

Her hand tightens around the compass as her thumb continues to trace down the side of the leather. She doesn't look at me right away, but I see it...her walls start to fall.

"I used to dream about you," she says softly. "I didn't know it was you, just the shadow with crystalline blue eyes begging me to find them. Each night I would chase after you, just wishing that you would tell me who you were. Your whispered words haunting me when I awoke." Her eyes flick up to meet mine, the green rim around her irises catching in the afternoon light. "I thought it was just a dream, just my imagination running wild. I almost believed that you were just a figment of my imagination, my dream to find my mate. Someone who wants me, sees me, and understands me without needing me to explain every piece of myself."

My wolf stills, ears forward. Even my breath feels loud in the space between us.

She laughs, but there's no humor to it. "I thought I was broken when no other guys seemed attractive to me. That I didn't look at other guys and want them. All these other teens were out exploring each other, and I was wandering the woods alone. I used to ask the Goddess every day for someone who would see me and love me for me."

She finally looks up at me. Her eyes are full of vulnerability. "All this time...you've been right here only a few doors down."

I swallow hard, my chest aching. Another piece of me finally clicking together after so long of feeling out of place.

"I see you," I tell her, voice thick. "I always have."

We wipe our faces like we're brushing off the weight of everything we just said, both of us laughing a little. As if our hearts weren't just cracked wide open, we try to bring ourselves back to the lighter side.

She leans into me, and I fold her against my chest as I lay us back onto the blanket. The wildflowers and tall grass completely guard us from the rest of the world. We lay there in the silence, her fingers clutched around the compass as it lays on my chest. Our heads tilted towards the sky as we watch the cotton ball clouds move with grace across the bright blue sky.

I can't help but watch her instead of the sky. The way her eyelashes flutter as she blinks slowly. The slow rise and fall of her chest as she relaxes against me.

Like the photos she takes, I wish I could stop time right here.

Right now.

With us right here in this field.

But deep in my soul there's a steady thrum that tells me the truth:

This is only the beginning.

Chapter 22

Selene

Sunday, July 20th – Sharp Teeth, Softer Hands

It's our first pack breakfast after our mating and to say I'm nervous is an understatement. My parents have been completely amazing about it. I've made sure

to check in with them each day, even though I'm right across the street from them. Since it's nothing new to wolves, they expected that the first few days would be a lot of a hem, mating. Dad said he didn't want to know what we were doing, just that I was alive. Mom has been gushing that she will be a grandmother soon.

Cal and I walk into the main room arm in arm as pack members turn to smile at us. It's not unusual for mates to become a couple not long after finding each other. It's more unusual for people to wait, although, I think some people have very good reasons for making someone wait.

Mom is waving her hand frantically in the air as she taps Dad on the shoulder. He looks over from where he is talking with both sets of my grandparents. Shit, did they have to bring everyone here like we just got married? My grandparents haven't been to a single pack breakfast since Nova started these, claiming that they retired so they didn't have to be up and out of the house before noon. Which, fair because I would have to agree with that sentiment.

I look up at Caelon as his eyes flit from one side of the room to the other. I can feel him trembling under my fingers as his nervousness bleeds through our bond. It's a different world for him to be in the crowds, not hiding in the shadows observing from a distance. My hand gently squeezes his bicep bringing his attention back to me as I feed calming thoughts through the bond back to him.

"You ready for this," I ask, just loud enough for him to hear but quiet enough that nobody else is privy to it.

"Not really," he says as more of his anxiety bleeds through.

"Hey." I nudge him to a stop. Everyone is chatting amongst themselves oblivious to the chaos swirling inside him. His soft cry for help. He turns to face me with anxiety etched in his eyes. "I want you to know that at any point during this it becomes too



much, too loud, too messy, all you have to do is squeeze my hand two times in a row and I'll find a way for us to get out of here. We don't have to stay a second longer than that, okay?" My hand runs up and down his arm, as I continue to push calm, relaxing feelings through to him.

"O...okay. I just don't want to take you away from your family because I can't handle it." He looks down at his hands as he wrings them together.

My hand caresses the side of his face, bringing his eyes back to mine. "Cal, you are my family, my home. The most important member of my family. As much as it's your responsibility to be strong, loving, and caring, it's also my responsibility to do that as well. It doesn't always have to be one or the other. Let me be the strong one today and maybe the next time will be your turn."

He nods his head. "Okay."

Bringing my arm back around his, we turn and finish walking through the crowd towards my parents. It's the first time I've actually seen them since my birthday dinner and it feels weird. I'm so used to seeing them every single day, that I hadn't even considered what it would be like to not. They look the same, but something about it has changed for me. Almost like I see them differently. I'll no longer see the little changes that happen or hear them giggling in the kitchen together in the mornings.

It's something we never talk about, the loss of those small comforts when you become an adult and move out on your own. We are all so ready to spread our wings, buck the system, forge our own paths in the world. That we never realize the things we are going to miss. Those moments that always seemed to settle your soul like the coffee brewing in the morning or your parents dancing together in the kitchen. Looking at my parents now, hugged together with their beautiful faces spread in a smile, I wish I could capture this moment like a photograph. Remembering how it

feels, smells, and looks forever.

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Mom breaks free of Dad the second we circle around the last group. Practically sprinting to me as if she's missed me as much as I realized I missed her. Her arms wrap around me, the smell of her patchouli and lavender soap surround me, I can feel a small piece of me settling again. There's nothing like a mother's hug to make the world feel right again.

"I've missed you Mom," I whisper into her long, golden locks as my fingers twist them around like I've always done.

"I've missed you too sweetie. My Moondrop has grown up and found her mate. I'm so proud of you, even if I miss having you in my home." She breathes into the side of my neck as she squeezes me even more into her before leaning back and holding me by the shoulders.

Her face is warm with love as her eyes scan all over me. Almost as if she's seeing me differently than before. "You've changed." She says it like it's so matter-of-fact.

I brush the hair back behind my ear as a blush creeps across my face. "I have not."

"Yes, you have. It suits you." She lets go of my shoulders before wrapping her arms around Caelon and kissing both of his cheeks.

"How is my handsome son-in-law doing?" She squishes his cheeks between her hands, making his lips pucker like a fish.

His eyes glance to mine with wild panic.

Thankfully Dad saves Cal when he comes over. “Now, June Bug don’t scare the poor man. You’ve only been around him once. He isn’t quite ready for your weird behavior just yet.” He taps Mom on the shoulder as she chuckles and drops her hands before stepping back into Dad’s embrace.

Dad smiles to both of us, with a knowing look in his eyes before he looks to Mom with a fondness. It’s almost like seeing us, freshly mated and young, reminds him of when they found each other. You can almost see the stories flashing behind his eyes. I can only hope that when we are their age we will still be as madly in love with each other.

Dad turns back to us. “Son, I hear...”

He’s cut off by the most obnoxious laugh that sounds borderline like a hyena on helium. We all turn towards the sound. If I thought Caelon was anxious before, it has nothing on the feelings flooding me. I’m overwhelmed trying to cypherthrough them myself. Between outright fear, he’s feeling anxious, worried, and guarded.

Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell come walking towards us with I’m assuming Asher behind them. I don’t really remember much about him, he is seven years older than me and I only have vague memories of him taunting Caelon in their backyard. Often he was so loud about it that it would disturb my twirling causing my feet to falter to a stop.

Mr. Blackwell is a tall, stout man with that rugged masculine look to him. Everything about him screams “I drink beer, scream at my football team, and there won’t be no sissy talk around here.” How a man like that produced someone as brilliant as Cal, I’ll never know. His mother, on the other hand, is exactly who he took after, at least in the looks. With her soft, brown curls touching just above her shoulders and her petite frame. I can easily see where he got his softer features and more gentle nature. She is far more timid than I would have thought, the way her eyes flick to his as if she’s expecting him to explode at any second.

Asher, he can already get fucked. The scowl on his face as he sneers at Caleon already has my hackles up. My wolf rises up ready to defend our mate against the threat clearly walking our way. He looks just like his father and that same shitty attitude is seeping off of him. After what Cal told me he did, I already have a few choice words for him.

The three of them come to a stop in front of Cal and I, my parents taking a step behind us in a show of support. I haven't even told my parents what his parents did to him, but they can tell by the atmosphere, and I'm sure what they already know of his parents, that this isn't going to be friendly or pleasant. What have they fucking done to him?

"Seems you found your mate, pity," his dad sneers as his lip curls in disgust and looks at me. "I almost feel sorry for you, but you seem happy about it, so maybe you are just as pathetic as he is."

"Hey now," my dad pipes up.

"Oh, it makes so much sense now. Of course you're Rowan's kid," he sneers again, his face morphing into a look of disgust. As if he just stepped in something sticky and foreign.

A growl rips out of my throat as I step forward. I move between Cal and his father. My chest heaves as my hands ball up at my sides. People surrounding us take a step back, some even covering their mouths in shock.

He doesn't even flinch, only looks down his nose at me. "If you knew what was best for you, then you would reject your mate. He'll never defend or protect you. He won't even protect himself, how could you possibly want to..."

I cut him off, tired of his bashing of his own child.

“Let me make one thing perfectly, fucking, clear. I’ll be sure to speak slow since I’m sure your pig head can’t understand simple English. You will never speak about my mate like that again.” I can feel my arms slowly sprouting my black fur as my nails sharpen.

Someone yells about someone needing to stop this. There’s a scuffle of feet, but I’m too pissed to stop now.

“Another thing, don’t ever ask me again to reject my mate because of some stupid, misguided judgement on your part.” I take a step closer, directly into his space.

“While you may think there is something wrong with Caelon because he isn’t some meathead jock who only thinks about football and fast cars, you couldn’t be more wrong. You’ve clearly never seen the intelligent, kind, compassionate man that somehow came from someone like you.” I take another step forward, forcing myself to tilt my head back and look up at him as his eyes widen slightly.

I lower my voice as I deliver my final line, “You lay one more fucking finger, claw, or part of your body on him again, I’ll be sure it isn’t connected to you any longer. Do you understand? Nod your head like a good boy.”

Someone says “Oh shit” from the crowd around us. I hear another person saying, “Damn son, she is scary.”

Cal’s father nods his head slowly as I move to his mother. She might not have directly done anything to him, but she failed as a mother to protect her child when he needed her the most. I come to a stop in front of her.

“You.” I glare at her.

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She is shaking when her eyes meet mine. “I never touched him. I didn’t..”

“No, what you did was worse. Instead of defending him and protecting him, you stood back while he was beaten and torn apart by his own family. How could you stand by while your own child was abused? You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“But I...” she scrambles.

“Don’t ever come near him again. You might have birthed him, but you are no mother to him. If we have kids, you won’t be a grandmother in anything more than the DNA flowing in their veins.”

