



# Moon Destiny

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** Brooke: When I agreed to accompany my boyfriend on a camping trip, I was hoping to salvage our failing relationship—not end up on the ground with my throat torn out. As I closed my eyes, I was certain it was for good. But the next time I opened them, I came face to face with my boyfriend’s mysterious father, who told me Alex hadn’t survived. But I had, and now I was a werewolf. Just like him. Now I’m stuck in his house and under his thumb, forced to obey my new “alpha’s” commands. He’s grieving his son, and he’s determined to find the rogues responsible for the attack. But I’m grieving, too...and chafing at the loss of my old life. I’m also having a hard time ignoring the attraction that flares whenever the alpha looks at me. If I have any chance of reclaiming my freedom, I’ve got to do it before my traitorous body leads me down a path far more dangerous than the new world I’m living in.

Hugh: They say only the most stubborn humans can survive a werewolf’s bite. Based on what I know of my newest pack member, the sayings are accurate. Brooke turned, which means she’s now my responsibility—and mine to tame. But I don’t have time for blonds with big blue eyes and sinful curves. I’m determined to find the rogues who killed my son. If I don’t, my whole pack could be in danger. There’s just one problem. Fate doesn’t care about my plans. Brooke is my one true mate. So it doesn’t matter if she wants to run. My wolf will always urge me to catch her. Unless, of course, I reject her. And that’s exactly what I intend to do. I’ll train her, keep her safe, and send her on her way. The sooner she’s out of my life, the better. Getting her out of my head is a whole other story...

**Total Pages (Source):** 58

## CHAPTER ONE

### BROOKE

“Isn’t this great?”

I looked up from tying my shoe to find my boyfriend, Alex, gazing at a waterfall.

Another waterfall. One of about two dozen we’d seen since we started hiking three hours ago.

He turned—and for a second he looked confused when I wasn’t right behind him. Then he spotted me kneeling on the side of the path. The confusion in his blue eyes cleared, replaced with mild exasperation. “Laces again?”

“Yeah.” I stood and injected levity into my tone. “You should have told me to bring boots.”

He smiled, and relief washed over me because I’d intended him to. He’d only warned me ten times or so that the Columbia River Gorge was “no place for Nikes.” I should have listened, of course. Alex knew what he was talking about. He loved this stuff—hiking and wildlife-watching and cooking hot dogs over an open fire while my eyes watered uncontrollably from the smoke.

He came to me and smoothed a strand of hair off my sweaty forehead. “Next time,” he said softly, “I’ll take you shopping and buy you a pair.”

My gut clenched. I'd agreed to this trip because I was pretty certain there wasn't going to be a next time. Alex and I had such busy schedules it was almost impossible for us to find a night we were both free for dinner, let alone a serious discussion about the future of our relationship. Some of that was my fault. After five years covering the community interest beat at the Seattle Dispatch, I was finally on the brink of doing actual journalism. The paper's investigative reporter was retiring and the managing editor had told me the job was mine if I wanted it. So I'd been working my butt off to prove I was up to the task.

Alex's job as an engineer was just as demanding. He spent his days in construction trailers and boardrooms, and his work frequently took him to job sites around Washington and Oregon.

The trip to the Gorge had seemed like a good opportunity to force us both to slow down so we could talk—and hopefully part ways as friends. We'd drifted apart over the last six months, and I was positive he felt it as much as I did.

But the way he was looking at me now, it seemed I'd read everything wrong. He and I weren't on the same page at all, I realized with a sinking feeling.

A breeze stirred, tugging at my ponytail and sending more loose hair across my face. He pulled a piece away from my lips, and his eyes dipped to my mouth.

Mild panic bolted through me. "Alex—"

"I always forget how fragile you are." He brushed a knuckle over my cheek.

I felt my brows pull together. At five-ten, I was hardly fragile. I was no match for his ripped physique, but I did pilates four times a week. I could keep up with him when he bolted up a mountainside so he could admire a view or check out a weird-looking plant. And I'd been a good sport over the past two days, accompanying him on

numerous hikes even as I longed for my comfortable apartment with its indoor plumbing and refrigerator stocked with food that didn't come out of a tin can.

He dropped his hand and adjusted his pack on his shoulders. "You think you can go another mile? There's an overlook up the trail just a bit. My dad used to take me there as a kid and I wanted to check it out."

I pushed down a sigh. "It's really just a mile?"

"Promise." He held up three fingers in a Boy Scout salute, an equally boyish smile on his handsome face.

My heart squeezed. Dammit, this wasn't going to be as easy as I'd thought. "All right." I glanced at the sky, which was stained dark orange with the setting sun. Shadows had already fallen over the cluster of trees next to the trail, making it difficult to see inside the forest. "But I want to make it back to the campsite by dark. It's supposed to rain tonight."

"Deal."

We continued up the trail as the sun sank below the horizon. The breeze picked up again, this time sending a rush of cool air swirling around me, and I shivered despite the sweat soaking my tank top under my pack. The Gorge was one of Oregon's biggest travel destinations, but we hadn't seen a single soul since we set out. With the sky turning purple and the trees soaring around us, it was easy to feel like we were cut off from civilization.

I gripped the straps of my pack more tightly and cast a look around the woods as nerves prickled down my nape. In a bid to stop myself from worrying, I'd deliberately avoided reading about what kinds of wild animals lived in the Gorge—a decision that seemed stupid in retrospect.

“Were you ever in the Boy Scouts?” I asked Alex. Maybe talking would keep my mind off the encroaching darkness...and all the creatures poised to eat us.

Stop it, brain.

Alex shot me a quick smile. “Naw. Dad never had time for that kind of stuff.”

“Too busy with work?” I knew Alex’s father owned a security company, but I wasn’t sure what, exactly, he did. I didn’t know much about Alex’s family at all, actually. His mother had passed when he was a child and he didn’t have any siblings. Beyond that, the Daltons were a mystery—and Alex seemed determined to keep it that way.

“Yes,” he said. “Work and other stuff.” Before I could press him, he gestured me forward. “Let’s pick it up a little so we’re not out here after sunset.”

It was too late for that, I thought with another glance at the trees. I walked more quickly, my mind buzzing with questions. This is part of the problem. Our problem. He wasn’t open with me. I didn’t expect him to spill all his secrets, but he could be so damn evasive. After two years of dating, I still hadn’t met his dad—or any family members. I hadn’t thought much of it at first, but as our relationship had grown more serious I’d started to wonder if something was wrong. Then, around six months ago, Alex had started spending a lot more time at his dad’s place in rural Washington—sometimes making the three and a half hour drive from Seattle twice a month.

## Page 2

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But I was never invited. It was as though he wanted to keep me at arm's length.

I stopped in my tracks, a sudden thought forming in my head. "Alex, wait."

He turned, frowning. "What is it?" Something in my face must have alarmed him, because he closed the distance between us, his eyes full of concern. "Brooke?"

"Are you ashamed of me?"

He snapped his mouth shut, unmistakable confusion flitting over his features. "What? Of course not. Why would you ask that?"

I held his gaze. It was obvious he told the truth. But now he was waiting for an explanation. "I don't know. It's just..." Did I really want to have this conversation here, in the middle of the trail? On the other hand, if we didn't talk now, we'd go back to Seattle with nothing resolved between us.

I drew a deep breath. "Every time I ask about your family—your dad, specifically—you kind of shut me down." I shrugged. "I thought maybe the problem was me."

His mouth tightened. "There's no problem. I told you, Dad's busy."

"For two years?" The wind whipped harder around us, carrying the scent of rain and lifting goosebumps on my arms. But I barely noticed as frustration clouded Alex's eyes.

“Is it really that important to you to meet him?” he demanded.

“It’s important to me to be part of your life. You’re so secretive about him, sometimes I wonder if your family’s in the mafia.” I gave a halfhearted laugh.

But Alex didn’t smile.

Alarm spiked in my mind. I’d meant it as a joke. There weren’t any mob empires in southern Washington. But that didn’t mean Alex’s father wasn’t involved in some other kind of criminal enterprise.

My heart sped up. “Is your dad doing something illegal?”

He huffed. “If you knew my father, you’d know that’s the furthest thing from the truth.”

“But that’s just it! I don’t know him.” Frustration joined the anger swirling through me, and the floodgates opened. Now that I finally had a chance to say all the things I’d been holding back, I couldn’t stop the words from spilling out. “There’s this whole side of you I know nothing about. And now you’re gone every other weekend and it’s like you drop off the face of the earth when you’re at your dad’s place. When you get back, you don’t want to talk.” I lowered my voice even though it was just us on the trail. “We haven’t slept together in three months. I’ve been trying to make it work between us, Alex, but I don’t know if I can do it anymore.”

His eyes widened, his face a mask of shock. “What are you saying?” His brows pulled together. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“I... Maybe it’s for the best.”

He cursed, then swung away and ran a hand through his dark blond hair.

I drew a shaky breath. “This isn’t how I wanted to do this.”

He turned back, his features taut. “Yeah, I have to agree you picked a really shitty time to drop something like this on me, Brooke.”

“What other time should I have done it?” I demanded. “We’re never in the same place long enough to have a conversation. You don’t answer your phone—”

“It’s hard to get reception at my dad’s place.” He lifted his hands. “Look, I know you have questions, but I can’t explain everything just yet. All I can say is that my father needs me. It wasn’t supposed to be this way, and it’s been a bit of a struggle realizing I have to change my entire life around.”

Some of my anger drained away. His father needed him? A range of possibilities flipped through my head. “Is he sick?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“I can’t talk about it. Not right now.” He drew a deep breath, his eyes full of emotion. “I want this to work. I— I care about you, Brooke.”

Misery wound through me. Care wasn’t love. We’d never said it. He obviously couldn’t bring himself to say it now. And even if he could, his secrecy was a wedge between us. His dad wasn’t sick, nor was he a criminal. So what was the problem? And why didn’t Alex trust me enough to fill me in?

But if I was totally honest with myself, whatever secrets he was hiding weren’t the only thing wrong with our relationship. The spark was gone. When he went on his trips, I didn’t long for him to return. I missed him, sure, but I didn’t feel like I was



missing out. Somewhere along the way, he'd become a friend instead of the man I wanted to spend my life with.

And I couldn't keep this charade going anymore.

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The wind rushed around us, sending dry leaves skittering over the ground. Overhead, thick clouds rolled across the sky.

I swallowed. “Alex, I—”

“Quiet,” he said suddenly, his nostrils flaring.

I bristled, ready to protest, but something in his eyes gave me pause. His irises were different. Almost...glowing.

“Get behind me.” He didn’t wait for me to comply, merely gripped the strap of my pack and shoved me behind him. Just as fast, he shed his own pack and then tensed, as if he braced for battle.

A growl rumbled from the trees. Then another. It was fully dark now—too difficult to see. Even as I thought it, a pair of golden eyes appeared in the forest.

My heart jumped into my throat. Oh god. A whimper escaped me before I could stop it.

Alex reached a hand back and touched my hip. “It’s okay. I’m calling my dad.”

What? Even with my heart pounding in my ears, I recognized the oddness of his statement. He didn’t have his phone. He insisted on “unplugging” when he camped, so he’d brought some kind of satellite location device. Was that what he meant?

A dark blur streaked from the trees.

Sounds exploded in my ears—my strangled scream, the dull thud of the blur smacking into Alex, the wild shuffle of Alex's boots on the trail.

Something slammed into my side.

I landed on my shoulder in the dirt, and the weight followed me.

More sounds. Deep growls and short, brutal yips.

Screaming. Is that me again? A flash of deep purple sky. Glowing eyes glaring into mine. Hot breath on my cheek.

Fire across my throat.

My back bowed off the ground.

Something hot and wet dripped down my neck.

Drowning. How could I be drowning when I was nowhere near the water?

Black crowded the edges of my vision.

Oh shit, I thought. I must be dying.

The black rushed forward. Raindrops splashed against my cheeks. In the distance, a wolf howled. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I should be worried about that. But my brain was sluggish, and my body was suddenly cold. But I was too weak to shiver. Or think. Sleep was good. An escape from the fear and the icy chill creeping over my skin.

I closed my eyes and let the darkness claim me.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HUGH

I tore through the forest, dirt flying from my paws as my enforcers struggled to keep up with me. My lungs burned, but it was nothing compared to the rage searing my veins. Alex was in trouble—I'd heard it in his voice when he'd called out in my mind.

“Come quickly,” he'd said. “They found us, and they're going to attack.”

I'd rushed from the house, tapping the mental connection as I went. “Who are they?”

But Alex had gone silent, and he'd stayed that way while I broke the speed limit and several other traffic laws racing the twenty-two miles to the Columbia River Gorge.

I'd made the trip in fifteen minutes—and now I was afraid I was fifteen minutes too late.

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The wind shifted, bringing the sharp scent of blood.

I put on a burst of speed, the trees around me nothing more than shapeless green blurs. A second later, I leapt into a clearing and skidded to a stop.

And my fears were realized, because Alex was already dead. He lay on his back with his throat torn out, his eyes staring sightlessly at a sky studded with stars. A few paces away lay a human female. The girlfriend he'd spoken of. The reporter from Seattle. I'd warned him that loving a human was a difficult path to walk—something I knew all too well from my failed marriage to his mother. Alex had resented me giving my two cents, and I'd vowed to back off and let him make his own mistakes.

It was too late to back off now.

I threw my head back and howled, only vaguely aware of my beta and top two enforcers cringing, their heads low, as my rage and sorrow echoed through the night. But I couldn't indulge my grief for long. It was starting to rain. Even a quick summer storm would wash away any trail left by Alex's attackers.

Dylan, my beta, shifted and went to one knee in the dirt. Gaze on my chin, he spoke in an urgent voice. "Alpha. Hugh. The woman isn't dead."

It took a minute for his words to sink in. When they did, I swung my head toward the female. She was slumped on her side with her back to me, her blond hair soaked with blood. More blood pooled under her. There was no way she could have survived. And yet...

There it was—a faint heartbeat.

I shifted as I moved toward her, and for once I didn't notice the aches and discomforts of the change. My skin was still tingling as I knelt in human form and brushed her hair away from her face. Her throat was a pulpy mess with bits of purplish bone visible among the torn flesh. How was she still breathing?

“The blood clotted,” Dylan said beside me. He pressed two fingers against her wrist, his blond brows pulled together. “She’s hanging on, but just barely.”

The rain fell harder, fat drops splatting in the dirt. In the distance, thunder boomed.

Tanner, one of my enforcers and a huge wolf with blue-black fur, trotted from the tree line where he'd been sniffing at the ground. When he reached us, he shifted and stood, the hair on his head the same sleek black as his fur. Shepherd, my other enforcer, fell in beside him.

“Do you have a scent?” I asked Tanner. He was the best tracker in the Pacific Pack, possibly the whole country.

He grimaced. “It’s faint. The ground is so wet I’d be surprised if it extends more than a hundred yards.” His hazel eyes lightened to yellow. “And these weren’t pack wolves.”

Which meant they were rogues.

A growl rumbled in my chest. Every pack had its own unique scent, and the wolves who belonged to it carried that signature wherever they went. But rogues—wolves who got kicked out or left the pack structure for whatever reason—smelled different. And because no two smelled alike, they were difficult to track. Typically, rogues wouldn't dare attack a pack wolf.

But these weren't typical times.

Still, it was almost unheard of for rogues to work together. They were outcasts. Loners who didn't follow any rules or coordinate with others. And yet that appeared to be exactly what happened here. I turned, my gaze falling on Alex. There were paw prints all around his body. Too many for one wolf to have made.

"It's just like the attack in Texas," I said. Two weeks ago, a pair of enforcers in the South Central Pack had been ambushed, their bodies ripped apart. The gruesome scene had sent shock waves across the packs, and several alphas—me included—had called for a Council meeting. But we'd been outnumbered, with the majority dismissing the incident as "unfortunate" but ultimately not worthy of a gathering. One alpha had even suggested a serial killer was behind the killings, as if a human could take down two dominant werewolves.

A fresh wave of rage pounded through me as I stared at my son. The Council bore some responsibility for this. Many of the alphas were old—born in a time when the world was slower and quieter. None of them enjoyed rubbing elbows with humans. They'd let their disdain for modern forms of travel stop them from doing the right thing.

Another growl rumbled in my throat.

"You should bite her," Dylan said.

I turned back, surprise momentarily blunting my rage. "What?"

"If she turns, she might be able to tell us who did this. She might even recognize their scents."

"She won't make it," Tanner said. "It's not worth the effort."

He was right. Women almost never survived the moon fever that followed a bite. I looked at the female's pale face streaked with blood. Her name was Brooke, I remembered now. She was lovely, and Alex had spoken highly of her intellect. She was—had been—some kind of newspaper reporter. “Such a fucking waste,” I bit out.

“It doesn't have to be,” Dylan said, urgency in his tone. He shot Tanner an exasperated look. “She'll die anyway if you don't bite her. What's the harm in trying to save her, even if it probably won't work? At least take the chance it might. Then we can avenge Alex.” As he spoke the last, his voice deepened to a growl and his brown eyes lightened several shades.

Which was no surprise. He knew more about loss and vengeance than most.

And he was right about this. If we moved Brooke now, she'd be dead before we got her to our vehicles. This was her only chance.

And mine.



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“Put her on her back,” I said, rising and pacing away. Dylan and Tanner moved her, careful not to jostle her head too much. Blood oozed from the wounds in her neck as they maneuvered her flat. She probably had seconds now.

I drew on the pack’s collective strength to rush my shift. Even so, the transformation set my muscles on fire, as if some invisible force grasped my wrists and ankles and pulled until my bones snapped and my tendons tore. I panted through the change, then prowled to Brooke in wolf form and nudged her head to the side.

I’d have to answer to the Council for this. Siring a new wolf was a serious matter. It made no difference if the human lived or died.

“You need to hurry, Alpha,” Dylan murmured, his gaze lowered as he delivered the mild order.

I bent and sank my fangs into Brooke’s neck. She didn’t so much as twitch, and I almost withdrew then and there.

Then her blood hit my tongue.

Recognition. There was something oddly...familiar about her blood. At the same time, it was wholly new and unexpected.

And I suddenly needed more of it.

I deepened my bite as whispers echoed through my mind, swirling around my subconscious until they solidified into one clear, coherent thought.

MATE.

I pulled my fangs from her neck and lurched backwards, my claws kicking up mud.

“Hugh?” Dylan looked at me with wide eyes. Tanner and Shepherd wore identical expressions.

My heart raced, the recognition I’d sensed—tasted—throbbing through my head. It was impossible. Fate would never be this cruel.

Of course it wouldn’t, I thought, dismissing the odd, clinging feeling. I was obviously in shock about Alex, and now my mind was playing tricks on me. It was the only explanation.

Dylan and the others were still looking at me, so I jerked my head in the direction of the forest. I’d shifted too many times in a row to speak mind-to-mind, but I didn’t need to. All three men had worked for me long enough to know what I wanted. They sprang into action, kicking dirt over the blood on the ground and gathering the backpacks Alex and Brooke had dropped during the attack. Tanner lifted Alex’s body, and I looked away. Later, I could sit with my son and ask for the forgiveness I didn’t deserve. Right now, I needed to get Brooke to pack headquarters before the moon fever struck.

Dylan gathered her in his arms, and the four of us started back through the rain-soaked forest. I’d roamed the Gorge decades before it had become part of the national park service, and I knew routes through the trees no human had touched.

We moved quickly and soundlessly, and before long we arrived at the vehicles we’d pulled into some brush. Lightning flashed, following by the boom of thunder.

Good. The storm would wash away any blood we’d missed on the trail.

Dylan lay Brooke on the backseat of my SUV, then stood back so I could jump in and wedge my bulk against the seats. He climbed behind the wheel and had us on the main road in seconds. “I’ll come back before dawn,” he said, meeting my gaze in the rearview mirror. “To find Alex’s campsite and pack up before someone calls the authorities.”

I dipped my head in acknowledgment—and gratitude. As much as I would have preferred to gather Alex’s things myself, I couldn’t leave Brooke. Siring a werewolf came with certain responsibilities, the first of which was seeing them through the fever.

Not that she’d actually make it through. Her lips were blue, and her heartbeat was so faint I struggled to hear it even with my beast’s sensitive ears. She’d live for now. My bite guaranteed it. But in a day or two, death would come for her.

I studied her face, waiting for the spark of recognition to flare back to life. But that was dead, too.

A mistake, then.

In a night of misery, it was one small thing to be thankful for.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BROOKE

Everything hurts.

It was my first thought as I came aware with a choked gasp. My world was pain, from the top of my head all the way down to my toes. Even my skin hurt.

And it was dark. Oh god, was I blind? The horrors of the trail came roaring back. Something—an animal—had attacked us. Had it clawed out my eyes?

And where was Alex?

## Page 6

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I reached for my face.

Or tried to. My arm was pinned above my head. Both arms.

Panic streaked down my spine. Despite the pain, I started to struggle, tugging at my wrists. As I did, I realized my ankles were bound, too. I pulled harder, a whimper escaping me.

Footsteps rang out, and then a deep, male voice reached me. “Don’t struggle. You’ll hurt yourself.”

I stilled, my head cocked toward the sound and my heart galloping like a racehorse. Hurt myself? Reason rushed in, dispelling some of my panic. I was in a hospital. That was the only rational explanation. Maybe they’d bound me so I didn’t pull at my bandages or rip out my IV. Hospitals did that sometimes.

“Untie me,” I said, my voice hoarse. As I spoke, I realized I was thirsty—like insanely thirsty. “Water,” I croaked.

“In a minute.” The man’s voice slid over me like a warm, gentle current. I should have hated him for denying me the water I desperately needed, but I couldn’t. Instead, I found myself holding my breath, anticipation shivering through me as I waited for him to speak again. Even in my blind, dehydrated state, I recognized how weird that was.

“I’m going to remove your blindfold,” he said.

Blindfold? The panic came surging back. Hospitals sometimes restrained patients for their own safety, but they most definitely didn't blindfold them.

Which meant I wasn't in a hospital. I'd been kidnapped.

Immediately, my heart rate kicked into overdrive.

Gentle hands touched my chin, turning my head against the pillow. Did kidnappers give their victims pillows? The thought slipped away as a scent drifted around me. It obviously came from the man, and I drew a deep breath, inhaling evergreen and leather and a hint of cologne.

It was...captivating. To my horror, my body responded, my nipples drawing tight and a rush of heat rolling through me. What the fuck?

His fingers brushed my hair, obviously working at some kind of knotted cloth. A second later, the darkness lifted from my eyes, replaced with blinding white that pierced my skull like a hot knife.

I squeezed my eyes shut and cringed away, only to have those fingers take my chin in a firm grip and force my head back to the center of the pillow.

"Don't fight it," he said, his voice maddeningly calm. "You'll only delay the inevitable."

Delay what? Burning my retinas? I tried to jerk away. "Let go!"

"Brooke. Stop this. Now."

The warm current flowed again, stealing my breath and holding me in place. I couldn't move—and it had nothing to do with whatever bound my arms and legs. All

I could do was lie there and wait. And wonder how he knew my name—and why my stupid body liked his voice.

Slowly, the white light receded and the outline of a man formed in the center of my vision, like someone standing in front of the sun. As my heart continued to pound, the pain faded from my eyes. My vision sharpened, and the world snapped into focus.

The man stood over me, his brow furrowed above clear green eyes. He was handsome, I realized with a start. Like really handsome, with dark brown hair that waved back from a broad, unlined forehead. His firm jaw was shadowed with stubble, and his gorgeous green eyes were fringed with thick, dark lashes. He was attractive but also kind of...wholesome. Like a sexy Clark Kent who moonlighted as a firefighter and also a lumberjack. It was difficult to judge his height from my angle, but he had to be at least a couple inches over six feet. He was dressed simply in jeans and a gray T-shirt that strained across a muscular chest.

And there was something strangely familiar about him.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “What have you done with Alex?”

An emotion moved in his eyes—there and gone so quickly I couldn’t decipher it. He turned and pulled a chair from somewhere, then sat next to the bed. His scent reached me again, and I stifled the urge to drag more of it into my lungs.

“My name is Hugh Dalton.”

My eyes went wide. This was Alex’s father? Reclusive millionaire and CEO of Dalton Security? The man who didn’t have time to meet me?

“You can’t be,” I rasped. Alex was twenty-eight. I was one year younger and my mother was fifty-three years old. This man was nowhere close to fifty. He barely

looked thirty.

He rested his elbows on his knees. “I assure you, I am. Alex was my son.”

I didn’t miss the past tense. My heart pounded harder. It was hard to get words past my aching throat, but I forced myself to ask, “Where is he?”

“Dead. He was already gone by the time my men and I arrived.”



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Tears burned my eyes. He'd shoved me behind him on the trail. "He saved my life," I whispered.

Hugh nodded. "I don't doubt it." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and his voice grew rough. "He was a good man. I couldn't have asked for a better son."

The tears overflowed, spilling down my cheeks and into my hair. I went to brush them away—and came up short when the bindings on my wrists dug into my skin.

"Don't fight," Hugh said. "You'll just make the knots tighter."

A sense of unreality descended over me as I remembered I was hurting and restrained. I was also filthy, I realized with sudden horror. My scalp itched and the tank top I'd worn at the Gorge was stiff with old blood. But there had to be a perfectly reasonable explanation, I thought, a growing sense of panic rising in my chest. Any minute now, this situation was going to make sense.

I drew a shaky breath—

Hugh cut me off before I could speak. "Nothing I'm about to tell you will make sense. But I need you to listen with an open mind."

My throat grew even drier. I was hardly in a position to refuse, so I dipped my chin. "All right."

"You and Alex were attacked by wolves. But not the kind you're used to." He paused for a beat, his green gaze holding mine. "These were werewolves. They killed Alex

and did their best to kill you. When I found you on the ground, you had minutes left to live. So I bit you.”

I stared at him.

He was mad with grief, I decided. He was in shock over Alex’s death and now he was experiencing some kind of mental breakdown.

“I bit you and I turned you,” he said. “Because I’m a werewolf, too. And now you’re like me.”

My heart pounded like a drum, each beat a canon blast in my ears. He’d bitten me—and then tied me up. What else was he capable of? His green gaze was steady, and if I hadn’t known he was in a full-blown crisis I would have taken him for a calm, rational person.

In journalism school, the local police department had given us a course on interviewing people with mental health issues. Sympathy was key.

“Mr. Dalton,” I said, pleased when my voice didn’t tremble. “I know this is hard for you, but there are people who can help...” I trailed off as he stood and moved to the end of the bed. When he faced me, I sucked in a breath.

Because his eyes had lightened several shades, and now his irises glowed an eerie emerald. No one had eyes like that.

Alex’s eyes had glowed like that. The memory of it swamped me, throwing me right back to those tense, shivering moments at the Gorge.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Hugh rumbled, and there was something almost apologetic in his tone. He turned his back and pulled his shirt over his head.

My gut clenched. I yanked at the restraints, all thought of sympathy flying out the window. “Help!” I screamed. “Someone help me!”

He removed the rest of his clothes and knelt on the floor. Still facing away, he rested his weight on his palms, giving me an unimpeded view of his muscular back and taut ass.

Then he changed.

And I stopped breathing.

His skin rippled. Dark brown fur sprouted across his back, shooting up like a video of grass growing in fast motion. His body bulged in ways both fascinating and grotesque, his limbs shrinking and reshaping themselves. He dropped his head forward. His ears slid down and then moved back up, the tips now pointed and twitching. The fur grew thicker. Flashes of red appeared among the black, and I realized I was seeing his flesh turned inside out as it formed into something that simply was not possible.

This wasn’t possible.

It all happened so quickly, and yet time seemed to stand still as the thing that used to be Hugh Dalton turned around at last.

Wolf. A freaking wolf stared at me, its green eyes burning with intelligence.

And I knew then that Alex had indeed been keeping secrets from me—and I was in a whole lot of trouble.

## CHAPTER FOUR

HUGH

Well, she wasn't screaming. That was a good sign.

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But she wasn't saying anything, either, and that could indicate shock. Most turned humans consented to being bitten. They went into the process of becoming a werewolf fully aware of the risks, including the possibility of death. The Council had to approve the bite, and the whole thing was done with medical support and a lot of preparation.

But Brooke had been attacked. She knew nothing of the world she'd been plunged into. Her injuries had healed when she came through the fever. Her body was strong—stronger than it had ever been when she was human.

Now I had to hope her mind was strong, too.

"I'm going to pass out now," she said under her breath. She braced herself, as if she waited to lose consciousness. When she didn't, her forehead furrowed, and she looked so perturbed I might have smiled if I'd been in human form.

I turned and padded to the clothes I'd left at the foot of the bed. It was slow going reversing the shift. Between nursing her through the fever and making arrangements for Alex's funeral, I hadn't been eating enough. That was one of many things I was going to have to discuss with Brooke. Werewolf metabolism was demanding, especially in new wolves.

When I finished the shift, I dressed and went into the bathroom, where I grabbed one of the water bottles I'd arranged on the counter. As I carried it back to the bed, her gaze latched onto it. "I'll give you this after I untie you," I told her.

She nodded eagerly.

Another good sign. Her mind was tracking, and her heart rate was steady. She held still while I worked on the knots binding her wrists to the headboard.

