



A Secret Baby by the Alpha (Sparkle Hollow Wolves #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: An evil Alpha rejected me. But not before knocking me up with his secret baby girl.

He was my first, but his rejection made me a low-level pack member.

He's the pack's enemy now, and when he gets his chance, he ambushes and kidnaps me.

How much longer until he finds out my baby girl is his?

He left me shattered years ago, and my status in the pack went up in smoke.

Now he traps me in his house and refuses to let me go.

He tells others that I'm his mate, but I cannot be.

I will never let him open that vulnerable part in me again.

But his strategies are unfair, and I don't stand a chance.

He touches me until I admit that he has every right to me and my secrets.

He invades my mouth until I soften and let him do whatever he wants to me.

I know he's manipulating me and that he won't stop.

What will the Alpha do when he finds out he has a little daughter?

Sparkle Hollow is a small paranormal town where wolves howl to the moon, mates chase each other through the woods, and alpha males claim their women until their bellies grow with the proof of their love...

Total Pages (Source): 27

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The Sparkle Hollow pack was on the move again. For the third time this month, a transport was heading between their sleepy little town and the reclusive Moonstone pack. It was suspicious behavior, and I was determined to get to the bottom of it. Which was why I found myself sitting in a dark sedan with the other alphas of the Dark Alpha group in the dead of night.

“It still doesn’t make sense,” Julian said. “They don’t even have an active alliance. What can they possibly be sending to each other? And why so frequently? And in secret?”

“If I knew the answers to your questions, we wouldn’t be doing surveillance out here, would we, Wentworth?” I sighed in displeasure at Alpha Julian Wentworth’s verbal barrage. We had been watching the road for hours now, and hardly a moment had passed when it was quiet. “Just focus, okay? If our scout’s information is right, they should be heading through here any minute.”

Julian opened his mouth to say something else, but with a glance from Alpha Axel Vitali, he seemed to change his mind. Of all the alphas in our uneasy coalition, Axel was the one I felt the most kinship with. I rolled my eyes in the rearview mirror and saw him muffle a laugh behind his hand. Julian had been irritating to all of us from the get-go, but he was still a part of the group.

In lieu of speaking, the young alpha began to drum his fingers on the car door. I pinched the bridge of my nose in irritation and reminded myself that we were on the same side here. As much as his quirks irritated me, the services of the Dark Alpha group were necessary.

I had only been a member of the group for a few months. I had Franco Stone to thank for that. The presence of his violent, cursed pack had caused too many problems that I couldn't ignore. Alpha Franco had assured me that their presence near our town wouldn't cause me any problems, but I didn't trust him—especially after he tried to erase his wrongdoings by rebranding the Forsaken Shadows pack as the Redeeming Light pack.

I scoffed at the memory of receiving his invitation to “celebrate” with him and their allies. Having a strong pack like Sparkle Hollow at my doorstep had hardly been grounds for jubilation. Especially considering my history with them. I couldn't take that risk without having some serious firepower behind me.

Which is where the Dark Alphas came in. It had been Axel who initially approached me and offered his pack's services to keep my pack and lands safe from interference. They had even gone so far as to help me expand my territory somewhat. It wasn't an alliance, necessarily. Each of us knew that the ties that bound us together were weak. But at least for now, it was in my pack's best interests to keep them intact.

“You sure you want to interrupt whatever this shipment is?” Julian interjected.

“Yes,” I replied simply.

Sooner or later, Sparkle Hollow would know about me. It was of paramount importance for that to happen on my own terms. What I needed was to get as much leverage as possible first. Intercepting this transport was the first step in seeing what exactly we were up against.

“I see headlights,” Axel said. “Let's go.”

We got out of the car quietly, signaling to our companions to get out of their vehicles as well. All six alphas were present tonight, as well as a dozen of our strongest

shifters.

“You remember what we discussed,” I reminded the other alphas as we watched two pairs of headlights come ever closer to our concealed position.

“Kaleb will pretend to be injured on the road. As soon as they stop, the rest of us will jump into action. If we’re quick, we should have control of the vehicles in less than a minute from when they engage their brakes,” Axel recited.

“Just remember—we don’t want to incur the wrath of Sparkle Hollow just yet,” I said. “So if any of them are a member of Lex’s pack, leave them alive.”

“Yeah, yeah, we got it, Alpha Goody-Two-Shoes,” Alpha Gage said derisively. “But as long as they’re not from Sparkle Hollow, they’re fair game. I’ve been itching for a chance to wet my teeth on some shifters.”

“Didn’t you just do that this morning?” Kaleb asked. He had positioned himself in the road and sat down, taking a position of helplessness as he grabbed his leg in a feigned injury.

Gage grinned in a wide, manic smile. “Yeah, but that was hours ago.”

I gritted my teeth and held back a retort. Killing pawns in the larger game of enhancing our packs’ territories was no issue for me. What I did take issue with was the joyous tone Gage Desmond always used when he talked about murder.

We take the good with the bad, my wolf pointed out. Focus. We need to stop this transport.

You’re right, Orin.

The headlights from the lead car flashed across Kaleb, and a loud screech met our ears as they engaged their brakes. The silver four-door came to a stop about ten feet from him, and the matching cargo van behind it swerved to the side to avoid rear-ending the rest of their contingent. The driver's side windows of both vehicles rolled down as the dust from their abrupt stop settled.

"You alright, man?" a voice called from the car's open window.

"Nah, I think my leg is broken," Kaleb said, pointing at it. "I've been waiting for over an hour, and you're the first person to come by. Think you can give me a hand?"

The sound of car doors unlocking was immediately followed by growls and roars as we all converged on their location with our fangs bared. Within seconds, the four men had been completely decimated.

"Come on, that one was mine!" Gage whined, pointing at the dead shifter by Kaleb's feet.

"You snooze, you lose," he quipped back, wiping blood from his palms.

I ignored them and headed to the back of the cargo van with Axel. This was why we were here—for the shipment. Violence was merely a means to an end for me.

Axel arrived at the doors first and yanked them open. "Well, well, well," he said with a smile. "What have we here?"

At first, I thought he was impressed by whatever Sparkle Hollow had been shipping back from the Moonstone pack. But then I heard a female voice shouting at him.

"Stay back!" she yelled. I could hear panic in her voice alongside an obvious strength and determination. Whatever she was guarding, it was obviously worth her giving her

life for it.

Fuck. It's about to get way too messy for my taste, I complained to Orin.

He was silent, but I sensed he agreed with my assessment of the situation. So far, only Axel and I knew she was here, but there was no telling how long it would take for Gage and the other alphas to realize things hadn't gone entirely to plan. It was best to make her death an easy one, rather than allow them to prolong her suffering.

"I got this one, Axel," I murmured as I came around the open door of the van.

But when I peered inside the open compartment, I saw the last face I ever expected to see.

"Christa?" I asked in disbelief.

"You know her?" Axel asked suspiciously.

"She's... I didn't think... Christa," I repeated with a stutter. "She's from Sparkle Hollow."

I had no idea how to explain to the other Dark Alphas what my connection to this woman was—Christa Lionel, my ex-girlfriend. The woman I had left behind long ago. Her ashy blond hair and gray eyes were unmistakable, even in the darkness. She was exactly the same as I remembered her.

It had been over ten years since I had seen her, but here she was. In our territory. Transporting goods between our enemies.

And cowering behind her was a smaller female. A child, with the same blond hair as her mother.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The sounds coming from outside the transport van were unmistakable. A fight had taken place, and I could only assume my traveling companions had been taken out by our attackers. If not, I doubted I would be in the precarious predicament that I now found myself in.

“Stay back!” I shouted at the shadowy figure blocking our only exit as I pulled my daughter behind me. I could feel Jenny’s body tense behind me in fear, and I promised myself that no matter what happened next, she would be safe. She had to be.

The look on the man’s face was hard to make out, but before I could come up with an escape plan, I heard another voice from out of sight.

“I got this one, Axel,” the man called.

Something about the tenor of his voice struck a familiar chord inside of me. It had been years since I had heard it. Almost a decade. But it was burned into my memories.

Those memories swirled inside of me as Colson Marsden came into view.

“Christa?”

His voice was both confused and hopeful as we locked eyes, staring each other down. His voice was the same, but his other features had seemed to harden with age. The youthful glow I had known before was gone, leaving behind a hard exterior. This was a man who had been through more than most. He held himself with an arrogance that

I didn't recognize. The only warmth left was found in his chocolate brown eyes, but I had never been one to make the same mistake twice.

I had trusted him before. Never again.

Of all the places we could have crossed paths, this was the last one I would have expected. No one was supposed to know about our mission to bring this shipment of security equipment back from the Moonstone pack. How had we been ambushed?

"You know her?" his companion asked questioningly.

"She's... I didn't think... Christa," Colson stammered. The sound of my name on his lips was both jarring and familiar. "She's from Sparkle Hollow."

I couldn't get a read on the dynamic between these men, but the mention of my pack brought me back to reality. This hit had been intentional—that much was clear. Somehow, I needed to convince Colson that he had made a mistake, and that he should let me and Jenny go free. Even if that meant giving up the shipment from our trade partners.

"Colson, tell them to step back. Just let us go, and you can have whatever you want from the van. Just let us go," I entreated.

Another man had rounded the corner, and he let out a loud guffaw at my request.

"Let you go?" he laughed. "I don't think so. Why don't you come on out of there so we can get a good look at you?"

Jenny shrank further into the van at the dark undertones in the man's mirthful laugh. If it weren't for the fact that I needed to protect her, I would jump into action immediately, but I needed to think this through. So far, I had only seen these three

men, but there must be more waiting outside. I couldn't fight them all off by myself.

"Desmond, that's enough," Colson said to the man before turning his attention to me.

"Christa, it's okay to come out. They won't hurt you."

Desmond made a scoffing sound, but I could tell from the fire in Colson's eyes that he was telling the truth. He wouldn't allow his companions to harm me.

I reached behind me to grab Jenny's hand and gave it a squeeze, pulling her along behind me as I stepped out of the van and onto the asphalt.

"You're kidding, right, Colson?" the one named Desmond asked. "They can't go free. We agreed beforehand—no witnesses."

"We also agreed that we wouldn't harm anyone from Sparkle Hollow," Colson pointed out. "Unless you're trying to start a war with the most powerful pack in the area—a pack with half a dozen allied packs—then these two are off-limits."

Desmond growled in response but remained silent. As they argued, we were joined by more members of their group, all talking amongst themselves about their successful takedown and wondering what Jenny and I were doing there. From what I could see, I was dealing with at least ten attackers. There was no way I would be able to fight them all off, especially not while protecting Jenny. If it came down to it, I was going to have to give up my life to buy her enough time to escape.

From my position near the back of the van, I could see the bodies of all four of my traveling companions. They were in their human forms, so I knew they hadn't even had time to transform when they left the vehicles—if they had even made it that far. I pulled Jenny close beside me and turned her so that she was facing away from the carnage. There was nothing I could do now to protect her from being in this situation, but I could minimize the damage. I cursed myself for bringing her along.

She's too young for this , I thought wistfully. This was supposed to be a simple transportation job.

Nothing is simple anymore, my wolf, Cassia, reminded me . And we were younger than Jenny when we saw our first battle.

That was different. A different time.

Not so different, Cassia argued.

Looking again at the dead Moonstone wolves, I realized she was right. In spite of all the alliances Alpha Lex had made, our pack was still vulnerable.

The voices of the wolves around me became more animated, and my attention was drawn back to them and away from the death and carnage behind us.

"I'm telling you, we can't let them go," Desmond said animatedly. It looked as though he and Colson were in a standoff, both trying to get the rest of their group on their side. I still couldn't tell if anyone was in charge or if they were all on equal footing. They carried themselves with the self-assurance of alphas, but none were taking command.

"Stop your posturing, both of you," one of the other wolves interjected. "I'm sure we can come to a solution that benefits all of us, but we need to get the cargo loaded up and get off the road before someone else comes through here. Right, Axel?"

"Alpha Charles is right," the first man, Axel, agreed. "Alpha Colson, take them to your car. We'll deal with them later."

Alpha Colson? Cassia repeated, her ears pricking up at the title.

It sounds like they're all alphas. I'm not sure if that's good or bad, though.

Colson seemed pleased that the warriors' attention was on the gear and not us, although Axel was still eyeing me warily.

"Let's go," Colson said to me sternly, nodding in the direction he wanted us to take.

I obeyed silently, thankful that no one else seemed to be accompanying us to the waiting vehicle. Jenny and I were safe for now, but who knew what the rest of the wolves would decide once they were done looting the van? We would have to make a break for it, and this was going to be our only chance.

We crossed the road, and I saw that Colson was leading us into the trees. If we could get out of sight for just a moment, we could run. I would only need a few seconds head start to transform and get Jenny to climb on my back. She couldn't transform, but I knew I was fast. I was fairly certain I could outrun Colson. I would have to.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the only thing I was carrying—a tube of lip balm—and tossed it toward the road. It made a light clattering sound that drew Colton's attention.

"What the—" I heard him say.

It wasn't much, but it was the only distraction I was going to get. I took off at a run, tugging Jenny's arm to encourage her to run with me, and headed toward the trees. Our feet thudded against the compacted soil, finding purchase in the tough weeds that littered the ground. My heart beat quickly as adrenaline coursed through my veins, fueled both by fear and the sudden exercise.

As we reached the trees, I started to believe we were going to make it when a solid mass hit me squarely in the back. I released Jenny's hand so that the force of my fall

wouldn't pull her down with me, but I was too late. We both went sprawling, tackled by Colson. He was faster than I remembered.

"Run, Jenny!" I yelled, hoping she would be able to get to her feet quickly and escape before anyone got their hands on her. I attempted to roll to my feet, but Colson had a firm grip on my arm.

"Don't!" Colson shouted at her, something like panic bubbling up in his voice. "If you run, the others will catch you before I do."

White-hot fear burned my throat as I looked between Colson and Jenny, pleading with my eyes for him to let us go. He pulled me to my feet and held tight to my elbow so I wouldn't escape again.

The sounds of our struggle had drawn the others. With a skittering of pebbles, they slid to a halt a few feet away. As they arrived, Jenny shifted to stand beside me again, unwilling to take her chances on running away.

"Dammit, Christa," Colson cursed, shaking me slightly. "Why did you run? What are you even doing here?"

His frustration was obvious, but I couldn't bring myself to give him the satisfaction of a real answer. "Bringing the transport back from the Moonstone pack," I said. "I thought that was obvious."

"Don't be sassy," he said harshly. "You're an elite member of the Sparkle Hollow pack. Why are you running errands like some low-level minion?"

"Why do you care?" I asked.

"If you want to live, you'll answer his questions," Alpha Charles pointed out.

I gulped, knowing I would have to put my pride aside to save us. “What do you want to know?” I asked.

“What is the purpose of the transport, why are you the one delivering it, and who’s the girl?” Colson asked.

There was no way I was going to tell Colson about why I had fallen out of favor in Sparkle Hollow, but at this point, I didn’t think it mattered if he knew what the equipment was for.

“The tech is a delivery from the Moonstone pack for Alpha Lex in Sparkle Hollow,” I explained. “I volunteered to ensure that it was delivered safely. It includes surveillance equipment because Alpha Lex wants to monitor larger areas of our territory and help our allies in Pinedale. With all the attacks against our packs lately, security has been a pretty important topic of conversation amongst the alphas.”

“We saw a crate of drones as well,” Axel pointed out. “Is Sparkle Hollow going on the offense?”

“I don’t know, but it wouldn’t surprise me,” I answered truthfully.

“And the girl? Can she shift?” Colton pressed. I could see in his eyes that he had been wondering about her the entire time. Now that I was answering his questions, he wasn’t going to stop until he got the answer he was looking for. The one answer I couldn’t give him.

“No, my daughter can’t shift. She’s half-human,” I explained. It was one truth followed by a lie, but it was necessary to protect her. I never wanted her to find out who her father was.

Colson inspected her, and I could tell he was looking for similarities. Ashy-blond hair

framed her round, delicate face atop a slim frame. Aside from her brown eyes, which were common enough, all Colson would see was a reflection of me.

“What’s your name?” he asked her.

“Jenny,” she answered quietly.

“Since when did Sparkle Hollow have an alliance with the Moonstones?” Desmond interjected.

“That’s not really any of your business, is it?” I countered, my hackles raising up in response to his domineering tone.

“Colson,” Desmond said, turning his attention away from me, “come on, man. They’re just going to keep running off until we deal with this problem. You know what needs to be done.”

Jenny’s dark brown eyes widened in fear. I was tempted to fall to the ground and beg for their mercy, but it would do no good. All I could offer my daughter now was a steady presence as we faced whatever fate awaited us.

“Get in the car,” Colson said suddenly to Jenny and me.

“You can’t be serious—” Desmond began.

“We’ll talk in a minute,” Colson snapped. “You two, get in.”

He held the door open for us, and we climbed into the back seat. As the door shut behind us, I couldn’t help but wonder if I had just signed our death warrants.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Desmond's request wasn't one I could even entertain. There was no way I was going to allow Christa and her daughter to be murdered in front of me—or anywhere else. We may not be together anymore, but I still cared for her. No. She would live. I just needed to convince the others that it was in their best interests to allow that.

These guys are more trouble than they're worth, my wolf said.

No argument there, I agreed. But this is what we have to work with right now.

"We aren't ready for a battle with Sparkle Hollow," I reiterated as I rejoined the Dark Alpha group. "These two are under my protection."

"What do you intend to do with them?" Alpha Julian asked.

They all shifted uncomfortably. I could tell that Desmond was of half a mind to pull Christa out of the car and ensure there were no witnesses to our ambush. The only card I had left to play was a trump. No one would dare hurt an alpha's luna.

"Christa is my mate," I announced to the group. "We've been separated, but the bond is still there. I assure you, she will be loyal to me when it counts."

"It didn't look like loyalty when she was high-tailing it out of here," Axel pointed out.

"I told you, we've been apart for a while. Haven't you ever been in a lover's spat?" I joked.

“Looked like more than a spat,” Julian mumbled.

I gritted my teeth inwardly, trying to maintain my position and put off an air of nonchalance. “Either way, I promise it will get sorted out,” I assured them. “She just needs a little time to understand her situation. Do you guys have a handle on things here? If so, I’m going to take them back to my place and get them settled in.”

“Do you need an escort?” Desmond asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” I assured him.

I could tell he didn’t believe that I was bringing Christa and Jenny back to my territory, but I had no reason to lie about that. Of all the members of the Dark Alphas, I had the biggest reason for wanting Sparkle Hollow to stay away. I may have told them that Christa would be loyal, but there was no doubt in my mind that the second she got back to Alpha Lex, I would have warriors on my doorstep.

“Let us know if you need anything,” Axel offered.

“We’ll be by soon to check on you,” Desmond added. The veiled threat was unnecessary, but I could see that a few of the other alphas were in agreement with him.

Looks like battle lines are being drawn here as well, I told Orin.

He growled, ready to spring into action against our haphazard group of unlikely allies. We really needed to find a way to extricate ourselves from the group, but it was going to be a while before we could put that into motion. The area we lived in was simply too volatile.

Someday, I assured him.

I walked back to my car slowly, trying to decide how to approach this conversation with Christa. She wasn't going to come quietly, but there really was no other choice.

"Take us home," she demanded when I got in the driver's seat.

I didn't answer immediately but gave her a hard look in the rearview mirror. "Here's what's going to happen," I told her. "I'm taking you back to my pack house. It's late, and I'm sure Jenny is exhausted. Once she's settled, you and I can talk."

Christa looked down at Jenny and realized that I was right about her. The adrenaline was wearing off. I imagined that the child would fall asleep before we even got home.

"Fine," she said, admitting defeat.

The ride home was quiet, with only the sound of the road beneath the tires. As predicted, Jenny fell asleep on her mom's shoulder within ten minutes. By the time I pulled into my garage, even Christa was having a hard time staying alert.

"I got her," I assured her, reaching for Jenny's sleeping form.

She looked at me in alarm as I pulled Jenny into my arms. "I can do it," she argued in a whisper.

"You're so stubborn," I whispered back. "Chill."

She huffed at me but allowed me to carry Jenny into the house. As soon as I set her down on my guest bed, Christa took over, removing Jenny's shoes and tucking her into the covers. With one last look at her daughter, Christa softly closed the door and followed me out to the living room.

"Does she need anything else?" I asked. I had never had children stay with me before

and didn't know what the girl might need.

"To go home," Christa shot back.

"That's not happening," I reminded her.

"What did you say to the others?"

"I told them the truth: that you and Jenny are coming to stay with me for a little while," I said, intentionally leaving out the part about her being my mate. Christa was already furious with me, for a number of sins. There was no reason to add something else for her to be upset about.

"Why couldn't you just take us home?"

"This was the compromise that allowed you and Jenny to live," I told her. "If I try to take you back to Sparkle Hollow, we all die."

"That's stupid," Christa snapped. "Why would they kill you?"

"That's the way things work here. There's a price to pay for betraying the group, and I'm not interested in paying it. So, you better get used to it."

"And if I don't?"

"If you don't get used to it?" I asked, taking a step toward her. "Well, then your stay here will be very unpleasant. If you do as I say, no harm will come to you. I can promise that."

She needed to know how serious I was about her following my instructions, but I wanted her to know that she was safe here. Especially since her daughter's safety was

on the line, too.

She had given an involuntary shiver at my threat, but the fire hadn't left her eyes. She was just as passionate and beautiful as she had always been, but there was a fierceness I hadn't seen before. She would clearly do anything for her daughter.

"You've changed," she said disdainfully. "What happened to the guy who swept me off my feet and made me see how good the world could be? Why are you being so cold and cruel? You're not the man I used to know."

"You have no idea," I sighed, reaching to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. It was a familiar gesture, even after all these years. "You're not the same as you used to be, either. What happened to that girl? The one with the big dreams and kind heart?"

"She grew up and realized that no one is telling the truth about who they really are," Christa snapped.

Her words were like a slap in the face, which was exactly how she intended them to be. I couldn't ignore the decade that had come between us. She may have been my one true love and the woman I would have done anything for, but that was a long time ago. A lifetime.

"It's just you and me, baby," I said to Christa. "Forever and ever."

"I can't wait for our forever," she replied, nuzzling into my chest.

We had snuck away from the pack celebration in Sparkle Hollow to bring in the new year and hidden in one of the cabins on the outskirts of town. No one ever came here, Christa assured me. We wouldn't be disturbed.

It had been all the information I needed to finally drop my guard down and share my

whole self with her. I had never been with anyone else, and I had been nervous about my performance. She was inexperienced, too, and together, we had figured it out.

Never before had I felt so content and sure of my place in the world. With Christa by my side, I felt invincible.

The fire burned in the wood stove, keeping out the chill of the air outside. Snow had begun to fall earlier that day, and I knew we would have to leave soon. I ran my fingers over her bare skin, enjoying the sensation of her supple smoothness against my fingertips.

“I wish we could stay here like this,” I told her.

“We have the rest of our lives to be together,” she reminded me.

I smiled at her assurances, knowing she was right. Christa and I were going to be together until we were old and gray. She was my one true mate.

“What if I don’t stay here?” she countered.

“If you leave my territory without my permission, you had better hope that you get to Sparkle Hollow before the Dark Alphas intercept you. If you do happen to get there safely, you’ll get to meet the new version of Colson Marsden when I attack your pack. And no one will be safe from us. No one,” I assured her.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The conversation with Colson didn't go as planned. I had accepted that it was probably best to get Jenny to sleep as soon as possible, but in my mind, there was no reason for us to stay past one night. The love that Colson and I had once shared had died when he had left me behind. It didn't matter that we had planned a future together—that future was gone. The man I had fallen for was gone. Colson might still look the same, but his heart—once loving, generous, and full of wonder—had been replaced by a cold and violent one. It would take dynamite to blow through his hard exterior to even get a glimpse at what remained of his past self, not to mention time. Time I didn't have.

No, this situation had nothing to do with me, and the second I got a chance I was going to make sure that Jenny and I left him in the same manner he had left me—without a word or a trace. Whatever weird feud all these alphas had with Sparkle Hollow had nothing to do with me or my daughter. That was the business of alphas and the ruling class, not for a mere pack member like myself.

I was furious with Colson for trapping us here like this. Sure, I had walked inside the house of my own accord, but it was still essentially kidnapping. Just because I hadn't been physically restrained didn't mean there was no coercion involved. I wanted to pay him back for everything he had ever done to me. Someday I would, but not today. Right now, my main concern was Jenny.

When I got back into the room where I had tucked Jenny in, I saw that she was still passed out in the same position. Her mouth was pursed, and her brows were wrinkled as if she was deep in thought. With my thumb, I smoothed the lines above her eyes and saw her settle even deeper into the pillows.

She had always been a sound sleeper, and I took the opportunity to memorize her face. Gone was the tiny baby who had kept me up at all hours of the night and the energetic toddler who kept me on my toes. In slumber, I could still see the same tiny features I had fallen in love with nine years ago. I remembered the way her little fingers curled around my thumb, and the chubby thighs spilling out below her diapers. The way she toddled around was still fresh in my memory, and I wiped a tear away from my eyes. Her father had missed every moment of her life so far, and it made my heart ache for what we had all been deprived of.

I shook my head to clear those thoughts and sighed deeply, wondering for the millionth time that evening what I should do next. Colson seemed to think we were safest here with him, but I wasn't convinced. His track record for keeping his promises was low, as far as I was concerned. What was to stop him from letting one of the other alphas and their thugs take us away? Absolutely nothing, except his word. Whatever that was worth.

There was no way I would be able to move Jenny tonight. She was exhausted, and so was I. It would be best if we both got a little bit of sleep. I could wake us both up early and make a break for it. Colson was sure to be on the lookout tonight, but I doubted he expected us to sneak out before sunrise.

Before laying down next to Jenny, I propped a chair underneath the doorknob. It wouldn't stop a shifter from breaking in, but it would give me a few seconds of warning.

I left my shoes on and settled into the bed, trying my best to quiet my mind. I was going to need as much energy as possible if we were going to escape. I listened to the steady sound of Jenny's breathing, and finally, after what seemed like hours, I managed to fall asleep.

It felt like I had just closed my eyes when they shot open again. The sky outside was still dark, and Jenny was gently stirring beside me.

