



# Cold Foot Curse

**Author:** T.S. Joyce

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Six long years ago, Jess Heichman had her entire life planned out. She had a good job, and was in a steady Crew, and she was newly Promised to a high-ranking shifter who had made a deal with her. In return for her loyalty, he was to keep her safe from the curse that had plagued her family for generations. They had a plan, and then Kade did something unforgiveable, and was taken away, leaving Jess to pick up the pieces of his broken promise. Now that she is finally moving forward, and ready to pledge her loyalty to another, the handsome villain himself shows up to wreck her heart again.

Kade is newly escaped from Cold Foot Prison and settling into a brand-new Crew in Wreck's Mountains, but he can't quite get past the girl he left behind. When he finds out Jess is being Promised to an enemy, he knows she had one chance to escape that dead-end Crew and secure her freedom once and for all. Jess was supposed to build a life for herself while he was locked away, but she stayed stagnant in the same place he'd left her, and now her life is about to take a turn for the worse. If he can separate her from her Crew for just a few weeks and show her what life is like on the outside, perhaps she can realize her prison was even worse than Cold Foot. He'd made a promise to her once upon a time—to pair up with her and never fall in love. His intentions are good, but Jess isn't the same as he remembers. Now, he can't stay away from the beauty, and all he can think about is being with her.

The Heichman curse is calling, and Kade has no idea about the wild ride he is in for.

He's breaking the rules, and the consequence is his demise unless Jess can figure out a way to save the man she's falling for...even if it means saving him from herself.

\*\*\*\*Content Warning: Explicit spicy love scenes, naughty language, and piles of sexy shifter secrets. Intended for mature audiences.

**Total Pages (Source):** 75

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

## Chapter One

She barely knew him.

Jessica Heichman frowned at the picture of Kade from years ago and tried to find something familiar about him. It was a picture of the two of them on their Promise Day.

It felt like a hundred years ago since she'd seen him last.

Her Promised had gone to prison for murder and left her here to fend for herself in a Crew of vultures. She had been so angry at him for a long time, but now, she didn't feel much of anything anymore. Desperation, maybe. Jess blew out a steadying breath. She'd worn his name out. Would it work again?

"Hey, Jess, are you ready?" Misty asked. Misty was her brother's mate and had been a sometimes-friend to her as she had transitioned into this strange life.

Jess turned off the phone screen fast, hiding the picture of her and Kade. "I really don't want to do this."

"Well, you've put it off long enough. You have to move on at some point."

"Do you think this is the right move for me?" she asked. "Honestly?"

Misty forced a half-smile. "Who am I to say what's right? It's logical. It makes sense."

It makes sense. Jess had grown up thinking she would find that mad-love, where she was head-over-heels for a man who was just as head-over-heels for her. But then she'd learned about the curse on her family and had mourned the death of that dream. And then she'd been Promised to Kade, and she'd tried to force her mind to give him a chance. And now she would have to force her heart to give another man a chance. A stranger.

This wasn't how her life was supposed to be.

"Come on," Misty encouraged her quietly. "They want to talk to you."

"They who?"

"Connor has called a meeting with the Alpha, the Second, and the Third."

"All three," she said softly. This was bad. "I'm still Promised."

Misty inhaled and cocked her head, leveling her with an impatient look. "Your contract to Kade expired, and you know it."

"Expired? I was Promised. My heart still recognizes the Promise. A promise doesn't expire just because some piece of paper says—"

"That's enough!" Misty snapped. "You keep talking about Kade like he's coming back. He's not, Jess. He's in the bowels of Cold Foot Prison, where he will rot for what he did. You should be angry with him."

"I was."

"Why has that anger faded? The Crew has tried to be patient while you grieve what you lost, but a Promise is only good if it's consummated, and everyone knows you

did not.”

“Misty!”

“Well, it’s true! You’ve avoided that direct question for all this time, and it’s done. It’s enough. If you want to stay here, you will have to choose another. You’ll have to be a functioning member of this Crew. You need to prove your value. You were lucky in that no one wanted you for these years since Kade was locked away, but that has changed now...”

Jess closed her eyes and pushed Misty’s words to the background. Misty was still griping, but she couldn’t make out her words anymore. No one had wanted her. No one had wanted her? Misty was throwing that in her face? Really? “I pay rent,” she said, interrupting Misty’s rant.

“Not enough.”

“But I pay what they asked me to pay. I don’t ask for anything from anyone.”

“Except protection.”

Protection from what? This is the part that had always been so confusing. “I don’t ask for that either.”

“You’ve been safe here for years. Having a Promise within the Crew will guarantee you can stay here, and I want you to stay here, Jess!”

“I want...I want to stay here too.” Right? She didn’t have anywhere else to go. This life was familiar now. She had a routine and liked her room. She liked her job. She mostly understood what was expected of her. She could mark off the days of her life without too much volatility.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Why did that sound like a lie?” Misty asked.

“I think I want to stay here,” Jess amended, confused. Even she could hear the lie in her voice though. “I want to stay here and just be Promised to Kade.”

“And be alone forever? Because again, Kade isn’t coming back. You’re getting older, and you are one of the few remaining females here, and your duty is to bear offspring for the next generation of Sister’s Edge.”

This was where everything got muddy. She’d met Kade. She’d been accepting, and didn’t mind being around him when he’d courted her, but that courtship had been very short. The Alpha had asked him to make a decision on her quickly. She barely knew him, but she’d had hope, and then that hope had been dashed, but her heart was still confused.

He’d chosen her right after the accident. Right after. He’d still picked her after she’d been damaged.

And that choice had made her animal loyal to him for reasons beyond her control or understanding.

She didn’t want to be Promised to Connor. He was choosing her after the reconstructive surgeries. He hadn’t given her a single thought until she’d healed, and the scars had been minimized. Connor hadn’t even looked her way until recently.

And yes, she realized most of her imaginings of how Kade probably was as a man were just that—imaginings. They were fantasies. They were derived from her hope

that his lawyers would find a way to shorten his sentence, and she would have a chance to get to know him.

But reality was this: Kade was locked up in Cold Foot Prison for the rest of his life, and she was locked into Sister's Edge for the rest of hers.

"Are you ready?" Misty asked again.

Jess inhaled deeply and stood, then nodded. "I guess I am as ready as I'll ever be."

## Chapter Two

"Stop, stop, stop!" Reed yelled, and Kade released the controls of the excavator.

The shop wall was only halfway up, and Reed and Wreck were pulling on something just out of sight. Something was jammed.

Kade pushed open the clear door and asked Cash, "What's up?"

Cash was grinning down at his phone, but at Kade's question, he looked up at him and frowned. "What?"

"Dude, where is your head at? Your Alpha is pulling chains under a huge wall and you're flirting with Harley."

"She's sending me titty pics. If Wreck needs help, he'll holler."

"Cash!" Wreck barked out. "Come hold this."

Kade snorted.

“Balls,” Cash muttered as he strode over there, dragging his feet bad enough to kick dirt on every step.

Kade sank back into the seat of the excavator and kept the door propped open with his foot so he could hear what was happening. In the cup holder, his phone screen lit up.

A quick glance down at it told him an unknown number had texted him. Probably spam.

“Can you try to lift it again?” Wreck called to Kade.

Kade eased the arm of the excavator higher, trying to keep the drag smooth so it wouldn’t put any extra pressure on the chain that was holding the heavy section of wall. The chain was too thin for his liking.

This shop out behind their cabins was turning out to be a pain in the ass to build. Everything that could go wrong had done it. The kit for this shop was the most inefficient build ever.

The materials were wrong, the blueprint was wrong, the instructions were ridiculous and made no damn sense.

He eased the wall up and held it steadily there while the boys went to work bolting the metal to the steel frame. Their cussing echoed across the mountain because nothing was lining up. This was the part that Kade wished he could abandon the excavator and help with the brute strength, but he was the only one trained on this machine.

His phone lit up again, and that same unfamiliar number flashed across the screen.

He frowned at the part of the text he could read from here.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

I hope this is you.

Well, that was a weird thing to say if this was a spam text.

Kade was staring at the phone when it lit up again. It's Seth.

The blood drained from his face, and he relaxed his grip on the controls.

"Hey, hey, hey!" King roared, and Kade jerked the arm of the excavator into place again. He glanced at the text once, twice, three times before the screen faded to black.

Seth.

Fuck.

Seth?

How did he get this number? How had he found him?

Kade's mind was bombarded with a thousand memories from his old life, all meshing together.

He'd killed Seth's brother, Tanner. At least, that's how the story went.

"Okay, we're good!" Wreck called out.

Kade lowered the arm by a few feet to loosen the slack of the chain so the guys could

unhook it, and then he cut the engine. He grabbed his phone and shoved the door open, hopped out of the excavator, and strode for his cabin.

“Where are you going?” King called.

“I need to take care of something,” he called without turning around. Kade lifted his phone and opened the text thread as he walked.

Someone said you got out. I hope this is you. It’s Seth.

Kade’s heart had never pounded so hard as it was doing right now. Short of breath, he took his porch stairs two at a time and bolted for the safety of his cabin. He slammed the door behind and deadbolted it, didn’t bother turning on the light, just went straight for the couch and sat down on the edge of it. He read the texts from his old friend again. They weren’t friends anymore. He’d testified against him. He was part of the reason Kade had been locked up.

A part of him understood though. A small part.

Kade began to respond but deleted it and just stared at the words on the screen.

It’s you, Seth texted. Maybe he’d seen the dots saying Kade had been typing. Maybe he was a freaking mind-reader. Who knew with Seth?

A video came through, and Kade held that phone in his shaking hand, while his heart hammered so hard inside of his chest cavity, it felt like it was chipping away at his sternum.

He’d worked so hard to forget his past. He’d done so much work to anchor himself to the present, and now his personal ghost had come calling.

He pushed the play button and tensed immediately.

Jess sat in Derek's meeting hall. That was Jess, right? She'd dyed her hair darker and cut it shorter. He could only see her profile. Her face was downturned, and her eyes were unblinking, trained on the table. Derek was talking down to her, standing with his arms locked against the table. Beside him was his Second, and on his other side was a guy who had been working his way up the ranks when Kade had been hauled off to Alaska. From his position on the left of the Alpha, he was the new Third. He must've been Kade's replacement. A couple seats away, staring straight at Jess was someone Kade hadn't thought about in a long time. Connor Edge. He had his hands locked in front of his mouth, elbows on the table, eyes glowing blue, a hungry look directed right at Jess.

He couldn't hear what Derek was saying. Kade turned the volume up on his phone but there wasn't any sound at all.

The Alpha looked angry, but what else was new? Derek had always been a stick of dynamite with a short fuse. What had Jess done wrong?

She looked good. Her scars were fewer. She looked up at Derek, and then over at whoever was taking the video—Seth probably. The video shook and cut to black, but Kade had seen it. He'd seen it there in her eyes.

He found the exact moment she'd locked eyes on the camera and paused it. Her eyes were glowing gold. Jess never got worked up.

What the fuck was happening?

She's used your Promise all these years, but your contract is up. She's up for grabs. Connor wants her. She doesn't have a choice.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Fuck!” Kade yelled and threw his phone at the couch. He gripped his hair in the back and closed his eyes. This wasn’t his problem. It wasn’t his problem! He left that life behind long ago, and not a single person had clung to him, not even Jess. And fair enough! They were strangers. She hadn’t owed him anything! And he owed her nothing now.

They’d made a decision in another life, and it didn’t carry to the new one.

Why the hell hadn’t she moved on? Why was she still there? She’d been set free with his incarceration, so why was she still in that dead-end Crew claiming the Promise?

He blew out a shaky breath and rolled his head back, staring at the ceiling fan high above.

“Old life?” Cash asked.

Kade startled and glared at the man sitting on his kitchen counter, eating a carrot. “I locked the door.”

“Yeah, I know. So annoying. I had to use the back door, which was unlocked.”

“If I lock the door, it means I don’t want you showing up here.”

Cash arched his eyebrow. “Again, back door was unlocked. That’s an invite.”

“No, it isn’t!”

Cash narrowed his eyes at him and crunched another bite of carrot. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” he muttered, pulling his phone from the crease in the couch that it had sunken into. He pulled up the video again and zoomed in on Jess’s profile. Where were her scars? Was this really Jess?

“Who is she?” Cash asked.

Kade shook his head, denying him an answer. None of this was Cash’s business.

“Who is she?” he asked again.

“Fuck, Cash! Leave it alone!” He was going to lose his mind right now. Kade paced to the stairs and back, his mind racing.

“We’re friends,” Cash said softly.

“A friend who would run to his mate and to the rest of the Crew if I tell you.”

“I swear on my life, I won’t.”

“Your life is a trainwreck. Swear on something else.”

“Fine. I swear on my bond with Harley, I won’t say anything until you say I can.”

Kade let off an explosive sigh and sank down into the couch. “A hundred years ago, I had a woman. A stranger. It was an arranged thing.”

When he looked up, Cash was just standing there staring at him with his lips in the shape of an ‘O.’

“Well? Say something.”

“You have a mate?” Cash asked.

“No. Yes. Kind of. We never consummated the pairing, so it doesn’t really count.”  
He gritted his teeth. “There was a contract though.”

“This marriage sounds sketchy as hell.”

“It isn’t a marriage! It was just...” Kade shook his head, searching for a way to explain it. “Not all Crews are like this one.”

Cash nodded somberly. “Why didn’t you go get her when you got out?”

Kade huffed a humorless sound and looked away. He stared at the woodgrain in the fancy wood floors of this place. “I’m not the same as when I left, and besides, my incarceration was supposed to set her free from the pairing. She’d talked about wanting to leave Sister’s Edge—”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Holy fuck sticks!” Cash interrupted. “You’re from Sister’s Edge?”

Kade dragged his glare to him.

“You’re really from Sister’s Edge? From the Crew in Sister’s Edge? You were a member?”

“I was Third.”

“Oh!” Cash crowed, pacing into the kitchen and then back. “You were Third in Sister’s Edge?”

“You don’t have to repeat it a bunch of times. I don’t want to talk about this shit anymore.”

“Um, now I want to only talk about this—”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“There’re monsters in that Crew.”

“Cash.”

“They only bring in monsters!”

“Cash!”

“Why didn’t you consummate it? Was she an uggo?”

“An uggo?”

“Ugly?”

“Oh my God, stop talking.”

“Couldn’t get it up?”

“I’m going to kill you.”

“It happens, man. Not to me, but I hear it happens to some people. It’s called erectile dysfunction, and it’s—”

Whomp!The book Kade had thrown at his head hit the wall behind Cash. He’d barely ducked out of the way in time.

“We didn’t consummate it because she wasn’t ready, and I was arrested a week after we were Promised!”

Cash’s mouth finally freaking stopped talking, thank the Lord.

“So why are you freaking out about her now?” Cash asked low. “If you set her free, why are you dropping walls, and rushing in here, and locking doors and making the entire mountains feel heavy?”



Kade inhaled deep and cracked his knuckles. “Contract is up. My old friend messaged me a video of her in what I’m guessing are Promise talks with some asshole I know. Or I knew? Back before everything fell apart.”

“Is he bad news?”

“The worst.” Kade shrugged. “For her it would be bad.”

“We should go get her,” Cash said.

“No.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Think about it—”

“I have! I will be getting her. There will be no ‘we’.”

“Oh shit,” Cash rocked back on his heels. “You’re thinking of going to Sister’s Edge? Alone?”

“It’s mine,” Kade said, hoping Cash would understand. This part of his story wasn’t for Cold Foot Crew to meddle in. It was his old life, and his alone. It was his responsibility to tie up the loose ends.

Kade could feel it so deeply now—the pull of his old life.

Cash nodded. “I can cover for you at work. I can cover for you with the Crew too. How long will you be gone?”

“A couple days at least,” but probably forever in a shallow fuckin’ grave. Cash didn’t need to know the danger. It wasn’t a full lie, so Cash didn’t sense anything wrong. Clearly, because he told him, “You should pack fast and leave before the guys are done with work on that shop for the day. They’ll be too distracted to notice you’re gone for a few hours, I bet. They don’t need the excavator for the rest of today’s work.”

Kade nodded his thanks, and stood, then headed for the stairs.

“Hey, Kade?” Cash asked.

“Yeah?” Kade asked from the middle of the stairs.

“I respect how you’re handling this. If you need anything, I’m just a call away.”

And Kade knew what he meant. Cash would come help if he could. He appreciated the offer more than Cash would ever know.

Kade was beginning to think that Cash had told the truth—maybe they were friends.

### Chapter Three

Jess ran her thumb across the scar that ran across her left palm. Promise contracts came with scars, and very soon, she would have a new one on her other hand, binding her to Connor.

How had she gotten here? How had she grown smaller and smaller until she felt trapped, and like she had no choice at all?

Connor was moving up the ranks and would be challenging for Third soon, but to hold a high rank in Sister’s Edge, the males needed to be paired, and open to providing the next generation to the Crew. This was one of the longest standing Crews in the world. They had never been annihilated to the point of extinction, had never lost battles for territory lines, and for hundreds of years had maintained a stronghold here in this dry, desert land outside of Sisters, Oregon. There were many reasons for their longevity, and some of their success could no doubt be attributed to the rules. Alpha, Second, and Third were the strongest and most dominant. Along with their brute strength though, they had to have a sound mind, and clear view of the future for the Crew. She’d been honored when she had been invited to be a part of Sister’s Edge all those years ago, but she’d been young, and desperate to belong somewhere. Desperate to feel safe. Every shifter knew Sister’s Edge was safe from the territory disputes that used to plague her kind. No one had tried them in years. Not

since long before she'd come to live here.

To maintain standing here in this Crew, she had to pay her own way, and contribute to meetings, and take care of anything the Alpha needed done. And if she was chosen for a Promise, she had to honor it.

Maybe she'd grown desensitized to the benefits of living in the heart of Sister's Edge. Maybe she'd forgotten how it was to really be scared, and feel hunted, and so she was taking it for granted. Perhaps that was why she felt like fighting this new Promise Contract. Perhaps she'd grown lazy, and soft, and didn't remember how scary the outside world could be when she wasn't under the umbrella of protection that Derek and the others could provide.

At least, that's what she was telling herself. Maybe if she remembered how she used to live, she would feel better about tethering herself to another stranger.

Kade had ruined everything.

They'd had a deal. They'd had a plan.

He had fought his way up the ranks to Third, and he needed to be paired, and she needed a Promise that made sense to her after she'd been disfigured. She'd lost her animal and was at risk of being shunned.

Only monsters were allowed here, and with the loss of her animal, she wasn't monster enough anymore.

When her tiger had disappeared after the accident, Kade had offered to secure her place in Sister's Edge with no strings attached. He'd found an apartment with two bedrooms for them, and promised they could live as roommates. He'd promised never to ask anything of her body. He'd assured her—and she had heard the truth in his

voice—that he only needed her so he could maintain his rank and eventually Challenge for Second. He had his eyes on Alpha someday. He could've done it too if he wouldn't have done what he'd done. In exchange for her accepting the Promise, and signing the contract, and taking the cut he'd made across her palm, he would offer her protection always. No one would ever be able to mess with her again. The females who had shamed her after her face was scarred would've been reprimanded until they learned her power as the mate of the Third. They would not be able to Challenge her animal anymore, knowing they would win, because her animal was gone during that time. They would have to turn off their predator instincts and stop hunting her in her weakened state.

Kade was going to fix everything, and the best part? He didn't care about the scars, or her ugly face, or her ruined body. He just needed a Promise, and he'd chosen to give sanctuary to her.

She didn't know him, but what she did know was that he was a beast, and a fucking hurricane in a Challenge. He was dominant and powerful, but at the center of it, he was merciful. That's what his Promise had meant, right? He'd chosen a mate he couldn't be proud of in front of the others. He'd had his choice between beauties, and he'd picked her instead. He'd done it out of pity when she needed a shield. He had tethered his life to hers, and didn't seem to care that at every meeting, she would be sitting right behind him, disfigured, horrifying to look at, unacceptable in some of the other Crew members' eyes. He hadn't seemed to care about that stuff at all.

Kade was terrifying, but when he'd offered the Promise, she'd seen something there. Kade had a heart. At least she thought so, before he murdered one of the members in cold blood. He'd murdered his best friend's own brother and broken all the rules. He'd brought shame to his entire lineage.

Jess had thought him merciful, but she'd been wrong.

She closed her fist around her thumb, pressed there against the scar Kade had made.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

More scars. More scars. All she knew of life as a shifter was more scars.

Jess looked up at her reflection in the dresser mirror. She'd curled her short hair, and teased it up, and pinned it back, leaving a few waves hanging down in her face. She'd fixed it up. Maybe if she impressed Connor, he would be kind to her. It would be their second date. The first one had been awkward, and punctuated by long silences over dinner, but maybe she would do better with communication when they got to know each other better.

I don't want to do this. The animal's voice whispered through her mind.

"Well tough," she growled out. Angry, she stood and grabbed her purse. Of course, her animal would show up now. She'd barely existed for years, but when Jess was sitting here trying to wrap her head around her new future, she puts her two-cents in. Of course she chooses now to do that. Jess shook her head in frustration. Where had she been when she'd needed her? Where had her two cents been when she'd been falling apart and trying to figure out which way was up?

"No, don't! Don't tell her. Shhh."

Jess froze and listened. That had come from downstairs, but it wasn't Misty's voice. It was Samuel's.

There was murmuring, but she couldn't make out the words. Silently, she padded to the door and eased it open, so she could hear better. Her brother was home from work early, and he was talking low to Misty downstairs.

“We have to go,” he said.

“But he said it’s all the Crew. I think Jess would want to know—”

“This will be over soon. We don’t need to confuse her.”

“Samuel, she should know she’s in danger—”

“Shhh! She’s not. She won’t even know.”

“Samuel, this doesn’t feel right.”

“You don’t listen. Get outside and stop talking about this. I said no. I don’t know why you think everything is a fuckin’ debate. If I say no, the answer is no, and if you have a problem with that, you can fuck off.”

God, she hated the way her brother talked to his mate. Always had. She would say he wasn’t raised that way, but she had no idea how he was raised. They were both foster kids who aged out of the system, and he’d tracked her down. He was good to Misty sometimes, but sometimes, like now, he was a complete jerk.

“Hey, Jess?” he called from downstairs.

She bristled and opened the door wider. “Yeah?”

“Misty and I are going out for a bit. I talked to Connor. He’s still set to come pick you up.”

“Okay,” she called, utterly confused. What was going on?

The front door closed behind her brother, and she went to the window low, and



peeked out at the street. Misty, along with the other two couples that lived in this house, were waiting for Samuel to catch up. They were headed toward Derek's house. Most of the Crew lived in this neighborhood.

Something was happening. Something to do with her. Something that put Jess in danger.

You can run away.

Her animal's thoughts startled her.

"What?" she asked aloud.

We could just pack a bag and go. The whole Crew is distracted.

Run away? She wasn't trapped. Not really. She didn't think. She could leave whenever she wanted. She wasn't a prisoner of Sister's Edge. Right?

Then why are we pairing with him?

Okay, her animal was confusing her. She'd talked more in the last ten minutes than she had in the last six years.

Jess's hands started tingling, and she clenched her fists hard, and stared at her knuckles. That felt like...that felt like the beginnings of a Change. She hadn't been able to Change in years. "What are you doing?"

I don't know, the animal whispered. I feel...I feel...something is happening.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

No shit. She was about to Change in the house. She couldn't do that! She would rip this place down to the frame.

Can you feel him?

Chills rippled up her arms, and Jess peeked out the window again. Was her tiger talking about Connor? Was he here?

"No," she whispered.

Yes, you do. You do. You do...you do...you...do...The animal's voice faded to nothing in her mind.

"Hello?"

Nothing. Silence filled her head once more. She hated that feeling—being alone. "Hello?" she asked more frantically. She was upset with the animal meddling, but she didn't want her to disappear completely again.

She was met with deeper silence. Shit.

She slapped her head a few times, trying to wake her back up, but that didn't help. It never did.

Why did she feel like crying right now?

She took it back! She wanted to Change. "You can have my skin," she pleaded. "We

can Change.”

Silence.

Outside, there was a commotion, and she pushed up from where she was crouching, and peeked outside. Mac and Tawk were arguing as they jogged by, headed in the direction of Derek’s house. A couple of cars that belonged to more of the Crew zoomed by. What the hell was going on?

She checked her phone, but the Crew loop was silent, which meant someone had called a meeting off-loop, excluding her. But why?

Jess pulled on a black hoodie and settled the long strap of her purse across her body. She pulled on a pair of black running shoes and bolted out of her room and down the stairs. She ran past the bedroom doors of the others who lived in this home, and to the back door. She knew a trail through the woods that would get her eyes on the back of Derek’s house.

She had no solid plan other than she had to know what was happening. She had a right to! It had something to do with her. Misty had said so herself.

She checked the yard, but it was empty. Her sensitive hearing hadn’t gone away with the disappearance of her animal, and neither had her hypervigilant instincts. No hearts beat around her except for a small group of birds in the tree branches of the oaks that lined the yard. She ducked under a low hanging branch, and high-kneed it over some brambles, looking for the trail she sometimes took to a creek when she needed time away from the world.

She found it within a minute and kicked her pace up to a jog, headed in the direction of the Alpha’s house.

She could hear yelling, so she pushed her legs into a sprint. The yelling was getting louder, and now she could hear specific voices. Tawk was roaring something about ‘rules,’ and geez, he sounded on the verge of a Change. That was against Derek’s laws. Changes weren’t allowed in the neighborhood. They hadn’t chased all the humans out of these houses yet.

She skidded to a stop and crouched down behind some brush. She looked down at the sound of a rattle though, and there was a rattlesnake coiled right where she was hiding. Crap! She yelped softly and bolted into the yard, then froze, exposed. Her skin was crawling. She hated snakes! But now she was in the back yard, and the back door was one of those transparent sliding glass ones. Someone would see her! She caught a glimpse of Derek’s house, and it was crammed full of people. Everyone had their backs to the yard, thank goodness.

She bolted for the side of the house, not about to push her luck in the friggin’ serpent safe haven woods behind her.

There was a window on the side, but the blinds were down. Crap. She ducked down and loped to the next window, and this one had a little better view. The blinds had been lifted just a few inches. Two guys were standing in front of the window with their backs to her, and were blocking almost everything, but one of them shifted to the side to say something to the other, and she caught a glimpse of a tall, heavily muscled man, with a slicked back mohawk. He stood in a power-stance, his legs splayed, his arms crossed over his chest. He wore a charcoal gray t-shirt, and medium-wash blue jeans.

Can you feel him?

She startled hard at her animal’s whispered question.

Two men were yelling at him, but she couldn’t see who from this angle. The man

didn't even flinch back.

Can you feel him?

She scanned the room as much as she could see with the men blocking most of her view, but she didn't see Connor.

He's here. Can you feel him?

Feel what? All she felt was a heaviness in her chest that hadn't been there before, but maybe she was just out of shape and out of breath? Or her adrenaline was jacked up because of the near-bite from the rattler in the woods, perhaps.

Watch.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Watch what?” she snapped quietly.

And at that moment, something happened that froze the blood in her veins.

The man with the big shoulders twisted and looked right at her. His glowing frost blue eyes snapped realization right through her. She knew those eyes.

Kade.

It was a knowing glance, as if he had known exactly where she was, and then dragged his attention back to the others.

With a gasp, Jess sank down, hand gripping her hoodie right over her heart.

Can you feel him?

The animal had known Kade was here.

Chills rippled up her entire body.

How? How was he here? Kade was locked deep inside the maximum-security shifter prison in Alaska. He would never see the light of day again. He’d been sentenced to life, but he was here, looking even bigger than she remembered.

Her heart was pounding out of her chest. She wanted to ease up and look again, but he’d only glanced at her. It was an I-know-you’re-there acknowledgement, but he wasn’t trying to draw too much attention to her. The heaviness she’d felt in her chest

was pulsing. It was reaching inside of Derek's house. It was reaching for Kade.

Kade the stranger.

She couldn't breathe. Short gasps took her lungs, but they wouldn't fill with oxygen.

"What are we looking at?" someone asked from right beside her.

Jess whispered a curse and pitched herself to the side, away from him. A man with dark hair and gold eyes was kneeling beside her, eating...sunflower seeds.

"Wh-who are you?" she whispered under her breath.

"Name's Cash." He held out his hand for a shake, but she just stared at him in horror. He wasn't a part of the Sister's Edge Crew. "Oh, I'm best friends with Kade. Although," he said a little louder to be heard over the yelling inside, "I'm pretty sure he will be mad at me for being here, and also for telling our Alpha about this. Shall we go? Do you need to pack anything?"

"Pack...anything?" she repeated dumbly.

"Well, I don't know Kade's plan, but if I was abducting someone, I would want to be nice about it and let her pack some clothes and tampons and stuff."

What. The fuck. Was happening?

"I should go," she murmured, and struggled to her feet clumsily.

"Right, lead the way."

"Alone," she whisper-screamed.

“Okay, so I’ll just follow you with ten feet of space between us, so that you’re comfortable. Raynah says I make people uncomfortable.”

“If you’re Kade’s friend, maybe you should go in there and save his life.”

“Oh, he’d be really mad at me if I did that,” he said as they penetrated the tree line. “He can probably handle them in there, and if not, he’ll die doing something he loves.”

“What could he love about going against Sister’s Edge?”

The man shrugged beside her and shoveled another handful of sunflower seeds into his mouth. Around the bite, he said, “Kade always came off as a man who wants to go out fighting.” He frowned. “No wait, I think that’s me I’m thinking about. You know, I actually don’t know Kade that well. He’s a bit of a mystery.”

“Please stop following me,” she murmured a little louder now that they were farther away from the house-of-confusion.

“Do you want some of these?” he offered, holding out the package of sunflower seeds. She read the label. “Ew, no. Who eats pickle flavored sunflower seeds?”



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“A simple no thank you would’ve worked. I’m beginning to wonder what Kade sees in you.”

“Kade doesn’t see anything in me because Kade doesn’t know me, and I don’t know him.” The pressure in her chest was growing uncomfortable the farther she got away from the house.

