



A Home With the Pack (The Moonglen Shifters #1)

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Category: Urban

Description: Luna never planned to stay in the quiet mountain town of Moonglen. But after a mysterious blackout and an attack that leaves her bloodied and confused, she wakes in the home of two men who claim she's not just human—she's a shifter.

Ash, an alpha still mourning his lost mate, instantly recognizes Luna as his fated bond. Connor, his second, isn't sure what he feels—only that he doesn't want to let her go.

As Luna confronts a past of control and coercion, she also must face the wolf rising inside her—and the pull toward a home and a future she never believed she deserved.

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Luna

As I entered the town proper, I drove toward the backdrop of a large forest filled with ancient trees and lush shrubbery. It felt almost like a fairytale.

Moonglen was the kind of town where your boss was also your real estate agent or grocer. Maybe there was a cute bookstore owner or a friendly barista.

Large cities had advantages like convenience and anonymity, but I wanted to try something different. I could make a friend here and stay for a while.

The place was quiet—almost too calm. I had dreamed of this kind of peace, but part of me still braced for it to be temporary; it always was.

As my directions instructed, I turned left and passed a row of homes until I was directed to stop outside what essentially looked like a cabin. A navy blue sedan was parked outside, and an older woman was sitting in it.

After parking, I hopped out, and she did too. She was tall and elegant, with dark auburn hair styled in a sleek bun.

“Luna?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“I’m Maureen. It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too.” I moved forward and shook her hand. She started walking, and I followed her.

“There’s one key for both doors. You don’t need any specific instructions, as everything is simple to operate and in good order.” She unlocked the door, pushed it open, and remained on the small front porch.

“Great. Thanks,” I said.

“You’ll be able to start work tomorrow?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Excellent. I’ll see you at 9 a.m.”

Maureen had hired me for a six-month temporary administrative assistant assignment because her last one had gone on maternity leave.

She seemed a bit put out by it, as if spending time with a new baby was a personal affront.

It was clear she was used to getting her way.

I figured we would get along just fine; I knew how to keep my head down, cause no ripples, and fade into the background.

By 3:30, I had the keys and had met my boss. It was efficient—just how I liked it.

The cabin was more homey than my old apartment, and I loved it— the slanted roof and warm wooden fixtures.

Everything was in one room except for the bathroom, which doubled as the laundry room.

The kitchenette was simple yet functional, featuring a small, aged wooden table with two chairs beside it.

The bed, a luxurious queen, was to the left of the front door, with a new linen set sitting on the edge.

To the right of the bed and table was a well-worn sofa that still did its job, facing a medium-sized television.

It was perfect. The places I had lived before never had such a cozy space or a backyard.

Looking out at the verdant forest sloping down from the yard, I could imagine weekend hikes and book clubs. The trees rustled in the wind—or maybe it was something else. I shook off the thought; it was just nerves.

The floorboards creaked in a friendly way as I walked through the cabin. The scent of lemon cleaner lingered in the air, mingling with the piney aroma from the forest beyond.

I had already unpacked my few possessions. The supplies from the big-box supermarket just outside town were organized in the fridge and on the shelves. I kept things minimal and easy to pack. I wasn't sure why I brought a decent set of books along when I had a Kindle, but they comforted me.

My cell rang. It was Jessica. I put the call on speaker.

“Hi, Jess,” I said.

“Luna! Have you arrived?” Her voice crackled over the line; she was in some distant country providing medical services with Doctors Without Borders.

“Yep, all settled in the cutest cabin.”

“Is the landlord okay?”

“My boss, actually.”

“Efficient,” she noted.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Great minds think alike.”

“Everything good there?” I asked.

“Yeah, just busy and undersupplied. Oh, I’ve got to go. Have fun and be safe!”

With that, the whirlwind that was my best friend hung up.

She had taken me under her wing during my last stint in a foster home run by her parents.

She had seen many kids come and go, but she really adopted me.

We were the same age, shared similar interests, and were at the right point in our lives to explore our boundaries.

Jess had once dared me to skip class so we could take the bus to the beach.

It was the first time I remembered choosing joy over fear.

I made a hot chocolate and sat on the back steps, watching the sun set over the trees. I could hear the distant sounds of children playing and birds fluttering through the branches, and it all felt so restful.

I had been running my whole life—from foster home to foster home, from temp job to temp job. University was the longest I had ever stayed in one place. Maybe this time, everything would work out.

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CONNOR

The morning light filtered through the blinds like it did every damn day—soft, golden, indifferent. I blinked awake to the same ceiling I’d stared at for a year. Same bed. Same silence on the other side.

Ash was already up. I could hear the low clinking of cutlery and the hum of the kettle boiling in the kitchen. Predictable, just like everything else.

I dragged myself out of bed, muscles aching in the dull, familiar way. Not from training. Not from any real effort. Just from... existing.

We kept moving. That was our solution.

I padded down the hall barefoot. The smell of strong coffee hit first—Ash liked it borderline burnt. There he was at the counter, already dressed in his gym gear, dark curls still damp from the shower, his mouth drawn in that tight line it had settled into since Claire.

He slid a mug toward me without looking up. “Oats are in the pot.”

“Cheers,” I muttered, taking the coffee. No “good morning”. We’d stopped doing that. No need to state the obvious—we were both still breathing.

I poured my bowl of oats, topped it with half a banana, and leaned against the counter while we ate in silence. The radio was on low in the background, playing an upbeat song that felt obscene against the heavy silence between us.

Ash finally broke it. “Need to reorder protein powder.”

“I’ll sort it this afternoon,” I said. “We’re out of resistance bands, too.”

He nodded, staring into his bowl like it might offer him purpose.

Running the gym was all that tethered us to any kind of routine, movement, or goals—even if they weren’t ours anymore.

After Claire, everything that used to feel vibrant had dulled.

The weight racks, the floor mats, the clients laughing or grunting through sets—it all blurred into one long stretch of distraction.

But distractions were better than standing still.

We headed out around 5:45. The sky was still a heavy blue, frost still clinging to the grass.

We couldn’t see any other pack houses from here, but there’d be people up and about. Our place sat farther out, a bit more privacy—something Claire had wanted. Now it just felt too quiet.

Ash drove. I watched the woods blur past, bare trees and scattered evergreens reminding me how deep into winter we were. It used to matter. Now, I barely noticed the seasons changing.

When we got to the gym, we unlocked the doors and fell into the usual rhythm. The first class of the day was for early risers—shifters from other parts of the territory, mostly. Ash led the warmup while I checked clients in and restocked the towels.

We worked like clockwork. Spoke when necessary. Motivated when required and smiled when expected.

Fake it long enough, and maybe it'd start to feel real again.

I caught Ash standing by the punching bag between classes, gloves still on, his shoulders rising and falling in short bursts. He'd been going hard, sweat darkening the back of his shirt.

"You good?" I asked, tossing him a towel.

He caught it. Wiped his face. Nodded.

I didn't push. Neither of us liked being cornered by our grief.

It crept in when we least expected it, like when we walked past the kids' training class Claire used to run, or when someone asked about her without knowing.

Her name sat like a splinter under our skin. Small. Sharp. Impossible to ignore.

By midday, the gym had cleared out. I took care of the admin, ordered the powder and bands, and then wandered out to the back storage. Sometimes, I just needed the quiet—the hum of the fridge units, the smell of rubber mats and pine cleaner.

I leaned against the wall and let my eyes close for a second.

There was no closure when you lost a mate. No healing that stuck. Just adaptation. A slow forgetting—not of the person, but of who you were with them.

Ash and I used to laugh more. Claire had this way of drawing joy out of both of us, even when life was heavy. Her absence had sucked the light out of our world like a

black hole. And we hadn't figured out how to live around it.

Maybe we didn't want to.

By four, we were packing up. Ash didn't say much on the drive home. Neither did I. Words didn't help. Sometimes, they only scraped the wounds raw again.

At home, he kicked off his shoes and went straight for the shower. I stood in the kitchen, watching the kettle boil again, wondering if I had it in me to care about dinner.

Eventually, I grilled some chicken, threw together a salad from the fridge, and we ate without ceremony. It was another quiet meal. Another day survived.

Ash stretched and looked toward the door as the sun dipped below the treeline.

"Run?" he asked.

"Yeah."

We stepped out into the cool dusk. Shifting together had become another part of the routine—less about need and more about memory—muscle memory, mateship, movement that didn't require speech.

I shifted first, the familiar pull of fur and claws a comfort by now. Ash followed, and we loped into the woods side by side. The wind rushed past, and I didn't feel empty for a few precious moments.

Not full, but not hollow either.

We ran for a while. No direction. No plan. Just running. Until the light faded and the

woods whispered that it was time to return.

Back at the cabin, we shifted and dressed in silence. Ash stood in the living room doorway for a long moment, staring at the framed photo on the wall. Claire, smiling, sun-drenched, held both of us in that effortless way she had.

“She’d hate this,” he said quietly.

I didn’t pretend not to know what he meant. “Yeah.”

“She’d tell us to stop sulking and do something.”

“Probably call us idiots.”

He gave a weak huff. Not quite a laugh. “Yeah.”

We stayed like that for a minute. Two men in a house that still smelled like someone we’d lost. Going through the motions, keeping the lights on, and waiting for something to shift.

Neither of us said it, but I think we both felt it—this couldn’t go on forever. Something had to give.

We just didn’t know it would arrive in the form of a woman with soft eyes and a scent that would gut us both.

Not yet.

But soon.

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ASH

We weren't sure what drew us here, but we came, just outside our territory.

The air smelled wrong. The forest felt dead around us—no birds, no rustling leaves, just the sharp, metallic scent of blood.

And something that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Our pack didn't wander this far without reason, and as far as we knew, rival packs didn't hunt here either. That alone felt wrong.

There, on the forest floor. A woman. Naked, her body covered in scratches—like from claws—and bruises, her dark hair tangled. The forest was dense here, with a decent distance between the town limits. There was an odd scent lingering; a rival shifter had been here.

I put my snout to her and sniffed deeply. Something about her scent called to me.

Scooting back, I willed the change to happen. The thick fur retreated, my body reformed, and my paws became limbs again. It happened with minimal fuss now, but it had been hell in those early years when I started shifting.

I sniffed deeply. Something about her scent echoed mine .

I rolled her over, my heart pounding in my chest. When I saw her face, my breath caught—everything inside me froze.

The force of it nearly knocked me off my feet.

She looked so fragile and broken, her innocent face almost angelic.

A bruise bloomed over her eyes, but something about her sent a pulse of heat through my chest, a flare of recognition that made my hands shake.

I scooped her up, cradling her against my chest, careful not to jostle her.

She groaned softly, her breath shallow, and I could feel her heart hammering beneath my hands.

Every instinct told me to protect her. I paused for a moment, studying the slight form in my arms. Her scent didn't match any I'd known.

Foreign. But something in it pulled at me.

I cradled her to my chest and nodded to Connor.

We walked grimly back to the house. He remained in his wolf form, alert for any potential threats.

We were both hyper-alert. Every crunch of a leaf beneath my feet echoed in the unnatural quiet.

If it were true, then whatever had done this to her could return to finish the job.

My shoulders released when we stepped back into our territory, an invisible line marked by our scent.

I breathed a sigh of relief when we could see our house.

A large, modern home built to blend with the forest. Skylights and large windows invited nature into our living spaces.

Bringing her inside, I paused. The bedroom downstairs had a bathroom connected and was close to the living room.

It felt auspicious to put this woman here.

We had no choice; she had to go to her bed. Claire's old bed.

I pulled the covers back, placed her down, carefully arranging her head on the pillow and her arms by her side.

I'd prefer to dress her, but everything of Claire's, our former mate, was gone and would have been too big. I smoothed her hair back from her face. The bruise across her eyes seemed to grow. Connor growled as we noted it. He walked closer to the bed, sniffing at her hair, face, and neck.

Neither of us wanted to leave her, but we needed to talk.

I tilted my head to Connor, who loped ahead of me, graceful in his wolf form.

I sank into the couch, rubbing my face with my hands, her scent distracted me, urging me to return to her.

Connor had changed back and was completely naked. I tossed him the pants beside me.

He cursed. Those were my thoughts exactly. He shucked on the pants.

"You smelled it," I confirmed.

“Yeah. But it can’t be right. Can It?” He dropped down next to me.

“You mean, can we possibly have a second mate after...Claire?” The words felt heavy, like a stone in my chest. We buried Claire three years ago.

I still couldn’t say her name aloud. We had shared our mate bond—what was meant to be the only bond—and it was a pain I couldn’t ever quite outrun.

The idea that another bond could manifest, that another mate could be possible .

.. It felt like spitting in the face of everything I had lost. I wasn’t sure if I wanted it to or not.

But she was here, and I couldn’t deny her existence or my job to protect her.

“No,” Connor said quietly. “It’s not ‘we’.”

“What do you mean? I smell it. I felt it.”

He exhaled sharply. “I think it’s just you.”

“You feel nothing?” I asked, my voice low.

Connor’s gaze flicked to her, then back to me, as if trying to untangle a knot that wouldn’t loosen. “Not nothing . I feel... something, but it’s not the same. Not a mate bond. Not like I felt with Claire.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. Was it guilt that tightened my chest, or relief?

I didn’t know. Maybe I didn’t want to know.

This wasn't supposed to be a possibility.

I couldn't comprehend this. We had shared our first mate.

It had been nearly impossible and had ended tragically.

Second mates were rare—unheard of, even.

This could be almost as devastating as the first time.

“How did she end up here without the pack knowing she exists?” He asked questions we couldn't answer, but we needed to say them aloud.

For the past three years, we had existed here together, going through the motions of life.

But we hadn't had a proper conversation in a long time. Not since we'd buried our mate.

This wasn't just about the mate bond; it was about what brought her here, who—or what —had hurt her. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that what we were dealing with could be bigger than us.

“Doesn't matter,” I said, my voice low and steady, though the truth of it bit hard. “Whatever happens, we protect her. That's the job. It's what we do.”

I could see him grappling with the same conclusion. However, he had to accept it. Slowly, he nodded, but a lingering cloud of doubt still hung over him. “What if she's not meant to be ours—or rather, yours?”

I didn't respond immediately because I wasn't certain.

What was clear, however, was that the connection felt right.

Even if it wasn't the same as before, and even if it didn't completely make sense, my attraction towards her was undeniable.

I couldn't just walk away from her after everything I had already experienced.

“I’ll deal with it. Later,” I said, my voice firm. “For now, we get her back to full strength. We find out what happened. One thing at a time.”

Connor didn’t look convinced, but I didn’t need him to be. He just had to follow my lead. “You sure about this?”

I exhaled, leaning back against the couch, rubbing my face. There were a hundred things I wasn’t sure about right now, but this? This I was sure of. “I don’t have a choice, Connor. And neither do you.”

His eyes met mine then, a quiet understanding passing between us. He wasn’t going to like it, but he would follow. He always did.

“I know. Just be careful, Ash.” His voice softened at the end, more concern than anything else. “She’s not like Claire.”

I could hear the unspoken words between us. Claire had been ours , and this woman was different. But as I looked at her, still unconscious, so fragile, I knew one thing for sure.

“She isn’t just another stranger. She’s ours.” Mine, biologically, ours by way of family.

And we would protect her, whatever it took.

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LUNA

I didn't know how long I'd been out, but the sluggishness in my body told me it had been too long. My senses felt muted as though I were drowning in fog. I tried to push through it, to force my mind to clear, but it wasn't working.

The first thing I registered was voices. They were low and rough, yet they carried a weight that felt like they were meant for me. They weren't close, not right beside me, but near enough for me to hear every word.

"Doesn't matter," one voice said, calm but firm. It was deep, commanding. Protective. "Whatever happens, we protect her. That's the job. It's what we do."

There was something about those words—an edge to them that made my heart beat a little faster. Protect her. But who? I couldn't remember why I'd need protecting. The haze in my mind clouded everything, like a dream I couldn't hold onto. But still, the words lingered in the air.

Another voice, this one a bit softer, but still strong, responded. "What if she's not meant to be ours—or rather, yours?"

I tensed, trying to focus, to understand. What did that even mean? Not meant to be ours?

"I'll deal with it. Later." The first voice again, more final this time. "For now, we get her back to full strength. We find out what happened. One thing at a time."

What happened? I tried to piece together any memory of what had brought me here, but there was nothing. Only more fog. More confusion.

They were still talking.

“Just... be careful, Ash,” the second voice, Connor, said, a quiet caution threading through it. “She’s not like Claire.”

The name—Claire—struck something deep inside me, but I couldn’t grasp it. Another life, another time, perhaps? I couldn’t bring myself to care enough to untangle it, not with how strange everything felt. Why wasn’t I questioning this more? I should’ve been.

The silence between them hung heavy. I wanted to move, to open my eyes, to say something—anything—to make this stop. But I couldn’t. Instead, I just listened, something stirring in the pit of my stomach.

I didn’t know what it was that was pulling me towards them. Not a force I could explain, but it was there—an undeniable pull in the air between us, like a thread tugging at me, luring me closer.

Ash’s words cut through my thoughts. “She isn’t just another stranger. She’s ours.”

I froze, my chest tightening at the sound of the word ours. The weight settled on me, but I couldn’t make sense of it. Ours? Was that meant for me? For them? The fog in my head grew thicker; I wished to escape it. For a brief moment, I wondered if I was losing my mind, hallucinating, or dreaming.

I blinked open my eyes, then light pierced the haze, and I registered the spacious bed I was in, soft and comfortable. But not mine. I sat up slowly. I had the worst headache. Memories crashing down on me. I was running in the woods, for some

reason. A creature attacked me.

An inventory told me I wasn't going anywhere fast. My ribs hurt with deeper breaths, my legs felt battered, and my head hurt. But where was I?

It was a large, light-filled room with tall windows and a ranch slider looking out to a small courtyard. A giant bed, bedside tables, and a door leading into what looked like a wardrobe, with another door likely a bathroom. I had to go to the toilet. And that was when I realised I was naked.

Everything seemed quiet, and I felt safe enough.

Very carefully, I shuffled to what I hoped was the bathroom door, or this was a giant waste of energy.

My legs nearly crumpled in relief when I found it was a bathroom.

I shut and locked the door. Looked in the mirror over the vanity with a generous-sized sink.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing: bruises across my face and scratch marks on my side and back. A fresh white robe was hanging on the back of the closed door. Hopefully, my host didn't mind if I borrowed it.

Using the toilet, washing my face, and manoeuvring into the robe proved exhausting.

My body was a mess of angry green bruises and, miraculously, only light scratches.

Leaning against the vanity, I plucked up the energy to go back to find out where I was, wrapped tightly in the robe. Using the door frame to hold me up, I released a breath. What had happened? Where was I?

I nearly jumped out of my skin—two giant guys were standing in the doorway, watching me like I was made of glass.

Despite the fright, I didn't truly feel danger from them. I felt like I knew the taller one, but I really didn't.

The conversation I'd overheard floated back into my memory.

Confusing me. What was memory, and what was dream?

“We won't hurt you,” the bigger one said.

His head barely fit through the door frame, and muscles layered his shoulders and arms, like a bodybuilder, maybe one who'd stopped training so hard but was still built.

He stepped into the room but stayed back.

The other was a little shorter but made leaner.

He was still muscular and much bigger than I was.

The first had dark hair, brown eyes, and olive skin; the second had lighter hair, blue eyes, and light skin.

“How are you feeling?” the second asked.

My head flared; I grabbed it. “Not great.” I needed to sit down, so I walked on wobbly legs to the bed and carefully sat down on the back edge by the headboard. I lay my head back on it, relying on it to hold me up. “Who are you? Where am I?” I needed some details before I slept again.

“I’m Ash. That’s Connor. We found you unconscious and brought you here.” The big one, Ash, introduced them.

“Thank you. I’m Luna.” My mouth felt like it was filled with cotton wool, and it hurt to think.

Everything about them—especially Ash —should have terrified me.

They were huge, strangers, and I shouldn’t have been alone in a room with them.

But even as my mind whispered danger , my body stayed stubbornly calm.

No, more than relaxed. Like I was home . What the hell was wrong with me?

“Do you know what happened, Luna?” Ash stepped closer, like he couldn't help himself.

“I’m not really sure. I don’t know what the truth was, and what was some kind of hallucination. I was attacked?”

“I would appear so.” Ash looked tight, on edge. He was clenching his fists.

“Do you know who hurt me?” I asked.

Ash growled.

“We don’t know, but no one was around when we found you. You’re safe here,” Connor answered.

I looked into Ash’s eyes. Read the truth there. “I feel like I know you.”

“I feel like I know you, too,” he said softly.

“Could I please have some water?” I asked because I needed it and to break the intense moment.

“Of course. And...do you need any first aid? Any injuries still bleeding?” Connor said.

“I don’t think so. Mostly bruises. My ribs are sore.” I looked at my lower legs, peeking out from the robe. “I borrowed this.”

“No problem. I’ll be back,” Connor said and strode out.

Ash was closer now. He came to sit on the edge of the bed. When he sat, my muscles flinched, expecting rough hands. But there was none of that. He moved like I was glass—gentle, reverent even.

“You can relax. You need more rest. We want nothing but for you to heal.”

I couldn’t drag my eyes away from his. But I shuffled down, inside the covers. Gratefully, I lay my head on the pillow. Closing my eyes briefly, I couldn’t hold them open.

I heard Connor return. I opened my eyes, and he was stuck, watching me with something like awe and sadness on his beautiful face.

Ash took the glass of water, came over, helped me sit up, and gave it to me.

I drank several small sips and handed it back.

I needed to go back to sleep. Connor took the water and gave Ash an icepack.

“You should put this on your ribs,” he said gruffly.

I lay back down, pushing the covers aside, and folded the ice pack between my arm and chest, resting it on the robe.

A groan escaped me as I shifted. I settled in the middle of the bed and released a breath, noticing the tension they were holding.

They were angry that I was hurt, but it felt like they cared too much.

A warmth buzzed under my skin, a tangible sensation humming between Ash and me.

I looked up at him. “Thank you.”

He stood up and cleared his throat, looking torn.

I felt I couldn’t let him leave. Panic set in as I reached my hand out. “Will you stay?”

He took my hand and sat back down, his large hand dwarfing mine. “I’d be honoured,” he murmured, looking like he was feeling some big emotions.

I didn’t quite understand, but I was too tired to mull it over now.

