



# Wolf's Reluctant Mate

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Ray Crawford never wanted a human mate—especially not Stacy, the stubborn, infuriating woman who's tangled herself in his world. As a werewolf, his duty is to his pack, to protect them from the growing threats circling like vultures. But Stacy is a complication he can't ignore. She's fire and steel, refusing to back down, even when she's caught between warring packs and a conspiracy that could destroy them all.

Tensions rise when a rival pack from Mercer sets their sights on claiming territory—and Stacy. Ray's instincts scream to keep her safe, but the more he pushes her away, the deeper she sinks into danger. And worse? Another wolf is watching her, ready to step in where Ray won't.

With secrets unraveling and a research facility at the heart of a deadly plot, Ray is forced to make an impossible choice: risk his heart or lose everything. As battle lines are drawn and blood is spilled, Stacy must decide if she's willing to stand by a man who refuses to claim her... or walk away before she's pulled into a world where love demands the ultimate sacrifice.

A gripping mix of enemies-to-lovers tension, pack loyalty, and a love triangle that will leave you breathless!

**Total Pages (Source):** 76

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1

RAY

Idiots, the lot of them. Raul and Monica. Sam and Erica.

Their names come to me like old scars I trace in the dark. My brothers and their human mates.

Raul had stood up to Brad, our old Alpha, risking everything for the woman he loved. And Sam tangled with a witch so powerful, she could've torn our whole world apart. Different battles, same underlying truths.

Pain. Loss. Complication.

They're in love—messy, intense, all-consuming love. Raul and Monica practically breathe each other. Sam looks at Erica like she hung the damn moon and her smile answers him with a glow that's almost blinding.

Doesn't the fact that they never had to happen make it worse? All that chaos for love?

Before the humans came into Dawson, life wasn't exactly simple, but at least it was predictable. We worked, we fought, we drank. The usual. Humans were a rarity at our hometown bar, and that was fine by me. We kept to ourselves and everyone knew the rules. Even Brad and Kenny, as much as they postured, knew better than to go too far. Raul ripping Brad's throat out? That had been a breaking point. All because he wanted to walk hand-in-hand with a human woman through town without fearing

reprisal.

Sam had gone even further—drawing Roberta Connors down on the town and pack. That witch was death wrapped in silk, and thanks to Sam’s choices, she killed two of our own. All of that led to an almost civil war among the pack. If not for our own secret weapon, the witch Helena, we’d have lost everything to Connors or the civil war that followed. All because of a human woman and Sam’s stubborn heart.

They call it fate. Destiny. Mating bonds. Whatever. I call it chaos wrapped in perfume and good intentions.

Still, even I can’t ignore the upside. Because of Raul, I can now walk into any bar in Shandaken without feeling eyes on my back. I don’t have to worry about rules or bloodlines. I’m free to talk to whoever I want, human or not. It’s a strange sort of freedom—one I didn’t ask for, but sure as hell won’t waste.

So tonight, I decide to test the edges of this new freedom.

“Tiffany’s” is a cozy bar nestled in downtown Shandaken. I’ve been here a few times, enough to know the owner, Tiffany herself, but not often. The air reeks of lemon cleaner, cheap perfume, and the kind of desperation that clings to too-high heels. Classic rock hums low beneath the chatter of small groups of women. The walls are plastered with legends—Hendrix, Joplin, Zeppelin. There’s something about that kind of music that hits differently when you’ve lived through war and blood and grief. Maybe it’s the rawness. The lack of filter.

I slide onto a stool, nodding at Tiffany who’s working behind the bar tonight. She’s a whirlwind of energy, always moving, always watching. She greets me with a grin and a familiar nasal tone.

“Evening, stranger. Usual? Or something to light a fire under that fur of yours?”

I chuckle. “The usual’s fine. Too hot for anything stronger.”

Her gaze flicks to the left and she grimaces before looking back.

“Stay clear of those girls at ten o’clock. Especially the redhead. She’s not from around here and she’s trouble. I knew it the second she walked in—miniskirt, heels, perfume like she’s hunting husbands. City girl, no doubt.”

I follow her gaze and freeze.

Stacy Bingham.

That freckled face—soft curves and quiet mischief—burned itself into memory long ago. Stacy Bingham. One of Monica’s friends. She’s been to Raul’s place more than a few times. We’ve shared wine, small talk, and tension thick enough to cut.

Tonight, she’s a walking temptation—blue top clinging to her skin, white skirt showing off those long, toned legs. She’s staring out the window like she’s waiting for someone.

“Hey, Tiff,” I murmur, eyes still on Stacy. “This her first time here?”

“Nope,” she says, popping the cap off my Corona. “She was here a couple weeks back. She was hanging with Ronnie Keller. They were onto their second bottle of Jack when his wife pulled up. Ronnie saw her coming and slipped off before it blew up but that one’s not giving up. Trouble, I tell you.”

I know Ronnie Keller. Married. Idiot. A right fucking cunt.

“Right,” I mutter, taking a swig.

The cold beer's bite doesn't kill the heat building in my chest. This is exactly what happens with these humans. Chaos. By their very nature it changes things.

I shouldn't care who she's screwing. She's grown. But I do care when someone I know walks blind into a buzz saw. Around here, once you're branded a homewrecker, it sticks. And when it sticks to her, it stains all of us—Monica, Raul, even me.

I don't need this shit. I like my life quiet. Decision made, I set the bottle down, toss a bill on the counter, and make my way toward her table.

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“Hey,” I say, keeping it casual. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

Her eyes widen, flick to the window, then snap back to me.

“Ray! Wow, didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I bet,” I say, sliding into the chair opposite her.

The frown on her face says everything but I’m not going to let a frown deter me. I’m on a mission and I’m going to save her whether she wants it or not.

“Ray... I’m... uhm... waiting on someone,” she says, choosing each word with care.

The air between us tightens. I catch the scent—musk and heat, low and coiled. She feels it too, no matter how she pretends otherwise. She darts her eyes to the window and back, pursing her lips.

“Yeah,” I say, putting my elbows on the table. “I know.”

“You know?” she asks, arching an eyebrow. “Ray there’s nothing between us?—”

“Look, I’m not here to ruin your night,” I say, cutting her off, “but you’re making a mistake. A big one and I can’t stand by and watch it happen without at least saying something.”

“Ray, if you want something, you have to?—”

I hold up my hand, shaking my head.

“You’re a grown woman and you do what you do,” I say, but I can’t keep my eyes from dropping along her body. It’s the briefest of moments but the tension in her body and the hesitant smile on her face tells me she definitely saw it. I barrel ahead before I can get more distracted than I am. “Ronnie’s married. Are you sure you want to wait for him?”

Her smile falters. “What? Married? Shit...” She leans back, like the words hit her chest. “I had no idea.”

“Well, now you do.” I say, lowering my voice and reaching across the table with one hand. “Let’s get out of here before he shows up.”

She looks at my hand and I think she’s going to take it. Her arm starts to move then she stops it and shakes her head.

“No,” she says, pursing her lips. She narrows her eyes and her open hands ball into fists. “I’m sorry, Ray, but I’m not leaving until I get some answers.”

I had all my attention on Stacy and barely register the sound of the door opening until it slams into the wall. A voice shouts, slicing through the music.

“You!”

The instant I turn Kelly, a brunette, is barreling toward our table. Her face is twisted in fury and she’s waving her fists through the air as if she’s fighting it on her way over.

“You fucking bitch!” she screeches. “Ronnie’s mine! My goddamn husband.”

Shit.

The chairs of those gathered scoot and a table clatters to the floor as they scramble to get away. Stacy lurches to her feet, unsure, hands half-lifted—but her legs don't move fast enough. She's about to be scratched by those carefully manicured claws.

I leap between them, catching the brunette's wrist mid-air. It halts her cold. Her death glare shifts to me as she screeches.

“No, this isn't happening,” I say, calm and cold. “You think your husband's cheating on you—with her?”

“Let me go, asshole!” she spits, yanking her arm. “Yeah, he is! Ronnie told me everything!”

I glance past her to Tiffany behind the bar, but don't let go.

“You hear that, Tiff? Apparently Stacy's been sneaking around on me—with Ronnie freaking Keller.”

The barkeep laughs, long and loud. “That's a good one, Ray.”

“What do you mean she's cheating on you? You're what? You're her?—”



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“Boyfriend,” I cut in smoothly. “Whatever Ronnie told you, it wasn’t her he was talking about. Ronnie knows me. You tell him that if he drags me—Ray Crawford—or my girl into his mess again, I’ll make sure he regrets it.”

Kelly curses, struggling against my grip on her wrist. She shifts her glare to Stacy then back to me. Finally she curses and stops fighting. I let her go, but keep myself carefully positioned between her and Stacy in case she’s not really done.

“You’re lying,” she says, but the fight is gone.

“I am not,” I say.

She glances around the now mostly empty bar like she’s looking for a likely candidate for her husband’s floozy. She huffs, shoots another death glare at Stacy, then storms out with the grace of a hurricane. I sigh and resume my seat across from Stacy. I lift two fingers, signaling Tiffany.

“Can I get another beer? And a refill for the lady’s drink.”

Stacy exhales, sharply, picking up the chair that fell over when she jumped up. She places it at the small table, gripping the back so tight her knuckles turn white. She closes her eyes as she inhales. She holds her breath, then takes the seat, pressing her hands to her cheeks, then she shudders.

“Thanks...” she says, shakily. “I... I didn’t know. Shit... just my fucking luck. I didn’t do anything Ray. Shit. I didn’t do anything to deserve that.”

I frown, staring at her. I'm trying to decide if she's serious or not.

"You were seeing her husband," I say, keeping my voice carefully neutral.

"But I didn't know!" she says. "He lied and besides, we didn't do anything. We didn't even kiss—we talked, that's it. I liked him, he seemed nice."

"He's a shit," I say, almost growling. "And people talk. A lot. Add to that you've been seen around town with Monica, which connects you to the Crawfords. People know her and they know you. You get a reputation like that and it will spread faster than a wildfire."

"I didn't know," she says, her voice small. "Ray, you have to believe me."

"I do. But what I don't believe..." I lean forward, my eyes locking with hers, "is why someone like you ends up here, waiting for Ronnie freaking Keller. What's wrong with Manhattan? Not enough men down there?"

Tiffany returns with our drinks. Stacy sips hers slowly. She's drinking vodka. I smell it. She sips then sets it down and lifts a finger.

"I'll tell you—on one condition."

"Hit me."

"This stays between us."

"My lips are sealed."

She looks down at her glass, swirling the clear liquid.

“I’m lonely, Ray,” she says, shrugging and shaking her head. “Monica has left the city. Erica’s busy all the time, when she’s not working she’s up here. It’s just...I used to have friends, laughter...something to look forward to. Now I don’t even have someone to call on a Friday night.” She hesitates, then adds with a small smile, “Also, and don’t you dare laugh or I swear you’ll be wearing this drink...I have a soft spot for mountain men.”

“You mean, you have a thing for bad tattoos and bad manners?” I ask, keeping my voice deadpan.

She giggles and takes another sip as her cheeks color. Her scent is... incredible.

“What? What’s wrong with them? They’re real. Rough around the edges, sure. But hey, they use their hands for more than just typing emails. What’s not to like?”

“Well, off the top of my head? They smell bad.”

She was taking a sip when I smart off and she laughs so hard that vodka sprays from her nose. I watch her—really watch her. Laughing like that, she doesn’t look like trouble. Just someone who’s been through too much and still finds a way to laugh anyway.

“Oh my God—what?”

“I’m serious. You smell like lavender shampoo. They smell like horse shit.”

Her laughter rings through the bar, unguarded and warm. She clutches her stomach, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Okay, okay, maybe not that rugged.”

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I watch her laugh and something unexpected is happening. Warmth forms in my belly. Interest, maybe even curiosity. And something else—empathy, maybe. The kind that creeps in before you realize it's not just her you're trying to protect.

“Can we get out of here now?” I ask softly.

She nods, still smiling.

I came here for answers. Now I'm wondering if I found something better. Something I wasn't looking for.

I still say love's chaos. But maybe it's the kind worth choosing.

2

STACY

Ray Crawford.

Of all the people in the world, he's the one who showed up when I needed someone most. Like the universe sent him to catch me midfall—just before I shattered. He showed up right as the floor gave way and kept me from being left crumpled and broken in the wreckage of another mistake.

At the bar, everything unraveled too fast. Ronnie—that son of a bitch—lied, right through his perfect smile. Through his stupid little laugh that I now realize was as fake as his perfectly rehearsed stories.

Married. He was fucking married.

And there I was. Moments away from having my heart handed to me, cut out by a broken beer glass by his furious wife when Ray arrived to save me.

No cape. No spotlight. Just calm, steady Ray—with that cool-eyed calm and the low, anchored voice that says, I've got this. And God, did he. It was little more than one look from him that had stopped disaster.

Ronnie's wife hadn't hurt me. She had left me stunned and shaking, but unharmed. Ray had led me out of there as if nothing happened. Like I hadn't been one breath away from total humiliation.

Now in the quiet hum of my car, my mind won't stop racing. I tighten my grip around the steering wheel. My body thrums with adrenaline, with nowhere for it to land. Every nerve is lit up. And all I can think about is Ray. How quiet he is, sitting in the passenger seat. How he doesn't ask questions or try to make it better with dumb jokes or pity. He just sits, here with me. Quietly present and most of all, not judging.

I pull into Monica's driveway and think that maybe this is my chance to say thank you. Maybe salvage something from the wreckage of the day. Maybe explore this tingling sensation in my heart.

"You could come in for a drink," I say as casually as I can, though my voice wobbles a little.

This is the stupidest of my bright ideas. Or maybe the bravest. I can't tell anymore.

I dig into my purse for the house keys, becoming suddenly aware of how dry my mouth is.

“Hmm.” His voice is soft, thoughtful. He looks at the front door for a moment as if passing judgment on it or something. “Okay. Funny thing. I’ve heard a lot about the doctor’s house, but I’ve never actually seen the inside.”

“It’s nice,” I say, climbing the steps to the porch and unlocking the door. The deadbolt clicks, loud in the silence. “What’ve you heard? I swear, if it’s the story about Raul busting in through that corner window, I’ve heard it a million times.”

Ray’s mouth curls. It’s not a full smile, but it’s close enough that warmth creeps across my chest.

“You mean when Raul broke her ex’s wrist? Yeah. That one does make the rounds.”

I step into the house and Ray follows in my wake. I flip on the lights and the warmth of Monica’s decor wraps around us. The air smells faintly of cinnamon and something floral—like the house itself is trying to hug you.

“Does he include the part about it scaring the crap out of her?” I ask over my shoulder, making my way to the kitchen. “She was all wide-eyed and shaky then, but now she can’t shut up about it. What can I get you?”

“Beer’s fine.”

I grab two and twist the cap off one before handing it to him. He stands at the infamous window, peering out like he’s watching a ghost—as if Raul might come crashing through all over again.

“Big enough opening,” Ray murmurs. “If I were him, I’d use it too.”

I linger a beat longer than necessary, watching him. The way his shoulders stretch under his shirt. The way his fingers gently curl around the neck of the bottle like it’s

something delicate.

“I’ve never seen it,” I admit. “The shifting thing. Monica and Erica say it sounds like a machine gun going off.”

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He takes a drink, slow and thoughtful.

“I don’t know. I hear the first few seconds and then it goes quiet. The wolf takes over. After the first few seconds... everything else fades.”

A small silence stretches between us, not uncomfortable, just thick. Charged.

“So,” he says eventually, “we’re skipping the family dinner. If this were April, Raul would be furious.”

I laugh quietly, leaning against the counter.

“Monica would kill me too. She gets this look when she’s been around the Crawfords too long. Like, ‘Don’t you dare leave me alone with these people.’ It’s kind of cute.”

Ray lifts his brows. “She clicked with Raul fast.”

“Yeah,” I say, softer. “Like two puzzle pieces just snapping together. Have you ever felt that?”

His eyes stay on his beer.

“Not really,” he says, then pauses. “But I don’t think it always has to happen like that. Sometimes love doesn’t come with fireworks. Sometimes it’s a slow burn.”

Something in the way he says that makes my throat tighten.



“Can I ask you something?”

He nods, quiet.

“At those family dinners... you’re not like this.” I wave a hand suddenly self-conscious. “This... serious, I mean. You’re different. You tease your siblings, joke around. Where is that Ray?”

His gaze lifts to mine, steady and unreadable.

“I put him away when I saw you in Tiffany’s.”

That hits hard, making my breath stutter and my pulse skip, then thunder. I’m left blinking and confused, trying to figure out what he means by that but I can’t make sense of it. Finally I have to ask.

“What do you mean?”

“That Ray—the one who jokes and teases—he likes you.” His voice is low, almost reluctant. “Always has. But we want different things.”

I stare as my chest tightens. “Like what?”

He finishes his beer and sets the bottle down with a soft clink. He stares at the now empty bottle in silent contemplation before he answers.

“Ask yourself that, Stacy.” His voice is calm, but it cuts deep. “Because I think you already know.”

His movements are sudden, like a decision has been made. He moves past, brushing close enough that I catch a whiff of cedar and something darker—something that is

uniquely him. It floods my senses and makes my pulse race.

“Thanks for the beer,” he says. “Stay away from married men. Next time I might not be around.”

He walks to the door. No pause. Not even a glance back.

I’m frozen. Every part of me burning with the things I should say but can’t. His words hit their mark. Each one slammed home and hit a target I didn’t know was exposed. He’s gone before I can move. But his words won’t leave. They hang in the silence like smoke—impossible to catch, impossible to ignore.

I stare at the door long after it clicks shut, feeling the echo of him inside the house. The room feels too still and too empty. Why did that feel like more than a goodbye? Like a long-term goodbye.

I move to the couch and sink, knees folding under me, bottle still in hand. The beer’s grown warm and unappealing. My throat aches. Ray’s voice loops in my mind.

You want different things.

But I don’t know what that means.

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I thought I wanted... something simple. Someone who wouldn't lie, who wouldn't manipulate, who would just be real. Wasn't that what I'd said to Monica, drunk on wine and cynicism? That I was done with men who wore masks?

Now Ray comes along and I didn't know what to do with him. He's too real. Too steady. Too much like something I could lean on. He fits what I said I wanted, but somehow that terrifies me.

I rub a hand over my face. My weekend on the mountain isn't over yet. There's still time. And there is something here. Buried under unsaid words and half-finished goodbyes.

I'm going to find out what's driving Ray away from me. Even if it means tearing down every wall between us. Even if I have to walk into the fire he's running from.

3

STACY

A tickle brushes my skin, soft as a whisper, coaxing me from the heavy fog of sleep. I float in that strange, heavy space between dreaming and waking—where nothing feels real. Then the scent hits me.

Coffee. Rich, warm, just a touch sweet—exactly the way I like it. Comfort in a cup. My mouth waters before I even open my eyes.

When I blink them open, blurry light spills through the windows, and the shape in

front of me slowly sharpens.

Erica sits on the edge of the bed, one perfectly manicured eyebrow arched, a deep purple mug in her hand. She holds it near my face like an offering, though her arched brow says it's more of a warning.

“Rise and shine,” she says, voice flat and tinged with disappointment.

I grunt, rubbing my eyes as I push myself upright.

“Good morning,” I mumble, throat dry, voice thick with sleep.

“For me, maybe.” Her lips curve, but there’s no humor in it. “You? Not so much. Mon’s waiting out on the patio. Feel free to join us.”

She doesn’t wait for an answer. Just sets the mug on the nightstand and glides out of the room like the drama queen she is.

I sit there blinking at the empty doorway, still half-lost in sleep and dread. Dreading whatever comes next. I crawl out from under the comforter and grab the coffee, blow, then sip. The rich, full-bodied flavor floods my mouth—liquid electricity. Monica never skimps on the good stuff. I appreciate that.

What is the drama this morning? And Monica too? What fresh disaster brewed while I was out cold? Then the pieces click into place.

Shit. Ray.

He must’ve said something. Or worse—he said nothing and left them to speculate. Either way, I’m the morning gossip special. My antics were probably the hot topic of conversation over pastries and decaf.

Fucking perfect.

I groan and flop back onto the bed—then immediately regret it. My body aches like I’ve been tossed in a blender and poured out wrong. I kick off the covers with a frustrated sigh. This is not how I imagined starting the day, in my fantasy, there was a kiss involved—maybe more than one. Definitely not judgment or side-eyes over coffee.

I shouldn’t have expected anything else after last night. Right now, all my fantasies feel like they belong to another lifetime—one in which I’m not a total screwup who can’t get it right. There’s no avoiding this, so I might as well get it over with. I drain more coffee, pull on the first clothes I find, and pad out to the patio—barefoot, still rumpled from yesterday.

The morning air is cool in the shade. Jasmine floats on the breeze, mingling with the scent of fresh coffee. Monica sits cross-legged, radiant in that serene glow she always seems to carry now. Erica, halfway through her second cup, perches with sunglasses like armor. There’s a third mug waiting. Mine. At least they didn’t forget me entirely. I settle into the seat across from them, wrapping my hands around the warm ceramic.

“So... I’m guessing Ray told you what happened at Tiffany’s?”

Monica lifts an eyebrow, surprised. “Ray?”

“Yeah,” I say, taking a sip. It’s just the way I like it—bless whoever made this. “You didn’t see him?”

“No, sweetheart,” Erica answers, shaking her head. “Ray was still passed out cold when we left Dawson. Why? Did you two run into each other?”

“Something like that.” I nod slowly, the memory of last night crawling back like fog.

“He’s why I woke up alone. And not in jail. Or worse.”

Erica straightens, leans in. “Okay, now you have to explain.”

I exhale, glance between them, and own it.

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“I was waiting for this guy I met the night before. Ronnie. Turns out he’s a lying prick. Ray was there telling me when his wife shows up. Full-blown fury mode. I mean, she was ready to throw hands. Literally. She raised her arm to hit me when Ray stepped in. Grabbed her wrist mid-swing like some kind of action hero.”

They’re both leaning in now, eyes wide. It’s clear that he didn’t tell them. I let the story carry me, its momentum easing the sting of embarrassment.

“He told her he was my boyfriend,” I continue. “Played it off like we were there together the whole time. Tiffany backed him up. It was over in minutes. Ray saved me from public humiliation and at least a black eye.”

“Son of a bitch,” Erica mutters, looking away.

Monica shakes her head slowly, lips pressing into a tight line.

“This Ronnie didn’t tell you he was married? He just let you walk into that mess?”

“Exactly.” I sigh, bitterness creeping into my chest. “And I thought he was sweet. Attentive. Guess my loser radar is still working just fine.”

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Erica says, but her voice catches on something sharp. Guilt, maybe. Or fury. “We’ll leave it at that. What matters is Ray was there. He pulled you out of a dumpster fire.”

“That’s true,” I say softly. “To thank him, I invited him over for a drink. And listen...” I lean forward, tucking a leg beneath me. “This is where it gets weird.”

“You know how he usually is—teasing his brothers, cracking jokes?”

They nod, perfectly in sync.

“Well, last night... he was different. Quieter. Focused. He actually said things that made me think.”

“Are you sure it was Ray?” Erica asks, half-laughing.

“Oh yeah.” I smirk. “Six-foot-one, blond hair, dark green eyes, lean enough to make a girl sin.”

Monica chuckles behind her mug.

“Maybe he doesn’t feel like joking around you,” she offers. “Maybe he’s trying to be... I don’t know. Serious.”

“So he’s the class clown with everyone else, and suddenly he’s brooding Mr. Darcy with you?” Erica scoffs.

“I asked him about it,” I say, leaning my head back against the chair. Clouds shift above, casting shadows across the patio tiles. “He told me he likes me, but thinks we want different things.”

“Okay, so what? He likes you but won’t do anything about it? That’s not romantic. That’s cowardly,” Erica snorts.

“You know how it is, Erica, how it’s different for them. Physical attraction means nothing if he’s not willing to take the chance,” Monica shrugs.

“I just...” My voice dips lower. “Different things. The words loop in my head, over



and over. What does that mean? What could it mean? Should I ask him? Would there be a point?"

"What do you have to lose?" Erica shrugs. "Ask. Don't forget—we're having lunch with the Crawfords today."

"Wait for it..." Monica drops her voice to a dramatic whisper.

"I'm looking forward to dessert," Erica grins, teeth flashing like a wolf's. "Maybe some light touching, heavy kissing... tongue definitely on the table."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Monica groans, flailing her arms like she's chasing off flies. "How many times do I have to ask you not to bring up sex in front of me? I can't even touch Raul until after the first trimester. Please, have some mercy."

"You're a real bitch sometimes, hun," I say through a laugh, shaking my head at Erica.

"She's right," Monica huffs, rubbing her temples.

"Fine, fine." Erica lifts her hands in mock surrender. "No more sex talk. But let me ask you this—if Red here gets lucky with Ray, are you going to let her go on about it? Or will you ask her to zip it and pretend it never happened?"

"That's an interesting question," Monica says, half-smiling. "If it happens, that'll make three out of three Crawfords."

"Three out of three." Erica winks at me. "Girl, I'm getting all kinds of ideas. I mean, for starters?—"

"Has anyone ever poured hot coffee on you?" Monica cuts in, eyes narrowing. "Do

you want to know what it feels like?”

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Erica lifts both hands again. “No, ma’am.”

“Then I suggest you shut up,” Monica says, all sugar and menace. “Pregnant. Sleep-deprived. Raging with hormones. You really don’t want to test me.”

I’m still laughing, but the sound softens as Erica’s words echo in my head. Three out of three. It sounds ridiculous. Like a silly competition. And yet... it has a certain ring to it.

Not because I want to complete the set. Not because I want a trophy. I just want a chance. A night. A moment. Just me and him. No interference. No jokes. No brothers barging in. No Erica turning everything into a sex joke.

Just quiet. Just Ray. Just... maybe.

If I’m lucky, he’ll let me see whatever it is he hides behind that teasing grin.

Maybe I’ll even get to touch it. Or maybe I’ll burn trying.

4

RAY

Lunch with the humans? Not happening. No way.

I don’t care what Raul or Sam say—I’m not going. Let them argue, guilt-trip me, throw brotherly concern in my face. It still won’t matter. I’ve been counting the hours

until Stacy leaves this mountain. I'm not about to sit across from her, force a smile, and pretend everything's fine just because my brothers think my absence might hurt her feelings.

They don't get it, and I do not give a shit if they do or don't. As I leave Raul's cabin, I hear the familiar rumble of my beast stirring beneath my skin. A low pulse builds in my gut—not for escape, but for space. For the wild. For air that hasn't touched walls.

Let me out.

His voice isn't words exactly, just instinct crashing through like a wave. He wants to run. To tear through trees, taste the wind, vanish into earth and scent and sky. It's his nature.

I push the wolf down, though not cruelly. What I need is the opposite—stillness. Control. Space to think. We're the same, him and I. He's just louder when the world feels like it's spinning off its axis.

My boots crunch against the dirt as I put distance between myself and the cabins, heading toward the woods where I've always been more at home than any building. Sunlight flickers through the thick canopy in narrow slants, casting long shadows across the undergrowth. A few golden beams punch through the green and paint soft halos over dead leaves, mossy rocks, patches of fern.

Cool air kisses my skin the moment I cross into the shade. The hush of the forest wraps around welcoming with its gentle quiet. Peace. Closing my eyes, I envision the tension draining from my body. Enjoying the air, I give myself a moment before putting my attention on my reason for coming.

I came to find her. The Witch of Crawford, Helena.

“She sneaks up on you when you least expect it.”

Sam’s voice echoes in my memory. He’s said that more than once, like some reverent mantra. He talks about Helena like she’s a living myth, a force of nature with lipstick and magic in her blood. He’s never tried to hide his awe and I don’t think he could if he wanted to.

My eyes scan the trees automatically, searching for her shape. That lean frame, that dark hair—Helena, the witch in black. The one who saved this place. The one everyone talks about in hushed, grateful tones. The forest is still and empty. She’s not here. I know she hasn’t been seen for weeks.

Which doesn’t really surprise me. After she defeated Roberta Connors, stopped the darkness that nearly swallowed our world—she could’ve taken a throne if she had wanted. Could have stayed and basked in the admiration of every shifter and human in a fifty-mile radius.

That’s not Helena, though. She had slipped away to my grandfather Edward’s hidden retreat. Back to silence and solitude. Exactly where I wish I was.

“Hey, you.” Her voice cuts through the quiet like light through leaves—sharp, sudden, unwelcome.

No. No, not now.

There’s no mistaking her voice or her scent. I turn slowly, jaw tight, spine stiffening even before my eyes confirm what I already know.

Stacy.

She crosses the invisible line between forest and human world with an effortless strut

like she owns the ground beneath her. Striding forward with her eyes locked onto me.

“Sam said I might find you here,” she says, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Then he’s in for an earful,” I mutter, turning away.

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“Don’t blame him,” she says, stepping closer. Determined. Unshaken. Her footfalls crunch softly—careful, but steady. She’s not stopping. “I twisted his arm.”

“Why?” I keep my voice flat, cold, eyes locked on a knot in the tree bark ahead of me. “Why bother? Skipping lunch wasn’t a mystery. I thought the message was clear.”

“I’m not here for lunch.”

The air tightens between us, heavy with everything we’re not saying.

“You and Sam?” she says, voice quieter now. “You’re more alike than you think. He did the same thing to Erica. Took off when things got complicated.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Hard.

“So, what?” I ask. “You came out here to tell me I’m a shitty brother? Or are you calling me a coward?”

“No. God no,” she says, circling until she is in front, leaving me no choice but to meet her eyes. “I came because you owe me an answer. Last night, you said we want different things. I’ve been thinking about that all night and all morning. I still don’t get it. What do you mean?”

I sigh, slow and deep. Shoulders drop. Fine. She wants the truth, then I’m going to give it to her. I need to shut this shit down before it gets out of control.

“You want something real,” I say, low and steady. “A boyfriend. Connection. A future. I don’t. That’s not what I’m built for.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Getting to know someone, holding them, laughing, sleeping next to them—that’s a burden to you?”

“Yes,” I say simply. “At twenty-six? Yeah. I’m too young to tether myself to anyone. Not like that.”

“I’m twenty-six too!” Her voice rises, raw and sharp. “And I’ve been in relationships. I’ve loved people. That doesn’t scare me. Why does it scare you?”

“You’re forgetting something.” I take a step closer, my voice dipping into something darker, heavier. “You’re human. If things fall apart, you grieve. You heal. We don’t. For us, heartbreak isn’t a phase—it’s permanent.” I tap my chest with two fingers. “If I fall in love—really fall—and it doesn’t work out? That doesn’t just hurt. It will break me. That happens and it kills something inside. You ever hear about a wolf losing their mate? It’s not like a human’s heartbreak. It’s bone-deep.”

“Ray...”

“You asked me where ‘fun Ray’ went last night,” I cut her off with a hollow laugh in my throat. “You want to know the truth? That guy—the flirty, makes-you-laugh, makes-it-easy guy? He’s dangerous. He leads to hope. Hope leads to wreckage. If he charms you, and something happens between us, guess what? It’s not just messy. It turns into a shitstorm. It’s not only us now, is it? It would involve Raul, Sam and your friends.”



“So you don’t want a relationship with me,” she says softly, and this time it lands.

She says it not like a question, but like a truth she’s finally willing to admit. I nod. Once.

“It’s not personal. It’s not even about you.” I breathe in. “I’m close with Raul and Sam. They love your friends. And those two, Erica and Monica, they trust me too. And they won’t if they think I’m playing with fire. We start something, and it goes sideways? That’s not just awkward. It’s more than just us, it could ruin the whole damn pack.”

“I love coming here,” she says, voice barely above a whisper.

“I know,” I say, meeting her eyes, trying to be gentler. “So let’s not ruin it. You’re smart. You’re beautiful. Hell, you’re hot, Stacy. You’ll meet someone back in New York who’ll take you to dinner, buy you flowers, send you good morning texts, rub your feet at night. Someone who’ll be everything you deserve.”

