



A Mate Betrayed (Sheridan Pack #6)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: On the brink of her mating ceremony, Kinleigh's world shatters when she discovers her fated mate's betrayal: him professing his love to another woman. Heartbroken and furious, she sends proof of his treachery to her father, resulting in his banishment.

Seeking solace, she visits her cousin in Sheridan, where she meets Daire Nolin, a man nursing the scars of lost love. Drawn together by an undeniable chemistry, they embark on a temporary escape from their pain, a no-strings fling meant to be carefree. Burgeoning emotions, however, complicate everything.

Just when Kinleigh thinks she can move on, her ex-mate returns, determined to reclaim what he lost. Will she fight for her freedom or succumb to the past?

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K inleigh stood in the shadows staring at her moon-fated mate as he embraced another woman. Kissing her in a way that brought tears to her eyes. A searing pain ripped through her heart, almost bringing her to her knees as the bond she shared with Vaughn Wishard fractured. The poisoned shards sliced her soul to ribbons.

No , she thought. This couldn't be happening . They were supposed to have their mating ceremony later that night!

Her wolf's anguished howl mourned as the betrayal seared through them both. She thought about the countless promises of love, vowed under starlit heavens, all reduced to nothing in a single, devastating moment.

Vaughn was studying under her father, James, to be his successor since he had none. Pack law forbade a female from being alpha, so when Vaughn turned out to be her moon-fated mate, her father started tutoring him.

Kinleigh bit her lip hard, forcing herself to watch. When her fingers curled into fists, digging her nails deep into her palms, a moment of clarity struck. She pulled out her phone and started to record the two secretive lovers rendezvousing for a tryst. Just that morning, he pulled her close and nuzzled her neck as he murmured words of undying love. The kiss he'd placed on her lips, full of passion and promise, echoed mockingly in her memory. Nothing but a cruel illusion.

"I'm getting tired of watching that bitch run her hands all over you," the woman huffed. Shocked, Kinleigh recognized her friend, Annette. She had weekend plans with the bitch to go shopping. "Like she has a claim to you."

“Just dumb good luck Kinleigh turned out to be my fated mate,” Vaughn said with a smirk. “At least the High Luna did one damn thing right.”

“I hate the thought you have to fuck her.”

“That doesn’t happen all that often, sweetheart. She thinks I give a damn about all that romantic bullshit.” He gave her another kiss. “I knew long ago I was made different. I was made to be alpha. Fuck the High Luna, I’m choosing you to be my mate.”

He was defective. That’s all Kinleigh could think of to explain the words coming out of his mouth. Nothing but a broken awful man.

“I truly hate her,” Annette growled. “All she talks about is cooking for you. Massaging your shoulders. What a perfect couple you two are. It makes me want to vomit every day, after all, we’ve been in love since childhood.”

Childhood? The admission pierced through her soul, stealing her breath. How could she not know about them? What about the bond? Tears blurred her vision as she watched them kiss.

“Patience, my love,” Vaughn said. “Kinleigh and I have our mating ceremony tonight, then I’ll officially be named Alpha Heir. I can regulate her to duties far away from the pack so you and I can move out of the shadows.”

“You’ll have to give her the mate bite.”

“It’s all for show,” he declared. “She’s a lackluster fuck. I have to think of you just to get hard.”

The callousness in his voice finished shattering her. Nausea rose, threatening to choke

her. Tears streamed down her face as her wolf clawed desperately to escape, wanting to attack the woman running her hands over her mate. Kinleigh refused to give up her skin because it was obvious Vaughn didn't love her ... didn't even want her. How could the High Luna give her such a horrible man? He fooled them all.

There were no signs, no warning, that she'd been blind. Questions filtered through her mind. How did she not see the writing on the wall? How did he deceive her so well? Truth was, he was a master manipulator. All the little touches he gave her. All the kisses they had shared. All the tender moments. Everything mutated into a dagger that twisted deeper with every harsh word, and the person sinking it into her back was her own fated mate.

Her wolf gave one more howl of pain. She didn't want to hear anymore, and neither did Kinleigh. Vaughn had clearly expressed his true colors. It was time to end this farce of a bond and all his expectations to be the next alpha of the Lightfang Pack. She stopped recording and immediately sent the video to her father. Then she turned her back on the two lovers and made her way back to her house. By the time she arrived, her father was already there.

"I will banish him," he said angrily. "He won't be able to set foot on our pack lands ever again."

"He's my moon-fated mate," she whispered brokenly. "I won't have another. He's destroyed everything, including my chance to have pups and give an heir to our pack."

"That doesn't matter," her father soothed. "You're more important than anything."

"I loved him," she cried. Her father's arms came around her and she collapsed into his embrace, sobbing. "I thought he loved me."

“He’s not worth your tears.”

“I know,” she mumbled. It was hard to talk when she kept having to swallow down her sorrow. “I never want to see their faces or hear their voices ever again.”

“It will be done.” He rubbed circles on her back. “You’ll need to reject him, and I’ll make sure he accepts the rejection.”

She leaned back. “How was I so stupid, Dad?”

“You’re not stupid. He planned this after he found out you two were mates. At least you found out before the ceremony tonight.”

Kinleigh shuddered at the thought. She rubbed her forehead absently, hoping a migraine wasn’t coming on. That’s the last thing she needed.

“You are a strong woman,” he declared. “I’ll gather the pack for a meeting tonight so we can end this. Hold your head up. Don’t let him see you cry. Focus on the anger and betrayal.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Perhaps you should get away. Go on a vacation. Spoil yourself.”

She pondered that for a moment. The idea was appealing to her. “Maybe I’ll go visit Payton. I haven’t seen her in a long while.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” he said, patting her shoulder. “Love you, jellybean.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

Kinleigh sat next to her father and watched as the pack filtered into the lodge. Her mother died when she was fifteen, and since her father never re-mated, she had stepped into most of the duties that the pack Luna performed. She helped where she was needed, whether working in kitchens or reading to the pups in the library.

Her wolf had made her appearance slightly late in life at age twenty. That's when she discovered her moon-fated mate was Vaughn. She'd been so happy because he was a gorgeous man. Big, muscular, with baby blue eyes and dark hair. She thought he was as infatuated with her as she was to him, but apparently it had all been a lie.

When Annette entered the room, hatred rushed through Kinleigh's body. It became even more potent when the woman smiled at her and gave a little wave. A moment later, Vaughn also walked through the doors and shot her a smile. His eyes quickly slid to Annette before meeting hers once again. Before she knew what she knew, Kinleigh wouldn't have thought anything of the brief moment. Now, however, bitterness surged through her heart. An icy emptiness filled her soul where Vaughn used to be.

Her father walked in and came to stand behind the podium. It only took a few minutes for everyone to settle. Vaughn came to sit front and center, a beaming smile lit up his face as he waited to be called up and crowned the next Alpha before mating with her. Kinleigh would rather slit her own throat than ever be with him again.

"Good evening," James said, his deep voice not needing a microphone. "Tonight was supposed to be a joyful celebration. However, some important information has come to light, and I thought it best to share it so rumors are dispelled. Please direct your attention to the screen behind me."

He stepped aside so he didn't block the video and nodded to someone, who had his

laptop open. Immediately, the cell phone recording played for all to see. Kinleigh kept her gaze on her ex-mate and ex-friend. The horror on both their faces was priceless.

Vaughn shot to his feet. “Stop!”

“No,” James refused, his alpha voice heavy with anger. “They all must bear witness to your treachery.”

And so it played out. The knife twisting in Kinleigh’s back digging deeper and deeper with each treasonous word uttered. When the video finally ended, Vaughn turned to the pack. “It’s not what you think—”

“It’s exactly what they think,” Kinleigh said. She came to stand next to her father. “I watched this whole drama play out, and I wanted to scrub my eyeballs with bleach.”

A murmur swept through the crowd. Kinleigh watched with satisfaction as accusing gazes turned to him and Annette. In just a moment, even the rug they stood upon would be pulled from under their feet. James lifted his hand, quieting the room.

“Vaughn, I welcomed you with open arms because you were my daughter’s moon-fated mate. I offered to train you as alpha heir so you may understand how a pack runs. I thought you were a good, trustworthy male, but I was fooled.”

“Sir, I—”

“Do not even try to talk your way out of this. The proof speaks for itself.” Fury thickened his tone. “When you betrayed my daughter, you betrayed everyone. I hereby banish you, Vaughn Wishard, from the Lightfang Pack.”

“What? No!”

Her father ignored his cry as he pinned Annette with his cold, hard gaze. “Annette Smith, you are also banished.”

A loud sob punctuated the room as Annette broke down. Kinleigh had no sympathy for either of them.

“Please, Alpha,” Vaughn begged. “This has been a mistake...”

“The only mistake was your unfaithfulness. As I said before, if you can cheat on your moon-fated mate, then you can cheat on the pack.”

A united consensus swept through the room, all agreeing with their alpha. Her father nodded to her, and Kinleigh took a deep breath.

“I, Kinleigh Shire, reject you, Vaughn Wishard, as my mate.” Pain burned in her chest at her words, but it didn’t compare to the agony in her heart. “Accept it.”

She stared at Vaughn, waiting. Outrage. Hatred. Indignation. It all swirled together, taking root and festering in every cell of her body. Vaughn put a hand over his chest, wincing.

“Accept it!” her father roared.

The alpha command in his voice forced the acceptance and Vaughn was unable to ignore it. “I ... Vaughn Wishard, a-accept your rejection.”

Somewhere deep inside, the bond between them snapped and shattered. Remnants of what could’ve been seared through her blood, igniting a fire of anguish. Kinleigh didn’t even flinch as she stared at the man who ruined everything. She vowed right then and there that she’d forget about him if it was the last thing she’d ever do.

“You have until tomorrow to pack up and leave these lands.” James looked at the rest of the room. “Any objection?”

No one said a word. Not even Mr. and Mrs. Wishard. They stared at their son like they didn’t even know him. James turned to address the sentinels.

“Make sure both of them are escorted off pack lands in the morning.”

Both sentinels nodded.