“Lower your arms slowly,” I murmured as I moved to her ankles. “You’ve been here for three days. You’re going to be sore.”

Her gasp made me look up, and her blue eyes were full of something akin to horror as she pulled her arms down. “You tied me up for three days?”

I finished with her ankles and sat in the chair. “I had to. The moon fever is hell on the human body. You would have clawed your skin off if you hadn’t been restrained. Few humans make the transition, and females almost never. You’re fortunate.”

She sat up, her movements stiff, and rubbed at her wrists. Her ponytail had slipped out during the worst of her thrashing, and her blond hair fell in a wild riot over her shoulders and down her breasts. Her tank top, which had probably been a khaki green when she put it on, was stained rusty brown with old blood. She brushed a hand over the front of her neck, feeling the smooth skin there before lifting a bewildered gaze to mine. “I was dying. I remember it now. My throat was...gone.”

“Yes.” I handed her the water bottle.

She twisted the cap off with shaking hands and drank, her head tipped back and her throat working. Her eyes slid closed and she let out a satisfied moan.

“Slow down,” I said, my voice sharper than I’d intended. When she lowered the bottle with a startled look, I stood and went to the window.

But putting distance between us didn’t help. Her scent followed me. Even after three days of fever, her essence beckoned. Vanilla and orange blossoms flooded my senses, and I stared sightlessly out the window as I struggled not to respond. But it was no

use. My groin tightened, my cock throbbing with need.

For her.

Anger rose hot and swift. Leave it to fate to play its twisted games with me. My one true mate—the female I was supposed to cherish above all others—was my dead son’s girlfriend.

What the fuck was I supposed to do now?

It was a slap in the face after losing Alex. But there was no denying the connection between Brooke and me. The recognition I’d tasted in her blood had come roaring back when she was deep in the throes of her fever.

And it was stronger now. I rubbed a hand over my face. It was like I’d been plunged into a nightmare I couldn’t wake up from.

Her silence was a palpable presence at my back. None of this was her fault. I had to remember that.

I spoke without turning around. “You need to take things slowly. If you drink too fast you’ll make yourself sick.”

“I know,” she said, and her voice had lost some of its raspiness. “I saw that on a survival show once.” She huffed a humorless laugh. “Never thought I’d actually need that advice.” She was quiet a moment. Then she spoke again, her words halting. “The wolf—werewolf—that attacked me. It made me...one of you?” Her voice faltered on the last, as if she couldn’t quite believe what she was saying.

I owed her answers, but I couldn’t give them halfway across the room. The things I needed to tell her required eye contact, so I stuffed down the desire as far as I could

and returned to the chair.

She watched warily as I sat, as if she sensed she wasn't going to like what I had to say.

“You're not quite like me. Most werewolves are born, not made. But humans can turn from a werewolf's bite. It's rare but it happens. Turned wolves are slower and weaker, although there are certainly some dominant wolves who buck that stereotype. The wolf from the Gorge didn't want to turn you. He used his claws, which means he wanted you dead. My men and I found you and I bit you to save your life. That makes me your sire as well as your alpha.”

And something else I didn't want to acknowledge at the moment.

The frown reappeared between her blue eyes. They were wells of color, the irises a deep sapphire with a navy ring around the outside. “What do you mean by”—she swallowed—“alpha?”

I tore my gaze from her face, and I could hear the gravel in my voice as I said, “We have a connection because I turned you. And you're now part of my pack. There are rules in our world, Brooke, and it might be difficult for you to get used to them. Every pack has a hierarchy. The alpha—the strongest and most dominant wolf—sits at the top.”



“Like a king?”

“We don’t use that word, but you can think of it that way if it helps you.” I met her eyes again, because this part was important. “Werewolf packs aren’t a democracy. They can’t be. Each of us has a beast inside, and some of us are better than others at controlling it. And that control is critical. We live alongside humans but our existence is a secret. All it takes is one wolf losing control to expose our race to the outside world. I’m an alpha because my beast is more dominant than anyone else’s. I can force control on wolves who need help managing their beasts. That’s what it takes to protect our species. To live in the pack.”

The pulse in her neck fluttered wildly. “What if I don’t want to live in the pack?”

“That’s something we can discuss later. Right now, I want you to tell me everything you remember from the Gorge. How many wolves did you see?”

Her frown deepened. “It happened so fast...”

“Did you catch their scents?”

“All I remember is getting hit and landing on my side. Then everything went black.”

That wasn’t good enough. She was my only link to catching Alex’s killers. “You have to remember more than that. This is important.”

“I’m sorry but—”

“Sorry won’t cut it. I need you to think.”

“I’m trying to,” she snapped. “But it’s hard with you snarling at me.”

A knock rang out, and I swallowed my reply as I looked toward the door. She had me so distracted I hadn’t heard Dylan’s approach. But he’d almost certainly heard us arguing.

“Come in,” I said.

The door opened and Dylan’s dark blond head poked inside.

“Brooke,” I said, swallowing my irritation. “This is Dylan Corbett, my beta.”

Dylan smiled, revealing the dimples that made women between eighteen and eighty swoon. “It means second in command,” he told her, and I mentally kicked myself for not remembering she was unfamiliar with werewolf terminology.

“Nice to meet you,” Brooke said. “I’m Brooke Ratner.” If she was moved by his dimples, she didn’t show it. And I wasn’t going to think too hard about how that made me feel.

Dylan nodded politely before turning to me with a solemn expression. “Everyone is here.”

“Thanks. Tell them I’ll be right down.”

“You got it.” He dipped his chin toward Brooke again. “Ma’am,” he said, his voice tinged with the lyrical notes of Appalachia, then pulled the door shut. His footsteps echoed down the hall. A second later, a screen door downstairs opened and closed.

I looked at Brooke and found her watching me. She chewed her lower lip, and her brows were drawn again, as if I was a puzzle she struggled to figure out.

I stared at her mouth. My cock pushed painfully against my fly.

Fuck.

I stood so quickly the chair's legs scraped the hardwood. "Do you think you're up to taking a walk outside? The pack has gathered to pay their last respects to Alex. I can put it off another day if I need to, but I'd rather do it now, assuming you feel strong enough. I can't leave you here without me."

Sorrow moved through her eyes, reminding me she'd lost Alex, too. "I wouldn't miss it for anything, but...why do you need me with you?"

"It's the other way around. You need me. You haven't shifted yet, and your wolf is new. You'll need me to help you control it until you're experienced enough to do it on your own. These first few hours are the most critical." I moved to the dresser and pulled out a pair of gray sweats—shapeless, one-size-fits-all clothing every pack kept on hand. "This will fit you," I said, placing the bundle on the bed. "I'll step outside while you change."

"Wait. I can't go downstairs like this."

I frowned. "Like what?"

Color stained her cheeks. "I haven't showered in three days. Before that, I was staying at a campground. Alex insisted on—" She clamped her mouth shut, and the flush in her cheeks spread down her neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound insensitive." She swallowed. "I just really hate camping."

“It’s all right.” A faint twinge of amusement pushed through my grief and fatigue.  
“He mentioned you weren’t a fan.”

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She looked startled. “He told you that?”

As abruptly as it came, my amusement faded. “He cared for you,” I said, memories of our arguments pummeling me. “Enough to brush off my warnings about how difficult it would be to have anything permanent with you.”

“Because I’m human.” She winced. “Or was.”

I nodded. “My ex-wife—Alex’s mother—was human. She never adjusted to this life.”

Brooke leaned forward, clearly waiting for me to continue.

I cleared my throat. “We should go.” I gestured toward the bathroom. “Everything you need is in the shower. The towels are clean, and there’s a new toothbrush in the vanity drawer. I’ll wait out here. Don’t lock the door.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Why not?”

My beast leapt to the surface, and it was an effort to stop the growl in my throat from breaking free. Patience, I told my wolf. I had to be patient with her. She had no idea it was foolish to challenge me—and our situation was complicated by the fact that she could get away with it because of who she was.

Because of what she was.

I forced calm I didn’t feel into my voice. “As I explained, this is a volatile time. Your

wolf is unpredictable. More practically speaking, however, you're weak from the fever and standing in a steaming shower is a recipe for disaster. If you pass out, I need to be able to get to you quickly."

A stubborn look entered her blue eyes. "I won't pass out."

In response, I picked up the chair and carried it to the bathroom, where I parked it outside the door and sat. "You've got fifteen minutes. Take it or leave it."

She gasped and scrambled off the bed. She stood for a moment, and I watched her closely, ready to spring into action if she started to fall. But she was steady, and she shot me a look of triumph from under her lashes.

My wolf settled down. The beast was...pleased. This female was strong. A worthy mate, and one unafraid to look us in the eye. The beast liked that.

I clenched my jaw. Forget it, I told the wolf. We aren't keeping her.

Brooke moved past me, trailing vanilla and orange blossoms as she entered the bathroom and shut the door. A second later, the lock clicked.

"Brooke," I said softly, and I sensed her freeze on the other side of the wall. "When I give an order, I expect it to be obeyed."

Her heart rate sped up.

"The lock won't stop me," I added. Neither would the door, but she'd learn that soon enough. There was no reason to frighten her. But I hadn't lied about the fever's toll. If she started feeling dizzy, I needed to reach her before she cracked her head against the tile. Snapping the lock wouldn't really slow me down, but I didn't feel like repairing a broken door.

And there was also the principle of the thing. If I let her defy my orders now, she'd continue doing it. And that would put her at odds with nearly everyone in the pack.

There was a brief, tense moment of silence. Then the lock clicked again.

I settled back on my chair. "A wise decision."

Her muffled curse drifted through the door.

I smiled despite myself. She couldn't see me, but I checked my watch anyway. "Fourteen minutes."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### BROOKE

I took the fastest shower of my life—and I kept my gaze on the bathroom door the whole time.

The unlocked door. I'd known Hugh Dalton for all of a half hour, but something told me he didn't make idle threats. Just my luck, I'd been bitten by an arrogant, overbearing werewolf, and now I was bound to him or something. Maybe this was why Alex hadn't wanted to bring me home.

That thought sobered me—and reminded me that Alex's memorial service was happening downstairs. It didn't feel real. Nothing about this situation felt real. My throat thickened as I pulled on the sweats and finger-combed my hair. Tears swam in my eyes, which looked weird.

I leaned closer to the bathroom mirror. My irises, which were usually a run-of-the-mill blue, glowed like they were lit from behind. My skin was different, too. Clearer

and smoother. A tiny scar near my eye—a souvenir from faceplanting on roller blades as a kid—was gone.



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And my neck, which had most certainly been ripped apart during the attack at the Gorge, was totally fine. Because I was a werewolf now. What the fuck? An image of Hugh's transformation flashed in my mind. Was I going to sprout fur like that? It was inevitable, right?

Why wasn't I freaking out right now?

As soon as I thought it, my heart sped up and a cold sweat broke out across my skin.

"Don't freak out," I whispered to my reflection.

"One minute, Brooke," Hugh rumbled on the other side of the door.

I whirled, my throat going dry. Later, I could lose my shit. Or maybe I'd fall asleep and then wake and realize this was all a bad dream.

Yes. That made sense. I was in a coma right now, hallucinating all of this. That explanation was a lot easier to swallow than "my boyfriend's father turned me into a werewolf."

You're fooling yourself, a voice in my head whispered. You saw the wolf with your own eyes.

Shut up, I told it.

Great. Now I was hearing voices—and arguing with them.

I drew a steadying breath. Whatever was happening to me, I was determined to survive it. And that meant playing along until I found a way to get out of this mess and back to Seattle.

With a final glance in the mirror, I went to the door and wrenched it open.

Hugh stood at the foot of the bed looking huge and impatient with his arms folded over his broad chest. His gaze moved swiftly down my body, and a muscle in his jaw twitched before he looked away. “Let’s go. The pack is waiting.”

“I don’t have any shoes.”

“You don’t need them. Shifters aren’t ones to stand on ceremony. You’ll probably see more than a few pack members in sweats just like yours, assuming they ran here.” He went to the door and opened it.

The thought of meeting other shifters was intimidating enough to make me forget about the shoes—and I definitely wasn’t going to mention my lack of a bra or underwear. The sweats were thick and boxy, which was better than nothing.

Besides, it seemed petty to worry about my appearance when Hugh was ready to bury his son. I slipped past him and into a spacious hallway lined with doors. Like the bedroom, this part of the house was decorated in tasteful, muted tones.

The style continued as Hugh led me downstairs and through a lower level that boasted an understated elegance only the truly wealthy could afford. I got a glimpse of a gleaming, modern kitchen, and then we were stepping onto a spacious patio bathed in the purple shadows of dusk.

And there were dozens of people waiting for us. They turned, their gazes locking onto me.

My nape prickled. At a glance, there appeared to be more men than women. Other than being fit and youthful looking, there was nothing to mark them as werewolves. But somehow I just knew. The awareness shivered over my skin and seeped into my bones. Their regard had a weight to it, and it was almost like I could feel their gazes pushing against me. The pressure grew—an invisible force that prodded and shoved, battering at my mind and body. Here and there, some of their eyes lightened...and then glowed.

And, suddenly, it was too much. My chest tightened. I tensed, braced to turn and run.

Hugh put a big hand on the back of my neck.

Immediately, the tension eased. A sense of wellbeing spread through me, flowing from his hand in a warm current. Evergreen and leather teased my nose.

Somewhere in my brain, I knew I should shrug out of his possessive grip. He had no right to touch me this way. But it was too hard to drag up a protest with pleasure sparkling along my veins like champagne.

He addressed the group, his voice vibrating with authority. “This is Brooke Ratner. She’s mine. I sired her, and she’s under my protection.”

Everyone lowered their eyes.

I didn’t have a chance to gape at their response—or Hugh’s archaic declaration—because he moved us forward and into the deepening night. He kept his hand where it was, steering me through the crowd, which melted aside like he was Moses parting the Red Sea. The patio under my feet turned to grass, and then we were on a wide stretch of lawn bordered by soaring trees. Stars scattered across a purple sky, and a crescent moon cast a soft, silvery glow over the grass. Straight ahead was a wooden structure built up almost like an altar...

My stomach dropped

Alex lay in the center, his body covered with a white sheet. Only his head was visible. His face was ashen, the spark of life glaringly absent.

I stopped in my tracks, a strangled gasp in my throat.

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“It’s all right,” Hugh murmured. He dropped his hand from my nape and faced me, his green eyes several shades lighter than they’d been in the house. They were a predator’s eyes.

I should be afraid. The thought racketed around my brain, some long-buried primitive instinct urging me to run. But his eyes were also full of anguish, and another instinct—one I couldn’t begin to understand—compelled me to stay right where I was. In fact, I was suddenly aware that nothing could make me leave his side.

“We have to use a pyre,” he said while I silently wondered what the hell was wrong with me. “We can’t risk the humans getting their hands on our DNA.”

Right. I’d watched enough true crime shows for that to make sense. I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I nodded to let him know I understood.

He looked at something beyond my shoulder. “Stay with Dylan.” Before I could reply, he was striding away and Dylan was next to me. The moonlight turned his hair to burnished gold.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

I opened my mouth to say “yes” but ended up blurting, “Not in any way.”

His brown eyes were kind. “Exactly what I’d expect given the circumstances,” he said in a soft southern drawl that was like a band-aid on my frazzled nerves. The other werewolves moved around us, forming a half circle in front of the pyre. He lowered his voice even more. “Everyone is unsettled because of the attack. Things

will calm down, I promise. And then you'll feel more at home."

My home was in Seattle, where I'd be returning as soon as possible. I frowned, ready to tell him as much, but he looked up as Hugh and a group of men moved in front of the pyre. The men fanned out, two on each side of him. Each one held a lit torch, and the hiss of the flames was the only sound in the quiet clearing. Then Hugh spoke, his deep voice echoing over the crowd.

"We are here tonight to mourn Alexander, beloved son of Hugh and Rebecca." He paused, and his chest lifted as he drew a deep breath. "My son."

An ache shot across my heart. Everyone was still, and it was like the clearing itself held its breath.

"Alex was a lot of things. Principled. Intelligent. Mischievous on occasion." One side of Hugh's mouth quirked up. "When he was six years old, I took him to his first Council meeting. Back then, the alpha of the South Central Pack was a notorious curmudgeon stuck in the last century. Possibly even the century before that."

"I remember Arthur!" someone called from the back of the crowd. Several of the werewolves chuckled.

Hugh smiled. "I spent the flight to the Neutral Zone showing Alex photos of all the alphas he was going to meet. We talked about how important it was for him to be polite and respectful. He was meeting the most powerful wolves of our race, and he needed to appreciate the gravity of the moment. So we got there, and the first thing he did was march straight up to Arthur, stick out his hand, and announce, 'My dad says you're a sorry son of a bitch.'"

Everyone in the clearing roared with laughter.

“Arthur’s enforcers spent the rest of the day feeding Alex ice cream,” Hugh added with a grin. The wolves laughed harder, and I pictured a pint-size Alex enjoying a treat while his mortified father tried to smooth things over with the other alpha.

When the laughter died down, Hugh sobered. “Alex was successful at everything he did. This was not the life he would have chosen, but he came home when the need arose. He was willing to serve...and he would have done so with honor.”

A hush fell over the clearing. Then, one by one, people came forward. They spoke of Alex, sharing stories about his life. A childhood friend told a humorous tale about sneaking to a party. A woman wiped tears from her eyes as she shared how Alex had helped the town rebuild after a flood destroyed several homes. A man who looked my age said he’d trained Alex to fight when Alex was a teen—and that Alex had never let his half-breed status stop him from “delivering a good ass-kicking when someone was picking on another trainee.”

I stood beside Dylan, absorbing all this new information even as tears clogged my throat. The people who spoke of knowing Alex when he was a child looked impossibly young. The same as Hugh. With a jolt, I realized they were probably immortal, which meant I was too now. Or might be. Alex had been a half-breed. Did that mean he’d been different? Was that why he hadn’t survived?

And what did Hugh mean when he said this wasn’t the life Alex would have chosen? The questions swirled through my head, threatening to overwhelm me as I grappled with my already overwhelming new reality alongside the surreal realization that Alex was gone. Suddenly, I was eight years old again and standing in the front pew of a small church while funeral home attendants closed the lid of my father’s casket. Until that moment, his death had seemed made-up. Like maybe there had been a mistake and he was going to walk through the front door humming “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” like he always did. But the funeral had delivered the merciless blow of reality. There was no gray ambiguity, just stark black and white.

It was the same now. Alex lay on the pyre, but he wasn't really there. Not anymore. Yet I was standing in the middle of his world, surrounded by people I now knew he'd never meant to introduce me to. It was hard not to feel like I'd stolen something, even if I didn't know exactly what it was.

The speeches continued until nearly everyone had spoken and the sky was totally dark except for the smattering of stars and the light of the moon. When the last person returned to their spot in the crowd, Hugh took a torch from one of the men at his side. The flames danced, casting shadows over his face.

"We honor Alexander," he said, then held the torch to the sticks at the bottom of the pyre. The other men followed suit. Fire licked up the side of the pyre. Within seconds, Alex's body was surrounded by flames.

"We honor Alexander," the people around me murmured. My vision blurred, but I was grateful for the tears. I didn't want to see. I didn't want to watch Alex burn.

\* \* \*

Hugh fetched me after the funeral, and he was quiet as he led me into the house. Which was fine, because I didn't know what to say. It was easier to trail behind him, my bare feet quiet on the sleek hardwood as I took in more of the house's furnishings. And the casual luxury only underscored just how much Alex had kept from me. I'd grown up solidly middle class. Everything he'd told me made me believe he'd been the same.

But now I knew that wasn't the case. He'd lived in two worlds, including one I was never supposed to know about. How could he have ever thought things would work out between us?

Hugh took me back to my room, where he shut the door and leaned against it. The



casual position did nothing to make him less formidable. “I’ll have food brought up. Then you need to rest.”

“Does everyone live here?” The house was certainly big enough, but it was hard to imagine all those people staying under one roof. Like some kind of supernatural commune.

“No,” he said, a weak smile flashing over his face. “I can guarantee that would drive me crazy. But this house serves as the pack headquarters. When wolves from distant parts of my territory come into town, they usually stay here.”

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I hovered near the bed's footboard as a new set of questions popped into my mind. "How big is your territory?"

"I'm the alpha of the Pacific Pack. Our boundaries vary a bit from the ones you see on a US map, but they're roughly the same as the states. I control everything from southern California to the Canadian border. However, most of the pack members live here in Bosford."

"What about Seattle?"

His expression grew shuttered. "I know you have a lot of questions." He moved to the nightstand and withdrew a book from the top drawer. "This will answer most of them." He handed the book to me.

"What's this, an instruction manual for new werewolves?" I inspected the leather bound spine, which was embossed with strange symbols. There was no title. Maybe he kept a copy in every room like hotels did with Gideon bibles. When I looked up, his face was as serious as ever.

"You might say that," he said. "But there's more in there than just werewolf lore. You're a part of this world now, Brooke. There are things you need to know." He nodded toward the book. "Be prepared to answer questions about what you've read."

I couldn't stifle my nervous laugh. "There's a quiz?" He couldn't be serious.

"I'll have someone bring up your dinner." He turned and headed toward the door.

“Wait!” Panic lurched through my gut. “What about the morning?”

He faced me. “Someone will bring breakfast, too. I’ll make sure you’re not disturbed.”

“No, I meant when can I leave here? I have to get back to Seattle. I need to call my boss.” I gasped, my brain finally registering that I’d been out for three days. “Shit! I need to call my mom.” She and my stepdad had retired to Florida years ago, but we talked or texted just about every day. She was probably worried sick.

“It’s been taken care of,” Hugh rumbled.

I went totally still. “What do you mean?”

“I emailed her. I also contacted your employer. The managing editor gave you a two-week leave of absence. It’s unpaid, but you don’t have to worry about money here.”

Money was the last thing I was worried about. “You contacted my boss?”

“I had to. I couldn’t risk anyone reporting you missing.”

“So you rifled through my life? How did you know who to call?” The panic twisted through me again. “I just got promoted. I can’t afford to take two weeks off right now.”

“I own a security company. Information is easier to come by than you might think. And I didn’t rifle through your life. I saved it.”

“Well maybe you shouldn’t have.” If he thought he was going to commandeer every inch of it, he was mistaken.

His eyes had lightened as we spoke, and now they narrowed in obvious displeasure. “I’m surprised you would say such a thing to me after what just happened outside.”

Regret made me wince. “I’m sorry. Today has been...a lot. But I need to go home.” I squared my shoulders. “Honestly, I think I’ll adjust better in familiar surroundings. I’m not asking for anything. If you could just call an Uber—”

“I can’t do that,” he said flatly. “And you’re not permitted to call, either.”

My hackles rose, my panic crystallizing into bright, spiky anger. Abruptly, I’d had enough of Hugh Dalton. He was a grieving man, but that didn’t excuse his breathtaking high-handedness. With deliberate movements, I turned and placed the book on the bed. Then I looked him in the eye. “I’m so deeply sorry about Alex. I appreciate what you did for me, but you can’t force me to stay here.” I moved around him and headed for the door.

I got three steps.

“Stop,” he said, his deep voice rippling with power.

Invisible bonds whipped around my body, rooting me to the floor. It was worse this time—the force of his command so much stronger than it had been when he removed my blindfold. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even muster the will to try.

That was it, I thought. He’d robbed me of my will. And I knew with absolute certainty that he could make me do anything he wanted. Terror clawed up my spine. I would have whimpered if I’d been capable of it.

He moved in front of me, his broad chest filling my vision. As quickly as it had come, the awful pressure lifted, leaving me free and struggling to catch my breath.

I clenched my fists at my sides. “Don’t do that again.”

“Don’t give me a reason to,” he said softly. He held my gaze—and suddenly I couldn’t look at him anymore. A strange feeling came over me, like there was a hook in my gut and it was attached to a rope that ran to a corresponding hook in my head. There was a wrenching tug in my stomach, and I dropped my chin with a gasp as I sought to alleviate the tension.

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At the same moment, his scent washed over me. Leather and evergreen and something indelibly masculine. Confusion and anger fought for dominance in my head. I tried and failed to lift my eyes, finally settling on his throat while my heart raced and heat licked through my veins. An ache built between my legs, and it was all I could do not to press my thighs tightly together to quell it.

What the hell was happening here? Was he responsible for this too?

A warm hand slid under my jaw, and he lifted my chin. I braced for the hook to tug again, but it didn't. There was just him—and his eyes that had lightened to that eerie, glowing green.

“Now you understand,” he murmured. “I’m not human, Brooke, and neither are you.”

His words brushed my skin, and I shivered despite the heat surging through me.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” he said. “But you must obey me.”

“I want to go home,” I said, hating the way my voice shook. Hating that he could force my compliance with nothing more than a whisper.

Hating whatever was happening to my body.

“I understand that,” he said, “but it’s not possible. I didn’t want to frighten you, not when you’re so new to this. But now I realize I have to tell you the truth.”

Wings of anxiety fluttered in my stomach. What truth could be more frightening than

the one I already faced?

“Werewolves are one of several immortal races,” he said. “We live alongside humans, but we keep our existence a secret. Two years ago, a group of wolves decided we should be a secret no longer. They broke the various agreements we have with other immortals. They defied the Council of Alphas and split from their packs.” His voice grew rougher, an edge of contempt sharpening his tone. “They’re rogues. Oathbreakers. And when they didn’t get their way, they began attacking their own kind.”

Understanding dawned, and it must have showed in my eyes because he gave a grim nod.

“I believe these rogues attacked you and Alex. They’re not powerful enough to challenge the Council directly, but they hope to pick off enough wolves to create tension among the alphas. If they can sow division within the Council, they can turn us against each other. It’s easier for them than declaring a war they know they can’t win.” His fingers on my chin tightened slightly before loosening again. “It’s too risky for them to kill me, so they’re going after people close to me instead. Once they realize you survived, you’ll be a target.”

My heart pounded. It was bad enough that my life was no longer my own. Now he was telling me it was threatened.

“You have much to learn,” he said. “Start with the book. I’ll teach you the rest.” He dropped his hand.

As soon as his fingers left my skin, I craved their return. Longing assailed me, and I almost took a step toward him before I realized what I was doing.

His nostrils flared, and for a second it seemed he might meet me halfway. But then he

turned and went to the door. When he reached it, he spoke over his shoulder. “You’re not to leave this room. I dislike giving this order, but it has to be this way for now.”

The unwanted desire dissipated, allowing me to draw a breath free of his scent. Anger rushed back, and I welcomed it, glaring at his back as I asked, “For how long?”

“Until you learn to obey.” He opened the door. Just before he stepped through it, he turned enough to meet my gaze. Green eyes glowing, he added gently, “And you will, Brooke. It’s just a matter of how much discomfort you cause yourself in the process.”

He left, closing the door with the same maddening gentleness.

## CHAPTER SIX

### HUGH

I descended the main staircase with Brooke’s angry gasp echoing in my head—and her scent filling my lungs. I’d left quickly, before she saw how hard I’d gotten when we argued. But my skin was so flushed I had to wonder if she’d noticed.

That was just what I needed, her thinking I meant to lock her away because I had designs on her. God, this was a fucking nightmare.

I was too exhausted to tap a mental connection, so I had to dig my phone from my pocket and text Dylan to meet me in my study. The word had always seemed pretentious to me, but the human Realtor who sold me the house had explained that “properties of this size don’t have home offices.” So study it was.

Dylan appeared within minutes, and he grabbed a bottle of scotch and two glasses from the wet bar before settling in one of the chairs in front of my desk. He filled both glasses to the brim and pushed one toward me. “I’m not going to ask how you’re



doing because I already know the answer and I have a feeling you might punch the next person who asks.”

A smile tugged at my lips as I drained the scotch. It burned all the way down to my gut. “Thanks,” I rasped, holding out my glass for a refill. Alcohol was good. Shifter metabolism meant I could never get truly drunk, but a few glasses would take the edge off my desire.

Dylan topped me off. “I put Malcolm and his team on patrol.” His lips curved. “He cussed me up one side and down the other for assigning him the night shift. Anyone crossing the town boundaries better talk fast or get their head ripped off by a cranky Scotsman.”

“Thanks.” I gave him a halfhearted smile as I raised my glass again. “Seems I’m saying that to you a lot lately.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said steadily. “It’s my job.”

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It was more than that. In the nine years he'd served as my beta, Dylan had become a trusted friend. He was young enough to be my son—grandson—but circumstances had forced him to grow up fast.

I finished my scotch and gave him a pointed look. "You're great at this job, but it's not the one you're meant to be doing." He was an alpha in his own right—or should have been. Rival wolves had decimated his pack, killing Dylan's father and seizing all of the Appalachian Pack's territory. Homeless and powerless at twenty-one, Dylan had appealed to the Council, which had promptly ruled that Dylan's father provoked the attack. The worst part was, the Council was right. I'd seen the evidence myself, and Ross Corbett had been far from innocent.

But that didn't mean his son was cut from the same cloth. Several alphas had objected when I took Dylan on as my beta—and I'd politely reminded them I could do whatever the hell I wanted in my own territory.