Her eyes shimmer. And I hate that I mean every word. Every. Damn. One. She deserves someone who looks at her and sees forever. Which I don’t. I can’t. All I see is danger. Risk. A chasm I’m not willing to jump across. Not for her or for anyone.

I move past her, slow and steady, accidentally brushing her shoulder with mine. And it hurts. It hurts so damn much.

Because I want to be that guy. I do want to be someone who doesn’t see love as a threat, but I can’t. I’ve lived too long in the shadow of what it could cost. I walk into the trees. My chest aches with every step.

And I don’t look back.

If I do, I might never leave.

5

STACY

## Page 10

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“Look on the bright side,” Erica had chirped. “He let you down gently. He was honest. You’ve got to give the guy some credit.”

Her relentless optimism makes me want to punch a wall. She always finds a silver lining, even in the darkest clouds. Like when her car got broken into and they stole the entire sound system.

She just shrugged and said, “At least they didn’t take my Beamer,” as if that made it all okay.

That’s Erica. Sunshine bottled up in human form, impervious to disappointment. I’m not Erica, not in the farthest stretch of anyone’s imagination.

What’s more, this isn’t about stolen electronics or scratched paint. This is my heart. My trust. My dignity. Torn into pieces and tossed aside like yesterday’s trash.

Let me down gently? Please.

I could list a hundred reasons why that’s bullshit, but one eclipses them all.

Why did he need to let me down at all? Why whisper promises in silence? Why pull me in like the tide—just to vanish like mist?

Because he’s hiding. Behind instincts and ancient fears. Behind “the curse of the wolf,” as if that excuses walking away.

I remember Monica’s trembling voice when she told us about Raul’s secret and his

belief in the ‘curse’. She’d cried in our arms and honestly I didn’t believe her. Who dies of a broken heart?

My disbelief didn’t matter. Raul believed it—and now Ray’s using that same excuse to not even try. A way to not consider what we could be. It’s like he’d rather avoid the possibility of pain than risk even a glimpse of happiness.

I get it, but understanding is a long way from forgiving. I’m nowhere near forgiving him, not now, maybe not ever.

We’re not children. We don’t have to write our names in the sky and profess eternal love. I’m not even asking for wedding bells. Just... a chance. A moment to figure out if the way my breath catches around him means something... if there is something that could be.

I could have told him all of this. I wanted to and would have, if he’d given me a moment, but that didn’t happen. He left me in the forest like I was baggage too heavy to carry. Like loving me was a burden he never intended to pick up. Which hurts worse than it should.

I toss and turn, sheets tangled around my legs, my skin clammy with frustration. No position is comfortable. No thought is quiet. Pulling the sheets over, only to toss them off. I must fall asleep at some point because the alarm clock’s shrill buzz tears through my skull.

The instant I wake up my thoughts are still spiraling around Ray. Great. This Monday is going to be hell.

I smack the clock harder than I should, knocking it off the stand. It continues to blare, indignantly, from the floor. I drag myself out of the tangled sheets. The air feels heavy, like the grief left in the aftermath of a nightmare. I’m not a morning

person—never have been, but since working at the Bank of America, I’ve learned to fake it.

Being a bank teller isn’t glamorous, but it’s reliable. Structured. Safe. A world where two plus two always equals four. I know exactly when I clock in and when I clock out. I’m guaranteed to have my nights free. Which is better than Monica can say. Her hospital shifts pay better, but I don’t envy the stress or the long hours, life-and-death decisions and walking a tightrope of responsibility. All while trying not to crumble.

That isn’t the life for me. I like my little bubble of order. Even if, right now, it feels like everything is closing in. My apartment is somehow smaller. The entire world is.

I arrive at work, grumpy, and still thinking about Ray. But I put on my best smile and a willingness to fake it till I make it. The sliding doors hiss, letting me into the building. The absurdly high ceilings above, dramatic by design. Modeled like some Roman cathedral built to remind the masses how small they are before the might of imperial capitalism.

I realized a long time ago that’s the point. It’s not about aesthetics—it’s intimidation. Seminar after seminar has subtly drilled the idea into us. Power, prestige, illusion.

The marble counter waits like a silent sentinel. A thick barrier to keep the masses away from the money that doesn’t actually sit in the vaults anymore. Sheila’s perched on her stool staring at her screen. Dressed in a navy-blue pantsuit crisp that is intimidating in its own right. We started this job within a week of each other, which bond has formed something at least akin to friendship.

“Morning, your redness,” she calls without looking up. “Seven thirty-four? That’s practically a miracle.”

“Please, don’t start, Sheila,” I mutter, brushing past. “God, I hate Mondays.”

“You’ve been hating Mondays since your first week here.” Her fingers pause on the keyboard as she looks at me. “Rough night?”

“Rough weekend,” I groan, letting my bag drop onto the counter with a thud that startles my screen. “Come upstate, enjoy the countryside, mingle with the locals—they’re nice, warm-hearted people,” I mimic Monica’s voice, thinning mine out to hit the high-pitched perkiness. “What a load of crap.”

Sheila snorts, covering her mouth as she chuckles.

“Sorry, Stac. I’m not laughing at you, but... the impression. That was dead on Monica.”

I give her a look, one eyebrow raised, and she mostly sobers.

“So? What happened upstate?” she asks, eyes twinkling with curiosity.

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“Too much. And most of it sucked,” I reply curtly. I like Sheila, but this isn’t the time or the place to unpack my forest heartbreak. Besides it’s not like I can tell her about the shapeshifter drama. Even if that wasn’t a secret to be kept, I’m still trying to understand it myself. She looks away towards the glass doors, and her expression tightens.

“I think our day just got worse.”

I follow her line of sight—and groan. Of all the smug, entitled bastards in Manhattan, of course it had to be Steve Wilkins.

Steve struts into the bank like he owns the air we breathe. Technically, he probably could. Billion-dollar oil tycoon. Private jets, custom suits, and a jawline sculpted by money. He oozes power—and knows it. All of which results in an arrogance that outsizes even his net worth. He’s flanked, as usual, by two bodyguards who glare as if we’re about to stage a coup behind the teller line.

“Good day, ladies,” Steve says, lips curling into a lazy, yet somehow still patronizing smile. “It’s a shame you have to work. It’s beautiful outside.”

He keeps his sunglasses on, which tells me everything I need to know. He’s not here for business. He’s here to gloat it over us lowly tellers.

“How may I help you, sir?” Sheila asks, ever the professional.

“Oh, I’m sorry, honey,” Steve says, shaking his head like she’s a child who spilled juice on the rug. “I’m not here for you. I came to see her.”

Perfect. Exactly what I don't need.

"What can I do for you?" I ask, voice flat as one of his bodyguards slips a crisp, ivory envelope from his inner pocket into Steve's hand.

"I'm throwing a party," he announces, like he's gifting the Ten Commandments to Moses. "It's at my mansion upstate, tomorrow night. I know it's short notice, but I've been trying to reach your doctor friend for days. I even went by the Metropolitan—turns out she doesn't work there anymore. They wouldn't give me her address."

He says the last with a look of affront as if he can't believe that anyone would deny him anything.

"North Haven?" I read off the embossed cardstock. "Mr. Wilkins?—"

"Steve," he interrupts smoothly.

"Right. Steve." I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. "North Haven's a bit far, and I have work on Wednesday. I won't be able to make it."

"Yes, you will," he counters, smiling like it's a foregone conclusion. "I'll send a limo." I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up his hand cutting me off. "No, don't worry. Your manager and I go way back. I'll have a chat with him, you'll have the day off."

I bite my tongue, debating. I want to say no, should say no. Spending time with this smug ass is not the way I want to waste an evening.

"You are still in touch with the doctor?"



“I am.”

“Perfect,” he says, voice purring with satisfaction. “I’ll expect both of you.”

He turns with a flourish, like a magician vanishing into a cloud of entitlement. As soon as he’s out of earshot, Sheila leans over the counter, her eyes wide.

“Holy shit, it’s engraved,” she exclaims, staring at the invitation. “Who engraves paper?”

“Yeah,” I say, though my mind is far away.

An idea sparks, electric and unexpected. I never liked Steve. It’s not his face—he’s got the build, the smile, the suit. It’s everything else. The smugness. The assumption that the world is his plaything. He wears his privilege like cologne—thick and cloying, but maybe... just maybe, this invitation could be useful.

Steve Wilkins wants me to join him at a party. At his mansion, which happens to be up north, close to...

My mind races. He isn’t invited, but if I go, he’ll follow. I feel it in my bones. I don’t think he’ll let me out of his sight. Even if he wants to pretend I’m a danger to him. Even if he swears we can never be.

And if he won’t do it on his own... Monica joining me will push it, because that will involve Raul. Raul will tip the scales.

They’ll come. He’ll see me there. Get jealous. And then Ray will give me the one thing I want from him. A chance.

It’s reckless. Maybe even pathetic. But it’s something. And right now, I’ll take

anything that feels like hope. How can this be anything but the universe telling me to go for it? I tap the engraved card then go to call Monica.

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RAY

“Let’s go,” Raul snaps, tossing the command over his shoulder like I’m still some reckless pup.

He doesn’t look back—he knows I’ll follow, no matter how much it makes me bristle.

“Where?” I ask, wiping grease off my hands with a rag.

“Move,” he says, his voice dropping so low it’s almost a growl.

He slams the garage door open, letting it crash shut behind him like a warning shot.

Shit. That look in his eyes—something’s wrong. What now?

Reluctant or not, I follow. Outside he’s waiting in his truck, revving the engine to the redline, gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles are white. Last thing I want is to sit in a truck with him, going who-knows-where for who-knows-how-long, but he’s my brother and my Alpha to boot, so no matter what I want, I’m going to.

I climb in the truck and before I shut the door he throws it in gear, smoking the tires as he reverses. Silent, I put on my seatbelt. I don’t care for the damn things, but when he’s in this kind of mood... better to be safe than sorry.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

He growls so I shut up and wait, watching the scenery slide by outside the window. We're not going to the city, but what our destination is I don't know and he's not in the mood to talk about it. When the city sign comes into view I grunt, looking over.

"New Haven?" I glance at him. "What the hell is in New Haven?"

He gives me a dark look. Tension fills the cab and I feel his wolf, barely contained.

"My mate," he says.

"Huh?" I ask, confused.

Anyone within two city blocks heard that fight earlier, but how that led to us driving out of Dawson doesn't make sense. He shakes his head, clearly too pissed to speak. I get it. He's struggling to contain the wolf. Been there myself a time or two and it's not easy. I can only imagine how hard it must be for him, being all Alpha and shit.

He picks up his phone, glances at the screen then takes a turn, driving through the town. At least he's slowed down enough we're not going to get pulled over for hot rodding. This is a rich person's retreat. The last thing we need is scrutiny from the local cops.

I wait, letting him drive and work to keep himself under control. Finally we're parked across the street from a goddamn mansion that's lit up like a movie set. Music pulses so loud that dull thumps rattle the windshield like a heartbeat that I don't want to sync with. This is exactly how I wanted to spend my Tuesday night, getting involved in his personal life. Not.

The house—no, the estate—is surrounded by tall shrubbery and a sandstone looking wall. It's crawling with rich humans. Expensive cologne, laughter that sounds more like bragging, stilettos clicking against stone paths. The kind of crowd that makes my

skin crawl. All flash and no substance.

And in contrast to the extravagance is Raul. Brooding, tapping out a rhythm on the steering wheel with his fingers that doesn't match the music. Glaring at the party, the guests we can see, the lights. It's as if he's willing it all to stop. All because he had a fight with Monica.

Sammy and I couldn't not hear it. Forty straight minutes of Monica screaming about how shedeservesto do things too. I know she'd mentioned a party, but Sammy and I had been trying to not listen, as impossible as she was making it.

"She's in there?" I ask.

"Not just her," he says, his hands spasming tightly around the steering well.

I frown, trying to think of who else would have him this worked up, but I'm coming up blank.

"Who?"

"Jack fucking Donahue is in there," he spits the name.

Oh. Fuck.

Jack Donahue. The name alone is enough to make Raul's blood boil—and mine freeze. Monica's ex-husband that dared to lay hands on Monica. Once because Raul saw it happen and hadlost control and shifted. That was the event that preceded him crashing through Monica's window. That time Jack got away with a broken wrist and a silent promise from Raul that next time there would be no mercy and no restraint.

I know my brother and he meant it.

Hell, I've seen him shift in rage before. Bones cracking, skin splitting like wet paper, his eyes glowing that demonic red just before the shift hits. If Jack's dumb enough to show up tonight, there won't be a third chance. Raul will destroy him. And not quietly.

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Which is why he brought me. It's on me to keep this quiet. My job's to keep him from blowing our cover. One shift in front of this crowd, and it's not just Raul—we're all exposed. Last thing we need is these rich fucks looking into why a giant wolf crashed their party.

“Helena would've lost her marbles around here,” Raul mutters, breaking the silence. “Some of these houses are bigger than our whole damn neighborhood.”

I shrug, keeping my eyes locked on the glove compartment. I can't let him go in there. If Jack is at this party...I have no idea how I'm going to keep Raul from killing him.

“Yeah, I guess.”

He glances over, narrowing his eyes and almost growling.

“What? What are you thinking?”

“How do you know she's here?” I ask, shifting in my seat to face him. “Maybe she went for a drive to clear her head. You two were going at it pretty hard.”

“She left Dawson!” he growls, gripping the steering wheel so tight I'm surprised it doesn't break. “An hour before we left she went to Stacy's place and a limo picked them up.”

That name slams into me like a punch. My head jerks so fast it almost wrenches my neck.

“What? Them?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“Yeah,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “That got your attention? Stacy is with her at this party.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” I ask, my voice raising.

“Would it change anything?” Raul growls, still staring at the party, like he could burn it down with a look. “You’re within spitting distance of her, but we’re still outside. Unless you want to crash a mansion full of rich assholes?”

I can’t deny that the urge is there. I inhale sharply and hold it.

“It’s not about her. What if you catch Jack’s scent? What if he is here?” I ask, trying to clear my head by distracting him.

“I’ll handle him,” he says, clenching his jaw.

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of,” I bite out. “You lose control in there, and we’re done.”

“Relax,” Raul says, patting my wrist like that’s supposed to soothe me. “If he’s there, I’ll have Monica lure him out. Plenty of dark corners around here.”

“You think she’ll suddenly forgive you and help lure her ex to you?” I ask. “Fuck.”

I lean my head against the seat right as the bass line hits hard enough to rattle the glass. The bass is so deep it vibrates my teeth. The whole house thrums like it’s about to crack open.

“We didn’t even need the address,” I mutter. “Could’ve followed the noise and we’d



find it.”

Raul smirks, glaring at the river of taillights stretching down the block from us. Dozens more cars waiting to get in. Must be the party of the goddamn century.

“We have to keep this chill,” Raul says, breathing steadily.

“You think?” I ask, shaking my head. “I’m not the one we have to worry about. It’s not my mate in there.”

But Raul isn’t snarling. He’s watching me with something softer. Almost... pity? No. That’s worse.

“Right, well you’re here. Captain Calm,” he says.

I roll my eyes as I shake my head.

“We’re too far back,” I say, hand on the door handle. “Doubt we’ll smell anything except gas fumes.”

“Let’s go,” Raul agrees with a nod.

As soon as I step out of the truck the scent of chlorine stings my nose. Carefully curated palm trees line the curb, casting shadows over manicured lawns. The mansion looms like a goddamn temple. Warm light spills from arched windows, casting golden halos over rich idiots. A buzzing chatter of dozens of humans, blended with drunken laughter, fills the night air, competing with the thundering music. This isn’t a home, it’s a goddamn kingdom.

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“I’m never going to complain about our loudness again,” Raul mutters, walking at my side.

I scan the darkness taking note of the shrubs, the gaps in the wall, looking for an opening. I spot a break between a thick bit of growth. A metal gate, partially obscured behind shrubs.

“There,” I say pointing and veering off the sidewalk.

“Good catch,” Raul says. He sniffs the air. “Wait. Do you smell that?”

I sniff, wrinkling my nose.

“Dog.”

“Yeah, leave him to me.”

The earth slopes down toward the wall. We push through the bushes and find the gate. It has three bars on either side but before I can test the lock I hear the approach of heavy paws. A black-and-brown blur lunges at the iron gate, jaws snapping inches from Raul’s face. A Rottweiler.

“Easy, doggie...” Raul says stepping forward.

He keeps his voice low as he puts his hands on the gate. His eyes flare red, the wolf slithering just under his skin like heat lightning. He leans in, aggressively. The dog yips and retreats, tail between its legs.

“Rottweilers,” Raul whispers.

“Hey! You!” A suited man shouts, striding towards the gate while shining a bright light on us. He was probably drawn by the stupid dog. “You got a death wish?”

Raul grins and shakes the bars.

“What? What if I do? You gonna set the dog on me?”

“Stupid asshole...”

The man comes too close and I don’t hesitate. I lunge forward, grab the back of his neck, and slam him into the bars. He drops like dead weight. Two key fobs hit the ground with a softchink. I scoop them up, toss them to Raul, and step back. The gate creaks as it opens and we step inside.

The backyard’s a glitter-wrapped circus—music pounding, lights flashing, people half-dressed and fully drunk. A lit-up pool is the centerpiece with dozens of people crowding around it with drinks in hand. The music pounds loudly, competing against the raucous laughter.

I scan the crowd and smell the air until I spot Monica. She’s near another portion of the surrounding wall chatting with two women. At least she looks safe, no sign of her ex. Then I see her. Stacy.

She’s walking next to some six-foot clown in an expensive white suit. He affecting a Miami Vice vibe, with his five o’clock shadow, pink shirt, and expensive ass loafers. His hand snakes around her waist like she belongs to him.

My wolf snarls. No. She’s mine.

The thought roars, as the wolf wakes, fast and angry. I'm moving. There's no thought behind it. I'm acting before I even know it.

“Ray—!” Raul's voice cuts through the chaos—then drowns in it as I bolt.

No hesitation. No thought. Just fury.

One guy topples into the pool, flailing his arms. Laughter erupts in my wake. I don't care. My focus is on Stacy but I see two guards clock me. They are closing in so I speed up, breaking into a run. They're not going to be fast enough.

Stacy and Miami Vice wannabe haven't seen me yet despite the commotion in my wake. The music is loud enough to cover my approach. I drop my shoulder and drive into him, full speed. He flies back, gasping—breath gone, balance shattered. He flies back, yelping in surprise as the air is knocked out of his lungs.

Stacy whirls. Her eyes go wide, lips parting in a shocked gasp. Hands fly to her mouth. Frozen. She looks stunning in a low cut dress with a V neck that dives down.

“Ray?” she screeches. “Ray, what in the hell are you doing?”

I open my mouth, but before I speak arms wrap around my waist and lift me off my feet. One of the damn guards has me.

I twist in his arms as he spins with me. The other guard is closing in, one clenched fist swinging at my face. I drive my boot into his chest, knocking him back gasping. Shifting, I drive an elbow into the stomach of the one holding me.

He barks in pain, loosening his grip. When I strike with my other elbow he lets go. I drop as he doubles over. Spinning I land a one-two punch across his jaw.

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“Who the fuck is that?” the white suit groans from the ground.

“Stay down, rich boy,” I growl as I whirl around. I loom over him and point at Stacy.  
“She’s mine.”

“What?” Stacy gasps. “Wh-who...?”

“We’re out of here,” I snap, grabbing her wrist.

She stumbles as I drag her away.

“You’d better have a damn good explanation—! I know that man!”

“Yeah, I bet. He seemed real friendly.”

“Not likethat,” she hisses. “He’s a client at the bank!”

“Move.”

Her heels click on the concrete as I pull her towards the gate we came through. We’re almost there when Monica’s voice cuts through the mess.

“Are you two completely brain-dead?! You just ruined a perfectlynormalparty!”

She continues screaming but I ignore her. She’s Raul’s problem, not mine. Glancing over my shoulder Raul looks like he’s about to say something stupid. Like I was supposed to keep him calm or some shit.

“Shut it,” I bark.

And I drag Stacy through the gate.

7

STACY

God, I’m an idiot.

I built it up in my head—every second of it.

A perfect plan for the perfect night. All I had to do was get Monica to come with me, and the rest would fall into place.

I had it all perfectly planned out in my head. If Monica came, Raul would come too. And Raul never shows up without Ray—not when Sam and Erica already had plans. They’d show up and Ray would see me talking. He’d get jealous, grab me by my hand and demand I come with him.

Laughing, kissing in my car, maybe pull over somewhere along the old highway, unable to keep our hands off each other. It was supposed to be a storybook night—spontaneous, charged, and reckless in the best kind of way.

That was the plan. But I should’ve known better—nothing in my life ever sticks to the script. Instead of passion and sparks, I got chaos. Violence. Screaming. A complete disaster.

I couldn’t believe it. He’d acted like a damn animal. No plan. No flash of bravado in a calculated display of alpha male claiming. Instead I got him barreling in like a bull in a china shop. Smashing, striking people, knocking a guy into the pool and

threatening Steve Wilkins. I'll be lucky if I have a job when I get back.

I'd wanted him to show up. Of course I did. That was the entire plan. Even Monica thought it would go okay. She was more worried about Raul who was the hot-headed one of the Crawfords. Not Ray, who was always the peacemaker. The one who never lost control.

Except he did.

Shame coils in my belly—hot, tight, relentless. I want the ground to open up and swallow me whole. I want to disappear and not just from North Haven, but from everyone who knows me—especially Monica.

God Monica. Sweet, loyal Monica. What a mess I've made. Monica's been my person since we were twelve. Loyal to a fault, loving with a fierceness I've never deserved. I know she'll still love me even after this, but I don't want her to see me unraveling. It would break her heart and how can I inflict this on her? After the scene I caused? And the fight between her and Raul? That's my fault too.

No. Not me. Ray.

He's the one who ripped the night to pieces in a violent storm of drama and ego. Monica, bless her, lost it. I didn't think it was possible. In all the years I've known her she's never raised her voice in anger. The stress of finals week didn't make it happen. Her boss throwing her under the bus last spring didn't.

But Ray Crawford was more than she could take.

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Raging storm that he is, he set fire to all her serenity and she lost it. Screaming at him and Raul both like a woman possessed before storming off to Raul's pickup. She slammed the door so hard I felt it in my spine.

And that was the end of it. I was too ashamed to ask for a ride so I'd called an Uber and rode back to the city in silence. The kind that feels louder than any radio station could ever drown out. With every mile, the knot in my chest loosened—just a little. Just enough to breathe again.

I managed to make it home before I cracked. That breath turned into a sob and there was no stopping the tears because when I asked myself who I could call, the answer hit me like a punch to the face.

My two closest friends were miles away in Dawson. I'd hurt Monica and besides they were wrapped in their new lives, their new homes, and their new men. How can I blame them? Love's supposed to move you forward and it did. For them.

God, I feel so left behind. Left alone in an empty space that used to be full of us.

Sure, I could hit that little video chat icon, but what good will it do? A screen can't wrap around me. Can't hold me while I fall apart. It's no substitute. I want to collapse into a hug that smells like our shared shampoo and feels like a thousand inside jokes. Like the group hugs we passed around, a kind of medicine before the Crawfords had barged into our lives and rewritten everything.

And right then my phone chimes. I pick it up and stare because it's as if she's in my head.



I heard what happened between you and Ray. I'll be at my place early tomorrow, so we can talk. 6 o'clock. Don't be late.

Erica. A sob slips out—raw, grateful. God, bless her.

She's saving me from having to crawl back to the Catskills to cry on her shoulder. And right now, more than ever before, the last thing I need is a trip back to the core of my shame. Where Ray is. His scent lingering in the air.

I don't even want to breathe the same air as him. The thought of being near him makes my stomach churn. God, no. I wouldn't survive it—not without saying things I know I'll regret. She's saving me from new drama and that is why my love for her will never die.

I pull into Erica's driveway promptly at six. My heart is so full of gratitude that my hands are shaking.

She's waiting outside, which, of course she is. Sitting in a chair on her small porch, sipping a mug like she's the queen of calm. I walk up the path and her eyes meet mine, warm and knowing.

"Hey," she calls, swirling the straw in her drink. "Do you want one of these?"

"No, thanks," I say, my voice dry as dust. "Last thing I need right now is caffeine."

"Damn..." she muses. "Monica said you were upset, but no caffeine? Here I thought she was being dramatic."

"Upset is a polite way of putting it," I say, sinking into the chair beside her. "Try outraged, humiliated, and end withdone."

She tilts her head, pursing her lips around the straw and sucking. She swallows and blinks slowly before she speaks.

“Okay, Red. Walk me through this, because I’m confused. I thought you wanted Ray to crash the party?”

I drop into the chair at her side, rolling my eyes. I stare out at the street, trying to sort out the words.

“I mean...” I sigh, motioning through the air like I might conjure the words. “I wanted him to come, sure—but full-on caveman was not part of the plan. He didn’t come to see me—he barreled through the damn gate and attacked Steve Wilkins. Took out two of his bodyguards. Grabs my hand and screams she’s mine like he was claiming a fucking parking spot.”

Erica blinks and shakes her head. She doesn’t smirk, but it feels like she wants to, or maybe I’m reading too much into it.

“That jackass,” she mutters, sipping slowly—like she’s trying not to laugh.

I stare, trying to decide if that’s sarcasm or not and finally shrug.

“He acted like I was a prize, a thing, to be taken. As if I didn’t have a say.”

“What did you expect?” she asks, unerringly piercing the heart of the matter.

“Not that,” I say, shaking my head. I close my eyes, lean my head back and sigh before meeting her steady gaze again.

“Well?”

“Simple, I guess. He walks in, like a normal person, pulls me aside and says he can’t stand seeing me with someone else. That’s it. I would have melted.”

“Hmm,” she murmurs, still keeping the mug at her lips. I narrow my eyes, she’s holding back.

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“Instead he acted like a mad man and I was nothing more than an object. Don’t get me wrong, I like an alpha man as much as the next girl, but I’m not... a thing.”

“Preach,” she nods. She sets her drink on the small table between our chairs. “Honestly, I have to say that I’m shocked. I didn’t think Ray had it in him to be violent.”

“Well, apparently he does.” Her lips part, but I hold up a hand stopping her before she says it. “Don’t you dare blame the wolf.” I lean back, crossing my arms. “Wolf or not, he doesn’t get a free pass. His instincts don’t excuse what he did.”

Erica shrugs and sighs. She shakes her head.

“Look, I’m not making excuses, but... it is hard for shifters. Sam and Raul spent years learning to control their instincts. I don’t think that Ray has.”

I scoff. “Apparently.”

“Look, I’ve had to learn a lot. It’s not just about when they shift,” she says, leaning forward. “The animal’s always there. Even when they’re in human form, it whispers and pushes. If they don’t train themselves to control it, it will take over.”

I stare at her for a long moment. There a lot I don’t know about the Crawfords and their nature.

“Yeah... well...” I trail off, digesting that. Trying to find it in myself to forgive him. “I didn’t know. But it still doesn’t justify what he did.”

“No,” Erica agrees. “It doesn’t, but it explains it. Some at least.” She studies me from behind her long, gorgeous lashes that I’ve always been jealous of. “You should’ve spent more time with us in Dawson. Then you’d understand him better.”

“I don’t want to understand him. He embarrassed me. And Monica. That night was supposed to be the moment, not... this.”

Erica smirks. “He got what he deserved then?”

“Oh, yeah. I slapped him. Hard.”

She snorts—literally, coffee through the nose. She scrambles for a napkin, laughing.

“You slapped Ray?”

“Yes I did,” I say, a grin forming despite myself. “Believe me, I wanted to do more.”

“Gutsy and stupid.” She dabs at her chin. “He could’ve shifted and?—”

“Bitten my head off?” I finish. “Yeah. Didn’t think of that ‘til after I left.”

Erica shakes her head, the smile fading. “That means something, though. He didn’t lose it. Even when provoked. That’s control. That’s... softness. For you, specifically.”

“Don’t,” I say, looking out over her perfect green lawn. “Don’t turn this into some romance novel moment. I’m not his project or his possession—I’m a person, damn it.”

“You do.” Her voice is gentle. “But he was better the night he saved you, wasn’t he?”

I nod, slowly. Remembering how he intervened and kept me from getting my ass kicked by a jealous wife I hadn't known existed.

“That’s what gets me. That night, he was... kind. Gentle, even. I saw something in him. Something I thought was real.”

Erica watches me for a long moment, silent, but clearly having something she wants to say.

“Look, I’m not saying forgive him, but he is Sam and Raul’s brother. That makes him part of my and Monica’s life. And we want you back in Dawson.”

“I don’t?—”

She cuts me off with a frown, her face shifting to her serious I-will-brook-no-shit expression.

“You don’t have to like him. You don’t even have to talk to him. But this weekend, you get your ass back there and bury the hatchet.”

I roll my eyes. “He won’t have forgotten that slap.”

“Probably not, but you’re my and Monica’s friend. I don’t want to miss you, so don’t let him take that away.”

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I breathe in, deep. Let it out slow.

“You’re not losing me.”

Her smile is warm, steady—like always. Like home.

We don’t need to say more. I see it in her eyes—everything we’ve shared, everything we will. If I were to let this rift grow, Ray would win more than a ruined night. He’d steal the one thing I’ve held on to longer than any romance.

My friends.

I won’t let him do that to me, no matter how much it stings my pride.

8

RAY

“The wild one,” Sammy says, shaking his head. “Charge on in. What, you think you’re Raul? You charged in there like a goddamn maniac. You’re lucky you got away with just a smack.”

I have to take his shit—because he’s not wrong. That’s what pisses me off the most.

I lost it. No strategy. No patience. Just reckless, raw impulse. I saw Stacy with that jackass and my blood boiled. Instead of walking away and letting it cool down, I let it spill over and the wolf surged. Even then I should have stopped it, but I didn’t. I let

my wolf's impulse to dominate take over.

And Stacy was pissed.

That calm, gentle gaze—full of possibility—vanished in a blink. Snapped like a dry twig underfoot. How am I supposed to blame her?

I can't stop replaying it. The way her eyes narrowed, her body stiffened, and the warmth drained from her face like I'd slapped her soul.

I hadn't just scared her—I'd betrayed something between us. Something that I hadn't even had the courage to name.

I pretend to focus on the alternator, but I'm really just waiting for Sammy's next dig. And sure enough...

"You sure that's the right screw, genius?" Sammy asks, not even bothering to look up.

I glance down. Damn it—wrong again.

You charged in there like a goddamn maniac...

"Not now, Sam," I mutter.

"Then when?" he snaps, looking up. His usually soft brown eyes are sharp, unforgiving. "You think everyone's just going to forget what you did? The risk of it? Not only did you make a scene, you embarrassed all of us. And don't get me started on how much you scared her."

I flinch. That last comment lands hardest. Stacy.



It's been three days and in every one of them Sam has made it his personal mission to remind me of what a jackass I was. Every misplaced tool, every minor mistake—he pounces, tying it all back to North Haven like it's the goddamn Rosetta Stone of failure.

I've given him grief too—it's what brothers do. But when I do it, it comes with a smirk. A laugh. A jab that lands soft. Sammy's throwing punches, and isn't pulling back. Sam's definitely not laughing, and neither is Raul.

Raul, I thought he would understand. He set the tone, didn't he? He lost it on Monica's ex, but fat fucking chance. He doesn't tease me or snap, but he won't look me in the eye. His disappointment cuts deeper than Sammy's sniping anger ever could.

And Monica? Hell, she used to welcome me with hugs, laughter, and invitations to dinner. Now it's a cold nod, if that. A polite smile stretched too thin to be real. A smile that cracks around the edges when she notices me looking. All that welcoming warmth is gone.

I apologized. Twice. Said everything I thought might matter. Told them I was sorry for storming that mansion, for putting Stacy on the spot, for not thinking it through.