It was over. Vaughn and Annette wouldn’t be the only two leaving. Kinleigh had her car already packed, ready to travel to Sheridan, Colorado. She needed time to heal and forget the man who broke her heart.

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Daire parked his truck and grabbed the clipboard before hopping out of his cab. The day was overcast and the cool breeze picked up a little. If he'd been a human, he would've said it was chilly.

Entering Jericho's office, he saw a woman standing in front of the empty assistant's desk, looking at her phone. She was tall, with long honey-colored hair streaming down her back. A very curvaceous ass filled out her jeans nicely. She looked over her shoulder and her eyes widened when she met his gaze. Sky blue eyes, a cute little button nose with a dusting of freckles. His wolf sat up and took notice as it'd been a long time since he'd gotten laid. He didn't like messing with anyone in Sheridan to avoid the awkward sidestepping that he wasn't interested in a long-term thing. Been there, fuck that. So, he usually headed to Colorado Springs whenever he wanted to find company.

"Hello," he said.

The woman startled and laid a hand over her heart. "You scared me."

"Sorry, that wasn't my intention." He offered his hand. "Daire Nolin."

She shook it, smiling. "Kinleigh Shire. I just texted Payton. She's on her way."

A spark of electricity shot through him at her touch, and by the flare of interest in her baby blues, she felt the same.

"Moving here?"

“No,” she replied. “Just visiting my cousin for a little bit.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Um, yeah. It’s Payton.”

That surprised him. “I didn’t know the Luna had family outside Sheridan.”

Kinleigh nodded. “Our mothers were sisters, but when Mom met my father at the Assembly, she moved to his pack in Oregon. Aunt Nancy came here with Uncle Marcus.”

For a moment, they stared at one another in mutual appreciation. At least he hoped she was impressed with him because he wouldn’t mind spending some time with her. Their hands were still clasped, and he was reluctant to let go.

“Maybe we could have a drink later on,” he murmured.

“I would like that,” she said, a little grin lifting at the corner of her mouth. “Where and what time?”

“Bar a couple of streets over, called The Unicorn. Funny name, but good place to relax. How about seven?”

“Deal,” she said.

Suddenly, the door opened and Payton Savidge rushed in. She smiled at him, but when her gaze landed on Kinleigh, she gave a little squeal and rushed over. Kinleigh dropped his hand to hug her cousin.

“I can’t believe you’re here!”

“I can’t believe it’s been five years since we last saw each other,” Kinleigh said with a laugh.

“How long are you staying?”

“Oh,” Kinleigh said with a sigh. “Not sure. With the whole, you know, rejection thing.”

Daire’s wolf pricked his ears at that. “Rejection?”

Both women turned to look at him.

“Hi, Daire,” Payton said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“Completely understandable.” He held up the clipboard. “I brought the estimates for Jericho.”

“Awesome!” Payton said. She took the clipboard from him. “He’s over at the new site, so I’ll put this on his desk. He’ll probably get back to you in a day or two.”

“Thanks,” he said, then addressed Kinleigh. He pushed the word “rejection” to the back of his mind. “See you later tonight?”

“Yep,” she said, giving him a wink.

He chuckled, then looked at Payton. “Thank you, Luna.”

She waved as he exited, leaving them to catch up. Looks like he had a date, and maybe a little more if he played his cards right.

Payton looked at her wrist which did not have a watch on it. “You’ve been here a minute and already got a date.”

“Maybe more if I play my cards right,” Kinleigh said with a chuckle. “That man is gorgeous.”

“Daire is a good guy, but don’t expect a happy-ever-after. He’s not the settling-down kind of man.”

“Not to worry, and since I’ve given up on relationships, neither am I.” Kinleigh sighed. “He took that from me. He took everything from me.”

Tears threatened to well up, but she blinked them away and struggled to keep her breathing even. Vaughn wasn’t worth her tears or her sorrow.

“Anyway,” she continued. “Maybe Daire Nolin will help heal my broken vagina.”

Payton laughed. “Well, I hope you have fun. Now let me put this on Jericho’s desk and we’ll get a bite to eat.”

Kinleigh nodded, watching as Payton hurried to the office in the far corner of the room. She hadn’t seen her cousin in years, and she was suddenly glad she was in Sheridan. Glad to have someone to talk to, who understood what she was going through. It wasn’t that long ago she thought Jericho had abandoned her.

“All right,” Payton said when she emerged. “Let me lock up.”

She took out a set of keys and Kinleigh followed her outside, watching as Payton locked up the office. Then she linked their arms as they took off down the sidewalk. The town of Sheridan was one of those picture-perfect places usually seen in magazine layouts. People waved or greeted them, showing deference for their luna.

“This is quite an unusual pack,” Kinleigh observed. “Lightfang is closed off. Wolves only, if you know what I mean.”

“Jericho’s dad, Branson, always said that packs have to embrace progress, otherwise we’re doomed to be extinct.”

Kinleigh thought about that. “He had a very good point. We didn’t start carrying cell phones until about ten years ago.”

“Is your dad more secular in his rule?”

“No, but without my mother by his side I think he just coasted through the motions.”

They passed a few ladies and all of them smiled and waved.

“Everyone is so nice,” Kinleigh murmured. “And you have humans here as well?”

Payton nodded. “Not many, but the families here keep quiet about the shifters. During the summer tourist season, a lot of hikers come our way, so their jobs are usually taking care of them.”

“Your pack sounds amazing.”

“Yeah, this a great place to live. Even when I thought I was defective.”

“Don’t say that,” Kinleigh said, laying her head on Payton’s shoulder. “You were never defective.”

“I know that now. I thought I would never have this life. I never cared about the luna title. It was the thought I’d never have Jericho that almost broke me. Thought I’d never be happy.”

“I’m glad you have him,” Kinleigh said, unable to keep the sadness out of her voice. “Let’s change the subject.”

“Okay.”

They arrived at the diner and delicious scents of apple and cinnamon greeted them when they entered. Her mouth immediately started to water for a taste of whatever yum-yum was cooking.

An older woman with short grey hair greeted them with a huge grin. “Hello, ladies!”

“Esmeralda, this is my cousin, Kinleigh.” Payton playfully held up her hand to her mouth like she was trying to tell a secret. “Don’t believe a word this old bird tells you.”

“Really?” Esmeralda asked dryly. “I’ll tell Wayne you’re on dish duty for the remainder of the month.”

Payton let out a mocking gasp, and Esmeralda rolled her eyes.

“Go sit down,” she ordered. “I’ll bring you the special.”

She winked at Kinleigh, who chuckled. Payton led her to a back booth.

“She’s very nice,” she said.

Payton nodded. “Esmeralda is a lifesaver. When Jericho was gone, she gave me a purpose to get out of bed. She became my de facto therapist when my parents thought I was a dud.”

“How are Aunt Nancy and Uncle Marcus?”

“They’re on a cruise for their anniversary. We still don’t have a great relationship. There’s too much between us to forget. You know?”

Kinleigh nodded. She knew all about how her aunt and uncle had been ashamed of her until Payton’s astral wolf came out to protect the pack pups.

Just then, Esmeralda showed up with two plates, each held a turkey club sandwich and sweet iced tea. “Apple pie for dessert. Enjoy!”

“Thank you. This looks amazing.”

For a few minutes they ate in silence. Kinleigh was hungrier than she thought, and the food was delicious.

“I’m sorry your moon-fated mate turned out to be a dickhead. I’m here if you need to vent.”

Kinleigh blinked back tears, her appetite suddenly taking a nosedive. “I’m only glad I found out about his real motives before I got the mate mark.”

“Me too.”

“He accepted my rejection, but now I have this hollowness inside.” Kinleigh tapped over her heart. “There are no second-chance mates, so that bastard took away my future.”

“You can find a chosen mate,” Payton said softly. She reached out and took hold of her hand. “You don’t have to be alone.”

“I know,” Kinleigh said sadly. “But I won’t have children. My pack won’t have an heir.”

“I think it’s dumb not allowing a woman to be alpha.” Payton scowled. “Jericho and I have already talked about this. If we have only girls, he has no problem training a daughter to be alpha heir.”

“I might have alpha blood, but I don’t have alpha power,” Kinleigh admitted. “Truthfully, I was never interested in ruling anyway. My dad said he has some people in mind that he can vet, so I guess we’ll see.”

“You could turn it into a reality show. Each week a contestant gets voted off the island.”

“That’s an awesome idea.” Kinleigh chuckled. “It just sucks that I had this idea of my future, and in five minutes it was ripped out from under me. How do I move on? Where do I go from here? It’s not like there’s a dating app for chosen mates.”

Payton reached out and grasped her hand. “If you’d like, we can stop by the apothecary and see if Savannah has anything to mend your heart.”

“What can human medicine do?”

Payton’s eyes widened as she leaned closer. “She’s an Other.”

Kinleigh frowned. “A what?”

“Apparently, there are a lot of magical creatures out there, and wolves aren’t at the top of the food chain. She’s an Enchantress.”

“I ... have no idea what that means or what to say.”

“Come on,” Payton said as she pulled out some money and laid it on the table. “Let’s see if Savannah has any suggestions.”

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The moment she stepped into the apothecary, Kinleigh's mouth dropped open. Dried herbs hung from the ceiling. All different types of bottles lined the shelves. She saw charms, candles, incense, jewelry, and knickknacks interspersed with ibuprofen, toothpaste, and tampons. It was truly a mix of modern drugstore and metaphysical.

"This place is awesome," Kinleigh breathed, looking around in awe.

"Thank you."

Both she and Payton turned. A tall, statuesque woman stood there, smiling. Her long, dark hair was braided down her back. Next to her was a shorter woman with curly red hair.

"Hi, Savannah," Payton said. "Hi, Brinnah. This is my cousin, Kinleigh. We've come about a problem of the heart."

Savannah cocked her head. "What type of problem?"

"I had to reject my moon-fated mate," Kinleigh said.

Brinnah's eyes widened. "I'm so sorry. I know how painful that is."

Savannah put her arm around the younger woman. "Brinnah was rejected, which caused her to flee her pack. She came to Sheridan and found her true mate."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you," Kinleigh said to the pretty woman. "But true mate?"

“The High Luna always has a plan,” Savannah said with a wink.