“So, you’re going to let him fight all those guys in there and you don’t even want to see the end result?”

“Why would he fight them?” she asked, rounding on him.

Cash shrugged. “So he can take you home?”

“Home? I am home!”

“There’s a snake.”

She yelped and jumped high as a jackrabbit, then skittered away. Indeed, a rattlesnake slithered across the deer path between them.

“Why is your home trying to kill you?” he asked.

“Am I in danger here?” she asked, needing to hear the truth in his voice when he gave her some kind of reassurance.

“Probably.”

“What?”

“You’re a member of the Sister’s Edge Crew. You’re probably a psychopath and also probably your animal is poisonous. Puffer fish?”

She slowly blinked, then did an about face and speed-walked back in the direction of her house.

“My mate is probably going to be waiting for me.”

“Oh, Connor? He sounds lame.”

“How do you know Connor?”

“I don’t know him. I did look up his social media though, and after I waded through the thirst-traps he posts for the probably thirty women he’s private-messaging on there, I found a picture of him eating an entire bag of pickle flavored sunflower seeds.”

“Wait, really?” How had he even found his social media?

“No. He did say he doesn’t like cats on one of his posts though, so fuck him. He probably has a micro-penis.”

She pursed her lips against a grin because this crazy stranger didn’t need encouragement. “Are you here to kill me?” she demanded, rounding on him again, and pushing him back.

“No. Like I said, just abduct. I’m assuming that’s why Kade is here. He wasn’t really specific. He was like, don’t follow me, bla, bla, don’t tell our Crew, bla, bla. I don’t know, my mate had just sent me tit pictures like ten minutes before, and I was still

riding the high from that. Plus, I got stuck on the part where Kade said he was paired.”

“Was paired. Was. Our contract is up. He came here for nothing. Those guys will kill him in there.”

“Mmm, well then they would all die by fire.”

“What?” she asked. “Fire. What does that mean? Do you have a dragon?” she asked.

“Because we have a dragon. You will be the one to die by fire.”

He spat a sunflower seed and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, then pulled a twenty-dollar bill from it. “I bet you twenty dollars our fire-maker will beat your fire-maker.”

“Did you hear me? I said we have a dragon?”

“Whoopy-who.” He shook the twenty-dollar bill, but she slapped it out of his hand.

“You’re crazy.”

“I’ve been called worse,” he said as he stooped to pick up his money. He spilled a bunch of sunflower seeds on the ground and uttered a cuss word. “Do you have a suitcase?”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“For all my tampons?” she spat out. “You freakin’ weirdo. No, because I’m not going with you, or Kade, or whatever imaginary dragon you think you have.”

“I didn’t say we have a dragon.”

“I can’t do this,” she said, her voice shaking as she veered to the left and headed for the back door of her house.

“Where the fuck were you?” Connor yelled as she reached for the door handle.

She jumped hard as he charged her from the side of the porch. She threw her hands up defensively on instinct, but he stopped himself just inches away. “I’ve been waiting here for ten minutes for you, and then you come sneaking in the back door? Where were you?” he asked again.

“I...I...”

“A bit of advice for you? Don’t lie to me.”

Oooh, Connor was different than he had been on their dinner date. He scared her a little. Everyone scared her. She didn’t have access to her animal to protect herself.

Her attention darted to the woods, but Cash was gone, like he’d never existed at all.

“I was curious.”

“About the meeting you specifically weren’t invited to?” He jerked his chin to the

back door. “Go pack.”

“For what?”

“Do as I say,” Connor growled, and she could see it. She could see it in the glowing blue of his eyes, and the scent of fur and dominance that clung to the air. His polar bear was ramping up. “Pack for a few days.”

“Is this about Kade?” she asked, trying to calm him down.

“Don’t say his name!” he yelled, and she hunched at the volume of his voice.

“But I’m not doing anything with Kade. That contract is done—”

“I said not to say his name!” Connor roared in her face, pinning her against the sliding glass door. He slammed his fist against it and shattered the door. She had to catch herself, but an instant stinging sensation consumed the back of her arm as she ducked down and covered her ears.

She dragged air into her lungs as glass rained down around her, and when she looked up, Cash stood in the middle of the yard, eyes gold and trained on Connor. “You drew blood,” he barked out, and all the friendliness was gone from his voice. Now he sounded gritty, and deep.

“Who the fuck are you?” Connor demanded.

“A messenger.”

“A messenger,” Connor said. “What’s the message.”

“You’re going to die.”

Connor laughed a humorless sound. “Oh yeah? Are you going to be the one to kill me?” he asked, stalking forward slowly.

“Nah,” Cash said easily. He backed up slowly, and then pointed to the woods in the direction of Derek’s house. “He is.”

Jess followed where he pointed, and stood slowly, confused by what she saw. The treetops were shaking, and there was a vibration that rattled through her feet.

“Oh my God,” she whispered as she realized what was coming for them. She knew what Kade was. She knew it. But knowing and seeing were two totally different things. When the enormous rhinoceros barreled right through the trees and charged right for Connor, she didn’t wait to see Connor Change. She didn’t wait to see the fight. She was in the path of destruction. She turned to go inside, but she was ripped from her path.

She screamed at the steel grip of the bird of prey that lifted her skyward. She glanced up to see a massive snowy owl. Just one glance and then she was headed for earth again. He dropped her at the front door of the house just as it was impacted by a deafening crash out back.

The owl beat his wings to lift himself upward and looked back at her. She knew what he was saying.

Pack! Everyone kept telling her to pack.

Well, this house was about to come down if the sound of war in the back was anything to go by, but she did indeed need some of her things. Her locket was upstairs. She had to have her locket.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

That was Cash. That was Cash! That snowy owl was Cash, and he had Changed so fast! He'd got her out of the way. He was here to help. He was here to help her, right? Her mind was racing as she yanked the front door open. The rhino had pushed Connor's bear right through the outer wall and into the living room, and it was pure violence.

No time! The back side of the house was collapsing, and she needed her locket!

She bolted up the stairs, screaming as the polar bear flew across the stairwell and cracked through the railing. He roared and charged the rhino, and that had been so close! He could've swiped her with his massive paw if he'd noticed her here!

The house was being absolutely destroyed, and the rest of the Crew would be here any second. She shoved her bedroom door open and ran across the room, fell to her knees, and skidded to a stop in front of the back wall. She pried the loose baseboard off the wall and reached into the space she'd cut years ago. She pulled out the little velvet jewelry pouch and shoved it into her pocket just as the frame of the house buckled. She yelped as the floor she was sitting on dropped by three feet suddenly. Her stomach dipped with the movement. The stairwell would be gone. She looked around the room frantically for anything else she would need, because Derek would take all of this out on her. He would. He would make this her fault. He always needed someone weaker to blame, and she'd been weak for so long.

The floor dipped again and angled toward her door steeply. She fell on her stomach, but clawed her way toward the window, pulled herself up to it, and pushed it up. It shattered with the next buckle of the house, and she flung her arms over her face to protect it. When she opened her eyes again, she was barely able to register the snowy

owl, his wings outstretched, trying to slow down, his talons reaching for her.

Jess didn't think. She just reacted.

The floor was collapsing, and she pushed herself out the window and reached for the owl as she fell.

He caught her by the upper arms.

A cuss whooshed out of her lungs as she was saved from colliding with the earth and launched upward. From up here, she could see what was happening below. Others in the Sister's Edge Crew had reached the backyard and were Changing. The rhino wasn't fighting Connor anymore. Was he dead? Instead, Kade was charging right for a pair of grizzlies. That was the last she saw before she was whisked back down toward a black pickup truck parked down the street.

The owl dropped her by the passenger door, and frantically, she yanked the door open, climbed inside, and slammed the door beside her. She shoved the jewelry pouch even deeper into her pocket for safekeeping and averted her gaze as a very naked Cash slid behind the wheel.

He started it up, threw it into drive, and hit the gas.

Panting, she turned to see some of the Crew were sprinting their way. Miles Changed into his wolf and immediately started gaining on them.

"They're going to kill us."

"They won't."

"You don't understand. Yes they will! If anyone leaves, it's only with the blessing of



the Alpha.”

“Well, you aren’t going back there, lady! That dude broke a glass door over you. He didn’t care if you were hurt. Even if you wanted to stay out of some abuse-victim loyalty to this place, Kade won’t allow it.”

“Kade doesn’t have anything to do with me!”

“Tell that to Kade, who went berserk the second someone drew blood. From you.” He jammed a thumb to the back window. “You want to have a sit-down with him now?”

She looked back, and Miles was running neck and neck with Kade’s enormous rhino. He slung his head, and the werewolf went flying into a neighbor’s yard.

This was definitely going to make the news.

“You’re bleeding.”

She took her attention off the powerful animal gaining on them just long enough to witness the concern on Cash’s face.

“I’m fine.”

“Can you make that stop?” he asked, pointing to her arm.

Confused, she looked down at the sleeve of her hoodie, but it was soaking wet, and warm. “Shoot,” she murmured as she twisted to look at the back of her arm. There was a huge piece of glass lodged into her arm.

She gritted her teeth and pulled it out with a grunt, then dropped the dripping glass on the floorboard by her feet.

“Sweet, that was disturbing and now I’m traumatized,” Cash griped. “Now can you heal it faster or something?”

There was a duffel bag in the back, and she turned in the seat and rifled through it, then pulled out a T-shirt. “I don’t heal fast.”

“Come again? You’re a shifter, right?”

“Kind of. I lost the animal, mostly.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

Cash's eyebrows were nearly to his hair line. "That's a lot of blood, lady."

"Why don't you worry about the rhino charging toward us instead of a little cut," Jess muttered as she peeled her ruined hoodie off.

The truck dipped with a heavy weight, and in terror, she turned to see if the rhino had hit them with a powerful swing of his head or something, but there was a man in the bed of the truck now.

His back was wide, and tanned, and every muscle in his body was tense as he looked behind them. Kade was a man again. His massive hand gripped the tailgate as Cash took a right, and when the truck had straightened out again, Kade swung a glance back at her. His eyes were such a light blue, they almost looked white. He looked terrifying like this.

Behind them, no one was following anymore, but Cash didn't ease off the gas. He sped right out of town. Jess buckled her seatbelt and tried to keep her panic stifled in her chest.

"Can we slow down now?" she asked as they reached the outskirts of Sister's Edge territory.

"No," he gritted out.

His eyes were still bright gold.

"I need you to slow down."

He frowned at her and swung his attention back to the road. “Are you trying to get us caught? You want to go back there?”

“No.” She tried to drag air into her lungs. “I was in an accident,” she admitted fast.

“In a car?” Cash asked. He still wasn’t slowing down.

She held onto the oh-shit handle and tried so hard to breathe.

“Is that what happened to your face?”

“Fuck you,” she wheezed.

A banging sounded on the window behind her. “Slow down, Cash! She asked you to slow down, so do it.”

And Cash did. He eased off the gas and then a few miles later, he pulled over on the side of the road. This was a long stretch, dotted by an occasional farmhouse and not much more. She scanned the road both ways, but they were the only car here right now.

Kade hopped out of the back and opened her door. He was naked, all tensed up, and looked enormous. The man blocked the entire world out.

“Are you okay?” Kade asked her.

“H-hi,” she answered him lamely.

He searched her face, his eyes so intense.

“That was awesome,” Cash said, a smile in his voice.

“Oh was it?” Kade barked over her. “I wasn’t there to brawl, Cash. I had it under control.”

“Wait, don’t blame me for that mess. Her boyfriend was the one who broke glass around her, which, by the way, she’s probably going to pass out soon, so you can sit here griping at me with your whole dick hanging out, or you can get dressed, and administer some first aid to the girl you stole, and we can leave this place and go home. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“You were supposed to stay home and cover for me!” Kade said. “It was simple instructions, and here you are.”

“Driving your getaway car.”

“He pulled me out of the window before the house collapsed,” she told Kade, her eyes downcast. He made the air so heavy right now.

Kade blew out a breath, and paced away, then back. He locked his arms against the frame, and she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t. Jess glanced over at his body. He had chiseled abs, and powerful legs, and his dick was huge and half-mast right now. Maybe he was one of those shifters who got worked up after a Change. He...was...perfect.

“Can you hand me some clothes from the duffel bag?” Kade asked low.

“Sure,” she answered, and reached into the back. “I used one of your T-shirts to wrap my arm. I’m sorry.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Stop apologizing. I always hated that you did that.” He yanked the bag out of her grasp and tossed it to the ground, rifled through it quickly and then dressed as Cash helped her tighten the T-shirt around the gash on the back of her arm.

A couple of cars passed, but Kade was already dressed. He made a gesture to her that she didn’t understand. She shook her head, confused.

“Turn in the seat,” he ground out. “Let me see it.”

Oh. Right. She swallowed hard and then turned and angled her arm for him to see it.

“Shit.” His eyes flickered to hers, and they were darker now. “Is your animal still gone?”

“Mostly.”

He opened the back door and lifted the entire bench seat to reveal a hidden storage compartment. He pulled out a big, red first aid kit. It wasn’t one of those small ones for minor cuts or burns. This one had been assembled custom. Without a word, he offered his hand to help her out of the car. She unbuckled and slid out, refusing his hand. “I don’t need anyone’s help.”

“Cool, you want to sew that up yourself then?” he asked testily.

“Why are you mad at me?” she snapped. “I didn’t ask you to come here.”

“No, Seth did.”

The mention of Seth washed away her anger. “He did?”

“Yeah.” He gestured back in the direction of Sister’s Edge territory. “Connor’s not it, Jess.”

“It’s not like I had a choice.”

“I know.” He blew out a breath and repeated it softer. “I know. That’s the reason I’m here. I’m not trying to extend our contract, Jess. I’m not taking you so I can force you to be with me. This isn’t some overprotective if-I-can’t-have-her-no-one-can move. You were supposed to leave, Jess. You were supposed to free your damn self. I don’t want Connor for you. I want to set you free. When you settle down someday, and your animal picks a mate, it shouldn’t be because you let some guy cut your hand and signed away your freedom.”

Her eyes burned. She struggled to break his gaze, and dropped her eyes to her lap, afraid he would see the tears building in her eyes. That was probably the only damn thing she’d heard in years that made sense.

She’d heard the truth in every one of his words. He really was here to set her free.

“I don’t know what I’ll do,” she said thickly. “My whole life is back there. My job, my clothes, my friends, my Alpha. I was never meant to be rogue.” She shook her head and dared a look up at him, hoping for understanding there.

“You’ll do it a day at a time.” He offered her a mini bottle of whisky.

“What’s that for?”

“For the pain. I need to clean your arm.”

“I don’t need it. I’m tough.”

Kade nodded and tossed the pocket shot back into the first aid kit, and then he poured hydrogen peroxide all over the cut. It burned so badly, she winced her eyes closed, but she refused to make a sound or move away from his work.

“Is Connor dead?” she asked. She had to know.

“No. I have control now. He’s hurt but he’ll live. No one died.” The assurances of a murderer. He was telling the truth though. She could tell.

“He won’t come for me,” she said softly. “They won’t leave the territory. Derek has rules. It’s how Sister’s Edge had stuck around for so long. All of the Alphas follow a list of rules. They protect the territory, that’s it.”

“Mmm,” Kade said blandly as he pressed on the cut, feeling for more glass. She didn’t feel any more in there. It just burned from the slice and the peroxide.

“Oh. I totally just forgot you lived here before. You already know this.” He probably knew the rules better than her. He’d been Third, after all. He’d been under Derek for years before he’d done what he’d done. “Um, I’m a little overwhelmed right now. That was my home. It’s nothing but dust now. That was a lot.”

Kade didn’t say anything else. He stitched her up shockingly fast, and she focused on staying very still for him. Where he’d learned to do that, she had no clue. Maybe it was from Cold Foot Prison, or maybe it was from his old life. She didn’t know about either one.

He wrapped a bandage around the injury and then put away the first aid supplies as she climbed back into the passenger’s seat and buckled up.



She hated riding in cars. Probably always would.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

Cash switched to the seat in the back and Kade got in behind the wheel, and they were off.

To where?

She had no clue.

Her entire life had been ripped out from under her, and she was in shock, perhaps.

The guys were acting like this was totally normal. Cash was talking to someone on the phone in the back, and Kade was surfing radio stations, and she was just sitting in this freefall, her mind going in a million different directions. And her animal...her animal...she must've been broken or something because all she kept whispering through her head on repeat was, Can you feel him?

Yeah.

Yeah, Jess could feel him.

Kade had felt big years ago, but now?

Now, Kade was a different animal altogether.

## Chapter Four

“You look scared.”

The words shook Jess out of her mind, and she dragged her attention away from the window. Outside, Kade was pacing in front of his truck, looking agitated, talking on the phone. She couldn't hear a single word from here, even with her sensitive hearing. It was like he knew her range.

Cash was sitting across the table at the diner. It was all red bench seats and checkered floors, and hamburger baskets. Her appetite was non-existent right now, so she'd just been sitting here staring at that stranger out the window. She uncrossed her arms from her chest and rested her elbows on the table and began ripping up the napkin in front of her. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I suppose you can just drop me here."

"I can go back and get your car for you."

"I don't have a car. I worked at the same place as my sister-in-law. I always hitched a ride with her or borrowed her car when she had a day off. The grocery store was right outside the neighborhood, and within walking distance. I made it all right."

Cash relaxed back against the seat cushion and watched Kade out the window. "He had a plan. I bet he's got a plan for getting you back on your feet. He's dependable."

She huffed a laugh. God, what a joke.

"That's funny?"

"How did he get out of Cold Foot Prison?" she asked.

"Escaped. Well, more specifically, we were yanked out of there by Damon Daye. The blue dragon hand-picked him."

"Why?" she asked. Oh, everyone knew who Damon Daye was. He was royalty in the shifter world, and the biggest advocate for her people. If he had come off his throne

long enough to yank Kade out of shifter prison? Well, that was probably a curious story indeed.

Cash shrugged. “So far, the reasons he pulled each of us out have revealed themselves slowly. And those reasons have strengthened our Crew.”

“He’s in a Crew?”

“Cold Foot Crew.”

She nodded slowly. Jess had never heard of it. “Is he climbing ranks?”

“No. Doesn’t seem to want to. He’s just...good.”

She frowned at Cash. “He’s good?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what he did?”

Cash shook his head. “I never asked. I figured he will tell us when he’s ready.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“He won’t ever tell you. He’ll be carrying that secret to his grave and hoping it doesn’t follow him straight to hell.”

Cash cracked his knuckles and crossed his forearms on the table, leaning heavily forward. “You hate him, don’t you?”

“No.” She considered it. “I don’t know actually. Maybe. I don’t really know him. I just know he made a decision that messed up our plan.”

“Your plan to pair up?”

“Kind of. We had an arrangement. He was supposed to keep all the pressure off me and not ask me for my heart. We were just going to exist together, you know? How long has he been in your Crew?”

“Nine months ago was when we escaped Cold Foot. We pledged to the Crew pretty soon after.”

“Has he ever mentioned me?”

Cash shook his head slowly.

She huffed a breath, because truth-be-told, that stung a little. It was hard being so easy to forget. He was probably happy to be out of the contract with her. He was probably planning to never let her know he’d gotten out of prison.

Jess had felt stupid in a lot of moments over the years with Sister’s Edge, and right

now was another one of those times.

She'd thought about him over the years, and kept his picture where she could pull it up easily.

Kade had moved on completely.

"I saw his face right after he found out you were being claimed by Connor, just so you know."

Jess stopped ripping up the napkin. "What?"

"He looked gutted. I can see you beating the shit out of yourself in your head right now. I don't know why he didn't go get you right after he got out. I don't know much of his story from before the escape. But I do know him as he is now, and he's good. Whatever he did, he's not that anymore. People change."

"No one ever changes. Not really."

Cash took one of the fries from her basket, and around the bite, he said, "I used to think like that too."

"What changed your mind?"

"Cold Foot Crew for one. Two was my mate opened up my eyes to a lot. The world is bigger than just in here." He gestured to his head. "You've been in that neighborhood, depending on people for a ride, sucked into being a rule-minder to a Crew who was trying to contract you into pairings, thinking you're free when you're not. You didn't even look mad when that asshole broke that door right next to your face. You weren't even mad, lady. That's going to sink in here in a few weeks. Trust me."

“Trust you, a stranger who came in and started a war in the heart of my Crew, and then left with me?”

Cash grinned and gestured to Kade, who was walking back toward the diner now. “You’ll thank me for that in a few weeks too. Trust me.”

She was still staring at Cash like he was an idiot when the bell over the door dinged a dainty sound, signifying that Kade was in here. He strode to the table and made Cash scoot over so he could sit across the table from Jess, as far away as he could. She pursed her lips and focused on eating her fries. Who knew when her next meal would be. She had her purse, so she had her debit and credit card. She had a little in her bank account, but not much, and she would need to find a place to stay. If she had her animal, she could go beast at night, but she didn’t. She would need shelter.

What town was this? She looked out the window for some sign. If it had an extended-stay motel here, she might be able to get a cheaper rate while she figured out a job.

“Are you not hungry?” Kade asked gruffly.

“I’m just...” Jess forced herself to eat a couple more fries.

“You’re just what?”

“Stressed.”

She watched the change in his expression. His stormy blue eyes softened. “It must be a lot. For me too.”

“How does me having to figure out my entire life in an instant have any effect on you?”

He swallowed and nodded. “Okay.”



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

No really. She was curious. He was going to drop her off somewhere and set her free. That's what his plan was. And she would have to rebuild from scratch, and he could go back to his Cold Foot Crew, with his friend, and whatever life he'd been building there for the past nine months.

He stood and walked away. She thought he was angry, but he stopped at the front kiosk and pulled out his wallet, then paid.

"Come on," Cash muttered.

She felt nauseous, and didn't want to eat another bite, so she stood up easily enough and followed them outside to say her goodbyes.

Cash had parked his truck here and flown into Sister's Edge, so the guys both headed toward their separate trucks.

"It was wild to meet you," she called after them.

Kade turned and cocked his head. "What are you doing?"

She clutched her purse against her chest like a shield and looked down the road at the first buildings of the main drag. "This place is as good as any other."

"For what?"

"For you to drop me off."

“You’re an hour away from Sister’s Edge,” Cash pointed out. “They’ll pull you back in so fast. You’ll be back with Connor by tomorrow.”

“Well, maybe I’ll travel east. Or west. Or...I don’t know.” She shrugged her shoulders up to her ears. Her eyes were doing that stupid burning thing again.

Kade inhaled deeply and then twitched his head for Cash to go on without him.

“Nice to meet you, lady.”

“Jess,” she said. “My name is Jess.” She cleared her throat. “Thanks for getting me out of that house.”

Cash did a little salute and then gave a two-fingered wave to Kade before he got into his truck and pulled out of the parking lot. He floored it on the main road and black smoke billowed out of the back of his loud pickup.

Kade scratched the scruff on his jaw and pulled out his phone. “You can stay in Cold Foot territory until you get back onto your feet.”

“Oh yeah? You mean I can stay in your house, and we can have a plan and then you can fuck it up and leave me all alone again?” She got louder as she said that sentence and yelled the last part.

Kade winced and squeezed his eyes tightly closed. “You’re mad.”

“Disappointed, but it’s nothing new. I do appreciate that you signed the Promise contract right before you did all that stupid shit. At least I was able to avoid another contract until now.”

“Sounds lonely.”

“Prison sounds lonely too,” she threw back at him.

“You didn’t write me,” he gritted out.

“I did! I did! I wrote to you for weeks, and they all came back to me in a bundle with a typewritten note that the prisoner had refused them. You refused them, Kade! So, I stopped writing, and I swallowed all the things I wanted to say, and all the confusion, and all the fear because I was the Promised of a man who killed one of our own! Sister’s Edge couldn’t take it out on you. You were gone. Guess who was still there? Me! What was the point of writing a stranger who didn’t want me to?” Oh, she hated that shake in her voice. He had no right to see her emotions up right now.

“You don’t have to stay with me.”

“You couldn’t pay me enough,” she gritted out. “You’re a let-down man.”

He flinched and walked away, shaking his head. “Fine. Suit yourself. Settle here or go back to Sister’s Edge. It’s not my business either way.”

“I don’t need anyone!”

He slammed the door and headed back for her. “You shouldn’t talk about things you didn’t witness.”

She held her ground and he stopped a few paces away. She didn’t know what he meant, so she crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin higher, didn’t say a word.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“I didn’t kill anyone, Jess. I just took the blame for it. I heard you asking Cash why Damon Daye took me out of Cold Foot. There it is. I didn’t do anything wrong. I fucking protected the person that did it.”

“No. You did it. They found you there. You did it.”

His eyes sparked with anger. He approached slowly, closing the last few feet between them. “I. Didn’t. Kill. Anyone.”

Truth.

Wait, what? Her heart was hammering so hard in her chest right now. “Who? Who killed him?”

“Your brother. The only people who know that are Samuel, me, Derek, Tanner in his last moments, and now you. There’s the big deep dark secret of Sister’s Edge. Sometimes they need a fall-boy, and sometimes they can yank a fall-boy out of the top three ranks and make his entire Crew hate him. Sometimes they can lock him away, but they didn’t need to do that. I would’ve kept their secret. You and I both know, loyalty to Sister’s Edge trumps everything.” He pulled his phone out and showed her a picture of a house.

“What’s this?”

“A rental. I just got off the phone with one of my Crew mates, Garret. I’ve paid for two months for you up front. You can be safe there and left alone. It’s in the territory of Wreck’s Mountains, but far enough away from me and my Crew that you can just

get a break from everyone and everything. You can figure your life out. And maybe that's to go back to Sister's Edge. Or maybe that's to spin a globe and put your finger on somewhere random, and then grow a life there. Garret's mate is all excited and grocery shopping for you right now. I bet she'll have a damn casserole in the fridge for you, so you don't have to worry about finding food right away. I hated that you just called me that." His eyes flashed with anger again. "I'm not a let-down man. I am sorry you got caught up in all of that. I'm sorry. I am. But it wasn't part of my plan. My plan was to follow through with the Promise, and get to know you, and maybe someday become friends. Teammates. I don't know. I was hopeful, and then that night happened and my best friend is testifying against me at trial, and I'm sent to Cold Foot, and I have to figure out where I stack up in the pecking order in a shifter prison, knowing I was there for life. There's the real story. I'm guessing things will make more sense to you the longer you're out of Sister's Edge. That's what happened for me." He walked away. "I'll wait in the truck for your decision."

And he left her there with her thoughts reeling. That's all he'd done since she'd seen him in Derek's house—left her reeling.

He was saying Samuel murdered Tanner. Not only that, but he had allowed Kade to take the fall for him?

It couldn't be. It couldn't. Maybe Kade had learned how to trick her shifter senses while he was in Cold Foot Prison. Maybe he could lie so convincingly that it sounded like the truth, even to shifters? There was no way Samuel did this. No way. No. Nope.

But...

She had seen Samuel in cruel moments. She'd seen him in bloody brawls with others in the Crew who had crossed him. She'd seen his attitude with Misty. She'd seen his draw to power, and Tanner had been dominant. She'd seen him in fights that could've

easily gone too far and ended up in someone being seriously hurt or worse. She'd known since she'd reunited with Samuel in her adult life that he had been vastly different from the little boy she remembered, before they were split into different foster homes.

He wouldn't do this though. He wouldn't.

She scanned the town around the parking lot, considering her loosely fleshed out plan to gain her bearings here, in the town of...she didn't even know where she was.

But Kade was offering her sanctuary with no pressure—if he was really telling the truth.

The house in the picture looked quaint and nice.

Can you feel him?

Her animal was so broken. Jess felt sorrow over the connection she'd lost with her. Now she didn't know how to say much. She just repeated nonsensical things.

What should she do?

Get into the truck with a let-down man and have faith that he had changed, or stand on her own two legs and figure out her life, here, on the outskirts of Sister's Edge.

Alone time in a house for even a few days sounded so nice. She'd been living in a Crew house for years, and there was always chaos, and it was hard to think clearly while she was navigating those dynamics.

She didn't know what the right answer was, but right now, everything was so messed up, did it even matter? Either way, Sister's Edge would hate her.

She waited for the feeling of sorrow to fill her stomach over that thought, but it didn't.

Maybe she was in shock and numbing down to cope.

In his pickup, Kade rolled down the window and draped his arm out. He didn't gesture for her to hurry up or anything. He just sank into patience and let the country music drift out of that open window.

Sanctuary for a few days sounded nice. It was a much better option than draining all of her funds to figure out a life here, in this unknown town.

She let her purse settle to her side and patted her pocket to make sure the locket was still safely lodged there. It was.

Steeling herself to take a little shot to her pride, she meandered toward his truck, and got in.

She waited for him to say something annoying, but he wasn't gloating. Instead, he pulled out of the parking lot and at the first stop light, he turned to her and asked, "How is your arm feeling?"

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

Honestly, she'd forgotten about it until he'd just reminded her that it was even hurt.

The cut didn't feel like anything at all.

Confused, she slid her hand over the back of her arm, now tucked into the gas station hoodie she'd splurged on after her last one was ruined by inconvenient bleeding.

Even putting pressure on it with her fingertips, it didn't hurt at all. What the heck?

She pulled off her hoodie, and when her head was free of the thick material, she caught Kade's attention on the upper shelf of her tank top. He jerked his attention to the road and looked just as surprised with himself as she felt.

Heat crept up her neck and landed in her cheeks as she readjusted her tank top. She dared another shy glance at him before she twisted her skin at her elbow so she could see the bandage better. It wasn't bleeding through at all. She pulled the bandage out so she could see the cut, but it was completely sealed up, and looked like a silver scar under the stitches. "Oh my gosh," she whispered.

"Is it bad?" he asked.

"No." She met his gaze, completely shocked. "It's healed."

A slow smile stretched his masculine lips. "That's a good thing."

"Yeah."



Can you feel him?

Her animal was here. She was confused, sure, but today, she'd been whispering to her more than any other day in as long as she could remember. If that wasn't proof enough, the fast healing would be. It was the realization that she had some kind of connection to her animal again.

Jess caught him staring at her.

"What happened to your face?" Kade asked.