Problem is they don't want apologies. They want me to be someone else. Someone better.

Raul says I should've controlled myself—like I wasn't acting on instincts he has every bit as much as I do. Monica said I shouldn't have been there at all. That I wasn't invited. They're both right, but that doesn't make their baleful silence any easier to bear.

"I'm done for the day," I say, tossing the carburetor onto the bench and walking

away.

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Sam says something, but I don't hear it and don't care. It's Friday and I've had enough. Their judgment clings like a noose—tightening every time I breathe. I grab my keys and get in the truck. In moments I'm leaving behind Dawson and the suffocating tension that clings to the air in town.

I need space. I need peace. Not the chaos of people, but the raw hum of nature—something real, something wild. So I drive east, toward the place that's always been mine.

I hear it when I'm close. A soft roar that grows as I descend the forty-five slope. The truck grumbles louder as the trees close in like old friends welcoming me back. The road bends, and there it is—Venus River. Wide. Alive. Untamed.

A silver ribbon cutting through the night, wild and free. The current rushes past jagged rocks, glinting silver beneath the moonlight. The scent of damp earth and evergreen hits me, grounding me in the moment. Mist clings to the low branches like a whispered secret.

I park and kill the engine, then walk to the edge. My boots sink into the soft dirt, and for the first time all week, I breathe easier.

“Always the charmer,” I whisper, gazing out across the water.

Then the wind shifts and a rustle across the way draws my attention. My body tenses, instincts kicking in—not fear, but curiosity. A shape moves between the trees, graceful, deliberate. Then the figure steps into view.

Helena.

She parts the foliage like it obeys her. Her eyes flash crimson in the moonlight. Leaves slide off her cloak as if the forest itself parts to let her through. Her presence is as undeniable as the river itself. With a tap of her staff, she vanishes, then reappears at my side.

“It is charming, isn’t it?” she says, her voice thick with appreciation. “That’s the good thing about snow. When it melts, it gives life back.”

I nod, holding back my reservations at her sudden appearance.

“It’s good to see you again,” I say.

She crouches in a fluid movement that is almost feline.

“Lots of people have been asking about you,” I add. “Why did you vanish?”

“I’m not one for public praise,” she replies bluntly. “I know they love me. I don’t need to see it put on display. I’m not royalty, Raymond. I’m a witch who did what needed to be done.”

“I think more than a few people would call that humble,” I chuckle.

“What about you? I expected to find you in wolf form. Your brothers are always running wild,” she says, tilting her head and studying me.

I exhale, staring at the river’s edge.

“My wolf’s done enough damage lately.”

“Ah, North Haven,” she says and I nod. “I spoke with Monica. Not your finest hour.”

“You’re being generous,” I mutter. A shimmer catches my eye—a smooth stone near the bank. Funny how despite my being in the middle of regret, nature has time for beauty.

“I screwed up big time.”

“You men confuse me.” Her voice shifts, tone sharper now. “Monica told me some about you and Stacy. You rejected her. Days ago. Then you crash a party and act like you’ve got a claim? What changed?”

“Instinct,” I say immediately, but it feels hollow the second it leaves my lips.

She scoffs. “You say that like it absolves you.”

“It’s the truth,” I say, defensively.

“No, it’s a shield,” she says. “I’ve known your kind for centuries. The beast doesn’t act unless the man wants it too.”

I look at her, startled. “What are you saying?”

“You know exactly what I’m saying,” she snaps. “The wolf didn’t hijack you. Youlethim take the wheel because you craved the same thing.”

My chest tightens.

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“Maybe,” I admit, voice hoarse. “I guess...I...I like her. More than I want to. She’s...young. Beautiful. Sharp. And she doesn’t take shit from anyone.”

“She’s also heading back to Dawson,” Helena says, and the softness in her voice catches me off guard. “Right now along with Erica, but they’re not going to make it there easily.”

I straighten up. “What do you mean?”

She reaches into her cloak and pulls out her orb. The familiar swirl of darkness glows faintly as it spins in her lap. Her hand hovers above it, fingers barely touching. A moment later, the image forms.

I see Erica’s car winding along a narrow road. The forest presses close on either side. The road curves sharply, treacherously. Then—headlights flare and illuminate a massive tree trunk that lies across the road, its branches tangled against the guardrail like skeletal fingers.

The BMW slows. Taillights flash. They’re stuck.

“They’ll be fine, right?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

Helena doesn’t reply.

Instead, she asks, “So. What’s it going to be, Raymond? Keep pretending this is just about the wolf? Or admit the truth?”

The weight of her words hangs in the air. Suddenly, it's not about instinct. It's not even about Stacy. It's about me—facing what I've buried, and finally owning it.

I rise to my feet. I don't speak because the decision is made. Helena smiles faintly, as if she's seen this outcome all along.

“Go,” she says. “They’ll need more than a fire department tonight.”

I nod once. “Thanks.”

The river continues its imperturbable rush as I stride back to the truck. The night air wraps around, electric and alive. I feel the change, but it's not in the way I'm used to. This is different because it's in my heart.

This isn't about saving her—it's about showing her she matters. No more hiding behind the wolf. No more excuses. Just truth.

It's about being the man who deserves her. And this time, I'm not going to screw it up.

9

STACY

“Come on, Phantom. Pick up. Pick up.”

Erica's voice cuts through the stillness like a blade—sharp, tense, but stubbornly hopeful. So typical of her. She calls Sam by his stupid pet name like it's going to summon him through sheer willpower.

I wish I could be like her. Hopeful. Unshaken. Capable of turning fear into a joke and

throwing it at the dark. But we've been unable to get through to Sam, or Raul, or even Nora. No one's answering and no one's coming.

Seven calls. Seven voicemails. Seven little failures stacking up like the mist creeping over the ridge ahead.

She shoves her phone into her jeans, staring at the trees that are blocking the road. One massive tree blocks the road ahead—and somehow, it took another down with it. Now we're trapped between them. She puts her hands on her hips, shakes her head.

"Magic?" I ask, only half-joking, hoping for some witchy miracle.

"I... can't," she mutters, shaking her head. Frustration draws her mouth tight. "I don't know how to use it like that."

I'm standing close to the mangled barrier staring at the drop. I wrap my arms over my chest like a shield, lifting my gaze to stare at the silhouettes of the mountaintops. The sun is setting, making them look like they are carved from shadow. Jagged and silently watching us.

"Shit," I mutter.

Coming back to Dawson for the weekend should've been enough trouble. But no—this is my life. The universe loves to fuck with me.

"I guess we can walk," Erica says.

Her voice is flat but edged with something brittle. I whip around, eyes widening and mouth open before I finish moving.



“You can’t be serious.”

She meets my gaze, and for once, there’s no sass in her expression, only exhaustion.

“It’s eight miles to Dawson,” she shrugs. “Last couple are downhill.”

“And the first six are uphill. Winding. Pitch-black,” I shoot back. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s going to get cold. Real cold. I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel like freezing my ass off in a Beamer hoping someone comes down this God-forsaken road.”

My gut twists. She’s right, but the thought of trekking that distance in the dark with only our phones for light makes my skin crawl.

“Try Sam again,” I mutter. “Or Raul. Someone has to answer, eventually.”

“I already did. Raul, Nora, Monica, everyone we know and it’s all one big nada.” She sighs and glances away, folding her arms. When she continues her voice is low. “We’re on our own.”

Before I can formulate a response, twin beams of light crest the turn, cutting through the dark. A deep rumble follows, low and guttural. I take a step back, squinting through the glare. The truck is moving fast, barreling toward the final bend in the road. Whoever that is—if they don’t slow down, they’re going to hit the downed tree.

“Cross your fingers,” Erica says, perking up.

“They’re going to wreck—move back,” I say, grabbing her arm and pulling her back.

The car slows as its headlights bounce off the asphalt. Then I see the truck’s profile—and my stomach drops. No. It can’t be. Sleek metallic gray. Too clean for these roads. Built tall and wide, like it has no concept of subtlety.

“Unbelievable,” I mutter, dragging my palm across my face.

“What?” Erica asks, pulling her arm free now that the vehicle stopped.

“It’s Ray,” I groan.

“No way! Ray?” she exclaims, her face lighting up.

“Chill, will you? He’s the last person I want to see,” I snap.

“Shut up, Red,” she says, stepping forward. “I’ll take anyone who can help.”

Ray pulls up beside us with a gentle scrunch of tires on gravel. The engine growls low before dying and then the door creaks open.

“Evening, ladies,” he says.

Confident, casual. Like this is just a normal Friday night run-in. His heavy boots clomp as he walks up. He stops in front of the downed tree. He looks it over like he’s assessing a flat tire.

“Talk about bad luck,” he mutters, peering at Erica’s car with a low whistle. “Oof. Doesn’t look like you’ve got a towbar, huh?”

“No,” Erica says with a sigh. “She’s just a pretty face.”

“All right,” he says, swinging his arms and rolling his head. “Stand back.”

He cracks his knuckles and heads toward the massive tree trunk lying across the asphalt.

“You’re not seriously—” I say.

“Back,” he repeats, shaking his head.

We move without more arguing, stepping out of his way as he crouches and puts his palms against the gnarled roots and splintered bark. This is ridiculous. No one’s that strong. He’s showing off, and there’s no way he’s moving that monster by himself.

With a grunt, he grips the edge of the trunk and pulls. At first, nothing happens. Then, slowly, the dead tree shifts, scraping against the pavement with a horrible groan. Ray leans in, muscles straining beneath the thin stretch of his black t-shirt. Veins pulse like live wires under his skin.

He has his jaw clenched and eyes locked on the log like he’s challenging it to defy him. I stand frozen. Watching in sheer disbelief.

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Little by little, he drags the huge tree. Splinters crack off the base and tumble across the road. He side-steps, hauling it inch by inch, until at last it's parallel to the road. A battle cry tears from his throat as he forces it the last few inches. Then he collapses against the barrier, his head hitting the cold iron with a dull thud.

“Holy shit,” Erica whispers. “How did he do that?”

I don't answer. I'm watching him breathe—slow and heavy, his chest rising and falling like he just ran a marathon uphill. My throat is dry and tight.

“Thank you,” I say, louder than I expect, my voice cutting through the thick silence. I step backward instinctively, needing space.

“Oh no, no, no.” Erica's voice turns sly. She grabs onto my arm holding me in place. “Where do you think you're going?”

“What?” I ask, unable to take my eyes off of Ray.

“That's not how you thank a man who just moved a goddamn tree for you.”

“Then you thank him.”

“Nope.” She smirks. “This one's all yours. It's the right thing to do—and you know it, Red.”

God I hate it when she's right.

Rolling my shoulders, I straighten and approach. Ray remains sitting on the ground, sweat glistening on his forehead and soaking into the collar of his shirt. I stop a few feet away, unsure of what I'm going to say until the words tumble out.

"I don't know how you got here, but... you were very helpful. We'd probably be hiking our way to Dawson if it weren't for you."

He looks up, breathing heavily as he meets my eyes. A smirk plays over his lips, not quite forming.

"Want to know the truth?" he asks.

"Sure."

"Take a seat," he says, patting the gravel next to him.

I hesitate, then sink down slowly, careful to keep some distance between us.

"I'm all ears, Mr. Crawford. How did you magically show up in the middle of nowhere? Divine intervention?"

"Witch's intervention," he says, wiping his brow with the back of his arm. "Helena showed me your problem in her orb. She's nosy like that."

I blink. "Helena?"

"Yeah," he says with a shrug.

He isn't looking at me, staring across the road. Erica goes to her car and climbs in, giving us some semblance of privacy. Great. Thanks for the backup.

“I’ll have to thank her,” I say, watching him out of the corner of my eye but not looking at him directly. If I do, I’ll do something stupid. Something I’ll regret.

“Look, I’m... I’m sorry,” he says, turning toward me. “For what I did. At the party. I was an ass. No excuses.”

His voice is quieter and edged with something raw. There is a note of vulnerability and regret I’ve never heard from him before. I don’t expect it to sting, but it does.

“I’ll accept your apology if you accept mine,” I say softly, turning to face him. “I shouldn’t have slapped you. You were a jerk, yeah. But I let anger win too, and that’s not fair either.”

“Apology accepted,” he says immediately.

We sit in awkward silence for a beat, then two.

“Would you like to go out... with me?”

The question hangs in the air. Heavy. Raw. Real. I raise an eyebrow.

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“Will you act like a grown-up if I say yes?”

“I will. I promise. No more games. I know I screwed up before, but I want to do this right.”

There’s something in his voice that catches me off guard—like he means every syllable. Not just because he wants me, but because he wants to earn me. Something is shifting, not fast or all at once, but shifting.

“I’ll give you your chance,” I murmur. “Pick me up tomorrow night. Eight o’clock. Monica’s place.”

He smiles, hopeful but wary. “Done.”

“I have one condition.”

“Name it.”

“You show up on a bike. Doesn’t matter what kind. Just... a bike.”

He nods slowly, lips curling into a smirk. “I can do that.”

I inch closer and press a kiss to his cheek. His skin is slick with sweat, salty and warm against my lips.

“Thanks again,” I whisper near his ear.

It feels too simple, but there it is.

I walk to Erica's car with my hands in my jacket pockets, heart pounding harder than I want to admit. The cold air nips at my face, but I barely feel it. It wasn't the truck. Or the tree. Or even his brute strength.

It was his voice. His honesty. The apology that came without pride or performance.

Owning what he did changes everything. Ray could've moved an entire forest and it wouldn't have meant a damn thing without that. This isn't about biceps or pickup trucks or even romantic gestures. It's about respect.

And tonight... he showed me some.

10

RAY

Next time I see Helena, I'm kissing her. Right on her witchy mouth.

There's no killing the smile on my face when I enter the shop. No more hesitation. No more overthinking. Helena cracked something open in me—something rusted shut so long I'd forgotten it was even there. She reminded me of who I am—what I am—and did it without judgment, without flinching. The Crawford witch is right.

She always is, damn her.

We shifters are born at war—with ourselves. The wolf wants dominance. Control. The man craves reason. Most days, we find a balance. Barely. It's easier with danger to focus us. But peace? Peace makes everything blur.



The wolf gets restless. He growls loudest when the world is too quiet. That's when I wrestle with him hardest, having to work to keep him reined in. Deep down, I know the truth. He and I have to agree before we can do anything. No matter how much I want to pretend he doesn't matter, he's still me.

Today, though, we're on the same page.

I step into the garage and inhale the familiar scent of oil, metal, and old coffee. It's familiar and comforting. Raul is hunched over his laptop, tapping away at some schematic. Probably another exhaust system design since that's what he's been obsessing over recently.

Sam's working his toolbox over, handling each wrench like it's made of glass. Typical. He treats them like holy relics.

"Morning, sunshines," I call out, my greeting echoing off the concrete walls. I stroll across the room like I don't have a care in the world. "Relax, Sammy. Your tools haven't wandered off. I stood guard all night to keep them from growing legs."

"One day they will walk away," Sam mutters. "And then you'll all be sorry."

Raul throws a glance over his shoulder. "Calling us 'sunshines' and cracking jokes? You get laid or something?"

"Tsk, tsks," I say, shaking my head in mock scolding and trying to hold back an even bigger grin. "Such vulgarity from the great Alpha? Mom would've washed your mouth out with soap."

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“Don’t deflect,” Sam cuts in, looking up, his eyes narrowing like he’s Sherlock Holmes.

“I’m not deflecting shit, pup,” I say.

“Oh?” he asks, arching an eyebrow and crossing his arms over his chest. “You think I don’t know about last night? You think my woman doesn’t talk to me, huh?”

“What of it?” I ask, acutely aware of the intensity of Raul’s stare.

“You moved a whole tree? With your hands?”

“Brute force.” I shrug, flexing a bicep. “You should try lifting something heavier than a socket wrench, pup.”

Sam snorts, shaking his head.

“A tree?” Raul asks. “What the fuck happened?”

I give him the broad strokes of last night, bringing him up to speed. He shakes his head before returning his attention to the design he’s working on, muttering that I was probably an idiot.

“There was a stupid amount of sheer stubbornness,” I agree, the aches in my back throbbing. “Nearly pulled every damn muscle in my back. Felt like I’d run a marathon afterward.”

Sam snorts and shakes his head.

“Whatever... but hey—worth it if you scored a date with Stacy, huh?”

I pause, letting the humor fade just enough. “I want it to be.”

Raul frowns as he sets his laptop on the bench next to him. He leans in, a questioning look on his face.

“That’s not the tone I expected. You’ve been beating yourself up for days over her. Now you’ve got another shot, but you sound like you’re heading to a funeral.”

I rub the back of my neck as the concerns I’ve been pushing aside thrust their way in.

“It’s not that I’m not glad. It’s just... complicated. You and Monica, you two clicked right away. Easy. Natural. Stacy and I? We haven’t even been on a real date, and we’ve already had two blowups. Doesn’t exactly scream fairy tale.”

Before Raul can respond, someone knocks on the open garage door. All three of us turn around.

“Well, if it isn’t our favorite witch,” Raul says warmly, walking over.

Helena steps inside. She walks in like the air belongs to her. Not just confident—unchallengeable.

“Morning, boys. Hope I’m not interrupting.”

“You never interrupt,” I say, my arms folding across my chest, hiding the sudden shift in my pulse.

A faint smile plays over her lips but she barely nods an acknowledgment.

“I wish I could say I came by to chat. But I’ve got something more—and it can’t wait.”

“Something wrong?” I ask, straightening.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” she says, tone dipping lower. “Five weeks back, a crew started clearing trees east of here. At first, I thought it was some rich human building a retreat. But when I saw it—” she pauses, eyes sharp. “It’s not a house. It’s cross-shaped, two stories, and wide open inside.”

“So what is it?” Raul asks, already frowning.

“Last week, I received reports that there were humans in lab coats moving around inside.”

“Alab? Out here?” Sam asks, scratching the day’s growth of beard.

“It seems to be,” Helena nods. “But what kind of lab... that’s the question. I don’t trust it and I want you boys to check it out.”

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“Let’s go,” Raul says, rising from his seat.

“Hold on,” Helena raises a hand. “It’s Saturday. It’s likely crawling with people. What are you going to do, waltz up and ask for a tour?”

“She’s got a point,” Sam mutters. “Middle of the day’s the worst time for stealth.”

“Why would anyone build a lab out here in the first place?” I ask. “It doesn’t make any sense to build something so far off the grid. That isn’t exactly prime real estate.”

She exhales slowly, eyes meeting mine.

“It could be legitimate,” she says. “Cheap land, maybe—but one way or another, I’ve got a bad feeling. And I trust my instincts. Be careful tonight.”

I nod, but there’s a stone in my gut. Helena knows something. She’s not saying all she knows—she never does—but I sense her unease. Whatever she suspects, it’s unfortunately big enough to cancel my date with Stacy. I pull out my phone and text her.

Hey, girl. I’m sorry, but I can’t make it tonight. Pack business. Hope you understand.

Her reply comes fast.

I’d understand if you told me what it was.

I can’t do this over the phone. Again, I’m sorry.

Whatever. Call me when you're done with "pack" business.

I close my eyes and sigh. Her anger hits, but I can't blame her. I bled for this shot. Lifted that damn trunk. And now I'm pulling the ripcord at the last minute. But this is bigger than one night. I'm a lieutenant. This is my duty.

Frowning at my phone I shake my head and slide it into my pocket. She'll have to understand. This is what life together would be like if we made it work.

Which does nothing to ease the pit in my stomach. I'm putting any chance of an 'us' at risk, but this isn't a choice, this is my duty.

We move under cover of darkness, leaving Dawson on foot. The forest swallows our footsteps, thick with shadows and the hush of nocturnal life. Pickups and bikes are too loud, too obvious. Shifting would be faster—but the noise, the scent trails, the stirred-up dust make it too risky.

Recon only. Raul drilled it into us all day.

We move in silence, every sense stretched tight. For over an hour we push through dense trees and underbrush, alert for anything—lights, voices, movement. The forest remains still. The rustle of leaves, distant owl cries, and the soft thrum of nature continues as expected.

Then we see it—trash. Soda cans, plastic wrappers, straws half-buried in the dirt. Human fingerprints on the land.

We follow the clearly laid trail, my gut tightening with every step. When we crest the last ridge, the structure comes into view. It juts from the forest like a scar—angular, raw concrete and unfinished steel.

“Come on,” Raul orders, taking the first step toward it.

Tall windows line both floors, and a glass entrance gleams in the moonlight. We pass wire fencing ready to be installed piled along the perimeter. Rolls of it stacked like coiled serpents, waiting to strike.

“They’re planning to keep people out,” Sam murmurs.

Raul kneels beside a coil, peering closer.

“No...I think they’re trying to keep someone in,” he says.

“Barbed wire,” I whisper, my stomach twisting. “What the hell are they building out here?”

“Not a prison,” Raul says, shaking his head. “Too small. Not enough cement. No interior cells. Let’s take a look inside.”

The structure looms like a threat, casting deep shadows as we approach. My boots crunch over gravel and loose debris. The door isn’t locked so we step through. Inside is a glass box of a room labeled Reception.

Raul heads towards the stairs while Sam and I explore the bottom floor. It’s an open space. The air is stale and thick with dust. Moonlight comes through the windows illuminating a marble floor. On the far wall is the gleam of computer towers.

“Not exactly a prison,” I mutter. “Unless the inmates are hardcore gamers.”

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“Boys, get up here!” Raul’s voice slices through the stillness, echoing against the hollow bones of the building.

The urgency in his tone hits me like a jolt of electricity. Sammy and I glance at each other, then we’re sprinting. Our boots pound across the dusty floor. We take the stairs two at a time. I grip the railing, and swing around the final landing. My lungs burn with every breath.

Raul stands in the center of a wide room, frozen. Eyes locked on something beyond our view.

My stomach knots as I step beside him and follow his gaze.

Three side by side, towering cages line the far wall. Bars as thick as my wrist gleam under a layer of construction dust and grime. Above each one, a sign hangs from steel chains.

Test Subject 1

Test Subject 2

Test Subject 3

“What the hell is this?” Sam mutters, voice cracking at the end.

“They’re going to run experiments,” Raul answers flatly. His hand closes around one of the bars. “But the question is—on what? Wolves? Grizzlies? Feel this. You know



it.”

I walk closer and reach out. The metal hums with a strange, too-familiar chill. My fingers brush the bar. Then recognition hits like a blow to the ribs.

“Titanium,” Sam blurts before I can. “No way. Steel cages could hold anything. Why would they need titanium?”

“Hey! You’re not supposed to be in here!” someone shouts.

A flashlight explodes against my cheek—blinding and hot. I don’t think. I move.

Adrenaline floods my veins. Instincts take over, muscles tighten, and my feet are hitting the ground. I lock eyes with the human. He fumbles at his belt—his hand dips—gun.

My wolf surges in my mind.

Unleash!

My blood howls for the shift. Muscles coil, claws itch beneath my skin—but I choke it back. Not now. Not here. One death brings a dozen more. They’ll ask questions. They’ll dig deeper. I clamp down hard on the beast.

I do roar as I lunge. I drive my palms into his ribs, full force. A bullet cracks past my ear, shattering tile as it embeds in the floor.

He grunts as I drive into him and we both go down. My head crashes into his gut. I pin him beneath me, fists clenched tight around his wrists, snarling in his face.

Then with a thud, a boot crashes into the side of the guy’s head, snapping it to the

side. Raul drops to one knee and seizes him by the throat.

“Alright, asshole,” Raul growls, voice low and lethal. “Five seconds. Tell us what this place is.”

The guy’s terrified. I feel it. His heart is galloping like a scared rabbit’s, loud in my hypersensitive ears.

“I don’t know, man!” he chokes, voice cracking. “I’m security! They tell me shit.”

“Anyone else coming?” I press, my voice flat, eyes narrowing to slits.

“Yeah! The other guy’s not due for ten minutes!”

“That’s not long enough,” Sam grunts.

His fist flies and the man’s head jerks back with the impact, blood spilling from his lip.

“We were never here,” Sam snarls. “Say a word, and I’ll come back. You won’t walk away next time.”

He punches the guy one more time and something cracks. The guard slumps.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:34 am*

“What the fuck was that?” Raul snaps, eyes blazing as he glares at Sam.

Sam shrugs, brushing off his knuckles. Calm as hell.

“He was telling the truth. And if he doesn’t keep his end of our agreement...” He leans down, fingers tugging at the guy’s shirt, revealing a name tag. “We know where to find him.”

Marcus Leonard.

“We need to go,” I say, voice sharp, and Raul reaches out to help me up. “Sam’s right. That guy was scared shitless. His heart nearly exploded.”

“Run!” Raul barks the command.

And we obey. My pulse thunders. We’re out of time.

This whole thing stinks. Cages. Titanium. Test subjects. Whatever’s going on here, we weren’t supposed to see it.

Which means now, we’re a problem.

I don’t want to kill some poor bastard for doing his job. But if he talks—if any of them talk—it’s on us.

And it’d be a damn shame if someone has to die for a paycheck that barely covers rent.”

STACY

No way. I'm not staying in Dawson for lunch.

I force a polite smile as I shake my head. Even the suggestion leaves a bitter taste on my tongue.

There was a time when those lunches were the highlight of my trip—a warm little ritual with Monica and Erica. Laughter that bubbled over glasses of wine, easy teasing, stories that pulled us back into our shared past like slipping into a favorite pair of jeans.

Not today. Not after Ray.

Ray's rejection sours everything. What should feel comforting now stings—like salt rubbed into an open wound.

The ride I'd fantasized about? Never happened. No sweeping curves of mountain roads, no wind tangling my hair while I held him close. No quiet jokes whispered over the engine's roar. Not even a touch. Not even a damn glance.

It hurts more than it should. Of course, Monica and Erica don't get it. Or maybe they do, and they're trying to distract me with food and familiarity.

"It'll be another two weeks before you come back," Monica says, her smile a little too hopeful.

"You realize I'm making lobster ravioli? Your favorite," Erica adds, nudging my arm.

“I’m going to miss you,” Monica says again, softer now.

I love them. God, I do. But they don’t get it. Sitting at that table pretending everything’s fine while scanning the street for his bike? Torture. And I know myself—I wouldn’t be able to stop looking. I’d spot a flash of blue gleaming in the sunlight—and every cell in my body would ache with the reminder.

You didn’t get what you wanted. Wait another two weeks. Try again.

No, thanks. I hand Monica her keys with a quiet apology and the vague promise of “next time,” then get the hell out.

The drive back is dull. Lifeless. Like all the color’s drained from the world.

On the drive up Friday, my chest was light and fluttery. Every mile that brought me closer to Ray felt like hope. Now? It’s like I’m hauling disappointment in the back seat. The engine hums, the tires whisper, but my pulse doesn’t. I lose count of how many cars pass me. Vans, trucks, motorcycles—every one of them going somewhere fast, full of an urgency I can’t summon.

By the time I pull Nora’s backup car into my extra parking spot, it’s after three. The car groans into place between a green Mazda and a battered black Camaro. It rattles like it’s giving up, too.

I grab my keys and climb out, not bothering to look up. And of course, my pants leg snags on a jagged edge of the Camaro’s bumper. I curse under my breath and tug at the fabric.

“Stupid thing.”

And that’s when I see it—the front wheel of a motorcycle. Not just any motorcycle.His.

“Subtle parking job,” a familiar voice drawls—amused, unmistakable. My heart jolts.

Ray.

He’s leaning against his Harley, arms crossed, all cool confidence and effortless swagger. His blond hair is wind-tossed to perfection. His dark sunglasses hide his eyes, but the smirk curling his lips is familiar. Inviting and dangerous.

“You should get that clutch checked,” he adds casually. “It’s on its last leg.”

“You’re here?”

“In the flesh.” His grin widens, and just like that, I forget how to breathe.

I laugh—short and stunned—and the tension I’ve been carrying all day melts into something warm.

“I didn’t see this coming.”

He shrugs like it’s nothing.

“I figured I’d tell you to your face. It was stupid of you to leave like that.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, blinking rapidly. This is not the apology I expected.

“We could’ve gone out after lunch,” he says, stepping closer. “I know it’s not the date we planned, but better than running off.”

I look down, heat creeping up my neck.

“What can I say? I was disappointed. I guess I acted like it.”

Ray tilts his head, pulling his sunglasses down just enough to meet my eyes. His gaze is steady.

“Now who’s being immature?”

Anger flashes but the smell of him, solid and intoxicating fills my nose. I can’t hold onto the upset because he’s not wrong. He told me there was pack business and I know from both Monica and Erica how that goes.

“Guilty.” I lift my hands in mock surrender, though it’s more real than I want to admit. “You love that bike, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Then you better park it properly before it gets towed,” I say, brushing past him with a smile I don’t try to hide. “I’ll wait.”

The weight in my chest lifts, replaced by something electric. He came. He’s here. This may not be the perfect moment I imagined—but it’s real. And it’s definitely better than lonely silence and Netflix reruns.

“I hope I don’t find my baby smashed,” he mutters as he follows.

“Follow me, Mr. Biker,” I call over my shoulder. “Your baby’s safe. Now come inside before someone else tries to seduce me.”

“Hard not to worry,” he says, lips twitching. “I built her from scratch.”

“Oh, you’re one of those bikers,” I tease as we reach the elevator.

“The kind who actually loves their ride? Guilty as charged.”

As the elevator doors close, a charged silence crackles between us. I lean against the wall, turning to face him.

“So, where would you have taken me last night? Please don’t say Tiffany’s.”



He snorts. “Tiffany’s? Seriously?”

You know, I had a bad experience kind of like that once.”

“Let me guess... a jealous woman?”

“Bingo.” I wince, looking away. “Except it was reversed. It was my mom. She caught my dad cheating in a bar that was similar enough and that was the end of their story.”

The elevator dings. He holds the door for me, silent.

“What did she do?” he asks softly, as I unlock my apartment.

I hesitate, keys trembling in the lock.

“She gave him a black eye. And the other woman? Scars. On her face. I was screaming, trying to stop her. It was like she didn’t even hear me.” Inside, the air feels heavier. I glance over my shoulder. “You saved me from playing out my own version of it where I would have been on the wrong side of the equation.”

He shrugs, dismissing it as if it’s nothing. He looks around my apartment until his gaze catches on the photo above my couch.

“She’s beautiful.”

“Was.” I close the door behind us. “Cancer took her in 2012.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, his voice soft and gentle.

“It’s fine,” I nod. “Anyway, I need to change. Think about what you want to eat. I’m starving.”

I slip into my bedroom and shut the door behind me, resting my back against it. My pulse’s still skittering. I hadn’t meant to dredge all that up—but I guess some memories never stay buried.

I undress then open my dresser and stare. Lace in black, white, electric blue... I bite my lip, considering.

G-string? Thong? Something bolder? My fingers hover, indecisive—until I bend down and—a low whistle slices through the silence.

“Fucking spectacular.”

I freeze. My pulse spikes.

I feel him, then his arms snake around my waist, hot skin on mine. His bare chest presses against my back, his breath warm at my ear.

“What’s that?” I murmur, playing coy.

“That body,” he breathes. His lips graze my shoulder. “Jesus, your figure...”

My eyes flutter closed. Oh, I definitely made the right decision leaving that lunch behind.

I gasp as his hands glide over my stomach, searing trails into my skin. Like fire on my skin—and craving the burn. The drawer snaps shut with a bang, forgotten.

“I thought...” my voice trembles, breaking on a whisper. A shiver of need coils down my spine, electric and sharp. “I thought you’d be hungry.”

His lips brush my ear, his breath hot, his voice low and rough.

“I am. But not for food.”

His hands climb higher, stroking up my torso like he’s memorizing every contour. My resistance crumbles.

I lift my arms over my head and grip the top of the dresser for balance, heart pounding, thighs parting of their own volition. I’ve waited so long. An ache, thick and constant, pulses under my skin. Now that he’s here, that hunger I was denying blazes to life.