“Mom?” she asked sleepily.

“Shh, honey,” I replied quietly. “I’m right here. We need to be quiet. Do you remember where we are?”

Her eyes opened fully, and she looked around in confusion before nodding. “Yes,” she whispered.

“It’s still night, and I doubt anyone is expecting us to be awake for a while yet. There will still be regular guards around Alpha Colson’s territory,” I warned her. “Do you think you’re up for an escape? We’ll need to be fast and quiet.”

Her face belied a mixture of fierceness and trepidation. I knew I was asking too much of her, but I didn’t see another option. I refused to sit around and wait for Colson to fail me again.

Jenny nodded firmly, so I grabbed her shoes and began to lace them up for her. Quietly, we got out of bed and tiptoed to the front door. As slowly as possible, I withdrew the deadbolt from the lock and unlatched the front door. We paused to listen for sounds from the other bedroom, but all was quiet.

I nodded at Jenny, letting her know it was okay to step outside. I pulled the door closed behind me, and we tiptoed down the front steps, making our way out of town.

No one was outside at this hour, except a few guards roving the edges of town. They weren’t being particularly watchful, and Jenny and I were able to slip out unnoticed.

“No one is following us,” I told her quietly. “We still need to be careful, but we can

try to move a bit faster now.”

She followed me as I ran in a crouch. Just as I began to let my guard down, we found ourselves surrounded by a group of men, headed up by the last person I wanted to see. The alpha Colson had referred to as Desmond.

“I told him you weren’t to be trusted,” he said.

“Not sure what you mean by that,” I said, deciding it was best if I played dumb. “Jenny and I were just out for a walk.”

Desmond laughed, but there was no joy in the sound. I wondered if he even felt things like happiness or if he truly was a sociopath.

“Ah, yes. A nice stroll through the middle of nowhere at five in the morning.” He took a few more steps toward us. “Where are you headed on this walk?”

“I hadn’t decided yet,” I hedged.

“Are you having a nice time, Jenny?” he asked, turning his attention to my daughter.

I pulled her close to my side, letting her know that I was with her. Don’t show fear, I thought, desperately wishing I could communicate with her telepathically. I had met men like Desmond before. They liked the hunt, but what they liked best of all was the terror on the faces of their prey. If he saw a target, he would take it.

“Yes, thank you,” Jenny responded politely.

I knew she hadn’t heard my internal monologue, but she had responded to him as if she knew exactly what I was thinking. Desmond cocked his head to the side inquisitively. It was clear he had expected his tactic to work on a little girl and was

surprised when it didn't.

"Your mother has taught you well," he said to her. "What other tricks has she taught you? I wonder... was she lying when she told us that you can't transform?"

Jenny shook her head.

"No?" he said, his voice lilting up at the end as if he doubted what Jenny said. He took another deliberate step toward her and continued. "I've heard stories of other little wolves who took a long time to change. Do you know what finally got them to do it?"

Jenny shook her head once more, and I could tell that her fearless resolve was beginning to falter.

You can do this, Jenny, I thought. Stay strong.

"Being chased by other wolves. I think we should play a little game. What do you say, boys?" he asked, turning to his companions. "Should we see if the little rabbit can turn into a wolf?"

The others began to howl in approval as Jenny's head snapped towards me. I could see the fear written all over her face. I only glanced at her for a moment, because if I looked any longer, my determination would falter, too. I was having a hard enough time regulating my emotions as it was. Instead, I pulled her to my side and stared Desmond down.

"If you even try to touch her, I'll rip you apart limb from limb," I promised him.

"We'll see about that," he sneered.

“No, we won’t,” another voice interjected from behind us.

Colson had shown up just in time once again.

“Nice of you to join us, Alpha Marsden,” Desmond said. The emphasis he put on Colson’s title didn’t escape any of us, and I knew he was taking a dig at Colson’s ability to keep track of his prisoners. “You’re just in time for a little fun. We caught these two trying to sneak back to Sparkle Hollow, although they claim to be out for a walk.”

“I’m sure they were. We’ll head back to my house now,” Colson said, still trying to de-escalate the situation.

“You forgot to tell them where the boundaries of your territory are. I’m afraid they’re on my side of the line, and that means they’re my problem now,” Desmond sneered.

Crap. We’re not even in Marsden territory anymore? I asked my wolf. I didn’t think we had gone that far. These wolf packs must live close together if we had already trespassed into another pack’s land.

Don’t worry, Cassia replied. I can tell that Colson has a plan.

“According to our alliance, they are still under my protection,” Colson said.

“Like hell they are!” one of the other wolves interjected.

For the most part, the Desmond pack had been quiet. Their alpha was the brains of their operation; these guys were just his muscle. Now that another male had entered the scene, they were all keen to show just how tough they thought they were.

“You’d better pull your goons back before I’m forced to break our alliance myself,”

Colson growled at his counterpart. “I have no problem taking out as many of your pack as I need to if they challenge my authority again.”

Desmond’s poker face faltered. He knew that allowing his pack to speak to another alpha of the alliance in a disrespectful way would only lead to trouble for him.

“Get back in line, Brahm,” Desmond ordered one of his pack members. The offending man hung his head slightly and took a few steps backwards away from us. “Make sure these two get back home safe, Alpha,” he said to Colson. “Don’t want them getting lost in the forest where no one can find them, now do we?”

Colson growled again, and Desmond waved his pack to follow him back toward their settlement.

“Get back home,” Colson ordered me and Jenny tersely. “Now .”

Once again, there was no point in arguing. If I chose to run with Jenny now, Desmond’s crew would be waiting somewhere else to pick us up. We were caught between a rock and a hard place.

Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t , I thought.

I think I’ve got a pretty good read on both devils, Cassia countered. I choose the devil that isn’t trying to kill us.

It didn’t take long for us to get back to Colson’s house. By the time we did, the sun was starting to peek out over the horizon.

“What did I fucking tell you?” Colson shouted as soon as we got inside. “Don’t. Leave. The. Territory. How much clearer can I make it? You’re lucky that I found you when I did. Pack Desmond isn’t known for killing people quickly.”

Jenny shuddered beside me.

“Go back to the guest room, Jenny,” I told her. “I’ll come talk to you in a minute. I just need to discuss things with Colson for a minute.”

She scampered away, eager to get out of range of Colson’s anger. Raised voices weren’t something she was accustomed to, thank goodness. None of this was normal, but I didn’t want to traumatize her any further than was necessary.

“What the hell were you thinking, Christa?” Colson demanded.

I ignored his question. I was still shaken by the events of the night, and not in any mood to defend myself to my kidnapper.

“Can you please not shout in front of Jenny? You scared her,” I said.

“I scared her?” he asked, dumbfounded. “I can’t even begin to explain what I went through when I realized you two were missing. You put her in more danger tonight than you even realized, and you don’t seem to be fazed at all. Do you have any idea how close you came to being tortured?”

Colson was more emotional than I had ever seen him before. It wasn’t just that I had disobeyed his order, either—he was genuinely upset about the encounter with Desmond’s pack. I had known Desmond was bad news when I first met him, but if even Colson was acting like this, then maybe he had a point about staying close to the pack.

“None of this would have happened if you had just taken us home,” I pointed out.

“You’re right. Then we’d all be at Alpha Desmond’s mercy, and I’d be too busy protecting my pack to come protect you. Again. Just... do what I say, Christa,”

Colson said. “And don’t leave the damn house again.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Considering the danger she had put herself in, I felt like I had controlled my anger admirably. Anyone else who would have disobeyed a direct order like she had would have faced steep consequences for their stupidity. I still hadn't ruled it out, but for now, I let her go to check on Jenny.

Her daughter was the only truly innocent one in all of this. I hadn't heard more than ten words from her since she stepped out of the van last night, but even I could see that she was a kind-hearted girl. She clearly idolized her mother. That kind of blind loyalty was admirable, but if Christa continued going against my directives, it was going to land both of them in a pile of trouble. I would need to be on my guard to make sure neither of them got on the wrong side of the other Dark Alphas again.

I did a quick check to ensure my outdoor security measures were still in place. I had forgotten to enable the alarms when I went to sleep last night, but I wouldn't make that mistake again.

When I was sure that everything was in place, I headed back inside and went to the kitchen. It was early, and I hadn't had coffee yet. Soon, the sound of coffee percolating and bacon sizzling filled the house. Moments later, I heard the bedroom door open, and soft footsteps padded into the living room.

"Colson?" Christa asked hesitantly.

"In here," I responded.

She came into view, Jenny a step behind her. I could tell that the girl was afraid of me, and I winced slightly.

“Jenny is hungry,” Christa explained. “Can I get her something to eat?”

“Of course,” I said. “I made plenty of breakfast. What can I get for you, kiddo?”

“Anything is fine,” Jenny responded.

She sat down at the kitchen table and waited patiently while her mother filled a plate with toast, bacon, and fruit. Christa placed it on the table in front of Jenny alongside a glass of orange juice.

“Aren’t you going to eat with me?” Jenny asked her mother.

“You go ahead, baby. I’m not hungry right now,” Christa said, petting Jenny’s straight blond hair. Her touch was tender, at odds with the ferocity she had shown toward me and everyone else since last night. Just from watching this short interaction between them, I could see that Christa had turned into a wonderful mother. Just like I had always thought she would be.

“Are you sure, Mom? You always said breakfast is the most important meal,” Jenny argued. The girl was shy, but I could see that her reticence covered up a feisty interior.

“It’s the most important meal for growing girls like you,” Christa said with a smile. “Eat up, sugar plum.”

As Jenny dug into her plate, I remembered that Christa had never been much of a breakfast person, but she drank coffee like her life depended on it. I poured her a cup, pushing it wordlessly across the kitchen island toward her. Our eyes met as she picked it up.

Goddess, she’s gorgeous.

I felt a prick of jealousy as I thought about Jenny's father. Christa had lived an entire life without me in the past ten years. She had been committed enough to someone—a human, even—that she had decided to have a child with him. I wanted to know more about their story, but I also dreaded finding out the truth. Had she been happy with him? Is that why she was trying so hard to leave?

“Thank you for breakfast, Mr. Colson,” Jenny said when she finished eating.

“You're welcome,” I replied, taken aback by her politeness. I hadn't spent much time with children, but I was under the impression that they were mostly self-serving and less likely to have good manners. “You can just call me Colson, though.”

She smiled at me and brought her plate to the sink, which she began to clean.

“I can do that,” I told her.

“She's used to doing the dishes at home,” Christa explained.

“It's my chore,” Jenny announced proudly. “That and cleaning my room. And sometimes taking out the trash, but only if Mom asks me to.”

“Your dad doesn't take out the trash?” I asked, hoping it came across as an innocent question. I hadn't intended to be so forthright, but I couldn't help but take advantage of the opportunity to learn more about Christa's life.

“I've never met my dad. It's just me and Mom. We're a team,” Jenny stated with a smile.

“That's right. Team Lionel,” Christa told her daughter with a smile.

She still has her maiden name, Orin pointed out.

And Jenny's never met her father, I added. Why would that be the case? It seemed unlikely that Christa would have fallen in love with a human when she mentioned that Jenny couldn't shift. There has to be more going on there.

The timeline is suspicious , Orin agreed.

"Well, when you're here, you don't have to do any chores," I told Jenny. "You and your mom are guests here."

Jenny smiled and relinquished the dish rag.

"Say, Jenny," I said. "How old are you?"

"I turned nine last month," she announced proudly.

"Well, that's perfect, because my neighbor has a daughter who is about your age, and she brought some clothes over for you to borrow," I told her. "They're in a bag in the living room."

Jenny scurried out of the room to look at her clothes while Christa gave me a hard look.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she responded. "I'm going to show Jenny where the bathroom is and grab her a towel so she can get cleaned up."

I nodded, and Christa left the room. A few minutes later, she returned, and I heard the sound of the shower running from down the hall.

"Find everything you needed?" I asked.

“Yes,” Christa said.

“Great. Now, I have a few questions for you,” I said flatly. I had been waiting for an opportunity to talk to her one-on-one, and now that Jenny was out of the room, I didn’t think I would be able to contain them any longer. Especially since I now knew that Jenny had never met her father before.

“Questions about what?” she asked tersely.

I wasn’t used to this version of Christa. The girl I had known was all light and laughter. Now, when Christa spoke to me, it was all harshness and sharp edges.

“About your life, and about Jenny,” I said. “I didn’t want to overstep in front of her, but I think it’s time you gave me an explanation.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” she replied haughtily. “Least of all, information about my daughter. My life since you ran off without a word is none of your business. If anything, you are the one who owes me an explanation.”

She was getting heated, and I knew I had struck a nerve. Her gray eyes flashed with a hint of blue as she glared at me. I may not be used to her anymore, but I couldn’t deny that I still found her wildly attractive. The way her hair fell across her shoulders and trailed past her collarbones drew my attention downward, toward her slim waist that was punctuated by a firm backside and curvy breasts. The perfect hourglass shape.

Focus , I reminded myself.

“Don’t try to shift the focus away from my questions. Tell me honestly: is Jenny my daughter?” I asked.

My heart was beating out of my chest as I waited with bated breath for her answer. I couldn't get over the feeling that the girl was mine. The timeline of her birth was just too suspicious for me to believe that Christa had gotten pregnant immediately after me leaving Sparkle Hollow.

"Of course she isn't," Christa scoffed. "I already told you, she's half-human."

"That's what you told me, but I don't believe you," I said.

"Don't you think she would be a shifter if she was your daughter?" Christa pointed out.

Although it wasn't completely unheard of for shifter parents to create a non-shifter child, the chances of that happening were admittedly low.

"Were you cheating on me?" I asked, doing my best to sound nonchalant. In truth, although that scenario made the most sense for the timeline, knowing that she had been unfaithful would crush me. There was nothing in the world I prized more than loyalty, and I thought she'd felt the same.

"Colson Marsden, how dare you," she seethed, stepping toward me. "How dare you ask me such an insane question. I was loyal to you. Every moment of what we had together was the truth. Can you really say the same?"

I winced. I had never—would never—cheated on Christa. But that didn't mean that my actions had put her first.

"I think we both know I have regrets," I murmured.

Christa's expression softened at my admission, and I saw a glimpse of the girl she had once been. I wanted nothing more than to reach out and pull her close, bringing

us both back to that time. But that time was gone. Long gone.

I placed my hand on her cheek, unable to control myself when I was in such close proximity to her. It may have been a long time ago, but my heart still ached for her. I couldn't go another moment without feeling her warmth against my skin.

"Why do you have so many questions about Jenny?" Christa asked.

"It's not just about Jenny," I admitted. "Seeing you again... I just had to know. I've thought of you so many times over the years, but I never thought I'd see you again. I admit I'm feeling a bit like a fish out of water right now."

"That makes two of us," she said with a sigh, and placed one hand on my waist.

That one touch seemed to ignite a fire that spread throughout my entire body, but instead of acting on it, I remained motionless. For a long moment, we stood with one hand placed on the other.

"Did you marry him?" I asked suddenly.

"Marry who?"

"Jenny's father. Did you marry him?" I repeated.

I saw her swallow, the motion drawing my attention to her neck. My eyes roved down toward her breasts before I realized what I was doing and refocused on her face.

"No," she whispered. "I didn't marry him."

She still belongs to us , Orin roared ferociously. It doesn't matter how many other

men she's known. She is still unclaimed.

Although the mention of Christa knowing other men made me flinch internally, I couldn't help but agree with Orin. I had always known that she was our true mate. From the way she was acting toward me right now, I thought she might feel the same.

I bent forward to kiss her, unwilling to let this moment pass, but she jumped back suddenly.

"Jenny's out of the shower," she said.

The sound of running water had stopped. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, knowing that nothing more could happen between Christa and me right now.

We have time , Orin reminded me excitedly.

"I should go check on her," Christa continued.

"Of course," I said, returning my hands to my pockets.

She gave me a backwards glance as she left the room, and I felt my heart soar with the possibility of rekindling things with her. There was nothing that would make me let her go again.

You're right, Orin. I'm not going to make the same mistake with her again.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The awkward push and pull between Colson and me continued to vex me during the days that followed. The initial twenty-four hours in Pack Marsden had been eventful, but after Jenny and I failed to escape that first morning, I decided it was best to play nice with the pack. At least for now. I hadn't given up on getting back to Sparkle Hollow, but there was no upside to repeating our failed escape.

Unfortunately, Pack Marsden and the rest of the packs they were aligned with were even more distrustful of me than I was of them. This had been apparent from our first day with them and became increasingly obvious with each encounter.

We had gotten permission from Colson to venture into the town without him, with his reminder that any move toward another alpha's territory would have dire consequences. So Jenny and I had taken a stroll down Main Street, looking for shops to keep us entertained. There wasn't much else to do.

"This place looks kind of cool," Jenny said, peering through the window at an assortment of herbs housed in glass jars. They were lined up on rustic wooden bookshelves, and I could see plants hanging from pots along the ceiling. A large orange tabby cat was lounging in a ray of sunlight that fell through the glass, looking content with his surroundings.

"Very cool," I agreed. "Should we go inside?"

Jenny nodded her head enthusiastically, and I opened the door. A metallic tinkling sounded from the other side of the door handle, announcing our arrival. I peeked around to look at them and saw a set of three copper bells tied around the handle on the inside.

“Witches’ bells,” I told Jenny. “They’re said to add a layer of protection when placed at the entrance to a home.”

“But no one lives here,” Jenny observed.

“I bet the cat does,” I replied, pointing toward the tabby.

Jenny smiled at the cat, who had lifted his head in curiosity as we came inside the shop. “Are those to keep you safe, big guy?” Jenny said as she knelt next to him and held her hand out for him to sniff.

“He doesn’t like people touching him,” a man said gruffly from behind the counter.

“Oh!” Jenny started and pulled her hand back. “Sorry.”

The cat stretched his front paws out in front of him and gave a lazy yawn before closing the distance between himself and Jenny, wrapping his body around her legs and nuzzling against her.

“He seems to like her,” I remarked with a chuckle, trying to lighten the mood.

“Hmph,” the man said with a frown.

I turned my back on the man and screwed my face up at Jenny, eliciting a chuckle that she immediately covered with her hand. She gave the cat a brief head scratch and got to her feet to follow me as I looked around at the herbs.

Aside from plants, the shop was well-stocked with candles, incense, and crystals. An entire wall was devoted to tiny drawers with labels describing their contents.

“Carved frog figurines, eagle feathers, twine, onyx beads, blackthorn twigs,” I read

the labels quietly as I walked down the aisle. “There’s all kinds of interesting things here.”

The bells made another tinkling sound as a trio of young women entered the shop. All around the same age, they wore flowy linen pants and tight-fitting crop tops. They were covered in jewelry, both silver and beaded, and were clearly regulars here.

“Did you get any of those gold pillar candles in yet, Fred?” one of the women asked the shopkeeper. Her hair was as dark as a raven’s, making her pale skin look even more white. The contrast made her skin almost luminous.

“Not yet,” he replied.

I went back to reading the descriptions on each drawer when the shopkeeper spoke again, this time much louder.

“Hey! Tell your kid to get their hands off my stuff,” Fred snapped at me.

I turned to see what had caused him to react with such alarm and saw Jenny’s face turn pink. She slowly removed her hand from a beautiful red cloth that was draped over a wooden dowel rod.

“She’s just feeling the fabric,” I told him, one eyebrow raised.

“This is why I don’t like having kids in here,” he grumbled. “Just keep an eye on her, will ya? You break it, you buy it.”

I saluted him sarcastically and rolled my eyes at Jenny as I walked toward her. Fred seemed to have had enough of my antics and took the opportunity to go into the back room, leaving us and the other women to browse in peace.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, hon,” I assured her. “Some people just want everyone else to feel as miserable as they do.”

“These people really don’t like us, do they?” Jenny pointed out quietly. Her shoulders had hunched over, as if she were trying to make herself appear smaller than she was.

I reached over and ran my hand across her shoulders, pressing gently in between them. “These people don’t know us,” I reminded her. “And their opinion of us is none of our concern. We know who we are, and we’ll carry ourselves the way we always have. Don’t let that guy make you feel like you’re wrong when you aren’t.”

Jenny smiled at me, and I smiled back. My daughter had been through enough teasing in her life to know the drill by this point, but I didn’t fault her for her reaction. Anyone would have a similar reaction to being scolded, and she was only a child.

“Don’t pay any attention to Fred,” said the woman who had spoken before.

“He’s crabby with everybody,” another woman—this one with mousy brown hair—assured us.

“I appreciate you saying that, but it’s okay,” I replied. “We know we aren’t welcome here.”

“Don’t be silly,” the brown-haired girl said with a wave of her hand. “You’re guests of the alpha. Of course you’re welcome here.”

“I think ‘guests’ might be reaching,” I mumbled.

“You clearly aren’t from around here, are you?” the third woman replied with a chuckle. “That’s just the way these Dark Alphas are. You’ll get used to it.”

“Are you three in the Marsden pack, then?” I asked. I hadn’t gotten much of an opportunity to talk to the rest of Colson’s pack, and I was keen to find any potential weaknesses that would help me find a way to get Jenny out of here safely.

“Yep. Born and raised,” said the raven-haired woman.

“So, you can tell me what the deal is with the Dark Alphas,” I said. “It seems like such a weird name to me. Is it just an alliance?”

“Not really,” the blond one said. “The packs of Wentworth, Rutherford, Vitali, Desmond, and Charles are all in such close proximity that the alphas decided to team up. They have rules amongst themselves, but they’re always subject to change at the whims of whichever alpha is in favor.”

“Luckily for us, that’s usually Alpha Marsden,” the raven-haired woman added.

“It doesn’t really matter, though,” said the brown-haired woman. “All we need to know is that our territories are safe. Beyond that, the alphas can duke it out.”

“I’ve never heard of packs banding together without a formal agreement before,” I admitted. From the way the women spoke, it didn’t seem like the Dark Alphas had long-lasting capabilities. Sooner or later, someone would break trust with another pack inside the group. What followed was sure to be a bloodbath. “How close together are all these packs?” I asked.

“We’re pretty much in the middle,” the blond explained. “Each pack has their own town, a home base that the other packs don’t go into without an invitation. But the claimed territory of each one goes past that.”

“How far beyond the towns?” I asked.

I was too eager, and the question came out more impatient than I had intended. I saw the three women exchange glances with one another, and I knew I had made a mistake.

“You’ll have to ask the alpha,” the blond replied.

They moved away from us and continued shopping, whispering together in low voices as they cast glances back at Jenny and me.

“Mom? Are you okay?”

I hadn’t realized that Jenny had been asking me something. My mind had been focused on what the women had said—and what they hadn’t said. Pack Marsden was in the middle of the Dark Alphas group, and that meant Jenny and I were trapped here indefinitely.

“Yes, I’m sorry, Jenny,” I assured her. “My mind just wandered a bit. Should we head back to Colson’s house?”

“Sure, Mom,” she said.

The walk back was quiet. My mind was still trying to wrap itself around what I had learned about our new home. The women hadn’t been as forthcoming as I would have liked. They didn’t regard me with contempt as some of the other pack members did, but that didn’t seem to matter. I needed to figure something out, though, and quickly. The thought of allowing my daughter to be kept as a prisoner a moment longer than necessary was repugnant to me.

And I knew the longer we stayed, the more likely it was that the truth of her parentage would be revealed.

“I’m going to take a walk to clear my head,” I told Jenny when we got back to Colson’s small, two-bedroom house. “Make sure you stay inside until I get back, okay?”

With Jenny’s promise to stay inside, I made my way back to the street and began a loop around the neighborhood. It wasn’t a large town by any means, but there were a few people out and about at this hour.

Just then, I saw one of Colson’s neighbors putting a trash bag into his dumpster. He appeared to be in his late teens or early twenties, most likely fresh out of high school and still living with his parents. His black-rimmed glasses, unkempt hair, and wrinkled jeans gave the appearance of a man who wasn’t used to getting female attention.

Old enough to answer my questions, but young enough that he probably hasn’t learned not to tell pack secrets to strangers, Cassia pointed out.

She had a point. I was much more likely to get the information I needed from a wolf of the male persuasion, and I had just been presented with the perfect target.

“Hey there, neighbor!” I called out to him, putting a friendly lilt in my tone that I rarely used. It made my voice sound unnatural, but if I was going to get to the bottom of things, I would need to use all the charms at my disposal.

“H-hi,” he stuttered, looking at me with wide eyes.

“I’m Christa,” I said, holding my hand out to shake his. “I’m staying with Colson—that is, Alpha Marsden.”

There was no telling what this guy had heard about me, so I figured I’d cover my bases as far as introductions went. No need to bring up that my visit was coerced.

“Harry,” he said, placing his sweaty palm into my hand.

I giggled and tucked an imaginary piece of hair behind my ear while I looked away, then back into his eyes. He took a shaky breath as his pupils widened, visibly affected by my flirtatious performance.

“I was just going for a walk. It’s so beautiful here!” I commented. “Have you lived here long?”

“Yeah, yeah, it is,” he said with a voice half an octave deeper than the one he used a moment ago. “I’ve lived here my whole life. Alpha Marsden and my brother grew up together. Are you going to be staying with the alpha for long?”

“I’m not sure yet. There’s been so much going on with the dark alphas. You know, with all their big plans coming up,” I whispered conspiratorially. “But a man like you knows all about that, I’m sure.”

“Of course,” he said, puffing his chest out. “My brother just asked me to join his squadron. He’s in charge of a team that works with Alpha Vitali and Alpha Desmond’s packs. Our expansion is well underway, I think.”

Harry was self-important, but it also appeared that he knew more than I could have hoped for. I just had to keep him talking.

“Alpha Marsden hasn’t given me the full briefing yet,” I said with a wistful sigh. “I don’t suppose you could tell me what the next big thing is? I really want to be prepared to help.”

The young man waved me off as if I had said something too silly to imagine. “You won’t need to help. Pillaging the neighbor packs is the business of men, not she-wolves.”

So they're going to expand by force, I told Cassia. I don't know what I expected, but I'm still disappointed.

To say the least, she agreed.

Maybe we can take advantage of one of their planned raids to make a break for it? If we can figure out which direction they're heading, we could escape the opposite way.

Fewer guards would help, she agreed. See if he knows when it's going to happen.