And just like that, her hopefulness faded. She made herself remarkably busy with removing the bandage. She would have to cut out the stitches. "You know what happened," she uttered softly.

"No, I mean what happened to your scars. They're almost gone. Did your animal do that?"

"Uuuh, nope. A surgeon did it. I'm still paying off the medical bills. I wanted to be easier to look at."

And there were Kade's bright blue eyes, boring into her, his dark eyebrows drawn down low. "You were always easy to look at."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"I'm not joking. Who told you that? Who said you were hard to look at?"

"It was said mostly with other peoples' stares. And the horrified glances. I hate it when people ask me what happened. I wanted to just meet someone, and them not pity me, or looked grossed out."

He nodded. “Well, just for the record, I thought your scars looked cool.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No. You were always pretty. It wasn’t hard to cut your hand, Jess.” He gestured to her face. “It makes sense that Connor would be interested now. Let me guess—he’s on a run for rank.”

“Good guess,” she admitted honestly. “He’s preparing to Challenge for Third.”

“He’ll need to be paired up to hold that rank.”

“That was his plan.”

“You mean you were his plan.”

“Sound familiar?” she asked softly.

Kade didn’t look at her again for a while. He just drove and looked thoughtful as the scraggly desert trees morphed to pines. That was the thing she loved about Oregon. It held every terrain—beach, desert, piney woods, forest waterfalls, and snowy mountains. She hadn’t seen the piney woods for a while. It was beautiful outside.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Can I roll down the window too?” she asked.

“You can do whatever you want. No one can tell you what to do anymore, Jess.”

She rolled down the window and rested her elbow against the frame, spreading her fingers wide to feel the wind. Her hair was whipping everywhere, so she pulled up her hoodie to keep it tucked back and relaxed into the seat and stretched her arm out again to the sound of the music.

Kade leaned over her, startling her, but opened the handle of the glove box, and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. Then he handed them to her.

They were a pair of men’s Oakley’s, and too big for her face, but she liked them. She turned and showed him. An accidental grin stretched her lips. She must’ve looked so silly right now.

“Perfect,” he said with a chuckle.

The smile faded from her face as she saw his smile. What a smile that man had. She didn’t remember it from before. He’d always been so serious back then, but now, he was an easy smiler. She could tell. He was healing polar bear claw marks, and had taken time out of his life to come pick her up, and this couldn’t be easy on him. She was a bag of memories he was choosing to carry on his back. Some might be good memories, but she would bet many were bad.

And yet still...here he was with a smile plastered across his face. A genuine one.

Had her smile ever been as easy as Kade's? She couldn't recall.

How had he gotten here? Cold Foot Prison couldn't have been easy.

"What was it like?" she asked.

"What?" he asked.

"The trial and stuff? I didn't go. No one was allowed to except for the ones involved or who were testifying."

He scrunched up his face. "Let's talk about that tank top instead. Was that what you were wearing to go out with Connor?"

She tried to hide her smile. "Too modest?"

He gave a dark laugh. "You need to be wearing a potato sack around that one."

"Maybe this is what I wear now. Maybe I'm scandalous."

He snorted. "I wouldn't call that shirt scandalous. The females in my crew wear freaking next-to-nothing right now."

"It's hot where you're from?"

"It's warm. They all run hot."

"Are they all...you know?"

"No, what?"

“Are they all pretty? Are any of them into you?” She shoved her hands into her hoodie pockets and said, “You know what? Never mind. It feels so weird right now to try for normal conversation when my house is probably a pile of rubble back there. The house fell.”

“That’s not your fault or mine. Connor broke the door and hurt you. The rhino reacted. He was the one who pulled the fight into the house. That’s on him.”

“They’ll blame it all on me,” she said low.

“Nah. They’ll blame me, and you know what? That’s okay. I could level every house in the Crew, and it still wouldn’t make up for what they did to my life.”

Huh. Okay, that actually made her feel better about the house.

“Derek makes all the Crew houses take on shifter destruction insurance,” she told him, reaching for a bright side.

“Well, there you go. It’ll be rebuilt in no time.”

“Is Connor really alive?” she asked suddenly.

“Yep. Hurt but alive.”

“He won’t come for me, I don’t think. Contract talk was really new. I think he was just settling for me. There aren’t a lot of females left in the Crew who are unpaired and my age. A lot of them left over the last few years.”

“I don’t blame them. They’re chess pieces. Who all left and who all is still there?”

“Mmmm, no. That seems like spying.”

“Curiosity about an old Crew I thought I would be tethered to forever. Fair enough though, what do you want to talk about?”

“How I’m going to pay you back for the two months’ rent. How much is it?”

“Seven hundred a month. Garret gave me a family discount.”

Okay, so she owed him fourteen hundred dollars if she chose to stay. She had some of that, but not all. “Is Garret part of your Crew?”

Kade nodded and then talked about the Cold Foot Crew for a while. He told her about each of them, and about the day they escaped the prison together. The way he spoke about it all was a breath of fresh air. He cared about these people. Oh sure, he was open with the fact that they all got on his nerves in different ways at various times, especially Cash, but overall, he cared.

He shared about his life some, and she got lulled into this safe feeling that she could

tell him about his old Crew too. Who was in charge now, who had moved up ranks and lost those ranks. Who was left, and who had been added since he'd gone to prison. How they had all coped after Tanner's death.

Oh, she would get to the bottom of his claims that her brother had murdered Tanner, but for now, while they were stuck in this truck together for the next ten hours, she wanted to keep the conversation light and interesting.

When she got to wherever it was that they were going, she was going to take some time and go over all their conversations, and his reactions, and she was going to figure out exactly how she felt about all of this, and most importantly, how she felt about the new Kade.

He wanted something from her. No man did anything out of the kindness of their heart.

Jess might not know what his angle was yet, but she was confident she was going to figure it out.

## Chapter Five

"We're here."

Jess inhaled deeply and eased her eyes open, confused. Where was she?

"Come on, sleepyhead. You can go back to sleep inside."

Kade looked tired, and as she checked the time, she figured out why. He'd driven straight through the night. It was six in the morning, and outside, the early morning light cast a grey hue over a sleepy neighborhood.

They were parked in a driveway, and she recognized the house from the picture he'd showed her. The yard was mowed, and there were flowers blooming in the landscaping. She sat up straighter and blinked a few times, trying to wake up. "How long was I asleep?" she asked. Jess didn't even remember falling asleep.

"Nine hours."

"What?" she whispered.

"Hey," he said softly. "You can sleep as long as you want. You can do whatever you want."

He was being too nice. The house was probably a halfway house or riddled with mold or something.

Kade got out, and she watched him saunter up to the front of the house and lift a rock in the landscaping to retrieve a key. He opened the front door and left it open.

She could still run. She could get out of this truck and start hiking down the road. She could catch rides to wherever she wanted. But...then what?

That was the question.

Now what?

Jess pushed open the door and got out, then shut the door gently behind her. The neighborhood was silent at this time of morning. The house to her right had a for-rent sign in the yard.

She made her way carefully up the sidewalk and then hesitated on the welcome mat. The house number was all crooked. One of the numbers sat at an angle, but when she



tried to right it, she realized the number had been nailed like that. She frowned at the 1010.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Do you mind if I make a cup of coffee before I go?” Kade asked from inside.

“Why would I mind?” she asked, stepping inside. “This isn’t my place.”

“Well, according to the welcome basket with your name on it, I’m pretty sure it’s at least temporarily yours.”

“Welcome basket,” she repeated, trying to shake the fog of sleep from her mind.

He was standing across the small living room in an open kitchen with woodblock countertops, and green cabinets. Cute. He was pointing to a big basket of snacks.

She closed the door behind her and took her shoes off at the door, then padded into the kitchen, eyes on the basket. There were tons of snacks in it, and a bottle of red wine. Beside it was a note.

Jess,

Welcome to the house! I don’t know what you like to eat, but I put some groceries in the fridge and pantry so you can find your footing before you have to worry about food. The last tenant moved out about a month ago, and the house has been cleaned, and all the bedding is washed. There are towels in the hallway closet. If you need anything, I’ll put my number at the bottom of this. My name is Raynah, and my husband Garret is the one who owns this rental. Let us know if anything needs fixing! Oh, and the propane tank is full for the firepit on the back porch. Use it as much as you want. Can’t wait to meet you. Any friend of Kade’s is a friend of ours.

Raynah Hoffman

P.S. I got a few flavors of creamer for the coffee because I didn't know what you would prefer.

Surprised, Jess set the note back on the counter and opened the fridge. It was full of food, and was all unopened jars and uncooked steak and chicken still in the grocery store packaging.

“Did she get French vanilla creamer?” Kade asked in a deep, sleepy voice.

He was loading some kind of pod into a weird contraption on the counter.

“Yes,” she answered, pulling out the right creamer for him. “What’s that?” she asked pointing.

“It makes a single cup of coffee quick. Here, you take your coffee cup and fill it with water like this,” he murmured, filling a cup in the sink. “Then you pour it into the back, like this.” He poured his water into the back of the contraption. “You put a coffee pod in here.” He opened up a lever on the front and showed her where he had put a pod in already, then closed it back and put the cup on the little platform in the front and pushed a glowing blue button. “It’ll fill your cup with the perfect amount of coffee in just a few minutes.”

This was so weird. Her old life was in splinters, and here she was, states away, learning how to make a cup of coffee using sorcery.

She meandered around the living room, picking up little décor items that adorned the fireplace mantle, and the coffee table. She made her way down the hallway and looked into the bedrooms and the bathroom. Everything was clean, dimly lit, and homey.

It wasn't hers though. Stuff like this didn't happen to a girl like her. Never had and never would.

Exhaustion dragged at her limbs as she leaned against the open doorframe to the last bedroom and looked longingly at the soft bed.

"Go back to sleep," Kade said from behind her.

She huffed a soft laugh and shook her head. "I don't know why I'm so tired. I don't usually sleep nine hours. I feel like I could sleep for three days." Jess made her way to the bed and sank down onto the edge of it, just to see if it was as comfortable as it looked. It was.

There was a lamp on the bedside table to illuminate the room, so she could see Kade just fine as he took her place leaning against the frame, one arm crossed over his chest, and the other holding his steaming cup of coffee. "When I was arrested, Sisters police department wasn't really ready to contain a shifter like me, so they had to send me a few towns over and hold me in this huge cage designed to contain destructive shifters. I had a lawyer visit me a few times and tell me what was going on with the trial, but otherwise, I was alone down there."

"That's awful."

His lips quirked into a slight smile. "No it wasn't. I slept for days. No one bothered me. No one needed anything from me. No one was messing with my head. I never slept so much in my life as I did when I was taken from Sister's Edge." He pushed off the doorway and pulled something from his pocket, then set it on the bedside table. It was the housekey. "Even if you slept for three days, it's okay. No one will bother you. No one will need anything from you. No one will be messing with your head." Kade took a sip of his coffee and then set it next to the key. It was kind of beautiful. Simple. It was just a cup of steaming coffee next to a housekey under a soft-glow

lamp. It was a square foot of something peaceful.

Kade reached behind her and pulled the covers down, and she stood so he could pull it back the rest of the way. Then she smiled sleepily, put her purse on the bedside table, and then pulled out the jewelry pouch from her pocket, and set it next to the key.

Kade's attention flickered to it, and held, but he didn't ask about it. Good. She didn't want him to. Not now.

He waited for her to kick out of her socks and pull off her hoodie and then settle into bed. He checked the cut on the back of her arm, but whatever he saw there, he seemed satisfied enough. He didn't fuss over it too much. She laid down and he reached for his coffee cup to leave.

"Maybe can you stay just a couple minutes?" she asked.

"Until you fall asleep?"

She dipped her chin once.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

His bright blue eyes held her gaze trapped for a few seconds, and then he picked up the coffee cup anyway. She thought he would leave. She thought she'd asked something stupid, and the blush crept into her cheeks quickly. He didn't go though. Instead, Kade sat on the edge of the bed, and took a sip, and then another.

"Why didn't you leave?" he asked low.

Jess shrugged and hugged one of the spare pillows closer. "I just got stuck, I guess."

He reached over and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "I imagined you found a better place. I had a lot of time to think in Cold Foot Prison, and that was the fantasy. You were supposed to be better off."

Whoo her heart. "My fantasy was that you would come back and make it right somehow. I have a picture of you in my phone, from our Promise Day. I would look at it when everything felt too heavy. I imagined who you were. Who you really were. I tried to figure out why you did what you did. I wanted you to be someone better than you were."

He broke their eye contact and stared at the open doorway he'd come in, like he wanted to escape. And she got it. She understood. She was still a bag of memories.

"If I never see you again, thank you for trying," she told him.

"Trying to what?"

"Trying to fix things. Setting up a few nights here for me. Being nice. You didn't

have to do any of this. Our contract is done.”

He huffed a breath. “Maybe it was never about a contract for me, Jess.” Kade stood and made his way to the door. “If I never see you again, thank you for trusting me enough to leave.”

She let off a sleepy laugh. “You got the entire Sister’s Edge Crew riled up, interrupted my date night with my next Promise, brawled with said Promise, and destroyed my house. What choice did I have?”

“There’s always a choice,” he said with a grin. “If you were too deep in it, you would’ve Changed and defended your next Promise.”

“I don’t have access to my animal much anymore, remember?”

“Oh yeah? Then why does the cut on your arm look two months healed already?”

And she had no response to that, because dammit, he had a point. A good one. If her animal was still dormant, the healing wouldn’t have happened like it had.

“Fuck that date,” he said. “I’m glad I interrupted it. I would do it again.” There was conviction in his voice. “Goodbye, Stranger.”

She smiled softly at him and wished she could take a picture of him just as he was—standing tall, dimly illuminated with the soft, gold glow of the bedside lamp, eyes bright, hair mussed, looking sleepy and drained, handsome, and smiling at her with an ease he was never able to before, when she knew the Sister’s Edge version of him.

She wished she could remember him just as he was in this moment, not what she remembered of him before.

“Goodbye, Stranger,” she murmured.

## Chapter Six

Kade sat in front of the house, staring at the front door. What was he still doing here? He'd been parked here for five minutes, trying to convince himself to leave.

Jess was probably long asleep. She didn't need anything. She was safe. She was good.

How many times had he looked over at Jess while she slept on that long drive? How many times had he noted how pretty she was, or the peace that found her face when she was unconscious to the problems in her world. She looked different, and she felt different too. She was more defensive now. More careful. A little bitter at certain points in their conversation. The years since he'd last seen her had taken a toll on her.

But underneath it all, there was still the watchful, sometimes shy, scarred but strong beauty with the surprising wit, and the smile that showed up sometimes when she was happy, and sometimes when she was feeling sarcastic. She was a study in balances.

She was hurting inside. That much was easy to sense when he was around her, but he knew that could change if only she had time away from the things that had been dragging her down.

Females in the Sister's Edge Crew were like birds who'd had their wings clipped.

Hell, after a couple years in Cold Foot Prison, he felt the same about himself when he thought back to his Sister's Edge times.

Distance from that place was what she needed. Distance and rest, and space from anything or anyone who needed anything from her.



And that...that was the part that was making it hard to leave.

He wouldn't see her anymore.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

Kade frowned and ripped his gaze away from her front door. He'd left his phone number on the counter in case she needed anything, but if he had to guess, she would want to distance herself from everything to do with Sister's Edge, and once upon a time, he had been Third there. And then he'd been taken away in handcuffs, and she'd been left to deal with the aftermath.

Jess would probably never forgive him for that. He could tell she didn't believe him about Samuel being the one who murdered Tanner. Maybe it had been a mistake to tell her.

He eased his foot onto the gas and coasted out of the small residential neighborhood and aimed his truck toward Wreck's Mountains.

### Chapter Seven

The clock on the bedside table read 6:29.

Confused, Jess pushed up in the unfamiliar bed and rubbed her eyes and then read it again. 6:29. The saturated evening light made a halo around the closed window blinds. There was no way she'd slept twelve hours. Not after sleeping nine on the way here.

No way. No. Way.

She swung her legs over the bed and pressed the soles of her feet against the soft carpet. Her back was sore, probably from lying in the same position for too long.

The silence threatened to drown her.

She could hear her thoughts too easily in a deep quiet like this.

Her house back home was probably reduced to rubble, and the Sister's Edge Crew would be sorting through insurance paperwork. Not your house. Your room, the animal corrected. More like a cage. Your cage is reduced to rubble.

Jess huffed a breath. Well, at least the animal could say something other than, can you feel him? It was progress, she supposed.

The carpet was so soft, it tickled her feet. Her skin was sensitive right now. The sheets were comfortable against the backs of her legs, and against the palms of her hands as she sat here with her arms locked against the mattress on either side of her hips.

Her hair was hanging in her face, and she shook it out of her way, then stood, and stretched. It felt so damn good.

Feeling groggy, she padded into the bathroom down the hallway and turned on the light, then noticed the gas station bag of toiletries she'd bought for herself while Kade had pumped the gas into his truck about an hour outside of Sister's Edge. She traced the lettering of the logo. Oregon. Oregon felt a million miles away now.

She looked up at her reflection and yelped and then laughed at her rat's nest of hair that had tangled on top of her head.

Her house was in a pile of rubble.

The thought dragged the smile from her lips. Inhaling deep, Jess traced the remnants of the biggest scar on her face from that damn car accident all those years ago. She

wished that she could look in the mirror and see anything else, but even when she tried, her attention always drifted back to her cheek. Her make-up from yesterday was probably smeared off onto one of the bedroom pillows, and the big scar was red and angry looking. The doctors had fixed so much, but this one was stubborn. Her jaw ached from clenching her teeth in her sleep. The break there had healed badly. A vision of headlights coming straight for her made Jess flinch. The sound of shattering glass, and metal slamming against metal was deafening. She broke out into a cold sweat.

Why couldn't she cut that damn memory from her head? It had been so long ago. God, she hated the scar-reminders in her reflection. She never wanted to think about it again.

He said Samuel killed Tanner.

The thought had her gripping the side of the sink. Jess squeezed her eyes tightly closed and tried to banish it from her mind. She didn't want to think about any of this stuff.

She needed to stay busy. That was her coping mechanism—stay busy from sunup until sundown, and go to bed so exhausted, she didn't have the energy to question her life.

She focused on one thing at a time.

Brush her teeth.

Brush her hair.

Wash her face.

Put her toiletries away.

On and on, and so forth until she felt as ready as she could be for the day, and then she made her way into the living room.

When she saw the coffee machine, she got a little excited. Jess looked around on instinct to make sure she wouldn't get in trouble. In the house in Sister's Edge, she rented the smallest room, because she was the lowest rank, and that siphoned down to a lot of things in that home. She was the last to get food if they were eating meals together. The last to pour coffee from the pot in the mornings, and often there was just a trickle left, and she wasn't allowed to make more, because any extra would be wasteful, according to Samuel. She came last on everything, but a pairing would've fixed that. Her Promise to Kade would've put her first on many things, because he was Third. Not that it was important to her, but there were times when she didn't get enough to eat or to drink that she thought it would've been nice.

Here? She could make her own cup of coffee with her choice of creamer, and no one could say shit about fuck about it.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

She pursed her lips against a tremulous smile as she performed the wizardry that Kade had shown her on the coffee machine. She got a little insecure when it didn't do anything at first, but figured out the little machine was just warming up the water.

She picked a caramel macchiato flavor of creamer, made with something called oat milk, but she was pretty sure oats didn't have any titties to get the milk out of it, so while her coffee made itself, she did an internet search on oat milk just to make sure it wasn't something weird before she drank it. It seemed harmless enough.

Plus, when she poured it into her steaming cup and took a sip, it tasted delicious. Way better than the powdered, fat free, sugar free kind Samuel insisted she and Misty consume to 'keep their figures.' That had always been weird to her because she was a shifter. It was hard to even gain weight. Likely, Samuel just needed a sense of control over everything. He'd been like that when she'd been reunited with him. Control was his gig.

Kade said he killed Tanner.

"Stop," she gritted out.

I didn't say anything, the animal answered.

"I'm not talking to you."

Then who are you talking to?

How did she explain to her animal that her voice wasn't the only one she shared her

head with? She had her own thoughts, and sometimes she didn't have the best control over them.

She knew her brother. He was controlling, and mean sometimes, but he wasn't a murderer. Not like Kade was.

She didn't know where to sit. There was no assigned seating, like at her other house—

Cage, the animal argued.

“House,” she said aloud, correcting her.

Jess could sit on the couch in the living room, or the loveseat, or the dining table in front of the window. The blinds were open above the kitchen sink, and outside, there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

It was six in the evening, and she was doing her morning routine. She frowned down at her coffee. This was a bad idea. She would never get back to sleep tonight. But then again, she'd already slept for twenty-one, almost consecutive, hours, so probably she wouldn't sleep tonight anyway.

With a shrug, Jess took another sip of coffee and noticed a piece of folded paper on the end of the counter, over by the pantry.

No one would get angry with her for turning lights on here and wasting electricity if it was just her, so she turned on the kitchen lights and made her way to the note, a flutter of confusing hope filling her heart with each step she took toward it.

Jess set the coffee down and unfolded the paper. A stack of money fell out. She counted out a hundred dollars in twenties. What the heck? She put the money down

and read the note out loud. “Jess, I wanted to give you my number in case you need it. I’m shit at texting people back, but for you, I’ll probably try. Maybe.” She giggled and read on. “There’s a bike in the garage, and a couple of stores right outside the main entrance of the neighborhood. It’s an easy ride. Seriously, if you need anything, I’m just up the mountain. Thanks for trusting me. Just breathe. Kade.” She uttered his signed name quietly.

He'd scribbled his phone number at the bottom, and while she was thinking about it, she went and grabbed her phone, and saved that number, and also the one on Raynah's note. She had contacts here. It made her feel a little better. Not so alone, and all.

She took his note into the bedroom and re-folded it and then placed it under her locket pouch. She was starting a little pile of treasures.

Just breathe. She smiled, and then nodded, and walked right through the kitchen and to the back door. She pulled it open and on the back porch, she sank right down onto a swinging chair that looked out toward the woods behind the house. There was a fence on two sides, but not at the back, and the view was great.

And she drank her warm coffee right here, swinging lazily, and no one bothered her, or asked her do something for them, or bossed her around, or got her in trouble for something little she hadn't even realized she was doing wrong. No one was picking apart her every move.

The quiet wasn't so scary out here where the birds were singing.

She sat out there until her coffee was gone. She sat out there until the sun was setting. She sat out there until her stomach growled to remind her she hadn't eaten in a long time. She sat out there until her swirling thoughts steadied out.



And then she did something that confused her down to her soul. She tucked her hair behind her ears, lifted her phone, smiled, and took a selfie.

She studied the picture of her. She hadn't taken a selfie in so long. This was what she looked like now? An unpaired, childless, Crewless thirty-two-year-old broken shifter with facial scars, a smile that didn't reach her eyes, and a huge question mark for a future?

Feeling hateful toward herself, she did something awful—she sent that picture to Kade with the caption, I don't remember how to breathe.

It wasn't until she hit send that she freaked out. Why the heck had she done that? Why had she opened this text thread? She'd only been awake for a little while, and she was supposed to heal up and figure out her feelings on everything, and she was being way too vulnerable with a man almost immediately? And not just any man. A man who had wrecked everything. Twice.

She tossed the phone onto the seat of the swinging chair and busied herself with trying to figure out how to turn the firepit on. She couldn't do it. There was a metal turnkey sticking out of the side of the firepit, but she clearly wasn't turning it correctly, or maybe it wasn't hooked up or...or...something. Her eyes were burning. She'd been so stupid to take that dumb picture.

It was getting harder to breathe.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

Why didn't you leave? Kade's question replayed over and over in her mind. Why? Because a weak part of her had thought he would come back for her, and apologize to the Crew, and make amends. It was a stupid, naïve part of her, but it had existed, and it was what it was. And she knew that sounded so stupid, but she hadn't known what else to do. They'd had a plan! She had stuck to the plan. He was the one who didn't stick to the plan!

Jess tried to drag air into her lungs, but it didn't work. A sob escaped her, and she sank down to the porch, with her back against the rough stones of the firepit. She buried her face in her hands and just...cried. Cried for everything that had gone wrong when she was little, and cried for everything that she'd lost, and cried for the disappointment that had always existed inside of her for her brother's behavior, and cried that the house had been torn down by a fight over her, and she cried for crying over a house where she had been trapped. Her animal was right. She'd called it correctly. It had been a cage, yet here she sat, weak, crying over being released from her personal cage.

The back door swung open, and there Kade stood, holding a pizza box and a six pack of soda cans. His eyes searched her face, and went from confusion to softness.

"Go away!" she yelled, hiding her face against her forearms.

She could hear him put the pizza box down on the swing, and she hated him. She hated him! She hated everything.

Kade's boot prints echoed hollowly against the wooden boards of the porch as he left. The door clicked closed behind him, and she sagged as another sob escaped her.

Her breath hitched as she heard the door re-open, and then there were Kade's boot prints again, coming closer. He was supposed to be gone. He was supposed to leave. She'd told him to go away, but stupid males never did as females asked.

Kade slid his arms around her, and she shoved him off. "Don't touch me."

He waited as she cried for a few moments, and then he slid his arms tighter around her, and this time, she couldn't break free. He was too strong. Men just thought they could do whatever they wanted. Jess struggled, but his hug tightened like an anaconda's grip. He was sitting right next to her now. She sobbed and struggled again, but he pulled her into his lap and his hug was suffocatingly tight.

Her next struggle was pitiful. Something shifted as she felt comfort in the pressure. She didn't want him to go anymore, because this embrace was probably the only thing holding her together now.

"I h-hate you," she whispered brokenly.

"That's okay."

"I h-hate you," she repeated. "I hate everything."

"It's going to be okay," he whispered against her ear as he rocked her slowly.

And she stopped struggling completely. Instead, Jess gripped his shirt and let off a heartbroken sob. "Everything went wrong."

He didn't shush her or tell her she was being unreasonable. These kinds of outbursts weren't allowed for females in the Sister's Edge Crew. Emotions were to be kept in check. But here, Kade just rocked her and let her talk. Jess fell apart and buried her face against his shirt and cried until she ran out of tears.

“I’m so fucked up,” she said in a small voice.

“We’re all fucked up.”

“But I’m really fucked up,” she whispered. Even she could hear the truth in her voice.

“Well, that’s probably why I find you so interesting.”

“What?” she asked, sniffing as she eased back.

Kade brushed his thumbs firmly across both her cheeks, wiping away the dampness there. “You would be boring as hell if you were normal.”

“Are you saying I’m...I’m...weird?”

“Oh, so weird.” He cracked a slow grin that said he was teasing.

“None of this is funny. I cried on your shirt.”

He shrugged. “I have a spare in the truck.”

She frowned. “What are you even doing here?”

“I was up the street getting you a pizza for dinner when you texted. I was just going to drop it on your porch, but then you texted and I thought that was the green light to come in.”

Her frown deepened. “You just walked into the house?”

“I knocked like four times, and then I texted and said I was coming in with food.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

“Oh.” She looked at her phone, still sitting face down on the swinging chair. “I shouldn’t have sent you that ugly picture.”

Kade snorted. “Woman, you are way too deep in your head if you think that’s an ugly picture. Here.” He pulled up his phone and angled it down at them. She caught a glimpse of her crybaby face and squeaked, then turned away from the camera fast.

Kade told her, “I just sent that one to you. Now we’re even.”

“Let me see,” she said softly.

He turned his phone screen and there was a picture of him pulling a goofy face, and her clutching onto his shirt as she turned her face away.

“You are annoying,” she grouched. “Even when you try to take an ugly picture, you still look...” She let the words die off in her throat as she realized what she was saying.

“I look what?”

“Nothing.”

“Hot?” he asked.

“You’re full of yourself. Let me go.” She pushed up and off him, and her head wanted to storm off and lock herself away in a dark room where he couldn’t see the tear stains on her shirt, but her heart made her hesitate. Her heart made her turn

around and offer him a hand up.

His smile was soft on his lips as he slid his hand against hers and allowed her to pull him to his feet.

“You weren’t supposed to see any of that,” she grumbled.

“See what?”

She gestured in annoyance to her stupid crying face. “Any of that.”

“I didn’t see anything.”

She cocked her head as she took in the innocent look on his face. Oh. He was giving her an out. He was letting her off the hook. He was fixing the awkward moment by telling her he would pretend he hadn’t seen her meltdown.

She liked that.

“Your stomach is growling,” he observed.

“I slept for an eternity and haven’t eaten. What kind of pizza did you get?”

“Meat lovers with sliced tomatoes all over the top, which, by the way is disgusting but I’ll pick the tomatoes off.”

Her heart stuttered inside of her chest. “That’s...that’s my favorite pizza.”

“I know. I remember.” He made his way to the pizza box that sat next to her phone on the glider and handed her a slice. It was still warm.

Jess stood there awkwardly, holding a slice of pizza, wondering what the heck had just happened between them. “I think I need to go clean up and maybe put some make-up on.”

“No thanks. You’re just fine as is.” He twitched his chin at a cushioned chair near the firepit. “Park it. I’ll get you a drink.”

“Um, that’s my job.”

Kade snorted. “Let me guess. To serve males? Sister’s Edge doesn’t exist here. Fuck them rules.”

“Oh.” Confused absolutely, she sat down slowly, just holding her precious pizza slice.

“You don’t have to wait on me to take the first bite either,” he told her. “Eat as fast as you want. I’ll literally clean up every slice you don’t eat, so get on it. I’m starving.”

Was he sure? She hadn’t eaten before the males in so long. That wasn’t allowed. Restraint was showing respect to the higher ranks. Was he testing her? Would he reprimand her if she fell for it?

Carefully, she took a little bite and chewed slowly. God, it was so good.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:11 am*

He parted his lips to get onto her. Here it went. “Do you want ranch?”

What the heck? “Uuuh, yes please.”

He chuckled and popped the top of a little plastic ramekin of ranch dressing, then handed it to her.

She took another bite of pizza—a big one this time. The tomato and sausage flavor exploded against her taste buds, and she stifled a groan. “Is this pizza place in biking distance?” she asked.