His palms cup my breasts. His fingers tease and circle. I arch into him, my breath hitching as his thumbs flick over my nipples. A soft moan slips out as his mouth finds my shoulder. Heat blooms in the wake of his lips dragging over my skin.

He presses closer. My knees weaken.

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“Ray...” His name falls from my mouth, laced with a need I can’t disguise.

He’s not just seducing—he’s unraveling me. Slowly. Completely.

“Yeah?” he asks, husky and breathless.

I don’t answer. I move.

I pause—just for a second—then spin in his arms and shove, hard. He stumbles back onto the bed. I follow, hunger blooming bold and unstoppable. Desire drives me, bold and hungry, crawling over him like a woman who knows exactly what she wants. Because I do.

My eyes flick down. He’s already hard—thick and pulsing, lying proudly against his abs. God, he’s beautiful. Not just his cock, but everything—his carved muscles, the delicious tension in his body, the way his breath catches as I crawl over him.

“I’m hungry for you, too,” I murmur, voice husky as I trail my tongue up the line of his neck, tasting the salt of his skin, his need.

He groans and seizes my waist, dragging me upward until our mouths collide—desperate, deep, the kiss messy and wild like a thunderstorm. I clutch at his shoulders, grounding myself and losing myself at the same time.

His hands roam up my spine, nails dragging enough to make me gasp. He’s consuming me. Worshiping me.

When he nips my lower lip, I feel it down to my toes. Every nerve lights up.

I kiss down his jaw, over the scratch of stubble, tasting his skin. The hard plane of his chest rises to meet my mouth as I trace a path down to his center, eyes locking on his face. His lashes flutter. His lips part. His breath comes faster.

I press my palms to his abs, reverent.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says, voice tight, eyes glittering. “I’m thinking it, too. But I want to give you something first.”

A slow, sultry grin forms on my lips.

“Perfect.”

I shift, sliding my leg over him and turning so I’m facing the length of his body. I straddle him again, bent low, ready to kiss and explore every inch. But before I can resume my path down his chest, his hands clamp on my hips.

And he pulls me down.

His mouth finds me in one hot, wet stroke—and I forget everything else. The first sweep of his tongue across my folds is devastating—deliberate, possessive.

“Ray...fuck...” My fingers dig into his thighs. “That’s not fair.”

He chuckles against me, breath a low rumble. “Don’t care.”

His hands spread me wider, fingers gripping my ass. Then his tongue finds my clit, swirling, sucking, teasing. I grind against him, desperate for more, but he sets the pace—slow, thorough, dominant. Pleasure crashes through me like a rogue wave. My

head drops and there he is—his cock, thick and proud, glistening at the tip. I reach for it, trembling.

“Oh my God...” The words slip from my mouth as I wrap my hand around his shaft. He’s so hard. So ready. Drops of pre-cum bead at the head, and I can’t resist—not now.

I guide him to my lips and suck him in, inch by inch, tasting salt and heat. He groans, his tongue never stopping its merciless rhythm. It’s a sensual loop of pleasure—we’re feeding each other, fueling each other. My lips glide down his shaft as his mouth works me over, each stroke drawing me closer to the edge.

I cup his balls, rolling them gently, feeling the tension coil tighter in his body. His finger slides through my wetness, circling, teasing. Then—yes. He pushes inside me, and I cry out, muffled around his cock. My back arches. I jerk him slowly, then suck harder, tongue swirling. He moans, low and raw.

I’m gone.

My orgasm crashes like fire behind my eyes. I tremble, waves rippling through. His hips thrust upward—he’s close too. His cock pulses, thick in my throat. A grunt rips from his chest as he lets go, heat flooding my mouth, spilling over my lips and chin. I kiss the base of him, breathless and sated, and collapse forward.

We’re a tangled heap of limbs and satisfaction.

“God, Ray...” I whisper, fingers drifting over his groin. “What did you just do?”

He chuckles, rolling me onto my stomach with a strength that still makes me shiver. “Wait ‘til you see what’s next, beautiful.”

His fingers glide up my spine, coaxing my hips upward. My cheek sinks into the sheets as I find myself on all fours, my ass in the air. He doesn't wait. His cock—already, impossibly hard again—slides through my folds, filling me deep.

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“Oh my...” My breath leaves me in a broken gasp as he pulls back, then thrusts in again.

He grips my hips like I’m something precious and breakable—but he doesn’t treat me that way. Not now.

His palm slides up my back as he murmurs, “You feel... incredible.”

I lift my head, locking eyes with him over my shoulder.

“Give me everything,” I whisper. “I want it all.”

He groans, dragging his cock out and slamming back in. I feel every thick inch. My body welcomes him home. His hands move restlessly over me—hips, ass, back—claiming every part. I brace myself on the mattress as he pounds in, each thrust stronger, deeper. I lose myself in it, drowning in pleasure, drinking in his grunts, his muscles, the sound of skin slapping skin.

“I’m close,” I cry, my body trembling.

“Fuck,” he growls, fingers digging in. “Me too.”

The second orgasm tears through me without mercy. My limbs shake, my core clenches, pleasure pouring down my legs. My vision blurs. I barely hear his shout as he follows, thick pulses of heat splashing across my lower back.

When it’s over, I roll onto my back, boneless, smiling like a woman who just got



exactly what she needed.

“This is what you missed when you canceled,” he says, flopping down beside me.

“Oh, I know,” I giggle, resting my head on his chest. “You don’t even understand. I was mad last night. Like... don’t-talk-to-me mad.”

“And now?”

“Now?” I nuzzle into him. “Now you’ve turned my whole day around.”

“I had help,” he murmurs, kissing my forehead. “You’re a damn good partner.”

My heart flutters. It’s ridiculous, how easy he makes me feel seen. He reaches for his phone.

“Food? I’d offer to cook with you, but I’d end up pinning you against the counter.”

“Tempting,” I tease, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. My body still hums from everything we shared, the lingering echo of pleasure like a second skin.

And as I glance back at him, I know I’m not done. Not even close.

12

RAY

I made the right call.

The thought hit like a punch to the chest as I stepped out of Stacy’s building, last night—and it’s been pulsing beneath my skin ever since.

Even now, with morning light spilling across the highway, I'm still wrapped in the feeling Stacy left behind—full, content, lit up from the inside out. The taste of her kiss clings to my lips like sugar. Her scent lingers on my skin, my clothes, carved into my damn soul. Sweet and sun-warmed, like strawberries left on the windowsill. There was something playful in the way she let me in. Not just into her apartment. Into her.

And yet, there were cracks. Moments where her regrets seeped through, raw and unfiltered. I heard the words on a loop, like a record she couldn't stop playing.

“I shouldn't have been so disappointed when you canceled.”

She said it four — no, five times. Each softer, like she wasn't just telling me, but trying to believe it herself. I held her. Listened. Did what I could. She feels things hard, wears her heart like a wound she never bothers to hide.

It isn't a flaw. It's just... who she is. Maybe it's what draws me to her. That vulnerability and her fire. Before we fell asleep, tangled together, she gave me a tired, almost sheepish smile and whispered she'd let it go. That she wouldn't bring it up again.

I didn't believe her, but I wanted to.

Driving down the interstate, surrounded by speeding cars and blaring horns, the warmth of last night cools. That's the thing about life—it doesn't wait around. Joy has no defense against death. And I fucking hate death.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:34 am*

It's too final. Too unforgiving. Especially when it steals someone who had so much to live for. Stacy told me her mom—Catherine—died at forty-three. Only forty-three years. That number and her early death won't stop circling in my head. It doesn't add up. Not for a woman who was healthy, active, had her shit together.

She didn't smoke. Didn't drink, except the occasional wine with dinner. No drugs—hell, she warned Stacy to stay far away from that crap every chance she got. She worked out regularly, watched what she ate. She was fit. She should've lived longer. So why the hell didn't she?

I'm not a doctor, but something doesn't add up. And there's only one person I know who might have answers—Monica. My Alpha's mate. If anyone can access the truth, it's her.

The road curves as I descend into the valley, Shandaken sprawling out below me. I ease toward the turnoff, signal ready—but something in me hesitates.

It's Monday morning. Monica's probably buried under appointments, drowning in the complaints of half the town's elderly population. I can already hear Raul's voice barking in my head if I ask for more time off.

“Hell, no. You were in New York, getting laid. Get your ass in here.”

I almost laugh. He's not wrong. Whatever. He'll get over it. I ride past the valley turnoff and head for Shandaken Medical Center. It's almost ten and if Monica's slammed, I'll wait, but I have to try.

I pull up outside and instantly know I've lucked out. The lot's half-empty. It looks like a quiet day. Two ambulances sit in front, idle, their drivers leaning against the doors and sipping coffee while they shoot the breeze. I nod as I drive past. Pulling into a spot, I kill the engine on the Harley. The growl of the bike fades, leaving behind the soft hum of the town starting its day.

I jog up the steps, trying to collect my thoughts. I'm not exactly a poet when it comes to words. Sammy's the smooth talker, not me. But Monica's sharp—smarter than most people I know. I just need to say enough for her to get it. Even if my words come out clumsy.

Stepping inside, I scan the floor. A young nurse pushes a man in a wheelchair to the left. Further down the hallway, a doctor in a white coat disappears through a door. Then I spot Monica. She's walking briskly beside a nurse, deep in conversation, eyes fixed on a patient's chart.

"Hey there," I call, speeding to catch her.

Her eyebrows lift in surprise.

"Ray?" She blinks, surprised. Then smiles. "Wow. Didn't expect to see you here. You've been a ghost lately."

"A redhead we both know," I say, flicking a glance toward the nurse.

Monica's smart and catches the hint.

"That'll be all, Darla. Thanks." She waits for the nurse to walk away, then turns and looks at me with narrowed eyes. "Is this about Stacy? Is she alright? She left in a rush."

I shake my head, keeping my tone casual.

“She’s fine. Better than fine, actually,” I say with a grin that I can’t suppress. “Just got back from the city.” Monica gives me a look—part smirk, part knowing. “Anyway, I’ve been thinking...you knew her mom, right? Back before she passed?”

Her face softens, the edges of her mouth turning down.

“Yeah. That was a rough time for her. I was in med school when it happened. Stacy was just finishing high school.”

I nod slowly. “I’ve got questions, but I don’t know how to ask them.”

“Try,” she says.

“Can cancer really take someone that young?”

She doesn’t miss a beat.

“Ray, kids die from cancer. Babies. It’s ruthless. And it doesn’t give a damn how old you are. We humans—” her eyes flick to mine “—we’re not built like your kind. We’re more fragile.”

“Yeah, but...” I frown. “Catherine was strong. Healthy. She worked out four days a week. Stacy doesn’t remember a single vice.”

“Sure, it helps,” Monica says with a shrug, “but there’s no such thing as a guarantee.”

My gut twists, but I push on. I don’t know why but something about this entire thing bugs me.

“Did she take her husband’s name? After marriage?”

“Yes,” Monica replies. “Her maiden name was LaVine.”

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I hesitate. I know what I'm about to ask won't sit well, but I can't let it go.

"Can you... look into her file?"

She stiffens, eyes narrowing, and a frown forming.

"Ray, why?"

"Because something about it doesn't sit right with me," I say, low and steady. "She had pancreatic cancer. I looked it up. The average life expectancy's over three years, but she died in less than one after diagnosis."

"That's why it's called an average," she says, her tone soft but tight. "Some people live longer. Some a lot less. It's not an exact science."

"I get that. But still—please. Will you look? See what you find. Maybe there's something there. Maybe there's not. But I... need to know."

There's a pause—long enough for tension to crackle in the air between us. Finally, she exhales.

"Fine," she says. "I'll look."

"Thank you." I meet her eyes, holding her gaze so she knows I mean it. "I'll see you back in Dawson."

I turn and walk out before she can change her mind. I feel her unease hanging behind

me like smoke. I know she doesn't get it—why I care or why I'm stirring up something that's been buried almost a decade. Maybe she thinks it's a fool's errand.

Maybe it is. I hope it is.

But I can't shake the feeling there's more to the story. That a woman so full of life didn't just fade out without reason. If I'm wrong, fine. I'll take the hit. But if I'm right...

Then someone has to say it — put the truth on the table. Even if I'm the only one who sees it.

13

STACY

By all rights, I should call Erica. That used to be our ritual—hot gossip, steamier details, no filters. We never held back, not when it came to sharing the best parts of a wild night.

Erica lived for stories like that. Unlike Monica, who'd politely nod and steer the conversation elsewhere, Erica and I leaned into it. Laughed until we cried over dirty confessions. Rated lovers by their tongue skills and the ache they left behind. But this time... I don't reach for the phone.

Because this isn't the kind of story you tell. It's the kind that brands itself into your bones. The kind that sinks deep and refuses to be spoken aloud.

Ray wasn't just good in bed. He wasn't only decent. He was a force of nature. Wildfire in human form.



His heat still lingers under my skin. His hands. His mouth. God, the way he moved—like fire given form—burned through me as if I were made of dry kindling and pure want.

I've had good lovers before. A few memorable ones. Skilled, attentive. But Ray... Ray is something else entirely. He doesn't just do sex—he devours it. Devoured me.

I expected him to be good—I mean, look at his brothers.

Sam had Erica calling me at all hours, breathless and giddy with tales of kinky bliss. Monica's quieter, but one look at her after a night with Raul tells you everything. So yeah, I thought Ray would be impressive. But this?

This was something else entirely.

I sit tucked into a corner booth at Michelle's Blues and Piano Bar, nursing a glass of something dark and smooth. From here, I've got the perfect view of the stage—center spotlight, velvet curtains, smoke curling in the air.

Erica commands it like she owns it.

She's radiant under the lights, fingers dancing across the keys like they're a part of her soul. Voice smoky, seductive, pure blues. No one else performs like her. I've seen her up there more times than I can count, and every time she gives it everything. No matter what's going on in her life, she leaves it at the edge of the stage and bleeds into her music.

Tonight, she glows. Not from pain, like in the old days, when every note was an open wound.

This is different. She's unburdened. Lit from within. Her joy thrums through every

note, her voice lush and velvet-smooth. Our eyes meet across the room. She mouths one word.

Outside.

I nod once. No need to talk. After so many shows, I know her rhythm. After she plays, she needs a moment to breathe and decompress. She gives so much it drains her. I get that, so I wait like I always have.

The May air is cool and a little damp from an earlier shower. The pavement glistens under the soft glare of the streetlight, rain beads on car windows like tiny diamonds. I stand five yards from the entrance watching the street. Breathing in the night air and the smell of wet concrete as people spill out, buzzing from the show. Their voices are low and reverent.

“She should be playing Madison Square Garden.”

“Hell, she’d sell it out in an hour.”

A bittersweet pride fills my chest. I know she’s that good, but she stopped chasing that dream. Settled for less. Not because she couldn’t make it, but because life beat the fight out of her somewhere along the way. And that... that still hurts to think about. A voice cuts through my thoughts, smoky and sharp.

“Whatever you’re thinking, it must be very important. You’ve been hypnotized by that streetlight for a solid minute.”

I whip around, grinning at Erica.

“Hey. You crushed it tonight. I mean, wow. You were fire.”

She shrugs, cringing slightly.

“Eh. I’ve had better nights,” she says, but the smirk says otherwise. She nods toward the parking lot. “Come on, I need air—and answers.”

“Lead the way.” I fall into step beside her. “So... you’ll never guess who showed up outside my building on Sunday.”

She doesn’t even blink before responding.

“Ray.”

I stop in my tracks.

“Wait—what?”

She lifts a brow. “Don’t play dumb, Red. Monica told me. He spent the night, didn’t he? My God, it’s been two days! Why haven’t you said anything? I’ve been waiting and waiting for you to call!”

“How does Monica know?”

“Funny story.” She sighs as headlights slice across our path. “He went to the clinic yesterday,” she says, glancing over. “Didn’t tell you, huh?”

I shake my head slowly, a strange hollowness opening up inside me.

“No. He didn’t. I noticed he didn’t want to believe it. He kept pushing me about losing my mom. It was like he thought he could rewrite reality.”

“Shifters don’t deal well with deaths they can’t fight,” she murmurs. “To them,

people die in war, by accident, or from heartbreak. Anything else? They just... don't know what to do with it."

I nod, tightening my fingers around my keys. The parking lot's almost empty. Erica's red BMW and my Jeep are all that are left.

"Looks like we're the last ones."

"Red..." Her voice has lost its edge. "We've got company."

Her hand clamps onto my arm, and I follow her gaze. Eyes. Yellow. Glowing in the dark. One set just beyond Erica's car. Another—low and watching—catches the bumper of my Jeep.

My stomach drops. My breath stutters.

This isn't the Crawfords. They wouldn't shift in the open. Especially not in New York. This—whoever this is—it's not them. My breath catches and I feel my pulse in my throat.

"What do we do?" I whisper.

"You run," she says, her tone steel. "I'll keep them busy."

“How?”

“Go!” She shoves hard between my shoulder blades.

Low, hungry growls fill the air. The sound flips a switch in my head—adrenaline dumps into my body and I bolt. My Cherokee glows like a lifeline in the distance. Twenty yards. A bit more. I don’t count. I run.

Behind me, Erica drops her purse with a thud.

“Bring it on, sons of bitches!” she roars.

I glance back—just once. Two wolves. One gray, the other black with a white patch on his chest. The gray lunges at Erica, jaws wide, saliva flying. She lifts her hand—and it’s glowing.

Not metaphorically. Actually glowing.

Light explodes from her palm in a sweeping arc.

The gray wolf flies like it’s been slammed by something unseen, skidding across the asphalt with a bone-rattling crash.

“Don’t look back!” she screams.

But I do. Of course I do.

The black wolf was chasing me—but at the other’s yelp, it whips around and turns on her. It pivots mid-run, muscles rippling beneath thick fur. It charges straight for my friend.

Oh hell no.

I leap into the driver’s seat and shove the key into the ignition. My hands shake, my whole body wired tight. I’m no witch—but I’ve got something just as deadly.

Two tons of Detroit steel.

The engine roars to life. I slam it into gear and floor it. Tires scream. Smoke floods the air behind me. He’s closing in on Erica, lunging from her left.

“Not today,” I snarl.

The bumper hits him with a sickening crunch. His body launches through the air—limbs flailing, a blur of fur and fury.

I slam the brakes and skid to a stop—panting, hair in my face, heart pounding in my throat. The wolf slams into the ground like a sack of concrete, rolls once, then twitches to a stop—just three feet from Erica.

Her eyes—pale, furious, and faintly glowing in the shadows—lock with mine.

“You’re not going home tonight,” she says quietly. “Neither of us is.”

And she’s right. I want to argue. Laugh it off. Pretend this is something a stiff drink and denial could fix. But we both know better.

We survived an ambush—but we still don’t know who sent them or why. Staying

here would make us sitting ducks, waiting for the next hit. There's only one place left that might be safe.

Dawson.

14

RAY

"Shut up," I growl, jabbing my thumb at my phone to silence the alarm with more force than necessary.

The sound cuts off, and I groan. Six a.m. is its own personal hell. I've spent years obsessed with my work, but if there's one thing I still can't get used to, it's being yanked out of sleep at the crack of dawn.

I drag my bare feet across the cool hardwood and blink at the pale wash of light creeping through the blinds. Everything feels heavy—my limbs, my thoughts. Even the silence presses in, thick and buzzing like static. I make a beeline to the bathroom. If coffee doesn't hit me soon, I'll start cursing my ancestors.

But something stops me.



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Not a scent. Not a vibration. A sound—low, muffled, distant. I tilt my head, tracing it. Two engines.

Most people would miss it. But I'm not most people—and I'm not fully human. My body tenses before I realize I've stopped moving. I close my eyes, focusing on isolating the frequencies.

Yeah. Two vehicles. Both familiar—but wrong for this hour.

I toss the towel onto the sink and break into a run. The floorboards groan as I hit the stairs. My heart picks up, pounding the same way it does before a hunt. I hit the bottom step and rush to the kitchen window, jerking the curtain aside.

A BMW and a beat-to-hell Jeep Cherokee pull into the drive. I blink. Once. Then again.

Erica's Beamer doesn't surprise me. Maybe she wrapped up a gig early and wanted to see my brother. But the Cherokee?—

That's Stacy's.

I don't hesitate a moment longer, rushing to the front door and calling her name as I step out onto the porch.

“Stacy? What the hell? You're supposed to be in New York.”

Erica's already out of the car, moving fast. Her posture's tight, wired.

“We were attacked last night,” she says. “Wolves. In Michelle’s parking lot.”

“What?!” I exclaim, my voice cracking. “In the city?”

It’s not only surprise—it’s dread, slamming into my chest like a hammer. Stacy slides out of the passenger seat slowly, her face pale, and her movements stiff.

“Yeah,” she says, her voice so soft I almost miss it. “I’d probably be dead if it weren’t for Erica.”

Holy shit.

I run closer and crouch to look at the Cherokee. The damage is brutal. Half the bumper’s gone, jagged edges scrape the gravel. The buckled hood looks like it took a direct hit from something massive—like a tree or maybe a monster.

“How the hell did this happen? And how the fuck did you drive it all the way to Dawson?”

Erica crosses her arms, unfazed as always.

“I ran over one of the bastards,” Stacy says. “As for how...she took some coaxing, but we limped her here.”

“We can fix it,” Sam says, appearing before I open my mouth.

He steps up beside me, his jaw set.

“Girls, did I hear you right? Our kind attacked you in the city?”

Stacy lifts her hand, holding up two fingers.

“Two. Now that I think about it... the parking lot was perfect for an ambush. Completely dark. They waited until everyone left and just—pounced.”

Raul shows up too, his expression a thunderstorm that’s about to break.

“A bold-ass move,” he growls. “Did you get a good look at them?”

Erica nods. “Yeah. One was gray with black legs. The other was black with a white patch on his chest.”

Sam frowns. “You sure?”

“Yes,” Erica says, firm. “I was using my magic so I saw them clearly. Why?”

Raul’s brow furrows. The fire in him cools to steel.

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“Because those colors don’t belong to anyone in our pack.”

“They’re outsiders. Have to be.” The words slip out before I fully realize I’m speaking. I glance between the others. “You all thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Dexter,” Sam mutters.

I nod once. “He’s the only one ballsy enough. And stupid enough.”

“That’s a stretch, kid,” Raul says. “Dex knows he ain’t got the numbers. He’s not that dumb.”

“Maybe. But Mercer’s not far. And desperation makes people reckless.”

Raul shakes his head.

“Doesn’t make sense. Why go to New York? Why target Stacy and Erica?”

Sam rubs the back of his neck. “Doesn’t explain much. But nobody outside this valley knows you’re a witch.”

“Make no mistake, we were targeted. They didn’t pick a fight—they picked us. Lucky for them they didn’t know who they were messing with,” Erica says, voice sharp as ice.

I glance at Stacy. She’s shaking. Barely, but I see it—because I’m always watching her. Always ready to catch her before she falls. I always am when it comes to her.

“Come inside,” I say gently, moving to her.

My hand finds her wrist, and that’s when I feel it—her pulse is hammering. Fast. Wild. She’s barely holding it together. She gives a small nod, pressing her lips tight. I open the door and lead her in. The others stay outside. The door clicks shut, and silence blankets us like snow.

I don’t speak, only hold her wrist, and feel the tremble in her bones. Her eyes glaze over, unfocused. She’s here in body—but her mind is still in that parking lot, trapped under headlights and claws. I run my thumb across her wrist, just once.

“You don’t need to talk,” I say softly. “You don’t even need to think right now. What you need is rest.”

Her gaze lifts to mine, and I see gratitude—but it’s buried under exhaustion.

“You, my dear red,” I murmur, trying to coax a smile, “need to lie down before your knees give out.” Her lips twitch, just barely, but it’s something.

“Thank you,” she murmurs.

“Don’t mention it.” I lean in and press a gentle kiss to her mouth, brushing her wrist with my thumb again. “You’re safe here. I swear it. No one’s going to lay a hand on you.”

She doesn’t say a word—and for once, the silence doesn’t feel like retreat. It feels like surrender. Like trust.

She turns and climbs the stairs without another word. I watch her go, that mess of red curls bouncing with each slow step, and my heart aches. This isn’t the firecracker I know. This isn’t the girl who laughs like thunder and fights like lightning. This is a

version of her the world tried to break. And I hate it. I step back outside, closing the door behind me, and rejoin the others.

“She’s in shock,” I say, voice low.

“She should be,” Erica snaps, crossing her arms tighter. “I’m still trying to process it myself. But Stacy... “I didn’t see that coming. She ran one of them down like it was nothing. That’s not the Stacy I know.”

I glance at the Jeep again, at the damage. At the proof of how far Stacy went to survive. Maybe fear didn’t paralyze her. Maybe it turned her into something fierce. Something unstoppable.

It probably helps that she’s seen our kind before. That’s the only thing I can think of that kept her from bolting the second she laid eyes on the wolves. I chew on that thought for a second, then glance around, feeling the weight of everyone's eyes as they wait for my take.

“So,” I say, trying to sound more certain than I feel, “where do we go from here, people?”

Raul steps forward, the steady thud of his boots echoing like a countdown. He’s got that look—the one that says I’m about to hear something I won’t like.

“Here’s where we go, Ray,” he says, his voice calm, but firm. “That attempt on Erica and Stacy shook you. I get it. There’s nothing we can do about it right now.”

I cross my arms and shift my weight, resisting the urge to punch something. He’s not wrong—but that doesn’t make it easier.

“I will send scouts to Mercer. Keep an eye on things for a couple days,” Raul

continues. “Dexter’s pack is the only other one operating in the tristate area.”

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“Fair enough.” I nod slowly, but suspicion prickles at the back of my neck. “And if Dexter’s pack wasn’t responsible? What if there’s someone new in the game?”

Raul chuckles, but there’s no humor in it.

“Do I have to answer that?” His eyes gleam, dark and sharp. “We can handle a rogue pack, Ray. It’s the other things that keep me up at night. The ones that don’t shift.”

I exhale through my nose. He’s right again, and I hate it.

“So what now? We sit on our hands or storm the compound again?”

“No.” Sam’s voice cuts through the air like a whip. Calm, but absolute. “That’s not an option. Security’s been tripled since we were there. I don’t know if the guy we roughed up talked, but I’m guessing he did.”

“Then let’s find out,” Raul says, his tone like gravel. “We’ve got Marcus Leonard’s address. Fucking guy lives in Shandaken.”

Sam raises a skeptical brow.

“What? You want to beat the crap out of him again? What good would that even do?”

Raul’s eyes go dark, more shadow than light.

“I’m not sure I’d beat him up,” he says, but there’s a storm in his voice. “He double-crossed us, Sammy. There should be a price for that.”



Sam doesn't blink. "Only if we're sure he deserves it. And right now? We don't know jack."

"We need to get practical," I cut in, trying to steer this before it spins out. "That guy had a logo on his shirt. Either of you catch it?"

Raul nods. "Yeah. It was a helmet or something."

"It was a Roman helmet—centurion style. I remember now. The company's called Roman Security. We should look them up online. Might get more answers there than cracking skulls."

Raul groans, the sound deep in his chest, like I just told him he needs a salad. He turns toward the workshop anyway.

"Yeah. Point taken. Do that."

"Aw, did I bruise your ego?" I say with a smirk. "Tragic. I'll try not to let it happen again."

He glances back, eyes narrowed.

"If that wasn't a decent lead, I'd have made you eat dirt for that crack."

Inside the workshop, Raul pulls up a browser and types in the name we found. His fingers move surprisingly fast for a guy who prefers claws over keyboards. He hits `Enter`, and we all lean in.

The first result is a squat building with a glaring red sign: `Star Pharma`. We click through. The next image shows three middle-aged men in lab coats, grinning like smug bastards. The third photo is a sleek hand holding an injection. Something about

it makes my skin crawl.

Raul clicks on the site's Who We Are section, and a video intro begins to roll across the screen.

"At Roman Security, we value medical work in every form. Whether it is research, hospitalization, or other clinical studies, our high training standards guarantee quality protection."

"Bullshit," Raul grunts, and I don't even try to read the rest. That marketing fluff tells me nothing I don't already know—or suspect.

"They're guarding something medical," I mutter. Obvious, but it needs saying. "We need to dig deeper."

"We should compile a list of their partners," Sam suggests, voice firmer now. "Track down who they work with."

I roll my eyes. "Sure, let's play amateur detective. Knock on a few doors, get a SWAT team on our asses by lunchtime. Pass." I jab my finger at the screen. "Click the CEO tab."

Raul smirks. "You got it."

A new photo fills the screen: silver suit, smug face, early forties, and a waistline that screams desk job. The caption reads: Jason Conley.

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My pulse spikes. I lean in, adrenaline kicking hard.

“That’s our guy. You want answers about what Roman Security’s hiding up here? He’s the one we ask. Forget Leonard. We need this guy’s address.”

“I’m on it,” Raul says, nodding slowly. Then he glances at me, eyes gleaming. “Nice going, Ray. Really.”

Sam claps a hand on my shoulder. “Good job.”

“You’re not gonna believe this,” Raul says, chuckling. “Guess where Conley lives?”

I don’t even have to look, and yet I do, my eyes scanning the address that’s popped up on the screen.

“268 Jamison Drive, North Haven,” I read aloud. Dry laugh. “Two blocks from the mansion we crashed last week. Gotta love the universe.”

Raul grins. “Saves us the trip to Manhattan.”

“Okay, what’s the plan?” I ask, looking between them.

Sam doesn’t miss a beat. “Teargas.”

I glare. “I’m serious, Sammy. The guy’s rich, and he runs a high-end security firm. That means guards. Armed ones.”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ll need a diversion.”

Before anyone can say more, a new voice cuts in from the door.

“Say no more.”

We all turn to see Erica leaning against the frame with her arms crossed and a dangerous sparkle in her eye.

“How much did you hear?” Sam asks, voice low and tight.

“All of it, pup.” She flashes a wicked grin. “You need a distraction? I’m your girl.”

“How?” he asks, already half-knowing the answer.

“By being a woman.” She steps closer, a little sway in her hips. “I’ll wear something distracting. Don’t ask what—I’ll improvise.”

Sam scowls. “They’ll be armed.”

She shrugs. “I kicked one of your kind’s asses last night, remember? Would’ve taken his friend too if Stacy hadn’t stepped in. You really think a couple of rent-a-cops scare me? I need sleep first, though. I’m dead on my feet. Can we do this tomorrow?”

“Fine by me,” I say before Sam can object. “We’ll hit them tomorrow night.”

Sam’s jaw tenses, but he gives a reluctant nod. “If anything goes wrong?—”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Erica cuts him off, her voice softening. She crosses the

garage to her Sammy, cupping his face in her hands. “Thanks for not wrapping me in bubble wrap. That kind of trust? It matters.”

“Thanks, Erica. We move tomorrow night. Ten p.m. Until then, let’s get some work done.”

“Hell yeah,” I say, laughing as I head toward the counter.

It feels like we’re making progress. We’ve got a name, a face, and an address. Next, we’re paying him a visit. And it won’t be friendly. I doubt he’ll be eager to share. But we’ll get what we came for—one way or another.

15

STACY

Isleep like the dead.

Not just tired—spent. Wrung out and discarded by everything that’s happened. I don’t lie down in Ray’s bed; I collapse into it, boneless and silent, crushed beneath the weight I’ve been carrying.

Nothing pulls me back. Not the roar of drills or the staccato hammering echoing from the workshop. Not even the low thunder of engines that usually jolt me awake in panic. I’m submerged beneath it all, floating in the dark warmth of exhaustion. My body refuses to wake, and my mind doesn’t even try.

It’s close to midnight when Ray checks on me. I sense him more than see him. His quiet presence in the doorway stirs some level of awareness despite his careful, light steps. He’s gentle in a way I’ve learned to associate with him—something that still surprises me.

He doesn’t speak. Just pulls the sheets up with a soft touch and presses a kiss to my forehead.

“Goodnight,” he whispers, his voice right at the shell of my ear. It sends a warm shiver through me, and I feel... safe. Protected. Not just from the world—but from him. From everything he’s capable of.

