



Cowboy Wolf's Kiss (Motley Crewd Shifters #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He's been trying to find an anchor for his Wolf. She's been living a secret life.

Emmet Quinn is a lone Wolf with a growly problem. Nothing seems to be able to satisfy his ornery beast.

When he gets an email about a new job opportunity Emmet doesn't have to think twice. Packing up and moving all the way across the country to New Jersey sounds crazy. But it might be the only thing to save him.

The Motley Crewd Ranch is the sorriest excuse for a working ranch he's ever seen. But that doesn't mean he's ready to walk away.

Especially not when he meets Jezebel Braydon.

The curvy human is soft and sweet, and he's dying to know more about her. Never one to strike out with ladies, he can't understand why this woman shoots down every attempt he makes at a little harmless flirting.

Emmet knows he should back off. But there is something about her and he can't let it go.

Something hidden behind her sad smiles. A secret, perhaps? And he's determined to ferret it out.

Can this wild-eyed Wolf win sweet Jezebel's confidence and her heart?

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

The dusty road that lay ahead of me was just another in a long line of endless paths I'd taken to nowhere permanent.

Each step stirred up the grit beneath my boots, clouds of dust swirling like memories I couldn't shake.

Moonlit nights. Pack runs. All the howling. The snarling. The screaming. And the bloodshed.

I lifted the rucksack onto my shoulder and started walking down the darkened street. There were no cars or trucks. No people. No moon to light the way.

Hell, I couldn't even pick up the sound of a field mouse anywhere in the vicinity.

It was like every living thing in a hundred mile radius had simply stopped. Like they were all waiting for me to go just so they could start living again.

It felt oddly fitting. After all, I was no stranger to being alone. I was a constant traveler. My route was a map of roads that led to nowhere.

My Wolf snarled and snapped, scratching the shit out of my insides, a visceral reminder of the chaos I carried within.

I had been banished yet again from another Pack. Their judgment was swift, as it was brutal.

What could I say?

My beast had a mind of its own, and it didn't relish having to listen to idiots and their outdated traditions.

I was restless. So was my Wolf.

That dissatisfaction was as relentless as hunger. Like I was a wild thing always yearning for peace and freedom in a world of structured chaos.

I had to keep my inner animal constantly caged just to get along. But sometimes, the Wolf slipped free.

Packs had hierarchies and pecking orders, and not all of them adhered to the old standard of bowing to the mightiest of the bunch.

Modern Packs acted more like mini kingdoms where titles were inherited rather than earned. Not all of them. But the ones I'd been involved with in Arizona, Nevada, and now, Texas, sure seemed to think that was the way to do things.

My Wolf did not agree.

Neither did I.

Grrr.

I could still hear the Alpha's voice, thick with arrogance, cutting through the air like a knife.

Banishment.

Again.

My Wolf had growled when that white-haired fool announced my fate earlier this evening. It was an instinctual warning, but they hadn't listened. And that was their mistake.

"You don't belong here, loser. How could you even think you did? Look at you, a worthless, untamed beast. You're an animal," the Alpha's son, Flint, had said, raising his arms wide as he beckoned others to join with his taunting.

After that, there was no holding my Wolf back, and now the Alpha's heir would bear the mark of my disdain forever. It took me ten minutes of scrubbing to get his skin out from under my nails once my claws had retracted.

The Winter Falls Pack had gotten off easy tonight. But I doubted they saw it that way. Halfway through my change, I'd been able to pull back.

The Wolfman shape was not easy to hold, but I wrestled with myself and in the end, I succeeded. Of course, the monster in me was something worse, something darker than others I'd come across.

Other Shifters seemed to live in harmony with their animal counterparts. Others still seemed to experience no disconnect between the animal and the human.

But me? Or should I say, we?

We were all about the disconnect.

My Wolf was separate from me in thoughts, feelings, and instinct. When I slipped into my fur, it was always a risk. Oh, I was constantly battling Demon for control. That was the name I gave my beast.

My human name was Emmet. But Demon, he was autonomous. An independent

creature who lived on instinct and primal urges.

I tried to rein in my disdain for Flint and the Winter Falls Pack in general, but my Wolf simply would not adhere to their rules. He hated the slithering little runt pretending to be king.

Flint Winters was a bully, plain and simple. Always tearing into the weaker ones, young or old. No one stepped up to stop him. His father sure as fuck didn't.

As I trudged down the road, the sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows that danced along the dirt.

Each footfall felt heavier than the last, a reminder of the weight of rejection and the pain of isolation.

My Wolf and I shared a singular disdain for these self-proclaimed monarchs, our spirits entwined in a bond of rebellion.

When I saw Flint try to force his attentions on one of the younger females, I'd had enough. I approached one of the Enforcers, demanding he do something.

I knew it couldn't be me. Demon was a monster. My Wolf wouldn't know when to stop. He just wanted to kill.

So, I suggested to this Enforcer, one who I thought had a good head on his shoulders, that he challenge the Pack's future leader. End the suffering and right the wrongs being done to their own members.

To say I was surprised at his response would be an understatement. The Enforcer, a Wolf named Colin, reported my proposition to Flint, who told his Alpha father and demanded I be dealt with.

They tried. I would give them that. I spit on the ground, my saliva no longer tainted red with blood.

Fighting eight to one was hardly fair, but it took that many to hold me down when the Alpha read his verdict.

So yeah. I was booted out on my ass and given a label that was sure to keep me out of any other Packs I tried to get into. It was the Alpha's revenge.

Broken.

That was what he'd called me, and it was what he told every Pack with spots open from here to Canada.

See, it only mattered because a lone Wolf was a dangerous thing. Going rogue would mean the end of me, and hating myself as I did, I still did not want to die.

Not yet, anyway.

My days were numbered. I knew that, but I didn't want to call it quits so soon. There was more to do. More to see. More to experience.

Demon was not going to get the best of me.

God, I hated my Wolf.

Some Shifters embraced their animal selves, but not me. How could I when all he wanted was to destroy?

I fought my change for as long as I could. And when it was no good, when I just had to allow him in, those were the worst moments. The darkest.

During my transformation, the world shifted. The air thickened with the scent of pine and earth, colors sharpening, sounds amplifying. My already heightened senses exploded into overdrive.

Demon was a true predator. Untamed and unrestrained.

Oh, it was exhilarating at times. But it was also jarring.

I lived with constant fear, knowing if I let Demon in, I would lose myself entirely.

The line between who I was and what he was would blur until my humanity just fell away. My Wolf's hunger rose inside me at the very thought, making my stomach twist and my entire body shudder.

Fucking monster just couldn't let me be. He'd rather go down fighting than take a chill pill and allow me to settle.

I might hate the Pack that just let me go, but their Alpha wasn't wrong.

I was a broken Wolf.

And no one wanted a broken Wolf amongst their own.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

S ix weeks later...

“I can’t believe of all the fucked up places I’ve been, I wind up in Dry Creek, where the last thing it is, is fucking dry!” I snarled as I tried again to push the fence post back into an upright position.

Rain pelted down on me, soaking the already completely saturated and muddied ground, and making more of a mess than I could even comprehend.

Each drop felt like a tiny fist beating on me, and I could barely hear myself think over the roar of the storm.

The sometimes beautiful scenery of the ranch transformed into a blurry canvas of grays and browns. The scent of damp earth mixed with the tang of metal and rotted wood from the felled fence, beneath that was animal fur and dung.

The joyful cacophony of bleating goats a second to the rolling thunder and nonstop tinkle of raindrops hitting the tin roof of their shelter.

“Goddamn it, Dolly Sue, stop head-butting me,” I growled at the big-breasted goat who kept knocking into my backside as I worked.

I knelt in the mud, fingers sinking into the slick earth as I assessed the damage.

Fuck. It was broken at the base, and I knew then I would have to replace it. Growling in irritation, I used my strength to grip the bottom of the post and yanked it up and out of the ground.

The mud worked against me, sucking on the piece of wood like Jed did on those ever present toothpicks in his mouth. It took some finagling, but once I had a good grip, I was able to force the thing out.

I tossed it aside with a huff and stood back to look at where the next four posts were already collapsing under the weight of water soaked logs. The tree that came down, creating this disaster, was still in the way, crushing the southern part of the fence beneath its heavy, sodden branches.

This was a mess I couldn't fix in a single day. The whole damn fence had to come out. The posts needed new holes, not to mention the fact that half the wood was rotted through.

Thoughts of rebuilding felt overwhelming, but it had to be done. But as I looked around, I also saw life teeming in the chaos—green shoots poking through the ground, resilient against the storm.

Somehow, amidst all the destruction, there was a promise of renewal.

“Quit it, Dolly Sue!” I shouted as my rear end met with another round of butting goat heads.

“That ain't Dolly Sue, Emmet. That there is Dolly Mae,” Jed, a crazy old Prairie Dog Shifter, and official Motley Crewd Ranch goat wrangler, and vice president of our line of goat's milk byproducts, called Dolly's Dairy Products , corrected me.

Rather unfuckinghelpfully too, if you asked me which, of course, nobody was.

Jed sort of came with the hybrid farm ranch in Barren County that my boss, and now Alpha of our mixed up group of Shifters and supes, Maximillian Leeds, bought from his own grandmother.

Honestly, if you follow all that, then you're doing a damn sight better than I was.

"Gonna have to move these old girls, else they'll wander," Jed told me as he ambled on, using a clicking sound to entice the goats back over the broken fence.

He was right. But I had no idea where we would put them with all the construction we had going on and all this damned rain.

I couldn't even tell you how I got to Dry Creek or more specifically to that ranch other than to say, I was duped.

After the Winter Falls Pack banished my sorry ass, I walked thirty miles to a bus stop and got on the first transport out of there.

My Wolf had been snapping and snarling, hating being cooped up on that bus, and I'd been asked not to get back on by two very skittish looking humans in security uniforms.

It wasn't the uniforms that got me to listen to their suggestions, but rather the matching set of 9 mils they had aimed right at center mass.

Now, for a bullet to kill a Wolf Shifter, it wasn't that it had to be a silver bullet. That bit of superstition was just that. An old wives' tale.

Truth was any old bullet would do. But it did have to be very fucking accurate.

I doubted those security guards' accuracy, but what I did not doubt was that getting shot would hurt like a motherfucker. Also, it would likely have spurred Demon into retaliating.

I might be able to heal from a lot of things, but outing the entire secret supernatural

world I lived in was not one of them. Even I was smart enough to recognize that.

So, what happened was I did not get back on that bus. Rather, I hitched a ride with a trucker. And another one after that.

Eventually, I found myself at a shitty roadside motel, scrolling through Ghoulgle, which was the supernatural world's private internet, until I found an advertisement for a job, this job, which pretty much brings us up to speed.

Did you ask where I ended up?

Motley Crewd Ranch—an apt name for a group of fuckups and misfits if ever I heard one. Located in Dry Creek, New Jersey, but commonly referred to as Barren County.

I'd recently been promoted to foreman or ranch manager, and something about being handed that responsibility sat well with me. Demon, too.

For the first time in my life, I thought maybe I could settle down. With Max, who was an actual Jersey fucking Devil, and not a Vampire as I'd originally thought, as our Alpha, and the rest of the group as my Pack mates, well, I was starting to think maybe this was kismet.

I mean, how often did a Devil, a Wolf, a Bear, A Bull, and a Dragon, not to mention a Prairie Dog Shifter, team up to make anything other than a mess?

But for whatever reason, it was working. I didn't know if it was because Max had recently found his mate, and perhaps it was Penelope's influence that had us all feeling a bit kinder towards each other.

I mean, I only had to break up like forty-seven fights between Dante, Kian, and Zeke this week, which was half of what it was last week.

So, yeah. Duped or not, I was starting to think maybe the Fates liked me a little. Not a lot. But just enough to keep me around.

I could live with that.

“Yo, Quinn!” Dante’s gruff voice interrupted my train of thought.

I turned on my heel, nodding at the Bear Shifter.

“What?”

“Boss found a place to move the herd. I’ll get ‘em loaded in the truck with Jed,” he called out.

I nodded.

I knew Max had been trying to solve the problem of what to do with the goats while we completely rebuilt the fences surrounding the recently refurbished holding pens and the dairy itself.

Goats were restless creatures by nature, always nipping at the edges of their enclosures, testing the limits of what they could get away with.

With the fences down, the concern about what to do with them to keep them safe was a big one. Poor Jed was beside himself with worry. Hell, he’d even taken to sleeping in a tent outside to try to keep them together.

Max had been scratching his head over the best way to keep them contained while we worked. The rain certainly did not make the task any easier.

But it looked like he had a solution. Dante had already started moving the goats into

the waiting trailer and I jogged over to my cabin to use the toilet and swap my ruined jacket and jeans for some dry clothes.

Bad weather didn't bother me. I was a Shifter, a Wolf, and I ran a little hotter than most.

But I was not fine with getting mud and rain all over the interior of one of our new rigs. Boss had bought six brand new F150 pickups for us to work this place over, and of course, Dante had hooked the trailer to mine.

Fucker .

The quicker we moved the herd, the quicker we could get to work fixing this mess without getting rear-ended by a bunch of ornery critters.

"They're ready for you and I plugged the address into your GPS," Dante called out as I jogged to the driver's side.

"Okay. Where's Jed?"

"In the back with them," the Bear replied and smirked.

I shook my head and offered a three fingered wave as I pulled out onto the road. I could hear the damn goats bleating their opinions and Jed cooing to them softly.

I swore the old man was getting worse every day. He spoiled those old gals.

Still, I knew they were better off where they were—contained, safe, and away from the muddy chaos that surrounded us.

The ranch looked like hell, but if you could see past all that, even just a few days

ahead, then you would see what I saw. You'd see Motley Crewd Ranch had potential.

Max knew what he was doing, giving us all a piece of this place. It tethered our animals to it. Made it belong to us.

Emotion filled me as I thought of the email I'd gotten, along with the rest of the Crew, earlier this week.

It was from Mr. Henries, the Leeds family's lawyer, and it explained that along with our wages, we would get a percentage of the income from the ranch and a shared stake in the property. Ten percent for each of us.

It didn't sound like a lot. But it was. And it meant something.

For the first time in a long time, as the rain continued to fall, and the wind howled, I felt like maybe I wasn't a lost cause.

Maybe I was less broken than I thought.

Demon snarled, and I winced, thinking maybe I thought too soon.

Okay, so the jury was still out on that one. I didn't want to get sappy about it. But this sure felt a lot like progress.

One fence post at a time.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

The kettle whistled loudly, cutting through the heavy silence of my cramped office and pulling me away from the depressing task of sorting through the month's bills.

I let out a sigh, rubbing my temples as I glanced at the piles of paper scattered across the desk—overdue notices, rising utility costs, and the inevitable reminder of my dwindling cash reserves.

For the last two weeks, the rain had poured down almost nonstop, a relentless deluge that mirrored my growing anxiety.

Each drop felt like a weight pressing down on my already wobbly finances, pushing me closer to the edge of no return.

I had always known that weather could make or break a business like mine—a drive-in movie theater in a small town was a fickle beast, reliant on the whims of both customers and the sky.

Bottom line, rain was bad when you depended on a drive-in movie theater to pay your bills. Typically, I was closed for about four months out of the year, but I was hoping to make it to Thanksgiving without having to shut it down for the season.

That meant I needed every ticket sale I could muster, and the thought of closing early was a crushing blow I was desperate to avoid.

“Dammit,” I said, groaning and biting my lip.

I stood up and walked over to the kettle, the steam swirling into the air like my

thoughts—chaotic and heavy.

As I poured the boiling water into my favorite chipped mug, the one that said “book boyfriends keep it going longer” in a pretty pink font, I glanced out the window.

The rain continued to fall in sheets, blurring the view of the parking lot and making the fact that the neon lights were currently off even more gloomy.

I sighed. It was hopeless. Pop’s bills were due, and the retirement home had increased their fees again this year.

My relationship with my only parent had always been tenuous. After my mother had passed away, and it was just me and him, well, things had been strained.

Especially when I talked about things I was seeing, impossible things that he would have preferred I left unsaid.

Oh, Pop, why?

Shame was one of the first emotions I learned to recognize in my father. That was closely followed by resentment and trepidation.

I closed my eyes against the shimmering shadows coming from outside, willing myself to ignore what I knew was there.

Shit.

Whenever I was upset, I allowed my shields to slip. Something a psychic medium should never ever do. It was a dangerous practice.

The world around me could become a cacophony of voices and emotions, a swirling

storm of energies that threatened to overwhelm me.

In those moments of vulnerability, I risked exposing not just myself, but the secrets that had been carefully buried beneath layers of silence and shame.

Not that anyone knew I was a psychic. To them, I was just an ordinary person with a less than ordinary job. But I was still someone who blended in with the crowd.

Pop had ignored the signs. He told me to leave it alone. To stop pretending I saw things that didn't exist.

Liar. Troublemaker. Just like my crazy mother.

God, I hated the memory of his voice when things had gotten too bad for me to deal with them alone. But after his swift rejection, I learned to compartmentalize my sensitivities until they felt like distant echoes rather than living things.

It wasn't easy. And I failed more often than not.

Control is everything.

I reminded myself of that often during my lifetime.

"Stop acting crazy, Jez. You want attention, do something else," he would say.

His voice was always so steady and calm. No heat or anger behind his words. But they hurt as readily as any slap would have.

I wondered sometimes if he thought I really was a liar.

God, how I wished I could ward off the spirits that danced around us just by sheer

will alone. And sometimes, when the weight of the world pressed too hard on my shoulders, my reserve wavered, and I felt the floodgates begin to crack.

My family tree was rooted in the shame my paternal grandmother brought down on us with her unfortunate proclivity for telling people when they were being haunted by a loved one.

Her gift had been both a blessing and a curse. While some found solace in her words, others shunned her. But no one suffered as much as my father had.

Nana was known as the town freak.

The whispers and gossip had echoed through our family like a ghostly refrain, and I'd grown up with the weight of that legacy on my back.

Of course, I pitied him. Pop tried to be a good man. He took care of me after Mom passed. He just didn't or couldn't understand me.

Shame was something I was greatly familiar with. Taunts and ridicules were an everyday part of my life, growing up in Dry Creek. But I managed. Living on the outskirts of town helped.

Right then, I swallowed hard and forced myself to build the walls back up, reminding myself why I had to be strong.

Pop was suffering from dementia now, and he needed me to pay for his care. I owed him that much.

I took a deep breath, grounding myself in the here and now, focusing on the mundane—a flickering light overhead, the sound of the raindrops hitting the roof and windowpanes.

I needed to remain present, to reclaim control, before the whispers became too loud.

The world of the living demanded my attention, and while I couldn't completely escape my lineage, I could navigate it on my own terms.

No one else knew about my struggles, and I kept it that way. Hell, I worked hard to keep it that way.

It's why I still lived in my childhood home. Haunted— literally —and yet always alone.

I'd never hurt my father by claiming to be cursed by the same thing that had turned his own mother into a stranger.

The pain of her heartbreak was too much for her to bear, and Nana's mind snapped long before I was born.

I'd only visited her twice while she was alive. Oh, I saw her sometimes when I went to put flowers on Mama's grave.

She was always sitting under the shady oak tree by my late grandfather's grave. I met her gaze just once, and in that fleeting moment, a connection sparked between us—one that transcended the boundaries of time and speech.

Nana nodded at me, her eyes deep pools of understanding, but she remained blessedly silent.

Like she knew I was beyond speech, trapped in a whirlwind of emotions that threatened to swallow me whole. In her silence, I felt heard. I felt understood.

And that was so goddamn rare for me. I thought my emotions would choke me that

day. But they didn't.

I was still here.

Tears flowed down my cheeks as I cradled my mug of rapidly cooling tea. I shivered, reminding myself to put on something thicker before I headed to bed.

My life was a solitary one, but I understood. This curse was my own cross to bear and bear it I did.

I dated a man about a year ago, and it got serious. He even moved in for a short while. I thought it would be nice having someone care for me. Only Patrick didn't.

He was a user and a jerk. I made the mistake of telling him exactly what I was going through one dark night. Predictably, he left, after clearing out the old coffee jar I liked to hide cash in.

Told me I needed help and that no one wanted to spend time with a freaky ass fat girl. Funny, but I never even thought about my body being too heavy to be attractive until he said that.

Yeah, it hurt.

So not only was I cursed, but apparently, I was fat, too. It was a lot to come to grips with all at once.

But I did. Now, I knew then I would never find someone to share my life with, and I accepted it.

It was hard. I mean, I was only thirty-one years old. But it was better to face the facts than to go into another relationship as blindly as I had that one.

Sometimes I just felt so alone.

It had nothing to do with the fact I lived in a trailer on the outskirts of town. But it did have everything to do with seeing the ghoulish remnants of the dearly, or not so dearly, departed that hounded me day in and out.

Shades wandered around aimlessly, stuck on this plane until they resolved whatever they needed to in order to move on.

Sometimes I was able to pick up on what they needed.

And sometimes I made a call, sent a letter, hopped on a bus and did my best to see that they were heard, and their final wishes were fulfilled.

It wasn't always possible. But I did my best with the meager budget I had and whatever time I could spare. It's all I could do.

All the Fates would allow , as Pop would say.

The rain was coming down in sheets now, and the good news was the old double wide Pop had bought back when I was in grade school was still standing.

Barely.

Sure, there were a dozen things I could list off the top of my head that needed fixing, but that would all have to wait.

It was all I could do to pay his bills and keep the lights on. But that wasn't so bad, right? I had my books and a ton of old movies to keep me company.

My phone buzzed with an incoming message, and I gasped as I read the text over.

Twice.

Hey Jezebel, It's me Penelope. You may have heard I'm engaged to Max Leeds, and he owns the Motley Crewd Ranch.

Anyway, we're having some trouble with our fences, and I was wondering if we could rent that lot you own behind the theater for a week or two.

We will pay top dollar for you allowing our goats to stay there, and we will even throw in a full time caretaker to tend to their needs. Let me know asap. -Pen

I blinked hard, wiping the tears that had come back with a vengeance. Was this real? I mean, I knew Penelope, but we were hardly close friends.

Still, I could not afford to look a gift horse, or in this case, goat , in the mouth. I grabbed my phone and replied. I didn't often get good news, but this sure felt like the start of something good.

Fingers crossed.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

The minute I started following the directions the robotic GPS voice spouted out over the speakers, Demon started snarling inside my mind's eye.

Fucking Wolf was going to be the death of me. Probably literally.

It was bad enough that the rain had gotten heavier, but with all the thunder and lightning I could scarcely see three feet ahead of the truck.

Lucky for me, I had Shifter reflexes, and I was a solid driver and I'd done this job before for other ranches where I'd worked.

The goats kept on bleating and Jed kept right on singing, and I wondered where the old man was going to stay the night. Not that I was too worried. He'd probably just shift and keep watch in his fur.

Still, I was thinking I'd probably just detach the trailer and leave it in the enclosure, just so the goats and Jed would have some sort of shelter for the next couple of nights while me and the boys worked.

While I was mulling all that over, I frowned as I took a left. This seemed oddly familiar to me.

I rounded a bend and stopped short of the tall, chain link fence, the sight of the huge "CLOSED" sign hanging on the gate jogged my memory.

The letters, stark and white against red painted wood, felt like a finality that echoed in the silence of the empty lot beyond.

It was a familiar scene, yet it sent a wave of disappointment crashing over me. What the hell was wrong with me?

Demon snarled. His hackles were raised and for the life of me, I could not figure out why.

Wait, I know this place. It's the drive-in .

Weeks ago, me and the boys had followed Max to this drive-in theater where he took Pen out on their first date.

Lightning flashed, and I saw something. A hooded figure, and it was on the other side of the gate.

Not knowing why, I jumped out of the cab, pulling my hood up as I ran to where the figure was trying to move the enormous, heavy chain off the fence.

“What are you doing?” I shouted, angry for no reason at all.

“Oh! You scared me!” A feminine voice responded, and suddenly, Demon stopped snarling.

I froze, stopping in front of the woman. She was strange and yet familiar, wearing a dark green raincoat that was at least two sizes too big. It hung past her knees on her much shorter frame, and suddenly I was incensed, wondering whose coat that was.

Take it. Give her ours.

The fuck? I paused, shocked at the very clear command in Demon's voice.

Typically, it was all snarls and growling, rage and anger. But this was not that. These

were words. Human words. And I had no idea what that meant.

“Can you help me get this off?” she yelled above the clamoring storm.

“Back up,” I replied, a snarl in my voice.

I pretended to use the key she gave me, but it was too slick. Wincing like I was trying to see better, I managed to use brute strength to break the lock and stuck it in my pocket before she could see it.

Of course, I would have to rig something before I left, so she’d be safe. Couldn’t leave her unguarded.

“Go on, get inside the truck. I’ll open the gate,” I called over the noise, nodding at the passenger side door.

Bright blue eyes met mine beneath her dark hood, and holy fuck, all the air seemed to leave my lungs.

Beautiful.

Demon never said anything like that before. But it was definitely his voice murmuring softly inside my head.

This woman was dangerous. She had my Wolf’s attention, and that wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

I watched her jog away, hugging the raincoat closer as she went, making her curvy little backside even more pronounced.

All the oxygenated blood in my body must have gone right below my buckle because

she had to honk the horn to get me moving again.

“Shit,” I grumbled, pushing the rolling gate with more force than necessary.

Damn thing zipped straight across despite the rust that had formed on the wheels. I grimaced, hoping she didn’t notice.

My heart was pounding as I returned to the driver’s side door. The second I opened it, bam, I was slapped right in the face with the best damn scent I’d ever encountered.

It was warm and familiar, but completely alien at the same time. Like hot cocoa laced with rum and toasted marshmallows.

A little something sweet, and a little something sinful.

Dear God, I wanted to lean in close and smell this woman all over. I wanted to lick her skin and see if I could taste that damn tantalizing smell on her skin.

Emotion threatened to choke me in the confined space of the truck’s cab. I closed my eyes to catch my breath, but when I opened them again, everything seemed so much more intense.

She was looking at me, those bright blue eyes just as stunning as before. Only now I could see her face, and holy fuck, it was perfect.

She had soft cheeks and plump lips, and a straight nose with a smattering of freckles across her smooth, creamy skin. She looked like heaven to me.

I knew I should say something to break the awkward silence, but my tongue was tied.

What did you say to an angel?

More importantly, what could I possibly say to one?

My chest rumbled, echoing in the small space, causing her eyebrows to rise.

Words escaped me. I knew immediately what Demon wanted. My monster Wolf was intrigued, and that was not a good thing.

“Um, the paddock is through that gate and to the left. Just follow the road behind my place, and there’ll be another g-gate. I can open that one,” she whispered nervously.

“No,” I growled the word and bit my lip, trying to rein in Demon. “I meant to say, I’ll get it. You stay in here where it’s dry,” I murmured.

Something was different about this woman. She was unique.

Special.

Mine.

No!

I battled the Wolf for dominance, inhaling sharply at the pain that sliced inside me at his insistence this female was ours.

But no. She couldn’t be.

I was not built for soft things, and by God, she was that and more.

Whoever this beautiful creature was, she was better off without me, without Demon, tainting her life.

Broken Wolves don't have mates , I told my inner beast.

The pain of his rage was greater than the storm outside, but I kept that hidden as I followed her directions. I said nothing as I got out and opened the second gate, driving to the center of the enclosed field.

“Stay in the truck while I unhook the trailer,” I growled.

“O-okay,” she agreed, and something in me softened at that.

Her ready submission satisfied my animal. Oh, I knew I was right the first time. This woman was dangerous.

Smelling of sin and looking like a saint, she was everything I ever dreamed of having, and nothing I should ever dare claim.

Goddamn, I was fucked.

My cock was thumping behind my zipper, and my Wolf was snarling nonstop. The air surrounding me was heavy. Too heavy. And I knew I would have to change before I went back.