"I bet you're excited to get out there," I said with a sultry smile. "A strong man like you will surely be sent right away with all the bravest warriors."

"Next week sometime, we should be heading for—"

"Christa!" a sharp voice interrupted Harry, and I cursed the poor timing.

"Hi, Colson," I responded with a strained smile. I wanted to keep up appearances with Harry, but I could tell from Colson's face that he had overheard at least part of our conversation.

"It's time to get home," he commanded.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

I could hardly blame Harry for opening up to Christa about what he knew of the Dark Alphas' plans. She was a charming and charismatic novelty to the young man, not to mention gorgeous. But I was still furious at her.

"I know you're trying to escape again," I told her quietly as we walked back to the house.

"Of course I am," she replied. "Just because I'm being forced to stay in your territory doesn't mean I have to obey your orders. You didn't expect me to just do whatever you say, did you? I thought we knew each other."

"I thought we did, too," I said. "Which is why I thought you would understand how serious I was when I told you to stay inside the territory. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I'm not an idiot, Colson. All I was doing was trying to get information about how to get out of here safely. I would never put Jenny at risk."

"There is no safe way for you to leave," I stressed. "If there had been another way to get you out of here, I would have taken it. But you were the one in the back of that transport van, and the group needed there to be consequences for that. There is only so much I can do to protect you, so just let me do that. Please."

"You expect me to believe that you care about keeping me safe? You—the man who abandoned me even when I had given you everything?"

"Of course I want to protect you. That is my duty, just like it was when I left," I

explained.

“You think leaving me was your duty ?” she scoffed.

It hadn’t escaped my notice that I had never explained why I left all those years ago. She probably had a million questions about it, but the last thing I wanted to do was rehash the past. We had arrived back home, and my main concern was getting her to go inside and stay there.

“You’ll have to take my word for it,” I continued. “I did what I had to do.”

Her face transformed from anger to heartbreak in an instant, and I felt my heart break in solidarity with hers.

“Whatever you say, Alpha ,” Christa said quietly.

I hated to see how my words had affected Christa over the coming days. She became quiet and withdrawn, and I worried that my dismissive attitude about our past had broken her spirit. There was a vulnerability in her that I hadn’t seen before, and it worried me. Especially since it was all my fault.

Still, the last thing I wanted was to allow her to see my own vulnerable feelings about the situation. It was best for both of us if I kept my distance, so that was exactly what I did. Luckily, my house shared a border with the forest. The pressures of being the alpha, on top of being a member of the Dark Alphas, often left me feeling pulled in too many directions. The forest was my haven, the one place I could go to be truly alone.

It was on one of my walks in the forest that I heard the unmistakable sound of shoes

scraping against the bark of a tree. I looked up and to my left, and saw a young girl climbing from branch to branch a dozen feet above the forest floor.

“Whatcha doing up there?” I asked kindly, expecting to see the face of one of the young pack members. “Jenny!” I exclaimed as the girl turned her face toward me.

“Hey!” Jenny shouted down at me with a smile. “Did you see how high I climbed? Pretty good, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” I replied, doing my best to keep my uneasiness from coloring my words. “You did really good. What are you doing out here by yourself, though? Does your mom know you’re out here?”

When I saw the young girl grimace at the mention of her mother, I knew what she was going to say before the words came out.

“I snuck out,” she responded sheepishly. “Mom’s been so tense and strict. Ever since we got here, it’s like she’s turned into this overbearing monster. She’s no fun. Not like she used to be. She doesn’t let me do anything .”

Her legs were dangling from a branch as she sat with her back to the trunk of the tall tree. I wondered if she was afraid of me, and that was why she chose to remain aloft.

“Do you want to come down here and talk about it some more? I’m a pretty good listener,” I assured her.

“Not according to Mom,” Jenny said quickly. “And also... I can’t. I don’t know how to get down.”

“That’s okay, I can help you,” I said. I clambered up the tree until I was perched across from Jenny on another branch. “It looks a lot higher up from here, but I

promise it isn't too far. The trick is to look at where you want to put your hands and feet instead of the ground. Watch me and try to copy what I do."

Facing the trunk, I found a foothold and lowered myself down, then moved my hand down to another branch. One after another, I continued until I reached the forest floor. Jenny nodded and made to follow, but hesitated.

"What if I fall?" she asked.

"I'm standing right under you," I assured her. "If you fall, I'll catch you. I promise, you won't get hurt."

She took a deep breath and began her descent, slow at first, then increasingly more confident. When she reached the bottom, she turned to look at me, beaming with pride.

"I did it!" she squealed.

"High-five, kiddo!"

She smacked my hand hard in excitement, and I sucked in a breath while shaking my hand.

"You're strong!" I exclaimed, making her giggle.

"Mom says that, too," Jenny said. "What's the deal with you two anyway? Why does Mom not like you? You seem alright to me."

"I'm glad you think so," I said with a smile. "But your mom and I have... a history. We knew each other a long time ago, and I hurt her feelings. Have you ever done something like that?"

“I had a friend that kept wearing this old hoodie with holes in it, and I teased them,” Jenny admitted. “I told them it looked stupid. They were really sad. But I apologized, and we’re friends again. Was it like that? Did you apologize to Mom?”

She may only be nine years old, but I had to give it to Jenny: she was smart.

“You know what, I don’t think I ever did,” I said thoughtfully. “Do you think I should try that?”

“Definitely,” Jenny said.

“I’ll try to do that soon,” I promised her. “Now, do you want to tell me why you’re out here in the forest by yourself? It’s not the safest place for a kid to be alone.”

“I feel more like myself out here,” Jenny said with a shrug. “More in touch with being a shifter. It sucks that I can’t shift yet. So many other kids my age can, and I’m so jealous. I want to know what my wolf looks like, and what her name is.”

“Everyone shifts at different times,” I say.

“I just feel like I should be able to by now. Mom’s a strong shifter, and my father is a powerful one, too. So, what’s wrong with me?”

I wanted to reassure her that nothing was wrong with her, but I was too focused on what she had just admitted. Her father was a powerful shifter. Not a human.

Jenny probably didn’t realize that she had just told me her secret—if she even realized it was a secret. Maybe Christa hadn’t even told her to keep it from me. But then, why did she tell me that Jenny’s father was human? Why wouldn’t she admit that her daughter was a full wolf shifter who was unable to shift? It was a common enough occurrence, especially for kids. Many pack members didn’t obtain the ability

to transform until they reached puberty.

The only reason Christa had for lying was to throw me off so I didn't find out the truth. It was the only explanation, and I needed to hear it from Christa herself. Whether Christa wanted to admit it or not, I knew that Jenny was my daughter.

Suddenly, I felt a protective urge toward the girl. It was important that she knew how special she was.

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with you," I gently told Jenny. "I promise. You and your wolf will be running through the forest before you know it."

My words seemed to resonate with her. Although she didn't look entirely convinced, she seemed to be in better spirits.

"Listen, though," I continued. "I know you don't want to listen to your mom right now, but it really isn't a great idea for you to be out here by yourself."

"I know, but there's nothing else to do," Jenny whined.

"Have you met the Marsden pack kids yet?" I asked.

"No."

"I saw a bunch of them playing down by the school. Do you know where that is?"

Jenny nodded.

"How about you go there now and tell them that Alpha Colson sent you to play with them."

“Alright,” she said. “Thanks, Colson.”

She skipped off toward the town, and I felt a rush of relief that she was heading somewhere that was more easily monitored. Even if she wasn’t my daughter, I wouldn’t want a kid her age playing alone out here. Not when we were surrounded by Dark Alpha packs of questionable morals. Knowing that in all likelihood, she was my daughter made it even more imperative.

Time to confront Christa, Orin said.

I sighed. I had been doing such a good job of avoiding her the past few days. But this really couldn’t wait.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

I had been doing my best to avoid Colson ever since he told me he left me in Sparkle Hollow to “protect” me. Even if I had believed him, his excuse was flimsy at best. Nothing could have been worse for me at the time than him abandoning me in my time of need. No matter what he claimed to be true, I knew he had wronged me. He hadn’t even had the decency to apologize.

I had never been one to sit around and mope, though, so I had ordered Jenny to stay in the house and gone to the pack house to look for something useful to do. That was where I ran into Sienna.

“Hey!” she said, her flaming red hair giving her away at once. I hadn’t known her well, but our paths had crossed back in Sparkle Hollow. “Christa, what are you doing here?”

“It’s kind of a long story,” I muttered.

I wasn’t sure exactly what story I wanted to tell her. After all, she had recently gotten married to Alpha Franco Stone. Everyone in Sparkle Hollow seemed to have welcomed them with open arms, but their pack shared a town with my captors. There was no way I could get Sienna and her mate to take my side and help Jenny and me escape without facing severe consequences. I knew my plight wasn’t worth the risk for them, and telling her about it would only make her feel bad.

“Well, I’m happy to see someone from back home,” she said. “I’m just checking in with the Marsden pack’s beta. Gotta keep the peace between these packs. What are you up to?”

“For sure,” I agreed, my suspicions confirmed. “Honestly, I’m just looking for something to do.”

“The beta said they’re working on some renovations out back if you wanted to check that out,” she replied helpfully.

“I might. It’s been a while since I worked with my hands, but I could use the distraction.”

“If you get bored later and want to come visit, anyone in the pack can point you toward our pack,” Sienna said with a smile.

“Um, sure thing. Sounds great,” I said, but something told me that visiting the Redeeming Light pack would be totally out of the question.

Sienna waved goodbye, and I headed out the back of the pack house, where I was greeted by a flurry of activity. Some pack members carried lumber and tools, while others were hard at work. The young wolf I had run into a few days ago was there. He waved as he rushed over to greet me.

“Hey! It’s you,” Harry greeted.

“Sure is. What are you guys doing?” I asked.

“Building an extension. We’ve been growing in numbers, and Alpha Colson wanted to make sure our pack house could still hold everyone when we all get together. Are you here to help?”

“Just tell me what to do,” I offered.

Harry set me to work with a group of wolves who were nailing together supports that

would later be inserted into the walls of the houses. It wasn't difficult work, but it felt good to be doing something besides being cooped up in Colson's house. I felt myself begin to relax, but that feeling dissipated when Colson himself arrived. His mood was tense, and my first thought was that something had happened to Jenny.

"What happened? What is it?" I demanded.

"You need to come with me," he told me in a low tone.

"Not until you tell me what's going on," I demanded.

I crossed my arms, but he ignored my protest. Colson grabbed my elbow and forcibly pulled me through the pack house.

"Hey! Cut it out!" I protested.

Members of the pack were looking at us, but no one stepped in.

Did you expect them to? Cassia asked.

I guess not, I conceded.

Colson continued to drag me until we reached his home, where he flung me through the front door.

"What the fuck, Colson?" I shouted. "Do you honestly think you're acting like a respectable person right now? Like an alpha?"

"I'm done, Christa," he said, his chest heaving with emotion. "I don't care what you think of me right now. I'm done with your lies and deceit."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but the way you are treating me is awful. I’m not going to stand for it.”

“Jenny,” he began.

“Jenny?” I asked, my tone changing from anger to worry in an instant. “Did something happen to her? I told her to stay in the house. Is she here? Jenny!”

I started to walk toward our bedroom, but Colson followed hot on my heels.

“She’s fine, Christa. I sent her to play with some of the pack kids down at the school,” he said.

“Why would you do that?” I demanded, whirling toward him. “I’m her mother, and I told her to stay in the house. I don’t trust your pack, and I don’t want her out there without me.”

Colson cornered me against the doorframe of the bedroom, towering over me as he leaned one arm over my head. I gave a sharp intake of breath at how close he was. Despite living in the same house for days, we hadn’t been eye to eye like this before.

“I sent her to play with the other children when I found her in the forest alone,” he explained. “You’re lucky it was me who found her, not one of the other Dark Alphas. Did you really think telling her to stay in the house would work?”

I swallowed, choking down my emotions as I stared into his deep brown eyes. “What was she doing in the forest?”

“She said she felt more in touch with herself when she was in nature,” Colson said, leaning even closer to me. “She also mentioned how upset she is that she hasn’t gotten her wolf yet, considering that her father is a powerful werewolf. Odd, don’t

you think? I distinctly remember you telling me that her father was a human.”

My heart skipped a beat, realizing I hadn’t explained to Jenny that she should keep information about her father a secret. Not that she had much, but I had made a mistake in not bringing her in on my lie.

“She must have been mistaken,” I offered.

“Cut the shit, Chris,” Colson commanded. “Just admit it: I’m Jenny’s father.”

“Don’t call me that,” I demanded. “You lost the right to do that, as well as the right to know any of my secrets, when you left us!”

Colson dropped his arm to his side and took a step away, placing his back against the opposite side of the door frame.

“Us,” he repeated softly. “I knew it was true. I hoped it was true.”

A strange sound emanated from my throat, halfway between a sob and a snarl, as my lie came crashing down around me. I hadn’t meant to admit anything to him, and I was devastated that my emotions had gotten the better of me. How did he always manage to do this to me?

“She is my daughter,” I said possessively. “You haven’t been a part of my life in a decade, and you think you have the right to know anything about me? About us? You have no right!”

Colson raised an eyebrow, and I knew before he said anything where his mind had gone. “You think I have no right to your secrets? To you?”

He closed the distance between us in a second, wrapping his hands around my waist

and pressing himself against me. As much as I hated to admit it, the feeling of his warmth against me felt so safe and familiar that I was immediately aroused. His sweet, musky scent enveloped me, and my eyes closed as I took a steadying breath.

“You lost your right to me,” I whispered.

“Who are you trying to convince? Me, or yourself?” he whispered into my ear.

He moved one hand up to my face, caressing my cheek before running his fingers through the hair at my temple and coming to rest at the nape of my neck. I heard myself sigh contentedly as my eyes closed.

I missed this, I admitted to my wolf. Not just being touched by a man, but being touched by him. Is that wrong? To miss him?

If this is wrong, I don’t want to be right, Cassia murmured in agreement.

“I’ve missed you, Chris,” Colson murmured against my lips, kissing them gently as he pulled me into the bedroom.

We ended up on the bed as his hands roved over my body, taking in the feeling of my full breasts, soft skin, and willing lips. His hands moved toward my waist, and I couldn’t stop myself from allowing him to unbutton my pants. I didn’t know if I wanted him to stop.

“Admit it,” Colson whispered. “Tell me I have a right to your secrets.”

“No,” I panted.

His hand moved inside my pants, his fingertip brushing the hair between my legs teasingly.

“I have a right to you,” Colson said again.

“No,” I repeated.

“Christa, look at me,” he ordered, removing his hand from my garments and cradling my face instead. “Tell me I have a right to all of you.”

I could see the need on his face, and I knew it was echoed on my own. I could practically feel the air pulsing between us.

“Yes,” I told him. “You can have me.”

He grinned, placing his hand back where it had just been and continuing down until he reached the warm folds between my legs. His pointer finger pressed between them, and I moaned lightly in anticipation. His face pressed into my neck as he kissed me and continued his ministrations to my labia and clitoris.

“Yes, baby,” he whispered. “I love feeling how wet you get for me.”

I moaned again as his finger went inside me. Even though it had been years since I had been intimate with anyone, there was no self-consciousness when it came to Colson. All of my firsts had been with him. Once upon a time, I had truly believed all of my lasts would be with him, too.

“Say it again, baby,” Colson said. “Tell me I have a right to you and all of your secrets.”

At the mention of secrets, my eyes snapped open and my body froze. “Get off,” I commanded, pushing him away from me.

“Woah,” he said, scooting away from me on the bed. “What did I do? I thought you

said yes?”

“I did, and now I don’t,” I said, hurrying to rebutton my pants.

“The fuck, Chris?” he murmured, clearly confused by my sudden change of heart.

“I’ll spell it out for you, shall I?” I said snarkily. “You still have no right to any of my secrets, or to any part of me. We aren’t together—you made sure of that when you abandoned me and our daughter. That’s the only secret of mine you’ll ever get, and only because I was too stupid to keep hiding it from you. Don’t worry, I won’t make any of those mistakes again. Especially not the mistake of allowing you to touch me.”

“Chris, don’t do this,” Colson begged. “Just give me a chance to—”

“No, Colson. You don’t get a chance. You lost your chance ten years ago. Now get out.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

I hadn't had any intention of seducing Christa when I confronted her about Jenny's parentage, but that didn't make it any easier when I was rejected. For ten years, I had been dreaming of this girl—my true mate—and she had the nerve to reject me? The alpha? Furious was an understatement for how I was feeling.

If I was being honest with myself, though, I was mostly upset at my own actions. There was no reason for Christa to trust me after what I had done to her. And, as Jenny had pointed out, I still hadn't apologized for any of it.

Christa had deserved the apology ten years ago, and I worried that anything I could say now would only sound trite and meaningless. An apology would be the kiss of death for any potential relationship we might have. Now that Jenny was a part of the picture, I couldn't risk that. I couldn't risk losing my daughter when I had just found out about her.

No, I wouldn't apologize. I would continue to be exactly as I had been—fierce, loyal, protective of what was mine.

“Get these tools out of here,” I snapped when I got to the pack house. “Construction equipment stays in the back. Got it?”

“Yes, Alpha,” said the young wolf I had spoken to. He ducked his head in submission and began carrying the toolbox toward the rear of the house.

I sighed in irritation and walked toward my office. I had to do my job, but I needed space from everyone. The slightest problems had been sending me into spirals, and it was becoming cumbersome to deal with.

Anger was at the forefront of my mind, but lurking in the back was regret. I hadn't been there for Christa when she was pregnant with our child, and that was something I could never change. I had missed an opportunity that I would never get again. One of many. Being there for the birth of my firstborn, watching her grow up—all those memories were Christa's to carry alone. Jenny would have no memories of a childhood with her father, and I would have no memories of being one.

Added to that anger and regret was my confusion at what had occurred in Sparkle Hollow since my absence. When I left, Christa had been highly regarded among her pack. Something had changed, and she refused to tell me what it was. She had made it perfectly clear that she wouldn't tell me anything else about her past, but I needed to know.

If Christa wasn't going to give me the answers I craved, I would find them for myself.

"Reagan, get in here!" I shouted to my secretary.

A moment later, Reagan appeared in the doorway. He looked skittish and afraid, but I hadn't called him in to berate him for any of the many mistakes that had been occurring in the pack lately. For now, what I needed was his help.

"I have a mission for you," I said. "Have you ever been to Sparkle Hollow?"

Reagan had been gone for more than twenty-four hours, and I was starting to get impatient. After giving him the rundown yesterday of what I wanted him to look for when he went to Sparkle Hollow, he had left in the afternoon with a promise to return as soon as he could. I had made sure he wouldn't be recognized by anyone in their pack, but part of me wondered if he had gotten caught snooping. I couldn't afford to

confront Alpha Lex head-on, but if I had to do it to get a pack member back, I would.

Let's hope it doesn't come to that , Orin said.

Why isn't he back yet? I snarled at my wolf. It's been long enough for him to find out what happened and what her status is in the pack. If he doesn't turn up soon, do I go after him myself?

No, he'll be back, Orin said.

I wasn't so sure. It wasn't just information about Christa that I needed, either. The ambush on the transport between the Moonstone pack and Sparkle Hollow would have been noticed, but if they had discovered who was behind it, we needed to be ready. A strong pack like Christa's wouldn't let it slide if they knew who was responsible for their missing equipment. Although the Moonstones had become more peaceful in recent years, they were still bound to be out for blood. No wolf pack would take the death of their members lying down.

Evening was fast approaching, and I decided that nothing more productive could be done at the pack house for the day. I may as well wait for Reagan's return at home.

Christa and Jenny were there when I arrived, eating dinner together and watching a TV show.

"Colson!" Jenny said brightly when I entered the room. "Come see what I made for dinner!"

She hopped up from her spot on the couch and pulled me into the kitchen, where a plate of food was waiting for me.

"I call them taco burgers," she said brightly, pointing to her creation. "I made tiny

burgers and put them on soft taco shells and melted some cheese on top. You can add whatever toppings you want. I like them with guacamole and tomatoes.”

Jenny was hopping from foot to foot, unable to contain her excitement at showing me what she had done. Although I wasn’t usually a fan of mixed-genre foods, I had to admit that it looked and sounded delicious.

“That sounds great, Jenny. Thanks for making dinner. You didn’t have to,” I reminded her.

“I wanted to,” she chirped. “Here, come eat with us.”

I grabbed the plate, put her recommended toppings on my serving, and followed her back to the living room to sit in my recliner. The TV was playing a popular show about a single mother raising her daughter alone in a small town. I felt a familiar pang of regret, but since I didn’t want to put a damper on Jenny’s good mood, I ignored it, choosing to eat my dinner in silence while the girls quoted their favorite lines to each other from the couch.

I had just gotten up to take my plate to the sink when someone knocked on the door.

“Are you expecting anyone?” I asked Christa.

She shook her head, so I answered the door. Reagan stood on the front porch, looking slightly disheveled but otherwise unharmed.

“Sorry, Alpha,” he apologized profusely. “I know you wanted me back within the day, but it took me longer than I expected to find out about—”

“That’s okay,” I said, cutting him off before Christa could hear the end of his sentence. “Come inside. We can talk in the other room.”

I led Reagan through the living room, where Christa gave us a perplexed look, to the small sitting area in my bedroom. Two chairs sat facing a small fireplace, sectioned away from the part of the room where my bed was housed by a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf.

It was my refuge within the refuge of my home—a place only a few select people had ever seen. Reagan had been working as my personal secretary for a long time, and this wasn't the first time he had been in this room. He sat down on his customary chair and leaned forward to tell me about the news from Sparkle Hollow.

“We don't have anything to worry about from them,” he began. “At least, not right now. They don't have a clue who participated in the ambush of their supply caravan, but it looks like their suspicions are prejudiced toward a pack that is outside of our territory. They think the packs within this area are all safe and under their influence.”

I smirked. It was just like Lex to think that just because he didn't know of a threat, there wasn't one. He was so focused on the borders of the region that he didn't think to look our way—surprising, considering the upheaval of alphas and lunas that had occurred since he came to power. He must think all the threats had been dealt with.

“And what of Christa? Are they looking for her?” I asked.

Reagan nodded. “They are, but she isn't a priority for them right now.”

“Not a priority?” I asked, surprised. “Even with her daughter being missing as well?”

“I thought it was strange, too. That's why it took me longer to come back. I thought there might be more to the story, and it turns out there is,” Reagan explained.

“Tell me.”

“I went to the town bar and got into a conversation with one of the more inebriated pack members,” Reagan said. “I mentioned I thought it was a little weird that finding her wasn’t more of a priority for the pack. He told me that she’s considered one of the lowest members in the pack. She lives on the outskirts of town in a tiny, rundown house with only one bedroom.”

The thought of her and Jenny living in such conditions infuriated me. When I had known her, she had been a well-regarded member of the community. It seemed unconscionable that Sparkle Hollow reduced her to those circumstances.

“Did he say why?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“Years ago, before her daughter was born, there was an interloper in Sparkle Hollow who caused some sort of scuffle,” Reagan explained. “He didn’t go into details, but I gathered that she had some sort of relationship with the guy. When the old alpha, Lex’s father, wanted to hunt him down and destroy him, Christa stepped in. She defended him, and when Sparkle Hollow kept moving forward with their plans, she set up a distraction—a fire—so he could escape before he was killed.”

“She set a fire in their own town?” I asked, baffled by the revelation.

“If it weren’t for that, the guy wouldn’t have been able to get away. That’s what my source said, anyway,” Reagan said with a shrug.

“So, she was punished for treason with a demotion,” I summarized.

“That’s what I was told,” Reagan said.

“And when the old alpha died his decision remained?” I asked. I had always heard that Alpha Lex was more level-headed than his father was, and that he cared more for his people. It seemed strange to think that he wouldn’t forgive Christa’s wrongdoing

in light of her circumstances. “What kind of alpha would allow a single mother to live in poverty and isolation?”

“He might have, if she hadn’t disappeared with the equipment she was supposed to be protecting. The wolf I spoke to said she had agreed to take on this mission, along with her daughter, to prove her loyalty to Alpha Lex and make up for the past. Everyone in Sparkle Hollow assumed that she had betrayed them again, which is why their priority is on locating the missing hardware,” Reagan explained.

Guilt flooded me as I realized everything about her current predicament was my fault. She had defended me, put herself on the line, and saved my life. They had punished her for it, and I imagined that in her mind, she thought it would be worth it. She had believed me when I said I wanted to spend my life with her, but instead, I had completely disappeared.

At the time, I thought I was doing her a favor. I didn’t want her to have to choose between me and her pack. What I didn’t realize was that she already had—and she had chosen me.

I couldn’t even imagine the pain she must have felt when she realized I was gone—and that she was left alone with our child in a pack she had betrayed on my behalf. And now, my reappearance in her life had solidified her status as the lowest member of the pack—if they even let her back in.

“Did you need anything else from me?” Reagan asked, bringing me back to the current moment.

“No, thank you, Reagan,” I replied quietly. “And take tomorrow off. You did great work today, and I appreciate it.”

He nodded his thanks, and I showed him out. Jenny and Christa had finished their

show, and I heard them talking in their room. Jenny must be getting ready for bed.

I took a deep breath, knowing I had to let Christa know what my intentions were. There was nothing I could do to go back and change the past, but my daughter was here now . I was going to get to know her, and there was nothing Christa could do or say that would stop me.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

When Colson first told me that he intended to spend time with Jenny, I had fought him. My daughter was the most important thing in the world to me, and I would die to defend her. I would kill to defend her. Right now, despite our past, Colson felt like a threat. He was prone to angry outbursts and violence, and I worried that he would direct those qualities at Jenny.

I didn't want to expose Jenny to danger if I could help it, but Colson had persisted. To be honest, there wasn't much I could do to prevent them from getting to know one another. But when I finally relented, it came with conditions. First, there would be no secrets between them. If anything happened, I wanted to know about it immediately. And second, Colson couldn't expose my secret to her.

If Jenny was ever going to learn the truth about who her father was, I wanted it to come from me. But I wasn't ready yet. If things went badly between them, I didn't want Jenny to have to deal with the added layer of finding out that Colson was her dad.