And I'd never regretted my decision. As far as I was concerned, Dylan had more than restored his family's honor. After nearly a decade, maybe it was time for him to reclaim what was rightfully his.

He tossed back his own drink with a grimace. "My gut tells me it's still too dangerous. What's left of my pack is scattered to the winds, and I'm not strong enough to pull them back in yet. I'm no good to anyone dead."

I hid a wince.

But not fast enough, because Dylan was instantly contrite as he set his glass on the

desk. “Shit, Hugh. I’m sorry.”

I waved it off. “It’s fine. And you’re right to trust your instincts. That’s where I failed Alex.” I sat back in my chair, which let out a sharp squeal. “My father always said power sits best on those who don’t want it. I told myself that’s what I was doing by naming Alex as my successor, but I was wrong. Being alpha was always going to be difficult for him as a half-breed. I should never have recognized him as my heir.”

“You were only doing what the Council pressured you to do.”

I shook my head. “I could have said no. Instead, I let their fear of the rogues convince me to act against my better judgment. Alex’s heart was in structural engineering, not shifter politics. I put him in an impossible position and it got him killed.”

Dylan didn’t argue, probably because he knew I was right. He also understood what it meant to lead. The alpha was responsible for everyone in the pack. There was no passing the buck. I obviously hadn’t made the rogues attack, but they wouldn’t have targeted Alex if I hadn’t pressured him to come home and train to replace me. Everything that flowed from the attack, including Brooke’s transformation, was my fault.

“How is she?” Dylan asked.

I wasn’t surprised he’d discerned my thoughts. The whole pack was buzzing about our newest member. Turned females were so rare, she was bound to spark curiosity wherever she went.

“Angry,” I said. “She didn’t like being on the receiving end of my orders.”

“I mean, does anyone?”

“She was particularly opposed.”

A somewhat fond smile touched his lips. “I can’t say I’m surprised. She’s strong. It’ll be interesting to see what her wolf’s like when she shifts. She had no trouble looking me in the eye.”

“Join the club.”

Disbelief flitted over his features. “She challenged you? She can’t be that dominant.”

“She’s not.” I drew a deep breath. “She’s...mine.”

For a second, he just stared. Then his eyes widened as comprehension dawned. “Fuck.”

“That pretty much sums it up.”

He refilled our glasses, then downed his drink in one gulp.

My lips twitched even though there was nothing remotely funny about my situation. “Just leave some scotch for me if you don’t mind.”

“Sorry.” He shoved a hand through his hair, ruffling the dark blond waves. “What are you going to do?”

Good question, and one I’d grappled with since I realized she was going to survive the fever. I’d thought I might be able to control my wolf—and hers—but tonight had proved otherwise.

I heaved a sigh. “For now, keep my distance as much as I’m able.”

He frowned. “That’s going to be hard when you’re under the same roof.”

Hard was a regrettably apt description. I swallowed. “You’ve done it with Wren.”

“She’s in Virginia. There are nearly three thousand miles between us.” His jaw tightened, his usual affable demeanor fading. “And even that’s not enough sometimes.”

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“I’m sorry,” I said, hoping he’d hear how much I meant it. He’d met his fated mate young, which normally would have been a stroke of good fortune. But she was a mageborn wolf—a member of the same pack that had seized his territory and driven him into exile. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

He waved it off. “It’s okay. But if you plan on keeping this from Brooke, I don’t think it’ll work. The connection between you two will only grow stronger, until it’s impossible to ignore.”

It already is. But Dylan didn’t need to hear about my sexual frustration. I’d burdened him enough. Unfortunately, I was about to burden him some more.

“I’m not going to keep it from her,” I said.

“Then...what? Do you plan on rejecting her?”

“Yes. Eventually.” And she would reject me, too. She had to, otherwise our bond would stay in place. Severing the tie between fated mates required the consent of both parties. “I know she’ll agree. I just don’t want to spring this on her so soon after she’s turned.”

Dylan nodded as he rubbed his chin. “Yeah. I get that. She hasn’t even gone through her first shift.”

“That’s where I need your help.”

He gave me a deer in the headlights look.

“I’m not asking you to help her through the transition,” I clarified. “Just stay close to her for a day or two, until my wolf settles down. You’re the only one I trust to do it.”

It was partly true. The reality was my wolf probably wouldn’t tolerate any other male getting near her. But Dylan already had a fated mate, even if they were estranged. His inner beast would be completely uninterested in Brooke. Whereas mine even now urged me to rush upstairs and claim her.

Which was why I had to stay away. On the other hand, I couldn’t leave a newly turned wolf unsupervised. No one in the pack would dare harm her, but she might inadvertently step on some toes with her ignorance of our laws and traditions. And dominant or no, she wasn’t fully in control of her beast. She needed someone strong enough to help her rein it in if necessary.

The situation was complicated by the fact that her connection to me allowed her to tap some of my strength. It was obvious in the way she held my gaze with minimal effort. She’d only lowered it when I cranked my power up.

Showdowns like that could not happen in front of the pack. Anyone seeing us square off that way would instantly know we were mates.

I looked Dylan in the eye. “I’m asking as a friend, not telling you as an alpha. If this is too much—”

“It’s not,” he said quickly. Then his lips quirked up. “I think Brooke and I will get along just fine. I like bossy females.”

The tension I hadn’t realized I’d been holding eased a little. “In that case, you’re in luck.”

“I think I’ll take her around town tomorrow. Show her the sights.” His smile grew,

probably because the “sights” in Bosford consisted of a tiny ice cream shop and a single stoplight. “Any objection?” he added.

My first instinct was to say no. What if she needed me? But I pushed that idea firmly away. I wanted distance between us. Getting her out of the house was one way to do it.

“No objection,” I said. “It’ll give me a chance to check on things at work. I haven’t been to the office since the attack.” Not that I was worried about my absence affecting the business. My COO was a former Navy SEAL who lived and breathed security. He was also human, which meant he didn’t have to worry about fated mates or the Council of Alphas. But he couldn’t oversee the kind of intel work I needed to find out which rogues had targeted Alex. I had a small team of wolves who handled supernatural investigations. Trails went cold quickly. The sooner I got into the office, the better.

“Sounds good,” Dylan said. He watched me reach for the bottle of scotch. “Feel free to tell me to fuck off, but when was the last time you ate?”

I stilled. “This morning. And you just reminded me I need to send dinner upstairs to Brooke.”

“I’ll take care of it.” He stood. “Just promise you’ll hit up the kitchen sometime tonight.”

“I will. And thank you. I owe you for this.”

He grinned, his dimples appearing. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you forget.”

I sat for a while after he left, my gaze on the forest through the window. The pyre was out now, but the wood still smoked, thick tendrils swirling up to the stars.



I'm sorry, Alex. I failed you.

Grief and regret mixed with the scotch in my gut, souring my stomach. But Dylan was right about no one wanting a hungry alpha werewolf around. I had to eat, even if I didn't feel like it. And tomorrow, I had to put Brooke Ratner out of my mind. My wolf might have chosen her, but I hadn't. There was nothing between us and there never would be.

It was as simple as that.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### BROOKE

The werewolf instruction manual was a heck of a lot more interesting than the Bible. Not that I had a lot of experience with the latter. My mother had made a halfhearted effort to send me to Sunday School when I was a kid, but she'd been a young widow working two jobs. Sundays had been her one day off, and she'd eventually dropped church so we could spend those few precious hours together. She'd made even the most ordinary things fun, turning our ranch-style house's minuscule patio into a picnic area so we could eat outside during the humid Seattle summers.

I really needed to call her.

Unfortunately, my new prison didn't have a phone. I tossed the book Hugh had given me on the bed and glared at the bedroom door. As he'd promised, someone had delivered breakfast this morning—and Dylan had brought up an absolutely insane amount of food last night.

I'd eaten everything. Then I'd locked myself in the bathroom, cranked up the temperature in the shower, and indulged in an ugly cry that left me drained and starving. Now it was nearly lunchtime and my stomach was already raring to go.

Seriously, I was going to get as big as a house if this continued.

A knock on the door made me jump. Right away, my thoughts leapt to Hugh. Had he changed his mind about letting me leave? After our weird staring contest—and my body's embarrassing response to him—last night, I hadn't been brave enough to try the door.

Something that made anger fire hot in my veins now. He might be a werewolf king or alpha or whatever, but that didn't give him the right to hold me against my will. This was America.

Resolved, I marched to the door and opened it.

A young woman stood in the hall. She was pretty and petite, with blue eyes and glossy brown hair. And she was holding several shopping bags in each hand.

She was also a werewolf. A faint hint of evergreen teased my nose. It was like Hugh's scent but also different. Weaker...and missing the notes of leather and cologne I hadn't been able to stop sucking into my lungs.

"I'm Julia," she said. She lifted the bags a little. "The alpha sent me to buy clothes for you."

I stared at the bags. "Hugh?"

She gave me a look like she was trying to decide if I was stupid. "Yes, Hugh. The alpha." She paused, then added, "These are getting heavy."

"Oh my gosh, of course." I stepped back, feeling like the idiot she probably thought I was. As she dropped the bags on the bed, my heart sank. If Hugh had sent her out for clothes, he had no intention of reversing his order for me to stay put. Even if I somehow got my hands on a phone and called the police, what would I tell them? That I'd been bitten by a werewolf who was now holding me captive? The newsroom at the Seattle Dispatch got bogus "tips" like that all the time—and we promptly dismissed them as pranks.

Julia ran a critical look down my body. "I had to guess your size. Hugh said you were tall and seemed to think that was enough information."

I smiled. “Typical man.”

“He isn’t typical at all,” she said, not returning my smile. “He’s the most dominant wolf in the Pacific Pack.”

Okay. “Yes. He told me last night.” Immediately, my cheeks heated at how suggestive that sounded. I cleared my throat. “Um. Thank you for the clothes.” I plucked at the gray sweatshirt I’d been forced to put back on after my shower. “I was starting to think I might have to wear this forever.”

Her expression didn’t change. “Try everything on. Leave anything that doesn’t fit on the dresser and I’ll take it back tomorrow.”

Out of nowhere, an odd sensation streaked through me. It was hot...and angry. Hardly aware of what I was doing, I stepped toward her—and something deep inside me was pleased when she had to tip her head back to meet my gaze.

Her eyes narrowed, and a flush spread up her neck. But she didn’t back up.

Wait. What was I doing? I stopped, strangely disoriented. For a split second, the room seemed to spin like I had a hangover. I shook my head and the sensation immediately cleared.

Julia watched me...and now her fists were balled at her sides like she was restraining herself from throwing a punch. It was like she’d bottled something up and had decided to let it out. Slowly, her blue eyes lightened, her irises brighter than the morning sky outside the windows.

What the hell? Was everyone in this place as insane as Hugh?

“Thanks for the clothes,” I said tightly, not caring if my tone was less than grateful. I

just wanted her out of my room. “I appreciate you bringing them.”

“I didn’t do it for you.” She spoke through clenched teeth, her smaller frame practically vibrating with fury. “I did it because the alpha ordered me to. For some reason, he thought turning a human was a good idea.” She said “human” the way someone might say “dog vomit.”

For a second, I was too surprised to speak. Then the hot, angry feeling rushed up my back. It spread over my nape and then I was baring my teeth as I said, “He turned me to save my life. Or maybe you think he should have let me die?”

“You’re weak,” she spat. “The rogues are out for blood and you’re the last thing this pack needs.”

In a heartbeat, I had her backed against the wall next to the door, my face an inch from hers. “Go ahead and call me weak again,” I growled. My voice was deep, and something within me stirred.

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Julia gasped and dropped her gaze, a deep frown between her dark brows.

The thing within me lifted its head. Emotion suffused me, and it didn't come from me at all. The thing was...satisfied.

Footsteps intruded and then a familiar southern twang pierced the satisfaction humming through me. "Oh! Oh my, this is not good, ladies." Warm hands gripped my shoulders and tugged me backwards. "Come on now, Brooke," Dylan said, turning me around.

I blinked up at him. "Dylan?"

"The one and only." He squeezed my shoulders, his brown eyes lightened to gold. "Get control, okay?" His tone was kind but uncompromising. There was no question he was issuing an order. "No challenges in the house. Hugh will have a shit fit if you break the furniture."

Challenges? The only person issuing challenges right now was Julia. The thing stirring in my head roused again, urging me to turn around and finish what she'd started.

"Brooke." Dylan's eyes drew mine as his tone sharpened. "You hearing me?"

"Y-Yes." Pain shot through my skull, as if I'd stared directly at the sun. Instinctively, I knew it came from him, and I dropped my gaze. "You can stop now."

He chuckled. "You first."

“I will. I mean, I am. I’m stopping.”

“Atta girl.” He gave me a firm nudge toward the opposite half of the room. “Go on over there and settle down, all right?”

“All right.” I went quickly, relieved to escape the pressure of his stare. On the way, I caught my reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Holy... My eyes were blazing. No wonder Dylan had hauled me away from Julia like I was an MMA fighter. I looked ready to commit murder.

Dylan faced Julia, all traces of playfulness vanishing from his voice. “What’s going on here?”

She lifted her chin, although she didn’t look him in the eye. “She shouldn’t be here. She’s—”

“That’s not for you to decide,” he said. “You have a problem with another pack member, you take it up with Hugh.”

“Maybe I will.” She darted a look at me, her blue eyes lit with malice. “Or maybe I’ll take it up with the Council.”

A deep, menacing growl rumbled through the room, making the hair on my nape lift.

Julia paled, and it was obvious she would have stepped back if the wall hadn’t been in her way.

“You do that,” Dylan said, his voice dipping into a register no human man could achieve. “Let me know how Hugh reacts.” He jerked his head toward the door. “Go. Quickly.”

She made a hasty exit.

Dylan stayed put for a second, his head bent and his broad shoulders rising and falling a few times. I wasn't sure what I expected to see when he turned around, but he faced me with ordinary brown eyes and a smile I was coming to recognize. "Well, that was weird."

I let out a startled laugh. "She seems nice."

His smile widened, revealing a set of dimples that made it hard to reconcile his boy-next-door good looks with the stern werewolf who'd sent me scurrying across the room moments before. "Ignore her. Julia's old and old wolves sometimes have antiquated ideas about turned humans." He hesitated, giving me a look like he was trying to decide something. "I also suspect she might have a bit of a thing for a certain alpha."

Oh. "I see. So I'm a threat because I'm female?" Ugh, that was a thing in the werewolf world, too? "Trust me, she can have him."

He stared at me for a long moment. Just as my cheeks began to heat, he gestured to the bags on the bed. "Assuming there's something good in there, you wanna bum around town for a bit?"

My jaw dropped. "Really?"

"Really."

"But..." I glanced at the door and lowered my voice. "What about Hugh?"

"He's spending the day at the office." He flashed another grin. "So he asked me to babysit the new werewolf."



Charming.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:08 am*

“I thought you might like to get out of the house,” Dylan said. “But I can guarantee you’ll be underwhelmed. Bosford and boring both start with B and I’m afraid it’s an entirely appropriate coincidence.”

“I won’t be bored,” I said quickly, ideas forming in my head. I knew nothing about Bosford, but it was a town like any other, right? That meant people. Humans. It was a chance to escape.

He nodded. “I’ll step out so you can change.”

“I’ll be fast,” I promised.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, I realized Dylan hadn’t been joking when he promised Bosford was boring.

“This is it?” I asked, staring at the block of buildings that lined the town’s main street—which, shockingly enough, was called Main Street. And “block” was a generous description for the cluster of brick storefronts. There were three businesses: a post office, an ice cream shop, and an honest-to-goodness general store. All the town needed was a rolling tumbleweed and some Hollywood director could shoot a Western in it.

Dylan laughed. “I did say you’d be underwhelmed. The ice cream is good, though. You want some? My treat.”

“Okay,” I said, sounding as miserable as I felt. Not wanting Dylan to think I was rude, I forced a smile. “I’ll buy next time.”

I waited while he ducked inside, my gaze taking in the single stoplight and the forest that huddled along the edge of the buildings. Between the narrow street and the thick trees, it was almost like being at the Gorge again. Goosebumps broke out on my arms, making me wish I’d thrown a jacket over my T-shirt. Whatever else Julia might be, she was a decent shopper, and I was comfortable in a pair of black denim shorts and a gray cotton shirt.

But it was the underwear I appreciated most. The next time I met Hugh Dalton, I would not be braless and commando.

Dylan returned a couple minutes later with two waffle cones loaded with French vanilla. My stomach let out an appreciative growl, and he grinned as he handed mine over. The teenage girl working the ice cream shop counter watched us through the window.

My nape prickled—something that kept happening so often I assumed it was a side effect of my transformation.

Lucky me.

I turned so the girl couldn’t see my face. “Is she a werewolf?”

Dylan glanced inside. “Half-breed. Everyone in Bosford is either a werewolf, half wolf, or married to a wolf. It’s exhausting living alongside humans. Here, surrounded by our own kind, we don’t have to hide. Most packs have their headquarters in rural areas like this.”

I nodded—and I couldn’t help wondering if that explained why some people got a

weird feeling when traveling through small towns in the middle of nowhere. Maybe those were werewolf towns.

We were halfway to Dylan's SUV when he waved at a man in a passing truck. The driver waved back, then gave me a lingering stare as he drove by.

I shivered. "I feel like he knew me."

"Everyone knows you." Dylan licked around the edge of his cone. "Turned females are super rare."

"Yeah, it said that in the book Hugh made me read."

Dylan groaned. "Of course he did. I'd forgotten about that thing." We climbed into his SUV and he finished his cone one-handed as he backed out of the parking spot. "I love Hugh like a father but he can be the biggest nerd sometimes."

"Oh yeah?" I could totally see it.

"Yeah. Don't even play Monopoly with him." Dylan lowered his voice like he was ready to say something scandalous. "Hugh plays through the whole damn thing. And he follows the rules."

There was a series of rapid-fire pops, and several holes appeared in the windshield.

Dylan shoved me down before I even registered what happened. More pops rang out. Glass dusted us as he covered my body with his, his weight pushing my cheek into the leather seat. The center console dug into my ribs, but I didn't care. Someone was shooting at us.

The popping stopped. Everything was still.

“Stay down,” Dylan said, his voice low and hard. He sat up and hit the gas, squealing out of the parking lot and taking the SUV from zero to what felt like a hundred miles an hour.

My heart raced just as fast. I’d dropped my cone in the chaos, and the scent of vanilla hit my nose...along with the coppery scent of blood.

The SUV hit a bump, and Dylan sucked in a pained breath.

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I sat up. Blood bloomed across the fabric covering his shoulder. “You were hit!”

“It’s nothing,” he muttered. But his face was pale, his features pinched. “I’ll be all right.”

“I can’t believe someone shot at us.” It was sinking in, and now my insides trembled. “Should we call the police?”

“No. They were rogues. Fucking cowards,” he muttered. “No self-respecting shifter uses a human weapon.”

“Maybe you should start.”

He grunted.

“Do you have a phone?” I darted a look around the seats. “I can call Hugh.”

“I already called him,” he gritted out. “Mental bond.”

I chewed my lip. Alex had said something similar just before the attack at the Gorge.

“What can I do?” I asked Dylan. “Do you need me to drive?”

He tossed me a weak smile. “I’m okay. A bullet won’t kill me, but it hurts like a bitch.”

I bit my tongue before I could say something dumb like well at least it wasn’t silver.

That was a myth, anyway, according to Hugh's book. The stuff about werewolves shifting on a full moon was true, though. So I guess I had that to look forward to.

We tore around a corner and Hugh's house came into view. I'd seen it when we left, of course, but I was struck anew by its size and beauty. It was built like a ski lodge, with a stunning combination of stone and windows. But what held my attention right now were the men spilling from it. Five of them ran down the front steps, each male more muscular and hard-eyed than the last. Two ripped their shirts over their heads as they sprinted like superheroes toward the forest. The others circled the SUV as Dylan lurched to a stop and slumped forward.

My door popped open, and I swallowed a yelp as a bearded, redheaded giant pulled me from the car and into his arms.

"I'm okay!" I twisted, struggling to get a look over his shoulder as he jogged up the front steps and into the spacious foyer. "It's Dylan who's hurt. Put me down!"

"No' happenin'," he said in a thick brogue. "Anything goes awry with you, lass, and Hugh'll have my bollocks."

As I was trying to translate, Hugh's voice boomed around us. "Where is she? Where is Brooke?"

The giant swung around. Hugh burst through the front door, his green eyes wide with something that looked like fear.

No, I mentally amended. Terror.

He was upon us in seconds, plucking me from the giant's arms and setting me on my feet. He gripped my arms and looked me up and down, his pulse pounding in his throat. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

“I’m fine.”

He didn’t seem to hear. His fingers bit into my arms as he continued searching me for injuries. “You’re not bleeding anywhere—”

“I’m okay.” On impulse, I grabbed his jaw in both hands in a bid to hold him still. Bright green eyes met mine. Instantly, all the shouting and chaos around us faded.

“You’re not hurt,” he said, almost like he was reassuring himself.

“I’m not hurt.”

Gradually, his expression shifted from fear to relief. “Thank Christ,” he rasped. “I can’t lose you.”

We stared at each other. Somewhere in my mind, I knew his words were far too familiar for our relationship. But it didn’t seem to matter. His stubbled cheeks were hot under my palms. The heat flowed down my arms and into the rest of my body, making every nerve ending hyperaware.

I can’t lose him either.

The thought sailed through my brain like an arrow, stunning me into dropping my hands from his face.

The spell broke, and I was suddenly aware of our surroundings. The redheaded giant stared at us, his ruddy brows drawn tightly together. Behind him, the other two men carried a bloodied Dylan inside. They caught sight of me and Hugh and stopped, their eyes widening.



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Hugh seemed to rouse himself. Like the flip of a switch, his demeanor went from soft and concerned back to hard and commanding. He turned toward the men holding Dylan. “Take him to the triage room,” he barked.

They moved past us. The giant fell into step behind them.

Hugh watched them go, his expression shuttered. “Come,” he said without looking at me.

And he didn’t wait to see if I followed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### HUGH

The triage room was tucked in a corner of the basement that used to be a wine cellar. “It’s a must for a home this size,” the Realtor had told me. Maybe, but stopping my wolves from bleeding out was more important than storing cabernet at the right temperature. So triage room it was.

The guys put Dylan on the table and then Malcolm went to work on Dylan’s clothes, cutting away his T-shirt with a pair of trauma shears. No one mentioned my reaction to the possibility of Brooke being hurt.

But they’d noticed.

I shoved all that out of my mind as I moved to Dylan’s side. “How you doing?”

“I’ve been better.” He hissed as Malcolm probed the bullet wound in his shoulder. “Take it easy, you oaf.”

“Went clean through,” Malcolm pronounced cheerfully. He winked at Dylan. “Yer lucky it didnae hit that pretty face o’ yours, Corbett. I would’ve missed it.”

“You sweet talk all your patients this way, Malcolm?”

The Highlander chuckled as he snapped on a pair of purple latex gloves. “Nah. I save it all for you.” He pointed at one of the hovering enforcers. “Get me an irrigation syringe and a shitload of gauze.”

My anxiety eased. Dylan would be okay. Malcolm probably didn’t even need to clean the wound, since Dylan’s body would push any bullet fragments out with his first shift. But it wasn’t the best feeling in the world. Some old school wolves turned up their noses at modern medicine, choosing to tough it out like our forefathers had. They were fools.

“I liked those jeans,” Dylan grumbled as one of the enforcers moved the scissors up his ankle.

I patted his forearm. “We’ll make them into jean shorts for you.”

“God, no. Wearing jorts is worse than getting shot.”

Tanner entered the room wearing nothing but a pair of loose-fitting sweatpants. He’d been on patrol when I alerted the pack, and he’d obviously raced to the house as quickly as he could. His hair was windblown, his chest sheened with sweat. “Alpha,” he said, his gaze flicking between Brooke and me. “Could I speak to you for a moment? Both of you.”

I motioned to Brooke, and I closed the triage room door as the three of us stepped outside.

Tanner got right to the point. “We scented at least two rogues near the forest next to the ice cream shop. One trail led away from town but another headed toward the house.”

Brooke put a hand over her mouth.

“How close?” I asked.

“About half a mile. Then the trail went dead. I’ve got every available enforcer scouring Bosford inch by inch right now.” He glanced at Brooke. “And I’d feel a whole lot better if you two left town while we clear it.”

Every instinct I possessed screamed at me to shut him down, to tell him there was no way I was abandoning the pack with rogues on the hunt.

But this was the second time rogues had targeted Brooke. They were either hunting Pacific Pack leadership—or they were hunting her. Keeping her in the house might sound safe on the surface, but there was a better option.

I nodded. “You’re in charge while Dylan is down. I want Malcolm and Shepherd to guard the house. All enforcers should be shifted and on patrol. Everyone else stays in their homes.” I swept my gaze over his disheveled hair and the dark circles under his eyes. “How tapped are you?”

“I’ve got one shift, maybe two, left in me.”

“Don’t push it. Text me with updates. I have my phone.”

“You got it, Alpha.” His expression hardened. “We’ll find them.”

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I clapped him on the shoulder, grateful to have such a reliable and skilled tracker in the pack. “I know you will. I trust you.”

\* \* \*

The urgent, frayed nervousness I’d felt in the foyer returned as I rushed Brooke to my SUV. The thought of rogue wolves near my home was infuriating. The thought of them harming Brooke made my beast strain against the mental bonds I normally had no problem keeping in place. Over the years, I’d heard countless wolves describe how it felt to find their fated mate. It had sounded dramatic to the point of absurdity. Surely, I’d thought, the claims of deep connection and insatiable desire were exaggerated.

Now I knew they weren’t.

I was perilously close to losing control. Hopefully Brooke was still too new to being a werewolf to notice.

“Are you all right?” she asked as I flew down the driveway.

I made a deliberate effort to unclench my hands from the steering wheel. “I should be asking you that.” She could have been killed. My fault, of course. I’d dumped her on Dylan and then fled the house like a coward rather than tell her the truth about what we were to each other. And in doing so, I’d put her in danger.

“I’m okay,” she said. “Worried about Dylan.”

“He’s fine. This isn’t the first time he’s been shot.” As soon as I said it, I realized how not reassuring that was. I cleared my throat. “I wouldn’t have left if I thought he was in danger.”

“No, I know that,” she said, and her words had the ring of truth. “Where are we going?”

“Early dinner.” I checked the rear view mirror as we sped away from the house. The likelihood of pursuit was next to nothing, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

She looked at me like I’d just announced we were leaving the solar system. “You’re taking me to dinner?”

“In Goldendale, yes. It’s full of humans, especially now that it’s summer and the tourists have descended. The rogues will never strike around so many people.”

She chewed her lower lip for a second. “But didn’t you say the rogues want to go public?”

“Not like that.” I merged onto the two-lane highway that connected Bosford to Goldendale. My beast settled down as we traveled farther from the house, and I relaxed into the leather seat. “Rourke is a fool, but he’s not stupid enough to commit murder in broad daylight under the nose of human authorities.”

“Rourke...” She paused, her nose scrunched up like she was trying to think of a word. “Villadsen?”

It was an effort to focus on the road, especially now that I knew how adorable she looked when she was trying to remember something. “Yes,” I said, willing the blood in my body to stop rushing places I most definitely did not need it right now. “You read the book I gave you.”

She huffed. “I didn’t have anything else to do last night.”

“And what did you learn, aside from the fact that Rourke Villadsen is the leader of the rogues?”

“Is this the official quiz or more like a review session?”

A smile tugged at my lips, but I kept it in check. “You’ve been thrust into a completely different world. I’m here to answer any questions you have about it.”

She waited a moment, as if trying to gauge my sincerity. Then she gave a little sigh. “There are twelve packs. Yours is the Pacific Pack.”

“Yes.” And the best one. It was possible I was biased, but I didn’t think so.

“Each pack has an alpha, and every alpha sits on the Council of Alphas. Leadership on the Council rotates every year.” She gave me a curious look. “Are you in charge now?”

I shook my head. “My term was four years ago.” And the rotation went by geography, which meant I had to suffer through six more months of the South Central Pack’s alpha helming the Council. If “archaic” was a person, it would look a lot like Hiram Grant.

“Hm. And what about the...mage? Magic-born—?”

“Mageborn,” I corrected. “That’s the Northeast Pack.”

“The book said they use magic.”

“Yes. According to legend, they’re descended from a sorcerer.” I glanced at her. “No

one can prove that, but the mageborn align themselves with the sorcerers, so I assume there's at least some truth to the story. Carrick—he's the alpha of the Northeast Pack—doesn't change his shoes without asking whether Delano Rayne has an opinion about it." I flipped on my turn signal and exited the highway. "Delano is the—"

"Leader of the sorcerers and CEO of Rayne Corporation," she said. Almost to herself, she added, "I'd like to look that up when I get a chance."



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My beast stirred, attuned to her emotions. She'd lost the aura of distress that had hovered around her back at the house. Now she was...intrigued. She was also gnawing at her lip again, her white teeth pressed into the plump, pink flesh. She'd scraped her golden hair into a low ponytail, and her profile was limned in afternoon sunlight. Her dark brown lashes were long and curly, and there was a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. She was dressed for the summer heat in a thin T-shirt that clung to her high breasts. Her black shorts had ridden up when she sat, and now her long, toned legs stretched in front of her in a glorious display of tanned skin. There was a charming spray of tiny freckles on her upper left thigh.