Maybe after I dropped her off, I could park somewhere nearby and go for a run in the storm. Demon would like that. He was a wild thing, just as untamed as the weather.

Yeah, we'd go for a run and forget all about the curvy little human in our front seat. I nodded to myself, coming to an agreement. But I should have known my asshole Wolf had other plans.

I climbed back in the truck after making sure Jed and the herd were alright, and the first thing I noticed was the scent of the woman's curiosity.

“I’m sorry, I, uh, forgot to introduce myself. I’m Jezebel, Jezebel Braydon,” she whispered, offering me her small hand.

Fuck.

I couldn’t not take it. That would be rude. But I knew touching her was going to be a mistake. A grievous error that could decimate the steel walls I’d built around myself.

Still, before I could talk myself out of it, I reached for her.

My hand was callused, the skin roughened by years of hard work, fighting, and living on the edge of civilization.

It felt twice the size of hers.

The rain had soaked through my shirt, and my fingers were damp as I moved closer, my heart racing.

As our hands met, I felt the warmth of her soft skin against mine, a stark contrast to the chill that clung to the air around us.

The second I closed my fingers around her soft warm ones I felt a shock that went straight to the soul of me. That jolt of electricity surged through me, like a living thing it coursed through my veins and jump started that long-dead organ inside my chest.

Mine, Demon snarled.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

The thing about being a psychic no one told you was that you tended to be blind when it came to your own life.

I used to think my curse was limited to seeing the shadows of the dead, but now and then, I saw other things, too. Inexplicable things.

Things that inspired people to make up fairytales and folklore.

Magic.

Monsters.

Mysteries.

That kind of thing.

Now, I knew the man in the truck was okay, after all, Penelope had sent him, and his truck bore the Motley Crewd Ranch logo.

But I wasn't expecting a psychic vision to fill my head the moment we locked eyes, which was probably why it hit me so hard.

It felt like a thunderclap in the stillness of my mind, jolting me out of reality.

My pulse started racing as the world around us blurred into insignificance.

The second I met his intense gaze I was struck by a vision so clear it rendered me

speechless.

I saw flashes of images—vivid colors swirling together, landscapes shifting like sand in the wind.

There was a darkened field surrounded by tall, imposing trees. The space was filled with ethereal flickers of light, as if by some unseen moon or maybe they were stars.

Shadows danced across the tall grass, but there, in the center stood a figure cloaked in mystery. It was not human.

I sensed a deep, raw emotion emanating from him, a blend of desperation and hope, as if he were caught in the throes of something monumental.

I moved closer inside my mind's eye and caught my breath when he came into focus. The figure was a wolf.

A gigantic, savage looking brute. But I wasn't afraid. This beast would not hurt me. I just knew it somehow.

My vision intensified, flooding me with sensations that were both exhilarating and terrifying.

I felt the weight of a thousand unsaid words pressing against my chest. Suffocating me. Urgency hummed inside my veins, but understanding was still beyond my grasp.

It was like I was witnessing a pivotal scene in a story yet to be told. It was important and somehow it had something to do with me.

This all took place in a moment. Just a moment. But it felt like a thousand years.

I was completely captivated by the wolf I saw in the strange man's emerald colored eyes.

This was no ordinary animal. He was special.

Enormous.

Powerful.

Breathtaking.

I wanted to touch the beast. To reach out with my fingertips and dance them across his thick black fur while staring into those glittering green eyes.

I never saw anyone with eyes like that. So stark and real. I saw pain and torment, and a loneliness that equaled my own. But I also saw potential and loyalty.

The vision was so powerful I hardly recalled what I said to him as I whispered directions to the field.

I closed my eyes, and just as suddenly as it had begun, the vision shattered like spun sugar.

The cacophony of the world rushed back in with a blast of thunder that shook the truck. He told me to stay inside while he worked, and I was grateful for the reprieve.

I needed a moment to center myself.

When he came back, I pretended this was all normal. That I was normal, and I introduced myself.

“I’m sorry, I, uh, forgot to introduce myself. I’m Jezebel, Jezebel Braydon.”

He seemed to think a good long moment before he accepted my hand. Like even he could tell, this would be life-altering.

His hand was so big it engulfed mine, and that vision I had before came rushing back with even more force.

The intensity in his emerald gaze deepened. I could see questions forming in his eyes, mirroring the chaos swirling within me.

“Shit,” I murmured, taking my hand back and looking straight ahead.

“What just happened?” he asked.

His voice was impossibly low, and I swore I heard the wolf growling inside the deep tones.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

What could I say?

Sorry, I am a freak, don’t mind me.

Been there. Done that. And I could tell you from experience, it wasn’t fun.

No. I would just have to make sense of the vision that had felt way too real, too powerful, all on my own.

Later. Much later.

Right now, I was left standing on the precipice of something unknown, caught between the realms of reality and the supernatural.

It was almost as if the wolf in my vision was still there with us. But that just couldn't be.

"Um, I don't know," I said, lying to the man.

I could feel my heart pounding, the weight of the moment pressing down on me, and I knew that whatever I said next could alter the course of both our lives.

"I hope that's the first and only time you'll lie to me, Jezebel Braydon," he murmured, and just like that, I knew I had to get away from him.

"Would you mind dropping me by the house?" I whispered.

"Sure. My name is Emmet, by the way. Emmet Quinn," he said.

I rolled the name around my head, testing the way it sounded. Emmet Quinn was a good name.

Strong.

Real.

Worthy.

True, I didn't know him from Adam, but I had no business talking to him or any man. Not with all my baggage.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to ground my thoughts.

“Thanks, um, is there anything I need to do? For the goats, I mean,” I said when he rolled to a stop a few feet from my front door.

Emmet turned his green gaze on me, then his lips quirked in a smirk I was sure had melted hearts and panties , all over the Garden State, and elsewhere since I swore, I heard a bit of country in that deep voice of his.

“Go out with me,” he said unexpectedly, and I froze with my hand on the door.

“Um, no,” I finally managed, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Why not?”

“Because, um, I don’t know you,” I replied weakly.

“So, get to know me. Come on. Take a chance,” he teased, and dammit I was tempted.

But I knew better.

“I don’t think so. But thanks, anyway,” I replied, then opened the door and ran up the stairs to my house.

I heard his door slam and turned to see just what the heck he was doing. And that was my mistake.

Emmet moved fast. He crowded me against the door, his big body taking up all the space on the top stair. I had to steady myself with my hands on his chest, else I might have slipped.

His big, rough hand cupped the back of my neck, and he tilted my head back, locking

eyes with me.

“I shouldn’t do this, but I’m going to anyway,” he said, and it sounded like he wasn’t even talking to me.

But that didn’t stop him from bending down. And it sure as shit did not stop me from responding.

Emmet’s lips crushed mine. His kiss wasn’t gentle or timid. It wasn’t sweet. It was rough and heady. Desire and desperation rose like the tide inside of me and I moaned as his kiss awakened feelings I hadn’t experienced in, well , ever, truth be told.

“There, that’s better,” he said before dropping one more plucking kiss on my lips.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“Do you really want to know?” he replied, canting his head to the side like a curious animal.

I nodded.

“Because I couldn’t just let you go and not kiss you, Angel.”

The admission hung in the air, heavy with implication. It felt like the weight of destiny was resting on both our shoulders.

I didn’t know if I was strong enough to bear it.

“Go inside now, Little Girl. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Then he was gone, back down the stairs. Emmet left me standing there in stunned

silence.

A chill raced through me as I watched him from the doorway, his silhouette barely visible beside the truck, outlined by the relentless rain that poured down like the sky itself was also mourning the loss of his kiss.

He stood there for a minute, waiting for me to go inside, I realized with a jolt.

I turned around and went inside, slamming the door and my eyes shut at the same time, trying to stem the sudden rush of emotions threatening to spill down my cheeks.

The sound of the truck backing up and turning around was loud as Emmet drove away. I felt his absence like I felt the cold— keenly .

It seeped into my skin, making me aware of the enormous impact our brief encounter had on me.

What the hell just happened?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

“A re you shitting me? Emmet!” Max yelled from the main house.

It was loud enough to reach me clear across the second ranch where I was helping Dante and Kian tear down the rest of the damaged fence. The rain had stopped sometime in the wee hours of the morning, but what was left was an awful muddy mess.

More trees had fallen, and several were weighed down by their heavy, sodden branches and leaves. Zeke was working, cutting them down. After he was done, he'd drag all the branches and trees to the wood chipper to make mulch out of the mess.

I took off my gloves and tucked them in my pocket, checking the time as I jogged to see what Max wanted. Boss man was still getting used to the life of a rancher/farmer, and it was not always easy going for him.

It was a little after eight, and I growled in frustration. I'd wanted to finish this before heading over to bring feed and supplies to Jed and the goats. And maybe stop by Jezebel's for a cup of coffee or something.

There was no denying the woman was taking up space inside my head. Demon hadn't stopped snarling since I laid eyes on the female, and after kissing her, well, it was ten times worse.

But more than my own inner battles, there was just something about the woman that drew me to her. Like there was a secret hidden behind her sapphire eyes and I was desperate to learn more.

But first, I'd have to deal with whatever it was Max wanted.

"Emmet!" he snapped as Mrs. O'Hare opened the door.

"Morning, Wolf," she greeted me gruffly.

The older Witch was a real piece of work. She'd left Max for a few weeks when he came to take over the ranch, forcing the somewhat spoiled Jersey Devil to stand on his own two feet, er , hooves— whatever .

The point was, having learned my lesson when I accidentally crossed a Witch back when I was just a Pup, I was always polite to the woman.

She nodded in approval as I wiped my feet on the outside mat before stepping over the threshold and directly onto the rubber mat she kept for me and the boys in the foyer.

"Emmet, look at this," Max snarled, slapping a tablet into my hand.

I read the headline and smirked, shaking my head as my eyes ran over the print. It was from the Dry Creek Herald , an online weekly paper that held all the gossip and rumors of the small Northern New Jersey town, including all talk of the monthly rodeo held at the county fairgrounds.

"Let's see, Motley Crewd Ranch is just another dude ranch in disguise where city slicker Max Leeds is trying his luck at goat herding.

A few lucky wins mean nothing compared to the blood, sweat, tears, and countless hours many of our hometown heroes invest in this monthly contest, and I wonder if the Motley Crewd boys will tough it out.

Only time can tell. Maybe Max and his minions should go back to the bright lights instead.

Shit, Boss. It's just some pencil pusher speaking out his ass," I said, handing him back the tablet.

But I could see ol' Max was surely riled as his skin started to turn a mottled red color, which meant his Devil was on the verge of breaking through.

"Oh no. Do you know who this guy is? He is the nephew of Tyson Peaks-Mill, the owner of Orchard Mill Ranch. This little shit is throwing the gauntlet down and it is our duty as a Crew to pick it up and accept the challenge!"

"Max, I don't think that's a good idea," I warned, but I knew my reservations were falling on deaf ears.

"Why not? You won last time. We can win again. We can build up our brand and get more business. It's a win-win, Emmet," he said, and I just sighed.

A Devil with an idea was worse than a Wolf with a bone.

"You get fined this month?" I asked, noting with pleasure the way Max's lips tightened.

"Yeah, but I was close to the sixty percent, I just know it," he said, and I grinned, handing him my gloves.

Part of Max's deal with his grandmother was that he had to personally see to sixty percent of all the physical labor on the place. For a supernatural, it was not asking a lot. But for a man who'd never done much of anything his entire life, I imagined it was life altering.

Either way, he'd already proved himself to me and the boys. It was why he was our Alpha, and why Demon felt more grounded than ever before.

True, I owed Max a lot for giving me this second chance. Now that I met Jezebel, I appreciated it even more.

I was determined to see him succeed. So, I came up with a plan on the fly.

"Get on out there, Boss Man. You help the boys take down the rest of that fence while I swing by Jed's to bring the feed. Then I'll run down to the lumberyard to pick up our order so we can get started on the rebuild. Need to get the posts in before the ground freezes," I told him.

"Fine. But I am signing you up for two events," he said, giving me a glare before grabbing his boots.

"Penelope at the bakery?" I asked, wondering how our new Alpha fem was faring today.

"Yeah. She went in for a few hours. Why?" Max asked, grabbing a sherpa lined denim jacket from the hall closet.

"Nothing. It's just very impressive how quickly she is learning to control her new, um, sensibilities," I replied with no little amount of pride.

Penelope had gotten more than a mate for life when Max had claimed her beneath the last quarter moon before his fortieth birthday. In fact, I'd never heard of someone turning into a supe before, at least not unless they were a Tiger Shifter, and even then, it was rare.

But for whatever reason, maybe just the strength of their bond, Max had gifted

Penelope with a Devil of her own. Now the little former human was one of the Crew and learning more about herself every single day.

Controlling the beast inside her in order to keep the supernatural secret was of the utmost importance. I had to admit, I was impressed with her level of control.

There were days when I still feared Demon would take over. I wasn't proud of that fact, but at least, I could admit it.

"She's a gem, isn't she?" he asked, his dark eyes rimmed in the red of his Jersey Devil.

"I'm not going to answer that, Boss, but I am happy for you both," I told him.

"By the way, I have a check for Jezebel," Max said, handing it to me.

I frowned, and my Wolf snarled.

"Everything okay?" he asked, looking far too amused than was healthy for either of us.

Last thing I needed was to get into a physical altercation with my new Alpha. Max wasn't a Wolf. I was strong, but he was something other than a Shifter. He had magic, and I didn't trust the fucker not to use it.

Besides, it was insanity. Me wanting to hit him. I mean, for what? For paying my girl for the use of her land when that was the deal?

Shit.

She wasn't my girl. I had to stop thinking of her like that.

Yet , snarled the Wolf.

“Yeah. Um, no. Actually, if you don’t mind, I’d like to pay for sheltering the herd, Boss,” I said.

“You want to pay her?” he asked.

I was already tearing up his check and putting it on the table before filling out one of the blank ones I kept in my wallet. I doubled the amount I’d seen on the one Max had drawn up.

Just fucking because.

“I think I have to,” I mumbled, rubbing the spot over my chest where Demon was currently trying to chew his way through my skin.

“Settle,” growled Max and just like that the Wolf went silent.

This is why it pays to have a good Alpha.

“Later, Boss,” I said and waved as I left the house and walked off towards my truck.

Excitement hummed in my veins, and my stomach trembled with nerves at the thought of seeing her again. The woman gave me butterflies, and hell, if that didn’t make me grin like the Cheshire cat.

I should have felt even the slightest bit silly. I mean, butterflies were for schoolgirls, not men or even Werewolves. But whatever. There was no pretending to ignore the fluttering sensation that twisted in my gut.

It might seem juvenile, but I couldn’t help it. Thoughts of Jezebel had kept me up

most of the night, and I was beyond eager to see her again.

That kiss. I knew I should have stopped myself, but the truth was, I did not want to. She tasted every bit as delicious as I'd imagined.

Dark rum and hot chocolate with toasted marshmallows.

I was fucking obsessed with the idea of sipping from her sweet lips again. But I hesitated, my hands on the steering wheel. I felt torn between the urge to push through my doubts and the instinct to retreat, to protect myself from the potential sting of rejection.

Demon snarled, the Wolf scratching insistently. He had no such qualms about going to see her again.

Mine.

It was safer to hide behind the mask of indifference. To maintain the facade of a man who preferred his own company.

But those butterflies refused to be silenced. Their wings beat faster and harder, growing bolder with each passing moment. Before I knew it, I shifted the truck into drive, and I was already moving.

Ten minutes until I reach her.

Five minutes.

Three.

Then I was coming to a stop outside her door, and what I saw made me frown. Hard.

Grrr.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

“ I asked you to leave, Patrick,” I said, staring in disbelief at my ex as he stood outside my door.

“Yeah, but you don’t mean that. Let me in, we can discuss things, and I swear I won’t be weirded out by all your hocus pocus,” he said, sniffing and wiping his nose.

His eyes looked glassy, and his nose was red. The ugly sneer he wore was not something I wanted to be around. I knew exactly what Patrick thought about me and my psychic abilities.

Just like I now understood he had a problem with drugs. Not to mention his money issues.

“Unless you’re here to pay back the \$197 you stole from me before you left last year, you need to get off my property,” I replied, narrowing my gaze.

Fuck this guy.

“Stole? Come on! You don’t mean that,” he said and tried to push his way inside.

One good thing about being a fat girl. I did not budge.

“Oh yes, I fucking do. I’m fat, remember? And a freak,” I added for good measure.

“Look, Jez, I’m sorry I was so hard on you.

I know you haven’t been with anybody since I left.

Why don't you let me in, and we can spend some time together?

I'll help you remember what it can be like between us," he said, with what I was sure he thought was a sexy smoldering look, but to me, it only looked like he had to take a shit.

"Ew! Gross," I said, ducking as he leaned down as if trying to kiss me.

I closed my eyes, flinching at the thought of his slimy mouth on mine. The image turned my stomach. But when nothing happened after a moment, I reopened them, shocked at what I saw.

Patrick's eyes opened wide as he was dragged backwards, down each stair, by a big, meaty hand on his shoulder.

"The lady said get lost," a familiar voice snarled.

The menace in his tone was undeniable, and I stood up straight and watched wide-eyed as Emmet shoved Patrick into the rusted junker the prick had driven up to my door. Like he'd be welcome or something.

"What's your name?" Emmet asked, squeezing his hand down on Patrick's shoulder.

"Ow. Ow. OW! R-Patrick. My name is Patrick! Look, it was just a misunderstanding," Patrick squealed unattractively.

"Misunderstanding? Oh, well, allow me to clear that up for you, son," Emmet snarled and punched Patrick right in the gut. "You don't come here. You don't talk to her. And you sure as fuck don't think about her anymore. Understand?"

"W-Who are you, man?" Patrick asked Emmet, cowering against his car and holding

his stomach.

“I’m the man who’s gonna be gunning for you if you darken Jezebel’s door again. You get me?” Emmet growled.

I bit my lip against the sudden overwhelming attraction I felt towards Emmet in that moment.

He was like beautiful defiance and glorious vengeance all rolled up into one. A whirlwind of raw power and unyielding ferocity.

My core tightened, and I felt a longing that was bone deep as I gazed at the figure he made, standing there so tall and strong.

Okay, something was definitely wrong with me if I was getting turned on by this guy punching my ex in the stomach.

Whatever.

Patrick had it coming. His treatment of me left a lot to be desired. But I was not about to waste anymore time on that jerk.

One lone shade, a faded sort of figure, milled about the property, shimmering in and out of existence in the periphery of my vision. But I ignored the ghost, recognizing that feeling I got when a vision was about to come through.

Bam!

It hit me suddenly. That same image of a midnight-furred wolf flashed inside my brain, just like the first time I saw Emmet.

His hackles were raised, and he growled ominously, watching as Patrick hustled into the driver's seat and peeled out of the lot like a bat out of hell.

I took in Emmet's striking features as he stood watching until Patrick's car was out of sight.

His sharp jawline. The tousled dark blond hair. Those piercing green eyes. All of it combined to create the perfect specimen before me.

I could see his rebellious streak a mile away. There was an innate wildness to him. This sense that Emmet was not like other men. He balanced on the edge of chaos with an effortless grace that left me staring in awe.

When he finally turned his emerald stare on me, I saw him again. The wolf .

This time, the animal seemed superimposed over Emmet's features, and for one split second, it was difficult to determine who was who.

I closed my eyes, and when I reopened them, only the man remained. Head canted to the side, Emmet watched me as he slowly approached.

"You okay, Angel?"

I nodded in response. Of course I was okay now. He was there. With me.

Emmet managed to chase Patrick away and make my panties wet all in the span of a few minutes. The guy was basically Superman.

"Yeah. Yes. Um, what are you doing here?"

"Had to drop off feed and supplies to Jed. Oh, and this," he said, reaching into his

coat pocket and taking out an envelope.

I accepted it and peeked inside, the breath leaving my lungs as I took in the amount.

“This is more than we talked about,” I said, mouth hanging open.

“It’s fair,” he argued, putting his hands up when I would have handed it back.

“Fine. I’m going to take it because I have financial obligations to meet, and I will send Penelope a thank you later,” I mumbled, more for myself than for his benefit.

“Come feed the goats with me,” he said, not asked.

I was already shaking my head, ready to decline. But men like Emmet Quinn did not take no for an answer.

He grinned, and I had to pinch myself to remember to breathe properly. The man was too damn handsome for anybody’s good— mine included .

It felt almost unfair. If I was being kind to myself, I would say I was plus-sized, not fat. But even if I ignored the obvious differences in our body types, I was just average when it came to looks.

Emmet was in another class. The way he could command attention without even trying should be downright illegal.

His jeans were molded to his powerful thighs and calves, and I had no doubt his ass would look fine as hell once he turned around.

His smile held an air of playful mischief along with a hint of mystery that hot boys often had.

My life was fairly mundane, but standing there with him, it felt more than that. The heat I thought I saw in his gaze drew me in, threatening to swallow me whole.

I gulped.

I guess I hadn't noticed in the rain last night, but now, in the soft light of morning, I took in the full scope of him. His hair was thick and wavy, a dark blond color that caught the sunlight in a way that made it almost shimmer.

It framed his face perfectly, accentuating those chiseled features that seemed to belong on a movie screen rather than a small North Jersey ranch/farm.

His eyes sparkled with mischief. The energy surrounding him was so intense it made my stomach flutter. But I couldn't tell if it was excitement or nerves. Or both.

"Come on," he urged, leaning slightly closer.

The scent of fresh earth and rain clinging to him like a second skin. There was something disarming about the way he spoke. Like feeding goats was my dream date. A thrilling adventure I could hardly even imagine.

With him, I might just believe it.

"They're waiting for their breakfast."

"Um, speaking of breakfast, I haven't had anything yet and I need to eat. Sorry," I said again, watching his face for any sign of judgment.

The thing about carrying some extra weight was people always looked at you as if you should feel ashamed of needing food.

But I got news, folks, everyone eats. It's sort of a requirement for living.

Emmet's eyes seemed to heat as they roamed over me from head to toe, and I had the distinct feeling he was not judging me. Actually, it looked like he was hoping I was on the menu.

Yes, please.

"Come with me now, and I promise to feed you after, Angel. What do you say?"

I should say no. I know I should say no.

"Alright," I replied softly.

"Good Girl."

Warmth suffused me at his words, and I bit my lip as he grabbed my hand and tugged me towards his truck. Emmet opened the door and helped me inside with his big hands on my hips, giving me the boost I needed.

The truck was tall, but I couldn't help but secretly hope there was another reason he put his hands on me. Especially when they glided over my ass cheeks on the way up.

"Don't look so worried, Angel. I promise you'll enjoy it.," he growled, and his gaze lowered to my chest as I buckled myself in.

I was wearing a thick sweater over two more layers of thermal shirts and a pair of fitted jeans. Nothing even remotely sexy.

But the way he was looking at me? I might as well have been in some lacy lingerie number I'd likely never buy or dare to wear with my soft belly and too wide hips.

My oh my.

I squeezed my legs together, willing the needy little ache his husky voice and intense stare had created to go away.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I said, replying to his earlier statement.

“You do that, Angel. Hold me accountable. Make me earn it.”

I was speechless at that, and Emmet, he just winked and walked around the front of the truck to get in on the driver’s side. His assent was a lot more effortless than mine. But I still enjoyed watching the play of muscles beneath his tight shirt as he moved.

A spied a swirl of ink coming out the collar and I closed my eyes on a moan.

Tattoos. He has tattoos.

Of all the things the sexy ass man with blond hair and green eyes could have that would make him any hotter, it had to be tattoos. Okay, so I had a little weakness for body art.

Why did I even bother with underwear?

“Something wrong, Angel?” he asked.

One perfectly sculpted eyebrow was raised as he looked me over, biting his lower lip as his gaze strayed to where my legs were clenched tightly together. It was all I could do not to melt into a puddle right there in the front seat.

“What? Oh, no. Nope. I am all good.”

“Damn right you are,” he whispered.

Holy. Shit.

If Emmet kept saying things like that, I was going to need a whole lot more from him than breakfast. But that would lead to all sorts of complications I did not think I was ready for.

I turned my head and gazed outside, wincing when that shade I’d seen shimmering around outside last night appeared again. This time it was clearer, and the figure seemed somewhat feminine as it floated beside the truck, keeping pace despite the speed.

“Angel?”

I jumped, startling as Emmet’s big hand squeezed where he was gripping my thigh.

“I called you three times, Jezebel. Are you okay?” he asked, concern filling his gaze.

“Sorry. Um, lost in thought?” I replied, but it came out like a question.

“I got you, Angel. Sit right there and wait for me,” he said, coming around the side of the car to open my door.

Holy hotness.

I never thought of myself as the obedient kind, but there was something about the innate power in his commands, and the heat beneath his words, that had me wanting to do anything he said.

Unexpected?

Definitely.

I had zero luck when it came to sex or relationships, but something about Emmet Quinn made me wish the opposite was true.

Sure, he looked at me like I was a bowl full of chocolate pudding and he wanted to lick it clean. But after he saw the real me, the one I tried to keep so carefully hidden, I could almost guarantee that look would be replaced by something else.

Pity. Or worse. Disgust.

But was that going to stop me from craving him or spending these stolen moments with him?

Probably not.

I was just that desperate for a bit of human interaction. And no, not just anyone would do. I wanted to get to know him. This sexy cowboy, who I learned in a text message from Penelope earlier this morning, came from Texas to take a job working on her fiancé's ranch.

So, what did I have here?

A single. Able-bodied. Hot as Hades. Honest to goodness cowboy. And he seemed interested in me.

Oh yeah, I was so screwed —or I would be soon, with any luck.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

A couple of days later.

“So, you met a girl you think your Wolf likes. You beat up her ex. Then you took her to feed goats? Like, for real?” Kian asked, scratching his stupid head.

“What kind of date is that? Feeding goats?” Dante replied with a question of his own.

“That wasn’t the date. That was before our date. I mean, we were supposed to go out to eat,” I mumbled, feeling all out of sorts.

“Shit. No wonder she said no to you after that. Never met a woman who let me touch her boobies after taking her to feed goats,” Kian muttered.

“She let you touch her boobies?” Dante asked, eyebrows sky high.

“No! Fuck. I didn’t try that!” I shouted.

“Why not?” Dante asked.

“Is something wrong with her boobies?” Kian seconded.

Demon snarled. I closed my eyes and forced the beast down, praying to the gods for patience.

“Oh my fuck. Look, just shut the fuck up about her boobies, alright?!” I snapped, trying to rein in my angry animal.

Why did I tell these imbeciles anything?

I slammed the hammer down on the fence post one last time, gritting my teeth against the vibrations that reverberated through my arms. A satisfying clang rang out in the crisp morning air.

It was cold out this morning. Cold and clear for the first time in weeks.

As I straightened my back, I felt a surge of pride wash over me, knowing the post was firmly anchored in place. I exhaled, a puff of smoke leaving my lips, a visible reminder of the change in the weather and the effort I had put into this simple task.

There was something uniquely fulfilling about using sheer brute force to make something go the way you wanted it. Every time I hit that post, I was throwing all my frustration into it.

Demon had been driving me crazy. Every night for the past couple of days, the beast had forced a shift. I'd find myself butt ass naked the next morning behind her house, in the woods that ran along the perimeter of the chain link fence she had around her property.

Jogging naked through the woods in the freezing cold sucked ass. And not in any good way. But I'd do it just to catch a glimpse of Jezebel's sweet face as she crossed the floor of her little house with the early sunrays dancing through the windows as she made her coffee.

Fuck. I had it bad.

"Hand me another post," Dante grunted, and I did.

Because of all the rain, we had to wait a few days for the lumber to be delivered, and

we were running behind. But one good thing about being a Shifter was the fact the three of us would have completed setting the posts before noon.