Because let’s be honest. I’m half-naked, in his bed, and completely at his mercy. I wouldn’t stop him if he made a move. I know that. I want him to want me—but he doesn’t even try.

He climbs into bed and lies beside me. He falls asleep, like holding space for me means more to him than feeding any need of his own. And barely aware, I think—God, that’s noble. Rare. That’s a man.

It’s not Ray who finally drags me back from unconsciousness. It’s the sound of my friends that wakes me.

Erica’s laugh is unmistakable—loud, crass, unapologetically full of life. Monica’s is softer, melodic, but they blend together into something familiar and beautiful. For a moment, it grates against the last threads of sleep—but then, I smile.

The sound reminds me of who I was before the chaos. Before blood and wolves and whatever the hell we’re tangled up in now.

I come fully awake in an empty bed and drag myself upright, then make my way to the railing. I look down into the kitchen, sunlight pouring through the windows. Golden and warm. The scent of fresh coffee and toasted bread hits me. It makes me realize how long it’s been since I felt like myself.

“I’ve missed this,” I say, leaning on the railing, watching my friends with quiet gratitude.

“What, being awake?” Erica teases, grinning up at me like she’s been waiting for the punchline since yesterday.

“The three of us. Together, you blonde, mess.” I smirk, letting the warmth in my chest rise. “Though—yeah, fair. I kinda earned the sarcasm,” I add, catching the time. “I practically slept through a whole day of my life.”

Monica shakes her head, her voice gentle and motherly.

“Don’t be hard on yourself, honey. After what you went through, it’s no wonder you crashed.”

“Yeah,” Erica mutters, barely hiding a smirk. “Not repeating my advice, though—I’m not in the mood to dodge flying objects.”

“What was it?” I ask. Monica gives her the kind of glare that could melt granite.

“Ride a lumberjack,” Erica says flatly, sighing like we’re the ones letting her down.

“You really are a mess.” I laugh, and it feels good. It feels real. “But you seem... different. Happier. Spill.”

Her eyes light up, mischief sparking in them.

“The boys came up with a plan about what to do with that creepy compound while you were out. They’re going to do something about it.”

My stomach tightens. There’s something more to this—I don’t know what, but I feel it.

“And?” I prompt.

“And I’m playing a pivotal role,” Erica says with a wide grin, completely unapologetic. “They’re planning to confront the guy behind that security firm. And guess who gets to distract the guards with her ‘sexy looks’?”

I blink. “Aren’t you scared?”

She sighs, already bracing for the argument she knows is coming.



“No, Stacy. I’m not scared. You saw me handle that wolf-shifter in New York.”

“I know,” I say, already heading for the stairs. “Just... don’t do anything until I talk to Ray.”

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I know trying to talk her out of it is pointless. Erica's stubborn streak could challenge tectonic plates—but that doesn't stop the twist of worry in my gut. Once her mind's made up, the best I can do is brace for impact.

I step outside, hoping to catch Ray before he disappears into his work. I don't have to look far. He steps out of the workshop, grease streaked up his arms, white tee clinging to him in all the right ways. Rough around the edges. Ridiculously handsome.

"Sleeping beauty returns," he teases, wiping his hands on a rag. "Good to see you upright."

"Yeah, thanks," I murmur. "I just heard the plan. Erica told me."

He raises a brow. "Not a fan, huh?"

"Not exactly." I fold my arms. "You're sending my best friend into a dangerous situation."

He meets my eyes, calm as ever.

"She volunteered. And she's not just capable—she's getting stronger every day. She's more than ready for this."

"Why not send someone else? Helena, maybe? She's experienced. More...covert."

"Erica took down a wolf-shifter on her own. That's not just impressive—it's rare. I

trust her and more than that, shewantsto help. Are you sure it's her you're worried about?"

I pause. He sees right through me. Damn it.

"No," I admit, finally letting my arms drop. "It's not just her. It'syou,too. You're going into a town full of humans who don't know what you are. One slip, one wrong move—and it could all blow up."

He steps closer, expression softening.

"We've thought about that. That'swhyshe's going. With Erica there, we won't have to use the wolf. Not even once. She's our buffer."

He leans in, that familiar warmth in his eyes making my chest ache.

"It's all going to be okay. I promise. And when I get back, I'll take you for a ride on my bike. Just you and me. Wind in our hair. Nothing but open road."

Something in me melts. In such a short time, he already knows how to work me.

"I'm holding you to that."

He wraps his arms around me without hesitation, pulling me in like he was always meant to. My cheek finds the solid warmth of his chest, and I let myself breathe. Earth. Grease. Him.

I could argue. Could pick apart the plan or demand a different approach. But I don't. Because standing here in his arms, all that fight drains out of me.

He's being kind. Considerate. Protective in ways that make me feel like maybe—just

maybe—I'm not in this alone anymore. Whatever happens next, I can only hope they all come back in one piece.

This strange, haunted little town needs protectors—people willing to fight back. And as much as it terrifies me, I need them too.

16

RAY

Ten minutes to ten, Raul's going over the details of our so-called excursion again. Like it's a goddamn picnic—as if what we're about to do is barely worth the effort.

Honestly? I agree. Humans pose no challenge. We don't even need the wolf—not for them. The odds are stacked in our favor like a house rigged for the win.

Everything shifts when Erica steps out of my brother's cabin, worry written across her face. Her eyes lock onto mine, searching for answers—maybe reassurance. Something's wrong.

“I can't find Sam,” she says, voice quick and clipped. “He left two hours ago, said he needed to stretch his legs. But that was two hours ago, and he's not answering his phone.”

Raul groans, looking away.

“Erica, stay here. Ray and I'll go find him. Get in the truck, kid.”

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“This isn’t like Sammy,” I mutter as I move to obey. “He’s punctual—clockwork precise.”

“Exactly,” Raul says, not liking it either. His hands tighten around the wheel as we pull out. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” His voice is low, grim. “Where do you think he’d go?”

“The east side of the woods,” I answer immediately. “My guess? He went to check out the construction site again. Curiosity probably got the better of him.”

Raul nods, but it’s not relief. Just hope—fragile and thin as thread.

“Let’s hope you’re right,” he says, speeding the truck up. “Because if you’re wrong, tonight’s off. I want Sam watching over Erica. If he’s not back, one of us will need to stay with her.”

I glance at him, brow furrowing.

“I get it. But truthfully? I don’t think she needs protection. I’d stay for Sammy, though, because he’d never leave his Siren without protection—not without a few armed guards prowling nearby.”

“He’s in love,” Raul mutters like it’s a fact of nature. “So am I. And you? You’re on your way.”

That makes me snort. “Am I? What makes you so sure?”

“Persistence,” he shoots back without hesitation. He glances at me for just a second, eyes sharp.

“Mutual persistence. You shut her down? She came back with a plan. Monica said the only reason they went to that North Haven party was to make you jealous. Stacy’s plan. She figured you’d see her with someone else, get mad, finally admit how you feel.

Didn’t expect you to lose your shit. Then she shuts you down. And what do you do? Move a tree for her. No one does that for just a pretty face. You like more than her looks, don’t you?”

“I do,” I admit, the words dry—gravel in my throat. “But now’s not the time.”

The road curves hard. The truck grips the turn as we ascend into Shandaken. Raul stays quiet, but I feel his eyes on me—Alpha gaze, always weighing.

Then a sound rips through the stillness, cleaving it open like a wound. A howl. It tears through the valley, soaked in fear and sharp with need. My gut lurches.

Sammy. And it’s wrong. Everything about it is wrong.

I don’t wait for Raul to stop the truck or give a command. I yank the door handle and hit the ground running. As soon as my boots hit the dirt, I scan the valley. A hillside blocks part of the view, but the town lights blink on the far edge of the valley like distant stars.

The air thrums with something terrible. My brother’s cry came from beyond the trees, near the one place we’ve been trying and failing to understand. I leap the dyke, muscles coiling as I surrender to the shift. It comes fast—eager, primal. My human skin peels away like an afterthought.

Muzzle elongates. Spine arches, cracks, reshapes. Fur explodes down my back. My paws crash into the dirt. The last scraps of my clothes scatter into the underbrush as I lunge forward. Not entirely beast. No longer man. I am the wolf—instinct sharpened by fury.

A snarl bursts from my throat as I barrel down the hillside, branches snapping as I pass. I let go of thought. My ears catch everything—the frantic rustle of small creatures fleeing. The pounding rhythm of Raul's paws behind me. I scan, searching for signs of Sammy. Trees flash past. Shadows flee. A deer stumbles out of my way.

And then—there. Twelve yards from the forest's border, near the edge of that cursed, cold-blooded science compound.

A shape. I see it through the green and gloom, a white blur, crumpled on the forest floor.

My paws dig deep as I push harder. Raul joins me, running at my side—a mirror of my desperation. We tear through the underbrush, unstoppable. These woods are ours. This is our land—always has been. We are the apex. The nightmare whispered around every human campfire. The unseen terror in the leaves.

And then—I catch the scent. It hits me like a punch to the gut—copper tang of blood, the stench of pain, and something burned and wrong.

We break into the clearing together. Just beyond the trees, at the forest's edge, is the shape—it's a white wolf.

Sammy.

Sammy's on his side, limbs bent wrong, his chest still. His eyes are open. Staring at something that he'll never see again. Blood stains his back from two long, red lines

trailing like morbid brushstrokes across snow-white fur.

The bushes around him are crushed. Leaves shredded. The cedar beside him looks like something took a bite out of it. Chunks of it are missing. My breath catches.

The wolf in me snarls to scream, to tear through the grief. But only a whimper escapes—raw and broken. Raul circles Sammy, slowly and reverently. His yellow eyes shine wet. He presses his snout against Sammy's fur, drinking in his scent one last time. Memorizing it. Mourning it. But I can't do that. I can't stay still.

Grief coils around me like a chain I can't break. Rage follows in its wake. I throw back my head and let the valley hear me. Let the stars hear me. Let the wind carry my cry. Let every creature—two-legged or four—feel what they've done.



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I howl.

It's not just a sound. It's an ache. A wound ripped open wide, poured into the air. I scream his name without words, declare my heartbreak in the only language the wild still understands.

He died alone. And we weren't there to stop it.

17

STACY

Along table. A single chair. And more silence than I know what to do with. That's all that's left in this room. That's all that's left of my best friend's world.

Erica sits alone in Sam's cabin, in the center of the living room—where the light doesn't dare touch the corners. I watched her direct his brothers, her voice tight and hollow, as they laid Sam's body on the table like a sacred offering. Then she asked for space. Not help. Not comfort. Just space. Just solitude—the kind that aches.

No one argued. No one dared.

Outside, grief carves itself into the people who loved him. Monica crumples in Raul's arms, her sobs tearing through the hush that has settled over dusk like a veil. They don't speak, just cling to each other like they're two survivors of a wreck. Her hand slams against his chest—once, twice—like raw pain looking for an exit, anywhere but in. Ray watches, crying openly, helpless. Salt tracks stain his face, glinting in the

fading sun. He doesn't try to stop them.

And Helena... She stands apart, still and silent. The infamous witch of Dawson, now just a woman mourning one of her favorites. I see her press her wrist to her mouth, trying to quiet the tremble in her breath. The odd snuffle escapes anyway. She doesn't speak. I don't think she can.

And me?

I'm just here—awkward, aching—standing in the wreckage of someone else's world. My heart feels like it's been shattered with a sledgehammer, even though I barely knew Sam. Not like Helena, or Ray. And certainly not like Erica. I'd heard stories—how kind he was, how fiercely he'd loved her, how ready he was to build a future with her. A good man. One of the good ones.

And now he's gone.

What do I even do? What do you do when the world caves in around people you love and you're still standing? Do I say something to Ray? If I could, what would I even say? There's no sentence strong enough to stitch a soul this torn. No words that will make sense of this. So I don't try. I stay close, hovering like a ghost, hoping he sees I haven't left. That he's not alone.

If he asked me to stay up all night, I would. If he needed me to sit beside him and say nothing until morning, I'd do that too. It won't bring Sam back. But maybe... maybe it will help him breathe.

I move toward Helena. She stands so still it's like she's carved from stone. Staring off into some far-off memory only she can see. I move quiet and hesitant.

“Helena?” My voice comes out hoarse. “I'm so sorry for all of this. I know you and

Sam were close.”

She turns her head slowly, her gaze catching mine. Her eyes are rimmed with red, glassy with unshed tears.

“Thank you, dear,” she says softly, her voice thin as a thread. “I love this family with all my heart. But yes...Samuel was my favorite. We had a bond. From the very start.”

There’s a movement behind me—footsteps and soft chatter. I glance over my shoulder and see the people of Dawson arriving. Women clutching pale roses of white and pink. The men walk silently beside them, solemn and slow.

“News travels fast around here,” I mutter, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice.

“It surely does,” Helena says with a tight snuffle. “They’ve come to pay their respects. He was a hero to many.”

A beat of silence passes between us before I speak again. “Maybe this is the wrong time to ask this, but...” I drag a hand through my hair, exhale slowly. “What the hell could’ve done that to him? He was strong. So damn strong.”

Helena looks at me then, and the weight of her gaze nearly knocks the air out of my chest.

“You’re right. This is the wrong time.” Her voice is gentle, but firm. “Tonight is for mourning, not questions. Go to Ray. He needs you.”

My throat tightens, and it feels like my heart is clawing at my ribs, desperate to get out.

“And do what, exactly?” My voice cracks, splintered and frayed. “He lost his brother. What could I possibly do?”

Helena doesn’t flinch. She tilts her head and asks, “What does your heart tell you to do?”

I meet her eyes—and there it is. The answer. It doesn’t fix anything. But it is something. I nod and step away.

Ray is on his knees, hands on his thighs, trembling. His head hangs forward like gravity itself is too heavy to fight. His shoulders quake with silent sobs. It wrecks me to see him like this—a man who’s always seemed invincible, now cracked wide open and bleeding grief.

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I kneel beside him and wrap my arms around his shoulders, pulling him in—into the only shelter I can offer. He comes apart in my arms. I feel the quiver of his muscles, the raw hitch of his breath against my skin. His tears dampen my temple. I let them. I hold him tighter.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper into his ear. “God, I’m so, so sorry...”

He doesn’t pull back. Doesn’t question it. Just leans in, silent and shaking.

“I miss him,” he whispers. “I already miss him.”

“I know,” I whisper, gently stroking the back of his neck. “I’m here. Let it out, Ray. Just let it out.”

He does. Another sob tears from him, and I cry with him. Not because I knew Sam like they did, not because his loss is mine in the same way,—but because I love Ray. And watching him break like this unravels something deep in me.

So I stay.

I stay right here, in the dirt and the dusk, in the thick, unrelenting weight of grief. It doesn’t feel like enough. Maybe it never could be. But it’s all I have to give. My presence. My arms. My heart, raw and open, holding space for his pain.

Maybe that’s all we can do sometimes—just stay. Just be near, so they don’t have to fall apart alone.

RAY

My blood. My brother.

He lies too still atop a towering pyre, surrounded by dried branches and solemn offerings, waiting for the fire to claim what remains and scatter his ashes across the soil he loved so fiercely.

I whisper he's gone, again and again, a hundred times, a thousand more—and still, it won't sink in. Sammy Crawford—our Sammy. The pride of Dawson. The fiercest warrior of us all.

He's gone.

He fought his last battle.

He lost.

We lost.

Who—or what—he fought doesn't matter anymore. Only the outcome remains. Final. Irrevocable. End.

Such a tiny word. Just three letters, but those letters carry the weight of an entire life ripped away. A future erased. Some endings are merciful—curtains over pain, closings on suffering. They cradle the broken and offer peace.

But not this.

This is Sammy.

And Sammy wasn't in pain. He wasn't lost or broken. He was in love. Alive in every sense—planning a future with Erica, glowing in a way I hadn't seen since we were kids chasing fireflies under the Dawson moon.

He called her his Siren, said she sang a song no man could resist. He was, at long last, building something for himself. A life filled with peace, with love, with her. Now, that dream lies broken and destroyed.

I stand at the edge of the platform where we built his pyre, the heat of grief pressing from behind. Our packmates and neighbors ripple around me like shadows in the twilight. Raul steps forward, dressed in white, a color that feels too clean for grief. His hands fumble with the microphone stand, fingers twitching like he's unsure what to do with them.

“What do you say...?” Raul's voice is low, stripped of its usual weight. “What the hell can you say at times like these?”

He pauses, bowing his head and swallowing hard, trying to cling to his last bits of composure.

“I'm sorry, Sammy,” his voice cracks, but he pushes on. “Sorry I wasn't there. Sorry I wasn't fast enough. You were the one with the words—not me. You could charm anyone, talk your way through every mess. I was fists and teeth while you had the heart. The voice. And all our hope.”

He pauses, scratching his jaw, then scans the gathering like maybe someone else might pick up the rest, take this burden from him, but no one does.

“I'd trade places with you,” he whispers, inaudible if not for the microphone. “God

knows I'd take your place in a second."



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He pauses and the silence that follows is so heavy I can't take a breath. The air won't come. I'm choking, my vision blurring. Raul lowers his head, choking too.

"Farewell, Sammy," Raul says.

The world is still. Even the breeze holds in deference to this moment. Not a cricket chirps or a bird calls. This is a moment for the entire universe to acknowledge the loss of my brother. Then the hissing fizz of the match flaring.

Nora's hand trembles as she strikes it. She holds the tiny flame over the pyre, sobbing, the stick clenched between thumb and forefinger. Turning her head to the side she lets it drop. She gasps and stumbles back as the tinder catches with a whoosh.

Nora steps back, coming to a stop between Raul and me. She rests her head on my shoulder and I wrap my free arm around her waist. Sam's body is wrapped and laid with care. It looks like he's sleeping and might, at any moment, wake up. Might crack a joke, ask who in the hell had the bright idea to set him on fire.

He doesn't. And it hurts. So fucking much.

The flames lick up the logs, climbing greedily towards him. The flames lick up the logs, crackling and spitting sparks into the dusk as they ascend the wooden tower. Then it's licking at the edges of the cloth. Curling around his too still form. Waves of heat slam against me, but I don't move.

My eyes sting, but I don't blink. I can't. My mind slips back—to the night I found

him. His still body in the dirt. The unnatural quiet. The blood. The way the stars overhead seemed to dim in deference.

“I love you...” Erica’s voice rises over the flame’s roar. She steps forward, barely beyond the boundary of the fire. She stares, eyes locked on the place where his chest used to rise and fall. Her words tremble. “You’ll always be my Sammy,” she chokes. “You’re not supposed to leave me, you hear? Never. It’s not fair!”

She lurches forward, but Monica and Stacy rush in, stopping her from throwing herself into the fire. Her sobs tear through the night as she collapses into her friends’ arms. My heart shatters. As bad as my own pain is, I can’t imagine hers. They pull her away but her wails echo through the clearing like the sound of a soul being torn in two.

I watch the three of them vanish into the crowd, swallowed by a forest of mourners. My throat clamps shut. I knew she loved him—I saw it in her eyes, in how she softened and shone around him.

But now?

Now I know.

She would’ve walked into that fire if they’d let her. Just to hold him one last time. To whisper his name against his skin, feel his heartbeat against hers for one more second. She thought they had forever. And they should have.

But we don’t get to choose how our stories end.

Even when we’ve earned something better.

## STACY

Three days after Sam's cremation, Dawson doesn't feel like Dawson anymore.

The small town that once buzzed with casual greetings, familiar laughter, and the comforting murmur of everyday life has fallen quiet. Too quiet. Even the wind feels different—less playful, more solemn, dragging its feet through empty streets like it, too, is in mourning.

Gone are the spontaneous porch gatherings, the impromptu backyard dinners that used to last until the moon crested over the treetops. Shifters are social by nature—pack-bound, even when not in a pack. But now? Now they're all just ghosts haunting their own homes. People glance away instead of making eye contact. Once friendly waves are stiff. Greetings are muttered and cut short, as if speaking too long might unleash the grief none of us want to touch.

Sam wasn't just someone. He was the best of them. There's this gaping hole where he used to be, and everyone's afraid to get too close to it. But in my heart—in the stillness I carry—I'm clearer than I've ever been.

Somehow the grief sharpens my thoughts. Slices away the noise. I know what I need to do—where my place is now. In loss I find what matters most. I split my time between Ray and Erica, but focus especially on Erica. She's unraveling, thread by thread, and I'm trying to hold her together with the gentlest hands I can manage.

I scrub dishes while she stares out the window, lips pressed tight. I sweep while she folds laundry with shaking fingers. I tidy while she refuses to eat. And when the storms inside her break through—because there is only so long she can avoid them—I anchor her.

"There's nothing left for me here," she says one night, voice barely a breath above

the hum of the refrigerator. “Being around his family is painful.”

I should press. Challenge her. We used to dissect decisions like this together, debate them until every angle had been uncovered. But now, she’s this fragile, grieving thing, and I can’t risk pushing her over the edge. Erica’s always been passionate. Sharp. Bright.

But when she’s this emotional, logic slips right through her fingers. I know from long experience that talking to her when she is like this is like trying to hold water in my hands. All I will get is soaked and empty. She’s not ready for that conversation. And I can’t argue with someone who is drowning. I pull her into a hug and hold her while she cries.

By the fourth day, I’m running on adrenaline and silence—the kind that clings to your skin and makes your thoughts louder than they should be. I’m on my way to refill the kettle for yet another cup of tea when someone slams the against the frontdoor. It’s not a knock—it’s a series of five hard slams, each one more frantic than the last.

“What the fuck,” I mutter, rushing to the door to find out what is so violently important.

I whip the door open, heart hammering, and find Monica. She’s wild-eyed, breathless, like she ran all the way from the valley. She has a gray dossier clutched to her chest like it might fly away if she loosens her grip. I stare at her not comprehending what she’s doing.

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“I am... pissed,” she says, brushing past me into the kitchen.

I blink after her, slowly shutting the door as I try to process what’s happening.

“I can see that. What’s going on?”

“You need to sit down.”

That does nothing to ease the tension knotting my shoulders or the headache forming behind my eyes, but I pull out a chair anyway, my stomach turning leaden.

“You’re scaring me, Mon.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” she says, slapping the folder onto the counter but not taking her hands off of it as if it’s an adder and might strike at any moment. “And honestly, you should be.”

“What are you talking about, Mon?” I ask, my throat clenching so tight I have to force each word out individually.

She closes her eyes, inhales deeply, holds it. Exhales slowly, then opens them again, fingers tapping the folder between us. Finally she flips it open and jabs the top piece of paper with her index finger.

“It’s your mother,” she says, her voice flat.

“What about her?” I ask, sinking into the chair because my knees feel wobbly.

“This is her medical chart. The progression of her illness,” she says, pointing again. “It all looks natural—textbook, even. I’ve seen patients deteriorate much faster.”

“Then why are you so upset?” I ask, voice cracking.

She doesn’t answer—just slides her finger to the header at the top of the page, stopping on a bold type set of words.

Cause of death: heart failure.

The words hit with the force of a gut-shot. My fingers seize the edge of the table as the room pitches around me.

“I cashed in one of my last favors to get this from Metro General,” she says, voice tight. “They treated it like top-secret government intel, but someone owed me. I got it.”

“Mon, explain,” I croak, my throat too dry.

“When Catherine first saw Dr. Simon Baker, he diagnosed arrhythmia. Irregular heartbeat. Scary—but treatable. He put her on medication. Nothing worked. No matter what he tried. So he dug deeper.”

I lean in, everything inside me taut and coiled. “And? What did he find?”

“Her blood, Stacy.” Monica’s eyes gleam with dread. “It wasn’t human. Not fully. It had something else—foreign, but bonded. Something human blood should reject, but hers accepted like it belonged. Baker ran the tests six times.”

A chill slides down my spine. I blink and it feels like it’s happening in slow motion.

“Did he figure out what it was?” I whisper.

She shakes her head, slow and grim.

“No. He didn’t. But I did.” Monica leans in. “Because I’ve seen it before—in Raul’s blood. That same anomaly. The same... wolf signature.”

“Mon... what?”

She reaches across the counter, taking both my hands and squeezing them tightly.

“It’s the wolf, Stacy.” Monica’s voice wavers. “Your mom... she was a shifter. Leaving your dad didn’t just hurt her—it killed her.”

I flinch so hard it feels like I’ve been struck. “Oh my God...”

I collapse onto the counter, cradling my head between my hands. Her words echo through me, colliding with memories of my mother—every quiet sigh, every ache she brushed off.

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“Stac...she knew,” Monica says, softly. “She knew what she was. I got a hold of Baker himself to find out what’s not in the records. He said when he brought up the blood test results...she flipped out. Apparently she threatened to kill his wife and baby if he told anyone. Said—and I’m quoting him—‘she growled like a goddamn beast and showed me herfangs.’”

“She threatened him to keep him quiet,” I mutter, horror creeping up my spine like cold fingers. “So he’d pretend he was helping her, even though he wasn’t. Couldn’t.”

“He was scared out of his mind. He only talked to me because I begged—and because I swore I’d never say a word.”

Silence thickens around us—heavy and suffocating, like syrup in my lungs.

“I knew it...” Ray’s voice slices through the haze. He’s behind me before I register he’s entered. “I knew she didn’t die of cancer. Not that young.”

“Yeah,” Monica says softly. “You were right. It wasn’t cancer. It was heartbreak. Literally.”

I slam my fists onto the table, teeth gritted. “I want a word with my father.”

“I don’t blame you,” Monica says. Her anger dims into something colder. “He didn’t just leave her. He killed her.”

“Where does he live?” Ray asks before I move.



“Brooklyn,” I snap. “I’ll be back by tomorrow morning.”

Ray plants himself in front of me.

“No way you’re going alone. I’m coming.”

“No. This is mine,” I growl, stepping up to him.

“You’ll still get to face him,” he says, absolutely calm against the rage pulsing in my head. “I’m only the ride. I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer, Stac.”

I stare at him. “Ray... you just lost?—”

“I know what I lost,” he barks. “I see it. Feel it. Every damn second. Let me do this. I need to breathe. Just for a bit.”

I exhale, sharp and fast. “Fine. But you don’t interfere. This is between me and him.”

“I promise,” he murmurs, brushing a thumb over my chin. That touch—it’s his anchor. Gentle. Steadying. And it breaks something loose in my chest I’m not ready to face.

“Thank you, Mon,” I say, sparing her one last glance. She nods, and I head for the door.

I’ve got unfinished business. And it sure as hell doesn’t involve Monica.

It involves the man who left a ticking time bomb in my mother’s chest and walked away like she meant nothing.

Larry Melvin.

Ray and I hit the road, the mountains shrinking behind us like ghosts fading into the rearview. The rage inside me burns hot and sharp, coiled beneath my skin like wire, but even through the fury, I feel him—quiet, steady, haunted.

Grief clings to Ray like smoke. I see it in the rigid line of his jaw, the way his hands grip the wheel too tight. In the silence between us, his pain speaks louder than words. Sam's death is carved into him. It mirrors the hollow ache I carry in my own chest.

Still... he's here. Driving me toward the confrontation I can't avoid. Toward a truth sharp enough to cut bone. I told him not to come. That this was mine. My fight. But Ray didn't flinch. He's not here for closure or vengeance. He's here because this is who he is—loyal, unwavering, willing to shoulder weight that isn't his, just to keep me from breaking under it.

And God, I wish I could say something. Reach for his hand. Let him know how much that means. But I can't. Not yet.

My heart is scorched earth. There's no space for tenderness, no safety in softness. Not until I look the man who abandoned my mother in the eye.

Not until I burn him down to the truth.

20

STACY

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We roll onto Cartwright Street, and my stomach clenches like it's trying to fold in on itself. I suck in a breath, bitter and dry. It scrapes my throat like sandpaper—useless, doing nothing to silence the chaos inside me.

I dig my fingers into the seat and stare out the window, trying to quiet the storm in my chest. A row of decaying tenements lines the street, each one flanked by overflowing dumpsters. Larry's building squats between two identical ones—like a bad memory sandwiched between regrets.

Brooklyn always made me feel like I was trespassing on something already broken—like the city itself never wanted me here. I used to come here for Larry—to see my dad. But that was before everything shattered. I felt obligated back then. He was still my dad—even if he and Mom were divorced. But now, I've got more than enough reasons to never set foot here again.

Ray parks across the seat. His hand brushes my cheek, gentle, deliberate. Grounding and centering in a way I need more than I could ever admit out loud.

"I'll be waiting," he says, his voice soft but sure. His lips press a warm kiss to my cheek, and even in the dark, I see it—that glow in his eyes. "If I hear anything—anything—I'm coming in. I don't care if you're mid-sentence. I'll bust the door down."

A jagged laugh slips out—half comfort, half disbelief. He's serious and I can't explain how much that means to me. I nod in understanding and push the car door open.

The city hits me in the face—wet pavement, sour garbage, and the metallic tang of old rain clinging to brick. The kind of New York smell that burrows under your skin. I cross the street without hesitation, eyes locked on the dented gray door like it's a target. I'm not second-guessing this. I'm walking straight into the lair of a man I once trusted. A man who shared his bed with my mother, swore vows to her—and killed her with his betrayal.

I'm going to treat him the way he treated her. My hand is up before I can think it through. I press the button for his apartment.

"Who is it?" his voice crackles from the rusted, tinny speaker.

I pause, gathering myself enough to speak.

"It's me. Stacy."

"Oh! Hey, honey! What a surprise! I wasn't expecting you!"

My skin crawls at the cheer in his voice. Does he know what he did? Does he know it was his fault?

"Buzz me in."

The buzzer screeches, and I slam the door open like it owes me something I can't ever get back. The elevator sits in the corner, ancient and tired, but I don't bother. Larry's apartment is on the third floor and I don't have the patience to wait for anything that slow.

I take the stairs two at a time, adrenaline pounding under my skin like drumbeats in a war march. Cold spreads through me as I climb, wrapping around my bones like frostbite. It's that kind of cold that numbs and sharpens all at once.

I reach his door in time to hear him undoing the chain. The door opens and I don't wait. I shove the door open and slap him—hard. My palm cracks across his cheek. His head snaps to the side, his mouth hangs open, stunned, but I'm not done.

I curl my left hand into a fist, twist my arm and punch him hard, right in the stomach. His breath whooshes out in a grunt.

“Jesus!” he wheezes, doubling over. “What the hell’s got into you, girl?”

“Don’t you dare pretend,” I snarl, kicking the door shut behind me. The echo bounces down the hall like gunfire. “Don’t you dare pretend you don’t know. You knew about my mother. Don’t lie to me.”

He groans, still hunched, a hand clutching his gut. “Knew what?”

“She wasn’t human!” The words tear out of me like claws. “You knew. You had to have known!”

He straightens slowly, pale and shaking. “Oh…”

Swallowing hard, he backs toward the living room, raising his hands like I’m a threat. Maybe I am.

“Sit down, honey,” he says hoarsely. “Please. It’s not that simple. Just let me explain.”

“Which part?” I snap. My voice spikes, shrill and furious. “The part where you kept the biggest secret of my life from me, or the part where you destroyed her?!”

“All of it,” he says, gesturing to the armchair like we’re about to catch up over coffee. “Have a seat.”

“I can’t.” My breath’s coming in short, sharp bursts. “Just... talk. I’m listening.”

He scrubs his face with both hands and sinks into the chair, like the weight of everything just caught up to him.

“Your mom was... an extraordinary woman. I met her at this?—”

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“The ball,” I cut in. “The one in that weird little town where everything changed. I remember.”

“No, it’s not like that,” he says quickly. “We met at the ball, sure—but the real story starts with where it was held. Have you ever heard of a little coastal town called Mercer? It’s upstate, near the New York-Connecticut line.”

“What does Mercer have to do with anything?”

“Everything,” he says, nodding slowly. “I got there by accident. Some college buddies and I were being dumb and reckless—road trip kind of thing. We ended up in Mercer without a plan. That’s where I met your mom.”