And I was staring again when I should be driving.

I focused on the road. "What would you like to know about Rayne Corporation?" Delano dealt mostly in real estate, which he used as a legitimate front for a multitude of illegitimate secondary businesses.

She angled her body toward mine, her voice brimming with curiosity. "Honestly? Like everything. Because the book made Rayne sound shady as fu—" She caught herself. "Really shady."

I grinned. "I think anyone who knows anything about sorcerers would agree with your assessment."

"Is it true they're all men? Why is that? How do they"—she twirled her hand in the air—"you know, make new sorcerers?"

"Daughters are born occasionally, but they don't inherit any magic. In previous eras,

sorcerers simply abandoned their female offspring.” I shot her a quick glance. “There were a few with just enough residual magic to attract the attention of human authorities, though. Many were burned at the stake for practicing witchcraft, but it’s more likely the women were either unaware of their gifts or simply couldn’t control their magic.”

She sucked in a breath. “That’s awful. Did the sorcerers try to help them?”

“No. Rayne and his ilk are nothing if not ruthless. They were more than happy to let females bear the brunt of human ignorance. In modern times, they use surrogate mothers and science to ensure their offspring are male. And powerful. Rayne oversees a sprawling breeding program.”

“Okay, sprawling breeding program are three words I never needed to hear together.”

I gave a reluctant laugh. “It’s dystopian, I know. Everyone thinks so. But the interesting thing is Delano actually does have a daughter. Livia Rayne is one of just a handful of sorceresses ever born.”

Brooke’s eyes widened. “Does that mean she’s crazy powerful or something?”

“That’s the rumor. It’s hard to know for sure, though. Delano doesn’t let her out of his sight.”

“Ugh. That must be fun.” Brooke fell silent for a moment, and I could sense she was thinking over everything I’d told her. She worried at her lip again, and now she twisted a bright lock of hair around her finger.

In an instant, I was hard and aching. I shifted carefully in my seat, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” I cleared my throat. “You were an investigative reporter, right?”

She gave me a startled look. “I still am.”

Abruptly, tension filled the space between us.

Fuck. Of course I’d chosen the worst possible thing to say.

I hadn’t intended to pick this fight with her. On the other hand, it was time to stop sidestepping conversations we needed to have. Concealing information could only lead to more near-disasters like today.

“We’re here.” I pulled into the restaurant parking lot and turned off the car. “And we need to talk.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### BROOKE

The restaurant was Greek, which was the last thing I expected to find in rural southern Washington. There was a charming bakery in the front, a busy dining room in the main section, and a small private area in the back. The hostess escorted us to the latter, which boasted a single table with a battery-operated candle in the center. The rear wall was one big window that made it look like we sat in the middle of the forest.

“This is beautiful,” I said while we waited for the server. The scent of bread reached my nose. My stomach growled loudly, which made my face heat.

Hugh handed me a menu. He looked like he wanted to smile. But maybe I was just imagining it.

“I have no idea why I’m so hungry.” My cheeks grew a little warmer. “I ate six pancakes this morning.”

“It’s shifter metabolism. You’ll have to eat a lot more than you’re used to. It’s dangerous to let yourself get too hungry.”

“Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?” I wasn’t letting him off the hook for his comment in the car. He’d spoken of my career in the past tense. “Because I’d like to talk about when I can return to Seattle. I need to check on my apartment.”

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Okay, that probably sounded stupid. My apartment was just fine. But I was a grown woman with a life and responsibilities. I hadn't chosen to become a werewolf, and I wasn't going to let Hugh Dalton dictate my future.

He sat back, and his eyes lightened a bit. Not as much as they had when he'd gripped my arms and said he couldn't lose me. No, this was more subtle—and somehow I knew I was looking at Hugh the Alpha and not Hugh the man who'd worried for my safety. Did he always run so hot and cold? The flip flopping was jarring. My stomach clenched as I braced for a repeat of last night, when he'd forced me to drop my gaze.

Instead, he asked, "Did you read anything about fated mates last night?"

After years of reporting, I knew he'd changed the subject on purpose. "Yes." For some reason, my stomach fluttered. Why was he asking me this?

He looked away, his brow furrowing. "I thought this would be easier," he muttered.

The fluttering in my stomach increased, a thousand butterflies flapping their wings.

"We're fated for each other," he said tightly. "You and I."

For a second, I could only stare at him while my brain attempted to arrange his words into something that made sense. When he merely continued staring back at me, I rasped, "That's not possible." The book said fated mates were inseparable. That it was physically painful for them to be apart. "You— You're lying."

Bright anger flared in his eyes. "I assure, I am not. I've never been so certain of

anything in my life.”

“But...I don’t know anything about you.” As his declaration sank in, heat climbed up my back. “You’re Alex’s father.” A horrifying thought popped into my head. “Oh god, did you know this before you bit me?”

He glanced toward the hallway that connected our room to the main dining area. “Keep your voice down.”

I gripped the table and leaned forward. “Just answer the question!” I said in a loud whisper.

He clenched his jaw. “I didn’t know. I suspected it as soon as I tasted your blood, but I didn’t know for sure until you were deep in the fever.”

“Why didn’t you tell me right away?”

“Do you really have to ask me that? As you pointed out, Alex was my son.” Pain flashed in his eyes.

A corresponding ache shot through my heart, swiftly followed by mortification. I couldn’t be tied to my deceased boyfriend’s father. Another sudden thought cropped up. “How old are you?”

There was the barest hesitation. “Eighty-seven.”

I gasped. I didn’t even have to scramble to do the math. There were exactly sixty years between us. And it was weird that he looked so youthful when he was pushing ninety. My brain didn’t accept it.

An older woman in a black apron bustled from the hallway and offered an apologetic

smile as she stopped at our table. “Apologies for the delay. We’re swamped today because a couple of big tour buses came in.” She pulled a pencil from her graying bun and held it over a thick notepad. “What can I get you guys?”

Hugh gathered our menus and placed them on the edge of the table. He ordered without even glancing at me. “Pastitsio for me. Same for the lady.”

Okay, maybe he was exactly as old as he looked.

The server tucked the menus under her arm. “The pasta is already baked so it’ll only be a minute. Can I get you anything to drink besides water? Our bar is open.”

“Wine,” I said before Hugh could order for me again. “Anything red. You can bring the whole bottle.”

She nodded. “And for you, sir?”

“I’m fine with water, thank you.” He waited until she was out of earshot before telling me, “It’ll take more than a bottle of wine to get you drunk.”

“Metabolism again?”

“Yes. It’s also unwise to imbibe with rogues in the area. Alcohol will mute your senses.”

Imbibe. Now I was going to be analyzing his vocabulary, listening for words no one used anymore. Except octogenarians. We had another mini staring contest, during which I mentally conceded he had a point. But I didn’t want to tell him that.

I lifted my chin. “Are you asking me not to drink or are you telling me? Because you should know, I don’t like being told what to do.”

Something moved in his eyes.



His wolf.

The hair on my nape lifted. He'd warned disobedience would cause me pain.

His reply was soft. "There's no need for me to ask, Brooke. If I don't want you to drink, then you won't."

My lips parted. I waited for anger to flare along with the tension that simmered between us. I should have been angry at yet another display of his arrogance. Instead, a heavy, dragging sensation spread through my core and pooled between my legs. Evergreen and leather and that tantalizing hint of cologne teased my nose.

"Are you..." My throat had gone so dry I had to swallow before I could go on. "Are you doing this?"

He made me wait a beat. "Some of it's the mate bond."

"Some of it?"

"Mmm." His voice dipped lower. "And I think some of it's because you actually do enjoy being told what to do. At least when I'm the one giving the orders."

My nipples tightened. I sucked in a breath. "You're wrong."

"Here we are!" The server reappeared holding a platter groaning with food. I avoided Hugh's gaze as she deposited pasta, bread, salad, and wine on the table. She added two big wineglasses and beamed at us. "Unless you need anything else, I'll leave you

to it.”

“This looks great, thank you,” Hugh said, sounding like a perfectly normal man who hadn’t just made my panties dampen with desire. “Oh, and we changed our minds about the wine.”

“No problem.” The server plucked the bottle and glasses from the table.

I held my tongue until she left, and then I swallowed against the desert my throat had become. “You can’t talk to me that way,” I said weakly.

“You’re right,” he said at once. He closed his eyes for a long moment, clearly locked in some kind of internal struggle. When he opened them, his face was strained, and it was like he had to force out his words. “It’s...difficult when you challenge me. My wolf responds. The way you’re feeling... I feel it, too. I’ve been fighting it since I bit you. It’s why I asked Dylan to stay with you today.”

Oh god. That meant he was just as aroused—and didn’t want to be. How humiliating.

I waited for a hole to open beneath my chair and swallow me up. When it didn’t, I dropped my gaze to my plate of delicious looking pasta I no longer had an appetite for. “So what happens now?”

“I can reject you.”

That brought my head back up. “What do you mean?” The book hadn’t mentioned that.

“You won’t find that in the book,” he said, as if he’d read my mind. He hadn’t, though. The book had mentioned that, noting that it was a vampiric trait. Werewolves could only hear each other’s thoughts when they spoke mind to mind, and even that

was limited to relatively short distances. It was a relief to know Hugh hadn't been listening in on my thoughts, even if I was a little freaked out that there were vampires in the world.

Hugh gestured to my plate. "You should eat before it gets cold."

"Tell me about this rejection thing."

"Eat first."

I picked up my fork without thinking, and I'd swallowed a bite before I realized I'd obeyed his command. Worse, something within me had wanted to. It craved his approval.

Was it coming from me...or some kind of metaphysical bond I had no control over?

More heat flooded me as I stared at the pasta on my plate. He was completely wrong about me enjoying this. My body might be off the rails, but my brain wanted nothing to do with Hugh Dalton and his orders.

I clenched the fork until the metal dug into my skin.

"Brooke," he said. "Look at me."

His voice was wrapped in a command, which meant I lifted my head without stopping to think whether I wanted to.

He met my gaze—and then deliberately lowered his own.

My breath caught. I didn't need to know werewolf rules to understand this was an apology of sorts. By dropping his eyes, he was giving me the upper hand.

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“We both need food,” he said quietly. “It’ll help with control. Then I’ll tell you how rejection works. And how we can rid ourselves of this desire.”

### CHAPTER TEN

#### HUGH

Brooke ate her food, her anger fading in the wake of my show of submission. I didn’t mind showing her that. On the contrary, it had been almost...liberating. I couldn’t let my guard down with anyone else in the pack—with anyone else, period.

But I could with her. Because whatever else she was, she was my mate.

For now, at least.

With that heady realization, my beast perked up, once again pushing me to make our connection permanent.

It takes two, I told my wolf. And what was I thinking, really, to even entertain it? Brooke and I were a bad idea on several levels, not the least of which was her connection to Alex.

No, we were here in this restaurant so I could tell her how to end this thing between us. Neither of us had asked for it. She’d been clear she didn’t want it.

And yet...her arousal lingered. The blame for that fell squarely on me. I’d been foolish—childish—to taunt her the way I had, telling her she liked my orders. There

was no excuse for it. I was, as she'd noted with mild horror, far older and more experienced. I was also supposed to be ending our entanglement, not encouraging it.

I ate on autopilot, hardly tasting the rich, cinnamon-spiked wine sauce the restaurant was known for. Brooke kept her head down, her long lashes shielding those incredible blue eyes. Some wicked impulse urged me to speak just to see them again.

I really couldn't afford to be this stupid.

It was a good time for my phone to buzz in my pocket.

It was Tanner. "Any updates?" I asked, my voice emerging more gruffly than I intended.

"Yes and no."

Brooke looked up with wide eyes.

That's right. No more one-way conversations. Superior werewolf hearing was one of several reasons I avoided phone calls whenever possible. I didn't need to hold the phone to my ear but I did it anyway in case the server made an appearance. Moving in the human world required a great deal of pretending.

"The trails went cold," Tanner said, "but we recovered bullet casings from Dylan's car."

"You feeling good enough to run ballistics?"

"Yep."

"Excellent. Take Shepherd to the office and make it happen. I doubt the rogues

dumped their weapons, but there's a slim chance we can match them through the database. It could give us a lead to track the bastards down."

"You got it, boss."

"How's Dylan?"

Tanner chuckled. "Up. Bitching at everyone. Malcolm threatened to shoot him again."

"Tell Dylan I'll expect him back on patrol tomorrow," I said dryly.

"Will do."

I ended the call with a smile pulling at my mouth.

"You have access to the federal ballistics database?" Brooke asked at once. Her eyes were sharp, all traces of her flustered desire gone. She looked like the reporter she was, curiosity hovering around her like an aura. And damn if it didn't make her even more attractive.

"I do." There was no use denying it, especially when I was certain she'd dig until she discovered the truth.

She raised her brows. "I didn't think private security companies could get that kind of access."

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“They normally can’t. But I’m a former U.S. Marshal. Dalton Security has a long history of partnering with the federal government.”

She absorbed that information, and I could almost see her mentally sifting through details and deciding which follow-up question was most important. “How long were you a Marshal?”

“Thirty years.”

“Why did you quit?”

I thought it over, because there were several reasons, including my failed marriage to a human. I settled on the one that required the least amount of explanation. “It’s not possible for me to do that kind of work now.” I waved at my face. “Eventually, people would notice I don’t age. Years ago, werewolves could disappear for a while and then reinvent themselves with a new identity. With modern technology, those days are gone, especially in a field like law enforcement.”

She frowned. “I haven’t really let myself think about the whole immortality part of things.”

Sympathy streaked through me, as well as guilt. As her sire, I was supposed to help her through all aspects of her transition. I’d bitten her. It was my job to make sure she retained her sanity as she grew into her new life. Instead, I’d given her a book and pawned her off on Dylan.

“It can be a difficult adjustment for turned wolves,” I said. “You’ve spent your life

until now anticipating that you would grow old.” I searched for a way to comfort her about perhaps the most complex issue she’d ever face. “I can tell you that werewolves in general dislike dwelling on the past. The truly ancient among us are reluctant to talk about bygone eras. It’s better to live in the present.”

Her lips curved. “That sounds like something a yoga instructor might say.”

My breath eased out because she’d let me off the hook. And because talking to her was, well, easy. I returned her smile. “Actually, most werewolves could probably do with some yoga.”

“You could get certified,” she said, her blue eyes twinkling. “Maybe offer some classes.”

“Something to keep in mind if I’m ever pondering a career change. Although I’m not sure my enforcers would appreciate seeing me in spandex.”

We stared at each other like that for a minute, both of us smiling. Her nose scrunched in that charming way that made her freckles stand out. She was like a living, breathing representation of summer with her deep blue eyes and golden hair. It was tempting to linger in her warmth.

But I couldn’t. With the rogues’ trail gone cold, it was safe to return to the house. I had a million things to do, including contacting the Council and doubling my enforcers’ patrols. I needed to check on Dylan and get my team of security experts working on the bullet casings Tanner had found.

And I needed to tell Brooke how to end this thing between us.

I cleared my throat. “You wanted to know about rejected mates.”



Her smile faded. “Yes.” I’d ruined our brief moment of happiness, popping it like a bubble and plunging us straight back into our tense reality. My wolf stirred, telegraphing its displeasure with this turn of events.

I ignored it.

“The only way to sever the mate bond is for each mate to reject the other,” I said.

She looked surprised, as if she couldn’t believe it was that simple. “So we do that now or...?”

“It has to be under a full moon, the same as a mating ceremony.”

“How long—?”

“Roughly a month from now.” Something she would have known if she’d gone through her first shift. I could sense the moon’s phases even in broad daylight. When the moon was full, it was nearly impossible to remain in human form. Restless energy built up, and only a shift could release it. I could stay on two legs if I had to, but it was unpleasant.

“A month?” Something like panic flashed in her eyes.

“The pack will gather and—”

“Oh no. I can’t do this in front of everyone.”

I sat back. “You don’t have a choice about that. Neither of us does. I know this is all new to you, but this is a metaphysical connection. With the exception of the mageborn, werewolves don’t use much magic. Not like the sorcerers or the fae. But we’re the only immortals with fated mates. This is our main source of magic, and as

with all magic there are rules.”

She was quiet for a moment, those gears in her mind turning once more. “What if one mate refuses to reject the other?”

“Then the ceremony can’t go forward and the bond stays in place.”

“Has that ever happened?”

I nodded. “Dylan.”

A little gasp escaped her. “What happened?”

I felt some amount of discomfort discussing Dylan’s situation. His story was a painful one, and it wasn’t fodder for gossip. But it wasn’t a secret, either, and I sensed I could trust Brooke. “You remember the alpha of the mageborn?”

“Carrick Hart,” she said, once again displaying her journalistic skills.

“His pack borders the Appalachian Pack, which Dylan’s father ruled. Carrick attacked, wiping out Dylan’s entire family and most of his packmates.”

She put a hand over her mouth. “God. Why?”

“Dylan’s fated mate is a mageborn female, and Dylan believes Carrick wants her for himself.”

Brooke looked sick. “You’re telling me a man murdered his neighbors because he thinks he has a right to a woman? Does the woman have a say in this?”

“She rejected Dylan. He doesn’t speak of it often, except to say Carrick pressured her to do it. I made Dylan my beta because I believe he’s a good male. I also have no doubt whatsoever that he’s capable of reclaiming his pack when he’s ready.”

“And you think he’ll try to reconnect with this female?”

“Yes. The mate bond is extremely powerful. If a pair is truly fated, they’ll always struggle to remain apart. After a while, denial is...unsustainable.”

Silence stretched as it became clear I wasn’t really talking about Dylan anymore. I cast about in my head for some way to break the tension without being obvious about it.

Brooke looked at her plate, a hint of pink in her cheeks. “I’m glad you helped Dylan.”

She’d handed me an out, and I took it like the coward I was. “I had selfish reasons. He’s an excellent beta. I’m not sure I could have weathered the past two years without him.”

“You mean the rogues pushing the Council to go public?”

“Yes.” Old bitterness welled. “Rourke made trouble for years and the alphas didn’t take him seriously. No one thought he would risk the wrath of the fae and the vampires, let alone the sorcerers, by pushing to expose the supernatural world. But the vampires are embroiled in their own politics and the fae usually can’t be bothered to worry about what happens outside their own alternate reality.” I huffed. “The Council let Rourke get away with his bullshit for so long they didn’t wake up to the threat he posed until he started killing his fellow wolves. To be honest, some of the alphas on the Council are still sleepwalking us all toward disaster.”

She frowned. “Why does Rourke want you to go public so badly?”

I considered saying it was us instead of you. She was a wolf now, which meant she’d inherited the crisis Rourke and his rogues had thrust on all of us.

Instead, I rubbed a hand over my mouth. “That’s a good question and not one I’m sure he’s ever answered. He was an alpha’s son but got passed over for leadership

when his father was killed. I believe that slight has stuck with him. But personally, I think he tapped into this sentiment that werewolves and immortals in general are superior to humans. We're certainly more powerful. To some wolves, that's reason enough to rule over anyone less powerful. It's as simple as that."

"But humans outnumber werewolves."

I smiled grimly. She'd grasped the inherent danger of the rogues' position, which was more than I could say for half the alphas on the Council. "That's right. They've always had the numbers, and they never hesitate to persecute the things they fear. Just ask the sorcerers."

"Are they helping you fight back? If the rogues are successful, they'll blow everyone's cover."

"That's the exact argument I made to the Council the last time we convened. The alphas should have been pressuring Delano Rayne to align with us from the beginning. I don't trust him any farther than I can throw him, but he cares about money and power. And the rogues threaten both of those things."

She worried at her lower lip, unconsciously making my blood heat. After a moment, she flashed me a look of sympathy. "You've got a lot on your plate."

My first instinct was to wave it off. But...she was right. "That yoga job is sounding better and better."

She grinned, and then we were both laughing. The server chose that moment to appear with the check, and she stopped beside the table with a bemused look on her face.

"Was everything okay?" she asked, glancing at our plates like maybe the food was

behind our laughter.

I accepted the check and smiled at Brooke. "It was great."

\* \* \*

Tanner greeted us at the door. He was freshly dressed and showered, but his hazel eyes were strained and his big frame appeared almost gaunt.

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I gave him a stern look as I ushered Brooke inside. “No more tracking for you tonight. You’re off duty.”

“I can stay here at the house.”

“Nope,” I said firmly. “Go home and sleep. And for god’s sake, eat something. You’ve dropped at least twenty pounds since this morning.”

It was obvious he wanted to argue, but he lowered his gaze. “I’ll call in the morning.”

“You won’t because you’ll be sleeping.” I put a hand on his shoulder to soften the command. “I appreciate everything you did today, taking charge of the investigation and making sure my”—I caught myself before I could say mate—“Brooke was safe.”

Tanner noticed the near slip, of course, but he’d never say anything. He just moved toward the door. “Julia and a few of the others left a bunch of food in the kitchen if you’re hungry.”

“Thanks.” I decided not to tell him Brooke and I had just eaten together in town. After my earlier display in the foyer, the whole pack was probably buzzing with speculation about what Brooke was to me.

“Well. Goodnight,” Tanner said with a nod toward Brooke.

Then he was gone, and it was just the two of us in the foyer—in the same damn spot where I’d told her I couldn’t lose her. It was as good a place as any to tell her the first step in my plan to separate ourselves from one another for good.

“Ah, I think you should shift tomorrow.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Like...into a wolf?”

I lost the battle not to smile. She was so effortlessly cute. And it would be best if I could stop noticing. “Like into a wolf.”

“Okay...” She frowned, clearly hesitant about the whole changing-into-an-animal thing.

My fingers twitched with the need to touch her. Not for any reason other than reassurance, but it was still a bad idea. So I ran my hand through my hair instead—then immediately regretted it when her eyes followed the movement and her heart sped up. “We can’t do the rejection ceremony until you’ve shifted,” I explained. “Not everyone manages to change forms the first time, or even the second. The first transformation can be especially difficult for turned wolves. The full moon is still a month away. It’s best to work on your shift as soon as possible so we don’t miss the opportunity.”

“Oh. Right. That makes sense.”

“I’m going to work in my study for a bit. My room is across the hall from yours if you need anything.”

Her cheeks turned the palest shade of pink, the color spreading under those distracting freckles. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. Thanks for dinner, by the way.”

“You’re welcome.”

We looked at each other for a minute, and then she turned and went to the stairs while I stood still and silent by the door. When she reached the first step, she turned, a little



frown between her brows. “Why doesn’t the book talk about rejection?”

I hesitated, but only for a second. “I can’t really say for certain.”

Her gaze sharpened, her reporter’s eyes pinning me in place. “But you have an idea.”

I thought about lying. Her senses probably weren’t sharp enough to scent falsehoods yet. But I discarded that idea. If she was going to reject me, she deserved all the information I could give her. And given her journalistic savvy, she might very well be capable of sniffing out a lie.

“Some wolves wait centuries for their mate. They long for the connection. For most wolves, it’s inconceivable that anyone would willingly give that up.”

The silence lengthened, growing longer than the space between us. At last, she said, “Does fate ever give you a different mate? If the first one...doesn’t work out?”

“No. To my knowledge, that’s never happened. Once a pair rejects each other, they’re free to move on. Have a regular relationship with whomever they choose.”

She started up the stairs, only to stop again and turn back. “But it’s possible, right?” She gave a weak smile. “I mean, anything is possible.”

The words hit me like a slap. Because they were dead wrong. And, suddenly, the laughter I’d shared with her over dinner rang hollow. Alex’s funeral pyre still smoked outside. I had no business laughing with the woman he’d hoped to build a life with. No business noticing her freckles or the way her blue eyes sharpened when she was curious about something. Those things had belonged to Alex—and then they’d been stolen from him.

“Some things are impossible, Brooke.” Her eyes widened at the ice in my voice.

“You only need to remember Alex to know that. I can’t bring my son back no matter how much I wish it.”

I left, my footsteps the only sound in the lingering silence.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### BROOKE

I was grateful I made it back to my room without seeing anyone. I could sense other people in the house, sort of like a tingling on my skin. Which was weird. Add it to the list.

It was growing dark outside but I didn't flip on the lights as I sank onto the edge of the bed. Hugh's book was on the nightstand where I'd left it. The shopping bags Julia had brought were huddled on the floor. In the chaos of the shooting and its aftermath, I'd forgotten all about her nasty comments.

But now they rushed back, her menacing tone fresh in my memory.

"You're weak. The rogues are out for blood and you're the last thing this pack needs."

Something clicked in my head—and I couldn't believe I hadn't realized it before. Even if I'd had no connection to Alex whatsoever, Hugh still wouldn't want me as a mate. He was an alpha. A leader. There were only twelve packs in the entire country and based on what I'd read and seen, the twelve alphas in charge of them wielded absolute power. With rogues attacking the Pacific Pack, a turned human for a mate would be a liability. I was never going to be as strong as a natural-born werewolf. Did I care? No. But everyone else seemed to care a lot.

Why should Hugh be any different?

Not everyone cares, a little voice murmured. Dylan didn't care. Or if he did, he was

great at hiding it. But Julia hadn't even tried to conceal her animosity. Tanner and the other enforcers had been polite, but I could still feel the pressure of all those eyes on me when I'd stepped onto the patio with Hugh.

If werewolves were truly prepared to wait centuries for their perfect mate, how disappointed he must have been when he realized fate had stuck him with a human. I'd believed his objections centered around my relationship with Alex, but maybe that wasn't the problem. Maybe he simply wanted a mate worthy of him, and it could never be me. Clearly, fate had messed up. It had gotten things all wrong, matching two people who didn't belong together. We didn't even really know each other. The rejection ceremony would free us both from a bad situation.

So why did I feel kind of...bad about it?

Slowly, I stood and went to the bathroom, where I finally turned on a light.

My face in the mirror was the same one I'd been staring at for the last twenty-seven years. My eyes were normal, with no hint of a glow.

Ordinary.

Human.

Hugh had saved my life—and saddled himself with an unwanted mate in the process. Worse, I reminded him of Alex. His abrupt coldness downstairs was glaring confirmation of that. No wonder he was pushing for me to shift tomorrow. He wanted to sever ties as soon as possible.

Which was fine. Really. I had every reason to want the same. I had a whole life waiting for me. A career I'd worked hard for. An apartment I loved. And...

I frowned at my reflection. There were other things. I was just too damn tired to think of them right now.

“The way you’re feeling... I feel it, too.”

Hugh hadn’t lied when he said that. Just as I could sense other wolves, I could tell he’d told the truth. It wasn’t a scent—not quite. But it was something similar, like the way a burst of winter air has a bite to it. The draw between us was real, even if neither of us wanted it. The problem was, we had to work together to make the problem go away. That meant spending tomorrow with Hugh. It meant fighting my body’s reaction to him while I transformed into a freaking wolf. Easy, right?

“I am so fucked,” I whispered to the mirror. Part of me wished he hadn’t told me that turned wolves sometimes struggled to shift. God, that would be humiliating. What if I got stuck in some kind of in-between state?

I left the bathroom as I banished the mental image of me writhing on the ground while Hugh and the whole pack watched. I found a nightgown in the shopping bags and yanked the tags off. Tomorrow was the first step on my path to going home. I was going to ace my first shift, wait for the full moon, and then tell Hugh Dalton no thanks to being his mate. He’d do the same, and we could both return to our regular lives.

Even better, the desire I felt in his presence would finally go away. It would be a welcome relief.

It was too early for bed, but I slipped under the sheets anyway. Now that I knew Hugh’s true reason for rejecting me, the morning couldn’t come fast enough. I closed my eyes, willing myself to sleep. I felt better already.

The little voice in my head tried to whisper something else—a question I’d stopped

myself from asking Hugh downstairs.

I ignored it.

But as I began to drift into unconsciousness, it whispered a little bit louder.

What happens if fate was right all along?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### BROOKE

In middle school, my stomach had clenched every time the gym teacher announced we were doing the “presidential fitness test.” Even as a kid, the name had sounded odd and strangely intimidating. But the truly intimidating part—the part that had made my stomach twist into knots—was the one-mile run. Everyone assumed I’d be a good runner because I was tall, which was...not the case. I hated everything about running. The dry throat. The burning in my lungs. The plodding around the track for no reason at all. The exasperated stares of my inevitably disappointed gym teacher.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:09 am*

I felt a little of that now as Hugh stood over me with a furrowed brow. We were in the forest beyond the house, and I'd been trying to shift for the past three hours.

"Okay," he said after a deep breath that sounded a lot like a sigh. "Try again, but clear your mind this time."

"What do you think I've been doing?" I asked, my voice testy. I was on all fours with a blanket draped over my back. It was undignified and unglamorous and a whole lot of other words that started with un. Unfuckingbelievable, for example. That one, too.

I shifted my weight to my knees, which made the blanket slip off my shoulders. I gasped and yanked it back into place.

Hugh pressed his lips together. "You don't have to worry about the blanket."

"Yes I do." Because I was not letting him see me naked. Or, more accurately, aroused. Because even in this awkward situation, my body thought it was "go time." Unreal.