“It sure is. Are you already planning your next meal?”

“Maybe. I love pizza.”

He popped the top on a soft drink and handed it to her, and she took a long, bubbly sip, and set it on the little table next to her chair. Oh, that was a crispy soda.

“I tried to turn the firepit on but couldn’t figure it out. That’s where my tantrum started, I think.”

He had taken a huge bite of pizza but tossed a glance over his shoulder at a propane tank that sat by a barbecue grill. He checked the connecting tube and then tipped the tank to check something, then turned a dial on the tank, and then returned to the firepit and cranked the key. Flames jumped to life in the dark rocks. Jess startled at how big the flames were, but he adjusted it down to just a subdued flicker of six inches or so.



“How did you know how to do that?”

Kade shrugged. “I picked up a few things I guess.”

“Since you got out of prison?” she asked carefully.

“You mean since I escaped prison? Yes and no. I was handy before I went in.”

She frowned as that admission collided with her memory of him. “I thought you worked in a corporate office,” she said.

“When I was in Sister’s Edge? I worked in an office for a construction company, but I had to work my way there. I started at the bottom. Now I’m at the bottom again.”

Her curiosity was piqued for sure now. “You’re in construction?”

“Nah, I tried, but they aren’t hiring felon’s around here. I work at a cabinet company. Woodworking isn’t my favorite thing, but it pays the bills.”

“This place is really nice,” she said, jamming her thumb at the house. “How did you afford to pay it? Will the rental payment put you behind on your own payment? I have some savings. I can help.”

He shook his head and swallowed a bite. “I’m good but thank you. I think you need to stop overthinking and just relax.”

She snorted. “Relax. I don’t even have a spare bra to my name and you’re telling me to relax. I feel like I have a checklist in my head that needs to be taken care of before I relax.”

“Okay. Lay it on me. What’s the checklist?”

She looked at him suspiciously. Was this a game? “Why do you care?”

He puffed air out of his cheeks and shrugged again. “Boredom, maybe.”

“Thanks a lot,” she muttered.

He cracked a grin. “Or maybe not. Who knows with me? Checklist. One, two, three, go.”

“Well...I need clothes.”

“Cool. Raynah sent me with three brown paper bags of clothes. They’re hand-me-downs, but beggars and choosers and all.”

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah, I left them in the living room. I don’t know if there’s any bras in there, but there’s for sure some hoochie shorts. I looked.”

She pursed her lips against a pleasantly surprised smile. “How did Raynah know what sizes?”

“She asked me.”

“How do you know my sizes?”

“Well, I told her your waist is like this...” He cupped both hands in a fairly accurate portrayal of her waist size. “And hips like this.” He made them wider. “And an ass like this.” He made a butt-grabbing gesture that made her laugh. “Tits like this size.” He did a titty-grab gesture, and she cracked up.

“I mean, it’s kind of accurate.”

“What can I say, I’m good at measurements.”

“Mmm hmm. We’ll see when I try the clothes on. Please tell Raynah thank you so much from me.”

“You got it. What’s next on the list?”

She’d been so excited by the prospect of trying clothes on, she’d forgotten about the check list. She thought about it. Food was taken care of. Raynah had stocked the kitchen, and now she was eating her fourth slice of pizza. She probably had enough for a week, actually. She had shelter. “I probably need to check in with Sister’s Edge and see how mad they are at me.”

“I don’t think you have to do that at all.”

“Why not?”

“Because fuck Sister’s Edge. I asked them nicely if I could talk to you, and ask you to leave with me, and that it would be your choice. You know what Derek said?”

“Hell no?”

“Correct. He said you don’t have choices anymore.”

Ew. Jess sank back in the chair and stared at the firepit flames as disgust rippled through her. “He really said that?”

“That’s a quote, Jess. Derek said, ‘she doesn’t have choices anymore’.” The truth in Kade’s tone chilled her blood.

She nodded slowly, absorbing that. Yesterday if she would’ve heard that, she wouldn’t have had any feelings about it at all, but now? Now things felt different for some reason.

Some of the numbness was wearing off, but not all of it. “Lots of Crews act like that,” she defended Sister’s Edge softly.

“I did that too.”

“Did what?” she asked defensively.

“Tried to justify the things I’d just grown to accept. Things I knew were wrong, but I’d convinced myself otherwise.”

“You don’t know me,” she said softly. “Don’t compare us. I’m not justifying.”

He was kind enough not to point out the lie in her tone, and she gritted her teeth in frustration with herself.

“You’re like a little cactus, aren’t you?”

Jess said, “I don’t know what you mean,” and then shoved the last bite of crust into her mouth and drew her knees up to her chest like a shield.

“You’re pretty. You’re flowering, but if anyone gets too close, you get defensive and teach them a lesson. You’ve learned how to sting them.”

“And don’t forget it,” she said primly, refusing to meet his eyes lest he see how touched she was by him calling her pretty. Flowering? Her? No. She’d never been one for flowers. Maybe a mesquite tree with no vibrant colors, and all thorns.

He pulled another slice of pizza out of the box—the last one—stood, and offered it to her. She looked from the pizza to him, and then back to the slice, considering. She was still a little hungry, but the rules. The rules, the rules, the rules. Males got the biggest portions, and this would mean she got one more slice than him.

“I like when you eat as much as you want,” he said gruffly, and she could tell he wouldn’t budge. He would probably be all stubborn and refuse to eat it, even if she pretended to be full.

She accepted the food, but didn’t unfurl her body as she ate it. She still felt on edge, and defensive. She felt like he was seeing her too easily, like he had a microscope, and she couldn’t escape his watchful gaze. Kade was smart, and more observant than any male she’d ever known. He was intimidating and kept her on edge.

“What’s your angle?” she asked.

“Do you want me to be honest?”

“Always. I would like only honesty. I like knowing exactly where I stand now. Since the rules are so different here, as you say, then I want to be on equal footing and know exactly where I stand with you.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and looked her straight in the eyes as he said, “Okay. I find you interesting, and there is something inside of me that really wants you to be okay. Like...I really want it. Whatever okay means for you, I want it. It might be for selfish reasons,” he said, shrugging. “It makes me feel good when you have big-realization moments, or when you smile, or when you relax completely. I liked it when you cried on my shoulder. I like the idea of poisoning you into never being able to go back to Sister’s Edge and settle for their bullshit again. I like stirring the pot. I like the idea of saving you, and before you get all prickly, little cactus, you asked for honesty. Maybe I have a hero complex, I don’t know. Now, I know you can march down to the main road and stick your thumb out and hitchhike to any town you want, and you will figure it out, because I believe that’s the kind of woman you are. You’ll use your savings wisely and get a job somewhere and figure out shelter and you don’t need anyone. Not really. But I like being a part of this. I want to watch you figure it all out.”

“Figure what out?” she asked softly.

He leaned back in the glider, and stretched one powerful leg out, and rocked slowly as he leveled her with a bright-eyed look. “Freedom.”

“And then you’ll trap me, right? That’s what males do.”

He huffed a laugh and shook his head. “I don’t have any interest in trapping you, Jess. I just want to be around for that wake-up moment when you figure out you don’t have to put up with anyone’s shit anymore, and you never did.” His eyes sparked brighter with intensity. He shrugged again. “Or maybe I’m just bored.”

“Liar. You lied on that last part.”

“Good. Good instincts. So, now you know where you stand with me.”

She lifted her chin higher into the air. “You said I’m pretty.”

“And?”

“You don’t want anything more from me than to be a part of my wake-up moment?”

His eyes narrowed. “See, this feels like a trap. If I say I memorized the size of your waist, and your ass, and your tits because I have looked and I enjoy the shape of your body, you won’t trust my intentions. But if I dance around the answer and convince you I don’t want you like that at all, you’ll feel rejected.”

She scoffed. “You’re full of yourself.”

“No. I’ve just been around the Cold Foot females long enough to know I’m treading murky waters right now.”

“Honesty always.”

“I’d fuck you,” he said without hesitation. He twitched his head toward the house. “If you said you had a need, and you wanted to forget everything, and you wanted me to take you into that bedroom and fuck the shit out of you, I would do it and it would be easy for me. But...I will never ever put pressure on you or talk about this unless you

engage in that type of conversation. I'll follow the same rules I had in place for myself when I cut your hand and you cut mine. I'll protect you as long as you are here, and anything you need, if it's in my power, I'll provide it. There will be no strings attached for intimacy. I don't want it that way. And that's where I stand. You're the boss."

"I'm..." her voice had cracked. "I'm the boss?"

Kade offered her the devil's smile, and stood. "Time to go, little cactus. I have things to do."

And he left her there, staring open-mouthed after him.

His voice had held absolute and utter truth as he'd told her where he stood, and she'd loved every word he'd said.

She replayed it in her mind, and truth be told, she was kind of turned on. It had been a long damn time.

He was leaving, and that fact struck her like lightning. She stood and ran around the side of the house and called out to him just as he reached his truck parked near the curb in front. "Kade!"

He hesitated, his hand on the handle of his truck. "Yeah?"

"I lied."

He swallowed hard and came around the front of his truck so he could see her better. "Which time are you talking about?"

"I don't hate you."



A slow smile stretched his lips. “Good. See you when I see you, little cactus.”

He got into his truck and drove away while she stood in the front yard feeling like a completely different person than she’d been just a couple of hours ago.

He said she was pretty.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

He said it would be easy to fuck her.

He said he wanted to be her hero.

He said he believed she was a woman who could just figure things out.

God, what a surprising, beautiful opinion he had of her.

Jess had been prepared to hate this entire process, but now?

Now, she kind of wished she could learn to see herself the way Kade did.

### Chapter Eight

Two days.

Kade swatted at the back of his neck. The fine hairs there had been standing up randomly today. He cast a glance behind him, and Cash was staring at him.

“What?” Kade barked out.

“I’m literally just waiting on you to be done with the door you’re working on.”

Oh. Right. Kade frowned down at the half-done cabinet door he was assembling. He’d probably been working on this damn thing for half an hour.

“Want me to do it for you?” Cash asked from right over Kade’s shoulder.

Kade shoved him away. “Give me space.”

“You are the worst at your job,” Cash grumbled and stomped away.

“It’s been two days.”

“Since your last period, you emotional fuck—ack!” Cash gasped out and swung on Kade. Why? Because Kade’s hand was around his throat. Fuck. He hadn’t even meant to charge Cash. Kade released his throat, ducked neatly out of the way, and held up his hands. “Sorry.”

Cash rubbed his neck. His eyes were blazing gold, and he looked pissed.

“What’s going on over there?” Tommy, their boss, asked.

“Nothing, just playing around,” Kade said quick. He did not need another write-up.

“Well stop fiddle-fuckin’ around and get back to work!”

“Who wants to fuck a fiddle?” Cash asked. “I never understood that saying.”

“I’m sorry, man,” Kade apologized. “I’m just on edge.”

“You think?” he muttered, walking away.

Kade checked that Tommy was looking away and then jogged after Cash. “Hey—”

“I will fight you,” Cash said, rounding on him.

“I know, I know,” Kade said, throwing up his hands in surrender again. “I lost it, but I didn’t mean to. I’m just freaking out a little.”

“Why? You are living a charmed life.”

Kade thought about it, and as much as he hated admitting it, Cash was right. He had it pretty good these days. He followed Cash to his station and hid behind a machine so Tommy couldn't see him. “Can I ask you a question?”

“No, not all STDs are fatal.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Oh my gah, never mind,” he gritted out.

“Wait,” Cash drawled out. “What. Ask me your question.”

Kade took a quick glance around and then leveled Cash with a look. “When you met Harley, what was it like for you.”

“Perma-boner.”

“I’m serious, man.”

“So am I. I couldn’t stop thinking about her, I couldn’t stop wishing I was with her, I couldn’t freaking sleep, I wanted to check in with her all the time.”

Yep. “I think I have that disease.”

“It ain’t a disease, man,” Cash said, sanding the surface of a cabinet door. “You’re just falling for her.”

“Well, how do I...you know...”

“Fuck her?”

“No! Cut it out of me.”

“How do you cut what out of you?”

“Liking her. You know, as more than a friend.”

Cash just stared at him like he’d sprouted an extra head.

“You know what? Never mind. This is a waste of my time.”

“I think you should just go over there, and take your shirt off, and show her your six pack. Seducing women is not as hard as you’re making it out to be.”

“I’m not trying to seduce her. I’m trying to give her space, to...you know...heal.”

“When the fuck did you get your therapist license? Go heal her...with your wiener.”

“I can’t do this,” Kade grumbled, walking away. He rubbed his hands roughly down his face and then pulled his protective glasses back over his eyes. Cash was a splinter on a good day.

“I bought us matching fanny packs yesterday,” Cash called after him.

“I can’t do this today,” Kade called without turning around.

He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and checked it for the four-billionth time in two days. She still hadn’t texted. The last time they’d talked on that loop was the picture he’d sent of him making a goofy face, and her clutching onto his shirt, and looking away from the camera. He’d looked at this picture a dozen times.

He’d gone to her house twice and barely been able to resist barging in and making up an excuse to hang out with her. The bike was in the front of the house in various positions both times he’d gone there, so he knew she was motoring around town.

She would text him when she was ready. Or not. Maybe she would go the whole two

months quiet, and then leave and he would just be left here with this weird hole in his middle that didn't make any damn sense at all.

This was how it was supposed to be. She was supposed to take time and space and process everything. That's what he'd wanted from her. But he left her in the middle of a flirting session, thinking she would message him that night, and she hadn't, and now he was second-guessing everything.

Fuck it.

He typed out, Pizza tonight? Send.

He stared at the phone screen like she was going to reply instantly. Get real. The typing dots appeared, and he nearly dropped the phone.

Nah, I'm already eating pizza.

The sting of rejection cut deep. I understand. Hope you are well. He hesitated and then hit send.

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

He closed his eyes tightly and rested his hands on his hips, wishing he hadn't even texted her.

His phone vibrated, and he checked it in a rush. She'd sent a picture, and what he saw in it froze him completely.

Jess had taken a selfie. She had her hair pulled halfway up, and she had make-up on that made her soft brown eyes look so pretty. Her smile was megawatt, and beside her, Raynah was grinning.

What the hell?

"Bathroom break," he called over to Tommy.

"Oh, so we're pretending you haven't been on a break all friggin' day now?" Tommy yelled as Kade strode for the restroom.

He was going to have to do better the second half of the day. You're with Raynah? he typed out. Send.

Yeah, at that pizza place. We met for lunch. She's giving me all the details of why the heck you probably ghosted me. Her theory is you are just a stupid boy being a stupid boy.

Me? Ghost you? I've been waiting for a text for two days. Send.

I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU TO TEXT ME. Also, I am bringing half a



pizza home with me in case you happen to stop by since you are so hungry for it. I added extra tomatoes though because I'm sixty-nine percent mad at you.

He caught his reflection in the mirror, and he was wearing the dumbest grin right now. She'd been waiting for him to text? And he'd been waiting for her? Ha. How can I make it up to you? Send. Cash suggested showing you my six pack and seducing you. Send.

Interesting. I'm asking Raynah about you, and you're asking Cash for advice on me?

Don't get too excited. His answer was healing you with my "wiener" which, by the way, hearing that word from a grown man's mouth just sounded messed up. Send.

She sent five laughing face emojis. Oh crap, she knew how to use emojis. He was going to have to learn how to do this. He opened up the emojis tab, looked through it, and then on a whim, sent her an octopus emoji and hoped for the best.

She sent a beaver emoji back to him, and then he sent an eggplant, and---ahhh! The door opened and Cash shoved his head in. "How's it going?"

"Dude, go away."

"Is it your girlfriend?" he whisper-screamed, pointing to his phone.

"You know her name. You helped rescue her."

"Oh yeah. Is that Jess?"

"She's hanging out with Raynah. What does that mean?"

"That she's probably going to get eaten by a crocodile? Because Raynah is a

crocodile?”

“I can’t talk to you. I’m emoji-ing right now.” Kade sent Jess a crocodile emoji, and two donuts.

“Dude, you’re doing that all wrong,” Cash pointed out.

“I don’t need your help.”

“Clearly you do.” Cash snatched the phone and began reading out loud as he typed.  
“I...miss...your...titties—”

“Cash!” Kade barked, grabbing the phone back before Cash could hit the send button.  
“Fuck off.”

“Here, give me your phone and I’ll take a picture of you with your shirt off.”

“What? No.”

“She’ll like it. Trust me.”

“Cash, please leave me alone.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Fine. Are you coming out with us tonight?”

“Coming out where?” he asked distractedly as he waited for the next set of emojis from Jess.

“Guys night!” Cash griped. “Come on, man, I’ve been telling you about it for two days. And I know King mentioned it to you too. And Wreck!”

“Oh. Oh yeah. Sure. Where is it again?”

“The address is literally in the group text.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll probably stop by.”

“Don’t stand me up,” Cash said as he walked out.

Kade narrowed his eyes at the door as it swung closed. He yanked it open and poked his head outside, then called after Cash, “You better not bring those matching fanny packs. I’m not wearing one.”

“It has our initials embroidered on them,” was Cash’s response.

Kade gritted his teeth and ducked back into the bathroom to check his phone. Jess had sent a picture of a half a pizza smothered in sliced tomatoes, and then an innocent angel emoji. Gross, but he would still eat it just for the excuse to drop by.

“Kade!” Tommy yelled from outside the door.

Crap. Got to get back to work. I'll stop by after I get out to finish off that pizza. Send. On a whim, Kade leaned over in front of the mirror, and held up his phone to take a picture of himself with his shirt lifted and his six-pack flexed, but then shook his head hard, let his shirt fall back down and said, "Nope." He was not taking flirting advice from Cash.

He and Jess were just friends.

Friends with no strings attached. No contract. No Promise.

Friends who asked for advice on each other, and waited on each other's texts, and bought each other pizza.

Friendzone buddies—nothing more, nothing less.

## Chapter Nine

"Relieved?" Raynah asked.

"I don't even know what I feel," she admitted as she tucked her phone into her purse. "Excited maybe?"

"Did he say why he hasn't been talking to you?"

"He said he was waiting on me to text him." She thought about it. "He was encouraging me to take alone time and figure things out."

"Two days is a lot of alone time," Raynah pointed out. "I wouldn't know what to do if I had two days to myself. I've been away from Breah for a couple hours and I'm already missing her like crazy."

“You should’ve brought her.”

“It’s Garret’s day off. He does this thing where he takes her to lunch every week and calls it dad-daughter-date, because he’s convinced if he spends that quality time with her, she will expect the moon out of a man when she grows up, and won’t settle for scraps.”

“That’s actually amazing,” Jess said, a little emotional. She wished her dad had done that for her. Maybe things would’ve ended up differently. Garret cared about his daughter and already anticipated her future. Good dad.

“Yep, and then tomorrow night he will ask one of the Crew to watch Breah so we can get a date night just the two of us. He feels like it’s important for us to get grown up time where he can spoil me.”

“Any tips on how to secure a dream man like that?”

“Girl, I don’t even know. I’m messy, but he handles it easily. I think it’s just got to be the right match, and things are easier.” She gestured to her pizza, all boxed up. “Are you ready to go?”

“Kind of. I’ve had fun hanging out with you. Thank you for calling and checking on me, and for inviting me out. I haven’t just gone out with someone for fun in...I don’t even know how long. We only go out with purpose in Sister’s Edge.”

“Well in Wreck’s Mountains, we will create purposes to go out,” Raynah said with a laugh. “I think the boys are doing guy’s night out at some local bar none of us has been to tonight.” She shrugged. “Just because they are all dudes wanting to hang out without us, I guess. They’ll be bored in ten minutes. We have a bet going on how long it’ll be before they call one of us and ask us to come out.”

“What’s the bet?”

“Ten bucks. So far, we’ve just been betting on it by minutes. Katrina thinks ten minutes, Timber said they’ll make it half an hour. Harley said thirty seconds after they get through the door, and she bets Cash will send her an ‘I miss you’ text.”

Jess snickered. From what Raynah had said about her female Crewmates, they seemed fun. Way more fun than the females in Sister’s Edge. “I’ll be curious on who wins that bet.”

“I’ll text you the results,” Raynah promised.

They left the pizza place, and Raynah drove her back down the street to her house—errr, her rental temporary house. Jess waved her off and made her way inside grinning like a lunatic. That was the most fun she’d had with another girl in as long as she could remember. Raynah was an easy talker and seemed so chill. Oh, she felt big, and dominant, and her animal was probably a monster, but Jess liked that about her. When she’d been able to Change into her animal, Jess had been a monster too. It was nice to be around a woman who harbored a beast and knew her power, and had confidence, and not one who had been badgered into thinking she was smaller than she really was.

It made her even more curious about the Cold Foot Crew. She kind of wanted to meet more of them.

She hoped Kade would get off work soon. She was starting to build up things she looked forward to.

Coffee mornings on the back porch with the firepit turned on.

Picking her outfit from the ton of clothes Raynah had sent over, fixing herself up, liking herself a little more each day, realizing no one was here to tell her what to do.

Then she usually biked around town and explored little shops and restaurants, and today, she'd excitedly told Raynah some good news pretty much immediately after talking to her for the first time, and that's why Raynah had taken her out—to celebrate. And now she got to tell Kade? Who had apparently been asking his friend about her?

That had to mean something, right? He liked her or something? At least as a friend, and that was pretty cool. Sure, he was a murderer, and probably a liar about that murder, and because of her lineage, she could never really fall in love, but she was putting that in the back of her mind so she could just live in the moment here.

She was experiencing happy moments, and it had been so damn long since her heart had smiled like this.

Her phone rang, but when she jogged into the living room to check it, her heart hit the floor. Misty was calling. Again.

Jess considered answering, but she knew how the conversation would go. It would go like her texts and her voicemails. It would be guilting her into coming back. Shaming her for wanting more than the adequate life she'd had.

The call stopped, and then another came through. This time, it was a Facetime call from Derek, and there was that pull of the bond to her Alpha. She tried to resist answering. She tried so hard, but she couldn't force herself to put the phone down.

Heart hammering inside of her chest, Jess accepted the call and sank slowly onto the

couch as her Alpha's face showed up on the screen.

"I tried to do this the nice way," he said as his greeting.

"What do you mean?" she asked softly.

"I tried to have you make contact with Misty, whom you have formed a friendship with."

Had she? Misty was Crew first, and Jess's feelings dead-last, but okay. She was her sister-in-law though, so she could see how Derek would think that.

"Is there something you need?"

Derek's eyes flashed brighter, and he bared his teeth, which were too sharp. The terrifying expression lasted for just a moment before he composed himself and relaxed his face once more.

"Would you like to ask questions?" he asked.

"What kind of questions." God, she hated playing games, and that's all the Sister's Edge Crew did. Wait. That's all that they did. She frowned. Jess had never realized the amount of game-playing until right now, at this moment.

"Perhaps you should want to ask about how your Promise is doing? Ask me how Connor is? Ask if he lived?"

Dread washed through her. Had he died from his injuries after all? Had Kade killed him? "Is..." She swallowed hard. "Is he alive?"

Derek waited five seconds before he answered. "He's fine."



“What the fuck,” she said on a breath, turning the phone away from her as she rested back into the couch, and then sat up again to face her Alpha. Why had he done that?

“Connor is not my Promise,” she said, trying to control the shake in her voice. “I have no signed Promise contracts right now.”

Derek narrowed his eyes. “And yet you left with your former Promise. Any more questions for me?” he asked, like she was supposed to read his mind on where he wanted to take this conversation. “Like maybe you should ask how your house is. It’s demolished. And your brother? And your sister-in-law? Your family? They are homeless.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Where are they living?” she asked, knowing damn well they weren’t on the streets. Derek could twist a story, but she was seeing things more clearly lately.

“Oh, you care now?” he asked. He was avoiding the answer.

“Where are they living?”

Derek’s face morphed into that terrifying expression again before he angled the phone away from himself. The screen went black. Whooo, he hadn’t ever liked her much, but now he really hated her.

It was at this moment that the front door cracked open, startling her. Kade came in, finger on his lips. Be quiet.

He padded silently to the love seat on the other side, and sat down, clenched his fists in front of him and went still. He looked handsome today in a dark grey T-shirt, and blue jeans. He’d gotten a haircut, and it was short on the sides, and mussed on top. He was the hottest man she’d ever been around, and now her heart was pounding a little harder.

“Where are you?” Derek asked, and she snapped her attention back to the screen of her phone. The Alpha was back and looked calm again.

“I’m safe.”

“Answer my fucking question.”

The hair prickled on the back of her neck, and a low snarl emanated from her.

“What the fuck was that?” Derek demanded. His dark eyebrows raised, and his eyes sparked with anger. “Was that growl for me?”

“Y-yes,” she whispered, feeling like there was cement in her windpipe.

“I want you to come back to Sister’s Edge now. That is enough. What you did was unforgiveable, but we have had a meeting with the entire Crew, and your brother and Connor have begged for your place here to be reinstated.”

She shook her head, so confused. “Why would you want me back?”

“Because Connor is going to be important for the future of Sister’s Edge. Now, you understand you and your brother’s importance to our continuation, but make no mistake, when you come back here, you are to stop running from the Promise, and you are to settle down and get into line. You’ve always had a problem with that part.”

“No, I haven’t. I’ve tried—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear it.”

Kade stood in a rush and walked to the kitchen, clenching and unclenching his fists. When he turned back to her, his eyes were the color of frost.

She put her hand out. It’s okay. I’m okay. Be calm. Be still.

Jess was used to being talked to in this way.

“What would you like to talk about?” she asked Derek.

“Your brother has given his oath that his offspring will be a part of Sister’s Edge. You’ll do the same.”

“My offspring,” she said quietly.

“You know why,” he gritted out. “Don’t pretend you don’t know why I allowed you into Sister’s Edge. You aren’t pretty, Jess. You aren’t a sight to behold. You don’t have your animal anymore. You are disfigured, but your children wouldn’t be. You are submissive, but with the right breeding, your children wouldn’t be. You’re witch-blooded, Jess. Anyone can feel it. It’s stronger in you than your brother. It’s been three generations since we had witch-blooded members, and I want to change that.”

“You want to change that,” she repeated numbly. “So, you want me to sign a Promise to Connor, and sign my offspring to Sister’s Edge?” She didn’t hide the disgust in her voice.

Kade was in the kitchen, his back to her, one arm locked on the sink as he stared out the window, drinking a glass of water. Every muscle in his back was tense and easily visible through the thin material of his T-shirt. Well, unfortunately now Kade would know what she was, if he didn’t already know.

“Why the fuck else would we want you?” Derek growled. “You can’t take orders, you can’t mind rules, you aren’t pleasant to look at. You’re lucky you’ve been offered two Promise contracts. Kade’s was a mistake. He was planning treachery in this Crew, but Connor is loyal. He can elevate your status, and can provide a home when you get here, since your old house was destroyed by your decisions. We are still willing to take you back.”

Lucky her.

How many times had she been told how ugly she was? How many shots had she

taken after the accident? How much had she wished those insults would slow down as she went through her surgeries?

“Did Kade really kill Tanner?” she asked suddenly.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

In her peripheral, she could see Kade turn his face, listening.

“What are you talking about. You were there. You know he did.”

“I wasn’t there, though. I was just at the Crew meeting after he was killed, with everyone else, listening to the story of what had happened.”

“You saw the heartbreak. You heard the truth in our voices.”

“Did I? It’s all kind of blurry these days. Did Kade kill Tanner?” she asked, forming the question carefully, so he couldn’t half-lie his way out of it.

“I think you’ve been away from Sister’s Edge for too long, and you’re getting confused,” Derek gritted out.

“Yes, or no. Did Kade kill Tanner?”

“Yes.” But it was there. He was almost good enough to get away with the lie. Almost. Hell, perhaps he’d tried to convince himself that Kade had done it, but she’d heard the false note under the layers of that word as Derek had uttered it. That ‘yes’ was shaky.

She allowed the suspicion on her face as she leaned back and nodded. “Did Samuel kill Tanner?”

A snarl ripped out of her Alpha, and he stood with the phone. “Kade is so deep in your head, isn’t he? He’s so deep and now you can’t see the truth. That’s your brother

you're talking about. You know him. He would never kill a member of Sister's Edge."

"Lie!" she yelled, standing. "Every word you are saying is a lie and you know it. Can you hear yourself? I can. Lies, lies, lies—"

"Shut up!" he roared. "You will come home. Now! You will find a ride and get back here right now. That's an order. I know you can hear an order still, Jess. I can feel that bond I still have to you. It's thinner because of your horrible choices, but it's there. Come. Home."

"Or what?"

"Or I will come get you." And there it was. There was truth in his voice with that threat.

"For my offspring I haven't even had," she gritted out, realizing so, so many things in this moment. So many messed up things. So many unacceptable things.

Her only value to Sister's Edge was her witch-blooded lineage that had been nothing but a curse to her.

"I don't practice witchcraft," she told him. "My mother didn't practice. My grandmother didn't practice. I have no spells. I've never had training. Samuel has no power as a male, so I don't even know why the hell you would protect him from consequences of his own actions. He can't give you what you want. I won't give you what you want. I will never practice, and I will never teach my offspring." God, she hated that word. "I'll also never sign away my kids for anything. I might be unsightly, and submissive, and hard to keep in line, but I know wrong from right, and you, Derek...you're wrong."

“Mmm,” he said, eyes glowing. He nodded slowly. “You’re going to figure out what Sister’s Edge is sooner or later, Jess. I just hope it’s not too late when you do.”

“Oh yeah? What is it?” she asked.

“It’s the only place that can keep that little curse off the people you love, and you know it. Keep that locket safe, will you? You have a day to get back home. I don’t care if you fuckin’ hitchhike here. Come home. Make sure to bring the locket back with you.” An empty smile stretched his face right before he ended the call.

Chills rippled up her arms, and her blood ran cold.

How did he know about the locket? How?

Samuel didn’t even know about it. The only person she’d ever told about it was...

Her cheeks heated with anger as she opened her text thread to Misty. I’ll never forgive you. Send.