I don’t even bother waiting for another response from her. His brother smirks as I step in his direction, already trying to pour on the charm. Fucking pathetic.

“Hey baby.” He leans in towards me. “Why don’t you leave the stiff and upgrade to the far superior brother? At least I know how to defend and protect what’s mine.” He reaches over, grabbing a strand of my hair. Ew.

A deep rumbling growl raises the hairs along my neck. Caelon wraps his arm around my midsection as his growl vibrates against my back.

“Be careful brother, I won’t stand by while you disrespect my mate. Seems I finally found a reason to be the wolf you so desperately wished me to be. Care to test out just how far I’m willing to go to protect what’s mine, hmm?”

A twisted smile carves across my face. It’s a complete turn on to see Caelon

protecting me, and his abusive brother cowering beneath his glare. Seems the tables have turned, and I'm here for it. I'm not sure what's more of a turn on: him standing up for me, his growl vibrating against me, or him taking down his bully.

My hand taps against his forearm, the muscles twitching with each tap.

“As much as I'm enjoying this, I've got something in mind for our dear ol' Asher here.”

I see Caelon's smirk in the corner of my eye before he lets go. Giving him a wink, I step closer to Asher.

Playing into his pride, I lean into him, gradually lifting my arms to his shoulders as I grasp them. He bites his lip thinking he's finally won, finally taken the only thing that was ever Cal's. I flutter my eyelashes, waiting for the exact second he softens. Like putty in my hands, he never sees it coming.

Digging my claws down into his shoulders, I jerk him towards me right as my knee thrusts up, smashing into his dick. He howls in pain as he grabs his junk and falls to the floor, screaming about how I might have broken his dick. I swing my leg back and kick him in the stomach with everything I have. He's screaming now. Tears were already starting to stream down his face. I stand over the top of him, glaring down at him before I drop spit right onto his face. When I look up, the red haze dropping slightly I see a mix of confusion, fear, and excitement across the faces surrounding us.

“That's for every single time you beat him. Treated him like he was a piece of shit because he wasn't like you. If you ever think I would leave him for you, remember this moment. Remember crying like a little bitch on the ground beneath my feet. You are nothing more than a sad bully who thinks far higher of yourself than anyone else does.”



The red haze lifts from my eyes as I look up at both my parents standing there with equal looks of shock across their faces. But, that isn't what catches my attention. No, it's Gail standing just behind them and my grandparents with a proud smile on her face.

I step over Asher who is wailing on the floor still, screaming louder as if that might encourage someone to pay attention to him.

Grant, Caelon's father, not willing to let this continue, rushes forward with his hand outstretched. Caelon steps between us, grabbing ahold of his wrist before twisting it backwards. Grant howls in pain as his knee hits the ground. Caelon towering over him.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear enough earlier. Make sure you listen well. There is nothing I won't do to protect Selene. Even if it means fighting my own father or brother. She's my family now. And nobody harms my family."

Caelon thrusts his father's arm away from him, knocking him off balance causing him to fall on his ass in front of everyone.

I come to his side and ask, "You ready?"

He glances up at me with wide, shocked eyes. He doesn't say anything other than nod his head and hold his hand out to me.

When we turn to walk past Mom and Dad I whisper an "I'm sorry" as we pass.

We don't look back.

We don't wait around.

We walk out the backdoor, heading to our place of solitude nestled deep in the woods.

## Chapter 23

Caelon

Monday, July 21st – The First Look

Today is the day. I've been waiting for the approval from the city council to come in so we could get started on the gallery. Selene still has no idea that I'm doing this for her and I've sworn everyone who does know to secrecy. Right now she thinks that I'm at the office working, but in reality I'm meeting with the contractor to discuss what all needs to be done between now and the grand opening.

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I feel bad for lying to her. Nobody should ever feel good about lying to their mate, but at the end of the day I'm not lying for malicious reasons, only so I can surprise her.

The windows along the shop front have been covered in paper to help conceal what we are doing, just like I asked the contractor to do. It's going to be even harder when the sign comes in and we have to put it on the front of the building. I'm thinking that we might wait till the morning of the opening so I have less time to keep it secret.

Sliding the key into the lock, I quickly look around to make sure that neither Selene or Odessa are anywhere close. It would break my heart if this was ruined long before I had the chance to see it to completion. With no one in sight that would run to tell on me, I slip inside.

They've already cleared out everything that was here before and put up fresh drywall and the base paint. It already feels like what I think a gallery would look like. Honestly, I googled galleries in New York City and asked Nova if she thought any of them were a good idea, given she had probably been to one after living there her whole life. We designed a clean, open concept gallery idea and brought it to the contractor to see if it was something he could do.

Thankfully, he said it was 100% something he could do and in the timeframe that I was looking for. He should be here any minute to walk me through the progress they've made and go over the next few steps. We have eight days left till the grand opening. It's down to the wire here.

The door swings open and in comes the contractor, Holt Rivers, a beaver shifter who

runs a construction company in town. Like any beaver, Holt believes in quality products that are built to last 100 years. Don't ever mention particle boards around him unless you want to spend thirty minutes hearing about the destruction of the housing industry due to cheap labor and products. I knew that if I wanted this project done correctly, cleanly, and to perfection, he was the man for the job.

"Hey Holt. Thank you for meeting up with me." I hold my hand out for him to shake.

His hand grasps mine firmly as he shakes it one time. "It's a pleasure. As you can see we've completed the walls and primed them for painting. I know you wanted to see the test swatches on the walls before we decided on the actual color. If you'll follow me I'll take you over to those. Ideally, you would want to see this at three different times of the day. But, given our time crunch and the secrecy of the project, I know that isn't possible."

He turns and walks to the left side of the gallery where the light is shining on three clear swatches of paint. It might be anal of me, but I wanted three different neutral options on the walls. From everything I researched, they said not to put a color on the walls outside of the whites as it will take away or distract the eye from the art. To anyone else these probably look like three versions of the same white, but to me I can see the subtle differences between the three.

He comes to a stop in front of the three rectangles. "This left one is the White Dove, the one here in the middle which is my favorite is the Pale Oak, and the last one is the Snowbound. Which one are you thinking?"

I stand in front of them, holding my chin between my thumb and forefinger, truly analyzing the colors and how they look in the light. I try to picture them spread across the walls with her framed photos on display.

"I think I'm going to agree with you on your favorite color, Pale Oak. It adds just

enough depth to the wall without taking away from the canvases that will be hanging on the wall.”

“That’s a great choice.” He scribbles the selection down on his notepad. “The light fixtures are in as well, did you want to see them before we install them as well?”

“Yes,” I say as he turns to walk away.

Following behind him, I try to think of what else that we will need.

On a pallet in the middle of the floor is a ton of cardboard boxes. He pops open the top box and pulls out the pendant lighting we selected. I nod my head before he pulls out the track lighting that we chose that offers spotlighting as a key feature. This will allow her to choose where she would like the viewer's eye to go.

We are in the middle of going over the last set of wall washers when the door opens. My heart rate shoots through the ceiling thinking we’ve been caught when a familiar set of gray curls peek around the door. Fucking Gail. Woman is going to give me a heart attack before I’m even able to surprise Selene.

Her warm smile spreads across her face as she pushes the door closed behind her. Her long, floral skirt brushes across the floor as she moves. She is always dressed in loose, ethereal-looking clothes as if she’s more than just a wolf.

“Caelon, just who I was hoping to run into today,” she says as she comes over wrapping her arms around me in her signature grandmotherly hug.

My eyebrow quirks, wondering what is she up to now. “You found me and gave me a heart attack.”

She gently slaps my shoulder. “Don’t be so dramatic. We have lots to chat about and

not a lot of time before Selene starts to wonder why you aren't at the office like you claimed." She winks before pulling out her own notepad filled with a checklist and tasks to do.

Over the next hour we go over everything she has listed before it's time for Lou to sneak this way. Thankfully Lou has helped keep Selene busy today with a photography challenge to help sharpen her skills. Since Lou used to be a Nat Geo photographer, we knew that she wouldn't question why Lou wanted to send her on a learning adventure.

The door swings open again and even though I know it's supposed to be Lou, I can't help my heart racing.

Lou's worn, leather skin wrinkles as she gives us all a small wave as she ducks her head in shyness. "Well now, sor-ry, sor-ry. My nerves done got me all riled up, like a hound dog on a scent. But I swear on the hills, ain't nobody laid eyes on it, not a one."

I smile. "It's alright Lou. Come on in. We were just finishing up on the last of Gail's ideas."

She comes over to where the three of us are standing, sighing once she comes to a stop.

She puts her hand on her hip and with a half grin says, "Well now, sugar, I brought a handful I reckon'd you might wanna take a peek at. Been around the world an' back, but I swear—these shots? They've got the kind of soul that don't fade. Thought I'd lend you a little taste of what a professional would look for an' all that."

She nudges me with her elbow giving me a wink. We spend the next little bit going over the photos that she recommends, and the couple that I want as well. I hand over

the photo that will be front and center. A photo that will never be sold but is priceless to me.

I rub my hands together as I look between the three people helping me achieve this dream. This wouldn't be possible without them.

“Alright, we each have our tasks, I'm going to head back to my office and get some work done before heading home for the night. Remember, this is...”

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“Supposed to be a secret,” they all say in unison. Might have harped a bit much about it if they all know what I’m going to say. I just don’t want it to be ruined and in this town...it’s not hard for that to happen.

Later as I’m sitting in my office looking over spreadsheets, there is a knock at the door. A quick sniff of the air lets me know that it’s Silas. “Come in,” I say without looking up from my computer screen.

Silas cracks open the door and sticks his head in before pushing it open. “Oh good, you are alone.”

My eyebrows scrunch in confusion. “Of course I’m alone, why wouldn’t I be?”

He smiles as he shuts the door behind him. “Cal, you are newly mated. It’s not unheard of for new mates to be inseparable. But, it shouldn’t surprise me the slightest that you would be here crunching numbers instead of with your mate.”

“Should...should I be with her? Am I doing this all wrong?”

He walks over sitting down on the leather couch across from my desk. I don’t even know why I would have a couch, I never sit anywhere other than my desk and never have guests, but it was here when I got the office, so I kept it.

He crosses his ankle over his knee as his left hand clasps around it. “Cal, I know that emotions and relationships are all foreign to you, but feel through your bond if you are doing it right or wrong. There isn’t a right way to do mating or anything. It’s completely up to the couple. Some need more time together, some don’t. I’m sure



Selene will let you know if she needs more.”

A rush of air blows out of me. I really don’t want to fuck this up especially now that I finally have the one person I’ve been waiting my whole life for.

“Is everything going okay with you and Selene? The bonding and all of that working well for you?”