The name slams into me like a bruise I didn’t know I had. Mercer. Of course it starts there.

“We clicked right away,” he goes on, eyes distant. “A week later, we were in Vermont together.”

I wrap my arms around myself, like I can hold my insides together before they spill out.

“You still haven’t told me why Mercer matters. What happened there?”

His gaze sharpens. “You were born there.”

My breath catches.

“When your mom was about thirty-four weeks pregnant, she told me she wanted to go back to Mercer to have you. I thought it was strange—leaving the city to give birth in some little no-name town? But she said she’d explain. And she did. Later.”

“And?” My voice is barely audible.

“She didn’t want to give birth in New York because the hospitals here would’ve run blood tests. They’d have run blood tests. And those tests would’ve shown things—things no human chart could explain.”

I already know what he’s talking about, but hearing it aloud, from him, stabs something deep.

“She was running. Hiding. She did it all for me,” I whisper, voice cracking. “And you let her die for it.”

“No!” His hands fly up, desperate. “I didn’t know. Stacy, I didn’t know! I didn’t understand what she was. I was young, stupid—I cheated. I won’t deny it, I did—but I didn’t know what it would do to her. I only found out after she left me.”

“You didn’t just screw around,” I hiss. “You shattered her. You broke her heart. She trusted you, and you killed her with that betrayal.”

His face crumples like wet paper. Tears fill his eyes as he drops his head and hunches his shoulders. He shakes his head, staring at the floor. Defeated.

“Look at me.” His voice trembles. “Look at my face, Stacy. Do you think I don’t carry that with me every day? I wake up with it. Sleep with it. It never leaves me.”

I glare at him through the burn in my eyes. “Cry all you want. It won’t bring her back.”



Tears leak from the corners of his eyes. He doesn't wipe them away, letting them fall, silent and useless. I turn on my heel, heart hammering in my chest. I don't want to breathe the same air as him. Every second in that apartment feels like being poisoned.

I burst out the door like it's on fire and tear down the stairs, fleeing the ghosts clawing at my back. My pulse thrums in my ears, the sounds of my boots pounding against the steps like gunshots. I hit the street hard and look up—and he's there.

Ray.

Still here. Waiting. He said he would be, but seeing him—with his arms crossed, eyes soft but watchful, alert like he's been listening through the walls. He doesn't say a word.

I stumble into his arms and collapse, all the tension snapping loose like someone just severed my spine. My whole body gives out, my muscles turning to water. He catches me, one arm around my shoulders, the other at my waist, holding me steady like I'm something worth protecting.

And I break.

A sound bursts out of me—ugly and raw. A sob that rips from the deepest pit of my stomach. I cry hard. Loud. The kind that turns heads. The kind that makes strangers pause, pity in their eyes before they keep walking faster.

But not Ray. He doesn't move. He squeezes me tighter, his cheek against my hair, silent and strong.

I cling to him, shaking, trying to hold myself together while everything inside me splinters. The image of my mother floods my mind—her soft voice, her warm smile, the way she always looked at me like I was her world. And then, the last look she

gave me, the sorrow behind her eyes as if she knew what was coming.

She died because she loved the wrong man. Because she loved him.

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I sob harder. For her. For me. For the part of me that's still that little girl waiting for a mother who never came home. Ray doesn't let go.

And in the middle of that filthy Brooklyn street, under the flickering glow of a busted streetlamp, I let myself mourn. Let myself feel it all.

And for the first time in years, someone stays. Just holds me, while I fall apart.

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RAY

Life doesn't just fall apart—it explodes.

Just a week ago, both my brothers were alive. I ran on adrenaline, not grief. The wind tasted like freedom—not ashes.

Now, all that's left of Sammy fits in a box—dust and bone. That's what remains of the one person who always stood taller than life to me. He's become memory. Silence.

The worst part? I had three hours today—three chances to think of anything but that brutal truth. I failed. Every time.

How could I? The pain claws at me from the inside. It doesn't leave room for distractions. It owns every part of me.

The forest rolls by as I drive, Stacy silent beside me, each mile tightening the pressure in my chest. She's hurting too—God, I know she is. Her entire world twisted sideways. Finding out about her mother, that her father knew and had kept it from her. Finding out what she is.

A shifter. Like me. Or the potential for it. We'll have to figure that out, but she has the genes.

I doubt he ever planned to tell her. If I hadn't gotten suspicious, she might've gone her whole life believing she was just human. He would've let her carry on, blind to the truth and to the sacrifice her mother made. That Catherine died of a broken heart—a pain I carry now like a mirror, cracked down the middle.

When we reach my cabin, tucked deep enough into the trees that the silence thickens—alive, watching, I hand Stacy the keys.

"I need some time alone," I say.

Her eyes meet mine, dark with her own grief, but she nods without a word. She's good like that—reading the spaces between the words.

"Be careful," she says, her voice tight with unshed fear. "Sammy's killers are still out there."

I give a faint nod, but we both know the warning won't stop me. It's too late for caution. The wolf in me has had enough of leashes. As soon as I step into the forest, I let go.

Bones stretch, muscles tear and rebuild. My skin rips and reforms. The pain is an old friend. It doesn't lie. It reminds me I'm still alive. Then I'm gone—Raymond dissolves, and what remains is instinct, power, and raw grief on four legs.

I run.

The earth rushes beneath my paws. Pebbles fly, the ground thuds with every step. I race up the hill, past the old ridge Sammy and I used to track deer from, past the outcropping where he once carved our initials into a tree with his pocketknife.

I don't stop until I reach it.

Venus River.

It lies ahead, glittering in the sunlight like nothing's wrong in the world. Like the past week never happened.

I haven't been here since we lost him. I couldn't bring myself to face it. This was his place too—his favorite spot. The place he went when he needed space to think, or just breathe.

The river hums low, steady—like it's trying to lull the ache out of my bones. It's a balm, a reminder that things still move, still live, even when everything inside me has frozen.

I start toward the riverbank, stones damp beneath my paws, the air cool and clean against my fur—and then I smell her before I see her.

Helena.

Her back is to me, dark hair rippling like spilled ink in the wind. She stands with her arms folded, gaze fixed on the river.

“You've become awfully predictable, Raymond,” she says without turning.

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Her voice is sharp, laced with knowing. It cuts through the air and slices into the brittle shell I've wrapped around myself. She reaches to her side and grabs something. A pair of jeans.

"Shift. Get dressed. We need to talk—and I'm not asking."

I let the wolf fade. It's hard, not because the transformation resists, but because the weight of being human is unbearable. The emotions rush back in like a flood, washing over the raw skin of my soul. I pick up the jeans and slide them on.

"Predictable, huh?"

She finally turns with one brow raised, like she's already won the argument we haven't had yet.

"Indeed. You bury yourself in work, only venturing out when you need supplies. And when you do? It's always here—alone. Where's your fire, Raymond? Your instinct? Your heart? Why didn't you bring Stacy?"

"Stacy's got her own storm to weather," I mutter. "Turns out her mother—Catherine—was one of us."

Helena goes rigid. "What did you say?"

"Yeah," I say with a sigh, eyes locked on the slow roll of the river. I step onto the slick stones at the edge. "It wasn't cancer. Her heart broke, and it killed her."

“Tell me everything,” Helena demands, her voice tight and low. I glance at her, but I don’t ask. I don’t have the energy.

“She met Stacy’s dad in Mercer. They had their fairytale until she caught him cheating. She couldn’t take it.”

“When did you learn this?”

“This morning.”

“Take my hand,” she orders, leaving no room for argument as she holds hers out.

I stare at her empty palm for a moment before placing mine in hers. Her palm radiates heat—almost too much. The moment her fingers tighten around mine, her staff strikes the earth.

Light erupts from the staff—brilliant, blinding. It devours everything until nothing remains but white noise and the echo of memory. Then?—

Voices.

I hear them before I can see. Echoes that thread through the brightness. Then it’s like a curtain parting as my vision returns. We’re in front of Sammy’s cabin. Helena pulls me after her, storming up the steps and entering without bothering to knock.

The first thing I see is a photo of Sammy and Erica on the far wall. The laughter in his eyes mocks me. Daring me to admit he’s gone. Erica sits on the couch, jerking her head up at our entrance.

Her cheeks are stained with tears and Monica is at her side, one comforting arm around her shoulders. Raul’s voice breaks through the haze. He’s already moving

toward us from the kitchen.

“I was just about to find you,” Raul says. “Monica says Stacy’s mom was a shifter. That true?”

“You already know it,” I say with a tired shrug.

“Do you agree?” Raul asks, looking to Helena and she shrugs.

“It makes sense. The attack on Erica and Stacy was wolf shifters. It had to be a shifter that killed Sammy, too. No human or regular animal could have taken him. Or do that kind of damage,” Raul says, shaking his head.

“But why?” I ask. “We’ve never hurt anyone from Mercer.”

“Maybe we’re paying for sins that aren’t ours,” Raul mutters, voice heavy with something deeper—regret, maybe. “I’ve been reading Grandpa’s journals. Some shifters left the settlements to live with humans a generation back. They were branded as traitors. I’d hazard a guess that Catherine was one of them.”

I clench my fists. “Okay... let’s say you’re right. What now?”

“Then we go to war,” Raul growls. “They killed Sammy. They don’t walk away from that.”

“No,” Helena snaps, stepping between us. Her eyes burn brighter, deeper. “We don’t know who or why. Not for certain. You can’t charge into Mercer like rabid animals. They’re two hundred miles away. By the time you get there, you’ll be too drained to fight. We need proof. Motive. A name.”

“So what? We just sit here and wait?” My voice rises—grief finally splitting open



into fury.

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“I’m saying we expand the patrols,” she shoots back. “Someone screwed up. Samuel’s killers got past our line. We can’t risk open war without proof. These aren’t rogues. They’re shifters. Your kin.”

Raul sighs, voice low with guilt. “I already added four patrols. They haven’t found anything.”

“People...” Erica’s voice slices through the tension. As one we turn towards her. She slowly rises, dabbing at her cheeks. Her hands tremble, but her gaze is steel—raw and sharp. “I know you’ve got your hands full, but I have something to say.”

“Erica, please,” Monica pleads. “Think this through.”

“I have,” she says, her voice breaking and rebuilding itself in a single breath. “For days, I’ve done nothingbutthink. And I don’t see another way. I’m leaving. I’m going back to New York.”

The words hit like a slap.

“Don’t you want us to find Sam’s killer?” I ask, not understanding.

“Will that bring him back?” she snaps—and the words hit harder than any blow.

No. It won’t. Nothing will bring him back.

Silence settles over us like a weighted blanket, thick and suffocating. Her footsteps echo too loud in the hush.

“That’s what I thought,” she mutters, her voice hollow as she disappears through the door.

Helena doesn’t stop her. Doesn’t flinch. But her jaw tightens, and her eyes flick to the floor for half a second—just long enough to show the crack beneath the calm.

“I’m going to Mercer,” she says, voice clipped. “Someone has to find out what the hell’s really going on.”

Then—just like that—she’s gone. A burst of red and black smoke swallows her, leaving only scorched air behind.

Raul slams his fist into the fridge. It groans, tips sideways, the cord snapping free—then crashes to the floor with a sickening crunch.

He’s panting like he ran ten miles, but he hasn’t taken a step. His eyes are empty—just like mine were earlier. That’s my cue to go. I slip out, leaving behind a room haunted by what we’ve lost—and what we’re becoming.

Sammy’s gone. But he’s not the only one broken. We’re splintering, all of us—Raul, Erica, even Helena, who’s usually carved from stone. She’s lashing out. Running without a plan. That’s not like her. None of this is.

And me?

I don’t know who I am anymore. The wolf? The man? The brother drowning in grief?

Maybe I’m all of them. Maybe I’m nothing at all. But this? This isn’t the end. It’s the ignition point.

STACY

Cheer? Laughter? Fun?

Those things don't exist here anymore. Not in the Crawford territory.

They're ghosts—faint echoes of a life that ended the day Sam died. A week has passed, but time is frozen, the air thick with loss. The house itself seems to mourn, its walls tense and brittle. Every floorboard creaks beneath the weight of grief.

The Crawfords are a family built on strength, but strength has a breaking point. And grief—grief is a relentless, invisible monster. You can't punch it. You can't chase it away. You just drown in it.

I hear Raul before I see him. His voice is a storm, ripping through the silence of the woods. The cabin I share with Ray sits maybe twenty yards from the boys' workshop, but it might as well be next door with how often Raul's shouting pierces the air. There's no pattern to it—sometimes it's because of something Ray did. Sometimes it's Nora's cooking. Sometimes it's just because the world keeps spinning, even though Sam is gone.

He's furious. Broken. And every ounce of pain inside him has to go somewhere.

Nora matches him, scream for scream. It's like watching two wild animals fight to drown each other out. Glass shatters. A vase once filled with daisies lies in pieces on the porch. Yesterday, it was the ashtray. The day before, some old exhaust pipe. Destruction has become their language. It's all they seem to have left.

But Ray...Ray's different.

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He's even quieter. He doesn't throw things. Doesn't scream. At least not when the sun is up. He smiles when I need him to, says the right things at the right times. But I see it. I feel it in him. This dull, unbearable ache he carries like an old injury no one can fix.

At night, when he thinks I'm asleep, he slips out of bed. I've followed, careful not to make a sound. I've watched from the bedroom doorway or through the curtain. Seen him standing on the balcony, barefoot, with a picture frame clutched in his hands. I see the way his fingers tremble. The way his shoulders shake.

The photo is always the same—him and Sam, leaning on a silver motorcycle, both of them grinning like idiots. He talks to it. Talks to him.

“There she is, Sammy,” Ray whispers, voice hoarse and thick with unshed tears. “Don't tell me you don't recognize her. She's the custom baby you and I were working on...”

His voice breaks. He turns the frame around and presses it against the railing.

“I'm thinking of naming her after you,” he murmurs. “Don't worry. I won't ride her. Hurts too much even thinking about it. Now that Erica's leaving... I'll put her in your living room. She deserves to be there.”

And then he does this thing—he lifts his head and stares up at the sky, his eyes glassy and raw. I don't know if he's talking to God, to his parents, or to the stars. Maybe all of them. Maybe none.

All I know is that the man I met in March—the one who made me laugh until my sides hurt, who once tried to race a hawk on his motorcycle—is gone. He's still here, flesh and bone, but his spark's been smothered by pain. He's learning to survive grief without destroying the people still standing beside him.

The days pass with little to no change. Until Monica. Of course it's Monica. The ever-logical doctor with the soul of a teacher. A healer. Monica summons us with a single sentence that's really a command.

"I'm cooking dinner tonight. You won't want to miss this—and by 'this,' I don't mean my tuna casserole. Be there."

She doesn't smile when she says it. Doesn't even blink before she turns back to the pot on Raul's stovetop, her white apron cinched tight around her waist. It's Monica's version of a battle cry. You just have to know how to hear it. Have to know Monica.

Erica almost didn't come. She packed her bags the day before, ready to vanish back into the safe, predictable world of New York. I begged her to stay—not for me, but for her. Because I know what loneliness tastes like—bitter and metallic, like copper pennies and regret. I remember all my lonely weekends waiting for the mountain to bring my friends back to me.

Now she's the one stranded on the edge of heartbreak—and I can't let her drown in it alone. All I could manage was convincing her to stay one more night, but even that wasn't easy. She's not just sad—she's sullen. She's going through the motions, but there's no spark left in her.

The five of us gather in Raul's cabin. Monica stirs the pot's contents like it's an ancient ritual. Whatever this is, it's not just dinner. She has a plan—I'll be damned if I know what it is.

“Go sit,” she says. “Give me a minute.”

Ray paces. “Your friend’s a weird lady.”

“I heard that,” Monica calls, not turning around.

I shrug. “You get used to her.”

“Patience is a virtue, people,” she says dryly. “Hope you’re hungry.”

“Every second I sit here, my appetite dies a little more,” Raul mutters.

Monica doesn’t rise to the bait. She ties off the apron, covers the pot, and walks into the living room with that familiar no-nonsense stride—like she’s about to change the course of history.

“Do you remember how much Sam weighed?” Monica asks.

Ray furrows his brow. “Two hundred and five? Maybe two-ten?”

“Very good,” she says. “Actually, it was two-oh-seven. I remember because I insisted all of you come in for a physical and he was weighed. And yes—call me weird—but I weighed the wolf you brought in before the cremation.”

“Yeah. You had four guys lift him onto the workshop scale. None of us understood why, but...” Ray trails off, shifting uncomfortably.

“That wolf was fourteen pounds lighter than Sam,” she says, stepping closer. Her voice cuts sharper now, deliberate. The room stills. “That’s not a small difference. I didn’t say anything earlier because weight can fluctuate—especially post-trauma, and I’m not sure about the shift. But this morning, I got the bloodwork back. I compared

that wolf's DNA to Sam's."

She reaches into her briefcase, pulls out two documents, and holds them up like cards in a poker game. I don't need to read the charts. Just the bold print at the bottom:

**NO GENETIC MATCH FOUND.**

Raul blinks. "You're absolutely sure?"

"I ran it four times," Monica says, calm and certain. "Different labs. Same result."



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The silence is instant and crushing. A single breath could shatter it.

“But...I heard him howl,” Raul murmurs. “I know it was him.”

“I believe you,” Monica says gently. “That it was Sam’s voice and that the wolf looked like him. But we’ve been played. Someone wanted us to believe Sam died, but he didn’t.”

“There were signs of a fight,” Ray adds. “It looked like a goddamn war zone.”

“Exactly.” Monica’s voice hardens. “The question is who staged it—and why.”

I feel my pulse pounding behind my eyes. Is this real? Could it be true?

“There’s only one group who benefits from this lie,” she continues. “That facility in the woods—you said there were cages. Steel reinforced. Too strong for any wild animal. Those weren’t meant for beasts. They were built for shifters.”

Ray’s whole body stiffens. “You think they’ve got Sam?”

“I am certain of it,” Monica says. “And if we don’t act soon, he may not survive whatever they’re doing to him.”

Raul growls—a low, primal sound—and pushes to his feet. “I’m going to tear them apart.”

“No, you’re not,” Monica barks, seizing his arm and yanking him back. “They have

security. Armed guards. You charge in alone, we bury another brother.”

“She’s right,” Ray says, stepping between them. “I want revenge as much as you do, but we have to be smart. Scout it first. Plan it out.”

Raul grits his teeth. “Fine. I’ll send scouts. But once they’re back?—”

“We break Sam out,” Ray finishes, eyes burning. “We kill every bastard in that place, and bring him home.”

A tremor ripples through the room.

“I can’t believe it,” Erica whispers. “I want to believe it. But... I’ll wait for the champagne until I see him. Alive.”

“You will,” Ray says. “I swear it.”

He leaves first, his jaw clenched, grief transformed into purpose. I follow him into the night. My heart’s racing. My hands won’t stop shaking. Because against all odds... I believe her.

Monica isn’t a woman who gambles. She’s careful. Calculated. She wouldn’t make a claim like this without proof. Whatever was in those tests—whatever she found—it’s enough to reignite hope in a room that’s known nothing but despair.

Sam is alive.

The Crawfords didn’t bury their brother.

We’re bringing him home.

RAY

Monica amazes me.

Even now, with grief etched into every soft line around her eyes, she holds herself together with a kind of quiet resilience that demands respect. She's hurting—God knows we all are—but she doesn't let it slow her down. There's something almost surgical about how she moves through the chaos, like she's carved out just enough space to hold the pain at bay—long enough to get things done.

And she has done something—more than any of us, really. It wasn't much on the surface. A few comments, a careful observation or two. But it was enough to shed light on a truth I hadn't even considered.

No one challenged Sam to a fight. No bruises, no brawl, no sign of a last stand. He didn't go down swinging. He was... taken. Captured.

The word feels foreign—alien, even—as it echoes in my mind. Like it belongs in a thriller, not in the raw ache that pulses in my chest when I think about Sammy. My brother and my best friend. The man who once lifted me by the scruff of my shirt and told me I'd better learn to love myself before someone else tried and failed.

The sunset bleeds into night, painting the sky's edge with fire and ash. I blink as the trees blur through my wet eyes.

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“She’s amazing,” I say softly, still turning over the impossible idea—maybe my brother isn’t gone.

“She really is,” Stacy murmurs as she steps around me, her voice soft like she’s speaking not just to me but to the night itself. “Believe me, I’ve known her a long time, but...” She pauses, and when I look at her, something in her gaze has shifted—softened. Her eyes carry something warm, something real. It feels like sunlight after too long in the dark. “There’s someone else I admire around here, maybe more.”

“Who?” I ask, feigning confusion.

“Need a hint? He’s always got oil on his jeans and thinks motorcycles are a personality trait.”

I laugh. It comes out as a low, rough sound, but it’s the first real laugh I’ve had in days.

“Thank you,” I say, unsure what else to offer. “Though I’m not sure what I did to deserve that.”

“Being strong,” she says, wrapping her arms around my neck. She searches my eyes like she’s seeing every frayed edge I’ve been trying to keep hidden. “You’ve being strong for both of us. I’ve been a mess ever since I found out the truth about my mom. And you—you’ve been grieving Sammy and still holding me up at the same time.”

Her voice wavers and that hits me in the gut.

“It’s nothing,” I say, my throat so tight that my voice is hoarse.

“That’s heart,” she whispers, pressing her forehead to mine like it’s the only way to hold us both together.

I want to deflect, crack a joke, turn this into something light, because the weight of her sincerity is a lot. Almost too much on top of everything else, but I can’t do that to her. Not now when she’s finally letting me in.

“Well, I couldn’t turn my back on you, could I?” I say, my voice softer than I intend, but it’s honest and raw. The way the truth should be. “What kind of boyfriend would I be if I ignored your situation?”

“A crappy one,” she says with a quiet chuckle, the sound brushing against the edge of something fragile inside of me. She leans closer, her breath warm on my skin. “But you’re not. Not even close. And I won’t forget this, Ray. I mean it. I’m here for you too. Just like you’ve been here for me. That’s a promise.”

Something in me breaks open at her words. Not in a bad way. More like... pressure releasing from a valve I hadn’t realized was at its limit.

I slide my arms around her waist, pulling her in as though that closeness can fuse us together. Maybe it can. Maybe, just for tonight, the ache of everything we’ve lost can be quieted by what we’ve found.

Her eyes shimmer when they meet mine—not from tears, but from the kind of intensity that makes time slow down. I don’t need to speak. I don’t need to think. I just feel.

I brush my lips against hers. Light. Testing and she doesn’t hesitate. She melts into me with a sigh, her arms tightening as she molds her body to mine. It’s like we were

always meant to fit this way. The kiss deepens, soft and slow, something sweet blooming behind the heat.

She tastes like spring after a long, cruel winter—fresh, sweet, impossible not to chase.

I kiss her again. And again. Until something inside me gives—shattering in the best kind of way. Something deeper than grief—deeper than guilt. Something ancient and hungry and starved for this kind of warmth.

Her body clings to me, her heartbeat syncing with mine like it was always meant to. The beating is music I never knew I needed. My hands find the curve of her back, sliding up slowly, reverently, as if I'm memorizing the map of her spine. She's soft where I'm rough, steady where I'm breaking. She grounds me. Rebuilds me in the cradle of her arms.

Before Stacy, I didn't know what it meant to hunger for someone in my soul, not just in skin. To need someone the way lungs need air.

But now I'm getting drunk on something rare and rich—the finest French wine, heady and dangerous. Her presence floods my senses, and I want to drown in it.

"I'm happy you're here with me," I whisper into her skin, my lips brushing her cheek.

"No way you're happier than me," she says with a smile, pressing her cheek into my collarbone. Her fingers thread gently into my shirt, like she's holding on for dear life. Or maybe like she's afraid this moment might slip away if she lets go.

Under the half-moon and the scattered stars, we stand—frozen in time, wrapped around each other as though the rest of the world doesn't matter. As though the cracks in us only make the whole more beautiful.

Her scent fills my nose—sweet and earthy, tinged with that faint floral perfume she always wears. Her heat seeps into me, banishing the chill that’s clung to my bones since the moment I got that call about Sam.

Nothing else exists. Not the silence that stretches between stars. Nor the ache in my chest that throbs with every beat of my heart. Not even the knowledge that tomorrow, we’ll still be standing on shifting ground.

Right now, it’s just her. Just me. Just this.

I’ve spent years waiting for a connection like this. For someone who sees past the grease-stained fingers, the emotional walls, the smart-ass comments. Someone who doesn’t flinch when I’m angry, who doesn’t turn away when I fall apart. Someone who chooses to stay.

“I don’t want this moment to end,” I murmur into her hair.

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“Then don’t let it,” she replies, her voice soft but sure. “We’ve earned this, Ray. After everything... we deserve to hold on to something good.”

My throat tightens. I nod against her, not trusting myself to speak. Because she’s right. We deserve this. But more than that—we need it. In the midst of all the lies, all the hurt, all the gaping wounds we’re still trying to patch up, this—she—is my truth. My anchor.

I pull her tighter, heart pounding, soul aching, and make myself a promise. No matter what comes next—I’m not letting go.

24

RAY

“Security’s tight. Real tight. It’s a goddamn fortress,” Billy says, his voice grim.

His words hit harder than they should. I clench my jaw in the silence blanketing our front yard, tension crackling like static. The way he says it—low, gravelly, certain—it’s not a warning. It’s a verdict.

“At least twenty guards,” Billy continues, voice flat. “Armed. M4s, M16s. Rotating in pairs. No clear approach unless you’re a damn shadow.”

I clench my fists until my nails bite deep into flesh. The pain keeps me grounded, barely restrains the wild urge to destroy something. Not because I’m angry—though I am—but because I’m helpless. And I hate that feeling more than anything else in the



world.

“Going in is suicide.”

Silence ripples out, cold and consuming—like blood blooming in snow.

Disappointment winds its way through our group, dragging morale with it. Raul doesn't take long to break the stillness.

“Any blind spots?” Raul asks, voice tight.

I hear the desperation under it. Just enough to crack his usual steel.

“Maybe one. Cameras, most likely. But if we're fast, we might slip through. There, at the back of the compound. We can leap from the trees to the roof. The schematics show a skylight in the design. But after you get in—” he pauses, letting that weight settle on our chests “—you're not getting out the same way. The only way out will be the front door. Every guard will know we're in and once they see us?” He shakes his head. “It's over.”

“Fuck!” Raul slams a fist against his forehead like he's trying to beat the frustration out. The sound of bone on bone makes me wince.

“What happened to the decoy plan?” Erica snaps, slicing through the tension like a blade. She's trying to piece together the change in our attitude. “You were all about that idea ten minutes ago.”

Raul gives her a look that says she's lost her mind.

“Did you hear anything Billy just said?” he snaps. “There are too many guards, Erica. Even if you distract half?—”

“There are still a lot left,” she finishes for him, eyes narrowing. She tosses a glance at me, and for a second, I catch something raw and wild flicker in her gaze. “I don’t care. They’ve got Sammy. This isn’t a choice.”

Her words drop like a stone into a still pond. None of us disagree it’s bad but no one wants to touch it. She glares at each of us in turn, stopping at Raul.

“Get me there,” she says. “You won’t have to worry about them. I’ll handle it.”

“Erica—” Raul starts, but she shoves her face in his.

“Don’t argue with me, you oversized oak!” she snarls. “I said I’ll handle them, and I mean it.”

I blink. She’s got our Alpha—a beast of a man and the strongest among us—backed into silence. And he lets her. Doesn’t raise his voice. Doesn’t argue. He nods once and turns to Billy.

Raul straightens. “We do this by the numbers.” His Alpha voice returns—steel in every syllable. “Notify the pack. Ten of our finest are going in. The rest, perimeter watch. Move out!”

And just like that, we move. No more debate. No more hesitation.

We pile into my truck. The engine growls to life, and adrenaline slams into me like a freight train. Every nerve lights up. The road ahead glows under the headlights, but all I see is Sammy. Locked up, alone, afraid.

“Tell me you’re not going in wolfed out,” Erica says, gripping the oh-shit handle as I tear down the dirt road.

“I’d love to,” I mutter. “But I can’t. I’ll need my hands to get Sam out.”

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“And how exactly are you planning to neutralize that many heavily armed guards, Erica?” Nora asks, leaning forward from the back seat.

Erica doesn’t hesitate.

“You all wanted me to embrace the witch. Fine. I am. But not for you. For Sammy. They took what’s mine.”

She growls the last word in a rumble any shifter would be proud of. Words lodge in my throat, unsaid. Not because they don’t matter—but because right now, they don’t help. My little brother has been missing for eight days. Eight days of silence. Eight days of thinking he was dead, then imagining the worst. Needles. Restraints. That blank, hollow stare he got when fear locked his voice away.

If they’ve hurt him—no. No room for rage. Not yet. First, get him back. Then burn the world down if I have to.

We’re five minutes out when the road narrows, the trees pressing close like jaws tightening around prey. The forest feels alive, holding its breath for what’s coming. The facility’s floodlights pierce the darkness like surgical blades, cold and clinical, slicing through the night. Even from a distance, I can see how bright it is. That place doesn’t sleep.

“That’s it,” Erica mutters, tapping the windshield like she wants to punch through it. “Sick bastards don’t even try to hide.”

“Yeah. Time to go dark,” I say.

I veer off the road, tires crunching over a shallow crest. Trees tower above us, thick and ancient. I kill the lights and coast, barely breathing, guiding the truck between thick underbrush until it's swallowed by shadow. Not a great spot, but it'll have to do. Raul's truck pulls up behind us. I get out, pulse thundering. Raul joins me at the tree line, eyes scanning the compound.

"They built this fast," Raul says.

"They've got money. Probably government backing," I say.

We move forward with as much stealth as we can manage. I spot two guards pacing near the fence, their rifles slung tight. Their movements are routine, practiced. Boredom like that breeds mistakes—and bullets. Raul nods toward Erica.

"Sammy's girl's got balls of steel. Must love him like crazy," Raul whispers.

I glance at her—tall, spine straight, eyes burning with purpose. There's fire in her, yes—but deeper still, something raw and ancient. Power uncoiled. Purpose awakened.

She steps out of the woods and onto the road without a flicker of hesitation. My stomach clenches. Flashlight beams snap toward her, blinding in the dark.

"Who the hell—?" One of the guards barks, rising up straight. "You lost, sweetheart?"

"Kind of," Erica replies. Her voice trembling and soft, just enough to sell the act. "My car broke down, and my cell is freaking dead. I need to call my friend for help."

"I've got a phone," the second guard says, his smirk oily. "But nothing's free, sweetheart."

“Earn it?” she asks, her tone flat.

The moment she lifts her arms, it all changes. A pulse of pink light flares around her fingers—brief, blinding. Their rifles jerk upward, ripped clean from their hands, twisting mid-air until they aim back at their owners.

“Now!” Raul barks.

“You sorry assholes,” Erica snarls, snapping her fingers. “You took my mate. Now I take everything.”

Two shots crack like thunder. Red erupts behind the guards, painting the fencing and their bodies crumple.

She bolts to the left. The gate slides open with a mechanical groan. Bullets rain down from the rooftop, aiming at her, but they bounce off the air around her. There’s a shimmering as they slam into nothing, a shield around her body. She doesn’t even flinch as she rushes ahead.

Thirty yards in, she slows. Lowers her head then raises her arms. She throws them wide open, her face is full of fury. Her scream tears from her throat like a banshee’s wail—grief, fury, and raw power woven into every note. The air itself flinches. A shockwave rips outward, warping light and smashing into everything like a tidal wave of rage.

Energy pulses outward, a shockwave of color that flattens everything in its path—dirt, wall, flesh. It doesn’t care what—it smashes it all. The guards it hits burst into flame. They don’t die quietly.

“Go!” Raul’s voice booms.

The pack bursts from the woods. Dozens of yellow eyes ignite the dark like embers. The forest erupts—claws shredding dirt, snarls rising like thunder as the pack descends.