Any hope I'd had of my desire waning had turned to ash when he knocked on my door this morning. His scent had hit me, and my libido had been firing on all cylinders ever since. It didn't help that the sunlight was picking out the reddish highlights in his brown hair and turning his skin to burnished gold. He was also shirtless.

Scratch that, he was practically nude, his big body clad in nothing but a pair of tight gray sweatpants that tapered at the ankle. And judging from the very obvious bulge in

the front, he wasn't wearing underwear. Logically, I knew he was dressed this way so he could shuck his pants and shift quickly. But his near-nakedness was more of a distraction than my total nakedness. His shoulders were taut and rounded with muscle. There was more muscle packed across his broad chest and rippling abs. And he had these sexy indentations above his hipbones that drew my gaze like a magnet. If I hadn't witnessed him stuff bread in his face with my own eyes yesterday I would have sworn the man had never enjoyed a cheat day in his life. I revised my earlier assessment about him looking like a sexy Clark Kent.

No, he was full-blown Superman. The Henry Cavill version, which had been genetically engineered in a lab to make women spontaneously ovulate.

A bead of sweat trickled down my back.

He squatted in front of me, and the cotton fabric of his sweats strained across his thighs.

Don't look at it. Don't look at it.

I looked.

"Brooke."

"What?" It came out sharper than I intended, and I jerked my gaze away as my cheeks heated.

He sucked in a breath. In my peripheral vision, I saw his frown deepen. "Maybe we should try again tomorrow," he rumbled.

"No. I can do it. I want to do it." I glanced at him. "I'm doing it."



I braced myself for him to argue. Instead, he huffed a laugh that was equal parts vexed and amused. “Stubborn.”

Our eyes met, and humor twinkled in his. “I prefer determined,” I said.

He studied me a moment. “All right. We’ll try again.” To my surprise, he reached out and adjusted the blanket so it draped more evenly across my shoulders. “Since you’re so determined to do it,” he added softly.

I could only nod. Because the look on his face was doing odd, fluttery things to my stomach. Slowly, he cupped my face in his hands. He stayed like that, his gaze locked with mine, with the sunlight shining all around us and the trees murmuring in the breeze. The world shrank to a pair of green eyes still dancing with humor. But there was something else there now, too. He looked at me with fondness, and his deep voice slid around me like a warm current as he said, “Change for me, wolf. Whenever you’re ready. CHANGE.”

And it happened. Heat built under my skin, rising and rising like a fever that makes you flushed and shivery all at once. My bones ached. My heart pounded—and the beat became a drum that shook my body. Shook the ground. Shook me to my core.

Hugh stayed as he was, his big palms cradling my face and his green eyes holding my gaze. I’m here, they seemed to say, although I couldn’t hear him.

Shouldn’t I be able to hear him in my mind now?

I didn’t have time to consider the question, because the ache had grown unbearable. I trembled so violently the blanket slipped to the ground, but I no longer cared. Nudity was the least of my concerns as tears ran down my face and my mouth opened on an agonized moan. God, even my teeth hurt. The second I thought it, my teeth moved.

Then everything sped up. Loud cracks filled my ears. Agony blazed down my spine, and my arms gave out. Hugh was right there with me, lowering me to the ground and brushing my hair off my face.

I groaned, but the sound was lost in a weak gurgle as my throat bulged, temporarily robbing me of breath. Knives twisted in my stomach, my legs, my arms. Bone slid over bone. The coppery scent of blood hit my nose. Immediately, my mouth filled with saliva. A different kind of ache sprang to life in my stomach.

Hunger. Dear god, was I hungry for my own blood?

My vision blurred, the sky and trees blending into blue-green blobs. A thousand tiny needle pricks raced across my skin, followed by a thousand more, and then everything itched worse than a million mosquito bites. I writhed, growling now, unable to ease my suffering.

“Almost there,” Hugh murmured, his voice like a balm...and a beacon. I latched onto it, my ears straining toward the sound. “You’re doing so good,” he said, as if he knew I needed him to keep talking. He didn’t touch me, just continued with words of encouragement, telling me I was okay and it was all right.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:09 am*

In the space of a heartbeat, my vision sharpened. The trees came back into focus, and now they were a dazzling green. Before I could absorb the change, scents assailed me from every direction. Rich soil, flower pollen, hints of animals hiding in the nearby forest.

And next to me, the evergreen-and-leather combination of the alpha.

MATE. The word rocketed through my brain as my beast sprang forward in my consciousness. I heard her so clearly now, as if a veil had been torn away.

Because, holy shit, I'd shifted. I stood on shaky legs as the last of the aches and pains faded. For a moment, I could only stare at my hands, which were paws. Without thinking, I flexed my claws. They dug into the soft dirt, and I groaned with pleasure at the welcome stretch.

A soft chuckle brought my head up. The alpha smiled at me, his eyes as green as the trees. Power rolled off him in thick waves I could almost see, like ribbons of smoke curling in the air. With him crouching, our heads were level, and that wasn't right. I ducked mine at once, sinking under the weight of his authority.

"No," he murmured, sliding his fingers through my fur. His big hands grasped the ruff around my neck and tugged gently, forcing my head up. "You don't have to hide. Never you."

Confusion swamped me. What did he mean, never me...?

The wind picked up, stirring my fur and bringing a cacophony of new scents that

tickled my nose. I jerked from his hands and sneezed violently. When he laughed, I did my best to glare at him. His smile broadened, and I bumped him with my new snout, sending him sprawling on his ass.

Oh shit. Immediately, my heart raced. I'd struck the alpha—

He grinned, then stood and hooked his thumbs in his waistband. "Wanna run?"

My anxiety melted away. I absolutely wanted to run. I tried for a yes, which emerged as a high-pitched yip.

He dropped his pants, and I was absurdly grateful for the fur that concealed the heat that flooded my face. He was as big there as he was everywhere else. I averted my gaze, but I found myself stealing another look as he turned away, giving me a mouthwatering view of his sculpted ass and muscular thighs. Then he dropped to all fours and shifted.

It was far more elegant than mine—and much faster than the last time he shifted in front of me. He slid from one form to the next, only pausing a moment to shake out his dark brown fur before trotting over to me. He'd been impressive the first time I saw him in this form, but I'd also been terrified and still recovering from the attack. Now that I could really look at him, I was stunned at what I saw.

I was no expert on wolves, but he was a lot bigger than any I'd seen in photos or on television. I estimated him to be around eight feet long and at least two hundred pounds. In other words, there was nothing in the forest bigger or badder than Hugh Dalton.

He bumped his nose against mine, then dragged his muzzle down my flank. It was...different, but my beast hummed happily in my head. Understanding flowed through the link that connected me to my beast, letting me know the alpha was both

greeting me and assuring himself I was okay. After a couple minutes of this, he nipped my snout and then bumped my shoulder with his.

The contact wasn't violent, but it still sent me staggering. What the hell? I rounded on him with irritation spiking my veins and found him staring at me with a doggy grin and a challenge gleaming in his bright green eyes.

Oh. The alpha wanted to play. My heart began to pound, anticipation coiling around me. I felt like a tightly wound spring ready to burst.

Hugh bounded past me, his long legs eating up the forest floor. The race was on.

I let out another yip and chased after him.

\* \* \*

Hugh was fast, but I was smaller and I found I could leap obstacles and dart in and out of the trees more easily. It wasn't much of an advantage, but it was enough to let me hold my own in our race. I pushed myself, my lungs burning as tree leaves slapped my face. When I spotted a stretch of flat ground, I sprinted past him. The look of surprise on his face was well worth the stitch in my side.

A few seconds later, branches cracked as he flew past me again. We kept going that way, racing neck to neck as we flew through the forest, our claws kicking up dirt and leaves. I heard everything—acorns dropping to the ground, the rapid flutter of birds scrambling to get away, squirrels scurrying into hiding places as we passed. My heart soared as Hugh and I cleared fallen tree trunks and splashed through shallow puddles.

Eventually, the burning in my lungs grew too uncomfortable to ignore. I stopped, chest heaving. Before I could sink to the ground, Hugh was there, nudging me forward.

Annoyed, I growled and moved away. Couldn't he see I was ready to die of exhaustion? My sides heaved, and I panted uncontrollably. Randomly, I remembered my middle school biology teacher telling us dog sweat glands were located in their paws, and they were pretty much useless when it came to cooling off. The main form of body temperature control for canines was thermoregulation, which dogs accomplished by panting. Heat rose from the chest and escaped through the mouth. It made sense that wolves would be the same way.

Hugh nudged me again, this time with his head lodged firmly behind my rump. Then he did it again, sending me skidding forward until my front paws splashed into—

Water. He'd led me to a little creek. I didn't stop to think about all the gross organisms that were probably floating in it. I just plunged my face in and went to town, gulping the cool liquid as fast as I could. It tasted amazing.

Something brushed my side, and I looked up to find Hugh watching me. His gaze took in the water dripping from my muzzle, and I couldn't help thinking back to how he'd warned me about drinking too quickly after I woke from my fever.

But I didn't feel weak or afraid now. I felt...exhilarated. I'd shifted my body into another form. It was really freaking weird, but it was also amazing. Like a present I hadn't known I wanted.

Hugh tilted his head toward the water, prompting me to follow the direction of his gaze.

My breath caught.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:09 am*

A cream colored wolf stared back at me. My nose was coal black, and my eyes were a brilliant, unearthly blue. My fur was thick and rich looking. Ridiculous tufts of downy hair graced the tips of my ears, reminding me of the Persian cat I'd had as a child.

Hugh was a study in contrasts beside me, his brown fur the same dark shade as his human hair color. His green eyes were the same, too, and they seemed to smile as he watched our reflections. We stayed like that for a minute, our paws in the creek and the sun slanting through the tops of the trees to sparkle in the water. It was so still and peaceful. Part of me wanted to lie down right where I was and take a nap.

As if he sensed my lethargy, Hugh jerked his head in the direction we'd come from. The message was clear: time to head back. He was probably right. If I rested now, I wasn't sure I could get back up again. At the moment, I felt like I could sleep for a week.

Sighing, I fell into step beside him. We went more slowly this time, picking our way over the leaf-strewn forest floor. The return trip seemed to take longer, and not just because we weren't running this time. With each step, my muscles screamed in protest and I felt thirsty all over again. I focused on the crunch of Hugh's footfalls beside me, matching my paces to his rhythm. My head drooped, so I was surprised when I stumbled over my clothes. Hugh had left them in a neat pile at the edge of the forest.

He moved silently back into the trees. A minute later, heavy breathing and the rustle of leaves confirmed he was reversing his shift. I stared at my clothes. How the hell was I supposed to shift back? If I waited for him to talk me through it, he'd see me

make that disgusting change again.

Not happening.

I hunkered down and closed my eyes. Please, I asked my beast. Help me out. Something inside me fluttered...and then heat streaked through me like lightning.

Relief swept me as I began to shift. It was slow going this time. It also hurt like a bitch, but I was too grateful to care. After what felt like hours of agony, I huddled on my hands and knees with my heart threatening to pound from my chest. A blanket settled over me, and then I was staring into the eyes of a concerned-looking Hugh. He wore his sweatpants once more, and his chest was sheened with sweat. The hair at his temples was damp, too, and it in no way detracted from his hotness.

“You okay? He tipped my chin up and searched my face like he was too impatient to wait for my answer.

“Yes,” I said breathlessly. My skin tingled where he touched me, and his scent washed over me, the evergreen and leather combo as familiar and comfortable as the blanket.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “You did better than I expected.”

I raised a brow as I tried to ignore how my heart was pounding harder. “That feels like a backhanded compliment.”

I wasn’t sure what kind of response I expected, but I wasn’t prepared for the slow smile that stole across his face—or the way it made me forget how to breathe. We stayed like that, inches apart and smiling at each other like a couple of idiots.

Like a couple.



The thought came out of nowhere, as clear and piercing as an arrow. Heat licked through me. I couldn't move or breathe, not with the way he was looking at me. Almost like he was going to...

His gaze dipped to my mouth.

My heart became a drum in my ears. The wind picked up, bringing new scents. But I was only vaguely aware of them. My lungs were full of Hugh.

Something flickered in his eyes. He dropped his hand. "We should get back to the house."

The abrupt statement was like a blast of cold air. My smile faltered, then I gathered the blanket in suddenly stiff fingers. "Of course."

He stood, and when he extended a hand he was no longer smiling. "Did you hear me in your head?" he asked as he helped me up.

I stopped fussing with the blanket. "No...was I supposed to?"

"It'll come with time. It's..." As he trailed off, his features lost their soft edges. He was the alpha once more.

"It's what?" I asked warily.

"Sometimes turned wolves struggle with mental communication. One theory says it's because the majority of humans are turned as adults, so the brain is kind of set in its ways for lack of a better term."

Just like that, the divide between us slammed back into place. I wasn't like him. He'd said it himself. I wasn't good enough. I never would be.

We'd come out here today so I could shift and get out of his life as soon as possible. So I could get my life back as soon as possible. I wanted that more than anything...didn't I?

Out of nowhere, my wolf stirred hard in my chest, its displeasure so sharp I caught my breath. NO came its response, the protest so forceful I could almost hear it in my mind, as if the beast had spoken aloud. A wave of dizziness crashed over me, and for a second I felt like I might shift without trying. Like the beast would tear her way out of my skin and take over.

Hugh's gaze sharpened. "You sure you're okay?"

I eased deliberately from his grip, and it was slightly maddening to know I only managed it because he allowed it. Before he could change his mind, I bent and gathered my clothes. "I'm great," I said brightly.

Then I walked toward the trees so I could dress in private—and so he couldn't see the confusion I was certain showed on my face.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#### HUGH

A cold shower was just about the biggest cliché I could think of, but here I was anyway, letting the icy spray blunt the desire that had pummeled me ever since Brooke made her first shift.

No. It started before that, when she opened her bedroom door this morning and her vanilla-and-orange blossom scent nearly blasted me off my feet. That whacked-over-the-head feeling had only intensified as we'd walked to the edge of the forest, reducing my control to a razor thin tether that had barely kept my beast in check.

She'd tried so hard to hide how nervous she was, and I'd tried to hide how much my proximity to her nude body affected me—a fact that made me feel like a degenerate. I was her sire for crying out loud. I was supposed to help her through the most difficult shift she'd ever attempt, not ogle her ass while she crouched under a blanket.

But I'd challenge any red-blooded male to ignore the temptation of Brooke Ratner. She was long, long legs and sweetly rounded curves. Golden hair and sapphire eyes framed by impossibly long lashes. I'd averted my gaze as she knelt with the blanket around her shoulders, but I'd caught enough flashes of creamy skin to know she had more of those delectable freckles sprinkled here and there. Fortunately, she'd been too focused on her shift to notice I'd gone hard as stone beside her.

When she'd transformed, pride had replaced my lust. Her wolf was gorgeous, with rich, creamy fur I couldn't help sinking my fingers into. Her eyes had stayed the

same, that tantalizing navy ring surviving her shift. For a moment, I'd just stared, unable to take my eyes off her. She didn't even realize how rare she was—a turned female and one capable of shifting on her first try. I was also fairly certain she was naturally dominant.

Then she'd knocked me on my ass, startling me out of my awe and making me excited for a chase for the first time in...well, I couldn't remember how long. So much of my life on four paws was spent patrolling and projecting an image of strength. There was little opportunity for play when the eyes of the pack were on me. And they were always on me.

But not with Brooke. Running with her had been exhilarating...and freeing. It was only when we'd returned to our clothes that I realized I hadn't thought about the rogues or the Council or any of the other dozens of issues that normally lay heavy on my mind. For once, I'd focused on the trees and the sunshine and the earth under my claws.

And her. Her scent had tempted me before. Her shift had increased it a thousandfold, until vanilla and orange blossoms blotted out everything else. My beast had delighted in our race, at how she wasn't intimidated by me in the least. How she'd recognized that her smaller size made her faster and more nimble. How she hadn't hesitated to take advantage of it whenever she could. She'd challenged me, just as she was meant to. No one else could do it better.

It was that heady realization that had rocked me to my core as we'd stared into each other's eyes after we changed back. Maybe I'd never truly believed in fate. But in that moment, with her blue gaze holding mine and her lush lips parted as she caught her breath, I'd wanted to take what fate was offering.

Then the wind had shifted...and the bitter scent of ash had hit my nose. Tanner and the others had removed the pyre, but the smell of the fire would linger for weeks.

I bent my head now, one hand braced on the shower wall while cold water pelted my nape like a thousand tiny needles. But it was nothing compared to the guilt roiling my gut. I'd gone from mourning my son to almost kissing his girlfriend steps from the spot where I'd watched flames engulf his body. Even if there were no other obstacles between Brooke and me, I could never accept her as a mate. Her presence would be a constant reminder of what I'd lost. Alex had wanted to bring her to Bosford, to introduce her to the pack. I'd resisted, memories of how difficult things had been for his mother running through my mind. She'd had her own life, and she'd put most of it aside to marry me. Resentment had brewed between us from the start.

It would be so much worse with Brooke. She was part of a profession that required constant interaction with humans. It was her job to document that interaction—something the Council would never, ever countenance. I'd bitten her. When she went looking for someone to blame, her anger was bound to fall squarely on me. Fate had chosen poorly for both of us.

And yet I couldn't seem to get her damn scent out of my nose. Even now, my cock stiffened, apparently undeterred by the freezing water. Determined to ignore it, I squeezed my eyes shut and thought about the ballistics reports Tanner and I had reviewed in my study last night. The bullet casings hadn't given us any leads, which meant I was stuck playing defense against the rogues.

The water temperature didn't seem to matter, because my desire remained unchecked. Great. Now the mere thought of Brooke had me stiff and aching. Still bracing one hand against the shower wall, I used my other hand to give my shaft a firm stroke. Heat flashed over me as I recalled how gorgeous she'd looked after her shift. Her beast had lingered in her eyes, turning them an icy blue, and the blush under her cheeks had made her smattering of freckles stand out. God, I'd wanted to lean in and touch the tip of my tongue to each one.

A groan escaped me as I continued pumping my dick. My balls tightened, my orgasm

gathering ridiculously fast. Dark humor twisted inside me. Some alpha wolf I was, reduced to a two-pump chump when the female I wanted was just across the hall.

That thought made my beast roar with approval. He surged so close to the surface I clenched my jaw against the urge to shift. She was so fucking close... A few dozen steps. Would she refuse me if I made the trip? Or would those sapphire eyes darken with lust as she welcomed my kiss?

It doesn't matter. A growl rumbled in my throat as I worked my shaft. I was never going to find out how she'd respond because I wasn't taking her as a mate.

Problem was, my dick wasn't getting the memo. My growl broke loose, rising with the saturated air as I worked my shaft faster. But it wasn't what I really wanted. What I wanted was to sink into Brooke's heat. To lose myself in her body and that goddamn scent that was driving me crazy.

"Fuck!" I gasped, slamming my fist against the wall. Grout crumbled into the water swirling around my feet. I'd care later, but I didn't right now. I just needed to exorcise this desire I couldn't afford to feel. Guilt and lust flickered back and forth in my head. I cursed, jerking myself in a punishing grip.

It was no less than I deserved.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### BROOKE

I paced the short path between my bed and the dresser while emotions tumbled through my head like clothes in a dryer. There was relief from making it through my first shift. There was irritation at being stuck in my room again. Most of all, though, there was confusion surrounding my body's response to Hugh, not to mention my

wolf's vehement objection to the idea of rejecting him.

Hearing the beast so clearly had left me shaken, and I'd rushed upstairs as soon as Hugh and I returned to the house. It was a good thing he hadn't tried to stop me, because I wasn't certain I would have backed down from a fight. With my wolf so close to the surface, I might have actually liked it.

And that was confusing, too. I wasn't exactly competitive—at least not in the traditional sense. Mom always said I was my own worst enemy, since I was never satisfied with “good enough.” I'd always wanted more. I wasn't sure where that drive came from, but it had pushed me all the way to a full scholarship at Northwestern. It had given me the grit I needed to endure five years of covering pot luck dinners and county fairs while I waited for a real journalism job to open up.

But none of that was remotely the same as willingly going toe to toe with an alpha werewolf. Especially one I couldn't stop thinking about. It didn't help that his scent clung to me, making my skin heat with every breath. I'd hoped a shower and a change of clothes might erase it, but no luck. It was like Hugh was in the room with me. What I needed was a distraction. And maybe some food, because I was once again starving.

I eyed the door. Hugh never said I was free to roam the house. Then again, he'd never not said that, either.

And anyway, I didn't need his permission. I knew my way to the kitchen. Shifters supposedly ate pretty much constantly. That meant there was probably a full fridge of food just waiting to be raided.

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Mind made up, I strode to the door with a sense of purpose. The hall was thankfully empty, but that didn't stop me from being nervous. I wiped my hands on my shorts. God, I was sweating.

Except I didn't have anything to be nervous about! I was sneaking—walking—down to the kitchen like a normal person. If Hugh had a problem with that, he could just—

A loud thud had me jerking around, my gaze going straight to Hugh's door. I strained, listening for more, when his muttered "fuck!" drifted into the hall. He sounded like he was in pain.

Had he fallen? Could werewolves fall? Of course they can, idiot. But it was hard to imagine someone as strong and collected as Hugh doing something as ordinary as falling. Still, if he was hurt...

There was a sharp crack followed by another moan.

I moved without thinking, quickly going to the door and opening it. I swept my gaze around the bedroom, expecting to see Hugh sprawled on the floor with a head injury or something. But there was nothing, just the steady hiss of a...shower.

"Brooke." I swung toward the cracked bathroom door. Heart in my throat, I rushed to it and pushed it open.

Hugh stood in the shower with his back to me and his dark head bent under the spray. One bloodied hand rested on a chunk of cracked tile just above his head. The other moved in a steady rhythm as he...



I froze in place, my face flooding with heat. He wasn't hurt. He was getting himself off—and he'd just said my name while doing it. My throat went instantly dry. He was impressive with his clothes on. Naked, he was magnificent, and I could only gape at the expanse of tan, water-slick muscle. My gaze roved over his broad shoulders down to his trim waist and—holy shit—his ass was a work of art. I'd never really been spellbound by a man's ass before, but Hugh's was drool-worthy. An ache built between my thighs as I studied his taut, muscular cheeks. Water ran down his skin in rivulets, and a fantasy popped into my head: me placing my hands on those broad shoulders and tracing the path of the water with my tongue.

I needed to get out of here. Needed to turn around and leave as fast as I could. Instead, I found myself moving forward, my heart beating faster as the need between my legs grew more urgent. I was so close now, I could see my reflection in the glass of the shower door. My eyes were a pale, glowing blue—and they were filled with something I'd never seen before but had no problem identifying now.

Hunger.

My wolf surged forward, its presence obliterating all rational thought. My desire surged too, making my nipples tighten and the needy flesh between my legs damp and wanting. My breathing grew ragged, and a tiny whimper escaped before I could stifle it.

Hugh whipped around. And, oh god, the front view was even more impressive than the back. He was big everywhere, from his sculpted chest to his rippling abs. And farther south...

I felt my eyes widen. He gripped himself, his thick shaft overflowing his palm. The fat head was engorged, and a pearly drop of precome beaded at the tip.

The hunger brewing within me flared higher. I licked my lips.

Our gazes locked. Glowing green eyes raked my body with a possessiveness that stole my breath.

Another whimper broke loose.

I wasn't certain who moved first. Maybe we moved at the same time, because suddenly he was out of the shower and we were crashing into each other, our mouths tangled together in a fiery kiss I felt everywhere. I clutched at his shoulders, my fingers slipping over slick, solid muscle. He gripped my ass in two big hands and hoisted me up, leaving me no choice but to wrap my legs around his waist. It didn't slow down our kiss one bit. We went at each other like combatants, our tongues thrusting and stroking in a wild dance. I ground my aching sex against his cock, desperate for friction.

He ripped his mouth away without warning, then trailed hot, gentle kisses down my neck, making me gasp and tip my head to the side as shivers coursed over my skin.

"Need to fuck you," he growled, the blunt words a tantalizing contrast to the tender press of his lips. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," I said, my voice so raspy I didn't recognize it. I wanted to tell him I needed it now. That I couldn't wait because my body was burning up.

But he seemed to know, because he walked us quickly to the bedroom. A second later, he dropped me on the bed.

I bounced once and lay still, my lips swollen and wet from his kiss. Afternoon sunlight filled the room, ensuring I could see every inch of his big, powerful body. I'd towered over boys since fifth grade, and it was rare for me to feel small. But I did now as Hugh just stood there, not making a move. Just watching me with his bright predator's eyes.

A big, bad wolf. And one who looked like he wanted to devour me bite by bite.

I couldn't stop my gaze from dipping to his cock, which thrust proudly from his hips, the veined shaft so rigid it looked painful. When I dragged my eyes back up, his own blazed like emeralds, and the look he gave me was like a brand. Mine, it said. I didn't need to read his thoughts to hear it.

"You're wearing far too many clothes," he said, his voice so low and guttural it took me a minute to decipher his words. He flicked a blatantly proprietary look down my body. "Take them off."

I did it without thinking, rising to my knees and pulling my shirt over my head. I unbuttoned my shorts and wriggled out of them. My bra and panties were coral pink satin, and I knew the color looked good against my skin. When his gaze went to my nipples poking against the fabric, a wicked smile curved in my mind. Instead of unhooking my bra, I slipped the straps off my shoulders and stroked along the edge of the cups, nudging them lower.

Slowly, he brought one hand to his dick and gave himself a leisurely stroke. I could only stare, riveted, as a bead of moisture leaked from the slit. "I didn't tell you to stop," he said.

The thinly veiled command licked over my skin like electricity, and I had to suppress a moan as I unhooked my bra and tossed it aside. His heated gaze devoured my breasts, and I couldn't hold back my moan. Because he was right. Him telling me what to do did it for me. So did this striptease he'd boxed me into. We'd gone from that wild, desperate kiss in the bathroom to him hitting the brakes in a squeal of smoke. He was fully in control and I had no idea what to expect and nothing had ever been hotter.

He watched me with eyes narrowed to burning emerald slits. "Are you teasing me,

sweetheart?” he asked in a dangerous voice.

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I bit my lower lip. How to answer? Slowly, I shook my head.

“Little liar,” he rasped. He pinched my nipple hard, and I groaned. “You should never lie to the alpha.” He gave my other nipple the same treatment. “It’ll get you punished.”

Need pummeled me. “Please...”

“Please what? Punish you or fuck you?”

Oh god. “Fuck me,” I gasped.

“We’ll see. Take those panties off.”

I obeyed. Nude at last, I settled on my knees, aware my nipples were pebbled to impossibly hard points.

Still stroking himself, he put his free hand to my cheek and drew a fingertip down my neck to my breasts, where he lightly pinched my nipples one by one. He went back and forth, plumping the tingling points until I gasped and sat up straighter, feeling lush and decadent. Like a pet preening under her master’s attention.

“You are so fucking gorgeous,” he whispered, tracing lazy circles around my nipples. There was something like wonder in his voice, along with a tenderness that touched me in a way I couldn’t quite explain. He was undeniably commanding, but he was also...pure. Reverent. Like he couldn’t believe his good fortune.

He drew a ragged breath. “Beautiful.”

The praise warmed me. His touch made me lean toward him, desperate for more contact.

He gave it to me, trailing his hand down my stomach to the top of my mound. He dipped into the narrow space between my thighs, his fingertip teasing my cleft. “Smooth here,” he murmured.

“Yes,” I breathed.

He delved deeper and found my clit. “Nothing to hide your secrets.”

I bit my lip as my body lit up with hot, glowing pleasure. I wanted to rise and press my body to his, to find out if his skin was as warm as it looked. I wanted to kneel at his feet and take his cock in my mouth. I wanted so much I didn’t know where to start first.

He removed his hand. “Show me how wet you are. How much you want this cock.”

I spread my thighs, whimpering a little as I went.

He tsked. “You’ll have to do much better than that.”

I moaned as I opened my legs as wide as they would go. Now I was fully exposed, my sex spread in a brazen display. On impulse, I cupped my breasts, gently squeezing the swollen mounds. My nipples were pink from his ministrations, and I could feel hot moisture leaking from my opening.

His nostrils flared. He released his shaft, and we both watched as he stroked a single finger from my clit to my opening. I was soaked, and I gasped at the sound of his

finger stirring me. My clit throbbed, the engorged bud swollen past its sheath. I rocked my hips forward, urging him to touch me where I needed it most.

Until now, he'd been calm. Totally in control. But that control was fraying, because his breathing grew rougher as he pushed a careful finger inside me. When I clenched around him, he groaned deep in his chest. More moisture swelled from his cock, which looked ready to burst. How long could he play this game?

How long could I play it before he drove me crazy? I was halfway there already, but I couldn't help but wait for what came next.

Then he showed me.

Gaze on mine, he pulled his finger from my body and sucked it into his mouth. Spellbound, I could only watch as he licked his finger clean, his eyes drifting shut like he'd just tasted heaven. When he opened them, his beast stared out from the green depths.

The hair on my nape lifted as my body recognized the danger before me. As swiftly as it came, the fear ebbed away. This is our mate, my wolf assured me, using something deeper and more primitive than speech. But the message was clear. Hugh would never hurt us.

