



# Falling for My Shifter Guardian (Wild & Forbidden Mates #5)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The moment I met her, I knew that she was mine—but I also knew I could never have her.

For years, I've kept my distance, watching over Olivia from the shadows.

She was too young, too innocent—and I had too many demons to ever entertain the thought of more.

But now, she's not a girl anymore. She's a woman—a fierce, determined woman who ignites a fire in me I can't control.

I've spent years burying the truth—that she's my fated mate

But the pull is getting harder to resist. I'm supposed to be her protector, not her lover.

The hunters are coming, her oldest friend is hiding deadly secrets, and I can't let her get caught in the crossfire.

But how can I keep her safe when the biggest threat to her might be me?

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Olivia

The scent of coffee and sizzling bacon clings to my clothes as I weave through the crowded diner, balancing a tray of plates in one hand and a coffee pot in the other. It's been a long day—double shifts always are—and I'm running on caffeine and sheer stubbornness. The bell above the door jingles again, and I bite back a groan. Whispering Pines Diner never slows down, especially on Friday nights.

"Table six is staring at you like you're dessert," Maya calls out as I pass her at the counter. Her dark curls are piled into a messy bun, and she's wiping down a sticky spot with the kind of efficiency that only comes from years of practice.

I glance over my shoulder and catch Ethan's grin from his usual booth. He lifts his coffee cup in a lazy salute, his amber eyes twinkling with mischief. I roll my eyes, fighting a smile. Ethan's harmless enough, but his playful flirting isn't exactly what I need in the middle of an eight-hour shift.

"He's not staring at me," I mutter, setting down plates at table four.

"Oh, he's definitely staring at you," Maya says, her voice dropping into a conspiratorial whisper. She leans on the counter, smirking. "You know shifters don't do subtle, right? If he had a tail, it'd be wagging."

I laugh despite myself. "Well, he can keep wagging from over there. I don't have time for a lovesick wolf."

Maya snorts. "Suit yourself, but don't act surprised when he starts showing up with

flowers or something. Shifters don't give up easily."

I shake my head, still smiling, and pour a fresh cup of coffee for a customer at table two. Maya follows me to the counter, leaning on it as I grab a fresh pot.

"So, what are your plans this weekend?" she asks, her voice casual but curious. "Don't tell me you're working another double."

I sigh, setting the coffee pot down. "Not this time. I actually have the whole day off tomorrow."

Maya raises her eyebrows in mock surprise. "A miracle. So, what's the plan? Netflix marathon? Sleeping until noon?"

I grin. "Tempting, but no. I was thinking about taking my camera out and finally getting some shots around the park. The light is amazing this time of year, and I haven't had a chance to do any real photography in months."

Maya's face softens, her teasing replaced with genuine interest. "Yeah? That's awesome. You've been talking about getting back into it for ages."

"I know," I admit, a little sheepishly. "It's just hard to find the time between shifts here and, you know... life."

"You mean supporting yourself while chasing the dream?" she says knowingly. "I get it. But seriously, Liv, you're good. Like, really good. You should be out there doing more with it."

"Thanks, Maya," I say, feeling a warm flush of gratitude. "I just need to save up a little more before I can make it happen. The camera equipment alone costs a fortune, and don't even get me started on editing software."

“Well, you better make time for it,” she says, wagging a finger at me. “The world needs more of your artsy sunset shots and cute squirrel close-ups.”

I laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

I shake my head and head back toward the kitchen. Maya’s one of the few people in town I trust, and she doesn’t shy away from what she is. I’ve always respected that about her.

What’s harder to figure out is Ben.

When my dad died, Ben was the one person I could count on. We moved to Whispering Pines together, both looking for a fresh start, though for different reasons. He was my anchor back then—my best friend, my constant. Growing up, he always seemed larger than life: the boy who could talk his way out of trouble, who could make me laugh when I thought I’d forgotten how.

The bell jingles again, and I know it’s him before I even turn around. Ben walks in, holding a brown paper bag from the deli down the street. He spots me immediately, his blue eyes lighting up as he waves. For a second, it feels like the old Ben—the boy who used to make me laugh until my sides hurt.

“Brought you dinner,” he says, setting the bag on the counter with a proud smile.

I grin. “Thanks, Ben. You didn’t have to do that.” I work at a diner, but it’s nice to have a meal that isn’t deep fried.

“You’ve been here all day,” he says, his tone a little sharper than I expect. “You need to eat.”

The words feel more like an order than a suggestion, but I nod anyway. I can feel

Maya's eyes on us, her expression unreadable. It's like she's weighing something, though I don't know what.

Ben leans closer, lowering his voice. "Do you have to be so friendly with everyone? That guy at table six hasn't stopped staring at you."

I blink, caught off guard. "Ethan? He's just a regular. It's not a big deal."

Ben's jaw tightens, and he glances over his shoulder at Ethan, who's now chatting with Maya at the counter. "You should be more careful around people like him."

"People like him?" My irritation flares, but I keep my voice low. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ben shrugs, his expression guarded. "You know what I mean. Just... be careful."

I know exactly what he's hinting at—Ethan being a shifter. Ben's been acting strange about them for a while now, but it doesn't bother me. Why would it? My father's best friend was a wolf shifter, and I practically grew up around them. I've always liked shifters. They might be different, but they've never given me a reason to fear them. Maya's a wolf shifter too, and she's my best friend. If anything, I trust shifters more than I trust most humans these days.

Before I can respond, Maya clears her throat loudly. "Hey, Liv, your shift's almost up. Go eat your sandwich before I get stuck covering for you."

I give her a grateful smile and grab the bag, muttering a quick "thanks" to Ben. I watch him leave, his shoulders tense, his gaze darting to Ethan with a glare that lingers too long, I can't shake the feeling that something is fundamentally wrong.

I retreat to the break room. The sandwich is good, but the knot in my stomach doesn't

loosen. Ben's always been protective, but lately, there's an edge to it—sharper, heavier. I don't know when things started to shift, when that easy friendship turned into something uncomfortable. Maybe it was gradual, like the way cracks creep across glass—so small at first you almost don't notice, until one day, the entire thing splinters and falls apart.

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After my break, the diner starts to slow down, the buzz of the dinner rush fading into a quieter hum. I wipe down tables and refill coffee cups, letting my thoughts drift.

Ben wasn't the only one who moved to Whispering Pines after my dad passed away. Derek Mercer did too. My dad's best friend from the military. The man who'd been like a shadow in the background of my life ever since.

It's been three years, and I still don't understand why he's here. His reasoning was vague—something about wanting a quiet place to settle down after years of military work. At least, that's what I tell myself. That he moved here for the fresh start, not because of me. But sometimes, when I catch him looking at me, it feels like there's more to it. Something deeper. Something I can't quite name.

I shake my head, trying to focus on the task at hand. Derek's always been an enigma—quiet, stoic, impossible to read. And yet, there's something about him that draws me in. It's not just his looks, though there's no denying he's attractive in that rugged, salt-and-pepper, ex-military way. It's the way he makes me feel... safe. Like no matter what happens, he'll always be there.

But then there's the other side of him—the distance he keeps, the way he always seems to hold himself back. It's frustrating, and it makes me wonder if I'm imagining things. Maybe he doesn't see me at all. Not the way I see him.

The clock above the counter ticks loudly as I count down the minutes to the end of my shift. By the time I clock out, the diner is quiet, the kind of stillness that makes the night feel heavier. I step outside, the cool air brushing against my skin, and take a deep breath.

I'm halfway down the block when I see him.

Derek.

He's here. Again. Just like always. He has a way of appearing when I'm on the verge of needing him—and sometimes even when I don't.

Leaning casually against his black truck, his arms are crossed over his broad chest like a shield. The streetlight above flickers slightly, throwing jagged shadows across his sharp, weathered features. Somehow, the interplay of light and shadow only makes him look more imposing, more untouchable. My breath hitches, the familiar reaction settling in my chest like a drumbeat I can't control.

"You shouldn't be walking home this late," he says, his voice low and steady, with that unmistakable edge of authority that always sends a shiver down my spine.

"I'm fine," I reply, though my pulse quickens under his gaze. "It's only a few blocks."

"Get in." He nods toward the passenger side of his truck. "I'll take you home."

I hesitate, caught between wanting to argue and the strange pull I always feel around him. Finally, I nod and climb into the truck. The scent of leather and pine fills the cab, and I try not to fidget as he starts the engine.

The drive is quiet, the kind of silence that feels heavy with unspoken words. I glance

at him out of the corner of my eye, taking in the hard set of his jaw and the way his hands grip the steering wheel. He's always like this—calm, controlled, like nothing could shake him. But there's something else there, something I can't quite name. A fragility, maybe. Like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say softly as we pull up in front of my apartment complex, the hum of the truck's engine filling the silence between us.

Derek nods, his steel-gray eyes flicking to mine before shifting away, as if the weight of my gaze is too much. His fingers tighten on the steering wheel, knuckles whitening. For a second, I think he's going to say something, but instead, he exhales sharply, his jaw visibly clenching. “You don't have to thank me,” he says, his voice low and gruff. “I'll always be there when it matters.”

His words hang in the air, heavy and unspoken things lingering beneath them.

I open the door and step out, my pulse thrumming in my ears as I turn back to look at him. “Goodnight, Derek,” I say, my voice quieter than I intended.

He doesn't respond right away, his eyes fixed on the road ahead, his expression unreadable. Then, with a brief, almost imperceptible nod, he puts the truck into gear and drives off, the taillights disappearing into the night.

The stillness that follows feels deafening, and his words replay in my mind.

I'll always be there when it matters.

Does that mean I matter?



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Derek

I drive away from Olivia's complex, gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles ache. Her silhouette lingers in my mind, framed by the soft glow of the porch light as she turned to watch me leave. Her auburn hair caught the light just so, gleaming like fire, and I had to force myself to look away.

I shouldn't have offered her a ride. I shouldn't have been waiting outside the diner in the first place. But the thought of her walking home alone, vulnerable in the dark, was too much. It's always too much when it comes to her

The Howling Pines Pack house loomed ahead, its industrial frame softened by the warm light spilling from the tall windows. What was once a cold, utilitarian warehouse had been transformed into a sanctuary for the pack—a place of strength and unity. The lower floors housed Theo's security business, while the upper levels were dedicated to pack gatherings and private quarters. It was functional, modern, and unyielding, much like Theo himself.

I pulled my truck into the lot, the rumble of the engine fading into the stillness of the night. The familiar scent of cedar and faint traces of packmates' scents drifted through the air, grounding me momentarily. But the tension in my shoulders refused to ease. If anything, it had only gotten worse since I left Olivia's house.

By the time I stepped through the main doors, Theo was already waiting for me in the central hall. The space, with its mix of industrial roots and personal touches, radiated warmth—rugs softened the polished concrete floors, and leather couches were arranged to foster conversation. But tonight, the arrangement felt more like an arena

for confrontation.

Theo, Alpha of the Howling Pines Pack—and my alpha—stood with his arms crossed, his auburn hair catching the glow of the overhead lighting. His presence was commanding, his dark eyes sharp and unyielding, carrying the weight of his authority.

Beside him, Ryan, the Alpha of the Whispering Pines Pack, leaned casually against the back of a couch. His posture was relaxed, but the watchfulness in his green eyes betrayed his vigilance. To see Ryan here, in our pack's space, was still an unusual sight. The two packs had only recently begun working together after years of mistrust, and while progress had been made, the alliance still felt tenuous to me. A part of me wasn't used to seeing him in this setting—like he didn't quite belong, even though I knew his presence was necessary.

“Late again,” Theo said, his voice gruff, though his tone carried more disappointment than true anger.

“Had something to handle,” I replied evenly, meeting his gaze.

Theo snorted, the sound almost derisive. “Let me guess—‘something’ involves a certain human living on the edge of town?”

I clenched my jaw but didn't rise to the bait. Theo had been vocal about his disapproval of my connection to Olivia, even as her guardian, and he wasn't wrong to question my priorities. But he didn't know the whole truth—not about her, not about the bond, and certainly not about the constant war raging within me. And I planned to keep it that way.

Ryan stepped in before Theo could push further. “We need to focus,” he said, his voice calm but firm. “The hunters are getting bolder. Marcus spotted unfamiliar

vehicles near the northern ridge this afternoon. They're scouting us, testing boundaries."

"They've done more than scout," Theo added, his jaw tightening. "They're looking for weaknesses. It's only a matter of time before they make their move."

I nodded, the weight of their words settling heavily on my shoulders.

"We need to increase patrols," I said, my voice low but steady. "If they're scouting, they'll be looking for entry points. We can't give them any."

Ryan nodded in agreement, his expression thoughtful. "Agreed. We'll need to coordinate efforts between the packs. The northern ridge is too close to Whispering Pines—if they breach it, they'll be on us both."

"You've been spending a lot of time in Whispering Pines lately," Theo said, his tone calm but firm as his sharp gaze locked on me. His arms were crossed, an Alpha's authority radiating from his stance. "Are you sure you're not letting personal matters distract you from your responsibilities?"

The words landed harder than I wanted to admit, but I didn't flinch. "My judgment is fine," I replied evenly, keeping my voice steady. "Olivia—"

"Is not pack," Theo interrupted, though his voice lacked the edge it once might have held. "She's human, Derek. That doesn't make her any less valuable. But right now, with the hunters becoming more aggressive, we can't afford any distractions—not for you as Beta, and not for me as Alpha."

A low growl rumbled in my chest before I could stop it, my wolf bristling at the perceived challenge. Theo's expression hardened slightly, his stance shifting as if ready to hold his ground, but he didn't press further. Before the tension could build,

Ryan stepped forward, his measured tone cutting through the charged air.

“Enough,” Ryan said, his voice calm but commanding. “We’re all on the same side here. The hunters are the real threat, not this.” He glanced at Theo, then at me, his tone brokering no argument.

The tension in the room eased slightly, though Theo’s glare didn’t soften. I forced myself to take a deep breath, shoving my wolf back down. He wasn’t wrong, as much as I hated admitting it. My priority should be the pack, not Olivia. But the thought of leaving her vulnerable made my stomach twist.

The meeting continued with plans to increase patrols and set traps along the northern ridge, measures that would buy us time but not solve the problem. When it wrapped up, I volunteered to take the first watch. I needed the distraction, something to keep my mind off Olivia and the gnawing pull of the mate bond that I couldn’t seem to shake.

And yet, as I left the pack house and climbed into my truck, I found myself steering toward her neighborhood. It wasn’t intentional—or at least, that’s what I told myself. But the truth was, I couldn’t resist the urge to check on her, to make sure she was safe.

It was a lie, and I knew it.

I parked in the shadowy lot of a park not far from her complex and stepped out, the cool night air brushing against my skin. I stripped off my clothes, folding them neatly and placing them on the bench by my car. The shift came quickly, my body changing as my senses sharpened.

In an instant, the world transformed—every sound became clearer, every scent more vivid. The tang of asphalt mixed with the earthy richness of the trees, but one scent

stood out above the rest. Lavender, soft and familiar, intertwined with something uniquely Olivia. It ignited something primal within me, a pull I fought to keep at bay.

Moving silently through the shadows, I approached her apartment. Her scent grew stronger, wrapping around me—a mixture of comfort and torment that sank into my chest and refused to let go. Through the living room window, I saw her. She was sitting on the couch, laughing at something Ben had just said. The sound of her laughter should have soothed the tension knotting in my chest, but it only sharpened it. My gaze locked on the way his hand lingered on her wrist, his grip just a fraction too tight, his smile not quite reaching his eyes.

Was Ben crossing a line, or was I just too sensitive when it came to Olivia? I didn't know. But my wolf didn't care.

A growl rumbled low in my throat, vibrating through me like distant thunder. I took a step forward, the gravel beneath my feet crunching softly. Every instinct screamed for me to act—to shove him away from her, to tear his hand from hers and remind him exactly who she belonged to. My wolf's possessiveness burned hot and fierce, clawing at the edges of my control. But I couldn't. Not without revealing too much—about the mate bond, about the danger she was in, about who and what I really was.

So I stayed rooted in place, the restless energy surging through me as I watched. Olivia's laughter faded, her smile faltering for a split second as Ben leaned closer, his words too low for me to hear. Her hand shifted away from his, subtle but deliberate, her body leaning slightly out of his reach.

It was such a small movement, but it was enough. Enough to make my wolf bristle, his fury scraping against my restraint. Enough to leave me standing there, tense and torn, battling the primal urge to protect her from something I still wasn't sure was a threat—or just my own obsession.

When Ben finally left, I stayed in the shadows, watching as Olivia locked the door behind him. She leaned against it for a moment, her shoulders slumping as if the weight of the day had finally caught up to her. Then she turned off the lights and headed upstairs, leaving the house quiet and still.

Her father's dying request echoed in my mind, the promise I had made to watch over her. It was both a blessing and a curse. I owed him everything—my life, my loyalty, my respect. And yet, every time I saw her, it felt like I was betraying him. I wanted her so much it hurt, and that want made me feel like I was dishonoring the man who had trusted me with his most precious treasure. She wasn't mine to desire, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop.