"Mom!" Jenny called, bounding into the room. "Colson wants to take me out to the forest to climb trees again. Can I go? Please, mom?"

Colson had his arms crossed and an eyebrow raised, silently daring me to stop him from spending time with her. I sighed, accepting the situation but doing my best to remain in control.

"Sounds like fun," I replied with a strained smile. "Do you mind if I come with you?"

"Really?! That makes it even better," she squealed. "Thanks, Mom."

“Come on, then,” Colson said to Jenny with a smile. “Let’s get a move on before all the good trees are taken.”

Jenny laughed at his bad joke and rushed to get ready. I didn’t necessarily want to spend my afternoon in the middle of the forest, but the thought of Jenny being out of sight for an extended period had left me feeling anxious. It was better for all of us if I went with them. Just to observe, of course.

Jenny and Colson walked ahead of me, chatting about various things as we headed toward the forest. I watched their body language and realized that Jenny was just as thrilled to have a male figure in her life as Colson seemed to be that person for her. He was alert to their surroundings, watching for any possible danger while giving Jenny the opportunity to talk to him about whatever she wanted. He was letting her take the lead, and it both surprised and delighted me.

When we got out of town, Jenny took off running, laughing as Colson followed close behind her.

“You can’t catch me!” Jenny shouted.

“Oh no! You’re so fast!” Colson shouted back, playing along. “I’m going to have to take a magic potion to speed me up.”

He pretended to unstop a vial and drink it while Jenny laughed. He shook his body, acting like he was under the effects of magic before he started running after Jenny again, this time faster than before.

“Roar! I’m a monster!” he growled, holding his hands up like they were claws.

I smiled in spite of myself as I watched the two of them frolic around in the forest, imagining they were all sorts of creatures. The longer I paid attention to their

interactions, the more I came to realize that Colson wasn't a threat to Jenny. Far from it. She seemed to be thriving with his attention, and he seemed to be benefitting from it as well. He was far more patient with her than I had seen him with anyone else. His demeanor was softer and kinder, as though he was aware of his size and strength in comparison to her and wanted to reassure her that she was safe with him.

After a few hours of games and adventures, they were both out of breath.

"You two ready to head back home?" I suggested. "It's almost dinner time."

"I'm starving," Jenny said dramatically.

"I'm definitely ready for dinner," Colson agreed. "We gotta get this little monster home and feed it before it attacks the village!"

Jenny gave a monster growl, and her stomach followed suit. We all laughed and headed out of the forest toward home.

I couldn't fully explain it, but there had been a shift between Colson and me after today. My feelings toward him had softened, somewhat reluctantly, as I saw that his affection for Jenny was legitimate. I knew I still couldn't trust him, but a part of me hoped that maybe Jenny could. The life I had dreamt of for the three of us wasn't possible, but a new life might be. If he wanted it, that was. I was very aware that whatever happened next would have to be on his terms. There was nothing stopping him from abandoning us again if he wanted to.

When we got home, I heated up some tomato soup and buttered rolls while they changed out of their dirty clothes. I set the table, hoping that I could extend the simple domesticity of the day by having us sit together and eat. We had mostly been eating in the living room or in shifts so Colson and I wouldn't be forced to have a conversation, but today was different.

“Smells great, Mom,” Jenny said as she took a seat.

Colson appeared, and I saw him raise an eyebrow at the change of venue. I shrugged, not sure how to explain my thoughts to him. We both sat down, and the three of us ate in silence for a few minutes.

“Are you my dad?” Jenny asked, suddenly putting her spoon down and staring at Colson intensely.

My eyes widened, and I saw that Colson’s had as well. He looked between Jenny and me like a deer caught in headlights.

“What?” he finally asked.

“Mom said that my father was a powerful shifter that she knew a long time ago, and I overheard you two talking about meeting each other before I was born. We have the same eyes,” Jenny explained. “So? Are you my dad?”

Colson took a deep breath and looked at me with pleading eyes. I wasn’t ready for this conversation, but it didn’t matter. Jenny wanted to know the truth, and she deserved to hear it. I couldn’t lie to my daughter anymore. It was very possible—likely, even—that when I explained I had kept it a secret, both Jenny and Colson would team up against me. I might lose her, but it didn’t matter. It had to be done.

Colson met my eyes, and I gave him an apologetic look. He knew I had lied, and that I had asked him to keep up the lie with Jenny, but I didn’t see any accusation in his expression. Only regret.

“I’m so sorry for not telling you sooner, baby,” I told her. “I never expected to run into him again. I didn’t even know where he was, or if we’d see him again.”

I flinched, realizing my apology had turned into an accusation against Colson. As hurt as I was by his abandonment, I didn't want to pass that bitterness onto Jenny. It wasn't her burden to bear.

I was fully prepared for Colson to defend himself and attack me in return, but his next words surprised me.

"I'm sorry, too, Jenny," he said earnestly. "I wish I had been there to see you grow up. If you're willing, I'd like to be a part of your life now. I know that doesn't make up for the past, but it's all I have to offer you."

"I want that. But why did you leave?" Jenny asked.

"That's a long story I will tell you when you're older. Just know that even though I had to go, I never wanted to," he said.

As his words filled the air, I wondered how much of it was the truth and how much was meant to make her feel better. Would we ever be able to be honest with each other for Jenny's sake? Or were we doomed to live in our lies forever?

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The vibe in the house had changed since Jenny discovered I was her father, but my role in the pack had remained the same. The Dark Alpha group was eager to scout a new area to the north, and it was my duty as a member to help them. It made me nervous to leave Jenny and Christa behind without my protection, but I knew my pack would keep them safe.

It had put my mind at ease knowing that the most dangerous member of the Dark Alphas, Gage Desmond, was with me on the scouting expedition. Unfortunately, that meant I had to deal with his constant power plays and sneaky attempts to downplay the other members' contributions and gain the upper hand over the rest of us.

We had traveled into the territory late last night and, so far, hadn't seen any signs of major pack movement. There appeared to only be a few small packs—even smaller than the ones we came from—mostly made up of family units.

“Getting them to cede their lands to us won't take much convincing,” I said in passing to Desmond and Alpha Vitali as we took a break on a hilltop overlooking the most recent of the pack structures we had seen. A handful of homes stood together in the valley, and no one appeared to be on guard—or even awake. “I don't think it'll even come to a fight. They'll just let us have it once they see the strength of our numbers.”

“This is exactly what I was warning you about,” Desmond whispered to Alpha Vitali.

“‘Warning’ him?” I asked. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Vitali gave a hard look to Desmond and shifted his eyes back towards me. “There's

been some talk..." he admitted uncomfortably.

"Talk about what, exactly?"

"About you and your new little lady friend," Desmond quipped.

I had known that some of the alphas were still upset by me leaving Christa and Jenny alive, but I had hoped with time, the females' confinement in my territory would help convince them of the rightness of my plan. Apparently, I was mistaken.

"Is there something wrong with her? Has she done something to your pack, Desmond? I didn't realize she had any power over your territory," I pointed out sarcastically. If he wanted to be derogatory, two could play that game.

"It has nothing to do with her power," Desmond sneered, squaring up to me. "I saw the signs when you wouldn't dispose of her when you should have. You've got her playing luna in your pack, claiming she's your mate."

"I claim nothing but the truth," I countered.

"That's what you claim," he argued. "But I think there's more to the story than you're telling. I think you're harboring a spy and putting us all at risk."

I laughed at the accusation, hoping to get him to realize how preposterous his thought process was. "My mate is no spy," I chuckled.

"If she's your mate, does that mean you've had the ceremony and bedded her, then? I bet you tasted all of her sweet, milky skin. Is that why you're acting like a little puppy who's afraid to fight for what is rightfully ours? She's got you pussy-whipped."

Hearing this vile man speak of Christa in such vulgar terms made my wolf rise up in arms before I even had the opportunity to register it was happening. Orin transformed and sprang at him, raking a claw across his shoulder before he could follow suit.

As we tumbled down together, Gage transformed as well. His dark gray wolf howled in pain and bit my flank, leaving a gash in my thigh. I growled and prepared to reengage when Alpha Axel Vitali, still in human form, jumped between us.

“Enough!” he shouted. “You two are causing a ruckus that’s going to wake the enemies. We don’t have any backup with us. Stop now, before you cause more problems for us all.”

I waited until Gage turned back into his human form before I did as well, unwilling to let my guard down.

“We’re allies. Act like it,” Axel said.

“Allies” is a bit of a stretch, Orin growled.

He’s right, though, I said. What were you thinking, attacking him like that?

I was thinking that he wasn’t going to stop talking shit until I made it impossible for him to talk again.

“We should head home,” I said. “We’ve seen everything we need here.”

“Yes. We have,” Desmond agreed. He eyed me suspiciously as we transformed again for the run back home. The hate seemed to roll off of him in waves as we ran. Our encounter may have been the first violence between us, but I could tell it wouldn’t be the last.

By the time I got back to the house, it was almost three in the morning. I did my best to be quiet as I came inside so I wouldn't wake the girls, but Christa must have been waiting up for me.

"Where have you been?" she whispered harshly.

"Out," I replied with a muffled groan.

My leg had started to heal, but wolf bites were always slow. Blood had soaked my pant leg, and if I didn't get it washed quickly, it would take longer. The sooner I got a calendula salve on the injury, the better my chances were of avoiding a scar.

"I'm serious, Colson," Christa said, following me to my room, where I headed immediately into the bathroom and started the shower. "Jenny was worried about you when you missed dinner. You can't just leave without telling her. You know that, right?"

I winced, both from the pain in my leg and the knowledge that I had hurt my daughter.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I haven't been a parent for very long. I didn't think—"

"Exactly! You didn't think. If you want to have a relationship with her, you had better figure out how to think of her well-being first," Christa chided.

"I will," I assured her. "But can I get some privacy, please?"

Christa's forehead creased in confusion at my request, and then she spotted my blood-soaked leg.

"Col!" she exclaimed. "What in the world happened?"

“You should see the other guy,” I joked, removing my clothes.

“Who hurt you? What happened?” she demanded again.

“Alpha Vitali and I had a bit of a scuffle.”

She sighed as she helped me get my blood-soaked pant leg unstuck from my skin and got me into the shower. My eyes closed as the hot water streamed down my body, relaxing my tense muscles.

I assumed that Christa would leave while I showered, so I was surprised when I opened my eyes and saw she was still there. She grabbed a clean rag and handed it to me so I could clean myself up.

“Why are you allies with them?” she asked quietly. “I don’t understand the appeal of tying yourself and your pack to a group of people that would be so cruel, let alone people who would turn on you like this.”

“Our goals align at the moment,” I answered. “Tonight was an outlier for how we usually interact. My wolf and I let our anger get the best of us and responded to Gage in a way that was... unhelpful at diffusing the tension. Trust me, if I play nice with them for a little bit, my pack will be safe for years to come.”

She eyed me intently for a moment and then turned to grab my towel. She handed it to me as I turned the water off and patted myself dry, careful to avoid getting any fresh blood on the cloth.

“Where are your bandages?” she asked.

I nodded toward the sink, and she opened a drawer to find what she needed. As I sat on the edge of the tub, Christa applied the salve to my wound and placed a large

bandage around my thigh. Her fingers brushed against my skin, and I took a deep breath at the contact.

When she was done, she looked up at me, and I could see a sea of thoughts racing behind her eyes.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You’re better than this, Colson,” she whispered. “At least, you used to be.”

The comment wasn’t accusatory. Instead, it gave a feeling of sadness that perforated the room. I reached my hand out to cup her cheek. She leaned into it, closing her eyes peacefully.

Both of us were thinking about the people we used to be, and how much things had changed. It made me wonder if what she said was true and if I was still the same person I used to be, deep down. I’d done many things I wasn’t proud of since then, but it had all been to protect my pack. Did that make me a good alpha, or a bad person?

“What if I want to be that person again?” I whispered back to her.

“Then show me, Colson,” she replied, an edge of pleading in her voice. “Be that man again. For Jenny.”

I swallowed hard, knowing the task she had set before me was a gargantuan one. But it was clear that I would need to figure out a plan, and soon. Alpha Desmond wouldn’t stop his scheming, and I had a family to protect now.

“I will,” I assured her.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Ever since the night that Colson had been attacked by Desmond, I had become hyper-aware of the missions and tasks he did with members of the Dark Alphas. Every time he left, I worried. At least one of his so-called allies had shown himself to be capable of attacking him. There was no telling when the next strike might occur.

In the last three days alone, Colson had been gone for more than half of the time. Some of the missions took a few hours, but the longer ones lasted over a day.

I was running ragged from lack of sleep, but if he was gone overnight, I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes. Jenny needed to be protected, and in Colson's absence, that duty fell entirely on me—just as it had for the last nine years of her life. If anything happened to Colson because of his involvement with the Dark Alphas, Jenny and I were sure to be their next target.

Last night, he had spent the entire night at home. I was grateful for his presence, because it meant I had been able to catch up on some of my missed sleep. He and Jenny had made dinner, after which I had passed out on the living room couch while they watched television. At some point in the night, he must have carried me to bed because I awoke next to Jenny, who was sleeping peacefully beside me.

Reaching over to rest my hand on the top of her head, I was in awe of my little girl's beauty. After all this time, I thought I would have gotten used to being her mom, but each day, I found myself amazed that I had been blessed with such an angel.

I kissed her cheek lightly, and she rolled over, falling deeper into sleep. With a smile, I got out of bed and quietly grabbed my robe and slippers, donning them as I crept down the hallway to make a pot of coffee.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty,” Colson teased as I came into the kitchen. “You’re up early.”

“I’m not used to having unbroken sleep like that. Thanks for taking me to bed last night. I would have had a hell of a backache if I slept on the couch,” I admitted.

“Why have you been so tired?” he asked.

“Just the usual mom stuff,” I hedged, folding my arms and squeezing them tightly against my chest.

“I told you,” he said, rubbing my arms reassuringly, “you don’t have anything to worry about. I have everything under control.”

I smiled at him tightly, hoping it was enough to show him that I was okay. There was really nothing he could say to make the situation better. If he tried, I was bound to just feel more anxious. The only solutions I could see were either for him to take Jenny and me home, or for him to break his pseudo-alliance. Neither of which seemed to be on the table.

“Did you make any coffee yet?” I asked to change the subject.

He released my arms and made me a cup, passing it across the kitchen island to me. We sipped our coffee in silence as the sun came up, letting its beams of light filter through the windows and slowly bring the house into sharper relief.

“Are you home today?” I asked when I had finished my first cup and poured myself another.

“No, I’m leaving shortly to meet up with the other alphas,” he said. He betrayed no emotion or information with his voice, but his tone was measured. Whatever they

were doing today, he didn't want to talk to me about it.

"When will you be back?"

"Hopefully before nightfall, but it could be later. I was hoping to see Jenny before I left, but make sure she doesn't wait up for me to get home."

"She'll be disappointed not to see you today," I pointed out. "Are you sure you have to go?"

"I'm sure," he said shortly.

I held my tongue, biting back the urge to argue with his assertion and remind him that he had promised to think about Jenny's well-being. Colson was a grown man who could make his own choices. The only thing I could do was be there for our daughter and manage her disappointment.

To his credit, he had been making an effort to be involved with Jenny since her discovery. Every moment he wasn't busy with pack duties, he was spending time with her. From game nights to movies, cooking to taking walks, Colson had been proactive in coming up with activities they could do together. He had asked about every aspect of her life that he could think of and had even been trying to include me in their bonding moments. Every sign pointed to him wanting to make things right.

Except for the Dark Alphas.

He left without another word, heading for whatever the newest task was, while I cleaned up the kitchen and waited for Jenny to wake up. Although she was disappointed that her father had already left, Jenny cheered up considerably after a day spent doing some of our favorite activities. By nightfall, she seemed relaxed and peaceful as I tucked her into bed.

She had just fallen asleep when I heard the front door shut. I sprang to my feet and rushed out, ready to confront an attacker, but found Colson standing in the room and staring blankly at the wall.

“Hey,” I said quietly, my demeanor changing instantly now that I didn’t have to defend Jenny against an imaginary onslaught of attackers. “You’re back. Did everything go alright?”

“Huh?” Colson asked, his eyebrows pulled down in confusion as he shifted his attention away from the wall and toward me.

“I was just wondering if everything went okay,” I repeated, taking a step toward him. His eyes didn’t look the same as they normally did. Instead of warm chocolate, they appeared darker, almost black, as though all the light had been drained from them. Something had clearly gone wrong, but he didn’t appear to be harmed in any way.

“Went fine,” he said tersely. “I’m heading to bed.”

He shuffled off to his room, looking lost and distracted, and I heard the door close softly behind him. Thinking it best to keep my distance, I locked the door, did a quick sweep of the house, and went to lay down next to Jenny.

I was nearly asleep when a loud shout startled me. It sounded like it had come from Colson’s room, but I didn’t hear anything else to cause alarm.

I waited a minute to see if anything else would happen, and a moment later, another shout echoed throughout the house. I jumped out of bed and checked to make sure that Jenny hadn’t woken up. Seeing that she was still out cold, I made my way out of the room toward the end of the hallway where Colson’s bedroom was.

I crept inside in case an attacker was lying in wait, but all I saw was Colson. He was

still in bed, tangled up in his sheets, sweat pouring profusely from his body. His face appeared pained, as if he were struggling with an unseen enemy, and his muscles were clenched.

“Colson,” I whispered, gently rubbing his arm. “Colson, it’s me.”

His eyes snapped open, and he lunged at me, pinning me to the bed beneath his body as he growled harshly. As before, his eyes weren’t the same as usual. They were cold and distant, and I realized that he wasn’t truly seeing me. Whatever he had experienced tonight had affected him, and his nightmare was causing him to confuse the past with his current reality.

My heart raced as I grappled with him, doing my best to keep myself safe while bringing him back to reality.

“You’re safe,” I assured him steadily as I held onto his shoulders. The muscles beneath my fingers were taut. I could practically feel the stress rolling off him. “It’s me. It’s Christa. You’re safe.”

“Chris?” he asked, shaking his head to rid the evil thoughts from his mind.

“Yes, it’s just me,” I repeated. “You’re at home in your bed. You’re safe. Everything’s okay, I’m right here.”

Colson took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes as I reached up and ran my fingers through his dark brown hair. His head fell forward onto my shoulder as his weight pressed down on me. His body seemed to melt into my embrace as I wrapped my arms around him. My assurances seemed meaningless as I saw that, for Colson, everything was not okay. I wished I knew what he had experienced so I could help him, but I didn’t want to pry.

I think you should ask, Cassia said gently. He's struggling with something, and he needs to know that he doesn't have to struggle alone.

"Everything is going to be okay," I corrected quietly, murmuring into his ear. "Maybe it'll help if you tell me about it."

"It was bad," he mumbled.

"The mission tonight?"

I felt him nod, nuzzling against my neck as he did.

"Tell me," I offered.

Colson sighed again and rolled off me but remained close, propping himself up on one elbow next to me. His fingers trailed over my arm as he avoided my gaze.

"Most missions with the Dark Alphas involve violence," he warned me. "I've gotten used to getting my hands dirty and fighting alongside them to protect the packs and claim territory. But since you arrived, I haven't. Until tonight."

"You hurt someone," I surmised, careful to keep any note of accusation out of my voice.

"No, Chris," he said, pain evident on his face. "I killed someone. I'm... wracked with guilt. Not just for this death, but for all of them. For every act of violence I've ever committed. I fell asleep tonight and was haunted by their faces. What have I become?"

He removed his hand from my arm and covered his face, overcome by the guilt.

“Shh, Col,” I said, prying his hand away so that I could see him. “You can’t go there. You can’t think like that. Everyone has done things they aren’t proud of. At the time, you were doing what you thought was best. Every day, we grow and learn to do better.”

“What do I do now? How do I live with myself?”

“By remembering who you really are, in here.” I took one hand and pressed it against his chest, feeling the steady beating of his heart under my palm.

“I don’t know who I am,” he admitted defeatedly.

“Then I’ll remind you. You’re loyal, protective, and brave. You’re a father and an alpha. You’re strong and handsome. You have a devilish smile when you think you’re getting away with something cheeky,” I joked. “You’re tough, with a surprisingly gentle touch. You’re a friend.”

“It’s not enough,” he said sadly.

“You are enough,” I argued.

I could see that his thoughts were spiraling. I could only think of one way to break through the guilt that was threatening to overtake him. Without another thought, I cupped his face in my hands and planted my lips on his, melding our skin together. For a moment, he seemed shocked, but once the realization of what I was doing struck him, he responded enthusiastically. His soft lips had been drawn tightly together, evidence of his stress and despondency, but as I pressed mine into his I began to feel them loosen. My lips parted and my tongue caressed his lips gently, urging them apart.

The kiss, which had only begun as a means of bringing him out of his mental anguish,

suddenly transformed into something else entirely. It had been years since I had felt this pull inside of me—since the first time Colson and I had made love, all those years ago, when life had seemed full of endless possibilities as long as we were together. Years, since I had wanted to give myself fully to a man and allow him to see me for all I was and all I could be.

Desire filled me. Like a summer rainstorm, hot and steady, it washed over me. It was an unstoppable force, and I knew I wouldn't be satisfied until I had given in completely—until Colson and I fed the hunger that had been growing between us ever since fate had brought us together once more.

“Mm,” he moaned against my lips.

My heart raced as I realized his thoughts had been following my own. His hands reached under the oversized shirt I was wearing as a nightgown and pulled it over my head, discarding it on the bed beside us before grasping my full breasts. In a flurry of fabric, the rest of our clothes came off. I looked at him hungrily as tightness pooled deep in my abdomen. The anticipation of our coupling was all I could think about. I licked my lips and pulled him closer as I laid down on the bed.

“Are you sure?” he asked, panting against my collarbone as he trailed kisses down my neck.

“I'm sure,” I replied confidently.

His tongue traced down my chest and lapped at my nipple, stimulating it into a point as I moaned with pleasure, and his hand reached down to explore my legs and ass. His calloused fingers were delicate against my soft skin, causing goosebumps to erupt as each touch electrified my senses. I took in a shaky breath as I shivered at his touch.

“You're so beautiful,” he said in a low voice. I wasn't sure if he was talking to me, or

to himself. "Like an angel. How did I get so lucky to find you again?"

"Let's not worry about that now," I whispered. "I just want to be in this moment with you right now."

"I'm not worried about anything," Colson assured me. "How could I be when I have the most beautiful woman in the world in my bed?"

His fingers slipped inside me, and I threw my head back, allowing him to pleasure me in whatever way he wanted to. He hooked one finger inside of me, putting pressure on the front of my vaginal opening where my pleasure was intensified, as he pulled it in and out. I moaned at the movement and my eyes closed as I focused on the continued tightness in my belly.

"Yes, Col. Don't stop," I begged.

He continued the motion, diligently keeping the pace he had struck as my breathing came in short spurts. The warmth that had started in my abdomen began to spread and sweat accumulated on my skin. I could feel that I was close to my climax.

"Do you want me to make you finish?" Colson asked, knowing I was near my peak.

I nodded as I bit my lip, unable to bring myself to speak. His mouth lowered itself to my nipple, joining in the stimulation. My back arched as the pressure was released. With one hand I muffled my exclamation as my body shook with the force of my orgasm.

"You're so wet, Chris," he said huskily. "I want you so bad."

"Take me," I whispered. I may have finished once already, but that didn't mean I had any intention of being done.

Colson shifted so that his shaft was lined up with my entrance as he hovered above me and pulled one leg up to rest on his shoulder. His erect cock teased my lips as he kissed the ankle. I sighed in frustration, wishing he would put us both out of our misery and give himself to me.

“Impatient, are we?” he asked, pressing the tip of his penis onto my quivering clit.

“Aren’t you?” I replied breathlessly.

He kissed my ankle once more as his hands caressed my inner thighs. The length of his shaft slid between my lower lips, coating itself in their wetness.

“I’ve waited so long for this,” he said. “I just want to enjoy the moment, like you told me to.”

My fingers trailed down his chest and abs as he looked me in the eyes and entered me.

“Yes,” I moaned, my chest heaving as I breathed heavily.

Colson’s lips met mine as each thrust brought me closer and closer to orgasm. Our breath intermingled in the confined space between our lips, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, entwining my fingers in his short, dark hair.

His hand hooked below one knee, and he rolled onto his back, pulling me on top of him in a fluid motion that left me gasping. For a moment, our gyrations paused as I took in the sudden change of vantage point.

“Too abrupt?” he asked. His hands stilled on my thighs while he made sure his manhandling hadn’t crossed a boundary. I was touched by the thoughtfulness of his question and smiled down at him. The motion had disconnected us, but my core still

ached for him to be inside of me.

I shook my head and straightened my back so he could get a better view of my torso. I grabbed one of his hands in my own and dragged it up my stomach, cupping his palm against my breast and giving a tender squeeze. “Just right,” I whispered.

It was his turn to moan as I lifted my pelvis off his waist and reached down to reinsert his cock. A shudder flowed through him as his eyes closed in rapture for a moment before fluttering open again. His pupils dilated as he eyed me hungrily. It was an untamed look, and my assent seemed to have unbridled his desire completely.

Colson’s powerful hands gripped my waist hard, moving my body up and down on top of him in quick pounding motions that caused wave after wave of pleasure to burst through me. I placed one hand on his abdomen to brace myself, feeling his tense muscles beneath my fingers, as I bit down on the other hand to prevent myself from crying aloud.

“Come for me,” he whispered, half begging and half commanding me to release myself to him.

As if on cue, my back arched, and waves of passion flowed through me. He grasped my hips firmly as I rode the wave, and he continued to thrust deep inside me. A moment later, he groaned, spilling himself into me.

I gave a contented sigh of relief at the complete peace and oneness our coupling had brought me. Breathing heavily as if I had just run a marathon, I rolled off of him and laid down in the crook of his arm. Warmth radiated off his skin, enveloping me in his sweet musky scent as our heartrates returned to a normal pace.

“Fuck,” he sighed.

“I think we just did,” I pointed out.

A small laugh burst from our mouths simultaneously, causing us to laugh even harder. There was nothing truly funny about it, but that didn't stop us from giggling like children. For the first time in a long time, I felt the connection I had been missing for so long.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

As much as I wanted her to stay, I knew that Jenny would worry if she woke up and her mom wasn't there. The last thing we needed was to complicate matters further by having to explain why the dad she'd just met was sharing a bed with her mom.