Then I could check my phone. See if she answered.

The other day when I first delivered the check to Jezebel and took her out to feed the goats, I thought I had it all worked out. Figured the pretty woman was going to fall right into my lap.

I wasn't bragging, but ladies seemed to like me. Only Jezebel had managed to refuse every single overture I'd made.

She ducked my invitation to breakfast that morning, much to my dismay. Before I could secure her agreement for a rain check, Max had texted with an emergency, and I'd hightailed it back to the ranch.

I wasn't one to give up a chase so easily. So, I texted her, having asked Penelope for Jezebel's cell number.

Sorry about leaving in a rush earlier today, but I believe I owe you breakfast. How about we make a date?

At first, she'd ignored my messages. Then I realized she likely didn't know who was sending them. So, I tried again.

This is Emmet, by the way.

Emmet Quinn.

From Motley Crewd Ranch?

Okay, so I sent three texts before I realized I was being crazy and stopped. But lucky me, she responded.

My Angel

Okay, stalker. How'd you get my number?

I snorted a laugh when I read that.

Me

I have my ways. But since we established, I might be a stalker, tell me are your doors locked, Little Girl?

My Angel

Always.

Me

So, breakfast?

My Angel

Are you suggesting I encourage you? I mean stalkers are dangerous, right?

Me

You have no idea. But you don't ever have to be worried with me, Angel. I'll protect you.

My Angel

That's a pretty big promise from a man I don't know.

Me

So, get to know me. I dare you.

She went quiet after that. It was a lot. I mean, I did come on kinda strong.

So, I gave her a day.

I knew sometimes people needed space, especially when emotions ran high. And after that kiss we shared, my emotions were running pretty damn high where she was concerned.

I gave her twenty-four hours, then I started with simple things—light, casual messages that wouldn't feel overwhelming or intrusive.

Just a “good morning” or “what are you eating for lunch?” kind of texts.

It felt like tiptoeing into uncharted territory, but I was willing to do it if it meant she'd answer me.

Fuck.

It was scary how quickly she became necessary to me. I mean I wanted her, for sure. But it was more than that.

I needed her to answer me.

Demon needed her to answer me.

It got to the point where I was checking my phone a few times every hour, hoping for a word, a meme, anything.

Jezebel was funny. Thoughtful. Her charm was effortless. Just like her beauty. This woman was dangerous. I was becoming addicted and fast.

She sent me pictures of what she was working on for the drive-in. Her enthusiasm for old films and her creativity made me smile. I was proud of her and wasn't that odd? I never felt that way about anyone before.

I didn't want to jinx it or look too closely at it, so I didn't. Our tentative texting friendship was sweet, but it wasn't enough.

Toeing the line between being attentive and pushy, I asked her this morning to go to dinner with me. She had yet to reply, and I was on tenterhooks.

I knew she was busy. Apparently, she had one good weekend left to make bank. She told me about her plans for a Holiday Film Festival before closing for the season, and I had to admit I was psyched about it.

Who didn't love holiday movies?

The thought of curling up in my car, warm blanket in hand, surrounded by the glow of flickering lights and the familiar comfort of classic films made me feel nostalgic.

Of course, when I thought of holiday movies my brain immediately went to Gremlins and Die Hard , which had Jezebel arguing over more traditional classics like Miracle on 34 th Street ,

When I brought up A Christmas Carol, I was admittedly confused by her vehement response that she did not like that story at all.

Not even the Muppets version.

But I warmed at the thought of all that precious enthusiasm she had just shining through her texts. Apparently, with the Holiday Film Festival came holiday themed goodies.

S'mores. Hot cocoa. Popcorn, of course. And holiday cookies supplied by Devil's Food Bakery.

"I think that does it," Kian grunted, leaning on the post he just finished hammering into place.

I wiped the sweat from my brow, feeling a sense of accomplishment swell within me as I looked at the results of all our hard work. Each post stood tall and strong, a testament to what we as a Crew could do when we banded together.

"Good work, boys!" Max came riding up to us on the 4-wheeler he named after his ornery old horse, Betsy Two.

The original Betsy was living the good life, retired from ranching, just sitting pretty in her stable and eating all the carrots and oats she wanted.

I had to admit, Max was doing a much better job now than he had at the beginning. With the dairy making the bulk of our income over the winter, it was important to maximize the land, turning the fields over, and planning our crop for next harvest.

Kian had some terrific ideas for accomplishing that. He was excellent when it came to gauging the fertility of the land. Maybe that was because of his Bull, I had no idea.

Wolves weren't farmers. We were hunters.

But I'd been working ranches for a long time now, and the Motley Crewd had an interesting blend of raising dairy animals and growing things. But I guess New Jersey wasn't called the Garden State for nothing.

Max sidled up to Dante, and the two of them started discussing the herd of dairy cows, while Kian and I put away the tools we'd used for this part of the fencing project. I was only half listening when Max called my name.

"Well, Emmet?"

"Well, what?" I replied.

"Will you be done in time to bring the goats home tomorrow? We want to bring the milk cows in from the second pasture," he explained.

"Yeah. Should be done around noon," I told him, nodding at Kian who was already grabbing a big roll of woven wire fence from the back of his truck.

"I thought we were using chain link?" Max asked, noting the material.

"This is better for keeping the goats safe. Jed insisted," I replied, and we both grinned.

That old Prairie Dog sure did love his Dollies.

"Okay, then. Jed would know," Max murmured, tipping his hat and walking back to his 4-wheeler.

I waved him off and got back to work with the others. As we got into the swing of

mounting the fence, my mind wandered. Running this place together was the best damn thing that's happened to me in quite a while.

There was a palpable energy in the air. I could not be sure what it was for, but it made my blood hum and my heart pump steadily as I worked side by side with Kian and Dante.

Maybe it was the fact that Demon was giving me some peace for a rare moment.

Or maybe it was because I was hoping so damn hard that Jezebel was going to say yes to my dinner invitation.

Whatever the reason, this sense of camaraderie felt good. Comfortable. Almost like that first sip from a hot mug of coffee on a frosty morning.

Each member of the Crew was finding their groove, discovering their strengths, and taking ownership of their roles. The transformation was almost magical.

Like we were building something more than just a fence. We were forming a community.

A family.

I could see it reflected in my eyes when I woke up in the morning, a sense of purpose energizing me each and every day since I stepped foot on this place.

Hell. Maybe the ranch was magic itself. I didn't know.

But I imagined the same rang true for the rest of them. I felt like each of us was finally coming into our own. And for the first time in my whole fucked up life, the possibility of having a future seemed almost within reach.

Maybe I'm not that broken.

“You gonna help or what?” Kian barked, and I grinned, flipping him the bird as I got back to it.

There was a rhythm to this kind of physical labor. Like it had a meditative quality, allowing my mind to settle and focus on the task at hand.

My phone buzzed, and I paused, sniffing, as I grabbed it from my back pocket.

My heart started thumping wildly beneath my breastbone. It was from her.

My Angel

Pick me up at seven.

“What’s got you smiling like the cat that got the canary?” Dante asked, hands on his hips as he dropped another roll of fence on the ground.

“She said yes. SHE SAID YES!” I whooped, and the two guys just shook their heads at me.

Seven o’clock couldn’t come fast enough for me now. Demon’s growl had my entire body rumbling, and the monster Wolf didn’t let up for the entire rest of the day.

Mine.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

I rubbed my hands down my arms. My gaze kept sliding to the copse of trees beyond the fence surrounding my place. The last few nights, the shades had been quiet, but the animals, well, that was another story.

Between the goats bleating and the dogs yapping, I was hardly getting any sleep. At least, I thought it was dogs. But did domestic dogs howl?

Just last night, I'd crept to the window and thought I saw the same big black dog sitting outside my fence that I'd seen almost every day this week.

His hackles had been raised as a shade appeared at the edge of the forest, and he snarled at the figure who then blinked out of existence.

I was beginning to be grateful for my furry guardian and when I smiled, he turned his big head, and those bright green eyes were just staring at me.

It was like he stood watch over me. And I wished his unwavering presence was enough to chase the monsters away permanently. But they would be back. The shades never stayed gone for long.

There was something profoundly comforting about having a large, silent protector in a world that often felt chaotic to me.

When I smiled at him, he turned his big head, and those bright green eyes met mine, piercing and full of intelligence.

It felt as if he could see right into my soul, understanding the unspoken thoughts

swirling in my mind.

The animal must be some kind of designer breed to have eyes like that.

He was a gorgeous creature. Big and muscular with fur black as pitch. So dark it appeared almost otherworldly. A vivid contrast against his bright and steady gaze.

Like Mother Nature had tested her mettle by blending pure elegance with raw power in one magnificent creature. Oh, he was a monster, I was sure.

No other animals dared go near him as he kept watch. Like some dark, furry sentinel. I grinned just thinking about him.

It was silly, feeling connected to an animal. But I couldn't help it. What if he was there for me? Wouldn't that be amazing?

I was being fanciful, but who could blame me? Every girl wanted a savior, right? A protector.

Well, what could be better than a black monster dog with glowing green eyes?

My guardian beast radiated strength, grace, and mystery.

I didn't think such a creature would exist in a world like this. So full of sadness and terror. But he did exist. And that alone was a comfort to me.

God, I was curious about that animal.

There was something special about him, and I did not mean that in the way I was special, er , cursed. He was not a shade or a spirit. I was sure of that.

He was a wild mystery. Too big to be a regular dog. Enormous, really. I thought it might be a wolf, but Google cured me of that.

Apparently, there were no wild wolves in the State of New Jersey. So, even if this was a hybrid, he was likely someone's pet. Something tamed and domesticated, which kind of made me sad.

An animal like that was surely born to be wild and free. I sighed and wondered if I should alert the authorities. Maybe someone was missing him if he was sneaking into these woods every night.

I shook my head against such a notion. If someone owned that animal and let him go, that was their problem. He sure looked healthy, and he didn't bother me. He didn't bother the goats, either.

I made a mental note to leave some ground chuck at the back fence for him if he came back. Just in case he was hungry.

Jed had come by every morning to say hello. Once he brought me a tin filled with fresh goat milk, and he even showed me how to make cheese.

It was freezing inside my house. But I couldn't afford to use any of the quarter tank left of oil sitting in the tank outside the doublewide.

I was trying to keep costs down after using all the money I'd made by lending my field to the Motley Crewd Ranch. I had finally caught up with Pop's bills and bought what I needed for the Holiday Film Festival I was planning.

Hopefully, that would put some money back in my pocket and I'd be able to fill the tank enough for winter.

I just needed the weather to hold up.

Please, oh please, oh please.

Fingers crossed, it would, and the festival could go forward as planned. Three nights with two showings of holiday triple features. Each movie festival would start at five PM, and end at two AM.

George, the teenager I hired to work for me through the early fall, would be back from college for the holidays and already agreed to help along with his two younger brothers, Adam and Steven. Between the four of us, we would direct traffic, scan virtual tickets, and run the snack stand.

I'd been so busy this week between planning and flirting with a certain sexy man who'd been blowing up my phone, I hadn't had a single vision or visitor.

And it was exhilarating.

I couldn't recall a single time in my adult life that hadn't been plagued by the inconvenient timing of persistent shades or intrusive manifestations. Each encounter always felt like a heavy weight on my shoulders.

The burden of carrying this curse around had been mine to bear ever since I could remember. But ever since that day when Emmet had picked Patrick up by the back of the neck and got rid of him, it had been blissfully quiet.

I chuckled softly to myself, recalling the way Emmet had rushed in, all confidence and raw strength. He handled the situation effortlessly and there was something incredibly liberating about all that.

Something sexy as hell, too.

I bit my lip, watching the window for Emmet's truck. We'd been texting all week. He was surprisingly good at playful banter, full of teasing innuendo.

The promise of a new message kept me on the edge of my seat during the day, and had me staying awake late each night, grinning like a schoolgirl.

I didn't usually do this sort of thing. But every time he asked me out, he was chipping away at my armor. I didn't want to say no. My only hope was that this peace I'd found would last through dinner, and if I was lucky, maybe dessert, too.

The anticipation was palpable. Ever since I met him it was like a spark had ignited. Something long since smothered, a secret wish I'd buried deep inside and hadn't allowed myself to feel in a long time.

It was a wish for someone who understood me. Someone who wouldn't run.

I knew it was foolish, but I guess dreams never really died. I didn't want to be alone. And some small part of me hoped that maybe with Emmet, I wouldn't have to be.

If only I wasn't so messed up.

Self-doubt plagued me as I waited for my date to arrive. I couldn't believe I was going through with this.

Hadn't Patrick taught me anything?

Shit.

Was this all a big mistake?

Emmet flirted like it was second nature. He was so handsome and built. What was a

man like that even doing looking at a woman like me?

Stop that. You're plenty pretty , Jezebel .

I scolded myself. And while I'd learned to love my appearance, it was still a sore subject, me being pleasantly plump and all. Seeing Patrick the other day had brought all that up again.

But Emmet was there. He'd heard it. And he didn't snicker and agree with Patrick's assessment of my body.

In fact, it angered him enough that he dragged that jerk to his car and sent him packing. Heat filled me as I recalled that rather boorish display.

Who knew watching someone deal with my ex would be so freaking hot?

I bit my bottom lip and tried to calm my nerves. If I was going to cancel, I was running out of time. I checked my cell phone.

Shit.

He was supposed to be here in five minutes. But men were always late when picking up women for dates, weren't they?

Maybe I could still send him a text?

The sound of a truck pulling up destroyed that notion. I took a deep breath, steadying myself before I moved towards the door.

Buckle up, Jezebel. You are going on this date.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

Mistake or not, it was too late now. This date was on.

I braced myself and stepped outside, watching Emmet's powerful body unfold from the driver's side.

A panty-melting grin stretched across his face as he jogged up the stairs to greet me with a kiss just to the side of my lips.

"Damn, Angel. You look gorgeous," he murmured, taking my hand and walking me to the passenger's side door.

"Thanks, um, you too," I whispered, my heart just about beating me to death.

"You think I look gorgeous?" he asked, his grin going even wider.

"Shut up. You know you're hot," I replied and rolled my eyes.

Emmet chuckled as he helped me into the seat, his massive hands circling my hips.

"Buckle up," he instructed and walked back to his side.

Maybe if I just ignored that part of me that was extra, I could have some fun tonight. That sounded like a good plan to me.

But when I watched him shift the truck into drive and turn towards me, that smile still dancing across his handsome face, my gaze caught his. And I saw it again. The black wolf.

“Hey, you okay?” he asked, his voice soft.

“Yep. Um, where are we going?” I asked, licking my lips nervously.

Emmet followed the movement with his eyes, and he made a noise like a cross between a growl and groan, and holy shit, it was like an electric current zipped straight through my body, making me clench my thighs tightly together.

“My place. I’m cooking you dinner,” he said.

Oh wow. His place. Yeah. I could do that. I could be normal and eat a meal with a hot cowboy. Sure. No problem.

The conversation to his cabin centered around food and what Emmet would be cooking for us tonight.

“I’ll have you know I cook for the boys three times a week,” he said, winking at me.

“The boys?”

“The Crew. Well, I guess there’s a girl in it now, too, if you count Pen.”

“Penelope works on the ranch?” I asked, shocked.

“Um, well, not exactly. But she’s engaged to Max, so that means she’s Crew,” he said, as if that cleared it all up.

“Well, I’m just really impressed you can cook. I never met a man who could,” I said as he led the way into the tidy little kitchen.

“Then prepare to be astounded,” he said with a wink and went to wash his hand after

guiding me to a chair at the eat in counter.

“So, you live here full time?” I asked, liking the warmth of his cabin.

It was an honest to goodness log cabin. A little larger than my doublewide and without the crappy appliances and drafty windows.

“Yeah. Do you, uh, like it?” he asked, rinsing off some broccoli in a metal colander and setting it aside.

“I do. Very much so,” I whispered.

The furniture appeared to be made out of wood, and the appliances were stainless-steel and looked to be new. Everything matched, which was like a secret dream of mine.

There was a large leather couch and a big screen TV in the living room.

A small table set with two chairs was set up in what I assumed was a dining room.

The floor plan was open, so it was not easy to tell where one room started or stopped, but it worked.

A staircase sat in the far corner, and I assumed it led to the bedroom.

Gulp.

My cheeks heated just thinking that and Emmet’s gaze flashed to mine.

“I’ll give you a tour after dinner if you like,” he said, and I nodded.

He worked quickly and confidently, and I wondered if that was just the way he did everything.

“What are you doing with that?” I asked, watching as he slid a long filleting knife inside a large turkey London broil.

“I’m going to stuff it with garlic butter and herbs,” he informed me, and I watched, impressed, as he did just that.

Emmet seasoned the meat liberally with salt, pepper, and a drizzle of EVOO. Then he took a box of pasta out of the pantry and set a pot with water on the stove to boil.

Next, he placed the turkey under the broiler and removed a cube of cheddar cheese from the fridge.

“Wine or beer?” he asked, pulling a chilled bottle of Chardonnay from a local vineyard out of the fridge.

“Sure,” I replied, nodding at the wine.

Emmet poured, and I sipped, and twenty minutes later, he dished up beautifully cooked slices of turkey and heaping scoops of macaroni with cheese and broccoli.

We sat side by side at the counter, instead of utilizing the table, and I had to admit, I liked this better. My blood hummed in my veins, attraction simmering between us.

Every time I moved, I felt him beside me. His big body was so close, but still not close enough. It was the most delicious sort of foreplay.

“This is amazing,” I moaned around another perfect bite of pasta.

“You can say that again,” he replied, his eyes glued to my lips.

“Sorry. I’m making a pig out of myself,” I murmured, covering my mouth with my hand while I reached for a napkin.

His hand shot out, lightning fast, and he closed his long fingers around my wrist, stopping my progress.

“You’re perfect, Angel. Don’t ever say different,” he growled, his eyes blazing with emotion or something .

“Emmet,” I whispered his name, swaying closer to him.

His eyes darkened and for a minute it was there again, the wolf from my visions. But then he closed the distance between us, covering my lips with his, and every thought I had left my brain.

Emmet’s kiss was addicting. My entire body shivered with need as I turned on my stool to get better access to him. He groaned against my lips, grabbing me by the waist and hauling me onto his lap.

“I’m too heavy,” I gasped right before his tongue invaded my mouth.

He growled, biting my lower lip lightly. Soothing the hurt with his tongue, he squeezed my soft body tightly against his.

And. I. Was. So. Turned. On.

His big hands grabbed my ass and Emmet dragged me closer, forcing my legs wide as I straddled him. I felt the hard evidence of his need pulse against my core.

I wanted him so badly. It had been a long time for me, and this? This was more than I'd hoped for.

“You feel so fucking good, Angel. I want you so badly. Will you let me?”

“Will I let you?” I parroted the question back at him.

His hands never stopped moving, cupping my ass, sliding up my sides to caress my aching breasts. I hissed as he slid them over my soft belly, right where my stomach bulged over my jeans, but he kept on going, growling like he liked what he felt.

Hell, I knew he liked it. I could feel his cock thumping against me, making me squirm. And oh damn, but I needed him, too. Just as badly.

“Will you let me have you, Angel?” he asked, his emerald eyes glittering in the semi-darkness of the cabin.

The world seemed frozen as I weighed my options. But really, it was hardly a choice. I felt my head bob with my nod before I heard his whispered “Thank fuck.”

Then he stood up with me in his arms, and they tightened like steel bands around me, holding all my pieces together.

All the while his lips never stopped moving. It was like he was drinking me in, sharing himself in a passionate exchange, and my mind went blank as I rode the wave of yearning desire that threatened to wash me away.

God, how I wanted the sweet, blissful oblivion his touches promised.

Emmet's chest rumbled as he groaned, walking with me wrapped around him like an anaconda to those stairs I'd spied earlier.

I knew I was too heavy for this, but he lifted me like I was light as a feather. And I appreciated it. Hell, I appreciated all of his muscled perfection and strength as he took the stairs without ever breaking our kiss.

Desire filled me as I begged him for more with every moan and slide of my stroke, every wiggle of my body against his.

His heavy palm flattened against my back, between my shoulder blades as he laid me down on the bed before sliding to my waist.

“Off,” he growled, unbuckling my jeans and tugging them off my hips, taking my socks off with them.

I gasped at the ferocity he displayed, sitting up to help as he pulled my sweater, then my thermal shirt up and over my head.

“Fucking perfect,” he groaned when he finally freed my breasts from the confines of the plain cotton bra I wore.

“Your turn,” I said, but he was shaking his head his gaze riveted to my heaving chest.

“Later,” he said, crawling over me and sucking one taut nipple into his hot mouth.

“Oh fuck,” I whimpered, arching my back as Emmet feasted on my tits.

His hot palm covered and kneaded my flesh while he sucked on one then the other.

“Goddamn, your tits taste so fucking good.”

He groaned again, sitting up, and I tried to follow him, but his big hand flattened against my chest as he pushed back onto the mattress.

“Stay,” he commanded, and the look in his eyes promised more than I could ever imagine.

He leaned back, biting his lower lip as his gaze roamed my body. Emmet spread my thighs, bending my knees as he stared at my soaked panties.

I felt moisture building there ever since he rode up in his truck and I knew there must be a visible wet spot. Embarrassment threatened to fill me, but the way he stared, his chest heaving as he looked his fill, told me he was more than turned on by my appearance.

That, and of course, the enormous bulge in the front of his jeans. My eyes rounded as I took in the size of said bulge and I whimpered.

I want that.

I couldn't wait anymore. I needed him to touch me.

“Emmet, please,” I begged, flexing my hips.

“Look at you, Angel. So pure and soft. Spread out like a sacrifice. I can see your panties are wet. You want me, is that it? Do you need me, Little Girl?” he asked, his gaze smoldering as he peered down at me.

“Yes. I want you. I need you. Please, Emmet!”

“You just had to ask,” he growled.

Emmet grabbed his shirt from behind his neck, shrugging it off and revealing all of his inked up glory to my hungry stare. Next, he undid the buckle of his jeans, pushing them down his hips and freeing his big, thick dick from the confines of his pants.

“Gotta taste you,” he murmured, dropping down to cage me in and shoving his tongue into my mouth.

I clutched at his shoulders, need soaking the cotton covering my aching sex.

Pleasure built inside of me at the feel of his big, heavy body bearing down on mine. Like a relentless tide that surged with each passing moment.

It coursed through me like a storm, pulsing in time with my racing heart, leaving me breathless and craving release.

All I knew was my body needed this. Maybe my soul did too. And it wasn't just sex. It was him.

Emmet was the only man who ever made me feel this way. The only man who'd ever brought me to such a state of reckless abandon.

Any second now, I was going to combust. All I needed was a touch. Just a brush of his fingers or the slide of his cock. I felt him there, pressing against me, and I whined at the thought of him so close and still so damn far.

Emmet's fingers reached between us, and he slid my panties to the side. Then I felt him there.

The broad head of his cock slid through my soaked lips. Up and down, like he was coating himself in my arousal. Each teasing flex of his hips made me moan.

“Emmet,” I whispered, pleading with him.

I needed him so much closer. Needed him to fill me.

“Fuck, Angel. You’re so goddamn wet,” he growled, his voice so gritty and deep.

“Your juicy cunt is dripping down my balls. I’m going in now, gonna fill you so good,” he grunted, and I felt him there, pressing inside.

I clutched at his shoulders, scratching his skin as he kept pressing, inch after inch, filling me until I could hardly breathe.

Lights danced beneath my closed eyelids as I breathed in his pine-scented skin. His body was tense, taut as he held himself still, like he was waiting for me to adjust.

Sweat slicked both our skin, and I opened my eyes to see him staring down at me. His brows were furrowed. His expression was so serious, so full of concern and emotion, it gutted me.

I cupped his cheeks, pulling him down to kiss me again. I needed it. Needed his mouth to ground me as my sex adjusted to his size and girth.

He went willingly, pressing his mouth to mine and licking into my mouth with his long tongue.

I was so ready to explode. All I needed was for him to move.

Just. One. Tiny. Move.

And I would shatter.

Waves of pleasure started to spill, and spasms rocked my body. Emmet moaned, then he moved. Sliding his big dick out of my wet heat, the sopping sound echoing off the bedroom walls.

It was lewd.

And hot.

So fucking hot.

“Goddamn, you’re fucking perfect,” he exhaled the words, his hot breath against my wet skin making me shiver all over.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, encouraging him, praising his efforts. He picked up the pace. Stroking me just right, dropping biting kisses along my neck and throat.

“Emmet,” I moaned, eyes wide as I felt his hand slide between us.

“Need you to come, Angel. Wanna feel that pretty pussy flutter around my cock,” he said, and oh my fuck, more wetness spilled between us as I start to do just that.

My orgasm slammed into me hard and fast. Breaking down all the barriers I thought I had erected around my heart. I felt myself opening for him, to him, and fuck, it was scary.

But not as frightening as the ferocious look on Emmet’s face as he reared upon his knees, pushing my thighs wider as he pounded into me harder. The wolf face I kept seeing was there now, like a shadowy overlay.

The beast was beautiful, baring his teeth, his emerald eyes so utterly familiar to me.

Then Emmet’s face was back, and he looked so goddamn handsome. Swirls of ink tattooed his body, and I reached out, tracing them as he pushed me towards another rush of pleasure before following me into such sweet bliss I never wanted it to end.

He fell forward, burrowing his face in my throat. I held him to me, crying out at the sharp sting of something on my neck before he flexed those marvelous hips, then my pleasure crested. I flew even higher than before.

Emmet lifted his face, his red tinted lips twisted in a heated smile as he said one word before crushing me under his kiss.

“ Mine.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

I was so fucking fucked.

I did not mean that literally. Even though, technically, yes, I'd just been actually fucking fucked. And Jesus, it had been wonderful. Better than anything else ever. Hands down.

But I still tasted Jezebel's blood on my tongue as I held her through every tremble and aftershock of her orgasms.

Yes, there were plural.

Demon growled deep in satisfaction, and I felt our matebond surge and swirl around us before I raised my head from where I'd buried it against her throat.

Holy fuck. But it was beautiful. Green and blue swirls of light danced around our bodies, wrapping us up like Christmas presents. I was so stunned, I could hardly think.

And when her bright blue eyes opened, I didn't know what to expect. But I knew the second she saw them, too.

Only, Jezebel wasn't mystified like I was. Nor was she caught up in the magic of it all. The surprise. The beauty.

No, my sweet Angel looked scared.

Terrified, really.

She pushed against my chest, her lips twisting in a frown, and I felt her fear stab into me like a knife. I lifted off her, allowing her to scramble backwards till her back hit the headboard.

“Angel, honey, calm down,” I murmured in what I hoped was a calming tone.

“D-do you see it too?” she whimpered, clutching the sheet against her beautiful body.

“Jezebel, please don’t panic. I can explain,” I tried again, but she was shaking her head.

“Y-you have black fur. Green eyes and black fur. The wolf dog. The one I’ve been seeing. It’s you!”

I froze. What was she talking about? Had my sweet Angel been watching Demon as he stalked her at her place every night?

Was she afraid of my beast? My chest shook with the force of my growl, and I worked hard to stanch the sound as her eyes went even wider.

My Wolf was a prick, but he would never hurt Jezebel. I knew that like I knew I couldn’t live without her. Just then, he pushed words into my mind, echoing the sentiment.

Never hurt her. Mine. Mate.

“How do I know you won’t?” she whispered, tears flowing from her eyes.

“You heard him?” I asked, shocked.

I sat back on my ass as Jezebel nodded.

This was impossible.

How could she know?

She was human. I was sure of it. She shouldn't be able to see these things. She definitely should not be able to hear Demon. My heart was pounding, and I didn't know what to do.

Talk. Mate.