I went back to the park and shifted back into my human form, the cool night air biting against my skin as I pulled on my clothes. As I turned to leave, I glanced back at her house one last time and whispered under my breath, "You deserve better, Olivia."

The words were carried away by the wind, unheard by anyone but me. But they lingered, heavy and unspoken, as I got into my truck and drove into the night.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Olivia

The camera feels steady in my hands. Whispering Pines Park is quiet today, just the way I like it. The sunlight filters through the canopy of trees, casting dappled shadows over the forest floor. Everything here feels untouched, serene. A refuge.

I crouch by the creek, adjusting the settings on my camera to capture the way the light glints off the moss-covered rocks. Photography has become my escape, my way of finding beauty in a world that hasn't always been kind. After Dad died, it was the only thing that made sense—a way to focus, to slow down, to look for something good in the chaos.

But today, even with the peaceful hum of the park around me, my thoughts keep drifting. No matter how many pictures I take, I can't stop thinking about Derek.

He's always been this quiet, looming presence in my life, like a shadow I can't quite shake. For years, he was just my dad's friend, the guy who showed up at the funeral with the weight of the world etched into his face. But now... now, I don't know. Something's different. Or maybe I'm different.

The way he looks at me sometimes—it's like he's holding back, like there's something he doesn't want me to see. And last night, when he gave me a ride home, the way his eyes lingered on me—it felt... intense.

Maybe I'm imagining it. Derek Mercer doesn't do feelings. He's all stoic glares and clipped words, a fortress with the drawbridge permanently up. Whatever I think I saw, it's probably just my imagination.

The sharp buzz of my phone snaps me out of my thoughts. I sigh, setting the camera down on a tree stump before pulling the phone from my pocket. It's Ben. Again.

Where are you?

Why didn't you tell me you were going to the park?

I could've come with you.

I stare at the messages, my jaw tightening. Lately, it feels like Ben always needs to know where I am, what I'm doing, who I'm with. At first, I thought it was just him being protective—he's always been that way. But now, it's starting to feel like something else. Something heavier.

I shove the phone back into my pocket without replying.

The sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel path behind me makes me tense. For a moment, I think it's Ben, come to find me after I ignored his texts.

But it's not.

It's Derek.

He's dressed casually—dark jeans and a gray Henley that stretches over his broad shoulders, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. His salt-and-pepper hair is slightly tousled, like he hasn't bothered to tame it today, and his steel-gray eyes lock onto mine the moment our gazes meet. He looks out of place here, too solid and imposing for the park's tranquility. But at the same time, he belongs. He always seems to belong, no matter where he is.

"I didn't expect to see you here," I say, my voice steadier than I feel.



His lips twitch, almost like he's about to smile but thinks better of it. "I was passing through. Thought I'd take a walk."

I raise an eyebrow. Whispering Pines Park isn't exactly a hotspot for casual strolls, but I don't press him. "Well, you found me. Congratulations."

He steps closer, his movements unhurried but deliberate. "What are you doing out here?"

I gesture to the camera resting on the stump. "Taking pictures. Trying to, anyway."

His gaze flicks to the camera, then back to me. "You're good at it," he says, and there's a sincerity in his voice that catches me off guard.

"You've seen my pictures?" I ask, surprised.

He nods once. "The ones you've posted online. They're... thoughtful. You see things other people don't."

The compliment warms me in a way I didn't expect, but it also makes me feel exposed, like he's been watching me more closely than I realized. "Thanks," I say softly, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "It's just a hobby, really. Something to keep me sane."

Derek's eyes linger on mine, steady and unflinching. "Why photography?"

I hesitate, unsure how much to share. But there's something about the way he's looking at me—like he genuinely wants to know—that makes me want to answer. "It started after my dad died," I admit, my voice quieter now. "I needed something to focus on, something that wasn't... everything else. And I guess it just stuck. It helps me see the world differently, you know? Like, even when everything feels chaotic,

there's still beauty if you look hard enough."

His expression softens in a way I've never seen before. For a moment, the weight he always carries seems to lighten. "Your dad would've been proud of you," he says, his voice low and certain.

The words hit me harder than I expect. "You really think so?"

"I know so," he says, and there's no hesitation in his tone. "He talked about you all the time. Said you were his greatest pride."

My throat tightens, and I have to look away, blinking back the sting of tears. "I miss him," I whisper. "Every day."

Derek nods, his gaze distant for a moment. "I miss him too. He... saved my life once. More than once."

I look up at him, surprised. "He never told me that."

"He wouldn't have," Derek says, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "That wasn't his style. But he was a hero, Olivia. To me, and to everyone who served with him."

The bittersweet ache in my chest deepens. Hearing Derek talk about my dad like this—it's comforting, but it also reminds me of everything I've lost.

The moment stretches, heavy and fragile, until my phone buzzes again. I flinch, breaking the spell.

I pull it out, already knowing it's Ben.

Why are you ignoring me?

I groan, shoving the phone back into my pocket.

Derek's eyes narrow. "Everything okay?"

"It's Ben," I say, trying to sound casual. "He's just... being Ben."

Derek's expression darkens, his posture shifting slightly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I shrug, avoiding his gaze. "He's been a little... intense lately. It's nothing."

"It doesn't sound like nothing."

There's a hard edge to his voice, one that sends a shiver down my spine.

I sigh, leaning back against the bench. "He's just been... controlling, I guess. But it's fine. I can handle it."

Derek's jaw tightens, and his hands clench into fists on his thighs. "You don't have to put up with that," he says, his voice low and firm. "You don't owe anyone your time or your patience, especially if they're making you feel small."

His words hit something deep inside me, something I didn't even realize was there. For a moment, I can't speak. All I can do is stare at him, wondering how someone who barely talks can say exactly what I need to hear.

"Thanks," I manage finally, my voice soft.

He nods, but the tension in his shoulders doesn't ease.

"Well, I'm about done for the day," I admit with a sigh. I sling my camera bag over

one shoulder.

“Let me drive you home,” Derek says.

I hesitate, caught off-guard by the sudden offer. “It’s not far. I can walk.”

“It’s getting late,” he replies, his tone steady, firm. “Humor me.”

There’s no arguing with Derek when he uses that voice. I roll my eyes, but a small smile sneaks across my lips. “Fine. But only because I’m carrying expensive equipment. Not because I think I need a bodyguard.”

I expect him to respond with one of his deadpan quips, but he just gives me that same unreadable look he always does—half intense, half inscrutable—and starts walking toward his truck.

The man is infuriatingly impossible to read.

His truck is parked at the edge of the lot, a sturdy, no-nonsense vehicle that suits him perfectly. As I climb into the passenger seat, the faint smell of cedar and leather surrounds me, and for some inexplicable reason, it feels... safe. Too safe. Like the kind of safe that makes my pulse quicken in all the wrong—or maybe all the right—ways.

Derek settles into the driver’s seat, his broad shoulders making the cab feel smaller than it really is. The low rumble of the engine fills the silence as he pulls onto the road, his hands gripping the steering wheel like it’s the only thing tethering him to the moment.

“You don’t have to keep looking out for me, you know,” I say, breaking the silence. My voice sounds braver than I feel. “I’m not a kid anymore.”

His jaw tightens, the muscle there twitching slightly. “I made a promise.”

“To my dad,” I murmur, barely loud enough to hear over the hum of the engine. “You’ve mentioned that before.”

He doesn’t respond, and the silence between us grows heavier, thicker, like it’s pressing against my chest. There’s something about Derek that always feels so weighty, like he’s carrying a world of things he’ll never say.

Before I can push him further, we reach my apartment complex. He pulls into a parking space, cuts the engine, and sits back in his seat, but he doesn’t move to leave.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say, hand on the door handle.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, his voice low, almost hesitant.

I glance back at him, my grip on the handle loosening. “Do you want to come in? For coffee or something?”

His brows lift slightly, like the idea hadn’t even crossed his mind. For a second, I think he’s going to decline—like always—but then he surprises me.

“Sure,” he says, voice gruff. “Coffee sounds good.”

I blink, momentarily thrown off. Derek Mercer, the king of keeping his distance, just said yes? I nod quickly, not wanting to give him time to change his mind, and lead the way to my apartment.

Inside, the dim lighting makes the space feel warmer, cozier. I set my bag down by the couch, gesturing vaguely toward the living room. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll get the coffee started.”

But of course, Derek doesn't sit. He lingers near the kitchen table, his sharp, watchful eyes scanning the room like he's assessing it for threats. I shake my head, half-amused, and step into the kitchen.

As I pull out two mismatched mugs, one of them wobbles, teetering dangerously on the edge of the counter. I lunge to catch it, but it slips through my fingers and shatters on the floor.

"Damn it," I mutter, crouching to pick up the larger pieces.

"Olivia, wait—" Derek's voice is sharp, but I've already reached for one of the shards. A sharp sting slices through my palm, and I hiss, pulling my hand back to see blood welling up along the cut.

In an instant, Derek is beside me, his movements swift and controlled. "Don't move," he orders, his voice firm but not unkind. He grabs a dishcloth from the counter and presses it gently against my hand. "Where's your first aid kit?"

"In the bathroom cabinet," I mumble, wincing as he applies pressure to the cut.

He disappears for a moment, returning with the kit he insisted I keep after I sliced my finger a few months ago. Kneeling in front of me, he opens it with practiced ease, his big hands working with surprising gentleness as he cleans the wound.

"You're always prepared, huh?" I joke weakly, trying to lighten the mood.

My eyes linger on him as he works—the way his brow furrows in concentration, the way his strong jaw tightens ever so slightly, like he's holding something back. My gaze drifts lower, taking in his broad shoulders that seem to fill the entire space around us, the way his forearms flex with every precise movement of his hands. Those hands—rough and calloused from years of labor and battle—move over my

skin with a gentleness that feels almost reverent.

“You’re good at this,” I say softly, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He shrugs, his steel-gray eyes flicking to mine for just a second before returning to his work. “Comes with the territory.”

“What territory?” I ask, trying to steady my breathing. “Being a human first aid kit?”

A flicker of amusement crosses his face, but when his eyes meet mine again, the humor is gone, replaced by something deeper. Something that makes my heart stutter and my breath hitch. “Being someone who cares,” he says, his voice low and steady.

The words land with a weight I’m not prepared for. His gaze holds mine, and I can’t look away. There’s something raw, almost vulnerable, in his expression—and it makes my chest tighten, my pulse quicken. The air between us feels charged, and I’m acutely aware of every point of contact between his hands and my skin.

He finishes wrapping the bandage around my hand, his fingers brushing against mine as he secures it with a piece of tape. The touch is fleeting, but it’s enough to send a spark racing up my arm. “There,” he says, his voice rougher now, like he’s fighting to maintain control. “You’re good to go.”

But he doesn’t move away immediately. Instead, he shifts just slightly, his nostrils flaring almost imperceptibly, as if he’s catching a scent in the air. My cheeks flush as I realize what it could be—what he could be smelling. My body betrays me, my breathing uneven, my skin tingling where his hands had been. His gaze lingers on me for just a fraction of a second longer than it should, and I swear his shoulders tense, as if he’s holding himself back.

I swallow hard, the room suddenly feeling too warm, too small. “Thanks,” I manage

to say, the word barely audible. “You didn’t have to do all that.”

He grabs the broom from the corner of the kitchen and begins sweeping up the broken mug with swift, practiced movements. “I told you—I made a promise.”

“To my dad,” I say again, my back pressing against the counter for support. “Is that the only reason you’re always taking care of me?”

He freezes mid-sweep, the broom still in his hand. The silence stretches, heavy and taut, as though the air itself is holding its breath. When he finally speaks, his voice is low, almost too quiet to hear. “You know why.”

My brow furrows. “No, I don’t. That’s the problem. You’re always there when I need you, but then you pull away. It’s... confusing.”

He straightens, turning to face me, his steel-gray eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my breath hitch. His expression is guarded, his jaw tight, as though he’s holding something back—something heavy, something important. “Olivia...”

He doesn’t say more, but the weight of my name on his lips feels like a confession. For a fleeting moment, I think he might finally tell me, finally let me in. His eyes soften, a crack in his armor, and I hold my breath.

But then, just as quickly, the shutters come down. He shakes his head, stepping back. “I should go,” he says abruptly, finishing the task of sweeping the shards into the dustpan. His movements are mechanical now, his voice distant. “I’ll take this out on my way.”

“Derek—” My voice is barely above a whisper, a plea I’m not sure I want him to hear.



“Goodnight, Olivia,” he says, his tone soft but unyielding, leaving no room for argument. Without another glance, he turns and walks away, the sound of the door closing behind him echoing in the now-empty room.

And just like that, he’s gone, leaving me standing in the middle of my kitchen with a bandaged hand and a head full of questions.

I sink into one of the chairs at the table, staring at the now-empty doorway. How can someone take such good care of me and still keep me at arm’s length? How can he make me feel so safe and so unsure at the same time?

I don’t have the answers. All I know is that Derek Mercer is a puzzle I’m not sure I’ll ever figure out.

But damn if I don’t want to try.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Olivia

The night air bites at my skin as I step out of the diner, pulling my jacket tighter around me. It's late—too late—and Whispering Pines is eerily quiet, the streets deserted except for the occasional flicker of a dying streetlamp. My feet ache from hours on the floor, and all I want is to get home, kick off my shoes, and drown the day in a pint of chocolate ice cream. The silence should be comforting, but it isn't. Not tonight.

I glance over my shoulder, the feeling of being watched crawling up my spine. Stop it, Olivia. You're just tired... and maybe letting Ben's paranoia get to you. That thought makes me wince. Lately, everything about him feels off—his constant warnings about danger, his sharp comments about my choices, his possessiveness.

I shake off the thought and take the shortcut through the park. It's not my usual route home, but my bed is calling, and the shadowy trees don't seem so threatening when the alternative is walking an extra ten minutes. I tell myself it's fine. Whispering Pines isn't exactly a hotbed of crime.

Except, the moment I step into the woods, something feels... wrong.

The air here is heavier, cooler. The pines rise like dark pillars around me, their branches whispering with the wind. My boots crunch against the dirt path, the sound too loud in the stillness.

Then I hear it.

A rustling noise, faint but distinct, followed by a low, guttural groan. I freeze mid-step, every nerve in my body on edge. My heart thumps hard against my ribs as I strain to hear, holding my breath.

There it is again. The sound of something—or someone—moving just beyond the tree line.

My instincts scream at me to turn back, to keep walking, to pretend I didn't hear anything. But my feet betray me, drawn forward by a mix of curiosity and dread. My phone is clutched tightly in my hand, my thumb hovering over the emergency call button.

“Hello?” My voice comes out shaky, barely louder than a whisper.

The rustling grows louder, and then I see him—a man lying crumpled on the park floor, his body twisted at an awkward angle. The metallic scent of blood hits me, sharp and undeniable, and my stomach lurches.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, rushing to his side.

He's young, maybe mid-twenties, his face pale and slick with sweat. His shirt is soaked with blood, the fabric clinging to a jagged wound on his side. Cuts and gashes crisscross his arms, and his breathing is shallow, uneven.

“Hey, can you hear me?” I ask, my hands hovering uselessly over him. He's alive—barely—but I have no idea what to do.

His eyelids flutter, and he lets out a pained groan. “No... no hospital,” he rasps, his voice barely audible. “Call... my pack.”

Panic claws at my chest, but I force myself to think. There's only one person who

might understand what's going on. Derek. He'll know what to do.

My fingers are trembling as I dial his number. It rings once—just once—before he picks up.

“Olivia?” His voice is sharp, alert, like he's already bracing for the worst.

“I—I found someone,” I stammer, my breath coming in short bursts. “He's hurt, Derek. Badly. He told me not to call an ambulance, just his pack. I don't know what to do—”

“Where are you?” he interrupts, his tone all business now.

“By the park, near the old gas station.”

“Stay there. Don't move. I'm on my way.” The line goes dead.

I look back at the man. His breathing is fainter now, his chest barely rising. “Hang on. Help is coming,” I whisper, pressing my hands against his side to slow the bleeding. The sticky warmth of his blood seeps through my fingers, and I bite back the rising tide of panic.

A truck screeches to a stop at the edge of the woods, and Derek emerges like a force of nature. He moves with purpose, his tall, broad frame cutting through the darkness, and for a moment, I forget to breathe. There's something about him—his presence, the way he commands the space around him—that makes the chaos feel a little less overwhelming.

“Olivia, step back,” he says, his voice low and firm.

“But—”

“Now.”

The intensity in his steel-gray eyes leaves no room for argument. Reluctantly, I move aside, my hands shaking as I wipe them on my jeans. Derek kneels beside Sam, his movements quick and practiced as he assesses the injuries.

“It’s Sam,” he mutters, more to himself than to me. “Damn it.”

“You know him?” I ask, my voice barely steady.