"Stay just like that," he told me. Then he turned and went to the nightstand.

I did as he said, my thighs spread and hot moisture leaking from my sex. I was hyperaware of my body, from the rise and fall of my breasts to my hair tickling the small of my back.

He returned with a condom, and he stared boldly at my splayed sex as he clamped the wrapper between his teeth and tore it open. Just that one act cranked my need higher,

until I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from begging him to hurry.

“I’m going to fuck you,” he said, his voice guttural as he rolled the condom onto his shaft. His hand trembled slightly. “It’s going to be hard and fast and rough. So I’ll ask you one more time: do you want this?”

“Yes,” I said impatiently. God, why wouldn’t he just—



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He was on me in a flash, pushing me to my back as he took my lips in a scorching kiss. I arched, moaning when he sucked on my tongue. He snaked a hand between our bodies, gripped his shaft, and thrust inside me in one swift plunge.

I cried out, my sex clenching as waves of pleasure rolled through me.

He pulled back. “All right?”

“Yes,” I gasped.

A brief smile touched his lips. “All right.” He braced his weight on his forearms on either side of my head and began to move in earnest, giving me deep, thorough strokes that quickly had me rocking my hips up to meet him. Our faces were inches apart, which maybe should have been weird but wasn’t at all. His bright eyes held mine captive as he thrust again and again and again.

Then he changed the angle so his cock stroked my clit.

“Oh...god.” I shuddered as dazzling pleasure spun through me. I wrapped my legs around his hips, digging my heels into his back to urge him deeper.

“Fuck, yes,” he growled. He thrust harder, his balls slapping my ass. The contact against my most sensitive place made everything that much hotter. The room filled with our panting breaths and moans of pleasure. My breasts jiggled, my nipples scraping his chest. Intense pleasure built between my thighs, ready to blast me apart in the best way possible.

Then, in an instant, he pulled out and flipped me over. Rough hands hauled me onto my knees, and he reentered me in a powerful thrust.

I gasped and braced myself as he launched straight into a merciless rhythm, pounding me from behind.

He grunted. “Almost...forgot...your punishment.” He slapped my ass, the crack obscenely loud in the otherwise quiet room.

“Ahh! Yes, please.” Heat licked through me, echoing the fire in my cheek. I went to my elbows, my ass raised high. Silently begging for more.

“You like that?” He didn’t wait for an answer. Just delivered another sharp smack that made me squeal. Then he seized my hips and fucked me harder. I buried my face in the sheets to muffle my moans. It was as fast and rough as he’d promised. I wanted it to last so I could keep chasing this feeling.

But I couldn’t hold on. I reached between my legs and found my clit. Between one breath and the next I was coming, quaking with the most powerful orgasm of my life. It started in my sex, swept down to my toes, and rushed everywhere else. I tensed and cried out, overwhelmed with sensation.

Hugh was right there with me. He thrust a final time and shuddered his release. It was fierce and powerful—hot jets I could feel even through the condom. After he was spent, he fell on top of me, then rolled us so he wasn’t crushing me. Cock still lodged deep inside me, he nuzzled the skin under my ear as his heart beat fast against my back.

My wolf reveled in the attention. Mate, it murmured in its way, floating in a sea of contentment. Sated and sleepy, I sighed and floated with her.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HUGH

I must have dozed off, because when I woke the bedroom was awash in the orange light of the setting sun. The bed was empty, but there was a long, golden hair on the pillow next to mine. I stared at it, disquiet swelling in my chest. My wolf had receded, its presence reduced to a faint blip in the back of my mind. The room smelled of sex and orange blossoms. My chest tightened.

What had I done?

Brooke emerged from the bathroom stark naked. She caught sight of me and smiled before strolling to the bed, her sleek body limned in golden light. “Hey,” she said softly, a satisfied smile on her lips. She put her arms over her head and stretched, unabashed in her nudity. She’d been the same during sex—completely uninhibited from the moment she’d entered the bathroom.

The constriction in my chest increased. I flung the sheets back, and the condom flipped onto the mattress. It lay on the white sheet like a deflated balloon. Or an accusation.

“Oh.” Brooke let out a nervous laugh. “I can get it.” She leaned forward. .

“I’ll get it,” I snapped, grabbing it and leaving the bed. I could feel her confusion as I brushed past her. I got rid of the condom in the bathroom and pulled a pair of gym shorts from the laundry bin.

She was still next to the bed when I returned. Her golden hair fell in a tangle down her back, and her nipples were a lurid pink. There were faint red marks on her hips and ass. From my hands, I realized.

“Put your clothes on,” I growled.

Her brows pulled together. “What is your problem?”

“Everything.” I gestured between us. “This. You shouldn’t be here. Not when you belong to Alex.”

She paled. “Alex?”

“Yes, Alex. My son. The one you were sleeping with. Or did you lose your memory when you took off your clothes?”

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I didn't even see her coming. My head snapped back before I registered the brutal thud of her fist smashing into my cheek. Caught off guard, I stumbled and fell into the door. When I spun around, I almost stumbled again. I was actually dazed from her hit.

She faced me like a pissed off golden goddess, her fists clenched at her sides. Blood dripped from the knuckles of her right hand.

I started to speak. Instead, I spit out a tooth.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### BROOKE

Hugh gave me an incredulous look before stalking toward the bathroom. Halfway there, he spun and pointed a blunt finger at me. "Don't go anywhere."

I swallowed a fuck you and turned my back so I could search for my clothes. I dressed with shaking hands, unsure if the trembling was from rage or hurt. Probably both, but the rage was more useful at the moment since it stopped me from thinking about how much my hand ached. As I pulled my shirt over my head, I spotted Hugh's tooth on the carpet. Holy shit, I'd actually punched him hard enough to knock it out. Would it grow back? His stupid book said werewolves could regenerate limbs—

Wait, what did I care? He was an asshole and if he had to go through life looking like a pirate, so be it. I stalked to the door, and I had it open when a big hand reached over my shoulder and slammed it shut. I whirled, fist raised.

Hugh caught it before it could land, then grabbed my other wrist and pinned my arms against the door next to my head. “Do not hit me again, Brooke. No one strikes the alpha.”

“That’s hard to believe!” I spat. “How dare you say that to me!” I tried to twist from his grip, but it was no use. He was simply too strong. Where the hell was my wolf? I reached for her familiar presence, but there was nothing. She’d gone totally dormant. I raised my knee, aiming for his balls.

He pressed one meaty thigh against both of mine, trapping me in place. “Stop this.”

I could still move my head, so I thrust it forward, snarling, “I’m not taking orders from you anymore.”

“You’re wrong about that,” he said firmly. When I continued struggling, he sighed. “You know I can hold you without touching you.” He released me and stepped back. “STOP.”

The command slammed into me, stealing my breath and seizing my muscles. I dropped my gaze because I had no other choice. Once again, he’d trampled my will.

Panic set in. “Let me go,” I croaked. It was difficult to speak. Somehow, that was more terrifying than the invisible chains he’d put on my body.

“Stop fighting me and listen.”

I clenched my fists. Of all the oddities that had been visited on me since I turned, this was the worst. I despised knowing he could enforce my compliance any time he chose. “Fine.”

The awful pressure lifted. I stayed where I was, my jaw set as I met his stare.

His wolf was in his eyes, but it faded as he spoke. “This attraction between us is inconvenient. I suspect your shift made it worse. I know it affected my wolf...and my judgment. Obviously, we can’t ever seriously entertain a mating. I couldn’t—” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “You were with Alex.”

Anger flared in my gut. I didn’t understand him at all. He talked of rejection, and then kissed me like he might die if he didn’t. He smiled at me, and then scowled at me. He was hot and cold and then hot again. He wielded the memory of Alex like a weapon, making me feel ashamed for an attraction I couldn’t control. If his intention was to mess with my head, then he’d accomplished his goal.

And I was done with all of it.

“I wasn’t thinking about Alex when we were together, Hugh. And contrary to your assertion, I never belonged to him. There are things about our relationship you don’t know, like how I planned to break things off after our trip to the Gorge. Like how our sex life was nonexistent.” My cheeks heated, but I forced myself to keep going. “And don’t act superior like you weren’t thinking about your son’s girlfriend while you were jerking yourself off in the shower. You moaned my name!”

His cheeks reddened. “You had no problem answering the call. You certainly seemed to enjoy yourself.”

I swung.

He caught my wrist and pinned it hard, and then I had a furious alpha in my face. “I told you not to hit me again.”

Maybe I should have been afraid, but he pressed against me from chest to thigh and my desire whooshed back to life like a wildfire. He must have felt it at the same moment, because he sucked in a breath. His eyes went heavy-lidded as he shifted his

gaze to my mouth. Tension arced in the nearly nonexistent space between us, connecting us by a million phantom threads. It would have been easy to thrust my hips against his. And I would have hated myself for it.

“I wonder if you know how you sound,” I said in a low voice.

He lifted a gaze fogged with lust. “What?”

“I know you’re old.” Even as I said it, the reality of our age difference sank in for the first time. Maybe it explained his behavior, but it didn’t excuse it. “I won’t apologize for liking sex, Hugh. Not now, not ever. I cared for Alex, but I didn’t love him. You’re implying I jumped from his bed to yours, and you were two seconds away from calling me a hussy just now. But there were two of us in your bed tonight, and you seemed to enjoy yourself as much as I did.”

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he backed away. His eyes were a normal green now, all signs of his wolf gone. “I...didn’t know. About you and...Alex.”



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There was contrition in his gaze, but I couldn't get his words out of my head—or the look on his face when he'd said them. Suddenly, I was exhausted, as if my shift and everything that had come after caught up with me at once. I rubbed my forehead. “We have a month until the full moon. I should leave.”

“Leave?” He clearly didn't like the sound of that.

“We're stuck with this attraction until we reject each other, right? If I stay here, it'll be torture for both of us. You said yourself the rogues will never attack in a big city. I should return to Seattle. I'll stay in my apartment and then come back for the full moon.”

His eyes widened, and if I hadn't known better I would have sworn he looked panicked. Then his expression hardened. “Absolutely not. I forbid it.”

“You can't make me stay here. No matter how many commands you force on me.”

His fingers twitched at his sides, and for a second I thought he might reach for me. But he steeled himself, and his eyes lightened several shades. “You're right. Commands are short-term. I can't enforce them across time or distance.” He leaned close, his voice a low rumble I felt to my toes. “But this house is full of wolves who answer to me. All of Bosford is populated by wolves who answer to me. Even if you managed to get through town, it's likely rogues are waiting in the wings. They're purists. Fanatics obsessed with building a dominant werewolf race. What do you think they'll do to a turned human if they catch you?”

I spoke through clenched teeth. “More threats?”

“Reality. It’s a long way between here and Seattle, and no one is going to help you get there.” He turned and walked away, then stopped and spoke softly over his shoulder. “I won’t compromise on this, Brooke. With the rogues poised to attack, I need all my enforcers focused on keeping the pack safe. I can’t have them distracted by escape attempts. If I hear anything about you attempting to leave this house without permission, you’ll spend the rest of the month locked in your room.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HUGH

“You wanted to see me, boss?”

I looked up from my desk to find Dylan in the doorway. “Yeah—” My voice emerged as a croak, and I cleared my throat before adding, “Come on in.” A week had passed since my falling out with Brooke. In that time, I hadn’t done much talking. I’d tried burying myself in work instead.

As far as distractions went, it had been largely unsuccessful.

Dylan crossed the study and sat. Earnest brown eyes studied me. “You look terrible.”

“Thanks.”

“Any word from the Council?” He nodded toward the papers on my desk.

I couldn’t keep the contempt from my voice. “Just more hollow rhetoric from Hiram. A bunch of flowery language about protecting our secrets. He wants me to drop the investigation. He’s insisting these latest attacks were isolated incidents.”

Dylan scowled. “I’m surprised he doesn’t send Rourke an engraved invitation to

come take over every pack's territory and be done with it."

"That's actually why I wanted to talk to you. I'm thinking of calling a special session of the Council."

He lifted a sandy brow. "Do you have the votes?"

"I think so, yes." I waited a beat and added, "If you're one of them."

Shock glazed his eyes. "I can't do that, Hugh."

"I need five alphas. You're an alpha."

"I'm your beta."

I shook my head. "That's not your future and you know it. I won't push you on this, but I'd like you to think it over. Carrick stole your birthright. It's time you reclaimed what's yours."

We stared at each other, and we both knew I spoke of Wren.

His eyes lightened as his wolf rose to the surface. Finally, he nodded. "I'll think about it."

"Good." I rubbed my forehead.

"I'd offer scotch, but I think you could use some aspirin."

"I'm fine." I did have a headache, although that wasn't the main source of my discomfort. The past week had been torture, and hiding in my study hadn't helped one bit. I'd thought throwing myself into the rogue investigation would keep me too

busy to think about my disastrous conversation with Brooke—and the mind-blowing sex that had preceded it.

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I should have known better. Her scent filled the house, and it found me wherever I went, reminding me of our mate bond. Urging me to go knock on her door and claim what was mine.

I couldn't do that, of course. Assuming she answered, I wasn't sure what kind of welcome I'd get. If her mood was the same as the last time we spoke—and I had no reason to believe it wasn't—I was likely to lose another tooth. Absently, I rubbed my jaw. Newly turned or no, she had an impressive right hook.

“She's with Tanner, by the way,” Dylan said. “He's teaching her to track.”

I stood and went to the windows. Sure enough, Brooke and Tanner were near the tree line. Tanner was in a crouch and pointing at something on the ground. Brooke had her back to the house, so I couldn't see her expression, but she leaned forward as though trying to get a better look at what he was talking about. That was...good. She needed to learn, and Tanner was one of the few enforcers I trusted to keep her safe. I'd asked him and Dylan to keep an eye on her this week. Both men understood that “keep an eye” meant “keep her from leaving.”

Even with my top enforcers ensuring her safety, my wolf bristled at the idea of her outside. Gaze on Brooke, I asked Dylan, “Did you double the perimeter security like I asked?”

“Yes, sir. Shep and Malcolm are running two teams around the house 24/7.” There was a pause, then, “Why are you fighting this, Hugh?”

I turned, ready to ask what he was talking about. But the second I saw his expression,

I knew playing dumb wasn't an option. With a last glance at Brooke, I walked to my desk and sat heavily in my chair. "I take it the whole pack knows she's my mate?"

He offered a sympathetic smile. "I was in and out of consciousness in the foyer, and even I couldn't miss your reaction when you thought she might be hurt."

The ache between my eyes intensified. "What are people saying?" Dylan always had a finger on the pulse of pack gossip—partly because pack members saw him as a conduit for influencing me, but mostly because he was easy to talk to.

He didn't mince words now. "They're wondering what's taking you so long to acknowledge it. You'll be hard-pressed to find a wolf willing to drag their feet when fate hands them a mate."

I hesitated, then decided to tell the truth. "I intended to reject her."

"Because of Alex." He made it a statement.

"Yes."

"You said intended. Are you rethinking it?"

"I don't know." I sighed. "Brooke told me some things... She and Alex weren't—" I cleared my throat as heat prickled over my nape. God, this was awkward. Maybe I was the out-of-touch geezer Brooke thought me. "Their relationship wasn't...flourishing," I finished lamely.

"Ah." Dylan sat back in his chair. "So she's open to accepting you as a mate?"

"She might have been...eventually, after we got to know each other. But I think I've fucked that up, too. We slept together." I glanced belatedly at the study door to make

sure it was shut. “I’d like to keep that under wraps if possible.”

“Too late on that one, I’m afraid.”

“Christ,” I muttered. “Is there no such thing as privacy anymore?”

He offered a wry smile. “When you’re the pack alpha? Not really.”

I released another heavy sigh. “Well, here’s something the pack probably doesn’t know. After Brooke and I were...together, I accused her of disrespecting Alex’s memory by sleeping with me.”

Dylan’s eyes filled with the same mix of shock and disapproval I’d seen in Brooke’s.

“Yeah,” I said grimly. “I’m an idiot.”

He recovered quickly, his features shifting into something of a neutral expression. And he appeared to choose his next words carefully. “You said Brooke and Alex’s relationship was on the rocks. But what if it hadn’t been?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s common knowledge that fated mates can’t keep their hands off each other.” A hint of pain glimmered in his eyes for a moment, and I knew he was thinking of Wren. “Not to sound indelicate, but I assume you enjoyed the sex.”

I grunted. That was an understatement.

“But it sounds like you’re only okay with Brooke enjoying it if she didn’t”—he made air quotes—“belong to Alex.”

I rubbed a hand over my mouth. “That’s almost exactly how she put it.”

He fell quiet—maybe to let my stupidity sink in. Then he leaned forward, his light drawl soothing some of the sting. “Fate isn’t making this easy for you. You’re grieving. Memory is the one thing we have to keep our loved ones alive. But Brooke is connected to Alex. If you try to forget that, it could feel like you’re trying to forget him.”



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I stared at Dylan. “Do you have a secret career as a therapist or am I just really easy to read?”

He smiled, his dimples flashing. Then he sobered. “I’ve lost people...and I know how it feels to walk away from a mate. You’re never going to forget Alex, whether you’re with Brooke or not. But he’s gone, Hugh. I guess you have to ask yourself what he would have said about this. Would he have told you to reject your fated mate and spend the rest of your life alone? Or would he have told you to seize happiness when you find it?”

“I don’t have to speculate,” I said quietly. “I know the answer.”

“Then I think you have your answer.”

I grimaced. “Now I just have to hope Brooke is willing to give me another chance.”

He heaved a good-natured sigh. “Dread it. Run from it. Destiny arrives all the same.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Aristotle?”

“Thanos.”

“Who?”

“You’ve never seen Avengers: Infinity War?”

I shook my head.

He rolled his eyes. “We really have to get you out more.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### BROOKE

I listened to Tanner point out the differences between squirrel and chipmunk tracks and did my best to look like I wasn't slowly losing my mind. We knelt side by side in the forest, his dark head several inches above mine.

It wasn't his fault tracking was the most boring thing in the universe. He claimed every werewolf had a natural instinct for it, but I was clearly an exception. He'd spent the past two days showing me how to spot trails, identify animals tracks, and pick up scents—and I was a miserable failure at everything. I still couldn't use telepathy, either.

“Brooke? Are you listening?”

Tanner was staring at me, the look on his face telling me he knew the answer to his question.

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly. “Got lost in my thoughts there for a second.”

“What, you're not riveted by my squirrel tracks lecture?”

For a brief moment, I thought he might be serious. Then he snorted, and we both started laughing.

“Come on.” He stood and extended a hand. “There's a creek just a little ways ahead.”

The same one Hugh and I went to. My throat tightened, but I forced myself to nod

and let him help me up. I'd resolved to put Hugh Dalton firmly out of my mind. I didn't want to see him or talk to him or think about him.

As far as the first two went, I had a perfect score. The third one? Not so much. The problem, I thought as I fell into step beside Tanner, was my body still craved Hugh's touch. It hadn't forgotten his skilled hands or his firm mouth. His thick shoulders or that incredible, sexy ass. His dominant streak that had set me on fire.

He'd plagued my dreams night after night, leaving me to twist and turn in lonely sheets, my body aching for his touch. Each dream had been more intense than the last, until I'd woken so wet and needy I'd plunged a hand between my legs and stroked myself, imagining it was his fingers between my legs. Wishing it was his tongue driving me to the brink.

I stumbled over a tree root.

Tanner caught my elbow and steadied me. "You okay?"

"Just distracted." I forced a smile.

"Trouble with the alpha?"

My cheeks flooded with warmth. Over the past two days in Tanner's company, I'd learned why Dylan called him "one of the best trackers anywhere." Tanner's sharp hazel eyes noticed everything. Including, apparently, my relationship woes.

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Not a relationship, I mentally amended. Hugh and I weren't in a relationship. We weren't anything—except maybe captor and captive.

"I'm sorry," Tanner said. "It's none of my business."

"No. No, it's okay." Except my face was a hot, sweaty mess now. "I guess the whole pack probably knows something is up between us, huh?"

"Yeah." He flashed an apologetic smile. "The alpha lives under a microscope. It's the same for his mate, I guess."

"I... I'm not Hugh's mate."

Tanner waited a bit too long to respond. "All right."

I sighed. "Is that what everyone thinks?"

"It's pretty obvious. And now that his scent's on you..." He shrugged.

The heat in my cheeks went supernova. "What do you mean? Wait, don't answer that. God." I turned away, only to swing back. "Is my scent on him?"

Tanner shook his head. "Only males can mark their mates."

And I'd thought the human race was bad when it came to misogyny. I bit my lip, wondering if I should voice the other question dancing in my head.

Oh, what the hell. “Does the, um, mark ever go away?”

“It can, sure. It’ll fade with every shower.” He gestured ahead of us. “Any kind of contact with water helps.”

I walked quickly in the direction he pointed, and he chuckled. “That bad, huh?” he asked as he easily caught up.

“I don’t like the idea of anyone marking me as their territory.”

“I get it. You weren’t born a wolf. You’ll never really fit in with our culture.”

The casual pronouncement jolted me, but I tried not to show it as we continued walking. His tone had been as casual and friendly as always, so he probably hadn’t meant anything by it. Still, I couldn’t help recalling Julia’s comments about my weakness hurting the pack, and I stayed quiet as we moved deeper into the forest.

When we reached the creek, I hesitated on the bank. “Do I just walk in?” The water wasn’t deep, but it would easily come up to my ankles. “Maybe I should take my shoes off.”

“Weak,” he chided playfully. “Good trackers don’t worry about their shoes when they scent a trail. Come on. I want to show you something.” He beckoned me forward.

“Where?”

“On the other side of the creek!” He splashed forward.

I bit back a sigh and followed, cringing when water filled my shoes.

Halfway across the creek, Tanner stopped abruptly. He canted his head to the side

like he was listening to something, and I watched in confusion as his brow furrowed and irritation flashed in his eyes. As quickly as it came, it vanished, making me wonder if I'd imagined it.

"Hugh wants to see you," he said, tapping the side of his head.

My heart sped up. "Now?"

"Yes." He left the water, mumbling, "Wish he would have said something before we got all the way out here."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, sorry." He clearly picked up on my anxiety, because he bumped my shoulder with his. "Don't worry. I'm sure it's nothing bad."

That makes one of us.

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Hugh was waiting for us on the front porch when we returned. After a week away from him, I wasn't prepared for the recognition—and longing—that slammed into me when I saw him. My wolf stirred forcefully, urging me to run up the steps and launch myself into his arms.

Forget it, I told her. He'd see it as more proof that I was nothing more than a bed-jumping slut. It was that dark thought that allowed me to rein in my beast as Tanner and I approached.

"Alpha," Tanner said with a formal bow of his head.

Hugh descended the steps. "Thanks, Tanner. Scent anything interesting out there?"

"Nothing. I don't think the rogues will risk venturing too close to the house. I'd like to move some patrols to town if it's all right with you."

"That's fine. It makes sense to position our resources where they're most needed."

Tanner nodded. "I'll make it happen." He looked at me. "See you later, Brooke. Don't forget: squirrel toes are closer together, and the claws usually press deeper into the dirt."

I couldn't control my smile. "Thanks."

He left, and then it was just Hugh and me at the base of the steps.

"Brooke, I..." He cleared his throat. "I'd like to talk to you. Inside."

Part of me wanted to snap, What, no metaphysical orders this time? But there was nothing to be gained from poking the bear—er, wolf—so I said, “Okay.”

He led me into a spacious home office with a wall of windows that overlooked the forest. It was as beautifully decorated as the rest of the house, but it had more masculine touches. The hardwood floor was covered by a plush oriental rug that probably cost more than all the furniture in my apartment. Big bookcases dominated the wall behind an equally big desk.

I expected Hugh to go sit behind it and preside over our meeting like a high school principal or the president in the Oval Office. But he settled in one of the two chairs angled before it and gestured for me to join him. “Please, sit.”

His scent twined around me, making my heart thump harder as I crossed the room.

“Your shoes are wet,” he said.

I sat and looked down at my feet. “Oh. Yeah. Sorry.” He was probably upset I’d tracked water on the carpet. My cheeks heated, and I couldn’t help feeling like a child who’d made a mess. “We went to the creek.”

Memory stirred in his eyes, and I knew he was thinking of our run together—and how it had led to the sex I was desperately trying to forget.

He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees like he had when I’d first woken from the fever. Now as then, I was struck by his masculine beauty. His chiseled jaw and those mesmerizing green eyes. His thick, dark hair swept back in a perfect wave. It was so unfair that he appealed to me in a way no one else ever had. Pretty on the outside. That was all he was. He was probably readying himself to say something gross and awful.



“I owe you an apology,” he said quietly. Steadily. “You were absolutely right to call out my double standards. There’s no excuse for the way I acted or the things I said to you. I’m sorry, even though saying it feels woefully inadequate.” He swallowed thickly. “And I hope you’ll let me prove that I’m better than the man I showed you last week.”

Everything seemed to slow down. Or maybe that was just my brain refusing to work at normal speed. I licked my lips, and my heart beat faster when his gaze flicked there. My voice emerged as a rasp. “What are you saying?”

“I want to forget about rejection,” he said bluntly. “Fate brought us together for a reason. I think we should try to find out what that is.”

“But...Alex.”

His wince was almost imperceptible, but I couldn’t miss it sitting as close to him as I was. “I won’t lie and say I can forget about losing him. I think that would hurt more than help, to be honest.” He moved to the edge of his seat and took one of my hands in his. “We live long lives, Brooke. In theory, we could have an eternity. You’re new to all of this—the pack, the shift, everything. But I’ve lived with my beast for a long time and I’ve learned to trust its instincts.” He squeezed my hand, his emerald gaze holding mine. “And my wolf is absolutely enamored with you.”

Oh...wow. “This wasn’t what I was expecting you to say when you brought me in here.” I darted a look around the fancy office.

He smiled, and it was like all the sunshine in the room gathered around his face. “What did you expect me to say?”

“It’s probably best I don’t tell you that.”

His smile broadened. Then he looked down at our clasped hands. He brushed his thumb over my knuckles before lifting his gaze. “Stay here. With me. We’ll have the ceremony under the full moon. It’s short notice, but I can summon the pack. Everyone will want to—”

“Wait.” My brain snagged on the word ceremony, yanking me out of the hazy aura of happiness I’d been floating in. “What ceremony?”

“The mating ritual under the full moon. It seals the mate bond.”

Unease crept through me. In the back of my mind, faint alarm bells went off. “Seals?”

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“We were going to use the full moon for the rejection ceremony. Now we’ll use it to make our bond permanent in front of the pack.”

I pulled my hand from his. “This sounds a lot like a marriage, Hugh. That’s a serious step.” Like, the most serious step—and he wanted to do it in less than a month.

He glanced at my withdrawn hand, a frown forming between his brows. “Marriages are for humans. Pieces of paper that can be altered with more pieces of paper.”

The alarm bells blasted at full strength. “Are you saying the mate bond is irreversible? Like, once I do this ceremony or whatever, I can never leave you?”

“You would never want to.”

That wasn’t a no. My heart raced, and this time it wasn’t from lust or poetic words about fate. “Answer the question.”

He hesitated. Then his expression hardened.

“Oh my god! Were you going to tell me this, or did you plan on trapping me?” I narrowed my eyes. “Why isn’t this in your little book?”

“Don’t start with conspiracy theories, Brooke.”

“Why isn’t it in there?” I demanded.

“I don’t know. Maybe you should write a new one.”

“Maybe I will.”

Frustration crossed his face. “Fated mates don’t want to be separated. Our connection is a sacred gift. Scholars believe it’s designed to make a relationship between immortals stand the test of time.”

He said it like it was a settled concept I should just go along with. Like it was completely reasonable that I should enter into an eternal commitment with no escape clause. “If we have all the time in the world, why can’t we wait a little longer?”

He tensed. “How long?”

“Why do we have to set a deadline at all? Can’t we just...date or something?” God, even saying that made my stomach flutter with nerves—a sure sign I was not ready to jump straight into a permanent mating ceremony. “I know Seattle is a commute, but I could drive here on the weekends.”

“That’s not happening,” he said harshly. He drew a deep, almost shaky breath. “I should have been more up front with you about this, but I didn’t want to bombard you with it so soon after you turned.” His lips thinned, his face uncompromising. “The life you lived as a human is over. You’re never going back to Seattle, Brooke. I’m sorry.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

HUGH

A range of emotions played over Brooke’s face. First there was shock. Then fear. And, finally, anger.

Well, maybe more like fury.

“Seattle is my home,” she said in a low voice. “My whole life is there.”

My wolf stirred forcefully, alerted by the resistance in her tone. She still didn’t understand that going home wasn’t an option. Maybe I’d hoped it would sink in once she shifted. Clearly it hadn’t. So now I had to clean up my mess.

“That changed when you turned. You’ll remain in Bosford for the foreseeable future.”

She stiffened. “You said your territory extends up and down the coast, all the way to Canada. I assume that includes Seattle? Or is there some kind of exclusion zone I don’t know about?”

“No exclusion zone,” I said evenly. “But it takes years for a turned wolf to master their beast. Your control is tenuous. Untested.”

“I’ve never lost control.”