“Angel, I don't?—”

“Please, just don't lie or say I'm crazy. Just, I-I hear a lot of things. I hear him. The black wolf. What does he mean when he says mate?”

I scrubbed my hand over my face, my eyes on her as she raised the sheet to her chin, holding it tight between her small fingers.

“Angel, I won't lie to you. Not ever. I promise. And I will never, ever call you crazy. There's just something I haven't told you. Something about me,” I hesitated.

My thoughts were running wild, and it was all I could do not to freak the fuck out.

How the fuck was I supposed to tell this woman that I was a monster?

That Demon was what I called my Wolf.

And that he was a goddamn beast who went and claimed her as his mate when I'd been buried deep inside her sweet body.

“I think you just did,” she whispered, eyes wide.

“Did you read my mind, Angel?” I asked stunned.

Jezebel nodded her head slowly.

“I do that sometimes,” she whispered.

“Yeah? What else can you do?” I whispered, dying to know.

She shook her head.

“You first. Explain the wolf, please.”

“Okay, okay,” I murmured, raising my hands and inching closer to her.

She nodded her head, and I moved until I was seated beside her.

“First, I’m sorry I bit you without your consent. That wasn’t right of me, but Demon, well, he never bothers to ask for permission,” I explained and rubbed my hand over my face again.

“Demon?”

“Jezebel, what do you know about Shifters?”

“Shifters? Like Shapeshifters?” she asked, eyebrows raised.

I nodded.

“Um, nothing. I mean, I thought they were just make believe.”

“I see. Well, they’re not. I mean, I am one. A Wolf Shifter, that is.”

“A Wolf Shifter? Like a Werewolf?”

“Sorta, but not really. I mean, it’s not like the movies. I don’t turn into a mindless half beast at the full moon or anything. Shifters are dual-natured creatures.”

“Dual natured? But he’s separate from you,” she said.

My mouth went dry. She understood. This tiny human actually fucking understood, and my chest heaved with emotion.

“It’s not always like that for Shifters. But for me, yeah. Demon is autonomous, but I swear Jezebel, neither he nor I would ever hurt you.”

“But he bit me,” she said carefully.

“He marked you. Claimed you as ours,” I murmured, watching carefully for her reaction. “That bite claimed you as our mate, Jezebel.”

“Oh,” she replied, dropping the sheet as she stared at me with those luminous blue eyes.

“You could say that,” I grinned, moving slowly, letting her see my intentions in case she wanted me to stop. But she didn’t, so I just kept on coming at her until I had her wrapped in my arms, sitting on my lap.

“I did say that, but Emmet, what exactly does it mean?” she asked, placing her hands on my shoulders to balance herself.

“It’s big, Angel,” I said, the growl in my throat softly building.

With one hand, she used her fingers to lightly trace the tattoo that curled up my chest

and onto my throat, pressing down harder where the growl was stuck in my throat.

“Is that him?” she asked.

I nodded slowly, unable to speak. The profundity at what was happening had rendered me mute. But this woman was really something else. She was precious. Special. Perfect.

Mine.

Yes, mine , I answered Demon.

“So, I keep seeing Demon because he lives inside you,” she said.

“Sometimes we switch skins, and he is me,” I whispered back.

“H-has he been coming to the house? Watching me from the woods?” she asked.

I nodded again, faster this time.

“Why?”

“Because you’re mine, Angel. You belong to me, and to my Wolf. He might be separate at times, but he’s still me. And you are mine to watch and to protect. Mine to cherish,” I said, dropping my head to nuzzle her cheek.

“Will I become one too?” she asked, touching my throat with one hand than using her other to touch the claiming bite I’d given her.

“No, it doesn’t work like that. But that bite marks you, so everyone else knows you’re spoken for. They’ll know you’re mine.”

“Okay,” she said, lifting her face to look at me.

“Okay?”

“Okay. I’m yours. And that means you’re mine, too, right?”

I nodded, helpless to do anything else, or so it would seem.

“So then I can do this,” she said, stealing a kiss as she turned in my arms.

It took a little maneuvering for her to straddle my hips and press her dripping sex against my hard length. My cock throbbed, dying to sink inside her.

But I was still reeling from the fact she’d said yes. Her voice echoed in my head on repeat, beating in time with my thundering heart.

“Okay. I’m yours.”

“I’m yours.”

“Yours.”

I licked my tongue into her mouth, savoring the spiked hot cocoa flavor of her, and committed our first kiss as mates to memory.

Demon watched from inside me. His ever present growl resonated with a deep, primal approval as I claimed the woman we both had chosen. The one fated for me and my Wolf.

The connection between us pulsed like an electric current that sent shivers through my veins. Our matebond was tightening and growing with every shared breath, every

touch of our lips, and brush of our skin.

I never had a mate before, so I did not know what to expect. But right then, I felt Jezebel seep into my very soul. This bond was forged in the depths of our beings. I felt her in my bones, in my blood, in my fucking marrow.

I was tethering myself to her with every second that went by.

No, I was not the broken Wolf anymore. I was something more.

I was hers.

“Mine,” she whispered, and the sound of her breathy voice sent shivers down my spine.

Jezebel pulled me to her like gravity. I knew she was dangerous the first time I met her. But I didn’t know how quickly she’d earn the fealty of my Wolf.

Demon’s growl rumbled louder, reverberating through me like thunder.

I felt his hunger rising, matching the feverish desire that simmered beneath my skin.

She was intoxicating. Breathtaking. Heartbreaking in the way she submitted to me. I lifted her hips, placing myself at her entrance and let go, allowing her to sink down and take me at her own speed.

Fuck, it was beautiful.

She was beautiful.

Mouth open, she gasped as I filled her and I clutched her to me, needing to touch her

everywhere I could reach.

It wasn't just bodies coming together, it was our spirits intertwining. Every heartbeat synchronized in a rhythm that felt ancient and right.

So fucking right.

"Goddamn, Angel, look at you. That's it. Let me in. Let go, and let me in," I grunted, taking over the pace.

I flipped our positions, pushing her legs wider with my body as I slammed my hips into hers.

Fuck.

"Emmet!" she moaned my name, scratching at my shoulders, her blue eyes, wide and lust-glazed, and so damn pretty.

She was so warm.

So soft.

So mine.

"Need you to come for me, Angel. Come for me so I can claim you again. This time with you looking right at me," I growled long and deep, more beast than man.

"Oh God. I-I'm coming," she mewled, and her eyes widened, and that was when I struck.

My fangs sliced through her soft, pale skin like a hot knife through butter. I sipped

from her life's blood, and drank her deep, sealing her wound with my saliva as I licked the marks.

A primordial sense of pride filled me, knowing she would carry the scar of my bite on her forever.

Oh, this woman was mine.

Broken or not broken. It didn't matter. I had a purpose now.

Jezebel was my reason. She was my everything. Demon snarled at the rightness of that statement, the Wolf building bridges between our souls faster than I could wrap my head around it.

Tonight, I was claiming something, someone , for myself.

Tonight, I was going to worship Jezebel's heavenly body with every bit of mine.

I was going to prove to her that I meant this claiming down to my very soul. That long since under used muscle began to thump steadily inside my chest as I breathed in her delicious, sultry scent. Her arousal was fucking intoxicating.

She didn't understand, could not possibly know, what this all meant. Caught up in the myth and magic of it, in the pleasure we conjured with every kiss and caress. The way she looked at me, as if I was something good and worthy of her, sent my pulse racing.

Oh, we'd talk in the morning. I would tell her all of it. My past. My problems with Demon. But not tonight.

Tonight was for showing my sweet Angel what it meant to belong to the Wolf.

Tonight was for breaking barriers and building bonds.

Tonight was just for us.

No one else existed in this bed we made together.

“You ready for me, Angel? Can you take me again?” I growled the question, my hand closing over her throat as I angled her head where I wanted it.

I kept her gaze, my dick still inside her, growing hard as I watched her blue eyes spark with lust-filled heat.

“Yes. Oh, yes,” she murmured, lifting her head the little bit my hold would allow, and licking into my mouth as she wrapped her arms around me.

Fuck me .

She was perfect. And I was falling for her hard and fast. This was more than claiming. This was loving.

Tonight, the rest of the world could go fuck itself. Right here, right now, it was only about me and mine.

Mate.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

I woke slowly, a smile stretching across my face as I slowly came to consciousness.

Bright rays from the sun filtered through the curtains, casting soft patterns across the room, and I blinked open my eyes to take in my surroundings.

I grinned at the plain white sheets and gray comforter that had been tucked in around me snugly. Like my very own cocoon of warmth and comfort.

It had been a long time since I had a sleepover. Especially an adult one. I wanted to savor the peace and tranquility of the morning.

I couldn't recall a time I felt such contentment. Usually, I woke up to chaos, but not today. Today, I felt relaxed and safe.

Loved.

As soon as the word crept into my brain, I pushed it away. It was far too soon for that. I mean, I felt something powerful for Emmet.

But love? I couldn't be in love. Not after only a week.

Speaking of Emmet, where was he?

We had a lot to talk about. Like what this whole claiming and biting thing meant. Also, about the fact we hadn't used protection last night.

I was on birth control, one of those implant things that was good for another two

years, and I'd been tested for STDs after dumping Patrick's cheating ass. So, I knew I was safe and healthy.

But still. If I was going to do adult things with adult people, then I needed to have adult conversations. It was the one lesson Pop gave me that I would never ever forget for a million years.

He'd caught me necking with my high school boyfriend junior year at the back of the drive in. And boy, did that fifteen minute lecture suck.

Still, I smiled at the memory. Pop was a trip.

Sitting up in bed, noting the delicious soreness between my legs, and I hummed happily to myself.

Memories from last night flooded back, and I felt a flutter of excitement in my chest. Things Emmet had said and done were just, well, they were perfect.

No man had ever made me feel so good about myself. And I meant that in every way possible. Oh, he played my body like a fiddle, but it was the way he cared for me after with his whispered praise and soft touches, those unspoken words that said so much.

Emmet was dangerous and not just because of Demon, the monster Wolf inside him who also seemed to have claimed me, but because he touched a part of me I thought no one would ever reach.

My heart.

Okay, it was too late to deny it. I bit my lip, wondering how long was customary to wait to tell someone you were like ninety-seven percent in love with them. My chest

felt tight, and I rubbed my palm over it, sighing as I tried to get myself under control.

He has my heart.

God, falling for someone was scary. I'd forgotten how scary. But maybe with Emmet it didn't have to be.

Still, he obviously left for the day for work. I knew he started early on the ranch, and when I checked the bedside table for a clock, I saw it was already a little past nine AM.

I stood up and walked to the adjoining bathroom and grinned when I saw a new toothbrush waiting for me and a stack of fresh towels.

"Dangerous," I whispered, running my hands over the plush white terrycloth.

For the first time in a very long time, someone was taking care of me. And it felt good. Real good. I only prayed it would last.

After my shower, I dressed in a pair of Emmet's too long for me sweatpants and a well-worn hoodie. The material was impossibly soft, and it felt so good against my skin. I also stole a pair of thick socks and was just slipping them on my feet when I heard the front door open.

Smiling to myself, I jogged down the stairs, almost falling, when I saw the shape of a woman from the back. She was holding something, humming to herself, but I couldn't make out what it was.

A lump formed in my throat, but I was too stunned to move. Hand on my chest, I actually whimpered when she turned, a stack of pastry boxes in her hand.

“Good morning!” The woman smiled as she turned in my direction.

Relief filled me as I recognized her. It was Penelope. The owner of the Devil’s Food Bakery was currently engaged to Maximillian Leeds, so I knew she was not there for any sexy shenanigans with my, er , Emmet.

Shit. What was I supposed to call him?

Anyway, she confirmed that when she handed me a to go cup of coffee and set the pastry box on the counter.

“Um, hi,” I said and gestured to the cup. “Thanks.”

“Oh, no problem. When Max texted me to say Emmet had a guest last night, I was shocked and thrilled. Then I was concerned since that old Wolf never seems to have any food in his house! I mean he always orders a ton of meat when I go shopping. Because, you know, Wolf ,” Penny said and winked.

Now, I remembered Penny from high school, but she always seemed the quiet type. But she was saying more than just good morning with all this. She seemed to know about Emmet being a Wolf Shifter.

“But he never buys anything girls like us want to nibble on in the morning, except for, well , I think it is safe to say you know all about that. Am I right? I am right, right?”

But before I could say anything, she was back to talking. I never knew her to speak in such a rapid flow, and I had a hard time following.

Nibble? Oh my God. Did she mean his dick?

“Sorry, am I talking too fast? It’s just I’ve been dying to have another woman to talk to who might understand all this craziness with me.

I mean, I have Avery, but she’s so busy with Rosie, I hate to burden her.

Plus, she is kinda pissed since I am getting more D than her lately.

But now that you’re here, we can talk, right? ” she asked, blinking at me.

D equals dick. Okay, I can follow along.

“Um, yeah, sure. I mean, we can talk, but um, Penny, I haven’t really talked to Emmet yet and I don’t know?—”

“What don’t you know? I mean he claimed you right? Max said he claimed you. Oh, please don’t tell me I fucked up our friendship this early by telling you Emmet is a Werewolf before he could,” Penny blurted, covering her hands with her face.

“Um, no, no, you didn’t tell me anything I didn’t know. I mean he already told me about Demon,” I said.

“Demon?”

“His Wolf.”

“He named his Wolf? That is so hot! I wonder if Max will let me name his Devil? But it might be different for me and Max because technically Jersey Devils are not strictly Shifters and our beastie sides are not animals,” she muttered out loud, and I did a double take.

“I’m sorry what now? Did you say Jersey Devils?” I asked, and I knew my eyebrows

were so high now, they were likely stuck inside my hairline permanently.

Oh, this morning could not be any weirder. I sat down at the small table heavily, the cup of coffee forgotten in my hand, and stared at Penelope.

“Yeah, you know about me and Max, right?”

I shook my head. Nope. I sure as fuck did not know about her and Max.

“Shit. Um, okay, so what did you and Emmet do last night?” she asked, sitting down across from me warily.

I took a sip slowly and shrugged my shoulder.

“Um, he told me he was a Wolf Shifter. And we, well , you know,” I mumbled, my cheeks heating under her stare.

“And he bit you?”

“Yeah,” I replied and nodded.

“And he told you what that means? And about his Crew? The rest of us, I mean?”

I shrugged, because he did, sorta . Then I just shook my head.

“Okay, so let’s start there. Max is the Alpha here at the Motley Crewd Ranch.

They’re a special group. You know, usually, like stays with like.

But we’re a mixed Crew. A bunch of last chance Shifters without anyplace else to go, which suits Max and his Devil’s needs perfectly.

You see, he has all this heart,” she explained, her eyes going soft as she spoke about her man.

“And he needs this place, these people, to settle himself. Shifters aren’t like people.

When they find their mates, they keep them,” she said.

Hope filled me, and I bit my lip, knowing it was too soon to feel this way, but unable to help myself.

“When I met Max, I thought he was too good to be true. A handsome man like that interested in me. What were the odds? He’s so, well, everything, and I’m just me.”

Penelope shook her head, sending tousles of chestnut hair rippling across her shoulders.

“Um, what’s wrong with you? Have you seen yourself,” I said to her.

Penelope was about the prettiest woman I’d ever seen. All curves and big brown eyes. The woman had tits for days, for fuck’s sake.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong. I know we belong together now. He is my mate. And he gifted me with this Devil,” she murmured.

“Wait. Y-you’re one too?” I whispered, my eyes narrowing as I pulled on the metaphysical veil between worlds, gasping as I saw her other form.

“Oh shit. You are!”

The room grew silent as Penelope gaped at me.

“How did you do that? Oh my God, are you special too?”

“Well, I mean, I’m not like you. Not a Shifter or a Jersey Devil or anything. But my whole life I’ve been plagued with the sight,” I whispered, my own shame and embarrassment rising.

“Holy fuck, Jezebel, that is so cool!” Penelope blurted, clapping her hands.

“Um, no, it’s not actually. I mean, I see ghosts, Penny.

And they aren’t all that nice. Plus, I get visions.

Sometimes they are mild, and I am alone, so it’s not bad, but sometimes I’ll be doing something.

Like standing in line at the grocery store.

Then one hits me and it’s just, well, embarrassing to say the least,” I confessed,

“Girl, you are looking at this the wrong way. So, you knew what Emmet was before you two boinked?”

“Boinked? Seriously,” I asked, and she just shrugged.

“Um, no, not exactly. I kept seeing his Wolf like superimposed over his face like some bad photo editor. I didn’t know what it meant.”

“And now that you do? Now that you know he’s a Wolf Shifter?”

“I think Emmet is just amazing. Demon, too,” I whispered, and that same warm feeling I got every time I thought about him started filling me.

“Seriously, Jez, you are thinking about this all wrong. I mean, I wish I knew what Max was before he came in and completely upended my life. I mean, getting used to having a dual nature is hard. But I guess you’ve always had that, huh?”

Anyway, I still wouldn’t change a thing about it,” she replied with a knowing smile.

I nodded and thought about her words as she went about opening the pastry box, revealing a half a dozen amazing looking muffins.

“What are those?” I asked, leaning forward and sniffing all that deliciousness.

“Okay, these are some new flavors I have been working on,” she explained excitedly.

“I got you two of each. So these are Devil’s Double Chocolate , made with the darkest and most sinful cocoa powder I can find that is responsibly sourced.

These are Mocha Cocoa Swirl, the same as those with a thick dollop of mocha cream in the center and some concentrated espresso in the batter.

And these are Cinnamon Chocolate Danger Zone.

Those are pretty self-explanatory, but I do use this incredible Taza Chocolate, so the flavor profile mimics authentic Mexican hot chocolate, and I add rum to the mix. ”

“Holy fuck, woman. Will you marry me?” I asked, only half teasing.

My mouth watered as I chose one of the muffins. She waited expectantly as I took my first bite, slapping my hand on the table as I chewed.

“Oh my God, Pen. These are fucking great,” I moaned and took another bite of the Cinnamon Chocolate Danger Zone muffin.

“Good, right?” She winked knowingly and took one for herself.

We sat there in comfortable silence, polishing away our muffins when she asked me a question.

“So, will you be moving in now?”

“What?” I asked, spitting chocolate crumbs as I choked a little.

“Oh, sorry. Here,” she said, standing and getting me a cup of water.

“Thanks,” I muttered and sipped. “Why would you ask that?”

“Because you two are mated,” she drawled.

“Yeah. I mean, we had sex, but I don’t know if he even wants to see me again. Why would I move in?”

“Oh, honey, did he not explain mating?”

“I mean, I think I know how to, um, mate ,” I replied, and my cheeks were definitely bright red.

“I don’t mean sex, Jez. I mean the fact you have been plucked and fucked. You are not going anywhere but right here with that Wolf.”

“What?” I gasped.

That sounded insane. Also hot. Very hot.

Shit.

Did I even want that?

Yes.

I mean, a part of me did.

Okay, fine. Every part of me did.

“Why would Emmet want someone like me around all the time, Pen? I mean, I am nothing special,” I said with just the right amount of self-deprecation.

“And once I start having visions and freaking him out, he is going to run for the hills like every other man I have ever known.” I replied, bitterness lacing my tone.

“Okay, first, I call bullshit. Seriously, Jezebel, tell that little criticizing asshole voice that says you are nothing special to go fuck itself, okay?” Penelope said, and damn, it sounded like a command.

I swallowed, eyes wide. Emmet was the only person who’d ever stood up for me like that, but I could see by the fire in Pen’s eyes and the way her skin tinted red that she meant it.

“You are beautiful, Jez. And I know for a fact Emmet thinks so. Hell, even if he didn’t, that doesn’t even matter. You were always so pretty. Even back in high school. You know, I was super jealous of your eyes,” she confessed, and I snorted a laugh.

“That’s, well, that’s dumb. But if we are confessing, I was always jealous of your tits,” I replied.

“Really?”

“Yep.”

She grinned. I chortled. Next, the two of us were doubled over laughing so loudly we didn't even hear the door open.

“What is going on in here?” Max Leeds walked right up to Penelope, grinning as she continued to laugh and kissed her right on her smiling lips.

“Hi, Sugarplum,” he whispered.

“You two doing alright?” Emmet asked, and I tilted my head back to see him staring down at me, a curious expression on his face.

I nodded my head and tugged on his jacket, heat filled me as he bent and gave me what I wanted.

The second that man's lips hit mine it was like nothing I ever experienced all over again. Heat filled me and that third eye I was so afraid of seemed to open up on its own, gifting me a view of Demon's blazing green eyes as he watched me from the other side.

There was something so primal and raw in his unwavering gaze. Something so prideful and for once in my life I did not hate my gift. Not in the slightest.

When Emmet finally lifted his head, I saw the same look in his eyes, and my heart thumped heavily inside my body.

Oh, this man was doing things to me. Things I did not think were possible. He was melting the frost. Making me live. Daring me to dream again. Burning me from the inside out with the heat of his gaze.

Sizzle. Sizzle.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

Take it slow.

I had that sentence on repeat inside my brain for the entire last week.

The crisp autumn air carried a hint of wood smoke, and the trees, dressed in their brilliant fall colors, looked like a work of art. Street art was becoming a favorite of mine, and I appreciated graffiti in a way I never had before.

The trees, though, especially the ones around her property seemed especially lovely. Like a mural of gold, orange, and crimson against the bright blue sky.

Look at me being all fanciful and shit.

I adjusted my cowboy hat on my head, manning up for my day. This morning had been easy so far, and I was here to bring the herd back now that the pens had all been properly fenced and cleaned of storm debris.

Yeah, it was a pretty morning. Real pretty.

Seriously?

What was I, a poet now, or some shit?

Demon snapped his jaws inside my mind's eye, and I snorted at the fucker's ornery nature. No. A poet, I was not.

Maybe it was just what being near Jezebel did to me. Whenever I was close to her,

the world didn't seem quite so awful as it used to. She was a fixer, that one.

A homemaker.

Soft and perfect with her bright blue eyes and soft brown hair. I couldn't believe I was fortunate enough to have her in my life. I mean, me . The broken Wolf.

How fucking lucky was I that I was the man who got to hold her?

To kiss her.

To make her moan and pant when I touched her just right.

To breathe in her sweet arousal.

To feel her sweet pussy gripping me every time I made her come.

To mark her with my bite.

Goddamn. I had it bad. She was so deeply ingrained in my heart, my mind, my very soul, I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Jezebel was everything. Even though it had only been a few hours since I left her, satisfied and glowing in her bed.

Only after licking her awake in the early hours of the morning.

Fuck. She was perfect. I could still hear the echo of her screaming my name as I fucked her with my mouth to glorious completion.

I missed her like crazy already. Her deliciously responsive, sweet, soft body. Those

precious smiles and the way the corners of her bright blue eyes crinkled when she laughed.

Fuck.

There goes my boner. It was my new constant physical state when I thought about her.

My sweet Angel.

My mate.

I hated that we still lived apart, but she was human, and it was too soon to do what I really wanted. Break down her door and carry her to my cabin and never let her leave.

But I couldn't do that. I was pretty damn sure there were laws against that kind of thing. Not that Demon cared about human legalities. The Wolf was on board with just taking her back to our den and keeping her there.

In my cabin.

Forever.

Shit.

I wanted her to be my home so damn badly I could taste it.

Take it slow.

Yeah, well, that was easier said than fucking done.

I watched the curve of the road as I headed towards the back lot where the goats were already waiting in the trailer.

“Morning,” Jed called out, his new kid, Dolly Lee, whom he called Lee-Lee for short, cradled in his arms.

“Jed,” I acknowledged him with a nod and jumped out of the truck to hitch the trailer to the back.

“It alright if I sit with this little girl up front?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Yep. I’m gonna stop by Jezebel’s before we go back though,” I told him, already having made that decision.

We took turns closing and locking the gates behind the truck as I drove to the next lot where her doublewide sat.

I had a list of improvements I was making to the place, just so she would be safe and secure. Demon would allow for no less. Overall, I liked it out here. It was peaceful, quiet, and pretty.

Like her.

I was relatively new to the Garden State, having moved here just a few months ago, after answering that advertisement about the ranch. But I had to admit I was slowly becoming a fan.

There was something about the rhythm of life here—the way the local diners served up hearty breakfasts, the lively chatter of neighbors during evening walks, and the vibrant energy of Dry Creek that soothed Demon, put the Wolf at ease.

He was getting attached, and that was good. Growing roots was what I needed to settle my animal.

For a man who'd been indifferent to the places I'd bounced around during my life, that said something. I'd always viewed cities and towns as temporary pit stops to whatever untimely end I'd imagined for myself.

Yet, here I was, finding myself drawn into the quirks and charms of Barren County—this hidden gem. I was fully embracing my role as foreman, and the men and I had developed a good schedule.

We were learning more about being in a Crew every day and with Max as our Alpha, things were sure as fuck never boring.

Most surprising to me was the richness of the land itself. The dark, fertile soil of the Motley Crewd Ranch, and the thriving dairy had been a shock. But a good one. The local rodeo, too.

I mean, who even knew they had those up here?

But none of that would matter without Jezebel. She was my real anchor. The beauty who tamed my beast. She was Demon's true purpose. The one woman who inspired me to do better. To be better.

Jezebel was my reason.

I knew she was still getting used to the idea of being mine. She was human. Her pace was different. And I was trying to be conscientious of that.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I was doing my best to give her space, but I could not stay away from her. Every night I had her snug in my arms, either in her place or mine.

It didn't matter where. That part was nonnegotiable.

Demon was not about to let me walk away from her. Especially at night when the ghosts that haunted her seemed so intent on keeping my woman awake. I let my Wolf out then.

Clever creature seemed to find a way to allow himself out while I stayed in my human form, slumbering beside my mate. I didn't quite understand it, but I made a few calls and words I did not truly comprehend like astral projection were being tossed around.

I even had a call in to the Alpha of the largest Pack in North America, Rafe Maccon. His Beta, Seff McAllister, was mated to a White Witch, and she was researching on my behalf.

I couldn't explain why my Wolf was behaving in such a way because I refused to divulge any of Jezebel's personal history without her consent.

No, I hadn't told my Angel yet, either. I just didn't want her to worry.

Jezebel kept her secret close to the chest, and I respected that. It was not mine to tell. And I did not want to put her in the position of having to do that just to figure out what was going on with Demon.

The Wolf was fine. He could handle himself.

He did a good job chasing away the shades. The ghosts that plagued her night and day were relentless far as I could tell.

My poor sweet Angel. Having to deal with all that shit alone? I was amazed by how strong she was. How brave. And if Demon could ease her burden by keeping watch

as our woman rested, then by the gods, he would.

Jezebel deserved to have some peace. If I could give that to her, I would. Hell. I would do anything for her. She just didn't know it yet.

Jed was crooning to Lee-Lee as I rolled to a stop in front of Jezebel's house. A creeping sensation crept up my spine. I frowned, glancing around the driveway.

Her front door was wide open and the tarp I'd draped over a hole in her roof was blown halfway off. I was not worried about rain since the weather had held up.

No rain for days, so the roads and the roof were both dry. It was cold, but the sun was shining. Not too uncomfortable yet. Still, I knew I'd nailed that tarp down. I frowned and shifted the truck into park and slid out of the seat.

"Jez?" I called her name.

Goosebumps were spreading across my arms, and a growl was building up inside my chest as I jogged up the steps to her house. I sniffed, noting she wasn't inside immediately.

The door must have been open awhile because it was cold inside, and her scent was faint. All the fresh air had diluted it.

Fear slammed into me, making my pulse race and my chest reverberate with Demon's growl.

"JEZEBEL!" I yelled her name.

I ran back down the stairs and moved around the house to the small backyard. My heart was beating so hard, I thought it might fly right out of my chest. I slid on the

graveled path when I saw her.

“Fuck!”