“He’s one of ours,” Derek says grimly. His jaw tightens, and there’s a flicker of something in his expression—anger, maybe, or fear. “Hunters did this.”

“Hunters?” The word feels foreign on my tongue, a puzzle piece that doesn’t fit.

Derek doesn’t answer. Instead, he lifts Sam with ease, cradling him like he weighs nothing. “You’re coming with me,” he says over his shoulder.

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s not safe for you to walk home alone. Get in the truck.”

There’s no point arguing. The look in his eyes is enough to tell me I don’t have a choice. I follow him to the truck, sliding into the passenger seat as he carefully lays Sam across the back.

The drive is tense, the air between us thick with unspoken words. Derek’s hands grip the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles are white, and his jaw is clenched in a way that makes the muscles in his neck stand out.

“Derek,” I say quietly, breaking the silence. “What’s going on? Who are the hunters?”

And why won't you ever tell me anything?"

His jaw tightens further, and for a moment, I think he's going to ignore me. But then he exhales sharply, his voice rough when he finally speaks. "Because it's not your fight, Olivia. It's mine."

"Not my fight?" I snap, anger rising in my chest. "I just found a man bleeding out in the park. How is this not my fight?"

Derek slams on the brakes as we pull into the parking lot of a large warehouse. He turns to face me, his eyes locking onto mine with a force that makes my heart skip a beat.

"I'm trying to keep you safe," he says, his voice low and raw. "That's all I've ever tried to do."

There's something in his tone that cuts through my anger, something vulnerable and almost... desperate. Before I can respond, Sam groans from the backseat, breaking the moment.

Derek is out of the truck in an instant, his focus snapping back to the injured man. I scramble to follow, my mind racing with questions that have no answers. The warehouse looms ahead, its enormous steel doors reflecting the faint glow of the moon. It's not what I expected—less industrial, more... homey, in a strange way. Warm light spills from windows high above, and the faint hum of voices filters through the walls.

Derek shoulders the door open, his movements careful but swift as he carries Sam inside. I trail behind him, my eyes darting around the massive space. The interior is a mix of rugged functionality and unexpected warmth—exposed brick walls, polished wooden floors, and an open layout that somehow feels welcoming despite its size.

A few people—men and women, all with the same sharp, alert energy as Derek—rush toward us the moment we enter. One of them, a tall man with auburn hair and dark eyes, barks out orders, and the others scatter to prepare a makeshift medical area.

“Theo,” Derek says, his voice tight as he passes Sam into the tall man’s arms. “Hunters. He needs help.”

The moment Derek disappears down the hallway with Theo and Sam, I’m left standing awkwardly in the middle of what feels like a living room designed by a lumberjack with unexpectedly good taste. The space is open and inviting, with oversized furniture, soft rugs, and the faint scent of cedar lingering in the air. It’s homier than I expected, but it does nothing to calm the nerves buzzing under my skin. My hands are still sticky with Sam’s blood, and I can’t shake the image of his pale, broken body from my mind.

I take a shaky breath, trying to make sense of everything. Hunters. Pack. Derek. None of it fits together in a way that feels real. How could I have lived my entire life without knowing this world existed? And how did Derek—a man who’s been a quiet, steady presence in my life—end up so deeply entangled in it?

I whirl around to find a petite woman with light brown hair and soft brown eyes standing a few feet away. She’s wearing a kind smile, but there’s a sharpness to her gaze, like she’s taking my measure even while her warmth puts me at ease. Beside her, a tall, broad-shouldered man with sandy blond hair is leaning casually against the wall, his arms crossed and his usual lopsided grin firmly in place. It takes me a second to recognize him—it’s the guy I’ve seen at the diner more times than I can count.

“Olivia,” Ethan greets me smoothly, his voice dripping with that familiar teasing charm. “Caught you slacking off, did I? What’s a hardworking lady like you doing

here?”

I roll my eyes, a small huff escaping before I can stop it. “Slacking off? Hardly. I see you so often I’m starting to think you live at the diner.”

“That’s because the coffee there is the best in Whispering Pines,” he shoots back with a grin that’s equal parts cocky and boyish. “Not to mention the best waitress.”

The woman beside him sighs, clearly exasperated but amused, like this is a routine she knows all too well. “Ignore him,” she says, stepping forward with an apologetic smile and offering her hand. “I’m Chloé. It’s nice to finally meet you.” Her voice is soft, but there’s an unmistakable confidence in the way she carries herself, like she’s used to keeping people like Ethan in check.

“Nice to meet you too,” I reply, offering her a small, apologetic smile instead of shaking her hand, mindful of the blood from Sam still staining my own. Chloé’s calm demeanor is a welcome contrast to the chaos I’ve just been thrown into.

Ethan tilts his head, studying me with a newfound seriousness, though his voice remains light. “You okay? You look like you’ve had one hell of a day.”

“More like a nightmare,” I admit, trying to keep my voice steady. “I just... I didn’t expect to find someone bleeding out in the park. And now I don’t even know what to think.”

Chloé’s expression softens, and she steps closer, her tone gentle but firm. “That must’ve been overwhelming. I promise, Sam’s strong. He’ll pull through. Now, why don’t you come with me? You should clean up—it’ll help you feel a little a little better.”

She leads me out of the community room and down a quiet hallway. Stopping at a



closet, she pulls out a set of soft gray sweats and hands them to me. “Here, these should fit. There’s a bathroom just ahead, and you can take a quick shower if you want. I’ll wait out here, and we can talk after.”

The bathroom is small but clean, the scent of lavender soap hanging faintly in the air. I close the door behind me and lean against it for a moment, exhaling slowly. My reflection in the mirror startles me—I look pale, with dried blood smeared on my hands and arms. The adrenaline that had been keeping me upright is finally wearing off, leaving me shaky and exhausted.

I strip off my clothes and step into the shower, letting the hot water pour over me. My muscles unwind, and for a few minutes, I let myself exist in the quiet rhythm of the water. It feels like I’m washing away not just the blood, but the weight of the day as well. By the time I’m done, the trembling in my hands has mostly subsided.

I towel off and pull on the sweats Chloé gave me. They’re a little big, but the soft fabric is comforting. When I step back into the hallway, I hear low voices coming from the community room. Following the sound, I find Chloé and Ethan sitting on the sofas, their expressions lightening when they see me.

“You look better,” Chloé says, offering me a small smile. She pats the cushion next to her, and I sit down, tucking my legs under me.

Ethan leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Feeling a little less like you’ve been through the wringer?”

I nod. “Thanks. The shower helped.” I glance between the two of them, my thoughts still spinning. “Derek said hunters were responsible. I’ve heard the word before, but... who are they? What do they want?”

Chloé glances at Ethan, and for a moment, a silent conversation seems to pass

between them. He shrugs slightly, as if to say, Go ahead. Chloé motions for me to sit on one of the oversized couches, and I sink into the cushions, grateful for the chance to finally sit. She takes a seat on the coffee table directly in front of me, folding her hands in her lap.

“The hunters are a group of humans,” Chloé begins carefully, her voice steady but tinged with gravity, “who believe shifters are dangerous. A threat to their way of life. They’ve been around for centuries, but recently, they’ve become more organized. More ruthless. They don’t just want to hurt us—they want to eradicate us.”

My stomach twists, and I glance at Ethan, whose easy grin is gone, replaced by a serious expression. He steps away from the wall and perches on the armrest of the couch, his amber eyes locking onto mine.

“They’ve been getting bolder,” Ethan says, his tone low and charged. “This... what happened to Sam... it’s just the beginning. They’re not playing games anymore, Olivia. They want us gone. All of us.”

A chill runs through me, and I wrap my arms around myself, trying to process what they’re saying. This isn’t just some isolated incident. This is a war—one I didn’t even know existed.

“Why?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. “Why would they do that?”

Chloé sighs, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “Fear. Prejudice. Power. Take your pick. They see us as monsters, as something unnatural. They don’t understand that we just want to live our lives, just like anyone else.”

Ethan leans forward, his expression softer now. “I know it’s a lot to take in. Trust me, I’ve seen that look on a lot of faces. But you’re safe here. Derek wouldn’t have brought you if he didn’t think so.”

At the mention of Derek, my chest tightens. Safe. The word feels hollow in the face of everything I've just learned. If hunters are out there—if they're willing to do that to someone like Sam—how can anyone be safe? And Derek... he's been living in this danger every day, carrying it without ever letting me see the weight of it.

"If this is what Derek deals with all the time..." I trail off, my thoughts spiraling. "How does he handle it?"

Ethan chuckles, though there's no humor in it. "Derek? He handles it by being a stubborn, overprotective pain in the ass."

Chloé smirks, but her eyes are kind as she looks at me. "He's one of the strongest people I know, but he carries a lot of responsibility. Too much, if you ask me. He doesn't like letting people in—it's his way of protecting them."

Her words hit me harder than I expect. Derek's protectiveness isn't new; it's been there since the day we met, always hovering at the edges of our interactions, unspoken but undeniable. But now, knowing what he's been shielding me from, it feels... different. Bigger. More personal.

My gaze drifts toward the hallway where he disappeared, the memory of his voice in the truck replaying in my mind. "I'm trying to keep you safe. That's all I've ever tried to do." There was something raw in his tone, something that felt like more than just duty. And the way he looked at me, like I was both the reason for his resolve and the source of his torment...

I shake my head, trying to clear the thoughts. This isn't the time to dissect whatever complicated emotions are swirling between us. But even as I tell myself to focus, my chest tightens with an unfamiliar mix of worry and longing. I've always thought of Derek as this unshakeable force, but now I see the cracks—the weight he carries, the sacrifices he's made. And for the first time, I wonder if I've been blind to something

that's been there all along.

"You love him," Chloé says softly, her voice pulling me from my thoughts.

I blink, startled. "What? No—I mean, of course I love him. He's... he's Derek. He's always been there for me."

Chloé's smile is small but knowing. "It's more than that, though, isn't it?"

I open my mouth to argue, but the words don't come. Because deep down, I know she's right. Derek isn't just my protector. He's the man I'm in love with. The realization has been there for a while now, growing quietly in my heart, even as I've tried to ignore it. And the thought terrifies me as much as it thrills me—especially now, with the hunters out there, threatening everything he stands for.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Derek

The outskirts of Whispering Pines are quieter than usual, the air heavy with the promise of rain. My boots crunch softly over the dirt path as I patrol the edge of town, the forest to my left, the faint bustle of the Farmer's Market filtering through the trees on my right. My wolf prowls inside me, restless, his growls low and insistent, vibrating at the back of my mind. Something's wrong. I can feel it deep in my bones—a sharp, gut-twisting certainty that danger is close.

I'm not the only one who's felt it. Theo's been on edge for weeks, ever since we caught wind of the hunters in the area. He's assigned some of the pack's most trusted members to take turns patrolling the town's borders, watching for anything out of place.

I clench my fists, the weight of responsibility pressing heavy on my shoulders. The pack is counting on me—and on Theo—to keep them safe, and I won't let them down. But the stakes feel higher now, sharper, because Olivia is here.

I pause, inhaling deeply. The air carries the familiar scents of the forest—damp pine, freshly churned earth—but beneath it, something sharper, fouler. It's faint, but it's enough to set every nerve in my body on edge.

And then I see him.

Ben Carter.

He's leaning against a lamppost outside the Whispering Pines diner, phone in hand,

his head tilted slightly as if lost in thought. But there's nothing casual about him. His movements are too sharp, his focus too deliberate. Every muscle in my body coils tight as I watch him. He's not scrolling aimlessly through social media. He's observing. Documenting.

I step back into the shadows of the tree line, my breathing steady, my senses sharpened. My wolf stirs, restless, as I track his gaze. It shifts subtly, landing on a pair of people exiting the diner—a man and a woman, both laughing, both oblivious to the fact that Ben's phone is now angled toward them. He taps the screen once. Twice. Taking photos.

Damn it.

My fists clench at my sides, the urge to confront him nearly overwhelming. But I force myself to wait, to watch. Ben's actions are too calculated, too precise. This isn't idle curiosity. He's gathering information. The man he just photographed—I recognize him. Carl, a shifter from Whispering Pines Pack. The woman, I don't know, but her scent carries the faint, earthy undertones of wolf. Ben's targeting shifters.

And he knows exactly what he's doing.

I shadow him as he pushes off the lamppost and starts walking, his movements casual but his gaze anything but. He scans the street, his attention flicking briefly to a young couple holding hands across the way. I catch the subtle shift in their posture—the man stepping slightly in front of the woman, his stance protective. Another pair of shifters. Ben raises his phone again.

Snap.

My jaw tightens, my teeth gritting against the growl threatening to escape. He's

building a catalog, a list. Targeting them like prey. My wolf paces, claws raking against the edges of my control, demanding action. But I hold back. Not yet.

Ben pauses near the entrance of the park, his fingers flying over his phone. He's typing now—notes, most likely. His head lifts occasionally, scanning the area like he's cataloging every face, every scent. I follow his line of sight and spot Marcus Blackwood, Ryan's Beta, leaning against a tree, arms crossed. Marcus doesn't notice Ben, but Ben sure as hell notices him. Another note. Another photo.

My muscles coil tighter, the need to act nearly unbearable. But then, from the corner of my eye, I see her.

Olivia.

She's walking toward the park entrance, her auburn braid catching the late afternoon sunlight, her light brown eyes scanning the area like she's looking for someone. Maya's with her, talking animatedly, her dark curls bouncing as she gestures. Olivia smiles at her friend, but there's a tension in her posture that stops me cold. She's been on edge lately, and now, seeing her here—seeing her anywhere near Ben—makes a low, dangerous growl escape my throat.

Ben spots her before she sees him. His entire demeanor shifts—his shoulders relax, his posture becoming less rigid, more casual. But it's a ruse. I see the sharpness in his eyes, the way his lips twitch with satisfaction. He shoves his phone into his pocket and steps toward her, his boyish grin sliding into place like a well-practiced mask.

“Olivia!” he calls, his voice warm, friendly. Too damn friendly.

She turns at the sound of his voice, her face lighting up with a smile that twists something deep inside me. “Ben! Hey.”

I step closer, keeping to the shadows, my heart pounding in my ears. Maya glances at him, her expression cautious, but Olivia doesn't notice. She still sees him as the boy who helped her through her grief. She doesn't see the predator he's become.

"Wasn't expecting to see you here," Ben says, shoving his hands into his pockets. "What're you two up to?"

"Just grabbing some air," Olivia replies. "Maya needed a break from work, and I needed a break from... everything else."

Her laugh is soft, but there's a strain in it that makes my chest ache. Ben doesn't seem to notice—or maybe he doesn't care. His attention flicks briefly to Maya, then back to Olivia, his grin widening.

I step out of the shadows.

"Ben." My voice is low, steady, carrying the weight of a command.

He freezes mid-step, his head snapping around to meet my gaze. His surprise is obvious for a split second before he masks it with a tight smile. "Derek," he says, his tone casual, but his eyes are calculating. "Didn't see you there."

"I'm sure you didn't." My voice is flat, my gaze unyielding.

Behind him, Olivia turns, her light brown eyes locking onto mine. For a moment, the world narrows to just her—her soft freckles, the way her lips part slightly in surprise, the way her presence pulls at something primal and undeniable inside me. My wolf surges forward, desperate to close the distance, to claim what's his.

But then Ben shifts, stepping closer to her, and the moment shatters.



“Funny how you’re always around when Olivia is,” Ben says, his tone light but laced with something darker.

My wolf bristles, and I take a step closer, towering over him. “Funny how you’re always where you shouldn’t be.”

Ben’s mask slips for a fraction of a second, his jaw tightening. But then he glances at Olivia, his expression softening. “Just looking out for her,” he says, his voice dripping with feigned warmth. “You know, with all the... strangers around.”

Maya snorts, crossing her arms. “Oh, don’t mind me. I’ll just be over here, being one of those ‘strangers.’”

Olivia frowns, glancing between us. “Seriously, what is going on?”

I keep my eyes on Ben, my voice calm but firm. “Just making sure everything’s okay.”

Ben scoffs, his bravado faltering under my stare. “Yeah, well, everything’s fine. Thanks for your concern, Derek.”

His sarcasm is thin, but I don’t miss the flicker of fear in his eyes. He knows. He knows I’m onto him.

“Good,” I say, stepping closer until I’m inches from him. “Because if it wasn’t, you’d have a problem.”

The warning is clear, and Ben’s face pales slightly. He holds my gaze for a moment longer before turning to Olivia, his voice softening. “I’ll catch you later, Liv.”

But Olivia doesn’t respond. Her eyes are still on me, searching for answers I can’t

give her.

Ben stalks off, his shoulders stiff, his steps hurried. I watch him until he disappears into the crowd, my wolf still growling, my instincts screaming that the worst is yet to come.

Maya nudges Olivia with her elbow, a smirk playing on her lips. “Well, that was sufficiently awkward. You’ve got some real tension brewing over there. Care to explain?”