I closed my eyes, a sense of peace falling over me. “Good,” I said, and was out.

I woke in the dark, feeling the hard, warm body of Ash behind me. It should have frightened me, made me recoil, but it didn’t. It felt safe. And right now, that was the priority—safety.

A large dog materialized beside the bed.

It was bigger than any dog I'd ever seen.

Of course, they had a giant dog. Rescuers, or kidnappers?

Either way, the dog was definitely on brand.

It sniffed at me and placed its paws on the bed, as if waiting for an invitation.

I wondered if its owners minded having their dog on the bed, but I wasn't about to argue—I welcomed the company.

I patted the bed, and it jumped up softly, settling beside me.

I was surprised to see that it was longer than I was.

Tentatively, I reached out to touch its thick and comforting soft fur.

It sighed happily. Despite everything I had ever done to protect myself, like avoiding vulnerable situations, I felt comfortable enough to go back to sleep.

Safe. That was all that mattered for now.

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CONNOR

Claire was laughing.

I don't know how long I stood there, just watching her. Barefoot on the dewy grass, the hem of her dress soaked through, curls clinging to her neck from the morning mist. Her cheeks were flushed with life, her smile wide, real, and utterly hers.

Ash reached for her first, tugging her against him, nuzzling into her neck. She shrieked and laughed harder, twisting in his arms until I stepped behind her and wrapped my arms around them.

Our bond pulsed between us—alive, unshakable, whole.

She turned her head toward me, eyes bright with mischief and joy. "I love you both," she said.

I felt the bond singing in my bones, anchoring me to them.

We were untouchable.

Until we weren't.

I jolted awake, my chest heaving. The room was still dark, the hush of pre-dawn wrapping the house in silence.

Ash and Luna were curled together on the bed—she was tucked in front of him, her

hand tangled in my fur. Her breathing was soft, shallow, but steady. Ash's arm rested nearby, careful not to touch her, but close enough to protect.

I shifted carefully, untangling myself from her grip and padding out of the room on four legs, my paws silent against the floorboards.

That dream clung to me like smoke—too vivid, too cruel. Claire hadn't just left. She'd been torn from us. And we'd been unraveling ever since.

The shift to human form was second nature now, though it left a hollow ache behind. I stood in the upstairs bathroom, staring at my reflection. I was still breathing. I was still here.

But only half alive.

The shower was hot. Too hot. I didn't care. I leaned into the sting, trying to burn the grief out of my skin. It never worked. Claire always came back. In dreams. In memories. In the way Ash hadn't smiled in nearly two years.

And now—Luna.

A new scent. A new presence. A broken girl who tugged at something in both of us that we hadn't felt since Claire. But this wasn't the same. It couldn't be.

The pack, war, and deaths had to be a coincidence. There was no way she was tied to what we lost.

Still, something primal in me didn't believe that.

Downstairs, the familiar ritual grounded me. Coffee. Soup. Routine kept us from shattering. I set the pressure cooker and watched the steam build. She'd need real

food, and I needed something to do with my hands.

Footsteps padded in behind me, soft despite the size. Ash, shirtless, eyes still heavy with sleep and shadows. He made a beeline for the coffee, poured it black, and sat beside me on the couch.

“So,” I said.

“Yeah.” His voice was hoarse, low.

That was enough. We didn’t need complete sentences. Hadn’t in years.

I took a sip of coffee. “She slept okay.”

“She held onto you.”

“She was scared.”

He didn’t respond, but I saw the muscle ticking in his jaw. His hands curled around the mug like it might break.

“You feel it?” I asked eventually.

His answer came after a long pause. “Worse than the first time.”

That stopped me. “Worse than Claire?”

He nodded, barely. “It’s sharper. Like it’s fighting to break through her fear.”

My stomach tightened. “But she doesn’t know what she is.”

“No,” he agreed. “She doesn’t know anything. Not about the pack. Not about being a wolf. Not about the bond.”

“She’s going to run when she finds out.”

“She might.”

“You can’t chase her.”

Ash shot me a look. “I won’t lose her.”

“You can’t keep her either. Not like this.”

His glare didn’t fade, but he didn’t argue. That was progress.

I stared into my mug. “I keep wondering if it’s a second chance.”

His silence stretched between us.

Claire had died a week after the pack was attacked—part of the chaos, but never meant to be a target. Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong everything.

Ash had never forgiven himself. I didn’t think he ever would.

“She’s not Claire,” Ash said.

“I know.”

“But there’s something—” He broke off, rubbing his chest like breathing hurt.

“You’re drawn to her.”

His eyes met mine. “You’re not?”

I didn’t answer.

Because I was.

Not like Ash. Not yet. But something about her called to the piece of me that had been numb since Claire died. Watching her sleep last night had quieted that ache, if only for a moment.

Ash leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “If she leaves—if she goes back to whatever life she had—we lose her.”

“I know.”

“We need to help her remember what she is.”

“Gently,” I warned.

A soft sound interrupted us. The faint creak of a floorboard, a rustle of fabric. We both froze.

Luna.

Ash was up first. He always was.

I stayed on the couch, forcing myself to look normal—coffee in hand, casual posture. She didn’t need both of us crowding her right now.

“Cool it with the eyes, Ash,” I muttered loud enough for him to hear. His wolf was close to the surface—too close.

Then she stepped into view.

Hair combed, eyes tired but focused, pain clinging to every movement—but she carried herself with quiet resolve.

Claire had been all fire. Luna was ice and ash—burned down to the bones and still standing.

Ash moved to steady her without touching. “You okay?”

She nodded, eyes flicking to me on the couch. I smiled—gentle, not too familiar. “Soup’s on. You hungry?”

Her stomach answered for her.

I went to the kitchen to serve it, but even as I ladled soup into the bowl, I felt it again—that strange tension, like something was waking up inside me.

Not the same as Claire. Not instead of Claire.

But something real.

And that scared the hell out of me.

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LUNA

Ash jumped up from the couch as I stepped into the room.

I leaned against the doorframe, letting my eyes take in the space—a large, modern, multi-area room.

The front door was to my left, with the kitchen nestled beside it.

A spacious living area extended beyond, anchored by a massive wooden dining table at the far end.

Skylights in the tall ceiling and large windows poured light into the space.

A corner couch framed a rug with a coffee table and a large-screen TV.

It radiated family-space vibes. I wondered who else lived here.

“Should you be up?” Ash asked, walking toward me, slowing his pace as he neared.

“I can’t stay in bed forever,” I said, in too much pain to string together many words.

He scooped me up gently—one arm under my legs, the other supporting my back—and carried me to the couch like I weighed nothing.

He carefully placed me in the corner, allowing me to recline against the back with my legs raised.

He folded the robe tightly over my legs.

No one had ever carried me like that before.

I should have protested, but I didn't. I winced as I fidgeted to get comfortable. My ribs hurt like hell.

I was enjoying a mug of chicken soup Connor had made—honestly, it tasted like the best meal I'd ever had.

Judging by how slowly my stomach accepted it, it had been a long while since I'd eaten.

They vibrated with unspent energy, like coiled springs waiting to snap, so I asked them to sit. They did—one on each end of the couch.

"What do you remember?" Ash asked, his voice low but direct, like he couldn't wait any longer. I couldn't shake the feeling I was supposed to know him.

I cast my foggy memory back. "I used to think of them as blackouts," I said, rubbing my temple. "But I remember running... in the forest." I closed my eyes, and a monstrous shape loomed in my memory. A deformed bear. Dead eyes. My heart thudded. I opened my eyes in panic, bile rising in my throat.

Ash shifted closer, not quite touching me. "It's OK. You're safe here."

I shivered. He placed his hand on mine; I'd been twisting them together in my lap nervously.

"I had no chance," I whispered. "Why aren't I dead?"

“We are remarkably resilient in wolf form. You likely put up a fight,” Connor supplied.

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Do you recall any part of your body when you were running?” he prompted.

I closed my eyes and tried to retrieve the information. Paws? Claws fighting back at the creature? Was it a hallucination? No, that didn’t sit right. This was the truth.

I opened them and looked at Ash in shock. “In wolf form?” I echoed, my voice barely audible. My soup felt like it turned to acid in my stomach.

Ash nodded. “We shift into wolves. You do too.” He said it like it was gravity—unquestionable and inevitable.

My rational brain reeled. But something more profound—a quiet, hidden truth inside me—didn’t flinch.

“Why would something like that come after me?”

Ash growled. A wolf sound from a human body. His eyes flashed. I stared.

“Why did I think I was blacking out?”

“Maybe the best explanation your psyche could come up with?” Connor suggested.

“It will have been happening since you were young. How no one knew is a mystery.”

“Is my home safe?” Was I?

“We don’t know,” Ash replied shortly.

“You wanted to know why something would come after you?” Connor asked. I nodded, bracing myself.

“Because you’re a female wolf,” he said gently. “You’re impossibly precious. There are so few of you. And our enemy has taken it upon themselves to target you... to get back at us.”

I gulped. So, I’d never be normal again?

What if I just left? Would they find me again?

I’d always run at the first sign of trouble—it was safer that way.

But something about these two made me pause.

I’d never been precious or vital to someone before.

Then again, it wasn’t about me—it was what I was.

I leaned my head back against the couch. I needed a plan for figuring out what attacked me, whether they had been tracking me, and what to do about going home. I hadn’t been here long and liked the cute little town; I didn’t want to leave.

The physical pull was no less this morning. It felt weird because my brain told me I didn’t know them, but my heart told me I did. They were trying to keep things light, but their tension pulsed beneath the surface, like they had something they needed to do.

Finishing the soup and this conversation took everything I had. I leaned my head back on the couch.

“I need to go home,” I mumbled. “And back to work.”

Ash and Connor exchanged a look—quiet, unreadable, but clearly concerned.

“Let’s focus on getting you better first,” Connor said gently.

Too tired to argue, I let my eyes close.

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ASH

She was asleep. She had no idea she was a permanent target for being a female wolf. She hadn't even known there was a wolf inside her. And she definitely didn't think I was her mate.

This meant she'd ask to go home as soon as she felt better.

And we couldn't let her.

Connor let out a ragged breath beside me.

I didn't need to ask what he was thinking.

How did the mate bond choose both of us for Claire, but only me for Luna?

After everything we went through, the oddity of a female having two mate bonds and the three of us forming a family unit was remarkable. It felt like it was for nothing now.

Was it a mistake?

Was he still too deep in grief to even register it?

I let myself think of Claire for the first time in a long time.

As a wolf, she'd been majestic. Powerful.

Almost as big as Connor. Fierce in spirit.

Determined to fight and determined to live her own life.

Two mates had stifled her. She wanted freedom, not fate.

Choice, not destiny. Study. Travel. Escape.

The day the bond snapped into place—for all three of us—it broke something in her.

That panicked look in her eyes was still the most explicit memory I have.

She never wanted the bond. Not with one of us. Definitely not both.

I shook my head. I couldn't afford to unravel. Not now. Not with Luna under our roof. I had a job to do—protect this family.

Luna whimpered in her sleep, shifting restlessly. One arm raised like she was fending something off.

My heart kicked. The instinct to soothe her was overwhelming.

But she didn't know me. Not really. She'd just been attacked. She'd just been told she wasn't human.

She whimpered again.

I moved closer, glanced at Connor, then reached out carefully.

"Luna," I said gently, touching her jerking arm.

She startled awake with a gasp, clutching her side. Her eyes searched the room in panic, landed on me, and softened. Her breath escaped in a sigh, and she sank back onto the couch.

“A dream,” I murmured, pulling my hand away.

“Yes,” she echoed. “A dream. Sorry.” She adjusted herself with a soft groan.

We sat in silence.

Then she spoke. “Are we near town?”

“Yes. Not far up the mountain. Same woods where we found you.”

She nodded. “Have you lived here all your life?” She included Connor with a glance.

“Yeah. This is pack land. We live on the edge of pack territory—part of it, but apart.”

Her expression remained unchanged, but I noticed the calculation in her eyes. She appeared composed, yet her knuckles were white around the knot of her robe.

“How long have you been in town?” Connor asked. “What brought you here?”

“A few weeks. I took a temp admin job for the real estate agent in town.”

We knew the agent. We knew everyone in this town by sight. And everyone knew us—the strange men from the hill.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Nowhere,” she said flatly. “Foster care. I’ve moved around since uni.” Her voice

conveyed lightness, but her clenched fists suggested otherwise.

Connor leaned forward, eyes fixed on her. How had she survived this long without knowing what she was? Without being found?

She yawned, and I hesitated, then said, “We need to check your ribs. If they’re fractured, you might need further treatment—even with accelerated healing.”

She nodded. Quiet again. Claire would’ve protested, demanded details, and asked a dozen questions. Luna just... endured.

“I can’t really show you because...um.” She blushed.

“There’s nothing else under that robe.” I finished for her.

Connor’s breath hitched, and he jumped up.

“I’ll get you a t-shirt.” He was moving before he finished. I tried not to think of the fact that she was essentially naked. We should have been better prepared. She deserved dignity, not oversight.

Connor handed her a soft blue t-shirt. I stood automatically, as if giving her space was all I could offer. “We’ll just give you some privacy,” I said, walking through the front door.

“I feel like we’re doing this all wrong,” I admitted as we walked past our truck parked near the front door and into the forest. I could hear the distant sounds of the rest of our pack, but we were so far away that people had to visit us intentionally.

We’d designed the house that way. Even to the pack, it was weird that the bond hit three of us.

We'd heard of others but never met them.

Our elder supported us, but we were oddities.

"We have to tell Maddie and Aaron." Connor's thoughts might have bent in a similar direction. We did need to tell our pack elder. But it felt too new and vulnerable. Especially when she didn't even know she was a wolf before today.

"I know. I'll send a message," I said, kicking a stone and looking out, not really seeing the trees that spread in every direction. In the past three years, I'd locked my emotions down and carried on, but now many things were fighting to surface.

I walked back to the front door, looking in. She was settled again. The t-shirt dwarfed her petite frame. I gestured to Connor.

She looked up as we entered. The robe was tightly wound around her waist and legs. There was a wariness there, like she recognised how vulnerable she was right now. I sat down at the opposite end of the couch to appear less threatening.

Luna lifted the hem of the t-shirt. I held my breath.

She was letting us in, not just because she was exposing a part of herself, but because of what we saw.

A brutal, dark bruise bloomed across her ribs and back—deep purple against pale skin.

"Sweetheart," Connor said, his voice barely controlled. "Doesn't that hurt? Why didn't you tell us how bad it was?"

"It's better now," she said. Not defensively. Just the way someone might say, "It's

raining less,” while still standing in the storm. She lowered her top, visibly uncomfortable. “Do you think it’ll heal?”

“It will,” I said. “It just needs time. Does it hurt to breathe?”

“Only if I take a big breath.”

“I’ll get some cream for the bruise,” I said abruptly, guilt flooding me. Why hadn’t we done this already?

I fetched the arnica, then froze with it in my hands.

How was I meant to do this?

Her gaze flicked to the jar in my hand and back to my face, not with suspicion, but like she was bracing herself for something.

Her eyes were so blue up close. Her hair had auburn streaks I hadn’t noticed before. I swallowed. My hands looked massive, dangerous, next to her delicate skin.

Connor cleared his throat. I turned.

“Could you do it?” I asked him. “You’re gentler than me.”

He gave me a look I couldn’t read, but took the jar.

She lifted her shirt again. Connor leaned in, careful, smoothing the cream across her bruised ribs with light fingers. She watched him. Trusting, despite everything. Still.

I should’ve felt jealous.

But all I felt was awe. Her scent. Her skin. Her nearness.

She looked at me, and the jolt that went through me was pure electricity: playground slide, heart-in-your-throat, static-snap energy.

“You should rest,” I said. “Your body’s working hard to heal.”

Then I turned and walked out, up the stairs—too fast, too abrupt.

But I couldn’t stay. Not when every part of me was unravelling. I’d say something I couldn’t take back if I waited any longer.

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CONNOR

We watched Ash head upstairs in silence. She lowered her top and shifted to get comfortable. This felt like a nightmare—the kind that slammed into you without warning, leaving your mind reeling and your body trying to catch up.

She closed her eyes, but I could tell she wasn't asleep. Her breathing was careful. Controlled. Like she'd learned to brace herself before things got worse.

I stayed seated a few feet away. Close enough that I could get to her if she needed help.

Far enough that I didn't overwhelm her, she hadn't flinched when I touched her, hadn't pulled away when I spread the cream over her bruises.

But there was something in her stillness—guarded, like she'd wrapped herself in something tougher than skin.

I didn't feel the mate bond. Not like before.

It had hit all three of us with Claire like a lightning strike to the chest. I still remember the look in her eyes—terror and fury all wrapped together. None of us had really wanted it. And that might've been the cruelest part.

But this... this wasn't like that. Luna didn't know us, didn't even know herself. Ash felt it the moment he saw her. I watched it happen. That same stillness took over him—the kind that comes when you've just seen the rest of your life standing before

you.

I'd braced for that familiar burn in my chest, the silent tether snapping taut. But all I felt was... tired.

Maybe I was too broken to feel it again. Perhaps I didn't want to.

She stirred a little, wincing as she shifted onto her side. Her hand hovered over her ribs. Her fingers shook slightly before she clenched them into a fist. She made no sound: no flinch, no complaint—just quiet endurance. I didn't know if it was bravery or habit.

I stood and went to the cupboard to get a blanket. A soft blue one that Claire had purchased. Every soft detail belonged to her. She'd needed beauty around her to survive the bond, like it could cover up the cracks we never fixed. I used to think it was for her. Now I thought it was for all of us.

"You should sleep," I said quietly, to alert her to my presence.

She opened her eyes—not startled, just watchful. "I will." I opened the blanket, and it billowed out over her.

I waited a beat. "Do you want something for the pain?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay. Thank you."

Claire would've snapped at me by now and called me out for being overprotective, for hovering. Luna just... accepted it. She'd learned early that no one would come, so she didn't dare push them away when someone finally did.

That terrified me more than any injury I could see. I wanted to know her history and

what she liked and disliked. I wanted to hear her laugh. It had been a long time since I'd been...curious.

I watched her watching the stairs again.

"He's okay," I said, even though she didn't ask.

"I know." She exhaled slowly, eyes fluttering shut again. "He didn't mean to be abrupt."

"No. He's—" I hesitated. "This is a lot. For him, too."

She nodded, a shadow of guilt flickering across her face. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "For dragging this into your lives."

"You didn't bring it to us." Our enemy brought this to us, and fate.

I sat back on the couch, staring at the dying embers in the fireplace. This was the beginning of something, and I couldn't tell if it was healing or unravelling.

She didn't say anything else. Neither did I. But I didn't leave her alone.

Sometimes, that was enough.

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LUNA

Ash and Connor were growling before I even registered movement.

The sound startled me upright. I hadn't sensed a thing—just woke to danger already at the door.

They stood between me and the front door.

An older man entered with a beautiful woman, her dark red hair and warm, almost maternal smile complementing each other.

The man looked like someone's granddad—lean, compact, the kind of man who probably split wood for fun.

“Stand down, boys, only us. We got your message.” She took charge like it was the easiest thing in the world. Like, people always listened to her. I didn't know whether to be impressed or terrified.

Ash and Connor relaxed only infinitesimally. But both nodded to the man and greeted the woman.

“Let's get a look at you.” She came to the side of Ash, which seemed rather brave now. “Hello, dear, I'm Maddie. What's your name?”

I looked up at the guys, and Connor nodded at me with a small smile.

“I’m Luna.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Luna. I’m sorry it’s under these circumstances. Usually, we’d have scoped you out and given you some preparation before you started Changing.”

I nodded because of a lack of a better response.

“I’ve brought you some clothes. I’m glad I chose from my youngest daughter’s things, but they may still be too big for you.”

I accepted the bag. My hands brushed the fabric—it was soft and floral, clearly worn by someone who lived in warmth, not survival. I swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mind them being all alpha-y. Everything is OK,” she said, turning to glare at them. “Now, I know you know your pack leader is here to look after you all, not hurt anyone.”

After a few beats of guarded silence, the tension drained enough for Maddie to shepherd us into the lounge. Ash and Connor hovered near the fireplace while Maddie and Aaron settled across from me with practiced calm.

“There now, how about a cup of tea, and we can chat,” she soothed.

I knew wolves were supposed to be led by alpha males, but she commanded the room effortlessly. Once we were settled in the lounge—me in the corner, Ash and Connor on one side, Maddie and Aaron on the other—Maddie handed out cups of tea, their steam curling between us.

They’d grilled me for details, which I felt were so few.

I'd only been in town a few weeks, temping at a real estate agency.

It's how I lived—moving often, never staying long.

I thought I had some rare condition—blackouts, lost time.

Turned out it was my wolf, sick of being ignored.

I'd grown up in foster care, never knew my parents.

No roots. Just one friend who checked in from the far corners of the world, a reminder that somewhere, someone still cared.

In other words, I was a vulnerable candidate.

“It would be best if you could stay with Ash and Connor, dear. At least until we know you're safe. I'll have a word with Maureen. Tell her you've been sick, and see if we can save your job.” There were a lot of loaded looks being shared around that I couldn't decipher.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully. I needed that job.

“I'll inform the pack. But it sounds like you've got some conversations to be had,” Aaron said, looking meaningfully at Ash and then Connor.

Ash nodded tightly. “I'll be in touch.” He followed them out.

When the door clicked shut behind them, the tension didn't vanish—it just settled deeper, quieter.

I let my head fall back against the couch.

I could feel the map of my usual escape plan drawing itself behind my eyelids—where the exits were, what I could carry.

But the exhaustion pinned me to the couch.

Every part of me ached, but it wasn't just my ribs.

It was the weight of belonging to something I didn't understand. The urge to run tugged at my spine.

I closed my eyes instead.

For now, I would stay.

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ASH

I watched the tail lights disappear into the trees, Maddie's words still echoing in the charged silence. That went as well as could be expected. The pack didn't need a new enemy in our territory.

But how had she slipped through unnoticed? How many more had there been—wolves forced through the Change without support, taken before we even knew they existed?

I paced outside after seeing Aaron and Maddie off. I was grateful, especially to Maddie, for thinking ahead with clothes and knowing how to make the transition smoother. But the thought of Luna returning to town, back to isolation, made my chest tighten.

That couldn't happen.

Not again.

