



Found by Fate (The Darkest Mark: Prequel)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Shifters see the world in shades of black and white, and so did I... until I met Brennan King.

The rival King pack was our enemy, and years of slaughtering each other means to see a King was to see death. Then I met him—Brennan King. The only wolf I'd ever met who enjoyed escaping into the human world as much as I did.

Brennan is supposed to be dangerous, and maybe he is. But he's also funny, generous and sexy. I can't resist him.

But love comes at a price, especially when you're already doomed to marry the alpha's son, a wolf obsessed with possessing me. Torn between duty and forbidden passion, I'm thrust into a world of betrayal, dark secrets, and choices that could tear me apart.

To make matters worse, Brennan is the alpha of his pack, bound by responsibilities he can't ignore. No matter how much we fantasize about running away from our packs and building a life together, our future seems impossible.

But the pull of the moon is strong, and destiny has plans of its own. Will we find a way to rewrite the rules, or is our love doomed?

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CHAPTER 1

It was the morning of my eighteenth birthday, and I just wanted to be left alone.

Within the next few full moons, I'd start shifting, and for the next few months after that, my ability to control my transformation might be... unpredictable. For now, I walked through the woods, a place I'd always found solace. It was my little birthday gift to myself. I'd come here often as a child; my younger brother and sister had been nervous about the dark, foreboding forest, so it had been a place to escape when I couldn't take their antics anymore.

Although they'd been right to be afraid.

As I walked, I let my mind wander, taking in the beauty of the swaying trees and the birds who sang so freely. Once I started to shift, I was afraid they would sense me and wing away frantically.

The sense of someone watching me swept up my spine and a sudden pit opened in my stomach.

I spun to find a tall figure standing about ten feet behind me. He raised his hands in a placating gesture, but my heart still beat frantically. He was incredibly tall, and muscles bunched along his biceps and in his corded forearms. His nose looked like someone had broken it more than once, but he had once been handsome, in a rough way. Nathan Longroad. I hadn't seen him in years, and recognizing him now did nothing to calm my nerves.

The alpha's runaway son.

Some people said the alpha had murdered him.

Some people said the alpha had good reasons for that murder.

But here was Nathan, in the flesh.

He was staring at me with strange intensity.

"Hi," I said, the word sounding flimsy in the wind that blew through the forest. I cleared my throat. But I didn't know what to say next.

"I'd hoped I'd find you," he said. "I've been thinking of you all these years."

"Why?" I took a step back, but the house was a long way back through the woods. That house had never felt safe before, but now I wanted to flee home.

Nathan was six years older than me. He could leap forward as a man and land on me as a wolf, pinning me to the ground before I could take another step. His eyes narrowed, the look on his face offended, and I forced my feet to come to a stop, to hold myself still.

I needed to use my wits to get away from Nathan.

"Because I'm going to marry you," he said with the sheer, smiling confidence of a madman.

My heart raced as his words sunk in. I'd never have expected him to appear out of nowhere and declare his intention to marry me as casually as if he were ordering a burger.

My sudden surge of anger that didn't beat out the fear already pounding in my heart. "I can't marry you. I barely even know you."

"Of course we'll get to know each other better," he said. "But I know you're my mate. I've known it since we were kids."

That revelation had skipped me. Nathan had been a huge bully during our school years. He'd never bothered me, but then, he'd been five grades ahead and for all I knew, he'd never noticed me at all.

"I can't marry you," I repeated. "I'm eighteen today... I'm not ready to marry anyone."

Had he come back because today was my birthday? It was too odd to be coincidence, but the timing was overwhelming. I pinched the skin on my wrist, wondering if it could be a dream. But Nathan still had me trapped in the woods and in this bizarre conversation.

"Oh, but I think you can," he said with a smile. "Together we'll be an unbeatable team. You as my wife, and me as the alpha."

"You as the... alpha?"

"That's the real reason you don't want me yet, right?" He spoke as if he knew everything, his voice confident and deep. "You're the most beautiful woman in the pack. You know that your beauty is a precious commodity, and you won't waste it on some disinherited nobody. No, I need to be alpha to win your love."

"No," I shook my head, annoyed at the way he spoke like I was some kind of gold-digger. "I just don't know you."

“You may think that I'm crazy.” He crossed his arms over his massive chest. "But mark my words: if you agree to be mine, then I won't rest until we're both standing at the top."

“Nathan, don't be silly,” I said firmly. “You'll only get yourself killed if you attempt...”

I couldn't say to challenge the alpha. It made me feel as if I were a part of his scheme, which would require him to kill his father in order to take over the leadership of the pack.

I trailed off as I realized how pointless it was to argue with him. His mind was already made up.

He laughed. “I'm not afraid. I'll show you my worth, Amelia, and then you'll marry me.”

“Don't do this for my sake,” I said in a whisper, still confused about how I'd become such a big part of his insane life plans. “I don't want you to get hurt.”

His smile widened, as if I'd just admitted I cared for him.

“I'll see you soon,” he said. “Don't tell anyone we met. You'll be in danger. But I'll find you soon.”

My lips parted, unsure how to respond.

Then he turned and strode back into the forest, which seemed to swallow him.

I walked back toward the house with my sense of solace destroyed, and even the soft morning sun shining down and the song of the birds couldn't restore that peace.

* * *

My stepfather, Curtis, was in the kitchen with my mother. His hands were on her hips and she was smiling up at him the way she always did, as if she loved him as much as he loved himself. I eased the back door shut behind me, but it clicked loudly into place.

Curtis turned toward me and smiled. “Hi, Amy. Ready for your birthday spankings?”

A pit opened in my stomach. I looked at my mom incredulously, but she laughed as if he was joking, as if that weren’t a weird, disturbing thing for a man to say to a teenage girl.

“I’ve got to get ready for work,” I said.

“You don’t need to work on your birthday,” he chided, but I was already on my way past them toward the living room.

My brother, Aiden, had just walked into the kitchen, and Rose followed him. Aiden stopped and, as he stared at my stepfather, a dark look came over his face. Aiden was just a year younger than me, and the two of us had always been close. Rose was just eleven, and she carried her hairbrush in one hand as if she was waiting for me to do her hair like usual.

“What did he say to you?” Aiden muttered as I passed.

“It doesn’t matter.” My voice was flat and colorless. “Don’t worry about it.”

“He was just teasing.” My mother patted my stepfather on the shoulder. She was the only one smiling, as if she was having this conversation in a parallel dimension, one where Curtis didn’t glower threateningly at my little brother. “Go get ready for work,

Amy.”

I wanted to scream at my mother that Curtis wasn't just teasing. I wanted to tell her, yet again, that he didn't belong in our family.

But I didn't. I combed through Rose's hair and plaited it into a fishtail braid, then made sure she'd packed her homework and her lunch even though she got huffy with me.

We had to get out of that house. I threw on my sweatshirt, then walked with Aiden and Rose down to the bus stop that would pick them up for the pack's combined K-12 school.

It was a long walk to the edge of pack territory, so I had plenty of time to think about what was happening at home. I wanted to get out of there so desperately.

But I didn't want to leave Rose or Aiden.

And there was no one I could talk to about my surreal encounter with Nathan Longroad. Curtis would take any opportunity to curry favor with the alpha. My mother would go right to Curtis with anything I told her. My human friends would never understand. They couldn't know anything about my life.

I was alone.

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CHAPTER 2

That night at work at Tex's Grill, my best human friend, Alison, couldn't stop talking about a bonfire. "You should come! It's your birthday, live a little."

I shook my head, not in the mood to explain why I didn't want to go. I'd have to ask my mom, which really meant asking Curtis, and I'd probably be denied, anyway. There's no point in making friends outside the pack...

"Come on, Amy," she said. "It'll be fun! Just a few of us hanging out around a fire, listening to music, roasting marshmallows...you know you want to!" She grinned at me, her blue eyes pleading.

I did want to go, and that was why I sighed. I'd always read a lot, but my favorites were books where heroines led normal, quiet lives filled with friends and families, the kind of books that let me soak in the details. The thought of making s'mores surrounded by teenage drunken revelry was delightful.

Then I thought about Nathan Longroad and my stepfather's words earlier that day. Maybe getting out of the house for a while would help me clear my mind. If I went with Alison and her friends, I should be the only shifter. Wolves didn't exactly hang around humans. Most of our pack preferred to stay close to home, venturing to town—and to this diner—only when they needed to.

Most of our pack felt they had everything they needed right on pack lands.

I didn't know why I struggled so much to fit in and just be happy. But maybe I could

pretend to be like Alison for a night. "Okay. Let's go."

Alison squealed in delight and threw her arms around me in a hug before running off to serve another round of decaf.

I smiled as I watched her go.

Maybe this bonfire was just what I needed.

* * *

In the better-to-ask forgiveness-then-permission vein, I didn't talk to my mother about the evening's plans except to say I had to work late.

We arrived at the bonfire half an hour later, and my heart raced as I took in the scene. The fire was huge, casting an orange light into the dark sky. People huddled around the bonfire, talking and laughing; some of them had brought guitars and were playing music. I felt a grin come over my face at the sight. It was like something out of a book or a teen movie.

Alison grabbed my hand and pulled me closer to the fire. We sat down on a log and she handed me a stick, producing a bag of marshmallows with an expression of triumph. As we talked and laughed, I felt myself relax for the first time all day.

But then something changed. My skin prickled as if someone was watching us. I could sense another wolf's presence nearby—a powerful wolf. I turned to look at the faces around the bonfire.

"What is it?" Alison asked, her eyes growing wide as I continued to search the crowd.

I shook my head and turned back to her. "Nothing. I thought I saw someone that I

knew, but I was wrong.”

“Okay.” I could tell that she didn’t believe me. But she didn’t press, and we continued to eat our s’mores and chat around the fire.

"How come you never come out with us?" Alison asked me. "Isn't this fun?"

"It is fun," I said, thinking about how within a few weeks, the full moon would rise, and I'd probably never see Alison again.

I couldn't change what I was.

No matter how much I wished I could.

Then I sensed the wolf's presence again. I glanced around the faces around the fire. Even the boy bent over his guitar, playing beautiful music with his fingers moving deftly over the strings, seemed suspect now. The once-cozy firelight cast flickering shadows over the faces surrounding me and made them seem malevolent.

Had Nathan found me again? Nothing would surprise me. The man was insane. There were stories about the things he'd done to people who crossed him when he was just a teenager. I'd imagine the intervening years of being outcast from his pack in an unfriendly world hadn't sweetened his disposition.

Then I saw the boy who was watching me from the shadows. The moment his eyes met mine, a spark ran down my spine, and I stiffened. He had intensely blue eyes, a clean-cut jaw, a mop of dark hair. He pulled his hands free of his hoodie and raised them in a gesture of peace. It might have been more calming if he hadn’t been so big: tall and broad-shouldered, lean at the waist. His black hoodie and gray sweatpants just highlighted his athletic build.

When he sat down beside me on the log, Alison gave me a big grin and stood. Her face said she thought she was doing me a favor, and then I realized how everyone else looked at him in admiration. He carried himself like an alpha and even the humans reacted.

He leaned toward me, and his lips dipping near my ear made me clench and freeze in an entirely new kind of tension, one I'd never felt before.

"My name is Brennan," he whispered. "And I mean you no harm. We can both be... normal... tonight."

When I looked up at him, he gave me a small, certain smile. "You like pretending that you're normal."

By normal, he meant human.

"And you do too?"

"I like it more than I should," he said, finally looking away from me and gazing into the fire. I let out a breath, feeling light-headed from the way he'd looked at me. The flickering flames cast shadows over his perfect profile: a determined jaw, a long, straight nose, his pillowy lips.

If he were from a pack who were our allies... then meeting him wouldn't get me in trouble. It might be the start of something good. I plucked at the hairband around my wrist as I asked, "Who are you?"

"I already told you. Brennan." He grinned at me as if I were an amnesiac and it were adorable.

"You know what I mean. What pack?" I lowered my voice, although it felt like we

were having an intimate conversation right now with the guitar music drowning out most conversation.

“It doesn't matter tonight.”

“It always matters, Brennan.” Some packs were always at war. Our worst enemy could be sitting right beside me.

“You never told me your name,” he reminded me.

“Amelia.”

“Like Amelia, who showed everyone how to fly?”

Amelia Earhart was the first female aviator to cross the Atlantic and fly solo across the Pacific Ocean. She was only five feet tall, but she was fearless. I was short too, and I'd always wished I'd been named after her. I decided to let Brennan believe it.

The way he was looking at me made me feel like we were the only two people at the bonfire. The knot in my stomach unraveled. I could breathe for the first time all day.

I had to remind myself that I shouldn't be so attracted to him. I definitely shouldn't feel safe around him. And yet...

He leaned forward, and he was so close that I could feel his breath on my cheek.

I imagined that we'd known each other for a very long time, that he was the boy next door or the popular boy in our school, that I was in a movie. I let my eyes drift shut, hoping he would kiss me.

With my eyes closed, my senses were even more intense, and I could feel him shift

until his lips were a breath away from mine.

Then there was a loud popping noise from the fire, and the sound of logs tumbling. Flames burst toward us.

His arm swept around me, yanking me from the log, and it seemed as if we were a dozen feet away from the fire among the dark shadows of the trees in seconds. His sweatshirt sleeve briefly blazed with sparks, and he beat them out with the other hand. He barely winced, his face stoic.

"Are you burned?" I asked.

He shrugged, gave me a slight grin. "Sorry. I might have overreacted."

I couldn't help smiling back. We were standing in the shadows of the pines, and everyone else was settling back in around the fire. But the cool air on my face felt welcome. Wolves ran hot, and I could tell I was pink-faced from both the flames and from flirting with Brennan.

"You saved me," I said, only half-mocking. "Now take off your sweatshirt so I can see if you're hurt."

He rolled his sweatshirt up obediently. His t-shirt rose with the hoodie, and I glimpsed his hard-edged abs, of the cut of his hip bones just rising above his jeans. There was the faintest suggestion of a dark happy trail below his belly button, and I memorized his perfect torso before he had pulled the sweatshirt off and his shirt had fallen back into place.

He grinned like he had caught me looking, but he didn't say a word.

"Oh, it burned you." As I saw the burns on his arm, I grabbed his wrist. "Why didn't

you say anything?"

"I was trying to look tough," he returned. "Please be impressed."

It was so unexpectedly honest, such self-deprecating humor that I never heard from men in my pack, that I laughed, and he looked at me as if he enjoyed hearing me laugh.

"I'm very impressed," I promised him, although it had nothing to do with his stoicism or even his protective impulses.

I just... liked Brennan.

"Let me get you some bandaids," I said. "Alison is a Girl Scout. I'm sure she's got a first aid kit in the car."

Sure enough, I found the first aid kit in Alison's tidy trunk. I carried it back to Brennan.

He was still waiting in the shadows. The two of us sat down on a log, intimately close.

There were no other people around us, no more parties in the woods. The only sounds were the trees creaking in the wind, and I could feel the night closing in.

I hoisted the first aid kit. "Let me see."

He showed me the burns on his arm. It felt strange, but nice, to take his arm and rest it in my lap. I was keenly aware of his body so close to mine, of the way he closed his eyes and relaxed into my touch as I spread burn salve over the wounds.

“You’re an excellent nurse. It feels nice to be taken care of.”

It felt nice taking care of him, which was odd when I felt so tired from taking care of Aiden and Rose, trying to protect them from Mom and Curtis. Aiden was so hot-headed and required a lot of protecting, and Rose was desperate for their approval.

"Anytime," I said, sounding cool despite the wild beating of my heart. "Anything else?"