“The man the High Luna gave me was a very bad person,” Brinnah said. “But he was a false mate. Now, I have a wonderful man.”

“I’m happy for you,” Kinleigh said sincerely. “My ex-mate is also a bad man. Payton thought there might be something to help with this emptiness inside.”

She tapped her chest, right over her heart.

Brinnah pushed her long hair behind her ear and Kinleigh saw the tip on the top curve, and she couldn’t help but stare in confusion. Brinnah must have seen where her line of sight rested and self-consciously moved her hair back into place.

“I’m sorry,” Kinleigh said sincerely. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

“It’s fine,” Brinnah said with a shrug. “I forget that my ears are different.”

“Were you born with them?”

She shook her head. “I come from a very secular pack. When our wolf presents itself, we’re taught to keep our ears in honor of our true nature. I never knew my pack was so old-fashioned until I came here. Unfortunately, I haven’t learned to retract them, and I’m not sure I ever can.”

“I think they’re beautiful,” Kinleigh said.

Brinnah’s eyes widened. “Really? Thank you.”

“Savannah,” Payton said. “Do you have something to help Kinleigh?”

She tilted her head. “May I?” she asked Kinleigh, who nodded permission.

Savannah reached out and ran a finger lightly over Kinleigh’s forehead. A flash of heat seared through her head, and the slight headache that had been lingering since she rejected Vaughn disappeared.

“Oh,” she said, surprised. “Whatever you did, that felt great.”

“The wound he placed on your heart is seeping,” Savannah murmured. “One gossamer thread ties you to your ex-mate.” She walked over to a wall and took down an amber-colored glass jar. “Unlike Brinnah’s case, the High Luna has not tricked you into leaving to find your true mate. She hoped this union would’ve healed the rot in his soul, but it’s too far decayed. He is to blame, not you. Would you like me to cauterize the slice?”

“Will that completely free me?”

“Yes. Once the thread is severed, you can find love again.”

“But I won’t have children,” Kinleigh said sadly.

Savannah held up a finger. “Actually, I do see children in your future, just not biological ones.”

“Oh,” Kinleigh said. “I never thought of that. I bet there are lots of pups needing a forever home.”

“Precisely,” Savannah replied. “Shifter children can’t integrate as foster kids. They have to stay with our kind. But finding homes for them can be a little tricky since most packs are isolated.”

Savannah walked behind her counter and grabbed a few more jars. Then, in a mortar dish, she added all the ingredients and mixed it with the pestle. Then she added the concoction to a mesh bag.

“Drink this tea,” she instructed. “It will sever that fragile cord and leave you free to find a chosen mate.”

Kinleigh smiled happily. “You have any hot water?”

Daire pulled his truck into the garage of his house and shut off the engine. Grabbing several folders resting on the passenger seat, he hopped out of the cab and entered his house. The idea of a date night excited him. It'd been too long since he enjoyed a female's company.

He tossed the folders onto his kitchen table and then made his way to his bedroom. Stripping off his dirty clothes, he tossed them into the laundry basket and stepped into the shower. Hot water cascaded down his body as he lathered up his hands to wash every inch of himself, while thoughts of Kinleigh Shire filled his head. He hoped they could have a little fun before she went back to her pack.

As he stepped out of the shower, his cell rang. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he hurried to his nightstand where his phone rested. The number that flashed made him pause.

Fuck! He really didn't want to answer it, but guilt was a nasty bitch. Swearing under his breath, he accepted the call.

“Daire?”

The fragile voice made him cringe. He didn't want to talk to her. Hell, he even went out of his way to avoid thinking about her. Guess he couldn't dodge her forever.

"Hello, Evonne," he greeted.

"Is she with you?"

He sighed. "No, Evonne. She's dead. Remember?"

She was silent for a moment, then the sobs came through. "Not my baby. Not my baby."

"Evonne, where is your doctor?"

She just kept crying.

"Evonne!" he said louder. "Where's your doctor?"

Finally, some noise and the obvious sound of the phone being taken away.

"Hello?" a male voice asked. "Mr. Nolin?"

"Yes, Doc."

"I'm sorry about this," he said. "She's allowed cell phone privilege once a month."

"I know," Daire remarked. "But I have no answers for her. Maybe you should revoke her phone privilege because she's not getting better if she still thinks she can talk to Nicola."

"Actually, I'm thinking about sending her to a new facility in upstate New York," the

doctor said. “Her psychosis is expanding. She’s living in the past more and more.”

“If you think it’s best, then I support that decision.”

“All right. I’ll start the paperwork and will send it when I have everything organized. Good night, Mr. Nolin.”

“Good night.”

He disconnected the call, and then stood there. His mind traveled back in time, to when he’d found his moon-fated mate and everything made sense. He’d been happy for an infinitesimal moment that ended far too soon.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed all that to the side. He was going to have a nice evening out with a beautiful woman. Maybe he would visit Savannah in order to finally break free from the lingering pain and sorrow festering in his soul. After all, how could he find happiness again if he was stuck in the past?

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Daire stepped into Savannah's apothecary and looked around. It had been quite some time since he'd last been there, and he'd forgotten how amazing it smelled. Sandalwood with a hint of rose.

"Hello, Daire."

He turned and saw Savannah. "Hi."

She cocked her head. "What can I do for you?"

"I ... well, I'm looking for something that can sever emotional memories."

"I see," Savannah said with a gentle smile. "May I?"

She held up her hand and he nodded. Stepping close she ran her finger across his forehead, and immediately, pressure he didn't realize he had eased.

"Wow," he said. "What did you do?"

"I needed to feel how deep the tendril of your ex-mate," she replied. "I have just the thing."

She walked behind the counter and took some glass jars down. Each one had some type of herb, mixing several together in a mortar with a pestle. Then she poured the crushed herbs into a satchel.

"Stay here," she ordered. "I'm going to grab a cup of hot water so you can drink this

right away.”

“I have a date tonight,” he said, eyeing the dark brew. “This won’t mess that up, will it?”

“Don’t worry. It won’t upset your night.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She nodded and left, hurrying up the stairs in the back. A few minutes later, she returned, holding a coffee mug with a tea bag floating in the hot water, turning it an amber color.

“Drink up.”

He took the mug and grimaced at the earthy smell. “Is this going to help me get over Nicola?”

“It will sever all ties of the festering bond and leave you free.”

That was exactly what he wanted. Fortifying himself, he drank the whole cup down in one long gulp. It was horrible. “Holy hell, that was foul.”

“Yes, but now the shackles of the past are gone and you can choose a new mate.”

He held up his hand. “Since I’ve given up on relationships, I’m not looking for a new mate.”

She smiled. “Regardless. There’s not an albatross around your neck anymore. With each hour that passes, the unbearable weight that had been on your chest will get lighter and lighter.”

“Thank you, Savannah,” he said. “How much do I owe you?”

She held up a hand. “Please. It’s my pleasure to help you.”

“Well, if you need any work done, let me know. I’ll be happy to help out.”

“Deal.” She held out her hand, and he shook it. “Have a good night with Kinleigh.”

He frowned. “How did you know about Kinleigh?”

“You weren’t the only who needed to sever a tie.”

She winked and went to help a new customer. Intrigued, Daire left Savannah’s, wondering how the evening would turn out.

“Welcome to The Unicorn ,” Daire said, smiling as he held open the door.

The warm lighting inside the bar cast a cozy glow. Industrial modern touches were interspersed with rich wooden textures. The long linear counter was lined with people as they sat, drinking with friends and family to unwind. The shelves behind the bar were meticulously organized, with two bartenders moving in a careful dance around each other as they served customers. The low hum of voices only added to the ambiance.

“Why is it called The Unicorn?” she asked.

“No one knows for sure, but my personal opinion is that it was meant to draw curious people in, and it worked. It has the right mix of sophistication and casual style.”

“Daire, you old dog, I see you finally managed to bring a pretty lady in here.”

They both turned. A tall, good-looking man stood there with a mischievous glint in his almost translucent blue eyes. She’d never seen such a color before.

“Hey,” Daire greeted. “Kinleigh, this is The Unicorn’s owner, Asher Reidman. Ash, this is my friend, Kinleigh Shire.”

Reaching out, Asher took Kinleigh's hand and brought her knuckles to his lips, giving them a theatrical kiss that made her giggle. Daire rolled his eyes, but a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“Don't mind him, Kinleigh, he likes to think he's some kind of Casanova,” Daire said, a touch of mock exasperation lacing his voice.

Asher winked, patting Daire on the shoulder. “Just trying to show this lovely lady how a real gentleman acts,” he teased, before finally backing off. “All right, you two lovebirds, I'll let you be. Enjoy your date, and I'll send one of the servers to get your order.”

Daire led her to a secluded booth. It allowed them a sliver of privacy despite the place being crowded. As soon as they sat down, a server came by to take their order.

“I could get used to this,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“We don’t really have anything like this in my pack.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope,” she said. “My dad is the type of alpha who likes tradition.”

“Ah,” Daire said. “Like the ones in Northern Canada?”

“Not quite that strict, but progress takes time.” She shrugged. “I think if my mother was still alive, she would’ve encouraged him to move a little more quickly into the twenty-first century.”

“Sorry about your mom.”

“It’s okay. I barely remember her anymore.”

The server returned with their drinks before taking off again.

“Cheers,” he said, holding out the amber-glass bottle of beer. She softly clinked it and they both took a drink. “Your dad never took another mate?”

“No,” she said. “I wish he had. I don’t like seeing him so alone.”

“What about you?”

“Me?” she asked, pointing to herself. “No mate.”

“The Luna mentioned a rejection earlier. When we were in the office.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I only asked because apparently I went to Savannah for the same reason you did.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You?”

“Yep. Long story.”

Something dark flashed across his face, and her wolf recognized the aching loss which mirrored her own soul.

“I, ah, had to reject my moon-fated mate,” she shared. “I caught him in an embrace with a friend of mine.”

“Ouch,” he said with a wince.

“He only wanted to mate me so he could be my father’s heir.” She took a deep breath. “He was going to send me away and make his girlfriend the pack Luna.”

Silence fell as she thought about the betrayal. It would probably always sting, even though she now felt nothing for Vaughn.