“No? You didn’t back Julia into a wall?”

She scowled. “Dylan told you.”

“He’s my beta. We discuss everything.” I tried to ignore how adorable she looked when she was angry. Her freckles bunched up and her cheeks flushed the same shade as her mouth. Some deeply rooted instinct warned me I should never, under any circumstances, tell her that.

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Maybe a different approach was in order. Like telling her something I hadn't discussed with Dylan.

"Did Alex ever talk to you about his mother?"

She blinked, obviously caught off guard. "Just that she died when he was young."

"He was ten. She took her own life."

Brooke gasped. "I d-didn't know. Alex never said."

"He never liked talking about it. And he didn't see his mother often after the divorce." I sighed as old regrets surfaced. "Rebecca and I should have never married. The Council frowns on long-term relationships with humans for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is the problem posed by aging. Or, in our case, the lack of it. I didn't tell her what I was at first, but I never lied to her about what I expected from our...time together. We wanted the same things." I coughed into my fist. "A low-stress, um, fling I guess you could call it."

Brooke said nothing. Just waited patiently for me to continue.

"Pregnancy in a werewolf-human relationship is exceptionally rare. In some cases, the child is fully human. But Alex was a wolf, and there was no way I could let Rebecca raise him alone. It was a shock for her, learning about me and this world. She hated the rules and the politics. It bothered her knowing she would grow old while I stayed the same."

“Could you have bitten her? Turned her?”

I shook my head. “I offered, but she didn’t want to risk it. Most women die from a bite. I wasn’t exaggerating when I said you were rare. My marriage to Rebecca lasted two years. I don’t know if being my wife and all that came with it caused her depression, but I bear some responsibility. Maybe all of it. I tried to help her. I hoped she would find someone who made her happy.” My throat burned. “I...found her. She hanged herself.”

Brooke slipped to her knees in front of me. She took both of my hands and squeezed them. “I’m so sorry, Hugh.”

“It’s fine.” I cleared my throat. “I’m— It was a long time ago.”

Brooke gripped my hands more tightly. “It wasn’t your job to make her happy. And even if you had, it might not have been enough. Depression is different in everyone. It manifests in all kinds of ways.”

“I know that.”

She gave me a skeptical look. “Do you, though? You have to lay down this burden, Hugh. It sounds like you did everything you could to make things right. To make it work. But you aren’t responsible for anyone else’s happiness.”

My breath caught. She was so gorgeous with the sunlight around her. It turned her hair to spun gold. And I couldn’t resist her. Couldn’t stop myself from rubbing the silky strands between my fingers. “You’re perfect,” I murmured.

She wrinkled her nose, her freckles scrunching. “I don’t know about that.”

Something hard and cold within me—my heart, maybe—thawed as I gazed down at

her, this charming burst of sunshine that refused to bend to my rules or edicts. Like sunlight, she danced around me instead, elusive and addictive and irrepressible. How had I have ever believed I could reject her?

“Do you feel it too?” I murmured. As soon as I said it, I had to know. Did she feel as swept up as I did?

She bit her lip, and that hesitation almost killed me. Then she gave a tiny nod. “Yes.”

Relief washed over me. “Thank goodness,” I rasped, a little embarrassed at how shaky my voice sounded. But she didn’t seem to mind, and she leaned into my hand as I stroked my fingers through her hair. The strands were warm from the sun. I smiled. “Like holding sunshine.”

Her lips parted, and the air thickened with the intoxicating scent of her arousal. “Hugh...”

I pulled her up and into my arms, slanting my mouth across hers. I tugged at her clothes as I walked her backwards, making short work of her shirt and bra. She bumped against my desk, and I broke off the kiss as I steadied her. At the first sight of her tits, my dick went rock hard. “Fuck,” I muttered, cupping her full breasts and tracing my thumbs over her stiffened nipples. “Fuck, these are perfect. Fuck.”

She braced her weight on her palms and leaned back, a teasing look in her eyes, which had lightened to a frosty blue. “Is that the only word you know?”

“It’s the only one that accurately describes what I want to do to you.” I bent and sucked a pink nipple into my mouth, reveling in her sweet scent. I suckled her hard before moving my mouth to the other one. “Have you dreamed of me?” I asked around the taut peak.



Her gasp floated over my head, and she arched harder against me. “H-How did you know?”

My cock tightened. I popped my mouth off her nipple and stood back so I could admire my work. She was flushed, her eyes bleary with lust as she leaned hard against the edge of the desk. Her tits rose and fell with her breaths, the nipples stiff and damp from my tongue. I stepped close, letting her feel how hard I was for her. “What did you dream about, sweetheart? Was I doing this?” I took her nipples between my fingers and pinched lightly.

“Yes.” Her eyelashes fluttered as she moaned. “And you were—oh god.”

“What?” I undid the button on her shorts and lowered the zipper. My cock throbbed, but I ignored my own need as I pushed her shorts down to her ankles. I seized her hips and followed them down, planting soft kisses on her quivering belly as I went. “Need an answer,” I said, kissing the lacy front of her panties right over her clit.

“Mmm.” Her hips jerked. “Y-You were licking me...there.”

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“Here?” I nipped the soft mound of her pussy through the fabric.

She jerked, and her voice went husky. “Close.”

Chuckling, I ran my hands down her long legs. She watched, her lower lip caught between her teeth, as I removed her boots and socks. When she was naked except for her panties, I stood and hooked my finger in the lacy waistband. I skimmed it back and forth across her skin, smiling when she shivered. “You’re overdressed.”

“You’re one to talk.”

I leaned in and kissed the side of her neck. “Ah, but I’m not the one”—I tugged her panties down and slipped my fingers into her damp cleft—“who’s getting licked”—I circled her clit—“here.” I sucked at her neck to emphasis my point.

Her breath hitched, making her nipples drag against my shirt.

I continued my lazy strokes. “I should keep you like this all the time. Would you like that? You could wait in my bed, your gorgeous body bare and open for me.” I nuzzled under her ear, drinking in her little sighs and shudders. The air was drenched with the scent of vanilla and orange blossoms. “Open and wet, with a hungry pussy ready to be filled.”

She moaned and thrust her hips against my hand. “Please...”

“Spread your legs,” I murmured, putting a little push of power behind my words. It wouldn’t hurt her, but she’d feel the compulsion like electricity over her skin. When

she gasped and did as I said, I slid two fingers from her clit to her entrance, teasing through the moisture gathered there. “Were you this soaked in your dream?”

“Y-Yes.” She shuddered, her head tipping to the side as I kissed down to her collarbone.

I traced languid circles around her opening, my cock harder by the second. “Did I put my fingers...here, maybe?” I pushed both fingers all the way inside her. She clamped down at once, and I groaned against her skin.

“You did,” she breathed. Her inner muscles clenched hard, reminding me how exquisite she’d felt around my dick.

“Fuck,” I muttered, abandoning my game. I pulled my hand from her panties and ripped the flimsy lace away. With rough hands, I hoisted her up and onto my desk, then dragged her ass to the very edge. “Legs wide, princess,” I ordered, pushing her knees apart as I went to my knees. I parted her delicate folds with my thumbs and sucked her clit into my mouth.

Her cry echoed around the room. She tunneled her fingers into my hair and held me against her.

Which was fine, because I wasn’t going anywhere. Not when she tasted like paradise against my tongue. I pulsed the hard little bud of her clit in my mouth before licking down her folds. She made an angry sound—a kittenish growl that cranked my lust even higher—and tried to steer me back to her clit.

“Bossy,” I muttered, looking up at her between licks.

Her wolf stared down at me with icy blue eyes. “I was close.”

I took a minute to appreciate the bounce of her tits as she squirmed on the desk. I wanted to take her to bed. To put her under me and feel those long legs around my waist while I plunged into her heat. I wanted to bend her over the desk and fuck her from behind while she screamed my name. There were so many things I wanted, but mostly I wanted to know she was mine—forever and for all time.

With my wolf ascendant, I thrust three fingers deep in her pussy. Then I fastened my mouth around her clit and worked her furiously with my tongue. She trembled, pulling my hair when I didn't let up. I went faster and harder, savoring her exquisite taste and the tight clutch of her channel.

Then she was coming, her pussy spasming as she cried out. Her body shook and her juices flooded my tongue. I lapped at her folds, gentling my kisses as she fluttered down from her high. I eased off at last, catching her gaze as I wiped my mouth with the hem of my T-shirt.

“That was hot,” she said with a shiver.

I rose and pulled her against me, stroking her hair back from her forehead. Her cheeks were flushed from her orgasm, and her neck was red from where I'd sucked her skin. Good. I wanted my mark on her.

With a wicked curve of her lips, she reached between our bodies and pressed her palm against my crotch.

And just like that, the tables turned. I growled and stepped back to give her more room. “Fuck, yes. Touch me, sweetheart.”

She opened my jeans and pulled my dick out, and I tried not to lose my mind at the sight of her stroking my shaft inches from her splayed, gleaming pussy. She seemed to know it, too, because she kept her legs wide open, rocking her hips a little as she

worked me over. She rubbed her thumb over the moisture gathered in my slit and spread it all over my crown, making goosebumps race across my skin.

Then she swiped her hand between her legs and carried her juices back to my cock.

“Fuck. Fuck.” I jerked forward, almost slamming my dick against the edge of the desk. She just tossed me another flirty smile and kept going, her hand stroking and gliding. She smeared her arousal all over my shaft until I glistened with her juices. With her. It was the hottest thing I’d ever experienced, and it didn’t take long at all until I was rutting against her hand with pleasure rushing me from all sides.

It boiled up—and then I couldn’t contain it. I came on a growl, thick jets of come spurting over her thighs and flat stomach. A strip landed right across her bare mound. And the sight was so sexy and primitive, I came some more, shuddering breathlessly while unimaginable pleasure coursed through my body. My knees loosened, and I had to grab her thighs so I didn’t fall down like an idiot.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, dropping my forehead to her shoulder.

She laughed and rubbed the back of my neck, scratching at my hairline. Somehow, it felt more intimate than anything we’d done.

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And I knew with a burning certainty that fate had chosen correctly. I'd been given a gift, and I would do anything to protect it.

Eventually, I gained enough control of my body to tuck myself back in my jeans. I pulled my T-shirt off and wiped my mess from her belly and legs. I chanced a look up and found her biting her lip as she tried not to laugh. I snorted, and then we both cracked up.

When we'd sobered, I helped her off the desk and into her clothes. Then I pulled her hips against mine and tucked a finger under her chin. "Stay with me. You won't regret it."

She put a flat hand on my chest. "I don't think that, Hugh. It's just..."

"What?"

"I'm not saying we can't be together. But I'd like to have a relationship first. I've been human all my life. It's going to take some time for me to feel comfortable with an unbreakable bond."

My wolf roared in my mind, pushing me to refuse. Until she was totally mine, our bond was open—with just enough space for her to slip through. If that happened, I could become like Dylan, estranged from my mate and aching with the loss of what might have been. He was good at hiding his pain, but I knew it wore on him every single day.

"Hey," Brooke said. My panic must have showed on my face, because she put a hand

on my cheek. “I’m not going anywhere. I just want to take things one step at a time.”

I pushed my wolf’s protests aside. “I won’t ask you for everything right now, but there are some things I can’t be flexible about.”

“Like?”

“You staying in Bosford. New wolves can’t live on their own. You may think you’ve got control of your wolf, but you’ve never really been tested. And I’m not okay with you living in Seattle while rogues are launching attacks.”

She frowned. “My job—”

“We have to find a way to compromise.” I rubbed a thumb over her bottom lip. “I’ll give you time, sweetheart. But I’m going to need you to give something in return.”

“You mean like my livelihood? Journalism isn’t just work for me, Hugh. I love what I do.”

But you don’t love me. I swallowed the words before I could say them. Instead, I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. “We’ll figure things out.”

Doubt swam in her eyes, and I braced myself for a fight—

—and then her stomach growled so loudly I felt the vibrations in my chest. She turned bright red, and we both started laughing.

“Hungry?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Like all the time.”

“Come on. I’ll feed you.”

“Okay.”

I pulled her toward the door, and the swell of tension ebbed away. But I knew it was a temporary reprieve. Nothing was really settled between us.

And I wasn’t sure how long my wolf would be content to let it stay that way.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### BROOKE

For the second time in two days, I listened absently while Tanner described a set of animal tracks. Deer this time.

At least I thought so. I couldn’t really be sure, because my mind was occupied by thoughts of Hugh Dalton. And I was more confused than ever. After our encounter in his office, he’d delivered on his promise to feed me—whipping up grilled cheese with fresh tomato and thick pieces of crispy bacon in the (thankfully empty) kitchen.

“This is amazing,” I’d said from my perch on a barstool, my body still humming from the wicked things he’d done with his tongue.

He’d winked. “Good, because it’s the only thing I know how to make.”

That wink had been almost as devastating as his touch, and I’d lowered my head so he couldn’t see how flustered he made me.



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After dinner, he'd led me upstairs—and instead of leaving me at my room, he'd opened his door and waited, a question in his eyes. I'd answered it by slipping past him and pulling my shirt over my head.

We'd finished what we started in his office, and we hadn't talked about mating ceremonies or the future or my job with the Dispatch. In the quiet sanctuary of his bedroom, those problems had seemed distant and unimportant.

But the morning had a way of bringing all those things hurtling back. Hugh had risen early, saying he had Council business to take care of, but I had a feeling he was giving me space so I could make a decision about our bond.

That meant making a decision about everything. No matter how nicely I tried to dress it up, the facts were these: being with Hugh meant abandoning the life I'd built for myself. Giving up dreams I'd nurtured since I was a little girl interviewing Barbies in my bedroom.

What would Hugh be giving up? His life would go on as normal. Mine would be nothing but upheaval. And maybe it was worth it. But I didn't have a crystal ball. I didn't trust my instincts like he did. For one thing, mine were brand new and largely untested. He'd said himself the mate bond made us crazy about each other. But there was a difference between amazing sex and the everyday grind of living with another person.

He was giving me time to decide, but under that promise was the expectation that I would decide the way he wanted me to. And when I was tempted to give him the benefit of the doubt, all I had to do was imagine his reaction if I announced I was

returning to Seattle.

I didn't have to think in hypotheticals. If push came to shove, he wouldn't hesitate to go full alpha.

So was I truly making a choice, or was he just humoring me?

Part of my brain—a larger part than I cared to acknowledge—told me none of this was a big deal. I'd landed a financially stable hottie who adored making me come. What was there to complain about? That same part whispered that it was pointless to insist on returning to work. I was a werewolf now, a member of a species that prized secrecy. Investigative reporting was about unearthing secrets, not keeping them. In the age of social media, it wasn't unusual for reporters to become targets of trolls and disgruntled keyboard warriors. I'd risk exposure with every byline.

The easy, practical thing to do would be to shrug my shoulders, pack up my apartment, and start planning the mating ceremony. It would make Hugh happy. But what kind of precedent would I be setting if I completely rearranged my life to accommodate his? Growing fangs and fur was a major obstacle to my career, but that didn't mean I was prepared to slip into my role as werewolf trophy wife. As I'd pointed out to Hugh yesterday, he wasn't just asking for a relationship. He was asking for everything—possibly eternity.

I wasn't ready to make that kind of commitment. I wasn't sure I'd ever be ready.

“Deep thoughts again?”

Tanner's low voice jerked me back to the present. He was staring at me, a knowing look on his face.

I flushed. “Sorry. Just having a small existential crisis.”

He rose from his crouch and dusted his hands. “You’re not the first turned wolf to have one.” He slanted me a look. “I’m sure it doesn’t help that fate matched you with the alpha.”

“It’s...complicated, yes.” That was another problem with dating—mating—Hugh. Our lives would be under a microscope. Relationships were hard enough without that kind of pressure.

A breeze rustled the trees around us, bringing a rush of cool air. The sky was overcast, and the forest was eerily dark for noon. I was glad I’d had the foresight to throw a hoodie over my T-shirt. Still, goosebumps prickled down my arms and legs.

“Maybe we should head back,” I said. “I don’t think I have it in me to shift today.” I was also starving for lunch, but what else was new.

“No problem.” Tanner jerked his head toward a break in the trees. “This way.”

We walked for a bit, and my head was so consumed with thoughts of Hugh that it took me a while to realize we were headed in the opposite direction of the house. I stopped. “Hey, are we going the wrong way?”

“Shortcut.” Tanner kept walking.

I frowned. But he was the tracker. Goodness knew I was sorely lacking in those skills. I’d also been zoning out during his lessons for the past few days, so I was hardly in a position to argue.

But when he splashed into the creek, I couldn’t ignore the sense of foreboding tugging at the corners of my mind. Something was off.

A few steps into the water, I stopped. “Just how long is this shortcut?” I gave a

halfhearted smile at my own joke. It died a quick death when Tanner turned around.

His eyes were yellow, his expression cold. “Keep moving.”

Cold sweat broke out across my back. Rapidly, I considered my options. I couldn’t outrun him. I couldn’t fight him off.

My options sucked.

I could talk, though. Reason with him. Stall for time, maybe, until someone back at the house noticed we’d been gone too long.

I swallowed against a suddenly dry throat. “Where are we going?”

“I told you to move.” As he spoke, power licked over me. It was nothing like Hugh’s. More of a pale imitation. But it still made me wince and take a step back.

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His eyes were flat, completely devoid of the humorous spark he'd occasionally displayed over the past week. "If I have to come fetch you, I'm not going to be happy about it."

My heart pounded loudly in my ears. I tried for a casual tone. "I-I'll come with you," I lied. "I just want to know where we're going."

Abruptly, his mouth twisted, anger flashing in his eyes. "Do you know how fucking irritating it's been, trotting you out every day?" He stepped toward me, but it felt more like aggression than pursuit. "This should have been easy."

"What should have been easy?" I asked, but on some level I already knew. He hadn't been teaching me to track. He'd been luring me away from the house. "You're working with the rogues," I whispered.

There was a faint click behind me, and then something hard pressed into my spine. I didn't need to see it to know it was the barrel of a gun.

Dylan's voice echoed in my memory. "No self-respecting shifter uses a human weapon."

Julia spoke closely enough behind me to stir my hair. "Wrong, bitch. We are the rogues." There was a whoosh of air. Pain exploded in my skull.

I crumpled to the ground.

Blackness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### BROOKE

The next time I regained consciousness, I opened my eyes and gazed around blearily. I was in some kind of motel room and, judging from the outdated decor and the smell of stale cigarettes, it definitely wasn't the Four Seasons. But I was alive. That was good.

The sound of cars on a nearby highway filled the room, the sound so persistent I could almost feel the rush of wind as vehicles flew past. I was stretched out on one of two queen-size beds, and my arms were tied to the headboard.

I really had to stop waking up like this.

The back of my skull throbbed like a bruise. I rolled my head on the pillow, trying to gauge how badly I was hurt. Julia must have pistol whipped me. And Tanner had led me away from the house. With a jolt, I realized he'd been doing it all along, coaxing me to the creek to kill any trails Hugh could use to find me.

My heart began to thump painfully. Hugh had called the rogues "purists." They believed they were superior to humans—and turned humans. Tanner and Julia could have killed me in the forest. They'd had the perfect opportunity. Yet they hadn't. I didn't want to think about what that meant.

An ache bloomed in my chest, and it had nothing to do with the pain in my head. Out of nowhere, tears filled my eyes. What if I never saw Hugh again? There was a real chance of that happening, and suddenly the thought of it was far worse than any physical injury.

The door opened, letting in a wave of gasoline-scented air as Tanner and Julia

entered. A tall, dark-haired man followed on their heels. He drew my gaze like a lodestone, but I ignored him while I tried to get a glimpse of the scenery outside—anything to give me an idea of a location. I strained against my bonds, spying a highway overpass and an empty parking lot littered with glass. Weeds sprouted among cracks in the pavement. It was still daylight outside, which meant we couldn't have traveled that far from Bosford.

The door swung shut, enclosing me with three werewolves.

Because the newcomer was a wolf. I knew it the second I met his gaze. His lips curved, and a blast of power hit me straight between the eyes like a fiery arrow notching into my forehead. I gasped and jerked my head to the side as nausea made my stomach pitch.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him turn to Tanner. "Were you followed?" His voice was deep and melodious, and under other circumstances I might have found it pleasant.

"No, sir," Tanner said. "I'm sure of it."

Sir? I held my breath as the stranger approached, because this could only be Rourke Villadsen, the leader of the rogues. His shadow fell over me, his big body blocking out the sunlight streaming through the sole window. I wasn't sure what I'd expected him to look like, but he didn't fit the stereotype of a typical villain. Like all the wolves I'd met, he was fit and muscular. But he was also boyishly handsome, with thick, brown hair and a square jaw. His eyes were the color of a clear morning sky. He looked more like the captain of a lacrosse team than a criminal mastermind.

Belatedly, I realized I was staring, and I turned my head away before he could flex his power again.

“No,” he said softly. “Look at me.” His power cracked like a whip, forcing my head back so quickly I winced.

I glared, not caring if he retaliated. He was going to hurt me anyway. I wasn’t going to hide my loathing. He’d killed Alex—or at least ordered the attack.

He smiled, unbothered by my dislike. “So you’re the reason Dalton has lost his edge. A tale as old as time, I guess.” He leaned a hip on the bed. “I’ve had spies in his pack for over a year, waiting for him to slip up or lose focus.”

I darted a look at Tanner and Julia, who watched from a corner of the dingy room.

“Yes, them.” Rourke tilted his head. “You think they’re traitors.”

I didn’t answer. He didn’t care what I thought. He was just luring me into an argument so he could tell me why I was wrong. But there was another reason to hold my tongue. Early in my journalism career, I’d learned that keeping my mouth shut could be just as effective as asking questions. Confronted with silence, most people couldn’t resist the impulse to fill it. And sometimes they ended up spilling all sorts of secrets in the process.



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“The real traitors are the fossils who run the Council,” Rourke said. “They’ve allowed half-breeds and humans to pollute our ranks. Weakening our race and preventing us from taking our place as the rightful rulers of the world.”

Ah, there was the “purity” bullshit. Somehow, it was still shocking to hear him say it out loud. Like all zealots, he obviously didn’t realize how weird and melodramatic he sounded.

He ran a leisurely gaze down my body, lingering in the usual places. “I hear Dalton enjoyed having you in his bed. And his study.”

My skin crawled, and my heart sped up despite my best efforts to stay calm. His hip was so close to mine I could feel the heat from his body. I could endure just about anything, but I couldn’t let him touch me—and I hated the rush of fear that swept through me at the idea of it.

I turned my head and yawned into my arm. When I looked back, he was frowning. “Sorry,” I rasped, my voice rusty from disuse. “I zoned out there for a minute. Please continue with your xenophobic rant.”

For a moment, his face went utterly cold. Anything resembling human emotion bled from his eyes, and certain death stared me down. Then he blinked, and his expression smoothed into an easy smile. “As I was saying, I’m sure you offered plenty of amusement. It’s high time Dalton removed the stick that’s been firmly lodged up his ass for decades. But there’s a difference between fucking a pretty creature and taking a human mate.”

“I’m not human,” I countered, trying to keep my voice steady after my glimpse of Rourke’s true nature. It would have been easier if he were simply crazy. But the thing I’d seen in his eyes was sane and calculating. No wonder he’d been able to sway others to his cause. He was like a cult leader—powerful enough to convince people to do terrible things and magnetic enough to make them believe they were right to do them.

Julia lurched forward, her eyes blazing. “You’ll never be one of us,” she snarled.

Tanner caught her arm and hauled her back.

“Julia.” Rourke spoke without turning around, his tone almost bored. “Go outside and make sure everyone is in place.”

I tensed. What did he mean, in place? Puzzle pieces clicked in my head. He hadn’t killed me yet, and he certainly didn’t need any help to do it. If he was placing rogues outside, he was using me as bait.

Because he was going to kill Hugh.

Julia shook free of Tanner’s grip and went to the door.

“Julia,” I called out. She stopped, and I spoke quickly before Rourke could silence me. “You care about Hugh,” I said, praying Dylan was right about her. “It’s not too late to stop whatever you’re planning.”

She stayed facing the door, her shoulders stiff.

“Don’t do this,” I said. I cast about wildly for the right words to persuade her to change course. “Don’t betray your alpha.”

She turned, and I knew from the look in her eyes that Dylan was indeed right. Then her face hardened. “Hugh betrayed all of us when he bit you.” She tossed me a final look of contempt and left.

Rourke watched her go, then looked at me. He shook his head, his handsome face full of mock sympathy. “Ouch.”

“Fuck you.”

He smiled. “You’re spirited. I understand why Dalton was taken with you. But he should have gotten you out of his system and moved on. Chosen someone worthy of being an alpha’s consort.”

“It’s not a choice. We’re fated to be together.” I believed it now. The ache in my chest had only grown while Rourke spoke.

“And that’s precisely the problem with bending to the dictates of fate. We have rejection for a reason. The mageborn have practiced selective breeding for the past fifty years. Did you know?”

“No, and I really don’t give a shit.”

His hand flew. My head snapped to the side, stealing my breath. He’d done it so casually. I opened my mouth, working my jaw to make sure he hadn’t broken it. My eyes watered and I tasted blood as I caught Tanner’s eye. He stood in the corner with his arms folded over his chest. I’d get no help there.

“Look at me,” Rourke said.

The command struck—quick and merciless—jerking my gaze back to his. I ran my tongue over my blunt, human teeth, wondering where the hell my wolf was. But

maybe she knew it was best to stay hidden. Rourke would only entertain challenges to a point, and I'd clearly reached his limits. I had no doubt he'd cow my wolf the second she made an appearance.

He examined his hand, where the broken skin of his knuckles was already healing. "Dalton and I agree on one thing, Ms. Ratner. The Council is a weak and ineffectual group of cowards. Every day, humans grow stronger and werewolves grow weaker." He lowered his hand. "The mageborn have learned from the sorcerers, and they've grown stronger for it. Half-breeds and humans have no place among werewolves. Strength matched to strength begets more strength. This is a truth the Council refuses to accept." He motioned to Tanner, who headed toward the door.

My mouth went dry as my heart threatened to pound from my chest.

Rourke stood and began untying my wrists.

"Wh-What are you doing?" I shrank away from him, making the cheap bedding bunch up on the mattress.

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Tanner opened the door, and a towering man with a shock of platinum hair entered. His eyes were like molten silver, and he radiated power—and menace.

And there was something...familiar about him. The room was warm, but goosebumps lifted on my arms as I met his stare.

Rourke finished with my wrists and gestured to the man. “Brooke, this is Seren,” he said, as if we were at a social gathering instead of a kidnapping. “He’s going to let you use his phone.”

Startled, I forced my gaze off Seren. “What?”

Rourke smiled down at me. “Tanner informs me you can’t speak mind-to-mind. It must be disappointing for you, but it’s a boon for us.” He brushed a lock of hair off my shoulder. “I’ll explain it for you, yes?” He caressed my cheek, and I had to clench my jaw to stop myself from biting his fingers off. “You can’t speak to Dalton in your head. No tattling on us, hmm? But you can call him on the phone. And when you do, you’re going to do exactly as I say. You’re going to tell him where you are and beg him to come save you. He might not believe I have you if I call. So you’ll do it. And when he comes rushing to your rescue like the dashing hero he is, you’ll watch while I kill him.”

My heart lodged somewhere in my throat. “I...won’t.” I pulled my cheek from his grasp. “I won’t do it.”

“Seren,” he said quietly.

The blond giant stepped forward. He lifted his hand, palm facing out and aimed at my chest. Then he squeezed it into a fist.

And I couldn't breathe. My oxygen was cut off as surely as if someone had blocked my mouth and plugged my nose. I scrambled to my knees, waving frantically for him to stop. But he kept his fist aloft, his silver eyes dispassionate as he watched me struggle. Panicked, I clawed at my throat. My eyes bulged. White dots swam in my vision.

"Enough," Rourke said.

Seren opened his hand.

I collapsed on the bed, my mouth open as I sucked in great lungfuls of air.

Rourke hunkered down beside me. "Seren is a mageborn wolf. I told you, strength begets strength. And Seren is very strong. You have a choice, Ms. Ratner. You can either call Dalton, or you can die."

I shuddered on the bed as I caught my breath. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, making my thoughts laser sharp.

And maybe that was responsible for the idea that formed in my head with crystal clarity. I'd never managed to tap a mental link with Hugh—or with anyone. But if I had any hope of saving him, I had to do it now.

Ignoring Rourke and Seren and the shitty motel room, I dug deep and roused my wolf. Help me, I begged her. He's in danger.

Then I squeezed my eyes shut and screamed one word in my head: "HUGH."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HUGH

It was the perfect kind of early evening. Not too hot, not too cold. The sun was starting to sink toward the horizon, and the lawn outside the house glowed a soft orange. Just...perfect.

But my throat was tight as I knelt next to the spot where Alex's pyre had stood.

"I, um..." I glanced around, even though I knew I was alone. Every enforcer in the pack was patrolling Bosford, and Brooke was still out with Tanner. He'd contacted me about an hour ago to say they'd be back in time for dinner.

So it was just me and Alex.