"You could kiss me," he suggested. "I've heard that kisses are very healing."

I laughed to cover my surprise... and the sudden rush of desire I felt. I'd never had such a visceral reaction to a man. I wanted to fall into him, to feel his arms wrap around me.

“You want me to kiss it better like you’re a child?” I asked archly.

He gave me another flash of a smile. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and raised it to my lips, carefully pressing a kiss to his inner wrist.

“I feel better already,” he promised me.

I felt a little silly, wondering if he would think I was a dork.

Then he leaned in and kissed me.

It was a delicate kiss, softer than I would have expected, his lips just brushing against mine. His body leaned into me, and I pressed back against him.

When his arm settled around my shoulders, I didn't want to stop.

Brennan's mouth moved across mine in a way that reassured me, his lips soft as the two of us slowly explored each other. He pulled back just slightly and let me set the pace. He smelled delicious, like the pine of the forest itself.

I could stay here kissing him all night, but I wasn't even supposed to be here.

I pulled back, breaking the kiss. This was a mistake, maybe even a dangerous mistake. I had never felt like this before, and I felt confused by how my body ached to keep kissing him.

This felt like the stories I'd heard about the mating bond. I'd always assumed they were nonsense.

"I have to go," I said. "I'm sorry."

I stood up and handed him his sweatshirt. Brennan looked up at me with startled, intense blue eyes. Then his face shifted into a faint smile as if he was about to make a joke, trying to put me at ease again.

I wanted so badly to stand there and keep flirting with him. Instead, I turned and fled back to the campsite.

Alison leapt up when she saw me, her eyes sparkling. "How was it?" she gushed, grabbing my arm. "Everyone has a crush on Brennan. Even the guys, I think... he's so..."

She sighed, as if she didn't have words, but I knew what she meant. Brennan exuded a sense of power and confidence that was intoxicating even to humans who didn't realize the wolf lurked just under his skin.

And the handsome face and easy smile didn't hurt, either.

Even though I had said nothing, Alison must have noticed my expression because she flipped, suddenly turning fierce. "You seem sad. Did he do anything to you? Are you alright?"

She craned her head, turning as if she was about to find him and fly at him.

"I'm fine," I promised. "I just....it feels weird with him."

"Weird how?"

"Weird like I... like him." I shook my head. "It's complicated. I have to get home, my mom is going to kill me."

"Um. Okay," she said, clearly not understanding my wild moods but willing to go with it anyway. "Did you get his number?"

"There's no point," I said.

"There's no point," she muttered, as if she couldn't believe me. "All right. I'll be right back, you can meet me at the car."

As I waited in the darkness of the parking lot, able to hear the music and laughter and see the flickering firelight through the trees, all I wanted was to walk back into the light.

And I felt more alone than ever.

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CHAPTER 3

I showered as soon as I got home, worried that Brennan's scent would cling to me as much as the smoke from the campfire.

When I had dressed in my t-shirt and sleep pants and opened the bathroom door, still wringing my hair out in a towel, Curtis stood waiting.

I jumped back, shocked to see him standing there.

"You made it home all right," he said. "They kept you late at work."

His tone said he knew I was lying.

"It was a long day. I need to get some sleep," I said.

His gaze dropped to my chest, and I crossed my arms awkwardly.

Then his nostrils flared, as if he were breathing in my scent. I stiffened, pressing my back against the wall as I tried to edge around him to my room.

Curtis let me go, but the way he watched me still made me feel sick.

* * *

The next day, Alison looked miserable with her hangover, more miserable than she usually was when waiting on a Sunday. The Sunday lunch patrons were different

from our regulars. They tipped like shit and left the tables a mess.

But she still brightened when she saw me. "Do you regret not getting Brennan's number last night?"

"No. Why? How often does he come to those things, anyway?"

"He's a regular," she said. "He comes to the diner sometimes too."

"Does he?"

"Are you sure you don't regret not getting his number?"

"Alison..."

Her answering smile was wide and mischievous.

"What did you do?"

"I've got his number," she sing-songed. "And I know he wants to take you out."

"I'm not dating anyone."

"That's why I told him he should come for lunch today."

She was lucky I couldn't shift yet, because I might have murdered her right there on the Formica counter.

"Why?"

"Because you deserve to have some fun and be happy, Amelia! All you do is work

and look after your ungrateful little brat-siblings."

"Hey." I frowned at her.

"Your words."

"Yes, and my siblings," I said. "It's different when I call them brats."

She raised her hands. "Just... take your lunch break and eat some french fries with Brennan when he comes. I'll get your tables."

"You're meddling," I scolded her. Then I softened, realizing that I was going to disappear from her life soon and she might think it was because she'd done something wrong. "But thanks. Now let's survive the lunch rush, then I'll think about Brennan."

Brennan didn't come until three, when everything had quieted down. I could feel him when he walked in, and I knew it was him before I looked up from the Coke machine and saw him. His shoulders looked broad in his leather jacket, and he smiled at Alison and said something to her. She practically buckled at the knees; my best friend swooned for him like everyone else, apparently.

He took a seat in a booth, and when I came over, he looked up at me. For the first time, Brennan looked uncertain.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "I wanted to see you again, but if this makes you uncomfortable, I'll go."

"Why?"

"Because I don't intend to force my presence on you. But I thought you might not want to see me again because of pack bullshit, not because you genuinely thought I

was ugly or boring.” He grinned at me in a way that suggested he was keenly aware he was neither.

"I meant why did you want to see me again?"

"Isn't that obvious?" He gestured at the seat across from him.

"No."

"You're beautiful, kind and clever."

"You have no idea if I'm clever or kind. You barely know me." And having people claim I was beautiful had only led me into trouble so far.

"I'm an excellent judge of character." He tilted his head to one side. "Are you?"

There was an open challenge in those deep blue eyes.

"You're welcome to join me for lunch," he added.

"I work here. I shouldn't date a customer."

His nostrils flared subtly. "You won't work here for much longer, will you?"

So he knew I was about to shift. He knew I'd be dangerous when I did, to anyone outside our pack.

"It's the wrong time for me to date." I slid into the booth across from him. Then I felt suddenly awkward. "Not that you..."

"I am looking for a date," he said. "I like you. I thought I'd made that clear."

I didn't know how to respond. But Alison dropped off two sodas and a basket of piping hot french fries, saving me from having to reply. Brennan seemed startlingly honest and direct.

It made me wonder what he was hiding, because every shifter has secrets.

We ate french fries and talked. I told him about my family and my job, and he seemed genuinely interested in the diner and the food and the people who came in and out. After a while, I noticed his gaze kept flickering to the door.

"What are you waiting for?" I asked.

"I'm just worried someone will come in who knows me," he said. "Or who knows you."

The thought sent a chill rushing down my skin, accompanied with a memory of Curtis watching me the night before.

"What is it?" he asked, frowning, almost as if he'd picked up on my feelings. He seemed unusually perceptive, even for a wolf. "Something's bothering you."

"I wouldn't call you a something," I said quickly and lightly, but he kept looking at me with that same intensity.

"If you want me to go, I'll go. But I have a feeling you're in some kind of trouble, and if you need someone to talk to..."

I felt so alone all the time, and it was strange to have this shifter ask me about my problems as if someone cared.

"I shouldn't talk to you," I said, but it was just me trying to talk myself out of it.

"Probably not," he said, with one of those easy smiles. His face lit up in a way that made him look even more handsome.

"So there you have it. I won't talk to you, and you won't talk to me."

"But I want to talk to you." His bark of laughter sounded rough and real. "I'd like to tell you more than I probably should."

It was hard for me to tell if he was flirting, or if he was just making himself clear.

"I was going to take you for a ride on my motorcycle today," Brennan said. "But I think you need to know me better before you'll trust me on a motorcycle ride. Given we are not from the same pack."

"All those girls at the party last night would love to go with you on a motorcycle ride."

He stared back at me as if he heard the tinge of jealousy in my voice, and it didn't matter to him at all. As if the girls didn't matter to him at all, either. "So?"

"What pack are you from?"

"The Steele pack."

My breath left my lungs with a gush. The Steele wolves were our enemies. I glanced around. The room was filled with humans laughing and talking, but that didn't matter. He could kill me in a heartbeat. He could kill everyone in this room in under a minute if he shifted.

"Amelia." His voice was calm and certain and soothing. "You're safe with me. This is neutral territory."

“But it’d be really easy for us to leave neutral territory,” I reminded him, thinking of the strips of land or the cities that formed neutral territory between packs.

"You'd still be safe with me," he promised.

There was something wrong with the way I reacted to him. I lost my mind, as if he were my...

My mind shied away from the word. As if he were my mate.

"Okay," I breathed. "After I get off work tonight. Before someone sees us."

He smiled. "I'll be waiting behind the diner when you're done."

He popped one last French fry in his mouth and rose. I could feel everyone watching him as he left the diner.

As hard as I tried to focus, I worked distractedly, smiling at customers but forgetting their drink orders. Alison came over to me to ask me if I was okay.

"Your cheeks are flushed," she said, giving me a knowing smile. "You're either sick or you're in love."

“I'm not in love. I met him twice. That would be ridiculous.”

She spread her arms in a shrug. “Love is ridiculous!”

I didn't have time to be in love, even if I wanted to be. I should focus on work and on getting out of Curtis’s house, the way I had until last night.

But now I couldn’t stop thinking about Brennan, no matter how I tried. There was an

electricity to him, a power that I could feel from across the room. I knew what kind of man he was, and he didn't seem the type to settle down with anyone, let alone a quiet and serious girl who spent all her free time working. I'd built up a stash of cash hidden in my room. Once my shifting was stable and I knew I wouldn't kill anyone, I'd move out.

There were free pack territories where I could start a life without having to answer to any pack. I wasn't sure I had the guts to leave, because I wasn't sure my pack would let me still see Aiden and Rose.

Falling in love would be an unnecessary complication.

And yet, there I was after my shift, joining Brennan as he waited leaning against his sleek black motorcycle. His hands were shoved in his pockets, the wind tousled his hair, and he looked incredibly sexy.

I had the feeling he knew that, but it was hard to be annoyed by his arrogance when he looked up at me and smiled, his eyes brightening when he saw me.

"Ready?" He straightened from the bike, his full height drawing him over a foot taller than me.

I might have felt intimidated, except I didn't see any lust in his eyes, just open friendliness. He waited, not touching me, not kissing me, not even looking like he wanted to. It was strange to be with a male who wasn't looking at me like I was something to be devoured.

"I'm ready."

He handed me a helmet and watched to make sure I put it on properly. Then he straddled the bike, and I slid onto the back. It felt awkward to wrap my thighs around

his waist, but he patted my leg with one hand—absently, just making sure I was all right.

He started the bike, revving it loudly. I buried my face in his back, hoping I wouldn't show how afraid I was of riding on the back of a motorcycle.

We didn't speak as he drove. There was a part of me that was terrified, but there was also something pleasant about being on the back of his bike, the wind in my face, the heat of his body, the sense of safety I felt with my arms around his lean waist.

He took us further away from my pack's territory, onto the open highway. Free territory. No one owned this space, because even the packs needed to use the highways. At first, I just wanted him to keep going; I wanted to drive together to the ends of the earth. I could stay in this moment.

My body tensed as we kept going, no longer enjoying the trip so much as I worried he was taking me toward his pack's territory. What if he was kidnapping me?

He slowed the bike, pulling into a parking lot, and the motorcycle came to a smooth stop. I slid off and looked at him in confusion. "What is it?"

"You tensed up," he said. "You're worried."

"I'm not," I said.

His lips quirked. But it was a different smile than before, one that seemed a bit sad and a bit condescending, as if he knew all about me. "You don't have to pretend. I want you to know you're safe with me, Amelia."

He climbed off the bike. "You get on in the front. I'll teach you how to ride."

I looked at the bike doubtfully. "I'd hate to kill us on our first date."

He grinned. "So you admit it's a date!"

"I don't know what I'm doing with you. But I have to admit it's a date."

"You don't have to." He patted the handlebars. "But if you want to... I'll teach you."

I slung my leg over it, feeling intimidated at the thought of being the one to drive.

Brennan got back on the bike, and it felt crowded and awkward. Especially because of how my body reacted to him. I wondered if he could smell my desire. Shifters had enhanced senses from the time we were children—but they grew even more intense once we began shifting. I didn't know what that would be like yet.

He kept his feet flat on the ground, squishing himself backwards in order to give me space. "The first thing you have to do is put the bike in first gear. Do you know how to ride a regular bike?"

"I know how to ride a bike," I said, a little irritated.

"Just in case you didn't." He walked me through the motions of how to start and drive the bike.

I tried to start it up again, but the engine sputtered and died. Brennan was so close to me, and his clove and pine scent was just as addictive as last night. I bit my lower lip and tried to focus.

"Try again, if you want," he said. He seemed like he was trying to give me all the power, and it felt strange, but nice.

I put the bike in first gear, but I missed it and put it in second. The engine roared loudly. I instantly tried to take it back out of second gear, but my fingers slipped and cranked the gears into third. The bike lurched forward.

"Take it out of third. You've got this, Amelia." He was so patient that it calmed my nerves.

The bike lurched forward, and it felt like I was losing my balance, but Brennan's arm was strong around my waist and his voice always stayed cool and collected.

I cranked the gear into neutral, trying to keep the bike from falling over. We both dismounted. Brennan let me lean against him while I caught my breath.

He was a solid, reassuring presence. It made me wonder what it would be like to lean against him in bed.

He put his hands on my waist. "It was a great first try."

"It scared the hell out of me," I said, looking up into his handsome face. Trying to drive the bike wasn't the only thing that scared the hell out of me.

"It's scaring the hell out of me, too," he said, smiling. "But that's your job. You make the decisions, you learn, and I'll be here to keep you safe."

His hands fell from my waist, and he straddled the bike again. "Starting is the hard part. Stop once you're actually going."

I nodded, and he got off the bike again. I slung my leg over the bike, squishing up to make room for him.

"That's good," he said.

He was still standing by the side of the road. He didn't get on the bike with me. I felt like he was pushing me to do this on my own.

I put the bike in first gear, and then I pushed down on the kickstand.

"Give it some gas. You have to get up to speed on a motorcycle."

He had to have ridden the bike a million times before, and it seemed like it was probably his prized possession, so I was amazed by how relaxed he was now.

I revved the engine.

"That's it," he said. "Now give it more gas."

The bike lurched forward. I let out the clutch, and the bike took off down the road. I only went about forty feet before I stopped and turned back. He was jogging down the road toward me, his face lit with a triumphant smile. He seemed genuinely so happy for me.

And before I knew it, we were flying down the road together. His grip on my waist was light, even though I would've had a death grip riding behind an inexperienced driver. He exuded so much confidence not just in himself, but in me. I relaxed, having fun easing around the curves of the road, watching the pines whip by.

Then suddenly, the bike skidded out from underneath me. My heart leapt in my chest as I let go of the handlebars and braced myself for impact, but Brennan was already a step ahead. He had both hands on the handlebars and expertly maneuvered the bike back under control. We'd narrowly avoided disaster, but he acted like it was nothing.

Once we were in a safe spot, he stopped the bike. He helped me off, and I yanked off my helmet. My heart was hammering in my throat, and I expected him to yell at me.

His face was gentle, like he knew how scared I had been. "You did great. It's not always easy to keep control."

He wrapped me in a hug that I didn't realize I needed until I melted against his body. Adrenaline was still coursing through my body, and his presence only strengthened it.

Finally, I found my voice again. "Thank you. That could have been terrible."

With my cheek pressed against his sweatshirt, I could how his heart pounded in his chest as if it were keeping time with mine.