So, after a few minutes of holding each other and recovering from our endeavors, Christa had gone back to her room and I had fallen asleep. I slept better than I had in weeks.

What had happened between Christa and me had gone far beyond sex for me. I felt such a physical and emotional relief, I hardly felt like the same person anymore. For the first time in a long time, I felt hope rekindle inside me, and I started to believe that I might still be worth caring about.

I rolled over in bed, remembering the sensations of Christa's body beneath mine and the way her lips had tasted. My body began to react to the memory, and I felt myself becoming excited at the idea of sleeping with her again. But at the same time, I was worried. Our tryst hadn't exactly been something either of us had planned, and it couldn't have come at a more confusing time. As much as I wanted to believe that Christa had been interested in me and that she might want to be with me, the truth had to be far simpler than that.

When she came to my room last night, it wasn't out of desire. She had heard me making noise in my sleep and come to check on me. That was all. It was me who had turned the night into something sexual. In all honesty, if I hadn't been upset, I doubted she ever would have kissed me again, let alone allowed me to touch her like I had.

I had been a pity fuck.

The thought of Christa feeling sorry for me was painful, and I knew that seeing her after last night would be awkward. But there was nothing for it.

I exhaled forcefully to release the nervousness from my system and headed for the kitchen, hoping I was the first one awake. If I could just get a little caffeine in my system, I would be much more prepared to face whatever mood she was in when she woke up.

The kitchen was empty, so I quietly made a pot of my favorite brew and sat down on a stool at the counter to scroll through my phone while I woke up. It wasn't my usual routine. Most mornings, I would sit in silence and mentally prepare for whatever tasks I had planned for the day. But right now, I needed the distraction.

"Good morning," Jenny said sleepily as she padded down the hallway, rubbing her eyes.

"Morning, Jenny-bug," I replied.

She smiled at the nickname, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I hadn't even thought about it before it came out.

Progress, I thought.

"You hungry?" I asked, pouring a bowl of her favorite cereal and setting it in front of the stool beside me.

She hopped up next to me and rested her head briefly on my arm. Her eyes closed, and a sleepy smile crossed her lips. My heartstrings tugged at the sight, and I was reminded of every moment I had missed with her. I bent down to rest my head on the

top of hers, breathing in the scent of her messy blond hair.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“Of course,” I responded, lifting my head from hers as she grabbed her spoon and scooped up her first bite. “You need anything else?”

“Nope,” she said through a mouthful of cereal.

I chuckled, seeing that she had gotten at least one character trait from me.

“Your mom still sleeping?” I asked.

“In the shower,” Jenny answered, taking another bite.

“Is there anything you wanted to do today?”

“Yeah! Can we go to the forest again?” she asked, eyes brightening at the thought.

“No tree climbing today, though. I just want to go out and listen to the birds. It’s hard to hear them in town.”

“We can definitely do that,” I promised.

“Do what?” Christa asked.

I hadn’t heard her come out of their bedroom, and I gave a start at her sudden appearance. Heat flooded my face as I looked at her, suddenly embarrassed to be in her presence.

“Colson said we can go to the forest today!” Jenny told her excitedly.

“Oh,” Christa said. “Um, yeah, we can do that.”

“I only meant if that’s okay with you,” I said awkwardly. “We should have asked your mom first, Jenny.”

“That’s fine with me,” Christa assured Jenny.

The room filled with silence as Christa and I stared at each other awkwardly, both unsure of how to proceed. She shifted from one foot to the other as I cleared my throat and went to take a sip of my coffee, but it was empty.

“Did you, um, want a cup?” I asked, heading toward the coffee maker to refill my cup.

“I can get it,” Christa said.

She reached up to grab a mug from the cabinet just as I bent forward to grab the coffee pot, and the door collided with my forehead with a loud bang. I sucked in a breath through my teeth and scrunched up my face as she began apologizing profusely.

“Oh my goddess, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“No, it was my fault.”

“Really, I’m fine.”

Christa looked at me, completely flustered by our interaction, while I held my forehead and assessed the damage. It didn’t appear to be bleeding, and thanks to my

wolf abilities, I knew any bruising would heal quickly.

We both poured ourselves coffee—slowly, this time, to avoid any injuries—and turned around to find Jenny looking at us with her mouth askew and one eyebrow raised.

“What?” we said in unison.

“You two are acting really weird,” Jenny said as she returned to her cereal.

My cheeks grew hot with embarrassment as I glanced sideways at Christa, who had done the same. As soon as we made eye contact, we both shifted our glances away and went to sit down on either side of Jenny.

It’s going to be a long, awkward day, Orin sighed.

When we were all ready for the day, we headed out to the forest, taking the familiar path through the neighborhood and toward the trees that bordered the town. Being together in nature had become something of a ritual for us, and I felt myself growing more at ease with each step.

“Come on!” Jenny shouted, bounding ahead of us. “You two are so slow!”

Christa and I picked up our pace, and soon the three of us were running through the forest’s undergrowth. Jenny laughed at the chase, thinking we couldn’t catch up to her.

“Slow pokes! Slow pokes!” she teased.

We kicked up into a true run and allowed our long legs to carry us closer to our daughter. She turned around to see where we were and, seeing that the gap between

us had closed, tried to run faster. I reached out my hand to tag her shoulder, but instead of meeting the fabric of her shirt, I brushed up against the fur of the whitest wolf I had seen.

“Woah!” I exclaimed, screeching to a halt.

“Jenny! Stop! Stop and look!” Christa shouted in excitement.

The wolf paused and turned around, staring at us with deep brown eyes. Christa and I looked from Jenny to each other and back to Jenny. In unison, we shifted, transforming into our wolves. The eyes of Jenny’s white wolf widened, and I could tell that she was realizing what had just occurred.

Her first shift! Orin exclaimed.

I’m so proud of her, I inwardly beamed. I can’t believe how quickly she did it, too. There wasn’t even time for me to register that it was happening beforehand.

She’s powerful, Orin agreed.

The three of us circled each other, allowing our wolves to get acquainted—or reacquainted, in the case of Orin and Cassia—for a few minutes. Then Christa and I transformed back and began talking Jenny through the process.

“Since your shift happened so fast, you probably didn’t have time to register the feelings that went with it,” Christa explained, sitting in front of the white wolf. “It’s similar to letting go or going outward. To go back to human form, you have to do the opposite.”

The wolf cocked its head to the side in a look of confusion.

“You need to focus inward,” I told her. “Think of all the things that make you, you. Focus on those things, and channel yourself into your human form.”

“It can help if you close your eyes,” Christa added.

The brown eyes closed, and within a minute, our daughter stood in front of us once more.

“Great job, baby!” Christa cried, rushing to hug her.

“I did it, Mom! I finally did it! Colson, did you see? That was so cool!”

Jenny’s enthusiasm was contagious, and both Christa and I joined in her celebration.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

To celebrate Jenny's first transformation, Colson and I thought it would be a nice gesture to give her something special to remember her day, so I left her and Colson at home and snuck into town to do a little shopping. There was a small jewelry store that I hadn't been inside yet, and I had a feeling I would find exactly what I was looking for there.

I felt a sense of peace as I walked down the street toward the town center. The sun was still shining brightly in the blue sky as puffy clouds floated across the blue expanse above my head. The weather was warm, and there was a slight breeze. Children were playing in their yards and homes as I passed by the residential area of town.

It's been the perfect day, I thought to myself.

There had never been a doubt in my mind that Jenny would get her wolf eventually, but I knew she was starting to feel upset about how long it was taking. I was so glad that it had happened for her, especially because she got to share the moment with both her parents.

It does seem like things are working out, Cassia agreed. But you seem to have forgotten about something.

What's that? I asked.

We still need to get home. To Sparkle Hollow, she pointed out.

I haven't forgotten, I replied. It's just that things have been... complicated.

Because of Colson.

Because of everything. Colson, Jenny, the Dark Alphas blocking our path. Not to mention the fact that we don't have much of a home to go to. It's not like Jenny has a bright future, being relegated to the outskirts of pack society because of what I did, I said ruefully.

It was still the right thing to do, my wolf said gently.

Maybe, I hedged. But I still need some time to think about what to do next.

We'll figure it out, Cassia agreed.

I arrived at the jewelry shop and headed inside. It was quaint, as most things were in this town, but there were a few people browsing the display cases. An older woman with bejeweled glasses dangling from a chain around her neck stood behind the register. She smiled at me as I came inside and greeted me warmly.

"Good afternoon," she said. "Can I help you find anything?"

"I'm just looking for a gift for my daughter," I told her.

"Let me know if you need any recommendations. We have some great pieces I'm sure she'll love," the woman replied cheerfully.

"Do you have any gold necklaces?" I asked.

She came out from behind the counter and walked toward a display case behind the picture window, indicating a section of dainty necklaces all made of gold.

"These are beautiful," I told her.

“Anything in particular strike your eye?”

Many of the chains had pendants that seemed rather large for Jenny’s size, but there was one emblem dangling from a dainty golden chain that looked perfect. I pointed toward the rectangular charm, and the woman smiled.

“Excellent choice,” she said, pulling it from underneath the glass. “This one was an etching done by an artist in the region. She doesn’t usually work with metal, but I managed to snag this one before it went to auction.”

She passed it to me, and I admired the intricate details that had been fit onto such a small surface: a wolf, howling at a crescent moon. I could practically feel the power of the wolf inside the picture. It may be a bit literal, but for the occasion, I couldn’t think of anything more suitable. I hoped that when Jenny wore it, she would feel more connected with herself.

“It’s perfect. I’ll take it,” I said, passing it back to her.

The woman headed toward the register to ring it up and package it. I followed, lost in my own thoughts. It felt like yesterday when I had been a little girl and my own mother had given me a necklace of my own. My parents hadn’t been rich, but they had been loving and kind. Their bravery and willingness to help others had elevated them within the ranks of the pack, but it was also why they had died before Jenny was born. Life wasn’t always kind to warriors of the pack. Of all the regrets I had in life, my parents not having the chance to meet their granddaughter was one of the biggest.

After paying for my purchase, I left the store and turned toward Colson’s house, but a familiar face across the street made me stop in my tracks. Alpha Gage Desmond.

We made eye contact, and I could see that he had recognized me as well. With a tight-lipped smile, I nodded at him, hoping my expression came across as both

nonconfrontational and dismissive. After our first two run-ins, he didn't need any more cause to accost me.

I turned my head and continued my walk, but from the corner of my eye, I saw that my attempt to disappear had been foiled. He strode across the street and stood directly in my path, his arms folded as he looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"I've been wondering when I would run into you again," he said.

"Alpha Desmond," I said, bowing my head and attempting to appear demure enough that he would let me pass.

"You can cut your bullshit," he said, his expression and tone oddly congenial for the content of his words. I looked around and realized he was putting on an act so as not to look suspicious to any passersby.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I said.

"You and Colson think you have everyone fooled, but I know the truth about you two," he continued. "You're a spy for Sparkle Hollow."

"I'm still not sure what you're talking about," I said, uncomfortable with the accusations he was making. Despite being untrue, they were also dangerous. If the rest of the alphas believed Desmond, we would be in serious trouble. "There is no conspiracy here."

"You can lie all you want, but my pack knows that you two will eventually betray the rest of the alphas. I'm watching you," he warned.

"It sounds like you're projecting," I snapped. "Colson is more loyal than anyone I've ever known. He doesn't have it in him to turn his back on his pack or the alliances

he's made to keep them safe. In fact, he has more loyalty in his little finger than you have in your entire body."

Desmond snarled quietly at me, and I knew I had made a mistake. I had gotten angry at the way he was speaking about Colson, but I shouldn't have attacked his character—even if what I'd said was true. But the words had already been spoken. I couldn't take them back now.

Even if I could, I realized I wouldn't. Every word I had said about Colson was true. He was an excellent leader to Pack Marsden. There had never been a time when he had put his own interests over those of his people. He always took care of them, and he was willing to risk his own life and happiness to keep them safe.

"You should be careful how you speak to me," Desmond warned. "We may be in Colson's territory now, but you won't always be. Have some respect for your superiors."

"I will speak respectfully to people who deserve it," I said, doubling down on my stance. "Colson doesn't deserve your vicious diatribe, and I won't stand here while you belittle him and his accomplishments as alpha."

"You little bitch," he hissed quietly.

"Excuse me," a voice said from behind him.

Desmond turned aside, revealing Colson. His dark eyes burned with pent-up rage and fire, but his stance was casual.

"How are you, Gage? I'm surprised to see you here. Considering this town isn't a part of your territory, I mean."

“I was visiting an acquaintance and happened to see your... mate ... walking about the town. I wanted to check and make sure she had all the information she needed,” Desmond said.

“I guess I should have been more clear in my greeting. I don’t actually care what you were doing, or why you’re here. What I meant to say was that Miss Lionel doesn’t need you harassing her on the street,” Colson said, checking his fingernails in a blatant display of being unaffected by Desmond’s presence. “And I don’t need another member of the alphas to be making trouble in my territory. Do we understand one another?”

“Perfectly,” Desmond responded through gritted teeth.

“Wonderful,” Colson said, clapping his hands together. “Then I’ll see you at the next meet-up.”

Desmond looked like he wanted to say more, but with the clear dismissal and a street full of witnesses, there wasn’t much he could do without looking like a fool. He turned and crossed the street, heading in the direction he had come from.

As he left, I breathed out a sigh of relief. My hands were cold, and I realized my fight-or-flight response had been activated by the confrontation. I rubbed them together and rolled my neck, trying to release the tension that had built up in my shoulders. When I looked back at Colson, I realized he was staring at me with a hint of concern.

“You look like you could use a drink,” he said.

I laughed at the unexpected segue. “Only if it’s a strong one,” I admitted.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

“Sorry for interrupting your conversation,” I joked as I walked next to Christa, heading for the hole-in-the-wall pub down the street.

“That’s okay, it wasn’t a very good one,” Christa said. “Is Jenny still at home?”

I nodded. “You were taking a while, and something felt off. I wanted to make sure you weren’t in danger, so I told her she could watch TV and we’d be back home soon. I hope that was okay.”

“I’m glad you came,” Christa said.

Relief flooded me. Our parenting journey was so vastly different from anything I’d seen or encountered yet, and I felt like I was constantly afraid of doing the wrong thing when it came to my role. Christa’s validating my decision helped me bolster my sense that I was doing the right thing.

I held open the door to the pub, and Christa entered.

“Bar or table?” I asked her.

“Either is fine,” she replied.

It was still early in the evening, so not many patrons were present. Even so, I didn’t feel like having a conversation with our backs turned toward the door, so I led Christa toward a small table off to the side where I had open sightlines in case Gage—or anyone else—decided to make an appearance.

Christa sat down and turned her head toward the bar expectantly, looking in search of that drink I promised her. As if on cue, the waitress headed over to take our order.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

“Double shot of tequila on the rocks, please,” Christa said.

“And for you?” the waitress asked me.

“The same, hold the ice.”

She scurried away and returned moments later with two glasses and a bowl of limes, set them in front of us, and returned to her position behind the bar. Christa picked up her glass and took a sip of the clear liquid before biting into a lime.

“Yup, tastes just like I remember,” she commented. “Cold and hot at the same time.”

“But damn, does it help,” I added, slamming my drink to the back of my throat in one gulp. “Why do you sip yours?”

“If you drink it all at once, it all tastes bad. If you sip it, you’ll start to get a buzz before you’re done, and it’ll taste better,” she said with a shrug.

“Really?”

“Honestly, it’s been a while since I’ve had any, but it sounds like a nice explanation, doesn’t it?”

I chuckled at the stereotypical “Chris” response. She didn’t appear to be uneasy in the least after her encounter with Gage. He had said some vile and threatening things to her, but she had held her head high the entire time. If I were in her position, I was

sure I would have felt the urge to run away, but she'd seemed calm and collected.

"Are you doing okay, Chris? Need anything, besides the strong drink?"

She shrugged. "I'm okay. Desmond isn't the first man I've met with a sense of entitlement and a predisposition to making everyone around him feel uncomfortable. I know how to handle guys like that."

I knew the world was full of men who were more than happy to intimidate those who appeared to be weaker or smaller than them, but the thought that Christa had enough experience with that type, enough to feel capable of walking away unscathed time and time again from them, made me want to rage against the world.

My protective urge grew stronger as I realized that she should have had me there to protect her all this time. I was the one who failed her.

Christa had always been strong—that had been one of the things that drew me to her in the first place. But the years she had spent raising Jenny alone had only served to make her even more formidable. I was thankful she had the skills necessary to stay safe, and to protect Jenny.

"You're good at reading people, aren't you?" I noted.

"Usually," she agreed. "For example, right now you look like you could use another drink."

Funny, wise, insightful, loyal, and with a beauty that rivaled anything else in the world. I had been a fool to ever let her go.

I ordered another drink, this time a mixer, and Christa and I sat in companionable silence while we waited. After it arrived, I decided it was time to ask the question that

had been burning in my mind since I had interrupted the confrontation between Gage and Christa.

“I have to ask, why did you defend me to Gage?”

Christa inhaled sharply. “I didn’t think you heard that. How long were you listening, exactly?”

“Long enough.”

“And you didn’t step in sooner?” she asked, her head cocked to one side.

“It seemed like you had everything under control,” I said with a shrug. “I only interrupted because I wanted to see him squirm at being caught. But you didn’t answer my question.”

I could see that she was deciding whether to answer or change the subject again. We had made progress, but I knew she still didn’t trust me. I was surprised when she decided to open up.

“Because that’s what I do, I guess. I defend the people I care about. Don’t get any ideas, though,” she warned, taking another sip of her tequila. “Just because I defended you to Desmond doesn’t mean you’re forgiven for the past.”

“I know,” I assured her.

She was silent again, and I could see that her thoughts were far away as she finished her drink.

“I know what you did for me all those years ago, and how it changed your life in Sparkle Hollow,” I admitted. “I had my secretary find out about it a few weeks ago.

I'm sorry. I never intended for you to suffer the consequences for me."

"It was my choice," she said, her voice shaking a little.

"Still doesn't make it right," I said. "I messed up."

She sighed deeply and started playing with her empty glass, avoiding eye contact with me. I could see her inner struggle to be honest, but she pushed through.

"I'm still haunted by it. Not just how it ended and you leaving, but all of it. The thoughts of what could have been, you know?"

"I know," I agreed.

"Anyway, we should probably get home," Christa said, breaking the tension. "Jenny will be wondering what we're up to."

I paid the tab, and we began the walk toward home, going slowly and leaning into each other for support in our partially inebriated state. We were nearly there when I felt a sudden urge to come clean.

"Hold on, Chris," I said, pulling her to a stop and turning so we faced each other. "I've gone long enough without telling you the story behind the reason I left, but I don't think I can keep it from you any longer. Can I...would you hear it? Is that okay?"

She nodded, so I plunged in headfirst.

"You know when we were younger, my choice of friendships wasn't always the best. Well, the people I was running around with back then... they liked to play pranks. Cruel ones," I said, highlighting the darkness of my story before I got too far into it. I

wanted her to know she could stop me at any time.

“Go ahead,” she encouraged.

“We were all out drinking one night, wandering around in the forest near Sparkle Hollow and messing around,” I said. “They saw a car heading toward town on the old country road that crosses the train tracks. A train was coming, but the car was going to pass through first.”

“Wait,” Christa said, frowning. “That crash happened the night before you left.”

I nodded, continuing. “The guys thought it would be funny for one of us to pretend their foot was stuck in the tracks, to make whoever was in the car think they were going to get hit. We drew straws to see who would do it, and I drew the short straw.”

“Col...”

“Hold on. Let me get this out,” I plead. “I got into position a little way away from the road and started making a racket, waving my hands to get them to stop, while my friends hid in the bushes by the road to watch what they would do. The car stopped on the tracks, and a man got out and walked toward me. I thought he knew a train was coming, but he was moving slowly. By the time he got to me and saw that I wasn’t really stuck, there was no way for him to get back to the car in time.”

Christa covered her mouth with her hands. I was sure she had heard about the train hitting the car, but she had never heard this part of the story before. No one had.

“My friends and I laughed at his expression when I jumped free of the tracks,” I continued. “I expected him to jump after me, but after he realized I was out of danger, he cursed at me, called me an idiot, and sprinted back toward his car. I remember thinking that he was an idiot for running in the same direction as the train. I didn’t

realize his wife was asleep in their vehicle.”

“He was trying to save her. He didn’t know a train was coming and thought he was just checking on you,” Christa realized.

“He wasn’t fast enough to get her out, and the train killed them both instantly,” I said. Tears began welling up in my eyes for the tragedy I had inflicted. “I went back to Sparkle Hollow and told the alpha what had happened—most of it, anyway. My friends, of course, fled the moment their plan went awry.”

“I don’t remember you being in Sparkle Hollow that day,” Christa said, concentrating on her memories. “I remember going to the pack house and hearing everyone argue about you, wanting to track you down.”

“It was early in the morning, before you would have been awake,” I explained. “They told me the couple who had been killed were allies of the pack, and that my actions had caused too many problems for them. They were going to lock me up with silver chains in the cells. I would have been okay with being punished for what I’d done, but they knew about my interest in you. They threatened to put you in the cells with me, too.”

“But they never did,” Christa said.

I shook my head, my heart dropping to my stomach as I said the next words. “No, because I told them I didn’t care about you. I wanted to throw them off your scent and make them think I didn’t have any feelings for you so that you would be safe from their punishment.”

“Then why did you run away?” she asked. “Why not stay in the cell until your punishment was over, and then be free of them with me?”

“Because they needed to believe I didn’t love you, and that hurting you wouldn’t affect me,” I explained. “No wolf would accept that kind of punishment unless it was for a noble cause—like protecting their mate. So when they tried to subdue me, I fought back. I injured some of them and ran away. It was the only thing I could do to keep you safe. I never imagined you’d try to defend me and end up being punished, anyway.”

“It looks like we caused our own downfalls,” Christa said with a sigh.

I placed my hands on either side of her face, staring deeply into her gray eyes so she would know how much I meant my next words.

“Chris, I am so sorry for the hurt I’ve caused and for the things I’ve done,” I said. “It’s unforgivable, but I hope to someday earn that forgiveness from you.”

“Forgiveness isn’t earned. It’s given,” she replied softly. “And I forgive you.”

Tears fell down my cheeks at the simple yet beautiful statement. I had a long way to go toward forgiving myself, but Christa made it seem like it might be possible.

I leaned forward and gave her a tender kiss, feeling the softness of her lips against my own. With a delicate touch, her hands reached up to brush the tears away from my cheeks as I pulled away.

“I’ve got a lot of making up to do,” I assured her. “But I swear to you, I’ll be a better man. The man you deserve.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Colson's apology still rang in my ears the following day, as did his promises. I believed that his story was true and that he felt he truly had been protecting me. But believing it and agreeing with his plan were different things.

In my mind, a million choices could have been made to avoid our fate. The past couldn't be changed, but I was determined not to make the mistake of allowing myself to be hurt by him again. I may have feelings for the man, but that didn't mean I needed to let him sweep me off my feet. We weren't young, dumb kids anymore. Now, we had Jenny to consider.

Today, we were taking her out to the forest for more practice with her shifting, and to give her the necklace I had gotten her. It felt like yet another step in the right direction, and I was excited for Jenny to continue learning about herself.

"Ready for day number two of shifting, Jenny-bug?" Colson asked.

Jenny nodded enthusiastically as she stood beneath the tall pine trees. As always, I was struck by just how much she looked like the younger version of myself. She had her own distinct features that made her unique, but certain things always made me pause and double-check that I wasn't looking in a mirror. The color of her hair, the tilt of her pointed chin, the curve of her smile—all of them reminded me of myself at her age.

"Before we have you shift again, Colson and I have something we want to give you," I told her.

"Really?" she asked enthusiastically. "But it's not my birthday."

“Not your human birthday,” Colson agreed. “But yesterday was your first shift. We wanted to mark the occasion.”

I pulled out a small box and handed it to Jenny. She took off the lid to reveal the golden wolf necklace perched inside. Her eyes widened, and her small fingers traced the delicate etching on the square token.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “Can you help me put it on, Mom?”

“You are beautiful, baby,” I told her, clasping the chain around her neck.

She beamed up at us with pride, and then an expression of confusion passed her face.

“Can I wear this when I shift?” she asked.

“Yes,” I assured her. “Anything you’re wearing—clothes, jewelry, that kind of thing—will travel with you when you shift. It doesn’t break.”

“How does that work, exactly?”

“We aren’t really sure,” Colson admitted. “There isn’t a great way to study that kind of magic without risking someone getting hurt. It’s just something shifters know from experience. That’s why we don’t show up naked every time we transform.”

“Ew!” Jenny said with a laugh, scrunching up her nose at him.

“Hey! You asked!” Colson pushed her shoulder playfully.

“So, if it’s on your body, it travels, but the things around you don’t,” Jenny said.

“Yes, and that’s something that’s very important for you to understand,” I told her.

“Right now, we’re shifting in a forest, but that might not always be the case. Any time you’re going to transform, it’s important that you look around you to make sure you don’t hurt yourself or someone else.”

Jenny nodded solemnly, taking in our lessons. Colson and I continued running her through different scenarios of where and when she might need or want to shift, and what she could do to make sure she was doing it safely.

As we did, I tried my best not to pay attention to the way I felt with Colson so close to me. Seeing him parent our daughter wasn’t helping matters, either. There was something extremely attractive about his patience with her questions that made me fight twice as hard to avoid getting even more attached to him.

In some ways, our circumstances were simple. We were two parents who had been in love and now found themselves back together again. Pack Marsden was starting to feel like my own pack now, and Jenny also seemed at peace here.

On the other hand, nothing could ever be that easy. Colson was the alpha, and his pack was right in the middle of a host of other packs all vying for land and territory that put them at odds with my own pack. Add in our complicated history and the fact that my home pack didn’t even know where I was, we had a disaster brewing.

I couldn’t leave Sparkle Hollow behind without a word. Eventually, they would need to be informed that I was alive.

