



Camp Dire

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Category: Horror

Description: Piper

I think the idea of a weeklong fall camp for kiddos is a wonderful thing! And offers me the perfect respite while I figure out my next move. I've not had an easy life, but I'm not going to let that stop me from giving the kids at Camp Dire the best fall break ever. Imagine my surprise when I find out Dire County harbors a big secret and I'm about to find it out the hard way. And the scariest thing in the woods, the thing that makes my heartbeat and my body melt, is the town's mayor and owner of the camp...Merrik Grimmwood.

Merrik

I've got problems on top of problems and the biggest one comes in a tiny, little, curvy package with enough spirit to keep the camp jumping. But I'm not the only one with my eyes on my newest camp counselor. There's a murderer in my woods and I have to find and stop the maniac before he can get his hands on Piper. To complicate matters I'm working on a tight deadline -so to speak- with only a week before the blood moon which is the final ingredient in the monsters messed-up formula. Falling in love wasn't on my itinerary but I'm not letting Piper go! Not during the blood moon or after! I can't! She belongs to me, and I always take care of what is mine!

Just in time for Halloween!!! A brand-new series with wolf shifters, fated mates, double virgins, murder, and a happy ever after that's all treat and no trick. So, go ahead and eat that candy, snuggle up, and read the new Dire Series book one! Let me take you away where good always wins, you never have to decide if you really need one more piece of chocolate (go ahead, I won't tell), and true love is the sweetest treat of all!

Total Pages (Source): 20

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter One

Merrik

I want to put my head down on my desk and howl...okay, I want to beat my forehead against the smooth wood surface until I'm senseless and then howl. Frustration sits heavy in my chest and clogs my throat until I want to start a fight just so I have a reason to wind up bloody and confused. Not that I would be the loser.

"Merrik, you okay?" I fight back a growl of irritation at my brother's interruption. It isn't his fault. None of this is his fault. It's just bad timing.

And that is the most vexing thing of all!

"Yeah, I'm alright."

"You want to go get drunk and fight someone in the bar?"

Maybe when I was younger, I would take my brother up on his offer. When my father was still in control. Now... I'm too damned old to get in bar fights and wake up the next morning not quite sure what I did the night before.

I shake my head as he comes in and closes the door behind him. My brother is the only other person I let in this office without explicit permission. And that's probably because he is my brother.

"Is it about what I think it's about?"

I give him a brief nod. His eyes become cloudy, like my head feels, over the fact we have problems at a time when we so do not need them. At least I'm not feeling this level of frustration on my own.

"I've got my guys out doing everything they can to find the asshole."

"I know you do. No one is blaming you for anything. Hell, no one is blaming me...for now. But you know as well as I do, they look to us for protection and guidance."

It won't always be that way. If we don't find the bastard who's causing the frustration and pain, then eventually everyone will be looking at me and my brother and blame will be thrown. I can't just sit and wait for that day to come. It's not in my nature.

"I'm doing runs every night and calling in the twins for extra eyes and ears."

My brother's eyes narrow and he huffs heavily, "Come on, don't do that!"

Even sunk in irritation like I am, I can't help but laugh at my brother's reaction to hearing I'm calling the twins in. He's always had a thorn in his paw over the two men.

"Isn't there something else we can do? Those two are...crazy, half unhinged, psychos who always make things worse no matter where they go. Do we really need another unhinged psycho running around? Don't we have enough of those? If you bring them in then we'll have three maniacs out there doing God knows what!"

I arch my brow at him. He knows exactly what that means.

"No, I'm not questioning your motives or your actions for that matter. I'm just...pissed it's come to this is all."

“Damn right, you’re not.” I give him a grin. “Nobody is more aware of how crazy the twins are than me.”

We were at Camp Dire with them, the camp I now own. One of the reasons Kenneally doesn’t like them is because they nearly drowned him one summer. Lucky for him it was the summer I realized who was in charge of things...me! I made them sorry they ever tried that shit with my brother and from that moment on they’ve been chill with most everyone... except Ken. He still carries a little grudge about things and more often than not they end up in a fight before all is said and done. They poke at one another something horrible and can’t be left alone for very long before everything turns into pure chaos.

“Fine, bring them in...but if they start shit Imma shoot them! And I’m the sheriff now. I know how to make it look accidental. Not that anyone would question why I would’ve put a bullet in either one of them.”

With that, he stands and leaves my office as I chuckle at his ire. As soon as he makes his way down the stairs, I sober up and turn my attention back to solving the problem at hand. Time is of the essence, not only do I have innocent campers coming in for the week, but I have counselors to keep safe as well. On top of all that, every soul in this town looks to me for protection from the terrors found in the dark.

Kids and counselors aren’t the only things out in our woods anymore. Something is stalking our town bringing fear and death with it. Hunting down the weakest and most vulnerable of our tiny community. Some **THING** is murdering women and children, and I plan to turn the tables on it. I will hunt it down, tear it apart with my bare hands, and stop this madness that has infected our peace and security.

Because that is what I do!

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Two

Piper

It's hot for fall but not nearly as hot as summer was. It's a good temperature for the campers. They can get one more swim in the lake, and one more night to pleasantly sit around the campfire stargazing together. This is a camp for kids who are on fall break. And I love it here. They do summer camps too, but I missed the deadline to be part of that this year. Hopefully next year I won't miss out on all the summer fun.

I love camp so much because I didn't have that growing up. I barely had food to eat most days. Camp was not even on the radar and if I had said anything about wanting to go, my mom would have had a shitfit. I would have been told how ungrateful I was, how spoiled, and how self-centered it was to want to leave your family so you could party it up with other kids while your family suffered at home. No, best to suffer with them and stop being childish. After which she would light another cigarette and bring her latest flavor of the month another beer. She could have sent ten kids to camp with the money she blew through. Believe me, the irony was not lost on me.

"Hi, Piper?" The woman who comes out to meet me is about the same height as me...which is short. But the smile she is rocking is so warm it's impossible not to give her one of my own.

"Yeah, that's me."

"I'm Annabelle. But the campers call me Annie. The owner chose me to show you

around and it will be my pleasure.”

I can already tell we’re going to be good friends.

“Let me show you where you can put your things first.”

"That'll be great. Thank you."

After she shows me where I’ll be laying my head for the next week and a half, she takes me around and introduces me to all the other counselors. Most of them are nice. One of them is a little...too nice. I don’t trust males very easily, especially the ones with easy smiles and wandering eyes. My mom was always hooking up -and getting left- by those kinds of men. I learned quickly most men want what I’m not willing to give them.

I make a mental note to stay away from him if I can and focus on the others.

“The only one you haven’t met is our fearless leader and owner of the camp, Merrik. He should be back sometime later tonight, and tomorrow the kids will be here.”

“That sounds great. Thank you so much for showing me around. Am I the last counselor to come or will more be coming?”

“Not for this fall, but we hire more in the summer because we have more kids. I saw on your sheet that you already signed up for summer so now you’ll know where everything is, and you won’t have to go through the three-day training session we put our newbies through.”

One of the other counselors comes up and throws his arm over Annie, “Hey, how about we go for a swim before we have to figure out dinner? Introduce the new girl to our lake.”

“I can’t, but feel free to take a swim, Larry. I’m sure the two of you won’t be the only ones interested.”

“You want to come with me to ask everyone else? I promise,” he gets a little closer, “I’m not super creepy like Doyle. He even creeps me out a little bit.”

I can’t help but give him a smile as he throws his arm around me like he did Annie. I don’t get the same icky feeling I get from the other guy, Doyle, with Larry. Something about his easy manner and quick smile puts me at ease. It doesn’t hurt that his eyes get all hot and steamy when he looks over at Annie.

Our eyes meet and he sighs and rolls his eyes, not at me. I think the eye roll is more for himself. “I know what you’re thinking. I’m pathetic, chasing after a woman that is several levels out of my league but, what can I say...I’ve loved her from the moment I met her.”

“That’s not pathetic. That’s sweet. I wish I had someone like you who is sweet and kind and looks at me with hearts in his eyes.”

“Stick around Dire County long enough and you just might get your wish, Piper. This town is crazy big on romance. It must be something in the water.”

We quickly get a group together and make our way to the lake. I make sure to hang out with Larry and some of the others to keep Doyle a good arm’s length away. Larry must realize it because he never lets him come too close.

I’m having a wonderful time when Larry cries out, “Look, everyone! Our fearless leader has returned!”

I look up at where Annie and a man who appears huge even from a distance is standing. I’ve never seen a man as...massive. A thrill goes through me at the sheer

thought of his eyes being on me. Then I scold myself. The last thing I need is to be lovesick over someone like Larry. And as close as he and Annie are standing together it would seem like me and Larry would have more in common than I am comfortable with.

I spare one more look at the tall man and push the need to see him better -up closer- out of my head and turn back to the others. I don't have time for a man, especially one that large.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Three

Merrik

“Are you wearing something new, Annie?”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Um, no.” She lifts the collar of her shirt to sniff but comes up with an even more confused look. “Is this some weird wolf thing?”

I narrow my eyes at her and fight a huffy growl. I have no idea what has me all out of sorts. I would never be this...vocal with someone like Annie.

Annie isn’t like most of us who reside here in Dire County. She’s...human.

Most of us are...not!

We have many names and the closest an outsider would liken us to is a werewolf. We prefer to call ourselves Lupin. When we speak of it at all. Humans like Annie are few, but they are here. Her mother -also human- married one of my wolves and that means Annie is also a part of us now. We Lupin take family very seriously.

I fight the urge to sniff Annie. The scent is too faint for it to be her and yet, it’s still there.

“Oh,” her brows go up, “you might be picking up on the new girl. I showed her

around just a little while ago.”

“New girl?”

As someone who knows what we are and what we can do, she is searching for a reason I am very interested in this new scent.

“Yeah, she came in a few hours ago and I showed her around. She’s human so...”

I narrow my eyes and slam the lid tight on the overwhelming craving that comes with her scent. This is the last thing I need. A human. I want no part of it. Not realizing the internal struggle going on inside of me, Annie keeps going.

“She’s swimming right now with everyone.”

Annie points down to the lake where people are splashing around and enjoying the water. My eyesight being better than a normal human’s, I can see the small brunette in a one-piece laughing and shouting with Larry. She stops when he cries out a greeting to us and turns to look the same way he is looking. I can feel her eyes on me even from this distance and even though I realize she can’t possibly make out details it’s as though she is looking right into my soul.

I huff off before I give into the urge to go down there and pull the woman out of the water right away, telling her, no -demanding- she only wear that little when I am close enough to kill anyone who stares at her too long. I’m not unreasonable, not a monster. I understand she’s going to draw male eyes...and some females as well. I’m not going to be a dick and blame her for that, for something she can’t fucking control. I’m going to growl and snarl and kill anyone who decides to look for too long or someone who thinks they can have what belongs to me!

Only...she doesn’t belong to me. She can’t! She’s human, and while human and

Lupin matings do happen quite frequently, I do not have the time for this. I have a murderer to stop and a town to protect. Maybe if it were another time, if it were under better circumstances, then maybe I would go down there and woo her the way she deserved to be wooed.

The coming of the blood moon makes the timing even worse. Blood moons happen two or three times a year when the Earth comes between the Sun and the Moon. It's a Lunar eclipse and causes the moon to turn a deep shade of red. These are known to cause...problems for Lupins. It makes us more susceptible to our animalistic side and...well, it makes us really fucking horny. It's not like the men are snatching women off the street and tying them to the bed until the phase is over or our women are climbing every male in sight. We just really want to be close to that one special person.

Just like we hold family sacred, we hold mates to be even more special. Males and females wait until they meet the one person they are meant to be with. Some of us can get our dicks hard before we find the one, but it's unsatisfying and never with another person. It's like eating without the flavor. Why do it if it isn't pleasurable? Lupins remain virgins until they sniff out their mate and then they lock up for a week or two until there is a babe on the way and they can finally feel settled.

When the blood moon happens, mated couples go hard at it often breaking beds, and making loud noises and the females go into a kind of heat -even if they are human- until they are good and bred again. I once knew a couple who were both Lupin and the male came away with a broken leg from the urges and needs flowing through my kind. No one asked him what happened because no one really wanted to pry but we all thought he was the goddamned man because of it.