“I would think moon-fated mates were a lie if I didn’t have friends who had found theirs and are completely devoted to one another.” She shook her head. “I can’t help but wonder what was wrong with me that he couldn’t love me.”

He lifted her chin. “His decision was his own treachery. Sometimes we aren’t enough for those who are truly broken.”

She studied his face. “You too?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “My mate ... she was an alcoholic. Weird for a wolf, but her drink of choice was moonshine, and not the kind you find in stores. Her mother struggled with her own addictions. The men her mother brought home led to Nicola being sexually abused. This happened before she got her wolf who could’ve protected her. I did everything I could to help her, but it wasn’t enough. I wasn’t enough. She, um, took her own life.”

His pain made her heart ache. She laid her hand on top of his and he ended up linking their fingers together. It was extremely unusual for a shifter to commit suicide, but there'd been cases. Their dual personas were of nurture as well as nature, a symbiotic relationship where the animal inside would regenerate the body. It's why shifters rarely developed diseases. For a shifter to kill himself or herself is telling that somewhere down the line, a disconnect between human and wolf had occurred. Mental health wasn't just reserved for humans.

"I'm so sorry about your mate," she murmured.

"No need to be sorry," he said with a shrug. "You had nothing to do with the choice she made."

"I know, but I empathize. We both lost something that was supposed to be sacred, and it robbed us of a beautiful future."

He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand as he searched her face. For a moment, she lost herself in his dark gaze. Attraction flared to life, causing her heart to thump rapidly in her chest.

"You're gorgeous," he murmured.

"So are you."

He grinned. "We can be gorgeous together, if you'd like."

"We could." She bit her bottom lip as she figured out what to say. "I'm not looking for anything long term."

"Me too. Fucking and having a good time is all I'm capable of."

“Then I guess that makes this a non-date date.” She tilted her head. “I’m only planning to stay for a couple of weeks.”

“Okay.”

Now, she felt a little shy. “I’ve never done this before.”

“What? Fucking?”

She let out a nervous little giggle. “Blunt. I like it, but no, not that. I’ve never propositioned anyone.”

“Is that what you’ve done? Propositioned me?”

“I think so,” she replied. “I’m not sure because, you know, I’ve never done this before.”

“Touché. I’d ask your place or mine, but I’m pretty sure you’re staying with the alpha and there’s no way I’m having sex under his roof.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Might be slightly embarrassing at breakfast.”

“So, Miss Shire. Would you like to come home with me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

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Daire's home was a large modern farmhouse isolated in the middle of the woods. Lights glowed along the walkway up to the door. The rustic exterior of board and batten held a rural charm, and the stone facade entryway added a dynamic contrast to the traditional aesthetic.

"Your home is beautiful," she murmured.

"Thank you," he replied. "This became my salvation when Nicola died. I had envisioned this place with children running around, especially when they got their wolf. But, well, that never panned out."

She remembered Savannah's statement, that she saw children in Kinleigh's future, just not biological.

"Have you thought about fostering shifter kids that have no parents?" she asked.

He blinked. "Um, no. I hadn't thought of that."

She shrugged. "Something to consider. Anyway, take me on a tour."

Daire led her through the front door, to a large living room with wooden floor tiles, a massive stone fireplace, and bay windows that brought in a lot of light. The open floor plan followed through to the kitchen. A modern décor with white subway tiles wrapping behind the large stainless-steel stove. The soapstone island was able to sit four. To the right was a long dining room table that could accommodate eight people.

"Wow," she said. "You did all this?"

“Yeah,” he replied. “I mean, I hired an electrician and plumber. My specialty is HVAC so I had a lot of people in the construction field able to help me.”

“Well, you accomplished something amazingly beautiful.”

He smiled and stepped closer, resting his hands on her hips. “You want something to drink?”

She looped her arms around his neck, bringing her body into direct contact with his. Tingles ran up her arms, quite different from how she had felt with Vaughn. With him, there had been this connection she felt deep in her soul. Almost like he’d been liquid gold that made her shine. She hadn’t known he’d been a sieve, with all her happiness and love draining away until it was gone. He’d ruined all her hopes and dreams, and slowly burned away the mental picture she’d had of them married, taking care of their pack, and having a large family. Now, she had to let that go.

As she stared into Daire’s deep, chocolate eyes, she felt the empty void slowly filling up with something else. Turning, twisting, morphing into a new vision of what could be. Maybe this was how she came back to life. Taking this first step into moving past the shards of her desolation.

She didn’t fool herself into thinking this was anything but sex. She had only just stepped over the crumbling cracks in her foundation, and instinctively knew this unexpected path would take a while to understand. She was just happy she’d found a new course of action. It might seem clichéd and silly, but sex with Daire Nolin was one piece to restarting her life.

“I’m not really thirsty for water. I have a craving for something ... more horizontal.”

Daire slid a hand behind her neck to bring her closer to his mouth, and the kiss ricocheted through her body, igniting a fire that had been dormant for a long time.

Not even Vaughn had rocked her world quite like this kiss had, at least she didn't think so. Maybe it was the tea that had freed her sexuality as well as her emotions, and she made a mental vow that nothing would stand in her way of finding bliss.

The kiss went on and on, and by the time she caught her breath, she realized he had maneuvered her into the bedroom. The large bed beckoned. Starting from the top button and working down, he popped each button through the eyelet, until it hung free from her skirt. A melodic tune of heavy breathing filled the room as he turned her around. Daire ran his hands upward from her waist, stopping just underneath her breasts. He cupped them and pinched the hard nipples through her bra. Ever so slightly, she leaned back into him and lifted her hands up to wrap around his neck. Squeezing gently but firmly, he rolled her nipples between his fingers, and an ache sprung between her thighs. He left love bites where her neck and shoulder met. Sometimes he nibbled on her earlobe, and her eyes rolled back as she gave herself up to the pleasure.

He slowly ran one hand down her body until he reached the waistband of her skirt, then bunched the fabric up. The heavenly touch of his hand heated up her skin as he teased the damp patch of her panties, sliding under the elastic band. She couldn't stop the breathless little moan escaping as he found and caressed her clit, gently rubbing circles of stimulation before giving her a hard pinch. The brief bite of pain only heightened her arousal and she couldn't stay quiet.

"You're going to make me come," she murmured.

"I want you to come," he countered, licking the shell of her ear. "We have all night."

It only took a minute or two of coaxing, and as soon as his finger slipped inside, her orgasm crashed over her. She undulated her hips, wanting more. Wanting to feel his big cock inside her pussy. She wasn't a virgin, but she'd never experienced anything quite as intense, and they'd barely started.

When she came down from her high, Daire grabbed the sides of her panties and pulled them down as far as he could, then took a step back to tug her shirt off and unhook her bra. She wriggled the skirt down and kicked them away, and then stood completely bare before him. A pleasant hum still vibrated along her nerve endings. Admiration reflected in his eyes as he cupped her face and lowered his head until their lips touched. He traced the seam of her lips with his tongue until she opened, and then dominated the very air she breathed. Walking backward, he guided her to the bed and pulled her with him as he fell back. She was on top, her pussy resting against the thick bulge of his jeans where his cock strained the material.

“I want you naked,” she murmured.

“Then undress me.”

She grinned and moved off, teasing him as she obeyed his command. Pulling his t-shirt off. Unbuttoning his jeans. He lifted his hips to help her wiggle them down his muscular legs. Much to her delight, he wasn't wearing underwear and his cock sprung up thick and long and hard as granite. A bead of pre-cum formed at the tip and her mouth watered. Taking hold of the shaft, she licked him like a lollipop. The salty taste exploding on her taste buds. She took the head into her mouth and began gently sucking. His hands found her head and guided it up and down as she worked the shaft with her lips and tongue. As she sucked him off, she touched her needy pussy, rubbing her clit. Just as she started the climb for another orgasm, he pulled her off his dick and brought her up against him. As he kissed her, his hands were everywhere. Squeezing her ass. Tracing the curve of her waist. Kneading her breasts. Her nipples were hard as diamonds.

He rolled them until he was on top of her and her legs wrapped around him. He ground against her dripping cunt and she gasped and moaned at the feeling.

“You want this?” he asked, his voice heavy with lust.

“I want you,” she gasped. “Have your wicked way with me.”

He grinned as he took hold of his big cock and lined it up against her slit. She was ready and wanting. They stared into each other’s eyes as the rotund head broached her entrance. Slowly, he eased inch after inch into her pussy, stretching her like no one else had before.

Over and over, he plowed into her, and she pushed back. His wolf flashed across his face as she became more and more assertive. She’d never been shy about chasing her own pleasure, so she reached between them to rub her clit. The orgasm that had been building rushed forward, and she couldn’t hold it back. Her hips bucked of their own accord as she exploded. On and on it went as he relentlessly stroked into her.

“You are so fucking sexy,” he murmured.

“You are too,” she purred, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He kissed her lightly on the mouth. “Get on your hands and knees.”

Pulling out, he repositioned her before he placed himself behind her and grasped her hips. He pushed his cock back into her and she gasped as he resumed his relentless fucking, filling her deeply from that angle. Taking every inch of him and loving it. There was something about the way he thrust into her, hanging on the cusp of his climax, that drove her crazy.

“I’m going to fill you up,” he grunted.

“Yes!” she urged. “Do it. Come for me.”

Daire grabbed her hips and thrust as deep as he could, grunting as he came. Spurt after spurt, he did exactly as he said he was going to do. Filling her up until they both

collapsed from exhaustion.

He slowly withdrew and Kinleigh collapsed onto her stomach. When he rolled off her, he turned her and pulled her into his arms. Her head rested on his muscular chest. Because they weren't moon-fated mates, she didn't worry about getting pregnant. Plus, no worry about STDs. A win-win situation.

"Give me a moment," he panted. "Then we can go again."

She chuckled and tilted her head up to look at him, basking in the aftermath of their lovemaking. "Again?"

He gave her a wicked grin. "Oh, baby. You're not leaving this bed until you're bowlegged."

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An alarm teased her from sleep and when the bed moved, she opened her eyes. A naked Daire flipped back the covers and sat up. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled when he confirmed she was awake.