The easiest thing to do would be to send them a message, but I worried about possible repercussions for Colson if I did. Especially after the revelations of last night. If the circumstances had been as bad as he’d described, I couldn’t be sure that Alpha Lex wouldn’t immediately call for Sparkle Hollow to storm in and take me back if they knew where I was.

But part of me realized that the consequences of Colson's choices—no matter how long ago they were—weren't mine to bear. Sparkle Hollow might decide to continue to seek retribution against Colson, but he also hadn't paid his debt to them yet. His choice had caused the deaths of two wolves, and that was something that would need to be addressed eventually.

My biggest concern, apart from my growing feelings for Colson, was the effect it might have on Jenny if she was wrapped up in a hunt against her father. There was no surefire way to keep her from learning what Colson had done, but I wanted to keep her as far away from the situation as possible for her own safety.

The other issue was the Dark Alphas. If any threats against one of their members were made, it would be seen as a threat against them all. They could very well decide to take matters into their own hands and do a preemptive strike on my pack. The innocent people of Sparkle Hollow didn't deserve to have men like Gage Desmond attacking them for things that had happened a decade ago. Not to mention that a message might be intercepted by the Dark Alphas and never arrive at Sparkle Hollow in the first place. If it was, they would think we were in league with their enemies.

The entire situation was hopeless, it seemed. But I needed to find a solution soon, before a bigger problem found me.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

“You’re sure this is a good idea?” Christa asked.

We had just arrived at Alpha Vitali’s pack house for a meeting of the Dark Alphas, and I could tell that she was nervous. It was true that none of her previous interactions with the group had been positive, but I felt this was a necessary step toward smoothing things out between them.

“We need to show them that we are a united front,” I reminded her. “If Gage thinks he can keep cornering us and making threats when the other person isn’t there, it’s going to be a long road.”

“I’m not worried about him but about the rest of them,” Christa admitted.

“We need to make sure they aren’t buying into the lies Gage is spreading about you—about us,” I pointed out. “The only way to do that is for them to get to know you and see that you aren’t working for Sparkle Hollow.”

Christa sighed, bracing herself for the confrontation as we entered the room where the other alphas were already assembled. Alphas Julian Wentworth and Dominic Charles sat on either side of a large, rectangular table with Axel Vitali at the head.

“There you are,” Axel said. “And I see you’ve brought a guest.”

“I think you all remember Christa,” I said, pulling a chair out next to Wentworth so she could take a seat before I sat next to her. “I see that we’re missing a few.”

“Rutherford and Desmond are busy today. They said we could go ahead without

them,” Axel explained.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Wentworth asked, fidgeting loudly in his chair.

“First, I’m curious why we have a non-member present at one of our meetings,” Alpha Rutherford asked. “Don’t you think that’s a bit of a security risk?”

“Christa is my guest, as you know,” I said pointedly. I was hoping to avoid using the word “mate” since that wasn’t something I had discussed with her prior, but if I needed to bring it up, I would. Right now, I was hoping that they would all remember my instructions when I first brought her back to Pack Marsden.

“She can stay,” Axel said. “As long as she knows there will be consequences if she shares anything she learns outside this room.”

“She is right here,” Christa said pointedly. “You can address me directly. I won’t bite.”

“Pity,” Rutherford said with a sly smile.

I growled in a low warning, and he shrugged before turning back to Axel. But Christa’s ferocity seemed to be endearing her to the group, and I squeezed her leg in encouragement as the meeting began.

By the time we were wrapping up, Christa had the alphas wrapped around her finger. With Gage missing from the proceedings, we didn’t have any snide remarks or threats to deal with. We had been able to show them who Christa was and that she was a supportive and fierce warrior who was on my side. In short, she had charmed them.

“Let me take you out to dinner,” I said as we drove away from the pack house.
“There’s a great little spot down the road. You hungry?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

We arrived at a small Italian place that was halfway between the Vitali and Marsden communities. It was nestled into a hill and surrounded by trees strung with soft yellow lights.

“Nice place,” Christa said appreciatively. “You bring all the ladies here?”

“No. Only the most beautiful ones,” I said.

“Such a charmer,” she teased. “I bet you call them all the most beautiful.”

“I reserve the term beautiful for only one woman,” I assured her.

Christa blushed as I held open the door for her and we walked inside. Quiet music filled the air as the hostess seated us at a table by the window and brought us drinks and appetizers. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been out on a date. It made me feel awkward and uncomfortable, but it was important to me that Christa understood just how appreciative I was of what she had done for me by attending the meeting.

“What did you think of the alpha group, now that you’ve had the chance to meet them all properly?” I asked.

“You were right about them,” she admitted. “They’re brash and violent, but the group does have its uses. I see that now, and that you’re just doing the best you can for your packs. I just wish it could be done in a slightly more... civilized way.”

“Unfortunately, this is the way we’ve always been,” I said. “I agree that a future of

peace sounds amazing, but we aren't there yet. This is the way we protect our packs so we can create the future we want for our children."

"I can see that," she said diplomatically.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "For being patient with me and for playing nice with the group. That meeting could have gone way differently if it weren't for your ability to charm everyone you meet."

"You think I charmed them, eh?"

"Are you kidding? I think if I hadn't been there, Rutherford would have asked you to go home with him. You're practically his dream woman."

"And what about you?" she asked, using a sultry voice as she looked up at me through dark lashes. For the first time, I understood what people meant when they described their heart skipping a beat.

"M-me?" I stuttered.

"Am I your dream woman?" she asked in the same tone.

I stared at her, stunned by the turn the conversation was taking. She smiled, and a twinkle came into her eyes. I realized she was teasing me.

"Oh no," I laughed. "Your charms won't work on me. You better cut that out before you get us into trouble."

"Maybe trouble is what I'm looking for," she continued, taking a sip of her wine.

I cleared my throat as the waitress brought our entrees, and we began to eat in silence.

“You never did answer my question, though,” Christa said after a moment. “What does your dream woman look like?”

“I think you already know the answer to that question,” I said.

She bit her lip and twirled her fork in her pasta as we stared into each other’s eyes.

“Not hungry?” I asked.

“On the contrary, I’m starving,” she said. “But I’d like to get some to-go boxes for our food, if that’s okay with you.”

“Check, please,” I said, flagging down the waitress.

By the time we got to the car, my head was spinning. Christa placed her hand on my knee, and I swallowed hard. Things had taken a turn I didn’t expect, and I wasn’t at all sure what to do about it.

“What’s wrong?” Christa asked. “Is my charm working on you after all?”

“I want to say no, but I can’t lie to you,” I admitted.

“Good,” she grinned.

She angled her body toward me from the passenger seat and began to unbutton my pants. My breathing grew heavy as she pulled my erect cock out of my jeans and began playing with it delicately. She wrapped her hand around the shaft and began to tug. My breathing became shallow as I watched her roll her hand up and down its length, and a glisten of precum appeared at the tip.

“Wait,” I said, stilling her hands as I struggled to explain what I was thinking. “As

much as I've enjoyed the teasing, this can't go further. I can't. Not as part of a game. Not unless you mean it."

"No games," she assured me quietly. "This is what I want. The teasing was just a bonus."

"You're positive?"

Her eyes answered for her as she lowered her mouth to my cock and wrapped her lips around the tip. I groaned with pleasure and wrapped my fingers in the hair at the base of her scalp. I could feel her tongue run the length of my shaft as she took me into her mouth.

"God, Chris," I panted. "That feels so good."

"Mm," she moaned, mouth still full of my engorged member. The vibrations transferred through her mouth, causing my erection to thrum in response.

My mouth opened as I breathed heavily and closed my eyes. With my hand on her head, I could feel as she moved back and forth, teasing me closer and closer to completion with each movement she made.

I felt her hand cup my balls, and I moaned again. She rolled them gently and then suddenly switched places, her mouth moving to my balls as her hand moved up and down my penis.

"Goddess," I breathed, looking into her eyes as she toyed with me. She smiled at my expression and returned her mouth to my cock, opening wide to take in as much of me as she could fit.

"Yes," I moaned, using my hand to increase the speed of her ministrations until I

could barely contain my release.

It had been so long since we had been together, though, and I didn't want it to end too quickly. I tried to pull her head away, but she was fully committed to the act.

"Chris," I pleaded. "Wait."

Finally, she sat back, and I looked into her eyes. Saliva and precum had mixed in her mouth, spilling over and down her chin. She wiped it away, and I pulled her close so I could kiss her lips.

"That was amazing," I told her as I pulled back. "But what I really want is to be inside you. I want to feel your tight lips pulsing around my cock while you ride me."

She hiked her dress up and removed her underwear, dropping them on the floor of the car. I moved my seat back, and she straddled my lap. Her hips gyrated as she rubbed her pussy against my cock. She parted her lips with one hand, and I saw my penis glide between them.

"I missed the feeling of your dick between my legs," Christa said.

"Let me in, then," I whispered, angling her hips so that I could slide into her wet opening.

She exclaimed passionately as she took in my length and wrapped her arms around my neck. I reached down with my thumb and found her clitoris, rubbing it gently in a circular motion as she rocked back and forth. Her breathing became more erratic as I continued.

"Yes, Colson," she whispered into my ear.

The combination of internal and external stimulation was driving her wild, and she began to ride harder and faster. I clenched my free hand on her hip, feeling the soft curve of her ass under my fingertips.

“Fuck, Chris,” I murmured. “You’re so tight.”

Our bodies slammed together as the car rocked back and forth. The parking lot was full of other cars, and I prayed that no one interrupted us before we were finished. I wanted nothing more than to finish inside her, but I refused to come first.

“Cum for me, baby,” I whispered into her ear, nibbling her earlobe gently. “Let me hear you.”

“Faster,” she ordered me breathlessly.

I moved my thumb faster, pressing her higher and higher toward climax.

“Yes, yes, yes!” she screamed as she orgasmed.

On her final “yes,” I allowed myself to come, ejaculating inside her as her body shook with her own release. She collapsed forward and rested on my shoulder, and I breathed in the sweet scent of her vanilla perfume. I could hear my heart beat in my ears as I sighed deeply, feeling completely at peace.

A moment later, I saw someone heading towards the car parked next to us.

“Um, Chris,” I said, clearing my throat. “We gotta go.”

She looked behind her, out the front windshield, and scurried off my lap and into the passenger seat.

“Yep, definitely time to go,” she agreed.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

“Are you sure it’s no trouble?” Reagan asked for the third time.

I was helping with the pack house construction project again today. The frame had been constructed and walled in, and we had moved on to the next phase of the project. At that point, we realized we were missing a few items that needed to be picked up from the hardware store on the other side of town.

“I really don’t mind going,” I assured him. “Just give me the list, and I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

“It’s a pretty long list. Do you want someone to go with you?” he asked.

“I think I can handle it,” I repeated.

He passed the list to me, along with a credit card and the keys to one of the pack vehicles. I climbed inside and drove to the store, passing through the main part of town and a few neighborhoods to get there. I hadn’t been to this side of town before today. This was closer to Alpha Franco’s territory, and part of the no man’s land that separated their pack from Colson’s.

The hardware store was small but appeared to be well-stocked. I grabbed a cart at the door and made my way through the aisles, checking items off the list as I put them in the cart. By the time I reached the last aisle, I had a full cart and an empty list, so I headed for the checkout.

As I approached the front of the store, another customer entered, and I saw it was Alpha Franco Stone. We hadn’t officially met before, but he was easy enough to

recognize based on his association with my home pack. I had already run into Sienna once, so I supposed it was inevitable that a similar circumstance would happen again.

I ducked my head down and pretended to be busy studying my list so he wouldn't notice me, but he made a beeline right for me.

"Excuse me," he said. "You look familiar. Have we met?"

I only had a split second to decide how I was going to respond. If he recognized me as Christa from Sparkle Hollow, he could tell them where I was, which might result in problems I didn't have an answer for. But I also couldn't pretend that I had no idea who he was. He was an alpha, after all.

"I don't think so," I told him. "I'm Jenny—part of Alpha Colson Marsden's pack."

"Ah, that explains it," he replied. "I must have seen you around town."

I smiled, hoping to end the conversation. Although he had accepted my answer, he didn't seem fully convinced. There was a slight narrowing of his eyes that seemed to indicate my story wasn't a good enough answer to his suspicions.

"I'm sorry for stopping you," he continued. "It's just that you look like someone else. Someone my wife grew up with."

"That's okay, I get confused for other people a lot. Just have one of those faces, I guess," I lied with a laugh.

"Well, sorry to bother you," he said.

"It's no bother," I assured him. "Have a nice day!"

I continued walking toward the checkout and resisted the urge to look behind me to see if he was still watching. I didn't think he had bought my story. At least, not totally. All I could hope for was that he wouldn't put the pieces together or ask Sienna if she had seen me around town.

Reagan was pleased when I came back with a completed order, and the rest of the day passed without incident. When we reached a stopping point, I decided to call it a day and head back to Colson's house.

"Hey, Mom!" Jenny said when I got home, bounding toward me covered in flour. "We're making pizza!"

"Sounds delicious," I told her.

"I'm just supervising. So if it tastes bad, that's all on Jenny," Colson teased.

"Hey!" Jenny exclaimed with a pout.

"I'm only kidding, Jenny-bug," he replied with a laugh. "How was your day, Christa?"

"It was good," I said as I took off my shoes. "The pack house is coming along really well. I think you'll be happy with it."

"I'm sure I will be."

I decided not to tell him about the encounter with Franco in the hardware store. For all I knew, the other alpha had bought my lie about being a member of Pack Marsden, and that would be the end of it. I didn't want Colson to worry that my presence in town was a danger to him, or that I was in danger in any way. Still, I couldn't help but worry about what would happen when Sparkle Hollow found out where I was.

“I’m going to shower before dinner,” I told them.

I headed toward the hallway but paused, looking back into the kitchen where Colson and Jenny were adding toppings to the pizza they had created together. My heart warmed at the sight, realizing that Jenny was finally getting the chance to bond with her father. A smile filled my face as I watched them, and they looked up at me at the same time.

“What?” they asked in unison.

“Nothing,” I assured them. “I’ll be right back.”

Dinner together was a comfortable, calm affair, and I realized I had made the right choice in not telling Franco who I was. Jenny deserved this chance to be with her father without interference from pack politics.

“Alright, baby,” I told her when we were done cleaning up. “Time to go to bed.”

“Colson, can you put me to bed tonight?” she asked.

He looked at me questioningly, and I nodded with a smile.

“Of course, Jenny-bug,” he said.

She ran to her room to get dressed in her pajamas, then shouted for us to come in. Colson pulled the covers up to her shoulders as I stood watching from the doorway, letting them have their moment together.

“Goodnight,” he told her sweetly.

“Goodnight,” she replied. “Mom, are you coming to bed?”

“Not yet, baby,” I told her. “Are you okay in here without me?”

She nodded as I said goodnight, and Colson and I both kissed her on the forehead. We shut off the light and looked back at her peaceful form, already slipping into slumber.

“Come with me,” Colson said, tugging my hand.

He led me to his room, where a fire had been started in the fireplace.

“Cozy,” I said appreciatively.

“You seemed like you could use a nice relaxing evening,” he explained. “Come lay down with me.”

We climbed into his bed, and he pulled me onto his chest. I could hear his heart beating along with the crackling of the fire, and before I knew it, I fell asleep.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The Dark Alphas gathered at the territory we had scouted. It was time to take our next step.

“Remember, we’re surrounding them before we attack,” I said.

“We got it, Marsden,” Desmond said, rolling his eyes. “You don’t have to keep reminding us of the plan we all made.”

I bit my tongue. Now wasn’t the time for infighting.

“Let’s go,” Axel said.

The alphas and their warriors fanned out around the small group of homes we had seen before. Once the circle was complete, a howl went up around the ring, and we all charged toward the center.

My wolf was strong and fast, but this time, I held back. I had told the group that this pack would not be a danger to us, but they had decided to use our full force to take it, anyway. That didn’t mean that I had to use my full force.

By the time Orin and my warriors reached the homes, the sounds of screaming were already coming from inside. I transformed and kicked in the door of the nearest home. Inside, an old man and his wife were standing in the corner, huddling together.

“We surrender!” he shouted. “Please, don’t hurt anyone!”

“Let’s go, then,” I ordered, grabbing their arms and pulling them out the front door.

We took them to the center of town and forced them to their knees next to the others who had already surrendered.

“How many more are there, waiting to attack us?” Alpha Rutherford asked the man in an intimidating voice as he towered over them.

“None of us will fight back. We aren’t that kind of pack,” he explained. “We will all come quietly. Just tell us what you want.”

“Your land,” Axel said. “And your fealty to the Dark Alphas.”

The man looked around at his people, huddled together in fear, and made the easy choice.

“I hereby renounce my title as Alpha of the Twin Rivers and pledge our loyalty to the Dark Alphas,” he said sadly.

While I was happy that our mission had been successful, and especially glad it had been done without loss of life, a part of me felt disappointed. It really was true that allies could make or break a pack’s ability to remain free. This pack had been small and unprotected. Their way of life was about to change, and there was nothing they could do about it.

The other alphas began to organize everyone so that they could give their own oaths individually, protecting us from retribution if they changed their minds in the future. Once the oath was made, they wouldn’t be able to fight against us.

“Time to divvy up our spoils,” Axel said to me. “We’ve got two hundred acres to claim. Which section did you want, Colson?”

“None,” I said.

He seemed surprised by my response, but I had been thinking about this move for a long time. My loyalty had been in question lately, and it was time for me to prove my willingness to work with the group in a way that they would understand.

“That doesn’t sound like you,” he replied.

He was right. The old me would have fought tooth and nail against all of them to claim the biggest portion I could for myself and my pack. But that wasn’t me anymore. The larger the area one pack had, the more they had to defend. I was happy with my land, and with the safety of my pack. Those were the things worth fighting for. Not more land that could be taken and given at a moment’s notice.

“Maybe not, but that’s my decision,” I told him. “This land can be divided among the rest of the Dark Alphas group. I’m sitting this one out.”

Axel clapped me on the back, impressed with my sacrifice. He headed back to the other alphas to continue their land negotiations.

It worked, Orin said excitedly.

For now.

As I transformed and ran back toward home, I felt a rush of adrenaline, a high unlike any I had felt in a very long time. It was all because of Christa. All I wanted to do was get back home to her and Jenny.

For the first time since I had found her again, things seemed like they had fallen into place. We had made more progress toward trust and openness than I ever would have expected, and I felt like we had a real chance this time. A chance at something real, and lasting.

I knew she still thought about going back home to Sparkle Hollow, and that worried me. I couldn't imagine saying goodbye to her again, or to Jenny.

Everything we had experienced together over the past few weeks made me certain that she had feelings for me, but whether those were enough to conquer her duty to her pack and the draw to go home remained to be seen. If she loved me, it would be different, but as much fun as we had together, I was sure her feelings came nowhere close to being as strong as mine were for her.

There had to be a way to convince her to stay for good.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Colson had another mission today, but he had promised he would be home before nightfall. While a part of me worried he didn't mean it, I decided to believe him. Jenny and I were looking forward to his return and had set up a family game night in his honor.

"Are you sure he likes these games?" Jenny asked. "They're kind of... old."

"Hey now!" I protested. "These are the games we used to play. Don't you be calling us old!"

"I'm serious, Mom. What if Colson doesn't like what we set up for him?" Jenny worried.

I pulled her into a hug and turned her toward the decorations and snacks we had set up on the kitchen island, complete with the "Welcome Home" banner that Jenny had hand-crafted this morning. A pile of games sat on the coffee table, ready for playing, and various drinks were prepped and ready in the fridge.

"Baby, he's going to love it," I assured her. "Colson isn't used to people taking care of him. He's still getting used to having us around. But I swear to you, he is going to be over the moon."

I could feel the tension in her shoulders and felt a pang of fear. After years without him, I could tell just how important it was for Jenny that Colson accept her bids for attention. I prayed to the moon goddess that I was right about my predictions, and that he didn't come home in a bad mood after their mission.

“Mom, I hear him!” Jenny exclaimed, pulling away from me and running toward the living room window. Headlights swung into the driveway, and a moment later, the front door opened.

“What’s all this?” Colson asked, hugging Jenny.

“Mom and I set up a party for you!” she chirped.

“A welcome home party?” he asked. “I’ve only been gone a few hours.”

“We know. We just wanted to do something to show our appreciation for you,” I explained quietly as Jenny went to showcase her work with the decorations. “You’ve been doing so much for us lately—building your relationship with Jenny, making us feel welcome in your pack, and all the other positive changes I’ve seen.”

Colson seemed to be at a loss for words, but happiness was evident in his eyes as he listened to Jenny explain her color choices for the banner.

We all loaded up our plates with snacks and headed to the living room, where Colson chose a game.

“Monopoly?” I questioned.

“Yeah, I want to see how competitive you ladies are,” he teased.

“Fine. Then I get to be the banker,” I said.

“Oh no!” he protested, grabbing the box from me. “Jenny and I both know you’ll cheat. Isn’t that right, Jen?”

Jenny laughed, and I protested against their conspiracy.

“I see the battle lines have been drawn,” I said, narrowing my eyes across the table at them. “Alright, then. Game on.”

The game took about two hours and, as I had expected, Colson won.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, pumping his fists in the air. “Victory is mine!”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“I just had to make up for not getting any real territory today,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Just then, the house phone rang, and Jenny jumped up to answer it.

“The Dark Alphas took some territory today, but I gave up my share,” Colson explained. “I realized that having allies who will defend what I already have is more important than getting more.”

“That’s a big step for you,” I said, surprised by his revelation. “How did the others take it?”

“I only spoke with Axel about it, but he seemed pleased,” Colson said.

“Hey, Mom,” Jenny said from the kitchen. “Lizzie wants to know if I can come over for a sleepover.”

“Lizzie?” I asked.

“Lizzie Spencer. From down the street.”

I turned to look at Colson, looking for a more experienced opinion about whether the Spencer family home was a safe place for Jenny to spend time.

“The Spencers are loyal. I know Jenny has been going to play at the park with their daughter for a while. They’re the same age,” Colson said, reading my mind.

“That’s fine,” I told her.

“Great! Thanks, Mom!”

She told the good news to her new friend and ran off to pack her bag. It didn’t take long until she was back and started heading out the door.

“Hold on,” I ordered. “Just because I said you could go doesn’t mean you can go alone. I still need to meet her parents.”

“Mooom,” she whined.

“Complain all you want, but it’s my job to keep you safe,” I explained, putting my shoes on. Colson was right behind me, feeling the same protective urge that I was at the sight of our daughter going to a sleepover.

We walked a few houses down to the house where Lizzie Spencer lived. It was a well-kept home, with the porch light shining brightly. Inside, I could see a girl with wild, curly brown hair jumping up and down by the window.

“Lizzie!” Jenny exclaimed excitedly when the door opened.

“I’m so glad you could come!” her friend chattered back to her. “Come on! I set up a spa in my room, and then we can watch a movie, and....”

Their voices trailed off as the two girls bounced off the walls, down the hallway, and out of sight.

“We’re sorry for the late notice, Alpha,” Mrs. Spencer said. “Lizzie has been asking for a sleepover with Jenny for weeks. Tonight, the plans just seemed to fall into place.”

“It’s no trouble,” Colson said.

“Call us if she needs anything,” I said. “I can come get her at any time.”

Mrs. Spencer smiled and nodded, and Colson and I started walking back home. Jenny had rarely been able to have sleepovers due to our low place in the Sparkle Hollow pack, and although I was excited for her to get the chance to bond with another little girl, I was also worried about her.

“She’s going to be fine,” Colson assured me.

“I know,” I said. “It’s just hard to let go.”

“It’s nice to have some time just for us, though,” he added.

We got back home, and I started cleaning up from the night. Colson joined me in the kitchen. I thought he was going to help with putting the food away, but he wrapped his arms around my waist and started kissing my neck.

“Um, hey,” I said. “What are you doing?”

“Kissing you,” he said.

His hands began traveling across my body, and I felt a tightness in my stomach at his

touch. Even though it felt good, I was hurt that his immediate thought once Jenny was out of the house was to begin touching me. It wasn't that sex was off the table, but it seemed like that was all he had on his mind.

"I see that," I said. I cleared my throat and unwrapped his arms from my body so that I could turn around and face him. "I'm trying to get this cleaned up right now, though."

His eyebrows creased as he looked at the food that was left out. "I'm sure that can wait, can't it?" he asked. "I don't think chips and cookies are going to go bad if they're left out on the counter."

"It isn't about that, Colson," I snapped.

"Christa," he said quietly, taking a step back. "Tell me what's going on. Did I do something?"

I sighed in frustration, not knowing how to explain the thoughts that were racing through my head without seeming like I had gone off the deep end. We weren't in a real relationship, and he didn't owe me anything beyond normal human decency. So why did I suddenly feel on edge?

"Talk to me, Chris," he said.

"The second we were alone, you were all over me," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "I don't know it felt... it felt..."

"Oh. Chris, it's not like that," he explained as he realized what I was getting at. "I'm not just after something physical. I was just excited, that's all, and I wanted to be close to you. I always want to be close to you. That's actually what I was hoping to talk to you about tonight."

“Talk to me about what?” I asked.

“These past few weeks have shown me what I need to do to be a better person,” he began. “I’ve learned that I need to prioritize the people I care about and be open with them. They’ve also shown me just how much I messed up in the past. I don’t want to repeat any mistakes. And the biggest mistake I ever made was leaving you behind.”

He was being more vulnerable than he had ever been, and I realized my jaw had dropped. I closed it quickly, listening as he continued his speech.

“You asked me to describe my dream woman, but all you need to do is look in a mirror,” he said. “It’s you, Chris. It’s always been you. I’ve been in love with you since the day we first met, and I’ll be in love with you until the day I die. All I ever want is to be with you.”

“Col,” I whispered, tears welling up in my eyes. “I love you, too.”

His dark eyes widened, seeming surprised by my admission. “Really?” he asked.

“Yes, really,” I said, putting my hands on either side of his face and staring into his eyes. “I just had no idea you felt the same way. I thought you were doing all those things for Jenny’s sake, and that I was just a live-in booty call.”

“No, babe,” he said, pulling me close. “It’s been for you. All for you.”

Colson kissed me delicately, but now that I knew where we stood, my hesitation had evaporated. I deepened the kiss, wrapping my arms around him and feeling his taut muscles against me. He put his hands on my backside, and I jumped into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist.