Olivia sighs, brushing a strand of auburn hair out of her face. “There’s nothing to explain. Ben’s just... Ben.” Her voice wavers slightly, and I catch it because I’m hyper-aware of everything about her—the way her hands fidget with her shopping bag, the way she avoids looking at me.

Maya doesn’t let up. “Uh-huh. And what about him?” She tilts her head toward me, her teasing grin widening. “Big, broody guardian angel following you around like a shadow. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Olivia’s cheeks flush, and my wolf perks up, pleased by the reaction even as I inwardly groan. Maya’s sharp. Too sharp. “Derek’s just looking out for me,” Olivia says quickly, her tone defensive. “Right, Derek?”

I force myself to keep my expression neutral, though my wolf rumbles with approval at being acknowledged. “That’s right,” I say, my voice low and steady. “Just here to make sure you’re safe.”

Maya raises an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. “Safe from what, exactly? The terrifying menace of overpriced honey and organic kale?” She laughs, and Olivia joins in, though it’s strained. I don’t.

“I have my reasons,” I say flatly, my eyes flicking toward the crowd where Ben disappeared. Maya’s laughter fades as she picks up on the edge in my tone.

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop prying,” Maya says, holding her hands up in mock surrender. “But seriously, Derek, you look like you’re about two seconds away from picking a fight with a zucchini. Relax.”

Relax. If only it were that simple.

The three of us continue through the market, but I stay close, my senses on high alert. Olivia and Maya chat as they browse stalls, Maya occasionally throwing little jabs my way. My wolf doesn’t mind the teasing; he’s too focused on Olivia, soaking in her presence like a balm to the tension thrumming through me. Every laugh, every smile she shares with Maya is a reminder of what I can’t have, and it’s both torture and solace.

Maya picks up a bouquet of wildflowers, holding it up to Olivia’s face. “What do you think? Too rustic for my apartment, or just the right amount of ‘I live in the woods, but I’m still chic’?”

Olivia laughs, a sound that makes something inside me ease, even if just for a moment. “Definitely chic. But you’ll have to fight me for them.”

“Uh, no way. You can’t just steal my flowers,” Maya retorts, laughing as she pulls the bouquet back.

I step closer without thinking, my eyes scanning the crowd again. Ben is gone, but that doesn’t mean other threats aren’t lurking. My wolf itches to track him down, to dig into whatever it is he’s hiding, but I can’t leave Olivia unguarded. Not now. Not ever.

After another thirty minutes of this—Maya teasing, Olivia smiling, and me following like a silent sentinel—we finally head toward the parking lot. Maya waves her bouquet as she heads to her car, calling over her shoulder, “See you later, Liv. And Derek, try not to scare off all the farmers next time, yeah?”

Olivia chuckles softly, shaking her head. Then she turns to me, her expression shifting from amused to exasperated. “Are you really going to follow me all the way home?”

I don’t answer. I just gesture toward her car, silently urging her to get in. Her light brown eyes narrow as she studies me, as if trying to decipher some hidden meaning I’m not ready to reveal.

“Unbelievable,” she mutters, but she climbs into her car.

I wait until she’s pulled out of the lot before getting into my truck and following her, keeping a careful distance. My wolf is restless, pacing inside me, snarling and clawing, his agitation mirroring the storm brewing in my chest. The memory of Ben’s hand on her arm burns in my mind, his grip too tight, his anger too sharp. My hands clench the steering wheel, the leather groaning under the pressure.

She was right; I am following her home. But it’s not just about Ben anymore. It’s about the hunters, the danger closing in, and the mate bond that refuses to let me look away.

It’s about her. It’s always been about her. And as much as I try to tell myself otherwise, I know I won’t stop until she’s safe—whether she wants my protection or not.

The promise I made to her father—to protect her, to keep her safe—repeats in my mind like a mantra. But it’s not just the promise binding me. It’s her. My mate.

She doesn't know. She can't know. And yet, my wolf howls for her, demanding I tear down every barrier I've carefully erected over the past three years. I can't. Not when Ben's scent reeks of something darker. Not when danger circles closer every day.

Olivia pulls into her apartment complex, parking in her usual spot. I stop my truck across the street, watching as she climbs out. Before I can stop myself, I'm out of the truck, my boots crunching against the gravel as I cross the street.

"Olivia." Her name comes out rough, my voice heavier than I intended.

She freezes, spinning around to face me, her auburn hair whipping across her face. "So, you did follow me."

She turns and unlocks her apartment door with an irritated sigh, stepping inside without inviting me in. She rolls her eyes but doesn't close the door in my face, leaving it slightly ajar. I take it as an unspoken invitation—or maybe just her begrudging tolerance—and step inside, shutting the door behind me. The scent of vanilla and something distinctly hers fills the small space, making it harder to focus. My wolf presses against my control, restless.

She turns to face me, arms crossing over her chest, her keys still clutched tightly in one hand. "So, what's this all about?" she says, her tone laced with frustration.

"We need to talk about Ben," I say, my voice coming out rougher than I'd planned.

Her eyes narrow, and for a second, I see more worry than anger in her expression. "No, we really don't." She drops her keys onto the small table near the door, her movements sharp and deliberate. "What we need to do is talk about you —about why you think it's okay to follow me, to show up unannounced like this, and act like you care when you can't even admit it."

Her words hit hard, but it's not the accusation that stings—it's the truth beneath them. She steps closer, and I can see the tension in her shoulders, the way her fingers twitch like she's trying to hold herself steady. "You can't keep doing this, Derek. Showing up, warning me about Ben like he's suddenly the bad guy, when he's been my best friend for years. You think I don't notice how you're always watching me? How you're always there, but never really there?" Her voice softens, wavering just slightly, and I can feel the weight of her frustration, her confusion.

"I'm trying to protect you," I say, my voice low, vibrating with the effort to keep my wolf in check. "You don't understand what's happening—what's at stake."

"Then explain it to me!" she snaps, throwing her hands up. "Because right now, it feels like I'm standing in the middle of a battlefield I can't even see, and you're just adding to the chaos. If Ben's such a danger, tell me why. If you care about me, really care about me, then stop hiding behind excuses and half-truths."

Her words are a challenge, but there's something else in her tone—something fragile, like she's asking for more than just answers. For a second, I think about telling her everything—the hunters, the mate bond, the promise I made to her father. But the weight of it all presses down on me, and the words stick in my throat.

"You wouldn't understand," I grit out, my fists clenching at my sides. I can feel my nails biting into my palms, the sharp sting grounding me.

"Try me," she says, her voice softer now, but no less firm. She's close—too close—and the scent of her wraps around me, warm and intoxicating, like vanilla and sunlight. My wolf stirs, restless, clawing at the edges of my control. "Whatever it is you're hiding, it can't be worse than this," she continues, her eyes searching mine. "This constant push and pull, like you're here but you're not. Like you care but you can't say it. I'm not a child, Derek. Stop treating me like one."

My chest tightens. She doesn't understand. She can't. "You have no idea what's really going on."

"Then tell me!" she bursts, throwing her hands up. "Stop with the cryptic warnings and vague threats. Stop treating me like I'm some fragile thing you have to shield from the world. Why do you even care so much?"

Her words hang in the air, heavy and unforgiving. The mate bond pulses between us, an unrelenting force pulling me closer to her. My wolf surges forward, clawing at the edges of my control. Her scent—vanilla and sunshine—fills my lungs, drowning out every rational thought.

Because you're mine.

The truth is on the tip of my tongue, but I can't say it. Instead, I close the remaining distance between us, backing her against the door. Her breath hitches, her wide eyes locked on mine.

"Because you mean more to me than you'll ever know," I rasp, the words tumbling out before I can stop them.

Her lips part in surprise, and the last shred of my restraint snaps. My hands move on their own, cupping her face as I crush my mouth to hers. The world falls away in an instant, leaving only her—the warmth of her skin, the softness of her lips, the way she gasps against me before kissing me back.

The bond explodes like wildfire, surging through me with an intensity I've never felt before. My wolf howls in triumph, claiming her in ways I've only dreamed of. She tastes like everything I've ever wanted, everything I've denied myself.

Her hands grip my jacket, pulling me closer, and for a moment, I let myself believe

this could work. That I could have her. That she could be mine.

Reality crashes back into me like a brutal punch. What the hell am I doing? I pull away, stumbling back as if distance can undo the kiss, undo what I've just done. She blinks up at me, her cheeks flushed, her lips slightly swollen. She's beautiful. Too beautiful.

"I shouldn't have done that," I mutter, my voice hoarse.

"Derek, wait—"

"Stay away from Ben." My words come out sharper than I intend, but I can't soften them. I can't stay here, not when every part of me is screaming to pull her back into my arms. I turn and walk away, each step heavier than the last.

Behind me, her front door slams shut, the sound echoing in my chest like a gunshot.

My wolf snarls in fury, clawing at my resolve. She's ours, he growls. Go back. Claim her. Protect her.

But I can't. Not like this. Not with the hunters closing in and Ben skulking in the shadows, threatening everything I've worked to protect. I've already crossed too many lines tonight.

I climb into my truck, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. The taste of her lingers on my lips, a cruel reminder of what I can't have. I drive away, forcing myself not to look back.

But as the distance grows between us, the bond pulses stronger, reminding me of what I've left behind. And I know—no matter how far I run, no matter how hard I fight—it's only a matter of time before I'm drawn back to her.



Because she's mine.

And I'm hers.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Olivia

The photo feels heavier than it should in my hands. It's just a cheap frame, the kind you pick up in a discount bin, but right now, it's holding a piece of my past that feels like it might slip through my fingers if I don't grip it tight enough.

It's been three years. Three years since that knock on the door, since the folded flag, the stiff uniforms, and the words I still can't forget: We regret to inform you...

I trace a finger over the glass, over my dad's face, his arm slung around my shoulders like the whole weight of the world could bounce right off just because he was there. His grin is wide, toothy, like he's mid-laugh. He always laughed with his whole face, his whole body. A BBQ king, a backyard football ref, the guy who taught me to parallel park and never let me quit anything, no matter how hard it got.

Next to him in the photo is Ben, holding up that stupid football like he's posing for a Wheaties box. His other hand is on my back, casual and familiar, the way it always was back then. He was my constant, the one who kept me steady when my world tilted.

I set the photo down carefully, like it might shatter if I breathe wrong. "You'd know what to do," I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. My throat tightens as I swallow. "You always did."

The knock at the door snaps me out of my thoughts, and I blink, brushing at my eyes quickly, just in case.

When I open the door, Ben's standing there, a paper bag in one hand and two steaming cups of coffee in the other. He's wearing that lopsided grin of his, the one that always used to make me feel like everything was going to be okay.

"Thought you could use a pick-me-up," he says, holding up the bag like it's a peace offering. "Your favorite—blueberry donut, no glaze, extra sprinkles. Took me three stops to find one."

I can't help it—a small smile tugs at my lips. "You're too good at this," I say, stepping aside to let him in.

"Yeah, well, some habits die hard." He walks in like he belongs here, setting the coffee and bag on the table before his eyes catch on the photo I left sitting there.

He picks it up, and for a moment, the usual lightness in his expression softens. "I remember this day," he says quietly. His fingers brush over the frame, and the way his voice dips pulls at something in me. "Your dad kept yelling at me to stop tossing the football near the grill. Said I was gonna knock over the burgers."

I let out a laugh, the sound warm and unexpected. "And you almost did. Twice."

Ben grins, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Yeah, well, he still let me have two burgers, so he wasn't that mad."

We sit down at the table, the coffee cups between us, the photo still in his hands. For a moment, neither of us says anything. It's... comfortable, in a way I hadn't realized I missed. But then his voice shifts, a little lower, a little more serious.

"Your dad... he was one of the good ones, Liv. The kind of man who made you want to be better, you know?"

I nod, my throat tightening all over again. “He was. He always knew how to make things feel... safe. Like no matter what went wrong, he’d figure it out.”

Ben sets the photo back down carefully and reaches across the table. His fingers brush mine, just for a second, before he pulls back. “You’ve got that in you too. He’d be proud of you.”

The sincerity in his voice catches me off guard, and something in my chest aches. For a moment, it feels like the old Ben is sitting across from me—the one who always knew what to say, who always made me feel strong, even when I didn’t believe it myself.

I clear my throat, trying to break the moment before it swallows me whole. “Thanks,” I say, my voice softer than I mean it to be.

He nods, his smile faint but warm. “Anytime.”

We talk for a while, mostly about nothing—work, the diner, the usual small-town stuff. It’s easy, familiar, like slipping into a pair of old sneakers.

"So, any plans for today?" he asks.

“I’m heading to Maya’s place for a game night after my shift,” I say, popping the last bite of donut into my mouth.

“Maya, huh?” Ben’s tone is light, but there’s something under it, faint and sharp, like a splinter you don’t notice until it’s too deep to pull out.

I shrug, not thinking much of it. “Yeah, she’s great. It’s nice to have someone to hang out with who doesn’t mind my terrible card game skills.”

He chuckles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "As long as you're happy. That's all that matters," he says, his voice soft. "I should get going," he says. "Don't want to make you late for work."

"Thanks for stopping by," I say, following him to the door.

He turns back as he steps outside, his blue eyes catching mine for just a moment. "You ever need anything, Liv... you know where to find me."

I nod, watching him walk away. For a second, I feel lighter, like maybe today won't be so heavy after all.

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The Howling Pines Pack's community room hums with life as I step inside, clutching my bag tightly against my side. Laughter echoes from one corner, someone groans in mock defeat over a card game, and there's the soft clatter of dice rolling on a table. The warmth of it all—voices layered in camaraderie, the golden glow of overhead lights, the faint scent of pine and woodsmoke—wraps around me like a soft blanket. It's a world so different from the quiet stillness of my apartment.

I linger near the doorway, scanning the room. A part of me feels like an outsider here, a human in a shifter's world. But before I can second-guess my decision to come, a familiar voice cuts through the noise.

"Liv! Over here!" Maya waves dramatically from across the room, her dark curls bouncing as she weaves through the crowd to meet me.

"Hey," I say with a small smile as she pulls me into a quick, warm hug.

"You made it!" she exclaims, thrusting a glass into my hand. "Here. It's basically

juice, I swear. But it'll help you relax.”

I glance down at the pale pink cocktail, skeptical but willing. One sip, and the sweetness of strawberries washes over my tongue, light and harmless. The tension in my shoulders eases just a little.

Maya grins, looping her arm through mine. “Come on, let me introduce you to some people. You’re gonna love it here.”

I let her guide me through the crowd, meeting pack members who are all friendly and welcoming. But beneath the laughter and smiles, I can sense it—the tension. It’s subtle, the way their eyes dart to the windows or the door when they think no one’s looking, the way their laughter sometimes feels a little too loud, like they’re trying to drown out unease. The hunters are weighing on everyone, even during moments like this.

Still, it’s good to be here. Better than sitting alone in my apartment, letting today drag me down. Three years. Three years since Dad died, and the ache hasn’t lessened. But tonight, I refuse to let it consume me.

I’m mid-sip of my drink when I feel it before I see it—that pull, that unmistakable awareness of him. My eyes drift across the room, and there he is. Derek.

He’s leaning against the far wall, arms crossed over his chest, his steel-gray eyes locked on me. He doesn’t smile, doesn’t wave, but his presence is magnetic, drawing my focus like a moth to flame.

There’s something in the way he looks at me—a quiet intensity that makes my heart stutter. It’s maddening. Exhilarating. And utterly confusing.

I force myself to look away, pretending I’m unaffected, but my pulse betrays me,

thudding in my ears.

“Hey, Olivia!” Ethan’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts. He’s standing by the dartboard, a cocky grin plastered on his face. “Feel like showing us what you’ve got? Or are you too chicken to take me on?”

I laugh, grateful for the distraction. “Oh, please. I could beat you with my eyes closed.”

“Big words,” he teases, holding out a dart. “Let’s see if you can back ’em up.”

I roll my eyes but step up to the board. The crowd gathers, the energy shifting into something lively and competitive. Ethan’s easy charm makes it impossible not to smile, and before long, we’re trading playful jabs with every throw.

When I land the winning shot, cheers erupt, and I can’t help but grin wide. Ethan clutches his chest dramatically.

“Fine, fine, you win,” he says, shaking his head in mock defeat. Then, with a smirk, he adds, “But how about a rematch? Double or nothing.”

I arch a brow, amused. “Double or nothing? What’s the bet?”

Ethan leans casually against the dartboard, his grin turning mischievous. “If I win, you owe me a date.”

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, a voice cuts through the silence like a blade.

“That’s enough.”

The crowd parts as Derek steps forward, his expression dark and unreadable. His steel-gray eyes aren't on Ethan—they're on me.

Ethan raises his hands in mock surrender, but his smirk doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Relax, Beta. Just having some fun."

Derek doesn't even glance at him. Instead, he steps closer to me, his presence overwhelming. Before I can react, his hand wraps around mine—not roughly, but firm, commanding—and he pulls me away from the dartboard without a word.