I tilt my head as I consider his questions. Silas and I have never really talked this much, let alone about personal things like feelings, relationships, and how I’m doing. Don’t get me wrong, I know that as our Alpha he is going to ask stuff like this now, but I’ve never talked to anyone about this, not until Selene.

“Uh,” I say as I scratch the back of my neck. “Everything’s fine. We have been spending a lot of time together and getting to know each other more.” My cheeks warm as the blush spreads.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. Speaking of all that, I actually am here to talk about the incident from Sunday brunch between your mate and your parents.”

“I’m sorry we made a scene. I know that we shouldn’t have handled it the way we did, but she has every right to be upset. Just as much as I do.” I know that he overheard parts of it, and I’m sure he has questions. I am unsure how much I can say, if anything.

Silas holds his hand up silencing me.

“I’m not upset that she made a scene or that I almost had two wolves shift in the middle of brunch. What I’m more concerned with is the things that she said about how they treated you and clearly someone as calm as Selene becoming that aggressive means that there is far more to this story. I’m not asking you to divulge

your entire story, but I am asking you as your Alpha what your parents did to you because I won't tolerate that kind of behavior in my pack by any member."

"You want to punish my parents and brother for what they did to me?" My voice shakes as the words barely leave my mouth.

"That all depends on what you are about to tell me, Caelon. If I deem their behavior horrendous enough, I will ask them to permanently leave our pack. I took down an Alpha for his behavior, I won't allow for others to do the same even if it's to their own pups."

My mouth drops open, I can't even begin to understand it. "I don't know what to say Silas. I've never felt seen like I do now. What you are saying is more healing than any action could be. I don't wish to see them punished even after everything they did."

He nods his head once before he leans forward, putting his forearms on his knees. "I understand. But this is beyond just you. How many others are suffering in silence hoping that someone would see them?"

"When you put it that way I feel obligated to tell you." I squint my eyes at him. He knew just the thing to say.

I tell him everything, even the parts that hurt. I don't want anyone else to experience what I went through. I can't imagine the other wolves in our pack going through it too. It hurts to go over it again, even though I know it might help. It's not easy to talk to the strongest wolf in our pack about how weak I was or really am still. Silas remains quiet the entire time, only nodding his head as I go. Once I'm finished, he clears his throat as he blinks his eyes rapidly. I've never seen him cry and I didn't think I ever would.

“Caelon, I’m sorry you went through that. No wolf should ever have to go through it either. I know the old way of thinking is that a wolf is only strong if he can fight, but I don’t believe that is the only strength a wolf can have. Sure if you plan to be Alpha, maybe physical strength comes into question given our role as protector. But, not every wolf needs to be strong. I believe that each wolf brings something to the pack as their strength, and that’s where real growth happens for a pack. It’s why when Selene asked to do photography I didn’t hesitate to say yes. Each of us is part of a whole working unit, we can’t all be fighters. I never want you to think that you don’t have your own strengths.”

He stands up and walks over to my desk, standing over me with soft, caring eyes as he scans them across my desk. He must find what he’s looking for because he reaches over and grabs my leather ledger before flipping it open to my running numbers for the pack’s budgets.

“This,” he says as his finger runs down the page. “Makes my head hurt just glancing at it. There is no way I would have been able to turn the pack’s finances around in six months like you have. We would probably still be in the red if I had been fully in charge of that by myself.”

He hooks his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Gail’s office.

“I probably would still be roaming around like a rogue if it hadn’t been for Gail who brought Nova and I together.”

He points across the hall towards Xavier’s office. “Our pups wouldn’t be discovering things about themselves and learning to control their wolves as young as they are if it weren’t for him. I can go on and on about each member’s role and how vital it is to the pack. Don’t let these old ideals keep you from believing you are important to me and this pack.”

“Thank you Silas.” I nod my head.

“You’re welcome. Now, if you don’t have anything else you wish to share, I have a phone call to make.”

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With that he turns and walks out of my office, closing the door behind him. I sit for a while staring at the door lost in my thoughts. I never would have thought that accepting my mate would change so much about my life. Sure I knew it would change things, but I never dreamed that I would feel this light as I shed all the past from me.

### Chapter 24

Selene

Friday, July 25th – The View From Here

I'm really excited about today's hike. Caelon and Chase, a mountain lion shifter, have both agreed to come with me as I explore the higher parts of the mountains. Lou recommended I try out this trail that nobody really knows about, and I'm not even sure how she knows about it. This last week she has been assigning challenges for me to help stretch my eye and ability to story tell with only a single image. It's been the most fun I've had with photography since finding Shadow in my valley.

This week's task has been capturing connections in unexpected places. Which is why I'm dragging myself out of bed super early on a Friday morning and bringing along Chase and Cal. She swears we will find an old abandoned fire pit on a lookout with views that could "make the soul believe in magic". Whatever that means, I'm down to find it.

I'm hoping for the perfect shot and for Cal to make a new friend, which is why I asked Chase to come along. Honestly, after everything I've learned since my

birthday, I've really felt this urge to find a friend for Cal, someone who will understand him, push him, and support him. I didn't realize just how alone Cal was until our bond snapped into place.

Chase is such a loving, friendly, caring individual with a super chill personality to match that I personally feel will be a great match to Cal. I know Chase can be a bit much sometimes but I think once Cal is used to it, he will get along with him beautifully.

"Do you think that Nat Geo will pay my loved ones if I die not even ten minutes into this hike?" Chase huffed, dramatically adjusting the pack on his shoulders like it weighed five tons and he can't continue to hold the weight.

He sure is bitching quite a bit today. I don't even bother looking back as a smile spreads across my face. "You're not dying, you're winded. There's a difference. You know for someone who loves hiking, you sure are acting like this is your first time."

"I'm dying because someone decided at six am that we needed to find a connection in unexpected places and she didn't even have the decency to take me to breakfast first. Someone failed to mention that it would be a brisk, uphill, mountain climb with a risk of mountain lions."

My eyes roll. "You are the mountain lion risk," I mutter as I snap a photo of the sun spilling through the canopy along the path. Rays of light perfectly spotlighting the trail. Lou wants me to improve my light work. She said she would settle for more texture or emotion in this set of photos. I'd settle for not pushing the whining lion off the cliff.

Cal chuckled behind me, quiet, low, with a hint of fondness. "He volunteered to come."

Chase scoffs in mock offense. “I did no such thing. I was bribed, I tell you! She took advantage of my love for coffee and muffins.”

“I said coffee and muffins if you behaved,” I toss over my shoulder.

“I’m still waiting on that, sunshine,” he clips back.

I turn around, grinning from ear to ear as I catch the smug mock outrage in his upturned nose as he even adds in an exaggerated stomp of his feet. “You’ll get them when you stop whining and start posing. Lou wants emotion. I think this exasperated idiot best friend energy you are giving might just be the winner,” I say as I hold my camera up snapping photos of him.

Seeing my camera up and trained on him, he pops his hip and throws his head back in a dramatic model pose.

“Be sure to get my good side, can’t have horrible photos floating around of me.” He continues to pose like he is going for the next supermodel of America.

Cal leans in close to me. “He really is an orange cat like you said he is. At least you can count on him for lighting up any adventure.”

I can’t help but smile behind the camera as I continue to snap photos. I love that he has a hint of fondness already in his tone. If everything keeps going the way I hope, by the end of the trip, Chase will have won over Cal.

Just to razz Chase further I say, “Sweetie, this lighting isn’t doing you any favors. Maybe we should move on, don’t want you to ruin my photos or anything.”

Chase clutches his chest. “You wound me Sunshine. Here I thought you were the quiet, sweet one.”

“Good. If you could bleed dramatically over here in the better lighting, that would be great.”

Cal laughs as he walks over to lean against the tree, watching as Chase continues with his antics and I snap more photos.

“Tell my story, sunshine. Let the people know I perished helping you find your art.” He throws his arm over his face as he leans against a moss-covered rock. His backpack lays in the dirt like a discarded lover. Honestly, I regret all the times I’ve hiked and not brought him along.

“Lou is going to die when she sees these.” I chuckle as I flick through a few of the photos on the tiny LED screen on the back of my camera. “You look like you belong in a tortured renaissance man’s play. Just add those puffy sleeves and tights and the image is there.”

Chase’s head pops up from the rock. “Oh, am I giving broody and misunderstood?”

“More like dramatic and under-caffeinated,” Cal says dryly, pushing off the tree.

Chase gasps as his hand covers his mouth. “Eu tu, Caelon?”



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I laugh, tucking my camera against my side as we continue down the path. Chase scrambles to grab his discarded backpack and catch up. The trees are thin, sunlight streaming through like speckled love marks across our cheeks until we come upon a clearing. There, tucked underneath the opening of a rock cave is a half-buried fire pit. The stones around it are blackened with age. Chunks of charred wood sit long forgotten inside the stone circle. Glass bottles are littered around the opening of the cave.

“Well,” Chase says as he kicks one of the bottles. “This feels like we stumbled into a memory.”

I squat down, running my fingers along the moss on one of the rocks. “It looks like it hasn’t been used in years.”

Cal steps in close behind me, his eyes scanning over the area. “The older pack members, long before Orion took over, used to come up here as a way to connect with our Goddess. Seems when Orion took over this was another thing our pack lost.”

There’s something heavy in his voice, something I can feel through our bond. I glance up at him, but he’s already crouching down beside me. His fingers tracing over the rocks right along with mine.

Chase sinks down onto a nearby log with less flair this time, looking around at the lost memory. With a faint frown on his face as he looks at me, he says, “Lou said she wanted raw emotion, right?”

“Yeah,” I say in a hushed tone as I lift the camera. As if any loud sound would

disturb the area. “I think we found it.”

Chase is mid-pout while poking a piece of the charred wood with a stick. Like a kid who got socks for Christmas, I can’t help but chuckle.

“Fine,” he grumbles. “One serious photo so Lou knows at least I tried.”

He strikes his most dramatic pose yet beside the pit, hand on his heart, his eyes misty as he looks up at the trees. You would think he was auditioning for the lead of the pack’s Shakespeare in the Pines and not just taking photos with me.

Cal laughs behind his hand, trying to stifle the sound. He leans in close to me and says, “That one’s going on the wall.”

“I will sue,” Chase deadpans, before grinning and flopping across a log, thumping his arm against the ground. “Tell her I love her,” he sighs before bubbles of spit foam at the side of his mouth and his eyes roll back.

I lower my camera, shaking my head. “You’re lucky you’re pretty.”

His head pops up, winking at me he says, “Obviously, now shh. We are acting out a dying lover here. Be sure to get that foam from the poison, really gotta sell it here.”