Women become more fertile during that time as well, so a lot of births happen nine months after blood moons. Unless of course the woman is already bred and then the blood moon doesn't affect the couple as intensely. Oh, they still want each other so

bad they can't breathe without being connected but there are no broken bones, no swinging from the chandeliers when the couples are expecting.

And now I have a fucking monster on the loose in the woods and a whole lot of vulnerable people depending on me to keep them safe through the blood moon mating. I have no fucking time to lock myself away sunk in a mate. It wouldn't be fair to her as much as it wouldn't be fair to the people who trust me to keep them safe. I huff as I walk away from the tiny human with the killer scent and turn my focus back on a heartless killer instead.

Am I happy about it? No. Will I get over it? God, I hope so. As my community's alpha, I need to find this killer, stop the murders, and keep my people safe so they can do what nature intended. And what about the little human? I'm not even sure if she is my mate. I could just like the way she smells. For all I know, she could have brushed up against my real mate and that's why she smells good. Either way, I can't let this derail me. I can't let it keep me from doing my job.

And maybe, if I say it enough times, I will start believing it myself.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Four

Piper

I laugh at the littlest child in the camp as he ends up with flour on his nose...and his shirt and I'm pretty sure it might be in his hair too. Lowell is six and the cutest little thing I have ever seen with big, wide eyes and ruffled hair. We've been making pumpkin-shaped sugar cookies for hours now.

Lupa, who is ten, has been helping me with some of the younger kids. Even though she is young, she is so mature and certain of herself. They have been making me and Annie laugh since we started with their stories and antics. Annie has two campers who are a little older over at the stove putting the cookies into the oven. While me and Lowell are in charge of shaping the cookies and Lupa is helping us decorate.

We're all covered in flour and food coloring and are having a ball when a dark shadow falls over what feels like the entire kitchen. Annie looks up and smiles and I don't have to ask who it is. The owner of the camp, and the mayor, Merrik Grimmwood. The man I have been trying to avoid for the past two days.

"Something smells wonderful."

"Merrik! Merrik!" All the kids go crazy, leaving half-made cookies sitting as they run over to wrap themselves around his legs and chatter excitedly. Even the teens head over to him to show him what they have been doing. Annie also moves closer. Only I hang back and hold my ground where I am.

“Merrik, come look at the cookies we’ve made. Come look at what we’ve done with Piper.”

“Piper.” The way he says my name makes my belly feel like I’m on a roller coaster. “I don’t think I’ve met Piper yet.”

Oh shit!

I am unprepared for the full weight of his gaze as it lands on me or how his very presence takes all the air out of the room.

“Piper.” He holds his hand out and waits for me to take it. I am well aware of everyone in the room looking at us. My hand is engulfed when I finally put my hand into his. “Very nice to meet you, Piper.”

I should say something, I know I should. I should at least nod for fuck’s sake, but nothing comes out when I open my mouth. It doesn’t help that he uses our connected hands to pull me towards him and uses his other hand to touch my cheek. I hold my breath thinking about kissing him when he pulls his thumb away to show me a streak of flour I didn’t even realize was there.

He’s not trying to be flirtatious or sweet. He’s just letting me know I am a mess. The reminder is like a bucket of cold water being poured over me and pulls me back to reality. “Nice to meet you too.”

Lowell comes rushing over, talking a mile a minute. Merrik swoops him up in his arms and listens to every word.

“Piper said I was doing the most important work because no one would have the cookies to make if I didn’t press them out the right way and no one would know what they were if I didn’t decorate them so good.”

“Wow, that sounds like important stuff you and Piper are doing.” His eyes are back on me.

I give Lowell a smile before I turn back around and try to focus on cleaning things up a little bit.

“Yeah! Piper says good things always happen when a bunch of people work together instead of fighting.”

“Piper seems very wise. You should listen to what she has to say.”

Everything goes silent and it takes me a while to notice that only me and Annie and Merrik are still in the room. I look over at Annie with a clear question in my eyes only to find Merrik watching me intently.

“I’m sorry, did you say something? I must have not heard you. I guess I was really focused on cleaning.” I give a nervous chuckle before glancing over at Annie again. She’s eyeing the two of us with something akin to concern on her face.

Is she worried I might make a play for Merrik? I give her a smile that hopefully tells her she has nothing to worry about. I open my mouth to tell the two of them I don’t mind leaving so they can, um, have a private moment when Doyle comes breezing in. He’s so caught up in finally finding me semi-alone that I don’t think he realizes Merrik is in the room.

“There you are. I was looking everywhere for you. If I didn’t know any better, I would think you were trying to avoid me. Oh, hi, Annie.”

I don’t make the mistake of smiling at him. Doyle doesn’t need any incentive to try to come on to me. He’s asked for a walk in the moonlight, tried to sit next to me during our campfire time, and even tried to talk me into going down to the lake with him

alone.

“I have to clean all of this up, Doyle. It wouldn’t be right to leave it all for one person to do by themselves.”

“No more excuses, Piper. You’re coming with....,”

A growl fills the room and makes Doyle turn white. I start looking for the animal when he wheels around to find Merrik standing by the counter. Where is the damned dog that just let out the death growl? Why is no one but me and Doyle worried? Am I losing it? Maybe there wasn’t a growl after all. I slide over to be closer to Annie who doesn’t seem to be surprised at all.

“Doyle, buddy, join me outside so we can take care of some things. So, no one gets hurt.”

The two men leave quickly and the tension in the room leaves with them. “Um, guess we should clean up and head back to the bunkhouse.”

She nods and we spend a good thirty minutes cleaning, which is timed perfectly as the last batch of cookies come out of the oven. We put them away but take one for each child so we can sneak it to them before they go to sleep tonight. Neither of us talks about what happened with Merrik and Doyle...or Merrik and me and Annie. And I’m left to wonder if maybe I’m going crazy. Maybe Merrik really wasn’t staring at me intensely, there was no animal growl in the freakin’ kitchen, and Annie doesn’t think I am trying to steal her man. Besides, there is no way a hot guy like Merrik is going to look twice at someone like me.

I’m either certifiable or I need more sleep. Both may be true since I’m stressing out about what I should do after camp is over and I have nowhere to go. There’s no time to think about things like sexy men and jealous women when I have so many other

things to stress over.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Five

Merrik

I took Doyle out and told him to leave Piper the fuck alone. Then I kicked his ass just to keep the request fresh in his mind. Once I came back in, Piper and Annie were gone and the kitchen was sparkling clean. I might have kicked over one of the industrial islands we have in there out of sheer frustration.

What would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted? Where would our little introduction have led if not for the fucking idiot Doyle?

She's skittish but I don't think it is just me. I'll have to keep an extra close eye on her so Doyle doesn't try anything. I could sense the difference in her immediately when he entered the room. It was how she held her breath, the scent she naturally emits that makes my mouth water changed to one full of worry with an undertone of fear. I was issuing the threat before I realized what I was doing. Damn him!

No one makes my... I slow my roll and rewind. She isn't mine. Yet. Not technically anyway. But I still don't want her to smell of fear and worry, especially not around me. Just the thought of her feeling unsafe has me pacing the cabin I stay in when I work with the camp. It makes me want to stake my claim immediately so she will have my full protection. But as cautious as Piper is it's going to take some time for her to get used to me and then I'll drop the bomb about being more than just an ordinary man. I just need more time.

I just need... to find this fucking killer so I can leave while the fucking moon is red

and not scare the shit out of her or do something stupid like...tie her to my bed and show her exactly what I am before I've told her. In the spirit of doing just that, I change and do some sniffing around but inevitably my wolf takes me back to the cabin I know Piper is in.

And I don't like what I'm scenting. Doyle has been out here. Recently. I sniff the air again. But so has another male. Larry? I pull back so my rational mind can puzzle over this one. Why would Larry be outside the cabin where my Piper is sleeping? Do I have to protect what is mine from every male in this town? A sense of anger and rage fills me and I can't hold back the snarls and growls that start coming out of my throat.

I can almost hear the moment she wakes, her heart beating faster. Immediately my own heart starts thumping in time with hers. And just like some invisible string connecting the two of us, her heartbeat starts to slow back down, even back out.

I want so badly to go to her. To say fuck it to all the responsibilities and demands I have on me and claim the woman who will be my mate for life. There is only ever one for my kind. Only one heart that beats with ours. Only one soul so attuned to mine it's entwined and inseparable. Only one.

And for me it is Piper.

I lean my head against the wooden wall of the cabin and huff out long breaths that turn to fog in the night air.

Sleep, Piper. Sleep for the both of us. Rest, knowing I will keep you safe.

I run off into the darkness of the night and finish my perimeter checks before heading back to my own cabin. My wolf is none too happy about not being allowed to go to his mate. By the time I get back and dress after changing, my phone is ringing. I can

sense what I'm about to be told before I even answer the damned thing.

"There's been another one." My brother's voice fills the room since I put the thing on speakerphone.

"Great!"

"It's a wolf this time."

"One of ours?" This is the first time the killer has ever killed a wolf. This is not going to make anyone in town happy. My head starts to bang right behind my eyeballs.

"And there's more."

"Oh great! What more?" I don't think I can take any more.

"We have a witness." A long pause fills the cabin. And I try to understand what my brother is telling me. Having a witness is a good thing. How can it be...? "But we have a problem."

"A problem?" I don't need another goddamned problem. That is for sure.

I prepare myself for my brother to say something about the witness being scared and not coming forward, that the killer saw the witness just like the witness saw the killer, that the witness is a human and our killer isn't one.

"She...I...She's mine."

Oh shit!

This is so much worse than I could have even imagined. This isn't just a problem. It's

a big damned complication that has my headache intensifying to maximum level!

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Six

Piper

I've been with the younger kids all day, helping them carve pumpkins and hike a shorter trail than the other -older- campers. I also spent the day staying as far away from Doyle as I could. He's been even more annoying than he was before he was pulled out of the kitchen by Merrik. I'm eventually going to have to do something about him and tell him I have no interest in him whatsoever. Hopefully, then he'll turn his attention somewhere else.

Usually, men like him don't take conversations like that very well. Maybe...Larry can help me when the time comes. I shoot down the idea as soon as I have it. There is no way I would want to put someone in the middle of this. I'll have to take care of Doyle on my own.

And it's that knowledge that keeps me strung tight all day long. Apparently, I'm not the only one either. Annie seems out of sorts and so does Merrik. Maybe they had a fight. I shouldn't be so happy about that, and I feel shitty about it. Annie is my friend. I'm a horrible person for lusting after her fucking boyfriend in the first place but now, I'm getting happy about them having issues. I'm going to hell.

That feeling might have caused the fight, but I like to think that it was something more altruistic on my side. When I come back to the camp's community area and find Merrik yelling at one of my littles, Ralf who is only eleven, I lose it. I stomp over and step in between the two, pushing Ralf behind me.

“What do you think you are doing?”

He straightens to his full height like that’s going to stop me from calling him out on bullying a fucking eleven-year-old.

“I’m correcting a behavior that needs to be curbed before Mr. Andrews gets any older.”

“A behavior? He’s eleven years old. What behavior could you possibly be ‘correcting’?”

He looks at me like he can’t believe I would question him. I refuse to back down and wait for his answer with my arms crossed over my chest. His eyes narrow on me and he runs his eyes up and down my body.

“Ralf Andrews is the oldest boy in his...family. As such he needs to make sure he is in a position to represent that family. Fighting with younger boys is not that way.”

I turn to look at Ralf who has his head down and he won’t look me in the eye. “Ralf...why would you fight with younger kids?”

He doesn’t say anything but shrugs his shoulders. I turn back to Merrik standing in front of me with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. He raises his brows at me when our eyes meet.

“That’s still no reason to yell at him.”

“It most certainly is. That is the only way sometimes.”

His answer just rubs me the wrong way.

“No, it’s not!”

“Look, you have no idea what you are talking about where this is concerned. You need to just focus on the younger kids and let me handle Ralf.”

Now I am livid.