"Derek!" I protest, stumbling to keep up as he leads me to a quieter corner of the room. When we finally stop, I yank my hand free, glaring up at him. "What the hell was that about?"

His jaw tightens, his broad shoulders tense. "You don't need to be making bets with guys like Ethan," he says, his voice low and gruff.

"Guys like Ethan?" I repeat, incredulous. "He's my friend. And what does it matter to you anyway?"

His hands clench into fists, his whole body taut with tension. The air between us feels charged, like lightning about to strike.

"You don't need to know everything right now," he says, his tone firm. "Just trust me, Olivia."

I shake my head, tears stinging my eyes. "You keep saying that, but how can I trust you when you won't let me in? You're always pushing me away, Derek, and I don't understand why."

The space between us shrinks as he steps closer, his presence overwhelming. I can



feel the heat radiating off him, the intensity in his gaze pinning me in place.

“Olivia,” he says, his voice rough and low, like it’s barely keeping something primal at bay.

When he doesn’t say anything else, just stands there, staring at me like he’s fighting a battle I can’t see, I let out an exasperated huff. “You know what? Forget it,” I say, throwing my hands up. I turn sharply, intending to walk away, but before I can take two steps, his hand shoots out, firm and unyielding, wrapping gently around my wrist.

“Don’t,” he says, his voice a low growl that stops me in my tracks.

There’s a tension in the air that feels dangerous, electric. I glance back over my shoulder, and the look in his eyes is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. It’s raw, unrestrained, as if something he’s kept buried for too long is clawing its way to the surface.

Before I can say a word, he pulls me toward him, his hold on me firm but careful, like he’s afraid I’ll break. His nose brushes just below my ear as he inhales deeply, and the low, guttural growl that escapes him sends a shiver down my spine. It’s not the sound of a man—it’s something primal, something wild.

“Derek,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “What are you—”

He doesn’t let me finish. Instead, he grabs my hand again, his grip still gentle but leaving no room for argument, and starts walking. I don’t even realize where we’re going until we stop in front of the elevator. My heart is racing, and I’m not sure if it’s from anger, confusion, or the way his touch makes my skin burn.

When the elevator doors close behind us, he releases my hand only to press the stop

button, halting us between floors. The sudden stillness is deafening, the hum of the elevator the only sound besides my pounding heartbeat.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, my voice barely audible over the tension thickening the air around us. I take a step back, but there’s nowhere to go. The small space amplifies everything—his presence, his scent, the heat radiating off him.

Derek turns to face me fully, his steel-gray eyes burning with an intensity that makes it hard to breathe. For a moment, he just looks at me, his jaw clenching and unclenching like he’s trying to hold something back.

“Making sure you understand,” he says finally, his voice low and dangerous, each word dripping with restrained emotion.

“Understand what?” I manage to say, though my voice shakes. I feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, and one wrong step will send me plummeting.

He steps closer, and I instinctively press my back against the elevator wall. There’s nowhere to run, no escape from the electricity crackling between us. His hand comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly against my skin, and I can feel the calluses on his palm—rough, like the man himself.

“Understand this,” he murmurs, his voice a rough whisper.

And then his lips crash into mine.

It’s not gentle or tentative—it’s fire and desperation, a collision of everything we’ve both been holding back. His hand slides to the back of my neck, holding me in place as his lips move against mine with a hunger that leaves me breathless. The other hand rests on my hip, his grip possessive, as if he’s afraid I’ll disappear if he lets go.

I don't know how to process what's happening—all I know is that it feels like everything in me has been waiting for this moment. My hands find his chest, the heat of him searing through his shirt, and I clutch at the fabric like it's the only thing keeping me tethered to reality.

The kiss deepens, and I feel like I'm drowning in him—in his heat, his strength, the way he consumes every inch of my being. It's overwhelming, and yet I don't want it to stop.

His lips leave mine, trailing a path of fiery kisses along my jawline, down the sensitive skin of my neck. I gasp as his teeth graze my pulse point, the sensation sending a jolt of pleasure mixed with a hint of pain straight to my core. His grip on my hip tightens, and a low growl rumbles in his chest—a sound that feels like it's vibrating through every cell in my body.

Derek's hand slides up my side, his fingers deftly finding the hem of my sweater. He pulls it up, breaking our kiss just long enough to tug it over my head. His eyes lock onto mine, a storm of desire raging in their steel-gray depths. I'm half-naked in an elevator with him, and yet, I've never felt more powerful—or more wanted.

His lips find mine again, hungry and demanding, as his fingers trace the lace edge of my bra. He doesn't hesitate, pulling the cup down to expose my breast. The cool air of the elevator hits my skin, making my nipple harden instantly. He groans in approval, his hand cupping my breast before his mouth descends, capturing my nipple between his lips.

The sensation is overwhelming. His tongue flicks and teases, and when he sucks hard, a moan escapes my lips. My hands tangle in his hair, holding him to me, as if he might stop. I can feel the vibration of his growl against my skin, a primal sound that sends shivers down my spine.

He releases my nipple with a wet pop, his eyes dark with need as he looks up at me. "Do you understand now?" he murmurs, his voice raw with desire.

I nod, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps. "Yes," I whisper, though I'm not entirely sure what I'm agreeing to. All I know is that I want more—more of his touch, more of his kiss, more of him.

As if reading my mind, Derek takes my hand and guides it down his chest, over the hard planes of his stomach, until it rests on the bulge in his pants. His erection strains against the fabric, huge and hot beneath my palm. I can't help but squeeze, eliciting a groan from deep within his chest.

"This is what you do to me," he growls, his voice barely human.

Before I can respond, he's kneeling before me, his hands sliding down my thighs to bunch up my skirt. His fingers trace the edge of my panties, teasing, before he tugs them down my legs. I step out of them, my heart pounding in my chest, as he tosses them aside.

He looks up at me, his gaze intense and full of promise. "I need more," he says, his voice a low rumble. "I need to taste you."

And then his mouth is on me, his tongue parting my folds to find my clit. The elevator walls seem to spin around me as Derek's tongue swirls around my clit, his hands gripping my thighs to keep me steady. I can barely believe this is happening—just moments ago we were standing in the hallway, and now I'm pinned against the wall, my skirt bunched around my waist as he kneels before me, devouring me like a man starved.

"Oh God," I gasp, my head falling back against the cool metal as waves of pleasure crash over me. My fingers tangle in his hair, gripping the short strands as if I can pull

him closer, push him deeper. His beard scratches deliciously against my sensitive skin, and I can feel the heat of his breath mingling with my own.

He groans against me, the vibrations sending shockwaves through my core. His fingers dig into the flesh of my thighs, hard enough to bruise, and the thought of him marking me makes my pussy spasm with need.

"You taste so good," he growls, and the sound of his voice, rough and hungry, makes me clench around nothing. "I could eat this sweet honey for hours."

His words, the filthy, unfiltered desire in them, make me burn. I've never been talked to like this, never been wanted with such raw, animalistic need. It's intoxicating.

He laps at me like a man possessed, his tongue delving deep, fucking me with a fervor that leaves me breathless. My hips rock against his face, chasing the pleasure that's coiling tighter and tighter in my belly.

"Derek," I pant, my voice ragged and needy. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

As if in response, he doubles his efforts, his tongue flicking over my clit in rapid, practiced strokes. One hand slides up my thigh, his fingers teasing my entrance before plunging inside, curling just right to hit that spot that makes stars explode behind my eyes.

"Derek," I moan, my head thrashing from side to side as the pleasure builds to a crescendo. "I'm... I'm going to..."

My words cut off on a scream as I come undone, my orgasm ripping through me. Derek doesn't let up, his mouth and fingers working in tandem to draw out my pleasure, to make me shake and shudder and beg for more.

When the final waves crash over me, I slump back against the wall, my chest heaving, my skin slick with sweat. Derek pushes himself to his feet, his chest rising and falling in rhythm with mine as his steel-gray eyes lock onto me.

The elevator chimes, and that's when he snaps back to reality, his expression shifting as he seems to fully register what's just happened.

There's still a storm of need churning in his gaze, but beneath it, I glimpse something else—guilt. Regret. It's subtle, like the faintest crack in his armor, but it cuts deeper than anything he's said or done tonight.

“Why are you...?” I don't even know what I want to ask him. But he seems to understand.

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he won't respond. But then, with a heavy exhale, he speaks. “This isn't the place. Not like this,” he murmurs, his voice low and rough around the edges. The words linger between us, heavy and raw, carving through the charged air.

Slowly, he lifts a hand and brushes a strand of hair from my face, the gesture unexpectedly tender against the tension that seems to radiate from him. His thumb pauses on my cheek, just for a heartbeat too long, like he's trying to commit every detail of this moment to memory. And then, with a quiet resolve, he steps back.

I'm still pressed against the elevator wall, my legs unsteady and my heart racing. My body is still thrumming with the aftershocks of what just happened. I don't know how to bridge the chasm that suddenly feels so wide between us. My lips part, but no words come out.

Derek reaches out and presses the button to restart the elevator. The soft hum of the machinery fills the silence, but it doesn't drown out the pounding of my heartbeat or

the tension crackling in the air. His jaw is tight, his eyes locked on the numbers above the door as they start to light up again. He's deliberately avoiding looking at me, and it makes my chest ache in a way I'm not prepared for.

"Derek—" I begin, my voice breaking slightly. I don't even know what I want to say. Ask him why? Demand an explanation? Beg him not to shut me out again?

But he doesn't let me finish. He shakes his head, his expression hardening, though his voice is anything but. "Not tonight," he says firmly, the words carrying a weight that feels like a door slamming shut. His eyes finally meet mine, and for a split second, I see it—the storm raging inside him. It's anger, longing, pain... and something deeper, something he's not ready to name.

The elevator lurches to a stop, and the doors slide open with a soft chime. I step out slowly, the cool air of the hallway brushing against my overheated skin. My legs feel shaky, like they might give out at any moment, but I force myself to straighten, to hold my head high, even as my chest twists with frustration and confusion.

I glance back over my shoulder, needing to see him, needing some kind of reassurance that this wasn't just a mistake, that I didn't imagine the connection between us. Derek is still standing inside the elevator, his broad shoulders filling the small space, his hand gripping the edge of the door so tightly his knuckles are white. There's a tension in his posture, like he's fighting some internal war, and for a moment, it looks like he might follow me.

But he doesn't. He stays where he is.

And then the doors slide shut, cutting him off from me, leaving me alone in the hallway with nothing but the echo of my own heartbeat and the weight of everything unsaid.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Derek

The map spread across the war room table is a battlefield of pins and markers, each one a reminder of how close danger is creeping. Diner. Community center. The park near Olivia's apartment. My eyes lock onto the red pin stuck into the diner, the place where Olivia spends most of her days. A job she loves. A place she feels safe.

Safe.

The word twists like a knife in my gut. Because I know better. Safety is an illusion, especially now. The hunters are circling. Their shadows are stretching longer every day, and the diner might as well be a neon sign—an easy target.

My wolf pushes against my control, a low growl rumbling in the back of my mind. He wants her out of there. Away from the diner, away from Whispering Pines, away from everything that could hurt her. Somewhere isolated, where only I can watch over her. Protect her.

Claim her.

I shove that thought down hard, but it lingers, an ember refusing to extinguish.

“Derek.” Theo's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts like a blade, sharp and commanding.

I glance up to find him watching me, his dark eyes heavy with that particular brand of scrutiny only an Alpha can wield. His auburn hair is tied back, his tattoos visible



where his sleeves are rolled up. He looks relaxed, but it's a deception. Theo doesn't relax—not when his pack is at risk.

“You zoning out on me?” he asks, his tone calm but edged.

“No,” I reply, my voice tight.

Theo leans back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight as he crosses his arms. “You sure about that? Because I can't have my Beta distracted right now.”

I bristle at the implication, but I keep my expression neutral. He knows me too well. Knows exactly where my head is. And I hate that I can't lie to him—not convincingly, anyway.

“I'm focused,” I say, forcing the tension from my shoulders.

“Focused on what?” His voice lowers, his words deliberate. “Her?”

My jaw tightens, and I look away, but it's too late. The flicker of guilt across my face betrays me.

Theo leans forward, resting his forearms on the table. “You think I don't notice? I see it, Derek. Every damn day. She's got you tied in knots.”

“You don't know what you're talking about,” I snap, the growl in my voice sharper than I intend.

He doesn't flinch. “Don't I? Because from where I'm sitting, you're distracted. And that makes you dangerous—to yourself, to her, and to this pack.”

His words hit harder than they should. Maybe because they're true. Maybe because

I've been telling myself the same thing for weeks now.

He doesn't stop. Theo never stops when he knows he's struck a nerve. "Whatever's pulling you toward her, you'd better figure out how to handle it. Because if you don't, someone's going to get hurt."

Someone.

The word echoes in my mind, but all I hear is her name. Olivia.

I grip the edge of the table, my knuckles whitening. "I've got it handled," I say through clenched teeth.

Theo doesn't look convinced, but he leans back again, his expression softening—slightly. "Make sure you do," he says, his tone quieter now. "We can't afford mistakes. Not with the hunters this close."

I nod once, curtly, and leave the room before he can press further. The tension in my chest feels like a live wire, sparking and snapping as I step into the cool evening air.

It should calm me, the crispness of the night. It doesn't. My wolf is too agitated, pacing and growling inside me, his instincts screaming louder than my logic.

I climb into my truck and grip the steering wheel so tightly the leather groans under my hands. I don't think. I don't plan. I just drive.

My body moves on autopilot, guided by instinct. By the bond.

By her .

\*\*

Last night.

It replays in my mind, vivid and unforgiving. The way her lips parted under mine, soft and warm. The way her breath hitched when I pulled her closer, my hands on her waist, her body pressed against mine.

The way she tasted.

It was everything I imagined it would be. And more.

And that's the problem.

I've spent three years keeping my distance, convincing myself that the bond didn't matter. That I could ignore it. That I could protect Olivia without giving in to the primal pull that's been clawing at me since the moment I met her.

But last night shattered all of that.

It started with a kiss. But it was so much more. It was a crack in the dam, a flood I can't hold back. My wolf is relentless now, howling for her, demanding more. Another kiss. Another touch. Everything.

And I want it too.

God help me, I want it more than I've ever wanted anything.

But it's wrong.

She's the daughter of my best friend. The man I swore to protect her for.

I made a promise.

And I broke it last night.

\*\*

The diner parking lot smells like asphalt and grease, the faint tang of fried food hanging in the air. It's quiet, the late afternoon sun stretching shadows long across the cracked pavement. My truck idles for a moment before I cut the engine.

I sit there, gripping the steering wheel, every muscle in my body coiled tight. I've been telling myself for days that I'm here because it's necessary. Because Olivia needs to understand the danger she's in. But deep down, I know it's a lie.

I'm here because I can't stay away.

Through the windshield, my eyes find her, moving through the back door of the diner. She's balancing a tray of empty glasses on her hip, the late sunlight catching in her auburn hair. She looks... radiant. Strong. Alive.

Her scent drifts to me, even from this distance—soft and warm, with that faint hint of lavender that always makes my wolf stir. He rumbles low in my chest, restless, and I clench my fists, trying to shove him back down.

Mine.

The word claws its way to the surface, sharp and insistent, and I hate how much it tempts me. How much she tempts me.

I step out of the truck, the slam of the door echoing across the lot. Her head lifts at the sound, her light brown eyes locking onto mine. She freezes, confusion flickering across her face before she sets the tray down and crosses her arms.

“Derek?” she calls, her voice carrying just enough surprise to make my chest tighten.  
“What are you doing here?”

I take a breath, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep them from betraying me.  
“We need to talk.”

Her gaze narrows, and I can see the resistance building in her eyes, like storm clouds gathering on the horizon.

“About what?” she asks, taking a step closer.

“About you needing to stay away from the pack,” I say, my voice low and even. “It’s not safe.”

The words land like a stone between us. For a second, she just stares at me, her expression unreadable. Then her jaw tightens, and I know I’ve stepped on a landmine.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” she snaps. Her hands find her hips, her posture defiant. “You can’t just show up out of nowhere and tell me to avoid people without explaining why.”

“It’s not a suggestion, Olivia,” I say, my tone sharpening despite myself. “The hunters are closing in. Being around shifters—being around me—puts a target on your back.”

Her eyes flare, anger sparking to life. “And whose fault is that?” she fires back, stepping closer. “You’re the one who’s always around, always watching me like...”

She trails off, her cheeks flushing, but the frustration burns bright in her gaze.

“Like what?” I press, even though I already know.

“Like I’m your responsibility,” she says, her voice cracking just slightly. “Like I’m a burden.”

The words hit harder than they should. Pride, guilt, desire—they all collide in me, leaving my control hanging by a thread.

“This isn’t about you being a burden,” I say through gritted teeth. “It’s about keeping you alive.”

“And why do you care so much?” she demands, her voice rising. She’s standing so close now, I can feel the heat radiating off her, smell the faint trace of her shampoo beneath the lavender. “Why does it feel like there’s something you’re not telling me?”

