



# Snowed in with the Vampire Prince

**Author:** *Jay Castle*

**Category:** Romance, M-m Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** Pierce

My death day is sacred. I spend it the same way I wish I could spend every day: alone in my isolated cabin, with a glass of wine in one hand and a book in the other. But when the scent of human blood shatters my solitude, I find James—unflappable, undeniably gorgeous, and utterly unafraid of me. He makes my blood boil and he stirs desires dormant for over a century. I must protect him, even if it costs me everything.

James

In the wake of my father's passing, I go to our secluded camping spot in the mountains to scatter his ashes. It's almost a full day's hike from civilization and I expected to grieve alone. I never dreamed I'd get stranded by a freak snowstorm or that I'd be attacked by wolves. I certainly never imagined I'd meet someone like Pierce, the grumpy, overprotective, and annoyingly handsome vampire who saves my life. Now, snowed in and surrounded on all sides by the werewolves determined to turn me into one of them, my only protection is the vampire I'm inexplicably falling in love with.

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

## Chapter 1

Pierce

Fair warning, I've never been what you'd call a happy vampire. Definitely not today, of all days. As of a few minutes ago, I'd been immortal for exactly one hundred years. It was midnight, the witching hour, so my death day had just officially begun. And I was milking the pain for everything it was worth. My pale hands were wrapped around a glass of red wine, and the cheerful orange light of the fire burning in the fireplace danced all around my one-room cabin, doing jack squat to dispel the sourness of my mood. Outside the single square window beside my front door, thick flakes of snow lazily fluttered past, but they fell faster and faster with each passing moment.

I'd been watching it since it had started. Within minutes, the snow had transformed the landscape beyond my cabin into a haunting vista of ghostly bluish-white and otherworldly violet. But that was to be expected. I was high up in the Cascade Mountain range, which separates the eastern part of Washington from the smaller but more well-populated western part of the state. It snowed here in the mountains all the time. Granted, it was early March, so it was a little late in the season for snow.

And yes, I was sulking. Sue me.

As if on cue, my phone rang, interrupting my wallowing.

"Pierce," I answered, without even bothering to look at the screen. Only a handful of people had this number. "What's happened? You know this is the one day?—"

“No,” Nathaniel, my maker, interrupted. “Nothing has happened. I’m calling to give you my condolences.”

Nathaniel is the vampire king of Seattle, and I am his only progeny, which technically made me a prince, if you wanted to get technical. But those are just the stuffy, antiquated titles our people should have—but haven’t—let go of. A vampire king—or queen, of course—is essentially just the ruler of their territory. They’re kind of like a combination of a mayor and a CEO.

Nathaniel’s territory included the entire Seattle Metropolitan area. So, nearly a million people. Granted, most of them were everyday mundane folks who had no idea vampires existed in the first place. Still, it was a lot of lives for him to be responsible for. And it was a lot of power, too, I suppose. In lesser hands, that power might have been a corrupting force.

But that wasn’t really who he was to me at all. Instead, Nathaniel was the one person in the world who knew me inside and out. I would gladly have given my life for him, and then I’d ask if he needed anything else.

But today was sacred, damn it.

“Are you being an ass right now?” I demanded, scandalized. “On my death day?”

“Guilty as charged.” He chuckled, and I could practically hear him rolling his eyes. I pictured a wide, indulgent smile on his face. “I’m also calling to let you know you can have the weekend if you want. You never take a day off, and I figured you might want some more time away.”

“On the eve of war?” I demanded, blinking in surprise.

Because Seattle witches had been turning up dead for several months, their bodies left

on full public display for anyone—mainly humans—to see, and obviously murdered by vampires, we were about a half-inch from outright war with the Seattle coven. They believed we were allowing the killings to happen instead of what we were actually doing, which was scouring the city for the culprit day and night so we could put an end to it.

“The witches haven’t declared war yet. Maybe they won’t. Perhaps we’ll catch the vampire responsible for the killings before they do. Enjoy this while you can.” He paused. “And if you want more time, you can have it. You can have as much time as you need.”

I was his primary advisor and second in command in case something important came up—which was quite often. My responsibilities ranged from event planning to negotiations to judge and jury, depending on what the situation called for. Like all of his closest advisors, I was his everything man. Though, the one thing Nathaniel had never asked me to do was to kill for him. In fact, for a vampire king, he was practically a teddy bear. He almost never killed anyone, and the few times he did, it was because the vampire he was executing was an unrepentant murderer. I’d often wondered if Nathaniel even liked being king. It seemed more like he was only ruling the city to protect its inhabitants from other, more brutal, members of our kind.

What Nathaniel didn’t need to tell me was that he didn’t want me anywhere near the city when the fighting started. Though, that was just silly. While I had only been a vampire for a century, I was a skilled fighter. And I could be even more ruthless than him when the situation demanded it. Still, the concern in his voice aroused a hot lump of emotion in my throat.

“Thank you.” My voice got strangely thick. How unbecoming. It must have been the wine.

“Listen,” he said, his voice dropping the playfulness and sharpening into a tone that

was far too serious for my liking. “I don’t feel the same way you do, but I understand you believe you’ve lost something that needs to be mourned. I’ll never regret saving your life—but I do regret that it causes you pain.”

“Only today,” I replied roughly.

That was the thing. I didn’t regret it either—most of the time. I had been a human, and my number had definitely been up before becoming a vampire. My mortal life had been over by the time Nathaniel turned me. So I hadn’t really lost out on anything. If I hadn’t become a vampire, my life would have just been over, full stop.

I’ll never understand why Nathaniel had saved my life. I had been a total stranger to him at the time. I doubt he had even really stopped to consider the potential—and very eternal—consequences of his actions. I’ve always been grateful to him for it though, even if I’ve never outright said it before. But I didn’t want to get into any of that right then. Maybe I’d tell him someday. But not today. It wasn’t like either one of us was getting any older.

I added, “And thanks, by the way. I’ll take the weekend.”

He let out a breath that told me he’d been afraid I would say no.

“Good. If you want, I can send you some company.”

By that, he no doubt meant a human donor. I scowled at the thought of sharing my death day with a human being.

Though I sulked on the anniversary of my death, it wasn’t like I had all these warm and fuzzy feelings for humans either. Three hundred and sixty-four days a year, I’m a vampire’s vampire. I’ve never had any qualms about my own hunger for blood or anything silly like that. I am what I am and I like what I like. There were very

attractive and very willing donors who worked for the king, and I had—count them—zero problems feeding on one of them when he presented his neck to me. I took what I wanted, and then I put a few drops of my blood on the wound after I was done to heal them right back up and send them on their way with a smile on their faces, only about a pint or two worse for wear. And don't let the door hit you on the way out.

I never killed people though. Admittedly, some of our kind did go a little crazy after a while and started getting a penchant for going all the way when feeding on someone. That, or they quite simply went mad and started killing people left, right, and center. Apart from the fact killing humans willy-nilly is punishable by death—in Seattle, at least—that's never how I've gotten my rocks off.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Even as a newborn vampire, when we are at our most vicious and uncontrollable, I've never really struggled with the urge to kill. Which was for the best, considering the fact most of the vampires who do completely lose all trace of their humanity and become the sorts of killing machines horror movies are made about are usually taught by their makers to kill early on, while they're still newly turned. The first month or so after becoming a vampire is crucial for our kind. If we don't become killers while our vampiric nature is still being hardwired, generally we don't tend to enjoy killing people indiscriminately later on either. And apart from the fact that Nathaniel never once let me into a position early on where I was out of his sight long enough to even have an accident while feeding for about the first decade, I've always more or less understood that, while humans weren't really anything special, they're still people.

"Pierce, did you hear me?" Nathaniel asked, after I had been silent longer than was probably reasonable. "If you want someone, perhaps a donor..."

He trailed off, letting that hang between us.

"No," I told him flatly. "Thank you. Besides, whoever you would send would have a hell of a time getting here anyway. It looks like I'm going to be snowed in."

The scene outside my window told me that was an increasing possibility, but it didn't worry me in the slightest. My cabin is pretty remote—several miles from the nearest road and more than a two-hour drive from the city—so I hadn't even bothered taking a car to get here. I had run the entire way instead and made it in about half the time it would have taken me to drive.

"I'd be happy to send someone in a chopper if that's what it took," he told me, and I

rolled my eyes when I heard how serious he was.

It was almost funny, actually, to imagine him trying to send out a chopper in the middle of a snowstorm. While Nathaniel controlled a sizeable portfolio of assets, he chose to live in the four-story apartment building he owned. He operated a neighborhood bar on the ground floor, which was open at pretty much all hours to sympathetic humans and vampires alike. He wasn't exactly the 'sending a chopper' type of guy.

But then a wistful note entered his voice and he added, "I wish you'd find someone."

Impossible.

I definitely wasn't into doing the horizontal mambo with most other breeds of the supernatural. Shifters and weres could be really hot, but they got weird and clingy after just one shag. They were quite literally into falling in love at first sight and all that other romantic, fanciful nonsense. You didn't even need to talk to one of them to get them to fall for you. You just needed to look at them the right way. Or the wrong way, I guess. Whichever. I've always thought it was the animal in them. They were pretty much always secretly looking for their mate, even if they claimed they only wanted to get naughty. Vampires were usually fine, so long as they didn't try talking to me before, during, or after. And warlocks...Well, fuck. Everyone knew you couldn't trust a witch—and warlocks were basically just male witches—even long enough to bang them senseless. The danger aspect was sexy, but it just wasn't worth it.

And then there were humans.

Some vampires were into that kind of thing, I guess. It's not even technically frowned upon. And it's not even like being with a human would be all that impractical, either. Humans who regularly drink our blood stop aging altogether, and they become way

more resilient to things like illness and injury, so it's entirely possible to keep a human lover for as long as you want, for hundreds or even thousands of years, if that's the kind of thing you're into. You don't even need to turn them into a vampire to do it.

As you might imagine, plenty of immortals do exactly this. I mean, the benefits are obvious—blood and sex whenever you want. Eternal companionship.

But that's not my jam. I'm not into keeping pets. I want an equal, someone every bit as strong as me. It doesn't need to be physical strength, but it sure as hell needs to be inner strength. And humans just don't have that. They're emotional, weak creatures. They're good for feeding on and occasionally for sex, but not for much else. Besides, nine times out of ten, they're scared to death of us anyway, even if they swear up and down that they're not. That, or they're all the way on the other end of the spectrum—which is even worse if you ask me—and they're all about getting fed on. Like it's some kind of kink for them. I guess the rush of fear when we bite them is as good a drug as any.

So where exactly did that leave me?

Alone. Which is how I preferred it.

"I worry about you," he added softly when I had gone quiet for too long again. "Just because you're a vampire, it doesn't mean you need to spend an eternity alone."

I grimaced, glaring at the phone in my hand. I decided then and there to shut the conversation down. Real talk with him might get in the way of all the wallowing I still had planned for the rest of the night.

"Thanks for the extra time off from my duties," I said flatly, a conversation-stopper if there ever was one. "I'll be back on Monday."

He sighed but remained patient and controlled when he spoke next. “I mean it. If you need anything at all—or if you change your mind about my sending someone—call me.”

With that, we hung up.

He was one to talk. He was more than twice my age, and he had never found a mate either. Or even a dalliance that had lasted beyond the second date, for that matter.

I didn’t know what he was looking for and I very seriously doubted that he did either. He had last tried to find someone about a hundred years ago. He’d been intentionally scouring the discrete hole-in-the wall big-city gay bars and speakeasies, looking for someone he might want to spend eternity with.

But he had found me instead.

A son, not a lover.

I might have stayed there until sunrise, frozen beside the fireplace, contemplating the empty eternity yawning before me, on the one day a year I allowed myself to have such thoughts, except that something very strange and unexpected happened right then.

Miles from anything remotely resembling civilization, in the middle of a snowstorm that was fast on its way to becoming a blizzard, I smelled something very strange.

Freshly spilled human blood.

## Chapter 2

James

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

I'm going to be snowed in, I thought, feeling dismayed by the sudden appearance of the white flakes rapidly falling around me, each about the size of a silver dollar. I had prepared for the cold, but I hadn't prepared for snow. The weather report hadn't mentioned anything about snow.

Not that freak snowstorms were unheard of in the mountains, even during the first week of March. I should've known better and planned accordingly. Now I had little choice but to hike back down the mountain in the snow, easily a full two miles to get to the parking lot where I'd left my wheezing but still reliable Jeep. It was a relatively flat and well-trod trail for most of the way, but it was so dark I'd be doing it by flashlight. I wasn't going to have much choice, though. Because if I waited too long, I was going to get snowed in. I didn't even have chains on my tires because the snow season should have been over. But clearly, mother nature had other ideas.

I glanced around my campsite, feeling dismayed at the prospect of breaking it all down and going home early. I hadn't brought much, only my tiny neon-blue tent and a black nylon hiking pack as big as my torso, which I'd stuffed with only the necessities.

My campfire got smaller by the second and began to hiss and crackle as huge flakes of snow landed on all the wood I'd painstakingly gathered earlier. It was one of those campsites you had to hike miles to get to, and no one else was around.

I had scattered my father's ashes hours ago, just before twilight. I had done it about a half-mile down from my campsite at Elizabeth Lake. The tiny oval-shaped lake surrounded by thin strips of rocky beach and looming evergreen trees had been our place. It was the place featured in all my best childhood memories.

It was where my father had taught me to fish when I was seven years old. I hadn't wanted to kill the rainbow trout I'd somehow managed to catch, so he'd told me it was okay, and then we'd tossed it back together.

It was where he'd given me my first sip of beer when I was twelve, on the promise that I didn't tell my mother—a promise I've kept all these years.

It was where I had come out to my father when I was a lost and confused fifteen-year-old, sure my admission was going to destroy everything.

It was where he had surprised me by telling me he'd known since I was three, and it didn't matter to him in the least. He'd told me that very night that being a man meant I should always be honest and true to myself and those around me.

It was where he had told me, last year, on our annual camping trip, a few weeks after my twenty-fourth birthday, that his cancer had come back, and it was moving way too fast for anything to stop it.

It was where, only a few months ago, when there had still been enough life left in him to make the journey here, he'd looked at me after he had drunk one too many slugs of brandy from his flask, and he'd said, his voice getting all solemn and serious, "Swear to me that you'll do your best to find someone. Promise me, son. I don't want you to be alone when I'm gone."

I hadn't been able to stop myself from getting teary-eyed right then, which I hated doing more than words could express. And he'd gotten choked up too, which was even worse. But I hadn't been able to promise him a thing. And that was good because I don't break promises, ever.

When I was thirteen, my mom got pregnant with another man's child. My dad tried to work it out with her, but my mom just left. She left him, and she left me, and then she

went off to start a whole other life with someone else. My parents had seemed so happy for my entire childhood, but it had all been a lie.

So, no. I don't believe in love. Not anymore. Everyone leaves.

And now, all I wanted to do was honor his memory, and there was no one else to do it. He'd been all alone except for me, and we'd both known it. So, I came here because this was the only place where I had felt okay to let myself really break down, miles from anyone, on the sandy shore of the lake—our lake. I had given myself over to the wrenching sobs that tore out of my body, one after the other, until they were all gone, and I felt shaky and exhausted.

Oddly enough, when I was done, I felt the prickles of unease on the back of my neck which told me I was being watched. But a scan of the lake had told me there was no one—not even a stray hiker. Nothing moved, and it was eerily silent. Not even the sound of birds singing. Only the perfect stillness of the lake, reflecting the trees and the rocky face of the mountain that looked shockingly close, looming over the lake as it always did. After that, I left quickly, hiking the rest of the way up to my campsite. I had been planning on doing a vigil for my father tonight, staying up until daybreak, remembering the good times, drinking to his memory, all that jazz.

But not with the rapidly falling snow now accumulating on the ground around me. My father would have told me himself to hit the road if he'd been able to. He would have told me putting myself in danger to have a one-man funeral for him was just plain dumb.

I'll break everything down in a minute, I thought resentfully, praying the snow would miraculously stop in the meantime. I raised the metal flask to my father's memory and took a swig out of it, swallowing the awful burn of the brandy as it slid down my throat. It had been my dad's favorite adult beverage for reasons known only to him.

I glared up at the sky, feeling like it had personally betrayed me.

A snowflake landed right in my eye. I blinked furiously.

My vision cleared a moment later, and then I saw the wolves on the other side of my dying campfire.

I blinked again, certain I had to be imagining it. But they were still there. One very large male wolf with a coarse dark coat stood in the front. Five smaller wolves with gray coats stood behind him. All of them, even the smallest, were far larger than regular wolves had any right to be, almost the size of people. Their yellow eyes glinted inhumanly in the dimming firelight as they watched me.

I froze.

I was too surprised to even let out a cry of surprise. Instead, I stared at them in stupid shock, my mouth hanging open. Wolves were exceedingly rare in Washington state. What were the chances an entire pack of them would cross my path?

It was the weirdest thing, but the biggest one, the Alpha, cocked its head. The way it looked at me was almost human. For an instant, the expression on its face was almost like shared grief. Like it somehow understood why I was here and what I was doing, and it shared my feelings exactly.

I forgot to even be afraid as I stared at it.

Then, without warning, it leapt across the campfire and landed on my chest, its paws driving me down to the ground with shocking and sudden weight. I let out a mingled cry of surprise and outrage, too startled to even be scared of what it might do.

It locked gazes with me steadily for a long moment as though trying to tell me

something important, as though its pale-yellow eyes were searching mine for something. It lowered its snout to the side of my torso, above my solar plexus.

And then it bit me.

Chapter 3

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Pierce

It took a full pint of my blood to save the young man's life. Thankfully, he'd been sensible, even only half conscious, and he hadn't fought me. If he had, he might have died. Because he was that badly hurt.

I'd found him about a quarter of a mile away, on the ground, clutching his side, the snow around him so dark with blood it seemed almost black. When his hand fell away, it revealed a single bite on his ribcage. He'd been barely conscious, and he'd passed out the moment I picked him up. Moving at top speed, I had carried him in from the cold and placed him in front of my fireplace, hoping that the heat of the flames would warm his freezing body. Then, when he didn't wake up, I bared my fangs and bit my wrist, hardly even noticing the pain. I pressed my fresh wound to his mouth, willing him to drink.

He did.

At last, his eyes snapped open. They were a lovely shade of warm golden brown, like tiger's eye. His gaze locked with mine as he drank my blood.

He let out a little moan of pleasure, drinking more of me.

Arousal tore through my body as I saw how much this handsome stranger liked the taste of my blood. From the greedy, frenzied way that he sucked at my wrist, I could tell that he just couldn't get enough. And I wanted, suddenly and without warning, to give him as much of me as he could handle.

Scowling at myself for the ridiculous thoughts this stranger was evoking in me, I pulled my wrist back abruptly. “That’s plenty.”

He stared at me for a long moment, wiping the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. “You’re a vampire.”

The matter-of-fact way he said it was strange. He didn’t sound afraid. Nor was he filled with giddy, simpering glee at the mere sight of me, the way one of the vampire groupies who loved being fed upon would’ve been. Instead, he said it like he might’ve been casually commenting on the weather. So maybe he wasn’t as human as he looked.

“Yes,” I told him, trying to remind myself that I was the one who had brought him here and I had no right to feel upset with him for ruining my death day. “Let me guess. You’re a warlock?”

“A what?” he asked, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise at my question. Then he grimaced. “No, definitely not.”

“So you’re an Old Soul, then,” I guessed, frowning at him. Old Souls are perfectly human, with one very unusual twist. When they die, they’re reborn into a new body, remembering everything from their former lives. They’ve lived many, many lives, and they remember every single one with perfect clarity. They’re one of the great mysteries of the supernatural world—no one knows why they keep coming back, only that they do.