My woman was frozen in fear, her eyes were wide, and her mouth was open in a silent scream. She had on her pajamas, too thin to be outside, and one hand was pressed hard against her heart. Frozen tears streaked her cheeks, and I called her name, but she didn’t move or blink or anything.

“Jezebel! Talk to me!” I ran right to her, turning my head to the side for just an instant and that was when I saw them.

Shades.

About a dozen or more ghosts in various and gory stages of decay.

Their bluish forms were mottled and sickly, like oozing, dripping mockery of the humans they once were.

The figures were all clamoring for her. They seemed angry and downright nasty, just straight on latching onto her life force as they fought for her attention.

I didn’t have time to think. So, I just acted.

Demon tore through my skin, decimating my clothing, but I did not give a flying fuck for my jeans or sweatshirt.

Snarling and snapping, I felt energy pulse through me, forcing the shades to stop their attack and to focus on the angry beast.

When Demon wore my skin, I always felt like a watcher. Like it wasn’t me. But this

time, it was my fury feeding the beast. Like our concern for her, our bond to her , united us like nothing else ever had.

She was a miracle, my woman. A goddamn thing of beauty and power. How I coveted her. She brought the two warring sides of me together, and I owed her for that.

I'd pay her back, too. I would keep her safe from these nightmares. I would protect her in this world and the next. Knowing she was mine to keep safe ignited a feeling of pure possession like nothing I'd ever experienced.

“Mine!”

My snarled words shook the very earth as I snapped my lupine jaws and spoke in a demonic, guttural voice, one that I had never used before. And those shades, they backed right the fuck off.

I growled again loudly, circling Jezebel, breaking the wraiths' hold on her. She gasped, and she collapsed onto my back, sucking in oxygen greedily.

Demon.

I heard Jezebel whisper my Wolf's name, but her mouth was not moving. The darkness in me seemed to revel in the fact she was using our matebond to communicate, calling my Wolf with it.

I was not a good man. Definitely not a good Wolf. I didn't fancy myself a knight in shining fur, but for her, for my sweet Angel I was something, alright. I was dangerous.

Deadly.

For Jezebel, I would tear apart this world and the next. I was hers .

Her weapon.

Her vengeance.

Her shield.

This woman owned me, and I would fight everything and anything in the material and spirit worlds to ensure her safety.

I could never be content without her by my side. I knew that as surely as I knew the sky was blue.

I belonged to Jezebel Brayden. Just like she belonged to me.

Wholly and completely.

There was no going back to how it was before. And if anyone, ghost, supernatural, or human, tried to take her from me, well, let's just say I pitied them.

I pitied them all.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

Blue and green lights shimmered around me and I knew I was safe in Emmet's arms the second I could breathe again.

But before that, when everything had gone all dark and misty, and I couldn't breathe or blink or move, I admit, I panicked.

It was a little while before he came racing to my side like a dark avenging angel—but no, not an angel, a Demon, my Demon—in midnight fur with emerald fire in his eyes, and it was then my worst fears revealed themselves.

See, I had only just found him, and I didn't want to leave him so soon. It was way too soon for this kind of emotion, but I was almost one hundred percent positive I was in love with the sexy Wolf Shifter.

I wanted to lash out against the cruel universe for showing me what it meant to find someone like him only to take him away in a heartbeat. But those shades surrounded me and started doing whatever they were doing, and well, I thought it was all over.

Everything.

My one chance at happiness.

My future.

My very life.

I didn't know what was happening to me before it was almost too late. One minute, I

was running outside to chase some birds off the last of my herb garden and the next, I was surrounded.

Shades seemed to come at me from every direction, and they were pissed. Angry apparitions were a force to be reckoned with, and while I typically stayed ahead of that sort of behavior by taking care of the most persistent if and when I could, I admit, I'd been lax as of late.

Thoughts of Emmet had swirled in my panicked brain and when I saw Demon coming for me, I swear my heart damn near imploded with love for the man and the Wolf he harbored inside of him.

I would have cried in relief if I could have moved.

"I got you," Emmet growled in my ear as he swapped fur for skin and lifted me off the cold ground.

I made a pitiful sound, wanting to speak to him, to hold him, but I was still in the grips of whatever this was. I couldn't even lift my arms.

"Shhh. It's gonna be okay," he told me, and I could hear the conviction in his voice.

"Emmet!" another voice shouted his name, and Emmet turned to look at someone over his shoulder.

"Move over, Jed. She needs help!" Emmet barked and ran with me in his arms.

He was stark naked, but didn't seem to care as he placed me in the middle seat of his truck and the other man, Jed, climbed into the back of the double cab.

"Is Miss Jezebel gonna be okay?" the man asked, and I recognized his voice as

belonging to Jed.

But Emmet didn't answer, and I didn't know what that meant. Panic made my pulse race, but it settled slightly when I felt him buckle me.

I couldn't even lift my head. I was in my own seat, but he pulled me to him, and I shivered as I leaned against his big, warm body.

It was cold. So very cold. My legs felt numb and my arms, too. Emmet was shaking with the force of Demon's growl and the air felt heavy inside the truck.

"I got you, Angel. You're gonna be fine," he murmured.

I wondered why he was so panicked. I mean, he saved me, didn't he?

Weariness washed over me, and I felt as if I could no longer stay conscious. I was completely shattered.

Exhausted. Dead on my feet.

I shuddered at the sentiment and fought to stay awake. I wasn't in the mood to die today. Not when I had such a damn good reason to live.

"Hold on, Angel. Just hold on," Emmet said, and I felt his body shift as he pressed harder on the gas pedal.

The truck swerved as he avoided potholes and turned down back roads where he really stepped on it. My body felt so heavy, but it was his arm around me that kept me in place, making sure I didn't tumble onto the rubber mats on the floor.

He slammed on the brake and leaned over, undoing my buckle. Big, warm hands

clamped onto my skin. Emmet's breathing was heavy, and I wanted to tell him to slow down, I was fine. But no words would come out and I still couldn't open my eyes.

"HELP! SHE NEEDS HELP! MAX! PENELOPE!" Emmet yelled, pulling me gently out of the truck and jogging with me in his arms.

Something was seriously wrong, but I couldn't move or speak and now that my eyes were closed, I couldn't see either.

"What happened?" a voice I recognized as Mrs. O'Hare's, Penelope and Max's housekeeper, asked.

"Shades. They surrounded her. I was too fucking late," Emmet snapped and the anguish in his voice was tearing me apart.

I wanted to reassure him. He wasn't too late. He got to me in time.

"Lay her down here," Mrs. O'Hare instructed.

"Emmet? Fuck," Max said, and I assumed he entered whatever room I was in.

Emmet placed me down on something hard and flat and I felt hands on me. These were cold, thin, impersonal hands.

I frowned, not wanting someone else to touch me, but I could hardly stop them. Besides, if Emmet was allowing it, it must be someone who could help. They were probably checking for whatever injury had rendered me temporarily paralyzed or whatever this was.

"How long has she been like this?" a woman's voice asked.

“I don’t know. Has to be maybe twenty minutes or more since I texted her and she responded last,” Emmet replied.

He sounded stressed, and I felt so bad. I hated that he was hurting, and that I was the cause. Exhaustion seeped through my veins, and I felt my consciousness slipping.

“Oh my God, Jez?!”

I recognized Penny then.

“What happened?” a man, Max I think, said.

“She was in the yard. Shades surrounding her,” Emmet growled, Demon was present in his voice.

“Shades? Ghosts, you mean,” the other woman, who I deduced must be Mrs. O’Hare replied. “She’s special then, your mate.”

“She’s special to me regardless,” Emmet said.

“I see. She appears to be drained, but I believe she will live. I’m going to prepare a tonic and you will help her drink it, understand?”

“Anything. I will do anything for her.”

“Good. Even White magic requires sacrifice to work. Give me something of yours for the tonic,” the woman said.

I wanted to argue to tell Emmet he already gave me too much, but of course, it was impossible for me to argue.

“Give me that bowl,” Emmet growled, and that’s when I lost the fight to stay awake.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

After giving Mrs. O'Hare about a pint of my blood, of which she only required a few drops for the potion and the rest was burned to appease whatever forces of magic the White Witch utilized in her practices.

I did not much care for Witches, but since Jezebel's ability seemed rooted in some kind of psychic magic, it made sense to listen to the woman.

"Here, Angel. Come on. Drink this down," I whispered fervently, pressing a dropper into Jezebel's mouth and rubbing her throat gently, helping her swallow the potion.

It was long and tedious work, but I would have done it for however long it took to bring my mate back to me.

"How is she?" a teary-eyed Penny asked from the doorway.

"Just finishing the last drop. Now we wait."

"Here. Brought you some water and food," Max said, appearing at Penny's side.

Both had been gracious enough to loan us one of their spare bedrooms so Mrs. O'Hare could check Jezebel's progress.

"Thank you," I said, and took the tray, placing it on the nightstand.

I had no appetite. But my Wolf required sustenance, and worried or not, I would be useless to Jezebel if I allowed myself to weaken while she fought whatever this was the shades had done to her.

Mrs. O'Hare was on a call with the Morrigan herself, trying to find answers. Sherry Morgan McAllister was mated to the Beta of the Macconwood Pack. She was the most powerful White Witch of this age, and I'd already had a call in to her, so this seemed like a good time to check up on that.

Shifters were supernatural creatures, but we did not practice magic in the sense that Witches, and apparently, Psychic Mediums, did.

And here I'd thought my pretty little mate was merely human. I should have known she was something else. Something more .

Extraordinary.

Powerful.

Perfect.

"Anything else you need?" Max asked with concern shining in the Alpha's red-tinted gaze.

"Just need her to wake up," I murmured, my throat sore from all the growling.

Anguish rose in me like the tide as I held her soft, pale hand. She looked so small in that bed. So fragile.

Fuck.

I couldn't lose her. Hell. I couldn't even imagine a world without her light shining in it.

Demon snarled. The Wolf in me disliked my despair, and I couldn't say I blamed

him. It was an awful emotion. Terrifying and paralyzing at the same time.

“Wake up, Angel. Come on,” I murmured, clasping her hand between two of mine.

I pressed my forehead to the mattress, whispering prayers to gods I long since stopped believing in. But for Jezebel I would repent. I would bargain, barter, and beg.

I would sell my fucking soul to bring her back to me.

Members of the Crew shuffled in and out, laying their hands on my shoulder and touching her leg or foot gently with fingertips. I hated that, but I knew what they were doing.

The Crew was lending their support, showing both me and Jez that they cared. They were here for the two of us.

Who knew Max would turn out to be a halfway decent Alpha, bringing us together like this? Sure, we were rough and crude. A bunch of foulmouthed monsters with atrocious manners and zero filters on our yappers.

But we were a real Crew. That meant we stuck together.

Demon growled softly, approving of the way they paid their respects to me and mine. I would return the sentiment to each of them. Max and Penny were attentive but careful not to crowd me. And I knew they gave the others the same rules.

Over the next couple of days, I refused to budge from her side, only long enough to use the bathroom and only when Mrs. O'Hare or Penny was available to sit with her.

The hours ticked by so slowly, but even then, I was never without support. It was new, that sort of unconditional back up. I didn't know how to handle it, but I was far

too busy worrying about my mate to question it.

When I came to Dry Creek, I was a broken Wolf. But I didn't feel so broken once we became a Crew, and definitely not once I found Jezebel.

She. Was. Everything.

To me.

To Demon.

Apparently, she meant something to the Crew, too. She hadn't spent much time with them, but because of me, they accepted her and that just about made me the humblest Shifter on the planet.

Every day, they came to check on us. Without words, they showed their unwavering fealty and loyalty.

That was sacred to people like us. Shifters like us.

Dante with his Bear's shy manners and concerned chuffing.

Kian with his Bull's penchant for pacing and rolling his eyes.

Even fucking Zeke with his elongated pupils and purple irises that seemed to see way more than the average Shifter.

With Max and Penny coming in every couple of hours, and Mrs. O'Hare's constant checking, Jezebel and I were rarely alone.

"Wake up, Angel, please," I murmured, kissing her temple and her hand, laying my

head down on the freshly changed sheets.

Knowing my human wouldn't rest until she opened her eyes, Demon forced a shift every twelfth hour or so, just to give my body a break. He curled up at the foot of the bed to make himself as small as possible.

No shades dared enter the room since everything went down. Whether that was because of the magical wards Mrs. O'Hare placed, or because of the constant snarling of my aggressive Wolf, I was not sure. Either way, I was grateful.

Please wake up.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

Three days, fourteen hours, and eleven minutes later...

Yeah, I counted the seconds.

And that was exactly how long it took before my sweet, precious Jezebel opened her beautiful eyes.

For the first time in all that time, I felt whole again.

Complete.

“There you are,” I whispered, unashamed of the tears pricking my eyes.

They said real men didn’t cry, and for cowboys that went double. But I didn’t buy into the world’s view of what manliness or machismo meant.

Fuck that.

I loved this woman. She was everything to me and my Wolf. Not having her by my side was never part of the plan, and had she left this world, I would have followed and dragged her sweet ass back.

But I wasn’t going to think about all that because here she was, staring at me with wide, bright eyes, and fuck, my heart constricted until I thought it would implode.

“Emmet,” she croaked.

Her voice was rough and scratchy, but she had never sounded more beautiful to me than she did right then.

“I’m here, Angel. You’re okay,” I said, the latter probably more for my benefit than hers.

But she would be okay. I’d swear it on anything, anyone, anytime or place.

It was the one promise I intended to keep above all others. Even if I had to give my life for hers, she would be okay.

Jezebel was mine to protect. Mine to keep safe. She was mine. Period.

Demon reared up inside of me. The black Wolf snarled loud and clear into the metaphysical plane where he waited until we swapped skins.

Mine.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

My entire body burned with pins and needles as my limbs slowly unfroze. I felt life pumping through my veins, sluggishly at first, then with a renewed vigor I'd hardly ever experienced.

In fact, that might have been the first time. But that was okay. There was a first time for everything, right?

Those shades had really done a number on me, and I understood now where I hadn't before. This curse of mine was a gift, or so my grandmother told me when I'd crossed beneath the veil to the other side.

My heart squeezed tight inside me. I'd died. Actually, died. The mob of angry ghosts had savaged my life's force, but as Grandma explained, I was the one to blame.

"A gift like ours can't be ignored, my darling. You have a responsibility."

"I'm sorry. Daddy always said it was a curse," I whispered, tears rolling down my ghostly facade.

"I should have explained to him so he could teach you. But I'm afraid the men in our family could never understand. The third eye has always been reserved for the feminine, my child," she replied, and her voice sounded so familiar to me, even though I knew I'd never heard it.

"I'm sorry I failed you, Grandma."

"Nonsense. You didn't fail."

“But I-I’m dead,” I whispered, afraid I would break from the sadness alone.

“Oh, hush now. You’re not dead. You’re in between,” she explained, and I saw serenity pass over her features with awe.

“But then, why am I here?”

“To meet me, of course. See, I wasn’t strong enough to fulfill our family’s destiny, but you, my dear. You are. And you have a Wolf to protect you. How wonderful!”

“A Wolf? You mean Demon? But we only just started, I can’t ask him to take this on with me,” I said, even though it was breaking my heart to admit to it.

Emmet had only ever given me affection and pleasure. How could I bring him into this mess?

“We don’t have much time, so don’t play coy, child. That Wolf has claimed you. He has bedded you. And more, he has bled for you. He is yours and you are his. It is simple as that,” she said, a knowing look on her face.

“Oh, um, sorry. It’s just times are different now,” I blurted, a little embarrassed my grandmother seemed to know about my carnal activities.

“They are not all that different, my dear. Now, you go on back to him. You have work to do.”

Forcing my eyelids to lift was tougher than anything I’d done in recent memory, but the pain was worth it when the first thing I saw was the steady emerald gaze I’d grown to love.

“Emmet,” I whispered, but my voice cracked.

Tears pricked my eyes, and I let them fall as I tried to swallow away the dry feeling inside my mouth.

“I’m here, Angel. You’re okay,” he replied.

He kissed my hand before grabbing a glass of water with a bendy straw and holding it to my lips. I drank greedily, swallowing down the delightfully cool water and sinking back into the pillows with a small groan.

“How you feeling, Angel?”

I nodded at him unable to voice all the emotions rolling through me. It was like the floodgates holding the memories of the past couple of days had busted wide open.

I remembered everything.

The way Demon came barreling towards me, snapping his mighty jaws and chasing away the shades.

The way Emmet carried me to his truck, not letting go even when he started driving.

How the crew came to check on me, lending their support and strength.

Penny, Max, Dante, Kian, and Zeke—all of them had stopped by daily. Even Avery, Penny’s best friend since they were kids, had visited me.

For a person who had very little in the way of friends and family, it meant the world to me that all these people had bothered to check on my well-being. Even if it was all because of him.

God, this man. The things he’s done for me. The way he makes me feel. Can he tell

how important he is?

Emmet stared down at me, emotion shining in his emerald gaze. He was so damn handsome. Larger than life and so very vital to me.

Emmet Quinn.

Cowboy.

Wolf Shifter.

Love of my life.

“How long?” I asked.

“Three days.”

I clung to him, not letting his hand go when he moved to stand.

“I’m not leaving you,” he said and moved closer.

“Good. Come here,” I whispered, my voice scratchy from disuse.

I held my arms open and scooted to the side. I needed his warmth and his strength. Hell, I just needed him.

“Come here, Angel,” he murmured, sliding in next to me.

I turned towards him and shivered when he wrapped his arms around me. Emmet pulled me closer, not stopping until I was more than halfway on top of him. He kissed my head, whispering soothing words of affection and encouragement while I cried

against his chest.

“It’s okay. You’re okay. Hush now,” he said, kissing and coddling me.

I’d have felt foolish with anyone else, but not with him. I inhaled a fortifying breath and lifted my head.

“I have some things to tell you,” I said, biting my lower lip.

I didn’t know how he was going to take the news. But I hoped he was going to be okay with it.

“Angel, you can tell me anything. You hear me? I will not judge you. I will only listen, and if I can help, I swear to you I will do everything I can. Do you believe me?” he asked.

“Yes. I do,” I said and sucked in another breath, tucking my hair behind my ears.

I ignored the fact I probably looked like a train wreck. I hadn’t showered or brushed my teeth in days, but with Emmet staring at me like I was a beauty queen, I did not mind so much.

“You are my queen,” he murmured, reading my mind, and my heart soared.

God, I loved him. And I should have told him then. But first things first.

“I-I saw my Grandma,” I began, telling him about what had happened to me.

Apparently, I had a job to do in this world beyond that of my drive-in theater and I could not ignore it. But I also knew I didn’t want to do it alone.

With any luck, I would not have to.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

J ezebel explained her abilities to me after her meeting with her deceased grandmother, and I was riveted.

My woman was so goddamn special. She sat there, her big blue eyes focused on me as she spoke her beautiful truth.

She had a job to do. A scary job, truth be told, but she didn't seem afraid of it. Only of me leaving because of it.

Silly woman.

Didn't she understand yet?

I. Was. Hers.

"You're magic, Angel. Pure magic and whatever you need from me, you've got it. You're mine, remember? My mate," I whispered, reveling in the profundity of it all as I dragged her to me with my hands on her flushed cheeks.

The sweet scent of her arousal filled the air, and my cock thumped behind my jeans. She was so giving, so free with her feelings when it came to me.

An open book just waiting for me to read the pages of her heart. And I would. I did. I memorized them. Etched them into my fucking soul.

Christ, I loved this woman.

Her trust in me. Her belief that I would do right by her. It was everything.

“Y-you’re not disgusted or afraid?” Jezebel asked and the hope I saw on her face just about broke my damn heart.

“Of what you can do? No, Angel. Of course not,” I told her, meaning every word.

Anger filled me at the idea of what she’d gone through her whole life alone. Of all the people who judged just because they didn’t believe or couldn’t understand.

Jezebel was so special. So sweet and beautiful. She was perfect. She was mine.

“I think you’re a miracle, Jezebel Brayden.

My miracle. And what you can do is a gift.

I want to help you anyway I can. I want to be here for it all.

Anything you need, you just tell me. I am not going anywhere.

I’ll be right here beside you while you find your way.

I can’t wait to see what you can do,” I said, confessing my truth.

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“With every inch of my being. Now, come here,” I growled.

I couldn’t help it, I needed to feel her lips beneath mine. Need to kiss her. To taste her.

“But I haven’t brushed,” she squeaked, and it was the opening I needed.

I drove my tongue inside her mouth, touching her everywhere I could, glad when instead of pushing me away, she clung to me.

“Need you, Angel,” I growled against her skin as I pushed her down and started stripping her of the panties and nightgown she wore.

The house was empty, otherwise I might have been able to contain myself. But since we had privacy and some time to spare, I knew I could not wait another moment to be inside her.

Need rose like a towering inferno. Like I would possibly ignite and burn to a crisp if I didn’t have her right this minute.

Frantic, insatiable, but still so damn careful, I slid over my mate’s lush body.

Love swelled within my heart, warming me like nothing else ever had, a steady flame that lit up the darkest corners of my soul.

I was captivated by her. Every inch of her, inside and out. Her beautiful heart. Her magical soul. And her heavenly body that sent ripples of joy and possession careening through me.

I thought I might have reached a pinnacle with how I felt for her—a mountaintop of affection where nothing could surpass this bliss.

But even as I savored that certainty, I could feel the falsity of that notion gnawing at the edges of my mind.

With every moment that passed, every heartbeat, my love expanded, filling the spaces

between us.

A feeling so strong it pushed against the boundaries of the sum of all my previous notions.

This love I felt was a force of nature, unstoppable and wild, growing in depth and intensity with each shared moment.

The time she was unconscious, lost to me, I felt so goddamn alone. Demon snarled at the intrusive thought, and I shook my head.

Never again. I will never be away from her again.

Our matebond pulsed wildly. I felt it wrapping around us like an invisible rope, binding our hearts, our souls, together for eternity.

Maybe that would be long enough.

I looked into her eyes, saw the layers of affection glowing within their sapphire hues, and my whole body trembled.

I adored this woman before all this had happened. But what I once thought was the peak turned out to be merely a stepping stone in the vast landscape of my feelings for her.

The realization that I was more than I had thought. More than a broken Wolf. That I was made for the purpose of loving her was both thrilling and humbling.

My heart, my soul, my Wolf belonged to Jezebel in ways I had never imagined.

They said love was a journey. And I had to admit it wasn't one I ever expected to

take.

But now that I was on it, I knew I needed her by my side. I wanted to walk hand in hand with Jezebel as we navigated the beautiful chaos of life together.

“Emmet,” she moaned, reaching for me, and my heart soared.

I never expected her to want me, too. It filled me with a sense of wonder, igniting my spirit and propelling me into darker, more possessive thoughts.

I was not good. Never pretended to be. But I knew this was right. We were meant to be together.

Her gift was intense and scary, but it was part of her, so I loved it. I loved everything about her.

So. Fuck yeah, I told her I would help her explore the uncharted territories of her powers by her side.

Mate. Mine.

I swallowed her gasp as one hand closed over her plump breast, teasing the tiny bud I found there. She spread her sexy thick legs, making room for me, and I wanted to howl my desire for her to the entire world.

But I was a little busy, sliding my hand between us and undoing my pants. Newly freed, my cock bumped against the soaked cotton of her pretty pink panties. I moaned as I licked into her mouth, tugging on the elastic that circled her thigh.

“You wet for me, Angel?” I asked. My voice was filled with hunger, laced with my Wolf. And I knew if I could see my own reflection my eyes would be glowing with

Demon.

“Yes, Emmet. Need you,” she whimpered.

“I got you,” I said, and I meant it.

I slid my fingers through her slippery folds, groaning at her soaked, hot flesh. Strumming my thumb over her tight little clit, I groaned as I pumped two fingers inside her channel.

Fuck, she’s goddamn dripping.

“So wet. So fucking wet for me. That’s my Good Girl.”

I should have taken time, should have prepared her, worshipped her more. But I couldn’t wait another second. Besides, I could do all that during the second round.

I lined up my dick and pushed inside with no resistance.

“S’fucking tight,” I groaned, burying myself to the hilt.

“Missed this so much. Missed you. Tell me how you feel, Angel.”

“Full. Oh, God, Emmet! I feel so full of you,” she moaned, and I loved it.

Her chest heaved beneath me, and I felt her quivering sheath tightening, stroking my dick as I seesawed in and out of her.

“Fuck. Mine,” I growled.

“I love it when you’re possessive,” she whimpered, clutching at me.

I watched the pulse at the base of her neck galloping as I drove into her, seeking her pleasure and, therefore, my own. Jezebel was so wonderfully submissive. So goddamn responsive. So fucking soft.

“You have no fucking idea how possessive I am of you, Angel,” I grunted, rising to my knees.

I just had to see her as I took her. Needed to watch every jiggle and shake of all the glorious flesh as I drove inside her.

I gripped myself at the base of my cock, withdrawing so just the tip sat inside her heated sex.

“Please, Emmet. Please,” she begged, and my eyes widened as she slid her hands to her tits, cupping the mounds and pinching her nipples.

“I got you,” I growled, slamming my hips to hers and driving for fulfillment.

Jezebel called my name, scratching my shoulders as I pressed her legs wider apart, crushing her beneath my bulk. But she was pulling me closer, so I knew she liked it from her response. That and the way her cream was currently dripping down my balls.

This woman was made for me. She took it all. My rough. My soft. And with such fucking grace.

That knowledge alone soothed my savage beast in ways I hadn’t thought possible.

“Come for me, Angel. Come right now,” I commanded, and that was all it took for her to fall right over the edge.

Thank fuck, because I was right there with her. And as I spilled myself deep inside her womb, I finally told her all of it.

“I love you,” I told her. “Love you so fucking much, Angel.”

When our hearts slowed down and our bodies stopped convulsing, I lifted my head, brushing my fingertips across her beautifully flushed cheeks.

“I love you,” I said it again.

“Oh, Emmet. I love you too,” she whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said, and her voice broke at the end, but that was alright because mine did, too.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes, oh yes,” she answered.

My Wolf howled, and I crushed her to me before standing with her in my arms. After we were both showered and dressed in clean dry clothes that had somehow appeared on the foot of the mattress, I helped Jezebel collect all our things, and we made our way to the kitchen where the entire Crew sat waiting for us.

“Um, hello,” Jezebel said shyly, offering a wave that was a cute as fuck to the mass of people in the room.

I tucked her closer to me.

“What’s going on?”

“We got things to discuss, Emmet,” Max said, his mien serious.

“Like what?”

“Like the rodeo,” my Alpha answered.

Shit. Guess I forgot.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

While the men were all out readying for the rodeo, which was taking place the following Sunday, I was busy going over the final checklist needed for my Holiday Film Festival.

A newsletter went out to my subscribers, of which there were over a thousand, I was proud to say. And I even printed out a few flyers and had the boys who worked for me, George, Adam, and Steven, hang them in a few local stores and the post office.

The only thing different about all this was I was not freezing my butt off back in my doublewide on the drive in property.

Rather, I was sitting comfy and cozy in the makeshift office a couple of the Crew had assembled for me inside of Emmet's cabin, where apparently, that beast of a man had them deliver all of my worldly possessions without even asking me.

Okay, so I wasn't mad. Not really. I mean, I loved Emmet, and after this morning, well, I knew he loved me too.

Sure, it was fast and crazy, but that was just the way it was sometimes. Life was unpredictable, and if there was anything being able to communicate with shades taught me, it was that nothing was guaranteed.

Speaking of which, I still could not believe Emmet had just accepted everything I told him about what I'd seen and heard while I'd been unconscious. Not only that, but he promised to help me anyway he could.

If I wasn't already head over heels in love with the man, that would have sealed the

deal for me. I grinned as I finalized the movies I would be showing and set up the schedule for the films, emailing it to George so he would know what to expect.