Her question cuts too close to the truth. She doesn’t know. Doesn’t understand the bond tying us together, the promise I made to her father, or the war I’ve been waging with myself since the moment I met her.

“Just trust me,” I say, my voice quieter now. “Stay away from the pack. Stay away from me.”

Her eyes widen, hurt flashing across her face before she masks it with anger. But she doesn’t back down.

“No,” she says firmly. “You don’t get to push me away like this. Not without giving me a damn good reason.”

I can’t give her one. Not without unraveling everything. But as she steps closer, her scent wrapping around me, her heartbeat pounding in my ears, I feel myself unraveling anyway.

My hand lifts almost on instinct, my thumb brushing against her cheek. Her skin is warm, impossibly soft, and the way her breath hitches sends a shiver down my spine.

“Olivia,” I murmur, her name barely a whisper.

She doesn’t pull away. Her eyes search mine, unguarded and full of questions, and for a moment—just a moment—I let myself imagine what it would be like to answer them. To tell her everything. To stop fighting and let myself have this.

But I can’t.

The bond roars to life, demanding more—demanding everything . My wolf surges forward, clawing at the edges of my control, and I know if I don’t pull back now, I never will.

“You don’t understand,” I say, my voice rough, almost broken. “Keeping you safe is the only thing that matters. Even if it means...”

Even if it means breaking my own heart.

I step back, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep them from reaching for her again. “Stay away, Olivia,” I say, forcing steel into my voice. “It’s for your own good.”

Her voice follows me as I turn to leave, sharp and defiant. “You can’t keep doing this, Derek! You can’t keep pushing me away and expecting me not to fight back!”

Her words hit like a blow, but I don’t stop. I don’t turn around.

Because if I do, I won’t be able to leave her again.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Olivia

My hands tremble, nails biting into my palms as I pace the length of my tiny apartment. The walls feel like they're closing in, my frustration boiling over with every unanswered question Derek left me with. He didn't even look back when he walked away. Just dropped his cryptic warning like a grenade and left me standing there, stunned and shaking.

“Stay away from the pack. Stay away from me.”

I can still hear the raw edge in his voice, the crack that betrayed something deeper beneath all that stoic indifference. And the way his fingertips lingered against my cheek, just for a second—long enough to make my heart stutter, long enough to make me hope—and then he was gone.

I let out a growl of frustration and tug at the end of my braid, pacing faster. He's always like this. One step closer, two steps back. Warm one moment, ice-cold the next. It's maddening. And now, after everything, after three years of him lurking on the edges of my life, watching me like some silent sentinel, I'm supposed to just stay away ?

No. Not this time.

I grab my phone off the coffee table with more force than necessary and scroll through my contacts until Maya's name pops up. If there's anyone who can give me a straight answer, it's her. She's been dropping hints for weeks, always stopping just short of saying too much.



The phone rings twice before her voice filters through, soft and familiar. “Liv? What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you,” I say, barely managing to rein in the sharp edge to my voice. “It’s about Derek. And...the pack.”

There’s a pause. A long one. Long enough to make my stomach twist with unease.

“What about them?” Maya’s tone is careful, guarded.

“Don’t play coy with me, Maya,” I snap, pacing again. My feet feel like they’re magnetized to the hardwood floor, unable to stop moving. “There’s something going on, isn’t there? Something dangerous. Derek told me I need to stay away from the pack, and you’ve been hinting at things for weeks. I want the truth.”

She sighs, and I can almost hear her shifting uncomfortably on the other end of the line. “It’s complicated, Liv. I don’t think—”

“Don’t give me that,” I cut her off, my voice rising. My chest feels tight, like I’m holding in too much air. “I’ve been in the dark for too long, and I’m not just going to sit here and wait for something bad to happen. If you care about me at all, you’ll tell me what’s going on.”

Silence stretches between us, heavy and tense, and for a moment, I think she’s going to hang up. But then she exhales, the sound resigned. “The hunters,” she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

The word lands like a punch to the gut. “Hunters?” I repeat, my voice shaky.

“They’ve been moving closer to Whispering Pines,” she continues, her tone more clipped now, as if forcing herself to get the words out. “The pack knows they’re

planning something big, but we don't have all the details yet. Derek's just trying to keep you safe."

The way she says it— keep you safe —makes my pulse quicken. "Who are they? And why do they care about the pack?"

"They're... an organization," Maya says carefully. "They think shifters are a threat to humans. They've been targeting packs for years, hunting them down like animals. That's why Derek's on edge. Why he's been so protective of you."

The air feels heavier, pressing against my chest. My head is spinning, trying to piece together this new information. Hunters. Shifters. It sounds like something out of a bad movie, but the seriousness in Maya's voice leaves no room for doubt.

"Why would they come after me?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm not... I'm not a shifter."

"You're close to us," she explains, her voice softening. "That makes you a target. And Derek...he's not just trying to keep you safe because of some promise to your dad. It's more than that."

Her words spark something in me—hope, confusion, frustration—but before I can press her for more, a loud knock cuts through the air, freezing me mid-step.

"Liv?" Maya's voice sharpens. "You still there?"

"Yeah," I murmur, my eyes locked on the door. My heart is pounding now, each knock reverberating through my chest. "Someone's at the door. I'll call you back."

"Be careful," she says quickly, but I've already hung up.

When I crack the door open, I'm greeted by Ben's familiar face—or at least, a version of it. His blue eyes, once warm and full of boyish charm, are sharp and cold now, his jaw set in a way that makes him look older, harder. His hands are stuffed into his jacket pockets, but the tension in his shoulders is impossible to miss.

“Ben?” My voice comes out tentative, confused. “What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?” he asks, but the way he says it doesn't leave room for a no.

I hesitate, gripping the edge of the door. Something about him feels... off. There's an edge to his tone, a weight in the air that makes my stomach twist.

“It's not really a good time,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “What's going on?”

Instead of answering, Ben pushes past me, brushing against my shoulder as he steps inside. The door swings open wider, and I'm left standing there, caught off guard.

“Uh, sure, come on in,” I say reluctantly, stepping aside to let him in fully. I close the door behind him, the soft click louder than it should be in the uneasy silence.

Ben moves into the small living room, his hands stuffed deep into his pockets. He doesn't sit, doesn't relax—he just stands there, like he's waiting for something. It's strange, seeing him like this. The boy who used to make me laugh until my sides hurt now feels like a stranger, his presence heavy and uncomfortable.

“So,” he says finally, his voice tight. “How was your night?”

The question catches me off guard. “My night?” I repeat.

“Yeah.” His tone is casual, but it doesn't match the hard set of his jaw or the

sharpness in his eyes. “What did you get up to? Game night, right?”

I nod slowly, trying to gauge where this is going. “Yeah, it was nice. Everyone was really welcoming. It was... fun.”

“Fun,” he echoes flatly. His lips twitch into something that might’ve been a smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. He starts pacing, his movements stiff and controlled, like he’s holding something back. “So, what? You had a great time with them, huh?”

I frown, crossing my arms over my chest. “Ben, what’s this about?”

He stops abruptly, spinning to face me. His blue eyes lock onto mine, and for a second, I see a glimpse of the friend I used to know—uncertain, searching. But the moment passes, and his expression hardens into something colder, something I don’t recognize.

“What have you been up to, Olivia?” he asks, his tone sharper now, the edge unmistakable.

“Up to?” I blink, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with him,” he spits, the words laced with venom. “With Derek. And the rest of them.”

The word “them” hangs in the air, heavy and bitter.

I sigh, trying to keep my irritation in check. “Derek’s been helping me,” I say carefully. “That’s all.”

“Helping you?” Ben’s laugh is cold, humorless. “Helping you with what? Sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong?”

His words sting, but I force myself to stay calm. “You don’t get to talk to me like that, Ben. And you sure as hell don’t get to tell me who I can and can’t spend time with.”

“You think I don’t know what’s going on, Olivia?” Ben’s laugh is bitter, a sharp, mocking sound that echoes through the room. His lips curl into a sneer as he steps closer, his voice dripping with venom. “I’m trying to protect you, Olivia. From them. You have no idea what they’re capable of.”

My patience snaps, the anger bubbling inside me finally spilling over. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Derek has done nothing but protect me—”

“Protect you?” Ben cuts me off, his voice rising to an almost frantic pitch. “You’re so blind, Olivia. They’re not human. They’re monsters. And you’re too busy batting your eyelashes at Derek to see it.”

I can’t stop the sharp intake of breath, but I force myself to stand my ground. “You’re wrong,” I snap, my voice trembling with a mix of fury and disbelief. “Derek has never—”

“Never what?” Ben interrupts again, his tone turning cold as his eyes narrow. “Never lied to you? Never manipulated you? Wake up, Olivia! You don’t see it, but I do. People like Derek, like all of them—they’re parasites. They take and take until there’s nothing left.”

I glare at him, my fists clenched at my sides. “You’re letting your hatred blind you, Ben. Derek hasn’t done anything to deserve this. He’s—”

“Deserve?” Ben laughs again, but this time, there’s no humor in it. “You think they deserve anything? I’ve been barely scraping by since we moved to this godforsaken town. Last month, I lost out on a promotion to a shifter who cozied up to the boss.

And while I'm stuck struggling to pay rent, they live like kings, hoarding everything Whispering Pines has to offer.”

I feel the weight of his words settle over me like a heavy fog, but I refuse to let him shift the blame. “That’s not Derek’s fault. That’s not the pack’s fault.”

Ben’s jaw tightens, his voice turning sharp and accusatory. “Isn’t it? They’ve got everyone in this town fooled, Olivia. They act like they’re just people trying to live their lives, but they’re not. They’re predators. And the hunters—” He pauses, his expression hardening. “The hunters are the only ones willing to stand up to them. To protect people like us.”

The words hang in the air, and for a moment, I can’t breathe. “You’ve been talking to them,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. “The hunters. That’s where all of this is coming from.”

Ben doesn’t deny it. Instead, he sneers, his eyes flashing with something dark and unrecognizable. “They opened my eyes. They showed me the truth. While you’ve been busy cozying up to Derek and his pack, they’ve been working to keep people safe.”

I take a step back, shaking my head as I try to process everything. “Safe? You call this safe? Threatening innocent people, spreading lies—”

“Innocent?” Ben’s voice rises, his anger boiling over. “You think they’re innocent? They’re killers, Olivia. They don’t belong in our world, and the sooner you realize that, the better.”

The words hit me like a slap, and my cheeks flush hot with anger—and something dangerously close to guilt. How had I missed this? How had I not seen the bitterness festering inside him? The boy I grew up with, the one who always had a joke or a

smile to lift my spirits, was gone. Replaced by this stranger standing before me.

“Ben,” I say, my voice softening despite myself. “This isn’t you. You don’t have to—”

“Don’t,” he snaps, cutting me off. “Don’t pretend you know me anymore. You’ve changed, Olivia. Ever since we moved here, you’ve been different. You don’t see it, but I do. They’ve gotten to you.”

I swallow hard, my throat tight with unshed tears. “No, Ben. You’ve changed. You let them fill your head with lies, and now you’re so caught up in your hatred, you can’t see the harm you’re causing.”

“Harm?” Ben steps closer, and I instinctively take another step back. His voice drops to a low, menacing growl. “I’m trying to save you, Olivia. But if you keep siding with them, you’re no better than they are.”

There’s something in his eyes I don’t recognize—something dark and twisted. For the first time, I feel a flicker of fear. Not for myself, but for the boy I thought I knew. The boy who used to be my best friend.

“Stop it,” I say, my voice trembling. “Just stop.”

But he doesn’t. His words come faster now, sharper, cutting into me like jagged glass. “You think I haven’t noticed? The way you look at him? The way you defend him? You’re so desperate for someone to care about you that you’re willing to trust a monster over me.”

“Ben...” My voice shakes as I take another step back, my mind racing. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? What you’re doing?”

“I’m saving you,” he snaps. “Even if you’re too stupid to see it.”

His words cut deep, but anger flares hot and sharp in my chest. “This isn’t saving me, Ben. This is—this is betraying me. Betraying everything we’ve ever stood for.”

His face twists with anger, and before I can react, his hand shoots out, grabbing my arm in a bruising grip.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he hisses, his voice low and dangerous. “You think you’re so smart, so independent. But you’re just a stupid little girl who doesn’t know what’s good for her.”

Fear spikes through me, sharp and cold. But underneath it, something stronger burns—anger, determination.

“Let me go,” I say, my voice firm despite the tremble in it.

When he doesn’t, I yank my arm back with all the strength I can muster, stumbling a few steps away.

“Stay the hell away from me,” I spit, my voice shaking but steady.

Ben’s face darkens, but before he can say anything else, I bolt. I fling the door open and run, my heart pounding in my chest.

The cool night air hits me like a slap, and I don’t stop until I’m outside, breathless and trembling.

That’s when I see it—a familiar truck pulling up to the curb, its headlights cutting through the darkness.



Derek.

Relief rushes through me like a tidal wave, my legs already moving before my brain can catch up. I run toward the truck, my heart pounding in my chest. Derek barely has time to slow down before I yank open the door, throwing myself inside without waiting for him to park.

I'm still shaking when I climb into the passenger seat, my hands trembling so badly that I fumble with the seatbelt. Derek's sharp, concerned gaze flicks to me as soon as I settle into the seat, his jaw tightening. The moment the door slams shut behind me, the weight of everything that just happened crashes down. My chest aches, tight and heavy, like I can't quite get enough air. Ben's voice echoes in my head—the anger, the betrayal, the way he looked at me like I was the enemy.

Derek doesn't say a word as he starts the truck, his jaw tight and his knuckles white on the steering wheel. The tension radiating off him fills the cab, but it feels more like a shield than a threat. He's angry, I can tell, but not at me. It's the kind of anger that simmers just beneath the surface, controlled and contained, but no less dangerous.

I stare out the window as the truck rumbles down the quiet streets of Whispering Pines, the streetlights casting long shadows over the road. The silence between us is thick, but I can't bring myself to break it. My thoughts are a jumbled mess, and I don't even know where to start. Ben. The hunters. The awful things he said. The way he... gods, how did I not see this coming?

“Olivia.”

Derek's voice is low, rough, pulling me out of my spiraling thoughts. I realize we've stopped, the truck idling in the parking lot of a small park. The familiar sight of the swings swaying gently in the breeze tugs at something in my chest. This place used to feel safe, comforting. Now it feels like everything else in my life—unsteady.

He turns to me, his steel-gray eyes locking onto mine. “What happened?”

His tone is firm, but there’s something else in it too—something softer, almost desperate. For a second, I can’t speak. The words are stuck in my throat, tangled up with the tears I’ve been holding back since the moment I ran out of my apartment.

“I—” My voice cracks, and I look away, blinking hard. “It’s Ben. He... he’s not who I thought he was.”

Derek doesn’t say anything, but his entire body tenses, his hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly I half-expect it to snap in half. I take a shaky breath, forcing myself to keep going.

“He’s been lying to me,” I whisper. “About everything. He’s... he’s working with the hunters.”

Derek’s growl is low, barely audible, but I feel it vibrate through the truck like a distant thunderstorm. His hands leave the wheel, one of them reaching out to grip the back of my seat like he’s trying to anchor himself. The other hovers near me, like he wants to touch me but isn’t sure if he should.

I swallow hard, the words spilling out faster now, like once I’ve started, I can’t stop. “He tried to convince me they weren’t dangerous, that they were just... trying to protect people. But then tonight, he—he said things, Derek. Awful things. About shifters. About you.”

His hand finally lands on my shoulder, warm and solid, grounding me in the chaos of my thoughts. I glance up at him, and his expression makes my breath catch. I’ve never seen him like this before—so raw, so completely unguarded. His eyes are dark, filled with something I can’t quite name, but it makes my heart skip a beat.

“Did he hurt you?” His voice is a low rumble, his thumb brushing lightly against my shoulder. “Tell me the truth, Olivia.”

I shake my head, though the memory of Ben’s hand gripping my arm too tightly makes my skin crawl. “Not... not physically. But he—he said things. Tried to make me feel like... like I was stupid for trusting you. For caring about—” I stop myself, heat rushing to my face. “He’s not the person I thought he was.”

Derek’s jaw clenches, his eyes narrowing. “I should’ve seen this coming,” he mutters, more to himself than to me. “I should’ve—”

“Derek, this isn’t your fault,” I interrupt, my voice firmer than I expect. “I didn’t see it either. I didn’t want to see it.”

He looks at me then, really looks at me, and for a moment, the intensity of his gaze is almost too much. It’s like he’s searching for something, some kind of reassurance or answer that I don’t know how to give.

“I won’t let him hurt you,” he says finally, his voice rough but steady. “Not him. Not the hunters. No one.”

The conviction in his words sends a shiver down my spine, but it’s the way he says them—like a vow, like a promise carved into stone—that leaves me breathless. I open my mouth to respond, but the words catch in my throat. Instead, I do the only thing I can think of—I lean into him, letting his strength and warmth wrap around me like a shield.