“I’m twenty-four.” His voice was softer than I would have expected, given the circumstances, but he gave me a look that communicated the fact that he had no idea what in the hell I was talking about. Then he seemed to disregard all of that entirely. He pushed himself onto an elbow. A few drops of my blood he’d missed still coated his lips. He gave me a lopsided grin, and I saw that he was drunk on me. In sufficient

quantities, vampire blood is intoxicating to mortals, rather like alcohol, but without the hangover in the morning. “Huh. I’ve never understood the big deal everyone makes about vampires, but I get it now. You’re sexy as hell.”

Yes, he was no doubt very drunk on my blood. And horny, judging by the gleam in his eye, the curve of his smile, and the way he kept his body open to me like he was silently begging me to climb on top of him and...

“You need to sleep now,” I told him with a glower, forcing my face back into its human visage. And like that, presto-chango, the fangs were gone. I added, “You’ve been through an ordeal.”

“Are you going to feed on me?” he asked, sounding more curious about the prospect than afraid. “Are you a Dracula vampire, or are you more of a Twilight vampire?”

I assumed he was referring to movies. Or maybe books. Or maybe both.

“Neither. I live in the real world, where when a vampire tells you it’s your bedtime, you go the fuck to sleep.”

“Don’t be a jerk,” he replied stonily, still seeming totally unphased by the fact that I was a vampire. Though, some of the drunkenness seemed to vanish from him, because a moment later, he added, “Wait. You saved my life.” He paused, swallowing hard and meeting my eyes. “Didn’t you?”

“You were hurt pretty badly,” I told him, making a conscious effort to keep my voice as gentle as possible. There was no need to upset him by telling him how close he’d come to dying. “That’s why you need to sleep?—”

He cut me off, pulling himself further into a sitting position. “I don’t want to sleep. I feel...better. I think.”

He stripped his black winter coat off, revealing a long-sleeved sage-colored shirt beneath it. He stripped that off, too, revealing his bare torso. It was covered in blood, but the wound he'd sustained was now completely healed.

I blinked, surprised at how much I enjoyed looking at him. He wasn't super-muscular or anything. But his body was lean and very, very masculine, with a seductive dusting of dark blond hair fanning out across his chest and both of his nipples were hard and begging to be played with. And his scent...

It was abruptly maddening. It shouldn't have been, but it was. You would think that all I would be able to smell would be blood, given that he was covered in it. But the way this strange human smelled wasn't like that at all. Instead, his scent brought back the memory of freshly laundered sheets at the orphanage where I was raised. Clean cotton dried in the sun. A simple but pure memory; one of the few I had that reminded me that I was cared for and safe. Oddly, his scent evoked a strange sort of peace in my emotions, which was entirely at odds with the extremely unhelpful bodily reaction I was having.

Plenty of humans smell good, I reminded myself harshly. There's nothing special about this one.

I raised my eyes to his and found him grinning at me again like he'd followed my gaze and somehow guessed what I was thinking. His face was rugged and angular, with a dusting of stubble across his jaw, but there was something boyishly innocent there as well. His hair was cut short and only a few shades lighter than his eyes, a dark gold color halfway between blond and brown. His skin was lightly tanned, even though it wasn't even technically spring yet. The unselfconscious way he smiled at me was decidedly masculine and almost pornographically inviting.

Then he seemed to remember what he was supposed to be doing because he tore his gaze away from mine and stared down at his chest, his dark eyes searching for the

wound he'd sustained and finding nothing. His eyebrows drew together in confusion, but it didn't last long. He lifted his gaze back to me. When he spoke next, he sounded puzzled. "There's no wound at all. I thought I was going to die."

"Well, you aren't," I told him stiffly, doing my level best—and failing miserably—to not look at him.

"Thank you," he said quietly, holding my gaze.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Look all you want, I told myself firmly. But he's going to run for the hills the second the shock wears off. Don't you dare mess around with him. No matter how gorgeous he is.

"I would have done that for anyone," I said stiffly.

"But you did it for me," the young man replied.

"We'll figure out how to get you home in the morning," I added, still waiting for his horror to sink in. For the screaming and cowering to start when it snapped into place, exactly what I was. The fact that he was trapped in a remote mountain cabin with a vampire. When that didn't immediately happen, I added, "But for right now, you need sleep."

"You keep saying that, but if you think I'm sleeping right now, you're out of your mind!" he snapped, glaring at me. "I was just bitten by a wolf, and then I got rescued by a real-life vampire. And now you want me to sleep?"

"A wolf," I repeated, tension darting through my body. "What do you mean that you got attacked by a wolf?"

"Yeah," he replied, grimacing. "There were a bunch of them, and they were huge. But only one of them attacked me. It jumped on my chest, and then it bit me." Then he frowned. "It was strange, actually. He only did it once, on my ribs... Like he was trying hard not to kill me in one go. Then they ran off, all at the same time. It was really weird. And painful."

“Damn it,” I whispered. “Fucking werewolves.”

“Wait,” he said, his eyes getting wide. “No. No way. You’re joking.”

I shrugged.

“Am I—am I going to turn into a werewolf now or something?”

“So, you can be sensible about the supernatural,” I said, catching the wavery note of fear in his voice. “Good to know.”

“Please don’t joke about this. I don’t want to be one of them.” He actually shuddered. Apparently, vampires were fine with him, but werewolves were a bridge too far.

“Their bite would have killed your mortal body and remade it, and then you would have become a werewolf. But you’ve ingested quite a lot of vampire blood, which healed you, and now there’s no bite. You’ll be fine. You’ll be a little sensitive to silver from now on, maybe.”

Why, oh why, did I feel so relieved at watching him visibly relax like that? Why did I want to comfort him, this handsome stranger who was crashing my death day? It was the strangest thing, but I felt strangely... drawn to him. There was a pull between us that felt almost palpable.

You’re being crazy, I chided myself. There’s no pull. He’s handsome, and you’re lonely. That’s all.

Besides, I had much bigger problems than worrying about this human’s emotions. Werewolves lurked nearby. And they were stalking this young man.

Werewolves were rare, and they were generally very reclusive creatures. They

sometimes formed strong bonds with human communities, to the point where they could consider entire human families and even towns to be an extended part of their pack. But they generally detest other supernatural creatures, except perhaps shifters and other breeds of were-creatures. And there was a werewolf pack in the Cascade Mountain Range, but they were supposed to be about a hundred miles north of us, up near the Canadian border. They weren't supposed to be this far south. They weren't supposed to be setting up shop anywhere near my cabin.

I felt the wild urge to leave this mortal and scour the mountains until I found the pack. Then I'd beat some sense into them. What were they even thinking, attacking this young man?

Werewolves don't hunt humans. Generally speaking, they protect humans. They are supposed to be guardians. So, if they had bitten him, it meant only one thing: they wanted him as part of their pack. There was no other explanation for it.

I stared at the human, feeling a mixture of resentment and protectiveness as I tried to make sense of this. What the wolves had done—tried to do, at least—was brutal. They'd tried to rip this young man from his life and fit him into their small corner of the wider supernatural world, where he would have had to give up absolutely everything for them. And without so much as a single word of explanation as to what was happening to him. They hadn't even tried to get his consent first. He had thought he was dying. Worse, they hadn't even stuck around to make it easier for him, to comfort him as he transformed. It seemed wrong to me what they'd done.

The same thing had been done to me one hundred years ago, but it was different in the sense that Nathaniel hadn't had any choice—if he had tried to get my consent, I would have died. I had been so badly hurt that not even his blood would have saved me. But the Alpha that had claimed this young man had been able to choose. And he'd chosen wrong.

But had I just unwittingly trespassed on an Alpha's claim?

As the king's only progeny, I would have to be very political about how I handled this. We were probably going to war with the Seattle witches at any moment, so we couldn't exactly afford to make enemies of some random werewolf pack as well.

Still, for reasons I couldn't quite explain, even to myself, I didn't like the idea of this young man becoming a wolf against his will. And yes, I was certain that my blood had undone the effects of the wolf bite—now it made perfect sense why it had taken so much of it to heal his wounds—but there was no guarantee that the wolves wouldn't come back and try again.

They wouldn't dare, I thought, glancing at the door.

"You're worried they're going to come back," the young man guessed, following my gaze. He shivered again, even though he was right beside the fire and should have been at least reasonably warm. He added, "Aren't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, even though he was right. "We might seem like monsters to you, but we have rules for how we do things. As long as you're here, you're perfectly safe."

Probably. But I didn't say that part aloud.

He didn't look convinced. Thinking that he meant to argue, I cut him off before he could. "If you won't sleep, can you at least go shower?" My voice sounded snappish and far unkind than I meant for it to be. I pointed in the general direction of the bathroom. "You're covered in blood, and it's making it hard for me to think rationally."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Another lie. It was actually his scent that was making it hard to focus. The blood had very little to do with it. But I needed a minute to myself to decide what, exactly, I was going to do next. I needed a minute alone without being in danger of meeting those big golden-brown eyes and giving in to the temptation this young man represented.

I expected him to argue, but he hadn't done anything I'd expected him to do thus far, so naturally, he didn't do that either. He stood quickly, wobbling for only a moment—but long enough for me to dart into a standing position and steady him without even deciding to. The bare skin of his chest burned beneath the cool skin of my hands.

I expected him to flinch away at my touch. Instead, he met my gaze and gave me a small, encouraging smile. “We could shower together. If you want.” He suggested it just like that. Bold as you please.

My jaw must have dropped open because he added, sounding smug, “You were looking at my body way too hard, so I know you’ve got to be into guys. Or, at least, you’re clearly into me.”

“Definitely not!” I snapped, even though I was extremely tempted, the wheels in my head already spinning in less than helpful directions. I added, halfheartedly trying to scare him, “I was looking at your jugular because I’m a vampire, and I drink blood, you ass.”

It wouldn't have held up in court. I can tell you that right now.

It was clear he didn't believe me either, but after a long moment of both of us waiting

for me to change my mind, he sighed and then gave me a half-shrug. “Okay, suit yourself.”

Then he turned and trotted off in the direction I’d pointed out earlier. I watched him vanish into the bathroom, glowering at his retreating form. My glower deepened even further when he didn’t even bother to close the door all the way, a clear invitation in case I changed my mind.

All I wanted was to be alone on my death day, the one day of the year that I took for myself. And this young man—I realized I still didn’t even know his name—was going to make that impossible. Worse, it was as clear as day that he was going to be nothing but trouble.

And, like it or not, between the snowstorm—which a quick peek at my window told me had now become a full-blown blizzard—and the wolves that undoubtedly still lurked somewhere outside, if I wanted to continue saving this young man’s life, that meant I had no choice. I was stuck in this cabin with him, at least for the immediate future.

## Chapter 4

James

I decided to throw myself to the wolves—quite literally—halfway through my shower.

The vampire’s bathroom was about as nice as you’d expect. I’d already gathered from his expensive clothes and even more expensive furniture—not to mention his attitude problem in general—that he was rich. His cabin didn’t have a ‘sketchy mountain man log cabin’ vibe. It was much more of a ‘designer log cabin straight out of an expensive catalog’ sort of aesthetic. His bathroom was no exception. There were

black marble counters, black and red tiled floors that were heated, a glass-encased shower that was almost like standing under the warm summer rain, and a collection of bath products that must've cost at least a hundred dollars a bottle.

I used them with gleeful abandon, feeling more and more resentful toward the vampire with each passing moment. I'd left the door to the bathroom wide open, hoping that he might change his mind and come join me. And he didn't, even though it was perfectly clear from the way he'd sized up my body—more than once, I might add—that he was very interested in me, at least on a purely physical level.

About halfway through my shower though, I started to feel more... normal. More like myself. And therefore, my resentment was increasingly mixed with a grudging feeling of gratitude that he hadn't taken me up on my offer.

What was I even doing?

I had come here to grieve my father. Then I got bitten by wolves. Actual werewolves. I still couldn't wrap my head around that.

I don't know why it should have surprised me so much to find that werewolves existed. It didn't surprise me in the least to know that vampires existed, because one of them had saved my life once.

I hadn't known exactly what was happening at the time, of course. I'd been seventeen years old, and I'd gotten into a car wreck that should have killed me. A drunk driver had swerved into my lane and hit my car head-on when I'd been coming home from a friend's house. My car had been crushed like a tin can, but the driver's side door had been found a good fifteen feet away from the car, with the hinges a mess of twisted metal, like it had been torn off with great force and then thrown.

The first responders had found me laid out gently on the side of the highway, as far

from the oncoming traffic as possible. My hands had been folded across my chest and I hadn't had a single scratch on me, even though my clothing was completely covered in blood. The taste of tangy-sweet copper had lingered in my mouth, and it had been just like waking up with this strange vampire's blood in my mouth.

I had one single memory of my rescuer. A raven-haired girl with brown skin who looked to be about fourteen or fifteen. But instead of being dark, her eyes were a deep shade of reddish gold that seemed to almost glow with an inner light. And her teeth had been needle-point sharp. Just like the handsome vampire in the other room.

Which meant she'd been a vampire too.

But she had looked down at me with concern, instead of bloodlust. "You'll be okay," she whispered softly. "I called for help. When they get here, tell them you crawled away from the car. Don't tell them I was here."

Fading in and out of consciousness, I'd merely nodded. Then she'd gone, so quickly that she might have simply vanished into thin air.

All these years, I'd wondered if it was a dream. Now, I knew that it wasn't.

Looking back on it, I was now certain that the vampire who had saved my life then had given me some of her blood to heal my injuries. Which meant that my life had already been saved once before by a vampire. That probably explained my non-reaction to this vampire, the total lack of fear response I should likely be having. My subconscious probably already knew what I was just consciously becoming aware of: vampires weren't the bad guys in my story. They were the heroes.

And then, tonight, the moment I'd realized I was a goner, I had been saved by a vampire yet again. Granted, he was no gentle dark-haired wraith girl with strange eyes, but a very solid, very present, very pushy vampire with an attitude problem.

And I was stuck here with him.

And I was throwing myself at him, apparently.

Why was I doing that?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

He was gorgeous, of course. But so were lots of guys. And yes, he was a vampire. That was definitely new territory for me in terms of intimate partners. I had a healthy sex drive, and though I'm not usually into random encounters with strangers, I've also never had any problem with establishing a sexual relationship with guys that I find attractive. It's usually friends with benefits, but still. I certainly found the vampire plenty attractive. He had short dark hair, pale skin, an angular face, and amber eyes, a color I didn't even know was possible without contact lenses. And even without being a supernatural blood-sucking creature of the night, he looked strong enough and muscular enough to snap me in half, the exact kind of guy that had always given me a thrill of excitement.

But that wasn't it either. Not really. There was something very strange about him. The moment I laid eyes on him, I felt like I had known him my entire life. And I knew, knew that he wouldn't hurt me—couldn't hurt me.

More than that, I knew that I wanted him in some visceral way. Like my very body and soul wanted him, even if my brain was still wondering what in the hell was going on.

Which had to be the blood loss talking. Or the shock. Or the something. Because that wasn't how I operated, ever.

Besides, I had already shot my shot, and he wasn't into it. And I was kind of coming off quite a bit easier than usual. And... well, what was I even looking for?

Sex, for sure. Which was, again, weird—I wasn't usually so forward.

Even though I had that weird inner certainty that told me he wouldn't hurt me, there was something dangerous about him. And not merely because he was a vampire. I was feeling strange, irrational things—impossible stirrings in my heart that definitely shouldn't have been stirring. And it needed to be squashed immediately.

Love doesn't exist, I reminded myself harshly. Love at first sight sure as hell doesn't exist. And even if it did, you wouldn't find it with a vampire. Nope. Ain't gonna happen.

I couldn't help remembering the stricken way my father had looked on the night my mother left us. The hollow wrecked look in his eyes was forever seared into my brain. I still don't know what she said to him that night, but whatever it was, she had crushed him. He'd never been the same afterward. He'd tried to pretend he was for my sake, but he hadn't been.

I couldn't stop myself from hating her a little because of that. But I'd promised myself a long time ago that what had happened to my father would never happen to me. I was never going to give my heart over to anyone. Ever. Love is for suckers who were into courting pain, even if they didn't know it.

No way, no how.

I stopped scrubbing, letting the water beat down on me and swirl down the drain. I felt a strange mix of dismay and conviction as I realized what I needed to do next.

The vampire had saved me.

And if I wanted to be loyal and true, like my dad had always told me to be, it meant I needed to pay back that favor now. Because the vampire had saved my life without a second thought, and he'd clearly gotten himself into some sort of serious trouble as a result of that choice. I had read the look in his eyes when he had glanced at the door

after I had told him all about the wolves. And I had known right then, from that one wary look at the door, that protecting me was going to be dangerous for him. He'd lied about it, but that didn't matter. I'm a good judge of character, and I can read people extremely easily. Being hypervigilant about the people you love suddenly walking away from you without any kind of warning will do wonders for your powers of observation.

The wolves were going to come back for me—I felt certain of that. Which meant that the best thing I could offer to the vampire now was to leave.

But could I, on a purely practical level, do that?

I thought so. I'm in good shape. My coat is warm, made for the cold weather. And I felt fine now—not even a trace left of the bite. I didn't even feel faint from the blood loss.

I could easily head back down the mountain. Though I didn't want to pollute the forest with my gear, I could leave my campsite behind if I had to. It would be too dangerous to stop and pack anything up. Nothing there was crucial anyhow, except maybe my phone. But that was replaceable. I might even get away from the wolves.

Maybe.

And then I'd go home and forget about all of this. Or, more likely, I'd get attacked by the wolves again. But if I did, they'd just be trying to turn me into one of them. Though, I wasn't looking forward to a repeat of the wolf bite. It hurt like hell.

Who knows? I told myself. Maybe being a werewolf would be fun. Maybe I'd learn to like it.

But I didn't believe that for a second. The wolves had jumped me for no reason,

without warning, without asking for my consent. That already told me everything I needed to know about them. I didn't want to become a creature capable of something like that.

But the bloodsucker had already told me I would live through the experience.

I had no such assurances about the vampire, who would be horribly outnumbered once the wolves came back. And if I was here, they would surely come back for me. The vampire, at least, thought so. And, remembering how the Alpha had looked at me, standing on my chest with that strangely human expression plainly in his eyes, I couldn't help but think so too. And then the outcome would be the same, except that I would have allowed the vampire's kindness to be paid back with violence.

The thought of anything bad happening to the vampire was... unacceptable. It didn't make any rational sense. It had to do with the unusual draw that I felt for him. It was all wrapped up in a strange protective impulse. I didn't understand it one bit, but I sure as hell felt it.

You're being ridiculous, I scolded myself halfheartedly. But really, I couldn't bring myself to care.

Instead, I decided to rationalize.

I didn't know if it was more or less healthy when you did it on purpose, but I knew that the vampire had already put himself out on a limb for me. I wasn't selfish enough to stay if it meant getting him killed. My mother might have made that choice, but my father never would have.

And I sure as hell knew exactly who I preferred to take after.

That almost made a certain kind of sense if you squinted just right at it. But the truth

was, I simply couldn't allow the vampire to get caught in the crossfire if and when the wolves came back. I didn't know why, but the idea of something happening to me seemed less awful than the idea of something happening to him.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

That left me with only one option. I needed to leave. And I needed to do it right now. Before the wolves came back for me.

### Chapter 5

Pierce

I had no idea what to do next.

If the Alpha had claimed this young man, I didn't have much right getting in the way. Except, based on what the young man had told me, he had never given his consent. Werewolves don't always consider things like that in the heat of the moment—it's the animal in them—but it's still technically illegal for them to turn someone into a wolf against their will, and they know it. I would, according to the letter of the law, be well within my rights as the vampire prince of Seattle, the closest major principality to this place, to forbid this from happening—unless the human consented to it, that is. Whether the wolves would listen was another question entirely. I could, of course, make them listen.

But violence against the leader of a wolf pack would only make new enemies, right when the king couldn't afford it. When we couldn't afford it. The witches were vying for control of the supernatural community, and they were every bit as powerful as we were, if not more so. War was imminent, and if I handled this wrong, it might mean more of our people dying as a result.