"You did great."

I let out a shaky, disbelieving laugh. "I almost killed us both."

"Well, you didn't kill us. You're learning." His eyes twinkled down at me, warm and open. Everything in me longed to get even closer, even though I was already wrapped up in his arms.

I kissed him.

It was an uncertain, tentative brush of my lips against his. His calm, friendly presence had made me wonder if he even wanted to kiss me or if I'd misread him, but I wanted him so badly.

He responded instantly, his arm tightening around my waist. But his lips barely brushed mine back.

When I pulled away, he looked at me uncertainly.

I asked, "Did you... is it okay that I kissed you?"

“It’s better than okay. I could kiss you all day.”

“Then why didn’t you kiss me first?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s what you need from me, Blue Eyes.”

“Blue eyes?” I crinkled up my nose.

“What? It’s a bad nickname?”

“It’s a little generic, isn’t it? What if I just called you broad shoulders?”

His smile widened. “You think my shoulders are broad?”

“You know you look—” I cut myself off, but I couldn’t resist smiling back. “You’re impossible.”

We left the bike parked and went for a walk, rambling through the forest near the road as we chatted. The sun was sinking behind the pines, and when I shivered, he stripped off his sweatshirt and handed it to me. It was freshly washed, smelling like Tide and his own scent, instead of campfire smoke. But the little holes in the sleeve were still there.

I told him about my younger siblings, and he told me he had an army of siblings: three brothers and a bossy sister that he found slightly terrifying. Imagining Brennan intimidated by anyone seemed ridiculous.

A prickle ran down my spine. I could’ve sworn I felt someone watching us. When I turned to study the forest behind us, Brennan asked, “Are you all right?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe it’s just my imagination.”

Brennan looked at me closely. He didn't press, but his face was so open, as if I could tell him anything.

And so, for the first time, I told someone about Nathan. His jaw tightened when I described the odd encounter in the woods, but he stayed as calm as ever.

"Nathan Longroad. He's the alpha's son?" He spoke as if he knew the name.

I nodded. "But there are stories his father disowned him."

"Even so. If you ever need to leave, you can call me, and I'll pick you up."

"You can't come onto pack territory," I said. "You'd start a war."

His answering look said he knew that perfectly well. For a second, he looked stern and intimidating. Then we turned to head back to the bike, and he offered me his hand. "So, are we going out for another ride tomorrow?"

"Another date already?" I teased him. I slid my hand into his. His skin was deeply tanned from the sun, and white scars threaded over his knuckles. Before he could rescind the offer, I said, "I guess I don't mind."

He laughed, and the moment in the woods seemed like nothing but a distant, uneasy dream as I climbed onto the back of his bike.

* * *

The next few weeks passed in a blur as Brennan and I sneaked out for many more dates.

"Hey, blue eyes," he greeted me.

“That’s a terrible nickname.” But I leaned up and kissed him anyway, and it was a deeper, more searing kiss than ever before.

He broke the kiss first and looked at me with a mixture of surprise and desire. "Are you really sure you're ready for this?"

"No," I said. "I'm not sure of anything."

"I want to be clear... I can't promise you much. I can't promise you a house or a family or even that you'll ever meet my pack. But I will promise you this." His gaze searched mine. "I will promise you a fun ride."

"A little bit arrogant. I didn't ask you for anything." My voice came out too soft despite the hardness of the words. "We just met."

"I know." His hand cupped my cheek. "But I imagine you want those things too... because I have the craziest feeling. I want to give them to you."

Because we were mates.

I knew it; I could feel it thrumming through my blood when I looked at him.

But we were on the wrong sides of a war.

For now, here in the shade of neutral territory, I just kissed him again.

CHAPTER 4

Every day that followed felt like it had a ticking clock. Soon I'd start to shift, and I wouldn't be allowed out of pack territory. I understood why. It would be dangerous if the world ever realized wolf shifters lived amongst them.

I wanted to save every dollar I could, so I kept going to work, but I cut my hours down so I could spend a few furtive hours with Brennan before I had to go home. He took me for a motorcycle ride every day, because that was the one place we could be free, out on the open road between my pack and his.

At least, that was the case for a while.

"You're getting good at driving the bike," he told me one day. "You should get your own."

"I'd like that. Maybe one day."

"Your first priority is..." He watched me carefully, but then Brennan always looked at me like that, as if every word I said was precious and he didn't want to miss anything.

"A home," I said. "Someplace safe for my siblings and I if we ever need to leave our pack."

The words came out in a rush, and I regretted them even as they tumbled out of my mouth. They were too much to tell him. But he just watched me compassionately.

"There are things you don't want to tell me about yet. But you will, one day?"

I shrugged. "We can't make any promises to each other, right? Except for a fun ride."

He nodded. "I have one other promise for you for today, Amelia."

"What's that?"

"Let me show you."

He led me out of town. We drove through the forest, and it was beautiful, the sun filtering through the trees. But there was something else here, something I couldn't put my finger on.

I turned to look at him. "What's going on here?"

"I want you to see something," he said.

I looked out over the vast woods, and the clear blue of a mountain lake rippled into view. It was a breathtaking view, and I didn't understand how I missed it before.

"Is there a cabin up here?"

"Yes," he said. "But there's no one else up here right now."

"Is this..."

"Neutral territory. I wouldn't risk taking you to my pack, Amelia. Not until..." He trailed off.

"You want me to leave my pack and join yours?" I asked. "Would your alpha let me

do that?"

They arranged intermarriages between packs. But not between packs who hated each other like the Steeles and the Longroads.

"Would you consider it?"

"Brennan... it would mean leaving behind my family. Never going back."

"I understand. It's a big thing to ask."

I could've asked him why he couldn't join my pack, but I didn't want to stay there anyway. The memory of Nathan's intense gaze rose in the back of my mind, accompanied by a shiver.

"Let's go swimming," he said.

"I don't have a suit."

Brennan just grinned, then pulled his t-shirt over his head. I forced my eyes away from the chiseled planes of his body, every muscle defined; my hands wanted to explore the hard curves.

He dove into the water, and I hesitated before deciding to undress too. I would normally have gone in slowly, clutching my arms over my breasts to protect them from the chill, but not now. I flung myself in before he could see me, and once I'd splashed into the water, he turned with a grin. I let out a shriek at the sudden shock of cold.

He reached for me, and I floated forward into his arms. His body felt comfortingly warm, and within seconds, the cold faded and all that remained was the sensation of

his smooth shoulders under my palms, of the two of us bobbing in the water so close together.

I kissed him before I even knew what I was doing, and he kissed me back. I finally let myself touch him, exploring the hard ridges of his abs, the tattoo on his chest. He put his hand over mine on his chest and said, “This is where I think my mate mark will be one day.”

“In my pack, only men mark the women,” I said.

“That seems odd. Just as much as I want to mark the right woman myself, I want to carry her mark, too.”

I touched the unmarked skin of my shoulder absently. I couldn’t help but think of what it would be like to wear Brennan’s mark. Then I decided not to worry about it today and instead kissed him again.

The water was ice cold, but his hands on my body felt hot enough to brand my skin.

“I’m glad you brought me here,” I told him. “Is this everything you wanted to show me?”

He grinned at me, then he dived under the water. I followed, going deeper and deeper until the water pressed against my face. Then I burst through the surface, gasping for air, exhilarated by the cold.

When I dove again, I caught a glimpse of his lean, graceful body undulating smoothly underwater, and I followed him. When he came up for air, I joined him. His eyes were shining. I was breathing hard, both from the cold and from watching him, and his chest heaved too. He caught my hand, drawing me through the water until our bodies touched—just faintly—then we drifted apart. The second of his chest pressing

my nipples, of his cock brushing against my thigh, sent an electric thrill through my body that didn't fade as we treaded water.

I wanted more of him.

"There's something else I wanted to show you," he said. "If you can keep up."

I dove under the water, following the trail of the bubbles as he kicked. It was strange to think that some day soon, we could both run as wolves. But I wasn't sure if we would still be meeting then. I wasn't sure there was any future for Brennan and me.

In that moment, I didn't care. I'd take the brief, delicious present for all it was worth.

When I broke through the surface, he hugged me, the water coming up to our chins. His lips met mine, and my body soldered to his. I wrapped my thighs around his waist and the two of us bobbed in the water as he held me up. Kissing him felt so right.

Because we were mates.

I didn't want to admit it, but deep down, I knew it was true.

And I couldn't imagine losing him.

"Come on," he said. "You're cold, but I have a fire waiting."

"There's another surprise?"

He flashed me a grin over his shoulder. After the two of us dressed, we walked up the hill to the cabin that overlooked the lake. Dusk was falling, and light glowed through the cabin's windows, making it seem cozy.

He took me up to a cabin where a fire glowed brightly in the fireplace. The smell of smoke and wood was comforting. He'd made a bed on the floor near the fire. It was covered in quilts and furs, making it seem like a refuge from the harshness of winter outside. He had stacked some logs in one corner and there were candles burning at intervals around the room. Clearly, he had been here before, setting up his own little nest.

"Come on," he said, showing me around. "I want you to stay here with me for as long as you can today."

The cabin had one large room with an old but comfortable sofa against one wall facing the fire, a table and a few chairs. There was also a small kitchen with shelves stocked full of canned goods and jars of spices, and against the wall stood a bookcase with a handful of books. The place was cozy, like something out of a storybook. I felt instantly at home.

But I pushed that thought out of my mind. Fairy tales weren't real, no matter how I felt when Brennan and I were together.

And yet, I still felt giddy. I was tempted to sit on his lap, but I didn't know if that was the right thing to do. I felt shy.

"You bought a place for yourself in neutral territory?" I asked. "Or does this belong to someone else?"

"I bought a place for us," he corrected. "Well... really... for you. As long as I'm alive, you'll always have a home where you can feel safe."

I stared around in wonder, then turned back to him to see him holding a key up on a chain.

"It's yours." He took my hand and pressed the key into my palm. Like every time he touched me, I was too keenly aware of how he towered over me, how safe I felt with him. "If you decide this entire situation... with our packs, with me, is too much... I'll never come back up here. You have the power here, Amelia."

I swallowed. It was so close to our own pack territory that if I'd had my own way of riding up here, I'd have been able to leave our pack territory, cross the highway, and I'd be here. Safe.

And on the other side of neutral territory lay his pack.

"This is too much," I said quietly. "You can't give me such a big gift."

"I can," he said, his voice slightly stern in a way that just made me feel safe and protected. "You know what we are to each other, Amelia. And even if it turns out we can't quite make it work... I want to protect you more than anything."

My eyes flooded with sudden tears. "Thank you."

His hand wrapped mine, folding my fist shut with the key held inside, as if he worried I would try to give it back. Then he leaned in and kissed me, soft and slow. I was the one who deepened the kiss greedily, and he smiled against my lips before he gave in.

The two of us collapsed on the little nest in front of the fire, trading kisses. Every time I threw my leg over his, I could feel his cock stiff against my thigh, but he just wrapped his arm around my waist and traded kisses with me.

Until it was time to go back to our separate worlds.

CHAPTER 5

Brennan had been through the shift already, years before me. He knew what was coming the night before the full moon when he picked me up on his motorcycle.

Usually, he climbed off to ride behind me so I could practice. Today, though, he handed me his second helmet and told me, "Hop on."

I felt a thrill as I pressed my chest against his back and wrapped my arms around him. I could smell his scent, so warm and comforting. The thrum of the motorcycle against my thighs stroked the always powerful sense of need I felt this close to Brennan.

We rode through the woods and up the mountain. It was a beautiful night, with a full moon peeking through the clouds.

"Almost there," he whispered.

We stopped in front of the cabin, nestled into the trees, like a bird's nest.

The scene looked different today, though. Because in front of the cabin's porch with its rocking chair for two, in the thin gravel, there stood a beautiful, sleek red motorcycle.

He rested his hand on my shoulder. "I wanted to have one last ride with you hanging onto me. You've gotten to be amazingly good in just a few weeks."

I stared at the bike, not able to comprehend what he was doing.

"You can't give me a bike and a cabin," I said. "It's too much."

Brennan wrapped his arms around me from behind, and I melted against his chest.

"Nothing will ever be too much for my girl," he whispered into my ear.

"How can you afford all this?"

"I inherited quite a bit of money when my father died. Let me do something for you, Amelia. Let me take care of you like you always take care of everyone else."

I closed my eyes, unable to believe it. "But this is everything I've always wanted."

A safe place to myself. A way to get there, or to take to the open road. Independence.

Funny that now I had that sense of independence, and all I wanted was to stay with him.

"You'll have to be careful until you've gotten control of the shift," he said. "But the cabin will be here waiting."

"Thank you," I whispered, throwing my arms around him. He hugged me back tightly.

I led him to the front porch, where he waited for me to fish the key out from the necklace around my throat. I looked at him curiously, and he shrugged. "I don't have a key. You've got the only one."

He did everything he could to make me feel safe. Warmth glowed in my chest.

I didn't know if I would see him again when I emerged from the chaos of my first

shift, but for now, he was mine.

Inside, we turned on the lights. The cabin smelled like raw pine and dust even though I knew he'd cleaned it from top to bottom before he brought me into our little nest. But it was a comforting smell, mixed with the faint scent of cloves. His scent clung to the cabin and made it feel like home.

"Start a fire for us?" I asked.

He went to work, and I watched him, his broad shoulders flexing as he piled the wood carefully, added kindling, and then struck a match with practiced competence. The fire was glowing in minutes.

I knew what I wanted, but I felt shy asking for it.

As he stood in front of the fire, his eyes danced in the light. I took a breath and stepped closer to him, unsure if he would hold me close or if he would pull away because he didn't think I was ready.

He lifted my chin so I was looking up into his face and said, "Whatever you want, Amelia. When it comes to this... you lead, like always."

The words gave me courage, and I smiled at him. Slowly, almost shyly at first, he leaned down until our lips met. His body against mine blazed with heat, and I clung to his shoulders. It felt so good to finally let myself give in to what we both wanted.

We broke apart eventually, but only for a moment before Brennan pulled me back against him. He reached for the hem of my shirt and slowly peeled it from my body as he looked at me with such desire that it made me melt. His hands moved over my skin as if memorizing every inch of it.

My body pressed against his. I was keenly aware the strength of his muscles, the smoothness of his skin, and the hardness of his cock against me. When he moved to kiss my neck, his lips lit fire I had never felt before. I let out a soft moan, arching my back so I could press myself against him.

He pulled away and looked down into my eyes, stroking my hair back from my face before he lifted me up as if I weighed nothing. I wrapped my legs around him and, seconds later, we were pressed against the wall, his lips moving up my neck to my ear.

"I've wanted you so badly," he whispered, sliding his hands along my body.

"I want you too," I said, my breath coming in pants.

He carried me to the nest in front of the fire and set me down. He reached behind me and fiddled with the catch to my bra before sliding the straps over my shoulders and taking my breasts in his hands. His fingers traced their curves. He lowered his head, taking one nipple into his mouth, and I gasped at the sensation of his tongue stroking over my skin.

As he knelt over me, I ached to run my hands over his muscular chest. It felt amazing to touch him freely, to let my hands explore him as if I were trying to memorize the hard planes of his body while he smiled down at me.

When I pulled the button of his jeans open, he smiled that wicked smile that made my heart beat faster. I slid the zipper down, and he rose so I could push his jeans down his legs. He stepped out of them, leaving him in his boxers. As I ran my hand over the bulge there, Brennan groaned softly.

I pulled his boxers down and sucked in a breath at the sight of his erection. I hadn't seen it yet, had only felt it, and I caught my breath at its size. My core clenched with

need, but I was nervous too.