His arms come around me almost instantly, pulling me close. I feel his chest rise and fall beneath my cheek, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat grounding me in a way I didn’t know I needed. For a moment, everything else fades away—the fear, the betrayal, the uncertainty. It’s just Derek and me, and the unspoken connection that’s

been simmering between us for years.

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit quietly, my voice muffled against his chest. “I feel like my whole world is falling apart.”

“You don’t have to face this alone,” he says, his voice a low growl that I feel as much as hear. “I’m here, Olivia. I’ve always been here.”

Something in his tone makes me pull back just enough to look up at him. His eyes meet mine, and the emotion in them takes my breath away. It’s not just concern or protectiveness—it’s something deeper, something that makes my heart race and my stomach twist in a way I don’t fully understand.

“Derek...” I whisper, but I don’t know what I’m trying to say.

Before either of us can speak, a loud noise cuts through the quiet night—the roar of an engine, followed by the screech of tires. A truck barrels into the parking lot, its headlights cutting through the darkness like daggers.

Derek’s entire body goes rigid, his arms tightening around me protectively. “Stay here,” he growls, his voice laced with a dangerous edge I’ve never heard before.

“Derek, wait—” I start, but he’s already moving, his hand reaching for the door handle.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Olivia

The night air feels like it's holding its breath, heavy with the kind of silence that comes before chaos. My pulse thrums in my ears, drowning out everything but the sound of Derek's steady breathing beside me. He's in front of me, a wall of muscle and unrelenting resolve, his broad shoulders squared and ready for whatever comes next. His scent—cedar and leather, earthy and grounding—is the only thing keeping me from spiraling into panic. But even that feels tenuous, a thread stretched too thin.

Across the empty parking lot, Ben stands flanked by three hunters, their weapons glinting under the dim glow of the streetlights. My childhood friend, the boy who used to laugh with me until our sides hurt, now looks like a stranger. His bright blue eyes are cold, sharp as knives, and his lips curl into a smile that doesn't reach them. It's a predator's smile, not the boyish grin that once made me feel safe.

"Olivia," Ben says, his voice deceptively soft, the way you'd coax a frightened animal. "This doesn't have to end badly. Come with me. Now. Willingly. And no one has to get hurt."

Derek growls low in his throat, and the sound is enough to send shivers down my spine. It's a warning, primal and raw, and I know without looking that his wolf is close to the surface. Too close. His entire body is taut, like a spring wound too tight, ready to snap.

I place a hand on Derek's arm, feeling the heat radiating off him, but he doesn't relax. If anything, he grows tenser. His steel-gray eyes flick to me, a storm brewing in their depths, but I can't let him take the lead on this—not this time.

Before I can second-guess myself, I step out from behind him. His arm shoots out, trying to block me, but I duck under it. “Olivia,” he growls, his voice a sharp command, but I ignore him.

Ben’s smile widens as I step forward, and it makes my stomach churn. “There’s my girl,” he says, his tone dripping with condescension. “I knew you’d see reason.”

I grit my teeth, clenching my fists so tightly my nails bite into my palms. “Don’t you dare call me that,” I snap, my voice steady despite the tremor in my hands. “You don’t get to act like you care about me after everything you’ve done.”

Ben’s smile falters, a flicker of irritation breaking through his smug facade. “Everything I’ve done?” he repeats, his voice rising. “Everything I’ve done has been for you, Olivia. To protect you. To save you from them.” His gaze flicks to Derek, dismissive, as if Derek is nothing more than an obstacle in his way.

“Protect me?” I laugh bitterly, the sound hollow and sharp. “You’ve been lying to me. Manipulating me. And now you’re standing here with people who want to kill —”

“Innocent?” Ben cuts me off, his voice dripping with venom. “You think they’re innocent? You have no idea what they’re capable of, Olivia. What he’s capable of.” He jabs a finger in Derek’s direction, his hand trembling slightly. “They’re not like us. They’re not human. They’re dangerous, and if you can’t see that, then you’re blind.”

Derek takes a step forward, his presence like a shadow looming over me, but I hold up a hand, stopping him. “I’m not blind, Ben,” I say, my voice quieter now, steadier. “I see exactly what’s happening here. You’re the one who’s dangerous. You’re the one who’s changed.”

For a moment, something flickers in Ben's eyes—hesitation, maybe regret—but it's gone as quickly as it came. His jaw tightens, and his expression hardens. "You don't understand," he says, his tone low and menacing. "But you will. If you don't come with me right now, I'll make sure he and everyone like him suffer. I'll make sure they're wiped out for good."

My stomach twists, and I feel the icy grip of fear clawing at my chest. "You're threatening to kill people, Ben. How is that protecting me? How is that love?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he takes a step closer, his hand tightening around the weapon at his side. "Last chance, Liv," he says, his voice a dangerous whisper. "Come with me. Or watch him die."

The words hit me like a physical blow, and for a moment, I can't breathe. My gaze flicks to Derek, who is now practically vibrating with barely restrained fury. His eyes meet mine, and in them, I see everything he's not saying. Trust me. Don't do this.

But I can't let him get hurt.

"Fine," I say, my voice shaking just enough to sound convincing. "I'll go with you. Just... don't hurt anyone."

"Olivia, no—" Derek growls, but I cut him off with a look.

Ben smirks, lowering his weapon slightly. "Smart choice," he says, stepping closer. "I knew you'd—"

I don't let him finish. In one swift motion, I grab the heavy flashlight from the truck's dashboard and swing it with everything I've got. The metal connects with his wrist, and he lets out a shout of pain, dropping the weapon.

Chaos erupts.

The hunters raise their weapons, but before they can fire, Derek shifts mid-leap, his massive wolf form barreling into the nearest hunter. The sound of snapping bones and snarling fills the air as he tears through them with terrifying precision.

I dive behind the truck for cover, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it might burst. Gunshots ring out, and I peek around the corner just in time to see Derek take down another hunter, his jaws clamping around their arm and tossing them aside like a ragdoll.

But there are too many of them.

A hunter breaks away from the chaos, charging toward me with a knife glinting in the dim light. Adrenaline surges through me, and I grab a discarded metal pipe from the ground. I swing it, the impact jarring my arms as it connects with the hunter's side. They stumble, and I shove them away, my breathing ragged.

“Olivia!” Derek’s voice—human again—cuts through the noise. I turn just in time to see him tackle a hunter who was aiming a silver-tipped dagger at me. The blade sinks into Derek’s side instead, and he lets out a guttural growl of pain.

“No!” I scream, rushing to his side.

Before I can reach him, a deep, commanding voice cuts through the chaos. “Enough!”

Theo.

The Howling Pines Pack charges onto the scene, their presence a whirlwind of fur and fury. The hunters don’t stand a chance. Within moments, they’re overwhelmed, retreating or subdued under the pack’s relentless assault.



But I barely register any of it. All I can see is Derek, slumped on the ground, blood pooling beneath him. The howls of wolves and fading gunfire blur into the background as I drop to my knees beside Derek. Blood pools beneath him, dark and terrifying against the cracked asphalt of the parking lot.

“Derek!” My voice is frantic, trembling, barely recognizable. I press my hands against the deep gash on his side, sticky warmth coating my fingers. The smell of copper is sharp in the cold night air, mixing with the lingering scent of smoke and sweat. “Stay with me, okay? Don’t you dare leave me.”

His eyes flutter open, those steel-gray eyes that have always seemed so unshakable. Now they’re glassy, heavy with pain, but they still manage to lock onto me with a force that makes my breath catch.

“I’m fine,” he rasps, his voice rough and strained. “It’s... just a scratch.”

“A scratch?” I snap, my fear sharpening into anger as I press harder against the wound. My hands are slick with blood, and it’s coming too fast, spreading across his shirt like an unstoppable tide. “You’re bleeding out, Derek. Don’t you dare downplay this.”

The faintest ghost of a smile tugs at his lips. “You’re bossy when you’re scared. I like it.”

“Derek, stop!” My voice cracks, and tears blur my vision. I can’t lose him. Not him. I press harder, ignoring his wince, desperate to keep him here. “This isn’t the time to joke. Just... just stay with me. Please.”

His hand moves, slow and unsteady, until it covers mine. His palm is warm, steady despite the tremor I can feel in his fingers. The gentleness of the gesture breaks something inside me, and the tears I’ve been holding back spill over, hot and

relentless.

“Olivia,” he murmurs, his voice softer now, almost tender. “Look at me.”

I do. I can’t help it.

“I told you I’d protect you,” he says, his eyes boring into mine with an intensity that makes my chest tighten. “I’ll always protect you.”

There’s something in his tone—something raw and unspoken—that sends a shiver through me. It’s not just a promise. It’s more than that.

“Derek...” My voice trembles as I lean closer, searching his face for answers. “Why? Why do you care so much?”

The question hangs in the air between us, heavy and fragile. His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he won’t answer. But then his grip on my hand tightens, his eyes softening in a way I’ve never seen before.

“Because you’re mine,” he says, the words barely more than a whisper.

The world tilts. I freeze, my breath catching in my throat as his words sink in. “What... what do you mean?”

He exhales shakily, his head leaning back against the cold asphalt. “I’ve been fighting it for years, Olivia. Fighting what I feel. Fighting this .” His free hand gestures weakly between us. “But I can’t anymore. Not when I almost lost you tonight.”

My pulse pounds in my ears, my thoughts a chaotic mess. “Fighting what?” I whisper, my voice barely audible. “Derek, just tell me.”

His eyes meet mine again, and for the first time, I see something raw and unguarded in them. Vulnerability.

“You’re my mate,” he says, his voice breaking like a dam. “My fated mate.”

Mate.

The word echoes in my mind, unfamiliar and yet... not. Pieces of the puzzle start snapping together—the way he’s always been there, watching over me, protecting me, even when I didn’t know I needed it. The way my heart feels like it’s tethered to his, even when he tries to push me away.

“I don’t understand,” I whisper, my hands still trembling against his wound.

“It’s a shifter thing,” he says, his voice growing weaker. “A bond... deeper than anything you can imagine. From the moment I met you, I knew . But you were so young, and I...” He swallows hard, his jaw clenching. “I swore to your father I’d protect you. That’s all I’ve ever tried to do. Protect you. Even from me.”

My father. Derek’s best friend. The man who trusted him with my life.

“You’ve been... fighting this? Fighting us ?” My chest feels too tight, my emotions a tangled mess of confusion, anger, and something else—something that feels dangerously like hope. “Why?”

“Because you deserve more,” he says, his voice breaking. “More than a life filled with danger. More than someone like me.”

Tears blur my vision as his words sink in. He’s been carrying this—this bond, this love—for years, all while protecting me from things I didn’t even know existed. And he’s been doing it alone.

“Derek,” I whisper, leaning closer until my forehead brushes his. “You’ve been fighting for me all this time. Now it’s my turn to fight for you.”

His breath hitches, and for a moment, I think he might argue. But then his eyes close, and he exhales a shaky, almost relieved breath. “Olivia...”

Before he can say anything else, the sound of approaching footsteps pulls my attention. I glance up to see Theo and Ethan charging toward us, their faces grim but determined. Behind them, the rest of the Howling Pines pack is finishing off the last of the hunters, their victory clear but hard-won.

Theo kneels beside us, his sharp gaze flicking between Derek and me. “How bad is it?”

“He’s lost a lot of blood,” I say, my voice steadier now, though my hands are still shaking. “We need to get him out of here.”

Theo nods, his expression unreadable. “Ethan, help me get him up.”

As they move to lift Derek, he lets out a low growl of protest. “I can walk,” he mutters, though his pale face and trembling limbs say otherwise.

“Shut up, Derek,” Theo snaps, his tone gruff but laced with concern. “You’re not proving anything by being stubborn.”

Derek doesn’t argue, which tells me just how bad it is. As Theo and Ethan haul him to his feet, I stay close, one hand on his arm to steady him. He leans into me more than I expect, his weight a reminder of just how vulnerable he is right now.

“I’m not leaving your sight,” I tell him firmly, my voice leaving no room for argument. “Not now. Not ever.”

Derek's lips twitch into the faintest smile, and he murmurs, "Bossy."

But this time, there's no teasing in his tone—only a quiet, unspoken gratitude.

As we make our way toward the waiting cars, the reality of what's just happened begins to settle over me. The hunters are still out there, the packs are still in danger, and Derek's wounds are far from healed.

But for the first time, I don't feel powerless.

Because now I know the truth.

And no matter what comes next, I'll fight for him. Just like he's fought for me.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Derek

The first thing I register is the steady rhythm of her breathing. It's soft but unmistakable, and it sends a sort of calm through me that I haven't felt in years. Before my eyes even open, the scent of her fills the room—wildflowers and honey, tinged faintly with lavender shampoo. Olivia.

I crack my eyes open slowly, the faint morning light leaking through the curtains casting her in a warm, golden glow. She's curled up in the armchair near my bed, her legs tucked beneath her, her face turned slightly toward me. Her auburn hair, loose from the braid she usually wears, spills in soft waves over her shoulder, framing her face like she's stepped right out of one of my dreams. Her arms are wrapped around herself, as if even in sleep, she's trying to shield something fragile.

My wolf stirs at the sight of her, at the mere fact of her presence here. A low, protective hum thrums in my chest, blending with the ache that lingers in my shoulders and ribs. My body's healing fast, thanks to the forced shifts—the pain dull, manageable—but the real ache has nothing to do with my injuries and everything to do with the woman sitting no more than three feet away.

I let my eyes linger on her, taking in the steady rise and fall of her chest, the slight furrow in her brow that still lingers even in rest. How many nights has she spent worrying because of me? How many times have I been the reason she's tried to carry a burden far heavier than she should ever have to bear? Seeing her like this stirs something in me, something I've kept locked away for far too long.

The truth slams into me like a brutal punch. There's no going back. No more excuses.

No more distance. She deserves better than a man who will hide, who will protect her from ten feet away because he's too much of a coward to face what's in front of him. I've been a fool, wasting years pushing her away thinking it was for her safety, when all it's done is hurt her—and me.

She stirs slightly, her fingers brushing the soft fabric of the chair as her eyes flutter open. For a moment, her gaze is unfocused, bleary from sleep. Then, she sees me, and everything changes.

“Derek!” Her voice is soft but urgent, and before I can even speak, she rushes to my side, her bare feet whispering against the floor. Her hair falls across her face as she leans down, her hands hovering over me like she's afraid I might shatter under her touch.

“You're awake,” she breathes, relief flooding her voice. “How are you feeling? Does it still hurt? Do you need anything?”

Her questions come in a rush, but I can hear the tremor beneath them, the worry she's trying so hard to mask. I reach for her hand, wrapping my fingers gently around her wrist to still her frantic movements. Her skin is soft and impossibly warm against mine. She freezes, her gaze darting to our joined hands.

“I'm fine, Olivia,” I say, my voice coming out steadier than I expect. Still, I feel the weight of those words—the unspoken truth underneath them. I'm fine because of you.

Her lips press into a thin line, the fierce determination in her light brown eyes making me want to smile despite everything. “Fine, huh?” she says, arching an eyebrow. “You nearly bled out in the middle of Whispering Pines, and now you're lying here telling me you're fine?”

Her voice is low but filled with a tension I can't quite pinpoint. Anger? Concern? Guilt? Maybe all three. But I don't miss the way her breathing hitches slightly, or the way her thumb unconsciously moves across the back of my hand in a soothing circle.

"They're just scratches," I tease lightly, hoping to ease some of the weight sitting heavy between us. "I've had worse."

The corner of her mouth twitches as if she's fighting back a smile, but she doesn't let me off that easily. Her eyes narrow, and she crosses her arms over her chest. "Scratches?" she echoes. "I'm sorry, did you miss the part where Ben tried to—"

Her words cut off abruptly, her eyes clouding with something darker. Fury and sadness swirl together, casting a shadow over her features. My chest tightens at the mention of Ben, the weight of my failure pressing down on me all over again. I should've seen it sooner—his betrayal, the danger he posed. I should've kept her away from him.

I sit up slowly, ignoring the warning ache in my ribs, and reach for her hand again. She doesn't pull away this time. "Olivia," I say, my voice soft but firm. "You're safe now. That's all that matters."

She shakes her head, her hair falling into her eyes. "You keep saying that—like your safety doesn't matter. Like you didn't nearly die for me." Her voice cracks, and the sound slices right through me. "Do you even realize what it's like to watch you get hurt over and over again, just to keep me safe? Like I'm some helpless—"

"You're not helpless," I interrupt, my tone sharper than I intend. I take a steady breath, keeping my wolf in check as it claws at me to close the distance between us. "You've never been helpless, Olivia. Don't ever think that."

Her lips tremble slightly, but she lifts her chin, meeting my gaze with the kind of



fierce resilience that has always left me in awe of her. “Then why do you keep acting like you have to carry everything alone?” she demands.

Something inside me breaks. Maybe it’s the exhaustion, the years of guilt and longing wearing me down. Or maybe it’s the way she’s looking at me now—with hope and fear tangled together in her eyes, like she wants to believe in me but she’s afraid I’ll let her down again.