“Excuse me! I don’t know what I’m talking about. I don’t know what I’m talking about?” I look around at the other campers and counselors who have all come out to see me and Merrik argue. “I don’t see your kids running around here.”

“All of these kids are my kids.”

His answer takes me back for a minute and a look of shocked horror rushes over my face. I take a step back and then another one. There are over twenty children here. And they’re all his? It feels like my breath is trapped in my throat and my heart is at my feet. I feel sick, really sick. He must be able to tell exactly what I am thinking because he backs up and restates.

“That came out wrong. These aren’t...I don’t have any children of my own. But I do see all of these kids as my own to protect and care for.”

Okay...that’s...more than a little hot. And I might have had a small orgasm just thinking about how hot it is. But that doesn’t give him the right to yell nor tell me I don’t know what I am talking about.

“The circumstances are...ones you wouldn’t understand.”

“I...that’s bull sh...,” I stop myself before I can say the words that aren’t ones I want little ears to hear. “There are better ways. There are always better ways.”

He throws his hands up in the air and turns, giving me his back and huffing loud enough that everyone around us can hear. “Sometimes there isn’t a better one. Sometimes these kids who are starting to hit puberty are all mixed up and they need someone to...

“Don’t say straighten them out. Don’t be that dou...,” damn it! I really want to tell him exactly what I think of him. Will it get me fired? Probably. And more than likely I won’t be asked back in the summer, but some things just can’t be looked over. “Don’t be that kind of Richard.”

It takes him a second to realize I’ve called him a dick but if the word fits...he reaches out and grabs my upper arm, pulling me in closer to him.

“You...are the most infuriating woman I have ever been around.”

“And you’re the biggest dick I’ve ever met.” Now that I’m closer to him, I can talk low enough only he will hear me.

He narrows his eyes, and I brace myself for the words I know he is going to say next. I’m fired.

He pulls me even closer to him and my heart starts to beat even harder. Things like the way he smells come floating through my head and I can’t find that criticizing voice in my head that normally tells me that this is not the opportune moment for such thoughts. But, God, does he smell really good, damn it.

And then he’s moving, and I’m lost as our lips connect and the world flips upside down on me. His mouth moves against mine in a surprisingly soft brush. Yet, it causes me to gasp out and he uses that opportunity to deepen the kiss by slipping his tongue inside. The kiss deepens and I feel his arms come around me to pull me even closer to him.

I need to stop this. Pull back and walk away. The last thing I need to do is kiss him back. But that's exactly what I do. As soon as he teaches me what to do. I follow his lead and brush my tongue over his before fighting down the moan that rises up inside my throat. It is over way too soon and he's setting me back on my feet, stunned silence all around us.

My hand comes out to strike him before my brain starts functioning again. The moment I make contact I immediately regret it. It's muscle memory, damn it. I've been so used to keeping people, especially men, at a distance that I don't even think about it anymore. I just act. I jerk my hand back and stare at him with shock and horror in my eyes and maybe some pleading.

Please don't take it the way it seems. Please don't think I didn't like it. Please... don't do it again. You could break my heart.

He spins on his heels and leaves, and I turn on mine and go the opposite direction. Everyone pretty much makes a path for me so I can go somewhere and try to calm the rushing of my heart and let my kiss-swollen lips return to normal.

Oh my God! I kissed him. He kissed me first to be fair but I ended up kissing him back. I'm shaking at the thought and then other thoughts come rushing through my now-functioning mind. Oh shit! I kissed a guy who has a girlfriend. A girlfriend I am supposed to be friends with. I hide behind one of the cabins and lean my head against the hard wooden side as I try to figure out what I need to do first.

When a twig snaps, my eyes jerk open and my heart starts racing for a whole new reason. And then Doyle comes out of the brush like...well, a creeper.

Great! Just what I need. More bridges to light on fire and leave in my destructive wake. Might as well get it all over if this is the last day I'll be here.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Seven

Merrik

I should stay the fuck away from her. I shouldn't be out here lurking like some fucking perv that needs to stalk his prey. But I can't stay away. And after that kiss, I am well aware of how hard it is going to be to let her walk away from me during the blood moon. Just the thought makes the creature inside of me fight to get out. And the fact she stood up to me without backing down just made me even fucking harder, even more certain that she was mine. That this is right and inevitable.

Yeah, she slapped me but thankfully, I have other senses that tell me just how turned on she was by that kiss, the scent of her sweetness getting stronger and turning to pure honey as she started to kiss me back. God, I could have dragged her off right then. Or worse, I could have taken her right there in front of everyone standing around.

A scent catches my attention long before I make my way around the camp to where I last saw her sneak off. This one makes the animal in me immediately burst free and rush to my mate.

"I don't...um, like you like that, Doyle. I don't want to hurt you but I...am not comfortable with...you."

"Because you're too busy panting after the mayor. Maybe if I was mayor, you'd start opening those legs for me."

“Oh, God, no! I mean...,”

“You should be careful, Piper. A tiny little thing like you might get hurt chasing after someone so powerful. You know, they found bodies in this forest. Wouldn’t want a whore like you to get all sliced up because your too stupid to realize what danger looks like.”

Piper’s face goes white as blood drains from her face and her scent turns acrid. A growl rumbles out of me and both of them turn to look at the thick underbrush. Doyle goes pale now. He knows I’m here and that I listened to every word he just said to my mate. The wolf and the man are in total agreement that Doyle has signed his death warrant. He will never leave this camp alive. But I don’t want to do it now, right in front of my already terrified mate. No, Doyle and I will end this thing tonight. Under the nearly full moon.

I watch as he runs, leaving my girl sagging against the cabin wall. As much as I want to go to her and rub my scent all over her, I also don’t want to scare her. So, I bide my time, spending the rest of the afternoon in my wolf form as I track every step she takes. I want to be sure she is safe in her bunk before I finish Doyle.

What I failed to calculate, is how much rot has infested Doyle over his life. She’s walking some of the younger campers back to their bunk after they sat around a campfire making smores and telling stories when a large wolf jumps out in front of them. Immediately, my mate shoves the tiny children behind her trying to protect them.

When we are wolves, we are bigger than a normal wolf. I’ve always wondered if it might be a holdover from the days more of our kind walked among people. Whatever it is, most of us in wolf form are twice the size of a normal wolf. And I’m even bigger than the rest of us because I’m the alpha.

Seeing Doyle in his wolf form is startling to say the least, especially for someone who didn't know we were out here in the world. Someone like Piper. Normal people in her position would run screaming. She stands in front of small children remaining calm and poised. She's got everything it takes to make a good mate for an Alpha like me, everything I could ever ask for in a mate. Everything.

Courage, bravery, and willingness to put others ahead of herself, she's perfect. And I will not let anything harm her or take her from me, especially not Doyle.

Piper backs up slowly and keeps the children behind her as the wolf advances closer and closer. When he opens his mouth, a roar fills the night air but not from him. The wolf's head snaps to the side as it looks with wild eyes as I emerge out of the brush and dark trees. The wolf standing in front of my mate is brown and white and gray while I am big and black, the same shade as the night around us. A color unmistakable among our kind.

I growl deep in my throat as I step closer and closer to the other wolf.

"Oh shit!"

The two words are said in a quiet whisper, but I pick them up, just like I pick up the scent of fear that is heavy in the air, not just from Piper but from the children as well. The wolf looks away from me and back to my mate. I feel his intent before he ever moves and in anticipation, I launch myself at the other wolf catching it in mid-jump sending us both rolling.

The last thing I hear before we both hit the ground is my mate screaming at the top of her voice.

"RUN!!!"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Eight

Piper

What the hell is going on? And why did my life suddenly morph into a fucking horror movie right before my eyes? When the first...creature came out of the woods I thought it was a bear, but the snout was all wrong and it had pointy ears that reminded me of a dog, but it was fucking huge! Huge! And now there are fucking TWO of them!

“RUN!!!” I use the fact the creatures seem to be fighting with one another to motivate the children behind me to run as fast as they can. I try to keep up with them but one of the creatures cuts me off before I can run away with the children. I turn and run the other way so maybe they will chase me instead of the kids. Those things have to be...wolves...or werewolves! Right? Fucking werewolves! In the woods!

“Hey! Come this way!” I duck into the forest and take off running as fast as I can when I hear twigs and branches snapping behind me. Apparently, it worked, and the monsters are chasing me like I want them to. Why did I think this was a good idea? Why, why, why?

I trip over something and go sprawling across the forest floor, but before I can get back up the first ‘wolf-thing’ is on me. A split second later the other wolf knocks him off me. I make it to my hands and knees only to find myself ducking and covering as a tree falls, its branches encasing and trapping me!

A merciless growl fills the woods as the tree hits the ground. By some stroke of luck,

the bigger branches and the trunk of the tree miss me but I'm trapped by the smaller branches at the top. But I'm still trapped!

"No!!" I kick out at the thin wooden arms trying to hold me down, but my thin canvas shoes are no match. I couldn't kick anything and break it if I wanted to, damn it! I grunt trying to press my way between two of the bigger branches as twigs and sticks grab and catch on the jacket I'm wearing. Light flashes through the trees and thunder cracks overhead like even the sky is pissed about what's happening. Another vein of lightning isn't far behind, creating forks of fire and lighting up the sky, giving me a better look at the two creatures.

Oh shit! I work faster at trying to wiggle between these two branches. I finally squeeze through but have to leave the jacket behind, snagged. And just in time too, because the fight between the two wolf things comes right towards me and one of them lands on my wooden cage and crushes it to pieces beneath its massive weight.

These things aren't werewolves...at least not like the ones in movies. A moment later, a flash of lightning affirms my suspicion. Not werewolves. There are no human features at all, no humanity in the brown eyes staring at me like the creature wants to eat me. He probably does and the worst part is I wouldn't be even an appetizer to these big things. More of a late-night snack.

I take off again and start to run in the opposite direction, away from the fight. I can see my breath in the cold air, but I don't feel a thing as I try to make my escape. No one is going to believe this. How am I going to explain this? Who the hell do I even tell? The police? The game warden? Fucking Animal Control?

I break through the tree line into what appears to be a glade. Shit! If I don't get back to the cover of the trees, I'm going to be easy pickings for the monsters behind me. I make a run for it through the knee-high grass, praying the entire time I don't step on a snake. I couldn't handle that right now, not something slithery on top of those two

snarling murder dogs and the threat of getting struck by lightning.

Halfway across the clearing, I trip over something lying in the grass and go down hard, hurting my wrist when I try to catch myself as I fall. I roll over on my butt, the cold of the ground sinking in. My hand throbs and I'm not sure if I broke something or just sprained it really badly. In the next brightening of the sky, I start to shake and back up, still on my butt.

It's worse than snakes. It's a dead person! Without thinking I let out a shrill scream as the world goes black again. One of these things already had a snack and now they want more. I scream again before covering my mouth and trying to keep myself from hyperventilating. I've not only entered a nightmare; I'm starring in a fucking horror movie! And the chances that I'm the main character are not great.

Tears stream down my face as I continue to stare in front of me even though I can't see the body anymore. The two wolves break through the trees. The brown one is limping and snipping at the black one. The black one's nose goes up in the air like he's caught the scent of something. I'm not sure if it's me or the dead body in front of me. I try to stand but my legs are wobbly and can't hold me up very well. I fall again and let out a sharp cry as I come down on my injured hand.

The black wolf's head snaps around, his blue eyes zeroing in on me as the sky lights back up. Unlike the brown eyes, these are...different - almost human. This time when the brown wolf attacks, the black one goes for his throat and rips it out. I gain my feet just as the brown wolf falls and I have enough light to see that there's blood everywhere. I feel myself sway as the world goes silent, no more snarling or growls, no more sounds of animals fighting, no more noise at all.

I need to run, to get back to the trees and hide from the big, dark monster coming towards me. I stumble back and turn only to be brought up short when I hear my name called out.

“Piper!”

What the fuck?

I turn in time to see the monster’s body start to shrink in size, the sound of bones cracking and realigning as the flashes in the sky become more and more frequent. Fur recedes and smooth skin takes its place. The ground feels like it moves under my feet as the thing that used to be a wolf stands up and stares at me.