The fantastic thing about running a drive-in theater in this day and age was I could order the movies via streaming service. The projection system I had was a good one, and the quality was amazing for the cost.

The convenience of running things this way meant I could offer more options and create festivals like this one where everyone's needs could be catered to. For example, my Saturday matinee showing started early and would feature PG holiday classics.

After dark, it was no holds barred. Yes, I was talking about Die Hard . The other movies were all good feels and laughter. And okay, one late late night showing of Bad Santa just because George begged me.

But it was more than the movies. The drive-in was a place where people came to remember the good old days. The twinkling fairy lights strung around the snack bar added a whimsical touch, creating a cozy, inviting space where patrons could mingle and grab some delicious goodies before the show.

I could not wait to smell freshly popped corn dripping in butter as it wafted through the air, mingling with the sounds of laughter and chatter.

The drive-in was the one place I got to be a part of the community without the taint of my curse, well, I supposed now that calling it a gift was more apt. Especially when I saw how Emmet looked at me when I explained what I thought I had to do.

His expression was one of complete adoration. Oh, that man knew how to get me. He did it with such ease. Like it was second nature.

He made me feel so special. And even more, he made me feel like maybe I could do something good with what I had been given. At the very least, I was determined to try.

Before I could fall down the rabbit hole of mooning over Emmet, my mate and fiancé— eek! I still couldn't believe it —someone knocked on the door.

“Hello?” Penny called out before bustling in with a stack of boxes in her arm.

“Avery, shut the door,” she said as I stood to greet the pair of women, smiling when I noticed Rosie was with them.

“Hi, Auntie Jezebel. Can I watch TV?” the little girl said shyly, and I grinned.

“Oh, um, of course,” I muttered shocked and delighted.

“You don't mind, do you? I just figured since Auntie Penny here is a fixture at the ranch and you are going to be too, it made things easier to have her call you Auntie, too, but I can ask her not to if you don't like it—” Avery blurted.

I shook my head and nodded, unable to speak for a moment. I had never been anyone's auntie.

“No, it's fine. I mean, I'm honored you would have her call me that,” I replied, taking the boxes Penny offered me.

“Great! Now, let's eat something. I am starving!” she exclaimed.

I started the coffee and smiled to myself, grabbing creamer, sugar, and some plates and forks. Whatever Penny had brought from her bakery smelled divine and I was hungry, too.

The sounds of a familiar Disney cartoon played in the background as I rejoined the women.

“How long till coffee? I swear I’ve been going through physical exam paperwork all morning and I am so beat,” Avery moaned.

She was a nurse at the local school, so I just assumed she meant work.

“It’ll be just another minute,” I told her.

“Yes! I think I love you, Jezebel,” Avery said and slumped back in her chair.

Of course, that was when Emmet and some of the guys walked in.

“Damn, I think I just walked in on a fantasy of mine!” Kian said, grinning widely.

“What?” Dante asked.

“A couple of good looking women professing their love for each other, bro. Am I right?” he asked, looking for a high-five, but the big Bear cuffed him on the head instead.

“Ignore them, Angel,” Emmet murmured, coming straight towards me.

He cupped the back of my neck with his callused hand, and I loved the feel of his skin on mine however he handled me. It was always just so perfect.

He squeezed my neck gently, and I leaned back, my gaze glued to his mouth. I was completely obsessed with the man’s lips. Couldn’t wait to feel them.

“You see something you like?” he asked, and I heard amusement in his tone.

“Stop teasing and kiss me already,” I said, growing bold in my need for him.

He didn’t say anything else. Just slammed his mouth to mine, and I reveled in the ferocity of his passion. The entire world seemed to disappear the second he kissed me.

It was just me and him. In our own little bubble. And Demon, of course.

With my hand pressed against his chest, I felt his Wolf’s ever-present growl reverberating through to me.

The steady tremble should have been frightening, but I loved every facet of this man and his dual nature. Demon was a part of that, so it was perfectly logical and reasonable that I loved him, too.

My mate. My Wolf.

“Okay, break it up,” Penelope moaned, tossing a napkin at us.

Emmet grinned and caught it before it could connect, but he never stopped kissing me.

“Hush! You know, Pen, just because you have your own man doesn’t mean we all do. Some of us have to live vicariously through others,” Avery lamented.

I giggled and Emmet slowed the kiss until it was just his lips brushing mine. Then he stood up, rubbing his hand over my head, and down my hair that I left long for him today.

“Get some work done today?” he asked.

In the background, Penelope handed out goodies to the others, and Avery went to grab the coffee. I was dimly aware of Dante going over to sit on the floor with Rosie in front of the TV.

Something about the way that big rough Bear was just so gentle with that child seemed very right to me. When I'd looked at the little girl earlier, I thought I saw the shadow of a Bear following her and I wondered if that had anything to do with him.

Something for me to ask Emmet about later. Right then, my vision was full of my mate, and it was all I could do to keep a straight thought inside my head.

"Yeah. I did," I told him, and explained my plans for the film festival.

"I can't wait," he replied. "I am only sorry I'll miss Sunday's matinee because of the rodeo," he frowned.

"Oh, that's okay. I plan on taking off during the matinee to come see you. It's mostly families and children who come to that showing anyway and George assured me he could handle it," I told him, unable to keep the surprise in any longer.

"Yeah? You want to see me riding a big ol' bull?"

"Baby, didn't I tell you about the Marlboro Man crush I had when I was a kid? I've got my very own cowboy now and I am not going to miss a moment of you all geared up to do whatever it is cowboys do—ooh!"

His face went still, and I wondered if I messed something up. Before I knew it, Emmet had dragged me to my feet and was lifting me off the ground.

"Um, I guess he has something to tell her," Penelope stage-whispered, and a gaggle of giggles erupted soon after.

“Emmet! Put me down,” I whisper screamed, my pulse racing.

He did, but not all the way. Having carried me to our bedroom, Emmet pressed me against the door, the hard bar of his arousal pressing against me.

“Say that again?” he demanded.

“What? That I had a crush on the Marlboro Man?”

“Fuck no. I don’t want to hear about other men?—”

“Made up men,” I mumbled.

“Call me that again.”

“That? Oh,” I said, licking my lower lip.

“Yeah,” he growled, his green eyes glowing in the dimness of the room.

“Baby,” I whispered, and my face hurt, I was smiling so wide.

“Fuck,” he groaned, flexing his hips and rubbing his dick on me.

“Emmet. Baby . Oh, I want you so bad,” I moaned as he licked into my mouth with his expert tongue.

It was a good thing my super strong sexy as hell mate was holding me up because my knees were positively weak at that point. If he let go, I would have melted into a puddle of needy goo at his booted feet.

“If we didn’t have a full house, I’d strip you bare and fuck you right now, right here,

up against the door. But I won't," he said, and I whimpered.

Emmet smiled and squeezed my throat, bringing my attention to his face.

"I won't because if anyone else hears those sexy little sounds you make when I'm loving on you, I'd have to kill them, Angel," he growled, nipping my lower lip between his teeth.

I believed what he said. And I knew, deep down, it was wrong. But it was also so fucking hot.

Holy Shit.

It was official. I was a complete slut for my mate.

His kisses were my kryptonite.

I supposed that made it a good thing he was my real life Superman.

All mine.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

T onight was the first night of Jezebel's Holiday Film Festival and I knew my sweet mate was nervous.

She was already there, getting everything ready with George and his brothers, while I finished up work for the day. I was just stepping out of the shower, eager to be with her again when my mind started to wander.

Last night, Jezebel had her first meeting with Sherry Morgan-McAllister, and it'd been a good one. The drive to Maccon City was long, a little over three hours, but it was worth it.

The White Witch had been very helpful and knowledgeable about my mate's gift. She gave her some expert advice and promised to be in touch. It was late by the time they finished chatting, so we wound up staying at the Macconwood Pack house overnight and driven back early this morning.

But last night, last night was different. It was special.

“Welcome to Maccon Manor,” Sherry said when we first arrived.

She was sitting on a rug in an all-white room with only a fire for light. Some candles were scattered about, but they were each glowing with different color flames and didn't do much to brighten the place.

There was something ethereal about her presence, but my Wolf was on high alert.

Rafe Maccon was away on business with his family, and Seff had been the one to

answer the door. The Pack Beta then introduced his mate, the Morrigan, who was just as eager to meet Jezebel as my mate was nervous.

“Please sit,” Sherry said, gesturing to the floor in front of her..

“Should I go?” I whispered, looking at Seff. The Beta Wolf smiled and took a seat beside his wife.

“Actually, I believe we all play a part tonight,” he said, and I followed suit, sitting beside my Jezebel.

“You have a very special aura, Jezebel. Are you sure there are not Witches in your family line?” Sherry asked.

“Um, I don’t think so,” Jezebel replied.

She was wringing her hands in her lap and biting her lip. Demon snarled and Seff’s eyes jerked to mine, but I ignored him and placed my hand on her thigh, hoping to calm her.

“You’re very attuned to your mate’s feelings,” Sherry observed, but I did not answer because what was the point?

I was attuned to Jezebel’s feelings.

“That is good. She will need your help. Now, can you explain, Jezebel, what happened to you the other day?”

I braced myself as my Angel told us how she’d been met with a mob of angry shades outside her home. How they’d never attacked like that before and how she’d felt terrified, frozen in fear, and then devastated at the prospect of dying.

“Fuck,” I growled, wrapping both arms around her and pressing my face to her neck just to breathe her in.

Her scent wrapped around me, growing stronger as she soothed me with her hands on my arms.

Hot cocoa and rum with vanilla marshmallows.

“It’s okay. You saved me, remember?” she whispered before turning back to Sherry.

“So, my grandmother told me I’d been neglecting my duty, and that was why they acted that way.”

“She is not wrong. But that trespass is not okay, Jezebel. Shades need a firm hand. They are not of this realm and have no power unless you allow them entry. So, what I shall give you is some guidance on ways to keep your walls up at all times. As for you, Demon,” Sherry continued, speaking directly to my Wolf in a way that got his attention.

“You did well, protecting your mate. And it will not end there, Hellhound.”

I froze.

“Hellhound?” I whispered.

My chest was so tight, and I felt Jezebel’s curious eyes on me. But I couldn’t look at her yet because, I mean, Hellhound .

Fuck.

Why did that make so much sense?

“Yes, Hellhound. You are aware this phenomenon is rarely seen anymore, but it does happen on occasion where those familial lines with ties to this type of supernatural have an occurrence every odd generation or so. Would you happen to know which side of your family this stems from?” she asked.

“No, I do not,” I replied honestly.

“Sorry, what is a Hellhound?” Jezebel asked.

“Well, generally speaking, eons ago Hellhounds were creatures of fire and rage, born from the very depths of the underworld. Their sole purpose was to hunt down stray shades—lost souls that wandered too far from their destined paths—and return them to the realm of the damned. It was a ruthless job, steeped in darkness and duty, where the howl of a Hellhound was both a warning and a promise of inevitable retribution,” she said.

“Holy shit,” Jezebel muttered, and I had to agree because, yeah, holy shit .

“So what does that mean? Do I need to do something?”

“Suffice it to say, that job still exists, though times have changed. The world is different now, and so are the rules. Even for Supernaturals. But for you, Emmet, I think you are exactly where you belong.”

“But how did this happen?” I asked.

“Well, thanks to some unsanctioned mingling with earthbound Shifters—those who can transform into animals—the Hellhound lineage occasionally introduces new traits into the mix. This is why you encountered a Wolf like Demon, dear Jezebel. His ability to pull you back from Death’s door and chase away those nasty shades that hurt you is no mere coincidence.

He carries the essence of a Hellhound, a flicker of the ancient fire that burns within him, intertwined with his Wolf's spirit. ”

“You really were made for me,” Jezebel said, and I swear my heart almost beat right out of my chest. I was so damn proud.

“Damn straight, I was.”

“But let's not dwell too long on the past,” Sherry interrupted.

“You see, children, what matters is the present—and your training. You're here to learn how to harness the energy that lies within you, yes?

To understand your newfound connection to these forces.

So, shall we get on with your lesson? It's time to unlock the potential you didn't even know you had and discover the power that awaits you.

Trust me, the journey is just beginning, and it promises to be anything but ordinary. ”

“Yes, please,” Jezebel replied.

But I didn't miss how she squeezed my hand affectionately, mouthing I love you while she went to the corner with Sherry.

I sat there, just watching until I heard Seff clear his throat to get my attention.

“I know you are working with Max Leeds, and are part of his Crew, but I would like to extend a welcome to the Macconwood Pack should you ever consider leaving,” he offered.

I was stunned. From a banished, broken Wolf to a mated, part Hellhound, foreman of a ranch and member of Crew with an invitation to join one of the biggest Packs in the world—well, that was really something.

“I appreciate the offer. But I am afraid I have to decline. You see, my Crew, they’re more than just that. They’re my family,” I said, feeling the truth of it to my bones.

I dressed quickly, donning clean jeans and a tight thermal shirt. I knew Jezebel liked it when she could see my muscles and I wasn’t above dressing to keep my woman’s eyes on me. And because of her little Marlboro Man fetish, I also slipped on clean cowboy boots, a leather jacket, and a hat.

I grabbed the tiny light blue box off the kitchen table and I went to the front door. I’d already asked my mate to marry me and was still counting my blessings that she even said yes at all.

But I forgot about the ring, and that was something I needed to rectify.

Tonight.

I grabbed my keys and jogged outside, pulling up short when I saw the honest to goodness caravan of pickup trucks outside my front door.

“What the hell?” I muttered, eyebrows sky high.

“Ready?” Penelope asked from the front seat of Max’s truck with its gold Motley Crewd Ranch logo etched on each door.

The big bad Jersey Devil Alpha himself was driving, and he offered a two-fingered wave, his red-tinted eyes on his mate.

“Um, yeah, but what are you all doing?” I asked, completely flummoxed.

“Hi, Uncle Emmet! We’re going to a film festival!” Rosie, Avery’s little daughter, shouted from the middle seat inside of Dante’s pickup truck where her mom sat, looking straight ahead.

Okayyyy.

That was weird. But it was none of my business, so I was going to pretend I didn’t see a thing.

Kian and Zeke brought up the rear, and the fuckers were in my truck.

“What are you two dipshits doing?”

“Waiting on you,” Kian said, the duh at the end of his sentence was implied.

“But why are you in my truck?” I growled, scrubbing a hand over my face.

“Not like you need it for necking with your girl. She lives with you now,” he said and shrugged.

Asshole.

But it was true, I was probably not going to get to snuggle with her in the back of the truck like I wanted to. She had things to do tonight, and I already promised to help out.

“Fine. But get the fuck out from behind the wheel. No one drives my truck but me,” I told the obnoxious bovine.

“Told you,” Zeke snorted, and the usually quiet Shifter was right.

“Let’s go!” I called out and honked, waiting for Max to start us off.

I couldn’t believe this. The entire Motley Crewd family had gathered to support Jezebel. Just like they had when she’d been hurt.

When I’d first arrived, I didn’t think much of this place or these men. Certainly didn’t think much of Max. I just assumed this was the place last chance Shifters went before things got so bad they needed to be put down.

But I was wrong. This was a place where families were found. Where fated mates met. Where my sweet mate was waiting for me.

“Come on, bro. Let’s go see what your rose has done,” Zeke said, and I turned and looked the Dragon in the eyes, noting his elongated pupil.

I nodded.

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

It was an unseasonably warm night. Dry too. Just perfect for a Holiday Film Festival at the drive-in.

Yes, I lucked out with the weather. But that was just one of the blessings I was counting for myself as I worked beside Emmet at the snack stand. I already sent George and his brothers to check cars in, and direct parking, and get the projector ready.

The gangly teens couldn't stop staring at the big, tatted up cowboy who showed up with a ready kiss for me, declaring he was mine to do with as I pleased so I might as well put him to work.

So, I had.

My cheeks hurt from grinning as I watched Emmet lean over to grab the bag of popcorn kernels from the floor. He poured them into the machine effortlessly, but it was the lean that did it for me.

Goddamn, my man was fine.

He looked hot as hell in his tighter than tight thermal shirt and his jeans molded to his muscular thighs and buttocks. Every time he moved it sent ripples of awareness pulsing through me.

His body was better than a work of art, though it was that too. Emmet's physique wasn't built for gawking, it was the result of years of hard work. Anyone could see he moved with confidence and grace.

His corded muscles were so much more than eye candy. But I had to admit I did not mind the treat myself. Of course, I wanted to bite the head off of every other female I caught staring.

But who could blame them? Besides, my man only had eyes for me, and I was not about to question that miracle above all others. I knew what I was. Pretty face, chubby body, weirdo tendencies.

But it didn't matter to him. Emmet wanted me just the way I was, and I wanted him right back. He gave me so much. I wondered if he knew how much it meant, him sharing his life with me. His world. His magic. His friends.

The Crew were second in line to get in tonight, and I could not believe they all showed up. I was humbled and full of emotion. So much of it gratitude.

The treats I'd ordered from Devil's Food Bakery were selling like crazy, as was the gourmet hot cocoa Emmet insisted I needed to include.

I was a regular Swiss Miss kinda gal, but he knew what he was talking about when he'd ordered all those flavored marshmallows and other confections to top the thick hot chocolate with.

"Too bad we can't spike that," one of the older men in line said, and I smiled and shrugged.

"Sorry, no alcohol on the premises."

"A shame, but I will still take one for me and the missus. Can we have two jumbo peppermint marshmallows? Oh, and one of those terrific looking muffins," he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Sure!”

I rang him up and made change, putting all his goodies onto a tray before helping the next customer.

“I’m back!” Steven called out and jumped over the counter.

“Easy, son,” Emmet growled, and I made sure to put some space between my mate and the young man.

“Steven, it’s slowing down now. Can you handle it?” I asked, making sure he agreed before grabbing Emmet’s arm and tugging him to the supply room around back.

“What are we doing in here—oh,” he said and grinned, cupping his hands on my ass and walking me backwards until my back pushed up against the wall.

“Yeah, oh,” I mimicked, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I thought maybe you needed a little break.”

“If by break you mean a little somethin’ somethin’ in the supply room with my sexy as fuck mate, then yes, I do need that,” he growled and slammed his mouth to mine.

Holy hotness.

He lifted me off the ground and I wrapped my legs around his waist, grateful I wore soft stretch pants with a zippered hoodie over my tank top.

“Mine,” he snarled, and I opened my eyes to see Demon’s emerald gaze staring back at me.

“Yours,” I told my Wolf, my Hellhound, and flexed my hips, needing more of him.

Our tongues tangled, and I reveled in the earthy flavor of my mate's kiss, grounding me, turning me on, doing things no man ever had.

"I need more," he said.

I felt him move, walking to the back and shoving something aside before placing me on a flat surface. One of the shelves, I assumed. I was too busy sucking on his neck, tracing the wickedly sexy tattoo there with my tongue. Emmet unzipped my hoodie, tugging my tank top down and freeing my breasts.

"This is all you had on? Fuck," he growled, ducking his head and sucking one hard nubbin into his hot mouth.

The man devoured me like I was something delicious. Like he was starving, and he couldn't get enough of me.

I knew what I was, and a sex kitten I was not. But Emmet made me feel like one. He showed me with his lips and his hands how much he wanted me.

He tuned me in to the extent of his desire and esteem with every growling kiss and caress. Maybe to some, making love in a storeroom was trashy or crude.

But to me, it was heaven because it was him.

My body was electrified, ignited by his touch. I had my hand on his buckle, undoing his belt and unzipping his jeans. I reached in, swallowing his curses as I freed his thick dick from its tight confines.

"Give me. I want it," I moaned, pushing him back and sinking to my knees.

"What are you—fuck!" he snarled.

His hands were cupping the back of my head as I licked a trail from the base of his cock to the drop of precum sitting at the tip. My core throbbed as I wrapped my lips around him, so turned on I could hardly think.

I felt our matebond swirling around me. For some reason, when we were like this, it was like I could see, feel, hear everything. My mate was so hot. His need pulsed around us, and I could feel how turned on he was, and that only made me take him deeper into my throat.

Gagging on his fat cock should have made me embarrassed, but it only made me try harder.

“Relax, Angel. That’s it. Fuck, you’re so good,” he grunted, flexing his hips, fucking my mouth like I needed him to.

Three more pumps and he pulled me to my feet with his hand on my neck.

“But I wanted—oh!”

“Need to fuck your tight little cunt, Angel. Need to feel you suck the cum from my balls,” he growled, and his voice was positively demonic.

My core tightened as he spun me around, forcing my hands down on the shelf he’d placed me on before.

I felt Emmet tug on the waist of my pants, pulling them as low as he could get them. My legs were still too close together, but that did not stop him.

He grabbed my hips, pulling them back as he placed the flat of his hand on my back and pressed me down so my chest was lying flat. Then I felt him at my entrance.

Need coursed through me fast as a bullet train, but I still wasn't ready for how it would feel when he slammed that perfect cock into me.

"Let me in, Little Girl. That's it. Take my cock," he grunted, stretching me with each stroke, making me positively feral with each flex.

My sensitive nipples pressed against the cold metal of the shelf, but that was nothing compared to the way I felt with every drag of his shaft inside me.

My body lit up like one giant nerve ending. Emmet's hands tightened on my hips, and I felt pricks of pain where his claws bit into my tender flesh. That only served to heighten my pleasure.

"Come for me, mate. Come now," Emmet demanded, and my body was well-trained by now. Living in his house. Sleeping in his bed each night. Oh yes, it listened when he spoke. When he said come, I came.

"Yes! Fuck, Yes!" I moaned, mouth open as I felt his hot cum filling me. There was so much of it, it was leaking down my thighs.

"You look so fucking good, dripping with my cum," he growled against my ear.

I felt him withdraw from my heat with a whimper, then I squeaked as he cupped his hands against my sex, pushing his release back inside me.

"I want you to walk out of here full of me, mate. I want to stand beside you out there, knowing your panties are wet because of me. Because of what we did back here. Because of how much your body wants mine."

Oh. Wow.

“Anything else?” I asked, eyebrows raised.

Yes, he was being overbearing. But I had to admit I loved that about him.

“Yeah. I want you wearing this while you do it,” he said, and pulled a blue box out of his pocket.

“Where did you—oh my God,” I gasped, covering my mouth with my hands.

Emmet took the ring out of the box and grabbed my left hand, sliding it onto my finger. I stared in awe at the two stones, one emerald, one sapphire, wrapped inside an infinity symbol.

“Do you like it?” he asked and seemed worried.

“Like it? Emmet, it’s beautiful. I love it so much,” I said, cupping his cheeks and bringing him down for a kiss.

“Mmm,” he moaned, tangling his tongue with mine before slowing us down. “Much as I would love to engage in round two, someone is coming. Let’s get you dressed,” he murmured, and pulled my pants up before I could protest.

Well shit.

I guess he was serious about wanting my panties wet with his cum.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

Saturday went much like Friday had, with two showings, a matinee and the evening one. I had to miss the afternoon since I needed to work and go over what me and the guys were doing for the rodeo the next day.

Still, I was able to work right by Jezebel's side all night and it was awesome. She was so much fun. So pretty and fun, brilliant too.

The holiday themed movies were a hit with everyone who came to see them. I watched couples come and go and families with big ol' grins on their faces as they splurged on decadent treats from Penelope's bakery, butter smothered popcorn, hot cocoa, and other candies and beverages.

"You good there, Baby?" she'd asked me when I stood staring too long and I smiled and patted her on the ass when she walked by.

"Hell yeah, Angel. With you next to me, I am perfect."

And I was. She was, too.

Jezebel was the perfect cure for what had been a pretty mundane day. Hell, make that a mundane life.

But that was just her.

My mate was just the sweetest Angel this side of the veil. She was amazing and my love for her seemed to grow by leaps and bounds with every passing moment.

“What a night,” Jezebel sighed, looking exhausted and beautiful.

I couldn’t wait to get home so I could show her just how gorgeous she was. The sinfully plush body of hers drove me wild. She was so thick and soft. So delightfully curvy.

I’d never been one to lean one way or the other when it came to body types, but goddamn, I was a fan of hers. Jezebel was a knockout. She could send me to my knees with just a look, and the best part was I didn’t even think she knew it.

Yeah, we needed to get home. And fast.

Hell. I didn’t recall the exact moment I started thinking of my cabin as home, but it definitely coincided with her being there.

She was changing everything. Shaking it up. Making it better. And I wanted to do that for her.

I needed to.

“Oh my God! It’s almost three. You have to get up early tomorrow?” she asked, and I nodded as we chained the lot and got in the truck together.

“Oh, Baby, I am so sorry,” she began, but I hushed her with my mouth.

Kissing that woman was goddamn addictive, and I couldn’t get enough.

“I’m fine, Angel. Now, get your sweet ass in the truck,” I growled, winking at her.

She bit her lip and batted her eyelashes at me. So damn cute.

I growled and snapped my teeth playfully, and she turned around with a giggle.

A fucking giggle.

Sigh. I am so in love with this woman.

“Tonight was awesome, Angel. You did a fantastic job,” I said, helping her into the truck and kissing her head before I rounded over to my side.

I started the pickup more than ready to take my woman home.

“Thank you so much, Emmet, for everything,” she began, but I shook my head.

“You don’t have to thank me. I enjoyed it. I love watching you do your thing.”

“Yeah? Thanks.”

She was so fucking cute, biting her lip and smiling sweetly from her seat. But her sudden gasp had me slamming on the brakes before I saw the ghostly figure on the road.

“Emmet,” she said my name, clutching at my hand.

“Easy, Angel,” I whispered, reassuring her.

Sherry had told her what she needed to do. How she needed to set her boundaries, but I understood her first time seeing a shade would be a little nerve-wracking, considering she probably had PTSD from the whole ordeal she’d been through.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

I felt Demon watching the ghost through my eyes. Knowing my Wolf was part Hellhound made sense now as he made sure Jezebel was safe. Waiting, watching, the beast in me snarled, alerting the shade to our presence, making sure he didn't try anything sneaky.

"I want to talk to him, I think," Jezebel said, blowing out a shaky breath.

"Alright. Come on," I replied, opening my door.

I tugged on her hand, encouraging her to slide out on my side of the truck. Helping her down was one of the bonuses of having such a high vehicle, but now was not the time to be drooling over my sexy mate.

I'd save that for after.

We approached the pale blue shade, careful to keep our distance from the dark shadow he cast.

It loomed like a warning, a tangible reminder that the veil between worlds was perilously thin in that particular place. Not safe for treading by the likes of us, those who were still living.

The air crackled with an unsettling energy. Now I was used to Shifter magic. It was something I encountered with every change. But this was a whisper of secrets held just beyond my understanding or experience.

"It's okay," Jezebel whispered, trying to comfort me.

I sucked in a breath, filling myself with her cocoa sweet scent. No one had ever cared about my well-being before, and if I didn't already love her that one whispered phrase would have done it.

The ground beneath us felt charged as we moved in closer. It was like the very earth was holding its breath, waiting for something to break the fragile boundary.

A chill emanated from the figure, making Jezebel shiver. I growled. I didn't like that. Not one bit. The ghost flickered in and out of existence.

Like the flame of a candle sitting too close to an open window.

Shades were elusive and unstable. A pale blue glow illuminated his outline, casting an eerie light into the otherwise dark lane.

Bare branches twisted upwards from the trees lining the road, like hands reaching up, searching for favor from a god who wasn't there.

"Don't touch him," I murmured as we drew to a stop just in front of him.

The shade turned slightly. His empty gaze seemed to pierce through the gloom that settled around him like a shroud.

I didn't know what was happening, but I knew it was something. Jezebel inhaled sharply. Her eyes went round and filled with moisture. For a fleeting moment, I felt her reaction through our bond and my heart hurt.

But no, that wasn't me. That was her.

My sweet, beautiful mate.

She felt everything, didn't she?