We linger a while longer. Snapping photos, tossing pine cones, swapping funny stories, and bringing life back to this long lost fire pit, before finally turning back down the trail, boots crunching against the fallen pine needles.

For the first time in a long time, I feel complete as if this is exactly what I needed. A mate who sees me, a friend who can turn any moment into a memory, and the whispered words across the winds as they breeze through the pine trees.

Even if Chase complains the entire walk back, I wouldn't trade this for anything.

## Chapter 25

Selene

Saturday, July 26th – The Hunt

The blindfold slips into place plunging me into darkness.

The soft fabric is pulled taut around the back of my head, cutting out all the light, the comfort of one of my strongest senses. Everything else heightens—the breeze moving across my skin like fingers trailing, the cool temperature of the damp forest floor beneath my bare feet, the air full of him.

His scent moves in slow curls as it surrounds me. Like pine, smoke, and something deeper, almost mirroring scorched earth and need. Our arousal clings to the trees, teasing the moss, living in the breeze, and it's already driving me wild.

Behind me, his voice comes low and deep as if it's not him talking at all, but something darker. "Let's see how well you can hunt, little Leni."

There's a rush of air. A breath. Then nothing.

He's gone.

My pulse picks up beating like a drum, low and steady. I slowly pull air deep into my lungs, centering myself, determining my first move. His scent is everywhere as though he rubbed it on every tree, shrub, branch, and rock he could before running away. Smart asshole. I can taste it in the air, but I can't pinpoint him, and that's exactly why he did it.

He's toying with me.

I should have known that someone as smart as Cal would never have let it be as easy as following his scent trail. The terms were simple. Only use my instincts and scent. No using the bond to pull me to him. Hunt as if he is the prey and I'm the predator.

I take a step. Then another. The dirt and pine needles crunching under my feet, every sound feeling louder in the dark. Every whisper of fabric across my skin adds another layer of distraction. I can hear a squirrel pushing his acorns around in his nest somewhere off in the distance. I can hear an animal munching on leaves. My body is wound as tight as a coiled spring ready to burst. It's restless and desperate as it aches for something...something only he can give me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:51 am*

A twig snaps close to me.

I turn, pausing, my breath stalling in my lungs. I wait. My chest is rising and falling rapidly as my hands clasp and unclasp at my side. Slowly, I draw air into my lungs, cataloging every single scent as it comes in. There. Faintly, as if just beyond where I'm standing is something I recognize.

Mine.

The word roars through me as I take my first steps out of the clearing we started in.

My pace picks up, each step measured and deliberate, guided only by my instincts and the unbearable hum. He wants me to give in. Let my wolf take over. He wants me to stop using my human instincts and become what I'm designed to be.

So I do.

Crouching down I press my fingers into the damp soil, cold against the tips of my fingers as they coast along the recently disturbed ground.

My lips twitch. "You're close."

Just off to the right, a low laugh.

The bastard's taunting me. Which can mean only one thing.

"Oh Cal," I say in a singsong voice. "You make this too easy on me. You better be

ready when I catch you.”

Silence.

And then, as if he anticipated all of this, his words whisper across the forest, low, amused, and hungry.

“I’m counting on it.”

My heart rate kicks up, almost taking away my ability to hear as it pulses in my ears. The forest is alive with sounds, but all I can hear was me.

Heavy. Ragged. Hunting.

The blindfold clings to me, damp with sweat, but I refuse to take it off. I made the rules and I’d agreed to the game. If I wanted him, there was only one way to get him. I had to find him and not with my eyes.

His scent clung to everything as I walked through the woods. Nothing was fresh, all of them were meant to distract me from my true target.

I wanted to snarl.

Something’s changed though. The world has quieted. The air thickened as the wind shifted. As if pulled by a thread my nose turns to the right, each breath shallow as I quickly track the scent.

There.

A breath.

So close.

I don't wait. I don't think.

My body collides with his, sending both of us to the ground with a humph. His laugh vibrates him below me as I whoop above him. My knees straddle each side of his hips, the moss and needles providing me something soft to kneel against.

He doesn't fight it or even try to resist as I grab his arms and pin them above his head. No, instead he lays there. As if he's offering himself to me, his body softened below me. Each muscle loose, his heart rate lowering, and his legs spreading.

I lean close to him, our noses only a hair apart.

"Found you."

His chest rises with a soft chuckle. "Did you?" he rasps. "Or did I let you?"

I reach up and tear the blindfold off. Glancing down I find him with a soft smirk playing on his lips, eyes blown with lust, and his cheeks already red from the adrenaline. His hands are splayed out on each side of him, not even attempting to touch me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:51 am*

“The rules said no touching until I found you,” I murmur against his cheek.

“They did,” he says, his voice thick with lust and adoration. “So touch me.”

I lean down and run my tongue along the edge of his ear. “Why did you do this? The game I mean?”

His fingers flex against the dirt. “Because I wanted you to hunt me like I’ve been hunting you. I wanted you to have the chance to claim me in the ways I’ve already claimed you.”

My throat tightens.

I kiss him.

There’s nothing soft or sweet about it.

It’s wild. Hungry. His lips crush against mine like he’s been waiting for this moment his whole life, and maybe he has.

With my hands braced on each side of his head, I roll my hips against him, feeling his dick press against me, hard and hot even through the layers between us. He groans—low and guttural, the kind that makes my toes curl. He lets himself go and the feelings rush through him.

“Selene,” he says breathily.



I rock slowly, moving against him. Feeling his muscles coil tightly with each rock of my hips. My teeth bite down on my lower lip as I watch him unravel. Watch him fight every instinct to take control. It's so fucking hot watching what I do to him. I roll my hips up his impressive length, stopping when my core hits the blunt head of his dick. Pushing down against it, teasing him with the idea of thrusting up into me.

He was letting me have this, even though I could see just how hard he was fighting against his own urges.

Leaning down, I run my nose along his neck, blowing softly against his sweat slick skin as the bumps pop and he shivers. "You're mine." My lips brush against his ear as I say, "You know that right?"

A soft breath leaves him. His voice shakes as he answers me, "Always have been."

My lips drag along his jaw before I lean up and look down at him. I know my eyes are glowing when I see them reflecting in his blown pupils. In a voice not entirely my own, "That's a good boy," I say before I sink my teeth into the curve of his throat. The coppery taste of his blood hits my tongue as his chest rises off the ground.

His dick jumps between us as if it could bust out his pants at any second. I can feel our bond strengthening with each passing second as the lust from him comes pouring in like a fountain on full blast. Our arousals mingle until there's no way to determine whose is whose.

His whole body shudders.

And then he flips us. My teeth release from his neck with a pop as I hit the ground, a feral Caelon hovering over the top of me. My tongue licks along my canines grabbing every possible drop as I run my finger along his bite mark gathering more. Sucking my finger dry as I chuckle.

His chest heaves, his eyes glowing that beautiful crystalline blue, the one that haunted my dreams for weeks. His claws dig into the dirt beside my head as he presses me further into the ground.

“Claim me big boy, I’m all yours.”

That’s all it takes. Like the beast he is, his teeth clamp down in the same spot that I marked him. With one hand he reaches down between us, wasting no more time, he rips another of my black leggings before shucking off his own shorts. I can’t even find it in myself right now to care about those leggings, all I can think about is his teeth in my neck and his dick pressing into me.

There isn’t any hesitation, he doesn’t wait a single second before he thrusts forward, slamming to the hilt into me. I feel it before I understand it—like a tsunami wave crashing to shore. One second I’m feeling the suck of his mouth along my neck, the pull of my blood, the fullness of him settled into me—the next I feel the world almost pause.

He growls against my neck, guttural, lower, wilder.

He pulls back, chest rising and falling sharply, shaky breaths leaving him, eyes feral and glowing brightly. I know that look, I’ve heard about it.

Rut.

It pulls him under like a rip current taking the very breath from him. Leaving him no choice, but to submit.

His head thrashes as he tries to gain control, but there’s no fighting nature.

He’s trying to hold back for my sake.

I can see it in the way his hands are trembling as he grasps his hair. His jaw clenches, a flicker of resistance—then another growl tears out of him and I know it's over.

He's gone.

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The fur begins to sprout along his arms, his shirt shreds like plastic against heat as his chest expands. His once human skin covers in fur as his face distorts into his humanoid form. I've never seen it in person, only the whispered words and tales that gossiping old hens say. If I thought his wolf form was large, it has nothing on his humanoid form.

Where he was once hovering over me at eye level, is now a ripped and defined chest with that beautiful smokey gray fur that I've loved for a long time. When his transformation is complete, he looks down at me. Eyes glowing, a raw and desperate growl rips from his throat.

"Shadow," the words whisper out of me in reverence.

His long, slender tongue licks along his jaw before he takes his razor sharp black claw and runs it down my favorite band tee. Right down the center as it gives away like butter against a hot knife.

My body arches to meet him as the cool forest breeze meets my bare skin. My nipples harden to a point of pain as I'm laid bare beneath him.

"Stop holding back on me, I won't break."

And Goddess help me—he does.

His claw, fur-lined hands contrast against my rose skin as he grips my thighs spreading me open. Leaning down, his tongue runs along the inside of my thigh in one long, languid stroke. Closing in on my aching, swollen pussy dripping with slick,

I whimper as he moves right past it and begins working his tongue along my opposite thigh. His grip so tight on my thighs I couldn't possibly move if I tried, and boy do I try.

His tongue strokes along my skin as if he is savoring every single inch of me before he finally comes back to my core. I can feel it pulsing, begging for his ministrations. His long snout hovers right above it as his piercing eyes look up at me.

"I told you I'd let you chase." His voice vibrates along my skin, gravely and low. "But this part? This part is all mine."

I gasp as his tongue plunges inside me, swirling as my torso lifts off the ground. My hands are scrambling to find anything to hold onto. Grasping his fur along his shoulders, I hold on for dear life as the whimpers and pleas pour out of me. He hits a spot deep inside me and the moan that leaves me could be heard by the birds high above us in the clouds.

I don't even have time to prepare before he is shoving me right over the precipice into an orgasm. Between the hunt, the adrenaline, and his tongue...my ears ring as the orgasm washes over me. Grasping the back of his head by tufts of fur, I grind my pussy against his snout, wringing every single drop of cum out of me.

My body falls back like a limp noodle, all the adrenaline rushing out of me right along with the orgasm. His dark, deep chuckle rings out across the silence as I try to catch my breath.

"We are far from done," he says as he flips me over onto my hands and knees, wrapping my long, brown hair around his clawed hand.

His thick, hard dick rubs against me, the ridges of his swollen knot hitting my clit causing me to gasp. I don't even realize it but my legs spread a little more, making

room for him as my back arches.

“You look so pretty all splotchy from our hunt, skin slick with sweat, back arched presenting your glistening cunt to me.”