This is no stranger. This isn’t an animal either – not anymore. I take a step back as my legs give out under me leaving me on my butt and staring up in the dark at familiar blue eyes and a mouth I was kissing not hours ago.

Merrik!

Merrik is standing in front of me in the exact same place the wolf was standing before. My eyes trail down his bare chest and I realize immediately he’s not wearing anything. Totally naked. Nude. In his birthday suit.

And laying at his feet...is a crumpled-up human with blood painted down his body. It takes me a second to realize that under all the blood and muck is the body of Doyle. When he moves closer to me my body goes numb and my brain shuts down as it refuses to accept what’s right in front of my face.

“Piper.”

“M...,” the first attempt doesn’t come out, so I try harder, “Merrik?”

As he comes closer to me, my neck feels too tired to hold my head up as the world tips and I end up on my back staring up at the night sky as more lightning forks across it. Merrik’s face swims in front of me for a split second before the world goes

dark!

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Nine

Merrik

I kick the door shut behind me as I carry Piper into my house. My mate is now right where she is supposed to be. Something inside of me loosens at the thought. It did not escape my attention while I was fighting with Doyle that the moon was almost full.

I take her to the only room she is ever going to sleep in. Mine. Once there, I go straight for the bathroom. I'm covered in blood and mud, and she's got dirt in her hair and on her body. I make quick work of our clothes and turn the shower on. I can tell she's hurt. There is heat emanating from her wrist that my extra senses can pick up on, but I don't sense anything else other than superficial scratches and bruises.

Still, the water will help me make sure. When the water hits her body, she starts coming around. Finally.

"Merrik?" She tries to push my hands away as I rub a smudge of dirt off her cheek.

I am well aware that she is completely naked in my arms. My eyes have already feasted on the sight before me, the soft swell of her breasts tipped with raspberry nipples, the soft curve of her hips, the hairless mound leading down to the delicious-looking lips that are equally bare. My mouth is dry and my dick is hard but right now my mate needs me to make sure she is alright and cared for. Touching and tasting will come later.

We're on the bottom of the shower floor and I'm fighting with her to stay still so I

can wipe the dirt off her.

“Merrik, there were wolves and people dead, and I thought...I think...I was dreaming?”

Now isn't the time to clear anything up for her. “Shh, let me make sure you're not hurt, sweetheart.”

“Hurt?”

Her brows furrow and she's quiet for a long time, giving me time to clean her soft skin. If I was in my wolf form, I would simply use my tongue to clean her but this is the way that won't cause her so much panic...hopefully.

She holds her hand up in front of her face. “I...fell. I tripped over something in the clearing and landed on my wrist.”

I wrap my hands around the wrist and start feeling around, bending it a little and checking on her. “I don't think it's broken, just sprained.”

“I fell...oh my God! Merrik, I think there was a body out there. We have to...we have to do something...why am I naked? Oh shit! I'm naked!”

She tries to pull away from me but I wrap my arms around her waist and hold her tight. “Sweetheart, you need to sit still.”

“No, I need to get out of here and find my clothes. What the hell? What the hell is Annie going to think?!”

She pushes against me so she can sit up and cover herself.

“Annie? What the hell does she have to do with any of this? Was she out there with you?”

“What? No, as far as I know, she was still at the campfire with the older kids.”

“Then why the hell would Annie care that you’re in my shower?”

She’s scooted back from me some and drawn her legs up tight so she can cover more of herself. It doesn’t make me happy that she’s trying to put space between us. My wolf doesn’t care for it either. He’s just got her in his home, he doesn’t want to wait or have distance put between us. He wants me to grab her by the ankle, pull her down, and put our mark on her. The look of confusion on her face is the only thing holding him back. We are in complete agreement that our mate comes first. No matter what. Even despite what we want most.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you tell me what Annie has to do with this?”

She looks around her and up at the showerhead before her eyes come back to mine being very careful not to stare at anything below my neck.

“We...we’re both, um, naked.” She whispers the last word. “Together.”

“Yes. When I brought you here, you were covered in mud. I wanted to clean you so I could make sure you weren’t hurt anywhere else but your wrist.”

“So...you...just did it to make sure I was alright?”

I nod carefully. “Sweetheart, what does Annie have to do with anything?”

“I just didn’t want her to think...it doesn’t matter. Forget I said anything.”

I move closer to her until I can take her by the wrist, the one that isn't hurt, and pull her closer to me. The water around us makes it easier for me to slide her to me and turn her so her back is to my front and my arms are wrapped around her.

"What didn't you want Annie to think, sweet girl?" Somehow, I feel it will be easier for her to talk to me like this. "Everything you think is something I want to hear, so please tell me."

"I was just worried she might get the wrong idea if she found out we were both together in the shower."

"The wrong idea?"

"I know she's not really like that but if, um, I was in her position I wouldn't be happy to learn someone I was with was naked with a woman in the shower. Maybe she doesn't care because she's super understanding and so sweet, but I just didn't want her to think I was...that we were...."

"Wait," it comes out as a growl and I have to breathe through the yearning to show her the only person I will ever be with is her, "you think me and Annie are a couple?"

"Yes."

"No." Her head swivels around to look at me. "I've never even looked at Annie like that. She's...she's a baby."

She stiffens in my arms and then I realize what I said.

"Wait, that didn't...,"

"It's okay. You don't date young women. It's...it's really not my business. I was just

worried I was...it doesn't matter. Annie is my friend, and I didn't want to..."

"It's not Annie's age that keeps me from dating her. I'm just not attracted to her."

"Like I said...it's not my business."

"I'm pretty sure it is your business to know if I am with someone." She looks at me like she doesn't understand what I am talking about. "I would never be in the shower with anyone else but you, Piper."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Ten

Piper

Why would Merrik say...what he said to me? He would never be in the shower with anyone but me. It doesn't make any sense. And he pretty much just told me there is no chance of anything happening between us since he thinks Annie is too young and I am younger than her. By a couple of years.

"Is the person out in the field okay? Is the person I tripped over...? She was dead, wasn't she?"

He looks at me and gives me a slow nod. Fragments of what happened flash through my mind but none of it makes sense. Why was I out in the woods in the first place?

A memory that comes as a murky whisp of smoke settles over me.

"I was running from...that can't..."

Memories come back but they're not making any sense. I pull away from Merrik.
"Did I hit my head?"

The look in his eyes makes me put even more room between us.

"You didn't hit your head, Piper."

If I didn't hit my head causing all of the shit to become massively jumbled in my

mind then..., “Oh my God!”

The way he is looking at me, the depths I see in his eyes, tells me I might not have made up the shit inside my head. I push his hands from around my waist and really look at him. His chest is wide, and a triangle of sparse curly hair leads down to his...I jerk my eyes back up before they fall any further. It's not his chest that has my attention...well, not all of my attention. It's the marks on his skin and the fact that they look half-healed already but are distinct enough that I can make out bite marks.

I shake my head but can't verbalize what I want to say. If he's got bite marks all over him then that means he was...there. He was one of the creatures I saw, one of the things that tried to eat me.

“I can explain.”

“Explain! Explain!” I use the wall of the shower to push myself up so that I am standing. “What are you explaining? That you wanted to wash your meal before you ate it. That you wanted to take your time and make sure I was clean before you...! Fuck this!”

I take off running. Thankfully the way Merrik's shower is designed is wide and open and all I have to do is sidestep to run away from him. A growl comes from behind me causing me to run even faster, and confirming that I was right about everything. I don't even care that I'm not dressed. I just need to get away.

I run out of the bedroom and into the hall but that's as far as I make it before a large arm bands around my waist and lifts me off my feet. I kick but he's got too good a grip on me. There's no way I'm getting away...for now.

“Calm down, damn it!”

“You calm down!” Yeah, I know it doesn’t make any sense but nothing does anymore. “Let me go!”

“I want to explain what is happening, Piper.”

Noise on the stairs has Merrik turning with me in his arms. The growl that rumbles out of him is so deep it vibrates through his chest and into me.

“Mer, I wanted to...oh...kay. I’ll come back!”

Merrik steps back into his room and locks the door before letting me go. I rush to the opposite side of the room trying to keep a good distance between us. His eyes send a chill through me when he runs them over me, from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, and not in an 'I'm so scared' way. It’s then that I realize I’ve been running around his house, carrying on full conversations, with no damned clothes on! I look around but can’t find the clothes I was wearing so I yank the entire bedspread off the bed and wrap it around me.

“I just want to explain what you saw tonight. I don’t want to eat you.” Under his breath, he adds, “At least not like that anyway.”

I tell my lady bits to settle down when they grow heated at his words. No! We do not fuck the hot guy who turns into a dog monster because that’s just wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong! I most certainly don’t think about what it would be like to have his tongue brush over me in all my most sensitive places.

A small growl emits from Merrik and my eyes widen when I realize he is sniffing the air.

“Oh shit! You can smell that?!”

Instead of answering me he moves to the closet and opens it. When he shuts the door it's with a huge, blue robe in his hands. He holds it out to me. "Please, let me explain who we are and what happened."

"W...we? There are more of you?"

He nods. "Some of the children from camp even."

"M...my kids?"

This completely floors me. All the fight drains out of me and I sag against the wall. I don't think I've ever felt so tired or confused as I do now.

"Oh my God! You weren't the dick at the camp when you were 'correcting' little Ralfie. I was."

He gives me a slow blink but doesn't correct me either. I cautiously step forward, one foot in front of the other but go slowly so, that if he...attacks or charges or growls I can reclaim that space, and snatch the robe from his fingers.

"Please sit. I'll sit over here in the chair if you sit on the bed. I worry some of this won't be easy to...digest."

"That...is a lousy choice of words."

I quickly wrap the robe around me and cinch the belt as tight as I can before I sit down on the edge of the bed on one side. He pulls the chair up to the same side but leaves enough space that I don't feel trapped.

"We are a species called Lupin." I know enough to know that means wolf in a whole bunch of languages. "We don't exactly know where we came from other than maybe

Ancient Rome. Either way, there are small groups of us all around the world. We usually remain pretty self-contained for the most part, probably because we were hunted at one point or another throughout history.”

So, he’s telling me he and all of his friends are...not human. Sure. Cool. No biggie.

Chapter Eleven

Merrik

I can't tell if she believes any of this or not, but she's at least pretending to listen. I knew it wouldn't be easy to tell her who I was but given the circumstances at least she isn't questioning whether we really exist.

"Dire County is a little different than a lot of the other Lupin communities in the fact we are about half and half in our population demography."

"Half and half? Half...what you are and half...?"

"Human."

"Do, um, all the humans know...about you?"

"Not all of them. We have a college on the very edge of town and none of the humans there know unless they knew before they started."

"Before?"

"People do know about us...when they have married into the Lupin community or one of their parents have married one of our wolves."

"People marry into...? I mean, they can...um, you can..." she interweaves her fingers together to try to show me what she means and is cute as hell doing it, "with

humans?”

I nod. “Annie’s mother is one of the humans that have mated and married one of our wolves.”

“Annie? She...knows about you guys?”

I nod for her.

“She...has a...what do you call it? A mate? Annie has a mate?”

“If she would get her head out of her ass she’d have a mate in Larry.”

“You know about that?” I nod. “Is Larry a wolf?”

I shake my head this time. “I think that’s one of the problems. She’s watched her mom fall in love with a wolf who will stay true and devoted to her mother all his life and beyond and she thinks that is the only way to be sure someone really loves her.”

“You’re... different from...men when you, um, mate?”

“We have what’s known as a destined mate, the only woman or man who will hold our heart for the entirety of our lives.”

I can almost smell the curiosity coming from Piper now. “Destined mates? You marry only once?”

“Marry, have sex, go through life.”

“Wait, you only have sex with one person...your entire life?”

“Yeah. We can’t get it hard for anyone else and although we can take ourselves in hand, so to speak, there is no enjoyment in it at all. Like eating but with no flavor to the food or drink.”

She sits and looks at me for a long time as what I have told her sinks in.

“What happens if you’re, um, mate dies or something?”