I guess we’re even then. The text came back almost immediately, and she didn’t even hate Misty as much as she hated herself for being so weak as to lean on anyone. She’d known all those years ago that telling Misty about her family’s curse would come back to bite her in the ass. She’d known it, but she’d been so lonely with it, and Misty seemed to be a friend at the time, and Jess had made a mistake. It was the one rule her mother had preached since she could understand words—never expose the locket or the secrets sealed inside of it.

Her eyes burned and she chucked her phone against the couch pillow and buried her face in her hands to contain her emotions.

What should she do?



“Breathe.” Kade’s voice was soft over the harsh roaring in her ears.

What should she do!

“Just breathe.” Kade’s voice was near her now, right beside her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“I don’t want anyone to touch me.” She dragged the words out through tightening vocal cords.

“Woman, do you hear your animal? I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole right now. I don’t want none of that smoke.”

With a frown, she took stock of her body. Tension hummed through her, and her skin tingled, and when the roaring in her ears died slightly, she could hear it—the snarl that rattled her chest.

Stunned, she jerked her attention to Kade. “She’s...”

“Here? No shit.” He twitched his chin at the room. “You’ve made this whole place feel heavy.”

“I’m...I’m sorry,” she whispered as the growl faded in her throat.

“Don’t be,” he said, standing. “It’s hot.” He stood with his hands on his hips, looking down at her with one eyebrow arched up. “Want me to kill him?”

“What?”

“Want me to kill Derek for talking to you like that?”

“Ummm...” Her frown deepened. “No?”

“Suit yourself.” He made his way to the kitchen and pulled the pizza box out of the

fridge, grabbed a slice, and began chewing it thoughtfully.

“Do you want me to heat that up?” she asked numbly.

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He canted his head and pointed the half-eaten pizza at her. “That velvet bag on your bedside table. Is that the locket Derek is talking about?”

She pursed her lips and refused an answer.

Kade nodded thoughtfully and took another bite. “You’re witch-blooded?” he asked around it.

Jess crossed her arms over her chest and relaxed back into the couch. “I think you should leave.”

“Mmm,” he rumbled, chewing. “You’re cursed?”

Jess glared, tears of anger rimming her eyes.

Kade took another huge bite, and leaned back against the kitchen counter, just watching her. “Do you want to talk about the locket?”

“No.”

“Sweet, what’s the good news?”

Jess frowned. “What?”

“You said on the phone, you had good news and were celebrating something with Raynah.”

She just sat there with her mouth open in confusion.

He swallowed and grabbed another piece of pizza. “This is me giving you a subject-change, Cactus. Take the bait.”

“You’re...you’re not going to push me for information?”

“I’m curious, for sure. I’m super interested. I think you just upped your interesting points by like...a zillion. I’m not a thief though. If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to talk about it.”

This was a trick, right? He had an angle.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Whatever this game is, I’m not playing.”

“Cool, me either. I hate games. I like honesty and knowing where I stand, and I like saying exactly where someone stands with me. You’ve got a story. I’ve got a story. Everyone in my Crew has a story. Everyone in yours has a story.”

“That’s not my Crew,” she uttered, and then gasped and dropped her gaze to the coffee table. That’s not my Crew? She’d just said those words out loud, and easily.

When she dared a glance back up, a slight smile tugged at the corners of Kade’s masculine mouth. “Truth,” he said softly.

Jess swallowed hard and shook her head. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“Want a theory?”

She couldn’t lift her face up to save her life, but she could lift her gaze to him. Her gaze and that was it. “Sure.”

“I told you, the longer you’re away from Sister’s Edge, the clearer things will become.” He gestured to her phone. “Have you ever talked to Derek like that?”

She thought about it. “Once.”

“What did you say?”

“I said you didn’t murder Tanner. Back when the big Crew meeting happened about

it. I got banished to my room for a week. Samuel called in sick for me to work and everything. I was supposed to fast and think about the way I'd talked to my Alpha."

"You fasted for a week? No food?"

She nodded once, not wanting to think about it.

"And what did you come up with at the end of that fasted week?"

Her bottom lip trembled, and she drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. "That I had to pretend to believe whatever they believed if I wanted to stay there."

Kade shrugged. "You don't have to do that shit anymore."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged again and looked around. "Who's here to tell you what to believe?" he asked. "You don't have to pretend anymore. Believe whatever you want."

And she sat there in that moment, with the impact of his words lifting a weight off her shoulders she hadn't realized she'd been carrying.

Kade made a gesture like scissors cutting through the air. "Cut that bond to Derek and see how fast you figure things out."

"I don't know how to do that."

"Sure you do."

She just stared at him, shaking her head.

“You’re already doing it,” he pointed out. “Listen to that gorgeous growl in your throat. Listen to the grit in your voice as you asked Derek over and over to answer to a lie. Look at your eyes.” He arched both of his eyebrows high, and took another bite of pizza, like he was done proving his point, and fair enough.

He’d left her with a dozen things to think about when she was alone and wanting to process what was happening.

“What’s in this for you?” she asked. “Are you wanting to destroy my bond to Derek and put it on you?”

“Oh fuck no. I have a bond to Wreck, and to the Cold Foot Crew. I’m not trying to be an Alpha or build a Crew. I’m good. I think you’re at the beginning of figuring out you’re good too. You’re just wary of it, and I get it. I was wary for a long time too.” He approached slowly and then squatted down on the other side of the coffee table and leveled her a look with those bright blue eyes of his. “I wasn’t supposed to be okay in Cold Foot Prison, but I was.” He gestured to the room. “You aren’t supposed to be good way out here, far away from Sister’s Edge. You’re supposed to be falling apart, but you sent me a selfie with Raynah today, and do you know what I saw?”

“What?” she whispered as a tear loosed from her eye and streamed down her cheek.

He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and pulled up the picture, then zoomed in on her face. He pointed to her eyes. “Your animal.” He pointed to her smile. “Happiness.”

“What is in it for you?” she asked again, as a tear streaked down her other cheek.

“Watching you free yourself is pretty damn satisfying.”

Jess squeezed her legs closer to her chest. Her heart was pounding away. “I think I got a job.”

Kade twitched his head, and a look of utter surprise washed through his bright eyes. “Are you serious?” he asked, standing, and God, that smile on his face was so genuine. It was everything in this moment. He was happy for her. Not threatened, like the males of Sister’s Edge would’ve been. “Are you mother-friggin’ serious?” he asked louder.

And she didn’t know why, but the tears just...streamed. She couldn’t keep them in anymore. It had been such a roller-coaster, emotionally charged few hours, and now she had no idea how to feel, and now her animal was making her skin tingle again.

He approached, but then backed off and paced to the kitchen, hands gripping the back of his hair, and then back. His grin had somehow gotten bigger. “I want to hug you because hell yes to all of this, but I get it. You don’t need anyone touching you right now.”

“No, I could maybe...” She cleared her throat and heat blasted up her neck and landed in her cheeks. “I could...you know.”

“Can I hug you?”

“Yes,” she whispered.



She had not realized how fast Kade really was. That man blurred to her and lifted her off the couch shockingly fast. Her feet were off the floor in a split second, and she was crushed to him, and now she was laughing. Crying and laughing, and whoo, she did not make any sense right now.

He spun her in a fast circle and then gripped her hair in the back and hugged her closer. Just...held her so close, like they were one person.

She melted into it because God it felt so good to celebrate like this.

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” he murmured right next to her ear, and she could hear the truth of it.

This feeling. Oh, this feeling.

Kade swayed her gently, her feet off the ground still as she hugged him around his neck so tight. Her pounding heart was racing his, and his grip tightened slightly at the back of her neck. Her body was tingling from her toes to her hair, and her skin sparked with electricity where she touched his.

He eased back his face by inches, and searched her eyes, and she could see his animal sitting right there at the surface. His gaze dipped to her lips, and then back to her eyes, and he wanted to kiss her...right? She was drunk on him in an instant. With the dominant weight of his animal, and the enticing scent of whatever cologne he was wearing. The warmth of his body enveloped her, and this was it.

She looked down at his lips, then closed her eyes and leaned in slightly. She waited, but Kade didn’t kiss her. Instead, he set her on her feet and backed off.

Mortified by the awkward moment, she rushed out, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to...It’s just I thought...I’m...”

“You did nothing wrong,” he assured her, but the bright color of his eyes had cooled. Kade ran his hand through his hair and blew out a slow, steadying breath. “Tell me about the job.”

“Uuuh...” Her mind was swirling with the rejection he’d just given her. “It’s been a long time since I...you know...”

“I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“It’s been a long time since I kissed someone. I just got caught up in the excitement of the moment. I didn’t mean to.”

“Don’t mention it. Really, you aren’t doing anything wrong. We were Promised once.”

Her embarrassment was eternal, and she accidentally looked down at the scar across her palm, then in a rush, she clasped her hands together to hide it. His hand had the same scar. She knew because she’d cut it into him with a ceremonial knife on their Promise Day.

“That’s probably it,” she blurted out. “We were Promised once, and I just got confused. If you want to leave, you should do that. If you want.”

A smile confiscated his face, and he ducked his gaze, but she’d seen the smile before he’d hidden it from her. “I’m not good at this,” he said softly.

She didn’t know how to respond, because she didn’t understand what he was trying to say, so she just stood there like an idiot nodding.

Kade gestured to a worn paperback book on the kitchen table. “Did you find the library?”

“Oh, sort of. Actually, do you want to get out of here? I can show you where I got it. We can just walk.”

“You want me to take a walk with you?”

“Yes. So that we aren’t trapped in here with me accosting you anymore.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“I hugged you first,” he pointed out as he made his way into the kitchen and put the pizza box back in the fridge.

“Right.” And then she’d taken it to a place she was never allowed to take it. What was she doing? Caring for a man this intensely was against the rules of her bloodline. Heichmans didn’t bond. It was the only way to keep everyone safe. She could be friends, and that was it. Friendship would save the people she cared for. Friendship and nothing more.

Kade was right to keep his distance.

She was wrong for encouraging more.

“Um, I’ll meet you outside,” she rushed out, and shoved her phone into her back pocket, and grabbed the keys off the table and then marched straight outside to have a mini-panic attack out of his view.

She pressed her shoulder blades against the garage and scanned the street as she tried to convince her lungs that oxygen was good for them. She needed to steady the panting, so she blew out a long breath, and then another, and another.

The door clicked closed and she pushed off the garage and forced a smile onto her lips. His eyes were soft and worried, and she hated it. Before he could say anything, she snapped, “I’m fine.”

He nodded and then gestured for her to lead the way.

“I have to lock the door,” she said low, and she did so. She wouldn’t admit to more weakness, but she was afraid Derek or Samuel, or even Connor would show up here and take her back.

“You’re scared,” he rumbled.

“I’m not scared of anything.”

Kade pursed his lips and nodded, then shoved his hands into his pockets. “What job did you get?” This was the second time he’d tried to change the subject by talking about her new job, and this time she allowed it.

“Have you seen that auto parts shop up on Rue Street?”

“Cliff’s?” he asked, recognition sparking in his eyes.

“Yeah, Cliff’s.” She set a relaxed walking pace heading up the sidewalk, leading him deeper into the neighborhood. “They had a few old, beat-up cars sitting in the parking lot with fair prices written onto their windshields, so I went in and just talked to the guy up front. Just chatting. Curious, you know.”

“You’re wanting a car?”

Jess shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what tomorrow will bring. I don’t know if I’ll be here long enough that a car would be life changing.”

“You can use my truck while I’m at work, if you want.”

Shocked, she glanced up at him to see if he was serious. He looked serious as hell. She cleared her throat and shook her head. “You can’t drag me through life, Kade. I’m not a puppy you adopted from a junk yard. You don’t need an anchor.”

“You aren’t an anchor, Jess. Take that back.”

“I’ll feel like one if you keep taking care of everything for me.”

Kade was quiet for a minute after that, and they just walked. “They were hiring?” he asked as they turned on Mason Avenue.

“I’d seen the hiring sign on the window when I went in there, but I don’t know anything about cars, so didn’t really register it. But the guy up front asked if I was looking for work, and if I could drive, and if I had a driver’s license. And then Cliff came out and talked to me about how the lady that worked for them driving parts to different shops had just moved to Idaho, and they were desperate for a driver.” It was getting easier to talk to him as they walked. “Well, I told him I don’t know shit about fuck about auto parts, and he said they would literally load the parts I needed, and give me the invoices with the addresses to take them to, and that I would pick it up soon enough and be able to pull orders in a couple months.”

“You’re a parts runner?” he asked, and she could hear it there—the pride in his voice.

A smile stretched her face. She couldn’t help it. She hid it by looking at the pavement in front of them. “Yeah. I filled out the paperwork. I start training on Wednesday, and the pay is really fair. Want to hear the best part?”

“It gets better?” he teased.

“I get a company car.”

“Holy shit, are you serious?” The excitement was growing in his voice, and did he understand what he was doing for her? Each time he showed his genuine excitement for the good things that happened for her? He was making her own her value. He was encouraging her growing confidence.

“Want to see a picture?”

“Hell yeah,” he said, stopping them as she pulled her phone from her back pocket and pulled up the picture.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“This guy is Dan. He will be training me starting on Wednesday. He said I could take a picture of the truck, because I said I wanted to show my friend. He seemed happy that I was all excited,” she said with a laugh as she zoomed the picture in so Kade could see the little white ford pickup truck. It was a little old and banged up and had the company logo across the doors and the bed of the truck. She loved it. “I got to test drive it,” she admitted softly. “It was a little driving test so Cliff could make sure I would be a safe driver for the company. I got to drive for an hour.”

Kade was just staring at the truck with an unreadable expression on his face.

She waited a few seconds before she gave a voice to her insecurities. “It’s nothing fancy or anything—”

“It’s fuckin’ awesome, Jess. Don’t downplay how cool this is. Look,” he said, pointing to the tires. “Someone has even put a little lift on it, and tires with good tread for the cold months. Do you get to drive it outside of work?”

“Yes, but only if I keep it within a certain radius and don’t put too many extra miles on it. They have one of those tracker things on it.”

“All fair,” he said, handing her phone back to her. He was grinning and looked like he wanted to say something, but he stayed silent instead and began walking again.

After a couple of quiet minutes, she asked, “What?”

He glanced at her and his eyes were sparking with his animal’s color again. “It’s just happening for you, Jess.”



She didn't understand. "It's just temporary," she said.

"You know when I got busted out of Cold Foot, I didn't believe anything good happening to me. I waited for that other shoe to drop too. Time is the fix for that."

"Chhh, you just think life is going to keep going straight up, don't you? You really have changed from the old Kade I kind of knew."

"Life doesn't work like that," he said. "It's not a straight up journey ever, but if you're ready, and wanting to work, you can go in the right general direction. Everything happens for a reason, Jess. You are piling up the meant-to-be's here. There is no Promise here. No pressure. No one telling you what to do. No bad intentions for you. And now you landed a job that will grant your independence what...2 days in? You just needed to cut the dead weight. Fuck all that Derek said. Fuck the manipulation. Look what you're doing outside of the reach of Sister's Edge?"

She shook her head. He didn't understand the Heichman Curse. She wasn't on the way up. She never could be. Fate had different plans from the day she'd been born a Heichman. She liked that he had such a positive view on things though, so she wouldn't correct him.

"There," she said, pointing to the neighborhood book nook.

Kade frowned at the little contraption that held the books. "It looks like a mailbox on steroids."

She snickered and picked up the pace, her heart racing with excitement to show him. The little door creaked as she opened it and exposed the double row of books. Instructions were etched onto the edge of the book nook. 'Take a book, replace a book.'

“This is cool,” he uttered, pulling out a book. It was a shifter romance with a half-naked male model on the cover. Kade pulled a face. “This dude needs to put on a shirt though.”

“Hell no he doesn’t,” she joked, snatching it from his hands. “This is on my list to read next.”

“So, you will read the book at the house, and then come and trade it out for this one,” he said, figuring out the rules.

“Yeah! But I kind of want to contribute, you know? I was thinking of going to the bookstore in town and buying a new one to add to the book nook.”

He was giving her the strangest look.

“What?” she asked, wiping her face in case there was something on it.

“You’re a builder.”

“What do you mean?”

“You improve things.”

Jess shrugged. “Not really,” she said softly.

“I’ve been in Garret’s rental house a half dozen times, and I’ve never seen flowers on the table, or that full length mirror next to the fireplace, or the candles on the mantle.”

She ducked her gaze so he wouldn’t see her pleased blush. “You should’ve seen me hauling that mirror back to the house. Three people pulled over and offered me a ride.”

He chuckled. “There’re some really nice people in this town. You are a fixer. I can tell.”

“I just like the idea of leaving a place better than I found it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Enough talk of leaving, I’m taking this book with us,” he said, holding it up. “For me. It’s not breaking the rules. I’ll buy a book without a shirtless fuckboy on it to put in the book mailbox when I return it too. We can be fixers together.”

Okay, he was fun. “First off,” she said as she closed the little free library door, “Garrison Hartford is not a fuckboy, which you would know if you read the blurb. He is a misunderstood billionaire who can change into a honey badger to protect his love.”

Kade belted out a laugh. “Oh yeah? Can he destroy the house of his arranged pairing, piss off her entire Crew as he kidnaps her, and then catch her sobbing when he tries to bring her pizza—”

“Oh my gosh, we could write you into a book! I’m going to need to take shirtless photos of you. It’s not weird, and I’m not hitting on you. I’m just going to need some eye candy so people will read your story. Taken by the rhino.”

“Dear God, no.”

“Anal-Banged by the Rhinoceros.”

He scrunched up his face. “How about Seduced by the Tiger Witch.”

She nearly tripped on a crack in the cement. “How do you know what I am? You haven’t ever seen my animal.”

He snorted. “Yes, I have.”

“What? When?”

“Before your accident.”

She stumbled to a stop to stare at him, combing through her memories of that time. They were all so blurry. “I didn’t know you before my accident.”

“I was around though.”

“Around enough to see me Changed?”

“On accident.” He ran his hand down his jaw and continued walking, leaving her to trot to catch up.

“When did you come to Sister’s Edge again?”

“Maybe a year before your accident.”

“A year?” God, why couldn’t she recall him in her memories of that time? The timeline did make sense though on him making a run for Third. “How did you get into Sister’s Edge? And how did you get to be Derek’s Third so fast?”

“I knew Tawk, Seth, and Tanner from when we were kids.”

She scrunched up her face. “Tawk is an asshole. I’m judging you now for the friendships you kept.”

“He’s an asshole to people he doesn’t know or trust. Anything he sees as a threat, he’s going to treat like a threat.”

“So, I guess he saw me as a threat,” she grumbled.

“He didn’t trust you, for sure.”

“How close were you two?”

“We were from the same place. Seth and Tanner too. We were closer when we were kids.”

“Tawk is a freaking dragon. Why isn’t he Second, or Third? Or hell, why isn’t he Alpha? If it was a fight between him and Derek, it’s Tawk burning him alive and eating his ashes all day long.”

“Tawk doesn’t want a Crew under him. He’s not like that.”

None of this made sense with the Tawk she knew.

Kade inhaled deeply and said, “Tawk’s dragon cares about treasure. That’s all. There is something about Sister’s Edge that his dragon covets. Doesn’t mean he wants to listen to the Crew’s problems and fix their shit all the time.”

“But you wanted to, as Third?” she asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“I guess I was attracted to power back then. I was arrogant and thought I could do it better than Derek. I wasn’t just after Third. I was going to Challenge for Alpha at some point. I’m guessing that’s why I went to Cold Foot Prison.”

She frowned. “You really didn’t kill Tanner, did you?”

“Nope.”

“Was it Samuel for real?” she asked, looking at him so she could watch his eyes as he answered.

Kade seemed to know what she needed and turned for her as he answered. “Samuel killed Tanner.”

“Why?”

“Misty.”

Jess frowned and softly repeated, “Misty?”

“Misty is having trouble getting pregnant. It caused a break with her and Samuel’s bond. Tanner was fucking her for a year before Samuel found out.”

“What the hell,” she whispered in shock. “Misty. Samuel’s mate, Misty. She was cheating?”

Kade nodded. “She was.”

“But...we were friends back then. I think we were friends. She never said anything.”

“Would she have?”

“Well, we grew apart, but back then, I thought we were close. I told her about the curse on my family. Samuel doesn’t even know.”

“How does Samuel not know if he’s your blood-brother.”

“Because he’s a male. It won’t affect him. It was supposed to be my secret to keep. I messed up. Apparently, Misty was better at secrets than me.”

“Nah. Don’t beat yourself up for trusting someone. She was the one who messed up and betrayed you.”

“Why did they pin it on you?” she asked.

Kade gestured to her rental house. “You want to go inside or keep walking?”

“Keep walking.”

He picked up the pace again and studied the cracks in the sidewalk as he talked. “That part I couldn’t figure out until I had some time and space from Sister’s Edge. I was so confused and hurt. So hurt, Jess. So fuckin’ hurt. It felt like an injury that wouldn’t heal, you know? People I considered friends were sitting there in court testifying that I did all this stuff I didn’t do, and I had to just watch, and be quiet. No one was there on my side, except for a public defender, because Derek didn’t help me get a good lawyer like he’d promised if I took the heat off Samuel. Derek had told me I could save your family if I just took the hit. That you’d been in foster care, and then on the streets when you aged out, and you’d been so happy to find Samuel again. He gave me a speech about being a good mate and setting up your life for happiness so



that you could learn to be loyal to me. And when I still wasn't sure, he promised that it would be four years max in prison, because Tanner is a shifter, and the humans give leniency if it's shifter on shifter violence. It's just the way it is. One less shifter on the planet to try and police. So okay, four years, but more likely two with them testifying on my behalf. Two years and I could get back to you, and my place would be held in Sister's Edge, and you would keep your brother."

"Yeah, but if all that was true, Samuel would've gotten four years, and then he would be back with me."

Kade huffed a breath and agreed. "Now when we're talking about it logically, and it's after the fact, that seems obvious. He should've paid the consequences for that mess. Misty's rank should've been completely stripped and she should've been shunned for the duration of his sentence. But back then..."

"They manipulate," she whispered, understanding down to her bones.

He nodded. "The sacrifice seemed so necessary because it meant so much to the people I was blindly loyal to. They said I was going to be able to tell you goodbye, and I'd planned on telling you I didn't do it. You were supposed to come to the trial, and see them back me up, and I was supposed to get some time to say goodbye. It was a bunch of promises and they didn't follow through with a single one."

"They had other plans, huh?"

"I learned there are always other plans. You think a promise to Connor is just to give you protection in that Crew?"

She couldn't even guess what the discussions had been behind the scenes.

"He's gotten two women pregnant outside of Sister's Edge. He has nothing to do with

either of those kids. He's a producer, and Derek wants your bloodline in Sister's Edge. Misty and Samuel aren't producing, so the focus swings to you. You will carry out that Promise in Sister's Edge, Connor will breed you, you will raise your cubs alone, and you will serve him when he wants it. There will be very little kindness. Sister's Edge doesn't care about that though. They care for results, and they will throw anyone under the bus who messes with the trajectory of those results. They wanted me gone, and they made sure I was going to stay gone. They used my life to buy time for Samuel to continue his bloodline. What is it?" he asked suddenly. "What is it about the witch-blooded that Sister's Edge wants? What's so important about it?"

Jess shrugged and shook her head. "I don't even know. I didn't even freaking know they knew we were witch-blooded. There is no benefit to it that I can think of. I'm cursed to be loveless, and there is nothing I can do to get myself or my children out of it. The end. My grandma and then my mom spent years trying to free the Heichman witches from the curse, but there's no work-around."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Why were you in foster care?” he asked.

“Ew, too close.”

“Too close to understanding you?”

“Mmm, nope, nope, nope. No one will ever do that. If we keep walking another half a mile, they have those ice cream Drumsticks at the gas station. You know with the chocolate and the peanuts, and you untwirl the packaging as you eat it? Like when we were kids?”

He chuckled. “I’m in.”

Jess should’ve worn something more comfortable than a pair of gas station flip flops, but it would be fine.

“You saw my animal?” she asked, bringing it back up.

“Yeah, back in that big park behind the Safeway in Sister’s.”

“Ooooh, I remember that Change. That was an accident.”

“Were you pissed off?”

“Yep.”

“At?”

“Samuel, as usual,” she said with a dark laugh. “He was being controlling.”

“Shocking. I don’t think I’ve ever seen your brother not being controlling. He has issues.”

“Yeah, but he’s my brother,” she said softly.

He gave her a sideways glance, and the smile faded from his lips. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Do you have siblings?”

“Nope. I was an only child. I was raised around other shifter kids, but I never had a brother or a sister. I can’t say I understand that bond.”

“It’s a strange one for me. Samuel and I were taken away from our mom at the same time, but he was older, you know? I looked up to him. When we were kids, he protected me, and took care of me, and it was us versus the world when things were bad. I built that bond with him when we were kids, but when I found him again as an adult? He was so different than I remembered. Hell, I was probably different than he remembered too. I had been in the gutter for a while by the time I found him. I was tougher, mouthier. I was more confident. Samuel didn’t like me much when I found him. He didn’t understand me anymore, and so I think slowly, over time, he needed me to go back to the scared kid that he could protect.”

“So he was allowed to change, but you weren’t?”

Jess chewed the corner of her lip as she considered it. “I guess if you put it like that, then yes.”

She thought he would take more digs at Samuel, but he didn’t. He just let her sit in

her own thoughts, and come up with her own feelings on it all. She was ready to be defensive and protective of her brother if Kade took more shots at him, but he didn't engage. So...she thought about it. Really thought about it. Yeah, what Kade had said made sense. Perfect sense.

"Maybe he had to be controlling because so much of our life was out of our control when we were little."

"Your mom?"

"Alcoholic."

He nodded, but didn't push her, so she sat there with that word. At the stop sign at the edge of the neighborhood, they checked both ways and bolted across the semi-busy road. She could see the sign for the gas station from here.

"That's hard," he said after a couple of minutes of walking.

"You can imagine, or you know personally."

"I can imagine. It wasn't a part of my story. I saw friends go through it with an alcoholic parent, but it wasn't my story personally."

"I think she was trying to cope with the curse, and what happened to my dad," she admitted softly, testing.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

His glance was soft on her, but he didn't push her. Not at all. He just waited patiently instead, and for some reason, that made her feel safe to talk.

"My dad died and it was the curse that did it. My mom worked so hard for so long to keep my dad at a distance and never to fall in love with him, but then she broke the rules. She fell in love, and he died for it. I don't think she could ever get over that. She couldn't forgive herself so she just...numbed out the noise."

"I'm sorry," Kade said softly. And it was enough. It was the perfect response. There was nothing that would make the truth of her life easier. It just felt nice for someone else to be like 'that's awful' in a word, and then they could move on.

"CPS took us when I was eight, and Samuel was twelve. They split us up immediately, and then it was just confusing, you know? Everything was unfamiliar. People, places, bed, school. I had to be in a special foster home because I was a shifter, and I couldn't understand why my brother couldn't be with me. It was just girls in the home, and he was sent out of state, but I didn't find that part out until later. And then there is the missing the parents, and missing the old life, and the emptiness, and the trying to process really heavy stuff but I was just a kid, you know. I didn't even have the tools to cope with any of that. No one showed up to adopt me, like it happens on tv. I turned eighteen and aged out of the system and then it was just me in the world, and how do you even cope with that, you know? By that time, my mom had moved out of the trailer park I remembered. I tried to find her and couldn't. And Samuel was just a ghost, and I was reaching for something familiar, but there was nothing there. All I had was this locket my mom had clapped into my hand when CPS was taking me away, and I knew exactly what it was. She'd been talking to me about it since I could remember. So that's what I have."

“The locket.”

“The curse. That’s the only thing that was familiar for all those years.”

“I remember the first time I saw you,” he said softly.

“Yeah? Was I a cool tiger? Were you seduced by the power of my animal? Was I interesting?” she said sarcastically. She no longer had her animal in that way. Everything got messed up.

“You were at the meeting where I was inducted into Sister’s Edge.” Kade stooped and picked up a stick and began breaking the little branches off the side. “I only knew Tawk, Seth, and Tanner, and had been talking to a few of the higher ranks about joining for a few months. I’d been living on the outskirts, waiting for the invitation. There was a dinner.”

Jess frowned as her memory got jogged. “We were having Frito pies.”

He grinned and nodded. “Yep. You were sitting on a countertop in the kitchen with Misty, Cara, and Danielle.”

“Oh gosh, I remember this. I was close to Cara and Danielle before they left Sister’s Edge.”

“Yeah. I could tell. You were all four laughing at some inside joke. I kept looking over at you because you had this huge smile, and I remember wondering if I had ever seen a smile that big in my life. You were pretty.”

“Were,” she muttered.

“You’re prettier now,” he said, and she jerked her gaze up to him, because there had

been that damn beautiful truth in his voice. “Your eyes were so bright,” he said, with a faraway tone to his voice like he’d been transported to Derek’s kitchen all those years ago. “They had this intensity whenever one of the males walked past you. A defensiveness. I checked your hand when you talked in gestures, making sure there was no scar on your palm. None of the males hung too close to you, so I thought you might be single. I couldn’t quit looking at you. I wanted everyone to shut the fuck up so I could hear what you were saying to the girls. I wanted to know what was so funny. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to smile at inside jokes. I wanted your bright eyes to land on me, but you were just...happy...right where you were.”

Jess’s lip trembled, and she bit it to stop the traitorous movement there. Those were good times. She had been happy back then. “What were you doing at that park?” she whispered through her tightening vocal cords.

“Making sure you were okay.”

“You saw me leave Samuel’s house?” she guessed.

“I was working on my truck in Tawk’s driveway, and you bolted out of that house and ran down the street, and I knew you were upset. I could feel it. I called out to you.”

“You were the one who asked if I wanted a ride somewhere,” she said on a breath, remembering. She’d been so upset.

“You told me to go fuck myself,” he said with a chuckle.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was so hot.”



“What? You are damaged.”

“Yep. Your animal was all worked up, and your eyes were glowing, and when you threw me that dirty look, I knew you could be a monster, and I wanted to see her.”

“My tiger?”

He nodded once. “I had to. I followed you knowing you were going to have to Change. I wanted to make sure you were safe, and no one would mess with you, but I also had to see what you could turn into. And I did.”