Yet, this young man hadn't consented to any of this. Maybe it was because it was my death day, but I empathized with him. No one had gotten my consent, either.

Nathaniel hadn't been able to get my consent, and I didn't blame him for it for a second, but it didn't change anything. I was still a creature of darkness, and I'd never asked to be.

I refused to let that same thing happen to the young man.

I would need to protect him without resorting to violence. There was no other choice. I knew I wasn't going to let the wolves have him. But I didn't want to start another war either.

The young man marched out of the bathroom, interrupting my thoughts. He was wearing only his trousers, and again, I was struck by his physical beauty. And with the blood washed off—with designer bath products that quite literally cost a king's ransom, I might add—his scent was even stronger than before.

Clean cotton. Sunlight. Warmth. If those last two don't quite sound like something that you should be able to smell, my body would have vehemently disagreed with you. Because being next to him was like standing in a pool of warm sunlight, without the bother of worrying how it was going to sap your strength or irritate your eyes. It reminded me of what it was like to be human, watching the world pass by from the steps of the church I was raised in, convincing myself with everything I had inside my chest that I belonged to it, that I was part of the hustle and bustle in a meaningful way.

It was a strangely pleasant memory.

"I'm leaving," the young man told me, without any kind of preamble, gathering up his bloodstained shirt and yanking it on with brisk movements. "It's the best thing for me to do."

I stared at him, the soap bubble of memory popping like it had never been. I felt a

moment of sheer incredulity, certain that I must have misheard him. I only realized that he was being totally serious when he picked up his bloodstained winter coat as well.

“It’s freezing out there,” I bit out, appalled, once it became obvious that I hadn’t misheard him. “Literally. You have a human body. You would die before the night was through, even if they didn’t come back for you. By the way, what were you thinking, setting up camp tonight in the middle of a snowstorm?”

“I’d head back to my Jeep, obviously,” the young man replied. He shrugged, though I saw the flash of pain in his eyes, plain as day. He added, “Not that it’s any of your business, but my dad died. I was scattering his ashes. And the weather report didn’t say it was supposed to snow.”

“It’s Washington state,” I replied, shaking my head, marveling at his idiocy. “And you’re in the mountains, and it’s only the first week of March. It could have snowed here at any time.”

He shrugged again, but I could tell he was about to get defensive. “I didn’t want the ashes in my house anymore. Anyway, that doesn’t matter. Thank you for everything, but I’ll be going now. Thanks.”

“You didn’t get along with your dad?” I guessed, stepping into his path and putting my hands on his shoulders to stop him before he could make it to the door behind me. I found myself still trying to make sense of his behavior, even as I tried to stop him from going back out there.

He sighed, leaning into my touch for a split second, a gesture that seemed almost unconscious. Then he stepped away from me, an annoyed expression darting across his face.

“No, my dad was awesome.” He paused, chewing on his lower lip for a moment, as though deciding what to tell me. “But it felt like having a ghost in the house. I couldn’t take it anymore. It was just me... and the ashes. So I figured I’d stop putting it off and get it done, so he could rest. So that we could both rest.”

“So, you traded a ghost for a hungry vampire and a pack of pissed-off werewolves.”

“I guess so,” he agreed, shivering again. His tone offered nothing in terms of how he felt about that trade. Then he added, more triumphantly, “So, they are going to be upset. They are going to try again. That’s what you’re saying.”

Inwardly, I cursed myself. And him. I had fed him a lot of my blood, so he should be drunk off his ass right now, feeling no pain. And causing me no problems.

Except he was clearly way too stubborn for that. Lucky me.

“I’m going back out there,” he told me, his tone flat and hard, like he was trying to be tough. He even glared at me, trying to stare me down.

I didn’t understand him one bit. Most humans would have been cowering under a blanket in his shoes, right? My intrigue ratcheted up a notch.

“Over my dead body,” I growled, but it was halfhearted.

Still, I couldn’t help glancing at the front door again. Surely the wolves would have noticed that the young man wasn’t in their company. That he hadn’t transformed under the light of the moon. That he wasn’t running with them right now.

“No,” the young man said, ducking out of my grasp and heading right for the door. “They aren’t coming here. I’m going to get to my Jeep, and then I’m going to leave. If they do come back for me, it’ll just be me they find.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

I used my vamp speed to block his path again, putting myself between him and the door. I moved so fast that it must have seemed like a blur to him.

“No.”

To his credit, he hardly jumped.

“I get it. You’re freakishly fast.” He glared at me yet again. “Now, get out of my way.”

He was brave. I had to give him that. In fact, he took all this in stride in a way I’d never seen before. Humans weren’t usually so sensible. Or so stupid.

“Absolutely not, you foolish human.”

“If I stay here, they’re going to come back and blow your nice house down with both of us still in it. If I’m out there, that doesn’t happen. So, yeah, I’m leaving.”

“This isn’t a fairy tale. This ends with you becoming one of them. It’s a painful process. And it’s a brutal life.”

He grimaced at that. “I have a high pain tolerance. And the life I had before wasn’t so hot either,” he shot back, crossing his arms over his chest. “Stop being an ass and let me go.”

“No,” I said again.

“You’re impossible,” he told me, glaring at me with a stubborn set to his jaw. “There are six of them, vampire. Against one of you.”

“Are you...” I trailed off, cocking my head to the side and frowning at him, trying to figure out what was going on inside of his mind. My jaw dropped when it clicked. “Wait, are you trying to protect me?”

The question was ludicrous, of course. The human should have been terrified of me. Not plotting out ways to protect me from a handful of werewolves.

“Obviously. But you’re making it hard to do that, so I’d like you to move now.”

“I’m supposed to be protecting you.”

“Says who?” he demanded. “That’s nuts. I’m a total stranger to you. You healed me and put yourself at risk in the process. It would be really messed up if I let you get mauled by a pack of wolves on my account.” His jaw hardened like he was steeling himself to be brave. He went on, “Now that I know they’re not planning on killing me, this seems like a pretty simple solution to a messy problem. Either I get away, or they turn me into a wolf. Whichever way it shakes out, if I leave now, you won’t get ripped apart just because you tried to help me.”

“Their Alpha probably wants you for some reason. Maybe as a mate.”

“Great,” he said sarcastically, without missing a beat. “It’s been ages since I’ve had a good lay. You’re clearly not up for it—maybe he is. So, get out of my way.”

“They won’t attack me,” I told him, not at all sure that was true. “I’m the only son of the vampire king of Seattle. They wouldn’t dare.”

The young man paused long enough to give me a sideways sort of look at that. The

corners of his lips twitched like he was fighting back a smile. “Yeah, I guess I figured you were an only child.”

I stared back at him, appalled. He was completely without any kind of sensibility—even the most basic self-preservation instinct—to be insulting a vampire like this.

I’d give him this, though. He wasn’t like any other human I had ever met. Not at all. I couldn’t help the fascination I felt—nor the annoyance that came fast on its heels. But nothing was going to make me let him go back out into the snowstorm, where anything could have killed him. We were stuck together, and I should have been infuriated by this. However, I couldn’t help feeling like...

Well, I couldn’t help but feel like I abruptly wanted to know him now. I wanted to understand what was going through his mind. I wanted to know why he was willing to protect a stranger, a vampire, even at the cost of his own humanity.

## Chapter 6

James

“You’re not keeping me as a prisoner,” I said, feeling outright scandalized as I stared the vampire down. “No fucking way.”

The vampire crossed his arms and stared back at me, clearly intent on doing exactly that. He had one eyebrow arched like he was silently asking me what in the hell I planned to do about it.

I glared back at him, but I was willing to bet good money that I couldn’t overpower him. If he didn’t want me to leave, I wasn’t leaving.

The arrogant way that he looked at me was sexy as hell. And even though I tried to ignore that fact, my body seemed to have plenty of other less-than-helpful ideas. I wondered if he had any idea of the kind of effect that he was having on me.

I doubted it, but then, I'm a sucker for guys like him.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

He had a very angular, severe face. His nose was thin and proud, his jaw looked hard enough to sharpen a knife on, and there was a cruel set to his mouth that was way more enticing than it should have been. He had dark slashes for eyebrows and, below those, eyes that were the color of amber. Once again, I was struck by the oddness of his eyes. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he was a vampire.

Strange, how quickly that fact seemed perfectly normal to me. But I had always known that the young woman who had saved me from the car accident wasn't human. Just a good Samaritan vampire passing through, apparently.

I frowned, wondering if all vampires had savior complexes. Or maybe being a vampire didn't change who you were all that much as a person? Like, if you were a good person to start with, maybe you became a good person who happened to just be gifted with extra speed and strength. And a desire to drink your meals.

My gaze dropped to his lips, where a few drops of blood lingered from when he'd bitten his wrist to save my life. And, of course, I'd seen the fangs earlier. They hadn't been all that scary if I was being perfectly honest. They'd looked like very sharp canine teeth, except maybe a smidge longer than was normal for a human.

My gaze drifted down lower, really letting myself take in his appearance. He was easily two hundred pounds of pure muscle, with broad shoulders and a well-developed chest, the outline of which was distinguishable through his black V-neck cashmere sweater. He wore matching black slacks that fit him way too well for my own good. He looked expensive, annoyed, and dangerous.

"You're not going back outside tonight, human," he told me. "Put it out of your

head.”

“Stupid vampire,” I grumbled, peeling my gaze away from his body with real effort.

He didn’t reply, but somehow I could tell he was trying to fight back a smile.

That’s great, bud, I thought, moving from annoyed to outright infuriated. Glad I amuse you.

Not trying to be too obvious about it, I scanned the cabin. I hoped to locate another exit, but I found none. It wasn’t necessarily a small space, but there wasn’t a back entrance, and there was only one window next to the door. Besides, the vampire had already proven he could move blindingly fast—he’d catch me regardless.

Though it was all one room, it had a full—albeit small—kitchen. To the left of the front door, there was a circular wooden table with a couple of chairs pushed into it. In the main area was a black leather couch with silver grommets that looked outrageously expensive and matching wing chairs arranged around a fireplace made from shiny black bricks. I had to hand it to the vampire. Total villain aesthetic, but it worked. Tall and narrow espresso-colored bookcases hugged the fireplace on either side, filled with a very neat and orderly collection of books. I bet he even alphabetized them—he looked like the type to be obsessive about the small things.

On the floor in front of the fireplace was a snow-white fur rug that looked an awful lot like it might have once been the skin of a polar bear. Except that it was now dotted red, evidence that he had marched out into the storm and fed me—a total stranger—his blood to save my life. Or my humanity. Whatever.

“What are you even doing out here?” I asked, turning back to him, ready to go on the offensive. “Or do you enjoy the prospect of getting torn apart by a pack of werewolves so much that you just can’t stay away?”

“It’s my death day,” he replied. Then he looked almost surprised at himself like he hadn’t meant to tell me that.

“Your death day,” I repeated, searching his face. From the quick and easy way that he’d said it, I could guess he didn’t mean that he was planning on dying today but rather that this was an established tradition of some sort. Like when someone casually mentions their birthday. But judging by the whole setup, the fireplace, the snow, the seclusion, the glass of red wine on the floor beside one of the armchairs, and the fact he was obviously alone... I intuited that his death day was meant to be a somber affair. Something to be endured alone rather than enjoyed with other people. “The day you were turned into a vampire?”

Raw emotion flashed across his face, so I knew I’d scored a direct hit. Grudgingly, he nodded, still standing between me and the door.

Interesting. My assumption had been right. He was here, alone, on what amounted to his vampire birthday. It clearly wasn’t a celebratory occasion though, which meant that he... what? Had problems with being a vampire? Missed his humanity? That, or maybe he just really, really enjoyed brooding.

I suddenly wasn’t sure how I felt about this line of thought since I wanted to stay infuriated with him.

“I’m sorry I’m interrupting. I feel like I crashed your party.”

Now that I was face to face with him again, I was once again acutely aware that I owed him my life.

“You didn’t mean to get attacked by wolves,” he replied coolly. He added, “I’m tired of calling you ‘human.’ What’s your name?”

“James,” I said immediately, matching his cool tone exactly, once again scanning the room in vain for an exit.

“Just James?” he prompted, sounding annoyed. His eyes followed mine, and it seemed to click with him what I was doing because his expression darkened.

“Yes,” I replied. “And are you just ‘vampire,’ or do you have a name, too?”

“Pierce.”

I smiled. “You don’t look like a Pierce. Maybe like a Vlad or a Demetri or something.”

“That’s offensive,” Pierce scoffed, but he seemed to relax a notch. His eyes were still filled with worry like he thought I might bolt at any moment. He added, “You’re stereotyping me because I’m a vampire.”

“Guilty. Sorry. You’re the first vampire I’ve met. Sort of, at least.”

“Sort of,” he repeated, cocking his head to the side, his amber eyes studying mine intently. “I was wondering if maybe you’d met others like me. You just seem so... calm. I expected you to run for the door when you realized what I was. That’s what any normal person would do.”

“I do want to run for the door,” I reminded him, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice. “But you’re in the way.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

“You know what I mean,” he said, shaking his head. But I noticed the smile threatening to form on his lips. “You want to leave out of a desire to protect me. A vampire.”

“You seem awfully hung up on that.” I cocked my head to the side, mirroring him. I meant for it to be mocking, but my words came out far more earnest than I meant them to. “Hasn’t anyone wanted to protect you before?”

Pain chased surprise across his face. “Just once. My maker. He protected me.” Pierce laughed. “I mean, I guess he probably wants to protect me all the time.”

“You have a partner then.” I couldn’t disguise how crestfallen I sounded.

“Strictly platonic,” Pierce replied, without missing a beat. “He’s more like a father, best friend, and older brother, all rolled up into one person.” He paused. “There’s no one like that for me.” He cleared his throat, a surprisingly human reflex. “Err, romantic, I mean.”

Why, oh why, did that particular bit of news make me so unreasonably happy?

Quit being dumb, I chided myself. So what if the vampire is single?

“Um, so, you are into guys, right?”

Pierce pursed his lips, considering me, like he was abruptly worried what I’d do with this information. “Yes.”

That particular bit of news also pleased me far more than it should have. A blush crept across my cheeks, which Pierce definitely noticed.

“Is that all vampires, or just you?”

“I was attracted to men before I was turned,” Pierce replied. “But all vampires are at least a little bit bisexual. Most humans are too, I suspect. The process of becoming a vampire strips away all your repressed or latent desires. For vampires, same-sex relationships are at least as common as relationships with someone of the opposite gender. It’s not taboo or forbidden. It’s like that with most of the supernatural races, actually. There’s a lot more freedom to love whoever you wish.”

“That actually sounds kind of...nice.”

“Look, if I step out of the way, are you going to make a run for it?”

“Undecided,” I told him honestly, giving the door behind him a hard look. “It’s not a good idea for you to keep me here. The wolves could come back any second. It would be easier for both of us if you let me leave.”

“Maybe you ought to let me worry about me,” Pierce suggested, folding his muscular arms across his equally muscular chest.

Stop noticing that! I commanded myself.

“Pot. Kettle. Black,” I shot back, gesturing back and forth between us with one hand, narrowing my eyes to glare at him yet again. “And are all vampires hypocrites, or is it just you?”

He shook his head, but then he burst out laughing as though I’d said something hysterically funny.

My glare deepened, and I wanted desperately to ask him what was so funny, but I was pretty sure I'd sound sullen and sulky if I did, so I kept my lips firmly shut.

"See?" he asked after he'd recovered enough to speak. He beamed at me triumphantly, like he'd proven a point. "That right there. You don't seem afraid of me at all."

Afraid, no. Annoyed, absolutely.

"Do you have a spare shirt?" I asked, changing the subject. "I'd like to sit down, but I don't want to ruin your nice couch with all the blood." I gestured to myself.

It didn't even cross my mind to go for the door the moment he moved out of the way to grab me some clean clothes. Nope, not at all.

"The blood is dry now. If you want to sit, then sit," he shot back, somehow making it clear that he'd guessed my game plan and wasn't falling for it. "Would you mind telling me why you aren't afraid of vampires? Have you been claimed by one of us before?"

"Not sure what 'claimed' means in this context, but no."

Pierce continued to stare at me, clearly intent on waiting me out.

Eventually, I sighed and added, "Look, I was in a car wreck once, back in high school. A drunk driver hit me head-on, going crazy fast. I don't remember much about it, but I'm pretty sure it was a vampire who saved my life. But I never saw her again afterward."

"Her?" Pierce's eyebrows knitted together. "Oh. I just assumed..." He trailed off, his expression darkening.

“Oh,” I said, after a long moment spent trying to decipher Pierce’s abruptly unhappy expression. “No, I’m definitely into guys. But, I mean, it wasn’t... intimate or anything. She gave me some of her blood to heal me, then she took off. I had always wondered if maybe I’d imagined it. But the driver’s side door was torn off the car and thrown, like she was in a hurry to get to me.” I paused, chewing on my lower lip in thought. “I think I was probably hurt really badly, but when the paramedics arrived, there wasn’t a scratch on me.” I paused again, swallowing my bile at the memory. “Um, the other driver though... he didn’t make it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

“He made his choices, and he suffered his consequences accordingly,” Pierce replied coldly. “It’s interesting that she didn’t just feed on you, though.”

I gestured to him, letting out a little laugh. “I mean, is it? From where I’m sitting, vampires are kind of like superheroes with fangs. Like, you guys just kind of show up whenever I’m in danger, like I’m Lois Lane or something.”

He obviously understood the Superman reference, because he snorted, and his lips jerked into a smile. “So that’s why you’re not afraid of vampires. Because you’re Lois Lane.”

I sighed, suddenly recognizing that he was trying to distract me—and worse, that it was working. I did my best to cling to my annoyance, even if it was increasingly mingled with my relief at not having to face down the wolf pack again.

Yet, at least.

I crossed the room and sank onto the couch nonetheless. I hadn’t been lying about that part—I felt like a total idiot, standing there in his living room, arguing with him. Arguing with a vampire.

“I don’t know about ‘vampires’ in the plural,” I told him, thinking it over and assessing my reaction to him so far. “Who knows, maybe I’ll meet a vampire someday that will spook me. But look, here’s how it is. I already knew that vampires aren’t mindless killers—in fact, some of you, at least, clearly have a lot of compassion and restraint. I mean, you’re right. The one who saved me way back when could’ve totally snacked on me—I was covered in blood. But she chose not to.”

I paused again, locking eyes with him. “And you’re obviously not planning on hurting me, so ergo, I’m not afraid of you. It’s as simple as that.”

Both of his eyebrows shot up at this, but he didn’t say anything aloud to contradict me.

I didn’t like his skeptical, disbelieving expression, so I started listing off my evidence, counting it off on my fingers. “First, you went out of your way to come and find me in the woods, which meant you’re selfless enough to value a stranger’s life over not-celebrating your vampire birthday. Second, you healed me—again, a total stranger—when you didn’t have to. Third, I was bleeding all over the place, and you didn’t feed on me. Which means you’re just like her. The one who saved me the first time. One of the good ones. And fourth, even though you’re being a jerk about it, you’re still actively trying to protect me from the fucking wolves outside that door.”

He rolled his eyes at that, but the corners of his mouth jerked up into what looked like another involuntary smile.

“If you add all that together, it means you’re trustworthy,” I concluded. I gave him a sideways look, then added, “Probably.”

“Probably,” he agreed, laughing like that was the funniest thing in the world.

Why on earth did he have to look so unfairly sexy when he laughed?

It had been a while since I’d had any gentleman callers, and apparently, I was extremely horny. If I lived through this without turning into a werewolf, I would need to rectify that situation immediately after I got back to town. Maybe I’d call up one of those friends with benefits I occasionally messed around with and put all this squarely behind me.

He eyed me warily, but he stepped away from the door, coming to sit down across from me on the chair to my right, next to where the abandoned glass of wine was still sitting on the floor, leaving me a clear path to the door.

A dare, maybe. Or a test. I didn't take the bait, obviously. He had literally just demonstrated that in a test of speed, I'd lose in a heartbeat. I needed to bide my time.