“Ple...please Cal,” I whimper.

He continues to rock his knot against my clit.

“Please, what?”

“Please fuck me.”

He plunges into me in a single, devastating thrust.

Every delicious inch of him stretches me wider, deeper than I even thought was possible. I thought sex with him in his human form was the best, but this is a whole different experience. Everything is larger in this form. I cry out as he pulls back an inch—half from pleasure, half from disbelief.

“I’m not going to be gentle. Your pleas are going to go unanswered. But I can promise you an orgasm unlike any other.”

He sets a brutal and beautiful rhythm, all rut-driven hunger and reverent groans.

Our scents mingle in the air—smoke, wildflowers, and primal passion.

His knot hits my entrance over and over, each time slipping a little further in. His claw-tipped finger reaches under me, gently flicking my clit before he pinches it between two claws. That’s all it takes for the first wave of the orgasm to start before he grips my hips, slamming his knot fully into me.

“I’m going to fill you with so much cum there’s no way you leave this forest not pregnant. I will keep at it until I’m satisfied that you’re bred and full.”

His knot swells, locking him in place as wave after wave of my orgasm crashes over me. His dick pulsing inside me as the ropes of cum fill my womb. Our labored breaths and moans fill the silence of the forest.

Using my hair, he pulls me up until my back is flush with his stomach.

“You think I was joking little Leni. We are far from done.”

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Before a single word leaves my lips, he rolls us and now I'm straddling him as he begins to pulse his hips underneath me. It's the most erotic thing we've done to this point. I can feel the warmth of our combined orgasms between us as each thrust a little more of our essence escapes.

"Twist around," he says as he moves my thigh up.

Slowly, I twist, and feeling his knot move around inside me sends me into another orgasm as my moans fill the forest. As soon as I'm facing him, he grabs hold of me and lifts us to standing. My back hits a tree as he slams us against it. My legs wrapped around him, our bodies locked together, knot buried deep as we cling to each other. There is nothing in the world for us but primal, urgent need.

His claws dig into my ass cheeks as his hands flex, grip tightening. Even in this form, I can see the reverence, love, and devotion in his eyes.

Then with a toothy, feral grin and voice rough from the rut coursing through him, he leans in and says, "This tree might break with how hard I'm about to fuck you, but it's okay, we'll plant another."

And that tree did.

Chapter 26

Selene

Sunday, July 27th – Bacon, Bickering, and Big Decisions



The scent of maple syrup, pancakes, and too many shifters in one place fills my nose as I look around at all the members of our pack gathered in the dining hall for another pack breakfast. Each week more and more members join us and I love it. The room is full of people talking and laughing, but through it all you can hear two people arguing about the proper way to cook bacon.

“Burnt is the only way bacon should be eaten,” Nellie, Nova’s best friend, declares, voice sharp and unapologetic.

Xavior grunts, “You mean ruined.”

They are sitting across from each other at the pack leaders table with Nova and Silas sitting at the ends. Silas leans his elbow against the table with a coffee mug in hand, looking like a man who regrets every life choice that led him to having these two sitting at the same table together.

Gail, of course, sits smugly next to Nova with a mimosa and the kind of twinkle in her eye that promises she’s already meddling in someone else’s day.

And Cal? He stands next to me as we walk over to the table, with a soft smile curving his lips as he watches it all. His fingers brush against mine as he grabs my hand in his, grounding both of us in the chaos.

We take our seats across from each other, me next to Nellie and Cal next to Xavior. Warrick and Aspen’s seats sit empty. Hopefully after their pup is born they will be able to return from Ireland, only time will tell.

My plate is stacked with honey dew melon, a banana nut muffin, and yogurt. While Cal’s only has three perfectly round pancakes with one square of butter on top.

“I don’t understand how you can enjoy bacon that tastes like ash and

disappointment,” Xavier mutters as his nose scrunches when she takes a bite out of her bacon. The crunch cracking across the table as his eyes darken.

“It’s called flavor, Mountain Man,” Nellie snaps back, already slathering her waffles in enough syrup to give a bear shifter a heart attack. “Some of us have taste buds that aren’t stuck on cornbread and milk.”

He scowls. “Some of us didn’t grow up thinking coffee was a food group.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Remind me again how many Michelin stars Jasper has? None? That’s what I thought. You wouldn’t know culture if it walked up and smacked you in the face.”

Silas doesn’t even look up from his pancakes as he cuts a chunk off. “Play nice, children.”

Gail sips her mimosa with a smirk. “Let them spar. It’s basically going to be foreplay for the two of them.”

Xavier chokes on his coffee.

Nellie just glares at him.

Silas clinks his silverware against his plate as he pushes back and stands. Our table is front and center with pack members seated throughout the room surrounding us. Silas moves around the table as we all follow him with our eyes.

He comes to stand in the center of the room, clearing his throat. The room settles down.

“Before we leave today, there is a matter that’s been brought to my attention that I

need to be very clear to you won't be tolerated any longer." His eyes scan over each wolf. "I know in the past that we lived by the belief that a wolf needed to be strong. We were taught that we needed to fight, to be aggressive, and engrain it into each future generation. What we allow to happen in the silence becomes culture. And the culture of this pack will no longer include abuse. Not behind closed doors. Not in the name of strength. Never again."

Everyone looks at each other, some with looks of confusion, and others with a look of contempt. My eyes look to Caelon's parents who are sitting stone-faced and rigid at a table with others who supported Orion when he was our Alpha. I only know because I've overheard my parents talking about a group that didn't like that Silas took over and how they preferred the ways that Orion ran the pack. His douchebag brother is sitting next to his dad glaring at Caelon as if it's all his fault and I'm half tempted to walk over there and finish what I started last week when Silas speaks again.

He turns to look directly at them.

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“You three have failed this pack. You failed your own blood. That ends today. I’m ordering that you offer a formal apology before this pack, and then you will serve this community as its lowest members. Not as warriors. Not as elders. But as caretakers for the sick and needy. You will serve this community until I deem you have served your penance.”

He doesn’t raise his voice. He doesn’t need to.

“Starting the next moon cycle, you’ll report to the Shaman and the kitchen staff at the Pawspital. You’ll work side by side with the wolves who care for the weak, elderly, and sick. You will help heal not with power, but with love.”

“Might even teach you how to make a blueberry cobbler since we know your baking skills are subpar at best,” Gail mutters loud enough for the entire room to hear.

Nova chokes on her coffee. Nellie barks out a laugh. Even Caelon smiles—barely—but it’s there.

Silas doesn’t back down, not even when Grant, Caelon’s father, slams his fist down on the table.

“This pack was stronger under Orion’s rule,” he growls, rising to his full height as he glares directly at Silas. “We don’t need coddling. We need control.”

Chairs scrape back as both Caelon’s mom and his brother stand up. There’s grumbling from the table as they all seem to agree with Grant’s opinion. Xavior shifts in his seat next to Caelon as he turns around, ready to jump to Silas’s defense if need

be. At the other end of the table, Nova's eyes narrow, one hand dropping protectively over her stomach. My eyes bulge as I look from her hand to her eyes. She holds a finger over her lips, quieting me.

But Silas? He only takes a step forward, steady as a mountain.

“And look where it got us. With a son who flinches when someone raises their hand too fast around him, a debt to a vicious pack, and a pack learning to heal after the rot that Orion left behind. We won't be going back to that.”

Grant's face turns crimson red as he kicks the chair out of his way. Elise, Caelon's Mom, grabs his arm as she whispers frantically to him. He grunts and yanks his arm from her before he storms out of the room without another word. Both Elise and Asher rush off behind him.

Gail hums into her biscuit. “Seems some people don't like their breakfast with a side of consequences.”

Laughter breaks out around the table as the tension bleeds into the morning light.

I lean across the table grasping Cal's hand in mine. He's been quiet during all of this, but something is looser in his posture. Almost like he feels free.

“So can we get back to the peace and waffles?” Nellie snarks, stabbing her fork into a chunk of waffles on Xavior's plate. “Since Mr. Grizzly over here has already finished eating.”

Xavior glares at her as she stuffs the forkful into her mouth. “You ate half my bacon.”

She smirks at him. “I earned it. Let's call it emotional labor tax for having to deal with your grumpy ass this early in the morning.”

Things are going to be really entertaining with these two around.

Caelon hasn't let go as his thumb brushes over the back of my hand. I don't know if it's from comfort or something else, but I don't let go either.

Across the table, Xavier leans back crossing his arms over his chest, a grim look on his face.

"Alpha," he says, voice low and steady. "You know that's going to be a problem."

We all look to Silas as he watches the branches sway outside the massive windows. I almost think he isn't going to answer when he sighs and looks at Xavier.

"I know."

## Chapter 27

Caelon

Monday, July 28th – Pastries and Pitches

I watched her all night last night, typing and erasing her email to the Nat Geo rep she found. Groans of frustration echoing from her side of the couch before she finally slammed the laptop shut, tossing it onto the cushion beside her. I know that she is worried that she will be denied, her fear of rejection shining brighter than her determination.

My fingers skim across the brown, leather portfolio that she has been working day and night at perfecting with Lou. I think she has rearranged the photos at least twenty times by now, yelling about how the story just isn't there yet. I have no idea what she's talking about, but I nod nonetheless.

My tea is cooling in my cup when I set it down on the dining room table next to her unopened laptop. When she finally gave up and went to bed, she set it down on the table claiming she would work on it again today. How mad would she be if I sent the email myself?

“Do it,” Calix chimes in.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:51 am*

“Hush, I want her to have the opportunity to choose this for herself. I’m already doing the gallery without her knowledge.”

“I think you just don’t have the balls to do it. Maybe I should take over and do it for you, hmm?”

“Stop it, we aren’t sending the email. She’s not ready for it.”

“Stop making excuses and just open the laptop. Come on, we are already sitting in front of it.”

“Fine,” I say as I look around, listening for any movement in our cabin.

I slowly open the laptop as the screen turns on. She doesn’t even have a password on it, giving me direct access to exactly what she was doing before.

There on the screen is the email she was working on last night. Five of her best photos are attached, some I think I would have to say are the best photos ever taken. But I am a bit biased.

Her generic opening is there with the partial paragraph she’s typed. I scan over the screen a few times, not touching the keyboard or doing anything.

Calix stirs, his impatience wearing thin. “She saved the draft, she’s more than ready. Nat Geo isn’t going to knock on our door and beg her to work for them.”

“I should let her look over it again,” I say as I sip my tea, hoping the herbs will help



me decide.

“Click the damn button.”

“I’m thinking,” I mutter, rubbing my temple as if it will encourage my decision one way or the other.

“You’ve been thinking for almost twenty minutes. At this point you are just marinating in cowardice.”