“You don’t sound sorry at all.”

“I’m not.” Truth. “So, to answer your question, yes.”

“What question?”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Did I find you interesting.” He tossed the stick into a nearby bush. “Yes.”

“Why...why didn't you talk to me?”

“I talked to you when the time was right. When I had something to offer you.”

“Your rank.”

He grinned a wicked expression, and told her, “I talked to you when you wouldn't tell me to go fuck myself again.”

Her mouth fell open as he pushed open the gas station door and disappeared inside, allowing the door to swing slowly closed behind him. She just stood there like a dummy, watching her shocked reflection in the door glass.

Kade had paid attention to her. He'd watched her. He'd been there all along, and she'd had no idea.

He'd formed their plan long before she'd even known she needed it.

Jess needed a minute with this new information.

She moved out of the way of a man entering the gas station and moved to the corner of the building. There were a couple of rocking chairs here, and she sat in one slowly, her mind racing.

A dozen memories hit her. Kade watching her at the meetings. Kade talking to

Samuel in the yard of their house, his eyes tracking her as she worked on the landscaping. Kade in Tawk's driveway, hanging out with him and Seth. Kade moving his way up the ranks, Challenging other males over and over, fighting monsters and winning. The way his gaze would always find her.

She'd been so deep in her own life, none of these things had meant anything to her back then, but now? They meant everything.

But...the curse.

Her heart sank.

Kade didn't realize it, but he was maneuvering them into dangerous waters.

Not for her, but for him.

## Chapter Ten

Never in a million years would Kade have guessed at Jess's life before she'd fallen into the lap of Sister's Edge.

No wonder she'd stayed.

No wonder.

Sister's Edge was probably the steadiest she'd ever felt, and so it was easy to overlook the bad in a place if she couldn't understand good. Chaos was probably familiar.

God, what a woman. What a strong woman to have gone through what she'd gone through, in almost a constant fashion. And then the accident, on top of everything

else, and the loss of her animal as she'd known her.

And she could still smile.

Kade's heart was hammering in his chest as he grabbed a pair of bottled sodas from the fridge.

He'd watched her through the window, and she'd shrunk to the side, expression on her face haunted. She needed a minute, and he understood. He needed a damn minute too.

God, she was strong. Did she realize how damn sexy she was? She'd locked her legs against every storm in her life and was still standing, and never in her story did she describe anyone behind her keeping her upright. That woman was a powerhouse.

The cut on his palm tingled, and he clenched and unclenched his fist to rid himself of the sensation. It had been doing that a lot over the last few days.

He pushed open the ice cream freezer near the cash register and pulled out a couple of the Drumsticks Jess had described.

As he was paying out, a familiar engine sound filled his senses. He looked over at the gas pumps knowing what he would find there.

Wreck was pulling up to pump number four. Kade tossed another Drumstick into the pile on a whim. He paid for their snacks and then made his way outside.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Come here,” Kade called to Jess. “I want you to meet someone.”

Jess looked confused but stood and caught up with him easily enough. He handed her an ice cream from the bag, and then before she’d even had time to respond, he ducked around gas pump number four.

“I knew I smelled shit around here,” Wreck said without missing a beat as he pumped gas into his truck.

He swung a smile to Kade and then looked surprised to see Jess standing just behind his shoulder.

Kade chuckled and handed him an ice cream. “Insulting me while I’m bringing you a present—that’s messed up, man.”

“I’m sorry for my language,” Wreck said as he offered a hand to Jess. “You must be Jess.”

“H-hi. Yes, I’m Jess,” she said, shaking his hand. She flinched back and gasped, shaking her hand. “You’re a dragon?”

“Crap, sorry,” Wreck murmured, looking down at his hand with a frown. “I never burn anyone anymore. I don’t even feel hot, or worked up.”

Kade reached out and touched Wreck’s palm, but it was cool to the touch. “You aren’t hot.” He swung his gaze to Jess. “Do you get a feeling for what shifters are?”

“Umm,” she said, shifting her weight uncomfortably. “I don’t know. It happens sometimes. Mostly with fire shifters. Water shifters, too. Raynah’s handshake made me feel like I was drowning at first.”

“Well, you’d be fun at a party,” Wreck said.

“Ha, I don’t know about that,” she said shyly. “I’m Kade’s friend. From his old life.”

“Oh!” Kade said, and clapped Wreck in the chest. “This is my Alpha. This is Wreck.”

“You...” Her eyes got big. “You just introduced me to your Alpha. And pushed his chest.”

Kade chuckled. “He’s a little different than Derek.”

“Kade and Cash told me a little about Derek. Sounds like a douche.” Wreck pulled the gas nozzle out of his truck and grabbed his receipt. “Are you coming out tonight?” he asked Kade.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Yeah well, the guys are all going. They’ll be blowing up your phone all night if you don’t make an appearance. Cash is calling it ‘team building barhopping.’”

“God, he gets weirder and weirder.”

Wreck laughed and unwrapped his ice cream as he leaned his shoulder against the bed of his truck. “His heart is probably in the right place. Look, if you don’t show up, there is a ninety-five percent chance he will turn into his owl, and fly to wherever you are, and then Change back, and while he is naked, he will give you a dumb speech about being a good Crew member. If you don’t want to see that man’s dick today, I

would suggest you make some time for guys' night."

Kade was already tired.

Wreck clapped him on the shoulder and nodded to Jess. "Does Raynah have your number?"

"Yes. I know Raynah. We had lunch together and she got my number."

"Good. I bet Timber and the girls all have it by now. If you need anything while you're here, reach out. I mean it." Wreck held up his Drumstick to Kade. "Thanks for the childhood memory, man."

"You got it. See you in a bit," Kade muttered begrudgingly. He wasn't up for the Cash-speech-and-dick-show tonight, but truth be told, he wished he could just find an excuse to hang with Jess.

Wreck pulled away and waved out his open window.

"Your Alpha is a very polite dragon," Jess murmured as she watched Wreck drive away.

"He's not a dragon," Kade told her, waving back. "He's worse." Kade opened the bag and showed her the matching sodas in there.

"For me?" she asked.

"Yep. We should head back. I have to go home soon."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“What’s your home like?” she asked, curiosity painting her tone.

“It’s an a-frame cabin. It’s got a loft bedroom and a big open living room to a nice kitchen. It looks like one of those magazine homes.”

“Fancy,” she said softly as they swung out onto the sidewalk to head back toward her neighborhood...er...Garret’s neighborhood for his rental house.

“Too fancy for me at first,” Kade said around a bite of ice cream. He recalled the first time he’d seen it. “I was used to a small prison cell I shared with a cellmate, and all the sudden I had this nice home, and stability, and people telling me there were no strings attached. Well, I had to pay rent every month, but then Damon Daye went after the prison immediately, and he got money for every single one of us. It’s hush money as far as I can tell. The Prison paid us off to keep their secrets, but that didn’t really matter. Damon got us all a shit-ton of money, and then he went after Cold Foot Prison anyway. It’s getting a complete overhaul. Now that dragon...he’s a boss and for good reason. I didn’t know much about him personally before I watched him make sure Wreck had everything he needed to get us to a good place. I bet he takes care of all of the Crews in his mountains the same way.”

“Why would he do that for Wreck?”

“Because Wreck is helping the blue dragon expand his territory. I don’t know why Damon’s dragon is needing that now, but he does. It’s called Wreck’s Mountains, but Damon is behind the push to secure the territory.”

“You talk about all of this way too easily. You should be more careful,” she warned



him.

“I haven’t talked about it outside of the Cold Foot Crew except for with you. Are you going to talk about it?” he asked. The answer mattered, but he already knew it. She understood the other side of betrayal.

“No,” she uttered honestly.

“Then I guess I’m okay talking about it with you. You told me personal stuff. Now you know I can’t blab about your history. You have information about the people I love.”

“People you love,” she repeated softly.

He startled internally. Love. He hadn’t said that word in a very long time, but just now, he’d said it so easily, without even noting it. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess I feel that way for the people in my Crew. They piss me off and get on my nerves every day ending in Y, but I would take a bullet for any of them. And lately, I think they feel the same about me. I think that’s the way a Crew is designed to be.”

The frown etched onto Jess’s pretty face as she quietly ate her ice cream down to the last bite said she was mulling it over.

Sister’s Edge wasn’t like that.

Kade knew it, and so did she.

He didn’t need to put thoughts in her head though. Manipulation was a Sister’s Edge move. She needed space to figure everything out on her own.

He started counting the minutes down as they reached her street, and he didn’t like it.

He didn't want to leave. Already, his phone was vibrating away in his back pocket, and it was probably the guys asking where he was.

"Thank you for hanging out with me," she said as they reached her door. She unlocked it and then hesitated on the porch. "And thank you for the ice cream. And the soda," she said, holding up the drink she'd taken from the gas station bag. "And also for being happy for me about the job." She inhaled deep, and he could see the pretty pink blush in her cheeks.

"You're welcome for all of it."

"There is a bet going on how long it takes you boys to message the girls of Cold Foot," she said. "Just so you know."

"Mmm. Did you make a bet?"

A pretty smile stretched her full lips. "Maybe."

"What did you bet?"

"Can't tell you. That's cheating."

He dropped his head and grinned. God, he didn't want to leave. If he was honest with himself, he wanted to kiss her. He'd wanted to earlier, but he was trying to give her enough space to figure her shit out. But after all she'd told him, he felt closer to her, and he wanted it. He wanted to taste her, and to push her back into the house and get her lost. He wanted to turn off that big, beautiful mind of hers and tether her to him.

The scar on his palm tingled, and at the same time he clenched his fist, she clenched hers. Huh.

“Tingling?” he guessed.

She looked down at her palm and clenched it again. “It’s fine.”

Mmm hmm. “Okay, Cactus. You stay out of trouble tonight.”

“You’re the one going barhopping.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

He laughed and backed up a couple steps. “I’ll send you a picture of how wild we get.”

“I’ll send you a picture of how wild it gets here. Me and my boyfriend.”

“Oh yeah, and who’s that?”

“Me and my firepit.”

God, his grin probably looked so dumb right now. Should he tell her? Should he admit he would do stupid things just for the chance to spend a night with her at that firepit?

He cleared his throat and did a little salute and then forced himself to turn away and head for his truck.

Jess’s arms slid around him. She hugged him from behind, and Kade staggered to a stop, and slipped his hands over hers to hold her there. He swayed them and rolled his eyes closed at how damn good this felt, her tits all smashed against his back, gifting him the embrace he hadn’t known he needed.

“I’m thankful for what you did,” she whispered thickly.

“What did I do?” he asked as he opened his eyes to look at his truck.

“You came back for me.”

She squeezed him tighter and then told him, “Don’t make this harder. Just leave.”

So, he stayed stock still as she slipped her arms from him and he listened to the hollow, retreating click-clack of her flip flops as she made her way into the house.

His heart had never hammered so hard as it did now.

He’d wanted to kiss her. He’d wanted it so badly, but somehow, somehow, she’d made that hug feel even more intimate than any kiss ever had.

Oh, she had him. She had all of him.

He was in it deep now.

The door to the house closed, and Kade forced himself to get into his truck and drive away.

Don’t make this harder.

Too late. He knew he would be messaging her as soon as he thought he could. He would be back here, looking for excuses to see her.

He’d thought she was interesting all those years ago?

Now, things had changed.

Now, Jess was impossible to stay away from.

## Chapter Eleven

Kade clenched and unclenched his fist and then rubbed his thumb across the old scar

on his palm. There was an almost constant tingling there now and it was starting to get on his nerves.

The guys were laughing at something Reed had said, and Cash elbowed him. “Dude, are you even here right now?”

“Yeah. Of course, man.”

“What did Reed just say then?”

Kade narrowed his eyes and took a wild guess. “His crabs are back, and his dick doctor has some concerns with some of the STD resul—”

Reed booed and threw a French fry at him. Kade laughed and leaned back in his chair, then took a long swig of his beer. It was getting warm. He’d been nursing this one for half an hour already.

“You keep messing with your hand,” Wreck observed, his bright eyes on where Kade was clenching his fist on the table.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

Kade slid his hand off the table and hid it. “It’s just sore.”

“Liar, liar, your wiener is going to catch on fire,” Cash sang.

The grossed-out expression on Wreck’s face probably matched Kade’s right now.

With a sigh, Kade showed his Alpha the scar across his palm. “Promise mark. It’s been feeling weird.”

“Since when?” Wreck asked.

“Since his Promise came back into his life,” Cash said, smushing his pointer fingers together. He made a kissing sound and Kade shoved him so hard, he nearly toppled over in his chair.

King and Reed were laughing, but Wreck was watching Kade with a completely serious expression. “I think it’s time you invite Jess up to the mountain.”

“We aren’t there yet.”

“If your damn claiming mark is tingling, I’m pretty sure you’re there,” Cash pointed out.

“It’s not a claiming mark.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it isn’t,” Kade gritted out.

Cash pulled up his phone and read aloud, “Claiming mark. An intentional injury or marring of the skin for some shifter cultures that show possession, and sometimes facilitate a mating bond.”

“That sounds like it was written by a human.”

“It was probably written by the damn robots,” Reed pointed out. “The humans love their artificial intelligence lately.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the movies,” King muttered. “I’m not a fan.”

“I love artificial intelligence,” Cash said. “Hey, AI, make me a coffee and fix my whole life.”

Kade narrowed his eyes at the dumbest of his friends.

“Do you ever think before you speak?” King asked. “I’m genuinely curious.”

“I can’t hear you,” Cash said, typing away on his phone. “Harley just sent me a titty pic.”

Kade sighed and checked his phone again. He wondered what Jess was up to. He held his beer out and took a quick picture. King took that opportunity to photobomb the picture, flipping off the camera, and grinning.

Kade chuckled and sent it to Jess. “I’m sending her the address to this place,” he grumbled. “Drinking is stupid if there are no girls here.”

“Oh, I already messaged Harley a half an hour ago. She’ll be here any minute.”



“Ha!” King belted out, texting on his phone. “I asked Katrina to come out before we even left for the bar.”

“So weak,” Wreck said, but there was a smile in his voice, and he was looking up at the door, and nodding his chin in a greeting.

When Kade swung his gaze to the entry, Timber was dressed in a slinky black dress, waving at Wreck.

“Let me guess, you messaged Sasha?”

Reed snorted. “No. I told her this morning if I have to hang out with you fuckin’ sausages, I need her here. She went shopping today for a new outfit.” He gave a two-fingered wave to Sasha, who was walking in behind Timber.

“Welp, it’s been fun boys,” Kade said, standing.

“Where are you going?” Wreck asked.

“To go pick up Jess. She doesn’t have a car.”

Wreck gestured over at the girls. “The ladies took care of it.”

Confused, Kade looked at the door just as Jess strode in. She was wearing shiny, skin-tight leggings, and a figure-hugging forest green tank top. The neck was low-cut and showed off the perfect curves of her tits, and holy shit, was she wearing high heels?

Kade hovered there, half standing, half sitting, hands gripping the arms of the chair.

Click.

King laughed and showed Reed his phone. “Look how dumb his dumb face looks.”

“Send me that,” Cash said. “I’m going to make it into a t-shirt.”

Kade would be irritated with them a different time. Right now, he just wanted to get to Jess. “I’ll order another round,” he told the guys as their mates filtered over to them. “Margaritas?” he asked Timber and Sasha, who were to the table first.

“Kat, margarita night?” Timber asked behind her.

“Yup,” Katrina said without hesitation as she headed for King, who had his arm out for her already.

“Fruity shit or normal?” Kade called as he walked away.

“Fruity shit. Surprise us with the flavor!” Timber called.

“Not grapefruit though,” Sasha said.

Raynah and Garret stayed home with baby Brea, but Jess seemed to be having fun with Harley. They were chatting and laughing and making their way slowly to the table.

Harley gave him a little wave and told Jess she would see her at the table as he reached them.

“Hi,” he uttered, still shocked she was just...here. “You look...” He shook his head and arched his eyebrows at her. “You’re fuckin’ hot.”

She laughed, and looked down, probably to hide that pretty blush in her cheeks. “No, I’m not. You’re just really nice.”

“Mmm, am I?” he asked, trying really hard to not stare at her perfect cleavage. “I’m headed to the bar to order drinks for the table. Want to come with me?”

“That’s what she said.”

“What?”

“That’s what...” Jess cleared her throat, and her cheeks were cherry red now.

“I’m just kidding. I heard you. I just wanted you to say it again,” he said with a laugh.

“I’m feeling very not smooth tonight,” Jess admitted as she slipped her hand into the inside of his elbow that he’d offered her, so she wouldn’t topple over in those hot-as-hell sky-high heels. “Raynah messaged me in a group text, and I had ten minutes to

get ready before your Crew picked me up. They're really nice," she said, looking up at him with those pretty crystal blue eyes of hers. God, she was so pretty.

"They're good people. Annoying as hell but good."

She giggled. "I can tell they're nice. They have no ill intention behind the things they say. And they just seem like happy, confident women. Harley brought me this shirt, and the heels. I already had the leggings from what Raynah brought before. I haven't..." She seemed stuck on her words, and her eyes were full of some deep emotion he couldn't guess at.

Kade eased her to a stop at the bar top and turned his shoulders to face her completely. "You haven't what?"

"I haven't done this in so long. Just had a fun night without a worry about anything." She tugged at her tank top. "I got dressed and no one had an opinion other than compliments, and I knew I was going to see you, and I just got your picture you texted and I got all excited inside because I knew I was going to see you before you even finished the last of that beer, and I just feel...I just feel...good."

Kade had never felt a smile consume his body from the inside out until this very moment. He hadn't even known that kind of feeling could exist. Her feeling good made the damn world make sense. How strange.

She rubbed her scarred hand absently. "Do you know, on the drive here, Harley asked what happened to my face, and I just answered. I didn't prickle or have flashbacks or hate that she'd noticed the scars. She'd just asked it so nonchalantly, like she wouldn't judge no matter what, and I just said it. I got in a car accident. A drunk driver hit my car, and I rolled down a mountain, and when I woke up, I couldn't feel my animal. I just said it without a shaking voice, or tears in my eyes, Kade. I just...said it."

“You mean you owned it.”

She nodded. “And do you know what she did?”

“What?”

“She hugged me and then squeezed my shoulders like this.” She gripped his shoulders and leveled him with a look. “And she said, I promise you, your animal will come back. You’ll just have to get to know her all over again because you will both be different.” Jess’s lip trembled and she released his shoulders and leaned on the bar top. “And do you know the best part?”

“She was telling the truth?”

“She was telling the truth,” she said through an emotional smile. “A stranger. A stranger gave me more clarity in the first few minutes of knowing me than any of the females in Sister’s Edge were ever able to.”

Fuck, he was going to send Harley a freaking cookie bouquet or something. Atta girl. Good job, Harley.

“What can I get you?” the bartender, a guy in his mid-twenties, asked from the other side of the bar top.

“Another round of Happy Hooker beers for that table over there, and some fruity margaritas,” he said, doing a quick headcount. “Four...wait.” One of Harley’s friends had just come in the door. Tammy was a bartender at another spot but must’ve had the night off. Harley probably texted her. “Five.” He turned to Jess. “Do you want a margarita too?”

“Yes, but look,” she said, pointing to a chalkboard with specials written in neon colored chalk behind the bar. “They have a special on margarita flights.”

“Good eye,” the bartender said as he was pouring beers. “You can pick four flavors.”

“We need six flights,” Jess said. “Mango, strawberry, raspberry, and plain,” she said. Turning to Kade, she asked, “Do you mind if I get this round?”

“What? No, it’s expensive.”

“I have savings,” she said, waving him off. “Plus, I won the bet tonight.” She pulled her wallet from her purse and set her card on the countertop, waiting. “It’s the least I can do. Tonight is probably my favorite night ever. I feel so freaking normal right now. Let me do something for your Crew.”

It didn’t feel right not to take care of her, but he did understand. She wanted to contribute to the fun, so okay. He would find a way to get her back, and cover the next round, but he respected her wanting to be a part of the night and taking care of their group.

He smiled and let her card stay on the bar top, just waiting to be swiped. He respected the hell out of this woman.

That little cactus sure has a sweet center.

## Chapter Twelve

Jess didn’t want to get out of the truck.

Kade had his elbow resting on the console, and he was leaning toward her. They’d been talking here for fifteen minutes already. Outside, the neighborhood was quiet,

but that was too be expected at two in the morning.

“You’re going to be tired for work tomorrow.”

“Today,” he said with a snort. “My boss will be super understanding, I’m sure.”

“Really?”

“Hell no.”

“Oh.” She giggled and fidgeted with the hem of her tank top.

“Has your hand been tingling?” he asked.

Illuminated in the gold-hued porch lighting, Kade looked so handsome. His eyes were a piercing blue, and his smile was so easy. He’d stopped drinking hours ago, and she’d stopped after that first margarita flight, but she still felt buzzed just being this close to him.

She considered his question and studied the old scar on her palm. “Sometimes. I almost had two scars.” She inhaled deeply and forced a smile. “Thanks for swooping in and putting a stop to that.”

“You aren’t angry with me anymore?”

Jess shook her head. “No. I think you poisoned me though.”

A slight frown drew his dark eyebrows down. “What do you mean?”



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“How can I go back to a cage now? You’re poisoning me with a peek at a good life.”

The corners of his masculine lips curved upward. “If I had it all to do again, I would poison you again.”

A strange fluttering sensation took over her stomach, and she rubbed the scar on her hand. “Do you have regrets on the Promise?”

He surprised her by nodding. “I have a few.”

“Oh. I understand.” She didn’t understand, so she didn’t really know why she’d told him that.

“I wish I would’ve taken you out of there. Before all the stuff went down with Tanner and Samuel, I wish I would’ve figured out a way to get us both out of there.”

“I don’t,” she admitted in a whisper. She dared a glance up at the confusion swimming in his eyes. “If you would’ve pulled me out of there, I would’ve wanted to go back. I didn’t know enough yet. And you wouldn’t have gone to Cold Foot, and gotten time to yourself to figure things out, and Wreck and Damon would’ve pulled someone else out of that prison, and from where I’m sitting, I think you ended up in a pretty cool place.”

And there was that smile again. “Well, when you put it that way, maybe I wouldn’t change a thing either. I wouldn’t have had the chance to listen to you screeching out Friends in Low Places at karaoke tonight—”

She smacked him gently on the arm. “It’s called harmonizing,” she joked, knowing damn well she couldn’t sing worth a hoot. “Besides, the whole bar was singing with me, so I’m pretty sure you were really the only one who heard me, and that’s because you were sitting right in front of the speaker.”

“Cash got video of the whole song. He’s already posted it in the Crew loop with like a thousand pictures. Freaking paparazzi.”

She fell over cackling just imagining how awful that video probably sounded. “Hey, I was trying to seduce you. Did it work?”

And that handsome-boy smile faded again. “Yes,” he admitted softly. Truth.

The laughter died in her throat, and she sat up straighter. “You can’t be falling for me, Kade. There are rules.”

“What rules?” he asked, and he was just a foot away from her.

“I can’t fall in love with you, and you can’t fall in love with me.”

“Why not?”

“Because you will get hurt.”

“What if I don’t mind getting hurt?” he asked.

“If you got hurt because of me, I would never be able to forgive myself. I would go on just like my mother, living a half-life, finding anything I could to numb the guilt.”

“And what if it’s too late?”

“Too late for what?” she asked on a breath.

“What if I’ve already fallen?”

“We can’t.”

“We can.”

“No, Kade. You don’t understand the curse. We can’t.”

“We can.”

“You’ll die—”

“Then I’ll come back to you—”

“Kade!—”

He leaned forward in a rush and his lips crashed onto hers, quieting her argument. Jess froze completely. This was wrong. Right? This was against the rules. This was against...this was...this...

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

His lips moved against hers, and she melted slightly, leaning into it as her eyes closed.

A soft moan escaped him as he shoved the console up between them and pulled her across the bench seat and crushed her against him.

She shouldn't do this. She shouldn't kiss him like this. It was against the rules. She was only to have empty affection for always, and pair with a friend, but God, this felt so good. His hand on the back of her neck, pulling her closer, his other clutching the fabric of her shirt at her waist like he couldn't get enough of her, and nothing had ever felt like this kiss.

Riding on the high of tonight, she allowed him to pull her into his lap and hugged his neck tighter as he moved the entire seat back to make more room.

She needed to stop them, but when she tried to pull away, her body didn't respond. Instead, she leaned into him more, melting against his chest completely.

Kade thrust his tongue into her mouth and there was no stopping anything now that she was tasting him like this. She wanted more and more and more and more...

She needed it.

She needed everything.

Frantic, she climbed over his lap, straddling his hips, and pushed his shirt up his chest and he separated from the kiss just long enough to peel the thin fabric from his body.

His abs were perfect, and his chest defined, and his arms were so powerful around her as he consumed her again. His hands were everywhere as he explored her body, gripping her curves, cupping her neck, slipping his hands up her tank top. Her touch stayed frantic as she slid her hands over the curves of his muscles, committing his body to memory. She coveted every inch of him. Never in her life had she seen a man this perfect. His skin was warm under her touch, and as she slid her fingertips to the button of his jeans, he stopped holding back.

Kade pushed her tank top over her head and let off a sexy sound as his eyes dipped to her lace bra. He unfastened it and pulled it off her arms, then leaned back and moaned as he slipped his hands up her rib cage to cup her breasts. His massage felt so good, she grabbed his wrists and threw her head back, closed her eyes and uttered his name. She could feel how ready he was. She was already so wet. Just the thought of his big, hard dick sliding slowly into her turned her on. Jess rolled her hips against him, and he threw his head back against the head rest and rolled his eyes closed. “I want it,” he whispered in a gritty, sexy voice.

And oh, to be wanted by a man like him. To be wanted after everything she’d been through. To be wanted after the constant drowning waterfall of insecurities that had plagued her since the accident.

She was scarred, and her animal barely existed, but Kade—strong, steady, powerful Kade—he wanted her.

Jess had never wanted anyone like this either.

She leaned forward and whispered against his ear. “I am desperate to have you inside of me. I want it deep.”

His hand slipped gently around her throat, and he kissed her, then released her and pushed his jeans down his hips, unsheathing his thick cock.

All logical thought left her. There were no problems, or questions here in the quiet of his truck. The world outside of this connection with him had simply ceased to exist.

He'd pushed the bench seat back to make room, but it was still tight as she pushed her leggings and panties down her thighs. Kade was smooth about helping. He pulled off her heels with one hand and yanked the leggings from her ankles, and then she was straddling him again, pressing her wet pussy right over the hard length of him. She rolled her hips, sliding against him, and he adjusted his hips and relaxed back against the seat. His hands were on her hips as she rolled against him again, and his fingertips dug gently into her skin there. She loved this. She loved that she was in control, but that he could tell her the pace he liked with the pressure of his fingertips.

He pulled her against him, and her breasts pressed against the strong planes of his chest. He looked down at where they touched, and she could tell he liked seeing her tits smashed against him like this. His eyes were blazing a frost blue now, and he looked wild with hunger as she rolled against him again.

Kade moved his hips slightly and pulled at her waist until her entrance was settled right over the swollen tip of his cock. "You want it deep?" he rumbled against her ear.

"Yes," she said, pleading in her voice.

He dipped her down onto him just a little, then pulled her back off.

"Please," she begged.

Kade drove into her deeper, deeper, deeper until she cried out with how good the stretch felt. He pumped into her shallowly, moving his hips so smoothly, hitting her just right like he already knew exactly what she needed.

“Kade?” she said mindlessly.

“You want more?”

“I need it,” she rasped out desperately. She was so close! God, how could anything feel this good?

She slid up and down him, up and down, faster now. Kade gritted his teeth and his grip on her waist got tighter as he pulled her down on him faster, faster. She could hear the slap of her ass against his thighs, and her tits were bouncing with every deep penetration, and fuck! “Kade, I’m coming!”

He gritted out her name and pulled her against his chest as he bucked deep into her, hitting her just perfect. Her body broke around him. He absolutely shattered her. No thoughts filled her mind except for the primal need to keep dragging out that pulsing pleasure that was consuming her. He slammed into her hard, and hesitated for just a few moments, and she could feel it so easily—the spurts of warmth splashing into her as her orgasm dragged on and on. He thrust into her slower, pulsing his pleasure with her, and only when both of their releases were through did they relax against each other in sated relief.

“Holy shit. Holy shit,” she chanted in a whisper.

His arms were around her now, and his strong hands were massaging her back as he laid gentle kisses on the top of her head. She just laid like this, feeling drunk with his affection. There was a throbbing sensation in her head, but it didn’t hurt. Perhaps it was his racing heart. She smiled and pressed her hand onto his chest, but the drum in her head didn’t match his heartbeat. It must’ve been her heartbeat she was feeling.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

What a beautiful thing to finally have her mind be so quiet that she could hear this. What a gift Kade had given her.

She lifted her lazy gaze to the window and looked out into the night. They'd just fucked in his truck, parked in her driveway. Classy. A giggle took her. "I'm a ho."

The rumble of his deep chuckle felt good vibrating against her cheek.

"You are anything but a ho."

"I didn't last but a few days around you."

"Technically you lasted years. I cut your hand a long time ago, and you cut mine."

She smiled and lifted her hand to look at the scar there. Her arm felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. It looked just like it always did. The drum in her mind held steady. Bum. Bum. Bum.

How strange it was to feel so completely and utterly connected to someone. How incredible.

They stayed like this for ten minutes more, just relaxed against each other, but the strange drumming in her mind didn't go away.

"Do you hear that?" she asked, easing up to look at him.

"Hear what?" Kade's hooded eyes looked happy and relaxed.



She mimicked the vibrating sensation in her head. “Bum. Bum. Bum. Bum. It’s like a rhythmic whooshing sound.”

A slight frown confiscated Kade’s face. “I don’t hear anything, pretty girl.”

Huh. Jess plugged and unplugged her ears, but it sounded the same either way. Perhaps the blood had rushed to her head while they were fucking or something.

“Want me to tuck you in?” he asked.