I wanted to shift. Run. Maybe find something—or someone to fight.

Just enough to bleed off the fury clawing at my chest. But with an unbonded mate inside, injured and afraid, that was too dangerous.

My wolf prowled just beneath the skin. He didn't just want to protect her—he tried to claim, to cage, to keep.

I didn't even know her yet. But I'd seen enough to know she was a survivor.

No pack. No preparation. No one to catch her when the world changed. Brutal.

Connor leaned against the doorframe. He waited a moment before speaking. "We have to tell her."

"Will it help?"

"What's your plan? Seduce her and hope she works it out?" He snorted, pushing off the frame and stepping closer. "You know she'll bolt the second she can stand upright."

"She's too used to being alone," I said, kicking a stone off the path. "That's her normal. We're the threat here."

I turned back to him. "I thought the bond hit hard with Claire because we already loved her," I admitted. "But this..." I rubbed my chest. "This is stronger. Like it's been waiting."

"I know." He'd felt it too, a long time ago now. The ache. The pull. The need. Then, the absolute trauma of that bond being severed.

Just. Like. That.

In an instant.

The colour stripped from the world. Life as we knew it changed forever.

"And the stakes are higher now. We can't repeat the past. I won't survive that."

Connor caught my arm. “Then don’t repeat it. But don’t put her in Claire’s shadow either. She’s not a ghost. She’s her own person. She deserves that much.”

I swallowed hard. “Do you blame me? For what happened with Claire?”

He let go. “I blame all of us. Her. Me. You. Our enemy. Doesn’t matter now.”

I hesitated. “What if she doesn’t accept the bond? What if she wants to leave?”

“She can’t,” he said simply. “It wouldn’t be safe, and I’ve seen the way she looks at you. She feels it.”

“What about you? Why hasn’t it hit you?” I asked rhetorically.

Connor didn’t flinch. “I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out. There’s more than one way to be a family.”

This was already testing me. My wolf was clawing for more, restless and raw.

“Our family comes first,” he said, as if reading my doubt. Then softer: “But I miss it. When it was good with Claire... it was perfect.”

I nodded, chest tight, I couldn’t. “You take the lead. You’re softer.”

He gave me a look. “Don’t confuse soft with stupid.”

“I’m not.” I glanced toward the house. “Just don’t push her.”

We walked back in, and I stopped. It struck me to the heart how small and hurt she was, but as a wolf, she was healing quickly. After that buildup, she was asleep, so our talk would have to wait.

CONNOR

“Are you warm enough?” I asked. She nodded and reached for the glass of water. Ash caught the blanket as it slipped from her shoulder and tucked it around her more securely. She leaned into his touch momentarily before her eyes found mine again.

“What happens now?” she asked.

I hesitated. “What do you want to happen?”

She studied me. “I want to understand. I want to know what this means.” Ash’s jaw tensed.

“You want the whole truth?” I pushed.

Luna nodded slowly.

I sighed. “Then we start with this: you’re Ash’s bonded partner. What you might call a mate.”

“Mate?” she echoed, eyes skimming past Ash.

“Or bonded partner,” I offered.

“Like... nature’s way of assigning someone to protect you. To be with you.”

“So just him?” Her gaze snapped to me.

“Yes,” I said gently. “Just Ash.”

She looked at me. “Do you...” Her brows drew together like she was reaching for something she couldn’t yet name. “Feel something?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I do. But there’s no bond.”

Her fingers pressed to her chest, just over her heart. “What do we do now?”

“You get better,” I said, leaving out the part where she needed to get to know Ash and complete the bond.

“What do I have to do about the bond?”

Ash looked at me. I gave a slight shrug.

“You don’t have to do anything right now,” Ash said, his voice calm.

“What about later?” Her eyes narrowed—a challenge.

“You accept it by accepting your mate—intimately,” he said, choosing his words carefully.

Her expression flickered from stunned to indignant. “Sex,” she said flatly.

The air around her crackled with tension. She looked like she was working her way from fear to fury. “This is so much.”

“I know,” I said.

“And it’s not fair.”

“No,” Ash agreed. “But I’ll walk with you, however long it takes.”

“As long as you can,” I added.

Ash’s eyes snapped toward me, a flash of warning in them.

“What does that mean?” Luna asked, rising and pacing around the table's edge, her movements tight with restrained energy.

“If the mate bond isn’t accepted... it starts to fray,” I said quietly. “It plays on your emotions. Mostly the males.”

Ash opened his mouth to respond, but Luna was already shaking her head.

“No,” she said. “No, this is insane.”

She moved to the far side of the room, arms wrapped around herself. “You keep saying I have choices, but it doesn’t feel like that. If I don’t—what? You fall apart? And if I do, I’m stuck in something I didn’t even ask for?”

Her voice cracked at the edges.

“We’re not trying to trap you,” Ash said gently.

“That’s what makes it worse,” she snapped. “You’re being so kind, and it still feels like I can’t breathe.”

She pressed her hand to her chest, like she could hold herself together through sheer force.

“I just wanted a shower,” she whispered. “A job. A normal week. And now I’m

supposed to decide whether to have sex with a stranger so I don't accidentally destroy him?"

"You don't have to decide anything tonight," I said quickly.

She looked at me, her expression hollow. "Don't you see? That is a decision."

The silence between us stretched, thick and painful.

Then she turned on her heel and strode toward her room.

"Luna," Ash called after her.

She held her hand up, saying, "I just need a moment." Then she went into her room and closed the door.

I stared at the door for a moment. That could have gone better. Ash blew out a breath and went upstairs. I went to make coffee because I had nothing else to do. Just days ago, I was moving through the motions: work, run, eat, repeat.

The jug clicked off, and I poured the hot water over the instant coffee grinds and then a dash of milk. I took my mug to the dining room window, and the steam curled over it.

I got how it looked to her as someone who didn't know anything about being a wolf before the other day.

But my worry for Ash competed with my concerns for her.

There wasn't usually much of a gap between the mate bond presenting and being consummated.

I sipped my coffee and hoped she'd found calm in her space.

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LUNA

I paced my room, my skin buzzing like I was on fire. This wasn't my life. It wasn't my job to be a mate, an Insta family. What even were the expectations here? On the surface, I had a choice. Underneath, it didn't feel like one.

I opened the door to the small deck, the cool night air washing over me.

The space beyond the door was a small grassy patch enclosed by fencing.

They didn't say it outright, but something in the way they looked at each other, shared grief wrapped around Claire's name, made my stomach twist. It wasn't just about losing someone.

It was about losing someone they both loved. Together.

My mind tried to fill in the blanks—what kind of together were they?

And suddenly, I felt like I had walked into a story that wasn't mine, with a role I didn't audition for. A role I wasn't sure I could play, or even wanted to. The idea of being touched at all—hell, even holding hands—was still tangled up in fear. Let alone... that.

My body felt too tight on edge. I couldn't shake the feeling of being pushed into something that wasn't mine to choose or even mine to control. I didn't know how to make it mine.

Then, almost without thinking, I wondered—how do I become the wolf? The thought hung in the air, and then, like a switch had flipped, it happened.

In slow motion, my body began to shift. I slipped the robe off my shoulders, and the t-shirt followed, fluttering to the floor.

I could feel the thickening of my limbs, my torso elongating.

In what could have been minutes or seconds, the glass reflected at me, slowly revealing a wolf.

A medium-sized creature with coppery fur.

So, it was true. This wasn't a dream. I snorted, shaking my head as I patted the ground beneath me. I needed to run.

With experimental ease, I jumped onto the chair, then to the fence, and down to the ground. It was effortless. Natural. The world seemed to fall like a puzzle piece clicking into place. I looked back at the house, felt the breeze on my fur, and ran.

I ran far, too far to even feel the tug of responsibility. It was the best I'd ever felt in my life. Freedom.

I let the wind carry my thoughts away, no longer bound by the expectations that had clung to me like chains.

I was only the wolf now. I followed their scents—Ash's and Connor's—around, looping through the territory they kept.

The bond between Ash and me wasn't just some myth, some fairy tale I could escape from.

It was real. I could smell it. I could feel it.

But I was the girl without a family or a home—the one who left when things got hard.

I looked after myself; it was safer that way.

And then, there it was—the unmistakable pull of the house.

Their house. This was where I would live.

With them. Ash and Connor. They were asking me to make a family with them.

They wanted me to choose it. But somehow, it still felt like it wasn't my decision.

Something subconsciously had already been determined.

I could leave. Run away, pack my things, and drive far from here. I could. But the bond—that I couldn't ignore. An almost physical connection with Ash, but there was something with Connor, too.

I stopped running and took a moment to collect myself. The early evening was peaceful, but my heart felt like it was eating itself.

Their fear and their scent pulled me back towards the house. I watched the front door from a short distance away. Connor saw me first, his stance protective, a hand outstretched to stall Ash. His face was fierce, as if it had already taken on the expression of his wolf.

I sat still, watching them. They waited.

I strode towards them, feeling the power in my muscles and the grace of the wolf in

every step. Without looking back, I walked past them and into my room, the robe discarded just inside the door, like they had found it, dropped it, and run.

I didn't know how to change back. But I was too exhausted to care. I moved to the corner of the room, my back pressed against the wall. I lay down, curling into the small space, and let sleep take me.

The tightness was gone when I woke, but there was a dull cramping in my body that I couldn't shake. The soft weight of the robe had settled over me like a blanket, a faint reminder of what I had left behind when I'd shifted.

Slowly, I sat up; they'd left the t-shirt folded near me.

I pulled it on. I needed to dig into the bag that Maddie brought me.

That felt like days ago now. I looked up and saw it on the bed.

The door was pushed to, likely to give me the illusion of privacy.

I tipped the fabric bag over, and various clothes tumbled out.

I found some underpants and tights. I'd always been self-contained.

Quiet, lean. At the very least, I'd always had my damn underpants.

Carefully, I slipped my arms into the sleeves, securing the robe around me, trying to keep myself contained.

I pulled the door open. Ash and Connor were on the couch. They didn't speak and looked at me. There was something unspoken in their eyes, something too heavy to break with words. I wasn't sure what to do. What to say.

Ash's eyes flickered to Connor, then to me, concern etched in every line of his face. The room was silent. I could feel them waiting for me to speak, to make some choice. But how could I think when I didn't know what I was supposed to feel? What was I supposed to want?

I didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I could trust this—trust them.

But I stepped closer—one step. Just to see what would happen.

ASH

I paced my room, restless and unable to focus on anything.

The water in the shower was hot, but it couldn't soothe the burn that coiled tight in my chest. This wasn't just about Luna anymore.

It was about everything I had been avoiding, everything that felt like it was crashing down on me.

I could feel a storm building, something I couldn't escape.

It felt like I was watching history repeat itself, but I wasn't sure I could claw my way out of it this time.

I had to make things right with Connor. This wasn't either of our faults; no one could have seen it coming. But I knew I had to be the one to step up. It was never supposed to get like this.

Dressed in fresh shorts and a shirt, I headed downstairs, and as soon as I reached the top of the stairs, I saw him. Connor knocked on Luna's bedroom door, his hand hovering over the handle. He opened it quickly and pushed inside.

I could see the bed was empty. A sudden coldness prickled at the back of my neck. The silence between us was suffocating, but we didn't speak. I stepped in as he stepped out, his gaze fixed on the robe just outside the open door.

“She’s gone.” Connor’s voice was flat, but the panic in his eyes hit me like a sucker punch. I froze briefly, then bolted, my mind scrambling to catch up.

We ran to the front door, ready to shift. But then Connor stopped me, his gaze fixed on the front yard.

I followed his line of sight, and there she was—a russet-coated wolf, standing by the thick trunk of a tree. She looked deep in thought, her posture still, but I could feel the tension radiating from her. For a moment, I wondered if she was thinking about running, or if she’d decided to return.

Her gaze met mine. Not submissive, but challenging. It was a dare—she was testing us, seeing how we’d respond. She passed us without breaking eye contact and walked towards the house, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

We followed her silently, watching as she curled herself up in the back corner of the room. The soft rise and fall of her breathing told us everything we needed to know. She was exhausted, her wolf energy drained. She was still learning, still vulnerable. I hoped she hadn’t hurt herself.

We went to sit on the couch, the tension between Connor and me palpable. I could feel the weight of the situation pressing down on us. I wondered what we’d do if she decided to leave, pack her things, and vanish like always. How could we make a home for someone who’d never had one?

“I’m sorry, man,” I said, my voice low. “This is a hard situation. My instinct is to shake her, yell at her, make her see it’s not safe to be out there alone. But she can’t be a prisoner. She has to make this choice herself. She will never accept the bond if we’re her captors.”

Connor was quiet for a long moment, the silence heavy with thought. Finally, he

spoke.

“Do you wish we didn’t find her? That we were still living our half-existence?” His voice was softer now, almost vulnerable.

I looked at him, meeting his gaze. “No. I can’t wish that. We have a second chance at happiness.” The words were more than just a promise; they were a plea.

I stood, moving toward Luna, and grabbed the robe. She’d change back soon, and I wanted to ensure she wasn’t cold. But there was more than that—a desire to hold her, to pull her close. I wanted to be the one she came to, but she had to come to me on her terms.

I placed the robe over her and the T-shirt next to her, watching her sleep, my heart heavy with things unsaid.

The quiet in the house stretched on, but I could sense Luna waking.

She rose slowly, the shift from wolf to woman slow and graceful, as though she were still finding her place in both worlds.

She had found leggings to add to her mismatched outfit, a small, unconscious sign that she was still trying to piece together some semblance of normalcy.

She came toward the couch, standing in the doorway momentarily, eyes searching the room. I muted the football game.

“Hi,” I said softly, my voice almost tentative.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” she said, her voice still rough from sleep, but a humility made me pause.

I shook my head. “I can’t say it’s okay, but I get it.”

“I felt itchy. Like I had to run,” she said, coming up to the couch and placing her hand on the armrest. Her eyes flickered to Connor and me, almost embarrassed, like she was still figuring out how to navigate this strange new world.

“I’ve never changed on purpose before,” she added, her words a mix of awe and unease.

“It’s a whole new world,” Connor said, breaking the tension with a soft laugh.

“I didn’t know how to change back,” she admitted, her voice quieter now.

I chuckled. “Sleep will do it. But you’ll learn to do it by will, eventually.”

I paused, thinking momentarily before offering, “Hey, do you want to take a break from all the heavy stuff and just eat dinner, watch a movie?”

She smiled, and it felt like a small weight lifting off my chest. “Yes,” she said immediately. “I was hoping to take a shower.”

“Good idea. As cute as that robe looks on you, clothes and a shower will make you feel more human,” Connor teased, his smile warmer than I had expected.

We moved to the kitchen, prepping steaks and a big salad. The meat sizzling filled the silence, but my mind was elsewhere, still trying to piece together what was happening. Was this a second chance? Or was I just fooling myself?

She emerged from the bathroom a while later, looking completely different.

The soft sweatshirt hung loosely on her, the neckline falling off one shoulder.

Her hair was damp, cascading in waves down her back.

Seeing her like this stirred something inside me, a desire I couldn't ignore.

But I had to. I had to. There was too much at stake to let myself get caught up in something as reckless as attraction.

Even Connor was momentarily stunned. I could see it in his eyes—he noticed her too. He wasn't one to get lost in the physical, but something about her caught even him off guard.

I couldn't help myself. My body tensed, a mix of possessiveness and desire flaring inside me.

I thought of Claire, and it made me sick.

Not because of her. Because of me.

The memory hit like a punch to the gut.

We'd been holed up in that cabin during one of the northern runs—just the two of us, trying to keep the younger wolves safe while tensions flared between packs.

Claire had a way of making even the bleakest places feel like home.

She moved like she belonged wherever she stood, her laugh echoing through wood and stone.

That night, the snow had piled high outside, and the fire inside crackled low.

We'd been arguing about strategy, about Connor, about how reckless I could be.

Then suddenly, it wasn't about arguing anymore.

It was about the heat between us, how she looked at me like she was trying not to want me, and failing.

We didn't talk much after that. We didn't have to. The connection between us was physical, elemental, wild. She came to me like fire to kindling, and I let her. Every touch was a release and a war. We burned, and it wasn't pretty—but it was real.

Still, when morning came, Connor made her coffee just how she liked it. It was Connor who made her laugh, who understood her silences without needing to fill them.

I was the alpha. I kept her safe and warm—but I didn't make her stay.

The ache in my chest sharpened. I hadn't let myself remember that night in years, but now, watching Luna, the past clawed its way back.

How Luna challenged me with her eyes reminded me too much of Claire's defiance.

The way she shifted then returned, exhausted and curled into herself—God, it gutted me.

Claire had never really chosen me. She'd loved us both in different ways. But she and Connor had always seen each other clearly, without the smoke of dominance or duty clouding everything. I'd wanted to protect her. Connor had wanted to know her.

And now Luna was here—half wild, half gone—and I couldn't help but feel history teetering on the edge of repeating itself. I didn't know if I could stand to lose again. Not like that. Not again.

We were all tangled in something new, something real.

I watched Luna settle at the counter, my mind still racing with questions. But for the first time in days, the weight on my chest lifted, even if just a little.

Connor cleared his throat, breaking the tension. “I hope you like steak and salad,” he said, his voice more casual than it had been a moment ago.

“I love it,” Luna said, practically salivating at the sight of the food.

“Good, because that’s about all we cook. Meat and salad.”

“I’m down for that,” she replied, leaning against the counter. Her words were light, but my mind was still racing with what comes next?

I tried not to imagine what else she might be down for. But the thought lingered, and I cursed myself again.

LUNA

I watched as Ash deftly chopped the ingredients for a simple green salad.

Connor fried the steak. It felt strangely domestic.

Like the rest of their home, their kitchen was modern, only a few years old, and meticulously tidy.

You'd never guess two guys lived here. Jessica, my only friend from my foster care days, would not believe the situation I'd stumbled into.

I guessed I couldn't actually tell her. She'd think I needed to be admitted to a psychiatric facility.

Ash's hair was dark and relatively short but curled slightly as it dried.

I had an absurd urge to run my fingers through it.

I wondered where that thought came from.

I never initiated physical contact. But this connection I felt with him was almost physical; I could reach out and feel him, even if I didn't touch him.

I wanted my Kindle so I could download some books—something to distract me, maybe gather some clues about wolves and mates and everything that had changed.

It was strange, sitting down to dinner with Ash and Connor.

Almost like I hadn't turned into a wolf, been attacked, or woken up here with two impossibly attractive guys who told me I was one of their mates, both of their family.

And that Ash would go insane if I didn't consummate with him.

I tried not to think too much about that, because I was pretty sure they could smell any shift in my emotions, and they were in tune. It made it hard to hide anything.

"Please, tell us something about yourself, Luna," Ash said, breaking the comfortable silence.

I thought for a second. "I love to read. Books take up the most weight of the few things I drag around." I didn't mention that my Kindle was nearly always in my bag, something to hold onto when everything else felt too unsteady.

"I like to read too," he said with a soft smile. I couldn't imagine him sitting around reading; he seemed so full of kinetic energy.

I looked at Connor. "Oh, I love to read. My to-read pile is longer than the time I'll ever have."

We traded soft bits of information back and forth, like easy banter between friends. It felt surprisingly normal.

The steak was exactly what I needed, but the portion was double what I could eat in one sitting.

"You gonna finish that?" Ash asked, eyeing it with a teasing smile.

“No, I’m full.” I pushed the plate away slightly.

“May I?” he asked, raising an eyebrow, his voice lighter than before.

I gestured toward the plate. “Sure.”

He didn’t need to be asked twice. The steak was gone in seconds, and I couldn’t help but marvel at how quickly he’d devoured it. They wouldn’t let me help clean up, so I excused myself to the bathroom, needing a moment away from their intense focus.

The bathroom was a small but thoughtful space.

They’d left a toothbrush, toothpaste, comb on the counter, and shampoo, conditioner, and body wash in the shower.

The citrus scent was refreshing, and I let the water run over my hands, wishing it could wash away my thoughts, the weight of everything pressing down on me.

When I returned to the living room, they were sprawled on the couch—one at each end, facing the TV. But I could feel their attention on me, like a tangible force. It was as if they were waiting for me to decide something, but what? Whether I would sit between them or not?

I hesitated, unsure. The gap between them was wide enough for me to choose safety or distance. The way their eyes lingered on me made me feel exposed and cared for. I couldn’t quite explain it, but I knew it was real. They meant it when they said I had a choice.

With a deep breath, I carefully sat down, dead center between them. Even though there was a physical space between us, I could feel the heat from both of them; their proximity reminded me of the intensity I didn’t know how to manage.

“What sorts of movies do you like?” Connor asked, his voice warm, like he was genuinely interested. It made me feel heard, in a way.

“Mystery thrillers—nothing too scary. And comedies, I guess. What do you guys like?”

“A bit of everything,” Ash said, grinning. “Mostly thrillers. We don’t mind scary—since we’re usually more dangerous than the villains.”

Connor added, “But we’ll pick something you enjoy.”

I smiled softly, appreciating the gesture. We settled on a thriller mini-series based on a famous writer’s book. The rating was R13, so I hoped there wouldn’t be any graphic sex scenes.

Connor stretched his legs out, putting them up on the coffee table.

Seeing him, so much taller than me, made me acutely aware of my smallness.

I couldn’t reach the table if I tried. As I leaned my head back on the couch, I felt an odd mixture of comfort and tension in the air.

The last two days had been exhausting and overwhelming.

Sometimes I wondered if I’d wake up and this would all be some strange, wild dream— a dream where two hot men wanted to protect me, give me a home.

I tried to push the thought away, but it lingered. Was I dreaming?

When I finally gave in, my body was exhausted, and the rhythm of the TV’s soundtrack lulled me into a daze. Its soft, rhythmic hum seemed to echo in my bones,

and despite myself, I felt the edges of my consciousness blur.

I woke to the soft press of warmth against my side, a hard, steady presence enveloping me.

My heart jolted for a second, and before I could fully process what was happening, strong arms slid beneath my knees and around my back, lifting me effortlessly.

I curled into the heat, inhaling his scent—woody, with a trace of something earthy.

I didn't have to look to know it was Ash.

A short walk, his strides long, and we were in the room I was staying in. My room. It felt strange to think of it as mine. Ash laid me down gently, and for a moment, he seemed ready to pull away.