“A lot of my kind choose to die with their mate. If they don’t they never take another wolf or human as a mate.”

“But...you...you got, um, you know in the shower. You were hard when I -we-kissed at the camp. If you can only get hard for one person your entire life, how come you were that way with me?”

I lift an eyebrow and wait for it to hit her.

“Was it because your mate was close to us?”

I roll my eyes. I can’t help it. Why this is the biggest concept humans struggle with about my species is a constant reminder of why I am really glad I’m a different species.

“Yeah, she was close. Like right in front of me.”

“Then why would you kiss me?! What kind of person does that?” She stands and huffs. “You tell me some bull crap about fated mates or whatever you call it and then you go behind your mate’s back and kiss other women. In front of her! So, you can kiss anyone you want, you just can’t fuck them? What kind of sense does that even make? It’s disgusting. You’re just like every other man. You say one thing, but you don’t mean it. And if you lied about that shit, what else are you lying to me about?”

You are going to eat me, aren't you? Does calming me down make me taste better somehow? Fuck this! I'm out of here!"

She takes off, running from me and my wolf yet again. And this time I can't hold the beast back from chasing after our mate and making her ours.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Twelve

Piper

I get much further than I did the first time. I make it all the way to the middle of the hallway before I hear the animal growl behind me. I can see the stairs and put on a burst of speed so I can make it to freedom. Just a little bit more and I will be on the steps. Just a little bit farther.

A weight hits me in the back and takes me down to the floor. I start fighting to be let up, scratching and kicking to get free. I'm flipped onto my back and the robe I was wearing is torn to pieces as it's ripped from my body.

"Stop! No!"

It's like he has fifteen hands, and they are all working to get me naked.

"You never run from a wolf, Piper!" His voice is rough and less than human.

I start pulling at his hair and finally resort to biting as nothing else is working for me. The sound that comes from deep down in Merrik is...thunderous.

"Oh my God!" I probably shouldn't have done that! I feel the growl he lets out all the way through me as the sound does funny things to my body, things that shouldn't be happening.

I try to scoot back but his weight is too much for me to move. He's pinning me to the

floor with only his hand. I'm not really running from him anymore. Instead, I'm trying to run from the feelings that well up inside of me. They're wrong and I'm wrong for having them.

He keeps his hand in the middle of my body as he starts to slide down. What the fuck?!

“What are you doing, Merrik?! Merrik?”

When he looks up at me his eyes are doing this glow-y thing that shouldn't happen to normal people. It takes my breath but not out of fear. It's as though they can see right through me. Like they know I'm wet where I shouldn't be wet and being chased by Merrik has made me...confused and...horny.

“You were so fixated on me eating you, little rabbit, I've decided to give you what you want.”

“What?” Oh, no! Oh, shit!

He pushes my knees open with his big body and keeps them spread wide with his massive shoulders. My hands go to his hand holding me down. My fingers curl around his forefinger and pinkie and drive home how much bigger he is than me since it's like I'm not even there. There's no resistance for him to work through because he's already got me naked and me pulling at his fingers is doing nothing to move his hand. I try to kick him but there's really nothing to hit since he's laying flat on the ground like I am.

“Merrik. Please.” God, what am I even asking him? My body is coming alive like it has never been before. Never in my life have I felt the things Merrik makes me feel. Not for anyone. I've never even felt horny for someone else. Is the throb between my legs supposed to be there?

I really need him to stop and explain what is happening and what to do about it. I need to put space between us so I can breathe again - and think, damn it! I need to run, as fast as I can. And stop wondering if he'll follow again, no matter how far I run. Because that's a little more than sexy.

He grins before ducking his head and...holy shit! He's...he's smelling...!

“Merrik!”

The first swipe of his tongue against my puffy lips makes me cry out so loud. The sound has me clapping my hands over my mouth. I can tell by the way his eyes sparkle and the corners crinkle that the asshole is smiling at me. I try to shoot him a nasty look, but the sting of the action is taken away when my eyes roll to the back of my head and all the fight drains out of me.

His thick tongue swipes up the middle, separating me, invading me in the best possible way. And then he buries his face and causes sensation after sensation to wash over me in uncontrollable waves of pleasure I lose sight of what I should be doing, what I need to do. All that matters is staying right where I am and letting him continue to lick me.

His tongue is rough against the sensitive skin he's working, and the contrast makes the feelings that much sharper, deeper, and more intense. He licks upward and finds the bundle of nerves that didn't work very well when I tried to touch them; they didn't work at all - until I met him. Now, my hips try to fly off the floor and I'm making wild sounds that I can't keep in. When he starts sucking and nibbling on it, I give in to the overwhelming rush towards something big. My body tenses and for one moment I have to wonder if I'm going to have a heart attack before my breath hitches in my throat and my back bows off the wooden boards under me. Every muscle below my waist locks and then begins to pulse and throb as a warm rush of ecstasy flows over me and everything turns to liquid heat.

My mind empties and everything goes quiet. It takes a couple of seconds to realize Merrik hasn't stopped or even slowed down. He keeps pushing my body to something bigger, something more than what I just experienced. And I'm starting to worry that I might not make it if he doesn't stop soon.

Chapter Thirteen

Merrik

Her flavor turns sweeter as her body sags back to the floor and honey flows out of her. More and more. My wolf is just as addicted as my human self is. I take her by the hips so I can lift her closer to my mouth and take more of that sweet cream with my tongue. It also has the double purpose of spreading her wider without me having to use my hands.

I push the tip of my tongue inside her tight pussy and confirm what I already knew. She's never been with anyone. Even if she had I would have kept her as my own as if nothing ever happened. Just like Annie's mom, a wolf would never turn their mate away. But Piper has never even fooled around. It was written all over her face when she started to cum for me. She was genuinely shocked by what was happening, what she was experiencing.

The taste of her innocence is also prevalent and when I push my tongue inside her pussy, there is no doubt what I am licking. I retract the muscle from her narrow passage and lick up to her clit again. Over time though, I find myself drifting back to the tight opening and push the tip of my tongue inside her again making sure I spread her walls wide but not enough to tear her hymen. I don't want to take her sweet cherry that way...no matter how tempting.

"M...Merrik! God, please...please...I can't..."

I push her open wider, getting her ready for me in this small simple way. I hold her

hips tight and then...I growl sending the sound through her. She cries out and goes stiff in my arms before her sweet pussy floods my mouth with sticky cream. The taste, the sound of her crying out her release, and the feel of her milking my tongue like she'll milk my cock has my wolf coming close to the surface and I don't try to stop him when my teeth elongate, and I bite down on the top of her mound. The mating bite.

Piper screams as her whole body shakes in convulsions stronger than any I have given her so far. The mating bite always elicits an orgasm out of the mate being bitten and a lot of wolves will bite one another many times to send their loved one to complete and total ecstasy.

Her pussy weeps with release as she pulsates around emptiness, but my bite isn't just a claim. It's a promise to send her to this state many, many times throughout our lives, a promise to fill her full and leave her completely satisfied. I lick over the wound closing it and then come up her bare body taking a second to stop and lick each nipple before I bring my lips to hers.

She doesn't kiss me back because she came so hard that she's passed out but I want to kiss her, to share the flavor of her so she realizes I'm not the only one who made my mark. I am marked by her just as surely as she is marked by me. I will wake up every morning and make sure her essence is painted all over my body, so everyone understands who I belong to! She will never have to wonder if others will know because I will make sure they all do.

My ears pick up on footsteps coming up the stairs and I cover my mate's naked body so no one can see her. We are both covered in so much cum, hers and mine, and barely dressed that the people coming closer are in serious danger of me attacking them for even being able to scent her like this. I let out a deadly snarl and the footsteps stop.

The twins.

I know it's them before they come any closer. I can also tell they are trying to figure out if they should speak or just turn around and walk away.

"Not trying to start anything, Merrik. Realize you have your girl with you." Another snarl is ripped from my throat. "We just want you to know what we found. We thought it might be important, that's all."

Damn! Damn! Damn!

Chasing after my mate and claiming her had me completely forgetting about the killer roaming our town. The killer who came way too close to my mate when she tripped over the latest victim while running from Doyle.

"I'll be down shortly. Meet in the kitchen."

"Okay, man. We'll be in the kitchen."

I listen to the footsteps retreat and finally pull back from my mate. She's still out of it, her breathing even and a smile tipping the corners of her mouth. She is...utterly perfect. I nuzzle into her neck before I lift her from the floor and carry her back to our bedroom. I hate to chain or cuff her to the bed so instead I use the softest material I have and rip it into pieces before wrapping it around her wrists and then the headboard.

She'll be pissed when she regains consciousness and finds out I tied her to my bed, but I can't be worried she will try to leave me and still focus on the things I have to think about with the twins. My wolf won't leave her until he's fully mated with her. Knowing she is right upstairs doesn't make him the happiest, but it pacifies him well enough that he will leave her to do his job as the community's alpha.

I have just hours to track this bastard down and stop him before the blood moon rises and the only thing I will be doing then, is making love to my mate over and over again. With that in mind, I call Annie for help.

Chapter Fourteen

Piper

I come awake slowly, rubbing my face against the soft covers under me. When I try to bring my hands down, my eyes fly open. It doesn't take long to figure out why I can't move them. I am apparently tied to the fucking bed. I pull against the binding, but it only gets tighter when I do.

Damn him!

I am actually surprised I'm not completely naked. Instead, I'm in one of my own nightgowns. At least he thought of doing that for me. I press my legs together and try again to twist free of the ties. One of the most embarrassing things about all of this - besides the fact I let Merrik eat me in the fucking hallway where anyone could walk up on us - is the heat I feel on my mound. I refuse to let myself think about why it could be so hot there - beard burn, scuff marks, scratches from when I fell in the woods.

"Oh, you're up. I was so worried I would... what the hell?"

Annie is standing in the doorway, and I have to wonder if maybe Merrik wasn't telling me the truth about him and Annie since she looks pissed as hell.

"What has he done to you?" She quickly moves across the room and immediately comes over to untie me. She's not pissed about me being here with Merrik, she's pissed at him for tying me to the god damned bed! "Are you okay, Piper?"

I nod but I'm not sure if it's true. I may never be okay again.

"I...I have to leave, Annie. I have to get out of this house before he comes back."

I'm already making my way to the door.

"Um, I don't think that would be such a..." Both of us hear a thud in one of the rooms close by. "What the hell was that?"

We look at one another and I shake my head so she'll know I have no idea either. I open the door slowly and listen, waiting for any other sounds.

"Piper, maybe we shouldn't leave the bedroom. You don't know everything. There's a murderer."

"What?" Fear rises up inside of me. I might have asked but I am intimately aware of what is out in those woods. I did trip over a dead body after all. It helps clarify my feelings towards Merrik. Never has he made me feel this way, this fright.

"Merrik and his brother, the sheriff, they went to find the guy who's been killing women and children in the Dire Woods."

My stomach lurches. "The body I stumbled over in the open field was..."

"The seventh."

"Wait! You said Merrik left to go find the killer?" My heart hits my rib cage at the thought of Merrik being anywhere near someone who has killed people.

She nods, "As the mayor and...um, do you know about...?"

“What Merrik is? Yes.”

She rushes through the rest, “As our Alpha, he’ll want to be right there when they find the guy.”

“How do you know it’s a guy?”

“Kenneally’s girl saw him when he killed someone trying to save one of the victims.”

“Kenneally?”

“Merrik’s brother.”

Another thump echoes down the hall drawing our attention back to the empty hallway.

“I think it’s someone in a room, Annie.”

“Piper if something happens to you while I’m here, Merrik will have me for dinner.”

“What if someone’s hurt? We can’t just leave them.”

My hand unconsciously comes down low to just above the spot that is burning. I go out into the hallway with Annie following close behind.

“Wait!” She disappears and comes back with the lamp from the bedside table.

“Are you stealing Merrik’s lamp?”

“What? No! It’s for protection.”

“Oh, maybe I should grab something too.” Another thump reversed my direction, and I looked around the room for something to fight with. “Shit! There is nothing here.”