"I'll be gentle, Amelia," he promised.

I nodded my head, and he climbed onto the bed next to me, pulling out a condom. He opened the package with his teeth, and I shivered as he slid it on. Then he was on top of me, kissing, stroking, and making me moan with delight.

He was so hot inside me, liquid fire seemed to drift through every limb. I wrapped my arms around him and moved with him, my hips finding a rhythm. We moved faster and faster until my core clenched around him over and over, and I cried out. Brennan thrust into me a few more times, then he groaned, slowing and finally stopping.

He lifted himself up, looking down into my face with a smile. He stroked my cheek before kissing me softly on the mouth.

"I really do love you, Amelia," he said. "I know it's too soon for you to say it back, but I want you to know."

I wanted to tell him that I loved him too, but the words felt awkward on my lips. No one in my family ever said they loved each other. Instead, I kissed him then. His hand slid down my body, and I gasped as he touched me, his fingers moving where we were connected still. A tremor ran through me again, and I wrapped my arms tighter around Brennan.

Brennan was always the one who brought up the future, but the fear of it was always inside me, mixed up with the pleasure and joy. But for a little while, all I wanted to think about were the sensations of his body against mine, the feeling of his lips on mine, the sound of his voice in my ear.

Everything was perfect.

And I never wanted to leave.

CHAPTER 6

The next night was the full moon. The pack gathered to celebrate those of us who might be about to start shifting. This time, it was just me and my childhood friend Lawson. We hadn't seen each other in months since he'd been busy and I'd been spending every spare second with Brennan, but when he winked at me, I felt instantly more at ease.

"Today we celebrate the newest wolves to fully join our pack as adults," the alpha, Jacob, said. He smiled at me warmly. "I know the next few shifts will be an adjustment. But we're proud of you both."

"Theirs is not the only adjustment to be made."

There were shocked gasps and a ripple of disquiet from the pack. I knew even before I turned that Nathan Longwood would be standing there.

The pack parted. For long seconds, the alpha and his son stared at each other. Then Jacob walked through the crowd to where Nathan stood. Both of them were tall and imposing, and the pack shifted away nervously as if they might transform at any moment and rip into each other. My heart was in my throat, and I could feel Lawson watching me but I didn't dare tear my gaze away from the two of them. Both their faces were unreadable.

Jacob stepped forward and embraced his son in a tight hug. After a second that seemed to last far longer, Nathan hugged him back. I exhaled, but my heart was still racing.

As he pack began to mumble among themselves, Nathan held up his hand to quiet them. "I just want to be part of this pack again. I know some of you may not trust me, but I can promise you that I've changed."

Jacob nodded, then turned to face the pack again. "If Nathan has learned from his time away, then we will welcome him back into the fold."

The tension between father and son was tangible no matter what they said. Jacob clapped Nathan on the shoulder before stepping back, signaling that it was time for us all to go out into the forest together as a pack.

Nathan strode through the crowd, his gaze locked on me. Some of the other shifters stared at us, and my cheeks blazed. The whole pack would talk about the way Nathan had rushed toward me. Lawson shifted uncomfortably at my side. Nathan was half a foot taller than Lawson.

"I came for you," Nathan told me with burning intensity. I could barely meet his gaze. "To run with you on your first shift. I should be here."

"Nathan..." He clearly thought we had some special connection, but I didn't understand why. Now I knew how powerful the mate bond was, because I felt it with Brennan. "Let's just run."

Maybe dealing with Nathan would be easier as a wolf. Because as a human, I had no idea what to say.

As I stepped closer to the edge of the forest, I felt the power of the moon shining down on me. I knew that moons might pass without Lawson or me shifting, and yet... as the moon shone on my face, I was sure it was my time. Regret filled me. I didn't want to miss Brennan for months to come. But excitement also sparked through my body, and a sudden rush of adrenaline and euphoria swept through me. I grinned at

Lawson, who grinned back at me, and I barely noticed the way Nathan narrowed his eyes at me. It didn't matter right now.

The shift was painful, but then as I emerged in my wolf form, I felt joyful and powerful. It was like I had been reborn. I'd always wished I could just be a normal human girl. Today, I was glad to be something else entirely.

The pack ran together through the forest, faster than we ever could have on two legs. Nathan ran alongside me and every now and then he would nudge me with his muzzle in a gesture of reassurance or support. I let my tongue loll out of my head, giving him a silly expression, but I appreciated that he was being kind in this wild, freeing moment.

We ran until the sun began to rise. I felt filled with happiness and I even had warm feelings toward Nathan. Then I had changed into my clothes again and saw him waiting for me. He fixed me with a cocky smile.

"You did well tonight," he said.

"Thank you." I didn't want to give him the wrong impression and have him think I was flirting with him. But I was surprised and relieved he had returned to the pack without violence. "I'm glad you're joined the pack."

He inclined his head. "I'll do whatever it takes to be here for you. This was the only way to run with you tonight."

I hesitated, licking my lips. Maybe I should talk to him and make sure he didn't expect anything, but Nathan gave off slightly crazed vibes. I didn't feel safe rejecting him outright. I just hoped he'd find someone who liked his kind of crazy and that he would settle back into pack life without killing his father or anyone else. Some

I turned away to find Curtis watching me from across the field. There was a knowing smile on his face.

I clutched my fleece closed more tightly, bunching the zipper in my hand. It had been fun being a wolf for the night.

But I wasn't the biggest, most dangerous wolf in our pack. Not a by a long shot.

CHAPTER 7

The next day, I texted Alison and my boss that I had a family emergency and I'd be gone for too long to keep working at the diner. My boss said she'd try to fit me in the schedule again when I came back. Alison texted me every day to check in. Brennan and I texted too, but I wished I could see him to talk about how exciting the shift was. I couldn't sum it up in a few lines of text. But I couldn't leave pack lands now, and I wasn't going to risk Brennan coming here.

One afternoon a few days into my new exile, I deleted all the messages through a blur of tears, then threw my phone into the top drawer of the dresser.

It was time to let go of my old life.

A few days later, Curtis stopped me as I was heading out to the woods after dinner. He leaned against the back screen door, straining the mesh as he crossed his arms. "I talked to Nathan Longroad."

"Oh?"

"He thinks you're pretty."

I was aware. That seemed to be my one and only qualification for Nathan's obsession. Lucky me. "Okay?"

"He's an alpha's son," Curtis spoke slowly, as if I were dim-witted. "You should be happy he likes you."

I didn't want to talk to Curtis about any of this. "Okay."

An expression of exasperation came over his face. "You really are such a sullen brat. Even now when you're supposed to finally have become a woman."

"Sorry." One word answers were the ticket when it came to dealing with Curtis and my mom.

He finally stepped aside. But then, when he was behind me, Curtis added, "If you don't like Nathan, you'd better talk to me. Or he might get the wrong idea."

That sounded like a threat. But then, everything Curtis said sounded like a threat.

I pushed open the door and went out without answering. The night air felt cool and full of promise, like always. Fireflies flitted through the grass, their little sparks of light magical. But none of that felt right now.

As soon as my feet touched the grass, I was running, and the next thing I knew, I was shifting. My run carried me through pack territory and across the highway. I knew I should stop, but my legs carried me as if they had a mind of their own. I finally slowed, realizing I had lost my mind, and glanced back across the black top of the highway. We weren't allowed to shift off pack lands.

But then I scented Brennan, and I couldn't stop myself. I raised my head in a howl that seemed ripped from my soul. My legs carried me steadily, my paws bounding over the grass, over stone, around the curve of the shining lake.

As if he'd been waiting for me nearby, Brennan's enormous silvery-white wolf bounded toward me.

My heart thumping, I slowed down as I approached, not sure exactly why I was

suddenly so nervous. It was just Brennan.

He reared back and let out a howl that was sheer joy. Then he tackled me exuberantly. We rolled and tumbled in the grass together until I bounded away toward the house.

Brennan followed, and we played chase, dashing across the green hill and into the woods. Then somehow, he chased me up to the cabin and we both shifted back.

We were naked, and I didn't remember now where I'd left my clothes. But it didn't matter.

Brennan threaded his hand into my hair and kissed me deeply. "You're a beautiful wolf."

I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling of his body close to mine. All my stress and anxiety had melted away in the joy of running as a wolf, and now being with Brennan again. Curtis and Nathan and all my troubles felt a thousand miles away.

I kissed him again, feeling the warmth of his skin and the powerful muscle of his chest flexing under my palm. He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed me slowly and deeply.

We laid down in the grass, and Brennan's mouth moved to my neck, trailing kisses along my collarbone. His hands moved over me, exploring each curve of my body as if he was discovering a map of me for the first time.

My heart hammered as his fingers worked their way lower, teasing and teasing until I felt my body melting under his touch. I bit my lower lip, reaching for him too. I felt fumbling and awkward when I gripped his cock through his jeans, but he responded by closing his eyes, his lips parting slightly in pleasure above that hard-angled,

beautiful jaw.

Feeling more confident, I reached for him. His cock felt huge and stiff in my hand, and I gently ran my thumb down it to flick the skin at the tip. His breath gave, and I experimented with doing it again.

He let out a moan, throwing his head back. “Amelia. God. The power you have over me...”

I grinned. It was a strange and heady feeling, feeling powerful with this tall, imposing man. “Tell me more about this power.”

He rolled onto his elbow, studying my face. He touched me, tenderly, on the cheek. “You make me want to run away from everything I’ve ever known. From who I’m supposed to be. So I can just be yours.”

“I’d like to run away,” I whispered.

His gaze softened. “All I can think about when I’m near you is making you my mate and my wife, and seeing you carry my babies—”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves!” I’d felt like I needed to raise Rose since she was born. My mother at least seemed to like her, but it wasn’t as if my mom took great care of Rose, either. I wanted children of my own someday. Maybe. But for now, I needed a break from taking care of kids.

“We could practice.”

“Mm. I’m going to put this where no babies are happening,” I said, grabbing his cock again and arching my eyebrows.

Then I settled onto his cock, enveloping it with my mouth. He let out a gasp that made me smile around his cock. I stroked up and down his dick, running my tongue along the shaft and then teasing at the top. He ran his hand over my hair, petting me as I kept going.

“That’s my girl,” he murmured. “You take my cock so well in every way. I love watching you suck me.”

I hadn’t expected sweet Brennan to have a filthy mouth, but his words turned me on even more.

“Put your hand between your thighs,” Brennan told me. “Find your clit and play with yourself. We can come together.”

I might have felt too shy about touching myself in front of him before, but now I felt high on the pleasure of watching him watch me. He bit his lip as if he were trying to stave off his orgasm, his eyes focused on me as I delved my hand between my thighs and began to rub myself.

He abruptly pulled away from me. “I want to come in that perfect pussy of yours, not your mouth. Beautiful as it is.” He ran his thumb over the curve of my lower lip.

His deep blue eyes smoldered at me, and they were so magnetic I could fall into his gaze.

I fell back in the grass, still stroking my fingers through my folds. I spread my legs wide, watching him watch me hungrily. He groaned as if he might come just from the view, then grabbed my thighs and dragged me toward him.

He grabbed his dick and teased it against me. “Oh, you’re so wet for me. That’s my good girl. Ready to come, and I’m going to make sure you do.” He flashed me a

devilish smile. "Over and over again."

He entered me with one long, full stroke, and I let out a cry as he sheathed himself in me fully, then pulled out again. He began to thrust, his hands tightening on my thighs, as pleasure bloomed through every muscle of my body. My toes curled in the soft earth, and I tangled my fingers in my hair, thrashing across the grass at the powerful sensations rocking my body.

"That's right, come for me," he murmured.

"Brennan!" I cried out his name as my orgasm ripped through me, and he came then too, letting out a roar as he shattered inside me.

Later, as we lay together in the grass under the moonlight, I knew that this moment would stay with me forever.

"Where were you?" I asked. "How did you know I'd come tonight?"

We'd never discussed meeting here. I'd assumed I'd have nothing but texts with him for months until I was sure I wouldn't shift unpredictably.

But my body had longed for Brennan and when I felt threatened, I'd run for him without any reservations. Our wolves, deep inside, knew each other, and I had a feeling we'd always be able to find each other.

"I didn't," he said, then admitted, "I've been coming out here every night. After my work is done... I just wanted to be close to you."

I didn't know what his work even was. "Your life is a mystery to me."

"You didn't want to meet my pack," he reminded me.

It felt as if it were the beginnings of a fight, when we'd been so warm and cozy a second before. "You know it's not as simple as that. I can't just go meet your pack. We'll start an international incident."

He rolled his eyes. "The packs are ridiculous."

"Well, maybe I'll become alpha and change things," I snapped back. "But for now, I have to live with the cards we've been dealt."

"Or you could grab another deck. You don't have to play by someone else's rules."

I was losing track of our metaphor, but I wasn't going to let him distract me. "You make it sound so easy! You don't even know if your pack would accept me."

"You don't have to come to my pack. You want adventure. Freedom. To see the world." His gaze met mine.

I wasn't sure what he meant, but I couldn't quite draw a normal breath.

"And what do you want?" I asked, my voice coming out breathy.

"To make you happy," he said simply. "Run away with me, Amelia."

I wanted so desperately to say yes.

I hesitated, imagining our life together.

Then I said, "Yes."

He grinned and buried his face in my throat, his beard scruff tickling my throat.

“Give me some time,” I said. “To figure out my shift. To... try to get my little brother and sister ready.”

“We have all the time in the world,” he promised. “I’ll wait for you. I need time to arrange things too.”

The two of us fell back side by side in the grass, holding hands.

Above us, the stars seemed bright. I bit my lower lip, but I couldn’t stop smiling.

CHAPTER 8

The first time I disobeyed pack rules and slipped off our lands to be with Brennan, my wolf had taken control. The second time, it was deliberate.

I'd texted Brennan. Can we meet up tonight?

Of course. You know I'll be there waiting.

The thought kept me cheerful all day as I helped my mother clean the house and she talked about what kind of work I could do for the pack. Curtis noticed, asking me why I was so happy while I was doing dishes, and my smile disappeared instantly.

But finally, that evening, I went out to run. My mother gave me a questioning look, as if she'd noticed I avoided running on my own.

"I'm going to see if Lawson or Nathan want to run," I said cheerfully. Then I slipped out of the house to shift.

As a wolf, I could barely control my desire to run straight for Brennan. But I made myself run the opposite way, heading further into pack lands and making sure I wasn't being followed before I looped around and headed for the noise of the highway. The rush of lights and sound made my heart pound as a wolf, but I finally leapt from the bushes and made a mad dash across the highway. A semi seemed to come out of nowhere and I leapt forward, barely making it onto the grass. The rush of wind of the truck passing close behind seemed to drive me forward as I dashed toward my mate.

Brennan waited on the porch, in his human form, clad only in jeans. I transformed on the grass and walked up to him; for the first time, instead of feeling shy, I felt powerful when he looked at me with such open longing. The moonlight shone on us both, shadowing his handsome face.

He pulled me into a tight hug. “I’m glad we found a way to meet.”

“We probably shouldn’t.” But I clung to him, pressing my cheek against the hard planes of his chest, and it was obvious I had no intention of letting go no matter what we should or shouldn’t do.

“I brought us dinner.” He waited until I disentangled myself from him slightly, then took my hand, hefting a picnic basket in one hand. The two of us went into the cabin, and he laid out a sumptuous meal of fresh pasta, salad and crusty, fresh-baked bread with herb butter. “My sister might be terrifying, but she’s an incredible cook. It’s how she shows her love.”