It was like she could see something more when she looked at the ghost. More than the scary. She saw his pain, his confusion, and his longing.

“H-hello,” Jezebel began. “What do you have to tell me?”

I smiled, nodding encouragingly as I held her hand. This shade wasn’t there to hurt her. The closer we got, the more Demon could sense his intentions.

I watched approvingly as she confronted him. Sherry had told Jezebel it was best to ask straight questions and make no promises to the dead. Sometimes just being heard helped them resolve whatever business they had.

“ Per favore, signora. Mia bella sposa , Annamaria, she is doing it wrong. My secret sauce recipe. Her diabetes is not good. She must stop. If she uses the right tomatoes, then she does not need to add sugar. Tell her not to be cheap,” the shade said.

A vision of his address floated through Jezebel’s mind, and a name, both of which I was privy to through our matebond. Seeing those images flashing through her mind, like pieces to a puzzle, was shocking. How invasive that must have felt for her all this time.

Being able to take some of that burden, to carry it with her was a privilege. And knowing it was our bond that allowed me to do that, seeing that connection work for the first time, well it just made my heart pound all the harder. My hand squeezed her tighter of its own volition.

I wanted to pick her up and take her home, wrap her up and never let anything hurt her or scare her again. It wasn’t reasonable, but I still wanted to.

Only her steady breathing kept me still. If she was brave enough to stand there and accept her gift, do her duty, and provide comfort to the restless, then the least I could do to honor her was stand by her side.

“I will do my best, signore. Be at peace,” she murmured, and smiled softly as the old

man's ghost vanished in the breeze.

I checked the clock on the truck before we exited. It was three AM. The Witching Hour, or so Sherry had said. Made sense that the fade would appear at this time.

"You good, Angel?" I asked, watching Jezebel wipe her eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. I just felt his concern and his love for his wife. It was strong enough to make him stay here until someone could hear his message."

"His message was about tomato sauce," I stated, frowning at her and attempting to lighten the moment.

"I know that, but it was still beautiful."

"You have such a big heart," I said, pulling her to my side and kissing her temple.

"Think you're gonna find her?"

"I think so. I can still see the house and the name and address right here." Jezebel motioned to her head.

"Alright, but not tonight."

"Not tonight," she agreed.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

S team from the shower swirled around me and I sighed as I leaned against the tiled wall.

It was still morning and today's temperatures were a bit colder than yesterday's.

I worried about what it could mean for the last day of the Holiday Film Festival.

But I had my fingers crossed that the afternoon sun would be enough to warm the field and keep folks coming for the two remaining showings of holiday movies.

Emmet was already out working. He'd already said goodbye this morning, and I smiled as I recalled waking up to him, as he put it, having his breakfast.

Of course, I had no choice but to hold on and just feel as he feasted on me. Not like I wanted to do anything else, but that.

The man was insatiable. I was just lucky enough to be his favorite treat.

Talk about a wonderful way to start the day.

Plus, I was able to go back to sleep after he made me come a time or three .

It was getting late now, and I had just enough time to dress and stop by the bakery for today's treats on my way to the drive-in.

George and his brothers were there now, readying for today's film festival matinee. I let them sleep in the doublewide last night, which started another brain baby.

What if I lent it to someone to watch over the property since it looked like I would be moving in here permanently? Like a sort of permanent security guard and groundskeeper who would live there.

Maybe Emmet would know someone suited to the job. I would have to discuss it with him.

I couldn't ask George to stay on permanently. He was far too young and the couple of lots I owned were a bit deserted, being so far from town.

Huffing out a long breath, I towel dried my hair and put it in a loose braid that hung down my back. Today would be busier than yesterday according to the online ticket sales, and I didn't want to fuss with it.

I already went over the proceeds from last night while I had my coffee, and I couldn't believe how well we did. Next Thursday was Thanksgiving, and it looked like I was actually going to hit my goal for the fiscal year.

I had a call in to Pop's nurse this afternoon, just to go over medication and routine. Unfortunately, I hadn't had a lot of time to visit just lately, and I made a mental note to ask Emmet if he wanted to come with me before the holiday.

It was never a cheerful thing, visiting a loved one with dementia. But complicated or not, he was my father, and I really should make the effort before time ran out for us.

Regret was not something I enjoyed feeling and even though he was ashamed of me for things I couldn't control, I still remembered the good times we'd had when I was a child.

Everyone did their best with what they had, and Pop had tried to love me. I knew he did his damndest not to make me feel bad about myself. And that had to count for

something.

If for nothing else, it would make me a better parent. Oh, how I was going to love my own children! I would likely spoil them rotten—I froze.

Children? I could maybe have them now. With Emmet.

Heat spread through my limbs at the notion that I could maybe someday have a child of my own.

A sweet little blond haired boy with stunning green eyes, maybe? Or a girl with her Daddy's sweet smile?

A vision hit me then. I hadn't had one like that in a long while and I leaned on the wall, dizzy and overwhelmed by emotion.

I saw two towheaded children, a boy and a girl, and they were running across a field of wildflowers. A big, black Wolf chased them, and they were laughing so loudly, I felt myself giggle.

When I looked behind the Wolf, I saw myself, my belly swollen and my hair shorter than it was now.

I looked happy, content, and loved. So loved.

Gasping, I cupped a hand over my mouth as the vision faded and reality set in.

I was still inside Emmet's bedroom, and my stomach, though soft, was not rounded in pregnancy. But it all felt so real.

Maybe someday.

I sucked in more air, reveling in the pine scent that always seemed present. It was one I associated with Emmet, and I loved the earthy, fresh fragrance.

I'd never even considered the possibility of having a family of my own since it was hard enough getting anyone to accept the real me. But Emmet did.

Effortlessly.

A new hope filled me. The promise of a life I'd secretly wanted for so long.

A home.

Somewhere I belonged.

A mate.

Husband. Someone I belonged to.

A family.

Found in the friends and Crew who filled this place with so much loyalty and laughter.

A child.

Conceived of love. Raised in union with the man who owned me, body, heart, and soul.

My phone buzzed, and I grabbed it. My heart was pounding even before I read who the text was from.

Emmet

Good morning, Angel. Call me when you get to work. I love you.

I couldn't stop my smile if I tried. I brushed the screen with my fingertips, my heart beating erratically.

Me

Okay! I will! I love you too!

I cringed at all the exclamation points, but I couldn't help it. I was just that excited. Smiling, I slipped on my fur-lined boots and grabbed the thick hooded sweatshirt I swiped from Emmet's closet with the Motley Crewd Ranch logo stamped across the back.

It was warm and soft, and even better, it smelled just like him.

My phone buzzed with a text from Avery, and I chuckled at the ridiculous gif she texted of a tiny little mouse hefting a stack of boxes, begging me to come get my order already.

She must be at the store, I mused, then replied.

Me

Be right there

I got in my car and started the engine, which my super sexy and talented mate had somehow managed to get working again.

My thoughts were so full of Emmet as I turned onto the main road that led into town and raised the volume on the radio, that was probably why I didn't notice the man in the backseat until he clapped a hand over my mouth and growled in my ear.

“So, Quinn found himself a human mate, did he? Let's see how he likes it when I take his betrayal out of your filthy hide!”

“What? No!” I yelled before a meaty hand slapped over my mouth.

Before everything went black, I had one last thought.

Emmet.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

The sign for Cow Country Rodeo had been decorated with some fall themed garland and lights, but it could probably stand to be repainted.

I walked past the separate bull pens, wondering which of those big bad bastards I was going to draw during my event in just a few hours. The smell of fur, sweat, hay, and dung was thick in the air, making my hypersensitive nose twitch.

I was used to the smells of ranches, farms, and animals, so it wasn't as repulsive as it sounded.

It was human smells that were often the most offensive. Not sweat or excrement. More the scent of intentions or emotions like cruelty, fear, mendacity, and deviant impulses.

But I wasn't paying attention to any of the men or animals in that place. My mind was elsewhere. My mind was on my mate.

"Yo, Emmet, help the boss out for a sec," Kian shouted to me.

"On it," I said, and turned, flipping him the bird.

It was like a thumbs up as far as I was concerned. More than the ornery Bull Shifter deserved. He'd been ribbing all of us all morning long about our lack of skill and finesse when it came to rodeo events, which was, for lack of a better word, bullshit.

I'd been competing in rodeos since I was fifteen and if Kian needed a reminder, well then, he could just watch me break one of his wild brethren in just a few hours. I

walked off towards the stables where Max was checking out the Broncos.

“You need something, Boss?” I asked.

“Not really, I just like fucking with Kian. He wanted to know why I needed you when I could just ask him, so I told him because it made a fuck of a lot more sense to ask a starting quarterback for help with my throw, than to ask a third string benchwarmer.”

I snorted a laugh.

“You are so full of shit, Max,” I replied, shaking my head.

I could tell the boss man was nervous, and it humbled me to see him care so much about this whole thing.

From a rich playboy whose days formerly consisted of fuck knows what, Max was now the Alpha of a mixed up Crew of Shifters. He was mated to a former human. And he was the majority owner of a farm/ranch/dairy, whose monthly rodeo competitions were good for the brand, even when we lost.

It was a motley assortment of tomfuckery if ever there was one. I wouldn't have blamed him for skipping town if he had in the beginning, but he didn't. Max stuck it out.

He proved himself as the Alpha, as a man, and as a mate to Penelope. My Wolf held him in high esteem, and I knew I'd made the right decision to come here.

Even more so now that I was mated and getting married. Jezebel already wore my bite mark and my ring, but I couldn't wait to see her wear my name.

When I came to Dry Creek, to the Motley Crewd Ranch, I was a broken Wolf.

But not me. Not anymore. Not ever again.

“How are we looking?” Max asked, dipping his chin at the horse we were both watching.

I dropped my hands against the top rail on the fence where one nasty looking brute was snorting aggressively.

“Well, if you hold and keep your head like I taught you, you’ll be fine. Remember, half the battle is mental, Boss,” I said.

Max had already been through all the physical training, mental preparation, and equipment readiness check that bareback bronc riding demanded.

Even Shifters had to work out and plan meticulously when competing in human events so as not to reveal the supernatural secret. There was a fine line, and we could not afford to cross it.

Targeting core muscles was essential for maintaining balance on top of a wildly bucking horse. I remembered those days well, even though I’d moved on to bull riding.

It was quite the feat, getting the bull to settle once he smelled my fur. Demon was a predator. The bulls sensed that. They knew death was on their backs and they fought like hell to rid themselves of me.

I admired them, and even when I lost, I won. Every ride was another lesson in what to do and not to do. Every second I spent riding, I was learning.

“I’ve already gone over every scenario I could think of. I’m aiming for second today,” Max said, and I nodded.

It wasn't conceit. Max had the physical strength of his Devil, but he also inherited magic and sometimes it was more challenging to rein that all in than it was to stay on the horse's back.

I admired his tenacity. My own rides had been more or less average since the move to New Jersey, as I did not want to garner any unwanted notoriety or attention.

But each time I closed my eyes, I could feel the rush of adrenaline surging through my veins, igniting a fire within me. It was both exhilarating and terrifying. I was eager to get back in the ring. To show off in front of Jezebel.

My mate.

"Good. You remember to twist with the bronc, and you'll be good, Boss."

"Yeah. Got it," he replied easily.

We stood in companionable silence for another moment, then I blurted out the question that had been on my mind all week.

"Um, I was wondering, well, you know I asked Jezebel to marry me," I said.

"Yeah? Hot damn! Congrats," Max replied, a knowing look on his face since the Jersey Devil was recently engaged himself.

"Yeah, um, I wanted to ask?—"

"If we could double wedding? Cause that might not work with my family. Or did you want to have to at the ranch? Maybe if we get the new barn built in time. But you are going to have to tell Jed you don't want Dolly Sue, Dolly May, Dolly Lou, Dolly Lee, or whoever the heck, to be your ring bearer.

I swear that old Prairie Dog is hard of hearing.

He's actually been training them with little pillows and everything.

They aren't half bad except for Dolly Sue.

She keeps eating the pillows," he said and frowned.

I laughed and shook my head.

"No! I wanted to ask if you would be my best man!" I yelled over whatever nonsense he was still uttering.

"Oh," he replied, eyes wide. "Shit, Emmet, I wasn't ready for that. Get over here," he grumbled and tugged me in for a hug just as Kian, Dante, and Zeke ambled over.

"What are you doing?" Dante asked, and he looked horrified.

"Can't you tell? They're having a bro hug! I want in!" Kian shouted before wrapping his arms around me and Max.

"Get off me," I growled, my arms pinned to my side.

"Just let it happen. Let the love in," Kian said, and I swear that fucker was smiling.

"Come on, Zeke," the Bull said.

"Fuck no. You guys can all enjoy your little threesome alone," the Dragon replied, grabbed a saddle from the rack, and stomped off.

"Don't deny our friendship!" Kian shouted after him. "How about you, Yogi?"

“Don’t fucking touch me,” Dante snarled.

“That goes for me too,” I said, struggling against both those fuckers’ holds.

Max was wheezing, he was laughing so hard, but eventually he shrugged and sent Kian flying into the wall.

“Enough of that,” he said.

“Um, Emmet?” Dante was holding up his phone, frowning hard.

“What’s up?”

“Have you heard from Jezebel?”

Thunder started low inside my ears as I stalked towards the Bear. I shook my head, took his phone from his enormous hand, and read the messages from Avery.

There were five.

Avery

Hey, Sorry to bother you, but I don’t have Emmet’s number and Jezebel was supposed to be here ten minutes ago to get her order. Can you ask him if she is there?

Avery

Still waiting. I called the drive-in. The boys have not heard from her.

Avery

She isn't answering her phone.

Avery

I am not sure what to do. Penelope said not to call the police. She is out looking for Jezebel's car.

Avery

Please get Emmet. Penelope found her car on the side of the road. Something is wrong.

"Fuck!" I snarled, Demon pushing against my skin.

"What is it?" Max asked, suddenly standing right beside me.

"Jezebel. She didn't get to the bakery," I snarled, unable to control the Wolf.

I started running towards my pickup, aware that the rest of the Crew were keeping pace with me.

"You don't have to do this. I know the ranch needs these rodeos for advertising," I said.

I was shaking with fear or rage, I was not sure which. Maybe both.

Please be okay.

"Jezebel belongs to you, and that means she is one of us," Dante rumbled.

"Bear's right. Let's go," Zeke said.

“Shut the fuck up and drive, Emmet,” Max commanded, but I was already turning the key without his Alpha order.

He pulled up Penelope’s location on his cell phone, and I raced to the back road where Jezebel’s car was laying in a ditch, abandoned.

Penelope ran to Max, who’d jumped out of the car at the same time I did. Only I was headed for the driver’s side.

“T-There’s blood,” Penelope whimpered.

“No, no, no!” I snarled, and dropped to my knees, fighting against my Wolf.

Demon was pushing so hard to get out. But I needed to keep my skin to find the bastards who hurt my mate.

I pushed the monster down and looked at what was right in front of me.

Blood on the door. It was hers.

Fuck. No.

I sniffed.

Fur. Wolf.

No, it was more than just a Wolf.

I knew that scent. I took another long inhale, ignoring the sounds of my Crew as they did their own investigating.

This was a Wolf I thought I was rid of. A Wolf I never expected to see again. A Wolf who'd just signed his own death warrant.

I closed my eyes, allowing Demon to rise inside of me. At the last minute I turned to my Crew. Locking gazes with Max, I said in an inhumane voice the last words I ever wanted to say.

“I know who has her.”

And I was going to make him suffer.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

Dusk had fallen, wrapping the world in a shroud of muted gray. The air had turned bitterly cold as I sat tied to the trunk of a gnarly old tree, its twisted branches reaching out like fingers against the encroaching darkness.

The woods felt alive with malice. The unsettling stillness made me shiver. Each rustle of leaves echoed ominously in the growing chill.

I could see my breath misting in front of me. Like clouds streaming from my nostrils. I felt vulnerable out here, all alone with a madman somewhere between the ranch and the drive-in.

The sky darkened as the last remnants of daylight slipped away like a distant memory. I missed it. The rodeo. The film festival.

My heart squeezed, and I wanted so desperately to cry out loud. But I didn't dare.

Even though my surroundings were familiar, the mood around me was dark, sinister.

I glanced up, wondering if we were going to get snow before the holiday—an uninvited thought that both thrilled and terrified me.

The prospect of a white Thanksgiving when so many were just wet or too warm felt like a promise I so desperately wanted to cling to.

As I sat there, the cold seeped through my clothes, biting at my skin. The knot around my wrists was rough and unforgiving, chafing away at my skin.

My mind raced, grappling with the uncertainty of my situation. Kidnapped in broad daylight. Rendered unconscious. Brought here. But why and for what?

I mean, I knew it wasn't for anything good. I also knew I didn't want to end like this. I just had to make it out alive.

I strained my ears, hoping to catch the distant sounds of people or cars driving down the road.

Instead, I was met with an unsettling silence, punctuated only by the occasional snap of a twig or the rustling of unseen creatures in the underbrush.

I shivered, pulling my knees closer, desperate for warmth. As the first flurries of snow began to fall, I felt a mix of dread and longing. I could not give in to whimsy or despair, so I thought of Emmet and took stock of myself.

He deserved a mate who fought to come back to him. And I was going to do my best to be worthy of him.

First, I was alive, that was one good thing.

Second, I was tied up— okay, not so good .

Third, my head ached on both sides. On the right, where that sonovabitch had struck me with his fist, and on the left side where I hit the door and cut my eyebrow.

Head wounds always bled so much, and mine had gushed for a long while before it slowed. I could feel the dried sticky mess on the side of my face.

Fuck. This didn't look good at all.

I felt dirty and bruised. I couldn't even imagine what I looked like cut open, bloody, with nervous sweat and tears tracking through the dirt and muck on my skin.

Emmet.

My thoughts were on my mate, and I had never felt so scared and full of regret.

He would blame himself. I knew he would, and that just broke my heart. I tried to move, but the ropes were so tight. I winced at the soreness in my muscles and the pain in my head.

The man in charge—he said his name was Flint—had laughed when he saw my wound. He seemed to get off on hurting me and seeing me suffer, so I tried my best not to let my pain show. Not even when he dug his finger into the cut.

“That would leave a scar if you were gonna live long enough, but you ain't, so I wouldn't worry your fat ass over it,” he taunted, sucking air between his teeth and making my stomach sick.

The other three men with him snickered and chortled. They were thin, gritty looking, and they had a sour green aura surrounding them.

“Can we have her, Boss?”

“Yeah. Let us play with Emmet's whore,” another said.

Fear trickled down my spine, making me gasp.

“No. That will ruin the fun. I want him to watch as we ruin his precious mate,” Flint growled.

Revulsion filled me as he shoved my face away, banging my head against the tree trunk, and I grunted at the pain throbbing behind my eyes.

“What are you waiting for? If you want to kill me, why not get to it?” I asked, so damn angry at this whole situation.

No, I didn’t want to die. But while I tried to figure out a way out of there, I thought it best to keep him talking.

“You in a hurry to meet Death, bitch?” the third guy asked, sneering at me.

Flint spat on the floor, a grotesque ball of phlegm and what looked like blood, and I frowned.

“Oh, don’t you worry your pretty head about me. You see, I’m gonna get my place back. Your mate started shit and left. Thought he was fucking cool riling the Enforcers, making them think they could kick ME OUT! ME?! HA!”

His three minions cheered, clinking together bottles of what looked like beer, but I couldn’t be sure.

“Easy with that brew. The Witch said no more till next moon,” Flint said, smacking one of the three dickheads upside the head.

“Ouch!”

“What the hell?”

“Enough! I am the leader here. I am the prince of the Winter Falls Pack!” Flint yelled.

Oh great. This big asshole was monologuing now. Going on and on about Pack law

and how wronged he was.

While I did not know a lot about Wolf Packs, I knew from Emmet that he'd been banished from his old Pack. That action alone told me all I needed to know about those Wolves.

For anyone to throw away a man, a Wolf, like my mate? Well, they had to be jealous of his power or just plain stupid because he was the best man I knew.

But I was not about to correct this fuckwit while he went on and on about how he was going to take the Pack back and it all started with showing them he was stronger than Emmet.

Yadda fucking yadda, motherfucker.

I focused my attention just behind the raging Wolf Shifter, reaching out with my third eye. One thing I had recently learned from Sherry about being a psychic medium was that shades were everywhere.

It wasn't just the ones who'd noticed me that I could communicate with. I did not have to wait for them to initiate contact.

I saw a young figure of a shade in historic garb floating about between two bare-branched beeches. Inhaling, I focused and tried to catch her attention. Without words, of course.

The shade flickered closer. Her pale blue aura pulsed with shades of purple and pink, and I realized she was curious.

"Hello. Can you see me?"

Her voice crept into my brain, invasive, yes, but I needed her, so I allowed it.

“I can see you. Please, I need you to get a message to my mate. He’s a Wolf. Emmet Quinn.”

“You are one who helps the lost, aren’t you? Yes, I can find him to repay you for your service.”

“Please. Thank you. There isn’t much time.”

The shade looked at Flint who was pulling his hair and snarling. She nodded once, then shimmered out of sight. All I could do now was wait. And hope.

Emmet. Please find me.

“Stupid! Stupid! STUPID!” Flint screamed, slapping himself.

He was muttering nonsense. Spittle flew from his lips as he continued to rage.

“I know what to do now. I need to kill you to hurt him, see? Once I sever the matebond, Emmet really will be broken?—”

“It won’t work. Emmet doesn’t even love me,” I said, my voice shaking, betraying my emotions even as I tried to put belief behind those words.

“Do not lie to me!”

Flint rushed behind me, using his claws to cut through the rope. He pulled on my hair, hauling me to my feet, and for the first time I felt real fear.

“You are going to suffer for his trespasses,” he growled, squeezing my throat with

one hand.

Then, as darkness danced around the edges of my vision and I was so close to passing out, I heard an inhuman roar rip through the night.

“JEZEBELLLL!”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

I was already hot on my mate's trail when the shade found me. Her ethereal voice crept into my brain with all the delicacy of a banshee screeching.

I held my ears and fell to the ground, but she quieted her tone and pointed, showing me with images a scene I wished to never witness again a million times. But that was horseshit because I needed to see it at least once more. To save my sweet Angel.

Hang on, mate. I'm coming for you.

The second I'd smelled my ex-Alpha's son's pitiful excuse for musk, I told Max who seemed to have already had the Shifter Council on speed dial.

Turned out that Enforcer I once upon a time told to challenge the Alpha for leadership of the Pack, finally took my advice, albeit belatedly.

He killed old Alpha Winters and banished his son, taking over the Winter Falls Pack and renaming them the New Hope Pack. That was fucking great, only he forgot to keep tabs on the Wolves he forced into exile. And now they were here. Hunting mine.

Grrr.

Oh, Flint Winters was going to suffer for his grievous and misguided decision to take my mate. There was no coming back from this. He would die. Either by my hand or jaw, I'd yet to decide.

Trees blurred as I raced through the woods, the Crew keeping pace with me. The sky was gray, and fat, white, fluffy snowflakes began to fall even as my feet pounded

against the hard earth.

I heard them before I saw them. A group of soon-to-be-dead assholes were terrorizing my mate, taunting her with cruel words and promises of violence.

“JEZEBEL!” I roared when she was within shouting distance.

I watched as surprise swept across Flint’s face even as red tinted my vision. Then, I allowed Demon to rip through my skin, shredding my clothes and filling me with a fiery rage that was unmatched.

For the first time ever, I embraced the darkness inside of me and it felt fantastic. Power rushed through my veins and everywhere my claws connected flames erupted.

“Holy fuck!”

“What is he, man?”

“Shit!”

I ran at them like a battering ram. My heart pounded heavily in my chest as adrenaline surged through my veins. The three extra Wolves scattered about the woods.

Their startled yelps echoed through the trees as they stumbled over roots and underbrush, perhaps temporarily blinded by the rapidly falling snow.

They tried to escape the force of my charge. But I didn’t worry about them. My Crew had it handled.

They were my found family. My brothers. And they were built for moments like this.

I listened to the sounds of Dante's Grizzly roaring his displeasure. Kian's Bull snorted and pawed at the ground in his rage.

He would give good chase, I knew it. A flash of red told me Max had unleashed his Jersey Devil, and that definitely spelled trouble for the bad guys.

Only Zeke would not free his beast, and I couldn't say I blamed him. A Dragon might be overkill here. But I trusted them to keep those distractions occupied while I focused on the real target.

My eyes were fixed on him. Flint. The man who had kidnapped my mate. The prick who had torn apart my world in a matter of seconds.

A wave of rage coursed through me, igniting every muscle as I pushed myself harder, weaving through the dense, knotted tree roots with a singular purpose.

The forest and everyone in it seemed to blur around me. The branches clawed at my fur, but I didn't feel them.

All that mattered was reaching Flint and making him pay.

He was standing over Jezebel. My mate's blue gaze filled with tears as she watched me coming for her.

She was so fucking beautiful. Even covered in dirt and blood. The fact she was here. That she was breathing and alive made her the prettiest damn thing in the whole world.

Every instinct screamed at me to close the distance between me and that asshole. I was going to bring him down. To reclaim what he had stolen.

The rapidly cooling air felt like razors as I breathed it in, stabbing at my lungs.

But I welcomed the pain. It reminded me I was alive. I was still here. And I was going to make things right.

Flint glanced back, and our eyes met for the briefest moment. A flicker of surprise crossed his face, quickly replaced by a calculating smirk.

He grabbed Jezebel's face and snaked his tongue across her cheek. She tried to push him off. Good mate. So brave.

Any chance he had of begging for mercy dissolved with that one move. He shoved her away roughly, causing her to hit the old tree behind her. She yelped in pain.

MOTHERFUCKER.

I snarled. Flint thought he could get away with this. That he could outrun the consequences of his actions. But he had no idea who he was dealing with. My Crew was out there, dealing with his men.

But I would not let him go. I would not stop until I spilled his fucking blood on this forest floor. I wouldn't let go until I had my mate back, safe in my arms.

Fueled by a fierce determination, I pushed through the final stretch of ground, focusing on my target.

The chaos around me faded, leaving only the sound of my heartbeat and the rustle of leaves beneath my feet.

Flint was within reach now, and I could almost taste the reckoning that awaited him, the soon-to-be-dead asshole who'd touched my mate.

Are you okay?

I asked Jezebel through our matebond.

Yes. I am now. Go get him, she added the last when I hesitated, warring between hunting him and staying with her.

Fuck. I hated making the choice.

“Go!” Jezebel ordered.

Pride filled me, but stronger than that was a need for vengeance. When I found the piece of shit, he was cowering behind a tree stump. When I approached, he crouched low, sputtering with his hands before him as if that would stop me.

“Y-you’re different. No! I won’t! It isn’t fair,” Flint sputtered.

But life wasn’t fair, and that was just too fucking bad for Flint.

I roared my anger to the wind as I vaulted over the distance between us and closed my lupine maw over his throat.

Then.

I tore it out.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

The ride to the cabin was quick and quiet. I didn't mind at all, glad to have the time to process what had just happened.

Emmet seemed to need the silence, too. For once, Demon was not growling.

I placed my hand on Emmet's chest without thinking, just to see if my ears were playing tricks on me or if the hybrid Hellhound Wolf was indeed silent.

Emmet startled beneath my palm, and I felt bad, moving to pull away immediately. He was probably still riled up after that fight or battle or whatever it was called.

But before I could remove my hand, his slammed down over mine, keeping my palms flattened tight to his chest.

"Don't," he murmured, and my heart squeezed.

Don't leave. Don't stop touching him.

That was what he meant, and I loved him so much right then. I unbuckled my seat belt, sliding to the middle of the truck.

"What are you doing?" he asked, frowning.

"I need to be closer to you," I confessed, not even bothering with the middle seatbelt because we were already home.