I finally settle on a statue that weights at least fifteen pounds. It will definitely do some damage if I hit someone with it, so I figure I’m okay. We both creep out the door and down the hall. It kind of sucks that I’m in nothing but a flimsy nightgown but it can’t be helped, there is no way I would have Annie check shit out all by herself. We stop at one of the doors farther down the hall and wait. Sure enough, the sound comes again. Holy shit! This just got a lot more real than it was when I first woke up.

And why was it different when I was running from Merrik? I wasn’t afraid of Merrik. I was afraid of what he made me feel. Now, I wish he was with us. Not just so he could protect us but because I would know he was safe too. Another thump lets us know we’re at the right room.

“Hello?” I call out but don’t hear an answer. Just another thump. I wrap my hand around the knob and turn it as my heart hammers a mile a minute at what could be behind it. What if the murderer brought a half-dead victim here? I’m not sure why he would do that; I am just thinking of the worst thing I can see behind the closed door. All I can think about is blood and...well, more blood.

The fucking door creaks like it came right from a fucking haunted house and out of the corner of my eye I see Annie raise her lamp higher, ready to fight. The door swings back and... there’s nothing in the room but another bed and a pissed-off girl handcuffed to the bed. The thumping is the bedframe hitting the wall as she pulls against the cuffs.

When she sees us standing with objects raised her eyes grow wide and scared. We hide the things behind our backs - or try to since I drop mine. “Thank God you’re not a psycho killer.”

“Um...not since I last checked. Are you guys...can you help me?”

“Are you Kyra?”

She rolls her lips between her teeth and looks from me to Annie and back again.

“Yes. Are you going to tell that...asshole I’m trying to escape?”

“No! I have an asshole too.” I immediately feel a bond with her. “I take it you’ve gotten the ‘talk’ from your ma...man.” I chose to use the word man instead of mate just in case she hasn’t.

“Yea, Kenny told me...um, everything.”

“Kenny?” Annie laughs behind her hand. “You call Kenneally Kenny?”

“The sheriff, right?” I know she told me but I just want to make sure.

Kyra nods. “Have you met him?”

I shake my head. A small worry fills my head. Why did Merrik not want me to meet his brother? Is he ashamed of me? Maybe he’s not really sure about the whole mate thing? I rub above ‘the spot’ and shove the worry out of the way. Annie rushes over to set her free only to turn back to me with a concerned look on her face.

“Um, I can’t untie these, Piper.”

I look around but don’t see what I need. “Hold on just a second. Don’t move.”

I rush out of the room and down the stairs, turning once I come to the bottom. I’m in the office before I realize what I have done. How the hell did I...? How did I know that office was here? That Merrik only lets his brother in here? It’s like someone was

showing me the way and I didn't hesitate to think I was one of those people he would allow in here.

I shove all that out of my head for later and take a moment to turn my back to the door before pulling up the hem of my nightdress. Right above my pelvic bone is a small mark that kind of looks like...an animal bite.

He bit me! I push down the hem and narrow my eyes. I am so going to have a few things to say to him when I see him. So many things!

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Fifteen

Piper

I come back into the room and go right to the bed, holding up my booty...a paperclip, and a letter opener. Both women look at me with questions in their eyes. Annie steps out of the way and I get busy. I wiggle the mechanism loose and then click it forward. One side of the cuffs pops loose and then the other. It takes me longer the second time because it's on Kyra's wrist, but I still get it done.

"Wow, Piper. How do you know how to do that?". The look on Annie's face says she's impressed rather than judgy.

"Misspent childhood and a sketchy mother."

"Uh, I had both of those and I don't know how to unlock fucking handcuffs, girl." Kyra rubs her wrists as she gives me a little more about her. Knowing she grew up kind of similar to me makes me like her even more.

The sound of something hitting the front door has all three of us running to the window.

"What the hell was that?" Annie might have asked the question, but it doesn't mean I want to know any less, especially not when whatever the hell it was shakes the whole damned house every time it hits the door.

"Whatever the hell it is, we can't just stay here and wait for it to get in."

Annie looks over at me when I speak and picks up her lamp again, signaling she has my back.

We look over at Kyra and she gives a small nod. “But I’m not going anywhere without a real fucking weapon. Let’s stop in the kitchen first.”

“Good idea.”

We head down the hallway together and I take a moment to touch above the...bite mark. In my head, I’m screaming for Merrik but on the outside, I try to remain as calm as I can for Annie and Kyra.

“Oh shit, wait!” Kyra disappears back into the room as another impact shakes the house. She comes out with the handcuffs.

“Just in case.”

We nod and I take a moment to really respect how this girl thinks ahead. I don’t know how I’m going to feel about Merrik’s brother, but his choice of a mate is chef’s kiss. When we hit the kitchen, I hear it...the splitting of wood. One more good hit and that door is gone. When I look over at Kyra and Annie both of them have big, fearful round eyes.

“Let’s go girls.”

Merrik, he’s here! Please come!

Just in case, by some miracle, manifesting it into the universe might make it come true I reach out and shout the words.

“Stay together. When the door fails, we all make a run for the back door.” I look at

the two women with me and don't finish the rest. If we go down, we'll go down together, as sisters, which is kind of weird since I've never had that kind of relationship with anyone in my life before. I guess the fear of dying will bond a group quickly.

Just as we are backing towards the kitchen door, the glass shatters, and something not entirely human reaches inside.

"Shit!" I think it but Kyra says it.

We all run for the front door. I'm almost certain there aren't two of them. We make it out on the lawn before I see the creature out of the corner of my eye. Bastard is fast.

"Annie!" I shove her out of the way as Kyra screams and the monster rises in front of us.

"No!" Kyra tries to stab the thing, but he swats her away like she's nothing more than a fly. Still, it gives me and Annie time to gain our footing. His inhuman eyes land on each one of us in turn.

"I only want you."

That's something I never ever want to hear from anyone but Merrik, especially not in the creepy as fuck voice he uses.

"You'll have to go through us, buddy. That's how this works. I don't know how I know that, but I do, and it does." Kyra sounds about as confused as I was about the office location.

"As you wish."

The girls fall behind me with their knives at the ready. I know what they plan to do. Just like Kyra, I'm not sure how I know, but I do. They're planning to push me behind them when this guy attacks giving me time to run.

And I can't let them do that.

I step up in line with them stare the...thing in the eyes. If he plans to do this, he isn't going to leave without some serious wounds.

Piper!

When did my inner voice suddenly start sounding like Merrik?

Move the girls to the side.

I look over at Kyra and then at Annie. "Ladies..."

I cross one foot over the other and shift, Kyra shifting with me and Annie following. None of us take our eyes off the monster. As soon as my foot hits the spot I need to be in my mind, a large body flies through the air and hits the monster from the side. Both go rolling but the big, black wolf - my big, black wolf - gets to his feet first.

Another wolf comes through the air and lands on the creature biting and growling.

"That one's mine."

I hear the unmistakable pride in her voice as she looks at her wolf. I'm pretty fucking proud too. Even though the creature flings the wolves off him, they just keep coming back and Merrik is vicious. He goes for the throat several times. The creature is covered in bites and the brothers work in tandem to keep it busy so it doesn't think about us. I look to Kyra and silently tell her to run back to the house as quietly as she

can.

She actually looks at me with surprise on her face before she starts walking backwards slowly. When she gets a good distance away, she breaks and takes off running. Two more wolves come out of nowhere also attacking the creature. They're smaller than Merrik but about the same size as his brother. All four wolves work together to do as much damage as they can to the monster. But they are going to need help.

When Kyra comes back, I start sweating. This is so important and what if I fuck it up? What if my aim is off? I have sucky aim to start with. What makes me think I can even pull this off? But what if I don't even try? Because if something happens to Merrik while I'm self-doubting and wasting chances...I would never forgive myself. I move to the side and send a silent message to Merrik. I'm not sure if he can hear me or not but he and his brother do back off slightly.

"Hey, asshole!"

The creature turns to look at me. As soon as I called out his name, I raised my arm, pulled back..., and let the statue I carried downstairs and had Kyra run to grab for me fly. I throw it with all my might. It doesn't do anything to the creature...but it allows Merrik time to be precise and go for his throat. It gives the other three time to jump on him in such a way that Merrik doesn't get hurt. And it just makes me feel better like I'm useful in some small way.

Merrik rips at the thing's throat, just like he did to Doyle when he was in wolf form and tried to kill me. When Merrik gets thrown off, his brother attacks and makes a gash in the other side of its neck. The creature is bleeding so much that he starts to stagger, and his powerful swings become less focused and the two smaller wolves grab onto the flailing arms, teeth sinking into the arms. The wolves eventually pull the thing down and Merrik and his brother take turns biting his throat.

The monster lets out an unearthly howl as its dark blood soaks into the ground around it. After a while, the wolves back up and the thing stops moving. Everyone seems to be holding their breath, waiting to find out if the thing is really dead or if this is going to be a true horror movie. After a long pause, the monster starts to shrink and turn into a man...only the hair on the creature doesn't recede. It takes me a moment to realize in the dim twilight what I'm actually looking at. The body is wrapped in...a fur pelt.

“What the hell am I staring at right now?”

I jump at the voice by my side.

“Kenny?”

He winces and looks over at Kyra but answers me. “Yeah. I guess I'm Kenny. You must be Piper. I've heard almost nothing about you but if you bother my brother this much then I can't wait to get to know you.”

He gives me an easy smile as he reaches for Kyra.

“Is he...? He...he's not one of our wolves.” Annie says with certainty.

“I don't think he's a wolf at all.” Merrik comes up behind me wrapping his arms around me, only after he does do I realize how cold it is out here.

“Merrik, my man, did you go and find yourself a mate, buddy?”

My eyes slide over to the man standing in nothing but a pair of loose shorts. His mirror image comes up right beside him.

“Man, I hate changing back in the winter. Your balls get all...”

“Hey!” Merrik’s voice whips through the air like a physical snap, “Dare! I would suggest you don’t talk about your balls or anything else of the sort in front of my mate or else I will be forced to end you.”

“Shit! The rumors are true! Merrik found his mate!” The other man all but shouts it out wearing a big, goofy grin.

“Damn, that moon is making everyone crazy! Let’s wrap this shit up and get the hell out of here, brother!”

The smiley one replies with a single word, “Agreed!”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Sixteen

Merrik

“Not until I settle my mate somewhere warmer. She doesn’t need to be out in this cold.”

“Mine either! I suggest the two of you clean this up and Merrik and I will secure the house, and we’ll all meet in the kitchen when we’re done. Wrap it up quickly so we can all be ready for the moon.”

“Yeah, yeah! Whatever you say...Kenny!”

My brother snarls at Dare as his brother Baden snickers and mouths the word ‘Kenny’.

“Unless the two of you want to be around when that moon comes up...I suggest hurrying.” I mimick my brother's words so they know it's an official request.

I watch as Piper rushes up the stairs. She mentioned something about trying to find clothes to put on, so she wasn’t just in her nightgown. I am all for that, but I also want to have a moment with my mate. I follow her up. When I walk into the room she’s standing in the middle of it looking confused.

“Your things are in the closet on the top shelf. I didn’t want to overstep by putting them away for you.”

She jumps and turns to me, her face morphing into one of surprise. “You...brought my stuff here.”

I nod but don’t say anything. I wait.

“That’s...what happened to Doyle, wasn’t it? Those guys helped move the body. Cleaned up the scene.”

“It’s better that way.”

“Why?”

“There are people that would hunt us, try to kill us. Or worse. They would try to use us so they can find a way to be just like us.”

She frowns and tilts her head like she might be trying to understand but just can’t figure it out, so I move around her to sit on the bed.

“You saw that man out there.” She nods. “He was human, Piper.”

“H...how did he...? He didn’t seem...”

“There’s a myth that if you kill thirteen innocent, pure souls and drink the blood of one of my kind you can become like us.”

“Thirteen? I thought you said there were only seven?”

“We caught him over two more dead bodies.” I finally can’t stop myself any longer and reach for her. She lets me take her hand and I use it to pull her closer to me so that she is standing between my legs.

“That only makes nine, Merrik.”

“He must have started way before he found our little town because as soon as we found him, he started changing.”