“Pretty sure the sun isn’t up,” she grumbled.

“You’d be right,” he said. “I have some work to do at the Wulfrun Site. You’re more than welcome to stay here and rest.”

“I better get back,” she said with a sigh. “I don’t want Payton to worry too much.”

He reached back and took hold of her hand. “Wanna see the site?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’d love that, if I won’t be in the way.”

“Not at all,” he replied. “I kind of like your company.”

“Oh, wow. Kind of, eh?” She chuckled. “I kind of like yours, too.”

“Awesome,” he said. “Okay, give me about twenty minutes and I’ll treat you to some of the best coffee in town.”

Giving him a thumbs-up, she shamelessly stared at his tight ass as he headed to this en-suite bathroom.

“Stop ogling my butt,” he said sternly, but then gave a little wiggle right before he closed the door.

Smiling, Kinleigh rose and started to dress. She left the bedroom hunting for her shoes, once more admiring the beauty of the home. She hadn't appreciated the floor-to-ceiling windows that faced the sprawling vista of the forest until she saw the morning sun play peek-a-boo through the tree branches. Her wolf sat up and took notice, tongue hanging out as it urged her to go for a run.

"Maybe tonight, girl," she murmured.

"Ready?"

She turned and nodded. "I think you promised me the best coffee around."

"That I did."

Daire walked over to the credenza and slipped his wallet in one of the back pants pockets and cell phone in the other. Then he held out his hand to her and Kinleigh slipped hers into his. After he helped her into his truck, he reached over to secure her with the seat belt and then gave her a quick peck on the lips. She checked him as he sauntered around the front of the truck and slid behind the wheel.

"So," he began as he headed down his driveway. "What are your plans for the evening?"

"I'm not sure. What are your plans?"

"I was hoping to convince a certain beautiful honey-blonde woman I know to have dinner with me."

"Oh, anyone I know?"

"Maybe," he teased. "She's beautiful."

“You said that already.”

“Yes, but it bears repeating,” he said. “She has sky-blue eyes. A very cute button nose. And little angel kisses over her cheeks.”

“Angel kisses?”

“Some people call them freckles.”

“Ah,” Kinleigh said, acting like she knew who he was talking about. “I think that rules out Esmeralda.”

“You are definitely right about that.”

“Linda? Abby? Sue? Ginger?”

“Do you know a Linda, Abby, Sue or Ginger?”

“No. Do you?”

“I think my first-grade teacher was named Sue, but no, not her. Or them. I’ll give you a hint.” He leaned closer, like he was going to whisper a secret. “She’s a good kisser.”

“Is she?”

He nodded “The best.”

“Really? The best?”

“Bestest of the best.” He pulled into a spot in front of a coffeehouse, turned off the

engine, and then moved closer. “I don’t know if you realized it or not, but you blew my socks off, lady.”

She batted her eyelashes. “Would you like me to blow something else tonight?”

“And now I’m gonna walk around all day with a hard-on. Thank you for that, Miss Shire.”

She winked, then exited the truck cab. He came around to open the door to the coffee shop for her.

“Thank you, kind sir.”

“Of course, milady.”

Inside the coffee shop, a bubbly redhead waved at them.

“Hi, Daire,” she greeted. “Hi, Daire’s friend.”

“Morning, Keegan,” Daire said. “This is Kinleigh. She’s Luna Payton’s cousin.”

“Oh, then double welcome.” A woman stepped from the back to behind the counter.

“And this is my cousin, Mairi, visiting from Scotland.”

The pretty redhead waved at them.

“I’ll take a dark brew with sugar,” he ordered, then turned to Kinleigh. “My treat.”

“A small cappuccino, please.” She nudged Daire. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

In a few minutes, Daire paid and they waved as they left.

“You were right,” she said as she sipped her coffee. “This is good.”

Daire drove them to the construction site where he worked on new single-family homes for the growing town. Payton told her there had been a mass application to join the pack, so much that she needed someone to help with all the petitions. Her cousin had even asked if she wanted to stay in Sheridan and work for them.

For a moment, Kinleigh actually thought about it. Even though she loved her dad and her pack, a restlessness flowed under her skin. An itch to find the place in this world where she belonged since Vaughn had taken away her future as Luna. Whoever her father trained to become alpha would have his own mate, regulating her to watch from the sidelines. It wasn't that she yearned for that position, but she'd grown up with the knowledge that whoever she married would be alpha.

Until the High Luna gave her a cheating liar of a mate.

“Jericho wanted each house to be eco-friendly,” Daire explained, snapping her out of her dark thoughts. From the tool chest in his truck bed, he pulled out two white hard hats and passed one to her since they were in an active construction site. “Recycled glass. Recycled steel. Reclaimed wood. We also use precast concrete, which takes less energy and material to produce.”

They walked along the dirt-strewn road, past houses in various stages of completion. The hum of saws, hammers, and drills echoed around. Various people raised their hands in greeting. The layout of the community impressed her, showcasing how Jericho paid attention to the needs of his people.

“Hey, Daire!”

They both stopped and turned as a man hurried up to them. He was big and brawny, good looking in a lumberjack sort of way. Short dark hair, dark beard, wearing flannel.

“Morning, Beta Ledger,” Daire said. “Have you met Kinleigh?”

“Not yet, but I do know you’re Payton’s cousin. I’m Ledger Klayman.”

She bowed her head to honor his rank. “Nice to finally meet you.”

“Hey,” he said, looking at Daire. “I looked over the estimates you dropped off and I like the numbers.”

“Great,” Daire said, smiling. “I’ll place the order once I drop Kinleigh at Jericho’s.”

“All right, I’ll see you later.” Ledger turned to Kinleigh. “My mate and I are planning a barbecue this weekend. I hope you can come.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “I’d like that. Is there anything I can bring?”

“Bring whatever and who ever.” He threw a wink toward Daire.

She saluted him. Ledger turned and gave a wave before heading back to one of the framed-out houses.

Kinleigh glanced up at Daire. “We’ve established we’re not calling this thing we’re doing as dating, so I’m not calling it a date, but would you like to go to the barbecue with me?”

He slid his arm around her lower back and pulled her into his body. “I would love to go on another non-date date with you.”

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As the sun set to allow twilight to descend, the forest transformed into a magical stage for nightly adventures. The forest floor was pitch dark since the crescent moon wasn't throwing enough light to filter through tree branches. For humans, it would be scary as hell, but for a wolf, darkness was freedom. Kinleigh stood on the deck at the back of Daire's house, breathing in the crisp night air laced with the scent of damp soil and musty foliage. The rustle of leaves, the whisper of the wind, and the distant call of a night owl. The nocturnal creatures gave a symphony with the grandest of instruments as they moved and thrived in the shadows.

Kinleigh had always felt sorry for humans who couldn't understand the enchanting world of shifters. She couldn't imagine going through life without her wolf.

A soft footfall let her know Daire had joined her. "Ready?" he asked.

She nodded. Facing one another, they slowly undressed, letting their clothes fall around their feet. Kinleigh admired his muscular physique. His chiseled abs. Defined biceps. The V-shaped Adonis belt. His hard cock. He winked and then he was gone as he allowed his wolf to take their skin. He brushed his soft fur against her legs as he urged her to shift. She gave him a scratch behind his ears before she allowed the change to fall over her.

She was a lot smaller than his massive animal. The two wolves stared, sizing each other up. Then he bent his head to run his snout against hers in a friendly gesture. Her wolf liked his very much so she playfully pushed back before giving him a little yap and taking off toward the woods. He immediately gave chase through the densely packed thicket. Many times he could've overtaken her, but his wolf seemed more than happy to let her lead.

Their agile forms effortlessly navigated the crowded trunks of towering trees, their bodies weaving a path through the shadowed expanse. Air stirred with the soft thud of paws on the damp earth, punctuated by occasional, playful yips that echoed through the woods. Their movements a blend of grace and raw power, muscles rippling as they surged through the undergrowth.

Hours later, they ended up where they had started—back on Daire’s deck. The wolves allowed them to regain their skin, and as soon as he could, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Hard. Plunging his tongue into her mouth as if he was trying to devour her whole. It was a kiss of possession, of lust, and it triggered an answering need in Kinleigh. When they eventually broke apart, they stared at each other, panting heavily.

Daire lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her back to his bedroom. He knelt on the mattress and then tumbled her from his arms before coming down on top, kissing her mouth, her neck, making his way down her body. Their eyes met and locked, and the sliver of moonlight trickled through the window, illuminating the desire in his eyes. An answering need rose up as she arched into his hands.

His hot mouth engulfed the tip of one breast while he rolled the taut nipple on the other. She panted as he pushed her legs apart, settling between her thighs. Waiting with bated breath, the tension coiled, and when he finally buried his face in her pussy, she couldn’t help the moan that came out. Licking her. Sucking her. Gently biting down on her sensitive clit. She curled her fingers into his hair and thrust against his face when he showed no mercy. Her orgasm rose quickly, screaming his name as she fell from the precipice.

“You are so fucking sexy,” he murmured as he made his way back up her satiated body.

“Not so bad there yourself,” she murmured. “Now, fuck me like you mean it.”

He took hold of one of her thighs and rested it over his hip, which lined his cock up directly with her open slit. With one thrust, he filled her up. She took him deep into her body, raising her hips up as he pounded into her harder, deeper. Possessing her. The world ceased spinning until it was only them, caught in a cosmic swirl. Pleasure so intense it consumed her. She never wanted this moment to end. Then he reached down between their bodies and rubbed her clit, and that was all she needed to fly apart. As she rode that plateau, he came with a loud shout.

As Kinleigh wrapped her arms around him, trying to get her breathing under control, she acknowledged to herself that when she returned home, she would miss him.

Kinleigh held the box of pastries while Daire walked beside her. Garlic and herbs scented the air, mixing with the sweet smell of propane. As soon as they rounded the back of the house, a host of greetings came their way. A woman with pink hair approached, smiling.

“Welcome!” she said, holding out her hand. “I’m Anais. You must be Kinleigh.”

Kinleigh shook her hand. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“Our pleasure. Come,” she said with a wave of her hand. “You can set the box over there on that table.”