“It’s a big deal, alright. I know you wouldn’t get it, but she has always dreamed of having this job. She didn’t even say if she was ready to send it yet or not.”

“She left it open on her laptop, best shots already attached, words mostly written. You think that isn’t proof enough? That she did this all by accident?” Calix grumbles.

I exhale sharply, eyes flicking across the screen. These are her best photos. She even included the one of Shadow, as she calls Calix, walking towards her. The same one that he won’t stop talking about.

“That’s really the best one in my opinion. My eyes are stunning. It’s a perfect piece of art, if I do say so myself. Frame it. Worship it. Make it the new pack crest.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes. “She didn’t mean to include that one,” I say as I move the cursor over the top of the photo, right where the x to delete the photo is.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Calix says in a panic.

“Wouldn’t I?”

“Don’t. You know she meant to include it. She means everything she does.”

The cursor hovers over the photo, as if it too is waiting for me to decide what to do. I chew on the inside of my cheek, battling with the decision to send it in.

“You aren’t sending her away, you are helping the world see her shine. Unless you want to hoard her away like a dragon hoarding it’s prized treasure.”

I growl under my breath, “Do you have an off switch?”

Calix chuckles, of course he does. “Nope. Click the button, Thumbelina.”

I glare at the screen warring with the decision before I ultimately decide that I’ll send the email, just not from hers. I open a new tab, quickly type in my email, before opening a new email box and copy/pasting all the information over. Including the photos. I adjust the wording to reflect what I’m doing, slap my phone number on there, and hit send before I can change my mind again.

Silence.

“Oh shit, you actually did it. You hit send. Look at my little man growing up. If I had hands I would wipe this little tear away.”

“You don’t have eyes either,” I grumble.

“Semantics really. Seriously, there’s tears here.”

“Shut up.”

“So proud,” Calix continues on. “Now, shall we cry into our nasty tea you drink every day or should we pretend you didn’t almost pass out like you were performing life saving heart surgery?”

I slam the laptop shut and down the last of my now cold tea. I am relieved and nauseous at the same time. Hopefully they reach out to me soon.

With Selene off on another adventure that Lou has sent her on, I’m free to sneak down to Crust Issues to see Bea about making some sweet treats. One of the things that Gail has on my very long to do list. She told me to make sure there were finger foods at the gallery that people could carry around with them as they viewed the photos while also highlighting the wonderful honey infused goodness that Bea’s known for.

Not understanding what she means by any of that, I’m hoping that Bea will understand this paper that Gail said to give to her. Apparently I can only be trusted with a sheet of paper and handing it to her.

I walk into Crust Issues with all the nerves and excited energy from earlier bubbling under my skin. I feel as if I have a sign hanging on my back saying “I sent a life-altering email and might throw up about it.”

Which is unfortunate because Bea, the owner, clocks it the second her eyes meet mine.

“Well, if it isn’t the man of the month himself with the most anxious aura I’ve seen outside of anyone other than Marlowe when she is trying to sneak a treat,” she says from behind the counter where she’s piping chocolate onto something that looks like a croissant and sin had a baby. “Coffee or comfort carbs?”

“Both,” I grumble as I walk over to the register.

“Get the cinnamon twists with caramel in the middle. It tastes like victory,” Calix pipes up.

“Cinnamon twist with the caramel in the middle,” I say without argument.

Bea’s brows raise, astonished. “Feeling extra bold today I see.”

“Apparently,” I grow as I fidget with the papers on the countertop.

“Oh, do tell.” She lays the piping bag down and comes over with a fresh cup of tea and the cinnamon twist Calix wanted.

“I might have...sent in the Nat Geo submission for Selene,” I say in a rush of words.

“Wait, like THE National Geographic?”

I nod my head as I slide onto the barstool next to the register. The long bar has glass domes with varying baked goods meant to entice customers into buying more as they sit here chatting with friends and loved ones.

“She was grumbling all night about how she couldn’t get it perfect and she probably shouldn’t even send it in until she finally tossed the laptop onto the couch. So, this morning I copied and pasted it into my own email and sent it off with my phone number.”

Bea whistles, grabbing a brown cardboard box as she begins to fill it with extra baked goods as she continues to listen. “You’re going to need some distractions if you are hoping that she won’t notice that you did that.”

“We survived worse. Remember that time when you touched her photo with Cheeto fingers?” Calix laughs.

“That was you,” I mutter.

“Semantics.”

Bea leans against the counter looking at me with a smile across her face as she slides the box of goodies towards me. “So what brings you to my sugary abode, besides emotional support treats?”

“The gallery opening,” I say as I unfold the paper from Gail and slide it back across the bartop. “Gail mentioned something about treats they can eat while they walk the gallery and something about it ‘highlighting the honey infused goodness you are known for’.”

Bea’s eyes light up as she claps her hands together excitedly. “Oh, how exciting. I have tons of ideas that would work for that but I think one of them should be an edible picture frame that we put a headshot of Selene in to feature. I can also make some mini tarts. Flaky maple bacon rolls. I can even make some photo-themed sugar cookies.”

I hold my hands up. “Whoa, I don’t even know what most of what you said even is. So I’m just going to trust you here.”

Bea pauses mid-count off on her fingers. “What’s the theme here? Rustic forest fae? Mountain Muse? Shifter chic?”

“Hot girl with a camera who swooped in and took over our lives,” Calix grumbles.

I can feel the panic starting to rise as I try to even think of an answer to that, before she flips open the paper and her eyes skim across what Gail wrote for her.

“Oh, lovely,” she hums as she continues to read. “She’s going to love that.”

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I scratch the back of my neck as I wait for her. “Uh, Bea?”

“This is going to be beautiful. Oh if you were wondering it’s Forest Witch for the theme. I can’t wait to get started. What day is the opening?”

“Still don’t know what that means, but thanks. It’s going to be July 31st, but I need you to do me a huge favor and keep this quiet. She doesn’t know that any of this is happening and I’d like to keep it that way as much as possible.”

She mimes zipping her lips as she leans in closer to me. “Your secret’s safe with me. I’ll be there bright and early with all the sugary treats.”

“That’s one of the reasons that she’s my favorite person.”

Later that night as we are cuddled on the couch, her head pillowed in my lap, a Nat Geo documentary playing softly in the background, I run my fingers through her hair, twisting my finger around a strand. Something about snow leopards in the Himalayas. Her breathing is slow, even. One hand curled under my thigh as the other rests against her chest.

I settle back on the couch as I continue to run my fingers through her hair. The weight of her against me grounds me in a way nothing ever has.

On screen, a voice narrates, “Instinct is survival. But connection is what makes survival worth it.”

I don’t dare move, even if it means we sleep on the couch tonight.

## Chapter 28

Caelon

Tuesday, July 29th – Bubbles & Big Breaks

I wake long before Selene, who sleeps peacefully on her side of the bed. There hasn't been a single day since her birthday that we have been apart outside of our jobs. My nerves are through the roof as the clock winds down on the reveal of her gallery. So many things I have left to do and I feel like there is not enough time to do them.

Padding down the hallway towards the kitchen, I start the kettle full of water for my morning cup of tea and decide to check my emails while I wait for it to boil. I almost drop my phone when I see the first email, right at the top.

Qamar, Lena: I would love to meet her!

My finger trembles as I click the email.

Dear Caelon Blackwell,

I am delighted to meet Selene. If her work is anything to go by, I can imagine she is an extraordinary woman indeed. If you could give me a call at 555-932-5783, I would love to set up a time to come meet her.

Sincerely,

Lena Qamar

"Told you. We're genius wingmen," Calix says smugly.



I can't believe it worked. Granted, I knew that her work would catch the eye of someone, but I didn't expect to have an almost instant reply.

I can't risk calling her while home. It would be my luck that Selene would overhear and everything would be ruined.

Stepping out the back door, I walk across my neighbor's yard and onto the other road. Hopefully far enough away that if Selene wakes, she won't overhear what I'm saying.

Clicking her phone number, I pull the phone to my ear. It only rings twice before an older, British accented-voice says, "Good morning, this is Lena Qamar."

"Hello, Ms. Qamar. This is Caelon Blackwell, we spoke over email about Selene."

"Oh, yes, dear, of course! I'm absolutely delighted to chat with you. I was rather hoping I could pop over quite soon?"

"Actually, she doesn't know it yet, but I've been secretly putting together her very own gallery that is having its opening on July 31st. Would it be possible for you to attend that?"

"Oh, how absolutely delightful! I'd simply adore to attend. You can most certainly count me in on being there!"

"Thank you ma'am. This is going to mean the world to her. See you then!"

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“Right then, it’s been an absolute pleasure chatting with you! I’m so looking forward to seeing you in just a few days. Do take care until then!”

I am excited but I also feel like I could shit a brick right now. It’s even more important now that the right pictures are up and everything is perfect. I can’t be the reason she doesn’t land her dream job after all this.

Checking the time on my phone as I weave back to my house, I realize that Hazel should be opening her shop soon. Giving me just enough time to get ready and meet her at Flick the Bean.

Rushing down the sidewalk, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, I push the door open into the cafe, finding Hazel already busily brewing coffee behind the bar.

“Cal! You’re here awfully early this morning.” She wipes her hands on the towel hanging over her shoulder as she comes around the bar wrapping me in a hug.

“I know it’s early. But, I wanted to catch you before all the customers started pouring in,” I say as she lets me go.

Hazel sweeps her hand towards one of the tables next to us as she moves to sit down at it. “What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to check in with you about possibly making drinks for a secret grand opening of Selene’s gallery on the 31st. Is that something you can help me with?”

“Of course!” she squeals and claps her hands together.

I swear I'm going to lose my hearing at this rate between all these squealing women.

"I have a delicious mocktail that would be absolutely perfect for the event! I can make a signature artisanal juice named 'Moonlight & Memory'. What do you think?" Hazel eyes sparkle with excitement.

I shrug my shoulders because I don't know a thing about artisanal juices or what would be best. "I trust your judgement. If you think it would be a good fit, then I will have to agree. Thank you for doing this."

"Wait right here." Hazel pushes back from the table.

She disappears through the swinging door with the same whirlwind energy she entered with, the sounds of the soft clink of glasses and the whirl of a juicer come from the back. While I wait, I scan the cafe taking in what Hazel has done with the place. The warm colors, soft lighting, and the open shelving along the walls. The art she chose features mountains and beautiful flowers in bloom. The massive chalkboard centered behind the bar features looping script and hand drawn petals, oranges, and wild lavender.

When she reappears, she's holding a tall glass that looks like it was poured straight from the midnight sky—deep purple with silver shimmer swirling through the liquid like she captured the stars.

She sets the glass down in front of me as she slides it closer to me. "Moonlight and Memories."