“I need you to get home safe and text me when you get there,” she murmured. “I’ll do my walk of shame alone.”

He snorted. “Walk of fame, woman. Ain’t no shame in what we just did.” He leaned forward and kissed her neck, tickling her as he did and she squirmed to the side as a giggle-fit took her.

“I’m going to need you to not watch me stumble to the door,” she told him.

“Mmm, no deal. I want to see you lose your balance at least twice or I know I didn’t do my job.”

She laughed and struggled ungracefully into her leggings. “Fine, but no pictures.”

“Deal. I’ll take video.”

“Kade!”

“Do you know how many times I’ve thought about being balls-deep inside of you, woman? I’m savoring this. I’ll savor it tomorrow too.”

“Oh, you think you’re getting an invite tomorrow, do you?” she teased.

“I’ll bring you food,” he bargained.

She scoffed. “How easy do you think I am?”

“I’ll bring you a double portion of fried rice.”

She froze and couldn’t think of a single argument. That sounded so good right now.

“Make it shrimp fried rice and I’ll think about it.”

“Mmm,” he rumbled, nipping at her neck. “Wear the lacy bra again.”

“You like it?” she asked, pulling her tank top on. She had plans to just carry her bra inside.

“I love it.”

Bum. Bum. Bum.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, the bra draped from her fingertips down his back as he made out with her for a few minutes longer.

And when at last she pried herself away from him and slid out of his truck, she meandered toward the front door, scrambling to find her keys in her purse. The strap fell off her shoulder twice, and goodness she couldn't even imagine what a hot mess she looked like right now. She looked up at him and grinned. She could see the white of his smile as he watched her out his open window.

“You're trouble, little cactus.”

“I'm innocent,” she teased.

Bum. Bum. Bum.

“I'll wait for you to get inside safe,” he called.

“I like you,” she said, feeling absolutely high on whatever he'd just done to her body.

“Good.”

She snorted and nearly dropped her keys as she tried to fit it into the lock. With the door finally opened, she turned and waved to him and then went inside.

Bum. Bum. Bum.

A smile stretching her face, Jess locked the door behind her and padded straight into her bedroom to flop onto the bed, stretched out like a starfish. She stared at the ceiling fan above her with what she could only imagine was the stupidest grin known to man.

Her phone vibrated in her purse, and she pulled it out, and read the text from Kade. I like you too.

She curled her knees to her chest and squealed to extract her happy, excited energy.

Bum. Bum. Bum.

The sound was louder now. Sitting up, Jess locked her arms on the bed and listened more carefully. Bum. Bum. Bum.

It was definitely louder now.

She leaned forward and scooted to the edge of the bed, horror rising up inside of her as the sound got even louder. Bum! Bum! Bum!

There was a soft glow coming from the velvet pouch her locket was contained in.

Bum! Bum! Bum!

With trembling fingers, Jess emptied the locket onto the bedside table, and gasped as she saw the pulsing light emanating from it.

She stood in a rush and bolted to the opposite side of the room.

Bum! Bum! Bum!

“No,” she whispered in horror. “No, no, no.”

Her mother had described this.

Her mother had told her stories about how the locket had come to life when she’d fallen in love with Jess’s father.

She’d described how the curse had activated.

How it had slowly gone from light blue, like it was right now, to a deep indigo blue over a matter of weeks. And when it glowed black, her dad...who was supposed to be this invincible tiger shifter...just dropped, and died.

Bum! Bum! Bum!

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

Jess clasped her hands over her mouth and stared at the cursed thing in horror. She was shaking like a leaf.

She'd known better.

She'd known better and she'd still lost herself in Kade.

This was her fault.

Everything that would happen from here out would be all her fault.

She'd fallen for him, and Kade would pay the price for her mistake.

### Chapter Thirteen

Jess yelped in pain as the ache in her hand ramped up to unbearable in an instant.

She sat up in bed and clutched her hand to her chest, panting as tears of agony filled her blurry eyes.

It felt as if someone had jammed a machete straight through her hand, but just as fast as the ache had come on, it faded to nothing.

Shocked, Jess opened her fist and stared at the scar there. It was red and angry looking but hadn't opened up or anything.

"You messed up," a deep voice said from the chair in the corner of the room.

Jess shrieked as she realized who was in here with her—Tawk.

He looked relaxed in that chair, as if he had been sitting there for a while. His hands were clasped in front of his mouth, elbows resting on the arms of the chair.

“Wh-what are you doing in here?” she stammered, wishing she sounded stronger than she did.

He flickered his fingers at the locket sitting on the bedside table, where she’d left it last night. She’d fallen asleep staring at it, imagining the blue was getting darker by the moment.

“That little treasure of yours is probably calling to anything with any extra senses right now.” His nostrils flared and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Can you smell the stink of dark magic?”

“Yes,” she whispered, heart hammering against her chest. “Can you hear it?”

“Bum. Bum. Bum,” he said in rhythm with the pounding in her head. “You sure didn’t waste any time activating it, did you?”

“Thirty-two years,” she uttered defensively. Thirty-two years without falling in love. It wasn’t enough, but it was something.

“Your ancestors had powerful enemies. I wonder do you know what they did to deserve the curse on your bloodline?” He narrowed his eyes. “I’ll make some coffee while you get ready. We need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk,” she said, finding the steel in her voice. “I’m here because I want to be. Sister’s Edge doesn’t own me.”

“No, it does not,” Tawk said from the doorway. “But you owe it to Sister’s Edge to listen to what we know about your little curse.”

Her hands were shaking as she watched him disappear out of the door. “Who else is here?” she called after him.

“Just me.”

What the hell was happening? In a rush, Jess kicked off the covers and flew into action, getting dressed as fast as she could. She scanned the room for her phone to message Kade that Tawk was here, but she couldn’t find it anywhere.

“I have the phone,” Tawk called from the other room.

Shhhit.

“You should be wearing the locket now,” he called out. “It’ll be calling for power. You’ll get it stolen quick if you don’t keep it on you.”

Since when did Tawk know every-fucking-thing?



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

A little growl escaped her, and it surprised her. The animal was awake. That rarely happened anymore.

She had dressed in cut-off shorts, a black tank top, a flannel and a pair of low-top sneakers that were a half-size too big because they had belonged to Raynah. Messy bun it was today, and then she was ready to face whatever this was.

Tawk was pouring creamer in a coffee and offered it to her.

“No thanks. I’m not up for being drugged first thing in the morning,” she grumbled, and passed him by to make her own cup of coffee.

“Suit yourself. Drugging isn’t my gig though.”

“Oh yeah? Just burning me alive and eating my ashes if I piss you off?”

“More like it,” he agreed.

She hated being in small spaces with Tawk. Even when he wasn’t worked up, his dragon felt too big and heavy and it made it hard to breathe.

“Kade will kill you if you hurt me.”

“Why do you keep thinking everyone is out to hurt you?” Tawk asked, sinking down onto the couch.

And she thought about it as she waited for the coffee to begin pouring into her little

mug. “It’s what most people I know have done.”

“Mmm, you’re talking about Misty? And Samuel?”

“Yeah, Tawk, and about a billion other people I’ve trusted over my lifetime. Misty told you guys about the locket and the curse. Samuel killed Tanner and let my Promise take the fall for him. And this whole time? This entire time? Samuel and Misty played it out like they were innocent, and I was crazy for still thinking kindly of Kade, and meanwhile, I was in the house with the real traitors to Sister’s Edge all along. And not to trauma dump on you, but this,” she said, holding up the locket that was now secured around her neck. “Has made trusting people a little difficult.”

“You trust Kade. I don’t think he would betray you.”

“Yeah, but the curse. The one person I can trust will be betrayed by me. That’s the fate of a Heichman Witch, right?”

“Do you know why you were cursed?”

“No. My alcoholic mother must’ve let that little family secret slip through the cracks while she was spending all our grocery money on her next bottle of numbness. She just told me I can never fall in love a bunch of times, and then didn’t even fight CPS when they took me, and then never followed up, never looked for me, never even fucking tried to help me through a single day of my life.” Sarcasm was thick in her tone right now but fuck it. She had all these feelings boiling over, and Tawk was asking annoying questions first thing in the freaking morning. It was barely dawn outside.

“I think she probably loved you in her own way.”

She huffed a laugh and shook her head. “Oh yeah? Did you know her?”

“My mom did.”

Well, that drew her up short. “What?”

“My family has known about your family’s curse for generations. Open the locket, Jess.”

She already knew what she would find in there—black and white pictures on each side of a man and a woman she didn’t recognize. She’d studied those pictures a hundred times.

He was waiting, his expression unreadable.

“Fine,” she muttered, prying open the glowing, pulsing locket. The light blue glow looked a little darker this morning, she swore. Inside were the same two pictures that had always been there. The woman had dark hair, pulled back into a low bun. She wore a dark dress with white piping along the high neckline. She wore a slight smile, but her eyes were dark and empty. The man on the other side had much lighter hair and a suit on, complete with a bowtie. He had his chin raised high into the air and was glaring at the camera with icy eyes.

“Favella Heichman was your great, great, great, great grandmother, and was the last in your line to be allowed love. She ruined it for all of you by falling in love with that man.”

“Who is he?” she asked, staring at the picture of him.

“Well, technically, he’s your great, great, great, great grandfather, but he wasn’t supposed to be. Back then, the covens were powerful, and he belonged to someone else.”

“He cheated with Favella?” she asked softly.

“They were both to blame,” Tawk said with a shrug. “They both knew better. His wife was head of all the covens back then. She was it. She was the one everyone went to, she knew the most, she held the most power, she was the most revered. She was also the most jealous, and brutal, and unforgiving. Favella and Edmund hid their affair for a long time, until Favella began showing. She wouldn’t say who the father was, and that kind of secrecy wasn’t allowed in the covens back then. When it came out that Edmund was the father, they weren’t killed in the traditional way. Helena wanted their betrayal to echo through the generations. She wanted to set an example, so that no one would ever dare to betray her again. She gathered all of the covens, and she did a blood curse on the Heichman’s, of which Edmund would be the first victim. He died in Favella’s arms.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“How...” She frowned, closing the locket. “How do you know all of this?”

“Because my family used to protect the covens. We were the guard dogs.”

What the hell? “What was in it for you?”

“We got to feed on blessed ashes, and cursed ashes, and our power was fed as payment for our loyalty.” He gestured to the locket. “If there were more of us left, they would be headed here, drawn to that.”

“I’ve never heard of any of the dragons having anything to do with witches.”

“I’m not like Damon, or Vyr, or Dark Kane, or Rowan, or any of them. My dragon is smaller and obsessed with treasure, and that treasure is ingrained in me from generations of my ancestors consuming ashes that were blessed by witch’s power. Blessed, or cursed. However you want to look at it.”

Chills rippled up her arms. “Tawk? Why are you in Sister’s Edge?”

“Because of you and Samuel.”

Truth. Chills, chills, chills.

“You might not practice, but you still give off power. It feeds me. That locket is feeding me as we speak. I am stronger around you.”

“Like a parasite?”

He huffed a laugh, but he just seemed kind of tired. “It’s a symbiotic relationship, Jess. I don’t want to lose the taste of your power, so my dragon would keep you safe.”

“Safe like when Connor broke the glass door and it cut me? Like when I was in that house scrambling to get out before it fell down on me? Or the times I was reprimanded and cut down in front of the Crew? The times I was belittled and told I was nothing? You suck at your job, Tawk. You’ve taken from me and given nothing in return.”

His mouth ticked up into an empty smile and he dropped his gaze to the coffee table. “You have to leave Kade.”

“Wonderful epiphany. What would I do without your sound advice?” she uttered sarcastically.

“I’m serious. I’m here at no benefit to myself. I’m going against Derek’s orders. You are supposed to be shunned until you come back begging for forgiveness, but I think you won’t do that until it’s too late.”

“Too late,” she repeated softly. She didn’t understand.

“After Kade is dead and you have nothing left, and you need a safe place to numb out, the way your mother spent her days numbing out.” Tawk looked up, and his eyes were full of emotion for the first time that she’d ever seen, in all the years she’d known him. “Kade is my friend.”

“You left Kade to hang out to dry,” she gritted out angrily. “If he’s your friend, where were you when Sister’s Edge was testifying against him? Huh? Where were you?”

Tawk shook his head. “I have no good answer.”

“Where were you when they were accusing him of killing Tanner. You were all friends as kids, right? You and Seth and Tanner, and you just let it happen.”

“I’m not arguing that I’m a good person, Jess. If you think that’s what this is, you’re wrong. I have simple needs, and I care about very little outside of those.”

“Eating my power.”

He nodded once.

“Manipulating me into thinking you give a shit about Kade and this curse.”

“I do. I do care. Do you know what happened to your father?” Tawk snapped his fingers. “It happens like that. The men the Heichman’s fall in love with just drop and there is no life in them. They’re gone in a snap, and so no. I don’t want to imagine that happening to Kade.”

“Because I wouldn’t be okay,” she said, the answer hitting her like lightning.

Tawk inhaled deeply and dropped his gaze again, and she knew she’d called it right.

“You can’t feed on power if I numb everything out, like my mother. And like her mother. And like her mother. Samuel can’t feed you like my power does, right?”

He shook his head. “Samuel barely feeds me at all.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“You really are a parasite. You need me to come back to Sister’s Edge so that Kade can continue to exist, so I have some life in me, and you can benefit. If I go back to Sister’s Edge and live an empty life, it benefits you.”

He nodded, but now he wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Connor was my choice for you,” Tawk said softly. “I know you can never love him, and so the curse will be dead for your generation, but he could give you offspring, and you could have something to take care of. A half-life is better than a destroyed life.”

“If I have children, they will be cursed, Tawk,” she whispered thickly. She held up the locket in front of her throat. “Why would I do this to them?”

“He will die,” Tawk murmured. “Kade will die. The locket is already engaged with your feelings for him.” He held his hands out, beseeching her. “Don’t you see, if you love him, you have to let him go?”

And damn it all, Tawk, that fucking parasite, he was right. He was making sense. She knew it to be true, but the thought of leaving Kade was so painful inside of her chest.

“Connor is waiting,” Tawk told her. “He’s on the rise for ranks, and there aren’t any other females that would work for what Sister’s Edge needs. He will forgive all of this, and he will cut you, and follow through with the Promise.”

“He knows about the curse?” she asked, disgusted even entertaining this idea.



“Let Kade find a mate who won’t kill him.”

The burning tears that had rimmed her eyes threatened to spill over, and now it was her turn to drop her gaze, so he wouldn’t see the heartbreak on her face. “I didn’t mean to fall,” she whispered.

“It’s not your fault.”

She huffed a thick laugh, and for a split second, she could see why her mother had worked so hard to stay numb. This pain was too much.

“Let Connor cut your hand, and things will get easier. Break any bond to Kade and watch the locket stop glowing.”

Jess buried her face in her hands as the tears started to stream. “I like the way he makes me feel.”

“I can imagine,” Tawk murmured. “I don’t bond to people like that, but I can imagine.”

She stood, feeling like she was drowning. “Then it’s you I’ll cut. You’ll never have a feeling for me, and I’ll never respect you, parasite. No kids ever. I’m not choosing Connor. I want my own place on the edge of Derek’s territory, and you will live separately from me. Make sure I never come back for Kade. Keep him safe from me. Do the job your people are supposed to do.” She lifted her chin into the air, knowing her life would never have meaning again. “Protect me from Sister’s Edge. It’s the only way I’ll come back.”

Tawk stared at her for a three count, rubbing the palm of the hand she would cut.

Slowly, he dipped his chin.

And this was it. This was the moment her life ended.

It was the moment hope left her.

It was the moment she took her power back from the curse.

It would never take Kade.

Even if it hurt every day for the rest of her life, Jess would make sure he still existed.

## Chapter Fourteen

Kade checked his phone for the hundredth time.

The good morning text had been ignored, so he'd texted again a few hours later just checking in. It had been ignored too.

Maybe she was freaking out about what they'd done last night. Maybe she needed some space, or maybe she had gone up to Cliff's to start training early, or something.

The scar on his hand was on fire, and he rubbed it with his thumb, trying to fix it.

The workday was eternal.

The second his shift let off, he bolted for the door and made it into his truck before Cash could catch up and ask a bunch of questions. He just wanted to see Jess, and hug her, and tell her whatever was going on in her head was okay, and figure out what she needed.

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

Kade pulled up to her house just ten minutes later. He'd hit every damn red light. The front door was locked, so he knocked. And knocked. Okay. He backed up and stared at the front of the rental house, thinking. The bike she used to go into town was still leaning against the garage. Maybe she walked somewhere. The book nook!

He took off at a jog and reached it in a couple minutes, but she wasn't there. Crap. Where was she?

A familiar book peeked through the window of the little neighborhood library. He opened the glass and found not only the book she'd been reading, but the one he'd taken and left at her house. She'd returned them both.

Mind racing, Kade closed the little door with a click and backed up a few paces, hands linked behind his head. Something was happening.

He ran to her house, feeling panicked. His skin tingled with the urge to Change. Maybe Connor had found her and taken her. Or Derek. Or Samuel. Fuck! He should've been more careful. He should've asked her to stay at his house up in Wreck's Mountains.

He went and knocked on her door again, tried the handle again, and then strode around the house to check the back door. He texted Garret on the way. I need the spare key for the rental house. Can I come pick it up?

Garret's response of, Sure, was immediate, and happened right before Kade looked up to the back porch to see a brick on the edge of the firepit. The breeze lifted the edge of a piece of paper under it.

Kade took the stairs two at a time and pulled the brick up to find the key to the house, and a letter. The handwriting was graceful, looping cursive, and he scanned the signature at the bottom. Jess had written this.

I'm sorry.

Kade, I'm so sorry. I should've been up front with you and told you my feelings weren't right. I could tell you were growing to care for me, but it felt good after everything, you know? And I didn't stop myself, and I led you on, and I'm so sorry.

I've been talking to people from Sister's Edge and have been sitting in my decision to stay in Darby, or to go back home, and I've decided to go home. I had fun hanging out with you and your Crew, but your life isn't for me. I'm sorry. I asked Tawk to come get me and take me back to Sister's Edge. I've decided to find a new Promise, and my hope is that you move on. Move forward. Find someone who matches you. I'm not her.

Thank you for being so kind to me, Kade. Thank you for trying.

I will forever remember your effort. I wish I was the woman you saw in me.

Truly, I'm sorry to leave like this and hope you forgive me someday.

Jess the Cactus

In disbelief, Kade plucked the key from where it had been hidden under the brick and opened the back door. Inside, on the kitchen table, she'd neatly folded the stacks of clothes the girls had given her. All of the food was still here, and the full-length mirror she'd bought for this place. A quick scan of all the rooms said she'd only taken what she'd come here with.

On the bedside table, the velvet jewelry bag lay empty. He sank down on the neatly made bed and gripped the soft velvet bag. A hollowness stretched out inside of him as he stared at the pattern of the carpet. He'd never felt so empty. Not when he'd gone to Cold Foot Prison, even.

Why? Why had she allowed them to get so far and then ripped everything away? Why would she do that?

Had he really misread every single cue from her? Had he misread her?

I wish I was the woman you saw in me.

Kade stood and flipped the bedside table into the wall. The agony of a loss he couldn't even understand washed through him like a tidal wave.

I wish I was the woman you saw in me.

He gripped the back of his hair and yelled. The bellow that shook the house didn't even sound human. Kade squatted down and covered the back of his head with his arms, trying to drag air into his concrete lungs.

Four was the number of times she'd said she was sorry in that letter, but sorry wasn't enough. What did words mean? Nothing. Action was bigger. He didn't care about her sorrys. It didn't make any of this even one percent easier. He wanted her here, with him. He wanted to hug her and see her laughing with the girls from his Crew. He wanted to feel her happiness. He wanted her to see his home. He wanted her to want to be Promised to him again.

Kade wanted her to match him, and now she was considering a Promise to another, the night after she'd touched his soul?

I wish I was the woman you saw in me.

Damn it all...he wished that too.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Hello!” Derek barked.

Jess shook her head and forced her attention from the pattern of the woodgrain in the table, to her Alpha.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“What the fuck is happening in your head right now, Jess?”

“Lots of stuff,” she said, but she didn’t recognize her own voice. It sounded gritty, and growly.

She was surrounded by the shifters of Sister’s Edge, and to her right sat Tawk. Across the table stood Derek, with his arms locked against it, eyes furious. Connor stood beside him, making the entire room heavy with his anger.

“The deal was you come back, and you fucking beg me for a place at my table!” Derek bellowed. “And instead, you are sitting here telling me what you’ll do? You’re telling me? You think you are in control of any of this?”

Samuel sat in the corner with Misty, looking at the floor, like the fucking coward he was. “Hey Samuel, how did you kill Tanner?” she asked him across the room.

“Excuse me?” her brother barked out.

The whispering and murmuring around the room picked up, and Jess smiled. Yep, everyone was going to know now. She was going to clear Kade’s name.

“Jess,” Tawk warned as she stood up.

“No,” she said to him simply, and then flinched back with surprise. “Whoa. It’s really easy to just tell you no. I think this Promise is going to suit me.”

“Quiet down,” Derek ordered, and the room went silent. “Now I know you are all

smart enough to see what Jess is doing. She's trying to divide us, and shake up what we know to be true—"

"Samuel killed Tanner because Misty was fucking him, and Kade took the fall," she called out in a bored tone. "You can hear the truth in my voice. Now you go, Derek. Make it believable."

The hum of conversation picked up even louder this time, and from the back, one of the Crew members called out, "Is that true?"

Against the wall, Samuel and Misty had stood, and Misty wasn't denying it at all. Her cheeks were red, and she looked guilty as hell.

Derek was trying to quiet everyone down, but the animal sides were getting ramped up now, and it was Seth who spoke next. "You killed my brother?"

Samuel held his hands out. "Look, my sister has been traumatized, and she's been brainwashed by another Crew, and she doesn't know what she's talking ab—ack!"

Seth's hand was around his throat. "Yes or no. Did you kill my brother."

Damn, she wished she had some popcorn for this.

"Derek," Samuel choked out, pleading in his eyes.

"How could you lie on your own flesh and blood brother!" Derek yelled at Jess.

"How could an Alpha lie so easily to his entire Crew for this long—"Slap!

Jess gasped as her face hit the table with the power of that open-palm slap from Connor. She was so stunned by the pain, it took her a few seconds to push up off the



table. The throbbing in her cheek matched the bum, bum, bum of the locket.

“Hey, man, that’s not cool,” Tawk uttered low, standing.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Jess growled at Connor, who stood there with a smug smile tugging at the corners of his thin lips.

“Or what? You’re going to sic Tawk on me? Tawk is with us. His job was to bring you back by whatever means necessary, and he did. He did his job. You are the job.”

Derek was trying to break up a mass of arguing around Samuel, but Connor had stayed. “You will not talk to anyone here like that, do you understand?”

Her cheek felt like her facial bones had been broken. She’d pressed her hand against it like that would cool down the heat, or keep her face intact, but it wasn’t helping. Her eyes were watering, and unintentionally, tears of pain and anger slipped from her eyes. She’d never been slapped like that before.

Fury was a slow boil inside of her blood. Glaring him straight in the eyes, she promised him, “I will talk to you however the fuck I want to.”

Connor was so fast. He was so fast. He grabbed her hand away from her cheek in a blur, and the sting of the blade didn’t even register for a few seconds. A red line welled up on her palm and spilled over her hand, and in horror, she looked up to Connor. “What have you done?”

He grabbed her other hand and clapped a blade into it, and yanked her over the table so hard, her arm felt like it was being pulled from the socket. “I will break you,” he growled against her ear as he crushed her hand around the blade and cut his own hand.

She was screaming. That sound was coming from her. That horrified noise was crawling out of the back of her throat, and she couldn't stop it. She couldn't halt what was happening.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

He released her hand, and it was broke. Her entire hand was crushed, and a sob escaped her as she tried to release the stupid ceremonial knife from her grasp. She couldn't.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Tawk yelled, shoving Connor back.

There was so much yelling around her, and that bum, bum, bum of her locket was deafening. A roaring sound consumed her, and her skin caught fire.

Slowly, she looked up at Connor's sneering face across the room where Tawk was yelling at him, and she hated him. In this moment, she'd never hated another more.

Jess inhaled deeply, and screamed, and the smile faded from Connor's face as he was blasted backward. He went straight through the wall, brick and all.

She could see daylight through the wall, and could see Connor getting up in the yard, and her skin was burning, and her hair was standing on end, and every inch of her body ached for...something.

She slid off the table and bolted for the hole in the wall, hunting instinct on Connor.

“Jess, don't!” Tawk yelled.

It was the only words that made it through the fog of her anger.

Just those two. Jess, don't.

But no one in Sister's Edge would ever tell her what to do again. Not ever.

Numbness crept through her as the world went dark.

## Chapter Sixteen

"Hey."

"Fuck," Kade murmured, turning away from Cash. He'd just wanted to be alone out here by his firepit.

"I told the guys you're busy today. King can operate the excavator."

Kade nodded, head turned away from Cash. He rolled his eyes closed and muttered a curse as he heard the chair next to him creak. "I need some time, man."

"Is it Jess?"

Kade nodded.

"What's going on?"

How could he explain that she'd ripped the insides out of him? How did he explain he was going to have to figure out how to walk the damn earth pretending to be alive when he died the second he'd finished reading her letter? How did he explain that he had bonded to her and didn't know how to take it back?

How did he explain he wasn't enough?

"It's been a couple days since you've seen her," Cash said.

“Are you watching me?”

“Yeah. I am. That’s what friends do.”

Kade made a tick sound behind his teeth and shook his head, keeping his damn animal eyes aimed at the woods.

“She left. She wants to be Promised to someone else.”

Cash went silent, and still. The quiet lasted so long that Kade thought perhaps he’d left. He looked over at the chair, and Cash was still here, elbows resting on his knees, eyes on Kade. He looked like he was about to cry.

Kade sat up and shook his head, angry. “Don’t fucking do it, man. I’m barely hanging on here.”

“That hurts,” Cash said low.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

Kade just sat here, shaking his head. No one understood. Cash was paired and it had stuck. He would never know what it felt like to have a mating bond stretched so thin. “I wish Seth would’ve never sent me that video of her,” Kade said. “She was going to make the same goddamn decision either way, and I got chewed up in the process and I wish he wouldn’t have ever even let me know she was still in Sister’s Edge. I can’t save anyone who loves their cage.”

“Maybe it’s not a cage to her,” Cash said. “Maybe it’s just home.”

“I’m home,” he gritted out angrily. “I’m home. Fuck that place, fuck that cage, I am home. I was supposed to be her home!”

Cash rubbed his knuckles across his cheek and Kade couldn’t watch it. He couldn’t watch his friend tearing up. “You’re being weak,” he gritted out, desperate to get Cash to stop with the emotions.

“Nah, that’s you.”

Kade jerked his pissed off attention to Cash. “Don’t get me worked up right now, man.”

Cash stood. “You want to fight? Do you need it? Would that make it better if we bleed each other?”

Kade considered pummeling the shit out of Cash, but his friend was standing here, tears in his eyes on Kade’s behalf, and he’d never seen him cry before. He was hurting for him. Kade couldn’t punish him for that. Not now.

Cash pointed a finger at Kade. “You’re weak for sitting here pouting and not doing something about it.”

“What do you want me to do?” Kade demanded, standing. “Go take her?”

“We did it before.”

“And do what with her? She doesn’t want to be here! She doesn’t want to be with me! She doesn’t want this goddamn bond!” he yelled, ripping at his shirt.

Cash pulled out his phone and turned it toward him. A picture of the night at the bar was pulled up. In it, Jess was sitting in Kade’s lap. Her cheeks were flushed after just having sung a karaoke song with Harley, and she was smiling at him. He was grinning too, in the middle of talking to her, and her eyes were locked right on him. She looked happy. “She sure was good at pretending.”

Cash huffed a laugh. “No one is that good.” He turned to leave and made his way down the porch stairs.

“What are you saying?”

“Go figure out why the hell she really left.”

“She wrote me a note. She told me why!”

“Oh yeah?” Cash yelled, turning on him. “Why did she put it into a note, Kade. Did you think about that? Why didn’t she tell you in person?”

“Because...” He shook his head, searching for an answer.

“Because she didn’t want you to hear the lie in her voice when she pretended you

weren't enough. You are. You want to fix it? Fucking fix it. You didn't build that bond by yourself. That ain't how it works."

Cash spat on the grass and walked away.

Kade was pissed. He hooked his hands on his hips and yelled a curse, and then dragged his glare back to where Cash had disappeared around the corner of his cabin.

Was he right?

He ran his hand down his beard. He hadn't shaved in a while. A quick pace across his porch and back didn't settle anything inside of him.

Fucking Seth.

Heart beating hard against his sternum, Kade pulled his phone out of his back pocket. Seth.

He still had the unknown number Seth had texted from.

Kade still had a connection to Sister's Edge.

He just stared at that open text thread for a few moments, considering doing something so stupid.

Hope was dangerous for a man like him, but he did want closure. Destroying doubt would make it easier to break this damn bond.



## Page 66

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

Is Jess okay?he typed out. He hesitated, his finger hovering over the send button. Screw it. What did he have to lose? Send.

Kade waited for a full minute to no answer and then squeezed his phone until the thing threatened to crumble. He needed to walk.

Kade jogged down the stairs and headed for the tree line. Maybe a Change would steady him out. Or perhaps a Change would destroy every tree that stood in Wreck's Mountains, he didn't know. He'd never felt like this.

His phone rang, and he frowned at the screen. Oh shit, it was Seth's number.

"Hello?" he answered in a rush.

"Hey. I got your text."

Okay. What now?

"Um, Jess isn't okay," Seth said somberly.

"What? What's wrong?" he asked, jogging for his truck.

"I messed up."

"What did you do?" Kade demanded. "What's wrong with Jess?"

Seth was quiet.

“Seth, you dumb motherfucker, tell me what’s happening!” Kade’s voice echoed through the clearing.

“Samuel killed Tanner.”

“No shit.”

“If you didn’t do it, why the fuck did you let us do you like that!” Seth yelled through the phone.