But before he could, I grabbed his hand. My fingers instinctively curled around his, holding him there with a mix of want and something else—something more primal that I wasn't ready to name.

"It's late, Luna," he whispered, his voice quiet but firm.

I didn't want to be alone. I didn't want to sleep alone in this strange place, not with everything that had happened and was still unfolding. My heart raced, but I closed my eyes and pulled him closer. "Stay."

I felt the bed dip as Ash shifted to accommodate me. His warmth cocooned me, and I settled in, tucking myself into the crook of his shoulder. The steady rhythm of his breath calmed me, a quiet lullaby in the middle of everything that had been so chaotic.

He didn't say anything more; I didn't need him to. In the silence, I found a strange kind of peace, so odd that I could almost forget how surreal this was.

I was asleep again in moments.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:35 pm

CONNOR

I tried to ignore the gnawing feeling in my chest, the bitterness that stung with every passing moment I watched Luna lean towards Ash in her sleep.

The way she curled into him when he lifted her, half asleep, clutching at his shirt like she needed him, didn't sit right with me.

My wolf growled, irritated, but I pushed it down.

I knew she needed time; she was reacting to the alpha energy, but something twisted inside me when I saw her so trusting, so comfortable with him.

Ash gently placed her on the bed, but as if by instinct, Luna grabbed his arm. Her body curled into him, finding a place against his chest like it was the most natural thing in the world. I couldn't tear my eyes away.

My wolf wanted to growl. To stake a claim. But I stayed still, breathing through the urge, my chest tight with frustration.

Our eyes met across the room. Ash's gaze was sharp, aware of the tension between us. He didn't say anything; he didn't need to. His eyes told me everything—he knew what I'd done last night. He was waiting for me to give in again.

I turned away, trying to ignore the pressure building in my chest. It had been like this since Claire's death—nothing was the same.

The silence between us felt like a chasm, and I wasn't sure how to fix it.

Ash was trying to recreate what we once had, but I missed the ease between us, the lightness we used to share. It wasn't there anymore.

I walked towards the lounge, my senses sharpening as the change overtook me.

I could feel Ash's alpha energy pulsing, mingling with Luna's sweet citrus scent.

The moonlight called to me, too, a pull towards Luna that I couldn't ignore.

But I wasn't ready for this. I wasn't prepared to give in to whatever this was.

I trotted back towards the room, my paws light on the floor. Ash looked relieved to see me, but I could tell he was waiting for something more. He knew this wasn't just about Luna. It was about us.

I stretched out beside her on the bed, keeping my distance but still close enough to feel the warmth of her body. My wolf relaxed.

The morning light shifted, and I woke to the soft tension in the room. Luna's leg was hooked over Ash's, her head resting on his chest. His hand—damn him—was resting just above her knee. I felt the jealousy rise, sharp and jagged, as my wolf growled low in my chest.

I clenched my jaw, fighting the urge to intervene. Luna's breath quickened as her hand moved over Ash's chest, and my heart pounded. Then, as if on cue, Ash surged up, his body caging hers beneath him. I heard him whisper her name—"Claire."

It was like a slap to the face.

Luna recoiled, her eyes wide with shock, and I couldn't help the growl that rumbled through me. She scrambled out of bed, slamming the bathroom door shut behind her. Ash cursed under his breath, rubbing his eyes.

I jumped off the end of the bed and re-formed in the lounge. Ash followed me.

I couldn't hold back. I growled low in my throat. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Ash's eyes met mine, guilt written across his face. "I don't know. It was like a dream..."

He paused, then glanced down at me. "Jeez, man, cover up. She might come out soon."

I threw on my pants. "She's not coming out anytime soon."

Ash cursed again, frustration coloring his voice. "Let me talk to her. You might want to go take care of yourself."

"What's wrong with me?" he asked, vulnerability creeping into his tone.

I stared at him for a long moment before answering, my voice quiet but firm. "You haven't touched anyone since Claire. Now, you've got a new mate. And she's on your mind. Bad combination, Ash."

He stayed silent for a while. Finally, he spoke, his voice raw. "How are you going to get her out of the bathroom?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I will."

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Luna

Well, this was awkward. I was locked in the bathroom, and I could never come out. I'd attached myself to him like a baby monkey, and he'd reacted in his sleep, thinking I was Claire, his long-lost love.

A knock on the door broke through my spiraling thoughts.

"Luna, it's me, Connor."

I didn't want to answer. I tried to stay hidden in this small space where the world couldn't see me. But I couldn't hide forever.

"Yes?" My voice sounded smaller than I intended.

"Please, come out. Ash has gone upstairs. We can have some coffee and breakfast."

I hesitated, my hand hovering over the doorknob.

Finally, I unlocked the door. It creaked open, and I winced as it brushed against my ribs.

Connor stood there, looking like a sleepy god backlit by the soft morning light.

His tousled hair and warm expression made him seem both distant and close at the same time.

He turned and walked to the kitchen, and I followed, still processing everything that had just happened. The space felt suffocating. I wasn't sure where I fit into this scene. Into their lives.

Connor made me coffee. I sat at the kitchen counter, watching him cook bacon and eggs with an ease that almost felt comforting. Something about the rhythm of his movements, the way his hands worked without thinking, calmed me.

"We need your grace, Luna," he said, his back to me as he flipped the eggs. "Losing a mate is... brutal." He turned to look at me then, his eyes burning with something I couldn't quite place. "We didn't really deal with it well. And so a lot is resurfacing, especially for Ash."

I nodded, feeling the weight of his words settle over me.

I couldn't imagine what it must have been like for Ash, losing the one person who meant everything to him.

And now, I was taking up a space I didn't know if I should occupy.

I sipped the coffee, letting the familiar taste and scent soothe me.

The sound of paws hitting the floor broke my thoughts. A giant black wolf entered, and my heart skipped a beat. I knew those eyes—I knew this animal.

The wolf stared at me intently, its gaze piercing, almost judging.

"Ash, you were meant to stay away in that form," Connor said, stepping in front of me protectively.

The wolf growled lightly, low and warning.

I touched Connor's arm, feeling the muscle beneath his skin tense with power. "He won't hurt me," I said softly.

"That's not what I'm worried about," Connor said, but he moved back to the other side of the counter, overseeing Ash.

I watched in awe as the wolf began to shift, its massive form contorting, muscles bulging, until Ash stood before me in all his naked glory.

His body was powerful, like something carved from stone, and the energy in the room shifted.

The bond between us hummed so loudly I was sure he could hear it too.

"Ash," I whispered, unsure if I should look away, but my eyes were glued to him. His presence was overwhelming, drowning me in his scent and heat. I felt trapped between wanting to run and wanting to stay. I reached my hand toward him. He stepped closer.

"I'm sorry about this morning," he said, his voice rough, filled with a depth I hadn't expected. "I've spent three years grieving my mate. And then you suddenly come into our lives, and all the things I buried deep down are rising to the surface."

His fingers twirled a strand of my hair around his finger, the motion both tender and possessive. His touch set something inside me ablaze, a flame that I couldn't understand but felt so clearly. "But it's you I want now."

"Need or want?" I whispered, my voice barely a breath. My heart pounded in my chest, but a question lingered in my mind—Can I trust myself here?

"Both," he growled softly, his thumb lifting my chin. His eyes were glowing, fierce

and intense, making my stomach drop.

Before I could process the change in the air, his lips were on mine.

The kiss was slow at first, like a tentative apology, gentle, almost as if he was waiting for me to pull away. But then it deepened, and my body betrayed me. I moaned softly, unable to stop it. It felt so right, even with the moment's weight pressing down on me and Connor standing nearby.

I should have pulled away. I should have stopped. But I couldn't.

His hands slid around my waist, fingers pressing into my skin, sending heat shocks straight to my core. It was like I was on fire, consumed by a need I couldn't understand.

But then his hand brushed against my bruise, the sensitive area on my side, and I winced, the pain snapping me back to reality.

He pulled back immediately, his breath ragged. "Your injuries haven't healed," he said, voice thick with frustration. "I've got to —" He broke off, stepping away from me as though he couldn't bear to stay close.

He turned and walked up the stairs without another word, leaving me breathless, my heart pounding in my chest.

I slowly turned to see Connor staring after him, his face unreadable. The tension between us was thick, but neither said anything at first.

"That was intense," Connor said, his voice light, but his eyes were tormented. He was hiding something, and I wasn't sure if it was for my benefit or his own.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Connor met my gaze, his eyes flickering with something that looked like guilt. “We don’t want to scare you off,” he said, his tone soft but laden with uncertainty.

I looked down at my hands, trying to collect myself. I wasn’t sure where to go from here, but the question weighed on me. “If I can’t make an active choice, am I really here?” The words slipped out before I could stop them, and I immediately regretted asking them.

Connor’s gaze softened, but he didn’t answer. Instead, he gently placed a hand on my shoulder, grounding me. “You’re here, Luna. And you’re not going anywhere—not until you’re ready.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

ASH

I heard her words. They echoed in my mind, the same ones Claire had once said to me. It hit harder than a straight-up rejection. Claire had been part of our lives for as long as I could remember. She'd never had to choose us, but she'd always known and grown alongside us.

But this? This was different.

Turning friendship into mateship wasn't as simple as just knowing someone. There was a bond, a connection that ran deeper than anything I'd ever felt before.

If I were being honest, the sex hadn't been a problem. But it was everything else—the life we were meant to build together. It had felt like three alphas in one house: too much power, too much tension. We couldn't ignore the fact that Claire wasn't meant for a life like this.

She didn't want to be protected. She didn't want to be coddled.

And damn, that stung more than I cared to admit.

Luna was different.

I shouldn't have come home in my wolf form.

Shouldn't have shifted in front of her, especially when my wolf was clawing at the edges of my control.

The bond was right there, just beneath the surface, waiting for us to complete it.

Shifting to kiss her when she was still injured?

Terrible idea. But she responded. I could still smell her scent on me, sweet and intoxicating.

She was drawn to me, at least physically.

And that wasn't a comfort, not in the state I was in.

Connor was pissed. I retreated to my room, trying to cool off, but it didn't take long before he stood in the doorway, his eyes hard with concern.

"We can't treat her with kid gloves, Ash," he said, his voice low and strained. "But you can't just change, be completely naked, and overwhelm her like that. It should've been a conversation. A real one."

I let out a long sigh. "I heard what she said."

Connor paced from the bed to the bathroom door and back, frustration radiating off him. "You're volatile right now, Ash. The bond's pulling at you, and you're not in control. You can't just act like you're still waiting for Claire to return. Luna's not her."

The words hit me harder than I expected.

It wasn't the first time Connor had pointed out how I was clinging to the past, but it still cut deep.

I was so damn scared of what this bond meant, of what it could do to us.

The pull of Luna, the way my wolf responded to her—it was a beast, feral and demanding.

If I wasn't careful, I could hurt her, and that thought terrified me.

"I'm scared of this, Con. Scared of what the bond means. It feels too... close, too wild. I don't know if I can control it."

Connor stopped pacing, his face softening as he took in my words.

He'd always been the one who saw through my defenses.

"You don't need to control it, Ash. You need to embrace it.

Luna's not Claire. She's never going to be.

But you have to understand—this bond is yours.

Yours and hers. You're meant for each other, just like we were with Claire. But this is different."

I stared at him, the weight of his words sinking into me.

I wasn't sure if I was ready for it. Was I even capable of it?

I'd spent so many years fighting the loss of Claire, trying to hold onto a family that was no longer possible.

I didn't know how to build a new life with Luna when I couldn't even trust myself to keep the bond stable.

“I can’t consummate the bond in this state,” I admitted, the vulnerability slipping out before I could stop it. “It feels like I’m a danger to her, like my wolf’s too close to the surface. One wrong move and I could destroy everything.”

Connor didn’t say anything at first. Then, he stepped closer, his voice gentle. “No, Ash. You wouldn’t hurt her. You’re not a danger to her. But you need to find balance. The bond doesn’t control you unless you let it.”

The faith in his voice made something twist in my chest. There was a time when Connor’s unwavering trust in me had been enough to carry me through anything. But now, it felt... different. Luna wasn’t just my responsibility. She was my mate. And that was something new, something terrifying.

“We need to get to her place. Check it out. Also, check in at work. I can’t just sit here spinning in circles,” I said, standing up, trying to redirect my thoughts.

Connor’s gaze darkened. “Agreed. But I’d like her to be healed before we leave her.”

I chuckled softly, the tension breaking for a moment. “You think she’ll let us leave her here when we go to her house?” I asked, knowing full well she’d want to come along, no matter what we said.

Connor’s lips twitched, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Probably not. No.”

I shifted uncomfortably, the memory of our kiss invading my thoughts. Her soft body pressed against mine, and the sounds of her pleasure as she melted into me. I pushed the thought away, but it lingered.

“What was it like?” I asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between us.

Connor hesitated, but then his eyes met mine, raw and open. “Like hell and home,”

he said softly, and it hit me—he was just as torn as I was. We’d both been through so much; now, everything felt like it was on the line.

“She said if she can’t make an active choice, she’s not really here. She’s thinking long-term, Ash. It is about fixing the bond and what it means for us. For the future.”

The weight of her words crushed me. Was I ready for that? Was she? We’d both been broken in different ways. How the hell did we fit together in all this chaos?

I paused, taking it all in. “Do you think she can handle it? The truth, I mean?”

Connor’s voice softened. “Not yet. She’s sheltered, but she’s not naive. She’s seen the world for what it is. But she hasn’t seen the darkness we carry. Not all of it.”

I nodded, the gravity of everything sinking in. “We’ll have to show her. And then we’ll figure out what comes next.”

Connor didn’t say anything, but I felt his agreement, his resolve. We couldn’t run from this. Not anymore.

He turned to leave, but stopped at the door when I spoke again. “Why does everything feel like life or death when we have a mate? Why can’t it just be... normal? Meals, TV, and then... everything else afterward?”

Connor chuckled, though it was a hollow sound. “Because it’s never normal, Ash. Not for us. Not for mates.”

And maybe that was the most brutal truth of all.

CONNOR

Her door was open—a good sign. Luna stood in the doorway, gazing out past the fence into the forest, her back to us. For a moment, I watched her, unsure of what she was thinking. Her posture was relaxed but distant, almost like she was lost in thought, her mind wandering somewhere far away.

She was dressed in tights and a singlet that fell loosely to her thighs, and though I was trying to keep my attention on her face, it was hard not to notice the way the fabric clung to her, outlining the graceful curve of her legs and the subtle rise of her breasts.

She had no idea how much of a pull she had on me, not because of a bond, but because of who she was.

Her hair was loose, hanging past her shoulders like a dark veil. It framed her face in a way that made her look almost ethereal, like a dream I wasn't quite ready to wake from.

She turned when she heard us. The knot in my chest didn't quite loosen, because even that tentative smile hit me like a punch. The wolf in me surged forward, recognizing her, craving her. I shoved him back down. Not now. Not when she was still deciding if this was safe.

“We were just talking through a plan,” I started, trying to sound calm, even though my mind was racing.

Ash's presence beside me, steady and unbothered, grounded me somewhat.

He had a way of staying quiet in moments like these.

Luna looked up at us, her expression open and trusting, trusting us to handle this right, not to screw up.

Then she spoke, which threw me off guard, yanking me out of my thoughts. “Were you the dog that slept with me? Well, wolf, not dog.”

I blinked. That was an unexpected question.

“Yes,” I said after a pause, my voice a little hoarse. “Sorry if that makes you uncomfortable.”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head, her lips curving in a reassuring smile. “It soothed me.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realise I was holding.

There was a subtle relief in her words, but it didn’t erase the underlying tension that still hung between us.

She smoothed her singlet down over her thighs, and I tried not to focus too much on how the fabric tightened across her skin and how her body moved with such grace.

“I love animals,” she said, her voice softening, almost wistful. “I’ve just never been able to have one...because I moved so much.”

Her words landed heavier than I expected.

There was a kind of longing in her tone, a hint of something deeper that I wasn’t sure how to respond to.

I thought about my childhood, when we were animals, running wild in the woods without supervision.

My mother raised me after my father passed away, and I remember the dog we had growing up.

She'd been the definition of family to me, my mum.

Ash's parents were like second and third parents, too, and I knew that Luna had never had that kind of stability.

"That sucks," I said, and the words felt too simple for the weight of what she was saying, but it was all I could offer.

Ash spoke then, breaking the quiet moment. "The plan is to go to your place and check things out." His voice was steady, like he had already decided it was time to move forward. I could feel my gaze shift toward him, but my mind was still caught on Luna's words.

Luna nodded, her eyes lighting up a little. "Oh, good. I'd like to get my clothes and some other things."

She was coming. No hesitation. No second thoughts. But I knew it wasn't that simple. She was still holding back, unsure of what this meant.

"So you'll stay here?" I asked, my voice quieter than I intended. I barely dared to breathe as I waited for her answer. This felt like the moment where everything could shift. The door was open. She could walk away if she wanted.

"Yes," she said, and for a heartbeat, I swore I could hear the unspoken "for now" in her words, though she didn't say it. It hung between us anyway, a delicate reminder

that this was temporary, that she was still figuring it all out.

I nodded, trying to hide the knot of anxiety in my stomach. I wanted her to stay, more than I cared to admit. But I also knew it wasn't that simple. We were still strangers. How could she possibly feel the same when she didn't fully understand what she was stepping into?

Ash cleared his throat, as though pulling me back from my spiraling thoughts. "Shall we head out to your place in 10?"

I glanced at him, then back at Luna. I could tell she wasn't as focused on the logistics as she was on the uncertainty of everything between us. "Yeah," I said. "We'll take care of things."

Luna nodded, smiled again, a little warmer this time, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. There was still something unreadable there. She was still processing and trying to find her place amidst all this.

As Ash and I moved to leave, I couldn't help but look back over my shoulder at her. She was standing in the doorway, her silhouette framed by the room's dim light. Again, it struck me how fragile this felt and how everything could break if we weren't careful.

Why couldn't it just be simple? Dinners and soft touches, her laughter in the kitchen, the warmth of a body beside mine at night.

The bond was here, forcing them—forcing her—to move faster, to make choices before she was ready.

I'd always known my place—strong arms, steady presence, decisions made quickly and cleanly.

But maybe Luna didn't need that. Perhaps she needed something else. Something quieter.

I sighed, pushing the thought away. For now, all I could do was be there, try to protect her, and hope we could figure out the rest along the way.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:35 pm

LUNA

I was feeling a lot of things. I sat in the back seat of Ash's pickup truck, the ride bumpy as we bounced down the mountain toward town.

Ash had kissed me earlier—easily the best kiss of my life.

But the aftertaste wasn't just sweetness.

It was a mix of warmth and dread, tangled like wires I didn't know how to pull apart.

Soon enough, we pulled up to the little place I was renting.

It was more of a cabin than a flat, but I loved it.

The pointed roof and wooden fixtures gave a cozy feel.

Everything was in one room, except for the bathroom, which also served as the laundry.

The guys had clarified that they were taking over the safety part of things.

It was sweet, in a way, that they thought I'd listen.

But as far as my safety was concerned, I trusted them.

When it came to my ability to take care of myself, though?

That was all me. I'd been doing it for a long time.

I stayed in the car, letting them check the place. Everything looked untouched. Both doors were locked—nothing out of place.

“I can't smell anything outside either. No one's been hunting her from here. It must've been someone who got a lucky break when she changed,” Ash said to Connor, his tone matter-of-fact as they guided me inside.

My phone was on the table next to my bag. There was only a missed call from Maureen and a text from Jessica—a simple check-in and a reminder of how self-contained I was. No one knew I had been missing for days, and that hit me in the feels.

I grabbed a bag and started packing what I wanted—clothes, books, toiletries, my Kindle—while they stood guard, one at each door.

I wasn't sure how long I'd be gone. Honestly, I didn't have much in the first place.

That made it easier. But if they expected me to stay with them permanently, I'd have to leave this place behind.

I was keeping my job, though. I wasn't about to become some stay-at-home partner, not after everything.

“What are you thinking?” Connor asked, watching me.

Caught. My guard slipped, and I looked up, meeting his eyes.

What had he noticed? I was used to keeping my thoughts close to my chest. But they could sense something.

I could feel their eyes on me, watching every move I made.

Like I was some fragile thing about to break.

I hated it—and needed it. And that contradiction made me want to scream.

“Wondering how many pairs of things to bring,” I murmured, avoiding the real question.

“If I had my way, you’d bring it all,” Ash said abruptly, arms crossed, his posture tight with something I couldn’t quite place.

“Well, you haven’t dated in the regular sense.” I let out a small, bitter laugh, shaking my head. “But in my world, you ask someone on a date, go on many dates, and then later ask them to move in. And some time after that, you ask them to marry you.”

Ash stepped closer, the space between us shrinking. “Are you pointing out the lack of asking I’ve done, or are you asking what happens next?”

I held my ground, despite the intimidating way he towered over me. “Ash,” Connor warned, but Ash wasn’t backing down.

“No. You haven’t asked me outright. You’ve told me what I am, what I’m supposed to be.

But you don’t even know me. Who am I? Have I got a boyfriend?

” I sidestepped, my frustration spilling out.

“How do I feel about having a mate —about whatever this is with you two? How do I even begin to feel comfortable with that? What are my needs, my wants?” I stopped,

leaning against the table, exhausted from the emotional weight.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Ash’s voice was barely a growl, fixating on the wrong thing.

“No. But that was the least of what I said.” I tried not to think about the one relationship I’d had. The one that had almost destroyed me. The one where I’d allowed myself to be vulnerable and paid the price. Never again.

“How do you feel about us? About this?” Connor’s voice cut through the tension, his question pulling me back to the present.

“Honestly?” I met his gaze. “Scared out of my mind. I don’t even know how to handle one man.

I’ve been in one relationship, and it wasn’t a long or a good one.

I don’t get the logistics of this. How does any of this work?

And now I’m supposed just to pack up and return to your place and. .. what? Do what you say?”

Connor’s expression softened, a hint of sympathy in his eyes. “We didn’t mean to overwhelm you, Luna. We’re still figuring this out, too.”

Ash sat on the edge of the bed, his posture tense as he looked at me. “Will you stay with us?” His voice was quieter, more vulnerable than I expected.

I met his eyes, trying to sort through my own emotions. “Yes.”

“I keep hearing the ‘for now’ part that you’re not saying,” Ash added, voice raw.