I leap the fence, running to Erica. My heart is pounding and every sense is screaming. My focus is on the building's glass entrance. Inside, three men in lab coats stand frozen. One of them screams and bolts as the doors open, and Dawson's wolves pour through.

Their snarls are deafening.

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I don't stop to watch, beelining for the staircase. Reaching the top, the hallway upstairs is brightly lit and cleaner than when we first explored it. Sterile. Gleaming. The halls shine like a hospital, as if polish and bright lights could wash the blood off the walls.

A woman steps out of an office with a binder clutched to her chest. She sees me—and behind me, Nora. Nora's fist finds the woman's nose with a sickening crunch. The binder flies. So does she. I barely look over because I know where I'm going.

There are flashing red lights over the cages we saw before. A warning system. I ignore the warnings, running along the cages, looking for my brother. The first two are empty. My gut twists, bracing for disappointment. What if we're wrong? What if Monica didn't have it right? What if....

I reach the third?—

“Holy shit...” Nora mutters, sliding to a stop beside me.

Sam.

He's curled in the corner like a broken bird. Pale. Punctured. Shaking.

My breath chokes. He looks up—barely.

“Took you long enough,” he whispers.

“No time for that,” I bark.



I fumble at the lock. My fingers slip. Again. Goddammit—why now? Why can't I get this right?

Nora shoves me aside—calm, steady. The lock clicks, and the cage swings open.

Sam stumbles out and collapses into my arms. He's shaking, half-conscious—but breathing.

He's alive.

And that's all that matters. For now.

25

STACY

Sam's return from the dead is like a spark in dry brush—instantaneous combustion. One second, everything is still, the world quiet and tentative in its grief. Afraid to hope he's really alive—then in the next, joy ignites in every corner of Dawson. It's a wildfire of celebration and disbelief that spreads faster than anyone could ever contain.

Shifters pour into the Crawfords' neighborhood, eyes wide and wild, expressions lit with disbelief and delight. Even from where I stand on the outskirts of the yard, the pulse of energy is electric. They want to touch him, to make sure he's real. To believe their own eyes.

It's chaos. Beautiful, absurd, noisy chaos. Laughing, crying, loud-voiced shifters practically form a parade, stomping through the Crawfords' front yard like it's Mardi Gras. Each one determined to get a hug or a high-five from Samuel. And Sam—despite the abuse he's endured—is thriving on it. He's all teeth and dimples,

that easygoing swagger I know so well back in full force. He embraces everyone like he never left, as if the world hadn't fallen apart in his absence.

And Erica hasn't let go of his hand, not even once. I watch her closely, worried about my friend. She thought she'd lost everything, and this is a miracle—but it's a lot to take in. I don't miss how her grip tightens, knuckles pale, whenever someone brushes too close. She's smiling, sure, glowing with the kind of joy that could only come from a resurrection—but the haunted edge in her eyes gives her away.

I know my friend and they may not see it, but I do. She hasn't shaken the nightmare of those eight days. Eight days of believing the love of her life had died. Eight days of mourning him. I don't blame her for clinging like he might disappear again the moment she lets go. Honestly, I'm shocked she didn't lock both of them in his cabin and swallow the key. I might have if it were me.

The celebration stretches long into the night—music, laughter, pine smoke from the bonfire, and beer heavy in the air. I dance with Ray under the stars, pressing our bodies together, the world once again feeling whole and warm. The weight of loss lingers around the edges, but it's thinner and no longer suffocating. The way Ray looks at his brothers, I know—truly know—how much this means to them all. Sam is more than blood. He's glue. The kind that holds a fractured family together.

When morning comes, Ray and I are tangled in his bed. Our limbs loop lazily over one another, heat trapped beneath the sheets. I shift slowly, peeling his arm from where it rests behind my neck, carefully trying not to wake him. His scent clings—musk and warmth and that smell that is distinctly him—which tugs a smile from my lips. I lean over and press a kiss to the edge of his jaw, slow and lingering.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” I whisper, nose brushing his cheek.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he murmurs, voice thick with sleep. “What time is it?”

“Seven twenty,” I say, glancing across the room at the clock. “I’ll make coffee.”

I slip out of bed, padding across the hardwood with a lightness in my step I haven’t felt in what feels like forever. My mood is buoyant, as if the shadows weighing on us have finally loosened their grip. But as soon as I come down the stairs a familiar, rich scent hits me before I reach the bottom. Coffee. Already made. I pause at the threshold, pulse racing, blinking in surprise.

Helena.

Of course she’s here. Behind the kitchen island like she owns the place, stirring a straw through her coffee with lazy elegance. She lifts her gaze when I enter.

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“You’re out of cream,” she says flatly.

I raise an eyebrow. “People normally say ‘good morning’, Helena. And they don’t normally come in uninvited.”

A ghost of a grin crosses her lips.

“You’re right. Good morning. And it is a good morning. God knows we needed one.”

“I didn’t know witches believed in God.” I smirk.

She tosses a used coffee capsule into the trash and shrugs.

“I do. And even if I didn’t, I might have started believing two days ago.”

Two days ago? Sam was only saved yesterday.

“Why? What happened two days ago?”

“I learned the truth about what happened with Samuel.” She pauses, closing her eyes, pursing her lips and sipping the coffee. She tastes it, nodding in satisfaction. But when she opens them again, a storm is brewing behind her eyes.

“What do you mean?” I ask, moving to the opposite side of the island.

“The shifters have been betrayed. And what I found out... it’s beyond the pale.”

Helena starts another cup of coffee just as heavy footfalls echo down the stairs. Ray appears a moment later, all warmth and gravity—his presence was grounding, welcome, and needed.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, scratching his bare, gloriously hairy chest as he pads into the kitchen.

Helena’s lips tighten. The storm in her eyes rages beneath an otherwise unreadable mask. She hands me the coffee.

“Good morning, Ray,” she acknowledges him. Darting her eyes to me as if to say, ‘See, I can be polite’. She punches the button for another cup. “I assume you remember Adrian Dexter?”

Ray growls, his lips pulling back into a sneer. It takes me a second to place the name—then it clicks.

“Oh,” I gasp. “The Alpha, right? The other wolf pack that moved into the area or something...”

“Yes,” Helena says, but her attention is focused on Ray. She sets the new cup of coffee on the counter for Ray. “The very one.”

“What does that bastard have to do with anything?” Ray asks, grabbing the cup.

“That ‘bastard’ and his pack are the ones behind the attack on Erica and Stacy in New York,” Helena answers.

“No,” I say.

“I’ll kill him,” Ray snarls, slamming the mug down and turning for the door.

“Wait, pup,” Helena says, her voice sharp and commanding.

He freezes mid-stride, glancing back over his shoulder, tension radiating off him in waves. I move to him, sliding an arm around his waist, anchoring him with touch.

“You’re not stopping this, Helena,” Ray snaps angrily.

“Ray, hear her out,” I urge.

His back muscles are coiled tight. I rub a small circle, trying to calm him down. Helena sips her coffee, unperturbed by the angry shifter.

“Hmm. You really need better cream,” she mutters, setting her cup down with a sigh. “It’s worse than you think. You cannot, will not, go charging in like a damn fool.”

“I’m not—” Ray protests but Helena arches an eyebrow, stopping him mid-sentence. “Fine.”

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He walks back over to the counter and I stay at his side. He picks up the coffee, cups it in both hands.

“The wolf you thought was Samuel?” Helena asks, her gaze laser-focused on Ray.

Ray stiffens. “Yeah?”

“One of their own. They sacrificed him to forward their plan—which is darker than anything I could have imagined in my worst nightmares. They’ve allied with a human,” she says, voice low. “And he wants every last shifter dead.”

Her words hit like stones dropped in still water—sudden, jarring, impossible to ignore.

“A human?” Ray echoes, squinting. “Is that even possible? The humans who know about us... they’re all here. And they’re not what I’d call hostile.”

“It’s a big world,” Helena says. “You can’t truly think only the people of Dawson know the truth. I didn’t get a name, just the initials. H.E.”

“What do they stand for?” Ray asks.

“Human Extremist,” Helena says, not a hint of mocking in her tone.

Ray lets out a dry chuckle. “That sounds like a damn cartoon villain.”

Helena snaps her fingers, shaking her head.

“No jokes. You need to take this seriously, Raymond. He may be human, but he’s dangerous. He’s clearly smart and has incredible resources. That facility and how fast they built it are testament enough to that. And you’ve seen the lengths he’ll go to get what he wants. Do not underestimate this opponent.”

Ray bows his head with a low growl, coffee forgotten. His fists clench, chest heaving. I feel his muscles twitching beneath my hand—taut and ready to snap. For the briefest of moments I think he’s about to shift which makes my skin turn cold. Then it’s over. He looks up, picks up the coffee, and sips as if nothing happened.

“You’re right,” Ray says, bowing his head. “Sorry.”

“Do Raul and Sam know about this?” I ask.

“I was just at Raul’s,” she says, placing her empty cup on the counter with a final clink. She squares her shoulders and looks at Ray. “I asked him the same question I’m going to ask you. This looks personal to Dawson, to your family. Who outside Dawson knows what you are? Who else might he target?”

Ray frowns, rubbing the back of his neck.

“No clue. We’ve always been careful—no shifting unless absolutely necessary. We keep a low profile.”

“Well, someone saw through the act. Damage is done,” Helena says grimly. “Now the question is—how do we contain the fallout?”

Ray sighs, sips his coffee, then tilts it back and drains the cup. He sets the cup down, rubs his face and rolls his shoulders before answering.

“Contain what, exactly? If this guy’s been running his mouth, it’s already out there.



What do you want us to do—track down every human he’s talked to and pray it’s not too late?”

Helena narrows her eyes. “Doubt it. He’s smart. If he wanted exposure, there’d be a viral video already. A press conference. Headlines. But there’s nothing. Which means he’s playing a longer game.”

“He told the scientists at least,” I add. “They wouldn’t be out there otherwise.”

“They’re dead,” Helena says, her tone cool but satisfied. “Erica outdid herself. Set the whole place ablaze—no spells, just old-fashioned fire. Natural enough not to raise suspicion. I’m impressed.”

“Conley!” Ray exclaims, eyes lighting up as he slaps the counter. “The guy from Roman Security—remember? He was guarding the lab. We pulled his name when we started digging. We were gonna go after him before Sam’s howl...”

“Then what are we waiting for? He has to know more. He’s clearly the next link in the chain,” Helena says.

“Easy,” Ray says, gesturing to the window. “It’s early. Raul and Sam are probably still hungover—I know I am. And we’re talking about a human. We can handle him. You don’t need to come.”

“What, you miss the thrill?” I tease.

“Hell yes,” she fires back. “Mercer was boring. Masking scent, sneaking around. I’ve had enough of that. I’m ready for something real.”

Ray frowns. “I think Erica wanted to seduce the info out of him. You planning the same?”

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“Nope. Erica’s got her way. I’ve got mine. I have a plan,” Helena says with a sharp grin.

“Why are witches always cryptic? Erica wouldn’t tell me hers, either. What is this big, mysterious plan?” I ask.

“Conley runs a security firm,” Helena says, clearly savoring every word. “I’ll set up a meeting. You two? My bodyguards. Big, brooding, and intimidating. Just threatening enough to sell it.”

The front door creaks open. I jump, spinning so fast my neck twinges. A hulking silhouette fills the doorway—Raul, backlit and unbothered.

“It’s perfect,” Raul says, sounding far too awake for someone who drank half the night. “No need to go scorched earth. We isolate the human, extract what we need, and disappear.”

“You heard all that?” I ask. Raul looks at me, the surprise clear on his face that I would even ask. He arches an eyebrow but Ray snickers, jerking my attention back to him. “What?”

Ray points at his ears, shrugging.

“Wolf,” he murmurs.

“But he was...” My voice trails off as realization hits—and my cheeks burn.

Oh god. If he heard this conversation from outside, then he's definitely heard—I can't even finish the thought.

If he can hear this conversation from outside the house, there's no way he can't hear me when... oh god. I am suddenly very interested in the pattern of the kitchen counter, unable and unwilling to meet anyone's eyes. Ray slips a comforting arm around my waist.

"Exactly," Helena says breezily, ignoring my meltdown entirely. "Let's not give him a heart attack, hmm? Not every day you meet three giant wolves in business casual."

"We'll be careful." Raul claps Ray on the back. "Now get your hungover ass moving. We've got work. And a hunt tonight."

Ray straightens and stretches. I can't miss the way the muscles roll as he does, which only makes my skin burn hotter.

"Yes, Alpha," he says, heading up the stairs to dress.

I watch them move together, instinctively in sync. The way they read each other, the silent bond—it's back. I hadn't realized how broken it was until now. Sam's return didn't just heal a wound. It completed them.

They aren't just a pack.

They're a force of nature.

And if I were this so-called Human Exterminator?

I'd start running. Now.

## RAY

Two phone calls. That's all it takes for Helena to land a meeting with Jason Conley.

The first one goes nowhere. His secretary puts her on hold before she can even spin her lie. On the second call, Helena's voice slips into a perfect mix of grief and wealth.

"I'm the widow of a North African diamond merchant," she purrs—and suddenly, she's through.

The name, the accent, the promise of millions in rare gems—it works like a charm. Literally. By the time the call ends, she has the appointment, and the plan is in motion.

Thirty-six hours later, we arrive in North Haven. Raul's behind the wheel of a sleek Mercedes S-Class, leased for the occasion. Helena sits beside him, resplendent in a sky-blue Dior dress Monica managed to source at the last minute. She looks like she belongs in a fashion magazine spread on power widows.

My brothers and I ride in the back, stiff in black suits and sharp red ties. None of us are comfortable in this kind of attire. Hell, the only time I wear a tie is if someone's died or getting married—but tonight, we're playing the part of a high-end widow's bodyguards.

The drive is smooth. The car is filled with the scent of leather and Helena's perfume. It's strangely calming. Despite the danger of our mission, I don't feel anxious. There should be no need to fight and we don't have plans to kill. All I have to do is watch over Helena. It's the first time in my life that I'm not a fighter, I'm only here for presence. Just another part of the theater Helena's conjured.

Conley's estate rises like a fortress. A fifteen-foot high stone wall stretches around the property. The wall glitters oddly—embedded with glass shards sharp enough to tear flesh. It's a deterrent to anyone attempting to climb the wall.

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The gate is designed to intimidate. It's tall, reinforced wrought-iron with thick bars topped with wicked looking points. Two armed guards in matching uniforms watch our approach. Raul eases to a stop as one of the guards approaches, his glare sharp and assessing.

"Identification," he says.

Helena hands over her ID, a flawless forgery bearing her assumed name: Mrs. Van Zant. The guard studies it, scans it then nods.

"Welcome, Mrs. Van Zant. You may proceed, ma'am."

As Raul drives through the gate, I lean over.

"That fake ID...you pull that out of thin air?"

"I'm a witch, Ray," she murmurs, barely moving her lips. "I could've set them on fire if I wanted to." She grimaces. "Remind me never to do this again. This much luxury is... obscene."

Raul snorts. "This is your plan, Helena. The widow of a diamond merchant doesn't roll up in a rusted-out pickup. Gotta sell the fantasy."

She sighs like someone drowning in silk. "Yes. Let's get this over with."

A butler opens the door, dressed in tailored black, his smile carved from politeness.

“Good evening, Mrs. Van Zant. Mr. Conley is expecting you. Please, follow me.”

Stepping into the mansion feels like being swallowed by excess. Everywhere there is polished wood, marble, and deliberately curated art. It’s a sickening display of materialism over humanity. It feels as if the entire space is designed to make you feel somehow less.

“Thank you,” Helena says, soft but clipped. Every word lands with rehearsed precision.

She walks with her head held high, but I see the tension coiling in her spine. This isn’t her world. She doesn’t like being watched, and here, every one of the dozens of paintings feels like a pair of eyes.

“Try to relax,” I whisper, falling into step beside her. “You look like you’re walking into a courtroom.”

“I feel like I’m walking onto a stage naked,” she mutters.

The butler leads us to a wide staircase. A four-foot-tall Buddha squats at the base of the stairs, silent and serene. I want to knock its smug head off. The walls are decorated with oil paintings that probably cost more than my entire neighborhood. At the top he leads us down a long hallway. Every six feet there is another statue—silver, bronze, and ivory.

At last we reach a double set of mahogany doors. The butler knocks, waits for a moment, then opens the doors and motions for us to enter. Helena leads the way with Raul and me on her flanks.

“Mrs. Van Zant!” Jason Conley stands behind a heavy oak desk. He has a wide, perfect smile and is dressed in a suit that is clearly custom tailored. “Welcome to my

humble home. It's a real pleasure."

Helena glides forward extending her delicate hand. Her smile is flawless—sharp as a blade and twice as dangerous.

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Conley."

"Please, have a seat," he says, gesturing to the high-backed chair across from his desk. He doesn't even glance at Raul or me. We're invisible—just the help, not worth noticing "How's your stay been? Enjoying New York?"

"Of course," she replies, voice warm and cultured. "New York is like a second home. I've visited many times."

He chuckles. "A charmer, I see. Drink? You? Your boys?"

"No, thank you," Helena replies, her voice cutting cool. "My men don't drink on the job. Now—shall we get to the matter at hand?"

"Direct. I like that," he says, leaning his elbows on the desk and steepling his fingers. "Very well, allow me to be direct as well." Something flickers in his eyes, and the million-dollar smile vanishes like smoke. "Who are you?"

I stiffen, eye darting to Raul. He's watching, but not acting, and I get it. Let it play out before we act. Trust Helena who is all cool calm. She leans forward, matching Conley.

"Excuse me?" she asks, sounding surprised.

"There is no diamond trader named Van Zant. Not in North Africa, not anywhere."



“Yes,” Helena says, voice flat. “Easily explained, you see I am Dutch.”

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Conley drums his fingers on the desk, smile still fixed on his face, but his other hand has moved out of sight. It's either on a button to call for help or a gun. I inhale deeply, masking the sound, scenting for gun oil or metal. Anything to tell me what he's reaching for.

“Who are you—really?” he asks, eyes narrowing.

Helena smiles, leans back in the chair, suddenly relaxed. She lifts her hand—and the door slams shut behind us with a thunderous boom.

“Fine,” Helena sighs. “Let's skip the pleasantries. I have questions. And if you want to avoid an early ticket to the afterlife, I suggest you answer.”

He smirks, maintaining a cool façade, but beads of sweat form on his forehead and I smell the first tangy scent of fear.

“Neat trick. What else can you do? My guards are trained special forces and will be in here in a heartbeat. Explain yourself. Immediately.”

A low growl breaks loose from my throat. I step towards him.

“Stay where you are,” Helena snaps, her eyes on Conley. “I've got this.”

She stands, calm and in control.

“Roman Security's reputation has taken a hit hasn't it? What, with the incident outside of Dawson. How many guards killed? And the facility you were guarding

burned to the ground? That cannot be good for your reputation. Tell me, how does something like that happen?"

"A freak accident," he says, not moving a muscle.

"A weak excuse," she says. "Pathetic, really. The press may eat it up, but I don't. A burned building. Lives lost. And yet, no one says a word about the facility's owners. Why is that?"

Conley's face tightens. "The people I work with prefer to keep their names out of the news cycle."

"Names," she demands. His jaw tightens and his eyes narrow, flicking to the door. "Believe me, they won't make it through that door in time to save you."

He hesitates and she flicks her wrist. His chair launches backward and crashes into the wall. He gasps, limbs flailing, fingers clawing at empty air. His neck jerks like it's caught in an invisible vise.

"I said, names!" she hisses, stalking around the desk like a panther. "Give them to me, or I'll snap your neck like a twig."

"Peterson!" he chokes. "Ivan Peterson! Eco Med!"

Helena pauses, staring at him. She takes a deep breath then slowly exhales.

"Thank you," she says, stepping back. "We're going to leave now. No one will stop us. Not one of your rent-a-thugs will get in our way. "

Conley coughs, clutching his throat. "Okay! Okay! Just go."

“Good.” Her tone is final. “Goodnight, Mr. Conley. Boys—let’s go.”

I open the door. That was brutal, but efficient and cleaner than we would have done it. Had it been up to us, there’d have been chaos, blood, and alarms. Helena kept it cool and controlled. We step back into the car and the smell of leather is oddly comforting.

“That was incredible,” I say as we settle in. “You scared the shit out of him.”

“Drive,” she tells Raul, voice flat. “I’m not done with him yet.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer, but turns and stares out the window.

We clear the gates, leaving the estate behind us. Helena lifts her hand to the rear window, palm pressed flat. Her eyes flash and then she yanks.

In the distance glass shatters. A scream pierces the night. Conley’s body arcs through the air like a ragdoll. Flying through his office window, a glittering storm of broken glass raining down around him. The form drops out of my line of sight.

Guards are yelling and rushing, but I’m sure it’s too late. Their boss is dead. Helena exhales slowly and sinks into the seat like a queen reclaiming her throne. None of us speak. There’s nothing to say.

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STACY

Success.

Ray texts a single word, and it steals my breath. The tension knotting every muscle in my neck and shoulders finally releases. A sob of relief slips from my lips.

I clutch my phone, staring at the tiny glowing screen like it's a lifeline. He's safe. They're all safe. No vampires in alleyways, no ancient horrors hiding in the dark. This time, it was only... humans.

And somehow, fighting humans feels worse. It's less surreal when the monsters look like us. Regular people. Then again, I'm not exactly one of them either.

Shifters avoid human cities like toxic waste zones—especially sprawling beasts like New York and its suburbs. Too many eyes. Too many secrets waiting to be uncovered. Too much danger wrapped in the illusion of civilization.

The more I think, the more unfinished it feels—like we're stuck in a game where the other side knows the rules and we don't. I try to shake off this feeling that I'm waiting on the next bad thing. Tonight shouldn't be about dread. It's about breathing, about laughing and forgetting, even if just for a few hours.

We've gathered in Erica's backyard, where the night air feels soft and is thick with the perfume of jasmine trailing over the fence. Stars scatter across the sky like shards of glass. My drink is cool in my hand, and—for once—it doesn't feel like the world is actively trying to kill us.

The weight Monica and Erica and I have carried is lighter, at least a little. We haven't had a night like this in what feels like forever—where we're all smiling, no one is bleeding, no one's hiding bruises under their clothes, and no one's halfway to a full-on panic attack.

"I was never worried," Erica announces, her voice dripping with playful arrogance as she waves her hand through the air, swirling her drink. "I had complete faith in their babysitter."

I blink. "Their what?"

She grins at me, raising an eyebrow. "Helena. She's like a wolf-whisperer. Kept them from doing anything too stupid—including your big tree, Mon."

Monica doesn't laugh. Doesn't even smile. That waiting-for-the-next-bad-thing feeling spikes, making my stomach clench and causing a cool layer of sweat to bead on my skin.

"Eco Med," she mutters, eyes locked on her phone like it's dripping poison and she can't stop sipping.

Erica frowns. "God, I hate when you do that. If you're going to sit here scrolling?—"

"Shut up for a second, okay?" Monica snaps, her voice sharp, startling both of us. She holds up her phone. "Eco Med. That's the pharmaceutical company. The one that owned the building you torched. I knew I'd heard that name before, but I couldn't remember when or where."

The name hits something inside me. A dull bell. Faint and far away.

"Yeah," I say slowly, sipping my drink. "It does sound familiar... something... it's

been years.”

“Because it’s from another life,” Monica says, voice cracking. Her fingers tremble as she lowers the phone to her lap. She presses the heel of her hand to her forehead. “Oh my God...”

Erica leans forward, concern etching her brow. “Mon, what is it?”

Wordlessly, Monica tosses her phone onto the wrought iron patio table between us. The image on it steals the breath from my lungs.

A man I haven’t given a thought to in what feels like ages stares back at us. Next to him stands a stranger in a sleek suit, the two of them smiling like they’ve just cured cancer. The caption reads:

Ivan Peterson & Jack Donahue

I sit up straighter, ice sliding down my spine. “Wait. Jack? Your ex-husband?”

Monica’s voice is flat. Cold. She stares out into the night, not looking at either of us.

“Ivan Peterson runs Eco Med. He and Jack... they go way back,” she says, eyes closing. When she opens them there is the hard edge of absolute certainty in them. “Somehow, Jack found out the truth about shifters.”

Erica raises a hand, palm out like she’s trying to physically stop the flood of information.

“Hold up. Even if Jack knows, Peterson is a billionaire. He wouldn’t bankroll something like this just because his buddy asked. There’s no profit in revenge.”

“Think it through, Erica,” Monica says with a bitter twist of her lips, “Eco Med’s a pharmaceutical empire. Of course there’s profit. Shifter blood is full of unknowns... if they can isolate even one antibody or mutation... it could be a cure, a vaccine, a miracle drug... it would be worth billions.”

“Right,” Erica breathes, processing. “So Jack gets his payback, and Peterson grows his obscene fortune even more. All for the small price of some non-humans.”



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Monica stares at the table, shoulders curling inward. She's collapsing under the weight of both the past and the future.

“I guess he never got over me. The divorce. It’s so ironic...” she swallows, blinking as if trying to chase away ghosts. “I talked to Raul about him. I thought Jack would eventually move on. Raul didn’t.”

Erica makes a small noise in her throat. “You know, you really should start listening to him.”

“Jack’s obsession was deeper than I wanted to admit,” Monica murmurs, her eyes lost in the dark, like she’s retracing every misstep that brought us here. “He must’ve gone to extraordinary lengths to prove something to Ivan. Whatever he showed him, it was enough.”

A tightness coils in my chest.

“You’re missing something,” I say, my voice sharper than I intend. “Jack saw Raul shift—right before Raul stopped him from hurting Monica. After that, it wouldn’t take much to start digging. Hire a PI. Hack records. Spy on us himself.”

A voice cuts through the tension. “Who’s been spying on us?”

We all turn as Sam emerges from the shadows near his cabin, his expression carved from stone. His eyes flick between us, jaw tense, like he knows he’s not going to like the answer.

Erica hesitates, then breathes out, “Monica’s ex.”

Sam’s whole body tightens. “Tell me you’re fucking joking.”

Raul and Ray come around the corner right behind Sam and even in the dim light, I see the fury brewing beneath Ray’s skin.

“Donahue? That Donahue? Last I checked, he was some wannabe copywriter with delusions of grandeur.”

Monica doesn’t blink. She stabs her finger at the phone like it’s a weapon.

“Jack had the motive and the idea. Ivan had the money. Together, they have the means.”

The silence that follows is suffocating. And I can’t shake the feeling that whatever comes next... none of us are ready.

“Shit. Those two must have teamed up with Dexter,” Ray says, circling behind my chair, voice low but biting. “It makes sense. They all win if we fall. Donahue gets revenge. Peterson gets richer. Dexter grabs what he couldn’t steal alone.”

Raul doesn’t blink. His voice slices the air, cold and sure.

“Over my dead body.” His jaw tightens, his expression hardening like stone. “We deal with Dexter and his mutts later. Donahue and his buddy come first.”

“I agree about Donahue,” Sam says, folding his arms. “But the buddy? He’s a much bigger problem. He may have gotten onto this by following Donahue’s lead, but Peterson’s a billionaire. He’s probably holed up in some guarded penthouse in Soho. Storming that? It’d be suicide. We should leave him alone.”

“After what that fuck did to you? No. No way, Sammy, you’re wrong,” Ray cuts in, sharp. “Peterson sees profit and now we’ve bled him. You think he’ll let this go no matter what we do to Donahue? He’ll come after us with more resources than we can even imagine.”

Raul nods slowly, rubbing his chin.

“Good point, kid. We need to cut the head off this snake. Best possibility is that we find them together. Kill them both, leaving no time for the other to retaliate.”

Monica stands, phone aglow in her hand. “I think I know just the place,” she says, eyes sharp with certainty. “Eco Med is hosting a fundraiser at the Mandarin Oriental in New York. Three days from now.”

Raul frowns, looking skeptical. “A packed hotel in the city? How the hell do we pull that off?”

“We’ll find a way,” Sam says with quiet confidence. “The key is getting them in the same room. At the same time.”

“Perfect,” Ray mutters, and suddenly he’s reaching for my wrist. “Time to go.”

“Hey!” I yelp, startled. “What the hell is that for?”

He doesn’t stop walking, but he glances back with something unreadable in his eyes.

“Because I owe you something,” he says. “Because I owe *us* something.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, my chest tightening.

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“Wait for it,” he says, that grin tugging at his mouth—mischievous and dangerous. He’s clearly got a plan.

We leave the backyard gathering. As we round the corner of the house, moonlight spills over everything in a silver wash. Then I see it—and stop dead in my tracks.

It’s parked beside the yard like a beast waiting to be unleashed—his latest obsession. The chrome gleams so brightly, I can see my reflection in the tank.

“She looks fantastic,” I whisper, reaching out to trace the sleek curves.

“She’s going to look even better with you on her,” he says, handing me a black helmet.

I don’t try to hide my smile. He slides the key into the ignition and hits the start button. The engine answers with a deep, throaty roar that sends a thrill through me. I swing my leg over the seat and settle in behind him. The rumble between my thighs is pure adrenaline. He remembered. Through all the chaos and everything we’ve been through, he remembered.

I wrap my arms around his waist and press my cheek to his back. He revs the motor three times then the motorcycle bounds into motion. We tear down the road, leaving the Crawfords’ cabins behind.

The wind hits my face, sharp and cold, but that only adds to my excitement. Houses blur past in streaks of dark and light. All the tension and all the noise in my head fades. This moment belongs to us.

We climb the winding hill toward Shandaken, trees blurring past like restless ghosts. I realize I have no idea where we're going—but it doesn't matter. A lake, river, or some forgotten path in the woods. It's irrelevant. All I need is this—him, me, the open road, and the hum of something alive beneath us.

When we hit the T-junction just outside town, I think he'll take the turn Monica always raves about. She's talked about Raul taking her up to the hillside so many times it's burned into my mind like a dream I haven't lived yet.

Ray doesn't turn, though. He keeps going straight into Shandaken.

The engine snarls as we enter town, louder than anything this sleepy place is used to hearing. A few heads turn. Some glare. An older man mutters something I can't hear, but I see it in the tight line of his mouth.

Ray doesn't flinch. He rides like the road owes him a debt. I lean in, pressing closer. Let them stare.

We pass through town and into the dark stretch of highway beyond. The streetlights fade, swallowed by night. Trees press in from both sides, looming. A jagged mountain rises in the distance, its silhouette massive against the starlit sky.

After four sharp turns, Ray veers off the road. Gravel crunches beneath the tires, but the bike doesn't falter. The suspension handles the uneven field like it was made for it.

Ray pulls to a stop, and the engine cuts out with a final purr. He swings his leg over the seat and offers me his hand.

“Here we are.”

I accept his hand, stepping off, and draw in a breath. The view hits me like a punch to the chest, stunning me to silence. We're on a cliff and the forest stretches below us, dark and endless. Farther in the distance are the scattered lights of Shandaken, flickering like fireflies. Beyond that—tiny and faint—Dawson glows at the valley's base, a memory cast in gold.

“Wow...” The word escapes me, too small for everything I feel.

“‘Pretty’ doesn't even begin to cover it, huh?” He squeezes my hand, his smile soft and knowing. “This used to be my favorite place growing up. All these years, it still gets to me.”

“I get it,” I whisper, heart swelling. “I don't think I could ever get tired of this.”

We walk slowly toward the edge of the field, the cool grass brushing my calves. My fingertips graze his. The silence between us stretches, but it's not uncomfortable. It's... honest. Then his steps falter. He looks at me, his gaze softer.

“Listen, I...” he starts, then hesitates. “Thank you for the past couple of weeks. I was falling apart. I don't think I would've found my way out if it weren't for you.”

Emotion rises in my throat, thick and sudden.

“Ray, you pushed Monica to look into my mom's death... you opened the door. You helped me find the truth—even if it hurt. I needed that. You didn't let me drown in not knowing.”

A bittersweet smile twists across his face.