“To the bedroom?” he asked.

I nodded, and he wasted no time whisking me away to his room.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

Last night with Christa had felt like a dream. Waking up with her in my arms and seeing her sleepy smile looking up at me had made me feel like the most powerful man in the world. All the hard work of fixing myself had paid off in a way I never could have anticipated, and I had finally been able to be with my true mate in the way we were meant to be.

Although we had slept together many times before, this was the first time we had sex and were completely open with one another. She knew my faults and weaknesses and accepted me, anyway. The bond between us had grown so strong, I felt completely comfortable with her in a way that was indescribable, except to those who had felt it themselves.

I had dreamed of proposing to Christa once before, and had let that opportunity slip through my fingers. Now that I knew she loved me, too, I wasn't going to waste another day before asking her to be my wife.

"Where are you heading?" Christa asked as I slipped on my shoes.

"I just have an errand to run in town," I explained. "I'll be back soon. Wait for me, okay?"

"Of course," she said with a smile.

I took a deep breath as her smile made my heart stutter, and kissed her goodbye before heading into town. No matter how impatient I was to ask for her hand in marriage, I refused to do it without getting her the ring she deserved.

I arrived at the same jewelry shop where Christa had found the necklace for Jenny—the only jewelry shop in our small town—and headed inside.

“Good morning, Alpha,” the shopkeeper said as she lowered her glasses from her face. “What brings you in today?”

“Good morning. I need a ring,” I told her, a half-hidden smile creeping up my face.

She gasped, her hand fluttering to her heart at my declaration. “Is Pack Marsden getting a luna?” she asked excitedly.

“I surely hope so,” I responded. “That all depends on whether my mate accepts me, I suppose. Can you help me find the perfect one?”

“It would be my honor,” she said, hurrying over to a display case near the back of the store.

After I glanced through the available options, only one ring caught my eye. It was a white-gold band set with a brilliant diamond of near-perfect clarity. Flanking the center stone on either side were two trapezoid diamonds that made the center stone appear even larger.

“This is the one,” I said.

She placed it in a ring box, and I pulled my wallet out to pay.

“Absolutely not,” she responded, offended by my action. “This pack has been waiting long enough for you to find your luna. It is a gift. May she bring us prosperity.”

Touched by her generosity, I tried to refuse, but it was no use.

“Thank you,” I told her.

I left the shop, still stunned by her benevolence, when I saw Gage walking up the street toward me.

“You’re here again,” I commented. “Should I be concerned?”

“You should always be worried when it comes to me,” Gage said.

“Comforting,” I replied sarcastically. “But seriously, why do I keep finding you sneaking around in my territory? Don’t you have anyone else to harass?”

“Don’t be like that, Marsden,” Gage replied, leaning against the wall. “I’m just here to have a chat with you.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Axel told the rest of us that you didn’t want a piece of the pie when we took over that last area,” he said, picking at his fingernails in the same manner I had when I interrupted his conversation with Christa in this very spot.

“So?” I asked. “What does that matter to you?”

“I just wanted to make sure you didn’t need anything. Like a lobotomy,” he said with a grin. “It’s a pretty weak alpha who doesn’t take what is rightfully theirs. Should the Dark Alphas be looking at your territory next?”

I stifled my growl, but my eyes shot daggers at him in response to his threat. In the past, I would have already fought with him. But now that I had Christa and Jenny, it was important that I try a different tactic. Men like Gage thrived on violence and one-upmanship. Giving into my baser instincts would be playing right into his hands.

“Look where you’d like,” I told him flippantly, “but the rest of the Dark Alphas won’t join you in attacking one of our own.”

“Are you sure about that?” Gage asked.

“One hundred percent. And I’m not going to let your peacocking affect me. Not today. I hope you have the day you deserve,” I said with a smile.

I could see that Gage was furious, but when I didn’t play along with his tactics, he ran out of ways to try to get under my skin. With a huff, he turned on his heels and walked away.

I chuckled to myself at how easy it had been to turn the tables on him and continued walking towards home. I had more important things to worry about today than an alpha with an attitude problem.

I arrived back at the house, finding Christa exactly where I had left her.

“You weren’t gone long,” she said, surprised by my return. “Did you find what you were looking for on your super-secret mission?”

“I did,” I responded.

I gave her a hug and pulled back to look into her eyes, wanting to remember this moment for the rest of my life. Gage’s sudden appearance wasn’t going to dampen my day.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Christa asked.

She looked concerned, and I realized a slight shadow must have crossed my expression when I had thought about the encounter with Gage. Deciding not to keep

anything from her, I divulged what happened.

“I ran into Gage again,” I explained. “I was outside the jewelry shop, in the same place you ran into him last time. I don’t know what he was doing there, but he confronted me about not taking any territory in the last raid.”

“Did you two get into a fight?”

“Not this time. I decided to take a page out of your book and kill him with kindness,” I said with a smile.

“I bet he loved that,” she said, a matching smile creeping onto her face.

“He was pissed.”

“Good,” Christa said with a laugh. “But what were you doing outside the jewelry store? Did you get another gift for Jenny?”

I shook my head.

“Not this time,” I said, pulling the ring box from my pocket. “This time, I got something for you.”

I opened the box and dropped to one knee, holding the box out in front of me to display the ring inside. Christa’s hand covered her mouth in shock as she realized what I was doing.

“Christa Lionel,” I began, hands shaking with anticipation, “will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife and true mate?”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

There was no way for me to know what was in store for our future, or how things would go between Colson and Sparkle Hollow, but there was one thing I knew for sure: I loved Colson. I couldn't think of anything I wanted more in the world than to be his wife.

"Yes," I said. "I'll marry you."

He placed the ring on my finger. I admired the way it sparkled in the light, casting tiny rainbows over every surface when I moved it.

"This is beautiful," I whispered as he got to his feet and took me in his arms.

"A beautiful ring for the most beautiful woman in the world," Colson said.

"That's the cheesiest thing you've ever said," I laughed as I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

His lips were soft against mine, as if I were a valuable and precious artifact he needed to protect.

"But it's the truth," he said against my lips.

"Mm," I agreed happily. "So, when are we getting married?"

"Today," Colson said.

"Today?!" I asked in surprise, pulling my face back so I could look at him.

“You seem surprised,” he chuckled. “I’ve waited long enough for you to be my wife. I’m not letting another day go by without claiming you to the world.”

“That doesn’t leave much time to plan,” I pointed out.

“Everything is planned,” Colson said, rubbing my arms comfortingly. “Reagan is getting everything set up right now.”

“What about Jenny?”

“I talked to Jenny about it last night during game night while you were out of the room,” Colson said. “She didn’t think she’d be able to keep it a secret from you for very long, so she helped me win, and I texted the Spencers to see if they could have her over for a sleepover.”

“You two are sneaky,” I laughed. “I never would have guessed.”

“Mrs. Spencer is getting your dress ready—she’s a seamstress—as well as Jenny’s,” Colson continued. “All you have to do today is relax and come with me to the pack house at noon for our ceremony.”

Two hours later, I was still in shock when Mrs. Spencer arrived with Jenny and two garment bags.

“I can’t thank you enough for your help,” Colson said, welcoming her into the house as Jenny bounded toward me and wrapped me in a giant hug.

“It was no trouble at all,” Mrs. Spencer beamed. “Christa, your daughter is a delight. She was a wonderful help last night, and we’re all so excited to be there for your

vows this afternoon.”

“Thank you so much,” I told her sincerely. “And thank you for the dresses. I’m honored that you were willing to do this for us.”

She waved her hand in dismissal of my thanks and bid us goodbye, heading back home to get herself and her family ready for the event.

“You two should get dressed,” Colson told us.

Jenny and I grabbed the bags and headed to the guest room, which had slowly turned into Jenny’s room over the past week.

“Wow,” I said, unzipping the bag and revealing the gown inside. The floor-length ivory dress was sleeveless, with lace detailing on the top that flowed into a tulle skirt.

“Isn’t it pretty?” Jenny asked. “I love the lace. It’s going to be perfect on you, Mom. And mine matches!”

She unzipped her own bag and pulled out a dress in a similar style, although shorter and with cap sleeves. We donned our dresses and did each other’s hair before heading back into the living room where Colson was waiting for us, already wearing his suit and tie. A boutonniere of yellow roses and baby’s breath adorned his lapel as he handed matching bouquets to both Jenny and me.

“You look great, Jenny-bug,” he told her as she beamed with pride. “And you,” he turned to me. “Wow.”

Colson grabbed my hand and twirled me in a circle to admire my dress from all angles. He shook his head slightly as I turned back around to face him, and I knew he was feeling lucky that we had made it to this moment.

We climbed into his car and drove the short distance to the pack house, where a great many members of the pack had gathered for our ceremony.

“You didn’t invite everyone , did you?” I asked nervously.

“Don’t worry,” Colson replied as he helped me from the car. “Given the short notice, it’s going to be a small ceremony. I didn’t think you’d want everyone’s eyes on you, anyway.”

I squeezed his hand in appreciation, and we headed inside, where Reagan had outdone himself in getting the space ready for a wedding. The windows that lined the common area had been opened, letting in a gentle breeze that made the room smell like flowers and sunshine. Bouquets of yellow and white flowers adorned the ivory-clothed tables. Trays of food and drinks were being passed around to everyone in attendance.

As soon as we were spotted, everyone gathered around the wooden arch that had been decorated with yellow ribbons and ivy. Jenny walked in front of us, smiling at everyone, until we reached the arch. She stood off to one side, and I handed her my bouquet, kissing the top of her head.

“I love you, baby,” I told her.

“I love you more,” she said.

I turned to face Colson and joined hands with him as he began the ceremony.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming on such short notice,” he said. “We’re going to make this short and sweet and then get to the part where we celebrate our marriage.”

The room erupted into cheers and claps, and I grinned at Colson. I had been worried

about being accepted by his pack, but I realized now that I had nothing to fear. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was home.

“Some of you may know that Christa and I have known each other for a long time,” Colson continued. “I made a lot of mistakes and thought she was lost to me. But the great wolf god granted me a second chance, and I’m so glad that I took it. Christa, I vow to love you every day and hold you above all others. I vow to be your champion and to be by your side until the end of my life.”

He paused so I could say my vows to him.

“Colson, I vow to be your best friend and the voice of reason when the world around us seems to be too much to bear. I vow to stick by your side through the good times and bad, and to remind you of your strength and kindness when you forget who you are,” I said.

Colson squeezed my hands with eyes full of emotion, and I squeezed them back. Behind me, I could hear a snuffle and knew that Jenny was tearing up as well.

“I, Alpha Colson Marsden, take you, Christa Lionel of Sparkle Hollow, to be my one true mate,” Colson said.

“I, Christa Lionel of the Sparkle Hollow pack, take you, Alpha Colson Marsden, to be my one true mate,” I repeated.

The crowd cheered as we kissed and sealed the bond between us. I looked out toward the crowd and smiled, only to have the smile fall from my face as an alarm rang out suddenly. Colson grabbed my hand and reached for Jenny before sprinting toward the front of the building.

“What is that?” I asked, fear filtering into my voice.

“It’s our perimeter alarm,” Colson explained. “It means a wolf from another pack has crossed our boundaries in their shifter form. Someone is coming.”

The room erupted into action as the assembled wolves filed outside, ready to confront whatever threat was heading our way.

“Should we take Jenny somewhere?” I asked.

“No time,” Colson replied. “They’re already here.”

He nodded down the road toward the forest, where a group of wolves barreled toward the pack house at full speed.

“That’s Alpha Lex,” I told him. “Sparkle Hollow knows where I am. I’m so sorry, Colson. I should have come up with a plan for this.”

“It’s not your fault. I hoped we had more time, but they were bound to find out eventually. We’ll figure this out,” he assured me.

“Together,” I promised, squeezing his hand.

The wolves slid to a stop in front of the pack house and shifted back into their human forms, with Alpha Lex at the front of the group. Beside him stood Franco, and I realized what must have happened. I had thought he had been thrown off my scent when I ran into him in the hardware store, but he must have figured out who I really was and passed the information to his allies back home.

“Colson Marsden!” Lex shouted from his spot twenty feet away. “You have some explaining to do.”

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

I had promised Christa that we would figure this out together, but in the back of my mind, I knew the chances of me walking away from this encounter were low. I couldn't deny the deaths I had caused or any of the other crimes I had committed. Now, Sparkle Hollow was here to collect.

"Colson Marsden, you have some explaining to do," Alpha Lex said.

"Alpha Lex," I responded, doing my best to keep my voice even despite the threat to my pack and family. "We haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet. Welcome."

"Save it," he hissed. "I don't need your false politeness. I know of your crimes against Sparkle Hollow and its allies, and now I find out you have added more to that list. We demand retribution."

"I'm aware of the crimes I committed ten years ago. The deaths of your allies was a tragic mistake that I have regretted every moment of every day since it happened," I admitted truthfully.

"Your regret doesn't bring them back!" Lex shouted.

"It doesn't," I agreed. "But neither does this."

I waved my hand at the infiltrating wolves, poised to attack my people as they stood in a defensive position behind me and Christa. Even if I was prepared to give in to Lex's demands that I pay for my crimes, I couldn't forget my duty. I was an alpha now, and I couldn't abandon my people.

“Do you think because it’s been ten years, you are going to be forgiven?” Lex asked.

“I don’t expect forgiveness,” I admitted. “But sometimes circumstances change. You’re an alpha, so you must understand. At times, an alpha must place his duty to his pack above all else—even his own conscience.”

“If I believed you had a conscience, your argument might hold more weight,” Lex replied. “But your willingness to participate in more crimes against us since then doesn’t bode well for you.”

“What crimes?” I demanded.

He pointed at Christa and Jenny, rage evident on his face as he spoke. “You have ambushed our allies, stolen our property, and kidnapped two members of our own pack. You will face the consequences of your crimes—all of them—starting with releasing Christa and Jenny Lionel.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Come now, Colson,” Lex said, exasperated with my continued defiance. “You know what happens next if you refuse. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. For your sake, choose wisely.”

The wheels in my head were turning as I tried to figure out how to get out of this situation without anyone else getting hurt. Lex wasn’t responding to my diplomacy in the way I had hoped. He had always been considered a level-headed ruler, from what I had heard, but nothing I said had made an impression so far.

When it came down to it, I knew I would fight to protect my pack. But for all my claims to the contrary, my priority was Christa and Jenny. I had promised to hold them higher than everything else, and I would stand by that vow. Anything I had to

do to keep them, I would do.

“It isn’t his choice alone,” Christa stated, stepping forward to address her old alpha.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Lex replied dismissively.

“Oh, really?” she countered, crossing her arms in front of her. “It seems like the only reason you’re here is because Alpha Franco told you where I was. Or are you telling me that after ten years, an alpha with your resources is only just now discovering that he has an enemy living so close to his territory?”

Lex’s face reddened at her barbed attack, and I could see her plan was to make him question his own decisions.

“Of course I knew where Colson was living,” he waffled. “But my duty is to protect my pack. An attack on a neighboring pack is unacceptable without new evidence against him.”

“So you’re here because of his supposed ‘kidnapping,’ is that correct?” Christa asked.

“We’re here to bring you home,” Lex replied.

“Then your job here is done. You can leave.” She waved her hand dismissively.

“What are you talking about?”

“Your information wasn’t complete, so I’ll fill in the blanks for you,” she replied. “I am here willingly—as is Jenny. We are not being held against our will. As of today, I am the luna of the Marsden pack, and you are trespassing on our territory.”

She spoke with an unmistakable command. I felt pride welling up within me at how

easily she held her own against an alpha who had relegated her to the sidelines for so many years.

“Even if you are here of your own accord, that doesn’t erase his past crimes,” Lex replied.

“No one can erase the past, but Colson has paid his debt for those deaths. For the past ten years, he has lived in exile, banished from Sparkle Hollow and separated from his true mate and his child,” Christa said.

Lex looked startled at Christa’s revelation and glanced between me and Jenny. I hadn’t intended to reveal any more about Jenny to them, but I could see the benefit of Christa’s honesty. Lex needed to know how much had been taken from me so he would know I hadn’t been living a life of ease and luxury after running away from their punishment a decade ago.

“His child?” Lex asked. “Is this true?”

“Yes,” I said.

Jenny had moved closer to me as the conversation expanded to include her. She was standing partially behind me, still holding my hand tightly in her own. I could sense that she was afraid of the situation, but she was holding her head up high.

Lex took a few steps closer, a look of curiosity on his face as he examined Jenny’s face. His eyes flickered to my own, and I could see that he was looking for a resemblance between us.

“Ten years ago, Colson and I were in love,” Christa said. “We were going to spend our lives together and start a family. When your father attacked him and chased him away from Sparkle Hollow, he robbed me of the chance to tell Colson about my

pregnancy, and he tried to steal Jenny's childhood from her. I'll be damned if I let you finish the job."

Lex turned back to speak with his advisors in hushed tones as Christa and I looked on nervously.

"Are they going to make us go back to Sparkle Hollow, Mom?" Jenny whispered.

"No," Christa said, reassuring her. "We're not going anywhere. This is our home. We protect our family."

"Good," Jenny replied, nodding.

"I've considered your story," Lex said, addressing us once more. "Given the marriage between you two and your shared child, we will leave."

Excited chatter from the Marsden pack met his declaration, but he wasn't done yet.

"However," he continued, "our alliance with Franco's pack does not extend to you. An official banishment will be decreed for all members of the Marsden pack. You are not welcome in Sparkle Hollow. Anyone found on our territory will be immediately imprisoned."

I nodded at him, understanding the implications of what he said. It made little difference to me or the rest of the pack, but Christa and Jenny would never be able to visit the home where they grew up. To be a family, they were required to cut all ties with their past. It was a steep price, but as Christa squeezed my hand, I knew it was one she was willing to pay.

"We accept your terms," Christa responded.

“If any threats are made toward Franco’s pack, know that Sparkle Hollow will respond with the full force of our power—as will our allies,” Lex added.

“We have lived in peace with Franco’s pack for some time,” I reminded them, aiming my explanation in Franco’s direction. “We have no reason to quarrel with you.”

“See that it stays that way,” Franco warned.

Without another word, Lex shifted into his wolf form and howled for his people to follow him. As they disappeared down the street, I breathed a sigh of relief and turned around to reassure my pack that all was well.

“Let’s all go back inside,” I announced. “It’s done.”

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The resolution with Sparkle Hollow was an uneasy one, but considering how quickly it had escalated, it seemed like the best option we could have hoped for. It wasn't an alliance; that would be far too much to hope for. But the promise of them leaving us alone for the time being was a good start.

After they had departed, we returned to our wedding celebration. It was somewhat dampened by the events of the afternoon, and Jenny refused to leave Colson's side.

The adrenaline was still coursing through my system, which helped me get through the rest of the day and put on a brave face for Jenny and the pack. Once we got home, however, I felt exhausted.

"Get some sleep," Colson urged me as he carried Jenny—who had fallen asleep—to her room for the night. "It was a long day."

"But it's our wedding night," I pouted.

Colson chuckled at my expression, shaking his head at my petulance as I removed my shoes.

"You're too tired, and so am I. We always have our honeymoon," he pointed out.

"Where are we going?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. I'm just going to put Jenny to bed."

He disappeared into the hallway and reappeared a moment later. He doffed his suit

jacket and untied his tie before sitting next to me on the couch. I opened my mouth to repeat my question about the proposed honeymoon when a sharp rap on the front door startled us.

“Stay here,” he ordered, jumping into action. He hurried to look through the peephole, and I saw his jaw tense as he spied who it was outside.

“Trouble?” I asked.

“Better not be,” he replied with a scowl.

The door opened, revealing Alpha Franco—alone.

“What are you doing here?” Colson demanded. “I thought things were finished between us.”

“I have a message from Alpha Lex and Sparkle Hollow. The official banishment,” Franco said.

“Come in, then,” Colson said, softening slightly. To anyone else, he would have sounded the same as he did before, but I knew him well enough to pick out the hint of defeat in his voice as he was reminded of the conditions of our truce.

Franco came inside and stood awkwardly in the entryway as I made my way over to them. He handed me a thick piece of parchment paper. The top of it showed the flowing script of Sparkle Hollow’s official documents.

“This has all the details concerning the banishment of Christa and Jenny Lionel from Sparkle Hollow,” Franco said. “There’s another sheet beneath that explains the consequences for any member of Pack Marsden if they encroach on the territory of Sparkle Hollow. It will be up to our allies if they want to extend those rules to their

own territories, so you will want to contact the other alphas before they make any travel plans.”

“Understood,” Colson responded. “Anything else?”

“There’s one other document,” Franco said.

I flipped to the last page and saw an itemized list detailing the value of the transport, supplies, and cargo from the ambush that brought me to Colson’s pack. I winced as I read the final line.

““Costs associated with the deaths of allies from Moonstone pack,”” I read. “Has the alliance been formalized, then?”

“It has,” Franco confirmed. “A condition of which is that Sparkle Hollow is negotiating for the repayment of these debts on their behalf. If you want the truce between us to last, a promise of repayment must be made.”

Colson sighed deeply, looking at the hefty figure at the bottom of the page. “That’s a steep price for peace, but we will pay it,” he promised.

“Alpha Lex asked that I get a timeline from you so we can let the Moonstone pack know your intentions,” Franco continued.

Colson pinched the bridge of his nose as he did some quick calculations to see when such a sum could be paid in full.

“Two years until it is paid in full, with quarterly payments of one-eighth of the total amount until it is paid,” he said. “Will that be sufficient?”

“It should be. I’ll pass the information along to the others and get back to you.”

With an awkward nod, Franco left. I reviewed the documents in front of me and then passed them to Colson.

“How are we going to afford this?” I asked.

“We’ll figure it out,” Colson responded.

We had gone to sleep shortly after Franco left, both exhausted from the emotions of the day. Now that it was morning, the realities of our situation had fully sunk in. It could always be worse, of course, but we had some tough decisions to make about how we were going to pay the debt owed to Sparkle Hollow and the Moonstones. The most obvious choice was to save the money that Colson wanted to spend on a honeymoon and put that towards our repayment.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” I assured Colson for the fifth time that day. “I’m not high-maintenance. Whatever I can do to help the pack, I’m going to do.”

“I know, but I wanted to take you away from here for a little while,” Colson sighed. “You deserve a break, and we need time to ourselves, too. What kind of man would I be if I didn’t take my bride on a honeymoon?”

“The kind that can see the bigger picture,” I assured him. “We have our entire lives to spend together. Let’s not start off on the wrong path. Besides, what kind of message would it send to our pack, or Sparkle Hollow, if we left right now? Things are on the path to being settled between us, but we need to be here to make sure everything goes according to plan.”

“You’re right,” Colson sighed again.

“But just because we aren’t going on a honeymoon doesn’t mean we can’t spend time together. What do you think Jenny would say to another sleepover at her friend’s house tonight? We could lounge around in bed for twenty-four hours and forget about everything but us just for one day.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like to do more,” Colson agreed.

Jenny, of course, was thrilled with our plan the moment we suggested it to her. “Can I go over right now? I’ll just go pack my bag really quick!” she said excitedly, running off to her room immediately to pack.

As soon as she was ready, I walked her back to the Spencer house, smiling at Mrs. Spencer when she opened the door.

“What would we do without you?” I asked. “Thank you for agreeing to do this again. We’ve had to change some of our plans around, but didn’t want to miss out on a mini-honeymoon at home.”

“It really is no trouble. Jenny is a joy, and we’re happy to have her visit any time,” Mrs. Spencer said.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, baby,” I said to Jenny, giving her a hug before she ran inside in search of her friend.

“Love you, Mom!” she shouted back at me.

I hurried back home and catapulted myself onto the bed where Colson was still lounging. He laughed as I burrowed under the blankets to snuggle up next to him.

“Miss me?” he asked as I flung one leg across his.

“I never want to be away from you again,” I declared.

“Good,” he replied, pulling me close to him.

For the remainder of the day and night, we remained glued to each other’s sides, talking about the past and the future we imagined for us. Our intimacy had transcended passion, settling into a comfortable and peaceful feeling of oneness. By the time the sun rose the next day, I felt more excited about the future than I thought was possible. Hearing Colson’s plans for the pack and our family had ignited a fire in me, and I couldn’t wait to get to work on making his dreams a reality.

But before we did, we needed to spend some time with Jenny. The past few days had been hectic, and we knew that she could use a day at home with us. So, after a leisurely breakfast, we walked back down the street to pick her up.

The sun was shining brightly in the sky and the birds were singing their morning song as we held hands and enjoyed the gentle breeze.

“I can’t believe it’s almost summertime,” I said.

“When the weather turns hot, I’m going to have to take you and Jenny to my favorite stream,” Colson said. “It’s perfect for swimming.”

“Jenny loves to swim,” I told him enthusiastically.

“Just like her dad,” Colson said with a smile as we headed up the short walkway to the Spencer’s front door.

We were steps away when I stopped dead in my tracks, the smile falling from my face as I looked at the front door. It had been kicked open. The wood was splintered around the doorframe, and it stood ajar.

I inhaled sharply as my eyesight laser-focused on the details of what I was seeing.

“Jenny,” Colson whispered, his attention drawn to the house after my sudden stop.

We both took off at a sprint inside the house, searching for Jenny in every room. The house was in shambles, having been ransacked by whoever had entered. Whatever they had been searching for, they had done a number on the place as they looked. Torn throw pillows lay on the floor, papers had been tossed from the desk, and the table—including a full dinner spread—had been flipped onto the floor. A thick red substance was pooling beneath one of the chairs, and I hurried toward it to inspect it.

“Pasta sauce,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Jenny!” Colson shouted.

There was no response.

Eventually, we found the Spencers. Mr. and Mrs. Spencer and their daughter had been knocked out and tied up in one of the bedrooms to prevent their escape. Mr. Spencer was just coming around when Colson knelt down to unshackle the silver chains around his wrists. At the sight of Colson so close to him, he began to flail about.

“Easy, easy,” I said calmly, moving into his line of view so he could see we weren’t a danger to him. “It’s just us.”

“Luna,” he breathed, wincing in pain from the silver cutting into his wrists and the lingering injuries from the fight. “I’m so sorry.”