“That’s fine. You don’t have to make any long-term decisions right now. But will you give us a chance?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell us what you want? What do you need?” Connor asked, his voice steady, but I could hear the underlying desperation.

“I’ll try. I’m not used to sharing. I’m used to keeping to myself,” I admitted.

“I see that. We’re not promising a traditional life.

But we can promise you that we’ll try to make this as natural as we can,” Ash said, his tone softer now.

“But it’s weird. All our friends got their mate bonds and accepted them immediately.

For us, it’s... different. We don’t know why.

But we are committed to making this work. For you.”

Connor nodded. “And we want to make sure you always have a choice. Every step of the way.”

I nodded, my exhaustion creeping in. “I need a nap.”

Let’s go home, Luna,” Ash said, standing and grabbing my bag, his voice a mix of tenderness and determination.

ASH

Her outburst scared the hell out of me, but it needed to happen. That conversation had been brewing, and she needed to let some of the steam out. To tell us what she was thinking. What she was worrying about.

Because she was worrying.

I could feel the weight of expectation pressing on her like a second skin.

And here I was, desperate to have her, while she was just trying to figure out what came next without drowning in it. The fear of what she thought we expected from her? It was thick in the air.

Tonight, we needed to talk—a little Q&A.

I dropped them off at the house and then headed to the gym to check in with staff and clear some of the admin backlog.

On my way home, I stopped to grab some flowers—blues and purples, like the colours she wore—and a few boxes of Chinese food. I wanted it to feel like a date, as close as possible, tonight.

I wondered if she'd asked Connor to nap with her.

The tightness in my chest? It could've been the unfinished bond.

It could've been jealousy. Probably both.

I wanted them to have their connection, and of course, I did, but it was hard not to feel like the odd one out again.

The alpha with the rules. That's what they saw. Hell, sometimes that's what I saw.

But Luna? She had grit. She had instinct. She wasn't just surviving—she was choosing. And I respected the hell out of that.

The house was quiet when I pulled in. Peaceful.

I paused a moment outside, took a long breath, and went in. Set the food and flowers on the counter, then padded to her room. The door was open.

She was curled up on the bed, fast asleep, one hand resting gently on Connor's coat, like she was holding on to his wolf.

She stirred.

Her eyes opened—and found mine. It was like a shot of adrenaline to my heart. I didn't know why I got to experience this, but I was glad as hell I did.

She smiled, still half-dreaming. Then her gaze flicked to her hand on the coat, and back to me. There it was. The double-take. She felt something. Maybe guilt. Maybe confusion. Probably both. Her heart was tugging in two directions, and she didn't know how to carry both simultaneously.

“Sleep well?” I asked, keeping my tone easy and light.

“Yes, thanks. Was work okay?” She stretched—and that glimpse of smooth skin

where her shirt lifted? That did things to me for which I didn't have words. I could never understand how she could excite me with something so simple.

"Still standing without us," I said. "We have a great team. I picked up dinner—I thought we could eat and talk to get to know each other a little better."

She lit up, and I could've made a life out of earning that smile.

Connor stood from the bed, stretching his limbs and shaking out his fur before padding past me, brushing against my legs on purpose—a little nudge of approval.

She'd changed into her clothes—jeans that hugged her just right, and a tee that skimmed her waist, lifting every time she moved. The sliver of skin it revealed might just kill me.

When she joined me in the kitchen, I handed her the flowers.

"They're beautiful. Thank you. That was really thoughtful."

"Want to eat right away, or a glass of wine first?"

"Wine, please."

"White?"

She nodded. "Would the couch be better for us to sit on, instead of the table? It feels softer there."

"Of course." Grateful she was letting me in, even in that small way.

Connor reappeared, dressed and relaxed. I passed him a beer. We settled on the

couch—me at one end, him at the other. She sat in the middle. That wasn't nothing.

“So, what do you read?” I asked, remembering the few books she'd tucked into her bag.

She blushed. Now I was curious.

“Romance. Mostly rom-coms,” she admitted. “But sometimes thrillers. Like the TV kind.”

She was a sucker for happy endings, even after everything.

“So,” Connor said casually, “can we ask the boyfriend story now?”

She froze, then took a few fast gulps of wine.

“As an adult, I've mostly moved around,” she began. A preamble. Good. “It didn't feel safe to date without any backup. But a couple of years ago, I gave it a go with a coworker. He seemed nice.”

I braced myself.

“It was nice at first. Flowers, sweet treats. Then he started acting like he was owed... more.” Her lips tightened. I exchanged a look with Connor.

“I don't like being told what to do. But he made me feel like it was my fault. That it was only ‘reasonable’ for him to expect more—physically.” She finished her glass. “It happened once. It wasn't good.”

Connor stilled. I couldn't move either. The words sat between us, awful and heavy.

“Did he force you?” Connor’s voice was quiet. Too quiet.

“Not exactly. But I wasn’t into it. He said I was a prude.” She was all but whispering now. And I knew—knew she was making excuses, rationalising.

“And you know that’s not okay, right?” Connor pushed gently.

She nodded. “Now I do. I packed a bag that night. Left the city.”

“Was that your first time?” I asked, shocked. A couple of years ago?

She nodded again. “Yeah.”

I would kill him.

“Did he... were you hurt?” Connor asked the question I couldn’t manage.

“I really need another drink,” she said softly, turning to me with eyes full of unshed tears.

I took her glass, poured another, and set the bottle within reach. Gave her the space to choose what to say next.

She hugged a cushion to her chest.

“I waited because I wanted to be in love. I wanted it to feel like the books.”

My chest ached. That dream had been stolen from her.

“What I felt this morning, when you kissed me...” She hesitated. “That’s what I should’ve felt.”

I let that sink in. Relief. Pride. Grief. She deserved better. She deserved us.

And maybe, if we'd met her years ago—no. No point wondering.

Then she hit me with a curveball.

“What happened to Claire?”

I nearly choked so much for a warm-up question.

LUNA

Ash clearly didn't expect me to turn the tables. Maybe he thought I'd stick to soft questions—but this mattered. If I could share my worst memory, he could share his.

They'd taken it well, so I thought they might understand now—my fears, not that they should stop me from living my life.

“Our enemy killed her. A rival shifter clan. Their territory is nowhere near ours,” he reassured me.

“It was a combination of wrong place, wrong time. She was pushing the limits and left our territory. At the same time, one of theirs did. They fought. But she was dead before we even knew she had gone.”

No wonder they'd panicked when they found I'd left. Guilt prickled at me, turning my stomach sour.

“There was a rivalry. They thought they were getting retribution for something they thought our pack had done. Decades-old grievances,” Ash finished.

“I'll never forget when Aaron arrived carrying her body. We didn't even know she'd gone out. We'd fought,” Connor took over, voice hitching.

My chest tightened. Their grief—and the guilt braided through it—hung heavy in the room. I suddenly felt like I'd stepped into a sacred space I hadn't earned the right to enter.

“We tried, all three of us, but it didn't really work. We couldn't get on an even keel. It was always imbalanced,” Ash took over. “I felt like it was them against me because I had to be alpha.”

“I felt it was you two against me because you had more of a visceral spark. An intense sexual connection I wasn't fully part of,” Connor added.

This was deep.

“I mean, we connected...together. But it wasn't the same.” He tried to offer context, but he was back in the sorrow. “And she hated being trapped here.”

“But she tried because it's the rule. Not some pack rule but some internal knowing,” he said—the mate bond.

We sat quietly for some time. Listening to the rain start on the roof. There was a lot of baggage on this table, and none of it was food.

“We should eat.” Ash's words cut through the silence like a lifeline. I didn't realise how tightly I was holding my breath until then. I noticed that was his way—retreating to action when emotion got too close.

“Yes, because I am a lightweight and I've had two glasses on an empty stomach.”

Connor laughed and offered me a hand to help me up. I placed my hand in his, feeling the warmth and softness.

Over dinner, I asked softly, “Have you had other relationships?”

“In high school, experiments. Nothing serious. Nothing since Claire,” Ash said. That surprised me. He was so...much. Physically attractive, obviously. But also a

confidence that lacked arrogance, that had probably seen every woman in a ten-mile radius swooning.

“Yeah, high school. And...last year there was someone.” Connor admitted, and Ash started, looking shocked. “We were so lost in our grief, I needed something. A closeness.” To me, he added, “We’ve never verbalised what we were without Claire. Were we flatmates? Something else?”

“We’re family,” Ash said, just now realising the truth about it.

“But without Claire, what did that mean? It was like when she died, we were just ghosts passing.”

“You’re one of the most important people in my life,” Ash said, placing his fork down, like he’d realised he was gripping it so tightly that his knuckles were white.

“But we weren’t in a relationship, so I sought it elsewhere.”

Ash blinked, stunned by the revelation.

He swallowed. “Wow. It never occurred to me that you would. I assumed we would be mateless, together, for the rest of our lives.”

“You never asked,” Connor said, echoing what I said earlier. “But did you really believe you’d never retake a lover?”

Ash looked thoughtful. “I didn’t the last three years, but I guess I may have eventually.”

“Now you’ve been blessed with another mate.” Connor smiled at me softly.

“How’d I get so lucky twice?” Ash mused. “And why does it have to be so damn complicated?”

We all laughed a strained laugh.

I wanted to break the tension, to offer something light, even if it risked surprise.

“I experimented at high school and college too,” I said, aiming for casual.

“What kind of experiments?” Ash asked, eyes zeroing in on my lips.

“The early bases,” I replied coyly, taking a sip of my drink.

“Men?” Connor inquired.

“Yes. You?” I asked, feeling inexplicably breathless.

“Both,” he admitted. I nodded. I suspected so.

Ash looked downright shocked. Looked like the best friends didn't share everything.

“Did you ever...with Claire before the bond?” I asked.

“No. Never even considered her like that,” Ash said immediately.

“Me either.” Connor agreed.

“Mate bonds are weird,” I said. “Would you have looked twice at me without it?”

“A hundred times,” Ash pronounced, eyes flashing.

I shivered, feeling hot in my chest.

Ash held my gaze. “What I feel—it isn’t separate from the need. It’s not just the bond. It’s you.”

CONNOR

Despite the heavy revelations, it was nice having a family dinner. I knew Ash felt it too. Luna had loosened up a little. She seemed to like clear parameters and expectations—structure. But she was also the type to cut and run, having relied on herself for too long.

I couldn't help wondering how this was all going to shake out.

The family looked how we wanted it to look. If we made space for her, hopefully, she'd find her way.

Luna was laughing at something Ash said. Her laugh landed somewhere behind my ribs—unexpected, warm. Her laugh. His smile. I felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster.

“Shall we watch more of that show?” Ash asked as we cleared up.

“Did I miss much the other night?” Luna asked.

“We turned it off as soon as we noticed you were asleep, so hopefully not.”

I folded the tea towel and hooked it over the oven door.

Luna stretched side to side like she was trying to shake off stiffness.

“Do you want more arnica?”

“Yes, please.”

She accepted easily. That pleased me more than it should have.

Standing in the kitchen proved far less tempting than sitting beside her on the couch this morning. I managed to rub it in without incident this time, and the bruising looked better as well.

Ash was wound a little tight, probably still caught up in her revelation, and what I’d shared about Claire.

“Want more wine?” he asked once she’d pulled her shirt down again.

“No, thank you. That’s my limit. I’ll just jump to the bathroom before we start.”

“Sweet,” I said, and watched her go. So did Ash.

We settled on the couch in silence. The weight of the day clung to the air between us.

“Are you mad?” I asked.

“No. I’m... sad.” His voice was low. “I wish I could’ve done everything better.”

I turned toward him. “It wasn’t all on you. We didn’t talk much, did we?”

“And I took you for granted after Claire died.”

“Severed mate bonds aren’t great to endure.” I glanced towards Luna’s closed bedroom door. I couldn’t remember the last time Ash looked at me like that—like he wanted to understand, not just forget. Maybe Luna’s honesty was catching.

“I think she’s going to be good for us. Even if it’s hard to get her to open up, she’s making us face things we’ve left sitting too long.”

Ash looked at me then, sharp and searching. “Why did you never tell me? About the lover? Your preference? Was it enough—what we had with Claire?”

My heart kicked up. I wasn’t sure which answer would hurt him more—the truth, or something softer.

“Yeah. It was enough. It’s about the person, not what’s in their pants. If that makes sense.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t tell you because... I love you. I loved what we had with Claire. But I didn’t need anything more. And I didn’t want to make it awkward.”

“Claire knew?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly.

“You never asked for anything after Claire.”

“No. It felt like all died with her.”

He let out a breath. “We left so much unsaid.”

“We were young.”

Luna’s door opened. She padded out in pyjama shorts that revealed slim, toned legs, and a fitted t-shirt with tiny love hearts.

“We need that robe back,” Ash muttered under his breath.

We were in trouble because we’d started to want again.

LUNA

I decided to put on my pajamas. If we were living together like this, I wouldn't stay dressed as if I were a guest. They paused mid-conversation as I opened the door. Two sets of eyes tracked me, slow and deliberate—I felt thoroughly appraised.

I put more confidence than I felt into my walk and carefully sat between them on the couch. Connor, who'd been leaning forward, talking to Ash, moved back to his side, giving me space. I couldn't wait until I didn't have to move so damn carefully.

“Want the blanket?” Connor asked, eyes on my legs, already standing to grab it from where it was folded over the back of the couch.

“Thank you.” I placed it over my legs.

He queued up the episode. We watched—it turned out I hadn't missed much.

But I felt weird. Like there was a gap between us all when it felt natural to be closer.

I had to be careful. They were so invested that without this bond completed, they were at a disadvantage.

But I wanted to know where I fit. I didn't want to be an accessory they needed but didn't want to have.

I tucked the blanket up to my chin, watching the screen, though I barely registered it.

I couldn't sleep. Waking alone, the silence of the house pressed on me. Quietly, I made my way upstairs, drawn like a moth to Ash's room.

The hallway was quiet, the moonlight soft and cool on the polished floor as I crept toward Ash's room. My heart hammered—half from nerves, half from a pull I couldn't explain.

I pushed the door open slowly. There he was, stretched out across that huge bed—his chest rising and falling with steady breaths, muscles relaxed yet defined even in sleep.

The moonlight kissed every line of him—strong shoulders, a bare arm draped across the pillow, the curve of his jaw shadowed by dark stubble. His hair was tousled, his skin glowing in the pale light.

Something inside me twisted—an ache, a warmth spreading low in my belly.

I swallowed, then stepped inside, closing the door behind me.

Ash stirred immediately, eyes fluttering open, alert.

“Luna?” His voice was thick, low.

“Can I stay?” My voice was barely a whisper.

He didn't hesitate. He shifted the covers, patting the space beside him.

I crawled toward him, heart pounding, and slid under the warm covers.

His arms wrapped around me, steady and sure, pulling me close.

His breath was warm against my temple as he kissed me softly.

The tension inside me unwound just a little.

I felt safe here.

I fell asleep quickly, but not before my fingers traced the taut planes of his chest beneath the thin shirt, memorizing every muscle.

Sunlight spilled across us. I woke, the heat of his body pressed against mine like a magnet.

My cheek rested against his bare skin, and every breath he took sent a thrill through me.

His hand moved slowly across my back, fingers brushing over bare skin exposed by my t-shirt riding up.

I pressed a kiss to his chest without thinking, lips soft and searching.

He smiled, eyes warm and steady.

“Good morning, Luna.”

His voice vibrated against my skin, deep and steady.

I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze—the slow burn in his eyes matched by the fire rising inside me.

“I came to you,” I whispered.

“Yeah.” He nodded, hand threading through mine under the blanket, holding me close.

I let my fingers wander, tracing his muscles, feeling the heat of him beneath my touch.

The ache between my legs was new, unfamiliar, but undeniable.

“Are you... Smelling me?” I teased quietly, breath warm against his cheek.

He chuckled. “Doesn’t sound so good when you put it like that.”

My hand slid up to cup his jaw, rough with stubble.

His control shattered.

He leaned down, lips capturing mine in a kiss that left me breathless.

My hands clutched at his shoulders, desperate to know this was real.

His lips trailed down my neck, reverent and searching.

“I don’t know what this is,” I whispered.

“Neither do I,” he admitted. “But it’s everything I’ve waited for.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:35 pm

Luna's body was pressed close, warm and genuine. She was still fully clothed, the fabric of her shirt soft beneath my bare chest. I could feel every breath she took, every subtle movement as she shifted closer into my arms.

I stayed still a moment, letting the quiet morning wrap around us. Her scent—fresh, faintly sweet—drew me in, a magnet pulling at something deep inside me.

I traced the curve of her back with one hand, feeling the heat of her skin through the thin cotton of her shirt. Her fingers found mine under the blanket, threading between my own with a gentle strength.

Her touch was tentative at first, but it grew bolder, exploring light strokes along my ribs, fingertips pressing into muscle, sending ripples of warmth through me.

I bent my head to kiss her temple, savoring the softness there before letting my lips trail lower—across her cheek, down her jawline, tasting the skin beneath.

She trembled slightly against me, and I caught her gaze. Her eyes were wide and bright, shimmering with something new—curiosity, desire, maybe even a hint of wonder.

My hand moved to cup her face, thumb brushing her cheekbone as I leaned in for a slow, deep kiss.

Her lips parted beneath mine, and the heat between us deepened, electric and alive.

Her hands slipped under my chin, fingers splaying against my throat, grounding me

as I traced the line of her collarbone over the fabric.

Every touch was a question, every sigh an answer.

I pulled back just enough to catch my breath, forehead resting against hers, heart pounding in sync with hers.

“I want this,” I murmured, voice low and rough. “Slow. With you.”

She nodded, breath hitching. “Me too.”

I let my hands wander, careful and reverent, tracing the gentle slope of her shoulders, sliding down to her arms, memorizing the feel of her skin beneath her clothes.

Her warmth was intoxicating, her presence a balm to every restless thought.

I kissed her again, soft and sure, hands gentle but insistent as they moved to cradle her face and shoulders.

We stayed like that—exploring, discovering, building a fire that burned bright but steady.

No words were needed—just the slow, tender dance of two bodies learning the language of each other.

And in that quiet morning light, everything felt possible.

Downstairs, Connor shifted into wolf form—massive, powerful, alert.

Luna greeted him calmly, fingers trailing over thick fur.

“Is it okay to touch him like this?” she asked softly.

I grinned. “He wouldn’t mind.”

Connor nudged her gently, eyes flicking between her hand and me.

He’d caught our scent—the mark of what we’d shared.

Something passed between us: possessiveness, curiosity, maybe respect.

We had to tread carefully—this was new territory for all of us.

Space, patience, trust.

That was the only way forward.

“What does it feel like when we’re touched like this?” Luna asked, her voice a curious whisper.

I thought for a moment. “It’s hard to say. Not many people touch us when we’re in this form. But I imagine it’s soothing. A connection of sorts.”

She nodded, her gaze drifting to Connor. I could see the way she was processing everything, her mind working through it all as she traced the muscles of his back with her fingers.

It was then that I saw it. Connor’s eyes flicked from Luna’s hand to my face, a flicker of something I couldn’t quite place passing between us. He’d caught the scent—the mark of what we’d shared.

I had no idea if he was jealous, relieved, or something else entirely. All I knew was

that this was a balancing act. The bond between Luna and me was still in the process of being forged, but we had to figure this out as a family, as a pack. Slowly, carefully.

I needed to give them space—to give myself space. Something unspoken still cracked the air between us.

The rich scent of bacon filled the kitchen as Luna came and leaned against me, warm and solid at my side.

The sizzle of the pan, the hum of the fridge—it all felt ordinary, except it wasn't.

She leaned into my side, her warmth against me as natural as breathing.

I wrapped my arm around her, pulling her closer.

I liked her openness and how natural it felt to be let in.

Claire had never been physically affectionate outside of the bedroom. This felt different. This felt real.

“He went upstairs, I presume to change in private,” she said, her voice low but warm as she took a sip of the coffee, humming in appreciation.

I nodded. “Probably.”

She looked up at me, her eyes a little brighter, a little more focused. “Hey, could we run together?”

I didn't need her to elaborate. I knew exactly what she meant.

My wolf had quieted, more content now that the bond had been fed, but still restless

beneath the surface. “I don’t see why not.”

She rubbed her chest again, a subtle gesture, but I saw it. She went to sit at the counter with her coffee. Connor had returned, looking a little more somber than before. His expression wasn’t angry, but there was something in it that suggested he wasn’t entirely at ease.

Luna had seen it too. But I wasn’t about to address it now. We’d figure it out later.

“Has anything changed for you?” I asked, keeping my tone casual, but with purpose. I didn’t want to make things awkward, but I needed to know where she was with this, with us.

She flushed, a hint of the same vulnerability I’d seen earlier in her eyes. I wanted to taste that blush again.

“In what way?” she asked, shifting slightly on the chair, her legs dangling just above the foot bar.

I watched Connor, who had quietly taken over preparing bacon and eggs, take my coffee cup with a nod as he went about his task. His presence, his steady silence, told me he was aware of the delicate balance here as well.

“With the bond,” I clarified.

“I know. You can say whatever. It’s okay,” Connor assured her, glancing at her with a surprising gentleness that caught me off guard.

There was a quiet moment, the air thick with unspoken words, before Luna finally spoke. “I feel like half of me is eased. But there’s something... like heartburn. Under the surface. Like something’s still missing.”

My chest tightened at her words. I could feel it too—the bond was growing, but it wasn't complete. Not yet.

“You didn't complete?” Connor asked, his voice low, curious.

Luna looked at me, and I answered for both of us. “No. Not complete.”

Connor's expression shifted slightly, like he'd connected the dots. He understood now.

I wondered how long it would take for Luna to accept Connor and what their relationship would look like. I knew it wouldn't be soon—not when she was still trying to make sense of her bond with me. There was a delicate line to walk here.

I could feel the pull in my chest, but it needed time to sink in.

And so did we.

LUNA

Eating breakfast with the guys felt oddly natural—like I belonged here.

“Luna would like to take a run today,” Ash said to Connor, who looked up from his plate.

“Is that a good idea?”

“That’s up to you,” Ash replied. “Best we stay away from others, though.”

“Why?” I asked.

Connor answered, “Because we wouldn’t be liable for our actions if we saw another male wolf near you.”

I shivered. This was all so primal.