Ledger walked over and slid a hand around his mate’s waist. “Glad you two could make it.”

“No talking shop,” Anais warned him. “This is a relaxing time.”

Ledger held up his last finger. “Pinkie-swear.”

Anais hooked it with her own and the loving smile she gave her mate made Kinleigh envy the bond. As quickly as she had that thought, she pushed it away. There were lots of mated couples and she couldn’t spend her life jealous and sad.

“Where can I put the pastries?” she asked, holding up the box.

“Oh, over here,” Anais replied.

With a wave, she escorted Kinleigh to a table off to the side where Payton stood with a few other women.

“Hello, cousin,” Payton greeted, a sly grin hovering on her lips. “Haven’t seen you much lately. Wherever have you been spending your nights?”

“Running through the forest a lot. Very. Very. A lot.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, clearly not buying it. “At least tell me you’re having fun.”

“I am,” Kinleigh said. Her mind flashed to Vaughn, and heartbreak once more tried to suck her under. It took force to push everything aside and just exist in the moment. Her glance strayed over to Daire, who was talking with Ledger and Jericho. “He has distracted me enough so I can get some rest and not think about my asshole ex-mate every minute of the day.”

Payton took hold of her hand. “Then I’m grateful you connected with him. Come on. I’d like to introduce you to everyone.”

Payton led her around talking with various pack members. Kinleigh waved at Keegan and Mairi. Esmeralda. A few other people she knew. She sat with Daire as they ate,

laughing at jokes being tossed around.

This was what she craved. Having friends and family to laugh with, share stories, plan for future events. Hopefully, she'd be able to find the place where she could have a life helping others and enjoying herself.

“Hey, I’m heading to the Digamma Center tomorrow,” Payton told her. “I usually teach movement courses for the elders. Easy stuff that won’t hurt joints. Would you like to come with me?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “That’d be great.”

“Cool.” A sly look crossed over her face. “Should I pick you up from Daire’s?”

“You’re like a five-year-old,” Kinleigh said.

Payton stuck out her tongue, and Kinleigh shook her head and laughed.

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Early the next morning , Payton pulled into Daire's driveway and honked her horn. Kinleigh stood on tiptoe to kiss him goodbye.

"What would you like to do tonight?" he asked.

"I'm down for anything. Did you have something in mind?"

He linked his arms around her back and pulled her in close. "Wanna hot tub?"

"You have a hot tub?"

"Yep."

"You mean, you've kept this monumental luxury from me?"

"I wanted you to want me , not my hot tub."

"Ah." She chuckled. "Very formidable weapon in your arsenal, Mr. Nolin, but don't worry." She rubbed her hand down his zipper to cup his junk. "A hot tub doesn't hold a candle to this."

He placed his hand on top of hers, trapping it on his hardening cock. "You just love me for my dick, don't you?"

"Well, it's a very, very nice dick."

She kissed him again, then backed up. Winking before she turned and hurried out the

door. Payton waved at her as she slid into the passenger seat.

“Morning,” she said.

“Morning,” Payton said. “Ready for some fun?”

“Gives a whole new meaning to dancing to the oldies.”

“Dancing with the oldies.”

They laughed as Payton drove them to the senior center. Elder wolves carried the title of Digamma, a reference to the retired Greek letter. Once a month, Jericho came to talk and listen to the elders, learning their wisdom or asking advice. A wolf pack valued the elders, and a good alpha always took their years of experience into consideration. Listening and asking for advice.

About a dozen seniors, a mix of men and women, waited for them in the community room. They were dressed in various exercise clothes and they all smiled as she and Payton walked into the room.

“Hello!” Payton greeted. “This is my cousin, Kinleigh, and she’ll be helping today.”

Everyone smiled, welcoming her into their center. For the next hour, they danced their way to low-impact moves. When the hour was done, she and Payton hung around for a while to talk with the elders.

A woman patted Kinleigh’s hand. “How long are you gonna be with us, dear?”

“Maybe for another week.”

“Aw,” someone else said. “Well, you’re more than welcome to come back.”

“Maybe I will,” Kinleigh said, smiling.

They soon left, waving their goodbyes.

“There’s an outside movie night in the park this evening,” Payton said as she drove them back to her house. “Wanna come?”

“Sure,” she said. “What’s playing?”

“Teen Wolf . The older one, with Michael J. Fox.”

“Werewolf movie, of course. I should’ve known. Count me in, I’ll be there.”

“Great! What about Daire?”

“I’ll ask him.”

“Okay. If he can’t make it or he doesn’t want to go, call me and I’ll come pick you up.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The crisp evening air caused goose bumps as it blew across her skin. Payton had told her to wear something warm, but the long-sleeved shirt she wore wasn’t great protection. Kinleigh glanced through the crowd of about two dozen people, searching for Daire. He’d run late on a house he was working on and told her he’d meet her there.

When their gazes locked on each other, happiness caused her to jump to her feet and

meet him halfway. The blankets and pillows he carried fell to the ground as he pulled her into his arms. Kissing her like he hadn't seen her in days, instead of just a few hours. Kinleigh wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing back with fervor.

"Missed you," he murmured against her lips.

"Missed you back," she replied.

He grinned down at her. "Brought us blankets, as you can see."

"Brains and beauty," she said with a giggle. "I hit the jackpot."

"Those were supposed to be my lines, Miss Smooth Talker. So ... ditto."

"And so eloquent. You make my heart flutter."

Daire pressed another sweet kiss against her mouth. "Mine too."

He released her so he could pick up the stuff he dropped then walked with her to where Jericho and Payton sat.

"Evening, Alpha and Luna," he greeted.

"Hello," Jericho said. "We're off the clock. You can drop the honorifics."

Daire laid a thick blanket on the grass. As the projector movie started to play, he moved the pillows into place and they laid down. He wrapped Kinleigh in his arms and they snuggled together under another blanket as she burrowed into his warmth. She felt the soft kiss he placed on top of her head.

Contentment filled her. This was the life she'd always wanted. Surrounded by pack.

Cherished in the arms of the man she loved. The glimpse into what her future could've been made her heart ache.

“Can I tell you something without you freaking out?” he asked, his voice low and intimate.

“Mm,” she replied.

“I like this. I like having you in my arms.”

“I like this, too,” she admitted.

He placed another kiss on the back of her head, and she knew she had to be honest with herself.

She was falling for Daire.

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Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:53 pm

“Morning, beautiful,” Daire greeted her the next day, holding out his arms.

She rubbed her eyes and moved into his embrace, trying hard not to admit it felt extremely right. Like she was supposed to be in his arms. Something strong pulsed between them. Something she wished she could explore, and wondered if Daire felt the same.

I’m screwed, she thought.

This was only supposed to be fun. They agreed they weren’t dating because there was no future for them. But boy oh boy, she would’ve loved getting to know him fully.

“What do you have planned for today?” he asked. His breath teased the small tendrils of her hair.

“I’m helping Payton in the office today.”

“Okay,” he said, pulling back to look at her. “Want to grab lunch together?”

She smiled and headed for the coffeepot. “I’d love that.”

“Hey,” he began, and she glanced at him over her shoulder. “I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind staying in touch when you leave to go back to your pack.”

“I was just thinking about that.”

“Oh? We must be thinking alike.”

“Yeah, we must.” She leaned her hip against the counter and sipped at the hot beverage. “Would you freak out if I said I like you?”

“No, because I like you back.”

“Enough to maybe go on a date? I know we said no dates, just fucking, but—”

“Kinleigh,” he interrupted, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her in tight. “I would love to go on a date with you. How about we go to dinner tonight? Maybe dancing. Or mini-golf. Or rock climbing. Or whatever, if you have any ideas.”

“I love all those ideas,” she replied, draping her arms over his shoulders. “I’m down for anything.”

He placed a soft, tender kiss on her mouth. “Okay, let’s make this official. Kinleigh Shire, would you like to go on a dinner date with me tonight?”

“I would love to, Daire Nolin.”

“That wasn’t so hard,” he said and gave her another kiss. “As much as I’d love to continue this, I have to get to work.”

“Damn work, always getting in the way.”

“Right?” He gave her nose a little bump with his own. “Have a great day, beautiful.”

“You too, sexy HVAC man.”

He laughed as he grabbed his lunch cooler and waved her goodbye.

“So,” Kinleigh said nonchalantly as she filed a large pile of invoices. “Daire and I are going on a date.”

Payton cocked her head. “Technically, haven’t you gone on dates?”

“They were non-date dates.”

“Oh, that clears it all up,” she snarked, rolling her eyes. “Call it what you want, sweet cheeks, but those were dates.”

“Tomato, to-mah-to. In any case, he wants to stay in touch.”

“Why don’t you just move here? I mean, there’s really nothing for you back in Lightfang and I’d love to have my favorite cousin here.”

“I’m your only cousin.”

“All the more reason to move here. I’m gonna need help with the baby anyway.”

It took Kinleigh about three seconds to digest those words, and when she finally did, shock rendered her mute for a moment. She looked from Payton’s still flat stomach to her face, back to her stomach and then back to her face.

“Are you knocked up?”

Payton nodded, laughing as Kinleigh rushed forward and hugged her.

“Does Jericho know?”

“Of course,” Payton said dryly. “He helped make the baby, after all.”

They were so engrossed with each other, they didn't hear the door open. Unaware they were no longer alone until the muzzle of a gun pressed against Payton's temple. In shock, Kinleigh's heart stuttered in dread as she met the deranged stare in Vaughn's eyes.

"Took me a while to figure out where you went," he snarled at her. "Then some of my buddies still in Lightfang told me you came here."

"Why are you here?" Kinleigh demanded.

"I'm taking you back, so you can tell your father to make me alpha heir. Then we're having our mating ceremony so I can give you the mate bite, and then no one can take away my right to be alpha!"

"You're delusional," Payton said.

"Shut up, bitch! This doesn't concern you."

"You're absolutely right." Kinleigh held up her hands, trying to placate him. "This doesn't concern her at all. Please put the gun down. And I'll come with you peacefully."

He studied her with narrowed eyes. "Fine."

"No," Payton whispered.