“Who did this?” Colson demanded. “Where is Jenny?”

“She isn’t here?” he asked, eyes widening.

We finished untying the family and moved Lizzie to her bed, as she was still under the effects of whatever had been used to cause their unconscious state. Colson remained with Mr. Spencer to question him about what happened as I walked from room to room, looking for any sign of Jenny that we might have missed.

Finally, I had to accept that she was gone.

“She isn’t here,” I told Colson, panic causing my throat to tighten as I spoke the words.

“She’s been taken,” Colson confirmed. “Mr. Spencer said that a group of wolves came in and started tearing the place apart. He held them off as long as he could, but they knocked him out first. Jenny must have been with Lizzie and Mrs. Spencer when she was taken, but they’re both still out cold.”

“Who could have done this?” I asked.

“I have one guess,” Colson said, his brown eyes darkening like a storm as he spoke.

“They wouldn’t,” I argued. “They promised to leave us alone if we agreed to their demands.”

“Who else could it be?” Colson snapped.

He pulled out his phone to call Reagan and alert the rest of the pack to the situation while I took my investigation outside. Colson was right that the most likely suspect was Sparkle Hollow, but a part of me still believed that they would hold up their end of the bargain. Besides, what motive would they have for taking Jenny? If anything, kidnapping Colson should have been their priority.

I could see from the tracks in the backyard where the kidnappers had gone, so I followed their trail. After a few moments, Colson caught up to me.

“What did you find?” he asked.

I pointed toward the north, showing that they had gone in this direction—away from Sparkle Hollow to the south. There was only one pack north of us that had any reason to quarrel with Pack Marsden. And the last person I would want to have his hands on my daughter.

Gage Desmond.

“Should we wait for backup?” I asked.

“No time,” Colson said, taking off in a dead sprint.

“We’re coming, Jenny,” I whispered, hoping that she could feel her parents running to save her.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

I couldn't believe I had overlooked the signs that Gage was planning something like this. As we raced toward Jenny, I kicked myself, feeling like a failure for not protecting my daughter from such an obvious threat.

We'll find her, Colson, my wolf assured me. I can smell them now—we're close.

I failed her, Orin.

We did not fail her. She's going to be fine.

I prayed he was right, but my feelings of incompetency remained. It was my duty to protect my family, but I had allowed myself to get distracted by Sparkle Hollow and missed the signs that were right in front of my nose.

Christa's wolf, Cassia, had caught up to me by now, and we barreled through the tall grass together as we followed the smells of the wolves who had taken Jenny. After a few minutes, I saw another set of footprints joining the trail, and then another. It appeared that Alpha Desmond's pack had met up with him after the abduction.

We came over the crest of a hill and saw a group of wolves waiting in the valley below. In the center of the group stood Jenny. Her face was red as if she had been crying, but she didn't appear to be harmed. She stood tall and proud, and I was immediately reminded of her mother. No matter what we encountered or how it played out, I could die knowing that my family were the strongest and most noble she-wolves in the land.

Jenny's head snapped up toward us, and a look of fierce determination settled on her

face as she realized that Christa and I had come to her aid. She kicked the back leg of one of the wolves standing guard over her and began to make a run for it, but the others closed in ranks and pushed her back to the center.

“Gage!” I shouted, shifting into my human form. “You won’t get away with this!”

“I already have!” Gage shouted back.

Christa and I raced down the hill toward them, prepared to enter into battle at the first indication that Jenny was at risk.

“Give Jenny back to us now,” I commanded through gritted teeth.

“I don’t think so,” Gage responded.

“Why are you doing this?” Christa asked. “What have we done to you?”

“I’ve been warning you and Colson for weeks now that I wouldn’t stand idly by while you conspire with Sparkle Hollow and its allies against the Dark Alphas,” Gage explained.

“We’ve done no such thing,” I argued. “In fact, my entire pack has been banned from ever going to Sparkle Hollow territory on pain of imprisonment.”

“I know what I’ve seen,” Gage hissed.

The rest of his warriors were still lined up in a defensive position around Jenny, and I could see his beta—the wolf she had attacked—standing mere inches away from her.

“If you aren’t going to let Jenny go, at least tell your wolves to back off so we can discuss this like civilized people,” I said.

“That’s your mistake, right there,” Gage replied. “Thinking you’re speaking to ‘people.’ We are wolves, and we act like it. Our entire way of life is at risk if alphas like you keep trying to ‘civilize’ their packs. You’re ruining our legacy for future generations. You aren’t fit to raise your young. That’s why Jenny is coming with us: so she can learn how to be a real wolf.”

“Like hell she is,” Christa growled.

“What are you going to do? Fight me for her?” Gage scoffed.

“Yes,” I replied. “To the death, if need be. One-on-one combat, just you and me, Desmond. Unless you’re too afraid?”

“I have nothing to prove to a weak alpha like you,” he said dismissively.

He was trying to put on a show of power, but I could see that my words had gotten under his skin. Alphas didn’t like to be questioned, especially not in front of their pack.

“Don’t be so sure,” Christa chided. “It seems like your warriors are wondering if you’re as tough as you claim to be. Walk away from Colson’s challenge, and you might just have an insurrection on your hands when you get home.”

It was a clever tactic, but Gage was a master of words and found a way to twist it around on us yet again.

“That’s exactly what you want to happen, isn’t it? You came here and infiltrated Pack Marsden, and now you’re trying to bring down all the Dark Alphas. But I saw right through you. And look,” he said, nodding toward the hill to the west. “The rest of the group is here to witness your downfall.”

The other alphas had indeed arrived at the scene. Gage believed they were on his side, but I noticed that they weren't joining him on his side of the imaginary battle lines. They had come down the hill to stand between us, looking back and forth between our two parties.

"What's going on here?" Alpha Vitali asked.

"Exactly what I told you would happen, Axel," Gage declared. "Colson and his little bitch are trying to take us all down, so we picked up the trump card. Their daughter will be joining my pack now and learning what a real alpha looks like."

The Dark Alphas looked at each other thoughtfully, trying to make sense of what Gage was saying before observing Christa and me with a look of careful consideration. While our bond was tenuous at best, it was also clear that Christa's presence at the last meeting had been a turning point for them. With their help, we might have a chance at getting out of here unscathed.

"Bring the girl forward," Axel commanded.

"But Vitali—"

"Now," he interrupted Gage's protest with a daggered look.

Gage grumbled and indicated that Jenny should be brought forward. His beta stood by her side, watching her carefully to make sure she stayed within their ranks. Axel continued his silent observation and then turned around to speak with the other alphas. Their low voices were hard to make out, but when he turned around to address us, I could see that a decision had been made.

"Your concerns have been heard, Alpha Desmond," Axel said. "But the girl must be returned."

Christa breathed a sigh of relief and opened her arms for Jenny to run into them. Jenny took a step toward her mother when Gage caught her arm.

“If we don’t get her, then no one does,” he threatened.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Gage’s beta lurch forward, ready to enact his master’s threat and end Jenny’s life. His elongated claws were poised to rip into her as I shouted for Jenny to drop to the ground. She obeyed without hesitation, and the wolf sailed through the empty air where she had stood. I jumped forward, shifting into my wolf form, snapping my jaws.

“No!” Gage screamed, but he was too late. Without a second thought, I clamped my teeth down on the beta’s exposed throat. Blood gushed from the wound as I ripped into him, tossing his lifeless body aside carelessly as Pack Desmond looked on in horror.

“I told you not to touch my daughter,” I growled, striding toward Gage in my human form.

“You’ll pay for that,” Gage spat, preparing to meet me on the battlefield.

“Enough!” Axel shouted.

Gage whirled around to look at the other alphas, a furious and dumbfounded expression on his face.

“There must be retribution for this,” he said.

“That was the retribution, Desmond,” Axel countered. “We all witnessed the exchange between you two and saw that your second had broken ranks to take matters into his own hands. You may be an alpha, but so are the rest of us. You do

not have the authority to go against our agreements.”

“Rutherford, Wentworth,” Gage said, appealing to the other alphas, “Charles—come on, you know I’m right. We can’t let them get away with betraying us like this!”

“Sorry, Gage,” Alpha Charles replied. “But you started it.”

Gage screamed, spittle flying from his mouth as his unintelligible yell hurtled through the air. His face was red and splotchy as he shouted, but it had no impact on the rest of us. For the first time, he allowed himself to look like the short-tempered child he was. When his scream was done, he kicked at the ground and took a deep breath to quell his anger.

Someone in his pack cleared their throat awkwardly, and I realized they had all shifted back into their human forms, unwilling to be my next victim if they appeared to be a threat to Jenny or Christa.

“Alpha Desmond,” Axel warned, “your pack will go home without any further displays of violence toward Alpha Marsden or any other member of the Dark Alphas group. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Gage said quietly.

“If you engage in any violence against a member of the Dark Alphas in the future, we will have no choice but to remove you from the group and hunt you and your pack down. It is only through our cooperation with one another that there can be any trust,” Axel added.

Axel helped Jenny back to her feet and ushered her toward me and Christa while Alpha Charles moved in to talk with Gage.

“Trust,” Gage scoffed at him. “As if there is any trust between us.”

“Look, Des,” Charles said quietly as he placed a hand on his arm. “You’ve got to get on board with this. If Axel lets you go against a member of the group, then what is there to keep the rest of us safe from each other? Or you safe from us? This is how it has to be.”

“Whatever,” Gage muttered, shaking Charles’s hand away from him. Gage whistled for his wolves, who followed as he left the valley and ran off back to their homes.

Axel sighed as they departed. “That one is trouble. Maybe more than he’s worth,” he said.

“But he’s still a member of the group,” I pointed out. “As you said, we can’t go against a member of the Dark Alphas.”

“I know. But if he senses any weakness in our frail alliance, he’s going to exploit it. We’ll need to be on guard against him,” Axel said.

“We will be,” I agreed.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The door to our house opened softly, and the three of us filed inside. Everything was exactly as we had left it, and yet everything had changed. The ticking clock on the mantle echoed through the room, somehow louder than it had been before. The cars in the streets and the sounds of children laughing from the houses next door seemed at odds with the somber feeling in the room. Yet, they fit right in. Life had continued while we had fought to preserve ours. It was exactly as it should have been.

Jenny and Colson sat on the couch, sitting silently as the adrenaline from the day left their systems. It had been a long walk back, and we were all exhausted. I stood silently near the door, staring at the faces of the two people who meant more to me than life itself. I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away from them, afraid that if I so much as blinked, they might vanish in front of me.

I shut the door behind me, and Jenny jumped, looking at me with wide and terrified eyes.

"Sorry," I whispered quietly.

"It's okay," she replied automatically. "I just..."

"We know," Colson said.

He reached a hand out, and she placed hers into his. His large, muscular hands enveloped her delicate fingers in his embrace, and I could see her relax at the contact. We all knew we were safe now, but an uneasiness lingered.

"Mom?" Jenny asked, looking at me with an expression far too mature for her age.

“They aren’t going to come back, are they?”

“No, baby. They’re gone,” I assured her.

“They’ll never hurt you, Jenny,” Colson promised.

Jenny gave a half-hearted smile, and I realized it was going to take longer than one day for her to feel safe again. My new mission in life was to make sure she could return to her carefree existence. The life she led before Gage Desmond pulled her into his bid for power and stole her innocence.

“How do you know?” she asked uncertainly.

I sat down next to her and placed an arm around her, resting my hand on the side of her head and tilting it onto my shoulder.

“Being the daughter of the alpha and luna isn’t always going to be easy,” I began. “Being a wolf isn’t always easy. But you’re lucky. You have two parents who love you more than life itself, who will stop at nothing to make sure you are safe. And more than that, who will make sure that you can keep yourself safe in any circumstances.”

“I didn’t do a good job of that,” Jenny said quietly.

“That’s not true at all,” Colson argued gently. “What you did today was very impressive. I’m not sure how you did it, but you convinced them to take you away in your human form on foot. Doing that made it so much easier for us to track you.”

“And faster, too,” I added.

Colson nodded in agreement. “Then when we caught up to you, you kept fighting

back. You listened to what we were saying and paid attention so you knew whether to fight or run. I'm very proud of you."

"But I got captured," Jenny said. "How do I know it won't happen again?"

"Because your mom got the other alphas to be on our side," Colson said with a small smile. "They all know now that if anyone messes with you, they're going to be in big trouble. And believe me, they don't want to be in trouble with us."

Jenny was beginning to loosen up. I could tell that Colson's explanation of why she was safe was making an impact on her, and I realized he was much more equipped to handle these questions than I was. I was in the same boat as Jenny—wanting to feel hopeful, but deeply afraid that everything I loved could be taken away at any minute.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to erase the memories of the day and focus on the here and now. Jenny was home, sitting right next to me, exactly where she belonged.

"I'm really tired," Jenny said.

"Of course you are," I said, kicking myself that I didn't ask her if she needed anything before now. "Do you want to go to sleep? Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I think I'm okay to be on my own," she said. "But if I change my mind..."

"We'll be here," Colson promised.

"We aren't going anywhere," I added.

Jenny gave me a smile, and I knew she was going to be alright. I walked her to her

room and gently tucked her under the covers.

“Can you leave the light on?” she asked.

“Of course I can.”

I closed the door behind me and headed back to the living room, where Colson remained sitting on the couch. Now that Jenny was safe in her room, I felt myself beginning to fall apart at the seams. The threads of my sanity felt like they were beginning to unravel now that I didn’t have to put on a brave face for our daughter.

Colson took one look at my face and hurried to my side, ready to lend me his support. “What are you thinking about?” he asked.

He tucked my hair behind my ear, an action he often used when he wanted to be close to me but didn’t know if his advances were welcome. I wrapped my arms around his waist and buried my face in his chest, breathing in the comforting smell of him.

“Life. Death. Everything in between,” I admitted. “We came close to the end today. I thought for a moment that everything we fought for would go up in smoke. That everything was lost.”

“But it isn’t lost,” Colson reassured me tenderly.

His chest was warm against my face as his strong arms wrapped around me, reminding me that we were still here. We had spent weeks—years, truthfully—working on our own issues so we could become better versions of ourselves. Through all the trials, we had been true to ourselves, and now, finally, we had defeated the biggest threat to our happiness.

Colson kissed the top of my head, his voice soft and gentle against my hair. “I’ll

always protect you, Christa. Our family is safe and always will be. I'm more certain of that now more than ever."

I pulled back slightly so I could see his face. All the emotions I had squashed down for the past few hours bubbled up to the surface. The fear, uncertainty, and terror of almost losing Jenny could no longer be contained.

"I don't know what I would have done without you today," I confessed. "If it weren't for you, Jenny would have been lost. And you... I almost lost you today, too."

Colson wiped a tear from my eye with his thumb, caressing my face gently as he did. "You'll never lose me, Christa. In all the worlds, in all the universes, in all the lifetimes, I will be right by your side. You are my one true mate. I will never be apart from you again," he promised.

I closed my eyes and nodded, feeling the certainty of what he said as the words washed over me. We had survived it all. Even with enemies disguised as allies pressing in on all sides, we had survived. Colson and I had come out of the experience stronger than ever, with a trust between us that grew by leaps and bounds with each passing day. Our bond was unbreakable now.

"I never want to feel helpless like I did today when we couldn't find Jenny," I admitted, unable to dislodge the memory from my mind: the frantic searching through the Spencers' house as we called her name, the race through the wilderness hot on the heels of her abductors—each second seeming to last an eternity before we had finally caught up to her.

"You won't," Colson assured me. "We're more prepared now, and so is Jenny. We're going to be okay. I'll make sure of it."

"How do I move past the fear? I'm so worried I won't be able to. That's no way to

live.”

“I can’t promise our lives will be easy, but I can promise that you will never be alone. The fear might never go away entirely—and maybe that’s a good thing—but it won’t rule our lives. We will find a way to move forward. Together.”

“You promise?” I asked, needing to make sure.

“I promise,” he swore. “And I never make promises I can’t keep.”

I sighed with deep relief at his words, feeling the weight of them down to my soul. We had come a long way from the kids we were when we first met, and even though he had hurt me in the past, there was no doubt in my mind that the promises he made now were true. Never again would I have to face the world on my own. I would still be strong, of course, but I didn’t have to be strong all the time anymore. Colson was strong enough for the both of us.

“I love you, Col,” I told him.

“I love you, Chris,” he whispered.

He bent down and placed one arm behind my knees, sweeping me up so that he could carry me like a bride through the threshold. The motion was sudden, making me erupt into giggles.

“Are you laughing at me?” he asked, feigning offense at my laugh.

“Always laughing with you,” I replied.

“Good,” he said. “I love to hear your laugh.”

His lips pressed against mine as he carried me into our bedroom. For the first time in a long time, I finally realized that I was home.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:40 am

The relief I felt walking up the front steps to our house after another long meeting with the Dark Alphas group was palpable. It was another scorching hot summer day, and while the others were out on another mission, I had abstained from this one.

Missing out on the heat was just a bonus for me, though. This mission was all about taking new territory for the group—a task I had given up in recent months.

At first, they had been reluctant to allow me to abscond from any group activities, but after I explained that I was still ready and willing to go on missions that were about protection and safety—and had proven that willingness to them—they had ultimately relented.

All except Pack Desmond, that is. Gage was still furious with me over his perception that I had sided with Christa and Jenny over the Dark Alphas. He continued to take every opportunity to goad me and attempt to get me to go against the group so he would have a reason to declare a battle between us without incurring the wrath of the others, but his attempts had been fruitless. I saw no reason to risk life and limb for a cause that wasn't noble. Not when Christa and Jenny were waiting for me at home.

Things might be different if it seemed as though Gage was planning another covert attack against us, but he seemed to have given up on that notion. The threat of retribution from the other packs had been enough to convince him to behave—at least for the time being.

I opened the front door and immediately heard music blaring from Jenny's room. She had taken up the guitar recently and, unfortunately for our eardrums, had settled on the electric guitar as her preferred sound. The daily sound of imperfect chords blasted

through the house on a regular basis now, but it was a small price to pay for our daughter's happiness.

"I'm home!" I called out as I tossed my shoes into the front hall closet.

"In here!" Christa replied.

I followed the sound of her voice into the kitchen and saw my mate and a guest sitting at the table. The woman had long, raven-black hair tied back in a braid that went down to her waist and mahogany skin. She didn't look familiar to me at all, and I struggled to think of how she had come to be sitting in our house.

"Col, this is my childhood friend, Renea," Christa explained.

"It's nice to meet you," I said, reaching over to shake her hand.

"The pleasure is mine," Renea replied.

Her brown eyes were wide and kind, and I could see that she was sincere in her greeting. A childhood friend of Christa's meant that Renea was from Sparkle Hollow, though. Ever since we had accepted their terms, Christa's old pack had left us alone. I was holding up my end of the bargain and had already paid two installments toward the debt we owed to them and the Moonstones.

"What brings you to Pack Marsden?" I asked.

"Just catching up with Christa," she said with a smile. "I was passing through on my way to visit my brother up north and got permission from the alpha to make a pit stop here."

"I'm glad he agreed to your request," I said.

The admission that Alpha Lex was still keeping tabs on us wasn't surprising, but it was a useful piece of information for us to have. As much as we wanted to believe that we would be allowed to continue living here peacefully, Christa and I had agreed that we needed to keep our guard up on all sides. There was no telling who might seek to hurt us, and we wouldn't put Jenny at risk again.

"As am I," Renea said. "But unfortunately, I need to head out. It's been so good to see you, Christa."

"You too," Christa said, standing up to hug her friend. "You're welcome to stop by any time you're in the area."

She walked her friend to the door and bid her goodbye before heading back in to give me a hug.

"I missed you," Christa said.

"I missed you, too."

The music from Jenny's room stopped, and we heard her answer her phone. Although she was only ten, we had decided to get her a cell phone after the incident with Gage a few months ago. It was more for peace of mind than anything else, but it seemed to be helping. We all felt safer knowing that Jenny could reach us at any time if she needed to, and she had been using the phone to keep in touch with her new friends in the pack as well. Anything that helped her feel safer and more at home was a bonus in our eyes.

"Dad, are you home?" Jenny shouted from the hallway as she came out of her room.

"What's up, Jenny-bug?" I replied.

She had only started calling me "Dad" a few months ago, and I had to admit that it

was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. She could have chosen to continue calling me “Colson” if she wanted to, but hearing the endearment from my daughter was a gift I never thought I would receive.

“Can I go over to Lizzie’s house? She said she got a new record that she wants to listen to with me,” Jenny said.

“Of course you can,” I said. “Just be back for dinner, okay? I’m making quesadillas.”

“I will,” she promised.

She grabbed her things and left the house, heading for Lizzie’s down the street. Jenny had almost completely recovered from her kidnapping and had felt comfortable leaving the house without us for a few weeks now. She might never have a sleepover again, which was understandable, and both Christa and I were fine with her taking as long as she needed to feel comfortable getting back into the routine of a regular kid.

Lizzie Spencer, on the other hand, had not seemed to recover as quickly as Jenny had. I suspected that was one of the reasons Jenny spent so much time with her friend. Nothing was better for healing trauma than sharing it with someone who understood what you had gone through. Jenny was turning out to be almost as strong and wise as her mother.

“She’s a good kid,” Christa said.

“The best,” I agreed.

“But... I’m glad we have some time without her home,” she added slyly.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked.

She pushed me backwards until my knees hit one of the kitchen chairs. Once I was

seated, she straddled me and began kissing my neck seductively. I sighed, a faint smile playing at my lips, as her petal-soft lips traced patterns across my skin. Immediately I felt my cock harden in response to her advances. Her teeth nipped at my neck in response as she felt my member against her inner thighs.

“Eager today, are we?” I teased, grabbing her backside firmly in my palms and pressing her closer to me to make it clear that I shared the same desires and excitement as my mate.

“Is there something wrong with me wanting to take advantage of my mate during one of the few times we have the house to ourselves?” Christa whispered into my ear, nibbling at it again as she did. I had told her once that nothing turned me on more than that simple act. She had clearly taken that information to heart.

“I see nothing wrong with that plan,” I assured her.

I swept her hair away from her neck and placed kisses of my own under her earlobe, eliciting a moan of hers in turn. I pulled back to enjoy the look of pleasure that I knew the action would give rise to and was pleased to see her eyes had closed. Nothing gave me greater pleasure than to see how peaceful she looked in my arms. Almost nothing, that is.

She opened her eyes and stared deep into mine. Her gray eyes pierced me like silver as her hands deftly removed her top, revealing her full breasts. I took her nipple in my mouth and heard a low moan emanate from her as she tossed her head back, enjoying my attentions. Her hips began to grind on my pelvis as my hands encircled her waist, feeling the softness of her skin beneath my fingertips.

“Chris,” I whispered, “I think we have too many layers between us.”

“You read my mind,” she said.

She stood up, and I followed suit as we both made a mad dash to remove every article of clothing from us until we both stood naked in the kitchen. Christa's eyes roved over my body ravenously, focusing on the fullness of my desire, which was on full display. She licked her lips, and I felt my loins quiver with anticipation.

Her breasts heaved as she took a deep steadying breath before striding towards me confidently, wrapping her slender arms around my neck and pressing her lithe body into mine. When our bodies collided in a frenzy of passion, I felt like my soul was complete.

"I love you," she whispered. My hands searched her body greedily as I moved my lips from her lips to her neck. Unwrapping her hands from around me I continued the downward movement of my attentions toward her chest and stomach. She gasped as I placed a delicate kiss on her ribcage, looking up at her in adoration.

"I love you," I murmured into her navel.

I knelt in front of her, placing my lips on the bud of her womanhood and kissing gently. She groaned as my tongue pressed against her, licking her clitoris tenderly. Within moments, her legs began to waver. My forearms supported her from behind, wrapping around her thighs as I continued. Her hands found a handhold in my hair, bracing herself against the waves of passion that rippled through her. As her knees began to shake, I retreated, standing up and pulling her along behind me as I walked toward the couch.

She laid down on her back, and I lifted her legs up, placing her ankles on my shoulders and positioning my erection between her legs. I began to enter her but pulled back at the last moment. Her hips wiggled closer as she tried to press me inside of her. I repeated the action again and could sense her growing frustration when a crease appeared between her eyebrows.

"Don't tease," she pouted.

“Very well.”

Nothing else needed to be said between us. I plunged myself deep inside her, feeling the warmth of her pussy around my cock. With each thrust, our breathing became more labored, until we finally reached the pinnacle of our release. With our energy spent, I untangled our bodies and laid down on the couch beside her, pulling her into my arms. Our bodies seemed to meld into one as we recovered, and our breathing slowed.

In spite of the rapture we had just experienced, my thoughts were far away from the current moment. The future was still untold, and I didn't know how much longer I could put up with the duality of being a good husband and father while working with the Dark Alpha group.

“Are you going to tell me what's bothering you, or am I going to have to pull it out of you?” Christa asked, breaking my reverie.

“I'm sorry, love,” I said, caressing her jaw tenderly. “I was just thinking about us and everything we've been through. After everything that happened, I hoped I would understand myself better, but sometimes I still feel like I'm a stranger to myself.”

“That sounds really hard,” Christa acknowledged.

“It can be. I want to be a good person, the kind of man that you and Jenny are proud of, but I'm still wrapped up with the Dark Alphas. I don't always know if I can toe the line between being honorable and being loyal,” I admitted.

“I'm so proud of you, Col. I always have been, and I always will be,” she promised. “No matter what comes, I will be by your side.”

“Even if I don't know who I am?”

“I know who you are,” Christa said. “You are both honest and loyal. You pay attention to the needs of those around you and work tirelessly to take care of those who need your help. You are handsome and loving. You are my mate and my best friend.”

After months of hearing Christa give me compliments, I still hadn’t gotten used to it. I wasn’t sure I ever would, so I deployed my go-to strategy: switching to humor to lighten the mood.

“You forgot about my nice ass,” I quipped.

“Oh no, I didn’t,” Christa responded, raising an eyebrow.

“Been thinking about it a lot, have you?” I asked.

“Here and there,” she admitted. “It’s hard to ignore when you leave the room. Honestly, every part of you is hard to ignore.”

“But only one part of me is hard,” I said.

“Already? We just finished,” Christa asked in surprise.

“I’ll never be finished with you,” I said.

THE END