“Maybe we should wait,” I said, guilt creeping in. “If I just... did what was needed for the bond, would it make it better?”

“No,” Ash said at the same time as Connor said, “Absolutely not.”

Ash added, “I mean, technically, yes. We’d be bonded. But that would be trading one set of problems for another. And we’re not thinking short-term here. We’re not using you as a means to an end.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for that.” Ash looked pained.

Quietly, I washed my plate and the pans used for cooking and went to my room, closing the door behind me.

Never could I have imagined this. After three years of refusing to date, now I was supposed to simultaneously accept that I was a wolf shifter and tied to two complicated “family” members. My life was a mess.

I took a long shower, letting the hot water soothe the tightness in my muscles. Then, I dressed in jeans and a T-shirt—my usual uniform. Needing a break from reality, I grabbed a book and settled into a chair on the deck. The sun was soft and warm. I leaned my head back and let it wash over me.

A knock came at my door. “Come in,” I called.

Connor stepped in, and his sheer presence momentarily struck me. Chiseled features, like a sculpture come to life, with messy blond hair falling across his forehead. He smiled easily.

“Enjoying the sun?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“I just wanted to let you know Ash has gone to work, and I’m heading outside to do some things.”

“Busy work, or would you have really stayed back?”

He paused, caught.

“Don’t worry. I get why you’re not leaving me here alone.”

“It’s not that we don’t trust you.”

“Well, you don’t know me.”

“We don’t know you well,” he clarified. “But we know the essentials. Forgive Ash if he’s protective of a mate we only just found out existed—and who was attacked days ago.”

“Fair.” I stood. “I might read on the couch, then.”

“Nice. Feel free to make another coffee or whatever you’d like.”

“Thank you.” I touched his arm as I passed.

I curled up on the corner of the couch, legs stretched out, propping my book on a cushion. It was a popular fae romance—equal parts epic love and gratuitous smut. I was a few chapters in when Connor walked by—shirtless.

The guy had abs. Like, full six-pack abs.

He paused, sniffed the air lightly. “What are you reading?”

Flushing, I handed him the book. It was better that he thought that caused my reaction than the sight of him.

He scanned a page, then looked at me over the top of the book, eyebrows raised, and kept reading.

“You like this?” he asked, teasing but intrigued.

I nodded. “I mean, in theory. I’ve never actually done anything like that.”

He sat beside me, close enough that his body heat kissed my skin.

“I think I want to read this too.”

“I’ve got the first in the series at my flat,” I offered.

“Cool.”

We sat there in silence, close enough to share breath. He smelled like peppermint and clean mountain air. I leaned in—and he met me, lips brushing mine with aching gentleness.

I melted.

Then he deepened it. His arms wrapped around me, pulling me flush to his chest, and I let myself drown in the moment.

Until I remembered this morning. Ash. His hands. His touch.

I pulled away, breath shaky. “I’m sorry. That was inappropriate.”

“It’s confusing.” His arms stayed firm a second longer before releasing me. His wolf didn’t want to let go, I could feel it.

“You make me feel hope again.” He brushed a finger down my arm, raising goosebumps in his wake. “But you’re his.”

Not ours, the unspoken words hung between us.

Before guilt could settle too heavily in my chest, he smiled again, softer this time. “Why don’t we run?”

His eyes glinted mischievously. I nodded.

He got up and opened the front door, already peeling off his clothes. I retreated to the bedroom, undressed, and let the shift come.

“Stay close to me,” he called, just before he changed.

I padded outside, tail swishing. Shifting near another wolf was strange and exhilarating.

He was much larger, with a light grey coat, while mine was smaller and tinged with red. And then we ran.

We chased across the breadth of their territory, racing through trees, across hills, our paws pounding the earth. Hours—or maybe moments—passed. Time didn’t matter when we ran like this.

Eventually, the house came into view. We sprinted for it, but he was faster, by far.

Inside, he nudged me gently with his snout. I rubbed mine against his, uncertain if I was sending the wrong signal—but too tired to overthink it.

I leapt onto my bed and curled up, content and spent. After a pause, Connor joined me, his much larger form curling nearby. Not touching, but close.

It felt like we’d reached a quiet understanding—there was something here, but

nothing like what I had with Ash.

And that made it easier to breathe.

I slept.

CONNOR

When I woke up, Ash was sitting in the lounge.

A couple of hours had passed. Luna was naked, sprawled in the same position she had been in when she went to sleep as a wolf, the robe draped over her inert form.

Ash must have been in here. Still in wolf form, I crept from her side and padded into the lounge before shifting back. My clothes were where I'd left them.

"Have fun?"

"Yeah. We did." I thumped down next to him on the couch.

"We kissed," I said because he was waiting for it. "But she stopped. Couldn't because of you."

"I'm sorry."

"No. It's right. She's your mate, and that needs to be completed before anything." I paused, unsure how to bring this up, so I barrelled on. "I think you've been trying to guide this to be like it was with Claire. And it's just not."

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Ran his hand over his face.

"There is something there."

“But it’s not the same and it’s only confusing her...all of us...to try.”

“I guess I just fell into the trap of thinking we got a do-over,” he admitted. It was there, the chance to rewrite history.

“I took her for a run. She loved it. Absolutely adored it.”

He chuckled, pleased. All wolves had a call to run, but her joy was contagious.

“You’re still vital in this family,” he said suddenly and urgently. I held his gaze and nodded, swallowed, and turned away.

“Maddie called. She goes to work tomorrow,” he added, letting the heaviness stay aside.

“OK.” It had to happen soon. We couldn’t live in a bubble up here forever, and the novelty would wear off. Three personalities would clash.

“Let’s try to have a less heavy night tonight,” he said, and I had to agree. We should find out her favourite food or something.

The subject of our thoughts walked out looking adorably disheveled, tying up the robe tightly. It was like Deja Vu.

Her eyes lit up for Ash. “Hey,” she said, coming to stand by the couch. He reached for her hand, and she gave it. He kissed it—the kind of thing he never did with Claire.

“How was your day?” he asked.

“Great! I read and then went for a run with Connor. Then I had a great nap,” she said, rolling out her shoulders. “How was yours?”

“Not as eventful but good. Got my stuff done. Maddie called. You’re due back at work tomorrow. We’ll drop you off on our way in.”

“Thank you.”

She came over and dropped down right next to me, in the corner, her legs bumping along mine.

“Your girl reads fairy smut,” I teased playfully.

“Hey!” she said, outraged. “That’s a popular romantasy. Everyone’s reading it.”

Ash laughed.

“I read it and nearly blushed.”

“No, you didn’t.” Now she was blushing.

“You’re right. It’s very vanilla, but Luna liked it.”

“I’m not going to stay here if you use your noses against me all the time. No secret is safe.”

I put my hands up. “Fine, fine. Just give me the book you promised, and we’ll be even.”

Ash’s shoulders were shaking with laughter. She nudged me with her foot but smiled.

After dinner, Luna was standing at the counter, waiting. We had our little routine, but tonight I wanted something better for her.

“Ash has a large flat-screen TV and a giant bed in his room. Would it be more comfortable to watch our program in there?” I floated the idea. Ash looked across at me.

“Sure.” She’d changed into her pajamas before dinner, so while she was definitely clothed, we could see a lot more now. Best to get her under the covers.

“Well, OK.” I led the way upstairs. We had spent many nights curled up here watching movies with Claire.

Luna held back while I grabbed the remote and thumped down on what had always been my side, on top of the covers—Ash behind her. I lifted the duvet. “Would you like to hop in? There’s plenty of space.” I left the offer open. She could choose. Without commentary, she hopped in.

“Do you want another pillow?” I asked.

“Yes, please.” I grabbed one from the cupboard and stacked it behind her. She was still moving carefully, but more normally now.

“Your ribs are feeling better?”

“Almost normal.” I thought she was being more optimistic than realistic, but she was healing. She was left of center. So when Ash lay down, they were nearly touching, but not quite. I lay back down on my side and turned on the TV.

I tuck my arms behind my head, keeping my hands to myself. Ash was doing the same. I wondered if it was harder for him to leave her alone. She’d accept it if he pulled her to him. They abstained for me.

The programme started with a recap of yesterday, and we turned our attention to that.

By the time the option to move on to the next episode came on screen, I realised she was asleep. She'd rolled toward Ash, his arm wrapped around her.

"She's a snuggler," Ash said softly, meeting my eyes.

"I can see that." My chest felt tight; it looked like she'd always been here. I turned the TV off and placed the remote on the side table.

"I don't understand the contradiction. The physical need and the emotional need. I want her so badly, but I want to hold her close just as much," he said to me, to the moonlight.

"Is it bad that it feels more right, with her?" Ash asked me so quietly.

"I don't think so." We had always assumed that the mate bond was the highest of all orders and that it was infallible, but what if it sometimes got it wrong?

We watched her quietly for a while. Taking in the moment. One we never thought we'd have again.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:35 pm

LUNA

I blinked my eyes open, taking in the tall ceiling and the skylight. I was in Ash's arms, and it felt right. The spot where Connor had been was empty.

"Good morning, Luna," Ash said from behind me. I turned around in his arms, laying my head on his bicep.

"Good morning. Why can't I stay awake when we watch TV?"

I felt his chuckle rumble through his chest.

"You're still healing. That takes energy."

I hesitated. "I, uh... I can feel you."

"Healthy biological response," he said, unfazed. "Especially when you're curled up in my arms."

He kissed my forehead like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I want to help," I whispered. "I want to touch you."

His breath hitched. "You're going to be the death of me," he muttered, eyes warm and full of fire. "And I'll go smiling."

I laughed, feeling powerful for the first time in forever. I explored his chest, the

complex curves of his arms. His control trembled—but he didn't move.

When I cupped his cheek, he looked at me like I was everything he'd ever waited for.

In a blur, he was over me, not quite touching, lips hovering close enough to steal the air from my lungs. I leaned in and kissed him. Gently at first. Then deeper. He groaned, low and rough, and returned the kiss like a man starved.

My whole body responded—heat curling low in my belly, a rhythm pounding in my chest. He paused only to ask, “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

He kissed me again, and everything else disappeared. We tangled together in a haze of heat, trust, and breathless wonder. Hands explored, sighs escaped, and I felt myself unravel in the safety of his arms.

Later, tucked against him, heartbeat steady, I whispered, “I liked that.”

He smiled into my hair. “Me too, Luna. Me too.”

I stepped into the shower downstairs, letting the water wash over me. Something in my chest felt looser, like a band had been cut free.

This morning's closeness still shimmered across my skin. Not just the heat of it, but the way Ash had looked at me—like I was precious, not fragile. Like I was wanted. Safe.

We hadn't gone all the way, but something in me had shifted. I'd let him see me. Touch me. And I hadn't broken. I felt... claimed, in a way that had nothing to do with marks or bonds. Just trust.

By the time I stepped out, dried my hair, and put on makeup, I felt almost myself. The white silk shirt hugged my shoulders perfectly, and the black pants were sharp and tailored. My heeled boots clicked softly against the floor as I walked out of the room.

Ash and Connor were in the kitchen, mid-laugh. Something inside me settled at the sound. They looked up, and Connor gave a low whistle.

“Ah, jeez. I thought you were hot before,” he said, eyes playful.

Ash crossed the room and pulled me in, pressing a kiss to my lips. “You look incredible.”

The kiss lingered just long enough to leave me dazed. I blinked, breathless, and caught Connor smirking as he handed me a mug.

“Splash of milk, right?”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“We didn’t have time to cook,” Ash said. “Protein bar?”

“Sure.” I took it, warmth blooming in my chest. This felt domestic. Soft. Normal.

They dropped me off at the real estate agent’s office just before nine. It was a temporary assignment with no fixed end date, but the rhythm of it had started to feel familiar. Safe, even.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said, hovering with my hand on the door handle, not sure if I should lean over and kiss Ash goodbye. Would that be too much? Too soon?

Ash might've read the hesitation in my eyes. He leaned across and brushed a kiss against my cheek, lingering just enough to make my stomach flutter. "We'll see you here at four, OK?"

His eyes were warm, steady. Like this wasn't just a ride—it was a promise. I nodded. "Have a great day."

"You too," he replied, and I stepped out, clutching my bag with more awareness than I meant to.

The crisp morning air bit at my cheeks as I walked toward the office, boots tapping against the pavement. The town was quiet at this hour, with just a few shopfronts opening. The florist, with its bright bouquets in the window, was already a riot of colour.

Inside the real estate office, the fluorescent lights buzzed faintly overhead. I shrugged off my coat and caught sight of Maureen at the kitchenette, pouring herself a coffee. She looked up as I walked in.

"How are you?" she asked, her tone clipped but not unkind.

"Better." I offered a polite smile. "Thank you so much for the time off."

Maureen stirred her coffee, eyeing me over the rim of the mug like she was weighing my answer. "What happened?"

I took a breath. "I was running in the forest behind my house and fell hard. Bruised my ribs something bad." Maddie and I had rehearsed the story. Technically true. Just not the whole truth.

She didn't comment right away; she just watched me for a beat longer than I was

comfortable. Then she said simply, “You shouldn’t go into the forest alone.”

Her words weren’t laced with concern—they carried more the weight of local wisdom. The kind passed down in quiet warnings and half-believed folklore.

“No, I guess not,” I murmured, tucking my bag beneath the reception desk and powering up the computer.

Maureen nodded once, already shifting into work mode. She walked past me toward her office, calling over her shoulder, “We’ve got three property inquiries from yesterday. Start with the emails. And if the Fergusons call again, tell them I haven’t forgotten.”

“Yes, Maureen.” I slid into the chair, fingers settling on the keyboard. The screen blinked to life.

Behind the hum of the machine and the click of my mouse, my mind drifted—briefly—to Ash’s kiss, to the heat in his eyes, to the way his hand had brushed against mine when I climbed into the car.

Something in me still thrummed. Still burned low and quiet.

But for now, I had work to do. And secrets to keep.

The guys were out front at exactly four, punctual as ever. Connor had the window rolled down and leaned out with a grin.

“Hey there, pretty lady, would you like a ride?”

I laughed softly, shaking my head. “That sounds so dodgy,” I replied, but my smile gave me away.

My eyes found Ash, who stood leaning against the side of the car. When he turned toward me, his grin was slower, softer, and something warm curled in my chest. I walked toward them, heart thudding for reasons I wasn't quite ready to name.

“Could we stop by my place?” I asked as I slid into the car. My tone was light, but something about the way their glances met—brief, unreadable—told me they were alert beneath their usual calm.

“Of course,” Ash said, voice steady.

When we reached the house, I paused on the front step.

The key felt heavy in my hand as I unlocked the door.

Inside, everything was as I'd left it—but the air felt hollow.

Like a space I used to belong to. The faint scent of lavender cleaning spray still lingered, and the throw on the couch sat neatly folded, untouched.

All of it was too neat. Too impersonal. I hadn't realized until now how much I'd already distanced myself.

Ash and Connor followed me in, moving more easily than last time, though still carefully. They seemed to sense the change, too.

“I think it's time I pack up the rest of my things,” I said aloud, like I needed to hear the words out in the open. “Let go of the lease. Bring my car.” I hesitated, then added, “I can contribute to the house costs with the money I'll save.”

They both went still.

I was moving too fast.

“Are you sure?” Ash asked, voice quieter now. His gaze searched mine, like he wanted to believe it but wasn’t sure if I genuinely did.

“Yes.” I nodded, firm. Maybe a little too much. The habit of trying to prove I could be decisive.

Ash took a breath. “This is me explicitly asking you. Are you ready to give up your place? Be with us?”

The room seemed to pause around us.

I crossed the space between us and placed my hands on his chest. The beat of his heart beneath my fingers steadied me. I looked up into his eyes. “Yes,” I said again—this time not just as an answer, but as a choice.

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close, and held me in a way that said he believed me now. Maybe he needed to have me just as much as I needed the holding.

Packing didn’t take long. There wasn’t much left—some books, my favourite kitchen knife, a few clothes I hadn’t worn in weeks.

Everything else was already sorted, donated, or boxed in a corner.

The house was spotless, every drawer wiped out, every room reset.

I’d always kept it that way. Ready to go. It was how I survived back then.

Connor insisted on driving my car, citing an issue with the alignment pulling to the left, so I rode with Ash. As we drove, my home—no, that house—shrank behind us in

the rearview mirror, and I didn't feel panicked. Just... untethered.

They carried my things in without fuss, placing them neatly in my room. Well. I supposed it would still technically be mine, but I hadn't slept alone since that first night, and truthfully? I didn't want to.

They showed me the wardrobe, the drawers, and the space in the side tables. They encouraged me to settle in and use what I liked. They took a quiet pride in giving me space.

Then they left me to it, saying they'd get dinner started.

I unpacked slowly, folding clothes into drawers.

I slid my books onto the shelf, a few already looking worn from reading them on loop during long nights.

I tucked a photo of my friend Jessica into the top drawer.

I wasn't sure how she was going to react to my news. But that was a problem for another day.

Dinner was simple and warm—grilled chicken, salad, and roasted potatoes. We ate, cleaned up together in the easy rhythm we were slowly learning, and then curled up in Ash's room for our show. The lamp cast a soft amber glow as the credits rolled. There were only a couple of episodes left.

I lasted through one, drifting by the end, my head resting against Ash's chest, his hand idly tracing my arm. I didn't need to speak. I was already home.

ASH

The last few days had been wonderful. Luna was healed, settled in the house, and work was going well.

It was an easy routine: waking together, eating breakfast, dropping her off at work, and meeting her again at the end of the day.

Like now, we were taking her to dinner at the local diner.

It felt like we'd been wrapped up in isolation. It was time to try normal.

She stepped out of Maureen's office and smiled when she saw me. That smile lit a bonfire in me. My wolf's pull to complete the mate bond was riding me.

"Hey!" she greeted me as she threw herself into my arms. Connor had stayed back at the gym and would meet us in a bit.

"How was your day?" I asked as she pulled back and took my hand. We started down the sidewalk. Moonglen comprised one main street for the regular businesses, residential streets spiraling off, and the commercial district back near the entrance. The forest stretched away for miles.

"Regular. How was yours?"

"Wow, I'm overwhelmed by the vivid narrative," I teased. "Truly, I was there with you."

She glanced at me and laughed. “You really want details?”

I looked at her like “duh”.

“It was good. I find it interesting in that she has few systems set up, and I like that—creating efficient systems. But it’s kind of boring. I’ve been doing admin for so long that there’s little to learn.”

“And moving a lot doesn’t help you move up in your career.”

“Correct. How was your day?”

We were walking past stores that were already closed for the day: a florist, a pet store, a butcher, a fruit and vegetable shop, etc.

“Good, thanks. There isn't much to do now, aside from paperwork, as everything is established, and our team is great. I mostly go to work to socialise and sign cheques.”

I stopped at the diner. It was the kind with red awnings over the expansive windows, a bell that tinkled as you opened the glass door, and was filled with tables of varying sizes with red booth seats and stools.

Luna stopped in the doorway, eyes wide, face lighting up. “This is the cutest place I’ve ever been.” Her delight was contagious.

“Hi Ash, take a seat where you like. I’ll grab your menus in a second.” Audrey Lim, the owner, saw me and called from another table where she was taking orders.

“Thanks. No rush,” I called and led Luna to a table along the back wall, facing the door.

“So, is admin what you saw yourself doing when you graduated from university?” I asked as we settled. She sat in the booth seat, and I slid in next to her. She turned and faced me, seating herself in the corner.

“Obviously not. But it was an easy start and provided a good way to move around the country as needed.”

“What do you want to do?”

She pursed her lips like she'd never thought about it. “I really don't know. Run my own business? Run a bookstore with a cafe? Something where I could build something of my own.”

I liked that. That's what we'd done with the gym.

Audrey delivered a hot chocolate for Luna and two beers when Connor arrived, bringing the cool air with him.

“Hey, I wondered where you were,” Luna said, smiling warmly at him.

There was a soft affection between them that didn't burn like the mate bond, but was grounded like roots.

Sometimes I envied how easy they were with each other.

I couldn't help comparing, but there was an affection growing there, a different feeling from the, at times, near feral need of the bond we had.

“Just helping with the after-work rush.” He brushed it off. He'd been giving us space.

The evening went exactly as I'd hoped. Luna loved the diner and the food, and we'd

gotten to know each other better in a low-stress environment.

We were presented with a bright, nearly full moon when we stepped back into the cool night air.

The sky was navy blue, with the twinkling lights of the stars studded across it like someone had thrown a bucket of stars across a canvas.

“Pretty,” Luna mainly murmured to herself. She pressed herself into my side in the cold air. “I keep thinking I’ll wake up and this will all be gone,” she whispered. “Like it’s too good to be true.”

I couldn’t dispute it; I felt the same way.

The walk to the truck wasn't long; I'd parked halfway between her work and the diner. But her steps were much shorter than ours, so we tried to match our pace to hers.

Back at home, she left us to go shower and change. I turned to Connor.

“That was the best night I've had in so long.”

He was smiling softly. “I could see.”

I started the fire and built it to maximize the heat. Connor sat on the couch with his book, the book Luna had lent him.

Luna came out, freshly showered, in warm pyjamas and the white robe. She sank into the couch.

“Are you loving it?”

“It's addictive, for sure.”

“I've just finished the second book, so that you can have it straight away.”

“Phew, I'm sensing a cliffhanger and I can't bear those.”

The fire crackled, Luna's laughter mingling with Connor's. For the first time in years, I felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be.

LUNA

“My friend Jessica wants to come see me,” I announced, testing the waters.

Ash looked up at me from his reclined sprawl on the couch. “That's awesome. How long will she be here?”

I leaned into him, and he wrapped his arm around me. It felt safe, but my insides were buzzing.

“She won't stay here, here,” I said, threading my fingers through his hair. “But she'll be in town for a few days. She's on leave between assignments. She arrives tomorrow.”

“What is it?” Connor asked, already picking up on the shift in my energy.

I hesitated. “What do I tell her about us?”

Ash pulled me down into his lap, as if that were the complete answer. “What would you like to say?”

“I don't know,” I admitted, letting my head rest against his chest. “But definitely not: ‘I'm a wolf shifter now with a mate I haven't bonded to yet, and another hot guy lives with us.’”

A surprised laugh burst out of Ash. “Yeah, I can see how that wouldn't go down well.”