“I’d like to meet her,” I said, and it was true, even if I was scared to go anywhere near his pack. His eyes lit up. God, he loved his family so much; it was obvious from the way he talked about them. It would be hard for him to leave them, and the thought of his loss tore at me as much as the thought of leaving Aiden and Rose.

“Is there any way we could stay?” I asked him.

He was looking down at the champagne bottle he was trying to open. “I’ve never actually done this before,” he admitted, then popped the lid. Champagne bubbles flowed down the bottle, and both of us laughed. I’d thought that only happened in movies.

“Well, that’s the thing,” he said, handing me a glass of champagne. When our fingers overlapped, I felt a pulse of energy between us, matched by the light in his eyes as his

gaze met mine. “Jacob Longroad agreed to meet our pack for peace negotiations. There’s a lot of bad history between our packs... between my family and the Longroads too, for that matter... but it’s worth trying for peace.”

My lips parted as a sudden swell of surprise and hope rose in my chest.

“We’ll be together,” he promised me. “Whether we start a new life somewhere else or we start a new life here... we’ll be together.”

Tears flooded my eyes. The thought that I could have Brennan without abandoning Aiden or Rose was such a relief. I set the champagne down, untouched; all I needed to celebrate was his kiss.

He wrapped me in his arms and brushed my hair back from my face. “Don’t be sad. You and I could live up here, between the two packs. We’ll find a way.”

“I’m not sad,” I whispered. “The thought of staying in this cabin with you forever is the best. I’m just... scared to hope that much.”

“It’s a brave, strong thing to hope, Blue Eyes. After a lot of dark days... you make me hope.”

The thought that I made him stronger, just as he made me stronger, was a powerful one. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

Brennan’s hungry, answering kiss sent a wave of warmth through my body, igniting a fire within me. His lips were soft but strong, and his tongue explored every inch of my mouth.

The sensation of his touch was electric. My lips tingled, and my body felt as if it were melting against his. I reached to unbuckle his jeans, pushing them down his thighs,

and his lips smiled against mine at my eagerness. He stepped out of his jeans, then scooped and lifted me over his shoulder. I let out a surprised gasp as he carried me to the bed in front of the fire, and the two of us sank onto the soft bed. I ran my hands over his powerful shoulders, trying to memorize every line of his face before he leaned forward and began to kiss me once again. His hand stroked over my sides, and my breasts felt full and aching, longing for more of his touch.

When our lips broke apart, I was breathless and intoxicated. The growing ache between my thighs made me wish his hands would delve lower as I found myself in a trace of desire.

His hands traveled over my curves, leaving trails of heat on my skin. When I closed my eyes, it felt as if I could see myself through his eyes, the way he loved each curve of my body, the way he wanted to hold me forever. It felt as if there was some invisible bond between us that could never be broken.

His kisses moved down my neck, each one more lingering than the last. He trailed feather-like kisses from my mouth down to my neck, teasing the sensitive skin with fleeting touches that made me quiver with anticipation. I gasped softly each time his lips moved lower. He looked up at me as he kissed my stomach, near my thigh, and his eyes shone with love and contentment. The connection between us went beyond physical pleasure, and I ran my hand through his dark hair to tousle it, feeling a powerful sense of affection for his tanned, hard-planed face and those gorgeous eyes.

His hands pressed my thighs apart, and he dipped his head. “God, you are so fucking gorgeous,” he said, before pressing a kiss to my inner thigh, so close to my aching core that my back arched. He looked up at me, his gaze mischievous. “Everywhere, in every way.”

When he pressed a kiss to my center, it felt like molten heat traveling through my body. I jerked away, but his arms wrapped around my thighs, holding me still, and he

set to licking and thrusting his tongue inside me with passionate energy. I'd never felt anything so incredible in my life as his mouth against my clit, and my hips tried to jerk and roll, but he held me still. His muscular biceps pressed against my calves as he held my thighs against his shoulders, pleasuring me until my toes curled and I let out a gasp, my hips rocking frantically against his face.

He pulled away. His eyes blazed with intensity as he joined me on the bed. I was frantic for him, wanting more of him, and our lips met in hungry, wild kisses. He wrapped his hands around my waist and pulled me toward him, and I straddled him. My thighs pressed his hard, lean abs as I reached for him and pressed him against the slick between my thighs.

"You feel so fucking good already," he murmured. "So wet for me."

I circled his cock urgently against my need. Then I lowered myself abruptly, and he gasped at the pleasure as his cock drove inside me. He felt so big, stretching me, and I was still barely used to it. His fingers found the back of my neck and he tugged me down, covering my mouth with his.

Between kisses, the two of us began to find a rhythm. I rode him, feeling the base of his cock press against my clit each time I came down, savoring the way each time I drove down fully, his tip pressed my g-spot and sent a wave of hot pleasure coursing through my body. He gazed up at me with warm eyes, and his hands wrapped my hips, and I felt each of his fingers hot and distinct against the curve of my ass.

Just as we crested our pleasure together, an almost overwhelming desire to bite him came over me. As I shuddered around his cock, my bones turning to molten pleasure, I kissed his shoulder wildly, then ran my teeth against his skin.

He let out a low moan of pleasure that seemed to be as much from my teeth as from the orgasm. "Do it," he murmured into my ear. "If you're ready to mark me,

Amelia... I'm ready."

It was all I needed. Without another second's thought, I drove my teeth into his shoulder. He let out a groan of pain and desire and rapture that I felt through my whole body. It seemed as if the two of us tumbled over the edge of another orgasm immediately, my core clenching wildly around him as waves of pleasure coursed through me.

The next second, he had flipped us both over. I raised my head from the bloody mark I'd left on his shoulder as he kissed the skin on my décolletage, right above my breast. He looked up at me with eyes full of question as he kissed me, and I nodded, before gripping the back of his head and pressing him hungrily against my skin.

His bite seared into my skin, and I let out a cry of pain as my hips jerked against his that then subsided into intense pleasure. As Brennan pulled away, my blood glimmered on his full lower lip; the next second, he'd licked it away before he kissed my lips. His lips were tender again, but the sense of his body against mine was reckless and wild and powerful, as if the two of us were being driven by fate.

"I love you," he murmured. "So much. I'd tear the world apart for you or I'd try to bring peace for you."

I blinked, and tears spilled onto my cheeks, but they were tears of joy. I opened my lips to tell him, but as he wiped my tears away with his thumb, I had the feeling he already knew. It might take me time to say those unfamiliar words, but I would.

As the euphoria subsided, Brennan cradled me in his arms and placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. I snuggled against him. When I rested my head on his chest, I could feel his heart beat against my ear. I felt so safe in his embrace, completely safe and loved.

Then a rough voice called from outside. "Brennan. What the fuck are you doing?"

I scrambled to my feet, fear spiking through my chest. He grabbed his hoodie and threw it to me, along with his boxers, before yanking his jeans up. I scrambled into the clothes.

"Stay hidden here in the house," Brennan told me.

"Are you in danger?" I asked, moving to his side instead. I was ready for a fight if anyone threatened Brennan.

Brennan grinned, a quick one sided smile, then pressed a kiss to my cheek. "God, I love you. Look at you, ready to leap to my defense. But I promise, I'm only in danger of being scolded by my annoying younger brother. Go, and I'll be back inside soon."

He barely pulled the door open to go out onto the porch, but he didn't close it either. I took that as an invitation. I slipped just to one side of the open door so I could listen.

"What are you doing here?" Brennan demanded.

"I came to talk some fucking sense into you."

"Stone, I don't need your advice," Brennan told his new guest. "You're not in charge of me."

"No, obviously not." Stone had a deep voice, a rich whiskey rumble. "What the hell are you doing?"

"It's none of your business."

"I think it is. You've been leaving the pack when they need you."

"Oh, come off it. I take a few hours to myself after everything is taken care of. Leave

me alone, Stone.”

“Who else is out here?” Stone demanded. “Whatever secret you’re keeping impacts the whole pack.”

I closed my eyes, a sick feeling curdling in my stomach. I always got too nervous when anyone fought, even if they weren’t mad at me. The two of them kept arguing back and forth.

“Listen, I’m capable of making my own decisions without your interference!” Brennan finally snapped at his brother. "I'm the alpha here!"

Shock rattled through me.

Brennan wasn't just from a rival pack. He was its leader. His words echoed inside my body. I'm the alpha here.

A sudden pit had opened where my heart used to be. We'd been so close and now it felt like a chasm had opened between us wide enough for me to fall through. This was why he was powerful enough to create peace talks between my pack and his.

“What are you doing out here with some human? The pack’s been through enough. Hell, our family’s been through enough. Casey needs you, you’re the only one who can calm him down, but you’re off running around with some pretend relationship that can never become anything—”

“Enough.” Brennan’s voice held an alpha growl I’d never heard before. "It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?" Stone challenged.

I watched nervously from my spot near the door, hoping they wouldn't notice me.

"It's complicated," Brennan said, his voice low and deep.

Stone snorted in disbelief. "Complicated? I highly doubt it." He hesitated for a moment before continuing, his voice softer now. "Look, Brennan, I know you better than anyone else. And I know how much you care about the pack despite whatever...you've gotten involved in right now."

He looked towards the house where I was hiding, and I ducked back with my stomach twisting. He knew full well I was inside listening to their conversation.

"We all make mistakes," he continued. "But what matters is how we move forward."

I didn't want to hear how Brennan answered. Brennan, the alpha of his pack. I felt sick. Had he been using me to learn about my pack? Had everything between us been fake?

No, the mate bond felt real. I hadn't even believed in a mating bond until I met Brennan, but now I had no doubt.

But sometimes, bonds weren't enough.

I went to the back door, planning to run back to my own pack lands. But I couldn't stand to do it. I couldn't leave Brennan forever without even saying goodbye.

As I reached the front door, Stone looked up and locked eyes with me. He looked so much like Brennan, a tall, strapping man with dark hair, but his blue eyes were cold and icy. He carried Brennan's sense of power, but also a sense of domination and aggression. I stopped dead.

"So, not a human then," he said, his voice dripping with derision. "Even worse. This is why you wanted peace with those animals. You are so fucking selfish, Brennan."

With that, he turned and left without another word, leaving me alone with Brennan once more.

Brennan let out a deep breath as his brother walked away. Then he turned to me with an apologetic expression on his face.

"I'm sorry." He moved closer to me so that we were standing toe-to-toe in the doorway of the house. He took both of my hands in his own as he spoke again softly but firmly. "No matter what happens, we will find our way together. Either here, or we'll forge a new path forward."

"How is that possible," I asked tightly, "when you've been lying to me all this time?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't lie to you."

"You're the alpha of our worst enemies," I said. "Are you using me to get information about my pack?"

"Amelia, no." He shook his head. "It's not like that. I love you."

The words felt like I was ripping them from my soul. "I never want to see you again."

Brennan closed his eyes, looking as if he'd been struck by a terrible blow. But when he opened his eyes again, his voice was as calm and quiet as ever. "I'll keep coming here. And when you're ready—"

"Don't." The thought that Brennan would be here, waiting, would drive me crazy. I didn't know if I could keep my wolf from fleeing to him again.

And eventually... he would stop coming. He'd move on.

Even if we were both wearing each other's marks.

"I'll be here," he finished, in that calm, patient voice, as if he were every bit the alpha.

I turned and fled.

CHAPTER 9

The next few weeks were miserable without Brennan. I wanted so badly to go to him and see him again. But I stayed strong, ignoring his texts. I only shifted into the wolf and ran when I was with the pack. I didn't trust my wolf not to charge right back to Brennan.

One night, Nathan knocked on our front door. Curtis answered, but Nathan looked over his shoulder and his eyes locked on me.

"Amelia hasn't been out to run lately," Nathan said. "She needs to practice."

Curtis obviously wasn't quite sure how to handle Nathan, who was the alpha's son but also had left the pack. No one was quite sure where he stood in the hierarchy now. Finally, Curtis said, "Nathan's right. Amelia, you should go out."

I wanted to refuse--the last thing I wanted was to be anywhere near Nathan while I was heartbroken over Brennan--but Rose and Aiden were watching. The sense of a storm brewing prickled down the back of my neck. I didn't want any trouble, especially not with them present.

"A run won't hurt," I agreed.

Nathan and I left the house, then parted ways behind the sheet that hung on a clothesline, shielded from the house. Nathan slung his shirt, then his jeans, over the line, weighing it down, and I hung my own clothes over too. Then I shifted, and I padded around to join him.

We ran together through the woods, our feet flying over the damp leaves and grass. The cool air blew past us, energizing us. As we ran I felt a small spark of joy, as if I could outrun my heartache and all that it entailed. We ran faster, pushing ourselves to the point where my breath came in short pants and my legs burned with effort. It felt too soon, though, that our loop took us back to the backyard behind the small house where I'd grown up.

He shifted back into a human and hurried to grab his clothes from the line before anyone could come outside. When he was dressed again, the two of us met on the other side of the line.

He said, "You're still as fast as ever."

"Thanks."

"What's wrong?" Nathan asked. "You can tell me."

My fingers rubbed over my turtleneck, and Nathan's sharp eyes noticed. I smiled at him, dropping my hand. Fuck. I'd been touching the mate mark without meaning to do so.

"I'm fine," I promised.

"I'm going to take you out on Saturday night," he said. "You aren't ready to leave the pack lands, but I'll have a picnic for us. We'll get out where it's quiet and watch the stars."

"That sounds nice," I admitted, but all I could think of was how much I'd like to do that again with Brennan.

His face darkened. "There's someone else, isn't there? Is it Lawson?"

"No," I said, confused.

"Then who?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm not seeing anyone," I said, looking away. "I'm sorry. I just--"

"I know that everyone makes mistakes," he said easily. "I just hope you know that you can always come back to me, no matter what you did. There's always a place for you in this pack."

I swallowed. "I'm not going anywhere."

The words felt like a curse.

"Good," he said, then abruptly lunged forward in a kiss. His lips were sloppy and hard against mine, and I automatically pulled away.

He wrapped his arms around me in a hug as if he didn't notice. I pressed my lips against his shoulder to get the wetness off my mouth, and I patted his back awkwardly, not sure what to do. I felt like a traitor.

"I need to go back home," I said. "My family is waiting."

"All right," he said, reluctantly pulling away from me. "We'll have Saturday night."

"I'm looking forward to it." But my words didn't match my aching spirit. I felt like my heart had been ripped out all over again by having another man kiss me. The mark burned under my shirt, and it took everything I had to keep from trying to rub the pain away.

I belonged to Brennan. There was no denying it.

I left Nathan behind, running back towards the house. I couldn't outrun the horrible feeling that I'd made a huge mistake. Whatever else Brennan was...he was my mate. My first love, my first kiss. Even if I'd rushed into things, that was all still true.

I felt like I was going to throw up when I reached the house. I snuck inside, grateful to escape into my room without being caught by anyone, then sat on the floor, hugging my knees. I had to figure out what to do. I was mated to an alpha from a rival pack. If anyone found out, Jacob Longroad could kill me for betraying the pack, and no one would question him. Not even my mother. The thought stabbed into my chest.

How long could I hide the mark?

I couldn't sleep that night. I tossed and turned, and the moon's light winking through the curtains no matter how much I tried to pull them shut felt as it were taunting me.

* * *

In the morning I found my mother in the kitchen making a pot of coffee. When I cleared my throat, she turned. She looked tired, her skin pale and eyes sunken.

"Mom?"

"Hm?" She looked up.

I didn't know what I wanted from this conversation. Comfort. I guessed. Which my mom could never give me at the best of times.