I blink at it, unsure what exactly she is serving me. I spin the glass around, watching the liquid create an entrancing view. "Is it meant to look like a spell in a cup?"

Hazel grins. "Exactly! I combined butterfly pea flower, blackberries, and lemon.

Shaken gently with edible glitter and poured over crushed ice. I think it's a perfect fit for the night. It fits the magic, nostalgia, and a hell of a lot of feelings."

I take a sip. It tastes like memories, almost like everyone would experience something different.

I tilt the glass, letting the taste linger on my tongue. "She'll love this. It's perfect."

She claps excitedly. "Then it's yours."

## Chapter 29

Caelon

Wednesday, July 30th – A Place Made For Her

Tomorrow is the day and I feel like I might explode from the amount of energy and nerves running through me. Each night this week Selene has shown me the project that Lou has her working on and I'm amazed at how much she's grown in the recent weeks. Don't get me wrong, her work has always been beautiful, but you can really tell that the skills Lou has taught her are already working.

With the walls painted, the lighting installed, the tables put in, everything is finally coming together. I can only hope that I did it right, that she will love it. What if she didn't want to run a gallery? Was that even a dream of hers?

There's only one way to find out.

Gail comes rushing in like a storm on a bright summer day. Her arms are full of plastic bags as she pulls a wagon behind her full of boxes. She pushes the door wide open as the wagon comes through before she lets it swing closed.

“Oh good, you’re here. What are you doing standing around? We have way too much to do today,” Gail says as she comes over, handing me some of the bags.

“Well good morning to you too Gail.” I chuckle as I set the bags down on one of the tables to start pulling stuff out.

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We spend the next two hours setting out all the decorations and tablecloths for each table. Who knew that they had fancy ones that wrap around the legs to keep them from sliding off. Shocking, really.

The final pieces are being set when the door swings open again. Fern comes bustling in with a stack of pottery wrapped in protective wrap.

Her eyes scan around the place before she finds me standing next to the center podium, placing a small succulent next to the lamp above where the clipboard will sit tomorrow.

“Good morning Fern. What’s all that you have there?”

“Just some pieces that I think would look beautiful displayed here. These are just some of the pieces the locals made. I even included little tags acknowledging who made each piece,” Fern says as she sets the items down on one of the tables.

Gail walks over to the pieces and unwraps the first one. It’s a beautiful golden yellow sunflower plate. She tilts it towards me, her eyes wide with adoration.

“These are stunning Fern. Of course we would love to display them along with the photos. It’s a great way to show off the culture in Jasper,” I say.

“Thank you. I have one more piece, something for her desk. Something that would remind her of the things she loves.”

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a wrapped figurine that she hands over to me.

Pulling the wrapping back, I find a porcelain wolf painted to look just like my wolf. Does everyone know what my wolf looks like now?

“I’ll be sure to put it there, thank you.”

Like Grand Central Station, the door swings open again, but this time it's Lou with the photographs for the walls. It's the final piece of this puzzle. Her metal cart bumps over the entryway as she walks in. The twelve framed photos we selected are all neatly wrapped in the cart, ready for us to hang up.

We work quickly, each of us hanging photos along the walls. Each one has a slick dark wood and a matte frame around each photo. Underneath we have a simple golden tag with a title for each image.

“I think we are done here,” Gail says as she comes to stand by the door, scanning over the room.

“Believe me, darlin’, that story’s just gorgeous the way it’s laid out, and viewers are gonna catch on to it right away,” Lou says as she comes to stand next to Gail.

Fern comes to Gail’s other side. “It’s amazing for sure. I can already see the tears of joy she will weep tomorrow.”

“Caelon did a wonderful job,” Gail says as she walks over to wrap her arms around me, kissing my cheek.

“Thank you,” I say, looking down at her fondly.

“We’ll get out of your hair, I’m sure you have a lot of things to get done,” Gail says as she gently smacks my cheek.

Gail, Lou, and Fern all walk out saying they will be back first thing in the morning.

I walk to the back, where I've left a print, a photo nobody has seen beside Selene and I. One from her private photo collection. The second she showed me the photo, I knew it was my favorite, even more than me walking towards her that day.

I pull it out from the cardboard box it was delivered in. I didn't use Lou for this print because I wanted it to be a complete surprise for everyone tomorrow. This one is going to be the centerpiece, the main photo of the gallery. I ordered a tripod to hold the photo right in front of the entrance. Making this the first piece that each viewer will see when they come in.

Grabbing the tripod and the framed photo, I take everything out to the front to set it up. The display looks beautiful, exactly like I thought it would. I even test it out by walking outside and back in, just to make sure it's exactly like I hoped it would be.

It's beautiful, capturing the light in the exact way she's been talking about. The emotions she's been chasing. A true moment in time perfectly captured.

I can only hope that after she hears how everyone raves about her photos, that she will finally see herself the way I do.

It's about time for a delivery when I hear a knock at the door. Finally.

Pulling the door open, I find two delivery workers holding a four foot tall, cloth wrapped sign.

"Where would you like it?" the first guy asks.

I swing the door open and point to an open space for them to lean it against. It takes them only a few moments to lean the sign against the wall and remove the wrap



revealing it to me.

The deep, dark greens behind a howling wolf with a crescent moon behind it. The gold swirling frame around the edge wraps around them popping off the sign. But the real piece, the real money maker, is the bright gold lettering with the name of her gallery. A name I chose in hopes that she would love it.

The Howlery.

### Chapter 30

Selene

Thursday, July 31st – Through Her Eyes

I knew that something was going on the second I opened the door. For some reason Caelon insisted on having a traditional date night. He wanted to pick me up and keep everything a surprise.

He is just standing there, not saying anything.

Just taking me in, as if he didn't see me this morning. As if he hasn't been with me every day since we found out we were mates.

His button-up shirt is tucked into his black slacks, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His hair is slicked back in a way that is sharper than usual, but his eyes are hungry as they ran over me, making my throat tighten and my legs clench.

"You're staring," I say.

He blinks, slow as if he's entranced. "You're stunning, as always."

"You're overdressed," I counter, tugging gently on his collar. "Should I change?"

"Absolutely not," he says as he pulls a long, black silk ribbon from behind his back.

"Trust me?"

I narrow my eyes at him. “Depends. Do you plan to kidnap me or drag me into the woods, wolf boy?”

“A surprise.” His voice drops as his eyebrow hooks up. “Something I’ve been working on for weeks. Now.” He twirls his finger in a circle. “Be a good girl and turn around.”

My pulse picks up. “That sounds dangerously, deeply romantic.”

He grins, mischievous and smug. “Good. Come now, turn around.”

The blindfold slides over my eyes, taking away all the light, reminding me of another time we played with a blindfold. His fingers move nimbly as he ties it snugly to my face. My skin prickles when he runs his hand down the back of my neck following the trail of the open back.

He leans in close to my ear, whispering, “Ready?”

My lips pop open as I breathily say, “Yes, I’m ready to be abducted by my mate.”

His low chuckle tickles the side of my neck as his hands slide down my arms. “Not abducted. Worshipped.”

He leads me, one arm firmly behind my back, the other grasped firmly in my hand. Guiding me down the steps, I allow him to pull me where we are going. I know that we are heading towards downtown based on the turns we are taking. The sound of town, people chatting, and the assortment of smells wrap around me.

I can smell the bacon scent that always comes from You’re Bacon Me Crazy. Where are we going? I feel the shift in the air, something is happening. The muffled voices, footsteps, the low chuckle of someone close.

“Are we in town?” I whisper.

“Mmhm.”

I can feel it, smell it in the air. Is that fresh paint? There’s something sweet and buttery. The low notes of a guitar playing in the distance.

He gently pulls me to a stop.

“Okay, don’t move,” he says as he lets go.

“Caelon?”

He steps away, I can feel him moving further from me. I hate how exposed I feel without his warmth wrapped around me. There are too many scents around me to really determine who is here. As if he wasn’t gone, he is back with his arm around my back, warm and steady.

“I’m going to count to three,” his words whisper against my ear. “When you hear three, I’m going to take off the blindfold. I want you to see everything the way that I do. Okay?”

“Bit dramatic don’t you think?”

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“Not dramatic, deserved,” he replies. “One...two...”

The fabric slips from my face, falling away.

“Three.”

Light floods my vision.

I blink my eyes a few times, waiting for them to adjust to the sunlight. The reflection of everyone standing around glints off the wide windows along the front. Soft banners flutter in the breeze in front of the warm wood and dark iron fixtures along the building. It's clean and modern, but has this air about it like it's always belonged. Above the dark paned double doors hangs the most stunning hand carved sign.

The Howlery.

The name knocks the wind out of me.

This isn't just a gallery, it sours.

Flowers line the sidewalk in front of it, not just any flowers, and certainly not ones that he bought in the store. These are wildflowers, similar to the ones in our field. It's the kind that is completely us.

I take a step forward, I don't even realize that I have. The world softens as I take in all the little touches. The time he took to really build something that speaks volumes of how much he sees me. From the soft, pastel ribbon wrapped around the pillars to

the wolf paw print into the concrete in the threshold of the door.

Caelon's hand tightens around my side. "Say something."

My throat tightens.

"I..." My voice breaks. "I don't think there are words to describe how I'm feeling. Nothing that would ever capture my thoughts."

He gives me a soft smile. "Good, because we are far from done."

There's movement behind the doors, drawing my attention. The door opens, and I see them. Odessa beaming, Lou waving, Fern clutching pottery, Bea wiping her eyes, and Gail, standing proudly with a ribbon and scissors in her hands.

The whole pack. Every single person who means the world to me, outside of my parents.

They are here, waiting for me.

Waiting to welcome us.

Gail walks forward waving a gigantic pair of gold scissors as if they are the prized possession of the night. A long strand of wide, red, satin ribbon dangles over her arm.

"Who would you like to hold your ribbon for you?" Gail asks.

Looking around the group of people gathered around me, I know exactly who when my eyes come to them. There is nobody else I can imagine being part of this moment than them.

“My parents,” I say as I call them over.

They each take a side of the ribbon, standing on each side of the pillars as I walk around to stand behind the ribbon. Caelon is standing there, watching as I come to a stop.

“What are you doing? I’m only here because of you. Come on. We will cut the ribbon together.”

He nods his head and joins me.

“Ready?” Gail asks, as everyone moves in closer.

Caelon places his hand over mine. “Do it together.”

And we do.

The blades snip through the ribbon, the crowd cheers, and just like that...

The Howlery is real.

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Ours.

“Ready to see the rest?” Caelon asks as he leans in closer to me, hooking his arm around my back.

Gail and Fern pull the doors open as we walk in. The gorgeous dark hardwood floors glisten against the warm rail lighting dangling high above. The tall ceilings with beams crossing from one side to other giving an open air feeling.