“Just tell her you fell for Ash and I’m his flatmate,” Connor offered, voice steady but eyes unreadable.

I mulled it over. “That feels like a lie.” But it was the version most people would expect.

I sighed.

I left the guys at a table near the back of the bar and jogged forward to meet Jessica.

She spotted me and threw her arms around me like no time had passed.

We squealed, drawing some amused glances.

She was tall, at least eight inches taller than I, in jeans and a soft sweater.

Same perfume. Same confident presence. For a beat, I felt like I’d stepped back into a version of myself I wasn’t sure I remembered anymore.

“You look so good.”

“You look amazing,” we said at the same time.

We slid into a booth close enough that I could still see the guys.

“So,” she said, “what’s made you settle down in the butt crack of nowhere?”

“Jessica—volume,” I hissed, glancing around.

“What? All these years of wandering, and suddenly you’re staying put? Here?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Judgey much?” I said, sipping my drink.

“I fell in love.”

Because how else do you explain pledging yourself to a found family after a handful of weeks?

She leaned in, brows raised. “Finally. I thought that ass ruined men for you.”

“I’ve moved in with Ash and his friend Connor.” The words tasted weird. Half-true. Half-lie. Whole mess.

“Wow, when you move, you move.”

“Jeez, Jessica. What is wrong with you?”

“You suddenly settle in some tiny town. Do I need to take you home? Are you safe?” She grabbed my arm and dropped her voice to a whisper. She wasn’t joking. If I even flinched, she’d throw me in her car and drive me away without asking more questions.

I laughed without humour. “I’m safe. I’m cared for. I’m happy.”

She blinked, surprised. “Really, truly?”

“Yeah.”

We switched to talking about her family and work—easier ground. But the truth settled heavy in my chest. She couldn’t ever really know what I’d walked into. And if she couldn’t, she couldn’t come back. This would be the last time she visited.

I knocked back a shot before taking her to meet the guys. No idea why. It should make things easier. Or perhaps I just wanted the familiar sting to brace me.

“Luna,” Ash said as we reached the booth, his voice sending a hum across my skin. I slid in beside him like gravity wanted me there.

“This is Jessica. Jessica, Ash, and Connor.” I gestured to each.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, sliding in beside Connor. She and Connor looked almost related—they had the same blond hair and blue eyes. Her hair was long now; I remembered when she kept it cropped short. This new version suited her.

I felt off. Slightly buzzed, mostly raw. Ash’s hand settled on my thigh beneath the table. Steady. Grounding. Still, I couldn’t shake the sensation that I didn’t belong in either world tonight.

Jessica was flirting. That was how she spoke to men. But it still made my back tense. I hated how much I noticed her laughing at Connor’s jokes and how casual she was around them.

Then she went for it. “So you’re both living with my girl?”

“We are,” Connor answered, voice tight.

“After a few weeks?” She looked Ash dead in the eye, tone sharp.

I felt like a goldfish, my mouth opening and closing.

“Because she’s a hopeless romantic,” Jessica continued. “All she’s ever wanted is a home and a family. So I hope you’re not just playing around.” Her voice slurred slightly, but the fire was there. She thought she was protecting me.

“We haven’t really discussed that. The future,” I said at the same time as Ash spoke.

“I’m not playing around,” he said, firm.

But I heard the pause before he said it. A hesitation, maybe imagined—but it hit me square in the chest.

And suddenly I didn’t know where I stood. Connor wasn’t just Ash’s friend. Ash wasn’t just my boyfriend. I wasn’t just visiting anymore. I wasn’t sure what I was.

Panic rose fast, scraping the back of my throat. I stood abruptly and beelined for the bathroom.

I braced my hands on the sink, focusing on the cool porcelain and the sound of my breathing.

The door creaked open behind me.

“You’re not going to puke, are you?” Jessica asked, stepping in.

“No.”

She joined me at the mirror. Her reflection was steady. Mine wasn’t.

She raised an eyebrow. “You okay?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t mean to say it aloud.

She didn’t push. Just waited. That’s how she’d always been—blunt, but patient.

“You could come back with me, you know,” she said. “Just for a while. Figure it

out.”

I stared at the sink. At the cracks in the basin. The idea didn't feel crazy. That scared me most of all.

“I think it's time to go home,” I said.

“You're a lightweight, my friend.”

I agreed.

Ash and Connor looked miserable when I came out. Like they'd been holding their breath. Neither of them said anything. I didn't either.

“I'd like to go home,” I said softly.

We saw Jessica enter her hotel next door and then walked to the car. I slid into the back seat even though no one was in the front. Neither of them argued.

Ash looked at me in the rearview mirror. I didn't meet his eyes.

My chest felt tight like something precious might break.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:35 pm

ASH

When Luna ran to the bathroom, I won't lie—I thought it was over. The fragile thread holding us together suddenly felt like it might snap. She'd change her mind, grab Jessica's hand, and leave us behind, just like that.

Connor and I exchanged glances that said everything we weren't ready to say out loud.

This wasn't just about a rough night or a small argument.

This was the fear we'd never fully dealt with before—losing someone who'd chosen this strange, complicated life with us.

Claire was young, still wrapped in the pack's rhythm; Luna wasn't. The stakes were higher.

She reemerged, fragile and pale, her voice barely whispering, asking to go home. We didn't hesitate. The car ride back was heavy with silence, a slow-burning tension I couldn't shake.

At home, the bathroom door shut with a finality that made my chest tighten. The shower rumbled, the water masking whatever storm she was weathering.

Connor swore under his breath. "What the hell was that?"

I stopped pacing, hands clenched. "That was Luna's truth—the thing she's afraid to

say but needs to. If we don't face it, it'll eat us alive."

Connor frowned, eyes dark. "We're always the odd family. Kids will get rumours, bullying."

I shook my head. "Marriage isn't just a party. It's a promise. Something real we can offer her."

He scoffed, grabbing a beer. "You really think marriage's the answer?"

"If that's what she needs," I said quietly. "Remember, Claire. Her fears weren't just about love. Financial security. Vulnerability."

I paced, fists clenched, fighting down the rising panic. The silence between us stretched thick, heavier than the air in the room.

She came out again, pale and fragile in her pajamas. That quiet—so unlike her usual fire—knotted something deep inside me. I wanted to pull her close, to promise she wasn't alone in this, but I hesitated, afraid to push her further into shutting down.

She drank water like she was steadying herself against a storm I couldn't see.

"Are you okay?" I asked the question, feeling small in the vast silence.

She shook her head, voice barely a whisper. "I can't see her again."

That hit harder than I expected. A cold knot settled in my chest—part fear, part helplessness. What if this was the breaking point?

"Where do you want to sleep?" I asked, careful to keep my distance, scared that any sudden move might push her further away.

“My room,” she said, quietly, “if that’s okay.”

It stung—more than I wanted to admit. The distance in her choice felt like a quiet surrender, a pulling back from all of us.

But of course, it was her choice. And I would respect that even if it broke something inside me.

I watched her close her bedroom door, soft as a sigh. No slam, no finality. But it still felt like a wall going up between us.

I ran a hand through my hair and sank onto the couch, elbows on knees, trying to ground myself. Connor hovered by the kitchen counter, beer untouched.

“You okay?” he asked.

“No,” I admitted. “But I’m not the one who matters right now.”

Connor gave a slow nod, then pushed the beer aside. “She’s scared.”

“Yeah. And I don’t blame her.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, replaying the night in my head. Jessica had held up a mirror, and Luna had flinched at her reflection. All the unspoken doubts between us were laid out by someone who didn’t even know the half of it.

I hated how powerless I felt. Like, no matter what I did, it wouldn’t be enough to make this easier for her.

“I thought she was starting to feel safe with us,” I said, voice low.

“She is,” Connor said. “But this thing with us? It’s not just a relationship. It’s a whole damn world she had no say in creating. And now her world’s clashing with ours.”

I nodded slowly. “She didn’t sign up for the chaos. She just stumbled into it.”

I stood. Couldn’t sit still any longer. A long run would help and hopefully tire me out enough to sleep.

LUNA

I tossed and turned all night, my mind racing with thoughts I couldn't keep up with. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Ash's face in the kitchen, tense and unreadable. Then came Connor's face, followed by Jessica's expression filled with concern.

By dawn, my body was exhausted, but my thoughts were louder than ever.

I picked up my phone and messaged Jess. Coming down for coffee.

No emojis. No explanation. She didn't need one.

The house was still and dark. I crept through the hall, feeling oddly like a trespasser. Guilt pricked at me as I shut the door softly behind me, but clarity buzzed louder. I needed space to think, and Jess was my lifeline for that.

The streets were empty, the town still stretching into the day. At the diner, they were only just setting up—the smell of coffee beans, warm milk, and cleaning solution mingled in the air. A quiet clatter from the kitchen marked the start of someone else's morning.

Jess was already seated, two pink coffee cups between us. The saucers were chipped but charming.

“Morning, Luna.”

“Morning. Thanks,” I murmured, taking the one closest to me. The heat seeped into

my palms, grounding me.

She studied me. “Did I stir the hornet’s nest last night?”

“Yeah.” I took a sip too fast, letting the scalding coffee burn its way down. I welcomed the sting. At least it was something clear. “You did.”

“Was he mad?” she asked gently. She meant Ash. Connor didn’t register in her version of the story.

“No. I didn’t even speak to him. Went to my room. Couldn’t sleep all night.”

The coffee machine hissed behind us, pots clanged faintly in the kitchen. The world moved on, oblivious.

“I can still take you home,” she said after a pause. “Even if I don’t stay long, you’re always welcome.”

Her voice was soft but firm. She meant it.

I looked down into my coffee. “This is my home now.”

I hesitated, then gave in to the truth that had sat stubbornly in my chest since the moment I walked into that house. “He is my home.”

Jess leaned back. “Well. Okay. Good for you.” Her voice was cautious. “It’s early days. I’m sure you’ll work it out.”

I nodded, but the ache in my chest pulsed harder. “He’s so perfect. So accepting of the situation.”

I stopped there. She couldn't understand. She didn't know the weight of being loved that completely, or how terrifying it was when you hadn't let yourself believe you deserved it.

"And I'm always one foot out the door," I said quietly.

"That's how you've always been," Jess said gently, without judgment. "It's not like you had a family to root you. You were always looking for the next safe place."

"Yeah," I said again, but the word landed heavier this time.

She reached across the table and touched my hand. "You deserve a family, Luna. A chance at happiness. I never liked watching you bounce around, always drifting. This—" she gestured vaguely in the air "—this might be good for you. Even if it's a whirlwind."

I smiled faintly. She had no idea.

No idea what Ash and Connor were offering. No idea the kind of love that came without demands, without expectations I couldn't meet. No idea how badly I wanted to believe it could last.

And no idea how tempted I'd been to throw it all away out of fear. I feared that I'd mess it up. That I'd become someone's burden again. That I'd need too much.

But maybe the scariest part wasn't leaving.

The scariest part was staying.

ASH

Luna walked back in and did a double-take when she saw us at the kitchen counter. Her gaze flicked toward her bedroom door—still closed—then back to us. She crossed the room slowly, fidgeting with the sleeve of her sweatshirt like she didn't know what to do with her hands.

“You came back,” I said.

She blinked at me. “Of course I did.”

I swallowed. Something about the way she said it—like it was apparent—sent heat to my face.

“We've felt like you were one breath away from leaving since day one,” My voice came out sharp, more brittle than I intended. “So forgive us for not knowing what to expect.”

“Ash,” Connor murmured, a quiet reminder.

I looked at her fully then. She was pale, with dark smudges under her eyes. Had she slept at all? She looked like someone who'd spent the whole night thinking. Overthinking.

“Are you alright?” Connor asked gently.

“I said goodbye to Jessica,” she said, voice cracking.

That broke me. I stepped forward and took her hand, guiding her to the couch like she might float away if I let go.

“And the rest?” I asked, settling beside her.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she burst into tears.

I shot a look at Connor. He didn’t hesitate—he sat on her other side and rubbed her back in slow, steady circles. She curled inward, trying to wipe her face, trying to breathe.

“We’ve been worried about the mate bond,” she said finally, voice wet with tears. “And whether I’m safe. But those aren’t the only questions.”

We waited. I retook her hand, kissed her fingers, and tasted salt. Her sadness was physical, like the air had thickened around her.

“What does ‘family’ mean?” she asked, voice shaky. “What do you expect from me? Am I just meant to... slip into Claire’s vacated role and pretend it fits? And if it did work out that way, do we get married? Do we raise kids here? Are we even safe?”

Each word hit harder than the last.

That was a lot. Too much for this early in the morning. But all of it was fair.

I exhaled, my chest tight. “What does family mean to you?”

I wanted to pull her into my arms. My whole body ached with the need to comfort her. But we needed to do this the right way.

“A husband. Children,” she said after a beat.

I nodded, but I could hear what was missing. “I think there’s something more you want than just that.”

She hesitated. “A home. Safety. Belonging.”

“That,” I said, my voice low. “That, we can give you. We don’t expect you to step into anyone’s place. I’m sorry if I made it seem that way. Claire’s gone. We’re not trying to recreate something we lost. But we can offer a new start. A new kind of family. With you in it.”

Connor nodded beside her. “I care about you, Luna. I think you care about me, too. But no one expects you to rush into anything you’re not ready for. If you need a definition, maybe think of me as a very close friend. Chosen family.”

She looked at him, and for a moment, her shoulders relaxed.

We weren’t going to solve everything today. But maybe we could find solid ground.

The Bond was clawing at me now, worse than usual. Like I was being pulled in two directions—one of them burning. I stood, trying to walk it off, pacing behind the couch.

“The community down there might be harder to win over,” I said, voice strained. “But up here, within the pack... they’ll get to know you. Accept you. Our neighbour is our age—widowed last year. She has a young son. We’ll introduce you. Could be good company.”

I was gripping the back of the couch now, fingers tight on the fabric. The Bond roared under my skin like wildfire. I looked at Connor, pleading silently.

He picked up the thread without missing a beat. “We want you to feel safe here. To

feel like you belong. Suppose that means marrying Ash and having ten kids, great. If that means staying in your room and reading books for the next year while you figure things out, also great. Whatever you need.”

She let out a short laugh—more breath than sound.

“And we want you in our family trust,” he added. “So even if something happened to us, you’d be protected.”

Luna stilled. “Is it that dangerous?” she whispered, gripping his forearm. “Are you in danger?”

“No,” he said firmly. “We’re careful. We’re strong.”

“But the neighbor’s husband—”

“An anomaly,” he said, voice soft. He didn’t mention his parents, and I was glad. She didn’t need that right now.

I felt like I was vibrating with heat. The Bond was pulsing, relentless. Connor caught my eye again and nodded toward the couch, like a command. Sit. You’re not helping.

I obeyed, slumping into the far corner and leaning back. Breathing.

“Okay,” she said at last. She took a deep breath, hands folded tightly in her lap.

“Okay. Everything’s alright.”

Connor smiled gently. “We’ll figure it out. Together.”

He stood and stretched. “Shall I make some breakfast?”

“I’m not hungry,” Luna said.

“Me either,” I echoed.

He gave a little nod. “Alright. I’m going to shower.”

He leaned down and kissed Luna’s forehead with care, which made my throat tighten, and then disappeared up the stairs.

She turned to me, eyes big and searching. “I’m sorry.”

Just looking at her softened something in me. The Bond stopped its screaming the moment she leaned into me.

She climbed into my lap, and I caught her like I’d never let go.

I buried my face in her neck, breathing her in. Everything inside me settled.

She was here.

We could figure out the rest later.

LUNA

I couldn't settle into my skin. It was like everything inside me had grown two sizes too big—like I might burst open from its ache.

The quiet of the house made it worse. There were no distractions, no chaos, just the soft hum of life continuing around me while my thoughts ran wild.

I'd woken up after only a few hours of sleep, heart thudding, chest tight. A thought had caught me in its claws and wouldn't let go.

If something happened to either of them tomorrow, what would I regret?

Not that I hadn't said the right thing. Not that I hadn't defined it correctly.

I'd miss their warmth. The way Ash held me with calm confidence. The way Connor's face lit up when he made me laugh. The feel of Ash's arms around me while we ate pizza on the couch. The comfortable silence during our TV show. The little things. Always the little things.

"What are you thinking about?"

Ash's voice pulled me back. His hand drifted down my arm, grounding me.

I blinked and realized I was standing in the kitchen, staring at nothing.

"What's important," I said softly.

He tilted his head, watching me with quiet curiosity. “And?”

“What I’d be worried about if you were gone tomorrow.”

Ash let out a breathy laugh, and I felt it rumble through his chest as he stepped closer. “We tell you I’ll marry you, and you start plotting our tragic demise?”

“Ha ha,” I murmured, rolling my eyes.

He wrapped his arms around me, and I turned into him, resting my cheek against his collarbone.

“If you weren’t here,” I said, “I’d miss your laugh. The way you hold me like nothing else matters. Falling asleep during your shows. Eating meals together. Watching you get too invested in fantasy league rugby.”

He pulled back just enough to look down at me. “You mean falling asleep while I do all the hard work of picking a lineup?”

I smiled despite myself.

His gaze lifted, and I followed it. Connor was halfway down the stairs, frozen in place like he’d walked in on something fragile.

“I mean both of you,” I said, loud enough for him to hear. “I’d miss all those things with both of you. And different things about each of you.”

Connor’s face softened. Slowly, he descended the last few steps. I reached a hand out toward him without breaking contact with Ash.

Ash gave a quiet sigh and kissed the top of my head. “This past three weeks have

been intense... but it's also been the best of my life."

Warmth bloomed in my chest.

He kissed my nose and smiled. "I'd miss the way you look up at me. The way you melt into my arms and then give me hell five seconds later. How you can simultaneously submit and subvert. You keep me guessing."

Connor reached us, slipping his hand into mine.

"I'd miss your vanilla fairy smut," he said, voice mock-serious.

Ash burst into laughter. "Way to take the moment."

But Connor didn't stop. "I'd miss how you bite your bottom lip when you're reading something spicy, that you're a sucker for happily ever afters. How you sass us out like you're in charge, even when you're blushing the whole time."

My throat tightened.

Connor raised his hand to brush a tear from my cheek, his thumb featherlight. "I'd miss your face most of all. The way it lights up when you're happy. I want to see that every day."

Ash rested his chin on the top of my head. "I want mornings with you. The real kind. Bad breath, weird dreams, too many pillows."

"I want runs and dinners and stupid memes and that thing you do when you pretend not to be cold but you're obviously freezing," Connor added.

I laughed and cried at the same time.

“You’re both ridiculous,” I sniffed.

“But I want all of it,” Connor said. “The ridiculous and the real. I’m not looking for a perfect future. Just one where we’re in it together.”

“I don’t know how to do this,” I whispered. “Make a family.”

Ash kissed my temple. “We don’t need you to know. We just need you to keep showing up.”

Connor nodded. “We’ll figure it out. One pizza night at a time.”

The tension that had lived in my chest for days finally started to loosen.

I let myself be held. Not just physically, but emotionally. I didn’t dodge their affection. I didn’t make a joke to deflect its depth.

For the first time in a long time, I let love land.

The Bond hummed in the background—quiet, strong, and steady.

I sighed, content in a way that didn’t feel like it was about to vanish.

For years, weekends had been something I endured. Empty hours echoing through an empty house.

Now, I had built-in company.

Now, I had them.

CONNOR

I waited until Luna had taken her first sip of coffee, then nudged her foot under the table.

“We’ve got a little adventure planned today.”

She raised her eyebrows over the rim of her mug. “Yeah?”

“Showing you around the pack lands.”

She grinned. “Finally.”

“Don’t get too excited,” I said, half-teasing. “It’s not exactly Disneyland.”

She was practically buzzing as we walked past the central cluster of cabins.

I watched her take it all in—the weathered timber, the communal gardens, the smell of woodsmoke in the air.

This place had always been home to me. I tried to see it now through her eyes: a self-contained, strange, close-knit world.

I tried to imagine what she was seeing as a first timer. A strange group of people had made their own town?

Finally, we drew back around to our closest neighbour, a log cabin. There was a trike

on the porch, and chalk drawings were on the ground out front.

We knocked on the front door, and a few seconds later, it creaked open.

“Hi, I’m Elena,” she said with a warm smile, extending her hand to Luna.

Her hazelnut skin caught the sun filtering through the porch awning, and her dark brown eyes had a calm intelligence to them.

She wore her curls pinned back loosely and looked every bit the kind of person you could talk to for hours without realizing time had passed.

Luna shook her hand and followed Elena to the couch.

The place was set up similarly to what Luna had been renting, except there were two bedrooms by the bathroom.

There was a kitchenette to the side with a small dining table and chairs, a living space framed by a couch, a mat with toys scattered around, and Luca in wolf form watching.

Luna crouched slowly, settling onto the mat without hesitation.

“Hi Luca,” she said, her voice soft and inviting. “I’m Luna. I’m really pleased to meet you.”

The boy-wolf sniffed the air, head tilted, paws inching forward. He blinked at her like he was trying to figure her out.

She waited patiently, her palm open. When he finally pressed his head into her lap, I felt something twist in my chest.

As we chatted about regular things, how we met Luna, and how Luca was, he got closer and closer to Luna. At last, he curled up in her lap.

Luna looked up at me, and I could see the hearts in her eyes. Elena smiled softly.

“Since his dad passed away last year, he prefers to spend more time in this form. It'll have to change when he goes to nursery school, but I allow it for now.”

Geoff had been one of the two killed in last year's skirmish with a rival pack—the bears, and for reasons we didn't know, they hated us, wanted us extinct. I hoped it didn't scare Luna. We were a brutal lot at times.

“I'd better put him down for his nap,” Elena said, looking at the clock. She gathered him up from Luna's lap. “You're good with him. Let's do a cuppa one time soon and get to know each other, just us girls.”

“That'd be great,” Luna said. I helped her up. She stretched out her legs.

Back at the house, Luna kicked off her shoes, cheeks still pink from the afternoon.

“He was adorable,” she murmured.

“You were good with him,” I said, and meant it more than she probably realized.

I hesitated, then rubbed the back of my neck. “I'm gonna go for a run.”

Ash nodded, and Luna smiled at me, soft, open.

As I loped into the trees, paws replacing feet, one truth stayed with me:

The more time I spent with Luna, the harder it became to pretend she wasn't mine,

too.