"I miss my job," I said, which was true; it was just the least of my many problems. "I

don't want to just stay on pack lands and wait to be married off."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "You seem to be doing your best to drive off the alpha's son."

"I don't feel any spark with him." That was an understatement. My connection to Brennan was a pulsing need; I couldn't imagine being with any other man, but certainly not Nathan.

"He's a good match, Amelia. Handsome, smart, strong. He'll be alpha one day, mark my words. You couldn't do any better."

I glanced out the window at Lawson's house next door. His very-pregnant sister was walking up the stone walkway, carefully holding the hand of her toddling firstborn. The image of Brennan's baby in my arms suddenly rose strong as a vision, accompanied with a supernatural prickling.

I couldn't be pregnant, could I? From that one night of sex when we'd marked each other?

It was just my imagination, which was always too active.

"I don't want to marry anyone. I want to be independent."

She let out a short, bitter laugh. "I had plenty of years of independence when your father left us. It's overrated, Amelia. Just... take the attention of a handsome, powerful man and be grateful, for once."

"Grateful for what?"

She forced a smile and poured herself a mug of coffee. "For being wanted."

I looked out the window again. The prickling sensation was still there. I turned to leave but then paused. "Mom?"

"Hm?" She sipped her coffee, and I could see that her hands weren't quite steady.

"Why is Nathan so interested in me?" I asked. "I hardly know him, but he keeps trying to get my attention."

"I don't know," she said. "I think maybe he's just lonely. And you are a beautiful girl." Her lips twisted bitterly. "Make use of it while you can, Amelia. You won't always be so pretty."

That was the closest my mother ever came to a compliment.

"If I'm supposed to be grateful for being wanted..." The words stuck in my throat, but I forced out the question that had always bothered me. "How come you've never wanted me?"

"You're being dramatic," she said.

I shook my head.

"You've had it so easy." Bitterness leaked through her words. "You're healthy, you're beautiful, you're talented. You don't know what it's like to suffer."

"If any of that is true, you should be happy for me." But I knew she wasn't. I'd never thought my mother saw me as gifted in so many ways, but instead of those thoughts being warm with a mother's love, they were cold too.

"Marry Nathan," she called to me as I reached the front door. "I want you out of this house, Amelia. Before you waste your best chance."

Your best chance. The words pounded in my heart as I made my way out to shift. Nathan was not my best chance... but what was?

Usually, my cares slipped away once I became a wolf. Now, as I ran through pack lands, it all felt pointless.

There was nowhere for me to run.

CHAPTER 10

The next day, when the doorbell rang, I felt an immediate rush of dread. Maybe it was Nathan. Curtis and my mother had gone out, dropping Rose off at a friend's house, and Aiden was in the shower—the pipes were rushing in the ceiling—so I had to be the one to answer.

When I opened the door, my next-door-neighbor Joseph leaned in the doorway. He flashed me a smile that used to make me melt when we were both younger. “Hi, Amy.”

“Did you come over to ask if Aiden can come out and play?” I asked him.

“Rude,” he said. “But yes. I need a fishing partner.”

“How's your sister doing?”

“Still immensely pregnant.”

As soon as I heard the word pregnant, I regretted asking.

He added, “She's doing great though. And you wouldn't believe how smart June is...she's already sounding out some words, and she can count to twenty.”

“That's awesome!” I couldn't help smiling, but I wasn't impressed by June; Lawson was an adorably proud uncle.

Later that day, I savored the silence as I walked through the empty house. I made my mother's chocolate chip cookie recipe—she wasn't great as a mom, but she made some amazing cookies—and then lit candles in the bathroom, deciding to take a long bath with a book.

For an hour, I soaked and floated in relaxation until an odd, unsettled feeling came over me. I sat up in the now-cool water, my nostrils flaring as I tried to scent what was wrong. I couldn't place it, but I scrambled out of the bath and clicked the lock closed on the bathroom door. I hastily toweled off. I'd brought my clothes with me into the shower, thankfully, and I dragged them on over my still damp body.

I opened the door to find Curtis standing there. He wore a scowl, as usual, and he smelled like moonshine.

My stomach twisted with a sense of impending danger.

"What are you doing back already?" I asked him cautiously. "Where's mom?"

"Out with friends," he said. "I ran into Nathan Longroad today. He's convinced you're cheating on him."

"What are you talking about? Nathan and I aren't together!"

He didn't answer me. Instead he lunged forward, grabbing me by the arms. I pushed him away, but his grip felt like steel. His hands roamed lewdly over my body as he tried to kiss me, but I fought him off and ran for the door before he could overpower me.

Curtis followed close behind, shouting obscene things at me in a slurred voice. I stumbled out of the house and across the street towards Lawson's house, feeling Curtis' hot breath close on my heels like an angry dog ready to sink its teeth into my

flesh if given half a chance.

The lights were off in Lawson's house. I hoped that he and Joseph had home anyway but when I reached the front door and pounded on it, no one answered. Curtis was right behind me.

"You're running around with someone like a slut," he said. "I can smell it on you. But why do you think you're too good for me?"

I tried to run from him. My motorcycle was hidden in the woods, if I could get there... and I was fast as a wolf.

I transformed into the wolf and raced away from him through the woods.

Curtis followed, but he wasn't as fast as me.

All my wolf wanted was to reach Brennan.

I raced through the woods, trying not to make a sound, my paws quiet. I caught a glimpse of Curtis behind me and ducked behind a large tree.

Then I saw something move on the ground, and I realized I wasn't alone.

The slender form of a big wolf, black and sleek, was curled up in a ball. The wolf was whimpering, lying in its own blood.

I crouched down and touched my nose to it.

The wolf had been beaten, but it wasn't dead.

We stared at each other for a long moment, and then I knew. It was Nathan.

I looked up and saw Curtis standing in front of the tree, and his beady eyes gleamed. "Your new boyfriend is trying to take what's mine to protect. How dare he fucking mark you."

I staggered back in shock, realizing he knew I was marked. How had he learned that?

I looked down at Nathan as he raised his head, but his eyes were unfocused.

Curtis stalked forward. As he lunged toward me, Nathan suddenly rose and attacked him. Curtis let out a shout as Nathan ripped into his leg, and as Curtis staggered back, Nathan collapsed to the ground again.

"Than you," I gasped to Nathan. I wanted to help him, but Curtis was already hobbling toward me, his hand pressing the bloody gash in his thigh. The best thing I could do for Nathan was lead Curtis away.

I ran, not looking back.

My motorcycle was in the clearing. I got on and glanced over my shoulder to see Curtis lurching through the woods. I revved the engine and took off toward the road, driving faster along the winding path through the trees than I would've liked.

Somehow, Curtis got ahead of me and he leapt from the trees. I swerved just in time.

I kept driving, faster and faster. Curtis was still close behind, transformed into a wolf now and moving with sickening speed.

If I could just make it to the cabin, Brennan might be there waiting for me.

If he kept his promise.

If not... my lips pressed together tightly at the thought of battling for my life out at the cabin, off pack lands where no one would look for me.

The night air whipped my hair as I drove past trees and hills. My heart raced with fear.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the familiar silhouette of the cabin rose on the hill above.

I pulled up and quickly shut off my motorcycle lights. But before the lights flickered and died, they illuminated a big, masculine figure on the porch. Panic fluttered at the edges of my vision.

“Amelia?” The shadowy figure rose, and Brennan’s familiar deep voice pierced the darkness.

I ran to him. He wrapped me in his arms and we just stood there for a moment without saying a word.

Suddenly, Brennan noticed the bruises and cuts on my body and he frowned. I hadn’t even felt the injuries I gained while I was fleeing. “What happened?”

I stammered, trying to explain what had happened. He looked angry and concerned all at once, even though my story was a mess.

He put his hand on the small of my back and led me up the steps. “Let’s get you inside and warmed up. I’ll deal with any danger.”

Curtis appeared behind me, his face twisted into a sinister grin. “Oh, Amelia. Do you know who this is?”

Brennan stepped in front of me, shielding me from Curtis' glare. "That's a good question," he said with a low growl in his voice. He squared his shoulders and looked directly at Curtis. "Do you know who the fuck I am, old man?"

"A dead man, for taking what belongs to me," Curtis said. "And no one will blame me for killing anyone who threatened my stepdaughter."

The tension in the air was palpable. Energy and rage radiated from them both.

Curtis and Brennan leapt toward each other at the same time. They fought as men, fists flying and legs kicking, throwing each other around like rag dolls. I gasped as the two of them wrestled and felt a rush of relief when it was Brennan who threw Curtis to the ground. Brennan leapt forward to stomp on Curtis's face, but Curtis rolled frantically aside, and he managed to scramble to his feet.

Curtis shifted into wolf form, snarling. Brennan transformed in a second too, his enormous silver wolf even bigger than Curtis's. The two wolves stood there for a moment, sizing each other up with their eyes before they lunged at each other in a flurry of fur and claws.

They raced away toward the woods, their growls echoing through the night air like thunder clapping in the distance. They tumbled over each other before they reached the forest, but this was not like the playful attacks we packmates launched on each other. The two of them snarled, teeth peeled back, flashing forward at each other and drawing blood. Brennan was quick and agile and fierce, but Curtis was wily and dangerous.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Brennan managed to grab Curtis by the throat and with one swift movement, ripped his throat out.

Brennan stood triumphantly above the limp wolf, raising his head to let out a long,

fierce howl. His fur was matted with blood and his body shook from the intensity of the fight.

Then his gaze swept to me. He ran toward me, and as he ran, he shifted back.

I ran over to Brennan and embraced him tightly, thankful for his strength and courage. His arms wrapped around me as if he would never let me go again.

CHAPTER 11

I was still shell shocked from what had happened, but the warmth of Brennan's arms felt like an anchor.

He kissed me gently on the forehead and he kept whispering soothing words into my ear, assuring me that everything would be alright...even if it felt like nothing ever would be again.

He was the alpha of a rival pack, and he had just killed a member of my pack.

If anyone found out... this would lead to open war between our packs.

He wrapped me in his jacket and called someone.

"You aren't going to like this," he said. "But I need you to come get a body and bury it in our pack land. You can fuss at me later."

I looked at him in surprise. No one from my pack would find their way onto Steele land. No one would ever find Curtis.

But it meant revealing our secret relationship to another member of his pack. I chewed my lower lip, thinking of how we'd left things, as he ended the call and wrapped his arms around me.

"I'm sorry, Brennan," I whispered.

"I'm sorry too," he said. "I should have told you I was alpha from the beginning. I thought you wouldn't want to be with me if you knew, but that was your choice to make. But I was so worried I'd lose you. You're my mate, Amelia. I've known it since I first saw you, and I can't imagine life without you."

He looked intent and thoughtful—and blurry, as I blinked tears from my eyes. "Can we still leave together?"

"Yes," he murmured. "Yes. It'll take time... I need to leave my pack in good shape...but we can go somewhere no one will ever know us and start a new life in pack territory. You can stay here, or I'll get you set up somewhere else... you never have to go back there."

I shook my head. "I have people to take care of too, Brennan. I'll go back."

I couldn't just disappear on Rose, Aiden, Lawson, Alison or even my mom. They all deserved some closure from me before I left. I hoped, one day, I'd be back in their lives again in some way.

A surly girl arrived with a car, Stone in the passenger seat. Stone unfolded his enormous body, gave me a look like he despised me, then hefted the body into the trunk. He moved that enormous wolf corpse as if it weighed nothing.

"Do you always manage to find trouble?" the girl asked Brennan.

"And you always get me out of it," Brennan said with that charming smile. She rolled her eyes, not seeming charmed, as if they were close as siblings.

"Let's move," the girl said.

My legs shook and I couldn't help but wonder what they would think of me when

they found out that I was a part of the pack that had caused so much trouble for them. Would they hate me even more?

Nausea swept through me, making me feel hot and tense, and I doubled over before throwing up. The girl made a disgusted sound. "Her first dead body?"

"Enough, Tee," Brennan warned. He stroked my back gently. "It's all right. Stone, get me the anti-nausea pills from the med kit."

"I'll be fine." I swiped at my eyes, trying to stem my tears. I didn't want to cry in front of these two grouchy members of Brennan's pack. All I wanted was to hide away and hold Brennan.

As I straightened, he wrapped his arms around me, and I rested my forehead on Brennan's chest.

"I know," he said. "He may have been an asshole, but it's still hard to see a man killed."

I didn't want to think about it. I wanted to be with Brennan and pretend that nothing bad had ever happened. But instead, I steeled myself. "If I stay away any longer, it'll seem suspicious. They'll think I had something to do with Curtis's death. I need to go home."

Even though that house didn't feel like home.

Home was wherever I was with Brennan.

CHAPTER 12

So I went back to my house, slipping in while it was still dark. My mother woke me up. "Do you know where Curtis is?" she asked, her voice a mixture of worry and anger.

I shook my head, unable to bring myself to tell her the truth. She didn't need to know what happened, or that I had been involved.

"Did Curtis do anything to you? He was acting so strange after his conversation with Nathan. Your admirer." Her voice twisted on those last few words. "He and a couple of his friends left right after that..."

I hated that she was asking not to protect me, but because she suspected me.

"No." I didn't trust her with any secret of mine. I'd tried to tell her a dozen times Curtis was a threat. The last, most horrible threat could stay my secret.

She kept asking and then eventually gave up, convinced I was clueless about what had happened.

Later that day, I could hear the rumble of Jacob Longroad's voice in the living room. The alpha was talking to my mother about Curtis's disappearance.

"He settled down when you came along, but before that, he was a rolling stone. I wouldn't worry just yet. He loves you, he'll come back."

My mother let out a thin sob, and my lips pressed together tightly. The memory of Curtis's blank gaze staring into the afterlife above the red, jagged remnants of his throat rose into my mind.

Someone tapped on the glass. I spun to see Nathan grinning at me through the window.

I crossed to him and opened the window to hiss, "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you'd want to know I was all right. You were worried about me last night."

God, Nathan remembered I'd been out in the woods last night. I'd hoped he'd been too badly hurt to remember he'd seen me with Curtis. My lips parted, and he said, "Yeah. Don't worry, Amelia. I'll always take care of you."

I pressed my lips together tightly.

"And you and I are going to rule the pack soon," he said, taking my hand in his. "Then no one will be able to touch us."

I swallowed. I had to get out of here before this maniac revealed what I'd done with Brennan. For now, I let him hold my hand, though I couldn't bring myself to wrap my fingers around his.

"Are you okay?" I asked, remembering how genuinely worried about him I'd been the night before.

"Fine. Nothing really hurts me." He squeezed my hand. "I'm going to challenge my father tonight. You need to come watch. I'll be better with you there."

I'd had my fill of violence for a lifetime already. "Please don't, Nathan. What if you

get hurt?"

"I'll be fine. I'm fighting for you, for us."

I couldn't say anything to that. I just needed him to stop staring at me so intensely, as if he was going to lunge at me again for another miserable kiss.

Then he added, "Amelia, I need you there. You're my mate, you're my only friend, and you will be my wife when I'm alpha."

He was so delusion, but I didn't want anyone else to die—not Nathan and not Jacob Longroad. "Please don't do this, Nathan. You're going to get yourself killed."

"Come watch me," he said. "Please."

I let out a shuddering breath. "Okay. I'll come."

He squeezed my hand again. "Thanks. I'll meet you in the backyard just before sunset. We'll go to this full moon together."

* * *

That evening, Nathan took my hand and walked with me to the pack meeting. I realized, too late, that it looked like I was at his side to challenge Jacob.

Jacob gave us a sad, resigned look, as if he already knew what was coming, even before Nathan turned to face his father.

"I'm here to challenge you for alpha," Nathan said calmly.