"Come here," he whispered, after shifting the truck into park.

Emmet turned sideways and dragged me over his lap, hugging me to his chest.

“Thought I lost you,” he said gruffly.

“You didn’t. You found me,” I said, smiling through my tears.

“Only cause you sent that shade after me, my clever girl. Fuck, Angel, I was so damn scared I wouldn’t get to you in time.”

“But you did. So, we don’t have to wonder what if. I knew you and Demon were going to come for me.”

“You did? How?” he asked, canting his head to the side.

“Because you love me. Both sides of you love me, just like I love you. Even if I hadn’t sent that shade, you would have found me. I believe that with every fiber of my being.”

“You think too highly of me, Angel. But I would have never stopped looking for you,” he said.

“I know. Now take me inside, mate,” I whispered, nuzzling his neck with my lips.

“I can do that,” he replied, gazing at me with a look of such raw hunger I felt it down to my toes.

Emmet carried me inside, not pausing for even a moment until we were both in the shower. He’d been naked after his shift, and even though I was wearing clothes, he didn’t seem to care. He just peeled them off me and tossed them into the sink, soaking wet.

“Turn around,” his voice was rough as he gathered a handful of shampoo and began washing my hair.

It was far too much, but I was not about to stop him. His fingers massaged my scalp, soothing all the aches and hurts. After checking my eyebrow in the mirror, I was relieved to see I didn’t need stitches.

Emmet had some medical glue in his first aid kit, and he’d cleaned and dressed my wound before we left. The rest of the Crew milled about, cleaning up and ridding the woods of evidence of the fight.

That they all showed up for me, fought for me, were there to help bring Emmet to me—it all just filled me with such gratitude and humility.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, but it was just all the emotion catching up with me.

“Shh, Angel. I got you,” he whispered, rinsing the shampoo, then working the conditioner through my long hair.

He turned me to face him, using a soft cloth to catch the three pumps of cocoa butter body wash he poured into the middle. Then he kneeled down, running the sudsy washcloth up and down my legs, hips, ass, and sex.

I bit my lip, loving the way he tended to me. I didn’t even mind that under these harsh lights he could see it all. Every dimple. Every extra pound. Every stretch mark and bulge.

The way Emmet looked at me—his eyes hooded, a spark of mischief dancing in their depths—set my heart racing.

Electricity sizzled in his glowing emerald gaze. The perfect blend of lust and

unguarded adoration that made me feel like the only person in the room.

Every glance he shot my way seemed to strip away my insecurities, revealing a version of myself I hadn't fully embraced yet.

His expression was a heady mixture of desire and reverence, as if he could see something in me that I struggled to recognize. It was difficult when you'd been the fat girl all your life.

The strange one who didn't fit in.

Different.

Weird.

But when I caught a glimpse of my reflection in his eyes, illuminated by the light reflecting through the glass shower door. Well, at that moment, I felt beautiful.

Radiant.

Perfect.

Because that was how he saw me. Emmet coveted every curve and contour, every jiggly bit and cellulite bump, all those pieces of me that I had ever doubted.

I could hardly breathe under the weight of his attention.

Emmet's Wolf was a monster. Demon the Hellhound. My fierce protector. But he was my monster. And I reveled in his steady, verdant gaze.

Each lingering glance wrapped around me like a warm embrace, banishing all my old

insecurities.

The way his lips curled into a smirk, the way he tilted his head as if drinking me in—it was intoxicating.

I couldn't help but smile back, feeling a blush creep up my cheeks, as if he could see straight into my soul.

Maybe he could. Maybe that was what being fated mates meant.

The air felt thick with unspoken words, and after rinsing my hair and washing off both our bodies, I was more than ready for my mate.

The beauty of the moment was ingrained in my heart, etched on my brain like a fond memory, and I knew I would never forget it.

This man, this Wolf, had cast a spell on me, turning my plain, boring, lonely life into something extraordinary.

How could I feel anything but beautiful, bathed in the glow of his admiration?

I could have stood there forever, wrapped in his gaze, floating on the warmth of his desire.

But I had other plans, and they involved our shared bed.

“Can smell your arousal, mate,” he growled.

Desire zipped right through to my core at the way his hot breath fell against the skin at the nape of my neck. My hair swept to the side, Emmet kissed the scar of my mating mark, and I swayed on my feet.

He'd followed me to the foot of the bed and his front was pressed to my back, the hard bar of his erection pulsed against my back.

"Need you," I whimpered, turning around so I could face him.

I ran my hands up his tight abs, tracing the swirling tattoos inked across his smooth skin. God, he was so hot. I didn't know what they meant, if anything at all, and I hoped he would share the story someday.

But we had time for that. We had forever.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and tugged him down to me. His lips curled, and he pulled against me, canting his head, green eyes glittering with Demon.

"Tell me what you want, Angel? Anything you want, you can have. You just have to ask."

"Need you to kiss me," I said, loving the way his nostrils flared, and his eyes glazed over with pure, unfiltered desire.

"I can do that," he growled, lifting me up and slamming his mouth to mine.

There weren't many perfect things in this world. Or if there were, I sure as hell hadn't experienced them.

But kissing Emmet Quinn was pretty close to number one on my list.

"What's number one if not kissing me, mate?" Emmet asked, curiosity on his face.

God, I loved when he read my mind.

“Being in love with you is tied with you being in love with me for number one, Baby,” I said, loving the smile that spread across his face.

“Oh yeah? So kissing me is number two?” he asked, falling onto the mattress with me still in his arms.

He kissed me harder, swirling his tongue with mine, and sipping from my lips like I was some fine vintage wine.

“If you keep sliding that hand where I think you’re sliding it, I might have to rethink that number two position,” I moaned, arching my back as he found my slick pussy with his fingers.

“I think I know how to solve this dilemma,” he growled.

Next, he slid down my body, sucking my breast into his mouth and releasing it with an audible pop as he traveled lower still. His hands were everywhere, caressing, kneading, branding me with his touch.

Emmet pushed my legs wider apart with his big shoulders, making room for himself. He leaned down, blowing hot air on my needy sex, and I flexed my hips, trying to get him where I needed him.

“So wet for me, Angel. Always so fucking wet.”

“Please,” I begged.

The sound careened into a moan as Emmet closed his mouth over my dripping sex and made out with my pussy. Licking, sucking, fucking me with his clever tongue. I clutched at his hair, determined to ride out wave after wave of pleasure he dealt me.

By the time he positioned his thick cock at my entrance, I was desperate for him, muttering unintelligible gibberish. My entire body was on fire with need, and only my mate could cool me.

Only Emmet could quench my thirst, sate my hunger, fill the void I'd been living with for so long.

"I got you," he panted, slamming his hips to mine, gripping me tight in his arms.

"Emmet. Love you," I moaned, feeling my body contract around him.

"That's it. Fuck, that is it. Feel s'good. My sweet Angel."

"Emmet, fuck, I'm coming again," I moaned, arching my back.

"That's right. Come for me again. Milk me with this sweet pussy. Tell me it's mine. Your body. Your heart. Mine."

"Yours!"

"Love you so much," he growled.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

Being the first to march my mate down the aisle we'd set up in the brand new barn right after Thanksgiving was a delight I never would have expected.

As we stood side by side, having just said our vows, I leaned over to kiss my new bride, but the sound of screeching drew me up short.

Jezebel gasped, covering her mouth as she snorted a laugh, and I joined her, watching chaos erupt among our small wedding party. The Crew was all there, of course. As was Max's grandmother, Mrs. O'Hare, who catered, Sherry Morgan, and her mate, Seff McAllister.

Even better, Jezebel's father was able to attend with a nurse accompanying him. It was a surprise for my mate, and she'd cried when she saw him. Especially when Max gave her the wedding present he and Penelope had picked out for her.

They'd paid for the man's retirement home for the next five years, ensuring he would get the best care possible.

Today was a good day for Alex Braydon. The older man recognized his daughter. He smiled and chatted and even walked her down the aisle.

He might forget her in another minute, but I had a feeling it was going to be okay. The ghost of his mother hovered around him, and I swear the old woman smiled when she looked at me and Jezebel.

My sweet wife had one helluva an important future, and I intended on being there beside her through every bit of it.

She wasn't alone anymore. She had friends now. She had Crew. And she had me.

Lord, did she have me.

The scent of new wood and fresh paint surrounded us, but it was muted under the flowers and scents of food and perfume mingling in the air. Nothing was better than the spiked cocoa scent of my mate.

Jezebel looked perfect in her soft flowing ivory gown with her hair loose and long and a crown of flowers sitting on top of her head.

She looked perfect in the new barn, with its high ceilings and large front windows. A blanket of snow covering the world around us like a big fluffy blanket.

Today felt alive with possibility.

We avoided the cold with huge standing heaters. Soft strands of twinkling lights hung from the beams, casting a warm glow that danced across the polished floor, making the whole scene feel magical.

I had asked Max to be my Best Man and Jezebel later asked Penelope to be Maid of Honor, which made everyone happy and really suited us, seeing how close all the girls were getting.

But what made me feel truly blessed was that Jedediah did manage to teach little Dolly Lee to carry our rings on a pretty satin pillow balanced right atop her fluffy head.

And she didn't even eat one of them! Well, not the rings at any rate.

She did, however, get a good bite out of Kian's suit coat. Hence the screeching.

“Goddamnit, Dolly Lou!”

“That’s Dolly Lee!” Jed yelled, chasing after the Bull Shifter who ran after one of the old Prairie Dog’s favorite kids.

“Uncle Kian said Goddamnit, Mama!” Rosie shouted, covering her mouth as she exploded in a fit of giggles.

“Rosie! We do not say that word?—”

Avery looked horrified. But everyone else was trying not to laugh. Penelope started the playlist, and music played through the speakers we’d set up earlier.

“Here now, let’s get some food, Rosie Posie. We’ll just ignore Uncle Kian,” Dante grumbled, picking up the little girl and walking over to the buffet we had set up.

“Think I can have that kiss now, Mr. Quinn?” my beautiful wife and mate asked, her blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Now seems a good time, Mrs. Quinn,” I replied, smiling as I tugged her closer, wrapping my arms around her waist and dipping her backwards as I claimed her mouth.

Wolf whistles sounded and a round of applause damn near brought down the rafters. Jezebel giggled, holding onto me with both hands.

“I love you, Wife.”

“I love you too, Baby. My Cowboy Wolf. My Demon.”

“Mmm, I want you to call me that again later. In fact, I’m gonna make sure you

scream it.”

“I can’t wait,” she replied, her blue eyes sparkling.

I’d come a long way from the Winter Falls Pack. From being a broken Wolf. Every inch of my journey had been hard earned, but the struggle was worth it to be where I was now. With my Crew. My found family. But especially with her.

Jezebel was the best thing that ever happened to me. She loved me with her whole heart. Both sides of me. I didn’t need to fight Demon anymore.

My Hellhound Wolf was content to protect our mate. To keep the shades in line when they came calling. Sure, we had some figuring out to do. Like how I created fire with each step the day I took Flint down, but that was for later.

Right now, I was going to embrace the moment and celebrate my wedding day with the woman of my dreams.

“Wanna dance with me, Mrs. Quinn?” I asked, holding out my hand.

“Hell, yeah,” she replied readily, her beautiful face stretched wide.

No more looking back at the bad and the what ifs.

From now on, I was looking at the future. Our future.

Hers and mine. And I have to tell you, it looked good from where I was standing.

Damn good.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

S waying back and forth with Avery on the dance floor as we celebrated Emmet and Jezebel's wedding was just about the best damn thing I ever experienced.

Truth was the curvy little human was driving me crazy. She was about seventy percent smart ass and thirty percent pure loudmouth most of the time, but I still found her irresistible.

Of course, I understood her reserve. Being a single mother was not easy. I should know having been raised by one. My Mama was the best damn woman I ever met.

Until now.

I think she'd approve of Avery. And little Rosalie. Hell, the beautiful little girl had me wrapped around her finger. I knew plenty of Shifters who wouldn't want anything to do with another male's cub, but to me the child was a bonus gift.

The tot had a secret, though. One she wasn't aware of, and I was pretty sure her mother was clueless as well. I just wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

"Well, look at you two all cozy. Mind if I cut in?" Kian interrupted us and, before I could tell the obnoxious bovine to fuck off, Avery stepped back and nodded her head.

"Sure. Um, thanks, Dante," she muttered, not looking me in the eye.

Kian started in right away on some cockamamie story. Damn Bull was always running his mouth.

I supposed I could make some joke about him being a bullshit artist, but I wasn't feeling very funny right then.

"Pick me up!" a little voice demanded, and my Bear's ears perked up as Rosie tugged on my pant leg and lifted her arms for me to pick her up.

"Pick you up? What are you supposed to say?" I chided gently.

"Please, Danny! Please!"

"Alright, Squirt. Come on," I said, grinning at the sweet cub.

"Dance, Danny! Dance!"

I nodded my head and two-stepped her around the room, purposefully bumping my elbow into Kian's side.

"Ouch! Such a Bear on the dance floor, Danny," he said, grinning.

Fucking idiot.

"You don't get to call me Danny," I growled.

"That's my special name for Dante, Uncle Kian! Only I can call him that," Rosalie told him in her best no nonsense voice.

"Rosie, are you getting tired? Sorry Dante, you don't have to carry her," Avery said, opening her arms for her baby girl.

Normally, I would have told her it was no problem. But if handing her Rosie meant Avery stopped dancing with Kian, then I was all for it.

I watched the two females walk back to their table, and my inner Bear chuffed in approval.

“You know, Danny, if you want that woman, you’re gonna have to do more than stare at her longingly,” Kian said, right before he doubled over in pain as a result of me shoving my elbow into his gut.

“Don’t talk to me. We’re not friends,” I muttered and walked away.

“You just haven’t accepted our love!” the moron shouted after me.

He was right, though. I did want Avery. Ever since I met the curvy little goddess my Bear has been saying one word over and over again inside my mind’s eye.

Mate.

I just didn’t know if I was worthy of either of them. Rosalie lifted her head off her Mama’s shoulder, and her eyes glowed in the dimly lit barn.

Concern for her was growing by the day. I needed to have a serious talk with Avery about her daughter and who her father was before she discovered what I suspected to be true the hard way.

But how the hell was I supposed to start that conversation?

Guess it was on me to figure it the fuck out.

The end

—or really, I guess it is the beginning for Emmet and Jezebel.

Did you enjoy this book? Please consider leaving a review so other readers can find it, too. Thanks.

Want more Motley Crewd Shifters ?

Happy reading!

Ten years ago.

Shereen Morgan, or Sherry as she preferred to be called, crossed the bare wood floors of her small apartment. She came to the small seaside town on a whim.

She'd needed a change. A major one. Moving next to the sea seemed like an excellent idea at the time.

If only she knew. Despite her nomadic past, Sherry had immediately fallen in love with the beautiful landscape that comprised the Jersey Shore.

For the first time in her life, she wanted to settle down, grow roots.

The apartment she'd rented was small, but it suited her immediate needs. She had one goal when she chose the space, and that was to rest, relax, and recuperate some of the energy she'd spent over the past few months. But all of that changed when she'd met him .

Her body still tingled from their fevered embraces, but still, sadness threatened to overwhelm her. She inhaled a deep breath and allowed the energy in the room to settle over her.

Don't be a coward. Sherry frowned. It wasn't like her to dawdle. She usually preferred to rip off the band-aid so to speak. Not this time.

Slowly, she exhaled the breath she'd been holding. Sherry glanced down at the note that sat unobtrusively beside the silverware caddy. She grimaced as she picked up the

surprisingly light paper off the tiled counter inside her small kitchen nook.

She'd decorated the small space with cheerful yellow paint and brightly colored curtains. But the happy décor did nothing to soothe her soul in that moment. Her hands trembled as she fingered the smooth edge of the paper.

He'd methodically torn it off of the legal pad that still sat on the clean wood table. Carefully as if not to rip it. And yet he's ripped my heart from my chest.

She took a moment to observe just how deliberately he'd folded his missive. His placement of it, propped up to ensure she'd see it almost as soon as she entered the room, just as thorough. How like him.

The familiar and neat, yet very masculine hand, had scrawled her name intently across the back of the page. Oh Seff. Dread filled her. She hated her own weakness. The fear she felt in the pit of her stomach that accompanied the pain that squeezed her heart.

She was not a true clairvoyant, but sometimes Sherry had psychic hits that proved all too accurate. Especially where he was concerned. S he sighed and replaced the note without opening it. She knew what it would say, but dammit , she wished she were wrong.

She'd thought that he of all people would have at least listened to her side of things! True, she couldn't expect him to ignore the edict of Zev Maccon, his Pack Alpha, but still. He could have talked to her.

Zev Maccon. The man was an all-around bastard. He hated everything and anything to do with magic. Especially the creatures who'd been born to it. Like me. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on her.

Sherry was a Witch. A fact of her birth that she could not control, nor deny, even if she wanted to. Magic was indeed real. Seff, as a Werewolf, had undoubtedly known about its existence.

Still, he hadn't connected it with her until they'd already become involved. My fault, she thought guiltily. She'd kept the truth of her powers from him.

Sherry recognized Seff was a Werewolf from the start. Surprised by the sheer force of her undeniable attraction to him, she'd delayed telling him the truth about herself. Foolish Witch.

At that time, she'd only heard rumors of the Macconwood Pack's Alpha and how adamantly he warred against magic. In fact, it was part of the reason she'd ventured to Maccon City.

To find out if the rumors were true, and to advise the Elders Trust on how to proceed. She hadn't really believed the accounts that a Wolf could object vehemently to magic. After all, what was a Werewolf if not magical?

When supernatural factions had disagreements, there were special forces called in to weigh on them.

Guardians to be precise. But before they were sent in, a third party was sent to gauge the situation.

Sherry had needed a break. She'd heard about the trouble and offered her services to the Order of the Guardians.

Having little contact with Werewolves before, she'd expected most of what she heard to be gross exaggeration. Her plans were to watch from afar while drinking in the sun and enjoying the cool waters of the Atlantic.

Then she'd met Seff. And the rest, as they say, was history. Had she known then that his Alpha had decreed to his Pack that no Werewolf of his would associate with Witches, she might have prevented this entire mess.

Still, Sherry could not help the shake of her head at the irony of it all. Rejected for her magic. Anger coursed through her veins. Zev Maccon absolutely refused to acknowledge the magic that worked within his own Pack.

He debased her and her kind as filthy abominations. Witches are not worthy to live let alone to be trusted. And as part of his Pack, Seff had no choice but to submit to Zev's fanatic views.

Sherry had spent years of her life steering clear of unnecessary strife. She'd rejected that part of her magic that was prone to violence and war. She had no desire to fight or to police other supernaturals.

It was inevitable that she'd run smack into a fight when she'd only been there to do some research and rest her weary bones. The Fates strike again. She wondered what she'd done to tempt them to break her heart.

It would have been so much simpler had she just said no when the Elders trust asked her to gather information on the Pack.

Werewolves in general were secretive, but none so much as the Macconwood.

Sherry's curiosity had gotten the better of her.

She'd been thrilled at first. She'd never seen so many Wolves in one place.

The small town was ripe with them. After spending the last few years stuck in a damned desert doing the bidding of the Elders Trust , that pesky council of the

leaders of the White Covens of the world, she'd been looking forward to some down time. This had seemed like the perfect assignment.

She waved her hand and the teapot on the table filled with the steaming herbal concoction that she favored. The note sat heavy in her hand. Coward. Open it.

Instead, she thought back on when she'd first met him . Seff McAllister, Werewolf, and all-around good guy with his boyish charm, exquisite, good looks, athletic build, and confident yet gentle nature.

Sherry had fallen for him. Hard . How could she not? He was made for her. Or so she thought. She thought she'd found her mate. Her true love. She had believed Seff loved her enough to get through the whole difficulty with his Pack. I was wrong.

The shock of her admittance was nothing compared to the words written in his Dear Jane letter. Her eyes closed on a wave of pain that shocked her to her core as she read his departing note. Oh Seff, we could have been great together.

She knew she should have told him as soon as he walked into her life that she was a Witch. And not just a Witch, she was a Morgan. Hers was one of the most powerful magical lineages known. She was a direct descendant of the Morrigan , once worshipped as a goddess amongst the ancient Celts.

Her famous ancestors also included Morgan Le Fay, that wronged half-sister of the legendary, but no less real, King Arthur of the Britons.

She came from warriors, supernatural magistrates who'd brought judgement, and oftentimes death, to the lands they'd touched.

They were both feared and revered, sometimes worshipped, by the Covens they'd served.

When Shereen Morgan was born it had been under a Blue Moon during a lightning storm. An omen, they'd later told her. Her mother had sacrificed her life for her child. She had been taught the ways of the Morganna by her grandmother.

Sherry was bright and powerful. Gifted by the Fates. Her skills unmatched, she'd wielded her power for whatever Coven her grandmother had assigned her to.

Once her grandmother's health began to decline, Sherry had put down her sword. She chose to nurture the healing arts instead. She was proud of her magic and her history. Especially once she began her journey as a healer and a guide to others looking for truth and peace.

Still, despite how far she'd come and how good she felt about herself. Neither feeling stopped her from withholding the truth about her magic from the one person she should have been honest with. And now, it was too late.

She had already given her heart to the young, incredibly handsome Werewolf by the time she'd whispered that she was a Witch in his ear. Seemed she'd been right in hiding that fact. Once he'd discovered the truth about her, he'd left.

Not that she could really blame him, though she tried. Seff had been raised to hate magic. Werewolves didn't trust Witches. Zev Maccon had declared all Witches the enemy of the Macconwood Pack. Seff's Pack .

Sherry had been curious about him from the first. Her intense attraction to the Werewolf shocked her.

She hadn't lied about what she was. Well, not exactly.

She simply hadn't flaunted her powers. The scent of her anima magicae , the heart of her magic, was easily masked with perfume and her constant baking. She'd always

loved to cook.

She wanted to weep when she thought of all the time they'd spent together. Didn't it mean anything to him at all? Especially these last few days.

They'd cooked Szechuan in her tiny kitchen, watched game shows where he blurted all the answers, danced in the living room to the sound of the rock band that practiced next door.

He'd brought her small gifts every time he dropped by. Candied apples, licorice whips, the red kind not the black, and of course, flowers. Potted ones so she could water them and watch them grow from their perch on her windowsill.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:58 pm

The weeks had flown by. It really hadn't been a surprise when the first real chill of October had set in the previous evening, that Sherry had opened her arms and her heart to him. After dinner, she'd turned on a horror film and brought them dessert to share in front of the screen.

She'd fallen in love over apple pie and ice cream. He'd turned to her after lowering the volume and feeding some more wood to the already roaring fire in the hearth. Those clever hands of his swept away her blouse and bra without her even noticing.

Before long, Seff had stripped off her skirt and her underthings, baring her flesh to his eyes and mouth. He'd murmured words of praise and tender endearments as he kissed and touched her in the most wonderful ways. Her body trembled at the memory of how he'd made the sweetest love to her.

Sherry's eyes stung, but still she felt no regret. It had been mutual and wonderful. Seff had skillfully seduced her willing body, building pleasure until she could no longer hide who and what she was.

The magic that had always been a part of her had pulsed from within as her senses became lost in his touch. In the end, it was her eyes that had given her away. In her ecstasy, they'd changed color as they were known to do. First hazel, then gold, and finally, to a deep, glowing amethyst.

"Sherry? Are you okay? Your eyes are different. They're changing color and glowing, but you, you're not a Shifter? I'd smell it on you. Oh God, you're a Witch!" He'd been surprised at first, but still, he had not scurried away.

“Yes, it’s true, I am a Witch and I know you are a Werewolf.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” his voice was laced with sadness and awe.

“Because I know how your Alpha feels about us. Are you going to stop?”

“I don’t think I can,” he whispered.

“Are you not afraid?”

With his thickness still buried inside her pulsing cleft, Sherry had feared his withdrawal more than she’d cared to admit. He’d looked at her with his own brilliant brown eyes glowing, his Wolf shone brightly in them.

Caught up in wave after wave of passion and desire, he’d kissed her lips, claiming them with his own. Seff played her body like a master. Every touch, every movement, every meeting of their lips had culminated into a symphony of pleasure that grew and grew until she could no longer bear it.

“The only thing I am afraid of is how much I want you.”

He pushed himself deeper inside of her heat. Grinding into her core while his lips did marvelous things to her neck and, finally, the tips of her breasts that ached with need.

He seemed to know instinctively how and where to touch and kiss. His hips drove in and out of her, the friction of his muscular body against her soft one created a feeling of pure ecstasy with each powerful thrust.

He sucked her tongue into his mouth, his teeth nipping the sensitive flesh of her lower lip.

Electric bolts of pleasure zipped down her spine, right to her core as he swirled his

hips and stroked her deep inside.

His scent filled her nostrils, clean and fresh with a spicy musk that was all him.

She wondered briefly if she would ever wash those sheets again.

She could breathe in the scent of him forever.

“Oh God. Sherry, you feel like fucking heaven. So damn good.” He growled and thrust faster, losing himself in her heat.

She welcomed his loss of control, reaching up and scratching her nails down his back. Whispering words in his ear that she’d be embarrassed to say in the light of day. But not right then and not with Seff.

They spent the entire night together. Between bouts of exquisite lovemaking, they’d talked, really talked.

She’d told him of her magic, and he’d told her of his brother and his place within the Macconwood Pack.

He’d been young when his parents had died, and he’d had to rely on Zev Maccon to provide for them.

Sherry could have wept for the little boy he’d been, but he’d silenced her tears with more kisses. They came together again on the rug and once more on the bed. Their bodies spent, but still hungry for one another.

Seff was a fantastic lover. Just as she’d expected. Each encounter more passionate, more urgent, until Sherry was certain she’d declared her love for him aloud. How could she not when every fiber of her being wanted to shout it from the rooftops?

Expecting him to be skilled was one thing, losing her heart and soul in the span of one night was quite another. She'd never felt that way in all her long years on the earth.

Being magically inclined, she did not age the same as normals and was older than she looked.

Not that age mattered, Wolves and shifters shared similar traits and Seff was also older than any normal would have guessed.

Still, it was the first time she wanted to claim and be claimed in turn, by anyone as mate .

Though more modern in marital practices than most Shifters, Witches did still believe in the concept of true mates. Some went so far as to blame the Fates who they said sometimes took a keen interest in the bedfellows of one Witch or other.

One thing Sherry had heard all her life was that when the mating instinct began in a supernatural being, it was difficult to quell. Sometimes impossible.

Sherry had grown up with tales of Witches gone mad when kept from mating with the one the Fates had chosen for them.

One of her own ancestors was such a Witch.

Others of course, did not believe in true mates.

Still, they married, had children, and lived productive lives.

And others still, wasted away for want of their true mates, choosing solitary lives until they perished from the loneliness.

Being magical in no way guaranteed happiness. As she could now attest to. Sherry stemmed the flow of tears that threatened to overcome her as she watched the play of sunlight on the folded note. She inhaled and caught his scent on her skin and in the air.

It was unfortunate, that she, one of the most powerful Witches of the last age, one who had denied the whims of her heart for many years, had finally let the blasted organ free, only to have it betray her.

Her foolish heart had chosen most unsuitably. A Werewolf who would put his Pack before her. Oh Seff.

The object of her desire had slipped away during the night. Slipped away like the thief he was. True, he left her a note. A note! The dog!

She opened it and could have howled her rage. He told her to forget about him, he explained that he had nothing to give her.

We have no future. Last night is in the past. Forget me.

Sherry grieved for what could have been, but she was not one to wallow. Head held high, she set the note aflame with but a wave of her ring adorned hands. She packed up the small apartment with another flick of her wrist and was gone within the hour.

Forget the Wolf and move on.

If only it was that easy.

Read more here: [The Witch and the Werewolf](#)