“I’ve known since the day I met you,” I begin, my voice raw, unsteady. “Since the moment you walked into the room at eighteen, I knew. You’re my mate, Olivia. The one person in this world I’m bound to—body, soul, all of it. It’s not just a feeling; it’s... it’s a connection, deeper than anything I can explain.”

Her eyes widen, her breath catching slightly, but she doesn’t pull away. “That’s what you said... that I’m your mate?” she repeats, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, swallowing hard. “It’s why I’ve stayed close, why I’ve always been there. Not just because of your father, or the promise I made to him. But because you’re mine, Olivia. Mine.”

The word lingers between us, heavy and unyielding. But it’s the truth, and I won’t take it back. Not now.

She stares at me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then, to my surprise, she reaches up and cups my face in her hands. Her touch is soft, steady, but it sets my entire body alight. “You should’ve told me,” she says, her voice breaking slightly. “I don’t understand all of this yet, but what I do know is that I’ve felt this connection, too. For a long time. And I’m not afraid of it, Derek. I’m not afraid of you.”

Her words undo me. Before I can stop myself, I’m pulling her toward me, my hand tangling in her hair as I kiss her. It’s slow at first, a tentative meeting of lips that

quickly deepens into something raw and consuming. Years of restraint, of holding back what I've wanted more than anything, crumble in an instant.

She lets out a soft moan, but I can feel her hesitation, the slight tense of her body as she pulls back, her cheeks flushed a delicate pink.

“Do you want this?” I ask, my voice low and weighted with emotion as I search her eyes. “Do you want me ? Do you want to be my mate, officially?”

Her lips part in a silent breath before she nods, a soft, “Yes,” slipping from her mouth. The simplicity of her answer sets my pulse racing, and I can feel the mate bond stirring between us already, pulling us closer, stronger than ever.

“You know what this means,” I murmur, brushing a strand of hair from her face. My thumb lingers against her cheek as her breath hitches. “It means I'll take you as mine... mark you as mine. I'll bite you.” My words come out husky, filled with the weight of centuries of instinct. Yet, her cheeks deepen into a richer pink, and her lips curve slightly, like she likes the thought of it—like she relishes the idea of belonging to me as deeply as I already belong to her.

“I want it,” she whispers, her voice unwavering, but I catch the flicker of worry in her gaze. “But... are you sure about your injuries? Last night, you—”

I silence her with a gentle kiss, pouring everything I feel into the press of my lips against hers. When I pull back, my voice is thick with conviction. “The pain of not having you is worse than anything else, Olivia. I can endure anything, as long as I have you.”

Before she can protest further, I gently pull her onto the bed with me, my larger frame enveloping hers. A low growl escapes my throat as the mate bond flares to life between us, a tangible force that pulses with each beat of our hearts. She fits perfectly

in my arms, her curves melding to my body as if she were made for me. And she was. She is mine, and I am hers.

Our kiss reignites, deeper and more passionate than before. I can feel her surrender, her body melting into mine as I explore every inch of her with my mouth and hands. She tastes like heaven, her scent driving me wild, awakening the primal instincts of my wolf. But I hold back, determined to bring her pleasure before claiming her as my own.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmur against her skin, trailing kisses down her neck, her collarbone, lingering at the swell of her breasts. She arches into my touch, a soft moan escaping her lips as I unbutton her shirt, revealing more of her to my hungry gaze.

I take my time undressing her, worshipping each inch of her skin as it’s exposed. She watches me with wide eyes, her breath coming in shallow gasps as I kiss every curve, every line of her body. When I reach her toes, I can feel her trembling, her body coiled tight with anticipation.

Slowly, I make my way back up her legs, my hands trailing lightly against her soft skin. She shivers as I kiss the inside of her thighs, her hips lifting slightly off the bed as she seeks more. I can smell her arousal, the sweet scent of her desire filling the air, and it takes every ounce of my control not to take her right then.

But I want to taste her first. I want to feel her fall apart under my touch, my tongue. I want to bring her to the edge and push her over, again and again.

When I reach her core, she lets out a soft cry, her fingers gripping the sheets tightly. I explore her with my tongue, learning her body, her responses. She’s hot and wet and tastes like pure sensation, and I can’t get enough. I tease her, bringing her close to the edge before backing off, only to start again.

“Derek, please,” she begs, her voice hoarse with need. “Please, I can’t—”

I don’t make her wait any longer. I focus on her sensitive nub, my tongue lashing against it as I slide a finger inside her, curling it gently. She comes apart instantly, her body convulsing as she cries out my name. I don’t stop; I keep tasting her, keep touching her, prolonging her pleasure until she’s cresting again, her second orgasm ripping through her with such force that her whole body shakes.

Only then do I slow down, easing her through the aftershocks with gentle touches and soft kisses. I look up at her, taking in her flushed cheeks, her glazed eyes, the smile tugging at her lips. She looks thoroughly pleased, thoroughly mine.

“That was...” she trails off, her voice breathy. “I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

I smile, pressing a kiss to her inner thigh. “Good,” I growl softly. “Because that was just the beginning, Olivia. I promise you, there’s so much more to come.”

And as I make my way back up her body, my wolf growls, ready to finally claim our mate in every way possible.

I reach down to remove my boxers, my erection straining painfully against the fabric. My cock feels like it's about to burst, the anticipation of finally being with Olivia nearly driving me over the edge. I'm so hard it hurts, every nerve ending in my body screaming for release.

But Olivia has other plans. She pushes me gently, her hands firm against my chest, and I find myself laying on my back, her body poised above mine. Her eyes are filled with a mixture of desire and determination, and I know better than to argue with the woman who's about to become my mate.

"I want to taste you too, Derek," she says, her voice a sultry whisper that sends a jolt of electricity straight to my groin.

I nod, my voice hoarse with need. "Do anything you want to me, Olivia. I'm yours."

She kisses her way down my chest, her lips soft and teasing, each kiss a spark that ignites the fire within me. I watch her, my hands fisting the sheets as she moves lower, her tongue tracing the line of hair that leads to where I want her most.

When she reaches my cock, her fingers wrap around the base, and I nearly lift off the bed. The feel of her mouth on me is indescribable—her warm, wet tongue swirling around the tip, her lips sliding down my shaft, taking me deeper with each stroke.

I can't hold back the growls of pleasure that escape my throat, the primal sounds filling the room as she sucks and licks me with an enthusiasm that's both maddening and thrilling. I'm losing myself in the sensation, the world narrowing to the point where her mouth meets my skin.

But I can't let this be the end. I need to be inside her, to feel her tight walls around me. I reach down, pulling her up to straddle me, my cock slipping free from the sweet confines of her mouth with a wet pop.

"Ride me, Olivia," I command, my voice a gravelly whisper.

She positions herself above me, her hand guiding me to her entrance. I watch, transfixed, as she slowly lowers herself onto my cock. She's so tight, so wet, that it takes all my self-control not to thrust up into her.

She looks so beautiful in this moment, with her hair falling forward in a cascade of waves that frame her flushed face. Her lush body is a vision of desire, curves highlighted by the soft light, every movement an expression of sensual grace.

Her breath hitches as she takes me fully, her eyes wide with a mixture of surprise and pleasure. I can feel her stretching to accommodate me, her inner walls clutching me like a velvet fist.

My hands find her hips, helping her to move, to find a rhythm that soon has us both gasping for air. She rides me with abandon, her movements growing more frantic as she chases her release.

I feel her orgasm building, her muscles tightening around me. "Come for me, Olivia," I urge her on, and with a cry, she does, her body shuddering as waves of pleasure wash over her.

I can't hold back any longer. With a growl, I flip her onto her back, my body covering hers as I drive into her with a fierce intensity. Our bodies move together, each thrust bringing us closer to the ultimate moment of bonding.

Her nails dig into my back, her breaths coming in short gasps as I feel my own release approaching. My mouth finds the soft skin of her neck, my teeth aching with the need to mark her, to claim her as mine.

"Derek!" she cries out, her body arching beneath me as she finds her release once more.

That's when I completely lose control. With one final thrust, I explode inside her, my body shaking with the force of my orgasm. At the same time, I bite down on her neck, the coppery taste of her blood mingling with the overwhelming sensation of our souls binding together.

The mate bond snaps into place, a connection so profound and intense that it's like nothing I've ever felt before. I can feel Olivia's emotions, her love and desire for me, as strong as my own.

We lie there in the aftermath, our bodies slick with sweat, our hearts beating in sync.

I hold her close, her warmth anchoring me in a way I never thought possible. Her head rests against my chest, and I feel her breath, steady and soft, syncing with the beat of my heart. My wolf, restless and raging for so long, is finally calm. I press my lips to her temple.

The room is silent except for the steady rhythm of our breathing and the faint creak of the bed as Olivia shifts slightly, her leg entangling with mine. I let my hand run gently down her back, tracing the curve of her spine, memorizing every inch of her. She sighs, nuzzling closer, and I can't help the small smile that tugs at the corner of my lips. For the first time in years, the weight I've carried feels lighter. The barriers I've built, the walls I've fought so hard to keep between us—they've all crumbled. And I don't regret a single piece of it.

"I still don't understand all of this," she murmurs, her voice muffled against my chest. There's no fear in her words, just quiet curiosity. "But I feel it, Derek. I've felt it for so long. This pull, like you've always been... there. Wherever I've been, you've been, too."

Her words hit me like a strike to the heart—a soft, gentle blow that reverberates with meaning. She's felt it. All these years, she's felt what I've ignored, denied, tried to bury. Guilt rears its head, but it's tempered by the profound relief of hearing her say it, of knowing I haven't been alone in this.

I tilt her chin up gently so she's looking at me. Her light brown eyes search mine, and I see everything I've ever wanted in that gaze. Strength. Trust. Love. My hand cups her face, my thumb brushing against the freckles on her cheek. "It's because you're my mate," I tell her, my voice low and rough. "It's always been you, Olivia. From the first moment, it's been you."

A smile ghosts across her lips, small but genuine, and it lights up her entire face. Her fingers trace the line of my jaw, her touch feather-light but reverent. She tilts her head, her hair cascading around her in auburn waves. “And you’ve always been mine, haven’t you?” she whispers.

The simple truth in her words steals my breath. I nod, unable to speak for a moment. “Always.”



*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:33 am*

Olivia

Without fail, my gaze finds him. I don't think it's a habit that will ever change.

Derek stands near the edge of the clearing, his tall frame illuminated by the golden lights strung in the community room. His salt-and-pepper hair catches the glow, and the strong angles of his face are unreadable except for the occasional flicker of intensity in his steel-gray eyes as he watches the gathering. Even from this distance, I can feel the energy radiating off him—the steady, unrelenting protection that has kept me safe for so long. He's talking to Theo, their stances mirroring each other, rigid and watchful. Two soldiers never really leaving the battlefield, even here, even now.

But Derek's focus breaks, sliding to me as though he can sense where I'm standing, waiting. A shiver drips down my spine, though the night is still and warm. He doesn't look away, and I find myself rooted in place, caught under the weight of his gaze.

"You're doing it again," Maya's voice chirps, startling me.

I turn, finding my friend smirking up at me, a second glass of lemonade extended like a peace offering. "Doing what?" I ask, my lips tugging into a smile as I accept the drink.

"That thing where you get all dreamy and tuned-out because someone over there—" She tilts her head toward Derek— "has you utterly bewitched."

"Bewitched?" I scoff, rolling my eyes. "That's dramatic, even for you, Maya."

She leans against the same beam, her caramel-toned skin catching the glow of nearby lights. “Come on, Liv. You’re not fooling anyone. Not me, not him, not the rest of this room. The guy might as well have a neon sign above his head that screams ‘Olivia’s protector-slash-eternal-swoon-inducer.’”

I sputter, trying and failing to suppress a laugh. “Swoon-inducer? He’s not—”

“Let’s not lie tonight, darling,” Maya interrupts, grinning. “You’re done pretending you don’t belong with him, right? I mean, look at you. You have that post-fate glow about you—like all the existential angst wrapped itself into a neat little Derek package, and now you’re on cloud nine.”

My cheeks burn, but before I can retort, she bumps her shoulder lightly into mine, her expression softening. “Seriously, though. How are you? Adjustment period still going okay?”

I hesitate, chewing the inside of my cheek as I consider her question. Finally, I look over my shoulder—not toward Derek this time, but out into the clearing, where strings of light bob gently above the wind-stirred pines. There’s a kind of stillness here tonight, one that feels earned. “It’s not easy,” I admit softly. “Things are... shifting. But I’m happy. Really happy.”

Maya’s usual playful demeanor lights up as she leans closer, her excitement barely contained. “Well, speaking of shifts,” she says, grinning, “guess who just landed herself a new job?” She pauses for dramatic effect, one brow arched. “I’ll give you a hint: it involves a mysterious, disgustingly wealthy businessman who just moved here.”

“I can’t help but match her grin. “Mysterious businessman? Sounds like the plot of one of those cheesy romance novels you hate.”

“Oh, please.” Maya rolls her eyes but doesn’t lose her smile. “It’s probably just another rich guy with more money than manners. Honestly, I’m not sure if it’s a step up from slinging burgers or just a slightly fancier way to keep the bills paid.” She shrugs, but there’s something in her voice—something curious, almost intrigued.

I laugh, nudging her playfully. “Still doesn’t sound like you’re complaining. I mean, hey, if it keeps you out of that grease trap we call the diner, I’ll take it.”

She winks at me. “Touché.” Maya squeezes my shoulder before stepping back into the crowd. “Oh, and tell Mr. Swoon-Inducer to stop glaring at me every time I try to grab dessert!,” she calls over her shoulder, her voice lighter now.

I shake my head, grinning as I watch her disappear into the flow of people. Before I can look away, though, I feel it again: his gaze.”

Turning, I find Derek closer this time, his conversation with Theo clearly over. He’s only a few feet away now, his hands tucked into the front pockets of his dark jeans, an expression on his face that I can’t quite define. He tilts his head slightly, the faintest quirk at the corner of his mouth breaking through his otherwise stoic exterior.

And then he’s moving toward me, every step deliberate, measured, until the space between us all but vanishes.

“You’ve been hiding,” he murmurs, his deep voice brushing over me like velvet—and gravel.

“I wasn’t hiding,” I counter, cocking an eyebrow in a futile attempt to sound composed. “I was thinking.”

“Thinking,” Derek repeats, his hand brushing lightly over my arm before slipping around my waist. The heat of his touch burns straight through the fabric of my dress,

and I'm acutely aware of how strong, how solid, he feels. He leans down slightly, his breath stirring the loose strands of hair that have fallen from my braid. "Care to share what's on your mind?"

I bite back a smile, tilting my chin up to meet his gaze. "Maya thinks you glare at her around food specifically to throw off her dessert game."

That earns me a rare, low laugh from Derek, the sound rumbling pleasantly against my skin. "Good. Means she gets out of my way when I'm bringing you a plate."

The warmth in his tone loosens something in my chest, and for a moment, I forget about the gathering around us entirely.

His hand shifts slightly at my waist, his thumb brushing the curve of my hip like he's testing how close he can hold me. His eyes drop to my face, scanning me with that same intensity I feel every time he looks at me—like he can see every hurt I've ever felt, every dream I've ever dared to have, and still, all he wants to do is stay.

"Are you all right?" he asks softly, his voice filled with the careful kind of patience he seems to reserve only for me.

"I am," I reply, and though the words are small, the truth of them feels enormous.

His jaw works for a moment, his expression tightening before softening into something so vulnerable it leaves me breathless. "I've been thinking a lot about your dad," he admits quietly. "About what he'd say if he were here."

I blink back the sudden well of tears at the mention of my father. "Yeah?"

"He'd be proud of you, Olivia. Of who you've become." Derek pauses, his thumb tracing soft, soothing circles against my hip. "And he'd be proud of us."

The words settle deeply in me, warm and bittersweet. “You think?”

“I know.” His gaze locks with mine, unwavering and steady. “He trusted me with you. But I didn’t expect... I didn’t expect you’d be the one to teach me what it means to fight for something that matters.”

I press my forehead gently against his chest, tears spilling despite my resolve. “I think... he’d be glad I found you.”

Derek’s arms tighten around me, his voice the lowest I’ve ever heard it. “We found each other, Olivia.”

And we did. Amidst grief and danger and the chaos of two clashing worlds, we found this—each other, this moment, and the endless promise of tomorrows yet to come.

Beneath the lights of Whispering Pines, with the hum of celebration all around us, it feels like the dawn of something new. Something we’ll face together, come what may.

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Derek

The house is quiet, but it's the kind of quiet I never thought I'd know—a peaceful, settled quiet. Not the silence of hiding or waiting, not the stillness before a fight. This is the sound of a home, broken only by soft coos and the occasional click of Olivia's camera. I'm standing in the living room, sunlight pouring through the windows, holding the tiniest, most precious reminder of how much my life has changed.