Still, when I didn't make a break for the door, he visibly relaxed.

"And you're, what, unsurprised to have it confirmed for you that vampires are real?" he asked, still sounding genuinely curious and weirdly fixated on why I wasn't quaking in my boots. "It doesn't alarm you that monsters exist in the world?"

"Plenty of humans do some pretty evil shit to each other," I shot back. "So, no. Just because you're a vampire doesn't necessarily make you a monster." I paused. "Not in my book, at least. Again, you guys have been the heroes in my story so far."

"Look, I'm trying very hard to understand you right now."

"Yeah, I noticed. Why is that?" I frowned at him. Now that he mentioned it, he did seem awfully interested in me. I added, "Seriously. I'm just a regular guy. I'm nothing special."

"Oh, I doubt that," he said immediately. But then he grimaced slightly as if he hadn't meant to say that aloud either. He added, "And stop dodging my questions."

"Fine. Yes, I guess it's maybe a little weird that vampires and werewolves exist. But you're sitting right here, talking to me, so I know for a fact that vampires are real. And the wolves that jumped me tonight were way too deliberate to be wild animals. A regular wolf pack would have torn me apart. So, I'm trusting you when you say they were werewolves."

“Right. And that doesn’t upset your worldview?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “Since the accident, I’ve known that the world was a more mysterious place than most people think. We—humans, I mean—well, we think we’ve got everything figured out. But we don’t. So, why not vampires?”

“And werewolves,” Pierce added.

I couldn’t stop the shudder that tore through my body again at the reminder. Not because they were werewolves, but because they were still out there, hunting me. I pictured the pack outside in the darkness, circling the cabin, biding their time, and waiting for the right moment to strike.

“And werewolves,” I agreed, grimacing.

“You’re a very strange human,” Pierce told me, his eyebrows drawing together slightly as though I still didn’t quite make sense to him. “But that’s probably just the lingering effects of my blood. You’re intoxicated. You don’t even know what you’re saying.”

“I’m fine!” I snapped. Indignation tore through me, lightning-fast, that he had automatically assumed that just because I wasn’t panicking, that meant I wasn’t in my right mind.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Pierce leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he searched my face. “Your pupils aren’t dilated. That’s odd. The effects of my blood must have burned away from healing your wounds.”

He settled back, but the frown on his lips deepened as he regarded me, as though that made my behavior even more confusing for him.

“So, I am in my right mind, and I do know what I’m saying.”

He pursed his lips, seeming annoyed. “It appears so.”

“And now what?” I asked, my pulse pounding faster than before. But not from fear. “We’re stuck here together until the wolves beat down the door or go away on their own?”

“I suppose not. I can call for backup. I can even get us a ride out of here by chopper.” He stood and flashed me a triumphant smile. “Being the only child of a vampire king has its advantages.”

He reached into his pants pocket, and then the smile died on his lips. He patted each pocket in turn, a look of total disbelief transforming his face. “That’s impossible. My phone is gone. I must have dropped it somehow when I was carrying you back from the campsite.”

“So, we’re stuck here together,” I confirmed. “Like I said.”

“I don’t suppose you have a cell phone on you?”

“It’s also back at the campsite. Not that I would have gotten any reception up here anyhow.”

He nodded, but he didn’t look happy about it. He sank back into the chair. “The werewolves need moonlight to remain in their wolf form. When the sun rises, they will become human again. They won’t be a match for me, and I’m sure they know that. When the morning comes, I’ll see you to your Jeep myself. Can I trust you to remain here with me until then?”

“The sunlight isn’t going to be an issue for you?”

“No,” he said. But I could tell from the stiff way he said it that he was lying again. He added, “Your word, please?”

“Why is sunlight a problem?” I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest.

He sighed. “Sure, I’ll tell the human all about vampire weaknesses—why not?” He shook his head, as though in disbelief that he was going to humor me. “Sunlight is irritating. It’s overpowering, so it dulls our senses and saps our strength. Not enough to matter, really. But it’s a nuisance. We become less sensitive to it as we age. Newborns have a much harder time with it. I will be fine.”

“You don’t burst into flames?”

“That’s a ridiculous myth.” He gave me a look edging into glare territory. “Give me your word that you won’t leave this cabin until it’s safe to do so—with me at your side.”

I grimaced. “I don’t like making promises.”

“And why is that?” From the way Pierce’s gaze zeroed in on mine, he had clearly

caught that I had just revealed something very real and very important about myself.

I didn't want to tell him, but I was stuck. Grudgingly, I admitted, "Because I don't break my promises. Ever."

"Even better." Pierce grinned at me. It made my heart pound harder to see his smile. "It's decided. We will ride out the storm—figurative and literal—and then I will see you to safety. But I need your word that you won't leave this cabin until dawn."

"I don't want to promise you anything of the sort."

"You owe me," Pierce reminded me, his amber eyes dancing in the orange light of the fire.

I swore under my breath because he wasn't wrong. I'm sure he caught exactly which choice curse words I used because his smile widened into something a lot more genuine, filled with real amusement. And he waited me out, the bastard.

"Fine," I snapped, giving in at last. "I promise. You have my word that I won't leave this cabin without you until dawn. Unless I have no other choice."

He sighed with clear annoyance at the loophole I had introduced, but then he seemed to give in. "That will have to do. So, I'm afraid you're stuck in here with me for another—" He broke off to look at the gold watch on his wrist. Then he grimaced. "Five hours."

He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly like a human would have. It was clear from that small action that he wasn't quite as blasé about our current predicament as he pretended to be.

Nice to know we had that in common, at least.

“Vampires can breathe?” I asked, still studying him as carefully as he’d studied me.

“Of course,” he replied, momentarily distracted from our plight. “Vampire bodies still work basically the same way as they did when we were human. We don’t need to breathe, strictly speaking, but we’re still capable of doing it.” He paused, shrugging at me. “Plus, it’s pretty much a requirement of speech to use the breath to form words. Not to mention, it’s a habit. And it’s calming for us, just like it would be for a human.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

“Right,” I replied, feeling a little dumb for asking. “I’m curious about the vampire sitting across from me. Sue me.”

“Sue me,” he repeated, shaking his head. Another smile darted across his lips, even though I couldn’t imagine why. But before I could ask him what was so funny, he added, “I’m curious about you, too. So, James, I have a proposition for you. Let’s play a little game.”

### Chapter 7

Pierce

James stared back at me, suddenly looking a little suspicious. “What kind of game?”

I shrugged. “Let’s make the best of being trapped in here together. I’ll make you a deal—you can ask me anything at all that you want to know, and I’ll be one hundred percent honest. And in return, you’ll answer all my questions honestly as well.”

James stared at me, looking utterly mystified by my suggestion. “Why?”

“Why not? I don’t spend a lot of time with humans.” Actually, outside of work, I didn’t spend a lot of time with anyone, but he didn’t need to know that. I added, “And you’re interesting to me. Besides, since you won’t be sensible and get some sleep, this would be as good a way as any to pass the time.”

I’m reasonably sure that neither of us believed that. There were far better and more enticing ways to pass the time. But doing anything of the sort would have been

dangerous for me. Because there was an inner strength to James that I found more and more beguiling with every passing moment. I could almost believe that he was a warlock and had bewitched me. I hadn't wanted to know anyone else the way I wanted to know James for a very long time. Only Nathaniel, and he was my maker so he didn't really count.

"And I'm supposed to—what—spill my guts with you?"

"Why not?" I asked. "It's not like we're ever going to see each other again after this. It will keep the night from growing dull. Besides, there are some things you can only tell a stranger."

The moment I said those words aloud, I wished I could take them back. But it was true, wasn't it? We were strangers. And we were going to go our separate ways. In a few short hours, we would be gone from each other's lives.

"And you'll agree to be fully honest and tell me anything I want to know about you?" James asked, obviously starting to warm up to the idea.

"Only if you'll agree to do the same."

"Deal," James said, agreeing to my proposal way too fast. He gave me a wicked smile that would have made my heart pound if it could still beat. "Ask away. I'm an open book."

"You like camping by yourself in the mountains?" I asked, wanting to get some of the easy truths about him under my belt first before I moved to harder topics.

"That's a lame opening question." He didn't literally roll his eyes, but it was most definitely implied by his tone. Then he sighed and added, "I used to go camping with my dad all the time. It feels good to connect with those memories when I can. And I

don't have anyone else willing to come with me, so yeah, I come alone.”

“You were close with your father?” I asked. I couldn’t quite keep the wistful note out of my voice, though I hoped James wouldn’t hear it.

“Yeah. He was my best friend,” he replied, frowning at whatever he saw on my face. “Um. So, were you and your father close?”

“No,” I replied, though I suddenly felt a lot more hesitant about this game we were playing. I added, “I never met him.”

“He left your mom?” James guessed, a spark of anger flashing in his eyes. A peculiar reaction for him to have on my behalf, I noted.

I didn’t want to tell him, but I had created the rules for this game, hoping to understand him better. If I stopped now, he wouldn’t tell me a thing about himself that was real, which seemed perfectly unacceptable for reasons I didn’t even want to consider. So, I forced the words out, one at a time, “I didn’t know either of them. I was raised in an orphanage.”

“I’m sorry,” James replied, the sympathy flashing in his golden-brown eyes, chasing away some of his obvious irritation with me. “Did they...”

Then he trailed off and winced like he was admonishing himself internally.

“I still don’t know why they abandoned me,” I said. I blinked a few times, rapid-fire. My eyes were stinging unexpectedly. I added, mortified to show weakness in front of him, “I apologize. I wasn’t expecting to talk about this.”

“What, you expected me to pepper you with questions about being a vampire?”

“You’re very intuitive for a human.”

“You’re very human for a vampire,” he replied in the exact same tone. “But we can talk about something else if you want.”

Here he was, trying to let me off the hook. He was trying to protect me again. What a strange human. If anything, it made me even more determined to know him. I had to know why.

“I told you I’d be honest with you about everything you asked of me. It wouldn’t be fair play for me to break my own rules right out of the gate.” But I paused. Because I don’t talk about this, not ever. I hadn’t even spoken about it with Nathaniel. But that was entirely different because Nathaniel was my maker and would be for an eternity, and this young man was a stranger to me.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

In the morning, we would go our separate ways once I had gotten him to safety. It was safe to speak to him in ways I could never speak with anyone else. So, I swallowed hard and continued. “When I was an infant, I was left on the steps of a church in upstate New York. I was raised in a Catholic orphanage. The sisters who ran the place—nuns—were very kind to me, so I was fortunate in that regard. But, to this day, I still don’t know why my parents left me because there was no note. I’m lucky I didn’t freeze to death because they left me in the middle of winter, and no one found me until the morning.”

They didn’t care if I lived or died.

I didn’t say that aloud, but I think that perhaps we both heard it. I did my best to keep my face perfectly neutral, but the stab of pain I felt at the memory was sudden and sharper than I expected, and some of it might have shone on my face. The question that had haunted me for my entire life rose again in my mind: what was so wrong with me that they took one look at me and decided not to keep me?

“I’m sorry,” James said quietly, watching me with an expression that was torn somewhere between sympathy and curiosity.

“It happened a long time ago.”

“But it still causes you pain?”

“Yes,” I admitted. I took a moment to squash down the sharp broken-glass feelings this line of questioning had triggered in me. “Why were you so willing to leave and put yourself in danger on my behalf?”

“It’s not past tense,” he replied. “I would leave right now if you’d let me. And it’s like I told you before, I can’t allow anything to happen to you because of me.”

“Yes, but why?”

“Because that’s not what someone who’s loyal and true would do,” he said so easily that I doubted he even had time to think about it.

I quashed down a surge of impatience as I tried to make sense of what he’d just said. I could tell I was missing a lifetime’s worth of context. Though the words were English, they made so little sense that they might as well have been spoken in another language. I had wanted to know something real about him, and I had gotten my wish. I could tell that this was real. Real and outrageously fragile.

I watched him quietly, waiting for him to explain.

He frowned at me, but he looked almost as unwilling as I had earlier. “Okay, I’m not sure I like this game.”

“We could talk about something else if you’d like?”

He shot me a dirty look. “Turnabout is fair play. Or whatever. Okay, so, when I was fifteen, I came out to my father.”

“That must have been hard.”

He shrugged, but then he gave me a small smile. “Doing it was hard, I guess. I was pretty sure it was going to wreck my whole life, but I couldn’t stand lying to him anymore. I didn’t want any part of my relationship with him to be based on a lie. I didn’t want him to think I was one person in his head, even when I was hiding something pivotal to me. I couldn’t do that to him.”

The way he said it, through his teeth, the flash of anger in his eyes... there was definitely something else there, just underneath what he was saying.

“My mother lied to him for a really long time. And then she left him. After that, I was all he had left because she apparently didn’t want me either.” He let out a deep breath, then he seemed to notice that his hands had curled into fists, because he flexed them a few times. “She left both of us, I guess.”

I felt frozen in place, watching him. Our pain was so terribly similar. I understood what it felt like to be left behind, to be unwanted. But I still had no idea what I could say to him in that moment that would have made any difference at all. A hundred years of immortality, and I had never been able to ease the sharp sting of rejection.

After a long moment, he continued. “Anyway. It was just me and him after that, and I had to tell him. I couldn’t let him love someone who wasn’t real. I couldn’t lie anymore. Not after what she had done. We weren’t far from the campsite where you found me, actually.” He paused, then continued. “He and I used to come here a lot on camping trips. And, um... I was literally shaking, the whole time I sat there and told him. I couldn’t even look at him afterward. I was just staring at our campfire, waiting for everything to fall apart around me. And he was so quiet afterward. It was awful.”

I felt an irrational surge of protectiveness for the boy he had once been. I wanted to stand between him and anything that might have tried to harm him. It was an impossible wish.

James shook his head, as though to clear it. Then he surprised me when he smiled. “But then my dad hugged me and told me he’d known since I was a little kid, but he was proud of me for being so brave and honest with him. He told me that being a man means being loyal and true to myself—and to others. It’s one of my best memories of him. And I guess, for better or worse, that lesson stuck. So, I try to be loyal and true whenever I can. It’s the one thing I can still do for him. As long as I can keep doing

that, it feels like I haven't really lost him."

"He wasn't wrong," I told him. Speaking of his father seemed to make James feel both happy and incredibly sad at the same time. I was pleased by the happiness, but I wanted to say anything I could to drive away the sadness. What was wrong with me? I added, "I think I would have liked him."

The protectiveness I felt was beginning to crystallize into a fierce sort of tenderness. The emotion was hot and sharp in my chest. It was both violent and gentle all at once, and it was altogether unexpected. I had never met anyone else in my entire life, not even when I had been a human, who had triggered such a feeling in me.

"You probably would have. He would have been curious about you, that's for sure," James replied, laughing. "Anyway, to answer your question, you put yourself on the line for me. You were loyal and true to me, a total stranger. So, to be loyal and true to you—to be the kind of man I want to be, the kind of man my father taught me to be—I can't let your decision to save me be repaid with violence. I just can't. That's why I'm willing to go back out there. If you'll let me."

"I understand now," I told him, still trying to quash the fierce tenderness, the hot and sharp protectiveness burning in my chest. It wouldn't be quashed.

Again, his scent burned in my nose, my throat, my everything. It wasn't the appeal a human usually had—he didn't smell appetizing, exactly. He smelled inviting, yes. But in a way that was clean, good, and comforting. It didn't make me want to feed from him. It made me want to gather him into my arms and breathe him in, it made me want to hold him close and never let him go.

His eyes lit up, but the expression on his face was halfway between relief and wariness. "So, you'll let me go? You'll release me from my promise?"

“I understand where you are coming from now, but your concern is not necessary. The wolves won’t harm me,” I told him. A note of anger entered my voice, but it wasn’t anger at him. It was anger at anything that might ever want to hurt him. “Please stop suggesting it. You want to protect me, but I want the same. I want you safe.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

He studied me for a long moment with no anger in him at all. Something pivotal had just changed between us, and we both knew it.

“It’s weird, but I think I believe you,” James replied, his voice growing soft. “But you know the wolves are going to come back. You know it, and I know that you do. I thought we were being honest with each other.” He said it quietly, but it was such a direct hit that I winced before I could stop myself.

“When the sun rises, I will personally see you home,” I told him, suddenly realizing, even as I spoke, that was exactly what I was going to do. I wouldn’t merely take him to his vehicle. I would see him home. Whatever it took, I would see him back to his human life as safely as I could before I slipped away from him again. I couldn’t do anything else now. Because he wasn’t a stranger to me at all. Not anymore. “I will make sure you are protected, James. That’s the sort of—well, I guess not man, but vampire—I want to be.”

The words hung between us for a long moment. For the very first time, I saw James give in to me, and I knew that he wouldn’t leave now. Not even if I released him from his promise.

“Man and vampire... they’re not mutually exclusive,” James informed me, speaking at last. He sounded every bit like he meant it. That serious look was still there, but he seemed almost hesitant now. “You’re more of a man, I think, than most guys are. At least, most of the ones I’ve met so far. The fact that you have fangs is totally beside the point.”

“I thought we were being honest with each other,” I replied, the impulse to push him

away flaring before I could even consciously stop it. I added, more quietly, “You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“Why do you do that?” he asked. His question was, again, without any kind of heat. But I suddenly wanted his anger to come back. Without it, James was really asking me, and that was somehow much worse. He went on, “I’ve known you for only a couple of hours, but you keep implying that you’re this big monster that I should be afraid of. Like you think you’re damaged goods or something. Why?”

“You look annoyed,” I told him, hoping that might make him annoyed again. That version of James seemed way safer for me to be around than this more serious, quiet version of him.

“I’m not,” James replied. He gave me an unhappy look that was almost... sad. Intolerable. “Anyway, it’s your game. If you want to break your own rules, go for it.”

“You might be the most vexing person I’ve ever met,” I told him. I didn’t mention that he was also the most alluring, that he was the one person I had actually wanted to understand in a very long time. That in my eternity, he was the only person, apart from Nathaniel, that had burned bright enough to make me even look twice, to make me feel anything at all. Mentioning it wouldn’t have helped my cause any.

“The feeling is mutual,” James replied, the tiniest trace of annoyance coming back into his voice at last. He even glared at me, though it was half-hearted. “Do you kill people?”

I blinked at him, confused by the sudden—albeit entirely sensible—switch in the direction of the conversation. He should be wondering about things like that in the presence of a vampire. But the fact that he was now, belatedly, recognizing how inhuman I was, made me feel far more vulnerable and exposed than I would have ever imagined.

“Never,” I answered.

He didn’t even look surprised. “Do you torture people?”

“No. That doesn’t mean?—”

He went on, bulldozing past me. “Do you ever feed on people without getting their consent first?”

“The king has well-paid donors for that. They very much consent beforehand.”

He raised an eyebrow at that but didn’t ask me to elaborate. Instead, he gave me the most serious look imaginable and asked me, “Do you cut people off in traffic for no reason?”

The question was so ridiculous that I laughed, and he surprised me by laughing too, right along with me. The tension between us broke all at once.

James just looked at me and said, “Well, I hate to break it to you, Pierce, but apart from your being stereotypically broody, a little controlling, and very unfortunately for me, extremely uptight when it comes to having sex with a willing participant, it doesn’t seem to me like there’s anything monstrous about you at all. So you can try that whole tortured vampire crap on someone else, but not with me. I don’t buy it.”

I hated myself for how badly I wanted to believe him. The impulse was sudden, laughable, and easily the most dangerous thing I had ever felt.

But I was saved from having to reply. Because right at that moment, there was a loud crash at the door. Wood splintered.

Beside me, James froze, his eyes growing big and round with fear.

Then, from outside the door, I heard a low, ominous growl.

The wolves had come back for James.

## Chapter 8

James

My stomach plummeted. The wolves were at the door. They were here for me.

They would no doubt resort to violence to get to me.

I should have asked him better questions when I had the chance. For instance, how a single vampire stacked up against a pack of werewolves in a fight.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

I doubted I would like the answer.