“Changing?” Her hands land on my shoulders as I run mine up under the edge of her gown and the back of her legs.

“I thought it was just a myth but...there are a lot of things we don’t understand about our own damned...species. When we started seeing him turn into that bastardized version of one of us we pretty much knew...the myth was real. He had a list with him that laid out exactly how to do it. Humans can turn into...wolves if they go through the ritual which includes killing a wolf and skinning it, murdering thirteen innocents, and drinking the urine of a wolf...not one of us but a full, normal wolf.”

“Oh my God! Is this...I think I’ve heard of this. Wasn’t it like a German man who said he used the pelt of a wolf or wolf pee or something?”

“I think it was found in Germany and France.”

“And he...actually did it. He turned himself into...that thing out there.”

I nod. And then ask the question I’ve been putting off until now.

“You tried to help me.” She nods. “Does this mean...you might be alright with being my mate?”

She brings her fingers up to trace across my cheek. “I realized while that thing was at the front door that I felt...safe with you. Even when you were trying to chase me down, I never for a second thought you would hurt me. Or let me get hurt. I...I’ve always...I thought...you wouldn’t want to be with someone like me.”

“A human?”

“A loser who doesn’t have any roots, barely has enough sense to keep herself afloat, and carries everything she owns in a couple of bags.”

My mouth tilts up. “You are not a loser. You are a smart, sexy woman who happens to be my mate and the woman I love and want to spend every waking moment with until eternity. And then beyond.”

The look on her face is one I will hold in my mind forever. It’s a mix of shock, surprise, and underneath all of that...hope.

“You...you love me.”

I make sure to stare deep into her eyes so she can read every emotion, every feeling, before nodding, “I do. I love you.”

“But...you don’t even know me. How do you know I won’t make your life miserable? Or that...fate fucked up. You only think you love me because this stupid mating thing makes you think I’m something I’m not. What’s going to happen when you find out what kind of mate you’ve been saddled with?”

I reach around her legs and pull her so that she loses her balance, and I can more easily put her where I want her which happens to be right in my lap. “Sweetheart, I knew before we met that you belonged to me. I smelled you on Annie right away and wanted to find out who she was around. And afterward, everything you did screamed how right you were for me from the way you were with the little kids and how fiercely you stood up for Ralf. But, baby, I especially knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you were made for me when you put yourself in front of those kids that night Doyle came after you.”

“They were so small, of course I had to protect them. That’s my...”

“Job.” I finish for her. “You are everything, and I do mean everything, I could ever dream of for my alpha female.”

“Alpha female?”

“Only an alpha female can be with an alpha male, sweetheart.”

“I...I’m not alpha...”

“You kept those other girls safe, kept them calm, and attacked something that was five times bigger than you. You are a warrior, baby. And my perfect match.”

Our mouths meet and our tongues clash with one another as we explore each other’s mouths. It takes all my self-control to pull back. “Fuck! There is so much I need to tell you but I have to get all these people out of here and actually mate with you before the fucking moon comes up.”

“Why before the moon rises?”

“I...,” Shit! “I don’t want to hurt you. I...need to tell you something and I want you to, um, well, it’s actually kind of hard to...shit, that’s the wrong way to word that.”

She laughs at my slip of the tongue before telling me, “Just tell me, Merrik.”

“When we mate, my kind...well, we kind of, merge together.”

“Merge together? Me and you?”

“No. I mean, yes. Of course, we’ll merge together. That’s how everybody mates. I

mean, we -the Dire people- have a moment where our human self becomes merged with our wolf self and things get...interesting.”

Not really the best way but what else can I do with time running out?

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:28 pm

Chapter Seventeen

Piper

“Interesting?” What the hell does that mean?

“I’ll explain everything, but I just need to...”

“Get everyone the hell out of the house so you can explain 'interesting' to me.”

“Yes.” He looks relieved that I understand, even if I really don’t.

“Then go. I’ll throw clothes on and meet you downstairs fully dressed.”

He turns back to me right before going out the door, “Wear something you won’t mind having ripped off you. For later.”

And then he’s gone, and I am stunned. Something I don’t mind having ripped off me. Really?

I don’t waste time throwing an old t-shirt on over a pair of stretchy leggings and head back down to the kitchen where I am greeted by Annie and Kyra. Somehow while I was gone, the window now had a small wooden board in the place of the broken windowpanes and Larry had come over. He has his eyes all over Annie.

One of the guys must have called him to come over. He finally sees me and smiles. “Look at you, the new mate to our alpha! You did pretty good for yourself, Piper.”

I give him a slight smile before walking closer to Merrik. Just being next to him makes me feel better, more centered, calmer, and...stable. He pulls me down in his lap like maybe he can't go without touching me either.

Merrik was right when he said he wasn't going to drag things out. He's ending the impromptu meeting before I even realize what is going on.

"The bodies have been disposed of?"

"Yes. Burned just as you ordered, Alpha."

"The community is prepared for the blood moon?"

"Blood moon?"

"It is a time when the moon looks red because of a lunar eclipse. It's one of the reasons our man was so powerful and performed his ritual to turn now. He could only achieve the transformation on the night of the full blood moon."

"But he was already...turned."

"If he had made a kill tonight during the full moon, he would have kept his powers to transform forever, as well as our healing properties and strength."

Every one of the men at the table looks at me as an awful thought zips through my head, "I was the one he wanted to be his first kill as that thing. That's why he told the others he just wanted me."

All of them nod.

"Because you are the bridge, the very thing he wanted to be."

One of the twins says the words but everyone nods. But I don't understand.

"I...I'm the bridge. What does that mean?"

I don't look to anyone else except Merrik for my answers.

"When we go through the mating ritual completely tonight you will have what he wanted, I will share my long life with you, my healing factor, my ability to communicate with everyone in the community that is like us. You won't change into a wolf but you will have all the benefits of our kind."

I gasp and look at Kyra. "That's how you knew exactly what I needed from the house without me having to say a word."

"Actually, that part is probably more because of me and Merrik. Since we're brothers our mates will be more prone to be closer with one another. It would be completely normal for you guys to talk through your telepathic connection."

"But I could hear her too. And I'm not a wolf at all."

"Bridge." The other twin -the less talkative of the two- says matter of factly.

"That is solely because of your friendship with each other, Annie. And the fact she cares about you so much. But yes, it would seem that my little mate is a bridge between her people and our people." Merrik says it with so much pride in his voice that I can't help but feel the warm rush of happiness that he thinks I am special and perfect for him. "Now, if everything is ready and in place. I will ask you all to leave so I can be with my mate during this very...exciting time."

I stand and hug Annie and Kyra telling them we will meet up and hang out as soon as this whole mating moon thing is over. When I hug Annie, I whisper a small

suggestion to her and place her hand in Larry's before stepping back to watch as everyone leaves me and Merrik alone.

As soon as the door is shut and locked, I am in his arms. He takes the stairs two at a time and he shuts the bedroom door before sitting me down. Instead of coming onto the bed with me, he walks to the window and stares up at the rising moon.

"I need more time, damn it!" He's not talking to me at all. In fact, I'm pretty sure he's talking to the moon like it can grant him a few more minutes.

I scoot to the end of the bed looking at his broad back and tight ass! He's the first man I've ever looked at this way -with so much lust and want.

"Merrik," I wait for him to turn around so I can be sure he hears every word I say like it's an oath or promise, "I know you would never hurt me. No matter how...uncontrollable or animalistic you become, you would never hurt me. No part of you and who you are would ever cause me harm under any circumstances."

He steps away from the window. Something about him is slightly different. He's...bigger, broader somehow. And I'm pretty sure his eyes have changed. There's a glint to them now that makes me think of the eyes of a predator tracking prey. Not for a second do I worry or fear him. If he's my predator I am more than willing to be hunted down.

Chapter Eighteen

Merrik

“You don’t know what you’re saying, little one. You can’t possibly understand what will happen when I lose control.”

“Then show me.” I curl my finger up in a come-hither motion and lay back on the bed. I don’t have to wait or give him a second invitation. He is on me in the blink of an eye, pulling at my shirt and leggings. I hear stitches popping and know that he’s about to rip me out of them. I try to work my shirt over my head as his eyes latch onto the tops of my breasts spilling out of my bra.

I save my shirt but not the lace bra. He’s got the delicate material ripped off me before I can even try to unlatch it.

He brings his mouth to my neck and starts sniffing and licking and kissing me. I feel his teeth nip at me and remember the place over my pubic bone. I grab his face and bring his attention fully to me.

“You bit me.”

“It’s how I claim you. That and to make love to you.”

“We’ll be discussing this more, but later.” He goes back to kissing my neck and shoulders as his hands come up to cup my breasts in a surprisingly gentle touch.

“Um, is it...supposed to...well, when I was feeling upset or scared it...well it sort of

tingled. God, that sounds so bad.”

“It’s the way we stay connected, my love. Just you and me. It’s how I was able to tell exactly where to come to find that asshole who was scaring you. You called for me and I came. I always will.”

His words have a slow smile stretching across my face and I bring his lips to my own as we share a kiss that melts my heart -and most definitely my panties as well. He kisses down my chin and neck before he starts using his tongue to trace little designs all over the tops of my breasts before finally licking across my aching nipple.

I gasp his name out and arch my back. I can’t help it. The sensations he is causing go all the way down to my clit like there is a direct link between the two places. He rolls the other turgid pebble between his fingers, squeezing until I gasp again.

“Merrik, oh shit! Merrik, please!”

The man plays my body like I’m an expensive guitar and he’s been doing it all his life, making such beautiful music.

He finally wraps his mouth around the hard peak while maintaining eye contact with me. It’s so much more intimate, like we are both sharing in the feelings he is causing, both working towards the same goal. His cheeks hollow when he sucks, taking more of my aching flesh between his lips. I can’t help but close my eyes as the feeling of him tonguing my nipple becomes all-consuming.

He licks a line across me to the other breast and waits until my eyes flash back open. “I can’t wait until these are heavy and full, sweetheart.”

“H...heavy and...”

“Mmm,” his agreement only comes out as a muffled sound as he swirls his tongue around the puckered skin of my areola, “when you have our babies and these fill with delicious milk. I’ll be on them all the time. But I’ll make sure the babies have all they need.”

“Oh...oh God!” Why does that make me ache and throb in between my legs so badly? He finally wraps his tongue around the stiff pebble before hollowing his cheeks out again. The connection between my nipples and my clit peaks and I’m rushing towards an orgasm before I even realize what is happening.

A growl is my only warning that Merrik can tell I just came. He pops off my breast and rips my leggings from me in one quick jerk.

“I can smell your release, little one. It drives me insane!”

My panties are quick to follow as he licks his way down my body. When I feel his mouth on my soaked pussy all I can do is cry out and sag against the soft surface under my back. He throws my legs up over his broad shoulders and licks me like I’m a fucking ice cream cone and just like an ice cream cone on a hot sweaty day, I melt for him.

“After I take your sweet innocence, I’m going to fuck you with my tongue. Pushing it all the way inside until I can lick your fucking womb.”

Oh shit! Oh God! Oh, hell yes! Please!

“Patience, little one. That comes later. Right now I want to get you ready to take my cock and my knot.”

“Your what now?”

“It’s...the part of me that comes from my wolf. When I am ready to cum inside of you, I swell at the base of my cock so that what I put in you will stay long enough to insure pregnancy. It’s what I was trying to find a way to explain to you before but...there’s not really a good way to explain that.”

“You...swell up enough to...lock us together.” Why the hell did none of the shows or books tell us about this? Never in a romance have I read about a...knot. Where the hell were they hiding this tidbit of information? “Will it hurt?”

He looks me in the eye so I know he isn’t going to lie to me. “I don’t know. I never really asked a mated female. It didn’t seem...mannerly to ask.”

I have to admit, I’m really glad he doesn’t know.

“You’ve never, um, done that with anyone before?” I just have to find out.

He shakes his head. “That would only happen with my mate. Never with someone else. I’ve never been with anyone but you, my love. We’ll be figuring all this out together.”

“Seriously. You’ve never been with anyone before?” he shakes his head in the negative. “But you seem to know how to do everything.”