"I feel silly doing this," I said. "But..." Tears burned my eyes. "I really fucking miss you," I finished, my voice breaking on the last word. I hung my head and stared at grass that had gone blurry. I swiped at my eyes and took a few deep breaths.

"There's a lot I want to say, and maybe you already know it all." I let out a quiet huff of laughter. "Or maybe I'm just talking to the wind."

The breeze picked up, tugging at my hair and stirring the leaves of the nearby trees.

Okay...

I could have simply talked in my head. Hell, I could have done all of this in the quiet of my bedroom or my study or literally anywhere else. But there was something about saying it all out loud—and saying it here, in this spot that had become sacred.

“I made so many mistakes as a parent.” I sighed, flipping through memories in my head. “I messed things up with your mom. I wish...I hope you’re together somehow. I like to imagine that.” A smile pulled at my mouth. “Maybe you’re both rolling your eyes at me now.” As I pictured it, I had to wonder if I might be right. I’d never thought much about faith, and I certainly wasn’t religious, but I was a werewolf for crying out loud. Magic was real enough. It wasn’t such a stretch to believe there was another world beyond this one.

I sat there on my knees, my gaze unfocused and my chest swimming with words. They pushed hard against my sternum like water behind a dam. And, finally, the dam burst.



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“I feel so guilty for wanting Brooke,” I blurted. “I feel like I’m taking something of yours, and I don’t mean that she belonged to you. I swear I don’t mean it like that. I feel guilty because I’m happy when I’m with her, and then I remember why I shouldn’t be. Because that happiness was yours.” I drew a shuddering breath. “You shouldn’t have been at the Gorge that night, and you wouldn’t have been if I hadn’t pressured you to take over the pack. I mean, maybe you would have gone anyway—Fuck, Alex, I don’t know.” I scrubbed my eyes with the heel of my palm and let out a watery laugh. “I think I know what you’d say if you were here. You’d tell me I’m overthinking this. I remember you telling me engineers love solving problems and if they can’t find one to solve they’ll make one up and then solve that, too.”

The wind picked up again, stirring harder this time. It ruffled the grass around me and pulled at my T-shirt. I lifted my head and closed my eyes, letting the sun warm my face. I felt...lighter. Maybe this hadn’t been such a stupid idea after all.

And I shouldn’t push my luck, but... “Alex, if you can hear me, how about giving me a little sign?”

Nothing, of course. Just wind and—

“HUGH.”

I jumped, lost my balance, and fell hard on my ass. Brooke’s voice had echoed in my head, as clear and true as if she’d spoken directly into my ear. And she’d sounded terrified.

“Brooke?” I stood, my senses on high alert. “What’s wrong, baby? Where are you?” I

spun in a circle as my heart began to pound.

For a long, agonizing moment, she didn't answer. Just when I started to go nuts, she made contact again, her voice going in and out like a badly tuned radio. "They've got me... Forcing me...make...phone call... Don't believe..."

I stood stock still, straining to hear more. Afraid to tap the bond and possibly cut her off if she tried to speak first. I was also afraid to move—worried I might lose her if I took off running. Besides, I didn't know where the fuck to run.

Okay, now I was ready to go nuts.

I tapped the connection because I couldn't help it. "Brooke? Who has you? Tell me where you are."

"Don't...come. Kill...you."

My wolf leapt forward, its presence so potent my jaw ached with the need to shift. Our mate was afraid.

I heaved a deep breath and made contact again. "WHO HAS YOU?"

Nothing. She was gone. I clutched at my chest, right where my heart was threatening to rip through bone and flesh.

"Hugh?" For a brief, glorious second, she came through loud and clear. "It's Rourke. Whatever I say on the phone call, don't come. They want to kill—"

She was gone. For good this time. I could sense it.

What did she mean when she said not to believe her? She'd mentioned a phone call...

I was running before my brain fully processed her words. I didn't always have my phone on me—something that drove Dylan crazy. It was charging in my study, and I sprinted for the house like the hounds of hell were snapping at my heels. Rourke had her. How the fuck did he have her? Where the hell was Tanner? My head spun with a dozen different possibilities, but one fact was paramount: Wherever she was, she was in distress—and Rourke and his rogue scum were forcing her to call me.

Dylan was in the kitchen as I slammed into the house, and I barked orders without slowing down. “Get every enforcer to the house now.”

My phone screen was lit up when I hit the study threshold, and I flung my body across the room to snatch it from my desk. Somehow, I remembered to play dumb when I answered. “Dalton,” I breathed, dread and fury the only things keeping me upright.

“Hugh?” To anyone else, Brooke's voice probably would have sounded steady. But I heard the wobble in it, and an icy fist closed around my heart.

“Brooke,” I said, shocked at how calm I sounded. “What's wrong?” I'm not supposed to know about this phone call, I remembered. “Why are you calling, sweetheart? I thought you were tracking with Tanner.” Rage heated my blood. The only way rogues could have gotten close to her was if Tanner had let them.

“I'm with Rourke Villadsen. He wants to meet with you. Just you.” She spoke like she was reading from a script. Which she probably was.

Dylan rushed into the room and stopped, breathing heavy. Malcolm and Shepherd crowded behind him.

I put a finger over my lips.

“I’m going to give you an address,” Brooke said. “Hugh... If you don’t come alone, Rourke said...” She made a soft sound, like she was sucking in oxygen, and when she spoke again her voice wavered. “Come alone or he’ll slit me from neck to cunt.”

The anger in my veins solidified into pure, malevolent wrath. Across the room, Dylan closed his eyes on a long blink.

Brooke rattled off an address, and I grabbed a pen and pad of paper off my desk and scribbled down the name of an abandoned motor lodge about twenty miles outside Goldendale.

She ended the call before I could say anything else.

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“It’s a trap,” Dylan said at once.

Malcolm gave a contemptuous snort. “A fucking obvious one, and Villadsen knows it.” He frowned at me. “Rourke knows she’s your mate. That means he knows you’ll do exactly as he says. But you can’t walk in there alone, Hugh. It’s a death sentence.”

“He’s probably got the whole place surrounded by rogues,” Dylan said. “Who knows what kind of firepower he has.”

They were right. If Rourke was making a move like this, he was confident he was going to win. He must have collected enough rogues to take on the Council. He probably planned to kill me and then move on the Pacific Pack. And there was no way he was going to leave Brooke alive. He’d kill her whether I followed his directions or not.

She’d sounded so scared on that call...

Deep in my head, my wolf snapped its jaws. That traitor dared to threaten our mate. He couldn’t be permitted to live.

And that meant breaking some rules. Rourke had a lot of firepower?

It was time to fight fire with fire.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BROOKE

I'd thought Seren would stop torturing me once I completed the call with Hugh.

Silly me.

He leaned against the ratty TV stand and flicked his fingers in my direction. "Dolor."

Agony slammed into me, bowing my back off the bed. The pain was incomprehensible. Every pore in my body was a little pool of suffering. My tendons strained. I would have screamed if I could, but there was no room left within me to do so. Pain crowded out everything else.

"Nix," he said with another wave of his hand.

The pain stopped abruptly, and I flopped on the bed. Sweat dampened my hairline and the front of my shirt. "Why," I asked, my gaze on the odious popcorn ceiling, "do you have to say magic words for this bullshit but not when you were squeezing my lungs?" I regained enough control of my neck to lift my head. "Is it like a Harry Potter cosplay thing you're doing?"

Slowly, Seren pushed away from the TV stand.

"Foolish, Ms. Ratner," Rourke murmured. He sat on the edge of the other queen bed, where he'd observed the last half hour with an air of detached interest. He seemed almost bored at this point, like he'd seen the same show over and over and was eager for something new.

And that didn't bode well for me.

Yeah, probably should have kept my mouth shut. But my voice was really the only weapon I had in this place. And it was good to keep both men occupied, right? Tanner had left shortly after I finished the phone call, and I imagined him putting

rogues into position outside the motel room. Whatever Rourke was planning, it wasn't an ambush. More like a bloodbath. All I could do was hope Hugh had heard my plea over our mental connection. He had to stay away.

But I knew he wouldn't, and I had no idea how to stop him. I'd tried to link with him mentally again, but I couldn't make the connection. Probably, I was too burned out. All I knew was I couldn't—wouldn't—watch him die.

"I can't lose you," he'd said to me once. Now I knew how he'd felt when he said it. Because I felt the same about him.

And I was determined to make sure I never had to live the reality of those words.

I made eye contact with Seren. "So which house are you? Slytherin or Hufflepuff or what?"

Anger flashed in his eyes, and as he moved to my side I braced myself for another round of misery. But he didn't flick his hand. Instead, he peered down at me and drew his fingertips over my sweaty neck.

A strange sensation flooded me, as if embers burned under my skin. Heat suffused my neck, the discomfort growing from a sunburn to an inferno that made me grit my teeth against the need to scream. At the same time, my body throbbed with recognition.

No...memory. I knew him. I'd felt his hot breath on my neck just before he'd ripped out my throat at the Gorge.

"You," I rasped.

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "I was sloppy that night," he said, regret in his voice.

Without warning, he moved his hand to my breast and squeezed. “I almost wish I’d bitten you. It would have given me more time to teach you to shut your mouth.”

I ignored my pain and revulsion so I could frown. “If this is your idea of foreplay, I’m afraid it’s not working.”



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He lifted his hand and made a fist—and he didn’t open it until my eyes were bulging and my heels drummed against the mattress.

“Easy, Seren,” Rourke said. “We need her alive.” The for now hung in the air.

I focused on moving air in and out of my lungs...and wondered if Seren’s fist-squeezing trick might be doing permanent damage. I’d passed out a couple of times in the beginning before he’d seemed to get a better idea of how much oxygen deprivation I could tolerate before losing consciousness. Apparently, torture wasn’t a scientific thing.

Dots swam in my vision again, but they were red this time. And it was weird because there were only two. One floated in the air above Rourke’s head, and the other bounced before settling in the middle of Seren’s forehead.

“Sniper!” Rourke shouted. He launched himself at Seren, tackling him to the ground just as drywall exploded directly behind the spot where Seren had been standing.

There was a series of pops outside—like someone setting off a bunch of fireworks all at once.

I struggled to sit up.

The window shattered, sending glass flying everywhere. A second later, a huge brown wolf soared through the opening.

Hugh.

But this was Hugh as I'd never seen him. He hit the ground with bared fangs and eyes blazing with green fury. More shots popped outside, followed by men's shouts and the deep, menacing growls of wolves. There was a battle raging outside, but it seemed far away compared to the one unfolding in front of me.

Seren jumped to his feet in a surprisingly agile move for such a big man. Hugh lunged toward him, but Seren swept his arm down in a swift arc. "Lapsus!"

An invisible force lifted Hugh's body and hurled him backwards. He slammed into the wall, but came up snarling. Before he could lunge again, Seren raised both hands and squeezed them into tight fists.

Hugh staggered, his head dipping violently as his oxygen cut off.

Oh shit. I didn't need to understand the ins and outs of magic to know Seren had been holding back with me. All this time, he'd been crushing one of my lungs. Now he was destroying both of Hugh's.

I jumped off the bed just as Rourke made a grab for me. I dodged his grasp, scrambled over the second bed, and flung myself at Hugh's feet. My knees stung as I slid over broken glass, but I barely felt the pain as I grabbed the ruff around Hugh's neck.

"Breathe!" I pleaded. "Fight it!" But he was just as helpless as I'd been. Terror rode me hard, and I whirled. "Stop it!" I screamed at Seren. "You're killing him!"

"That's the fucking point," Rourke snarled, his mask of civility off. His eyes glowed as he charged at me. At the same moment, the door burst open and a group of men in head-to-toe camouflage and tactical gear swooped inside. They pointed their weapons at Rourke, and the one in the lead bellowed, "Don't move!"

Two things happened at once: Seren opened his hands and thrust them toward the newcomers, and Rourke drew a handgun from the back of his waistband. He aimed at Hugh.

I didn't think. I just moved, throwing myself sideways so I blocked Hugh's body. A bullet whizzed by my head. I hit the ground—and then everything slowed down.

The soldier leading the charge by the door collapsed on the ground, gasping for air.

Rourke whirled and ran to Seren's side.

Chaos. Someone was shooting. The pops echoed in my ears.

Seren and I locked gazes. He lifted his hand and brought it down in a vicious arc. "Incisus."

A line of agony streaked down my front. I opened my mouth to scream, but only blood emerged.

A roar shook the room.

The last thing I saw was Seren grip Rourke's arm—and then they both vanished.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### HUGH

Brooke was fading again. "Help me!" I yelled to no one and everyone. There were plenty of people in the room now. On the floor behind me, Malcolm was in wolf form savaging the neck of the former SEAL Seren had tried to kill. He may have killed him yet, assuming Malcolm's bite didn't take.

But I couldn't worry about that now. Seren had sliced open Brooke's chest from the inside out, using a power word to manipulate her body down to the cellular level. I ripped open her shirt and snapped her bra. Her chest was open to the bone, the wound so surgically precise it was almost grotesque. The two edges of her flesh tried to knit together before my eyes.

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But it wasn't working. She'd lost so much blood, and Seren had already weakened her. There were tiny clusters of burst capillaries around her eyes. He'd tortured her by cutting off her air—and he was a dead man.

Suddenly, Dylan was at my side. He was nude from his shift, and his chest was absolutely covered in blood.

"It's not mine," he said quickly. "Tell me what to do."

"Hold her skin together. That'll give it a chance to seal." I had no idea if I was right. Malcolm was the pack medic, and he was currently on four paws with his incisors buried in a man's neck.

Fuck.

Dylan gently pressed the sides of Brooke's wound together. But there was so much blood, I couldn't tell if his efforts were working.

"Here," a deep voice said at my elbow. Logan, my human COO, tugged his camouflage neck gaiter over his head and handed it to me. "I take it you don't have to worry about germs?"

"No. And thank you." I wiped around Dylan's fingers, clearing Brooke's blood. Later, I could worry about how I was going to explain things to Logan—and how I was going to defend my decision to involve him in this mess to the Council.

But seriously, fuck the Council. I was done with inaction. Inaction had killed Alex.

Inaction had led to Brooke being kidnapped and tortured.

Her breathing was so shallow...

And I was not doing this. Not again.

I seized her face with both hands. “Brooke. Baby. I need you to open your eyes and look at me. I know you’re stubborn and don’t like obeying my orders, but you don’t have a choice on this one.” I threw all my power into my voice, calling up my wolf until I was teetering on the edge of shifting. “Open your eyes right now,” I growled. “Come back to me and I’ll never try to stop you from having a career again. We’ll make it work, sweetheart. I’ll buy the goddamn Dispatch if I have to.” My tears splashed onto her cheeks and nose. Her adorable nose with those maddening freckles. If I never got to see her nose scrunch in thought again, I wasn’t going to live very long. My heart would die with her. It was that simple.

“Open your eyes,” I said. “I love you.” I sucked in air. I was probably squeezing her face too tightly, but I couldn’t help it. I needed her to stay with me. “I love you and it has nothing to do with fate. I’d choose you all over again, totally on my own. I’ll always choose you. Open your eyes.”

Her eyelashes fluttered. I held my breath, my heart fluttering just as wildly.

She opened her eyes. Her lips moved, and I practically broke my neck leaning down to listen. “You are so bossy,” she rasped in my ear.

I scrubbed at my eyes—probably getting blood all over my face in the process—but I needed to see her clearly. My chuckle was more of a watery hiccup. “And you’re stubborn as hell.”

“The perfect couple.”

We smiled at each other. I couldn't tear my gaze away. Like a lovesick fool, I let myself drown in her sapphire eyes.

Someone politely cleared their throat. I looked up to find Dylan and Malcolm standing side by side. When had Malcolm shifted back?

"We gotta go, boss," Dylan said, casting an anxious glance at the ex-SEALs who were lifting their fallen comrade's body as they prepared to carry him outside. Shepherd and another enforcer were already ripping up the carpet. We couldn't leave any trace of our DNA behind. It would be best if we could torch the whole motel, but that would bring the human authorities in droves.

Dylan continued. "We fired a lot of shots. This place is off the beaten path, but I'm worried about that highway overpass."

He was right. Every second we lingered risked a passerby calling the cops. I brushed Brooke's hair off her forehead. "It's a short drive home. Do you think you can tolerate it?"

"Yes. As long as I'm with you."

"You are. I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck with me."

Her eyes twinkled. "Sounds perfect."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### BROOKE

"So tell me the part where SEAL Team Six rescued us again."

Hugh looked up from his laptop. He was sitting in a chair in the corner of his bedroom while I reclined on the bed. He wore nothing but a pair of cuffed jogging pants, and his bare feet were propped on an ottoman. It was unfair how hot he was. Not that I was complaining.

Well, maybe I was complaining a little bit. It had been five days since my injury, and he still refused to touch me. He insisted I was weak from blood loss and needed to rest.



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But he also refused to leave my side. He'd moved all his work stuff into the bedroom, which was kind of adorable. However, I was going to plot his demise if he tried carrying me to the bathroom again.

"It wasn't SEAL Team Six," he said now, his face tinged with exasperation. "Thank goodness. I can only imagine the Council's collective aneurysm if that were the case."

I swung my legs off the bed.

Right away, his brows drew together. "Brooke, you shouldn't—"

"Hush, Alpha." I went to him and held out my arms. "See? Totally fine." I could see the battle raging in his head. On the one hand, he wanted to order me back into bed. But as his gaze moved down my body, an unmistakable spark of lust fired in his green eyes.

I pounced on that, turning in a slow circle. The boy short panties I wore hugged my ass, and I could feel the heat of Hugh's gaze like a brand on my backside. I stopped and cast an innocent look over my shoulder. "Do you think I've gained any weight from eating like a middle aged soccer dad on vacation?"

"No," Hugh said absently. He didn't seem to realize he'd leaned forward, or that his computer was in danger of sliding off his lap. "But even if you had, I wouldn't give a shit. You're perfect."

Happiness bubbled inside me—but then I remembered what we'd been talking about

and faced him. “I know it wasn’t SEAL Team Six, but those were Navy SEALs.”

“Former.” He roused himself, righting his laptop in the process. “Logan and his guys have been out of the service for a while.”

“But they’re humans. Won’t that cause problems?”

He started to shake his head. Then he stopped, and his bare shoulders lifted as he sighed. “It’s not ideal. It helps that Jordan survived the moon fever. I would have never forgiven myself if he died because of me. Of course, now he has Malcolm for a sire, so he might have preferred death now that I think about it.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Yes. Mostly.”

I plucked the laptop from him and set it carefully on the floor. Then I knelt between his knees. “It wouldn’t have been your fault if Jordan died. You were trying to save me and the pack and possibly all the other packs.” I shivered. “I looked into Rourke’s eyes. He’s a monster.”

Hugh grimaced. “And now he’s allied with the mageborn. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen Seren in that room.”

Memories of having my oxygen cut off surfaced. Hugh had explained that Seren was Carrick Hart’s beta—and the second most powerful mageborn wolf in the world. There was no way Seren would have appeared in that motel room without Carrick’s approval. That meant Rourke had all the mageborn on his side. The Council might not have wanted a war, but they were getting one anyway.

“Hey,” Hugh said softly, interrupting my troubled thoughts. He slid a warm hand

under my jaw and rubbed his thumb over my lower lip. “Don’t worry about this, sweetheart. We’re going to fight back, and we’re going to win.”

My voice trembled. “I just don’t want you doing this alone.”

“I’m not. Dylan is reclaiming his pack. He’s a strong alpha. There are other strong alphas among the packs. We have seats on the Council. Don’t forget that. And if we can get the sorcerers on our side—and I think we can—we can stop Rourke from hurting anyone else.” He brushed his thumb across my lips again, sending tingles through my body. “Do you believe in me?” he murmured.

My eyes widened. “Of course I do.”

“Good.” He gave me a tremulous smile, his gorgeous eyes full of emotion. “Because that’s all that matters.” He caressed my cheek, then pulled his hand away. “I, uh, I have something for you.” I watched, mystified, as he withdrew a piece of paper from a stack on a little work table he’d positioned next to his chair. He hesitated, then shyly held it out.

I took it and scanned it, unsure what I was reading.

“It’s a list of journalism jobs with remote work options,” he said. “I want to make it clear, though, that I understand if you’d rather return to the Dispatch. I mean, I won’t love it because I’ll worry like hell, but I don’t have a right to stop you from pursuing your dreams. I just...the one thing I ask is that you let me give you a security detail. Just a couple—well, like a group, I guess—of enforcers to keep you safe while you’re working.”

“Hugh...”

“I know you probably aren’t thrilled about it, and I won’t force the issue if you say

no, but—”

I grabbed his leg. “Hugh.”

He sucked in a breath. “Yeah?”

“I don’t need a security detail.”

He closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them they were stark. “Please, baby. I failed you when it came to Tanner. A-And he’s still out there—”

“No,” I said quickly, and I seized his hand. “You misunderstand me. I don’t need a security detail because I’m not going back to the Dispatch.”

“You’re...not?”

I shook my head. “I had a lot of time to think when Seren—” I swallowed hard, and Hugh squeezed my fingers. I squeezed them back to let him know I was okay. “When he hurt me. I thought I lost things when you bit me. But I gained things, too. One of those things is time. I’ve spent years waiting for opportunities at work, and I’ve always felt like I was racing against an invisible clock. My time was limited but...it’s not anymore. I can explore other writing jobs.” I grinned. “I might even revise your boring werewolf instruction manual.”

He tapped a gentle finger against my jaw. “Cheeky.”

I leaned into his hand. “I gained time, but I also gained something far more important. Fate brought me to you. There is nowhere else I’d rather be.”

We looked at each other for one bright, shimmering moment. Then he was up and backing me to the bed. He lowered me carefully to the mattress and covered my body with his. I expected him to kiss me, but he propped himself on his elbows above me and just...beamed. He was so handsome. And he looked so happy. I’d done that. It was a heady feeling knowing I’d made Hugh Dalton happy.

“I love you,” he said. “The whole pack is going to make fun of me because I’m going to be an absolute idiot about it.”

My heart swelled. “It’s okay. There are plenty of other reasons to make fun of you. And I love you too.”

“I’d like to kiss you now.”

“Okay.”

And he did. He took my mouth in a tender, unhurried kiss, stroking his tongue along mine and biting gently at my bottom lip. His rigid cock prodded my thigh, and I squirmed under him, anxious for him to speed things up.

In response, he grabbed my wrists and stretched them over my head. Then he took our kiss from soft to scorching. I arched into him, moaning as moisture flooded my panties. “Want,” I gasped against his lips.

“You’ll get it,” he said, his labored breathing proving he wasn’t as in control as he might like me to believe. He moved quickly, bounding off the bed and grabbing a condom while I stripped off my clothes. On his way back to the bed, he pushed his sweatpants down. They caught on his ankle, and he shook them off with an impatient growl.

My soft snort brought his head up, and he grinned as he straddled my hips. “Are you laughing at your alpha?” he asked with a raised brow.

“No.” I held my breath as he stroked his cock, his abs rippling. God, he was huge. And he was all mine. “Wait. Do I get punished if I do?”

His grin widened. “I’ll have to check the rules but, yeah, I’m pretty sure a punishment is in order.” He ripped open the condom with an exaggerated growl, and I couldn’t help but laugh. Then my breath caught as he covered me once more and pushed inside. Goosebumps rushed over my skin, and warm, liquid pleasure snaked through my veins.

“Hugh,” I whispered, rocking up to meet him.

“Yes.” He began to thrust, his cock stretching me in the most delicious way possible. He sank all the way inside and moved his hips in a sensual glide. “Just like that, baby. God, your pussy feels so good.” He dropped sweet kisses on my face, touching his lips to my forehead, my eyelids, my nose. “I love your little freckles,” he rasped, deepening his thrusts.

“You do? I’ve always hated them.”

He looked scandalized. “They’re so fucking cute. We should get you more.”

My chest shook with laughter. “You can’t just get more freckles.”

“Ah well.” He kissed the bridge of my nose. “I’ll have to make do with these, then.” He hiked one of my legs high on his hip and pumped faster.

“God, yes!” I clutched his big shoulders, hanging on as he pounded into me, his thrusts deep and merciless and perfect. I wanted more. Always, always more.

“Touch yourself,” he gasped. He reared back, settling on his knees as he continued to thrust. He grabbed my ankles and held me open, bending me in half so my sex was splayed before him. “Make yourself come, sweetheart. I want to see it.”

Shivers coursed over my skin as I plunged my hand between my legs and stroked my clit. White-hot pleasure threatened to blast me apart. I worked myself furiously under his watchful gaze, my body trembling with every powerful thrust of his cock. He filled me and possessed me...but he also gazed at me with utter adoration. His green eyes gleamed, his gaze running a continuous path from my face to my bouncing breasts to my clit.

“So gorgeous,” he breathed, his nostrils flared. Sweat sheened his chest as he fucked me faster, his bottom lip caught between his teeth. We both watched as his cock

pummeled me, his thick shaft shiny with my arousal.

My orgasm took me by surprise, blistering through me in a hot sweep. I rubbed my clit in fast, hard circles, riding the waves of pleasure until I had no choice but to throw my head back and scream. “Yes! Hugh, oh God, yes!” My hand fell away from my pussy, and I held my thighs open while he continued to pound me.

His release took him just as quickly. He lost his smooth rhythm, his movements growing frantic and disjointed. He pumped a few more times and cried out as he emptied inside me.

We crashed on the bed together, panting and sweaty. He pulled me against him and traced a finger down my chest, over the unblemished skin where Seren’s magic had cut me.

“I’m okay,” I said, still trying to catch my breath. My sex spasmed from my orgasm, and my throat was raw from crying out Hugh’s name. “It healed.”

He stroked my hair back from my damp forehead. “I felt like my heart had been ripped from my chest that day. No one will ever hurt you like that again.”



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“I know.” I scratched my fingernails over the dark stubble on his cheek. “You’ll keep me safe.” I feigned a sigh. “With your big muscles and your super hot body.”

He grinned and rolled on top of me, one thick thigh pressing between my legs. “It’s the worst, isn’t it?”

“Mmm. Terrible.”

“I guess you’ll just have to suffer through it, sweetheart. We’re fated to be together.”

I smiled up at him. “Good point. I mean, who am I to fight fate?”

## EPILOGUE

### HUGH

The moon hung heavy in the night sky, its silvery light spilling all over the forest floor. It was beautiful.

But it was nothing compared to the woman walking toward me.

Brooke was radiant in a loose white dress. The clingy style was perfect for her long body and mouthwatering curves. She’d woven orange blossoms in her hair, and the delicate white flowers peeked here and there among the golden waves.

She was breathtaking. A sun goddess who’d descended from on high to walk in the moonlight.

Pack members smiled and nudged each other as she made her way to me and took my hands. She offered me a soft smile. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

We stood there in the moonlight, and I couldn’t believe she was real—or that I’d ever considered rejecting her. Like that would have ever happened.

A warm, gentle breeze moved through the trees. Fireflies drifted around us. It was, in a word, magical. I wanted to seal this moment in a bottle so I could take it out and look at it whenever I wanted. So I could see Brooke just as she was now, her golden hair loose around her shoulders and her wolf turning her eyes a frosty blue.

Malcolm stepped forward, impressive in his kilt. He cleared his throat. “Um, no’ to be pushy, but I’ve got two hundred pounds of wings back at the house that need to be turned or we’re all eatin’ burnt chicken tonight.”

Brooke’s lips twitched.

“No problem, Malcolm,” I murmured. I squeezed Brooke’s hands. “You ready?”

She smiled, her freckles bunching up. “Yes.”

I turned to Dylan, who had a knife waiting for me. Our eyes met as he handed it over, and I saw determination in his gaze. He was leaving in the morning, heading for Tennessee, where he was going to reclaim his pack and find Wren. I knew he was probably thinking of her now, and I nodded as I accepted the knife. “Thank you, Alpha.”

Surprise flared in his brown eyes. “You’re welcome. And...thank you. For everything.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“You bet.” He smiled, his dimples showing. “Now claim your mate before Malcolm starts whining about his chicken wings again.”

Malcolm huffed and smoothed his beard. He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “should have let you bleed out.”

I was grinning as I turned to Brooke, but I sobered as I held the knife above her palm. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m a werewolf. I’ll heal.” Her eyes softened. “And I’d put up with a lot more than a little scratch if it meant spending the rest of my life with you.”

My breath caught. Before I could lose my nerve, I quickly sliced her palm. Then I did the same to mine and clasped our hands together. Gaze locked with hers, I lifted our joined hands. The whole pack watched as our blood mingled and ran down our arms.

“Gross,” Brooke whispered. Someone—Dylan from the sounds of it—snorted. A couple people giggled, and then we were all laughing as Brooke and I looked into each other’s eyes.

I was prepared for the rush of heat, but it still made me gasp as it flashed through me. Brooke felt it a second later, because she jumped and squeezed my hand.

Her eyes lightened even more, her irises like crystals. “Was that—?”

“Yeah,” I said, reveling in the heat—and her. “We’re bonded, sweetheart. That was a little bit of magic.”

She pressed against me and tipped her head back, her eyes shimmering with love. “Show me more, Alpha.” She raised onto her tiptoes and pressed her lips to mine.

“I’ve got all the time in the world.”

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