Pierce shot to his feet. He did that blurry vampire-speed thing again, putting himself between me and the door. He dropped into a deep crouch. The tension coiled through him in an instant. Like he was ready to defend me with his life.

No.

I wasn't sure how I felt about Pierce now. It was a mixture of frustration and annoyance, but there was very clearly something else there now too. No way he was getting hurt because of me.

I got to my feet. Warily, I scanned the room for anything I might be able to use as a weapon. No luck.

Then my eyes landed on the fireplace. The logs were cheerfully engulfed in flames. An awful idea bloomed in my mind.

Another crash at the front door shook the entire cabin. It was accompanied by the sound of splintering wood.

The door slammed open. In the doorway was the largest wolf I'd ever seen. The same one that had bitten me. He looked even bigger and more deadly in the soft orange light of the fire.

The wolf didn't even hesitate.

He jumped on Pierce.

Five other wolves piled into the cabin. Each of them grabbed onto bits of Pierce's clothing and flesh.

Pierce kicked off the two wolves that pinned his legs. They went flying into the doorframe. They crashed into it with high-pitched yelps. Then they landed in a tangle of limbs and fur.

I flinched. Vampire strength was no joke.

There was still a wolf on each of his arms. Pierce struck them one after the other. His movements were almost faster than I could follow. One wolf went flying across the room. It landed on the kitchen table. It collapsed with a crash of splintered wood. The other wolf sailed into the far wall. The blow was hard enough to shake the entire cabin.

While Pierce was distracted, the Alpha went for his throat. The wolf locked his jaws around the vampire's neck.

Pierce let out a strangled cry. Dark blood spilled onto the floor.

No.

Conviction burned through me, even hotter than my fear.

I turned, and without even thinking about what I was going to do, I reached into the fireplace. I yanked out the biggest burning log I could find, grabbing it barehanded.

I almost dropped it.

I couldn't stop the strangled cry of agony that tore out of my throat. The skin of my hands sizzled where it touched the log. Hot tears stung my eyes. I gritted my teeth against the pain. I forced myself to be okay with it.

The smell of burning flesh—my burning flesh—filled the room. It turned my stomach.

A wolf growled from behind me.

Still holding the flaming log, I turned.

I darted forward, rushing the gray wolf that hadn't attacked Pierce.

It backed up with a surprised yelp.

It practically fell over itself to get away from me. Or, rather, from the fire in my hands.

I swung at it with the burning log.

It ducked, whimpering as the flames brushed the edges of its fur.

It took another step back.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Grim satisfaction filled me. Yes, it was clear that the wolves didn't like fire at all.

I turned back to where the Alpha still had Pierce by the throat. I prayed with all my might that he hadn't killed Pierce yet.

That I still had time to save us both.

Fear was the only thing that gave me the strength to keep holding onto the burning log because each moment was even more excruciating than the last.

Around me, the other wolves started to stir again.

Not him. I thought fiercely. The flames licking my hands had nothing on the rage that ignited within my heart. You can't take his life. I won't allow it.

With that thought burning in my chest, I advanced on the Alpha.

### Chapter 9

Pierce

If I had been a human being, the Alpha would have killed me by now.

Behind me, I heard James let out a cry of pain that sent me into a frenzy, grabbing at the Alpha's throat and squeezing hard enough to grind bones. He released me at once but then ducked out of my grip, far stronger than a regular wolf should have been, and then darted back in to continue trying to tear my throat out.

However, we both froze when, a half-second later, the smell of burning flesh filled the room. There was a yelp from one of the wolves, followed by the sound of scrambling claws on my wooden floor. I heard rapid, barely controlled breathing, coming so fast it was nearly gasps, accompanied by the human footsteps that stopped right behind me.

“Get off him!” James grunted as a burning log connected with the Alpha’s head.

The Alpha leaped off me, letting out a high-pitched yelp.

I shot to my feet with murder in my heart. It must have been written all over my face too, because the Alpha backed away from me.

Or no, it wasn’t me he was afraid of. He backed away from James, the crazy human who had grabbed a burning log from the fireplace with both hands and swung it at his head.

James circled around me. Tears burned down his cheeks, and his teeth were clenched against the pain he very obviously felt. A lone human, holding the flaming log in front of him with both hands, trying to fend off a pack of wolves. One end of it was on fire, and the other end—which he was holding, like a goddamn lunatic—was red-hot glowing embers. Literal smoke rose from where he touched it. His face was set in a grim mask of determination that anyone could see, meaning that he was prepared to lay some serious hurt on the wolves, the consequences to himself be damned.

“Get. Out. Of. Here!” He bit off each word, staring directly at the Alpha. “I don’t want to be in your pack!”

The Alpha growled at that, but he gave James a look of grudging respect and backed away, stepping outside the cabin. The other wolves, one after the other, followed after their leader, forming into a semi-circle behind him, their pale inhuman eyes glinting

in the firelight.

I knew that however badly the Alpha had thought he wanted James before, it was undoubtedly nothing compared to how he felt now. The sheer gravitas and physical courage it had taken James to grab onto a burning log and use it as a weapon were unlike anything I had ever imagined a human to be capable of. I'm sure the Alpha was having similar thoughts, and he was no doubt increasingly sure he'd made the right choice in selecting James.

But more to the point, every moment that passed was another moment James suffered. I needed to end this. Now.

"I am Pierce Bailey, the only progeny of Nathaniel Bailey, the Vampire King of Seattle," I told the Alpha, invoking my position as I stared him down, forcing the words out of my injured throat. A wave of dizziness threatened to seize me, but I thankfully remained upright. No doubt about it, the wolf had wounded me. Badly. I forced myself to keep going, even though each word felt like broken glass that had been dipped in acid. "If you continue, you will risk a war with the vampires of Seattle. There are a lot more of us than there are of you. We will wipe out every last one of you if we have to. You have my word on that. Leave now, for the sake of your own people."

The Alpha peeled his approving gaze away from James and glared at me. His snout was soaked in my blood.

But my words clearly sank in because then, with a huff, he turned and trotted off into the darkness. The other wolves followed behind, leaving James and me alone.

I didn't waste any time. I closed the door and, moving at vamp speed, shoved one of my heavy wooden dining chairs under the doorknob. It wouldn't keep the wolves out if they wanted to come back, but it would slow them down for a few moments, at

least. I was banking on the possibility of impending war to be enough of a deterrent against them coming back.

At least, not right away.

I turned to see James still holding the burning log. In fact, he was carrying it back to the fireplace like a fucking crazy person instead of just dropping it to the ground. It was still burning him.

I sped over to him, grabbed the log out of his hands, and threw it back into the fireplace, where it couldn't cause him any more pain.

"Show me your hands," I ordered, even though each word cost more than the last. The Alpha had hurt me very badly, and I needed to heal.

With his eyes still tearful and defiant, he held out both of his hands. The skin of his palms was covered in angry red blisters. He was so badly burnt that the outer edges of the skin around his burns had turned black and brittle. It was a miracle he could even still move his hands at all.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

“What were you thinking?” I demanded, feeling a helpless rage ignite in my chest at the sight of his injuries.

Without even waiting for him to reply, I brought out my fangs and tore into my wrist yet again, making the blood come out in a gush. I held my bleeding wrist over his burns.

The blood hit his wounds, and he yelped, jumping a little. “It stings!”

“Wait,” I muttered, fighting the weakness that crashed through my body. I felt as if my own life force left me yet again tonight with nothing to replace it. James had saved us both. This was the least I could do. I couldn’t allow him to be in pain.

Even though I knew this was going to cost me dearly.

He let out a soft gasp a moment later as my blood caused the skin on his hands to heal rapidly. It was like watching a time-lapse of his burns that had been sped up to a breakneck pace, only in reverse. The blisters became lighter, the black edges vanished, and then his palms became pink. Then, at last, his hands were whole, smooth, and unblemished.

As easy as that. For him, at least.

“Holy hell,” James whispered, his shocked gaze rising to meet mine.

I couldn’t help the feeling of relief seeing he was no longer in pain.

I swayed on my feet, another wave of dizziness crashing through me as a combined result of my wounds and all the blood I'd given James to make him whole caught up with me all at once.

I didn't regret it, though. Not a bit.

I fell to my knees.

"You're an idiot," I said, but I couldn't stop myself from smiling at him again, even as little black dots swam into my field of vision. "You're a brave, foolish human."

James caught me, his eyes wide and his mouth forming into an adorable little 'O' of surprise. Then everything went black.

## Chapter 10

James

Pierce slumped in my arms, unconscious. Not that I could blame him. He'd probably given up a solid quart of his blood tonight to ensure that I would make it through all this alive. He kept saving me for reasons known only to him. Plus, the wound on his neck looked so bad that I didn't have any desire to examine it any closer because then I'd see just how inhuman he was. Nothing mortal could have survived having their throat half torn out like that.

I didn't want to move him, so I set him down on the floor as gently as possible. I removed my coat, folded it into a makeshift pillow, and slid it under his head.

Was it my imagination, or did he seem even paler than before?

Also, his wound wasn't healing.

Was that normal? I had no idea. It didn't seem like it should be normal though, given that his blood had the power to undo my wounds in a matter of moments.

Blood.

Of course. He was a vampire, which meant he needed blood. My blood.

I hesitated, staring down at him. He looked so peaceful, so innocent, so open right then. All of the arrogance and surliness were gone.

I'd talked some big game earlier about trusting him that he wasn't going to murder me. I still felt that way. He wouldn't hurt me. On purpose, at least. But did I have the same assurances now, in his weakened state? What if he lost control and took more blood than I was willing—or able—to give him?

I couldn't let him bite me then. So where did that leave me?

Like an idiot, I looked around the room as though the solution would magically be waiting for me. And to my immense surprise and relief, I wasn't disappointed. My gaze landed on the wooden knife block he kept in the kitchen area, on the counter right beside his sink.

If he needed blood and I didn't completely trust him in his current state to bite me to get it, that left only one option. I needed to feed my blood directly to him.

He had saved my life earlier. And then he healed my hands, saving me from the agonizing pain and the burn scars I would have had for the rest of my life. He had done it without even hesitating, even though he had been badly wounded, and that action had cost him dearly.

I shoved myself to my feet and lurched across the room toward the knife block. I

picked up a small knife that looked wickedly sharp.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Gripping the knife in my hand, I returned to his motionless body and dropped to my knees beside him.

Don't think about it. Just do it, I instructed myself.

After only another moment's hesitation, I sliced my palm open with the knife, sucking in a huge gasp as fiery pain engulfed my hand, even though it wasn't even half as bad as the burns had been. Ruby red droplets of blood welled up in the wound.

I held my hand over his mouth and dripped my blood onto his lips.

"Come on," I whispered. "Please don't be dead."

His mouth opened ever so slightly. Then he licked his lips. Very slowly, his eyes opened, and his gaze locked with mine.

"What are you doing?" he managed. Each word sounded like it cost him more than the last. "Don't hurt yourself!"

"It's already done. Drink," I instructed him, pressing my hand directly to his mouth.

He animated then, grabbing my wrist with both hands so I couldn't pull away. And he began to suckle my wound, drinking deeply of my blood. But his smoldering amber gaze never left mine.

You'd think that it would be painful to be fed on. Or, at the very least, like it would have been one of those things that should have been way more enjoyable for him than

for me. But then you'd be wrong. A feeling almost like electricity began to build within me, igniting every single nerve ending in my body with pleasure.

I couldn't help it. A moan tore free from my lips.

I don't know how it happened, but I found myself on top of him, straddling him. I exposed my neck, an offering I hadn't wanted to make only moments ago. But now, somehow, I wanted nothing more than to feel him penetrate me. I wanted to give myself over to him.

He definitely noticed. He dropped my hand and pushed himself up. I saw that the wound on his neck was already halfway healed. He leaned in so close to me that if he'd been a human man, I would have felt his warm breath on my neck. He put both of his powerful hands on my back to steady me.

But then he pulled back, hesitant, and there was a question in his eyes as he looked up at me. Then I remembered that he'd told me he wouldn't feed without consent from his partners.

"Do it," I commanded, exposing my neck. "I trust you."

He nodded, the smolder in his eyes becoming a full-blown inferno. Then I felt his lips on the skin of my throat. It was followed by a pain that was sharp, sudden, searing, and over in an instant. It gave way to a delicious, languid pleasure that spread through every part of me. More electricity soared through every nerve ending in my body.

I let out another moan, much louder than the first.

With his powerful arms wrapped around me, holding me fast, I didn't feel unsafe. I felt protected. Cherished. And the act of giving myself to him swept away everything else, all of my fears, all of the pain and horror I had experienced tonight. Being with

Pierce in this way was sweet, intoxicating, and delicious. No one had ever needed me quite as he did at that moment.

When he pulled back, I only wanted to bring him in closer again. I wanted him to keep going.

“No more,” he whispered, meeting my eyes. His lips were stained red with my blood. “I don’t want to hurt you. My brave, foolish human. I’ll never hurt you. I swear it.”

Then he stripped off his sweater and tossed it aside, revealing a muscular chest that made my mouth go dry with desire. Very deliberately, his eyes still locked with mine, he used the nail of his index finger to make a small scratch on his chest, a line of blood so dark it was nearly black flowing in its wake. “I want you to drink me too. Only a taste.”

He didn’t need to tell me twice. I nuzzled against him, pausing for only a moment to note, with a rush of pleasure, that the bite wound to his neck was already healed. Then I lapped at the thin trickle of blood from his chest, where he’d scratched himself. It tasted delicious, sweet, and intoxicating, more like spiced wine than blood.

It was his turn to moan this time.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “Yes.”

Then the room fell away from us. I know he felt it too because all of a sudden, I was extremely aware of his mind, pressed up right against mine like it had been there all along.

A blood bond. The way he said it, filled with awe, made me fiercely happy. It only took me a heartbeat to realize that his lips hadn’t moved, that he hadn’t spoken aloud.

I can feel you, I replied, unable to keep the wonder from my voice, even though I was also speaking without saying a single word aloud. Does this happen every time?

It sometimes happens during blood-sharing, but it's very rare. It's never happened to me before.

Later, I knew that I would ask many questions. But now, with his strong body beneath me, I wanted to be touched by him, to see the pleasure in his eyes as he took his fill of me. My cock was rock hard, and every inch of my body ached for him.

I felt him sense all of that. And I sensed his desire in return, his need. He had been alone for a very long time. So very, terribly alone.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Not anymore, I told him firmly, scarcely even aware of what I was promising. The idea of him alone and isolated was, quite simply, unacceptable. Never again. Not if you don't want to be.

With our minds joined like this, it was easy to drown in him, to get swept away by him. It was hard to worry that I'd just made a potentially eternal promise to a vampire I hardly knew, and it was even harder to deny to myself or him that I meant it completely.

You're mine, he agreed roughly. I want you to be mine forever.

Yes. I could have melted right then and there. I had momentarily lost track of what was happening around me, what Pierce was doing to me. There was only his body pressed up against mine. That was the only true thing. That was the only thing that mattered.

I don't know if it was him or if it was me, but someone peeled off my shirt and tossed it away like it was on fire.

You're so fucking beautiful. He whispered the thought into my mind, his fingers running through my chest hair until they found my nipple. He teased it, his eyes filled with wicked delight. Are your nipples wired?

Fuck yes, they are.

His lips curled into a devilish grin. Good.

He flicked my nipples, one after the other, and then lowered his lips to my chest and took them in his mouth, one at a time. I groaned, feeling my cock get even harder, like I might blow at any moment.

My brave, foolish, beautiful human.

Pierce lifted me with my legs still wrapped around his waist, as though I weighed nothing, and he laid me down gently on my back, on the bearskin rug, beside the fire. Then he pulled back, his amber eyes still smoldering with desire as he undid the button of my pants and slid down my zipper.

His touch felt so magical that I couldn't help myself. I arched my back, writhing under him.

He used that opportunity to pull my pants down and off me, tossing them away, revealing just my black briefs. Wet spots soaked the fabric where I had leaked precum. He stared down at my body hungrily, devouring every inch of me with his gaze.

I grinned up at him, knowing he liked everything he saw.

With such gentleness that his fingers barely even brushed my flesh, he tore my underwear in half like they were made of tissue paper, releasing my cock.

It was his turn to grin, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "It's beautiful."

Then, without waiting for my reply, he bent down and took me in his mouth all the way down to the base of my shaft.

Oh. My. Fuck.

His cool mouth felt so incredible on my hardness, like fire mixing with ice, as he sucked me.

I let out a groan.

His impossibly strong hands cupped my ass, holding me fast so that I couldn't get away from him. So that he could dominate me with his mouth. He worked my shaft all the way down, with no hint of a gag reflex as I hit the back of his throat.

When I was ready to blow, he pulled back. "You're going to cum when I'm inside you," he warned me. "And not before."

Fuck, yes. Do it now.

He slid his index finger into his mouth, coating it with saliva. Then his fingertip found my hole.

I let out another small noise of delight, unable to help myself, as he slid his finger into me.

He let out a small gasp as well, which mirrored my own, and I realized, for the very first time, that I could sense everything he felt. He marveled at how warm I was, how strong and yielding my body felt under his touch.

And I knew that he felt everything he did to me too. We both felt the momentary flash of fear as he entered me. We both fought the instinct to get away from the intrusion. And then we both felt all that sweet, sweet pleasure as he found my prostate and rubbed it back and forth with his fingertip, gently at first, then more roughly as I relaxed against him.

He worked me like that for a long time. I felt like I would cum at any second, but I

sensed that he knew when I was close, and he backed off. It was like magic. All of it was just like magic.

Then, after I was sure I couldn't take it anymore, he pulled his finger out of me.

I let out an anguished cry, feeling suddenly empty.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:31 am*

Then he stood and unbuttoned his pants, pulling them and his underwear off in one move. He coated his hand with saliva and rubbed it on his magnificent rock-hard length, lubing himself up to enter me. His cock was long, wide, and deliciously curved. He knelt back down and lifted my legs with both hands. And then, very gently, he guided himself into me.

I bit back a cry as he filled me. It was pain and pleasure all mingled together. Then he began to move inside me, and it was just pleasure.

Explosive fucking pleasure in sharp bursts, everywhere in my body. I gasped, panting against him, inside of me, filling me up, taking me completely.

He was gentle at first, peering down at me with concern.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice rough with his desire. I knew he could feel I was doing fine, but he was still checking in.

I nodded, biting back another cry of delight. “Don’t stop,” I begged.

A wicked smile twisted across his lips, and his eyes drifted closed halfway as he gave in to his own instincts and pushed himself further into me, then pulled almost all the way out before sliding back into me again. A soft groan escaped his lips.

The rhythm he established was fucking bliss; savage, feverish, and filled with his own need. He destroyed me and worshipped me, all at the same time.

He kissed me roughly and deeply, his lips firm and sweet, his tongue meeting mine.

His mouth tasted sweet and coppery. His scent, like a combination of woodsmoke and cinnamon, enveloped me. His weight crushed me deliciously, grinding my body into the rug as he moved rhythmically in and out of me, primal and rough, filled with desire and desperate need.

He let out a strangled cry of pleasure as he came inside of me.

That sent me over the edge, and I came too, without even touching myself. The mixture of my orgasm and the echo of his own was devastating, blowing apart my sanity and reason and setting my world ablaze.

## Chapter 11

Pierce

What have I just done? I wondered, watching as the darkness of the night lightened outside the cabin window, signaling the approach of dawn. James slept nestled next to me on the bearskin rug, the dying light of the fire lengthening the shadows that danced along his face, making him look not merely handsome but haunting and timeless, a mysterious otherworldly creature. Beautiful, fragile, and filled with warmth.

His scent curled around me, a clean, warm, and comforting smell. It made sense now, why it had been so powerful, even from the beginning. James smelled like my best memories from childhood, the tangible reminder that I was cared for. His scent was the scent of home, of belonging.

Impossible, but true.