“Our connection lets me know what you like, what you want more of, what you want me to do next. It will be the same way with you when you take my dick in your mouth, sweetheart.” My mouth falls open, half in shock and half in excitement. “It’s what makes our matings so...intense.”

The fact he can tell what I like and my level of arousal, that we share and compound on that sensuality and intimacy, solidifies in my mind what I already understood in my heart. Merrik is incapable of hurting me.

I give him a smile and brush my fingers across his cheek in a light caress. “We should get started then. It seems like it is going to be a long night.”

He grins back at me with a heart-melting smirk and dips his head so he can run his tongue over the top of my mound where his bite is. I gasp at the sensation because it feels like he is directly licking my clit. He makes a humming sound deep in his throat and I'm certain he is experiencing the same thing I am.

“The mark is highly sensitive. Under the right circumstances, I think I can make you cum by just licking the mating mark.”

I believe he could because, even though I just came, my body is gearing up for another release. He takes one more swipe over the mark and then sinks his teeth in the exact same spot as he did the first time. It sends me flying over the edge and all I can do is cry out his name. When I come back to my senses, it's to find him licking and sucking on my over-sensitized clit and working my entrance open with a finger.

“Fuck, baby, you are so fucking tight! I should send you away, wait until this damned moon is over before I take you.”

I reach out as his words hit me right in the heart. “Don't send me away.”

“I can't. I couldn't possibly send you away from me right now. I can't ever be without you.”

A smile stretches across my face at his words as he comes up to kiss me, sharing with me how I taste. He tries to slip another finger inside of me, making me feel stuffed full. He tips his fingers up and starts rubbing something inside of me that has even more liquid pouring from me and my eyes roll back in my head. Merrik sure knows what he is doing for someone never having done this before.

“I’ve read about how to do this. From what I gathered when I read it, it might make you have a really intense orgasm.” He must have been able to hear my thoughts or I just blurted them out without realizing it.

“Oh! Oh shit! Merrik! I...it’s different...I...I think I’m going to cum again.”

“Cum for me baby! Cum so I can slide my cock inside you deep.”

I give a strangled shout before convulsing through a huge orgasm and the place Merrik is playing gets a whole lot wetter.

“Son of a bitch, baby! You...you just...fuck!” He holds his fingers up and they are soaked. He runs his tongue over his fingers and licks me off them before a growl vibrates out of him. “If you get any tastier, I just might have to tie you back to the bed and live off your perfect body.”

“You better...oh, not...do that again.” I end the serious statement with a moan that kills any sting the words might have had. “Now get up here and give me a reason to howl at the moon...mate.”

Our eyes meet and the look he gives me makes me love him even more. Holy shit!
“Merrik, I...I love you!”

Never would I be so free, so at ease, with anyone else but Merrik. It feels like I’ve known him my whole life. Like he is the other part of me.

“I love you, Merrik.”

Chapter Nineteen

Merrik

For a moment I worry I am projecting what I want to happen and not what is really happening. Maybe I've gone moon-mad, and reality has stopped functioning for me.

"I love you, Merrik."

"Really?"

She gives me a big grin and a nod before shyly looking up at me from under her eyelashes.

"Don't turn shy now. Not when you've made me so happy." I bend to capture her lips. "I love you too. With all my heart."

Her eyes come back up to mine. "Will you, um, make me your mate completely?"

"Oh absolutely, sweet girl. Absolutely."

I make quick work of shedding my clothes. Once I've shucked my boxers a loud gasp fills the room. I look over to find her mouth open, her eyes wide, and a mixture of heat and caution in her beautiful orbs.

"It will fit, my love. I promise. And if it doesn't, I'll live my life being happy with getting just the tip in."

“No, I want this! I want to feel you inside of me. Deep inside of me!”

I run my cock up and down the channel of her soft, wet pussy making sure to use my bulbous head as a battering ram against her sensitive clit. Her hands come to rest on my shoulders as she moans and arches into me. Her nails sink into me when I breach her tightness finally. I think about the best way to take my innocent mate. Should I do it quickly and then help her to relax afterward or take it slow? Can I take it slow with the moon rising higher and higher? There is already a pink tinge on one side of it.

I push until her soft walls give and the head of my dick sinks inside of her. We groan at the same time. I can't help but look down so I can see the thick shaft of my cock spreading her innocent pussy open. It makes something inside of me snap. The wolf rushes forward and no matter how hard I try to hold him back, there's no denying the animal.

“I'm sorry, baby,” I say the words seconds before I take her hips in my hands and punch forward. Her barrier tears as she shouts out my name and clamps her teeth onto my arm drawing blood. At the same time, I push more and more of my cock inside as my hand drops to start playing with her clit. Tears cloud her eyes, and it feels like a knife twisting in my heart since I put them there. And I am swelling thicker and thicker because her white little teeth are sunk in me. I'm nothing more than a fucking animal.

Her tongue licks across the bite and my cock grows even thicker as I look down and see my mate's mark on me. Precum is mixing with her arousal and making a mess out of her and all I can think about is how my mate marked me. It's in a place everyone can see when I roll up my sleeves. When I meet her eyes it's to find absolute terror there.

“Oh my God! I...I hurt you!” Tears start to fill her eyes as I fall even further in love with her. She is my wonderful, beautiful, mate. The other half of me.

“No! You did what was natural for our kind.” I lean forward to brush my lips over hers. “You marked your mate, sweet girl.”

“I...I what?”

“Like I had the urge to bite and leave my mark on you, you have that same driving urge to leave your mark on me. And I couldn’t have picked a better spot. I want everyone to see it, to know my mate loves me as much as I love her!”

“I do. I do love you. Oh my God! It feels so different with you in me! You’re so hard but warm and velvety too. You feel so good!”

“I feel the same way about you. You’re so tight, it feels like you’re strangling my cock, baby.”

“Oh my God! Did you just...get bigger?”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I just...I looked down and saw...”

“Saw what? What did you see, Merrik?”

“The ring of blood and cum on my shaft, proof that you are mine! All mine! There’s no going back! You belong to me! Just as I belong to you!”

I reach the very back of her and feel her cervix meet the head of my cock. It starts to work to suck the cum right out of me. “Oh God, Piper! It...it feels too damned good, baby.”

She cries out, “Merrik! I can feel it! I can feel you growing! It’s...it’s pushing against me.”

I can feel it too. The base of my cock is swelling, causing it to become harder and harder for me to push and pull out of her. What's more...I can feel the tightening in my balls as the tingle in the bottom of my spine climbs towards the shaft of my cock. My dick has never swelled, I've never been buried in someone, never released my seed, and now I'm about to do all three. The feelings are overwhelming. And that doesn't even take into consideration that I'm also feeling Piper's feelings and pleasure.

Her chest is rising and falling in quick pants as she grabs onto my upper arms when my base swells even wider. "Is that...your kn...knot?" I nod. "I...Merrik, I'm scared."

My blood runs cold, and my wolf starts whining in my mind. "Of me? I would never..."

"I'm...I'm about to cum. You're...knot is about to make me cum! Is that normal? Am I wrong? Oh my God, Merrik!"

I have no idea if it's because she is getting the feelings of joy and pleasure from me or if the swelling is pressing against the walls of her tiny pussy and rubbing against her G-spot, but I'm fucking happy as fuck that she is. My wolf growls as I lower myself on top of her when she wraps her legs around me. It likes being surrounded by her.

"No, my love! It makes you perfect!"

My mouth finds hers as my release shoots through my shaft and fills her waiting womb. She starts climaxing as soon as she feels my seed splash the back of her pussy and wash into her. My knot swells to its max size and plugs her entrance so none of the baby batter I give her can escape. I gently rock while still inside of her as I draw out her orgasm.

She finally opens her eyes as I roll us, so I am on the bottom, and she is spread out on top of me. “Rest, my beautiful mate. Rest and let my knot go down then I’ll clean, bathe, and feed you.”

“Merrik,” she lifts her head so she can look at me better, “I thought we were going to mate throughout the blood moon. Surely there’s another hour of it left.”

My mouth stretches into a wide grin. “It doesn’t affect pregnant mates as much as it does ones that aren’t carrying a baby.”

Her brows draw down and she stares at me with confusion for a couple of seconds. “Oh my God!”

She jerks herself into a seated position, or at least she tries to.

“Shh,” I press her back down on my chest. “We can’t do anything about it until my knot goes down but if you want to make love again I am more than alright with that. But this time...I’m going to let more of my wolf out to play and take you on your hands and knees...doggy style.”

She kisses me and runs her tongue across my lips, “Food can wait! The world can wait when we’re together.”

Yes, I agree. My mate has a wonderful way of putting things and she took the words right out of my mouth as I take the kiss over and show her just how much I love and need her. To show her what forever feels like when you have the perfect mate by your side!

Page 20

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Merrik

Two Months Later

I watch my beautiful mate twirl around the dance floor with Kyra and Annie. She's beautiful in her pale dress, her hair done in a soft bun with flowers spilling around it. And she's carrying my babies. Underneath that soft gown is a small growing bump that turns me on every time I see it.

Twins!

Piper and I couldn't believe that we were having two cubs at the same time. A boy and a girl, a rarity in our kind. Leave it to my little mate to do the impossible. Her eyes catch mine and I spot the hot look that comes into them. It turns out my mate is something of a horndog. Thank God!

She hugs Annie, Kyra, and then Annie again before sashaying over to me. I take her hand and pull her into my lap. "How is my beautiful wife?"

"Tired but happy."

I smile. I love knowing she is happy, not so much the tired part. "You aren't overdoing it, are you? Do you need to rest?"

"I'm fine, Merrik." I accept her words and give her a nip on the shoulder.

"Ready to get out of here?"

“Nooo! She hasn’t even thrown the bouquet yet.”

I look over at Larry who is also more than ready to get out of here. He meets my eyes and stands up to go to his bride. My brother sits down beside us and looks over at where Larry and Annie are talking and kissing.

“So, tell me why again Annie made poor Larry wait for years and years.”

“She’s human, duh! She couldn’t be sure if he was her soulmate because she couldn’t sniff it out. She also worried that he wouldn’t be as faithful as a wolf would be to her. I told her to get her head out of her ass and marry that man before he stops waiting for her.”

“Jeez, sis, you’re hardcore when you want to be.”

“Damn straight and don’t you forget it, brother dear.”

Just like Kyra and Annie, my sweet mate has grown close with my brother. They refer to one another as brother and sister now. She’s even tamed the twins to the extent Ken can be in the same room with them without resorting to fisticuffs...most of the time!

“My wife and I would like to thank everyone for coming to celebrate this day with us. Truly we will never forget the magical time you’ve all given us. However, I’m ready to carry my beautiful bride off and keep her just to myself for a couple of weeks.”

The wolves in the audience around us clap and shout, knowing exactly how Larry feels, and I squeeze my mate gently to me. I didn’t waste time getting her to the altar. As soon as the moon returned to normal and most of the people were out of their mating frenzy, I had her down the aisle. And right behind us was my brother and his mate!

I made sure she had the wedding she always dreamed of too! Nothing but the best for my sweet girl.

Piper pops up out of my lap and starts gathering all the single ladies in one spot so they can reach the bouquet more easily. Annie throws it up high and down it falls, right into the waiting arms of one of my shyer residences. Much like Annie, she's the daughter of humans, but her father died, and her mother mated with one of the wolves in our community. She's young but not very much younger than my own beautiful wife.

"Good for her! I have just the wolf in mind." Piper walks up beside me.

"Oh! Who would that be, my love."

"Dare, of course."

"Dare? You think shy, little...?"

"Opposites attract my love, and I am very sure that she is a mate to one of those twins. I just have to find out which one."

I don't doubt for a second that my mate is right. Piper has a sense about these things and has already matched two couples up. But that's going to be a hell of a story when it's all said and done. For now, I am very ready to go home and make my little mate shout my name over and over again.

I watch as Piper lowers her hand to just above the mating mark and her eyes turn steamy. I plan to make more chapters in our love story tonight and I don't even need a blood moon for inspiration! My little mate makes me go wild for her just by being herself. My sweet, perfect mate!

The End!