ASH

We stepped inside the quiet house. I watched her with Luca and Elena—how natural she was with them, how her presence calmed the boy and offered Elena a friend. It struck me again how lucky we both were.

Luna stopped and turned, her hands settling on my chest. Her eyes were bright, flashing with a heat that pulled me in.

“Will you take me upstairs?” she asked, voice low, almost daring.

“What?” I blinked, caught off guard by its suddenness.

She held my gaze for a moment longer, then turned and walked ahead without another word, her hips swaying with that confident rhythm I knew so well.

My wolf growled softly—alert and hungry. I stalked after her, heart pounding in time with each step.

The bedroom door clicked closed behind us. I stood facing her, the air thick between us. She’d lost some of that boldness, replaced with a softer, vulnerable edge.

She stepped into me, her hands sliding around my waist. I could feel the steady thump of her heartbeat against my palm.

Her eyes locked on mine as she peeled off her t-shirt, slow and deliberate. I swallowed hard. Her body was incredible—every curve, every line, perfect and mine.

I pulled off my shirt, matching her move. Her hands traced across my chest and arms, fingers teasing down to the button of my pants. She slowly unfastened them with a smirk, allowing my jeans to slip to the floor.

I sprang up, hard and ready, and caught the sharp intake of her breath. My wolf stirred violently, the bond tightening between us like a live wire, pulsing toward its crescendo.

I lowered her jeans, revealing soft skin, and waited. I laid her down on the bed with care, taking a moment to drink in the sight—Luna, poised and beautiful, waiting just for me.

But beneath her resolve, I felt the quick and subtle flutter of nerves. I leaned down, pressing kisses across her forehead and along her temples, tracing the curve of her nose until my lips met hers.

She hummed against me, breath warm and inviting, her body arching beneath my touch.

“Will it fit?” she asked suddenly, her voice shaky but steady.

I laughed softly, brushing hair from her face. “As long as you’re ready.”

She breathed out a slow, sure “I am.”

“Maybe emotionally,” I said, voice low and steady. “Let me handle that part.”

She moaned into my mouth, her hands clutching me tight. She was right—she was ready. But this moment needed to be perfect, sacred even.

She bucked against me, urgent and fierce, whimpering as I positioned myself over

her. I pressed in slowly, inch by inch, feeling the sharp edge of her breath hold tight around me.

“Luna, breathe,” I whispered, sliding my hand along her ribs.

She inhaled shallow, then deeper, her body finally relaxing into mine.

When I was entirely inside her, I paused, holding still. It felt like heaven—like this was where I was always meant to be.

Then, the bond coiled tighter—like a vine wrapping itself around our souls—twisting and twisting until it clicked into place with a sharp shock that sent a jolt through us both.

“That was it? The bond?” she asked, pressing her palm to her chest, eyes wide with awe.

“Yes,” I breathed, stunned. “You accepted it—fully.”

A serene calm washed over us, like we were wrapped in a bubble of something ancient and perfect.

Time slowed until it felt like it didn’t exist at all.

I felt like my heart was knitting itself back together, piece by piece, as the bond rooted itself deep within us.

This wasn’t just a connection between bodies—it was the intertwining of our souls, the promise of something lasting and unbreakable.

For the first time, I knew what it meant to be truly whole, to have someone who

wasn't just beside me but inside me, in every way.

She shifted beneath me, breaking the spell, and I slid back in, this time moving slowly but with purpose, pushing all the way home.

“Yes,” she moaned, louder now, a sound that set fire to my skin.

The floodgates opened, and we lost ourselves to the rhythm—faster, harder, desperate.

She clawed at my shoulders, bit my lip fiercely, then held her breath and released it all at once in a shuddering climax that clenched around me, igniting my release.

Our breaths filled the room, ragged and heavy.

I collapsed beside her, pulling her close, heart pounding fiercely.

It was the culmination of everything we'd been building, the closing of a circle that began long before we met.

With this bond sealed, there was no turning back, no doubt.

We were mates now, bound by something ancient and fierce, and I was ready to fight for her, for us, no matter what.

She smiled, dazed and glowing. “We should do that all the time.”

I held her tighter, grinning. I had zero problem with that.

LUNA

We lay cocooned in Ash's bed, his arms wrapped tightly around me.

I kissed the warm skin of his chest, neck, and cheek, then sat up.

He looked delighted, and I felt like I was floating on air.

The bond's hum had shifted—no longer a roaring wildfire but a steady, reassuring ember connecting us quietly, profoundly.

“Connor...” I started, but the man himself burst in before I could say more. Naked, breathless, and frantic, it looked like he'd shifted and dashed straight up here. His eyes widened as he took in our positions, our nakedness, and he sniffed the air delicately like a wolf catching a new scent.

Ash sat up, calm but alert, and nodded at him.

“Good,” Connor said, voice sharp. “You're needed. Rival shifters on the territory. There's a fight.”

Ash was on his feet before Connor finished speaking. Naked and urgent. This was definitely not how I imagined being caught between the two of them, especially like this. Then again, I hadn't imagined much about this moment.

“How many? How bad?”

Connor's gaze flicked to me, eyes flashing fiercely, before returning to Ash. "Bad. Every male and trained female."

Ash cursed under his breath. Then we heard it: the sharp, urgent ringing of the bell.

I pulled on my top as Ash handed me my pants.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Calling for trained females means they're desperate," Ash said tightly. A look passed between them—an unspoken understanding.

"What should I do?" I asked, already knowing the answer. I was neither trained nor capable of defending myself in a fight.

Ash's eyes flashed wolf—wild, protective. He was here for me, but now the world was pulling him away.

"You need to go," I said softly, my hand still in his. His grip tightened on my arm.

Connor's eyes flicked to Ash's hand. "Ash, you need to change and go."

Ash dropped my arm like it was on fire. "Stay here. It's safest." He moved swiftly, shifting into wolf form, powerful and sleek.

"Connor." I caught his hands as he shifted, eyes blazing.

"Stay safe. Close the front door behind us." His voice was low, urgent.

"You too," I whispered, heart pounding.

They were gone before I made it down the stairs. I closed and locked the front door, though I knew it wouldn't hold against any determined pack attack. Bear and Lynx shifters—both strong and cunning—were no joke.

My chest tightened with a raw ache. I could lose them before I even properly had them.

I glanced out the far window toward Elena's house. She'd be alone with Luca. They'd be scared. I had to go. I had to help.

Outside was eerily still. No birdsong, no rustling leaves. It felt like the forest was holding its breath, waiting for the fight's outcome.

I ran toward Elena's house on slow human feet, careful to stay unthreatening.

The street was deserted except for the distant echo of the bell's ringing.

I knocked firmly on Elena's door.

"Elena, it's me, Luna."

She cracked the door open, eyes wide as she recognized my face, then shut it quickly.

"Did the guys send you here?"

She locked the door again. We both stared at it—it wouldn't keep out determined attackers.

"No. I was worried you and Luca might be scared alone."

Luca, in human form, ran up to me and clung to my legs for a moment before darting

back to his mother.

The tension in the room was thick. I positioned myself by the window, eyes scanning for any movement outside.

Elena murmured soft, comforting words to Luca. Slowly, he settled and fell asleep on her lap.

“If something happens...” I started.

“You can’t think like that. They’ll take care of it,” Elena said firmly.

I nodded. That was what I needed to hear, but I felt her effort to stay calm for her son.

The bell cut off abruptly.

Elena stood and released a long breath. “It’s over. They’re back.”

She opened the door just as Aaron knocked, his eyes flicking between me and Elena.

“Did they send you here for Elena to look after you?”

I knew who he meant. I nodded silently. Better not tell our pack leader I disobeyed my alpha directly. The order was significant, especially now.

“She came here to help us,” Elena said, folding Luca into her side.

“Good. The more protection for the young, the better. Everything’s okay now.”

“No one’s hurt?” I asked.

“Ash and Connor are fine, but they’re probably looking for you.” His eyes questioned me, and I looked away.

As two familiar wolves trotted past, sleek and alert, I stepped into the street.

Oh, there would be words.

I ran back and found Ash and Connor hurtling down the stairs, both in wolf form. They circled me, huffing and tense.

Connor shifted back first. “Where were you?” he demanded. I put my hands on him, checking for injuries.

He grabbed my hands gently. “I’m fine. We’re both fine.”

Ash formed next, eyes flashing, towering over me. Bigger than I’d ever seen him. But I couldn’t care about that. I checked him too—just a nasty scratch on his back, already healing fast. I traced it lightly, careful not to hurt him.

I slumped against the counter, relief washing over me. My heart was pounding as adrenaline ebbed away.

“Where were you?” Ash repeated Connor’s question, voice low and rough.

“At Elena’s.”

“I told you to stay here. I ordered you,” Ash growled.

I felt my wolf chafe—wild and restless—wanting freedom, though I knew I couldn’t win against him.

“Were you scared?” Connor asked, softer now.

“I was worried about them,” I whispered, eyes fixed on Ash.

“Calm down, little wolf,” Connor soothed, voice gentle. He subtly told me my eyes were flashing with wolf fire.

“I was worried about her, alone with Luca. So I went to help.”

“That was brave. Probably smart. But you can’t disobey...” Ash started.

“Disobey you?” I cut in sharply.

“I’m your...”

“You’re my what? My owner? My boss?” Heat flared beneath my skin, anger rising.

“No. But we need to know you’re safe when we’re out there.” His honesty doused the fire.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, guilt tightening my chest. “I can’t be trusted.”

“I’m sorry too,” he admitted. “It takes time for the edge to wear off. But there are times when I have to be the alpha.”

“I get it,” I said softly, holding his gaze.

We sat in silence for a moment, and then I realized they were both still naked.

“You might want to get dressed.”

Ash grinned. “Don’t like what you see?”

“You know I like it—a lot. But you can’t walk around with your stuff hanging out. This room is mostly windows.”

They laughed, easing the tension.

“You were worried for us,” Ash said softly.

“Out of my mind,” I admitted. Words, feelings—I needed to say it all.

“I was scared you’d be hurt. Or worse.”

“We’re okay, and the council is meeting to plan steps to keep us safer,” Ash said. Planning felt good.

He kissed my forehead and went upstairs. Connor followed.

I sank onto the couch, adrenaline finally draining away.

Ash returned, dressed in a singlet and shorts.

“Do you feel okay?” I asked, sitting straighter.

“Are you mother-henning me?”

“Yes.”

He softened. “I’m fine. I love you.” He kissed me.

“You what?” It hit me like a spark.

“We’re mate-bonded. Is that such a surprise?”

“No. Yes. Repeat it.” I whispered, leaning into him.

He held me close. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He blinked, swallowing big feelings. Then kissed me again.

“Does it frustrate you that I don’t understand the wolf rule book?” I asked suddenly.

“The wolf rule book?” he laughed.

“I don’t know the rules...like how you’re meant to be the boss and stuff. I’ve always looked after myself.”

Connor came down, grabbed two beers from the fridge, and asked, “Wine?”

“Yes. Large,” I said.

They laughed again, the tension melting away.

I took a grateful gulp of wine as Connor handed me the glass and settled beside me.

“How does it feel? The bond?” He asked.

“Solid. Locked in, rooted, but living,” Ash answered.

I looked at him. “That’s how mine feels, too.”

He scooted closer. I leaned against him, and he wrapped his arm around me.

“It’s done. We’re a family,” Connor said, voice full of awe and disbelief.

“Now, just the rest of our lives,” I said, excitement blooming inside me.

I had a home. Two people who loved and would protect me. The rest? We’d figure it out in time.

CONNOR

We dropped Luna off at work, but she didn't seem eager to let go as she headed inside. "I'll see you after work," she said over her shoulder, a subtle but meaningful change — she reminded us she'd be back.

Ash and I watched her disappear through the office door before he pulled back onto the road. We drove to the gym and parked in our usual spot. I wasn't paying full attention, distracted by the idea Ash had hinted at, when I nearly bumped into someone.

My heart skipped a beat as I looked up. Phoenix.

The man I'd seen a few times last year, during the darkest months when Ash and I were lost in grief, unsure which way was up. My throat tightened, and my tongue suddenly became heavy and dry.

"Oh, sorry," he said as I blurted, "Oops, sorry."

We chuckled softly, and he placed a steady hand on my elbow to help me balance. The jolt was electric. I pulled away too quickly — if Ash hadn't suspected anything, he would now.

"Connor, how are you?" Phoenix's brown eyes were warm and calm.

"I'm good, thanks." I forced a smile. "You know Ash?"

Ash leaned forward and shook Phoenix's hand. "Good to see you back around town."

This was a small town. We all knew each other, at least by sight. But inside the pack, it was more than that. I needed to move this along before my nerves showed.

"It's good to see you again. Have a great day."

Phoenix smiled and continued on his way. I glanced at Ash, trying to ignore the look of quiet curiosity he was giving me.

Back at the office, I reminded him, "You said you had an idea you wanted to run by me after we dropped Luna off?"

"Oh, yes." He shut the door behind him and sat down on the other side of the desk. Ash spent most of his time here; I was usually operational on the floor.

"You know that space off to the side we've kind of quietly set aside for future expansion?"

I followed his gaze through the large window in his office wall. The area was mostly empty, with a weird little alcove tucked in one corner.

"I was thinking we could develop it into a cafe, and that nook could be a secondhand bookstore. Obviously, we don't want to manage it ourselves. I thought maybe we could involve Luna."

I looked back at him, impressed. It was a great idea — but would Luna see it as a handout?

"She'd need to be clearly labeled as our business partner," Ash said firmly. "She'd need to know she earned it. Which she would."

He'd clearly thought this through.

"I'm keen."

"Oh, great! I had a whole spiel planned."

"It's wasted space and she's wasted talent as an admin assistant."

We agreed he'd pick Luna up from work to float the idea by her. I slipped away before the conversation could drift into other territory.

Ash brought Luna in just after 4 PM. I'd just finished with a personal training client, and the gym was quiet in that lull before the after-work crowd poured in. My chest warmed when Luna's eyes met mine, and she smiled.

We opened the door and wandered over to the storage area, which was currently cluttered and far from cafe-ready.

Ash explained the idea. Luna listened quietly, scanning the space. It was a blank canvas — it would take time and careful planning to become a real business.

"We don't have the time or inclination to manage another business ourselves," Ash said. "So we wondered if you'd be interested in doing it?"

She was silent for a few moments. I felt the urge to fill the quiet, to assure her we weren't just doing it to keep her happy.

But she spoke first. "So... you want to be my boyfriend and my boss?"

Ash nearly choked. "Boyfriend? I don't think that's adequate. And no, not your boss. Business partner. We have the space and the capital, but not the time. We'd be equal

partners, and you'd have full operational control. There'd be contracts and everything."

She looked thoughtful again.

"You know I haven't launched a business before, right?"

"Neither had we when we started this place," I said, hoping to reassure her.

"I'd love to. As long as we have clear rules." She said it firmly.

"Absolutely. We can see the lawyer draft it up." Ash agreed immediately — he'd been expecting that.

"Have you been calling me your boyfriend?" he asked after a beat, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

"I honestly wasn't sure what to call you. In my head, I try to avoid it. And out loud, well, no one's asked."

I caught Luna's eye and smiled. There was something new in that smile — a quiet confidence, a spark I hadn't seen before.

This could be precisely what we all needed—a fresh start, built together.

I squeezed her hand briefly, hoping she'd feel the same hope I did.

"Ready for the next chapter?" I asked softly.

She hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. Let's do this."

The gym around us hummed quietly, but in that moment, it felt like we were standing on the edge of something much bigger. Something real.

Whatever came next, we'd face it together.

ASH

Luna had worked diligently to turn the vacant space into a successful business.

The shiny espresso machine she had fought hard to obtain stood proudly next to the smoothie machine, the two key investments for a café attached to a gym.

The cabinet was filled with high-protein, post-workout snacks and sweet treats for anyone strolling in from the street.

Outside, under the awning, a few tables invited customers to sit, and a doggy water station had been installed, catering to the many dog walkers in town—something the other main café hadn't thought to offer.

She'd poured herself into this project, far more than I'd expected.

We'd barely seen her, but I understood her need to prove herself.

Luna stood behind the counter, dressed casually in jeans and a Moonglen Gym t-shirt that hugged her slight curves just right.

Watching her move with quiet confidence, my chest swelled with pride.

This was more than just a café now—it was hers.

Connor joined me at the entrance, and together we stepped inside. When Luna spotted us, her face brightened like the first sunbeam after rain.

“Hey boys,” she greeted with a smile. “Come to try my goodies?”

“I’ve already tried—and love—your goodies,” I assured her, and I caught a faint blush rising to her cheeks. Connor chuckled softly beside me.

“I’ll take a flat white, Vanilla,” Connor said with a playful grin.

“Is that a flat white with vanilla, or are you using that terrible nickname again?” Luna teased, moving toward the espresso machine.

He just winked. The nickname had stuck, and it wasn’t going anywhere.

She expertly ground the beans, tamped the coffee, and slid the portafilter into the machine.

“Long black?” she asked, turning toward me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied with a smile.

The little book corner was slowly filling up, the shelves now lined with donated volumes. We’d been collecting books for weeks, and the cozy nook was finally taking shape. The donations raised money for the community creche and garden, conveniently located side by side.

Luna handed Connor a perfect flat white and me a long black. The rich aroma filled the air.

“Thanks. Smells too good in here—I’m going to be overdoing my caffeine intake for a while, aren’t I?” Connor said, grinning.

I glanced around the bustling café, then back at Luna. “Did the new guy say when

he'd start?"

It had been a running conversation: when to hire help, so Luna wouldn't have to pull six a.m. starts six days a week.

She wasn't keen on adding too many employees, so we'd compromised on a student for Fridays, Saturdays, and a few mornings.

Connor and I had also learned how to operate the espresso monstrosity to step in when needed.

"Ricky starts tomorrow," Luna said pointedly.

"Good."

"Yes. Good," she echoed, a small smile tugging at her lips.

Connor chuckled. Some of our conversations still danced around teasing and gentle banter, but we'd made it work. And I loved every minute of it.

As I watched her move behind the counter, I knew this was only the beginning—for her, us, and everything still to come.

Chapter One

Connor

Luna had changed everything.

She'd slipped into her place in our family—and the pack—with a quiet strength that caught me off guard.

Six months ago, she was still finding her footing.

Now, she moved through our lives like she belonged.

Not just as Ash's bonded mate, but in a way that stirred something unspoken between her and me.

Nothing official, nothing defined—just real enough to make my skin prickle.

Ash and I had been living a half-life when we'd met her. We'd shared a mate once, by some cruel twist of fate, and lost her over three years ago. Sometimes, I felt that bond snap in my chest, like a phantom limb twitching.

Luna blew fresh air into our quiet, cobwebbed home. Metaphorically speaking, our place was far from messy, but the weight of old grief had dusted the corners.

She perched on a tall kitchen stool, her feet dangling above the footrest. It was adorable.

We gathered here most mornings to have breakfast together.

We had many meals at the counter, over on the large dining room table, or our laps on the couch together.

We spent many days watching TV down here or in Ash's room.

“Phoenix is back,” she said, her eyes bright. We'll need to debrief.”

My heart stuttered at the name. Phoenix. Hot, messy, intense—brief but unforgettable. I hadn't even known where I stood with Ash just over a year ago. We'd been more like flatmates between losing Claire and meeting Luna in those three years.

Luna's long brown hair, flecked with auburn highlights, was tied in a loose ponytail that had fallen over her shoulder.

She wore a Moonglen Gym t-shirt and jeans—the same ones she'd been living in since she turned the old storage room into a café and secondhand bookshop.

She had thrown herself into it, and into the task force, too—a group trying to find wolves out there, alone and unprotected.

There were more than we realized. Orphans and abandoned wolves who didn't even know what they were.

The thought sent a shiver down my spine—how many females had already been killed by enemy shifters we never even knew existed?

Luna had almost been one of them. Phoenix was helping with the task force.

Ash moved closer, a smirk pulling at his lips. “Sounds so professional and sexy when

you say ‘debrief.’”

Luna tipped her head back to meet his gaze. “You might need to debrief with me when I get back.”

They fit together, still cast in the honeymoon glow. I sat stiffly, pretending to sip my coffee, trying not to watch.

Ash and I had this house built. We designed it to blend in with the forest rather than being a modern eyesore that juts out. Though the outside blended in, the inside was modern—tall ceilings with skylights, tall windows. Every way you looked, you could see the forest.

Then Ash’s heavy hand landed on my arm, jolting me out of my thoughts. He grinned—lighter somehow these last few months. “You nearly ready?”

“Yeah,” I forced a smile. Luna gave me a soft one back, bright blue eyes searching mine.

She reached for my hand, small and warm.

I turned my palm up, wrapping my larger fingers gently around hers.

One of the small gestures she’d started since growing more comfortable around me—quiet moments I treasured.

She headed to her room to finish getting ready. Ash’s eyes locked on me. Taller, broader, built solid like a lumberjack, he stood there, the dark oaf Luna teased him for. I was her chiselled Adonis—blue-eyed, fair-skinned, a little less rugged.

We drove to the gym in easy silence, the unspoken questions hanging like a thick fog.

I watched the trees blur past, my wolf itching to run.

The town was a peculiar but also fairly regular small town.

There were the small specialty stores—the diner where most of us gathered at one point or another during the week.

The garage, school, and gym were in a reasonably tight block.

I loved this town. And the people were good.

I had a feeling some of the nonshifters knew something of our secret.

But as long as we helped keep the town and forest safe, no one asked too many questions.

When we pulled into the parking lot, Luna kissed Ash and waved at me before slipping inside the café.

Ash lingered. “Luna seems to throw herself into the task force.”

“Yeah. Luna’s passionate.” I fought down the knot twisting in my gut. I hated that she was working with Phoenix.

“She keeps talking about going on trips with the local contacts.” Ash’s jaw tightened.

“Surely no one would approve of that?” Our enemies had targeted female wolves for decades—vulnerable, hunted. Most alphas guarded their own fiercely, making it hard for females to live freely outside the pack’s shadow.

“Approve, maybe not. Stop Luna? No.”

She was proving herself indispensable, maybe too much. Different from Claire in every way, but the old problems seemed to follow us no matter what.

I exhaled slowly, feeling the familiar weight settle back on my shoulders. Some things never change.

Luna had changed everything.

Grab book two , A Place Within the Pack , now.