And his mind was right there. Close enough for me to touch. If I wanted to, I could reach out with my thoughts and know what he was dreaming. I would always know

what he was thinking. And he would now always be able to do the same with me.

A blood bond isn't usually a two-way street. Or, even if it is, the vampire is almost always the one squarely in control of the connection. The human typically can't do more than lay back and let it happen. If they do happen to get scraps of their vampire mate's thoughts here and there, that's fine, but they're not supposed to be able to head-dive or communicate telepathically with the same ease.

James, though, had been able to talk to me inside of my head, and his voice had felt every bit as loud as my own mental voice. That meant that the connection between us was roughly equal. He probably could head-dive with me. If he wanted, he could no doubt know every single thing I've ever done, and I wouldn't be able to stop him from seeing it. I'd never be able to hide anything from him ever again.

A blood bond is permanent, and it only ever gets stronger with time and use. It never gets weaker.

The thought filled me with a strange mix of emotions. Tenderness. Longing. Fear.

How had he become, in a matter of hours, the most precious thing in my world? How had he managed to slide past a century of my defenses undetected? And why did I want, more than anything else, to keep him by my side?

Everything had changed. And not only because the sex was so incredible, though I couldn't deny that. But I had just firmly tethered myself to a human. It was too much and not nearly enough at the same time, and I might never be happy again without him.

Blood bonds were tricky and dangerous like that. They had the power to turn even the vilest and most predatory of our kind into fierce protectors and loyal guardians of our mates. And they lasted for an eternity. Which was a very long time if you were a

vampire.

Vampires only ever forge blood bonds with one person, and it is almost always intentional. And usually, it took many years for it to develop, though, in some rare instances, it did happen spontaneously, just as it had with James and I. But, as a rule, there's time to say no to it, to change your mind before it's fully established.

There was no saying 'no' to this.

"Hi," he said, opening his eyes. Did you sleep?

I fought back a grimace. Yes, the blood bond between us was stronger than ever. And, yes, James could communicate telepathically with me every bit as well as I could with him.

But there, next to him, my fears suddenly seemed unimportant. Laughably trivial. The only thing that mattered was how he was handling this. The only thing that mattered now was that he was okay. I had lived a hundred years on this earth, but now the only thing I wanted to live for was him.

I slept a little, I replied, noting the flash of concern in his mind at my well-being. I added, How are you feeling?

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

This question suddenly seemed like the most important piece of information in the world for me to have right then. I could have looked for it in his mind, but I wanted him to tell me.

Overwhelmed. Happy. Confused. Scared.

Scared? I demanded, suddenly feeling alarmed. I wanted to pull back, to put distance between us so that I couldn't frighten him any longer.

He rolled his eyes. No, I didn't suddenly get scared of you or anything. Stop being dumb. I'm scared this is just going to be over and done. I'm scared my life will go back to the way it was.

I thought you said your life was fine. Again, I resisted the urge to read the truth from his mind. I tried to hide my delight too, that he'd admitted that he feared losing me—the vampire who had inexplicably dropped into his life.

"It is fine," James replied aloud. He paused, and I sensed a feeling of awe that flashed through him. He added, "Wow, speaking out loud with actual words feels weird now. Clunky."

"It's fine, except..." I trailed off, prompting him aloud.

I noted that he hadn't been wrong. Speech didn't seem the same anymore at all. It seemed like a pale imitation of real communication.

"Couldn't you read how I'm feeling from my head?"

I felt an irrational surge of pride in him that James had intuited so much already. But then, of course, he had—he was always surprising me, and I had no doubt he would keep surprising me for a very long time. And I was fiercely proud of him that he seemed to take our telepathic bond in stride, the very same way that he'd accepted that I was a vampire. He was incredibly brave. He wasn't like other humans. Not at all.

I could, I allowed, drinking in his presence, noting again how handsome he was, how perfect his body felt against mine. But I don't want to invade your privacy every time I have a simple question.

He grinned at me, his eyes lighting up in a way that would have caused my heart to go all pitter-pat if I'd been a mortal man. It made me feel a surge of tenderness for him, but there was a bitter edge to my thought. Because I wasn't a mortal man. I was just this.

A vampire. A monster.

"I'm going to teach you that you're wrong about that," he said quietly, but his voice was fierce and determined as his warm golden-brown eyes held mine. "You're about as far from being a monster as it's possible to be."

"You didn't answer my question."

He sighed. I wasn't lying when I told you my life was fine. It is. But it's... flat. I have a job. I have friends that I see sometimes. I have a couple of guys I mess around with now and then. I like to read. And I like hiking and camping. But there's nothing else.

"I don't understand," I admitted out loud.

His life didn't sound bad. It sounded nice.

James gave me a tiny smile. “Nothing has ever mattered to me before. It’s like my entire life was gray until last night. Now it’s all in color. And I’m terrified that it’s all going to go gray again. I’ve only known you for a few hours, but I’ve never felt closer to anyone in my entire life. And I’m afraid of losing you now.”

I marveled, once more, at his courage. At his fierceness. At his simple humanity. It seemed miraculous. With each passing moment, he seemed more and more like a miracle to me.

You won’t lose me. I spoke the thought into his mind. Into our shared mindscape. I put every ounce of my own fear of losing him into the thought.

An expression of wonder transformed James’s face. It was guileless and real. At that moment, he seemed both boyishly innocent and timelessly wise. And true in a way that nothing in my life had ever been, not even once.

How could he have ever believed he was anything less than extraordinary?

I kissed him again without even realizing I was going to do it. His lips were warm, soft, and deliciously sweet against mine. His kiss was even sweeter than his blood had been. I wanted to drink from him all day long. I wanted to bask in the bliss of being near him.

James seemed to have the same thought because when I pulled back, he wrapped his arms around me, resting his head on my chest. His level of comfort at my nearness was unexpected, staggering, and so unlike what his instinctive reaction toward me should have been that it made me feel something so raw that it felt like it could shatter me if it all went wrong.

“How did you become a vampire?” he asked, murmuring the question aloud, against my chest.

“Surely we’re not still playing my game?”

Obviously. Except now, nothing can be hidden.

How right he was. Again, the flash of fear I felt at that thought was immediate. What if he peered into my mind and saw something that drove him away? Already, I couldn’t imagine my life without him.

“I want to know you,” he told me, and I could feel the sincerity of his words within his mind. He added, “And it’s your death day, after all. So you should talk about this.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

“Only with you,” I whispered, giving in to him.

I couldn’t deny him anything. Not anymore.

James waited for me to begin. I felt his tenderness for me, a soothing and impossibly fragile embrace, but so much like what I felt for him. I sensed his overwhelming relief that I was okay now. What the Alpha had done to me had scared him, badly.

“My maker, Nathaniel, saved my life,” I told him. “I was leaving a gay bar in New York City, a hole-in-the-wall type of place with an unmarked door that you had to go into an alleyway to get to. It was hidden, like a speakeasy. Anyway, I had gone there looking for someone to have fun with for the evening, but I came up empty-handed.”

I shook my head, grimacing at the memory of the dingy, crowded bar. Even though it had been exactly one hundred years, I could still remember the way it had smelled of mildew, bootleg alcohol, cigarette smoke, and sweat.

James listened in silence, watching me steadily.

I continued. “I left by myself. I was drunk. Even though it was during prohibition, they still had plenty of booze in the bar. And I didn’t even have a switchblade to protect myself with. I was twenty-four, and I thought I was invincible. Besides, nothing had ever happened to me before.”

James stiffened against me. Abruptly, the memories of the events flooded through both of us. He was there, beside me, in the alleyway. I knew that he could sense, from my mind, what was coming next.

“There were half a dozen guys in the alley, waiting for someone to come out of the bar. They took offense to our proclivities.” I didn’t tell him about the iron pipes they held in their hands, nor the sick wash of fear I’d felt when I realized I couldn’t defend against them all at the same time. I knew he could see it easily enough anyhow, even though I did my level best to mentally shield him from it. “It could have been anyone they attacked. But it was me. I was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and then they took one look at me and saw something they couldn’t abide.” I couldn’t keep the bitter note from my voice.

James clung to me and I felt his surge of protectiveness, like he wished he could go back in time and protect me. I knew he would have traded anything at that moment to have saved me. And, even though he was right beside me, reliving this right along with me, it didn’t even cross his mind to mentally turn away from what he was seeing. He didn’t want to let me go through this alone.

Again, I felt the flash of fierce tenderness in my heart for him. It was such a new, raw emotion, but it felt like it must have been hiding somewhere in my chest all along like I couldn’t have ever felt any other way.

“Nathaniel was in the bar, too. He was looking for a mate. Someone to spend an eternity with. Instead, he found me. He smelled the blood, I guess. And he saved me without even thinking about the consequences. I was so close to death that when he gave me his blood, even that wasn’t enough to save me. But when I died as a human, I came back as a vampire. Nathaniel had been a vampire for well over a hundred years at that point, so he had to have understood exactly what he was doing. I guess he saw something in me that night that told him I was worth saving.”

“Because you are,” James said savagely, as if he was trying to force me to believe it myself.

“Anyway, Nathaniel and I knew right away that we weren’t going to be lovers. It

wasn't like that at all."

"Sometimes you look at someone, and you know," James agreed, smiling. "And Nathaniel did find someone to spend his eternity with."

I gave him a mental shrug because I didn't want to jostle him with a physical one. "I suppose so. He's been the closest thing to a father—to family—that I've ever had."

What happened to the men who attacked you?

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "They were gone when I woke up. And Nathaniel has never talked about it. But he always gets really unhappy whenever I bring it up, so I've stopped asking him."

"I hope he killed them," James whispered. "I know I shouldn't want something like that, but they were monsters. What they did to you was inhuman."

I smiled at his fierceness. How could I have ever imagined humans to be weak, emotional creatures? James had shown me, again and again, how wrong I had been.

"Is that why you've been trying to protect me from the wolves?"

I considered his question. "I would have healed anyone. I told you that before, and it's true. But... when I realized they were planning to turn you into one of them without giving you a choice..." I trailed off.

You couldn't have let that happen, James told me, and I could feel his smugness. You never had a choice about becoming a vampire. So you couldn't let someone else's choice get taken away from them. Because those men were wrong about you. You are wrong about yourself, too. You're good. You couldn't be a monster if you tried.

“Give it a century or two, then tell me how you feel,” I joked. But I could feel myself beginning to give in. I could feel myself wanting to give in to him. To be better, for him.

“I don’t know if I want to be a vampire though,” he whispered suddenly. I felt a ripple of unease from his mind. The accompanying thought told me he was worried about how I’d take that. He added, “So I don’t know where that leaves us. Long-term, I mean.”

“When vampires take human lovers, they can live for an eternity. All it would take is regularly drinking a few drops of my blood, and you’ll never grow old. You’ll never get sick. You’ll be stronger, faster, and less breakable. You’ll heal from any injury quickly. In our world, we call humans like this Sanguinatos. It’s Italian for blooded ones. But really, it just means that I’ll be able to love you for an eternity. We’d never have to leave each other.”

He stiffened. And I felt a sudden wall go up around his thoughts. Until that very moment, I hadn’t even known it was possible to hide anything after a blood bond had been established.

What is it? I asked, alarm ripping through me. What’s wrong?

“It’s nothing,” he whispered aloud. His mind still felt closed off from me. How on earth he’d managed to close himself off to me was a total mystery. He was every bit as in control of the blood bond as I was. More so, actually, because I doubted that I would have been able to wall myself off from him quite like this.

“You don’t want...”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

I trailed off. Of course he didn't want to spend eternity with me. Even when I was a human, something was clearly wrong with me. My parents had given me up. And my wrongness had resulted in my human death as well.

Stop that! He commanded, and his frustration washed through both of us. It isn't that.

"Then what?" I asked, feeling confused.

He sat up, pulling away from me. The wall around his thoughts was still between us, cutting me off from him.

He grimaced. "We should get dressed. It's sunrise."

Without waiting for my reply, he stood up and grabbed his pants from the floor.

I stared at him, frozen, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Icy dread curled my stomach, tightening it into a sharp knot of fear. Fear that he finally saw whatever it was that everyone else had always seen about me. Fear that I wasn't good enough for him. Fear that he knew that. "What did I say to upset you? Tell me, and I'll take it back."

He winced and shook his head. "It's nothing. Really. We can talk about it later. The wolves are still out there somewhere. They might come back."

"They're gone," I told him. "Probably. Between the two of us, I think we scared them off. They don't want a war either."

But I wasn't entirely sure if I was right. I had seen the way that the Alpha had looked at James, the human who had stood against a pack of wolves with a flaming log held in his bare hands, brave enough to withstand pain and danger to protect himself and the vampire he'd crossed paths with.

When they first bit him, the wolves might have seen something in James and then impulsively decided he should be one of them. They were part animal, after all, and sometimes they acted on instinct. But now that the Alpha had seen what James was capable of, how different he was from other humans, I doubted they were willing to just let him go without a fight. The Alpha would want nothing more than to claim James as his mate now. Wolves were sexually omnivorous, and who they chose as a mate relied less on gender than it did on some sort of secret sauce that was partly animal instinct and partly whether the potential mate displayed the constellation of qualities that wolves valued most: inner strength, loyalty, fierce protectiveness, and courage. Physical beauty went into that equation, too.

The thought filled me with anxiety. James possessed all the qualities that the wolves prized, and more, in spades. And he'd displayed them all to the Alpha last night. The Alpha would want him. Badly.

"So I was right, then. We need to leave," James said quietly. "I don't want to be a wolf. And I don't want to belong to anyone else. And I don't want them hurting you again."

"How clearly can you hear my thoughts right now?" I asked, still speaking aloud, even though I already knew the answer to my own question. Even walled off, James could still hear me just fine.

He gave me a small, triumphant smile. "I can hear pretty clearly. You should get dressed, too. We need to get the hell out of here."

“Can we talk about what just happened?”

“Later, please?” he asked, giving me a stricken look. “It’s stupid, I promise, but I don’t want to get into all of it right now. When we’re safe, maybe.”

When he was home, back in his human life, where I couldn’t follow him. He didn’t say it, but it hung in the air between us all the same. I didn’t believe for a second that what he was feeling was trivial. Otherwise, the walls wouldn’t have come up like that.

Feeling suddenly numb and mechanical, I got up and began dressing.

I tried to ignore it, but I felt the first stirrings of real unease as reality reasserted itself around me. What had I been thinking?

I had let James completely into my heart, past all the defenses I had spent a hundred years building. I hadn’t realized it was even possible for me to feel the kind of feelings I now felt for him. For the very first time, I wanted my eternity just so that I could spend it by his side.

But what if he didn’t want the same thing?

## Chapter 12

James

My campsite looked like a scene out of a horror movie. Blood was everywhere, shockingly red against the whiteness of the newly fallen snow. My tent had been shredded to pieces by sharp claws. Paw prints were everywhere I looked. We had to walk right through it to get to the trail leading to my Jeep.

But we didn't even stop to grab my things or look for Pierce's phone. I didn't believe for a second that the wolves were gone. And I knew Pierce didn't believe that either.

"This would be a lot faster if you had just let me carry you," Pierce muttered.

"Not a chance."

"Right," he whispered, shooting me a miserable look. I felt a flash of anxiety tear through his mind, and then nothing at all. I realized, with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, that he had just shut me out of his mind the same way I had shut him out. Pierce began to walk fast enough down the trail that I couldn't quite keep up with him.

"Wait," I said, jogging to keep up with him, panic surging through me. "Can we please stop and talk for a second?"

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

“I thought you wanted to talk later.”

I felt a surge of irritation, but it was all mixed up in my fear. He was acting so weird. Then it clicked.

“Wait a damn second.” I stopped in my tracks. “Are you one of those guys who gets all bouncy with someone and then takes off after? Am I even going to get a dear-John letter from you, or are you just going to leave?”

He rounded on me, a look of outrage on his face. “You have got to be kidding me if you think that’s anything remotely close to what’s going on in my head right now!”

“I have no idea what’s going on inside your head since you shut me out.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk.” He laughed, but it sounded more like broken glass. “You shut me out first.”

“I didn’t do that on purpose,” I retorted, which was only technically true. I hadn’t slammed a wall down over my thoughts on purpose, but I had been plenty grateful when it had happened accidentally.

“Okay, then explain to me what happened,” he demanded, a note of bewilderment creeping into his voice. “Please. I was trying to talk about our future, and you shut down.”

He had promised to love me for an eternity. That’s what happened. He had promised me that, and for a split second, I had almost—almost—believed him.

Then I remembered the stricken, broken expression on my father's face on the night my mother had left us. Everyone leaves eventually, and I wasn't going to be one of those suckers who let their heart get torn right out of their chest.

"I think that maybe we're moving too fast," I told him, forcing the words out around the hot lump of emotion that had formed in my throat.

The words hung between us, strangely final.

"You think this was a mistake," Pierce stated. His face was like a mask, and his mind felt like it was behind the door of an impenetrable bank vault.

I wanted to say something to contradict him. But the words wouldn't come. They were drowned out by the sudden, crushing fear I felt. It would be better to lose him now when this was all so new than to lose him later after I had built a whole life with him. When losing him might have the ability to break me.

But why did it already feel like I was shattering into pieces? Why did it feel like I would never be able to breathe quite right ever again?

"After I get you home, I will leave, then," Pierce told me, his voice growing colder with each word. His face was like a rigid stone mask and his body had gone utterly, unnaturally, still. "I will leave you be if that's your wish. The blood bond will always exist between us, but I will close my mind to it. I will trouble you no longer."

His words were everything I was afraid of. Everyone leaves.

I gazed at him in dumb shock, and I don't know what was written all over my face except that I felt a numb wash of horror.

As he looked at me, I felt some of the walls around his mind collapse. I felt the hot

edges of his pain. The pain I had caused him. His cold expression began to thaw as he studied me. “James...”

“Maybe you should listen to the boy,” said a blond man who stepped out of the snow-coated trees beside us. He had a crossbow aimed right at Pierce’s chest.

He was tall and muscular, with a fan of stubble across his rugged face and piercing blue eyes. He was barefoot, wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else. He was seemingly oblivious to the cold, even though I could see my breath in front of my face. I couldn’t deny that he was very good-looking in a cowboyish sort of way, even though I tried not to notice.

The Alpha wolf in human form, no doubt.

“You need to leave,” Pierce growled, staring the blond man down. “Leave now, and I’ll allow you to walk away with your life. James stays with me.”

Some of the walls between us had fallen. I caught from Pierce’s mind that he was belatedly realizing, and cursing himself for it, that he could smell the others somewhere very nearby, even if he couldn’t see them. They were probably hiding in the trees all around us.

Get ready to run, Pierce told me, whispering the thought into my mind.

If you think I’m leaving you, you’re out of your goddamn mind, I shot back.

I felt his surge of frustration, which told me he heard me just fine. Then, without warning, he leapt into the air, clearly planning to tackle the Alpha to the ground. He was airborne for about a heartbeat before he smashed into an invisible wall about five feet in front of him. The sound it made echoed through the forest, and I felt Pierce’s pain roll over me like a wave of darkness.

“It’s a barrier spell,” the Alpha explained, looking down at Pierce. “A warlock joined our pack a few months ago. He’s been quite useful. We don’t want war with the vampires either. We only want—” He broke off, looking up at me. His expression softened fractionally. “James, right?”

“No!” Pierce yelled, vamp-speeding from one end of his prison to the other, banging on the invisible walls that held him, searching frantically for a weakness in the spell that contained him and finding none. “James, run!”

“If you run, we’ll kill him,” the Alpha told me. It was a simple statement of an ugly fact. “If you care what happens to the vampire, you will cooperate.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

On cue, the other wolves—in their human forms—stepped out of the trees. There had been five others with the Alpha last night. Now I saw that there were at least a dozen of them. Most of them were men, but there were two women as well. All the men were shirtless. A few wore jeans like the Alpha, but most wore athletic pants. Both the women wore jean cutoffs and itty-bitty T-shirts that seemed like they had been selected to reveal as much mid-drift as possible.