"Don't worry," Kinleigh told her. "He's not going to hurt me because he needs me."

Her cousin still mouthed "no," but she'd already made up her mind because if anything were to happen, she'd never forgive herself.

“Come here,” he ordered.

Slowly, she moved closer. “I did what you said, now let her go, Vaughn.”

“Don’t use that fucking tone with me, Kinleigh!” Spittal from his temper tantrum flicked onto her cheek and she immediately wiped it off. The thought of mating with Vaughn sickened her, but she’d do anything for the people she loved. “We wouldn’t be in this predicament if you hadn’t fucked me over.”

“I’m sorry,” Kinleigh apologized. “What happens now?”

“We’re going.”

“Where?”

“Someplace special.”

“Fine, but you have to let her go unhurt.”

He stared at her a moment, before spinning Payton around and backhanding her. She fell and hit her head, laying still. Kinleigh gasped and knelt, making sure Payton wasn’t dead. Her steady heartbeat reassured her.

“I said unhurt, you asshole!”

He shrugged. “I took that as alive, and she is. I can’t have her go running to her alpha asshole mate and fuck up my plans for you. Now, come on. A deal is a deal.”

He held out his hand and she looked at it for a moment. She didn’t want to do this. She didn’t want to touch him, but she had no choice. He was forcing the issue and he still had a gun. Grasping it, he hauled her to her feet and led her outside, away from

the office. Many people glanced at her, and then him, and she could see they realized something bad was happening.

“Don’t try anything,” he warned. “It’s the reason I have a gun. A bullet travels faster than a set of claws.”

She believed he’d use it, so she let him drag her away. Off the sidewalk and between buildings, yanking on her hand in order to break his hold. She was strong, but still no match for an alpha male.

A few streets over, she spotted his car. He stomped toward it, then opened the passenger side to shove her in. The few seconds it took for him to get to the driver’s side, she stealthily as possible reached into her pocket and placed a call to Jericho, turning the volume down so Vaughn wouldn’t hear any noise.

They sped out of town, but to her surprise they didn’t head to the Interstate that led back to Oregon.

“Where are we going?” she asked, hoping Jericho could hear her.

“Shut up.”

“No, tell me where we’re going. I thought you wanted to go back to Lightfang.”

“We will, but we have to pick someone up.” He flashed her an evil grin. “Someone you fucked over just like me.”

“Annette,” she said flatly.

“Bingo.”

They turned onto a road, clearly long abandoned if the weeds growing between the cracks were anything to go by. He pulled behind a truck that waited there.

“Where are we?” she asked. “Is that a falling-down barn by that stream? Are we still in Sheridan?”

“Shut up,” he snapped. “Come on.”

He exited the car and rounded it to yank her out, partially dragging her along. Now that they were away from Sheridan, and specifically away from Payton, she could plan her escape.

“My father is going to kill you,” she said, trying to rattle his calm facade. Vaughn actually thought she was going to follow through with his deranged plan. The only good thing about this whole fiasco was discovering that she felt absolutely nothing for him except disgust. One thing was very clear, however, and that was Vaughn had to be put down.

“I doubt it,” he said, sounding smug. “We’re going to be mated in a few minutes.”

Shock caused her to stumble as cold dread slid down her spine. Surely, she misunderstood what he implied. The only thing she could think about doing was to continue to taunt him.

“You’re weak,” she sneered. “That’s why you need me, because you can’t start your own pack.”

“Shut up!” he screamed, turning to face her. “I was gonna be alpha and you took it from me! Now, I have no pack. No future. This is your fault.”

“The consequences of your actions lay on your shoulders, not mine,” she snapped.

“Besides, you would've made a shitty alpha anyway.”

Before she could blink, he backhanded her. Caught off guard, she fell sideways and landed awkwardly on her arm. Pain exploded and she let out a stifled groan. It took her a moment to collect herself and push to her feet. Vaughn's fists were balled by his sides as he watched with malevolence.

Anger lit her up, and she spat the blood that had pooled in her mouth at him. The red stain landed on his cheek. In response, he grabbed her chin, squeezing hard. Tears welled in her eyes but she'd be damned if she let him see her cry. Bringing her knee up, she meant to incapacitate him, but he must have sensed her intention and blocked it.

They stared at one another, and she knew it was now or never.

The air crackled with a raw, hostile energy, and any pretense of civility vanished. Vaughn was too close, and he made her skin crawl. She let her claws out and swiped them across his face. He roared with fury, letting her go as he held his damaged cheek. Crimson stained his fingers. Kinleigh backed up as quickly as possible, keeping him in sight, but he moved with terrifying speed. Hatred poured from him as he became the hunter and she the prey. She turned to run, but his massive hand clamped around her arm like a vise, pulling her back into his front. It sickened her that this was turning him on, and he made sure to grind his hard dick into her ass. His intention was very clear.

As she tried to free herself, a surge of adrenaline made her kick back and her heel connected solidly with his shin. He cursed under his breath, so she followed that with a sharp elbow to his gut. Vaughn grunted in pain, momentarily loosening his grip. She used the opening to turn and unleash a flurry of fists and claws, each blow landing with satisfying force. Her punches landed against his jaw, making him stagger back, giving a sense of relief. She was strong, with a fighting spirit, but the

downside was he was built like a tank.

She knew she couldn't win this fight so she took the only option she had. Her wolf was fast, hopefully faster than his wolf. When she turned, however, she came face to face with Annette.

"I hate you so much," she said, just as she swung a board and delivered a crushing blow to the side of her head, sending her tumbling into darkness.

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Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:53 pm

Daire was up in the attic space laying some duct work when his cell phone went off. He glanced at the screen and saw Jericho's name and answered it.

"Yes, Alpha?"

"Get to the office now," Jericho said harshly. "Kinleigh's gone."

The call disconnected, leaving him confused. Gone? Like got in her car and left Sheridan gone? He packed up his tools and headed toward his truck. Luckily, the drive only took a few minutes and he parked in front before heading inside the office where a dozen people waited. That's when he knew Kinleigh leaving wasn't what he had at first interpreted.

He moved through the crowd and saw Luna Payton sitting in a chair, with Savannah next to her bandaging a wound on her head.

"What happened?" he asked.

Everyone turned toward him and Jericho stepped forward.

"Daire, Kinleigh was taken," he said.

"What do you mean taken?"

"Vaughn," Payton said. "Her ex-mate showed up, demanded she go with him. She did it to protect me."

So many different thoughts rattled through his head and none of them stuck. Only one thing cut through everything.

“We have to go after them.” He glanced back at Jericho. “Have we tracked him yet?”

“I have scouts out there now. As soon as they—” He no sooner started talking when his cell phone went off. “It’s Kinleigh. Where are you? Kinleigh?”

He pulled away the phone and placed the call over the speaker. They listened to Kinleigh having a conversation with a man that Daire assumed was this motherfucking Vaughn.

“Falling-down barn next to a stream?” Beta Ledger said.

“She has to mean the outlier road near the old lumber mill,” Jericho replied.

“I know it,” Daire said, already moving. He didn’t know if Jericho and Ledger wanted to come along, but he wasn’t waiting. He hurried out of the small crowd and got to his truck and took off, gunning the engine once he cleared the town.

Sheridan, way back in the day, had started as a lumber community. The old mill had been where wood rested between saddle blocks, and sawyers would hewn the logs. As he passed the mill, which had been closed ever since electric saws came to be, he spotted something far down the cracked road. Gunning it, he sped forward just as he saw a man lift an obviously unconscious woman in his arms.

A red haze descended over his eyes. The closer he got the angrier he became. The man saw him and dropped Kinleigh like she was a hot potato onto the busted road. Daire skidded to a stop and jumped out of his truck, not caring that he left the engine running or that the door was wide open. He didn’t even say anything, just flew at Vaughn Wishard.

Swinging his arm, his punch connected to Vaughn's midriff, causing him to grunt and double over slightly. Daire gripped the back of his head, brought his knee up, and cracked Vaughn's face apart. Blood poured from the broken nose. He was about to move in for the kill when Vaughn charged, hitting him in the gut and sending them both flying.

They grappled and stumbled, the fight less about strategy and more about raw, unfiltered rage. Daire punched with jabs, using every inch of his arms and legs. Elbows thrust upward while knees tried to cripple. They dove for one another causing each fist to connect with a jaw, and then staggered back.

"She's not your mate!" Daire shouted.

"This is none of your concern. Kinleigh is mine!"

"Not any longer, you asshole. You fucked around and now you're finding out just what you destroyed."

He pulled his fist back and punched the guy in the face as hard as he could. Vaughn's head bounced on the busted concrete road. Daire eased back and that's when he heard a feminine scream. Spinning, the sound of a gun reverberated and a woman fell facedown, claws out and ready to strike him while his back had been turned.

Then he followed the trajectory of the bullet and saw Kinleigh holding a gun. Her hand dropped and she swayed. He rushed to her and caught her, helping her to steady. She held out the gun and he took it, sliding the safety on and sticking it in the back of his jeans.

A pickup truck came to a skidding halt and Jericho jumped from the driver's seat while Ledger exited the passenger side.

“Looks like we missed the fun,” Ledger quipped.

“I killed her,” Kinleigh said. She reached up and touched the back of her head. Blood coated her palm.

“Shit, Kinleigh,” Daire said. “We need to get you to a doctor.”

Then her gaze fell on Vaughn as Jericho hauled him to his feet, slapping his face to rouse him. Hatred blanketed her face as she stomped over.

“Let me get this straight,” she hissed. “First, you cheat on me. Then you threaten my cousin. You kidnap me and hit me. And you think I’m going to want you back? We’re wolves. So, we’ll settle this like the animals we are.”

In the blink of an eye, she swiped with her claws, directly over his jugular. Blood sprayed, and Vaughn slapped his hand around his neck in a vain attempt to keep from bleeding out. Shock settled over his features as he quickly came to the understanding his life was draining fast. Even a wolf’s rapid healing wasn’t quick enough to save him.

Jericho let go and Vaughn fell to his knees. His mouth opened and closed like a fish.

“You’re nothing,” she said coldly. “And now you’re dead.”