“Did you ever think we'd end up here? After the mess we made of things?”

“No. God, no. ‘Got off on the wrong foot’ doesn’t even scratch the surface. We were a disaster,” I laugh, feeling light and happier than I can ever remember feeling.

“We were,” he agrees, stepping closer as his arms slip around my waist. “But I don’t want to relive that disaster. I want to remember this. Right now. You. Me. This moment.”

“Then shut up and kiss me, idiot,” I murmur, looping my arms around his neck with a grin.

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His mouth curves into that slow, infuriatingly sexy smile that makes my heart skip. He leans in, and when our lips meet, everything else vanishes. Just him. Just us. The night, the wind, the stars—all of it fades into nothing.

A soft breeze stirs the field around us, lifting strands of my hair into the air. They brush his face, his cheeks, his temples—but he doesn't move. Doesn't flinch. He's all in.

And so am I.

The world can fall apart tomorrow. But tonight? I have this. I have him. And for once—that's more than enough.

28

RAY

Wouldn't life be perfect if it were just long bike rides and wild kisses under the open sky?

That thought keeps circling my head. It dug in three days ago and won't let go. I know why. It's instinct. A defense mechanism.

My brain clings to the softness of that dream, desperate to balance the harsh reality I've been trudging through with my brothers. Sammy calls what we're about to do "taking care of business"—he never uses rough words if he can help it. Ever the gentleman—even in war. Raul, on the other hand, doesn't sugarcoat it. He says we're



going to “tear those sons of bitches to pieces.”

Me? I call it what it is: doing whatever it takes to get our lives back.

We’ve been living in a shadow for too long. That cursed building out in the middle of nowhere. The ambush on Erica and Stacy. And worst of all—my brother was kidnapped, leaving us all thinking he was dead. The grief nearly broke us. These psychopaths didn’t just take Sammy. They took something sacred to our entire valley—our peace of mind.

This isn’t about comfort—it’s about survival. Without that peace, everything collapses. I won’t call this revenge because it isn’t. This is justice, a reckoning, and a restoration. We’re not committing a crime. We’re righting a wrong—meeting cruelty with resolve.

Until now, we’ve been reacting to everything they’ve done. And all of it led us here. A goddamn fundraiser in one of the fanciest hotels in New York, the Mandarin Oriental. None of us belong here. We aren’t rich. We’re not celebrities or Wall Street sharks with private elevators and fake smiles. We’re just three wolves from the woods, clawing our way into enemy territory.

But Monica had a plan.

“There’s an ID check at the front. Unless you can pass as someone famous, you won’t get in. But janitorial staff? They don’t check their IDs. Grab a blue uniform, a bucket, a mop—that’s your golden ticket,” she told us.

And she was right. It worked like a charm.

We’re dressed like maintenance workers—uniforms on, tools in hand. The valet barely glances up, checks his watch and waves us through.

“Come on, people,” he mutters. “I want to be able to eat off that basement floor.”

The hotel sparkles like a polished jewel in the city’s crown. Lights shimmer against the glass, reflecting a city that never learned how to sleep. The place hums with expensive perfume and fake laughter. Limousines line up like predators waiting to pounce. High heels click across marble. Cameras flash. Reporters shout. And up there, behind all that glamor, our enemies lurk.

“Damn,” Raul whispers as we crouch on the landing of the grand staircase, peering down at the scene below. “That guy’s suit probably costs more than I’ll make in a year.”

“Can you focus?” I mutter, brushing past the row of spotless toilets.

“I am focused,” he says, and I hear the edge in his voice. He’s watching. Listening. Calculating—just like me.

Downstairs, the applause begins. Another big donor must be entering. The pack of leeches claps like trained seals.

“They’re here. If either of you has a plan, now’s the time,” Raul murmurs, leaning in.

“Relax,” Sammy says, his voice smooth as he slides his bucket across the floor. “There’s no bathroom in the lobby. They’ll have to come down here eventually.”

Raul isn’t convinced. “Enlighten me on this master plan of yours.”

“We don’t want to make a scene,” Sam replies, calm as ever. “So, they come to us.”

I don’t need more explanation. We trust each other. If Sam has a plan, I’ll follow him through hell.

The sting of chlorine clings to the back of my throat. I keep clear of the restrooms, patrolling thirty feet out so I can see without being obvious. Everything's clean. Everything's quiet. Too quiet.

I scan the hallway. Men and women glide through like ghosts, dripping in gold and drowning in cologne. Especially the women—layers of perfume so thick I could track them blindfolded. They remind me of Erica, but not in a good way. These women wear their scents like armor. Trying to be noticed. Trying to matter. They don't realize how desperate they smell.

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Then I hear it. A lazy, drawling voice. Ivan Peterson. We watched his interviews—his smug tone etched into my memory.

Sam whistles as Peterson clears the last step. Raul shifts, silent and sure, kicking his bucket across the tiles and pulling the caution sign out of his cart. Sam's already near the elevators, fiddling with his mop, waiting for the bait to bite.

Peterson pauses, phone in hand, clearly annoyed.

"Sir?" Sam calls out, his voice mild. "Can you give me a hand? The bucket's stuck, and I need to swap the water."

Peterson glares.

"Do you have any idea who I am?"

"I do. That's why I'm asking. Just need an inch. Won't take a second." Peterson sighs like it's the hardest decision he's ever made, then steps forward.

Sam moves fast. As Peterson leans in, Sam grabs his collar, spins him, and slams him into the chrome wall. His cheek hits with a crack that echoes.

"Hey!" a voice shouts from the far end.

Donahue. Raul's moving.

"Come here, you piece of shit!" Raul snarls, grabbing Donahue's arm and slamming

him into the bathroom door.

The door bursts open with a bang as Raul shoves him inside.

“Make it quick,” Sam mutters, yanking the caution signs into place. “We’re on the clock.”

I step into the elevator, staring at Peterson lying crumpled on the floor. His expensive tie is crooked. His combed-over hair is a mess.

“You bankrolled Donahue’s little war,” I say in a low voice. “Meeting you isn’t a pleasure. It’s overdue.”

“Who—?” he gasps, trying to rise. I crouch beside him.

“I’m the last face you’ll ever see.”

Rage hits like a wave. No hesitation. I lock both hands around his throat. He squirms, eyes wide with disbelief. He doesn’t think something like this can happen to him, but I know it can. And I’m not letting go.

He fights, slamming his fists against my arms. I don’t budge. My fingers tighten. He gasps for air, tongue pushing past his lips.

“Wait—please—I can pay?—”

“One death,” I growl, squeezing harder.

He bucks, his face turning red, then purple. His legs kick weakly. I yank his head up—then slam it down hard. The crack echoes off the chrome. I don’t flinch. He gurgles. The fight drains from his limbs.

One last twitch. One last gasp. Gone.

Sam's voice breaks through the haze.

“Good. Now help me get him out. We can't hold the elevator forever.” I exhale heavily, still panting.

My heart pounds like a war drum. I shift around the body, grab his arms. Sam takes the ankles. Together, we drag the bastard into the nearest bathroom, adrenaline roaring in my veins.

Upstairs, the fundraiser keeps buzzing—music, laughter, toasts to things they don't understand. Down here, death hums quiet and sure. As I step back into the hall, Raul meets me with a grim nod.

“Is it done?”

“Yeah.” My voice is steady.

“What about you?”

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“Donahue won’t bother us again.”

I glance once over my shoulder. Two monsters down.

“Let’s move.”

We vanish before the blood even cools.

29

RAY

The sky ahead softens, streaked with hues of orange and crimson slicing through the navy veil of night. Dawn. A real one. Peaceful. Honest.

I rest my head against the window, watching the mountains take shape in the growing light. We did it. Jack Donahue and Ivan Peterson are gone—dead in those marble-floored bathrooms. They won’t haunt our people again. They won’t haunt me either.

Raul is his usual loud self, gesturing too much as he recounts everything for the third time. Sam, ever the strategist, stays reserved, repeating the core facts like we weren’t even there. What matters is not only that we did it, but we did it without the wolves.

Letting our wolves handle Jack and Ivan might’ve been faster—easier—but it also would’ve been a bloodbath. The kind of spectacle that draws exactly the attention we’ve spent years avoiding.

They wouldn't have paused to consider consequences. They'd have torn those men to pieces in front of God and everyone, leaving the mess right there on the hotel floor. No question—the guests upstairs would've heard the screams. Maybe seen claws. Fangs. Bodies ripped open.

And then what? Rumors. Videos. Panic. More labs. More soldiers. And eventually, they'd find Dawson. Find us.

There'd be no safety. No witch strong enough to wipe every video, to pull back a reveal already flooding the internet. There would have been no lucky break. There is no way it wouldn't have ended with the military rounding us up like infected animals. We didn't just protect ourselves tonight. We protected all of Dawson.

I see it in my brothers' eyes too—the quiet satisfaction. We're drained, but the cab feels lighter, like a knot inside us finally gave way. That feeling shatters the moment we near home.

“What the hell?” Raul mutters, leaning forward.

A massive figure paces in front of Raul's cabin—bare-chested, muscles carved with tension. He's not alone. A smaller form stands beside him, cloaked in black. Familiar. Female. My pulse stutters.

Raul slams the truck to a stop and is out before I can speak, striding toward the pair.

“Should I even bother saying good morning?” Raul calls to the scout—Mark Gibbs, one of our sharpest. He's pacing like a caged animal, eyes darting to the horizon. “Because something tells me it's not.”

“We've got trouble,” Gibbs replies, face grim. “They're back, Raul. Mercer's pack. And they're not hiding anymore.”



The words hit like ice water dumped down my spine.

“We ran into them near Lake Paxton last night,” Gibbs says. “We almost had the drop on them—but Dexter spotted us and pulled them back.”

Raul scoffs. “Let me guess. The bastard wants peace now?”

“He wouldn’t say. He screamed at his pack, but when I pressed him, all he said was he wants ‘a sit-down with Raul Crawford.’”

My blood is boiling and I can’t stop the growl that breaks free of my throat.

“A sit-down?” I bark a bitter laugh. “Unbelievable. That fucker sent his people after Stacy and Erica in New York? He sacrificed one of his own to make it look like Sam had died and now he wants to talk?”

“He’s got some balls,” Sam growls beside me, fists clenched. “What does he think we are? Idiots? Forgiving? Letting him live near us would be like handing him a second chance to finish what he started.”

Raul holds up a hand. “Look, I know you’re both pissed. I am too. Believe me, I’d love to rip his throat out.”

Sam narrows his eyes. “There’s a ‘but’ coming.”

“There is,” Raul admits, glancing toward the land like it might answer him. “They’re shifters. Like us. Not vampires. Not witches. There might even be family ties somewhere down the line. It’s not simple.”

“It is simple,” I snap. “They tried to destroy us. I don’t care what blood runs through their veins—evil’s still evil.”

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Sam nods, voice hard. “We already spared them once. We give them another shot, they’ll take it as weakness. And that’s on us.”

Raul’s quiet for a beat, then turns to Gibbs. “Gather everyone at Joe’s. Two hours.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. A vote? You’re letting them decide what happens to traitors?” I ask, staring at him in disbelief.

“No,” Raul bites out. “I want our pack to have a say. You think war’s the hard part? It’s not. You let the animal out, and it does the job. The real battle comes after—when the blood’s dried and you’re left with the choices you made. The ones that never stop echoing.”

His words strike a place I keep buried—a place full of ghosts I never asked for. And he’s right. That’s what kills me. Every fight we’ve survived leaves a mark. Some nights, I see the faces. Some deserved what they got. Some... I’m not so sure.

But Mercer’s pack? I assure. Until now.

We’ll put it to the pack. Let them decide if mercy still has a place in us.

30

RAY

Joe’s Bar is packed, tension crackling through the air like static. It coats my tongue with the bitter sting of ash and adrenaline.

Every pack member is here—near, far, it doesn't matter. Not one of them is sitting. They're clustering in small groups, whispering and waiting. Sam leans next to me at the counter, arms crossed, scanning the room like he's planning an assault. Raul paces in front of the bar, nervous energy coming off him in waves. His mouth's calm, but his body's loud.

"Fifty-nine," Gibbs reports from the doorway. "That's all of us."

Raul stops his pacing, facing the assembled pack. The soft chatter continues.

"Quiet!" he says, too loud, but silence falls instantly. "You know why we're here. Mercer's pack is camped outside Dawson."

A groan ripples through the room. Raul lets it pass before speaking again.

"We offered them trust. Gave them peace and they betrayed us," Raul says. "They sacrificed one of their own just to make it look like Sammy was dead. In truth, they teamed up with humans who locked him in a goddamn cage. We took care of the humans, but the Mercers are still out there. So the question is—what do we do now?"

"Fight!" someone shouts before he even finishes.

"With all due respect," Locksmith growls, stepping forward, "this isn't peace—they've earned our hate."

"They went after your family, Raul," Kyle snaps, his voice raw. "How can you even hesitate?"

Raul lifts his chin. "This isn't softness. It's choice. So let's make it official—war or peace?"

“WAR!” The word erupts like a thunderclap. Arms shoot into the air, voices layered with rage and righteousness.

Raul’s jaw tightens. He hates the answer—I can see it—but he nods. He asked. Now he has to follow through.

“Alright. Tonight, no warnings. We hit hard, hit fast, and we don’t leave loose ends. Midnight. When it’s done, come back here.”

The cheers swell so loud that they rattle the walls. Packmates slap each other’s backs. Some even hug. From the outside, it might look insane. Who celebrates a coming war? But I get it.

We’re not fighting strangers—we’re fighting those who once called us family. Who tricked us. Betrayed us. Hurt us—twice. This isn’t vengeance. It’s protection.

There’s no room for doubt. No forgiveness left to bleed.

31

STACY

“What’s going on out there?” Erica asks. Her voice cuts through the quiet of the kitchen, sharp with worry.

She doesn’t need to ask—we’re both standing by the window, trying to make sense of the chaos unfolding. Hearing her say it, though, makes it real.

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I press my hand against the cool glass, my breath fogging a small circle on the pane. People are running. Not in panic—but in a strange, energized rush. They look like some collective frenzy has seized everyone on the street. Laughter and shouts of joy fill the air. The sound echoes up and down the road like the town's been injected with adrenaline.

I focus on the faces. A woman I don't know spins in the middle of the road, arms raised. Two boys dart past her, fists pumping like they've scored the winning touchdown. Words drift up through the partially open window.

“It ends tonight!”

“Let's get rid of them!”

None of it makes sense. Not the cheering. Not the dancing. Not the words that sound like they belong in a damn war movie.

The growl of an engine cuts through the noise. I flinch as Ray's silver pickup tears up the road, dust spinning in its wake. It screeches to a stop outside the cabin. He jumps out first, flanked by the other two—those mountain-sized brothers Erica calls the “Brick Houses.” They've always looked like walking tanks to me, but right now, they are something else entirely.

They're not smiling. Unlike the jubilant crowd outside, their faces are hard, drawn. Like men who've seen something too heavy to shake. Ray walks in but doesn't speak. He walks toward me like he's got all the time in the world, even though it feels like the world is turning upside down.

“You must be in a world of confusion right now,” he says, a hint of a smile ghosting his lips.

His voice is calm. Too calm. It grates against the energy pulsing through the street, too measured in a world that’s gone wild.

I raise an eyebrow, arms folding across my chest instinctively.

“Why would you say that?”

“You just confirmed it,” he replies, and now that small curve is a full-blown smirk. “You’re not so tough to read, Stac.”

I bristle. I hate being predictable, so I don’t answer. Instead, I glance again out the window at the swirling chaos.

“Why is everyone so... thrilled?”

My voice barely carries, but it’s enough. His smile doesn’t fade, but there’s a flicker in his eyes—something darker, buried underneath.

“And why aren’t you?” I add, turning back to him fully.

“Oh, I am,” he says, tone light, but his face stays solemn. “I might not look like it, but trust me—I am. We’re settling our differences with the Mercer pack tonight.”

The words slam home. The Mercer pack.

He says it like it’s a normal thing. Like it’s a friendly poker game and not some savage blood feud. Like “settling differences” won’t involve claws, teeth, and screams. Ray doesn’t even pause.

“By the time we’re done, they’ll wish they never came near us.”

He says it with absolute conviction. Sure of himself. Sure of his pack. Sure of the outcome. I blink, my stomach knotting tighter with every beat.

“So they’re all excited about going to war?” My voice pitches higher, raw with disbelief. “You do realize how completely insane that sounds, right?”

He doesn’t flinch.

“I’m not happy,” he says evenly, eyes locked on mine. “I’m satisfied. There’s a difference. I like that this insanity is finally coming to an end.”

I don’t buy it. I can’t. I shake my head and step back from the window. Suddenly, the distance between us is too small, too charged.

“I don’t get it,” I murmur, folding my arms around myself. “All of you are about to risk your lives. The Mercer pack isn’t a pushover. They’re every bit as strong as you. Maybe even stronger. Why the hell are you all acting like this is something to celebrate?”

Ray exhales slowly, then takes a single step closer. Not threatening. Not demanding. Just... there. Solid. Grounded.

“Because we’re fighting for something,” he says softly, almost reverent.

Then he leans in, voice dropping even lower.

“Because I’m fighting for everything you see around you... this town... these people...you.”

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That last word lands like a punch to the chest. I stare while my heart hammers too fast. My lips part, a breath catching in my throat. I want to say something. Anything. But the weight of his words steals my breath.

He moves before I recover. Wrapping his long, strong arms around my waist. I barely have time to register it before I'm enveloped in him—his scent, his warmth, the press of his chest against mine.

And God, it feels good. Too good.

A soft kiss grazes my temple, and something cracks open. That flutter in my chest turns into a full-on storm, wild and uncontrollable. I don't care that I can't move my arms in his grip. I melt.

It's stupid. It's reckless. It's dangerous to let myself feel this much, but I can't deny that I do.

"Bike ride," he whispers into my ear, voice like velvet. "All the way to New York... when I get back."

I let out a shaky breath—a quiet huff, half laugh, half sob. "Okay."

A hundred and thirty miles. I imagine the wind tearing through my hair, sun painting the sky above us, his hand in mine. I can see it. I can feel it. None of it means anything if he doesn't make it back.

I bury my face against his chest, squeezing my eyes shut. I want to freeze this



moment and keep it safe. I want to believe in that stupid road trip dream like a child believing in fairy tales. But the truth doesn't care about dreams.

There are no guarantees. Not for Ray. Not for anyone going into that fight. Yet there is a flicker of hope that sparks inside me. Tiny and fragile, but alive.

It's like he's feeding a fire inside me. By the way he holds me like I'm the only thing that matters. By the way he speaks of fighting not for glory or pride—but for us. I cling to that fire, praying it will be enough to see him through the night. Because I've never wanted anything more than that ride to New York.

With him. Alive. Free.

32

STACY

I'm worried.

No—that's not strong enough.

I'm terrified.

My stomach twists with dread, an invisible vice squeezing tighter with every minute that passes.

This wasn't supposed to be a drawn-out battle—no careful war strategies, no lines in the sand. Just instinct versus instinct. Claw against claw. Blood, dirt, and muscle.

And yet... there's nothing. No howls of victory. No scent of returning wolves. Only the soft rustle of wind through the trees and the hollow coo of a distant cuckoo.

Even the forest feels wrong. It's too still, like it's holding its breath.

"Relax, Red," Erica says, leaning against the porch railing, arms crossed like she hasn't a care in the world. "I'm sure they're all right. It's not their first rodeo."

I stop pacing, whip around, and glare—heat rising to my cheeks.

"Rodeo? Are you kidding me? They may be dying out there, and you're calling it a rodeo?"

She flinches at my tone, her casual facade slipping.

"Hey, don't get upset on me, girl," she says, her voice softening. "They've done this before. They're experienced. They know what they're doing."

"You should have gone with them," I snap, the words cutting sharper than I mean them. "They need you and your witch powers. You know they could've used you."

She tightens her jaw, eyes narrowing. She straightens, squaring her shoulders.

"I know," she says, meeting my angry look with her own. "But Sammy didn't want me there."

"Since when do you take orders from?—"

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A sharp crack in the air cuts me off, yanking my attention to the yard. A streak of black and red mist slams into the ground then a gust of wind and dust sweeps across the porch. I stumble back a step, blinking and wiping at my eyes to try and see through the swirling debris.

When the smoke clears, four figures stand—two facing two. Three of them are strangers, one is Helena. Between the four of them, slumped, naked, and unmoving, is the one person I could never mistake.

Ray.

My breath catches like a fist to the throat. I can't move. Can't speak. He collapses to the ground and the sight of him—broken, vulnerable—rips a scream that comes straight from my heart.

“Oh my God.” My hands fly to my mouth as I run to him. “Ray... what did they do to you?”

His body is wrecked. Deep gashes are torn through both sides of his abdomen. Long, angry claw marks rake over his torso. His legs are caked in dirt, and his throat... oh god, his throat is marred with dark, angry bites. Blood weeps from the open wounds.

“Get him inside!” Monica’s voice is sharp and commanding. She sprints to the cabin and throws the door open.

“Where are the others?” Erica demands, running to Helena.

“Sam is fine,” the witch says, barely sparing her a glance. “He’s hurt, but he’ll live. So will Raul. Now move.”

“Wait—!” Erica yells.

But Helena doesn’t wait. She raises her staff, slams it to the ground—and vanishes in a swirl of mist before Erica can say another word.

I barely register her departure because I’m stumbling after the others into Ray’s cabin. It’s like wading through molasses—slow, surreal, and suffocating. Everything is surreal. I’m watching this nightmare play from outside my body.

They lower his broken body onto the couch. Monica tosses white sheets over the cushions, then guides them gently into place. They move with something akin to reverence. I don’t know the strangers who brought him, but I want to fall to my knees and thank them for their care.

“Details,” Monica says. Her voice is calm, clinical. Each word is clipped and precise. “How long since he was injured?”

“Thirty, maybe forty minutes,” one of the men answers. “He fought like hell.”

“Forty minutes...” Monica mutters, already rummaging through her kit. “Why wait so long to bring him here?”

“We were in the middle of it,” he says, his voice tight with frustration. “We couldn’t break free from the fight.”

Monica doesn’t respond. Her focus is locked on Ray. She waves them off without looking.

“Fine. Thank you. Now leave. That includes you too, Stacy. I’m sorry, but I need space.”

“How bad is it?” I ask, my voice cracking under the weight of the question. The words scrape past the tightness in my throat. My eyes sting, brimming with unshed tears.

Monica looks up—just for a second—and her mask falters. In that brief moment, I see everything. Panic. Desperation. Grief.

It steals the breath from my lungs.

“Stacy, please,” she says, barely holding it together. And in her eyes, I see something that destroys me—fear. Not just for Ray, but for me. She’s afraid of what this will do to me.

Something inside me breaks.

I turn and stumble outside. Every step feels like I’m dragging my body through quicksand. My lungs can’t seem to fill. My vision blurs. I sink down on the porch steps, my knees giving out beneath me.

The wind stirs, scattering dust across the yard. I brace my elbows on my knees, trembling hands clasped in my lap, and try to breathe. I still see Ray—bloodied and broken. I can still smell the metallic sting of his wounds. The silence presses in like a never-ending scream.

God. Please let him live.

A sound like thunder shatters the quiet. I bolt upright.

A stampede of wolves crashes through the trees, snarling and wild as they charge past the cabin. I don't recognize most of them—not that it matters. None of them are him.

Ray promised me a bike ride. All the way to New York.

When I get back.

How? How are we supposed to go anywhere now?

He came back shattered. Barely breathing. And those words... they echo in my skull, ghostly and cruel.

“Any news yet?” a deep voice asks beside me.

Sam limps toward the steps, one arm slung around Erica’s waist. His face is pale, streaked with grime and blood. He looks like death. But he’s still standing. Still moving. It’s not fair. It’s just not fair.

“No,” I whisper, my throat raw. “What happened?”

He lets out a breath that sounds like it hurts.

“Too much,” he says grimly. “It was the worst fight we’ve seen.”

“I can tell.” I stare at the wood beneath my feet, blinking fast. Then I speak again, barely above a whisper. “I think your brother’s dying.”

Sam crouches beside me, placing a steadying hand on my shoulder.

“I know,” he says quietly. “I saw him go down.” His grip tightens. “But he’s a fighter, Stacy. You know that. He’s not going anywhere.”

“Don’t,” I say.

He hesitates. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t lie to me. Don’t pretend you believe he’ll be okay.”

“I do believe it,” he says—but his voice falters.

“I’m not a doctor,” I whisper, swallowing against the tight knot in my throat. “But I saw what they did to him. I saw the blood. The bites.”

Before he can respond, Erica kneels beside me and wraps her arms around my shoulders. I collapse into her without hesitation, the weight of it all tearing loose from my chest. My sobs come fast, violent, and uncontrollable.

Her hands stroke my back, gentle and slow.

“I’ve got you,” she whispers. “Let it out, Red. I’ve got you.”

And I do. I let it all out. The fear. The helplessness. The unbearable guilt. It pours from me like a dam breaking until I’m shaking in her arms, gasping through the tears as my heart splits open.

Then—Click.

The cabin door opens.

I jerk upright, head spinning. Monica steps onto the porch, her hands covered in blood, her expression unreadable. Our eyes meet.

“He’s stable,” she says at last. “I stopped the bleeding. That’s all I can do here. I’ve



called an ambulance. They're on their way."

"Thank you," I whisper, though the words feel hollow compared to what I mean.

She nods once and slips back inside without another word.

I sit there in silence, cradled between Erica's arms and Sam's steady presence.

It should feel like relief. But Monica didn't say how deep the wounds go. Or how close it was. Or how far we still are from safe. She didn't say whether Ray would ever walk again. If he'll wake up. If he'll remember me.

She didn't have to.

We've known each other too long.

So I fold my hands together.

And I pray.

I pray for Ray to wake up. I pray for one more day.

I pray for that ride to New York. And I pray?—

That I won't lose the only man who ever made me believe in forever.

33

STACY

Five minutes after the ambulance pulls in, they load Ray onto the stretcher—and something inside me splits wide open. It's a stabbing certainty, sharp and clean, driving straight into my heart.

I love him.

No more pretending. Every second of panic during that fight, the way my chest clenched waiting for news, the hollow ache when I saw his broken body—it all adds up to one devastating truth.

I'm in love with Ray Crawford.

“OR One! Move it, people!” Monica's voice slices through the chaos—firm,

commanding, in control.

She doesn't say anything to me directly, but the message is clear—Ray needs surgery. That's what she meant back in Dawson when she said she'd done all she could. I clutch my arms around myself, helpless, and watch them wheel him away.

Raul, Sammy, and Erica show up a few minutes later, catching up to the ambulance I rode in with Ray. They find me in the waiting room. Raul sits beside me, his face scratched and bruised. He looks like hell, but then we all do.

"He's in good hands," he says, voice low.

I glance over.

"No offense, but I thought you'd be more upset. I mean... he's your brother."

His jaw tightens, and he looks away.

"Believe me, Stacy. I am upset—I just don't want to show it here."

"He means he doesn't want to start breaking stuff," Sam says, easing himself into the chair beside Erica.

"Man, what a night..." He rakes a hand through his hair, the motion slow and heavy with exhaustion. "I still hear that noise. That awful noise..."

"Now's not the time for details," Erica snaps. "We all saw what happened on that hill. Someone almost died."

"I want to know," I tell Sam, leaning forward. "What happened? How did Ray get hurt?"

Sam's bravado slips. He looks at Raul, I'm not sure if he's asking for permission or what. Raul shrugs.

"By being brave," he says, then shrugs. "And maybe a little stupid. He rushed in to take on one of Dexter's wolves. He had that one handled—until another joined in. We were all locked in our own fights, so he was left facing both. Helena jumped in to help, but Raul... Raul was going toe-to-toe with Dexter himself."

He pauses, looking at his brother again. Raul grunts, shakes his head, then nods.

"Dexter had a plan. Two more wolves jumped Raul from behind. Ray couldn't let that happen, so he went for it—tried to break away from the two he was already fighting. But then Dexter's lieutenants came out of nowhere. Two more. That made four on him. Ray killed one. I got the other. But by then..." He trails off, swallowing hard. "It was already too late."

"How long has it been?" Raul asks, jerking his thumb toward the OR doors.

"Almost three hours," Erica murmurs as she glances at the clock.

Then—thump. I jump at the sound. We all turn. Monica stands in the doorway, wiping her hands on her scrubs.

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“Well?” I ask, breath caught in my throat.

“Good news,” she says, her eyes lighting up. “Ray’s going to be alright.” Her eyes light up. “I was worried about his leg, but the damage wasn’t as bad as we feared. It’ll take time for him to walk again, but he’ll recover. He’s going to be okay.”

Relief floods me like a warm tide, and I close my eyes, offering up my gratitude. “Thank God...”

“Told you he was in good hands,” Raul grins, hugging Monica. “Thank you.”

“Go see him, Stacy. Just don’t stay too long. The anesthesia and painkillers will have him drifting off soon,” Monica adds.

I offer a smile as I make my way past her and down the hall. It’s only been a few hours, but it feels like I’ve been waiting years to see him. The sharp scent of antiseptic clings to the air as I step into the room, sterile and too quiet.

He’s pale and still, wrapped in gauze from the waist down. Bruises bloom across his face and shoulders. Stitches mark the places that nearly stole him from me.

“Hey, handsome,” I whisper, dragging a stool to his bedside. “How’re you feeling?”

He cracks a smile. “Handsome? Don’t make me laugh—it literally hurts.”

“I wasn’t joking.” I trail a knuckle down the inside of his forearm, needing the contact almost as much as he needs the reassurance.

“Yeah,” he murmurs, nodding slightly.

“So that’s it then,” I say softly. “Back to normal life. I return to my spreadsheets, and you go back to tuning engines.”

“Guess so.” His eyes are heavy with drugs and exhaustion.

I lean closer, until our faces are just inches apart.

“You’ve been through hell, so I’ll keep this simple. Is this it for us? You saved my life, and I’ll never forget that. But you live three hours away. And that’s real life talking.”

He doesn’t answer with words. Instead, he lifts a hand—slow, shaky—and cradles the back of my head, drawing me down until our lips meet. The kiss is soft, familiar, and full of quiet promises. A vow made without words.

That flutter in my chest returns—hope, longing, love—spilling through me like sunrise through dark clouds.

“How was that?” he murmurs, lips brushing mine. “Did that feel like the end of the line to you?”

“No, silly.” I smile and rest my forehead against his. “Just had to make sure you still passed the important tests.”

I draw back enough to look him in the eyes.

“This might not be the perfect moment, but I don’t care. I love you, Ray Crawford.”

He smiles, slow and wide. “I love you, too. And no, it’s not the meds talking. It’s me. Just... my heart.”

“I know.” I grin. “Monica said those meds are like a truth serum, so I’ll take that as gospel.”

“Stop teasing,” he groans, but there’s laughter behind it. “I’m in pain here.”

“I see that.” I press a soft kiss to the tip of his nose. “You focus on healing, okay? You still owe me that motorcycle ride to New York, remember?”

“I didn’t forget.” His eyes search mine, full of fire and something even stronger—commitment. “The minute I’m better, I’m taking you there. On my bike. Just you and me.”

That’s the Ray I fell for—determined, tender, and strong in all the ways that matter. The man I met in the Catskills, who once seemed cocky and wild and completely out of reach. But that version of him? That was just the surface. This Ray—bruised and bandaged, but still smiling—is the real one. The man who stepped between me and danger. The man who fought tooth and nail for the people he loved. The man who’s not afraid to show his heart, even when it’s stitched up and sore.

He doesn’t know it, but that one selfless act—saving me from a jealous wife—changed my life. He gave me something I’d been searching for longer than I even realized. A love that feels real. Not convenient. Not temporary. Real. Lasting. The kind that survives blood, sweat, and fear.

We earned this. We bled for it.

And now, we get to keep it.

Ray Crawford is mine.

And I’m his.

Always.