The soft notes of the guitar I heard earlier play over the speakers throughout the room. I barely notice the crowd around us as we walk inside.

My breath halts in my lungs as I see it. There in the center of the room is a beautifully framed picture that I didn’t even think would see the light of day. During one of our trips to our field, I pulled my camera out and snapped photos of us as we laid in the flowers together. The one he chose is of both of us mid-laugh, alightness to our faces, as we looked at each other. It’s so perfectly us.

“I couldn’t resist a moment to display something that represents us. It’s my favorite photo you’ve ever taken.”

He pulls me gently to the left side of the room. “We designed this to be like your display at the Summer Solstice. Telling a story of your life.”

We stop in front of the first photo. There is a sign beside the first photo calling the series...



## Through Her Eyes.

The first photo I recognize as the very first one I captured with an actual camera instead of my phone. It seems a lifetime ago now, when Warrick caught me taking photos with my camera and encouraged me to take the leap.

We walk together, stopping in front of each one as we go down memory lane of the last few months of my life. Watching as each one becomes more developed, clearer, more emotional.

We round the corner to Bea's bright and full of joy section. At the front of the room in one of the corners, are snapshots of her bakery, flour dusted hands, and steamy cinnamon rolls. In the center of her table is a framed photo of me. A beautiful headshot that I didn't know had even been taken while I was in the midst of taking a photo myself.

She stands proudly behind her table with a wide smile across her tan face. Her long, black soft waves fall down her front.

"Bea, thank you for being here," I say as we come to a stop in front of her. "What is this amazing looking frame?"

She beams with pride. "This frame is my own twist on this photography display. I thought wouldn't it be amazing to have an edible frame with wildflowers and paw prints to really tie in the theme." She winks.

"It's beautiful," I whisper in awe.

She truly outdid herself with this. It's a piece of art all on its own. Along with all her desserts on the table. So many things I can't wait to taste. She even included honey cakes, my favorite thing she makes. She sees me eying them and smiles before

handing me a tiny plate with one on it.

I nod my head as Caelon moves me to the next stop. A wall with wooden shelves displays stunning ceramic plates designed like various flowers. These have to be from The Muddy Paw.

We make one final stop at Hazel's table where these small jars sit with this midnight purple liquid swirls with a sparkle. She is stunning with her pastel pink summer dress and her long, dark curls hanging loosely.

"Now, what is this?" I say as I pick up a jar and twist it around.

"Moonlight and Memories. A nod towards your name and what you believe in."

"I love that," I say before taking a sip of the juice. "It's wonderful Hazel. Thank you."

"I'll leave you to mingle with your supporters, my love," Caelon says as he moves off to talk with Silas and Nova.

I spend so much time chatting with everyone that I don't even realize how much time has passed until someone is tapping me on the shoulder.

I turn around to find an older woman with short, curled gray hair and aged skin. I've never seen her before.

"Hello," I say as I hold out my hand towards the woman.

"Oh, I'm so very glad to finally meet you, Selene. I truly have heard so much about you, and I simply couldn't wait to see your wonderful photos in person. My name is Lena Qamar."

Gasping, my hand flies up to my mouth. The National Geographic rep I have been struggling to find the right words to say to is standing in front of me, in my very own gallery. How?

A warm hand presses against my back as Caelon comes to my side.

“Mrs. Qamar.” He shakes her hand gently. “I’m so glad that you were able to make it. Have you had a chance to take a tour yet?”

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“I haven’t, but I have something I want to talk about with Ms. Selene first.” She pulls out a stack of papers from her bag. She holds out the papers towards me.

My hands shake as I grasp the papers in my hand. I read over the title of the paperwork. Proposal of Contracted Services Between Contractee and National Geographic LTD.

My eyes bulge as my mouth drops open. I glance between the papers and Cal, unsure if this is real. He nods his head, giving me an encouraging smile.

I look back at Lena, who is standing with her hands clasped in front of her, waiting patiently.

“Is this real?” I ask as the tears well up in the corner of my eyes.

“It certainly is, but I really would recommend reading over it carefully and perhaps taking a few days to truly decide if it’s something you’d genuinely like to do.”

“I can’t...” I look at Caelon. “I don’t even know how you found me.”

Caelon clears his throat. “That would be me. I saw your email to her and after much consideration, decided to send it on your behalf. I know you’d been battling with what to say or how to say it. But, I also know that your work would speak for itself. It only needed a gentle push. So one morning while you were sleeping, I snuck onto your computer and sent it from my email. She reached out immediately and I invited her here. I didn’t know about the contract though.”

I'm staring in disbelief. I can't...I don't even know what to say. All these amazing things that he has done for me. I can't even put into words the emotions flowing through me.

"I think I'll..." Lena starts when Bea yells interrupting everyone as we all turn to the commotion.

There, in her small pine nut form, is Marlowe running across the floor with one of Bea's cinnamon rolls tucked in her mouth. We all burst out laughing as the tiny little claws scratch against the door before someone pushes it open letting her run down the sidewalk.

"My, my, it seems things are always quite exciting around here!" Lena giggles, her eyes alight with humor.

"You can say that again," Caelon says with a laugh.

"Anyway, as I was saying. I think I'll certainly take my chance to explore your gallery opening. Do enjoy yourself, and I look forward to hearing from you very soon," she says with a dip of her head as she turns to walk away.

"Cal...this is too much. I can't believe that you did all this."

"I love you." He kisses my temple.

"I love you too," I say leaning into him.

Chapter 31

Xavior

Friday, August 1st – What a Performance

I can't stop thinking about what Grant said at the last pack breakfast. Something about it isn't sitting well with me and if I've learned anything from the years I served in the military it's always trust your instincts.

If we can take out the threat before it becomes one, then we can save a lot of people from being injured in the long run.

I push open the door to the Pack House hoping to speak with Silas about it, but there is nobody here. I know it's early in the morning, but I figured at least one of them would be awake already. Walking through the Pack House, I follow the sounds of women laughing. It's the private part of the house where Silas and Nova reside with their twins.

My knuckles rapped on the door when I hear a faint, "Come in."

Nova has already filled the hallway with photos of the twins, giving this part of the house a homey feel it never had. There is soft giggling coming from the living room. Of fucking course she's there. Why am I not surprised?

I've just walked around the couch, ready to ask Nova where Silas is when...

"Ew, didn't your mother teach you to take off your shoes at the door? Rude of you to drag the outside world into the house," Nellie sneers at me.

My eyes roll because it's always something with her.

"Did someone shove the stick further up their ass today or is this just the latest show that nobody signed up for?"

Nova gasps as she covers Damon, her dark, curly haired twin's ears, as she glares at me.

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Nellie mock gasps as she covers Kael, the red-haired freckled other twin's ears. "You truly are a barbarian. Do you really have no shame?"

Says the girl that cusses more than I do, but sure let's pretend you are so perfect.

"Calm down Broadway, nobody here is going to give you that five star rating you are so desperate for."

Nova coughs to try to cover her laugh as Nellie cuts her eyes to her. Nova holds up her hands in surrender when Nellie points a finger at her.

Thankfully Silas comes walking in with a smirk on his face. He knows how much Nellie gets under my skin every single time, and yet he doesn't offer any advice either.

He comes to a stop next to me, looking down at his little family with so much love.

"What can I do for you Xav?" Silas says as he raises an eyebrow at me.

"I wanted to talk with you about the Grant issue. My gut is telling me that we need to handle that sooner rather than later."

He nods his head. "Come on then, let's go to my office."

He walks over, kissing Nova on the top of her head as he puts a hand on her stomach before he kisses the twins and signals for me to follow him.



I follow behind him until we reach the front door. With one last look over my shoulder, Nellie flips me off as she blows me a kiss.

I shake my head before I walk out the door. I don't know what it is about her, but no matter how hard I try, I can't help but antagonize her.

As much as she annoys me, something about her draws me in. I gravitate towards her each time. As if she is earth and I'm the moon orbiting her. The flash of defiance each time we bicker is like the sun rising over the horizon, lighting up my world each time.

## Epilogue

### Selene

#### Two Months Later - The Stranger

My key slides into the lock of The Howlery, locking the door after another wonderful day. It's been two months since Caelon gifted me this amazing gallery and I've cherished every single second of it. I've got plans to offer photography classes, have shows featuring different artists in our town, and so much more down the road after our little one arrives.

As if she knows I'm thinking about her, she gives my firm, rounded belly a nice kick. It won't be long now before we are welcoming our first pup. Thankfully wolves only gestate for sixty-three days instead of the nine months of a human pregnancy. I can't even imagine doing this for that long because at this rate, I'm already over it and I'm only fifty-eight days through.

After Lena came by for the gallery opening, Caelon and I reviewed her offer. While we loved everything about it, we didn't like the idea of the amount of traveling it required. When we brought the concerns up to Lena, she countered with one trip

every six months instead of once a month, which was the initial offer. So far my projects have been local with everything being within driving distance, which was another huge change for me. With Jasper being as small as it is, we aren't accustomed to driving all the time. I've loved all the feedback they've given about my photographs though which has made it worth it already.

The street had been silent given the late hour until the high-pitched snarl of an engine cuts through the quiet like a blade. There's only one group around these parts that ride motorcycles, and they aren't supposed to be in our town.

There on the bike, with his black leather boot propping him up, is a man with dark, shaggy, black hair. His black shirt is practically glued to his skin, with arms covered in tattoos. He's got the bad boy look down to a perfected art. But it's not his looks or his vibe that worries me, it's the Ghost River Pack tattoo that stands out against his wrist. The black wolf on one side of the river with a mirror ghost wolf on the opposite side of the river. Each tugging on a chain pulled taut between them. The red initials GR bleed into the river giving an almost blood river look to the water.

My hands reflexively cover my belly, protecting my daughter from whatever threat is happening.

"Can...can I help you?" My voice shakes.

I know we had our issues a few months ago, but I thought we solved all that when we paid off the debt. So why is a wolf here?

"I'm looking for your Alpha."

My eyebrows scrunch in confusion, but I keep my thoughts to myself. I'm in no position to protect myself, and there's nobody around to aid me either.

"I'm not here to cause any trouble," he says, his smooth, deep voice trying to placate

me.

He swings his leg off his bike as he stands. I can't tell for sure, but I swear he's at least 6'2" if not taller. His cocky, assured smile crosses his face as he takes a slow step towards me.

I take a step back, putting distance back between us. He holds his hands up in surrender.

My fingers tremble as I reach into my bag to grab my cell phone. Silas needs to know about this immediately.

Pushing his contact, it only rings one time before he answers. I don't wait for him to ask questions, or even say a word.

"Alpha, you need to come down to The Howlery right now."

The End