But what they lacked in clothing, they made up for in weapons. Several of the men were holding swords. A few held wooden stakes. And, like the Alpha, both women held crossbows in their hands, notched and aimed at Pierce's chest, ready to fire at him the moment they were permitted to do so.

And behind all the rest of them, there was a dark-haired man in his mid-twenties, bundled up in winter gear. He stared right at Pierce and chanted something under his breath. He had to be the warlock the Alpha had mentioned. He was the one holding Pierce in place with his spell.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that I was outnumbered, outgunned, and outclassed. Even if these had been regular humans, I still would have been done for.

And if I didn't cooperate, I did not doubt that the Alpha would order the other wolves to kill Pierce right in front of me. The thought filled me with mind-numbing, soul-crushing terror. It was unlike how I had felt earlier when I had been trying to leave the cabin on principle. Now, it was a conviction seared deeply into my soul that I would go to any lengths to protect Pierce. Even if it took suffering through another one of those agonizing wolf bites, that's what I would do.

“Don’t hurt him,” I said, staring the Alpha down with as much rage as I could muster. “I’ll come with you. But if you hurt him, I’ll kill you. I swear it.”

No, no, no, no, no!

Pierce practically screamed it into my brain, but I ignored him, even though it broke my heart in two.

The Alpha smiled. “So much courage and loyalty for a human. I can’t wait to see what kind of wolf you’re going to be. The vampire is right. You’re something special.”

He gestured to the rest of his pack. With the weapons still in their hands, they streamed forward, surrounding me so I couldn’t run. They smelled like pine trees and freshly cut grass. The heat they produced enveloped me as though I had stepped into a slightly too-warm room.

“James, no!” Pierce cried out loud, banging on the spell that held him in place. “Let him go! James, run!”

Though it broke my heart into tiny, jagged pieces, I went with the wolves without putting up a struggle as they began to march me through the forest, leading me down the mountain. Though tears burned in my eyes, I refused to let them fall. I could do this one thing to ensure that Pierce lived. That was all I wanted now. Pierce called after me for a long time, his voice echoing through the trees behind me. I could feel the frantic edge of his thoughts as he tried to reach out to me, but I didn’t open my mind to him again. I didn’t want my resolve to waver. I told myself that I wasn’t abandoning him, and I tried very, very hard to make myself believe it.

The entire time we walked, I pretended that I couldn’t feel my lover’s agony at all.

## Chapter 13

Pierce

Rage unlike anything I've ever felt before tore through me. It wasn't until James left with the wolves that I realized there were no limits as to what I'd do for him. My eternity no longer belonged to me. It belonged to him and him alone.

But coursing underneath my rage was my grief. How could I have believed—even for a moment—that I could survive the rest of my immortality without James? How could I have allowed him to think such a thing?

He had transformed everything that I was in the blink of an eye. I had never understood how anyone could ever just look at someone and know that they were the one. Now, it made perfect sense with an awful and adamant clarity. I hadn't known I was doing it at the time, but I had waited one hundred years for him.

Love wasn't romance. Love was seeing someone else and recognizing that you would fight for them. That you would risk anything for them. And somehow, inexplicably, James had become that person for me. There would be no others. James' mind was utterly unlike my own, yet the bond between us was like coming home. It was the safe harbor I had never had—never allowed myself to have.

My insides felt like molten glass. Like my rage, fear, and grief had all superheated and melded together into one thing. And if I allowed the storm of emotions within me to cool, I knew I might shatter all over again.

I beat on the barrier that contained me until my hands felt raw, searching for a weakness in the warlock's magic, but it was useless. Brute strength wasn't going to cut it.

The spell was impenetrable. It was, in fact, too strong. And the warlock hadn't stayed behind to maintain the barrier. He'd gone with the rest of the pack. Add those together, and it meant that the warlock had tied his spell to something. Witches and warlocks can do that—tether a spell to a natural phenomenon, usually a celestial event—to make their spells stronger. The most common natural phenomenon for a spellcaster to use was the cycle of the moon, which wouldn't rise tonight until just after sunset. That probably meant that he'd used the cycle of day and night itself, always another popular choice. Odds were, once the sun set, the warlock's spell would fall.

In fact, I was sure of it.

Of course, by then, I would have only minutes to get to James before the wolves could transform under the light of the moon and give James the bite that would rob him of his humanity forever.

Even if he became a wolf, I knew I would still want him. I would always want him. But I would never—never—allow anyone to take his choice from him.

If they hurt him, I would kill every last one of them.

Why had he gone with them? He hadn't even tried to fight.

But then, I already knew the answer to that. I had felt the depths of his fear when the wolves threatened to kill me. I had felt his immediate and wholehearted willingness to trade away his humanity for my life.

Right after, he had all but said he didn't want to spend eternity by my side.

But that didn't matter right then. What mattered was that he was safe. That he was okay. That he remained himself.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

Something had very obviously changed in me. Though I hadn't even felt it the moment it had happened, the biggest wall around my heart had already come crumbling down the very moment his mind touched mine and I saw myself through his eyes. James had given me a gift that could never be repaid.

He had shown me myself.

He had believed in my goodness so much that he had gone with the wolves without a fight in order to protect me. Without a single moment's hesitation, he was willing to give up his own humanity—his agency—so I could continue living.

More importantly, I knew without a doubt that he wanted me to believe what he'd seen in me from that first moment—that I was still a man, even if I was a vampire too. I already knew I would never deny James anything for as long as I lived.

So, I couldn't deny him that, either. If he wanted me to recognize my own humanity, I would do it. I couldn't help but do it.

And if I was willing to accept that I was still a man, it meant that I was also still fully capable of giving and receiving love.

And I couldn't help but love James. He was the blazing comet that had lit up the eternal darkness of my life. Possessing him mattered less to me than ensuring he was safe, happy, and cared for, even if it wasn't with me. He had saved me from a cold and barren eternity of isolation, where I had kept my heart safely out of reach of others.

But I didn't want to protect my heart any longer. Certainly not with him.

And now, the only thing that mattered was finding and saving him from the wolves. And tearing that pack apart. Starting with the Alpha who had taken him and the warlock who had sealed me here.

I had exactly one option. When the barrier fell with the setting of the sun, I'd have a few minutes until the wolves turned James. That would be enough time if I moved at full speed, but only if I knew exactly where I was going. I didn't have time to search the mountains for him.

I needed to use the blood bond to find James, even though he had closed his mind.

And if I failed, I was going to lose the one thing that mattered most to me.

## Chapter 14

### James

The wolves took me to their pack headquarters, which, as it turned out, was a forest commune situation, only a couple of miles away from Pierce's cabin. It was a bunch of log cabins built in a semi-circle on the edge of a gently sloping hill. Down the hill, there was what was obviously their meeting space. It was a roughly circular patch of ground about fifty feet wide. There were a bunch of logs arranged around a massive firepit that they'd dug into the ground. Beyond it was the tree line.

The wolves took me to the largest of the cabins. Most of the pack waited outside, but two dark-haired men who looked so alike they might've been brothers came into the cabin with the Alpha and me, presumably to make sure I didn't try to make a break for it. The warlock entered the cabin too. Without any prompting, he moved around the space, touching the door and each of the windows, muttering what had to have

been a spell of some sort under his breath. No doubt it was another barrier spell. He only met my eyes once, by accident, then he quickly looked away, grimacing.

So, he understood that what he was doing was wrong, at least.

The two dark-haired wolves, however, stared at me openly from the other side of the cabin with nearly identical expressions of unease. That led me to think that this was not their standard operating procedure. Kidnapping someone and forcing him to become part of their pack wasn't an everyday occurrence for any of them and they weren't all that comfortable with what was going down.

It was a larger cabin than Pierce's, and the furniture looked comfortable but way more worn-down and lived-in. There was an awful dumpy green and red plaid couch in front of a fireplace. Cushions that looked like they had been mended many times throughout their life were thrown haphazardly on top of it. A rickety-looking rectangular wooden table sat next to a window that overlooked the snowy forest. The threadbare rug on the ground had maybe once been a vibrant green but was now a faded and grayish sage color. A few paintings of forest landscapes at sunset had been properly framed and hung on the walls.

They were the only touch of real personality in the whole place.

"Thank you, Daniel," the Alpha said to the warlock, a clear dismissal.

Daniel and the two dark-haired wolves cleared out without a word, leaving me alone with the Alpha.

My heart felt like twisted and sharp bits of metal that had been heated in a supernova, as though it might burn right out of my chest. Though I could throw up a wall between myself and Pierce, I couldn't stop hearing his agonized voice all over again, on a loop, begging me to run.

And I couldn't help feeling like I had abandoned him. And I wanted, more than anything else, for him to be back in my arms. I had been foolish. I should have explained to him about the wound my mother had left on me. I should have explained how scared I felt at the prospect of giving my heart over to someone else. Even though, if I was being honest with myself, I had already given it to Pierce. But now there was no time, and there might never be time again to tell him any of that.

But he had lived. The wolves hadn't killed him. That was what mattered now.

Forcing myself to move through the haze of my grief, I wandered around the space, taking it all in. My gaze kept drifting back to the paintings, which had obviously all been done by the same artist. The rest of the space seemed neglected and barren. There was a thick layer of dust on the mantle above the fireplace. The rug on the floor was threadbare. There were dirty dishes piled in the sink. But the frames around each of these paintings were immaculate, as though they were cleaned every day. They were polished to a fine, gleaming sheen. They were the one thing in this cabin that the Alpha treasured.

He watched me in silence. I could feel his eyes boring into me.

"Who painted these?" I asked, gesturing to the one I was looking at. It was an image of Mount Rainier against a sunset sky that had been shot through with rich reds, purples, and golds.

If my question caught the Alpha off-guard, he didn't show it.

"My former mate," he replied. His voice thickened, losing its cocky edge. "He's gone now. This is all I have left of him."

I nodded, unsurprised.

“I’m sorry,” I said, unable to stop myself from feeling the stab of sympathy at how raw his voice sounded, even though I could have still cheerfully set him on fire for having separated me from Pierce. I turned and studied him for a long moment. The Alpha’s piercing blue eyes were filled with pain. I added, “It sounds like it still hurts.”

He nodded, swallowing once. “I wish it hadn’t gone this way. You must think we’re terrible monsters.”

The way he said it pissed me off. Like he hadn’t had a choice in the matter.

“Look, I want to make it clear that I don’t give a solitary flying fuck that you’re a werewolf,” I said, my voice getting colder and steelier with each syllable. “That’s fine. But you walked into my camp and bit me last night. You could have at least tried to get my consent first, but you didn’t. And now you’re keeping me here against my will so you can force me to join your pack. Your behavior seems pretty monstrous to me, yeah.”

“You’ve got a mouth on you,” the Alpha replied after a long moment of silence. I expected anger at my outburst, but he sounded almost amused. “I’m much more impulsive in my animal form. More instinctual. But you’re right. I should have asked first.”

I stared at him. “Why? Why did you choose me? Why are you doing this?”

“I saw you at the lake,” he replied as though that explained anything at all.

But I remembered the prickling unease I’d felt earlier after releasing useless, wrenching sobs into the sand. The sense that someone else was watching me.

“That was you,” I said slowly, putting it together. “You saw me scattering my father’s ashes.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. I assumed he meant that he was sorry for my loss and that he wasn’t apologizing for being a creeper. Or for kidnapping me. He added, “Were you two close?”

I shrugged but didn’t reply. I didn’t want him to be kind to me now. Not when he locked me away in his cabin and held me here against my will. Not when Pierce was somewhere out there, separated from me, still at the mercy of the warlock’s spell. It was too confusing. I wanted to be angry with him. It was easier.

“Is it going to stop you from turning me into a werewolf if I tell you no right now? If I tell you I don’t want to be a wolf?”

“My name is Jeremy,” the Alpha said, dodging my question and not even being subtle about it. “I chose you last night because I saw the loneliness in you, and the wolf in me acted. It sometimes knows things that I do not. But I promise you will never be alone again once you join us. This is a gift we are giving you.”

He even dared to give me an imploring look, like he was trying to make me understand his side of things.

Naturally, it didn’t soften me to him. Instead, it gave me exactly what I needed. Namely, it made me angry.

“Well, I’m saying no to your gift,” I told him flatly, crossing my arms. “I don’t want it. So, if you do this to me, you’re going to be doing it against my will. You can dress it up however you want, but what you’re doing is wrong, and we both know it.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re still drunk on the vampire’s blood. He fed from you. He confused you. We’re protecting you from him.”

I laughed at him. I had never been less confused about anyone in my entire life. I knew now, with crystalline clarity, that Pierce had stolen my heart. But the mention of my vampire sent another stab of pain bursting through me. Again, I saw the anguish in his amber eyes as I went with the wolves and left him behind, abandoning him just like his parents had.

The walls that I was throwing up between him and me collapsed for an instant.

James! James, are you okay? Where are you?

Pierce’s voice immediately echoed in my mind. I felt a swell of instinctive relief that he was okay. And I knew he sensed I was, if not okay, then at least unharmed. But the twisted metal feeling in my chest got worse and worse, like it might cleave me in two at any moment.

Twice, the wolf pack had trounced him. I wasn’t going to let there be a third time.

I threw the wall back up between us without responding. And I ignored the agony in my chest. It wasn’t going to help me now. I pushed the feelings away, taking a deep breath.

“I’m not confused, and I’m sick of people telling me that I am,” I replied at last. I still felt fully ready to clobber the Alpha over his head with the nearest heavy object. “I’m livid. If you do this to me against my will, I’m going to hate you, I swear it. Maybe

you're into that, but I'm not. Let me go."

"Look, I'm not a bad guy. I run a bar further down the mountain. I give white water rapid tours in the peak season. I volunteer at the food bank. I care about my pack. And I could care about you, too," Jeremy said, locking eyes with me. "I swear I would."

"Really? Because from where I'm standing, you're someone who likes to kidnap strangers and force them to become fucking werewolves." I paused, feeling my hands curl into fists reflexively. "Yeah, you're a real gem. And you still can't even really tell me why. And don't even think about giving me that bullshit about how the 'wolf knows' or how sad I seemed. Give me something true."

I glared at him, putting every ounce of my fury into it. He just looked back at me calmly. And he didn't even have the common decency to get angry with me in return.

"You look like him," Jeremy admitted, naked emotion creeping into his voice. "I saw it last night when you defended the vampire. You're just like him in the way that you carry yourself. And in your facial expressions. And most of all, in your eyes. They're just the same as his were. You're a mirror image of my mate in all the ways that matter. And I can't let you go—it would be like losing him all over again. If you need to hate me, do it. But you're going to be mine as soon as the moon rises."

Chapter 15

Pierce

The moment the sun set completely behind the horizon, the spell containing me collapsed into nothingness. I didn't waste any time. The one instance where I had gotten through to James, where his mind had opened back up to me, had been enough for me to get a lock on his location. I could sense where he was now.

I began to book it at top speed down the mountain.

Vampires can move extraordinarily fast. For the average human witnessing us at top speed, it would seem like magic to them, like we've simply manifested out of thin air.

I made it to the werewolves less than five minutes after the sun had set, pausing at the treeline and assessing the situation.

The entire pack was in a circular clearing at the bottom of a hill: eleven wolves, the Alpha, one warlock, and James. They'd built a truly massive roaring orange bonfire for the occasion, like something that witches from legend might dance around. The wolves were in as few clothes as possible, and most of them were seated on logs that had been converted into benches.

The Alpha was standing before them, still half-naked. James stood beside him, still fully clothed. Luckily for the wolves, he looked to be unharmed. His eyes searched the clearing, and though his mind was mostly closed to me, the blood bond still told me that he was searching for something to use as a weapon with which to clobber the Alpha over the head.

Of course he was.

His eyes landed on me, standing there between the trees, and they widened. He looked away quickly before anyone could notice. Just like that, all the walls came down between us.

Are you okay? I demanded.

I'm fine, he told me, his instinctive joy at my nearness so overwhelming through the telepathic link that it almost—but not quite—brought tears to my eyes. He added, Don't kill anyone. Please.

I didn't want to lie to him, so I didn't reply.

I darted out and stopped right behind the Alpha. I moved so fast that, to everyone else watching, it probably looked like I had just teleported. I reached out my hands to grab him by the head and break his neck—which wouldn't have killed him since wolves heal insanely fast—but the Alpha seemed to sense my presence. He moved at the last moment, dropping himself into an acrobatic tumble to get out of my way.

Inwardly, I cursed myself that I couldn't deny James anything. I should have torn out the Alpha's heart and been done with it.

The Alpha sprang up a half-second later, way faster than a human would have been able to move, and he turned to face me. A snarl of fury tore out of his throat when he saw me.

"Vampire," he spat. Like it was a dirty word.

"Wolf," I greeted him, my tone matching his exactly.

We glared at each other for a split second. Then I launched myself at him.

I was too fast; he couldn't escape me. I struck out with a savage blow to his jaw that would have taken his head clean off if he'd been a human. Again, I found myself going for the hurt instead of the kill because that's what James had asked me to do.

He returned the blow without missing a beat, even though he should have been seeing little cartoon birdies around his head.

I dodged out of the way, then got behind him again.

He whirled to face me, his eyes flashing bright yellow. When he swiped at me, his hands had become claws.

I jumped back, avoiding having my midsection shredded by less than an inch. My shirt wasn't so lucky. With a tearing sound it came open, and cold night air swirled around the exposed flesh of my torso.

The other wolves were slower on the uptake but still loyal to their Alpha. They rose and moved quickly to form a loose circle around me, cutting off my escape routes. Worse, James was behind us, still stuck in the makeshift fighting ring. There was every chance we'd hurt him by mistake just because he was standing so close.

The warlock crept forward as well, but he kept well behind the wolves, amber light beginning to dance between his fingertips.

I lunged forward and shoved the Alpha onto his smug werewolf ass.

He landed on the ground and slid five feet on the packed earth. One of the braver wolves, a dark-haired, broad-shouldered man, darted forward and tried to hit me, ready to protect his Alpha.

He wasn't as fast as the Alpha and not even half as talented of a fighter. I grabbed his arm and swung behind him, moving like a dancer, and prepared to break his elbow at the joint.

The wolf tried to jerk his arm away, but it was no use.

The warlock threw his spell at me, and I shoved the dark-haired male werewolf I was holding in the way of it, using him as a shield. He went rigid, like all his muscles had turned to stone. The spell had been some sort of paralytic enchantment, and he was now helpless in my hands.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

“No!” the warlock cried, stricken. His voice broke. “Please don’t hurt him!”

I released the paralyzed wolf, feeling disgusted at myself for showing him mercy. He tumbled to the ground at my feet.

The warlock let out a sharp cry that was both surprise and relief.

In my momentary distraction, the Alpha had grabbed a stray fallen tree branch from the ground and shot to his feet. Just as I turned, he broke the branch in two, leaving the edge he held jagged and sharp enough to end me.

The clouds overhead parted, revealing the pale moon. It struck the clearing, bathing the Alpha and all the wolves around us with silver light.

“The game has just changed,” the Alpha informed me, grinning smugly even as his face began to transform, his teeth lengthening into fangs and fur beginning to sprout on his face. “Now you lose.”

### Chapter 16

James

All around me, the wolves began to transform. This was the manifestation of my very worst fear. Pierce was going to get torn apart because of me.

I couldn’t let it happen.

“Stop!”

Everyone turned to look at me as though startled to remember that I existed. I stepped forward with both hands held up like I was calling for a time-out.

I put myself between Jeremy and Pierce.

What are you doing? The panicked edge of Pierce’s thoughts crashed through my mind as my gaze met his.

Please trust me.

I do.

I nodded, relief flooding through me. I turned away from him, praying that what I was about to do would be enough.

I raised my voice so that it was audible to everybody in the clearing. “Everyone, stop!” Forcing myself to remain calm, I met the eyes of every single wolf, one at a time. Most of them were halfway transformed already, but they all stopped to listen to me. The human that they had spent the night hunting.