Then she kicked him in the chest, sending him sprawling on the old road, and watched as the life ebbed from his eyes. After using her foot to shake him, making sure he was gone, she turned to face Daire, Jericho, and Ledger.

“Is Payton okay?”

“She’s fine.”

“Are you okay?” Ledge asked, looking at the two bodies.

“Come,” Jericho said. “Let’s get you back and checked out. I’ll send people to retrieve them.”

“I don’t care if they rot, but I think their parents will want them back.”

Suddenly, Daire swooped her up bridal style and headed back to his truck. All he wanted to do was inspect her and make sure she was unhurt.

Later that night, Kinleigh and Daire lay in bed facing one another. When they’d gotten back, Savannah had treated the wound on her head. In his home, they’d showered together and then made love. She needed to replace the bad memories with good ones.

“I have a question,” Daire murmured, a few hours later.

“I hope I have an answer.”

“What do you think about chosen mates?”

A bolt of excitement shot through her. “I don’t think it’s fair that the idea of chosen mates isn’t given the same revered status as moon-fated mates. You and I had shitty mate choices from the High Luna.”

“I have another question.”

“I hope I have another answer.”

He smiled at her cheek. “What would you think about us maybe being chosen mates?”

She studied him for a moment. “I thought you weren’t looking for a mate.”

“I wasn’t,” he replied. “Then I met this amazing woman that knocked both socks off, and I kind of want her to stay around.”

“Just kind of?”

He pushed some of her hair behind her ear. “I’d like to explore this, Kinleigh. I think we owe it to ourselves. Who knows, maybe this was the High Luna’s plan all along.”

“I’m not sure I take stock in the High Luna anymore, but I agree we should allow ourselves the chance to see if we’re compatible long term.”

“You make it sound so sexy,” he mused.

She winked. “We should do a six-month investigation. Reevaluate at that time to determine if we’ll stick together.”

“It’s a deal, Miss Shire.”

“Now shut up and kiss me, Mr. Nolin.”

“With pleasure.”

Six Months Later

Kinleigh sat next to Daire in the Lightfang pack house, watching her father designate his alpha heir. Michael had been a school friend from kindergarten until graduation. His grandfather had been an alpha, so he had the blood and the power.

She thought her father had made an excellent choice.

After the choosing ceremony, she held Daire's hand as they made their way toward her father. He beamed at her and pulled her into his arms for a hug. Once he let her go, he turned and shook hands with Daire.

"Thank you for coming back," he said.

"Of course, Dad," she replied.

"Taking good care of my girl?" he asked Daire.

"Always," he told her father. "She's the most precious person to me."

His words made her father beam.

Later, they walked hand in hand toward the bungalow her father had set aside for their visit. The big moon overhead guided their path.

"I've something I want to tell you," he said.

She looked up at his profile. “Am I going to like this something you have to tell me?”

He smiled down at her. “I hope.”

“Okay, hit me.”

He stopped walking and pulled her around to face him. He brought her flush against his body and wrapped his arms around her.

“When we first met, I had no interest in a long-term relationship. My last one didn’t end so well. But I was smitten with you the first time I saw you.”

“Smitten?”

“Smitten, and hopefully bitten.” He got down on one knee and pulled a small box from his pocket. “Would you, my beautiful Kinleigh, honor me by agreeing to be my wife?”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Yes.”

Happiness radiated from him. “Thank the High Luna. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you said no.”

“No chance of that.” She cupped his face. “I love you, Daire Nolin.”

“And I am so in love with you, Kinleigh Shire.”

Then he kissed her under the radiant moonlight.

The End

UNHOLY CROSS

Deadly & Ruthless, 1

Beth D. Carter

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Sample Chapter

A era Cross downed the weak-as-piss shot of whiskey the bartender had placed in front of him, grimaced, and immediately gestured for another. It was better than nothing, especially with the almost empty wallet in his back pocket. The crack of pool balls couldn't drown out the godawful country music streaming from the speakers, matched only by the rednecks who were clearly the target audience. About thirty men were inside the bar, and Cross figured all of them combined probably made one complete set of teeth. Dentistry didn't seem to be a worthwhile career choice in the small, Podunk town.

It was just about time to move on. Perhaps he'd head north for a bit to get away from all the local yokels. A feminine hand slid across his shoulders as a set of fake breasts pushed against his arm. He knew who it was, and it solidified his decision to leave.

"Hey, big guy," the woman—Zara? Tara? Mara?—whatever her name, she spoke in a husky voice she must have thought sounded sexy. It grated on his nerves like nails on a blackboard. "I've missed that big cock of yours—"

“Stop touching me,” he ordered in a cold voice. “You won’t like how I remove your unwanted assets.”

“You know you want it,” she murmured, leaning closer.

There was a sour punch in her breath that caused him to jerk back.

“Did you just suck someone off?” he demanded.

Her eyes widened. “Uh...”

“Let me get this straight,” he sneered. “You want another fuck, but you hit on me with cum breath from another man? Get off me, bitch. You were a one-fuck chick, and it wasn’t all that great.”

She gasped at the same time a man walked up to them, anger sneering his face. The long scraggly beard did nothing to hide the acne scars on his cheeks. He wore a red-and-black checkered flannel shirt with the arms pulled off, and a dirty baseball cap on his head that boldly proclaimed I Pee in Pools . Cross figured he was the source of the cum breath.

“You insulted my woman, asshole.” He pulled a blade from his pocket and flicked it open. “I think if you give us enough Benjamins to overlook this insult, you can leave without me gutting you.”

Cross rolled his eyes. “You come at me with that switchblade and it’ll end up in your chest.”

The idiot snarled and charged forward, and Cross immediately struck, his fist connecting to the man’s nose, causing him to take a few faltering steps back. Clearly jarred from the punch, and while he was dazed, Cross grabbed the switchblade and plunged it into the asshole’s chest, just like he promised. The moron gave a little

squeal of fright and pain, looking at the hilt of the knife protruding from his torso like a grave marker.

“Look at that,” Cross said with a grin. “I missed your heart. You better run off now to get that stitched up, and take your cum-breath girlfriend with you.”

The woman cried out and hurried to her lover’s side so he could lean on her as they left. It said something about the bar he was in that no one stepped in to say anything. Or called the cops. Most of the other patrons never looked their way.

Cross picked up his glass and threw back the shot. Suddenly, he caught sight of a small, nerdy-looking man slinking around the room. It was clear he searched for someone. Cross could envision little mouse whiskers twitching as the man scurried past people, ready to jump back into his mouse hole before being caught. His gaze clashed with the little man, and much to his irritation, the scurrying rodent made a beeline right to him.

“I’m so glad I found you,” Mouse Man said. He pulled out a white handkerchief and patted his forehead. “You didn’t tell me the bar’s name so I’ve been searching. I saw your bike outside, but I knew it was you when you punched that man in the face.”

“Listen, you have—”

“Yes! I do have your money.” He looked around and then slid over an envelope. “I know you said twenty grand, but I could only come up with ten. I had to sell my car, but I’ll figure it out.”

“You’ve got...”

“Here’s a picture of my daughter. They’re going to hurt her. Please take the money and rescue her. I promise I’ll get more.”

The picture the man placed on top of the envelope grabbed Cross's attention, and he felt compelled to pick it up. The young woman was gorgeous. Messy honey-colored hair piled on top of her head with wisps framing her heart-shaped face. Guileless grey eyes seemed to stare into his soul. Lush full lips. Unblemished skin. An ethereal woman like her only existed in fairy tales.

"She looks nothing like you," Cross muttered.

"She looks like her mother. Does that mean you'll accept the ten thousand?"

It was clearly obvious that Mouse Man had mistaken him for someone else. Cross placed the picture back onto the envelope. The money was a moot point. He could take the money and lie. Leave town like he planned, ten grand richer. Yet, his gaze kept landing on the woman's delicate face.

"She looks young."

"She's twenty."

Figures, he thought sourly. Too young for his fucking ass. Yet...

"Who has her?"

He hadn't meant to ask the question, but it rolled out of him without conscious thought. Mouse Man visibly relaxed, thinking Cross accepted the mission.

"Noble Vale Sanatorium."

Cross frowned. "She's crazy?"

"No." Mouse Man looked around then leaned in close. "She's special."

“Special as in crazy?”

“Special as in ... g-gifted.”

Everything inside Cross froze. Vivi Wence flashed through his head, and how blissful it was having all the rage in his head cease even for a moment. He had tried to take her back, but messed it all up. After that, his life imploded. First, he'd lost his Heart of Darkness MC President patch. Second, he had almost fallen in the gauntlet he'd been forced to walk when the club kicked him to the curb. Had almost lost his life, and the demons in his head taunted that he'd be better off dead. The thought of suicide haunted him.

So, once he had recuperated, he ran. Trying hard to outrun his thoughts, he hopped on his bike and headed to parts unknown. Moving on when he felt it was time. And here he was, in another dive bar, drinking his way to an early grave. Maybe this woman was the salvation he desperately hoped for. Cross didn't believe for one damn minute she was this man's daughter, but now he was curious.

“Gifted?”

“A doctor by the name of Costello Birsha has her. He runs the sanatorium and he's going to pick her apart trying to unlock her gift, but she's too fragile to handle that. It's going to destroy her. Please ... please help her.”

“What type of gift?” Mouse Man shook his head, but Cross grabbed his shirt and yanked him close. “What. Type. Of. Gift?”

Mouse Man shrank back as far as he could go. “Lorelei can h-heal people.”

He had a name. Lorelei.

Wasn't Lorelei a siren who lured men to their deaths? Damn, if he wasn't going to

follow those poor assholes. He should probably walk away. He'd gone toe to toe with the fucking X-Men already and hadn't come out the better. Yet one look into Lorelei's eyes, and he knew he was going to find her. However, she wouldn't be reunited with Mouse Man here because he intended to keep her. Call it divine intervention, or a moment of good luck. This was his second chance to claim a woman who could quiet the voices in his head, and this time he wasn't going to let anyone stop him.

"I'll find her," he said, scooping up the envelope. Peeking inside, he saw a stack of hundred-dollar bills, and placed that with the photo on the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Mistaken identity might have just delivered his salvation.

End of sample chapter