There were murmurs from the pack, but I didn't think anyone was really surprised.

My mother watched the two of us with an expression I couldn't read. I was glad Aiden and Rose were both too young to be here, too young to see this.

Watching Nathan fight Jacob was like watching a train wreck. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. He blocked all of Jacob's strikes, and it seemed as if he held back his own blows. As if he was playing with the alpha.

His father clearly thought so too, and he grew increasingly frustrated. He'd raise a hand to strike and Nathan would just back away. He did it over and over again.

Jacob grew impatient and lunged at him. Satisfaction flashed over Nathan's face as he leapt to meet his father. My stomach turned. Nathan had been baiting him the whole time.

Nathan immediately started hitting him, locking up with his father and delivering a series of punishing blows. Jacob was big, but Nathan was faster and had a more deadly aim. His hits left his father gasping and bleeding.

When Jacob staggered, Nathan lifted him up and slammed him down on the ground, then let him go and climbed off. Jacob gasped for breath and rose, staying bent over. His eyes looked glassy. Jacob's hands were shaking as he covered his face.

Nathan helped his father to his feet, then turned to face the pack, holding his arms wide open as if to embrace the entire pack. "I'm alpha."

Then Nathan pointed to me. "And this is my mate."

I could feel all of them staring at me like a weight pressing me down into the grave. I raised my chin.

Nathan's voice rose in the silent silence. "Is there anyone who wants to challenge

me?"

There was no answer. Nathan swelled with pride, then took my hand and walked to Jacob.

"I'm going to marry her at the next full moon," Nathan told him.

"The next full moon?" My head swam. That was only a month away. "Nathan..."

Jacob looked up, but his eyes weren't focused on me or Nathan. He was looking at something else. I twisted, but there was just a blur of movement slipping into the forest.

Brennan.

It was deadly dangerous for him to enter our pack territory.

Jacob's gaze met mine, and I held my breath.

"You can't marry her," Jacob began. "She's not your mate."

He didn't even finish speaking before Nathan leapt forward. He grabbed Jacob's jaw and snapped his neck.

His father crumpled to his feet.

The pack went deadly silent in shock.

Alphas and their challengers usually fought to the death. But in our pack, we always knew a challenge could end with bloodshed, but more often, it ended with banishment. It had looked as if Jacob and Nathan would transfer power over death. I

stared in shock at the alpha's colossal body sprawled across the ground.

"No one will stop me from having Amelia," Nathan ground out, looking every bit the deranged madman he had in the forest. He looked around for another challenger, but no one said anything.

Nathan grabbed my wrist and raised both our hands together in a symbol of victory.

After a long, tense moment, the pack broke out in cheering.

CHAPTER 13

As we walked home, Nathan kept talking about how we would get married.

My next hope was that my mother wouldn't agree to me marrying Nathan. Although I didn't need her permission, it would be a reason to stall while Brennan and I prepared our escape.

But when my mother walked into the house and saw Nathan in our kitchen—he seemed to take up all the space in the room—a nasty gleam came into her eye.

She knew I wasn't happy, but she seemed pleased for me to marry Nathan. Something hard crystallized in my chest.

"We can get married at the next full moon," Nathan said. "There's no reason not to just get it done. I've waited so long."

He slung his arm around my shoulders and beamed down at me.

"Let's get married on the blood moon instead," I said. "It's good luck."

"I'll make our luck," Nathan promised me.

"Nathan," I said softly, keenly aware of my mother watching me. "Please. It's just... a lot for me. I'm a..." I trailed off, biting my lower lip. "I'm scared."

Nathan's gaze softened. "Of course. I forget sometimes how innocent and naive you

are. But you'll grow into being an alpha's wife."

When he'd left, my mother said, "That's some bullshit you sold him right there. Curtis told me you were sneaking around."

"Mom..."

"I won't have you betraying our pack. You're going to marry Nathan. He's a powerful alpha, and he'll be a good husband to you."

"He doesn't love me."

"Love isn't everything. He's taking care of you, and someday soon you'll take care of him. You're lucky you were picked. Some girls would kill for a man like Nathan."

"I'm not interested in marrying Nathan or anyone else. I'm eighteen! What's the rush?"

That was a lie, but I was pretty sure my mother didn't know the truth.

She sneered. "You're young. You don't know what's good for you."

I felt sick inside, but I just walked away. I'd never been able to bridge the gap between my mother and myself. When I was little, I'd tried desperately the way Rose did now, always trying to please her. But I was done.

Over the next few days, I was desperate to escape to see Brennan, but I no longer had a job or any other excuse to leave the pack, and I was never alone. My mother took me shopping for a wedding dress in the city. Rose prattled along in excitement. I craned my head around hoping Brennan didn't think I was abandoning him. I'd texted him, and he'd told me everything was going to be all right. But I still worried.

I tried to leave to see Brennan the next night, but when I shifted into my wolf form, I found myself running with the pack. Every time I got near the perimeter, I found other wolves there who joined me on my run.

Nathan was making sure I stayed on pack lands.

I went back to my room and cried that night, but in the morning, I was ready to fight.

"Aiden." I said to him the next morning over breakfast. Our house was peaceful now, without Curtis's intimidating presence. "Are there men watching our house all the time?"

He froze, his coffee cup halfway to his lips, then nodded. "There's a rumor going around the pack you're seeing a human."

That was bad, but it would be far worse if they knew I was with Brennan Steele.

"And so... they're watching me?"

"I didn't want to scare you, but yeah," he said. "There are always wolves in the woods and a car parked on the road. Nathan says it's to protect you, but..."

He chewed his lower lip.

"It'll be all right," I assured him.

Even if I didn't really know that was true.

CHAPTER 14

Nathan came over for dinner or took me out most nights. He was scrupulously polite to my mother and charming with my little sister, but as we ate our lasagna one night, he was subtly a condescending dick to my little brother Aiden. Aiden pretended not to notice, but his cheeks reddened, and Nathan seemed to enjoy the fact no one wanted to challenge him now.

I fumed inside. And most of all... I worried about what would happen to Aiden when I ran. So far, Nathan had begun to win the pack over, after their initial burst of fear. He'd seemed fair and kind so far.

But I didn't trust that impression one bit.

Afterward, Nathan and I went out for a walk down the road. I knew we were being watched, and it would be my chance to ask him about it.

Lawson was out splitting wood, and I waved at him. He propped his axe over his shoulder and waved back.

Nathan stared at him in a way I didn't like.

I explained, "Lawson and I grew up together since we're next door neighbors. We're like brother and sister."

"Is that right?" Nathan asked. "You think you're friends?"

"Absolutely," I said. "We used to play X-Men and Barbies. It was quite the crossover story. Barbies could fuck some shit up."

He frowned at me. "I never heard you swear before."

"Oh," I said with a laugh. "Well, I don't swear around my mom. She washed my mouth out with Dawn when I was in fourth grade and it traumatized me forever."

"Someone should do it again," Nathan said, and I frowned at him. He frowned back. "You're going to be an alpha's wife. You should be classy."

"I can be classy and curse."

He made a small, disgusted sound, then let the subject drop, but I had the sudden feeling that if everything went wrong and somehow I did end up married to Nathan, he'd try to control everything about me, from how I spoke to who I counted as friends.

CHAPTER 15

As the days passed, Nathan seemed to dote on me. He brought me flowers every day before he took me to dinner or ate with my family.

But he was possessive. He watched me too closely. He didn't like it when I talked to other people.

I was on edge all the time. I'd wake up at night thinking I could hear Brennan's voice, but I never could. I'd smell his scent and imagine him standing beside me, but my door would open, and Nathan would be there, staring down at me.

It felt as if I couldn't get away from Nathan, even in my sleep.

Brennan texted me every day, making plans for when we'd leave together. I didn't want him to know how scared I was. He couldn't help me until it was time to move, because if he did, we'd endanger both packs.

Then, one night, I was messaging Brennan when I heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. It was Nathan; my mother was out, Rose was reading through her stack of library books, and Aiden was hanging out with Lawson playing video games in his room.

Nathan entered the room as I was stuffing the phone under my pillow.

But he moved in a blur of speed. He grabbed the phone and scrolled through the last few messages I hadn't yet deleted. It was just Brennan checking in on me and telling me a funny story about how he'd accidentally pissed off Stone.

My stomach shrank, expecting him to be angry, but when he raised his head his face was a mask of fury. His eyes looked dark, like they belonged to a demon. He threw the phone to the ground and advanced toward me.

"I can't believe you!" he shouted, spittle flying from his lips as he towered over me. "You think you can run around on me with some guy? You think you're too good for me?"

He reached forward and grabbed my arm tightly, squeezing it until I gasped in pain. Tears filled my eyes as I tried to pull away, but he had an iron grip on me and wouldn't let go.

My heart raced as I looked up at him, terrified of what he might do next. His face contorted in rage as he drew closer to me and then suddenly let go of my arm. He turned all his attention to smashing my cell phone. He stomped on it over and over.

He was still screaming at me, but I no longer heard what he said.

All I could think was that if I didn't escape him, one day he'd smash his boot into my head like that, crushing not just my electronics but my face. I felt numb.

Aiden came running down the hall. He ran into the bedroom, and his eyes went wide when he saw Nathan standing near me with his face a mask of barely contained rage.

"What the hell?" Aiden shouted.

Lawson was right behind Aiden. "What's going on?"

Nathan stooped and scooped up the pile of my cell phone parts. At least he had barely looked at the phone before he flipped his shit, and he had ruined any chance at obtaining my old messages, where Brennan and I had plotted our escape.

He grabbed my wrist roughly and lifted my hand, pouring what was left of my mangled cell phone into my palm. His eyes blazed into mine. "There is no one for me but you, Amelia. And there's no one for you but me. If you ever fucking talk to whoever this was again, I will kill him. Do you understand me?"

I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but what mattered most now was surviving the next few moments. Lawson and Aiden had balled-up fists, but I wasn't sure they could take a full-grown alpha wolf, even the two of them.

And no matter what Nathan did, he'd have the backing of the pack. They'd see it as me cheating on him, and that was unforgivable. Especially against an alpha. Once we were married, I'd produce the heir. The thought made me sick.

"Do you still want to marry me?" I asked, my voice coming out trembling. Please say no.

He grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me close, and Aiden and Lawson tensed.

"Nothing could ever keep me from marrying you," he growled. "And anyone who tries will suffer."

He pressed his lips to mine in a suffocating kiss. His lips tasted salty, his breath was hot and heavy, and all I wanted was to pull away, but he was gripping me too tightly.

I gasped as he let go.

Nathan turned to Aiden. "Make sure she doesn't see him again. I'll hold you responsible."

Aiden nodded, but I had the feeling it was just to get Nathan away from us.

Nathan stormed out of the house, slamming the front door behind him.

Lawson came up behind me and held out his hand as if to touch my shoulder and comfort me, but he hesitated. "Amelia, he's your mate. He can't help being possessive."

I shook my head. "He doesn't understand. I've already got a mate bond with someone else. I can't go through with the wedding."

Aiden looked at Lawson, and they shared a grim look.

"You guys have to help me get out of here." The catch in my voice shook me, but I couldn't hold it back. "I have to have a way to talk to Brennan, to make plans..."

"Amelia, we can't," Aiden said softly. "We're sorry. He's our alpha and he--"

"You'll stand there and watch him kill me?" My voice rose wildly. "He's crazy. He's going to get worse."

Aiden bit his lip, but Lawson finally gripped my shoulder. "I don't think he's going to let you go, but...what do we need to do?"

We made plans and all the while, he talked to me like I was fragile. Aiden paced the room, looking frustrated but I knew my little brother. He'd always have my back, just like I'd always have his.

Lawson pushed the curtain aside and glanced out the window. "He's watching. Well, he's got people watching."

"We'll need a diversion," Aiden said thoughtfully.

"You'll help me?" I looked between them, needing to hear the words out loud.

"Of course," Lawson said. "You're still my best friend. I'll always have your back, Amelia."

I looked to Aiden, who said slowly, "If you don't want to marry him, I'll help. But I want to know what I'm getting into.. and what you're getting into. Who is this guy, Amelia?"

So I told them all about Brennan, worried they wouldn't help me once they knew he was the alpha of a rival pack. I had to be honest or it wouldn't be fair to ask them to help.

After a few long, tense seconds, Lawson said slowly, "It sounds like... if this Brennan is who you think he is... he'll come and get you if we don't help you escape."

I hoped so with all my heart.

"So if we want to avoid a war that will mean casualties for our pack too," Lawson finished, "we need to help you."

He looked at Aiden, who nodded.

"We'll do it," Aiden said. "Whatever comes next."

But there was a grim cast to his face that told me he expected bloodshed.

CHAPTER 16

We let a few long, miserable days go by. It was obvious I was being watched the entire time. I worried about what might happen to Aiden and Lawson after I disappeared, and I tried to convince them to come with me.

"To another pack?" Aiden asked skeptically. "I'm not convinced that would end any better for us."

I used Lawson's cell phone to text Brennan, but we couldn't exchange loving messages anymore--just a few quick planning texts which Lawson then swiftly deleted. He worried that Nathan didn't trust him either.

One day, Lawson walked me to the front door only to see a shifter across the way ducking out of sight into the forest.

Nathan was jealous of Lawson too, and it made me worry.

"Be careful." Lawson's eyes tracked the same movement.

"You too." I would've hugged him, but I knew better when we were being watched.

I couldn't say a real goodbye to anyone, not even Rose or my mother. Mom might tip off Nathan if she knew.

Nathan's car pulled up in between our houses, parking on the grass, and my stomach curdled at the sight.

"Make nice with him," Lawson said quietly. "Make him think you have no intention of ever seeing Brennan again."

"I will," I said, even though the thought made me feel like I was betraying Brennan. But I knew Brennan would want me to do whatever it took to stay safe...and come to him.

If Brennan entered our pack lands to get me, he would start a war. That kind of fight wouldn't be good for anyone. Especially when he and I wanted to run far away from both our packs and start a new, peaceful life. We couldn't leave chaos behind us.

I had a feeling Brennan wasn't the kind of man to leave his pack if he felt they truly needed him. He trusted Stone to take his place as alpha. The thought of Stone's tall, formidable body and the aura of power and dominance he cast sent a shiver down my spine, but not like the one I felt as Nathan unfolded himself from the car.

Lawson swallowed hard as Nathan strode toward us. Lawson looked as if he wanted to run, but he stayed rooted there even if he was afraid of the alpha.

Nathan covered the last bit of ground leapt up the last stairs to the porch with superhuman speed. He grabbed my arm roughly.

I winced. "Nathan, let go of me! You're hurting me."

He gritted his teeth and looked over at Lawson before turning back to me. "You don't belong to him," he spat, pulling me closer to him. His grip tightened painfully on my arm, and I tried not to cry out in pain.

"She doesn't belong to anyone," Lawson said, stepping forward despite the look of anger that crossed Nathan's face. "Let go of her."

Nathan growled under his breath and shoved me away from him, sending me tumbling off the porch. I slammed hard into the grass, and for a long second I lay there trying to catch my breath.

Before I could get up, Nathan lunged toward Lawson with a roar that shook the trees around us.

Lawson swerved to the side, letting Nathan's fist pass through the air where he had been standing. A desperate look had come over his face, but he punched the alpha in the stomach.

Nathan stumbled away and charged back. Lawson managed to dodge around him again, and this time, he grabbed the alpha's shoulder and shoved.

Nathan staggered, but he twisted with the motion and tackled Lawson, bringing him to the ground. Lawson tried to punch him while they tumbled, but it was clear he was outmatched.