Then I turned to the Alpha. “Jeremy, please stop this.”

He stared at me, but it wasn’t with anger. It was with a stricken, unhappy look on his face like he had guessed what was about to happen. Even halfway transformed, with pale yellow eyes and the sharp teeth of a wolf, he looked miserable and very, very human.

“Jeremy, please listen to me. I know that you’re in pain. I can’t imagine the pain you’re in. But I can’t replace your mate. You’re about to make a serious mistake, one

that you're going to regret for a long time."

Jeremy stared at me, the miserable look on his face intensifying. But he didn't say anything.

I took a deep breath, realizing I was about to risk everything for Pierce. My life, my humanity, and worst of all, the walls I kept around my heart.

"I've chosen the vampire," I told him, my tone gentle yet firm. "He's the one my heart belongs to. He's the one my heart will always belong to. He's the one I want to spend my life with. I don't want to be a part of your pack. And I will never willingly be your mate."

Raw emotion chased across Jeremy's face at my words. Disbelief, anger, pain, and grief, one after the other. "Once you've turned—" he started, sounding more hesitant.

But I cut him off with a soft shake of my head, giving him a very small, very sad smile that let him know I didn't want to hurt him. Not really, at least. "Listen to me, Jeremy. Please, do your best to hear me right now. Do you really want to try to bind me to your side, even if I don't want to be there? Do you really want to force me into this life, even after I've told you I don't want it? That will make me hate you, and you know it. Nothing will ever be able to fix that betrayal of my trust. Do you really want a mate that hates you and who will always hate you? You're better than that, Jeremy. I know you are. So be better."

The wolves stiffened, but I caught what I thought must have been relief on some of their faces. At least a few of them hadn't been fully on board with this either. But then, I already knew that from the uneasy way the dark-haired wolves in the cabin had been looking at me. I already knew that Jeremy's wolves thought he was better than that too.

Jeremy's face shifted from wolf back into human, and his eyes were filled with raw emotion as he looked at me. "But I can't just let you go," he whispered, staring at me, now fully heartbroken as my words finally sank in. "You're the first man I think I could have loved since my mate died. How can I give you up?"

"Because I think—despite the evidence to the contrary—that maybe you're a good person," I replied, holding my breath.

It was a gamble I was taking with my own life and with Pierce's. But that's how I had known that he would listen to me in the first place. It's how I had known that, deep down, he didn't really want to do this.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

Everyone stared at me. Jeremy most of all, though, I could feel Pierce's mixture of pride and awe at what I was doing, like I had done something remarkable instead of just choosing to talk to the Alpha like he was a regular person. I also sensed that if anyone so much as flinched wrong in my direction, Pierce was fully ready to kill to protect me.

I gave Jeremy a very small, very sad smile as I added, "You're the kind of person who sees the loneliness in another person and wants to do something crazy to keep him from ever feeling that way again. That's your very first instinct when you see someone in pain. You're the kind of person who cleans your mate's old paintings every day because they're the one piece of him you have left. You're the kind of person that's worth following. Or, at least, your wolves sure as hell seem to think so. They're willing to follow you, even when you're doing something crazy."

I pointed at myself, and I caught a few of the wolves giving me grudging smiles from the sidelines. I could still feel Pierce's eyes boring a hole in my back.

I added, "You're the kind of person who deserves a mate who chooses you too. You're the kind of person who deserves something real. You're the kind of person who wouldn't take something real away from anyone else." I looked at him, locking eyes with the Alpha again. And then I asked the most dangerous question of all. "Am I wrong about you?"

"You think you have something real with the vampire?" Jeremy demanded, even though the defeat was obvious in his voice. He sounded just as miserable as he looked.

“I’m connected to his mind,” I replied quietly. “It happened last night. I can talk to him without words now as easily as I’m talking to you. And he can do the same to me. It’s the most real thing I’ve ever experienced. And there won’t ever be anyone else for me now. I’m sorry.”

Then I said the one thing I promised myself I would never say. The one thing I promised myself I would never feel. “I’m in love with him. I didn’t mean to be. But I am.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the clearing. That’s how quiet it got.

“A blood bond,” Jeremy said, breaking the silence at last. His voice came out as a ragged and sharp whisper. He raised his gaze to meet Pierce’s behind me, and I knew from the way that he looked at my lover that the battle was over. “That’s how you found us. That’s how you found him.”

Pierce stepped forward to join me at my side. He nodded back at Jeremy, but the murder he would cheerfully commit to protect me was still plain to see in his eyes.

“I’ll protect him with my life,” Pierce growled. I felt him putting every ounce of his devotion and fury into the words. “And I’ll love him for as long as I live.”

Jeremy swallowed hard and then nodded at Pierce sharply. All the fight drained out of him in an instant. He turned back to me with a rueful smile, even though the pain stamped across his face was still naked for anyone to see. “Thank you. You stopped me from doing something pretty stupid here.”

Around us, all the wolves relaxed at once. Then, one by one, they shifted back to human form, their intense relief plain on their faces.

I gave Jeremy a tentative smile. “You’re going to find someone who rocks your

world. I know it.”

Jeremy nodded back, but it was clear he didn’t believe me. Then he glanced at Pierce. “Take your mate and go. You have nothing to fear from us anymore. I swear it on moon and word.”

Pierce nodded at him. Then he took me by the hand, and relief flooded through me. With all the wolves in the pack still watching us, he led me out of the clearing and into the darkness of the night.

## Chapter 17

James

The journey back to my Jeep seemed to take no time at all. I relented to being carried, and, despite the snow and ice on the ground, it had only taken us a few minutes to get to the parking lot where I’d parked my Jeep. The journey should have been frightening, but it wasn’t. I had never felt safer than I did in Pierce’s arms.

“I have better reflexes and a lot more experience driving in the snow. So, hand over the keys, human,” he told me. I sensed from his mind that he would tolerate no argument on that score.

However, oddly enough, his emotions were like a storm, building in intensity but whipping so fast that I couldn’t pick them out of the fray to get a clear picture of how he was feeling. But the one thing that I did sense from him was his fear.

So, I forked over my keys, but I couldn’t help myself from telling him, “Be gentle with it. It’s about as old as I am.”

He cracked the smallest of smiles at that but didn’t reply.

Of course, we had only gotten to the parking lot exit before we had to stop. It was after hours, and there was a heavy metal gate that someone—probably a park ranger—had padlocked shut.

“Maybe we can go back up to your place,” I suggested, frowning at the gate blocking us. The thought of returning to Pierce’s cabin without the threat of the wolves was a seductive one. What would it be like to be there if it was just us, able to do whatever we wanted with—and to—each other? I added, “There’s no rush now. The wolves aren’t coming back for me.”

“I’m going to see you safely home,” Pierce said after considering it for a moment. “I won’t be able to relax until you are as far from here as possible.”

Then he popped open the driver’s side door, jumped out of the car, and tore the padlock off the gate like it was made of wet paper instead of metal. He swung the gate open, then jumped back into the driver’s seat. The whole process only took him a few seconds.

We drove in silence for about an hour. He kept glancing over at me, but he didn’t speak. My face was everywhere in his thoughts. But so was the fear. It was like it was on a loop.

I didn’t try to make conversation either because he was being so fucking weird. But then it finally clicked that he was pulling away from me.

Fury ignited within me at the thought. It felt good. It felt right. I shot him a glare and found that he’d glanced over at me at that exact moment.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

He blanched, seeming to grow even paler than before, before turning his eyes back to the road. We should have been back in his cabin, making love in his bed, but instead we were here, with him driving my jeep through the freshly fallen snow—grudgingly, I had to admit he was doing an excellent job of that—and taking me back to civilization.

The endless crush of trees on either side of the freeway and white expanse of snow blanketing the ground both began to lessen with each mile we drove. By the time we reached the freeway, there was no snow at all. Apart from my ragged, bloody clothing, it was almost like I might have imagined the whole thing.

Feeling more and more uneasy, I gave Pierce directions to where I lived. The hour was growing late, but even so, there were a number of cars on the road. Ordinarily, that would have been a small measure of comfort. Under ordinary circumstances, it should have been a reminder that, no matter how alone I ever felt, there were other people very nearby, going about their lives, who probably sometimes felt the exact same way I did.

Alone. Disconnected.

But I wasn't alone anymore, was I? I certainly wasn't disconnected.

Or, I shouldn't have been, at least.

But the strange silence standing between Pierce and I—both audible and mental—was frightening. It was like an invisible wall, growing denser and denser with each passing moment, harder to break through.

At last, Pierce pulled off the freeway and turned onto a street that should have been familiar and safe. But in the darkness, it seemed almost unrecognizable, a place where some stranger lived, not the street I had grown up on. This feeling of eerie unfamiliarity only got stronger as he pulled my jeep into my driveway.

The house in front of us was a modest single-story rambler, painted yellow, with white trim. The lawn was maybe a touch too long, growing a bit wild and unruly. It hadn't been mowed in far too long. There was a single tree on the property, an ancient and wizened willow with a wooden swing dangling from one of its thick lower branches. It looked so thin and brittle that if anyone dared sit on it, it might snap in two.

I stared at my father's house with a sense of panic. It should have felt like it belonged to me now, especially since I had just let him go. But instead, it felt even more like it belonged to someone else. I didn't want to go back into that house alone.

Pierce looked over at me. "We need to talk about this."

Then, without waiting for my reply, he opened the driver's side door, climbed out, and walked over to the passenger side of the car, moving at human speed. Probably so that he wouldn't frighten my neighbors. His amber eyes were practically on fire, but his expression was otherwise unreadable as he opened my door for me.

Warily, I got out of the car.

"I know you didn't want this," I said, deciding that the kindest thing I could do right then was to take control. For both our sakes. "I know you didn't plan on a blood bond with me. Or with anyone else. But we can be adults about this. I mean, we'll need to figure out what to do about it, obviously." The words felt like broken glass, scraping against the inside of my throat. But I forced them out anyway.

“Obviously,” he echoed, though his lips jerked into what looked like an involuntary smile. “And what do you propose we ‘do about it?’”

“I don’t know. But I don’t want you to be chained to me against your will.”

“Against my will,” he repeated, his eyes going wide. His jaw dropped. “No. No, that’s not?—”

“You got so quiet,” I said, feeling suddenly defensive. “And, I don’t know, weird. I figured...” I trailed off, suddenly not sure if I should be feeling stupid or just terrified of what was going to happen next. I forced myself to keep going, to keep shoving the words out of my mouth, one after the other. “And then there was your fear. I could sense it through the bond. I thought you were worried about how you were going to break things off.”

“You scared me,” he whispered, his voice going raw with emotion. “I’m not used to not being strong enough to protect the people I love.”

“Well, I’m sorry that your ego is bruised—” I started, feeling a swell of righteous anger that felt a whole lot better than the icy dread I’d been wrestling with for the last hour. But then I broke off suddenly, finally hearing what he’d just said.

“Wait.” I swallowed, staring up at him, feeling my eyes widen. “You love me?”

He just stared back at me, looking incredulous. “I said it back in the clearing. Did you think I was making it up?”

“I thought that maybe you were trying to rescue me from the wolves and said what you needed to. Heat of the moment and all that.”

“You said it too,” he accused, narrowing his eyes at me. “You told the Alpha that you

loved me and there would never be anyone else for you. You did a whole speech. Was that heat of the moment?"

"No." It was just one word, but my entire heart was contained within it.

"Thank God," Relief flooded into Pierce's eyes and his mental walls crumbled enough to show me how worried he'd been. His fears, the entire drive here, had been almost identical to mine. The wary, guarded look I'd gotten when he had spoken to me of the future had been haunting him the entire time. "You got quiet, too."

"I know," I whispered. "I'm a little afraid, maybe."

I knew better, of course, but I still half-expected him to poke fun at me, or to tell me how he didn't think I was afraid of anything, or something else that might dismiss the way I was feeling or make it easier on him somehow. Or even worse, for him to make my fear about him, about the fact that he was a vampire, when that wasn't it at all.

Instead, he nodded, giving me a small smile, his eyes searching mine. "Yeah, I get that. Me, too."

It was like Pierce and I were standing at the edge of a misty chasm, and we had no way of knowing how far down it went or whether we'd be okay when we hit the bottom. All we really knew is that we were in this together.

We were here, together.

I couldn't help but fear the worst, he added, speaking the words into my mind. I've been steeling myself for your rejection.

"Silly vampire," I whispered aloud. A sudden lump formed in my throat as my relief gave way to an abrupt array of white-hot emotions that I couldn't even put a name to. It would take a long time probably, but I was going to show Pierce that he was worth being chosen, that nothing was wrong with him. I was going to prove to him that he didn't deserve rejection.

However, according to what Pierce had told me about humans who drank vampire blood, I had a very, very long time for all of that. For right now, all I knew was that I wanted him in my bed, immediately.

"Yes, please," Pierce said, grinning at me, the tension between us snapping. His fangs were abruptly visible, but I almost didn't even notice. They were just a part of him, after all.

With my heart pounding, I led the way to the front door and realized that Pierce still had my keys. I stepped back and allowed him to unlock the door.

After he'd done so, I turned the knob, pushed the door open, and stepped inside. The house didn't feel right anymore, like it was even less mine than it had been before I'd left. But that wasn't important right now. What was important was Pierce.

Then I turned around, my eyebrows raised in question as a sudden thought occurred

to me.

Wait, do you need to be invited in?

“It’s polite, but unnecessary,” Pierce informed me aloud, seeming amused by my question. He demonstrated this fact by stepping over the threshold.

The door shut behind us with a soft click.

“This is where you grew up,” Pierce whispered, and I could feel his...reverence...for the space. It was a very strange reaction for him to have, given that the living room was so horribly mundane. There was a worn-thin couch my father had loved, a too-large flat screen television set mounted to the wall, a couple of lamps, a bookcase, and a coffee table that still had a half-finished bottle of beer resting on it. There was a woven cream-colored rug, slightly rumpled, on the scuffed-up hardwood floor.

I gave a shrug—both physical and mental.

Perhaps it was silly, but I felt abruptly shy. Somehow, Pierce being here, standing in my home, so very present in my world, made everything that had happened between us seem more real and true.

“It is real,” Pierce agreed, reading my mind again.

I smiled, finding to my own surprise how much I was enjoying our shared mental space. It should have been deeply strange. And perhaps it was. But it was also... nice.

Pierce returned my smile, but the wicked gleam in his eyes—and the sudden hot edge to his thoughts—told me he was eager to get us to the bed. Or the floor. Or the kitchen counter. Or all of the above.

Grinning like a fool, I led him by the hand to my bedroom.

Pierce pulled my shirt over my head and dropped it to the floor. His lips parted and his eyes darkened with desire as his gaze raked over my torso.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

No one has ever told me I’m beautiful before, I informed him honestly. I’d been called cute before, and some guys had even told me I was hot on occasion. But no one had ever looked at me with a straight face and called me beautiful. If they had, I wouldn’t have believed them. But I believed Pierce. I added, I think I like it.

I began to undo the buttons on his shirt, smirking at the fact that the deliberately slow pace I’d set for the task was driving my vampire more than a little crazy. I could already see that the telepathic bond between us was going to have plenty of very, very interesting uses.

But I took pity on him and undid his pants much more quickly. Or perhaps I was just as eager as him.

Pierce pulled me into a kiss that was warm and wet and sweet, his tongue entering my mouth and turning it deliciously dirty and demanding. My cock jerked to attention and every nerve ending was abruptly aware of his nearness.

I wanted him inside of me again.

When he pulled back, my pants dropped down around my ankles. Pierce had one-handedly undone my pants while kissing me. I had been so caught up in the kiss, in him, that I hadn’t even noticed it.

He gave me a smug smile, catching my flash of surprise. Then he gave me a gentle

push down onto the bed. He pulled my pants all the way off of me. Then he kicked his own pants the rest of the way off.

My room wasn't all the way dark. The moonlight was filtering in through the blinds, illuminating his silhouette in silver-white, dancing off the muscles in his arms and chest. His face was turned away from the light and his eyes gleamed at me in the half-darkness in a way that no human pair of eyes could have, but it didn't frighten me in the least.

I pulled him down on top of me, marveling at the delicious weight of him pinning me to the mattress, crushing me against him. His cock was hard and pressed against my thigh.

I threw a memory at him of where I kept my lubricant and he pulled back, grinning down at me like a fool. "You're so good at that," he told me, punctuating the statement with a kiss.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:32 am*

He reached over to my nightstand and produced the bottle of lube. He popped the top off it and then his eyebrows raised when I held out my hand. But he poured a fair amount into my hand. Then he sucked in a sharp breath, his face tilting heavenward as I coated his shaft with the lubricant, working my hand up and down him, marveling at his hardness and length.

Fuck, that feels good.

I wasn't quite sure whose thought it was because I had sucked in a breath as well, as the phantom sensation of my own hot touch on his cock rippled through the blood bond, the pleasure of it causing my own toes to curl.

I hastily spread some lube on my hole, then pulled him down on top of me.

He laughed, getting into position over me, one hand on either side of me. "So eager. So demanding."

"Always," I agreed, wrapping my legs around his waist. I pulled him in for a kiss while he guided himself into me.

Then, we both sucked in a gasp at the same time as our combined ecstasy, the overwhelming sensation of being both inside of another man and having another man enter us at the very same time, shot through the telepathic link.

It was the hot, wet tightness of sliding into me that Pierce felt, the feel of making love to another man. But it was also the delicious fullness and the jolts of almost-too-much full-body pleasure I felt at having him moving inside of me, at having him work

himself in and out of my body.

Pierce let out a groan of pleasure, gripping my hips as he drove himself into me again and again, tearing little moans and gasps from my lips.

Holy shit, that's incredible.

Pierce must have heard my most secret desires, or perhaps he felt precisely the same way I did, because while he was a bit too gentle at first, he made up for it by setting a devastating pace that caused me to whimper and writhe with pleasure on the bed beneath him, my body his for the taking.

I felt a familiar tingling in the base of my spine, accompanied by a tightening sensation in my balls, but every time I got too close, he slowed his pace down, refusing to let me orgasm too early.

And when he, at last, found his release inside of me, his orgasm sent me over the edge too, and I shot hot ropes of white across my stomach.

The explosive combined pleasure of our shared orgasm, echoing between us, left both of us gasping and clinging to each other for dear life.

After the mind-bending pleasure of our combined orgasm had fully faded, Pierce carefully pulled himself out of me. Then, using vampire speed, he vanished from the room and returned a few seconds later, carrying a towel. He dried me off first, then himself.

This blood bond is dangerous, Pierce told me silently, arching an eyebrow. There was the ghost of a smile on his lips, but his eyes were dancing with mischief. However, I didn't need any of that anymore to know that he was mostly kidding. The connection between us told me everything I needed to know.

He added, just so you know, this has entirely ruined any other type of sexual experience for me.

Good, I replied with a grin, pulling him back down into the bed beside me and throwing my arms around him. Because you belong to me, vampire.

The connection between us told me that his surprise at the simple way I had laid a claim to him was eclipsed only by how much he found he liked it. No one had ever claimed him before. Not really, at least.

Well, that was going to change. I was planning on claiming Pierce every single day for the rest of our lives.

For starters, at least.

And then, even as this thought echoed between us, I felt his love for me. It was fierce, and it was new, but it was real, and I don't know how I could have ever doubted that love existed in the first place. And some last, lingering piece of resistance broke in me as well, swept away on a wave of pure emotion. For the very first time in my life, I knew that my heart was fully open, and I didn't feel like a sucker at all. I knew that he would never hurt me.

"My brave, foolish human," Pierce whispered aloud, drawing me close with his powerful arms and kissing my neck. He whispered, right into my ear, "You're everything I'll ever want and everything that I'll ever need. And I promise that I will love you for eternity. If that's okay with you?"

"Yes," I replied, feeling my own love swell in my chest, filling every part of me so completely that I felt like I might burst with it. Pierce was everything I would ever want as well, for as long as I lived. "Yes. Eternity sounds about right."

THE END