“I don’t have time for this, Seth. Water under the bridge. I’ve moved on—”

“We were friends. You let me believe you killed him!”

“And now you’re what? Mad that I didn’t? Go take that up with Samuel. I got burned, man! The whole Crew burned me. Including you. What’s wrong with Jess? You fucking owe me!”

“She’s stuck.”

“Stuck how?”

“Stuck as the animal.”

Whatever he’d been expecting Seth to say, it hadn’t been that. “What happened to her?”

“Derek called a crew meeting and Connor slapped her for talking back. I was rushing Samuel, because she’d just told us all that you hadn’t killed Tanner, so I didn’t see the slap. I heard her face hit the table though. I did look over just in time to see him cut her hand, and he crushed her hand around the hilt of the knife and made her cut

him too. Broke her fingers.”

“No,” he choked out, sagging to his knees in the grass.

“She made the room heavy, like the roof was coming down on us, and the way she looked at him...and then he went flying. She didn’t even lay a hand on him, and he went flying through the wall, and Tawk was trying to stop her, but she went tiger and followed Connor right through the hole he’d made.”

“Did she kill him?”

“No. Kade...she ripped his hand off.”

Kade froze. He just sat on his shins there in the grass, staring at the back of his cabin, with no words.

“Did you hear me?” Seth asked.

“I heard you.”

“She didn’t just rip it off, man. She fuckin’ ate the hand he’d made her cut.”

Kade pursed his lips against a smile and cleared his throat.

“Are you...are you laughing?” Seth asked.

Kade clenched his fist around his own scar. She hadn’t bitten his hand off after she’d done her Promise Cut.

“It’s kind of funny if you think about it,” he murmured.

“That’s because you didn’t witness it. I’m traumatized. Connor didn’t even have time to Change, and he was screaming, and holding his arm, and Jess turned on the entire Crew and kept them back.”

“So they couldn’t help him?”

“So they couldn’t help him,” Seth murmured somberly.

Kade shrugged. “I bet no one will smack her again or try to force a Promise on her.”

“No one wants to touch her with a ten-foot fuckin’ pole man. She’s using some kind of power to keep people back. It took a dozen of us to get her animal into the basement at Derek’s.”

“You put her in the cage?” he barked out.

“You weren’t there! She’s on a rampage! We’re all cut up just trying to muscle her down there, and she kept blowing us into walls. No one can Change into their animals. She clawed everyone and we aren’t healing right. The whole Crew is limping. You want her? Derek said to come get her. He said he’ll pay for your gas money. He said to bring enough tranquilizers to fell Godzilla and a big trailer to haul her away in. He said he doesn’t want any witches in the Crew anymore. He’s booting Samuel out too.”

Kade was pursing his lips against the laughter that threatened to bubble up his throat. Little hellion. God, he loved her.

He loved her.

He loved Jess.

The smile faded. “Tell everyone to stay away from her. I’m on my way. If this is some kind of trap, you should know I will end every last member of Sister’s Edge, and there will be nothing left of your legacy.”

“It’s not a trap. Come get the witch.”

Kade hung up the phone and leaned his head back. He closed his eyes against the sunlight and blew out a steady breath.

“Can we go get her now?” Cash asked.

Kade didn’t even flinch. Nothing surprised him with that freaking eavesdropper now. “I’ve got to pick up a trailer in town.”

“For what?”

Kade opened his eyes and allowed a smile at Cash. “Her tiger is back.”

Cash’s eyebrows shot up. “She’s a tiger?”

“Yeah. A big one.”

“Holy crap this is awesome,” he yelled, slapping his leg. “How big of a trailer? Ten foot? Fourteen foot? You know what, fuck it. We’ll figure it out. Can we get hamburgers on the way? I’m starving. I have a coupon for a free milkshake from Burger Mini’s. Let’s stop at Burger Mini’s. I’ll pay for your milkshake—” Cash kept blabbing as he walked away at a crisp pace, and Kade pushed up to go grab his keys.

Jess’s animal was back. Her animal was keeping her safe.

He couldn’t help the smile on his lips imagining Connor screaming over the painful lesson he’d learned.

Her animal had avenged her. Atta girl.

It didn’t matter if nothing had changed between them.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

It didn't matter that he was headed to free her again, knowing he still wasn't a match for her.

She was growing, and changing, and her animal had come through for her when Jess had needed her to.

Whatever happened next didn't matter. Kade was so damn proud of her.

### Chapter Seventeen

Parasite.

Jess lunged at the bars and swiped a paw out as far as she could. She barely missed Tawk, but only because he flinched out of the way last second.

"Stop!" he barked out.

Fuck you. Jess paced the cage, eyes on him...eyes always on him.

"I'm not the one who did this to you. I was trying to help!" The room was heavy with his anger, and it made her fury grow in response. She lashed out again, trying to reach him. The sound of her powerful body colliding with the metal bars filled the room.

She missed Kade. God, she missed him so badly. A wave of emotion overcame her, and she roared and backed away from the bars, shaking her head.

"I brought you something," Tawk said. "Release my animal, and I'll give it to you."

She pulled her lips away from her sharp teeth in a smile. Oh, she knew what she could do now. All the shifters of Sister's Edge were without their animals right now. Just like she had been all this time. All the times they had made fun of her, and taken shots at her, and pointed out her weakness. All the times they'd treated her like the bottom of the Crew...Now they were all helpless.

She didn't know how far she could stretch this power that was emanating from her in bitter, dark, foggy tendrils, but it was far enough to take the shifter abilities from the whole of Sister's Edge. She bet if she caught Tawk with a claw right now, he wouldn't be able to instantly heal himself. She bet she could hurt him.

She bet she could draw blood on a dragon.

"Stop," he gritted out, staggering to a seat in the corner of Derek's basement, too far away from her.

Tawk sagged forward on his elbows and lifted a glare to her. The locket fell from his grasp and dangled from his fist on the broken chain. He must've picked it up when she'd Changed yesterday.

To her horror, she noticed the pulsing blue color was much darker than before. Bum. Bum. Bum. Bum. Bum.

The rhythm was faster now, filling her head.

No. If she left Kade, the curse would go away. If she wasn't around him, falling for him deeper, then the locket would go colorless again, and stop pulsing power. Right?

But had anything in her heart changed? When it came down to it, did she love Kade less now that she was away from him?



No. She'd revisited memories of how kind and understanding he had been, and how much more she respected him than any of the males in Sister's Edge. She was doing this wrong. She loved him more now. Being back in the cage of Sister's Edge made her brief time with Kade mean more.

She was strengthening the curse.

For the first time in her life, she truly hated who she was. She hated who she'd been born to be. She hated that her mother had continued the Heichman line and then left her to figure everything out for herself.

She hated that no one in her lineage had figured out a way to break this curse, and she hated that she would be the reason for the demise of the best man she'd ever known.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fucking fair.

The door to the basement swung open, and as if her thoughts had conjured him, Kade stood there, glowing blue eyes locked on her.

Emotions warred within her—relief, horror, joy, agony.

He was here for her. He was here. He'd come for her.

Bum. Bum. Bum. Bum.

I'm so sorry. She wanted to tell him how sorry she was. How she regretted that she was ruining his life. She wanted to make him understand, but she couldn't speak in this form. Some shifters could, but it wasn't a power she possessed.

"She's going to kill you," Tawk said low to Kade.

"I'll be all right," Kade said flippantly.

"No, you don't get it, man," Tawk said, lifting the locket higher. "This is your death sentence."

"I'll take that," he said, approaching him. "I'm taking her home. She'll want the locket."

"Home," Tawk said over the sound of Jess's snarling as she paced the cage.

Tawk! Get him to leave!

Tawk didn't do his job though. He didn't get Kade to leave. Instead, he stood and handed Kade the locket. The broken chain necklace dangled from Kade's closed fist.

Kade was touching his death, and the thought of it made Jess sick to her stomach. She had to Change! She had to explain to him! She had to make him do something unforgiveable. Something awful. Sleep with another woman, or tell his Crew her secrets, or slap her or something! She needed to fall out of love with him right now,

not be saved by him again.

He was making it worse. The locket was calling to her. Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum. Was it humming faster? She thought so.

Kade, you have to go away!

Shit, she needed to Change, but when she closed her eyes and tried, nothing happened. Nothing at all. When Jess opened her eyes, Kade was crouched near the bars, and Tawk was nowhere to be found.

“It’s going to be okay,” Kade said, but he didn’t understand. He didn’t understand any of this!

Jess charged but stopped just short of the bars. She didn’t want to hurt him. She just wanted him to know she needed to talk to him and make him understand.

“Hey,” he said, eyebrows lifting as he leveled her with a look. “You have to trust me. Everything is going to be okay.” There was steel somberness to his tone that she didn’t understand.

Kade was wrong. Nothing was going to be okay.

“I’m going to take you to Wreck’s Mountains. Can you Change? If not, it’s okay, I have a trailer, but if you can Change, it’s easier. I can hug you.”

And God, the temptation. If she could Change, she would. So much had happened in such a short amount of time, and the idea of melting into his embrace felt like everything. She wanted to cry and roar at the same time.

She closed her eyes again and tried. She tried and tried until she was panting. She

sauntered to the back of the cage, agitated. She tried again. And again.

“Okay. It’s okay,” Kade murmured. “Can you stop putting my animal to sleep?” he asked softly. “I have to be able to get us out of here in one piece. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

She hadn’t even realized she was putting his animal to sleep though, and she definitely didn’t know how to turn it off. He wanted to be able to protect them with his rhino if it came to that, and she got it. Tawk would be telling the entirety of Sister’s Edge that Kade was here right now to take her away.

Who knew what Derek would do, or hell, even Connor. One-handed or no, he had rage and vengeance behind him now.

She tried to focus on pulling the tendrils of power back into herself, but just like her inability to Change back to her human form, she couldn’t control herself. Frustrated, she paced the cage, needing to move. There was no tingle in her skin of an imminent Change, no compromise from the animal, but that was to be expected. She’d been trapped for a very long time. Was it her fault? Jess had blamed the loss of her animal on the car accident, but was it? Or was her animal put to sleep with her own powers, and she hadn’t even realized what was happening?

Another wave of anger at her mother washed through her. She hadn’t taught her anything about herself, or her powers, or her lineage.

“It’s no good,” Kade whispered, watching her. His eyes held a somberness that she interpreted as disappointment, and it made her even angrier with herself.

Bum, bum, bum, bum.

That damn locket was pulsing in his clenched fist, calling to her, pointing out the

mistakes her ancestors made, and Kade would be the one to pay.

She paced and paced, not knowing what to do.

It was Kade's whispered words that halted her. "I'm sorry," he said, and the look in his eyes held a hundred ghosts.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

Pain stung through her hind end, and she jumped to the side in surprise, then looked around for danger, but all she found was Cash, kneeling by the basement door, a tranquilizer gun aimed at her.

Shocked, and betrayed, she glanced back at her tingling right leg. There was a dart with red feathers on the end. Jess roared and tried to reach it with a tight circle, and when she couldn't, she scraped it off on the bars.

"I'm sorry," Kade said again.

No, no, no, he didn't get it. She hadn't figured out a way to tell him about the depth of the curse yet. She couldn't go to sleep! She had to tell him so they could come up with a plan together!

Kade, please. She couldn't talk. She couldn't tell him.

Jess tried to stay upright, but her hind end had gone numb, and she hit the ground in a sitting position. She dragged herself toward him. Kade, Kade, Kade. Bum, bum, bum, bum...

Her ribs were numb now, and her shoulders were tingling, and her eyelids were getting heavy.

Kade, please! Make it stop!

She hit the cement floor and blinked slowly, trying so hard to keep her eyes open.

Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum.Faster. It was going faster now, filling her entire head with that damn throbbing vibration. Each beat ticked off the seconds of Kade's remaining life, and she wasn't done. She hadn't figured out a way to save him yet.

Kade...an animalistic moan escaped her throat, but it was so soft, and her eyelids weighed a thousand pounds.

Kade...please...

And she thought the forbidden words. She didn't know why she betrayed herself like this, but she thought the forbidden words, because she was so damn scared that she would never see him again. She wished he could understand her heart.

I love you.

Kade flinched and dropped the locket, as if it had burned his hand, and she could see it there on the floor on the other side of the cage bars.

The sky blue had turned to a deep indigo hue.

Kade...

She understood her mother at this moment. Jess understood why she'd spent her life trying to escape her own mind after what she'd done to Jess's father with her love. She hadn't been able to find a way to save her mate. This same thing had happened to her parents, and Jess knew she wouldn't be okay either.

She would never be okay again.

Bum, bum, bum, bum.

Bum, bum...

Bum...

## Chapter Eighteen

“And then what did he say?”

“That he’s happy he chose me,” Misty said in the mushiest voice Jess had ever heard from her.

Jess grinned at the screen in her car. It said Misty’s name on the caller ID. She dragged her attention back to the road. The land around Sister’s Edge was flat in general, but she was an hour away and on a mountain road that dropped off steeply on the right side. The shoulder was only a few feet wide. This road had always given her the creeps for some reason, and driving at night made it worse.

“Do you think that discussion will make things easier on your relationship now?” Jess asked. Misty and Samuel had been fighting like cats and dogs lately but for reasons she didn’t understand. It was all over small, petty things, and Misty had been leaning on her for support.

“I think it will make me want to try more again,” Misty said softly. “I was ready to leave. Your brother...well he’s not the most empathetic.”

Jess pursed her lips and nodded as she rounded another curve. “I think that happened in the years he was separated from me. He wasn’t like that when we were younger.”

“He also won’t talk about the time after you two were put in different homes, so it’s hard to understand. Most of the time, he just feels mean, and cold, and uncaring.”



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Well, him opening up tonight is a good sign.”

“Yeah. Hey, have you seen what Kade has been doing?”

“Kade?” Jess asked, distracted by a deer on the side of the road. How had it even gotten up here? It would have to travel down the road a ways to find a safe place to head down the mountain.

“Yeah. You know that tall guy. Kind of new. Really, I didn’t notice him much, but he’s been Challenging.”

“Really?” she said, snapping back to the conversation. “I’ve only seen him a few times. I don’t know much about him.”

“Yeah, well, maybe study up. He’s making a run at Third. He just Challenged Arthur. He nearly killed him.”

Jess’s eyebrows shot up. “Arthur lost a Challenge?” He was a freaking lion. “What’s Kade’s animal?”

“A mother freaking rhinoceros!”

“Holy shit!” Jess exclaimed, rounding another curve. A car passed, and the headlights were bright, so she winced against them and waited for the car to pass before she dug back into the conversation. “Aren’t those rare?”

“I’ve never known a rhino shifter,” Misty said.

Jess shook her head in disbelief. “I didn’t even pay attention or register him as dominant.”

“He has a quiet presence at the meetings for sure. Boy can fight though. Samuel sent me a video of the Challenge. He’s the size of a freaking house when he’s Changed. I wouldn’t tangle with him. Well, I mean maybe if I wasn’t with Samuel, I would tangle with him,” Misty said in a wicked tone.

“If he’s a rhino taking out lions, he could probably kick Samuel’s ass.” Sometimes she thought Samuel needed someone to put him in his place. She didn’t like how he treated Misty, or her, or the way he talked to anyone, really. He just had a mean streak in him that hadn’t been corrected in a long time. It got worse the older Samuel got.

Headlights ahead said another car was coming toward her, and she prepared mentally to take a face full of the high beams again. Out on these quiet roads, sometimes drivers forgot to dim their lights after a while of driving without seeing anyone else.

“Hey, Jess?” Misty said in a small voice.

“Yeah?”

“If I tell you something, will you promise me you won’t talk to anyone in the Crew about it?”

“Of course. You can tell me anything,” Jess said, confused.

The car’s brights were definitely on, and Jess flashed her lights at him to try and tell him to dim them.

“You know how Samuel and I haven’t been doing very well for a while?”

“Yeah,” Jess said, taking the curve carefully. There was a steep drop-off on her right-hand side, and barely any shoulder. Just the metal railing to keep her from falling into the abyss.

This dude had freaking UFO lights or something. She squinted, shielding her face to try and keep her eyes on the road. “Geez, my guy,” she muttered, her eyes watering as she focused on the outside line of the road.

The lights were getting so bright though, and something felt off, and when she forced her attention to the brights, they were aimed straight for her. “Shit!” she screamed, slamming on her brakes, but it was too late. The pickup truck slammed right into her. Time slowed as glass flew in front of her face, and her car blasted through the railing. She screamed as her stomach dipped with no ground below her. It was a three second hang-time before her car hit the trees below.

There was agonizing pain, and then everything went black...

Jess blinked her eyes open. Every cell in her body was on fire. The pain in her face was fading, and she didn’t understand what she was looking at. There were metal slats right in front of her face, and beyond, she could see the woods.

She lifted her hand to her cheek, where her face had been disfigured in that awful accident all those years ago, but it wasn’t bleeding. It had just been a dream. She wasn’t stuck in that car for hours. She wasn’t even alone. She could hear voices outside. Someone was yelling, “Stay with me!”

Chills rippled up her arms as she pushed up and looked around. She was in some kind of animal hauling trailer, but it was on its side. The slats she could see out of belonged to the roof of the trailer. What the hell?”

Jess’s limbs tingled with a strange half-numb sensation, and she pushed against the

back door. It had been damaged and fell open without much effort. Slam! The metal sounded deafening as it hit the asphalt.

In shock, she climbed out onto the road. Her hands had been cut up, but as she looked at them, they were healing right before her eyes.

“He’s almost here. Stay with me!” The voice sounded familiar, but it was as if she was hearing him from underwater. The words slurred and distorted.

“...with me...”

“...fight!...”

“Come on, Kade!”

Kade.

Hyper awareness hit her in a moment, and she jerked her attention to the sound. Cash was here, in the middle of the road, by the front of Kade’s truck that had jack-knifed, and separated from the trailer, and was sitting destroyed on its side.

Cash was doing CPR.

No.

Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum...

The locket was in the truck. She could sense it as she bolted past it. It was bragging. This was its victory lap. It had done its job again. It had destroyed again.

A sob escaped her as she reached them. Kade was staring up at the sky with empty eyes.

She fell to her knees beside him.

“He’s going to be fine,” Cash said as he did another round of chest compressions.

“Kade, Kade, Kade,” she squeaked out, tears streaming down her face as she hugged his head and pressed her cheek against his. “Kade, I’m sorry. I love you and I’m sorry.”

He wouldn’t ever understand.

“He’s going to be fine, Jess. Give me room to work.”

“You don’t understand,” she screamed. “I did this to him! I cursed him!”

“He’s going to be okay,” Cash said, and then leaned down to breathe into him.

She wished he was right. She wished she could believe him, just to hold onto hope for a few more seconds, but she could feel it—Kade had faded.

Cash did chest compressions again and glanced up to the sky. “Come on! Kade, he’s almost here. Stay with me. We have a plan. We have a fucking plan! Stick to the plan.”

Plans. Kade had a plan with her before too. She slipped her hand around his and held onto it, beside herself with crying. She would never be okay again because he would never be okay again.

“He’s dead,” she whispered, absolutely shattered, never to be put back together again.

She’d killed the man she loved.

Cash looked up at her, and there was a strange excitement in his glowing gold eyes. “I know.” He grinned. “We gotta go.”

“I...” She frowned down at Kade’s still form. His eyes were glossing over. “I don’t

want to leave him.”

“Trust me, you do!” Cash yelled over a sudden roaring sound.

A great wave of power whooshed over them, blasting her backward, but Cash was there trying his best to hold her upright. Terrifying green flames were rushing straight down the road toward them. Toward Kade.

“Dragon,” she uttered in warning. Fucking Tawk! What was he doing?

“Not a dragon,” Cash said, yanking her off the ground. His grip was steel as he pulled her behind the trailer and covered her eyes as the green flames hit Kade’s body. “Phoenix,” he whispered.

Phoenix?

Jess pried Cash’s hand away from her face and stared in horrified awe as Wreck emerged from the green flames beside Kade. Wreck looked up at her and his eyes glowed with power. He knelt beside Kade and lifted his hand into the air. Kade elevated, burning with those green flames. The air smelled like a power she didn’t recognize, and threatened to choke her, but she couldn’t look away. Kade’s body hovered twenty feet above them, and Wreck swung his gaze toward the truck. He lifted his other hand, shot green flames at the front windshield, and pulled the locket out of there. It was small, and embraced by the flames, but something strange was happening...

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

Dark tendrils of black magic were leaking from it and floated up toward the sky.

She didn't understand the wind, or the whooshing sound until she realized they were wings.

Tawk's gold dragon dove down right above them, flattening she and Cash to the ground. He opened his enormous mouth and dragged some of those black tendrils into his throat. Tawk roared, and flew over the trees, then circled as Wreck drew more of the poison out of that goddamn locket.

She couldn't stop crying as she watched Wreck repeatedly feeding the curse's power to the golden dragon. With each pass, Tawk's gold scales darkened, and he seemed to grow in size. Wreck fed the power of the curse to that dragon until there was nothing left but the locket, and then he cast that up into the sky for Tawk to devour with the chomp of his razor sharp teeth.

Wreck fell to his knees, and Kade faltered in the air. The Alpha was shaking as he lowered him to the ground, but he set him upright, on his feet, and Kade—her Kade—he stood on his own.

Green flames licked his skin as his eyes opened to behold Jess.

"We had a plan," Cash said softly from beside her.

And God, she'd never cried harder than she was right now as she bolted for Kade.

She fell into his open embrace and pushed them both back ten feet as she sobbed



against his chest. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” she murmured mindlessly over and over again. “I thought I wasn’t going to get to tell you that.”

“I already knew you loved me, Jess. Your locket gave you away.” His voice was gritty and hoarse, like he’d been screaming, but it was Kade’s voice. He was really here. He was warm, and talking, and she could hear that gorgeous sound of his heart.

Bum-bum, bum-bum, bum-bum. The sound of his pounding heartbeat had replaced the death chant of the Heichman Curse.

“Wreck are you okay?” she choked out through the heavy, acrid scent of his power. Green flames still peppered the asphalt around them, but Wreck had sagged back onto his bent knees. He heaved labored breath, but he rocked his head back and looked down his nose at her. A slight smile took the corners of his lips. “I will be.”

Kade released her long enough to take a blanket from Cash’s hand, and he wrapped it around her. “I saw your tiger,” Kade rumbled. “She’s just as pretty as I remember.”

“She’s a monster,” Jess whispered thickly.

But Kade’s lips stretched into a smile. “She’ll fit right into Wreck’s Mountains.”

“Wh-what?” she asked, hope filling her chest.

He held out his hand and Cash set something onto his palm. The blood drained from her face as she realized what it was.

Kade held a knife.

Jess clapped her hands over her mouth as the tears started streaming again. “Really?” she forced out.

Kade looked exhausted, but he nodded. “I wanted to do this better. I wanted to ask you in front of the whole Crew, and give you a special day if it’s what you want, but I’m about to have a couple rough weeks.”

“The green flames are a little brutal to recover from,” Cash explained from where he crouched near Wreck. “Kade won’t even want to be in the light for a while.”

“I don’t want to wait that long to ask you,” he murmured, searching her eyes. “When you left, it gutted me. I don’t want to be away from you again. Now you know exactly where you stand with me. I want all of you. I want to be your Promise again. That’s what I want.”

Jess looked around at the remnants of the fading green fires all around them, and the destroyed truck, and the trailer he’d brought to take her home. Again. They were sitting right in the middle of the destruction their love had created.

He’d had a plan, and he’d stuck to it, and he’d ended the curse.

Kade had saved them both.

She wiped her wet cheeks and forced the words past her tightening vocal cords. “Yes.”

“Really?” he asked, wincing as if the volume of his voice hurt his head.

She nodded, and whispered, “Really. I couldn’t name a better place to make a Promise to you. It was always you.” Shaking from the adrenaline rush, she cut his hand again, right over the old scar she’d made, and then she offered her hand. “Over the scar Connor made, please. I’ll take two Promise marks from you. Erase his.”

Kade’s eyes were glowing so bright as he nodded. He made his second Promise to

her, and this time, she would cherish it.

He had chosen her right after her accident before, when he'd barely known her, but now?

## Page 74

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

He was choosing her, knowing all her damage. Choosing her despite the curse. Choosing her despite all her walls and trusting her to lower them for him. And she would. She took this Promise seriously.

“Welcome to Cold Foot,” Wreck said.

She smiled at her new Alpha, and then at Cash, and then at Kade. Her Kade. Her mate. Her other half. Her Promise.

“It’s an honor,” she whispered, and hope they all three knew the depths of what she meant.

### Epilogue

Jess loved the heck out of this truck. Her boss, Cliff, had even let her hang a little pink, glittery air freshener from the rearview mirror. She’d done it mostly as a joke so the guys at the shop could all complain about it in jest, but now it was her little good luck charm.

It was three weeks at the new job, and already, she was recognizing car parts and pulling some of the orders herself. She was also getting to know the receivers at the different auto shops from here to Missoula and loved that every day of work was different.

A call came through Bluetooth on the truck, and she grinned as she saw the name on the screen. “Hello, hunk,” she answered.

“Hey, Cactus. How was the call?”

“Okay, Clara Daye is awesome. She is my shero.”

“And Vyr?”

“Terrifying, but very nice and had good advice too. And his mate Riyah too. We’re going to start doing training over video calls a couple times a week just to get me some more support, and they are planning a trip out here for next month to meet with me in person. And some really pretty lady named Lucia joined the video chat too.”

“Holy shit, Lucia? That’s awesome! Do you know who she is?”

“I’m not sure. I was going to ask you.”

“She’s Beaston Novak’s daughter. She’s a seer and powerful. She’s coveted in Damon’s Mountains, just like her father. Her brother, Weston has the power of sight too.”

“I feel like I’m meeting famous people. Vyr was quieter, but Lucia and Clara had a lot of things that really make sense for my powers. And Riyah did too.”

“Do they think you’ll be able to control putting our animals to sleep?”

“They think I’m already correcting, and learning. I just need more practice containing it.”

“I freaking love this. I’m glad Damon is putting a team together for you. You deserve the support, Jess. It’s time to correct the path of that lineage of yours.”

“I think...” She bit her lip, hesitating. “I think I might start learning spellcasting.”

“Are you serious?” he asked, and she loved the excitement in his voice.

“They think it may help me to learn control, and it’s also something I want to learn if we ever have kids. If we have a daughter, I want her to know who she is.”

“Oh hell yeah! Jess, I’m so proud of you.” Truth. “Are you almost home?”

“I’m pulling up the hill now,” she told him.

“Good. I made dinner but wanted to check your ETA.” He got off work earlier than her, and they’d settled into a routine that just made her so happy from her heart outward. Even through the brutal stretch of time he’d had to heal from Wreck bringing him back to life, he’d cooked for her. Kade’s home was gorgeous, and the kitchen was to die for. She’d also learned that he loved cooking, and sharing food, and she was fairly sure it was his love language, taking care of her in that way.

God, she loved him. She loved their life. She loved everything!

“Okay, I can’t wait to see you,” he said. “Speed. But not too fast. Drive safe. I miss your boobs. Okay, bye.”

She was giggling when she said bye and hung up. She was so grateful he was recovered from Wreck’s green flames now. That was a brutal couple of weeks.

When she pulled into the clearing, Kade was standing right out front, and the Crew had the grills going. Reed and King were flipping what looked like steaks on the grill. The others were all here, including Garret’s human brother, Dylan, setting up a huge spread of food on folding tables.

Confused but excited, she stopped right where she was and rolled down the window. “What’s going on?” she asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:12 am*

“Park it right there,” Kade told her. “The Crew wants to celebrate our Promise tonight.”

“What?” she asked, even more excited now.

“Yep. They were just waiting for me to recover. The girls have been planning.”

Her mouth fell open. She looked over at Raynah who was approaching with the others. “Is that what y’all have been so secretive about?”

“Yep!” Raynah said, switching baby Breah to her other hip. “We got matching Cold Foot Crew t-shirts for tonight, since you will officially be one of us.”

Jess’s eyes burned with happy tears as she shook her head in disbelief of how she’d stumbled into a life like this. She loved matching with the girls. She felt a part of something finally, not coasting on the outskirts.

She belonged.

Jess got out and Kade pulled her into a hug, and kissed her, then patted her butt and said, “Go get your clothes on, pretty girl.”

“Seriously,” Cash said from where he was digging around in a blue cooler for a drink. “If I have to hear one more gosh-dang thing about these stupid t-shirts...”

“He’s jealous we didn’t make any for the guys,” Harley explained.

“You know, guys like things that match too,” Cash griped, standing. “I’m going to make a rap about it.”

“No!” Wreck barked out. “I forbid you from doing one of your stupid raps tonight. You are not ruining this.”

Jess laughed at their banter as she followed the girls toward Timber and Wreck’s house to change into her shirt. Before she made it three yards though, she just needed to touch Kade again. She was so excited and happy, and so was he, and this was like food for her soul. She turned and bolted for him, and he caught her and held her up off the ground, hugged her tight as he looked deeply into her eyes.

“I like being your Promise,” she uttered.

“You’re not just my Promise anymore,” he said softly. “You’re my mate.”

If a heart could smile, hers would be doing that right in this moment. It was the first time he’d ever used that term with her.

Did he know? Did he understand how proud she was to be his? How proud she was that he belonged to her back? How proud she was to be a member of Cold Foot, under an Alpha like Wreck, with friends like the members of this Crew? How proud she was to be an honorary auntie to baby Breah? How much she looked up to the relationships here?

Did he understand how safe she felt here, with him, and how damn much that meant to a girl like her?

His answering smile said he could read it on her face.

“Happy?” he asked.



She nodded, eyes full, heart bursting, wishing she had the words to make him understand. She didn't, but when she leaned in to kiss him, his lips went so soft against hers, and his hand was so gentle on the back of her head, like he was coveting her.

Someday she would find a way to tell him how very much he was appreciated.

How his sacrifices had tattooed devotion onto her heart for him.

How him showing up in Sister's Edge had ended up being the first day of her favorite part of her life.

She eased back from the kiss and rested her forehead on his and listened to the sound of his beating heart—the most important sound in the entire world.

He really was the best part of her life...

And they were just getting started.