Nathan slammed his fist into Lawson's face with a terrifying crunch, and I caught a glimpse of red as I ran to try to get Nathan off Lawson. Nathan didn't even seem to feel me push him desperately away from Lawson.

Lawson finally managed to shove Nathan off of him, but as soon as Nathan rolled away, he was up on his feet. Lawson clumsily got to his feet, blood pouring from his nose and mouth. Desperation ran through me like a jolt of electricity and I leapt at Nathan, trying to stop him, but Nathan was completely focused on Lawson. His gaze burned toward Lawson, his eyes lit with madness once again, and he pushed me aside as if I were nothing.

Nathan sent a series of quick, brutal punches snapping toward Lawson. Lawson scrambled out of the way of all but the last one, which knocked him halfway across

the field.

If anyone tried to step in, Nathan was the alpha.

We were on our own, at best. If anyone came to help... they would probably help Nathan. Things had changed so much since the day Curtis—and his cronies, I would imagine—beat Nathan in the woods. I still wasn't sure what had sparked that fight, but I wished Curtis and Nathan had killed each other then.

As Lawson swung around, Nathan grabbed his arm, twisted it and kicked him hard against the side of his head, knocking him to the ground. Lawson tried desperately to get Nathan away from him, but it was too late. The alpha straddled him, his hands around his neck. A shout of anger and fear escaped Lawson's lips as he pushed against Nathan's arm and tried to free himself of the alpha's hold. A mad grin came over Nathan's face as he squeezed Lawson's throat.

I screamed as I realized he was going to kill him. "Nathan! Stop! Let him go!"

He shot me a look, his eyes dark with anger, and my stomach bottomed out. How did I get him to stop? I could run into the house for a weapon, but what would I find that would help me take down this mountain of a man?

His grip tightened until Lawson's face was crimson and his eyes began bulging.

I didn't think anything would get Nathan off Lawson except...

I dropped to my knees, sobbing. "Please don't kill him! I'll do anything you want, just please let him go."

Nathan released his hold and Lawson fell to the ground, gasping for air.

Nathan turned to face me, his eyes crazed, and I wanted to run.

"Why are you like this, Amelia? Why are you fighting me when I love you so much?"

"I'm sorry," I managed.

Nathan held out his bloody hand to me. "Come on. We're going out tonight."

I felt panicked as I walked past a bleeding, gasping Lawson, but the best thing I could do for him was to get Nathan far away.

Nathan opened the door for me. I climbed into the passenger seat, feeling sickened by the overwhelming scent of his cologne and the slightly metallic scent of his body. Mates smelled good to each other, intoxicating even. Why was Nathan so obsessed with me? Why couldn't he see that we weren't meant to be together?

Lawson hadn't moved from the grass. Nathan turned the car back on and put it in reverse. All I wanted to do was run to Lawson and make sure he was okay.

Then Lawson raised his head and looked at me. His face was a bloodied mess, but he was alive, and relief shot through me.

"Where are we going?" I pulled down the passenger side mirror and realized I looked like a mess. My face, wide-eyed and frantic, seemed unfamiliar and it scared me. I put the mirror away, but I tried to smooth down my disheveled hair.

He glanced toward me. "You don't look as pretty as usual tonight."

"I didn't know we were going out."

"An alpha's wife should always be presentable."

A hundred snarky comments rose to my lips, but I said, "I'll try to keep my hair and makeup done."

"Good," he said. "We're going to town."

"Town?" My stomach flip-flopped, thinking of the town with the diner that I'd left behind when my shifting started. Brennan might be in town, although it wasn't likely. Still... part of me hoped, and part of me was afraid. I didn't want Brennan to see me with Nathan, no matter that he knew the situation. "I thought I couldn't go until later in my shifting... when we were sure I had it under control..."

"I'll keep you under control," he promised.

God, I didn't love the sound of that. "Oh."

"I know what a good wife you can be. You just have to grow up."

I stared out the window and didn't say anything. After a moment, he reached over, running his hand over my leg. I grimaced but stayed silent, hating that he was touching me but knowing I needed to stay calm and keep him happy.

"This is why men are the leaders," he added. "You're emotional. Fickle. You'll forget that stupid human once you're carrying my baby."

Two warring emotions rose in my stomach. One: relief that he thought I was interested in a human and didn't know anything about Brennan. Two: disgust at the thought of carrying his baby.

I couldn't stop thinking about the way Lawson had looked as we left, the way his eyes had met mine through the windshield. He'd been in so much pain, and I couldn't parse his expression.

Nathan's knuckles were bleeding, but he hummed, not seeming to notice. He seemed cheerful now.

He took me to the diner. Alison gave me a confused look when she saw me with another man, and I silently prayed she wouldn't say anything. Nathan ordered for us both, and the two of us ate dinner quietly.

"I never got to see you serve here," he said when he'd gotten the check. Then he grinned at me. "But I'll get to see you serve plenty when you're my wife."

"That's not exactly a romantic thought, Nathan."

"Mm. You'll get used to me and my ways." He shook his head. "You can't see Lawson again."

"You were watching me?"

"Of course." He twisted and looked at me. "I can't protect what's mine if I don't know what's going on."

"We can't get married if you don't trust me! Why would you even want me, then?"

He let out a laugh. "Maybe I want to tame you."

I stared at him in shock and exhaustion. He was handsome in a rough way, even with his nose bent to one side, but his face filled me with revulsion. "I have to use the bathroom. Do you need to watch that too?"

He waved me off dismissively, and I walked to the bathroom. Alison followed me into the ladies' room a moment later.

"Are you alright?" she asked me.

I couldn't involve her; a human could do nothing about shifter problems except get themselves eaten. "I'm fine."

She looked at me closely. "It's one thing if you decided Brennan wasn't the man for you, but you seem... so nervous with that guy."

"It's a rough night," I said. "But it's alright, Alison."

"Amelia..." she hesitated as if she didn't know what to say.

"It's my life," I said sharply, already regretting how harsh the words sounded, but I didn't want her to get hurt. "I know what I'm doing."

She didn't seem convinced, but she nodded and left me alone. I leaned against the bathroom stall for a long moment, wishing I could tell her everything.

When I walked out, Nathan was waiting for me, right outside the bathroom door, and I let out a small gasp of shock. He gave me a smile and made some comment about how he'd already paid, but I couldn't stand the feeling he was always lurking, just on the other side of the door. My skin crawled as he put his hand on my back and escorted me out the door.

We got back into his car and he drove south, out of town. When we had reached pack lands, he turned and drove down a narrow dirt road under swaying trees. He pulled over into a large clearing, cut the engine, and walked around to my side to open my door.

"Where are we?" I asked him, trying to control my tone, but my voice trembled.

He held his hand out to me. "You wanted me to be more romantic. I had something set up for the two of us."

"Oh." I managed numbly, before taking his hand. He certainly didn't love me for my sparkling conversation, because I could barely form words around him. A knot seemed to press against the back of my throat, and all I could think of was how much I missed Brennan, with his easy smile and endless patience.

We walked together through the tall grass, then stopped at a small, curtained-off nook at the edge of the clearing. He swept aside the fabric to reveal a small table set with candles, cake, and wine.

"It's beautiful," I said, but my voice sounded shaky.

"Just like you." His voice was oddly cold, as if it were just a statement of fact.

It wasn't as if being beautiful was serving me very well in life. I had the sudden urge to shave my head and change everything about my appearance, to try to make myself look less like something he wanted to possess.

The two of us sat stiffly on the gilt chairs under the beautiful twinkling lights. It would have been a special surprise with someone else. With Brennan, the conversation would have been light and quick.

"You and I are waiting until marriage to consummate our matehood," he said. "But that only matters if you're still a virgin. Are you?"

I stared at him in shock. My cheeks flushed. "Yes."

"I'll know," he warned me. "The first night. But I won't be angry if you just tell me now, Amelia."

"I'm a virgin," I said, furious. I rose from the table. "Now take me home!"

"I'm glad you're still a virgin, Amelia." His voice sounded as if he was trying to be soothing, but nothing about Nathan left me feeling peaceful. He put his hand on my back, but I shrugged it off. "You're a good girl. Now sit down, let's have dessert."

I forced myself to sit stiffly down again, although I couldn't get my heart to stop racing.

He pressed his lips to mine in another thick, suffocating kiss. As his hands crept over my skin, under my shirt, I leapt away.

God, what would happen to me if he ever discovered the mark on my throat? The mark seemed to pulse desperately now, burning against my skin.

Nathan followed me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I backed up only to find myself pressed against a beam as his big body enveloped mine.

"Nathan," I murmured, trying to push him away. His arousal pressed against me. Repulsion and fear warned in my chest, and everything inside me wanted to shirk and run. He was trying to claim me, to own me, and I couldn't let him.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," I lied, even though the words made me feel sick. "I want to wait until we're married."

"You can trust me. I'm not going to change my mind about you."

"I know." There was no escaping him... not until I got away with Brennan. "Please take me home. My mother wouldn't like us being out here alone like this when we

aren't married yet."

He looked as if he were on the verge of losing his temper, but then he relaxed and nodded. "You're right. There will be plenty of time later. Years and years together."

I tried to make myself smile in answer, but I knew it didn't reach my eyes.

CHAPTER 17

Lawson's house was dark when Nathan dropped me off at home that night. I desperately wanted to go see him and know he was okay, but I could feel eyes on me as Nathan walked me up to the door and planted a hard kiss on my lips.

"I hope you enjoyed our special night," Nathan told me.

"I did," I lied. "Despite the rough beginning."

Nathan frowned as if he didn't even remember, but then apparently decided he didn't care to ask. I was pretty sure it was an act; Nathan was smarter than he let on.

He gave me another kiss, then reached to open the front door. When he closed the door behind me, it felt as if he were sealing me in.

I turned to find Rose reading on the couch right under the picture window. Her book was open but she had a familiar guilty expression as if she'd been eavesdropping.

I backed away from the door, letting out a shaky breath now that Nathan wasn't staring at me.

"Amelia, what really happened to Curtis?"

"I don't know. He probably ran off."

"Did Nathan hurt him?"

I debated, realizing that if people suspected Nathan had killed Curtis, no one would ever investigate the paths that could lead them to Brennan. "I don't think so. He's... possessive...but I don't know why he would kill Nathan."

She looked dissatisfied. "Curtis wasn't a good man."

I didn't want to answer, not when the memory of Curtis's bloody throat rose in my mind, but she already knew what I'd thought.

"Do you love Nathan?"

I shook my head.

"Then why are you marrying him?"

If Lawson was still going to follow the plan, then we'd leave late tonight. But I didn't know for sure. He might have backed out after tonight's beating.

He might not be able to help me after tonight's beating. My stomach twisted, desperate to go to Lawson and check on him, but I needed to stay away for both our sakes.

"Life is complicated," I told my sister, sitting beside her on the couch. I wanted to hug her goodbye, but if my mother caught us, she might be suspicious, so I had to be careful. "Sometimes it's hard to find our way to a happy ending. But we have to try. Even if it's scary."

She stared at me. "You make no sense."

"I know." I dared to hug her, and she seemed perplexed but she still wrapped her arms around me, then patted my shoulder.

That night at one o'clock, Aiden tapped on my bedroom door. I met him in the hallway, my heart already pounding with anxiety.

"Have you talked to Lawson?" I asked, glancing through the window at the empty house.

He nodded. "He's still in. More than ever... he wants to protect you from Nathan. I think he still loves you, Amelia."

That was more than I could cope with at the moment.

As we reached the front door, Aiden eased it open carefully. Headlights swept past us: the car that was always watching was pulling away down the road.

"Brennan texted that he sent some of his pack to patrol along our pack territory," Aiden explained briefly. "He hoped it would pull them away."

I stepped outside, and was surprised to see Lawson waiting.

His face looked puffy and swollen, and I gasped, but he tried to smile. "Time to go. Are you ready?"

"I'm going to stay here to distract them if they come back," Aiden told me. "Good luck, sis."

I hugged him goodbye, but he barely squeezed me back before he pushed me away. "You've got to go," he said, his voice rough. I would've taken it badly but I knew my little brother, knew how he sounded when he was choked with emotion.

"Good luck," I told him too, then I followed Lawson, my heart pounding in my ears.

I was barely aware of the cool night air on my face as we rushed through the woods, fearful to avoid any eyes that might be watching us.

The farther away from pack territory we got, the safer I felt, until finally Lawson and I stopped at the edge of the highway. I looked up at the stars twinkling above us and suddenly felt free for the first time in weeks.

Lawson smiled at me, his face illuminated by the silvery light of the moon. "We made it this far."

It was only then that I realized how scared I had been; tears pricked my eyes and streamed down my cheeks without warning.

Lawson took me into his arms and held me tightly while I sobbed against his chest. After a few minutes, he tensed, then let go of me.

A car was coming down the road, its headlights sweeping down the cement.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:24 am

We both froze as the car drew closer, but then I saw who was driving: Brennan. His eyes were searching the trees, and his jaw was set in determination. He'd come for me.

He brought the car to a stop in front of us, before jumping out and rushing over to me.

Before I could even say anything, he had pulled me into a passionate embrace and kissed me fiercely. The tears that had been streaming down my face stopped abruptly as I melted into his kiss. This was what I had longed for since he left.

I felt myself being lifted up off the ground as Brennan continued to kiss me with intensity and longing that mirrored my own. Finally he broke away from our embrace, but kept his arms around me protectively.

"You're safe," he said gruffly, brushing away the wetness on my cheeks with his thumbs before kissing them gently.

Lawson cleared his throat awkwardly and stepped back as Brennan continued to cradle me against his chest. "Goodbye, Amelia. Have a good life."

My eyes welled with tears. Maybe this was the last time I would ever see him.

"I'll miss you," I started, but he turned and vanished into the forest without another word. My heart ached at the thought of leaving Aiden, Rose and Lawson behind.

Brennan's eyes were shining with relief as he looked down at me.

"You're never going to be afraid again," he murmured in my ear, before he kissed my cheek again. "Especially with an alpha to protect you."

"I can protect myself," I said, but I was smiling as I said it. "Don't think I won't be fighting beside you during a battle."

He chuckled softly. "I believe you. You can do anything you put your mind to, Amelia-who-can-fly."

I looked back up at the stars, feeling more myself than I ever had in my life. "Time to go."

Time to start a new life.

As he started toward the car, I turned to look back at the forest, the place I had spent my entire life. I took a deep breath of the calming night air, and then walked into the future.

* * *

Brennan dumped the car in the next town over, and I grinned at the sight of our two motorcycles waiting in a parking garage.

"I was worried we'd need a car to escape them," he said, a mischievous smile playing on his lips. "But now... we can travel in your preferred style."

We drove for hours until we reached a small town and arrived at the hotel. I was relieved to finally get off the motorcycle and stretch my legs.

The room, though small, was comfortable and inviting; we had a king-sized bed in the center of the room, along with a few pieces of furniture. Brennan lit some candles, filling the room with a soft glow.

We slowly began to undress each other as our desire took over, no longer scared of being discovered or judged.

Brennan's hands explored my body tenderly as we kissed; he seemed to know exactly what would make me moan or gasp with pleasure. His body pressed against mine felt like it was meant to be this way forever.

When we were completely spent, we lay together in a sweaty, blissful tangle of limbs. I rested my head against Brennan's chest, trying to catch my breath. I wanted to tell him something true, even if the words were hard and strange for me. "Brennan... I love you."

I could feel him smiling. "I love you too."

As we fell asleep together in each other's arms, I felt deeply safe in a way I never had before.

I thought that I would be happy forever.

I didn't know then that Nathan would hunt me to the ends of the earth.